

CHOISEN LITERATURE.

WORKS OF FICTION.

Before commencing the publication of another serial story it occurs to us that the following chapter from Dr. Pryde's recent admirable work on the "Highways of Literature" will be perused by many readers with pleasure and profit:

Man comes into the world the most helpless of creatures. He is little else than a soft, sprawling, squalling piece of flesh. How is it possible that he will manage to survive in this bustling, jostling world, where his fellow-creatures will thrust him aside, and the mysterious powers of nature lie in wait on every side, ready to crush him? How will he know how to act amid so many difficult and perplexing circumstances? God has provided for this. A craving has been given to him which will never let him rest, but which compels him to seek the very things necessary for his guidance through life. This craving is an irrepressible desire to know what others are doing, to add to his own experience the experience of others. And he does not wish to know them in the abstract, but in the concrete; not so much what they are, but what they are doing. And if he cannot see them undergoing adventures in reality, he wishes to see them in imagination. He wishes, in other words, to hear a narrative. This desire, too, continues all his life. "Tell me a story," lisps the infant almost as soon as he is able to speak. "Commend me to any exciting novel," says the young man. "Anything new? What is going on?" asks the man of middle age.

Now, if things were as they ought to be, history and biography should suffice to satisfy this craving. But history treats of great political events, and biography of great geniuses, and the majority of people care little for either of these. Like draws to like. They prefer ordinary occurrences and ordinary people; and if they cannot get them real, they must have them imaginary. The historian, therefore, is thrust aside and the novelist called in.

In doing this, people cannot be said to be casting away the true and preferring the false. The circumstances of a novel, which after all are not essential, may be imaginary; but the description of the rise and progress of the action, which is the substance of the novel, may be real. Who shall dare to say that that most touching of all fictitious narratives, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, is not true? The feeding of the swine and the eating of the husks are fanciful; but the incident of the infatuated boy eagerly seizing his patrimony and spending it among debauchees, and coming back a beggar to be forgiven and taken to his father's bosom, is, alas! too true. It is still occurring every day.

Fiction, therefore, has been invented and cultivated to supply the wants of man, and is a necessary, just like tea and coffee or any other nutritious stimulant; and true to its character, it varies its form to suit the circumstances and tastes of each period of life. If we examine, we shall find that the circumstances of each stage of a man's life have led to the production of a kind of fiction exactly suited to them. The story-tellers have taken into account the different periods of a man's mental growth, and without sacrificing truthfulness in any case, have produced a story to suit each period.

A child has little experience, and lives in a world of wonder. Its little eyes are always wide open with astonishment, and it sees everything through a sort of glamour. Big strangers seem giants. Unseen friends who send gifts are fairies. Cats, dogs, and even dolls, are intelligent beings, and could speak if they liked. The most complicated actions seem to be done by magic. Accordingly, the teller of a child's story must study these peculiarities. Everything he introduces must be strikingly simple, and at the same time wonderful. The naughty characters are great, big giants like Blunderbore and Cormoran, and the heroes are very diminutive champions like Hop-o-my thumb and Jack the Giant-Killer. The good people are all very, very good, and the bad are all very, very bad. Complicated processes in making things are dispensed with. Everything is done by magic. When Cinderella wants an equipage, there is no difficulty about it. By the touch of her grandmother's wand, a pumpkin is changed into a carriage, mice into horses, lizards into footmen, a rat into a coachman; and all these proceed to do their work with the perfect precision and coolness of old hands.

But the child soon becomes a boy, and is sent out into the rough world, where all the nonsense about giants and fairies is soon knocked out of him. A reckless activity now becomes his characteristic. He develops an astonishing talent for mischief, which he calls fun. He catches sparrows, and cannot see "a harmless, necessary cat," without stooping down and groping for a stone. He has frequent fights and adventures with certain individuals of his own age, whom he calls "cads." He also assiduously cultivates practical joking, with a satisfaction to himself in which his nearest relatives do not always share. To suit this hopeful young gentleman, the story-teller changes his hand and writes a boy's novel. Its elements are adventure, fighting, and mischief. The receipt for its composition is very simple. Take a boy or young man for a hero. Let him run away to sea. Wreck him on the coast of Africa, and land him among hordes of grinning negroes. Give him no end of fights, and hairbreadth escapes, and moving accidents by flood and field. Then, with a company of faithful blacks, let him penetrate into the interior, where he finds the biggest game in the world, and where he blazes away to his heart's content at buffaloes, lions, elephants and hippopotamuses. And all through, let there be with him, as a humble but favourite attendant, a genuine, hearty British tar—a sort of salt-water Sam Weller—always ready to play practical jokes upon the natives, and to be hale and hilarious under the most pressing circumstances. This is the boy's novel; and the boy, clutching it in one hand and a piece of buttered bread in the other, and devouring both simultaneously, is soon fascinated by the story, and pronounces it, in his own particular dialect, to be "awfully jolly."

But the days of his boyhood soon pass. His relatives coming to visit him after a year's absence, finds that he has shot up into a young man. He discovers the use of a mirror and gazing into it gets his first idea of manly beauty. He also forms his notions of the cut of a coat, the colour of a necktie, and the parting of the hair, and adapts his walk and conversation to what he considers a gentlemanly style. He finds, too, that he has a heart, and that he can write poetry, and he frames verses abounding in such rhymes as "heart," "part," "ever," "sever," "never." The future is enveloped in rose-tint, and he fondly hopes that in that romantic land there will be in store for him nothing but beauty and bliss. For this emotional young man the sentimental novel is produced. Its elements are beauty, devotion, danger, deliverance. Its favourite characters are: a young lady, exquisitely lovely, with golden locks, and the figure of a sylph; a young man of slim form, bright eyes, and raven hair, who adores the sylph, but is in despair, because, alas! he has no blue blood in his veins; a little, rickety aristocrat, who offers a title and a fortune for the hand of the sylph, and a cruel, cruel father who favours the rickety aristocrat. All these characters are at sixes and sevens through the greater part of the book. Then, lo! a sudden catastrophe—a conflagration, or inundation, or both. The youth of the raven hair rushes in at the risk of his life and saves the sylph. Then that philanthropic, middle-aged man, so frequent in novels and so rare in real life, whose sole business it is to make young people happy, comes in at the very nick of time, and by means of some paper found somewhere, proves that the youth of the raven hair is the eldest son of Sir Somebody, and that his blood, after all, is of the proper regulation colour. "You have saved her life; she is yours, take her, and be happy," says the father, now no longer cruel. And then there is added just one sentence more to say how happy they were to the end of a long life; for in the sentimental world all miseries end with marriage, and the rest of life is one delightful monotony of unmitigated bliss.

But the man gradually emerges from the sentimental world into the sober world of reality. His heart has subsided to a hum-drum beat. The rose colour has died out. Beauty and bliss may have come, but they have come very much alloyed. Now, if the man is of a shallow nature, he falls into a weaker state than ever. Simple enjoyments pall upon him. He becomes blasé, and nothing in the real world interests him, save such exciting causes as steeple-chases, fighting and games of hazard. It is to administer to this mind diseased that the novelist prepares his sensational novel. Its elements are mystery, murder, detection. The great essential is a culprit. And to make this culprit as interesting as possible, she is a lady as exquisite as an angel, with sunny locks and eyes of heavenly blue, entrancing smile, melodious voice, and small, soft, delicate hand, the idolized wife of a baronet, yet bearing about with her a guilty secret. And to torment this lovely culprit there is an accomplice, a woman with waxen face, white eyebrows, and colourless lips; and this woman has a husband, a red-haired, bull-necked ruffian, who is constantly making himself tipsy, and almost blurring out the secret. Then to get up the hunt, a relation of the baronet comes in, and he suspects the lady's crime, and sets himself to find it out. A detective is put on the scent, and the chase becomes exciting. He schemes hard to get some papers. She destroys them before he can get them. He after most intricate inquiries, gets other evidence. She sets fire to a house, and tries to burn up both him and the evidence. At last he brings her to bay. She confesses that she has been married before, that she drowned her first husband in a well, that she has a taint of madness in her blood, that she has been mad all the while; and is carried off raving to the asylum. Then, to the surprise of all, her murdered husband turns up. He had been thrown into a well, but had scrambled out again, and had lain hid, disgusted with the whole affair. We did not wonder at his disgust.

But if the man is of a deeper nature, when his romantic ideas vanish, a far wider and truer theory of life succeeds. He now sees the real world is more wonderful than the ideal, that truth is stranger than fiction; and he becomes interested in all the phenomena of this wonderful world, especially in that wonder of wonders, man. It is to meet the wants of this lover of reality that the great English novelists—Richardson, Fielding, Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, and George Eliot—have written what is called the "Novel of Manners."

Such are the various kinds of works of fiction. There are others, but these are what may be called the legitimate kinds. And in the account which we have just given of their origin, we have ascertained that there is a natural demand for fiction; that the demand continues under different forms, at all periods of a man's life; and that the books which supply this demand may be held to be necessities of existence.

This consideration, we can easily see, have a very important bearing upon the practical question: how novel-reading should be treated? We can now see how useless it is to tell young people not to read novels at all. As long as they have imagination, as long as that imagination cannot be fully satisfied by history and biography, so long must they continue to read them. Instead of trying to proscribe novel-reading, the only practical plan is to regulate it, to show how novels should be used, and to point out the remedies in the case in which they are abused. This we now proceed to do.

Novels should be used, in the first place, to teach human character. This, after all, is their great purpose. And what an important subject it is that they take up! Of all earthly subjects, surely it is the grandest. The inferior animals, the plants, and the material forces of Nature, are wonderful; but as far as our knowledge goes, "man is the noblest work of God." "What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving, how express and admirable! in action, how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!" What a grand subject, therefore, human nature is! But the subject is not only grand, it is also useful in the highest degree. Besides our duty to God, we owe a duty to ourselves and a duty to others.

But we cannot do our duty to ourselves and others, unless we know ourselves and others, unless we know, in other words, human character. Now, besides the Holy Scriptures, which are the highest exponents of the secrets of the human heart, there are several kinds of books whose business it is to describe human nature. The most pretentious of these are histories and biographies. But histories and biographies tell us chiefly about great men, and it is not about them we want to know. We want to know about every-day people like ourselves, who are placed very much in the same circumstances, who are tempted in the same way, and who may be models of warning to us. Now, this is the knowledge that the true novelist undertakes to give us. He presents to us a life-like picture of this bustling work-a-day world, with its interesting scenes and incidents. There he shows us a variety of characters, all playing their appropriate parts. We see not only the outward movements, but also the inner workings of their nature. We watch the motives rising in their hearts, going out into action, and ending in most momentous results. We observe, too, how easily vice springs up, with what difficulty virtue is maintained, how selfishness always ends in degradation, and how benevolence is its own reward. Take Thackeray as an example. We hold that Thackeray—the keen, satirical, warm-hearted, tender, true, pure minded Thackeray—is one of the greatest educators which this country has produced. There is no doubt that he is one of the most truthful delineators of human nature. The only objection brought against him is that, in his early works especially, he is too apt to dwell upon the dark side of things. But this, instead of being an objection, is one of his most valuable qualifications as an educator of youth. The young and inexperienced are prone enough of their own accord to look upon the bright side. Their animal spirits, aspirations, fresh fancies, all lead them in this direction. It is the dark side of the world, with its flatteries, hollow promises, disgusting selfishness, and plotting villainy, that they are in danger of overlooking. Now, Thackeray, side by side with scenes that are bright with the smiles of innocent children, the devotion of noble women, and the wit and wisdom of true-hearted men, has depicted the haunts of fashion in colours that can never fade. He brings before us the Vanity Fair of London, and shows us its parks, its streets, its clubs, its theatres, its ball-rooms, all bustling with the votaries of pleasure. Unlike most other novelists, he does not engross our attention with only a few persons. Away in the background are many less important people whom he has not time to describe, but whose character he merely indicates by characteristic names. There are, for example, the friend of George IV., the Earl of Portansherry; a prosy talker, Mr. Jawkins; a wearisome old woman, Lady Hum-and-haw; and a German pianist, Herr Thumpenstrumppf. And in the foreground there are some whom he describes far more fully with the most striking effect. Take as specimens the following group of pleasure-hunters of very different kinds. We both see and hear them speak. There is light-hearted, frolicsome Harry Foker. At school he has been dull and dirty, had been unable to spell, and scarcely able to read. But he has developed all at once into a full-blown man of fashion, with a bull-dog's head for a pin, bull-dog's head for buttons, and sporting scenes ornamenting his shirt front. At the University he prosecutes his education by painting his tutor's door vermilion, and is rusticated for it. Then he thinks of completing his education abroad. "It don't matter," said Foker, talking over the matter with Pen; "a little sooner or a little later, what is the odds? I should have been plucked for my little-go again, I know I should; that Latin I cannot screw into my head, and my mamma's anguish would have broke out next term. The governor will blow like an old grampus, I know he will—well, we must stop till he gets his wind again. I shall probably go abroad and improve my mind with foreign travel. Yes, partly voo's the ticket. It'll, and that sort of thing. I'll go to Paris and learn to dance and complete my education." There is Joseph Sedley, "a very stout, puffy man, in buckskins and Hessian boots, with several immense neck-cloths that rise almost to his nose, with a red-striped waistcoat and an apple-green coat, with steel buttons almost as large as crown pieces." He is an Indian official home on sick leave; but during the Waterloo campaign, when it is thought that there would be no fighting, he goes across to Belgium with the English army, dressed in a frock-coat, duck trousers, and a foraging cap ornamented with a small gold band, and swaggers about and talks loudly of the absurdity of thinking that "Boney," as he calls him, will ever attempt to face them. But no sooner does he hear that "Boney" is approaching than he sheds his military attire, shaves off his moustache, buys a horse at an exorbitant price, and is off, leaving his friends behind him. Yet, when he returns to India, he talks of nothing but the campaign of 1815, goes into all the details, leaves the impression that he must have been by the side of the Duke of Wellington on the eventful day, and in general identifies himself so much with the battle that he goes by the name of "Waterloo Sedley." Then there is that profligate yet most amusing waif, Captain Costigan, in faded and somewhat shiny garments, with red nose, a wisp of hair, like somewhat withered hay, on each side of his head; a hat cocked very much over one eye, and a pervading flavour of "po-tween." In a rich Irish brogue he drivels about "me daughter," blarneys those who are likely to lend him money, and brags about his acquaintance even with royalty. "Faith sir," said he, "the bullion's scarcer with me than it used to be, as is the case with many a good fellow. I won six hundred of 'em in a single night, sir, when me kind friend, His Royal Highness the Duke of Kent, was in Gibraltar." Then there is Major Pendennis, the inimitable specimen of an aristocratic toady. He is got up for the purpose in shiny hat, rich brown head of hair, unrumpled cravat, coat without a crease, and spotless linen and gloves. The gods of his idolatry are the Upper Ten Thousand, and to sit at their banquets and bask in their heavenly society he would lick the very dust. But when there is no blue-blooded divinity at hand to worship, he will truckle to any one, however vulgar, who will give him a good dinner. "That is the benefit of knowing rich men;—I dine for nothing sir;—I go into the country, and I'm mounted for nothing. Other fel-