

another—Mr. Trollope, say, to Mrs. Ross Church, or “*Cuida*” to the author of “*Guy Livingstone*.” Very soon, however, the taste becomes deadened and blunted, and all power of distinction and appreciation is lost. In this stage the unhappy patient can no more go without her novel than can a confirmed dipsomaniac without his dram. The smaller circulating libraries, which lend out very second-hand novels indeed at a penny a volume, are put under contribution, and any amount of garbage is swallowed wholesale. Quality is held absolutely of no importance, and quantity is everything. The very process of reading becomes more or less mechanical, and seems to afford a species of mechanical pleasure or satisfaction. When the disease is thus confirmed, the dropsical habit of mind becomes apparent. The conversation of the patient becomes flabby and limp. Her interest in all ordinary subjects—except, perhaps, the latest fashions, or the more scandalous portion of the evidence in the Tichborne case, or the marriage of the Princess Beatrice—flickers feebly in the socket, and finally dies out. The last stage—that of absolute imbecility—is now, unless very powerful remedies are exhibited, a mere matter of time.

So much for the symptoms or diagnosis of the disease. Its prognosis depends greatly upon the natural constitution of the patient; but is, as a rule, unfavourable. Even where vigorous treatment has been adopted, and has apparently effected a radical cure, there is always danger of a serious relapse. And even if the cure be permanent, the patient is none the less permanently enfeebled, and will always remain incapable of any severe or protracted mental exertion. It is, indeed, upon the whole, unwise to encourage delusive hopes of a complete cure. The disease is as obscure as insidious, and as little capable of control as is softening of the brain itself; and it is doubtful whether we ever do more than for a while to arrest its course. What is most sad, is the self-deception of the patient herself, which is very analogous to that of the habitual drunkard. She is, as a rule, perfectly convinced that her evil habit is under her own control; that she

could, if she chose, begin to-morrow, and never open a novel again. She is, indeed, fruitful in such good resolutions; but, if any attempt is made to secure total abstinence even for a day, she will resort to subterfuges as pitiful as those to which a dipsomaniac will have recourse if deprived of his accustomed dram, and will tell any falsehood, or use any evasion, rather than struggle with the cravings of her diseased appetite. In such hopeless cases, even the most judicious firmness is of very little avail.

It is curious and interesting to observe that as this comparatively new female disease has grown more virulent and intense, the old disease of scandal-talking has become comparatively rare. It is, of course, physically difficult to talk scandal and to read a novel at one and the same time. Our grandmothers used to devote three or four hours every day to discussing the virtues and vices of absent friends over a dish of tea. Our sisters loll in American chairs, and listlessly turn over a third volume; and the concentrated and slightly venomous interest which used to be excited by the peccadilloes of some half-dozen neighbours is now languidly diffused over the doings of some four or five hundred washy creations of a washy imagination. It is, of course, possible, nay, even probable, that, were novel-reading sternly repressed, scandal and gossip would revive. Were it not for this consideration, it is an open question whether the novel traffic ought not to be dealt with as stringently as Mr. Bruce proposes to do with the liquor traffic; whether it would not be well to enable the rate-payers of a district to limit the number of circulating libraries, or even to close them altogether; and to place the “habitual” novel-reader under some such paternal restraint as that to which Dr. Dalrymple wishes to subject an “habitual drunkard.”

It is too clear, unfortunately, why it that so many women thus waste their time and rot their minds. They read novels, exactly as some young men smoke and drink bitter beer, for sheer want of something to do. What a woman needs is an education which shall