

ROUND THE TABLE.

Among the unique performances in literature may be reckoned that of William Beckford, the author of "Memoirs of Extraordinary Painters," who wrote his wonderful romance, "Vathek," at a single sitting, and in French—a double feat of genius and scholarship. The tale is as weirdly great as any of the romances of Edgar Allan Poe or Théophile Gautier. The author amassed a marvellous collection of curios and brought together a fine library at Fonthill Abbey, the residence which he built for himself, and which, with its treasures, subsequently fell under the auctioneer's hammer.

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There is a curious natural phenomenon in the Franconia range of the White Mountains, New Hampshire, described in the local guide-books as "The Profile, Franconia Notch." It is, in fact, the features in profile (for, viewed from all points but one, only formless masses of rock are apparent) of a colossal head, sculptured by chance from the living rock. The Indian legend connected with it is poetic. Long ago, says the tradition, there dwelt in this region two powerful tribes, ever at variance. The young chief of the one loved and was beloved by the beautiful daughter of the cacique of the other. She fled from her home to become his bride. But the marriage did not help to allay the enmity of the aged chieftain. After long entreaty, the girl prevailed upon her husband to allow her to go and strive to pacify her father and reconcile the hostile tribes. She promised to return the same day, and the young chief said he would sit upon the lofty rock that overhung the village and await her coming. But she came not back, having been secretly put to death, and night fell, and the morning dawned, and he sat silent upon the crag, never stirring, but suffering in silence, till his heart broke, and the Great Spirit in pity changed him into stone. And there he sits yet, Sphinx-like, amid the quiet of the mountains.

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The revolting and fiendish series of crimes which has lately invested the name of Whitechapel with an association of horror, reminds one of the old stories about vampires and wehr-wolves. They had doubtless some foundation in fact. There exist creatures in human shape capable of committing any atrocity, however devilish and unspeakable. Nobody, probably, has ever imagined anything so horrible that someone, at some time or other, has not either done or attempted to do.

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The following passage, from Shelley's "Defence of Poetry," is considered by some critics the finest example of prose in all the range of English literature:—

"Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union under its light yoke all irreconcilable things. It transmutes all that it touches, and every form moving within the radiance of its presence is changed by wondrous sympathy to an incarnation of the spirit which it breathes: its secret alchemy turns to potable gold the poisonous waters which flow from death through life; it strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty, which is the spirit of its forms."

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In the world of letters, just as in the world of politics, there are extremists on both sides of every important question. With regard to slang, we have both radicals and conservatives—those who confess to a strong and frank admiration for and a tendency to make use in composition of the numerous floating uncrystallized words and expressions which appertain to every living speech, and the disdainful purists who decry the innovation of every slangy word or phrase into the language of literature.

Slang, however, may be said to be a natural process, with-

out which no language would expand and advance with the extending and progressive ideas of its speakers. A large proportion of the language in common and in literary use was once slang of the most barbarous description. Truly, the slang of to-day is the good English of to-morrow. And the main dislike of slang arises, not from its innate ineptitude, but from the fact that the introduction of many of its words and phrases is often forced and premature. Language is a gradual growth, and any attempt at artificial enlargement generally produces enfeeblement and enervation. The language richest in the strong yet delicate expression of thought will be that which neither offers resistance to nor essays to hasten the changes which time inevitably effects. Doing the one leaves the language in the rear of the national development; to do the other is to create, as it were, a new speech, or, at all events, to produce a wide and undesirable discrepancy between the popular and the literary language.

As in the growth of a tree leaves and branches are continually dying, and being replaced by others which bourgeon in their stead, so in a language, words and expressions become inadequate or inappropriate to convey the ideas originally attached to them, grow obsolescent, and disappear, to be replaced either by ingrafting foreign words, or by the natural succession of hitherto uncrystallized forms. These, too, in the normal order of replacement, will always be such as peculiarly commend themselves to the taste, for their happy suitability to the idea to be expressed, for their condensed humour or metaphor, for their suggestiveness or picturesqueness. It is best, therefore, in language as in everything else, to let nature take her course, and time, or chance, perform its work unassisted.

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Mr. James Russell Lowell recently reviewed on a public occasion the last sixty years of American literary effort. Sixty years ago, when he was in his youth, there were but two American writers, Cooper and Irving, who could have supported themselves with their pens. Now the number of American writers who earned a competency by literary work is vast indeed. This, too, although the publishing houses deluge the country with numberless cheap editions of foreign authors. The most characteristic development of all that period is a form of racy and popular humour, which, says Mr. Lowell, is thoroughly wholesome. He might have added, and wholly irreverent. For the great American joke is always a jibe, and when the joker has exhausted his material, he finds new resources in mocking at himself.

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A genuine bookworm is perhaps to be avoided,—he is a bloodless man, who has lost in the turning over of the leaves of his tall folios sympathy with things external. And then, how useless to this quick life of men all his curious information. Yet have I known C—, kind, shrewd, honest, and a great reader withal. It is as good as a play to watch C— at a book-stall when he has found a book to his mind,—the way he has of deluding the seller as to his choice until the bargain is struck; the eagerness quivering in his voice in spite of his efforts to have it sound indifferent. For C— is a true believer in the natural wickedness of a book-dealer. When he has come to terms in the end, and has possessed himself of the coveted volume, he slips it under his coat, which he buttons triumphantly. But C—'s trials in the landing of his prize are not yet over. He must smuggle it into his den. For there is an edict of his household against more books to clutter up the place, and C— is of an easy temper, and cares not to fly in the face of authority. He cannot conceal his impatience at table, and at the earliest possible moment disappears. Now is the time to watch C—. He enjoys himself hugely as he settles in the padded arm-chair leisurely to inspect his purchase. After a time his interest is fired, and he begins to read, his zeal quickening as he turns the leaves, mumbling passages to himself, and at length pacing with long strides up and down, down and up, fairly devouring the pages, tearing them apart, if uncut, with a gaunt forefinger. The vehemence of the man is amazing. The next day his select friends knew that he had been making a night of it. For he shared with them the spoils. Peace to his ashes, for his was a gentle soul.

H.