

Lessons in English Literature.—X.

BY ELEANOR ROBINSON.

Sir Thomas More's "Utopia."

The sixteenth century was a wonderful time of learning and of making books. There were two chief reasons for this. In the first place, for some time great sailors and explorers, from Italy, from Spain and Portugal, and from England, had been pushing their way further than ever before, both east and west. Columbus had discovered a new world across the ocean. Portuguese sailors had dared to sail round the Cape of Good Hope. The Cabots had explored the coast of our own country. People in the Old World were roused to wonder and curiosity by tales of new lands and new races of men. The world was larger than they had thought; there were more and different people in it. There were new animals and plants, new ways of living, to be studied.

And secondly, almost at the same time that men's minds were being excited by the wonders of a new world, their thoughts were turned also towards the old learning that had been almost forgotten. For the greatest learning and the best literature there had ever been was that of the Greeks; and for many, many years the Greek language and books had been neglected by the people of Western Europe. Even the learned men did not read Greek; it was not studied in the universities. But now, towards the end of the fifteenth century, Greek scholars, whose country had been conquered by the Turks, had begun to flock into Italy, bringing with them their books and their wisdom. The Italians welcomed them gladly, and Italy became a home for Greek learning. All the history and poetry and philosophy that the great writers of Greece had left was eagerly studied. And not by the Italians only; people went to Italy from other countries to study the "New Learning," as it is called, and especially many Englishmen. They brought back their knowledge to England. Greek was taught in the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, and all the knowledge that the wise Greeks had stored up lay open to English students.

Now no one is much the better, either for travelling or for studying books, unless they make some good use of what they learn by it. Happily, there were some good and learned men in England at

this time, whose great desire was to do all the good for their country that they possibly could. They were not satisfied with simply accepting what other people wrote or told them, and just keeping it stored up in their own minds. They looked about them, and saw many things that were wrong in the lives of their countrymen, in the government, and in the religion, and they used their learning to try to make things better. They thought that the great good of knowing Greek was that they might study for themselves the New Testament (which, as you know, was written in Greek), and find out exactly what Christ and His apostles taught, so that they could better follow His teachings. Some of them who were in high offices in the church tried to reform the lives of the clergy. Some taught in the universities; some founded schools.

One of the best and most famous of this band was Sir Thomas More. He was a very learned lawyer, and high in favour with Henry VIII, who made him Lord Chancellor in 1529. But afterwards he displeased the King by refusing to say that Henry was right in proclaiming himself head of the English church, and in putting away Queen Katherine and marrying Anne Boleyn. For this he was beheaded in 1535.

More saw very plainly, and with much sadness, the evils of his time, and he longed to do away with them. He said once to his son-in-law: "Would to God that I were put in a sack and cast into the Thames, upon condition that certain things might be established in Christendom." Two of these things were: that all Christian kings and princes might live in peace, and that the church of Christ might be united and free from all errors. He wrote his book, "Utopia," to show how happy a country might be where the people lived and were governed after the plans that he had in his mind.

The book was written in 1516, in Latin, for most people who could read at all could read Latin then; but about forty years later it was translated into English. It begins by telling how, when More was at Antwerp on the King's business, he met one day on coming out of church "a certain stranger, a man well stricken in age, with a black sun-burned face, a long beard and a cloak cast about his shoulders, whom by his favour and apparel forthwith I judged to be a mariner."

His friend, Peter Giles, introduced him to this stranger, whose name was Raphael Hythlodaye, and who had been a great traveller. They went to