

"PENNY DREADFULS" AND THEIR READERS.



AT a time when the wants and wishes of the commonly called lower orders are thrusting themselves somewhat obtrusively on the notice of the public at large, when the injustice which a measure may inflict upon "poor people" is a sufficient bar to its becoming law—when, in fact, people are awakening to the truth that Government exists for them, and not they for Govern-

ment—it is interesting to note the literary influence to which the children of poor people are subject.

The children of the poor are left greatly to their own devices and resources, and it does not seem to have been realised by their parents that there is much duty to be done to them after having brought them into the world. The guardianship and careful control of a boy of the upper-middle and upper classes cease when he is seventeen or eighteen years of age, that of a poor child at about nine or ten; and inasmuch as these are generally assisting to augment the family income as soon as they are worth anything at all, they are practically free from parental control as soon as they obtain a situation of any kind. In a place like London, where everything good, questionable, and bad is at the disposal of any one who likes to pay for it, these young sprigs of humanity are left exposed to a hundred temptations. With their literary temptations only we propose to deal.

Childhood is the age of imagination. At no time during life is the mind so ready to believe all that the ears hear, and at no time is it possible for such vivid pictures to be created in the mind by outside influences. We laugh at the tale of "Jack and the Bean-stalk" now, but which of us has not had his own Jack, whom he firmly believed in, and his own bean-stalk of the proper stoutness and strength to support Jack as he climbed up? Ah, me! what a time it was when there were so many kings and queens, fairies and giants; and when those terrible bogeys, too, which never were seen, were always coming after you in dark places, although they were so shy of light and grown-up people, and never had any power underneath the bedclothes!

Nature being most impartial in her gifts, and graciously bestowing them quite irrespectively of the worldly position of the recipient, blesses nearly all children, rich and poor, with vivid fancies. This may be assured in a dozen ways. Think how easily children are amused by a tale of adventure of the wildest and most primitive kind. Examine the nursery rhymes, and see what a tax they are upon the powers of credulity and imagination. Still better, go behind a Punch and Judy show in the street, stand facing the crowd, and notice the cluster of intensely interested

little faces which are staring with all their might and main at the wooden figures of the drama.

It is not surprising to find this imaginative power coming to the surface, whatever station of life a child may be in. If he has to toil all day in a warehouse at some purely mechanical process, and then to go home, where he has nothing to do except to keep himself out of the way—ever a difficult feat for children—what wonder that he turns to reading as an easy and available form of amusement? Give him a halfpenny periodical, and he can at once banish himself into realms of gardens, mountains, palaces, forests, caverns of jewels—of goblins, genii, kings, princesses, and dragons. To meet him, there has rushed into the market a host of publications, which he devours with only too great an avidity. As well tell him not to eat, not to laugh, or not to perspire, as not to read them. The desire is as firmly fixed in his physical construction as his heart or his liver. Read he must, read he will; and he reads what is closest at hand, and most within his means. "Scapegrace Jim," "The Boy Highwayman," "Tom Careless, the Boy Pirate," and similar garbage he reads by the hundredweight, to the depreciation of his mind and morals.

The mischief of these periodicals lies in their extreme badness. They are thoroughly badly-written, careless, clap-trap, catch-penny, commonplace tales. This is sufficient to condemn them, though they have frequently much worse faults. It is enough that the good young men are always killing some one, and then wanting some young lady to "fly" with them, and that the bad young men are always dissembling, or grinding their teeth as if they would reduce them to powder. The effect of this trash (no matter how innocuous in itself) on the minds of the impressionable must be bad. Music is a charming and elevating art, but a piece of music played constantly out of tune would finally degrade the taste and understanding. So, although a well-written story is always entertaining, and frequently stimulative of much that is good in us, a trashy tale has a correspondingly deleterious effect.

To discover the extent of the evil spoken of, a visit should be made during the dinner-hour of the employés to any large warehouse where boys are employed. Most of the lads will be found lying about the benches, having finished their dinners, but not their dinner-hour. It is strange if nearly all the boys are not reading intently that class of periodical which is known to its subscribers as "penny dreadfuls." And if the reader has ever chanced to be at a wholesale counter, where lads who are sent from other establishments have to wait five or ten minutes while their orders are being executed, he may notice that they hand in their orders, and then instantly relapse into a state of abstraction over one of the papers we have been alluding to, which they carry about with them in order to avail themselves of such leisure moments for its perusal. At one of our large Government departments, too, there used to be a little boy whose duty

was simply to stamp with an endorsing machine all documents passed to him, and then slide them down a tube to the proper officials, by whom they were duly classified. The documents came to the boy at the rate of about two a minute, and in the intervals he used to read the adventures of some heroic bandit or pirate, as set forth in the particular "dreadful" to which he subscribed. The custom at length became quite attached to the situation, and lasted until some lad with a keener power of fancy than his predecessors became so absorbed in his fiction that he stamped his penny journal, and sent it flying down the tube, to the horror of the circumspect officials below.

These jottings in passing show the extent to which this kind of reading prevails; and a recent motion in the Common Council of the City of London on the subject reveals the fact that it has grown to be a question of moment. It may be worth while, then, before concluding to mention a remedy which we have tried with some considerable success. Has it occurred to you, reader, that the same facilities which permit journals of the "Boy Brigand" class to be issued at a penny a week, also enable some of our most famous literary creations to be brought out at similarly low prices? It has occurred, at any rate, to many publishers, and the result is the cheap editions of some of the best standard works

of fiction, as also many of our most famous poets' works, which may be seen at numerous London book-stalls and shops. Should our lads be left to waste their money on works of the "Dick Turpin" class, which are extravagantly dear in comparison to those of which we have spoken? It would be sixpence or a shilling well laid out to buy one of the copies alluded to, and give it to any lad you may know to be in the habit of reading light literature of a pernicious kind, and will be worth all the lectures and scoldings you could invent. He will take no harm from genuine fiction such as "Robinson Crusoe" or "Don Quixote," simply because they are "good;" and his mind will be injured by "The Boy House-breaker," &c. &c., because they are "bad." Just as he would take no harm physically from a plate of wholesome pudding, although he would probably be upset by a feed of stale pastry. The good old standard novels and tales of adventure were what we read ourselves, reader, as children; and many of our best modern authors, too, have enjoyed them in their early days, and may be found speaking and writing lovingly of them in their later years. Kind parents and friends put them into our hands when we were young, and we can make a slight return by similar gifts to less carefully nurtured wanderers on the road of life.

A. H.

## THE BROKEN HEART.

A TALE TOLD OVER A COUNTER.



YOU would think Mrs. Chappell an empress incognito, so majestic is her port, so noble her countenance, so dignified and gracious her demeanour; yet she is only a perfumer whom fashion has converted into a dealer in ladies' hair, and her place of business is a leading London thoroughfare. There it was, over her own counter, we first met, and that was about five years

ago; and many's the chat we have had over that same counter since she questioned me so closely concerning the long soft tress of fine fair hair I offered for sale that day.

She has clear dark eyes, and they seemed to look through me as she put the question—

"Has this hair been cut from the dead or the living?"

I've no notion of gaining my ends by either falsehood or equivocation, so I looked her fearlessly in the face, and answered—

"From the dead."

The hair dropped from Mrs. Chappell's fingers as if there had been contamination in it.

The implication was palpable. I felt that my character was at stake.

"You need not be afraid, madam," said I; "Mary Marbury has been a nurse to the sick more than twelve years, but she was never known to do a mean or dishonourable action, or be capable of wilfully carrying contagion abroad for the sake of gain. The sweet young creature from whose fair head that hair was shorn died of decline, not fever."

Mrs. Chappell must have seen that I was really wounded by her involuntary suspicion, for she replied apologetically—

"Pardon me, but the traffic in human hair is attended with considerable risk, and I have known such serious consequences to result from indiscriminate dealings with strangers, that—"

"You suspect every one who is not personally known to you," was my quiet interruption, as I proceeded to fold up the hair, which lay on a glass case, and replace it in my black leather hand-bag.

"Scarcely that," said she, smilingly laying her hand on the package I was withdrawing, "but in our trade precaution is essential; and as the very feel of that hair told me it was not shorn during life, I was bound to put the question I did. But it is easy to see that you do not belong to the common order of nurses;