

ART AND LITERATURE FOR THE PEOPLE.  
 AN INTERVIEW WITH MR. WM. ROSSITER.  
 BY OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT.



IN THE PICTURE GALLERY.

**H**OW did I commence the Free Library? Why, I just threw open the doors of my house and said in effect, 'There are my books;' and I lent them to any one who came—that is, any one who had a ratepayer's recommendation, or who would deposit the value of the book.

"That was about twenty years ago—in 1868. We were in Kennington Lane then; and for some years there was not another Free Library in the whole of South London. As those now existing have followed ours in the districts in which we have been, we claim to be, to some extent, pioneers in the Free Library and Art Gallery movement in South London."

So speaks Mr. William Rossiter, a gentleman of short stature and spare form, with a ring of white hair around his head, and dark, kindly eyes glancing from under iron-grey, shaggy eyebrows. We stand conversing with him in a large room consisting of two shops knocked into one, and hung with good

pictures and photographs. In through the open door streams a constant succession of people, including, indeed, all sorts and conditions of men, women, and children—the rough and ragged as well as the respectable. The wide windows are full of light which pours out into the dull winter evening beyond and attracts a constant crowd, who view the pictures in the front and stare into the interior.

"You may come in," says a young lady at the door; and so, from three o'clock until five in the afternoons, and from seven until ten in the evenings, except on Saturdays, the people pour in. "Sometimes," says Mr. Rossiter, "we have 1,000 people in an hour!"

Certainly the situation is admirably suited for obtaining such results. Outside roars the noise and traffic of the busy, bustling Camberwell Road, a great thoroughfare through the metropolis south of the Thames, where, as Mr. Rossiter maintains, the true home of the West and Central London artisan is to be found. For a time the Library and Art Gallery were located in New Road, Battersea, a thoroughly artisan and neglected neighbourhood, remarkable, as he has



said, for its numerous public-houses, the strength of its language, for long hours of labour, and the utter absence of any means of education other than its day schools. Just beyond this point South London is no doubt rich in natural beauty, and the abode of wealthy people. Yet, for about a million of Londoners, this Library and Art Gallery of Mr. Rossiter's was for some time the only collection of books and pictures south of the Thames.

It was started, as has been said, in 1868. Yet its beginnings go back much farther—to that memorable year, in fact, 1848, when London was so deeply stirred with fears of the Chartist meeting on Kenning-

a college could not be opened there? But eleven years elapsed before the college was established, and during that time Mr. Rossiter travelled about England, lecturing to the workers in various industrial centres.

At length, on the 4th of January, 1868, in Blackfriars Road, the South London Working Men's College was opened, with Professor Huxley as president, Mr. Westlake, Q.C., as treasurer, and Mr. Rossiter as secretary. Now the idea of the Free Library, which had been growing all this time, came within the bounds of possibility, and two rooms in Mr. Rossiter's house in Kennington Lane were opened as a Free Reading-room.

Ten years afterwards the college, over which Mr. Westlake had spent some £1,500, about half of the expenditure, came to the Library at Kennington, and the idea may be said to exist to-day in the lectures



*Listening to one  
of Mr. Rossiter's  
Stories*

ton Common. Then public buildings were barricaded with sand-bags, bridges dominated by artillery, and soldiers and special constables garrisoned the town and lined its streets in force. But there were a few men who were not sure that repression was all that was needed. They thought that something more might be done; ignorance should be enlightened and earnestness directed into wise and useful channels. Among these men we need now but mention two—Charles Kingsley and Frederick Denison Maurice, the latter of whom became the leader, or the “centre of union,” between men of varied minds. A room was taken in Ormond Yard, classes were established, and the Working Men's College, now in Great Ormond Street, came into being.

Mr. Rossiter was one of the teachers at that institution, and from the very beginning had been intimately acquainted with all its details. After a few years of work he conned over the list of students, some 1,200 in number, and found that the artisans were less than one-third of the whole, and that very many of these lived in South London. He therefore asked whether

delivered weekly, and sometimes more often, by Mr. Rossiter and various other gentlemen.

Meanwhile, the Free Library grew and prospered. In four years it spread over the whole house, the books increased fourfold, and a Fine Art Gallery, consisting of pictures lent by owners of private collections, and in some cases by the artists themselves, was added. Among the firms of publishers who have sent gifts of books to the library may be mentioned Messrs. Cassell and Co., Macmillan and Co., Nisbet and Co., Chatto and Windus, Longman and Co., and others.

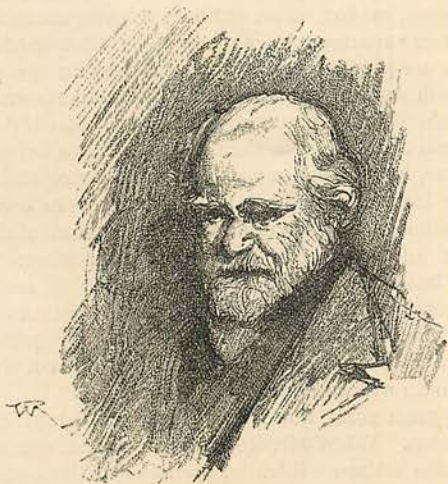
“And do you ever lose a book, Mr. Rossiter?”

“Very rarely. One man brought a subscription of four shillings which he had collected for the benefit of the Library, and he borrowed a five-shilling book and never returned it! But, as a rule, we lose very few in this way.”



"And what books do you find the most popular?"

"The best books, as a rule, are the best read. Forty per cent. only, I calculate, are novels. We never attempt to force a book on a reader. Mr. Ruskin said to me once, when I saw him in Venice, 'Look at the pictures which please you;' and I always say, let a



MR. ROSSITER.  
(*Sketched from Life.*)

person have the book he wants. We let the readers here have whatever book they like; that is, of course, excluding all bad and immoral works. But we have none such in our Library."

"Do you ever have any difficulty with the people?"

"No more than you see now, as a rule. This afternoon we had three big girls who began playing and disturbing the gathering; and sometimes a drunken man; but the people are generally quiet and well-behaved. I do not like those well-to-do people, however, who come in and think they are conferring a favour by coming.

"Not long since we had a small attempt to steal our money-box. For some of the people put in their pennies towards the expenses—the amount given averages about one farthing to every ten persons entering. Ah! and I had my collection of Jubilee coins stolen not long since; however, I've forgotten that now.

"The Gallery and Library are at present about £370 in debt, and I am the unfortunate treasurer! This debt is an accumulation of the deficits of the last five years or so. It is not owing to excessive expenditure. For instance, our removal here from Battersea only cost £5, and £3 of that was for cartage. We have a committee of working men, and they did most of the labour free. The average yearly expenses are but £200, as so much of the work is done gratuitously. The subscriptions and donations last year and the year before were about £150.

"You see, the idea running through this work and that of Mrs. Rossiter in dealing with poor children

is that of inviting a guest to your house. I throw open to the men and women the books and the pictures, there is a reading for them free, and we have, at stated hours, lectures followed by discussions. Some days last winter I used to get the children in and tell them fairy tales. So we endeavour to diffuse the blessings of science, art, and literature among the poorest. We endeavour to help them to rational recreation."

"I see you have a label up there: 'Free Christian Church.'"

"Yes; this building is registered as a place of worship. It gives us a legal right to quell any disturbance that may arise at once; moreover, the Lecture-room is my church. I believe that religion should lead everything, and should leaven everything. I assert religion as the leader of everything here. For myself, I am a member of the Church of England."

"Then you do not regard this place as a club?"

"By no means. It is not so in any sense of the word. Moreover, I know little about the inner working of clubs. There are many of these growing up; some political, and some, I fear, little better than drinking dens. There is too much wire-pulling in them for me. No; we try to do the best we can in science, art, and literature for those who choose to come. We invite them to come as guests, and a committee of genuine working men help to manage and sustain the movement."

Usually, there is a different president every year, and among those famous men who have in this way assisted, have been Mr. Gladstone, Sir Frederick Leighton, and Sir Crichton Browne. Works of



MRS. ROSSITER.  
(*Sketched from Life.*)

art have lent by Sir F. Leighton, Sir J. D. Linton, Messrs. Walter Crane, P. H. Calderon, A. Bruce Joy, R. Macbeth, the Duke of Westminster, the proprietors of the *Graphic*, and many others.

"You spoke just now of Mrs. Rossiter's work among the children. How is that managed?"



"My wife's work in taking poor children into the country to some extent may be said to have commenced the work now developed by the Country Holidays Fund, and it has been very successful. We just put a letter in the paper, saying the house was open, and then we selected from the numerous replies those cases which seemed the most deserving, and then the children came. This still goes on for eight months in the year. Mrs. Rossiter commenced this movement in July, 1877, and during all the time, from then until now, she has never had what may be called real rudeness from any child, notwithstanding the many varieties of character and disposition, and the lack of training of the poor children who come."

It was in a little Kentish cottage that this work was begun, but even before that Mrs. Rossiter used to take parties of poor children to the parks or Epping Forest; then to the Isle of Wight. At last it was decided to keep the house open to such parties. There were to be no formal rules, and the system of family life was to be preserved in all its freedom and simplicity.

In 1880, the number of children largely increasing, it was decided to take Horsfrith Park, near Ingatestone, Essex. Here there was room for twenty children, the house being large, and having five acres of land attached. Five years later Mrs. Rossiter removed to Birchanger Hall, Bishop's Stortford (which she left, however, towards the close of 1887, intending to select another house on the South Coast), the general arrangements remaining the same. The children come on alternate Mondays, in parties of from eight to fourteen, according to Mrs. Rossiter's means for receiving them; and they stay until the Friday of the following week. The parents and friends pay their train fare; all else is provided for them, the idea being that the children come as visitors, and live with the ordinary freedom of home life. It is even better to prevent illness than to cure it, and this the public are now beginning to see. In addition to which, Mrs. Rossiter believes in the right of all children to a knowledge of nature as part of their education, and urges that it is better to see country sights for a week than to read about them for a year. Town children of the poor can never hope to develop all the possibilities of their life without some experience of the freedom and beauty of the country. Pent in narrow streets and ill-fed, their minds and bodies alike become cramped and stunted, and their moral sense dulled. Nature as a teacher as well as nature as a medicine is Mrs. Rossiter's idea.

Like the Free Library and Art Gallery, the expenses are to some extent borne by public subscriptions; but to keep twenty children in the house from March 1st to October 30th would require £500: the donations in 1886 were but £157 4s.

Thus, with the other efforts made by Mr. Rossiter, the desires of our humbler brethren—men, women, and children—for a larger, wider, and better life are endeavoured to be met. But now it is half-past eight—time for the lecture.

We follow some people up-stairs, and see the Reading-room on the left; and Mr. Rossiter draws our attention to some cartoons of foreign papers. This collection is somewhat unique, for he has a large and, in some respects, complete set, especially of Italian cartoons.

We pass through other rooms, in which are pictures and books, and then into the Lecture-room, consisting, in fact, of an ordinary drawing-room floor, with two apartments connected by folding doors. Chairs are placed in rows, and are filled for the most part with working men, and on a little *daïs* stands Mr. Rossiter. He is in evening dress, and, indeed, this is his usual attire when in the Gallery, the idea being, we presume, in accordance with that of receiving visitors.

The lecture to-night is an endeavour to explain that religious and scientific men have not all of them, and at all times, been opposed to each other. Religion has been, and is still, the leader of science. Incidentally, Mr. Rossiter maintained that smoking and drinking were often indulged in for pastime. A man often got drunk because he did not know what to do with himself.

The great point, however, of these gatherings is the discussion. When Mr. Rossiter concluded, one man, a genuine artisan evidently, propounded the question in a little speech of perhaps five minutes' duration, asking how the Biblical account of the Deluge could be reconciled with the discoveries of modern science.

To this Mr. Rossiter replied; and his questioner not being at first satisfied, he vouchsafed another answer. Then another man arose with other trenchant criticisms, to which Mr. Rossiter again replied. Thus the discussion proceeded, not, be it remembered, in the tone of children or ignoramuses coming to be instructed, but rather in the spirit of a hard-headed, keen, intellectual fight.

It is no slight task, nor one which an ill-prepared man could possibly undertake, thus to endeavour to answer question after question, or settle difficulty after difficulty, week after week. Yet it must be owned Mr. Rossiter holds his ground in such debates remarkably well. Once, when some applause was given at the close of his lecture, he gently rebuked the audience, maintaining that he wished the meeting conducted as though it took place in a drawing-room.

It is significant that such lectures and discussions are held. They afford, to our thinking, one of the most remarkable features of Mr. Rossiter's work. For only by coming face to face with genuine, hard-headed, working men, and hearing them express their opinions without reserve, can one tell what they want or of what they are thinking. Their thoughts are oftentimes confused, and their aspirations vague. But may not these be clarified, made more definite, and guided aright? Again, men and women often become demoralised for want of something better to do. To assist in providing better pastime must be the work of the free libraries and their et ceteras now happily beginning to arise in some of our cities and towns.

