

## Our Girls.

### Pleasant Reading for Sweet Seventeen.

NOVELS.

**I**N the stories our grandmothers read, the "moral" was often concisely stated at the close by an author, who seemed to have little faith in his readers' powers of penetration. But nowadays the writer leaves us to find out for ourselves the central thought of which the story is but the gay or beautiful garment.

It is curious how often even an intelligent reader will miss this central truth. In a tale worth reading, there is apt to be so much to fix the attention and please the fancy, and in enjoying the wit, delineation of character, fine descriptions of scenery, stirring incidents, or lovely thought, we forget to ask ourselves what the book is written for. Yet almost every novel worth reading has been written with some definite purpose. Till we know what this is, we can scarcely venture to criticise the work; for how can we tell whether the writer has achieved his end until we know what that end is?

Many of the best-known modern novels, for instance, are written to expose abuses and to show the evil working of bad laws. Charles Reade considered this the only worthy use of the narrator's art; and almost every one of his books holds up some wrong to popular detestation. Thus, "Never too Late to Mend" describes the horrors of old-fashioned prison discipline; and in "A Woman Hater" we have a most interesting account of the struggles and trials of a brave girl determined to study medicine in spite of the obstacles which made such a course well-nigh impossible for women forty years ago. "Put Yourself in his Place" tells what evils may result from trades unions; while Kingsley's "Alton Locke" tells us how workmen were oppressed before they protected themselves by forming the societies from which trades unions have grown.

"Nicholas Nickleby" exposed the dreadful Yorkshire schools, which, thanks to Dickens, are now abolished. "Martin Chuzzlewit" showed up the swindles by which poor immigrants were persuaded to spend their little savings in the purchase of worthless, fever-breeding lands in the—to them—unknown West; and many other noble and needed reforms resulted from the writings of Dickens.

Miss Edgeworth's delightful tales of Irish life were written when there was much bitterness and misunderstanding between the natives of the "emerald isle" and their British rulers. The clever authoress had spent much of her life among the Irish, and she loved and understood them. So she tried to tell English readers the real nature of the people with whom they had to deal—of their virtues and of their sorrows. Her portrayal of the lovable qualities of the Irish peasantry excited such friendly feelings toward them that Walter Scott was encouraged to speak for the Scottish peasantry, so dear to his heart, and awaken in the English kindly sentiments toward their neighbors and subjects north of the Tweed.

Thackeray makes his readers see and scorn the hardness, frivolity, meanness, and pretense of some phases of fashionable life. Bret Harte's stories bring out the truth that, even in the most sin-polluted soul, there still lingers a divine spark of purity and nobleness.

George Eliot teaches the same lesson over and over again. It has been said that she portrays no villains, unless one character in "Daniel Deronda" can be called so. Her sinners are not malicious, only weak. They fall through their love of ease and pleasure, and their determination to

avoid everything hard, dull, and disagreeable. Seeking comfort and happiness at any cost, they fall into dreadful guilt and misery. And so this gifted writer, in a number of charming stories, teaches what Carlyle expresses in one short sentence: "Let go happiness, and seek after blessedness."

Helen Jackson, when death silenced her, had taken up the cause of the Indians, and "Ramona" excites our sympathies for the sorrows, and our indignation at the wrongs, of that oppressed people. "Uncle Tom's Cabin" painted the horrors of slavery in vivid colors. It has been more read than any other narrative ever penned, and has been translated into twenty languages. It stirred the hearts of the American people, and thus had as great a share in the glorious work of letting the oppressed go free, as all Lincoln's armies.

In the words of Mrs. Livermore, "Fredrika Bremer, the Swedish authoress, in her early life endured great suffering and privation, out of which blossomed power and helpfulness for her sex. The series of exquisite novels which she wrote forty years ago, opened the Musical Academy of Stockholm to Swedish women, also the Industrial College and its Academy of Fine Arts. Not content, she wrote 'Hertha,' aimed at the tyrannous laws of Sweden concerning women. It so moved King Oscar that at the opening of the Swedish Diet he proposed a bill granting to women twenty-five years old the control of their property, and, if unmarried and worth four hundred rix dollars per annum, the right of suffrage."

In our own day, Walter Besant, in the amusing pages of "All Sorts and Conditions of Men," has suggested a beautiful way of bringing sunshine into the dreary and sordid lives of the London poor. The "People's Palace of Delight," at first a mere air-castle, the dream of a tender-hearted romancer, has "materialized" into solid masonry, and become a lasting comfort to thousands of people.

At the beginning of this century, novels held an inferior place in literature. Miss Austen tells us how the young lady caught in the act of reading one would "blush furiously and hide it away behind the sofa-cushions." At this time, Miss Burney's "Evelina" and "Cecilia" came out, and fairly took the reading world by storm. These books give an amusing picture of fashionable life in England nearly a hundred years ago. "Our girls" will probably enjoy them, though, when compared with the good fiction of our own day, they seem in no wise remarkable. One is tempted to think that the reason they delighted everyone when they appeared was that in those days there were so few novels that were pure. People who enjoyed stories, but disliked to read what was indelicate or absurdly impossible, found little indeed to their taste. So Miss Burney's bright, innocent books filled, as the advertisements say, "a long-felt want," and fed a hitherto starved appetite.

Now, however, novels have become the means by which the best minds give the world their best thoughts. If a writer wishes to cry out on some sham, redress some wrong, or convey a great moral or religious truth, he knows that by a story he can make the strongest possible impression on the greatest number of people. Our libraries are now so well stocked with bright, pure fiction, that there is gratification for the most varied tastes, and ample provision for the wants of the most insatiable devourer of stories; and excellent novels are sold so cheap that one can buy an armful for a dollar. So there is no excuse for those who waste their time and vitiate their taste over trashy stories. One wonders that a market can be found for literary rubbish in days when admirable and charming stories are so plenty and so cheap. The prodigal fed on husks—or thought of doing so—because nothing better could be had. But what should be said of a prodigal who preferred the husks to the good things set on

the Father's table? Yet such a choice is made by many readers, prodigal of their time and mental powers.

The majority of trashy stories are written by women (more's the pity!), and, paradoxical as it may sound, if they were worse they would do less mischief, for people would then be on their guard against them. It is strange that readers do not weary of their tiresome uniformity of plot and characters. The heroine is transcendently beautiful, because it is necessary to her happiness and to the readers' that she should be surrounded with adorers. The writer can easily account for the infatuation of these gentlemen by reiterating on every page that the heroine is fair, whereas it would require wit in the narrator to make her witty, and creative skill to make her lovable. But do we find in real life that beauty is such a passport to popular favor? Is not the popular girl more often liked because she is merry, or kind, or a good musician, or gracious, or "easy to talk to," or even, perhaps, in some circles, because she is "forth-putting"?

And because this beau-encompassed heroine is fair, all that she does is adorable; and she "stamps her dainty foot," and scolds with her "ruby lips," and wrath and scorn flash out "neath her long, curling eye-lashes," and all her be-adjectived features express naughty tempers, for which, were she nine years old, she might be sent to bed in disgrace. She has, apparently, no more sense of moral responsibility than a butterfly, and no higher duty in the world than a Dresden-china shepherdess,—ornamental—and useless.

"For what were you made?" is the searching question in one of the old catechisms; and the solemn answer is, "To serve God and enjoy him forever." But the writers of such novels answer, in effect: "A woman is made to look pretty, wear becoming dresses, attract men, and marry (if she can) a fortune." Such lower than pagan literature soon starves down every high ideal and noble ambition of a woman's soul.

There is little need to praise again those stories which are already known and admired wherever our language is spoken. George Eliot, Scott, Thackeray, Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, and Mrs. Stowe are familiar friends in thousands of homes. It is essential to a good education to make some acquaintance with their writings, and rarely indeed in this criss-cross world does one get a chance to do anything at once so necessary and so enjoyable.

The later works of George Eliot, "Middlemarch" and "Daniel Deronda," were produced when the writer was deeply perplexed in her religious views. They breathe a spirit of doubt and gloom, and young people, I think, will do well to let them alone, and form their ideas of the author from her earlier works, which are full of delicate, kindly humor, and which express a beautiful faith in the fatherhood of God. "Scenes from Clerical Life," "Felix Holt," "The Mill on the Floss," and that exquisitely lovely story "Silas Marner," tales which critics can scarcely praise enough, can be intensely enjoyed even by quite young girls.

They are excellent Sunday reading, and so are the beautiful tales which George MacDonald tells. "You cannot hurry through his books," says Amanda Harris, "he is never in a hurry, and you must take them leisurely, under the trees in summer, and by the fireside in winter; and you can hardly fail to be helped by them. They are full of exquisite thoughts, and of love to God, nature, and man." George MacDonald's Scotch novels are his best, and so he thinks himself. Who should be able to describe the land and people of Scotland better than he, a Scot of the Scots? For "The MacDonalds" were among the ancient clans, and long ago a MacDonald was "Lord of the Isles." I think "our girls" will enjoy "Sir Gibbie" best of this writer's works. It is an exquisitely lovely story of God's care for a lonely and outcast child.

Mrs. Gaskell, best known as the biographer of Charlotte

Brontë, has written some excellent novels which are not nowadays so much read as they deserve to be. Her "Ruth" is a sad but very beautiful history of a girl's sin and a woman's repentance.

Charles Reade's novels are highly spiced, and girls can find many books which, if not actually better, are better for them; but one likes to form an idea of the style of every prominent novelist whose fame is honestly earned. "The Cloister and the Hearth" is one of Reade's best and brightest stories, and is greatly admired for the correctness with which it describes manners and modes of thought in Europe four hundred years ago.

There is not space to speak adequately of G. P. R. James' excellent historical tales, nor of Bulwer's romances, which have made so many young hearts beat high with excitement and delight.

In "Homes of American Authors," we read that "no product of the American mind has been spread so extensively as the writings of Cooper. In every country of Europe you find them side by side with its own native classics. An eminent doctor of our city was called the other day to attend some emigrants just arrived from Germany. He was anxious to learn where they had got their knowledge of the country of their adoption. 'We learnt it all from Cooper,' was the reply. 'We have four translations of his works in Germany, and we all read them.'

"Have you anything new from Cooper?" "What is Cooper writing now?" are questions which have been asked us again and again in Italy." His books describe pioneer life, and are better enjoyed by men than by women. Indeed, some very bright women have been known to confess, in bated breath and with closed doors, that they found some of Cooper's novels tedious reading. But if girls wish to have some keen pleasure, and to form an idea of the style of this famed writer at his best, let them read "The Last of the Mohicans."

Lowell calls Hawthorne "the rarest genius of our century, and the rarest, in some respects, since Shakespeare." His matchless stories are veritable poems, and so great is their witchery that it is almost impossible to leave, and quite impossible to forget them. Young readers will best enjoy "Mosses from an Old Manse" and "The House of Seven Gables," leaving to the elders "The Scarlet Letter," a lurid narrative of misery and crime.

"So many persons famous in the world of letters have enjoyed Jane Austen's novels and praised them," says Amanda Harris in "Pleasant Biographies," that for this reason, if for none other, I would read at least two or three of them. Walter Scott said that her talent for describing the incidents and characters of ordinary life was the most wonderful he had ever met with. In his last years, when broken in health and fortune, he used to turn to them for diversion. John Ruskin calls Jane Austen "that excellent thinker, and best of all story-tellers."

How tastes differ! Charlotte Brontë, in the teeth of established literary opinion, frankly confessed to finding Miss Austen dull. "I do not enjoy having my blood curdled," said this intrepid small woman, "but I do like it stirred." Miss Austen's heroes and heroines, it is true, are not saintly nor vicious nor witty nor profound. They are nowise more remarkable than our own neighbors and fellow church-goers.

Students of portraiture know that strongly marked and peculiar faces are the easiest to transfer to canvas. Oddities of feature and expression are comparatively easy to catch and to reproduce. The difficulty lies in portraying the evasive "something" which gives individuality to a face of more ordinary pattern. So in novel-writing; it is comparatively easy to draw eccentric characters. The refinement of art is

to make one commonplace person differ, slightly perhaps, yet distinctly, from another commonplace person. This power, Scott said, Miss Austen had to an extraordinary degree.

Miss Mulock's pure and lovely stories are probably old friends in most of the households into which this Magazine goes. So we will not linger over pleasant memories of "John Halifax, Gentleman," and the rest, but speak of a work less familiar to many readers.

"Picciola," translated from the French of Xavier de Saintine, is an exquisite story which girls will delight in. The title means "a little one." "Picciola" was a little plant which struggled up between the stones in the dreary court-yard of a Spanish prison, the only interest in the barren days of a noble Spanish prisoner. Frail as Picciola was, it had a mission to his soul, tortured with doubt and burdened with sorrow. The flower's beauty cheered him, its wonderful structure taught him faith in the Creator, and at last, through the agency of this "little one," the captive gained his freedom. The story is as true as it is beautiful.

Sara Orne Jewett's pleasant, faithful portrayals of New

England life, Miss Woolson's enchanting "Lake Country Sketches," and the exquisite stories of the South, by Cable and Charles Egbert Craddock, have been so recently praised by reviewers, that they need no further mention.

Mrs. Burnett has reached "high-water mark" in her novel entitled "That Lass o' Lowrie's." In it the writer describes the Lancashire mining people and their strange surroundings, as vividly as if she had lived among them always. We would be glad to believe that noble Joan, "Lowrie's Lass," was as real as she seems.

Nowadays, even if we neglect all save the best novels, there is still an "embarrassment of riches," and one can read too many even of the best. The most vigorous minds have been nurtured on stronger food. In the Macaulay household, fiction was only to be indulged in after supper. Miss Mulock's allowance was "one novel to one solid book." And here is Miss Willard's emphatic dictum on the subject:

"The young people who read the greatest quantity of novels know the least, are the dullest in aspect, and the most vapid in conversation. The flavor of individuality has been burned out of them." E. M. HARDINGE.

## Home Art and Home Comfort.

### Easter-Egg Tea-Sets,

AND OTHER ORNAMENTS.

ANY of the charming conceits which pass from one to another as gifts or remembrances at Easter-tide, are either eggs or in egg-shape, and may often be as well made by the home-worker as by those who supply the dealers with these pretty devices.

As many of the daintiest articles of food are concocted with eggs for chief ingredients, so no less dainty, though different, usage may be made of the discarded, empty eggshells "with white-washed wall as white as milk,"—nature's own porcelain fabrication, more fragile and delicate than anything human skill has yet succeeded in creating.

Our pretty tea-set is made of this exquisite ware, and



EGG TEA-POT. ACTUAL SIZE.



EASTER-EGG TEA-SETS.

with the body of the design at hand, the manufacturer has only to complete and embellish. The set comprises four pieces: tray, tea-pot, sugar-bowl, and cream-jug. The first illustration shows three different patterns of "egg-shell china," but we give working designs for one only; and as the variations in the shapes of the spouts and handles constitute the only real difference in the patterns, these modifications can be made by reference to the illustration.

No. 2 is the tea-pot of the first set, in actual size. The first thing to be done is to remove the contents from the eggs, from the pointed end. You will not be able to make the aperture very even, but this will be concealed by the bands.

Then cut out of white card-board the bands, handles, spouts, etc. Eight pieces, cut after the pattern given, will be required for the handles for the set,—two pieces for each handle; two pieces each for the spouts of the pitcher and tea-pot; three bands for the bottoms, and four