AN AFTERNOON CHAT WITH MR. JAMES PAYN.

By Mary Angela Dickens.

It is difficult to imagine a pleasanter room—a room at once brighter, more comfortable, and more suggestive. On one side are long windows opening on to a veranda and leading into a delightful garden beyond—the garden of a square truly, but boasting trees as beautiful as need be. Through these windows the sunshine streams. It rests upon books, pictures, details of all kinds, each with its own charm of association, and it rests finally upon the owner of all these things—the very centre of the cheery atmosphere of the room—Mr. James Payn himself.

From a photo by] MR. JAMES PAYN. [*Elliott & Fry.*

Full of fun, full of genial kindliness, with an intimate knowledge of literary matters present and past, Mr. Payn is the most delightful companion possible. He will pass from one subject to another, throwing sidelights of all kinds on everything he touches—sidelights of experience, sidelights of keen intuition, sidelights of spontaneous and always kindly humour. There is hardly a branch of literature with which Mr. Payn is not practically acquainted; there is certainly no branch of the subject on which he has not something to say well worth the hearing. Many men have experience, though in few men is it so vivid as it is with Mr. Payn. But few men, bringing with them so much from the past, have so keen an appreciation of the present. It is his extraordinary "up-to-dateness" which is pre-eminently noticeable in his talk. He is as closely in touch with the literary world of the moment as though he still stood in the thick of the fight with his way yet to make. He is eager over the younger men—their excellencies, their successes—full of bright sympathy with their triumphs.

"Go and look at those candlesticks," he tells you, "on the table there, with the inkstand. They were given me by Merriman and Stanley Weyman; they were two of the young men to whom I happened to be able to be of use in their early days. Have you read 'The Sowers'?" he interpolates eagerly. "Isn't it a good book? There's a horribly laudatory inscription on the inkstand. But I tell them the best part of the affair is that they should be able to give silver candlesticks and inkstands." He speaks the last words with a genial laugh; its echoes make a background while you read the lines from Pope engraved upon the inkstand, and you understand something of what its owner must have been to the givers as they made their struggling way up the steep hill of success.

Nor is it only his own protégés, so to speak, who excite Mr. Payn's enthusiasm. Most men can excite themselves over their own "finds." But all good work, all "movement"—in the right direction, be it understood—enlist Mr. Payn's eager interest. He reads all the "new men," and he has something to say of them all. And it is essentially characteristic of him that even when that something is not approval it is so expressed that it hardly sounds like condemnation. Mr. Payn has been a reviewer of books for many years, as everybody knows. And yet "I never wrote a bad notice in my life," he declares, "except in one case where I thought the book was immoral. When I don't like a book I simply leave it alone; when I like it, I like to say so." In his "Literary Recollections" Mr. Payn has told us about the first newspaper notice his own work ever received—a good notice of course. "It was like ten thousand tonics in a single dose," he says. "When I became a reviewer myself, and had to deal with a young author who had genuine merit in him, I never failed to recall the encouragement I had myself received when I most needed it." But those who know him may be forgiven for doubting whether this incentive to justice was ever in the least needed by Mr. Payn, or whether the root of the matter does not lie considerably deeper—in his own nature indeed. For in every word he speaks, as surely as in every word he writes, rings that kindliness of truest penetration to which the good reveals itself more swiftly and distinctly than the bad.

It is well worth noticing, in connection with James Payn the reviewer, that this critic, absolutely incapable as he is of writing a malicious line, has the strongest possible opinion on the subject of signed critiques.

"It's a mistake," he says emphatically. "The fashion seems to be going out, and I'm glad of it. The critic ought to be impersonal. You don't speak of a man, even when you praise him, exactly as you speak to him—it's impossible. And if you write a criticism of your friend's work and sign it with your name, you're speaking directly to him. It must influence your point of view. It's inevitable; it can't be helped."

Turning from the work of other people to his own work, Mr. Payn becomes very much less eager, less explicit, and altogether non-enthusiastic. You feel rather as though, in effecting the transition, you had put out your light with an extinguisher! The actual facts of his career—profoundly dull reading, in Mr. Payn's opinion—are as follows: He was born at Cheltenham, and educated originally for the army. Why the army should have been the profession chosen for a boy who preferred the fireside and "The Mysteries of Udolpho" to a day's hunting, and who, to quote his own words, "was a homebird in every feather," is neither here nor there. Nature interposed, and ill-health brought about the lad's removal from Woolwich. A university career followed, with the Church as a goal. It was during these years that James Payn published his first book, a volume of poems called "Stories from Boccaccio." Poetry was his first, and perhaps always his dearest, literary love. He drifted away from her however, as men have done before and since, urged by such sordid considerations as a desire to see himself more frequently in print and a respect for pecuniary remuneration. He had an interval of uphill struggle, in the course of which his work won the recognition of the editors of *Household Words* and *Chambers's Journal*. He became a regular contributor to both these papers. Before very long he succeeded Mr. Leitch Ritchie as editor of *Chambers's Journal*. He wrote many books and a great number of miscellaneous articles. He "advanced in public favour," he says of himself, "but only in a moderate way." Then he produced "Lost Sir Massingberd." The book was a conspicuous success, and James Payn had "arrived," as the slang phrase has it. He had "arrived," and he had "come to stay." He had come to occupy a prominent and almost unique position in the literary life of his time. And yet, be it observed that this man of many "lines," this novelist, journalist, critic and publisher's reader, altogether falls foul, first and foremost, of the assumption that he was ever what is currently understood as "a great worker," that he ever worked for long hours, or in any way made a slave of himself.

"I never did imaginative work after one o'clock," he says. "I kept the afternoon for more mechanical work; and I never worked at all after four or five. After that time I used to go down to the club and play whist. It's a question of concentration," he adds, warming a little to his subject as it becomes more abstract. "If a man walks about and stares out of window he won't get through much, and he'll have to spend more hours at it. And some men, you know, have a way of saying, 'Hullo! here's a fine day! Let's go up the river!' And that doesn't answer. After all Trollope's principle was the right one—regular work, regular hours. But he turned out exactly the same quantity of work every day, and that, I am bound to say, I never did. I don't see how he managed it."

He pauses a moment, and then, with his mind still running on the question of hard work as represented by long hours, he goes on: "But then I never made engagements ahead; that's the mistake so many of us make nowadays. Of course it's a temptation. What everyone wants is permanent employment, and permanent employment of the genuine kind isn't easily found. If you've orders four years ahead that's a very fair substitute for a permanency. But it's a mistake. You may be ill—you may very easily be ill—but even without that any number of things may interfere, and there you are, bound, whether you can turn out good work or bad; the mere idea would be enough to make me ill at once."

During the past ten or fifteen years the spread of education has revolutionised literature, though perhaps rather as a trade than as an art. And on this subject Mr. Payn's conclusions are particularly interesting.

"Everybody reads nowadays," he says, "and the difference in the demand for books—I mean within my memory—is enormous, enormous! There's a new public altogether. It doesn't affect the classics much, but it has created a tremendous flood of second and third-rate books and magazines. That's what the mass of the public wants—second and third-rate literature. People like to find their own floating ideas expressed for them; they like the imagination that doesn't go over their heads. Look at the popularity of Tupper—that's the way to account for it. There's an immense public for the commonplace—immense!"

"As to the 'New Woman' literature," Mr. Payn continues genially, "that appeals to a very small public. Have I ever seen a 'New Woman'? Why, no"—this with the cheeriest laugh—"and to tell you the truth, I don't believe she exists, or if she does there are not more than half a dozen specimens of her."

On the subject of one much-discussed point in connection with the influence of literature, Mr. Payn has exceedingly definite and distinct opinions. Indeed such a thing as a half-hearted opinion is wholly incompatible with his temperament. The idea that the young ruffians who present themselves as precocious candidates for prison discipline have been assisted in their criminal development by the "penny dreadful," in which they are popularly supposed to steep their young souls, is regarded by Mr. Payn as a fallacy of the most patent description.

"If boys are bad, bad they will be, whatever they read," he says. "And the average boy gets no harm from the 'dreadfuls'—not that they are so very dreadful, as far as I see, for the villains always come to a bad end. Boys like excitement and adventure in their stories; that's what they read for."

The position of publisher's reader is one involving experiences many and various, and Mr. Payn is not the man to let experience go by him without extracting its last iota of humour or pathos.

"I've made my mistakes," he says frankly, "and I've had my successes. 'Vice Versâ' was one of my successes. It had been refused by ever so many publishers before I had it. There's a delightful book! I never laughed so much in my life as I laughed over that. And 'John Inglesant' was one of my failures. Yes, I refused 'John Inglesant'—and then I forgot all about it!"

The story of this episode is so good that it must be given in Mr. Payn's own words, although, as he says, he has told it already in disguised form.

"A paragraph appeared in one of the papers," says Mr. Payn, "asserting in round terms that I had had the stupidity to refuse 'John Inglesant.' I was extremely indignant at the libel, as I considered it, and I showed it to my chief when he happened to come into my room.

"'Look here,' I said, 'what these fellows are saying! Did you ever see anything so infamous? I can't stand it! I shall write and contradict it!'

"'I don't think I would trouble to do that,' was the soothing reply. 'What does it matter? They will say anything, you know.'

"'Oh, but I really must!' I said. 'It's altogether beyond a joke. I shall write to the man and give him a piece of my mind.'

"'I don't think I would if I were you,' persisted my chief.

"'Why not?' I demanded.

"'Because—well, because you *did* refuse "John Inglesant," you know.'

"'I did nothing of the kind,' I protested. 'Refuse "John Inglesant!" I refuse "John Inglesant!" I never heard of such a thing!'

"'Let's have up the letter-book,' was the mild suggestion.

"So the letter-book was brought," concludes Mr. Payn with a delicious mixture of ruefulness and enjoyment, "and there it was in black and white! I had refused 'John Inglesant,' and my publisher had never said a word of it to me. Wasn't it good of him?"

A characteristic last word. As such let it stand.