

BOOKS and AUTHORS.

A LITERARY CAUSERIE FOR COLONIAL BOOKBUYERS AND BORROWERS.

BOOKS marked thus (*) have arrived in the colony, and could at the time of writing be purchased in the principal colonial bookshops, and borrowed at the libraries.

For the convenience of country cousins who find difficulty in procuring the latest books and new editions, the 'BOOKMAN' will send to any New Zealand address any book which can be obtained. No notice will, of course, be taken of requests unaccompanied by remittance to cover postage as well as published price of book.

It is requested that only those who find it impossible to procure books through the ordinary channels, should take advantage of this offer.

The labour involved will be heavy and entirely unremunerative, no fee or commission being taken.

Queries and Correspondence on Literary Matters Invited.

All Communications and Commissions must be addressed

THE BOOKMAN, Graphic Office, Auckland.

* The *Stark Munro Letters*, by Conan Doyle, offers some difficulties to the reviewer. A more curious medley of diverse and incongruous subjects was probably never brought together between the covers of a novel. It is difficult to know how to take it. Whether we are to have perfect faith in its author and regard his achievement as a *facsimile* from life, with all those incompletenesses, those disconnected threads and loose ends, to which nature is so partial, or to blame him for want of consideration, for haste, for weariness—for anything, in short, which will account for the lame and impotent conclusion to which he brings us.

Whichever way it be, I feel that the *Stark Munro Letters* is a work of such a high order of talent that it is scarcely an exaggeration to call it a work of genius. It might easily have been the novel of the year, it might have been the novel of the decade, but for the circumstance that it is not a novel at all. What it is it is difficult to say, but it is excellent and of absorbing interest. It has no plot, but it thrills the reader into the belief that it has. It leads him along with eager step and senses on the alert, and leaves him abruptly to rub his eyes and wonder. A friend of mine who belongs to the realistic school of art was enlarging to me recently on the plot of a novel he had under construction in which the hero, after surmounting unheard of vicissitudes, is run over by a Mile End 'bus, but Conan Doyle forestalls him. His hero, having overpassed all his troubles, is instantaneously killed in a railway accident. 'The end,' says an editorial note, 'was such a one as he would have chosen,' yet there is something very grim about its coming at that particular moment, and when one reflects on Dr. Munro's optimistic belief in the non-existence of evil, it is impossible to avoid the suspicion of an ironical motive in the catastrophe.

The character of Munro is admirably suggested in his letters, and a very lovable character it is; his maunliness, his modesty, his straightforward, confiding, unfeared disposition are set forth with a skill that never falters from the first page to the last. But this is only one instance of the vividness with which the author sees and depicts his characters; all are drawn with the same un-failing vigour and distinctness, and all are alive. One, moreover, bids fair to be immortal. With some trepidation I express the belief that this particular figure of Cullingworth is original in fiction, and to be quite honest with myself I will add that I believe it to be one of the greatest triumphs in fiction. Certainly I can at this moment remember nothing which for daring, for insight into human nature as it actually is, and not as we are usually content to behold it in romance, is comparable with the brilliant figure of Cullingworth, with his vivid imagination, his boisterous humour, his inventive genius, his companionableness, his suspicious and diabolical temper, and his strains of treachery, meanness, and unscrupulousness. The figure, indeed, is a work of art of such astonishing force and truthfulness that for the reader it lives and breathes. The fascination it exerts is the fascination of truth. In that face, distorted by malignant passion, which but a minute before smiled affection, we see mirrored our own complex natures. Meanness alternating with generosity, petty spite following heroic self-sacrifice, the virtues and vices jumbled and blended in all but inextricable confusion. This is the real stuff of which humanity is composed.

But there is another respect in which Dr. Doyle has achieved a literary triumph. In reviewing Mrs. Humphrey Ward's 'Marcella' I pointed out that the analytical method in construction meant a loss of vigour in the thing created. To pick a character to pieces with the pen and lay it out in straight sentences may be clever, but it is not convincing. How far it fails in the suggestion of power may be observed by comparing the best of such creations with a figure like Cullingworth, constructed synthetically by the accumulation of words and actions. In one case we have a weakling, a bloodless

microcosm, responding mechanically to order, in the other, a creature without order, with all the capriciousness and unexpectedness of life. And it is this life-likeness that gives the idea of power. We do not immediately associate power with the word angel—that at any rate is not the governing suggestion—rather our idea is of something feminine, but the very first suggestion of the word devil is that of power—dark, malignant, grotesque, it may be, but power in its strongest sense. The reason for this is that one is lifelike, the other is not. We may see a devil every day, but we shall look in vain for an angel through four score years.

Yet despite all this *The Stark Munro Letters* falls short of greatness, and this is all the more lamentable in that it might so easily have been otherwise. The fault is due to a want of proportion. Cullingworth is like a bull in a china shop, a hawk in a dove-cote; he crosses the track of the others like a fiery comet, he dominates the book, and assumes for himself and his doings the whole interest and attention of the reader. This might have been forgiven, it might even have been construed into a merit, but for the fact that half way through the volume he disappears and is hardly heard of again. It was a fatal blindness that prevented the author from seeing that the reader's interest in the sayings and doings of the *raconteur* was subsidiary to his interest in the real central figure of the story, and that the disappearance of that figure meant the cessation of the reader's curiosity. However, Cullingworth is not dead, but gone—with all the strong men of fiction—to South America. It is allowable to hope that Dr. Doyle will pursue him to that continent, and that in some future book we shall hear of him again.

The Stark Munro Letters lends itself admirably to quotation. The book is, in fact, full of good things. I select a passage from the brilliant seventh letter, but must warn the reader against supposing that it gives an adequate idea of this extremely complex work:—

When the surgery was completed (Cullingworth writhing and groaning all the time) my eyes happened to catch the medal which I had dropped, lying on the carpet. I lifted it up and looked at it, eager to find some topic which would be more agreeable. Printed upon it was—'Presented to James Cullingworth for gallantry in saving life. January, 1879.'

'Hullo, Cullingworth!' said I. 'You never told me about this! He was off in an instant in his most extravagant style.'

'What! the medal! Haven't you got one? I thought everyone had. You prefer to be select, I suppose. It was a little boy. You've no idea the trouble I had to get him in.'

'Get him out, you mean.'

'My dear chap, you don't understand! Any one could get a child out. It's getting one in that's the bother. One deserves a medal for it. Then there are the witnesses, four shillings a day I had to pay them, and a quart of beer in the evenings. You see you can't pick up a child and carry it to the edge of a pier and throw it in. You'd have all sorts of complications with the parents. You must be patient and wait until you get a legitimate chance. I caught a quincy walking up and down Avonmouth pier before I saw my opportunity. He was rather a stolid, fat boy, and he was sitting on the very edge, fishing. I got the sole of my foot on to the small of his back, and shot him an incredible distance. I had some little difficulty in getting him out, for his fishing line got twice round my legs, but it all ended well, and the witnesses were as staunch as possible. The boy came up to thank me next day, and said that he was quite uninjured save for a bruise on the back. His parents always send me a brace of fowls every Christmas.'

* *The Salt of the Earth*. Under the general title of *The Salt of the Earth* Mr Philip Lafargue collects six short stories of fair average merit. They are well written, and well related in a first-class literary manner, but they possess no striking qualities of newness or interest, or anything, in short, which will prevent the reader forgetting them one and all so soon as he has closed the volume. 'Time's Revenge' is probably the best thing in the book. The idea is happy and well followed up, but fails somewhat in the conclusion. 'The Music Master's Yarn' is hardly worthy of the rest. The title, as explained in the preface, would seem to be too ambitious for the sort of stuff it binds together. Max Nordau's 'Higher Degenerates' must always be objects of devouring curiosity to us unfortunates who are born sane and remain average; therefore, if this emotion fails us in *The Salt of the Earth* it would appear that Mr Lafargue has not really got to the root of the matter in any of his stories.

From the same publishers I have received a reprint of Thomas Hardy's *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. This exquisite idyl has lost nothing from the lapse of years since I first read it; indeed, it gains somewhat from the contrast it presents to the ultra cleverness of the modern novel. The figure of Elfride is as charmingly natural as ever. There is no need for the author to speak of the fascination which accounts for her conquest of hearts; that fascination is self-evident, and the reader must yield to it without a struggle. Here is a notable distinction between works of talent and works of genius. Talent needs to say, 'this is so,' to keep on saying 'this is so' that the reader may be induced in his semi-somnambulism to believe that so it is. Genius, desiring the same result, makes

the thing so by some not to be understood process, and it remains so without other words. This difference is well exemplified in the case of the charm of the heroine, who has many lovers, but it is even more strikingly shown when one character in the book poses as brilliantly clever, witty, epigrammatic. Talent wielding weapons beyond its strength must place its ultimate reliance in bald statements; not so with genius, which without effort provides those attributes which talent is only able to postulate.

But to come back to the novel. There is probably no writer of fiction who can portray certain subtleties of the feminine mind more vividly and truthfully than Thomas Hardy, and there is to be found in his works no better instance of this power than is shown in the character of Elfride Swancourt. The figure of Knight also is as splendid a study of a certain type of man as Elfride is of woman, and in the conjunction of these two elements—more especially through the tense scenes in which the 'tragic mischief' is slowly evolved—we get a force of realism which no power short of genius can command.

The title, *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, gives a somewhat unfortunate idea of the nature of the novel. It certainly suggests nothing of the grim irony of that closing scene where the two lovers, journeying down to cast themselves at the feet of the girl they have both loved, are accompanied all the way by a singular species of railway carriage, mysterious, dark and grand, as ominous of doom as the voice heard by Oedipus in the wayside wood.

* *The Stark Munro Letters*, by A. Conan Doyle: Longman's Colonial Library. 2s 6d paper; 3s 6d cloth. Postage 4d.

* *The Salt of the Earth*, by Philip Lafargue: Macmillan's Colonial Library. 2s 6d paper; 3s 6d cloth. Postage 4d.

* *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, by Thomas Hardy: Macmillan's Colonial Library. 2s 6d paper; 3s 6d cloth. Postage 4d.

[ERRATA.—In last week's issue 'The Story of Christine Rochefort' and 'The House of the Walls' should have appeared as belonging to the same library as 'The Stark Munro Letters' above.]

THE NO-PETTICOAT CLUB.

THE very newest thing in clubs has been discovered in the United States. Its members are all girls. Indeed, in the very nature of things, this couldn't be otherwise, since it was organised for the express and particular purpose of emancipating womankind from a form of slavery under which she has endured discomfort, not to say innumerable physical ills, for years and years—in fact, ever since she began to be an integral part of the busy, work-a-day world outside of her home.

Now, a woman's club may want to emancipate itself from something or other that has nothing whatever to do with political equality. For instance, the members of new club are too occupied in getting their daily bread this with its butter and jam accessories to even think about striking out the word 'male' from the Constitution, and they will frankly tell you that they can make neither head nor tail out of the whole tariff question. They are bright, every one of them, but their brightness doesn't scintillate in a legislative way. The problem of life for these industrious maidens is the very latest method of getting through the coming winter without damp clothing, red noses and colds in the head. They have mapped out a programme and have pledged themselves to abide by the rules and regulations of the N.P.C.

Expanded, this means the No-Petticoat Club, and its members intend to liberate themselves from the yoke of dry goods' tyranny. In other words, they will hibernatise in bloomers.

Creating any sort of public sensation is farthest from their thoughts, and the reader who jumps to the conclusion that a skirtless brigade of emancipated girlhood will pirouette upon the thoroughfares is much mistaken. The bloomers will be there, but friendly mackintoshes will curtain them from the gaze of the common herd.

'It's just this way,' said a pretty girl, confidentially. She was so pretty and so confidential that you would have admired her as I did, and betrayed her as I am doing, for the purpose of letting the world know what a very sensible thing an N.P.C. is. 'We girls all earn our own livings, some of us as book-keepers, some as stenographers, others as telegraphers and in various business ways, and we have to be out, rain or shine, six days in the week. You know what it is to manage dress skirts, parcels, purses, umbrellas and what not, all at the same time, with your hands done up in gloves until they're about as useful as a pair of tongs. Then getting in and out of street cars with muddy platforms, crossing sloppy streets and walking on slippery pavements result in the certainty that, no matter how careful you are, you will reach the office bedraggled and chilly, and cross in the bargain. Sitting all day in damp petticoats is bad for the health and trying to the temper. I caught fearful colds that way last winter, and paid out a big part of my salary in doctors' bills and cough medicines. I felt that I couldn't stand it again this winter, so I talked it up among the girls, and they all fell in with the idea that a club could be formed in which every girl would promise to wear bloomers and leggings under her rain coat. We shall keep a dress skirt at the office, of course. Nobody could object to a peg in some out-of-the-way corner for that purpose. One can hop into a skirt in a jiffy and be ready for the day's routine without the aqueous accompaniment of soaked hems and trailing sponges around one's feet.'