

"Yahoo literature"; they talk of it everywhere, and pass it round among their aristocratic acquaintances as "something too awful, my dear!—do read it!" But hardworking women, for whom life still means simple love and faith and duty, cling to what "A Man of Letters" rightly calls "the splendidly-wise and tender-hearted tradition of Scott, Dickens, and Thackeray"—and, inasmuch as the Workers always outnumber the Drones, it follows that where the prurient novel sells from three to five thousand copies, the clean, sane, wholesomely human book sells a hundred thousand. Dickens, called "vulgar" in his own day, and even now accused by many affected stylists of "slipshod English, faulty construction, gross exaggeration, and mawkish sentimentalism," still commands his millions of readers, for which those who wish to keep human nature at its best may very heartily thank God. Though, judging from contemporary criticism, it would seem that it is not a sign of an author's merit if his or her books are "popular." It is, on the contrary, according to reviewers, merely a proof of his or her incapacity, and of the "degraded" taste of the public. Yet if the "degradation" of the million continues to be manifested by a love for Dickens as a novelist, and for Shakespeare as a dramatist, it looks more like elevation to a higher grade of intellectuality than that possessed by the "cultured" and exclusive classes who delight in the ethics of the dustbin. The fact that the demand for the prurient novel exists chiefly among the "Upper Ten" shows us that the light seems to have settled on the top of the tree. Whether it will creep down and eat its way to the core of our noblest national ideals remains to be seen: we hope and think and pray it will not. But the current Press cannot be exonerated from blame in having largely assisted to bring about the state of things of which "A Man of Letters" so justly complains. By the constant discouragement of poets, it has well-nigh killed poetry, the highest of all arts; and when a widely-read journal like the "Daily Telegraph" gives special prominence to the following "advertisement" of a merely disgusting "literary sensation," we can hardly wonder if the degraded parties who are concerned in providing that sensation should find their imitators among semi-educated and weak-minded persons who imagine that impudence is genius.

"The public are accustomed to read love-writers after their deaths, but it is an unusual sensation to read them while both actors in the love drama are living. Not since D'Annunzio, in his book 'The Flame' revealed his love passages with Eleanor Duse, has such a literary sensation been roused in Italy as by 'Letters to Lydia,' which have just come out. They are impassioned love epistles, written in the purest and most charming style. The author is Edward Scarfoglio, one of Italy's best writers, and ex-husband of the well-known actress, Matilde Serao. Lydia is the beautiful actress, Lydia Gauthier, who, to make the affair more piquant, herself publishes the letters. She explains her action by saying that her friends had reproached her for her love of Scarfoglio, and that she publishes the letters as a justification to prove that after such wounding she could not help herself."—"Daily Telegraph," October 15th.

D'Annunzio, when he made capital out of the unselfish love of Eleanora Duse, showed himself as nothing but a "cad"—and the "beautiful actress" who now deliberately gives to the public love-letters addressed to herself alone, declares herself to be of a class unmentionable to ears polite. The point at issue, however, is that a reputable journal read by the British million should put this unsavoury item forward as "news" of first-class importance. Men and women who are so lost to a sense of decency as to publish each other's love-letters should rather be ignored, as the vulgarities they undoubtedly are. But if the Press encourages and applauds indecency and vulgarity, it will be difficult work for authors to keep up the high standard set before them by the unallied examples of Scott and Dickens. Publishers, of course, have a remedy for the evil: they can always refuse to publish objectionable books. It is vaguely understood that a law exists prohibiting the sale of indecent pictures and indecent literature; why is this law not brought to bear on certain cancerous specimens of the modern novel? Authors are often jeeringly told by their critics that they "take themselves too seriously," but it may be questioned whether they take

themselves seriously enough. For their responsibility is great. Their business is to elevate, inspire, and help their readers to a hopeful and healthy outlook on life and love, and the greatest reward that any writer, however gifted, can win is the knowledge that he or she has influenced even one, if no more than one, fellow-creature for good. On the other hand, no greater crime can well be committed by authors of books than the deliberate writing of prurient stuff calculated to injure and undermine the moral sense and perception of their readers, and one does not envy the condition of mind and conscience in which such authors exist, knowing, as they must know, that the world is the worse for their "fleshy" productions, when, if they were only true to their high vocation in the spirit of Scott and Dickens, it should be infinitely the better.

MARIE CORELLI.

ROBERT HUGH BENSON.

It is excellent to think that "The Bookman" has drawn public attention to a public danger. It does not seem to me that the primary danger lies so much in the subjects treated of as in the manner of treating them. To show a disgusting thing to be disgusting may be a fine and a necessary work; but to show it as being harmless or praiseworthy, or even as essentially attractive, appears to me simply diabolical. This, it seems to me, is what renders many moderately discreet books so extraordinarily injurious. It is not modesty that is wanted, but clearness of mind.

ROBERT HUGH BENSON.

A. W. PINERO.

I don't read much fiction nowadays, but I have made it my business to glance at some novels belonging to the Fleshy

School. One of these, written by a lady and put forward boldly as the work of the greatest living English novelist, would, in respect of its composition, reflect small credit upon a kitchenmaid. As to certain details of the story, few kitchenmaids, I trust, could be so depraved as to conceive them. Such productions are, in my opinion, most pernicious. They owe their vogue, which is unquestionable, to publishers without conscience and reviewers without honesty or without brains. Let intelligent and high-minded critics take a firm stand against this stuff; or, better still, let editors of first-class journals forbid all mention of it in the columns of their papers. Then it would be strangled in its birth.

ARTHUR W. PINERO.

ELLEN THORNEYCROFT FOWLER (Mrs. A. L. Felkin.)

I sympathise most heartily with all those who disapprove of "The Fleshy School of Fiction."

In the first place, I think that this school is artistically incorrect. Nowadays the passion for so-called "realism" is becoming a positive obsession; and modern writers seem to forget that it is possible to be so accurate as to become untrue. Art deals with effects rather than with details; and to paint a thing exactly as it is frequently makes it appear precisely as it isn't. For instance, a skilfully touched-up photograph is generally a far better portrait than a snap-shot taken by an amateur. A kodak in the experienced hands (say) of an irresponsible brother is a cruel and a fearsome thing; yet its results must in their very nature and essence be realistic; but they certainly are not artistic; and heaven forbid that they are true to life!

In the second (and more important) place, I deprecate the influence of "The

Fleshy School" because I consider that it inculcates the dangerous and depressing and deleterious habit of always looking at what is diseased and sinful and abnormal! Not being a Christian Scientist, I do not deny that there are such things in the world as disease and sin; but they are not the most important nor the most permanent things: disease and sin are the abnormal, while health and righteousness are the normal conditions of mankind as originally created. Thus why should fiction present to the world at large a false and pernicious view of life and human nature, by giving such undue prominence to the abnormal and the exceptional and the transitory? Being a practical person, I do not deny that in every inhabited house as at present constituted, there must be a coalhole and a dustbin. But what man in taking a photograph of his own home would place these "realities" in the foreground of the picture?

Those of us who are old-fashioned enough to read "Dickens" will realise that the dark savings of Mrs Wilfer with regard to her "under petticoat" are of wider and broader application than was dreamed of in that excellent lady's philosophy. Even though we "know it's there," we may find it "more delicate and less personal" on our part to avoid allusions to anything about which it is neither pleasant nor profitable to talk. And those of us who read a still more old-fashioned writer than Dickens, will remember that the best prescription ever written for the sound mind in the sound body ran as follows:—"Whatever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."

ELLEN THORNEYCROFT FOWLER (Mrs. A. L. Felkin.)

A Short Life, but a Merry One.

