

NOTES

Books—Good and Bad

Most people will pronounce off-hand that a book is good or bad; but it seems to us that the number of people whose opinion is worth taking is limited. As sheep follow one another through a gap, men and women, with traditional blindness will speak of the badness of the penny-dreadful, while they will put into the hands of their children some sugared, sickly, sentimental romance which is as bad for the mind as a diet of cream-puffs would be for the body. Before passing judgment on a book one ought to be able to grasp it in its entirety to weigh its purpose, to appreciate its message—if, indeed, a modern novel has one. One ought to be free from false prudery, able to take a comprehensive view of things as they are, accustomed to judge in the light of eternal principles. One must remember that unpleasant things have to be faced and taken into account, that to reveal the dangers of life is a part of true education, that only a false guide would be silent where it were better speak out, that to pretend that there are not pitfalls on the path is more immoral than to indicate them plainly. The *Catechism*, our books of devotion, our *New Testament* tell us, with salutary and necessary outspokenness of certain evil things which prudish persons would be more likely to think than speak about. But are they bad books because they do so? Only a fool would say that they are. Novels that deal with dangerous topics, such as prudes are silent about even when speech were silver, are therefore not to be condemned straightway as bad. The bad novel is not the one which paints vice in its true colors and conveys a warning against sin, but it is the one which makes vice attractive, even when it does so in veiled and suggestive words such as Mrs. Grundy's censorious eyes might approve of.

The Importance of a Shadow

Many years ago we were given, to help us towards proficiency in German, a book by Chiamisso which told a wonderful tale about one Peter Schlemil, who got into all sorts of trouble because he sold his shadow. If you think that losing one's shadow makes no difference you had better read about Herr Peter. All right-minded persons recognise the importance of a shadow and reverence their umbral outline as Tim Healy once insisted that the equator ought to be revered. In the down-gone years of boyhood, we lived under the shadow of the hill on which the Battle of Ross was fought, and if we were proud of it, we did not boast of it half as much as did our neighbors by the Slaney, who could hardly ask for the daily paper without reminding the public that they were born under the shadow of Vinegar Hill. In later days we found traces of this shadowitis in New Zealand, especially in Taranaki, where many good friends of ours take a legitimate pride in living by day and sleeping by night under the shadow of Mount Egmont, loveliest and noblest of Maoriland mountains. If Peter Schlemil was cursed in that he had no shadow, how happy are the Pungarehuites, and the Okatoites, and the Opunakeites, and the Pihamaitees, and the Kapongaites, and the Stratfordites in that they have two shadows—one personal and the other provincial, videlicet, the shadow of the man and the shadow of the mountain. The chest-expanding pride of the Opunakeites, or the Kapongaites, or the Elthamites, in their magnificent new schools, is something that passes with time. But their pride in their mountain shadow is like the just cause that goes on for ever. And why not?

Slang

When Bishop Wilberforce, remonstrating with a British workman for swearing, said: "My good man,

where on earth did you learn that language?" the reply was: "Yer 'aven't an 'ope, guv'nor. It's a gift." So it is with slang. Those of us who have not the gift are content to sit quietly and wonder at the vigor and picturesqueness of the new words that flow from the lips of the eloquent exponents of the outraged tongue, and we are without either hope or desire to attain the fluency which strikes us dumb. New Zealanders, in some instances, have the gift. Australians have it more fully developed, as witness the glowing pages of *The Sentimental Bloke*, or of *Ginger Mick*. But to America goes the belt, without a moment's uncertainty. Examine and study at your leisure the following account of an Irishman's meeting with a daughter of Uncle Sam:

It was of a certainty Miss New York. She burst right in on top of me, and at a first glance I saw she positively exuded First Avenue from the top of her turban-like swathed head to the toe of her dainty shoe. I stood up in hesitation, not recognising her. She introduced herself, and when she had unwound the yashmak that concealed all her features save the point of a powdered nose, my memory called up a little girl I had known years ago, who bore a resemblance to the person who stood before me.

"You are very much changed," I said apologetically.

"Yep, ain't I. But you've sure changed yourself. Why, I wouldn't know you from a hole in the wall."

"A hole in the wall!" This set me thinking. Why a hole in the wall?

"What hole in what wall?" I asked.

"Oh, any old hole. See here, guy! You ain't goin' to put it sarcastic over me. I'm here to tell you that."

I disclaimed all intentions of sarcasm, and protested that I was merely a seeker after truth.

"Sure," she replied, "truth's dandy."

Then she sat down, and we began to talk, or, to put it accurately, she began to talk, and continued to talk. She rambled on interminably, and by careful attention I was able to translate most of what she said. I put in a remark now and again to show that I was a dutiful listener, and to it she responded at one time by "Yah," at another by "Yep," and at still another by "Sure thing."

Suddenly she stopped.

"Got a Morley and Hodges?" she asked.

"No," I replied, "a second-hand Ford is even beyond my income."

"I ain't talking of automobiles, but of cigarettes," she snapped.

I unearthed some, not Morley and Hodges, and as she lay back in her chair watching the smoke rings fade towards the ceiling she continued:

"Got any street cars in this little outfit?"

"Oh! yes," I replied, "we have horse-trams."

"Didn't see them to-day at any rate. Why! I'm sure footsore slogging around."

"Perhaps," I said, by way of explanation, "the horse is sick."

"Yep."

Up to this I had been listening to a monologue. I determined to assert myself, and, seeker after truth that I had proclaimed myself, I began to ask some questions.

"How long have you been in New York?"

"Twenny years," she replied.

"Twenny years," I repeated, "how long would that be?"

She looked at me with disdainful contempt.

"Didn't I say twenny years?"

"You did," I replied, "but I don't understand."

"Why! twenny years is twenny years, t-w-e-n-t-y years; get me?"

And then I went on: "I suppose you have made and saved quite a lot of money in that time?"

"Made, yep; saved, nix."

"How's that?" I inquired.