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Gossip About a Few Books

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GOSSIP ABOUT A FEW BOOKS.

MR. MESSENGER :

Who can have written the little book called "CONQUEST AND SELF-CONQUEST?"* I met with it lately in a Richmond bookstore; and read it with a delight that no book of its class has inspired me with, since *Sandford and Merton*, *The Parents' Assistant*, *Popular Tales*; and the best of Miss Sedgwick's juvenile narratives. Amid the numberless and worthless tomes of trash that have in recent times superseded those glories of English Literature just named, it is meat and drink to one who relishes an exquisite blending of the sweet with the useful, to find such a treat as this "Conquest and Self-Conquest." It is a story of an American boy, who, after an early education at home, under the eye of a judiciously fond mother, went, at 11 years of age, to a grammar-school: fought, was beaten,—grew stronger in body and principles,—won the heart of his adversary,—entered the Navy,—and there in a career of virtue and honor, proved how unnecessary vice or ferocity is, to a high place among the sons of maritime glory. Except Miss Edgworth and the author of *Sandford and Merton*, I do not know a writer who has so happily portrayed true heroism. I pray you, tell me who she is? A woman, certainly; as well from the delicacy of some turns and touches, impracticable to a man, as from one or two slight incoherences, which his more mathematical nature would have avoided. Thus, in September or October, 1811, a certain adventure occurs (p. 61): eighteen months afterwards, is another incident: and then (p. 105) the succeeding March is in 1812, not long before our last war!—At least one other inaccuracy might be found, by a person who chooses to hunt out a bit of chaff in a bushel of wheat. Whoever does it will surely deserve, like him of old, to be rewarded with the chaff for his pains. The book seems in the main, above the powers of my favorite, Miss Sedgwick: yet it contains a vulgarism to which I grieve to say she is addicted—the transitive verb *to leave*, used without expressing its object: thus, (p. 93) "readiness *to leave* whenever," &c. Fie, fie, Mrs. Nameless!

Does it not excite your ire, Mr. Messenger, to

* Conquest and Self-Conquest; or, Which makes the Hero? pp. 216, 12 mo.

see the glorious works I have mentioned, shoved aside or overlaid by the trash I alluded to? It excites mine. How wroth it makes me, to enter a bookstore, and on asking for *Sandford and Merton*, the *Parents' Assistant*, *Popular Tales*, or any other of the inimitable Miss Edgworth's productions, or those of Miss Sedgwick, or *Evenings at Home*, or Sargeant's *Temperance Tales*,—to be told they are not there, and to have Peter Parley, or Mary Howitt, or Sir Lytton Bulwer, or a dozen besides, too new and poor to be named, pushed in my face!

I always long to serve such a bookseller as Alcibiades is reported by Plutarch once to have served a schoolmaster in Athens. You remember Alcibiades—young, handsome, rich and spoiled, so that he could take strange liberties with every body. He entered a school one day, and asked the teacher for Homer's works. "I have them not," said the pedagogue. "Have n't got Homer!" replied Alcibiades: "then take that!"—and gave him a rousing box o' the ear, before all his scholars. I am very much inclined to treat parents in the same way, who confess that *they* are without the same books.

Considering the incredible multitude of books, and other kinds of reading, that are hourly crowding into the world, the great aim of all except first rate geniuses should be, methinks, to direct the public mind continually to the acknowledged standards of excellence, and divert public favor from inferior works. The classics of our language should live perpetually in the critic's page; and his stiletto* should be busy in exterminating the insect swarms, which every day brings forth, and which a day, thank Heaven! for the most part consigns to oblivion—and so saves him the trouble. And if our periodicals would copy ten times what they do, from the great Masters, and exclude nine-tenths of the so-called "original" matter they publish,—at least one reader would be very much obliged to them.

Dickens. His new assault upon our country, in the January number of the *Foreign Quarterly Review*,† is the most venomously spiteful that he has made. Yet it has a pungency that tickles,—a frequent happiness of expression that strikes and pleases,—amid all the injustice, and the still greater malignity in which it abounds. Nor is it always unjust. Though, upon the subject of slavery, and its incidents, Mr. Dickens exaggerates and falsifies more than Mrs. Trollope, or any travelling book-wright since, and approaches the brutal injustice of Parkinsson, Fidler, and the other early tourists who slandered us,—yet, to much that he says on other topics, our plea ought to be "guilty." Boastfulness about our country,—excessive thirst for money,—a consequent neglect of many useful

* Is not t'other end of the *stylus* called *stiletto*? Of course I do not mean an assassin's dagger.

† In an article entitled "The Poets of America."

things which tend not only to comfort, but to virtue, and even to Freedom—lawless violence, under the decrees of that vile usurper, Judge Lynch—and perhaps above all, the foulness of our newspaper press,—are sins for which Mr. Dickens does not give us one lash amiss. Truth never outwent fiction farther, than two village newspapers in Tennessee outgo Boz's Eatanswill Gazette and Eatanswill Independent, in violence and scurrility. And the daily observation of us all,—even daily remarks now current among us,—show that our Newspaper Press generally is, and that we feel it to be, worse than Dickens' worst representations of it. It was with difficulty, three days ago, that I could get a gentleman of very high standing for intelligence and honor, (no dyspeptic, either, nor otherwise morbidly inclined,) to except the National Intelligencer, the New York Evening Post, the Boston Courier, and one or two others, from the general censure for unfairness, vulgarity and bitterness. We have not taken the criticisms of foreigners (including Boz) upon our manners and country, as we ought to have done. We have been too thinskin—too resentful. The uses of censure, like those of Adversity, are sweet, if rightly taken. "Though like a toad, ugly and venomous," it "wears yet a precious jewel in its head," to such as know how to find that jewel. If, instead of bristling up at those ill-natured criticisms, we had carefully examined ourselves to see how far they were just, and to mend our ways accordingly, it would have been wiser. Pictures that others draw of us, are in fact the very fulfilment of Burns' prayer which is in every body's mouth:—

"O would some Power the giftie gie us,
To see oursel as others see us!
It would frae many a blunder free us,
And foolish notion."

By flying into a passion at such pictures, we become unable to see what truth they contain; and lose all the benefit of having the poet's prayer granted. By-the-by, if our foreign monitors wish us to profit by their schoolings, they ought to infuse more kindness into them. Advice, to man, woman or child, is sure to be rendered powerless by spite or arrogance in the giver!—Suppose Mr. Dickens in his Notes for General Circulation, and in his late Review, had substituted kindness, and that good-humored banter in which he excels, for the snarling tone in which he utters his well deserved blame of our filthy spitting habit—of our fast eating—and our other peccadilloes?—why, he would have done more for our amendment than all our own lecturers and satirists combined; and at the same time have doubled his popularity in America, instead of annihilating it.

I do not see what we gain, or that we at all refute the foreign calumniators, by shewing their own countries to be worse than ours. It would poorly mitigate the evil to Virginia, of having

60,000 white people above 20 years of age, who cannot read or write,—to know that England has two millions. It is wiser to compare her with the 4,500 of Massachusetts, or the 44,000 of New York, or the 33,000 of Pennsylvania: the first having as many, the second thrice, and the third twice as many white inhabitants as Virginia has.

A word more of Mr. Dickens' Article. I am glad of his severity (if it were less ill-natured) towards the poetasters, whom I have long ranked among the country's nuisances. Who can dissent from the justice of his animadversions upon the Epic yclept "Washington,"—the common-place tameness of Pierpont,—the "feeble verbosity" of "the American Hemans,"—and the utter inanity of ninety-nine hundredths of those newspaper and magazine rhymesters,—clerks, foredoomed their father's souls to cross, and penning stanzas when they should engross? Rhymesters, to whom Oblivion has a fair, indefeasible claim; and of whom Mr. Griswold vainly endeavors to defraud her, in his late collection of their indiscretions.*—But towards Hail Columbia and the Star-Spangled Banner,—towards Drake's American Flag, and Trumbull's McFingal, Mr. Dickens has not been just, as any jury of sensible Englishmen could easily be satisfied by an examination of them. To six American Poets, he has dealt out a measure of praise with which even themselves would probably be satisfied: Alfred B. Street, Mrs. Brooks of Louisville ("Maria Del Occidente"), Ralph Waldo Emerson, Halleck, Bryant, and Longfellow. "Halleck," he says, "is the author of a noble lyric, 'Marco Bozzaris.' Had he written nothing more, he must have earned a high popularity; but he has written much more, equally distinguished by a refined taste and cultivated judgment."—"We are too much pressed for space to afford room for the whole of this poem, and are unwilling to injure its effect by an isolated passage. The chrysolite must not be broken."—I wish his praises even of the three whom he most admires, had not been alloyed by some qualifications that savor of the ill-nature and illiberality that pervade nearly the whole "Article." Mr. Dickens ends with a paragraph powerfully true. Though I fear its effect in America will be marred by its coming from him, and by its repulsive context, yet quote it I must, for the sake of its truth. How impressively it reinforces the (entirely too long) essays of Mr. Simms, in your January and March numbers!

"We repeat," says Mr. Dickens in the Foreign Quarterly, "that it is matter of regret, and not of censure, that America should be destitute of a national literature. The circumstances through which she has hitherto struggled, and to which she continues to be exposed, are fatal to its cultivation. With the literature of England pouring in upon her, relieved of the charges of copyright and taxation, it is impossible there can be any effectual encouragement for

* The Poets and Poetry of America. By Rufus W. Griswold.

native talent. Literature is, consequently, the least tempting of all conceivable pursuits; and men must float with the stream, and live as they can with the society in which they have been educated. Even were the moral materials by which this vast deposit of human dregs is supplied, other than they are—purer, wiser and more refined,—still America could not originate or support a literature of her own, so long as English productions can be imported free of cost, and circulated through the Union at a cheaper rate than the best productions of the country. The remedy for this is obvious, and its necessity has long been felt on both sides of the water,—a law for the protection of International Copyright. Such a law would be valuable to us, simply in a commercial point of view—but to America its advantages would be of incalculably greater importance. It would lay the foundation of a comprehensive intellectual movement which never can be accomplished without its help; and by which alone, she can ever hope to consolidate and dignify her institutions. We trust the day is not far distant when the unanimous demand of the enlightened of both countries will achieve a consummation so devoutly to be wished for.”

Good bye, Mr. Messenger.

Louisa, March, 1844.

Q. Q.
