

## OPINIONS.

It has been occasionally remarked by people who are not wholly in sympathy with the methods and devices of our time that this is an age of keen intellectual curiosity. We have scant leisure and scant liking for hard study, and we no longer recognize the admirable qualities of a wise and contented ignorance. Accordingly, there has been invented for us in late years a *via media*, a something which is neither light nor darkness, a short cut to that goal which we used to be assured had no royal road for languid feet to follow. The apparent object of the new system is to enable us to live like gentlemen or like gentlewomen on other people's ideas; to spare us the labor and exhaustion incidental to forming opinions of our own by giving us the free use of other people's opinions. There is a charming simplicity in the scheme, involving as it does no effort of thought or mental adjustment, which cannot fail heartily to recommend it to the general public, while the additional merit of cheapness endears it to its thrifty upholders. We are all accustomed to talk vaguely about "questions of burning interest," and "the absorbing problems of the day." Some of us even go so far as to have a tolerably clear notion of what these questions and problems are. It is but natural, then, that we should take a lively pleasure, not in the topics themselves, about which we care very little, but in the persuasions and convictions of our neighbors, about which we have learned to care a great deal. Discussions rage on every side of us, and the easy, offhand, cock-sure verdicts which are so frankly confided to the world have become a recognized source of popular education and enlightenment.

I have sometimes thought that this feverish exchange of opinions received a fatal impetus from that curious epidemic

rife in England a few years ago, and known as the "Lists of a Hundred Books." Never before had such an admirable opportunity been offered to people to put on what are commonly called "frills," and it must be confessed they made the most of it. The Koran, the Analects of Confucius, Spinoza, Herodotus, Demosthenes, Xenophon, Lewis's History of Philosophy, the Saga of Burnt Njal, Locke's Conduct of the Understanding, — such, and such only, were the works unflinchingly urged upon us by men whom we had considered, perhaps, as human as ourselves, whom we might almost have suspected of solacing their lighter moments with an occasional study of Rider Haggard or Gaboriau. If readers could be made by the simple process of deluging the world with good counsel, these arbitrary lists would have marked a new intellectual era. As it was, they merely excited a lively but unfruitful curiosity. "Living movements," Cardinal Newman reminds us, "do not come of commitments." I knew, indeed, one impetuous student who rashly purchased the Grammar of Assent because she saw it in a list; but there was a limit even to her ardor, for eighteen months afterwards the leaves were still uncut. It is a striking proof of Mr. Arnold's inspired rationality that, while so many of his countrymen were instructing us in this peremptory fashion, he alone, who might have spoken with authority, declined to add his name and list to the rest. It was an amusing game, he said, but he felt no disposition to play it.

Some variations of this once popular pastime have lingered even to our day. Lists of the best American authors, lists of the best foreign authors, lists of the best ten books published within a decade, have appeared occasionally in our journals, while a list of books which promi-

nent people intended or hoped to read "in the near future" filled us with respect for such heroic anticipations. Ten-volume works of the severest character counted as trifles in these prospective studies. At present it is true that the World's Fair has given a less scholastic tone to newspaper discussions. We hear comparatively little about the *Analects of Confucius*, and a great deal about the White City and the Department of Anthropology. Perhaps it is better to tell the public your impressions of the Fair than to confide to it your favorite authors. One revelation is as valuable as the other, but it is possible, with caution, to talk about Chicago in terms that will give general satisfaction. It is not possible to express literary, artistic, or national preferences without exposing one's self to vigorous reproaches from people who hold different views. I was once lured by a New York periodical into a number of harmless confidences, unlikely, it seemed to me, to awaken either interest or indignation. The questions asked were of the mildly searching order, like those which delighted the hearts of children, when I was a very little girl, in our "Mental Photograph Albums:" "Who is your favorite character in fiction?" "Who is your favorite character in history?" "What do you consider the finest attribute of man?" Having amiably responded to a portion of these inquiries, I was surprised and flattered, some weeks later, at seeing myself described in a daily paper—on the strength, too, of my own confessions—as irrational, morbid, and cruel; excusable only on the score of melancholy surroundings and a sickly constitution. And the delightful part of it was that I had apparently revealed all this myself. "Do not contend in words about things of no consequence," counsels St. Teresa, who carried with her to the cloister wisdom enough to have kept all of us poor worldlings out of trouble.

The system by which opinions of little

or no value are assiduously collected and generously distributed is far too complete to be baffled by ignorance or indifference. The enterprising editor or journalist who puts the question is very much like Sir Charles Napier; he wants an answer of some kind, however incapable we may be of giving it. A list of the queries propounded to me in the last year or so recalls painfully my own inexperience and simplicity. These are a few which I remember: What was my opinion of college training as a preparation for literary work? What was my opinion of Greek comedy? Was I a pessimist or an optimist, and why? What were my favorite flowers, and did I cultivate them? What books did I think young children ought *not* to read? At what age and under what impulses did I consider children first began to swear? What especial and serious studies would I propose for married women? What did I consider most necessary for the all-around development of the coming young man? It appeared useless to urge in reply to these questions that I had never been to college, never read a line of Greek, never been married, never taken charge of children, and knew nothing whatever about developing young men. I found that my ignorance on all these points was assumed from the beginning, but that this fact only made my opinions more interesting and piquant to people as ignorant as myself. Neither did it ever occur to my correspondents that if I had known anything about Greek comedy or college training, I should have endeavored to turn my knowledge into money by writing articles of my own, and should never have been so lavish as to give my information away.

That these public discussions or symposiums are, however, an occasional comfort to their participants was proven by the alacrity with which a number of writers came forward, some years ago, to explain to the world why English fiction was not a finer and stronger arti-

cle. Innocent and short-sighted readers, wedded to the obvious, had foolishly supposed that modern novels were rather forlorn because the novelists were not able to write better ones. It therefore became the manifest duty of the novelists to notify us clearly that they were able to write very much better ones, but that the public would not permit them to do it. Like Dr. Holmes, they did not venture to be as funny as they could. "Thoughtful readers of mature age," we were told, "are perishing for accuracy." This accuracy they were, one and all, prepared to furnish without stint, but were prohibited lest "the clash of broken commandments" should be displeasing to polite female ears. A great deal of angry sentiment was exchanged on this occasion, and a great many original and valuable suggestions were offered by way of relief. It was an admirable opportunity for any one who had written a story to confide to the world "the theory of his art," to make self-congratulatory remarks upon his own "standpoint," and to deprecate the stupid propriety of the public. When the echoes of these passionate protestations had died into silence, we took comfort in thinking that Hawthorne had not delayed to write *The Scarlet Letter* from a sensitive regard for his neighbors' opinions; and that two great nations, unvexed by "the clash of broken commandments," had received the book as a heritage of infinite beauty and delight. Art needs no apologist, and our great literary artist, using his chosen material after his chosen fashion, heedless alike of new theories and of ancient prejudices, gave to the world a masterpiece of fiction which the world was not too stupid to hold dear.

The pleasure of imparting opinions in print is by no means confined to professionals, to people who are assumed to know something about a subject because they have been more or less occupied with it for years. On the contrary, the

most lively and spirited discussions are those to which the general public lends a willing hand. Almost any topic will serve to arouse the argumentative zeal of the average reader, who rushes to the fray with that joyous alacrity which is so exhilarating to the peaceful looker-on. The disputed pronunciation or spelling of a word, if ventilated with spirit in a literary journal, will call forth dozens of letters, all written in the most serious and urgent manner, and all apparently emanating from people of rigorous views and limitless leisure. If a letter here or there — a *u*, perhaps, or an *l* — can only be elevated to the dignity of a national issue, then the combatants don their coats of mail, unfurl their countries' flags, and wrangle merrily and oft to the sounds of martial music. If, on the other hand, the subject of contention be a somewhat obvious statement, as, for example, that the work of women in art, science, and literature is inferior to the work of men, it is amazing and gratifying to see the number of disputants who promptly prepare to deny the undeniable, and lead a forlorn hope to failure. The impassive reader who first encounters a remark of this order is apt to ask himself if it be worth while to state so explicitly what everybody already knows; and behold! a week has not passed over his head before a dozen angry protestations are hurled into print. These meet with sarcastic rejoinders. The editor of the journal, who is naturally pleased to secure copy on such easy terms, adroitly stirs up slumbering sentiment; and time, temper, and ink are wasted without stint by people who are the only converts of their own eloquence. "Embrace not the blind side of opinions," says Sir Thomas Browne, who, born in a contentious age, with "no genius to disputes," preached mellifluously of the joys of toleration and of the discomforts of inordinate zeal.

Not very long ago, I was asked by a sprightly little paper to please say in its

columns whether I thought new books or old books better worth the reading. It was the kind of question which an ordinary lifetime spent in hard study would barely enable one to answer; but I found, on examining some back numbers of the journal, that it had been answered a great many times already, and apparently without the smallest hesitation. Correspondents had come forward to overturn our ancient idols, with no sense of insecurity or misgiving. One breezy reformer from Nebraska sturdily maintained that Mrs. Hodgson Burnett wrote much better stories than did Jane Austen; while another intrepid person — a Virginian — pronounced The Vicar of Wakefield “dull and namby-pamby,” declaring that “one half the reading world would agree with him if they dared.” Perhaps they would, — who knows? — but it is the privilege of that half of the reading world to be silent on the subject. Simple preference is a good and sufficient motive in determining one’s own choice of books, but it does not warrant a reader in conferring his impressions upon the world. Even the involuntary humor of such disclosures cannot win them forgiveness; for the tendency to permit the individual spirit to run amuck through criticism is resulting in a lower standard of correctness. “The true value of souls,” says Mr. Pater, “is in proportion to what they can admire;” and the popular notion that everything is a matter of opinion, and that one opinion is pretty nearly as good as another, is immeasurably hurtful to that higher law by which we seek to rise steadily to an appreciation of whatever is best in the world. Nor can we acquit our modern critics of fostering this self-assertive ignorance, when they so lightly ignore those indestructible standards by which alone we are able to measure the difference between big and little things. It seems a clever and a daring feat to set up models of our own; but it is in reality much easier than toil-

ing after the old unapproachable models of our forefathers. The originality which dispenses so blithely with the past is powerless to give us a correct estimate of anything that we enjoy in the present.

It is but a short step from the offhand opinions of scientific or literary men to the offhand opinions of the crowd. When the novelists had finished telling us, in the newspapers and magazines, what they thought about one another, and especially what they thought about themselves, it then became the turn of novel-readers to tell us what *they* thought about fiction. This sudden invasion of the Vandals left to the novelists but one resource, but one undisputed privilege. They could permit us to know just how they came to write their books; in what moments of inspiration, under what benign influences, they gave to the world those priceless pages.

“Sing, God of Love, and tell me in what  
dearth

Thrice-gifted Snellicci came on earth!”

After which, unless the unsilenced public comes forward to say just how and when and where they read the volumes, they must acknowledge themselves routed from the field.

*La vie de parade* has reached its utmost license when a Prime Minister of England is asked to tell the world — after the manner of old Father William — how he has kept so hale; when the Prince of Wales is requested to furnish a list of readable books; when an eminent clergyman is bidden to reveal to us why he has never been ill; when the wife of the President of the United States is questioned as to how she cooks her Thanksgiving dinner; when married women in private life draw aside the domestic veil to tell us how they have brought up their daughters, and unmarried women betray to us the secret of their social success. Add to these sources of information the opinions of poets upon education, and of educators upon poetry; of churchmen upon politics, and of politicians upon the church;

of journalists upon art, and of artists upon journalism; and we must in all sincerity acknowledge that this is an enlightened age. "The voice of the great multitude," to quote from a popular agitator, "rings in our startled ears;" and its eloquence is many-sided and discursive. Albertus Magnus, it is said,

once made a head which talked. That was an exceedingly clever thing for him to do. But the head was so delighted with its accomplishment that it talked all the time. Whereupon, tradition holds, St. Thomas Aquinas grew impatient, and broke it into pieces. St. Thomas was a scholar, a philosopher, and a saint.

*Agnes Repplier.*

## BRONSON ALCOTT.

"AN odd thought strikes me," exclaimed Madame de Staël: "we shall receive no letters in the grave!" Nor, it is to be presumed, do they read books in the grave. But if it were otherwise, if there were only some kind of celestial or infernal express by which one could communicate with the departed, it would be a great pleasure to transmit two neatly printed volumes<sup>1</sup> to that quiet corner in what, we trust, is another and better world, where Mr. Alcott tries the patience of Plato, or buttonholes his especial favorite, Jamblichus. It was the ambition of Mr. Alcott's life to be taken seriously, and his two biographers, both of whom were his disciples while he was on earth, have taken him very seriously and at considerable length. There is even a hint (it would be invidious to call it a threat) of a possible more to come, for in the preface it is said, "There is ample material remaining in the possession of the editors of this book for a more detailed history of the Concord School of Philosophy and Mr. Alcott's connection therewith." "But," it is added, and wisely, "these pages present all that now seems to be needed to portray our friend as he lived,—in youth, in middle life, and in serene old age."

The editors do indeed present the raw

<sup>1</sup> *A. Bronson Alcott. His Life and Philosophy.* By F. B. SANBORN and WILLIAM T.

material from which a correct view of Mr. Alcott is to be gathered, and their work is done with much literary skill and with a becoming modesty on their own part; but nevertheless it is not easy to discover what manner of man Mr. Alcott was, nor to explain the glaring contradiction between Mr. Alcott as he appeared to the select few and Mr. Alcott as he appeared to the many, more especially as it is the latter appearance which seems to be confirmed by his published works. It is well known how highly Mr. Emerson valued him. Alcott might be described as the one, the single subject upon which Emerson permitted himself to be extravagant. Thus he wrote to Carlyle: "Alcott gives me the same glad astonishment that he should exist which the world does." And on other occasions he said or wrote of Mr. Alcott: "The most extraordinary man and the highest genius of the time. He is a great man,—the god with the herdsmen of Admetus." "His conversation is sublime. He is pure intellect." Professor Harris speaks of Mr. Alcott as his "spiritual father." But neither in the Orphic Sayings, nor in the Tablets, nor elsewhere in what the sage left behind him, can this greatness of intellect be discovered. Moreover, we have a singular and weighty piece of testimony concerning the slight-

HARRIS. In two volumes. Boston: Roberts Brothers. 1893.