

THE CONTRIBUTORS' CLUB

THE DISCROWNING OF AUTHORS

CRITICISM, like most things, is mel-
lowed by the advance of time; but there
is one point in which it retains even to-
day a great deal of its primitive cruelty.
It cannot forgive an author's inferior-
ity to himself; it is alert for every token
of the decline of his powers, and it is
eager to declare that the falling-off is
irreparable. The living English man
of letters best known to the outside
world is subjected to a fate not unlike
that which he has touchingly sung in
his *Gentlemen-Rankers*. The greatest of
the women novelists of contemporary
England is accused of having 'written
herself out.' An English dramatist
and lyric poet of rare gifts is spoken of
in language which implies the efface-
ment of his power. The greatest, or
all but the greatest, of contemporary
German dramatists is thought to be
the survivor of his own genius.

Let an author publish two or three
works of a stamp inferior to early work
or public expectation, and the cry of
decadence is heard on all sides. The
fact is pointed out with great regret,
though with singular promptitude;
and the news is sped from mouth to
mouth, from press to press, from na-
tion to nation, with that cheerful alac-
rity with which we share with one an-
other the sources of our own depression.
The appeal of such a fact (or fiction) to
ordinary human nature is intelligible
enough. We regard it as an attestation
on the part of destiny of that early-
formed and cherished intuition of ours,
that nobody is after all much better or
abler than ourselves. We are rejoiced
to learn that the instances of apparent

exception to this wholesome and grati-
fying law were after all illusory. We
are thankful to Providence for the just
retribution which an author suffers for
the affront to mediocrity implied in
the previous display of a presumptuous
superiority. Another motive works to
the same end. The mere pleasure of
reading books — a tame affair at the
best — is as nothing compared with
the two great excitements of making
and breaking a literary idol; and when
an author's fame has put it out of his
power to oblige the public with the first
of these sensations, it is only fair that
he should indemnify it with the other.
Anything rather than the tameness of
established worship. Every authority
tends to enlarge its own functions: the
public's power in authorship is not to
write, but to crown and discrown; and
it will multiply occasions for the exer-
cise of these privileges.

What do we ourselves gain by our
prompt consignment of living authors
to the infirmary or asylum? Let us
suppose the facts to be on our side. Is
the world better off for the demonstra-
tion that it has one great man the less,
and are our lives richer for the know-
ledge that one source of pure and re-
fined pleasure is permanently exhaust-
ed? Is genius so superabundant on the
planet that we should run hither and
thither to spread abroad the glad tid-
ings of its depleted quantity or its
shortened span? Is any nation, is any
age, so affluent in intellectual splendor
that men should be not only forward
to announce, but eager to anticipate,
the obscuration of any brilliant in its
tiara of majestic lights?

But this is by no means the most

serious aspect of the case; the question is one of justice and humanity. It is one thing to say that one book, two books, three books, are secondary or weak or bad; it is quite another thing to declare that a mind is impaired. It is one thing to weigh the present, and another to prejudge the future. Inequality of performance need not imply decay of faculty; and the inequality may often be referred quite as justly to the fluctuations of a variable and volatile public opinion as to changes in the actual quality of the work. The breath of the public acts upon the reputation of a contemporary like wind upon a torch, now fanning it to feverish and unnatural brightness, now reducing it to extreme and morbid obscurity. Again, is it fair to any man to pit him against himself, to indict him at the bar of his own past, to impale him, as it were, upon his own achievements? Ought it to be as hard for a man to live down a triumph as a crime?

In pointing out distinctions between this and that product, and this and that period of an author's career, it is well for us to bear in mind that there is another old-fashioned distinction worthy perhaps of our serious and self-probing meditation, — the distinction between rudeness and courtesy. Were the imputations of decay or dotage uttered in a London or New York drawing-room in the hearing of their objects, they would brand the speakers as forever after ineligible to the society of well-bred men. The very critics concerned would be the first to rebuke. But is not any word uttered on a well-known living writer in a magazine or newspaper of wide circulation a word uttered to all intents and purposes in the writer's presence? The drawing-room is a wide one, certainly; but the acoustic properties are wonderfully good. Are gentlemen to be publicly and openly told by other gentlemen

that their minds are falling into decay?

The slightest doubt should act in such a case as a seal on all gentle lips; there is only one thing that should seal them more firmly than the slightest doubt, and that thing is the fullest certainty. If it were indeed true that one of the most painful of human possibilities had realized itself in one of the brightest of living souls; if there were no doubt that his May of life had fallen into the sere and yellow leaf, that the prime of his years was the old age of his genius and his power, what louder call could there be to every Christian and chivalric and manly impulse in the human heart to drop the veil of its reverent silence between its own bowed and humbled thought and a calamity too sacred even for sympathetic words? Let us appropriate a part of that fine instinct, which forbids us even to canvass in thought, much more to exploit in public, the failing powers and growing infirmities of our parents and benefactors, to the defense of those other purveyors of noble and exquisite service to whom the lives of all of us are so deeply indebted for refinement, interest, and cheer. Let their misfortune be a sanctuary, impenetrable to any harsher sound than the tender and grateful acclaim in which a sorrowing world records its sense of their excellence and glory.

I have permitted myself to assume for the moment the reality of the deterioration; let us glance at those other cases in which it is largely a figment arising from the pessimism of critics and the levity of newspapers. Where this is true, it is well to remember that great authors hold in their hands the option of requiting our light and thoughtless speech with the most effectual of all revenges, — the revenge of their silence. Could they forget their humanity and self-restraint, other forms of retaliation might be open to

their use. Critics who assail or decry the masters of literature might read with profit the account of Coriolanus amid the teasing servants in the hall of Aufidius; or, better yet perhaps, they might recur to another story on which the vividness of childish memory has impressed, it may be, a more poignant emphasis. Let the sons of the Philistines beware how they lead out, for the pastime of a gaping populace, the infirm and despised Samson, weary and bowed perhaps with the grinding of sordid corn for profane appetites in their commercial mills; let them beware how they make a mock in the market-place of his relaxed sinews and his shrunken loins; lest the hour come when they turn with wonder and fear to behold the pillars of their vain and idle temple reeling and crashing into nameless fragments before the wrath of his revived and invincible power!

PARABLES IN MOTORS

THE other day I was escorting an elderly philanthropist across a crowded street. She is a lady of vigorous opinions and free speech, gems of which I herewith string together without exhibiting the thread of my own colorless rejoinders.

'Did you ever see anything so outrageous as these motors!' she exclaimed in righteous wrath, as we just escaped being crushed between a taxi-cab and a huge touring-car. 'Automobiles are such insolent advertisements of wealth! I don't see how their owners can endure being either hated or envied by that portion of the world that has not yet lost the use of its legs. For every human being automobiles kill, they create a socialist. They are vulgar, hideous, death-dealing machines, put in the ignorant hands of the fools who own them and the knaves who run them. Now look at those little child-

ren trying to cross the street, — and that poor old lady! I declare the chauffeur is simply chasing her for his own cruel sport, — hunting her as he would a fox, and blowing his horn.' Then, — in italics, — '*I can't see how a self-respecting person with any love or regard for humanity can own a motor.*'

The next time I saw my vindictive friend she was tucked up in borrowed plumage, and comfortably installed in the limousine of an acquaintance who had kindly placed her car at our disposal to visit some distant charitable institution of which we were both directors. It was my friend's maiden trip in an automobile, and as we bowled gayly along she seemed to have forgotten entirely our last meeting and conversation.

'I must say the motion of these cars is delightful,' she said, sinking back among the cushions with an air of perfect ease and familiarity. 'How safe we seem! I really think it would do no harm if the chauffeur should go a little faster. Do look at those stupid women rushing across the street like frightened hens! I should think they'd see that we're not going to run into them. Now look at those children! It's outrageous that they should make it so hard for the chauffeur to avoid running over them. If we killed one of those fool hardy little idiots, people would blame *us*, and it would n't be our fault at all, — it would be simply a case of suicide.'

I acquiesced in her views, as I had done once before.

'After all, there is a great deal to be said for these motors,' she continued judiciously. 'They are not only perfectly delightful to ride in, but they make all kinds of difficult things easy, and really most of the people who own them are apt to be very considerate to those who are less fortunate. There are certainly two sides to automobiling.'