

GEORGE MEREDITH AND THOMAS HARDY



ENGLISH authors nowadays have little to complain of in the treatment which they receive at the hands of the American publishers. Indeed, if there need be any complaint it might come as a protest from the reader's side against the publishers who make a little literary tin god of every new author who succeeds in "catching on," by dressing his books out in "new and uniform editions." The new edition of the works of George Meredith, however, is calculated to give satisfaction to all parties. This edition in sixteen volumes, published by the Messrs. Scribner, contains Mr. Meredith's recent revision, and there we might register a gentle protest, but we said all that we had to say at the time the revision first appeared about two years ago. Each volume has a photographic frontispiece, and may be obtained apart from the set. Of the work itself, it is surely superfluous to write at this late date in Mr. Meredith's career. There are those who will agree with us that he has bestowed an imperishable literature on the world; there are at least many who will say of his work as he himself has said of the chronicles of Baba Mustapha in *The Shaving of Shagpat*: "They that have searched say of them, there is matter therein for the amusement of generations."

George Meredith passed his seventieth birthday last year, having been born in Hampshire, in the year 1828. He came of obscure parentage, and the fact that artisan blood runs in his veins accounts perhaps for his wonderful insight into homely characters. While still very young, his parents died, and left him to be educated as a ward in Chancery. During the impressionable years of boyhood, he came under strong Teutonic influences in Germany, and was recalled thence by his guardian at the age of fifteen to devote himself to a study of the

law. The profession, however, was distasteful to the young lad, and he soon deserted it for literature. Unsuccessful at first in poetry, he then published the fantastic series of tales in *The Shaving of Shagpat*, and a short story called "Farina," in his early twenties. At the age of twenty-seven *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* appeared, and at once attracted the attention of the critics. "No writer," says Mr. Gilman of Concord, and a friend of Mr. Meredith's, "has fought harder for fame and fortune than George Meredith. His life in London for many years was a hand-to-hand struggle with poverty in its harshest forms. He found himself hampered at the threshold of his literary life with pecuniary difficulties, and with heavy debts, not of his own contracting. For one entire year, it is said, he lived exclusively upon a diet of oatmeal." In addition to this burden of debt and the very discouraging reception which his first literary efforts met with, Mr. Meredith's early married life was deeply embittered. His wife, who was a daughter of Thomas Love Peacock, now remembered as an English humourist, was a singularly brilliant and witty woman, and her death after twelve years of marriage closed a tragic chapter of his life. Some years later, Mr. Meredith married again, but since 1886, when his second wife died, he has lived alone at Box Hill, not far from London, with his son and daughter for company.

An American visitor to Box Hill some years ago, was very much impressed with the splendidly healthy tone and superabundant life of the man, and remarked the vigour and sanity in his way of looking at things which is so characteristic of his work. One need not talk with Mr. Meredith to discover his hatred of shams and sentimentality, for this is a prominent keynote of his work. But this visitor had it impressed upon him anew in a refreshing manner. Upon making some wholly obvious and commonplace reference to the changing leaves, and the sombreness of their colour in comparison with that of our

American foliage, the visitor finished with a platitude about the English views being more pleasing, as they were less obtrusive and suggestive of the dying year, which meant the flickering of one more series of candles on another Christmas night that would never return. Mr. Meredith had no place for sentimentality of this sort. What was there, he protested, in the thought of the passing years that should be sad? It was life, more life and fuller, for which man should be ever seeking; but life was not to be had by whining into a past that had turned tail and fled. Rather men must look up bravely, planted on the honest present, to the problems of the pressing future, never content to live in a fool's paradise, but always courting activity, and making use of moments as they came so bravely, so well, that such moments would be quite transformed into the energy of character, not left behind to haunt you like sloughed chrysalises of vanished butterfly hopes and impulses. No wonder the visitor recalled Mr. Meredith's saying, "You may start a sermon from stones to hit the stars."

Not long ago Messrs. Harper and Brothers completed a uniform edition of the works of Thomas Hardy, and since then the same firm has issued his new volume of poems, which also contains some illustrations by Mr. Hardy. We hope that later the publishers will follow the good example of the Messrs. Scribner and publish an edition of Mr. Hardy's poems uniform with the set of his works, as was done with Mr. Meredith's poems. Mr. Hardy's new volume, *Wessex Poems*, is not what one would call a pleasing book, but it is full of interest. That Mr. Hardy was a poet every reader of his novels must have known. In *Wessex Poems* he has elected to throw his poetry into verse, and by no means unsuccessfully. Yet it is as a great writer of prose, one of our very greatest, that he will permanently stand. There are a few pieces of verse in his new volume that will remain in the memory when the work of younger poets by profession will be forgotten, but the Titan works with an instrument that is not quite pliable in his hand; in other words, Mr. Hardy is not a great poet in the accepted sense.

Mr. Hardy's worn and thoughtful face, his gentle and courteous manner, are a true index of his quality. Whatever one may think of his opinions, nobody can deny that they are the result of severe travail and an earnest effort to understand the meaning of what he has found himself compelled to reject. Some one has said that the only complaint any one could make of Mr. Hardy is that he does not know how great a man he is. He takes much too seriously the attacks of small critics. He is one of those men



THE CHALET, BOX HILL, WHERE MR. MEREDITH WRITES HIS BOOKS.

of genius who are quite devoid of self-consciousness. In general company he is very silent. Half a dozen journalists have been heard discussing style in his company, and he, very nearly the first stylist left to us, has sat quiet and attentive as if he wished to learn. And yet Mr. Hardy is a most animated and brilliant talker, and, as might be expected, he holds decided opinions, and has a decidedly independent view of contemporary literature. He is an admirer of Mr. George Gissing and was one of the