

A Book of the Week.

"LORD ORMONT AND HIS AMINTA."*

LAST week I dwelt upon the genius of George Meredith; this week I hope to write of his last published novel, "Lord Ormont and his Aminta." The story begins in a boys' school, and readers of Meredith will remember that he is at his very best when he is writing of the human boy, his high spirits, inconsequent behaviour, and frolicsome pranks. In the neighbourhood of this boys' school Miss Vincent keeps a young ladies' seminary, and on Sundays the two schools pass each other as they take their weekly walks abroad. Matey Weyburn, the captain of the boys' school, would say to his enthusiastic followers: "You're going to be men," "meaning something better than women" . . . "There was a notion that Matey despised girls. Consequently, never much esteemed, they were in disfavour."

At last Matey observed a well-grown girl who walked the left of the second couple in the march past of Miss Vincent's young ladies. "She had a nice mouth, ready for a smile at the corners; or so it was before Matey let her see that she was his mark." "Is she good enough for Matey?" was discussed at length by the boys, and their verdict was, "Browney was the girl for Matey." Now during the little love duet that followed, the boys and girls spoke of their common object of adoration. Lord Ormont, the best officer in the British army—an Indian general whose action in certain native warfares had been much discussed throughout the country.

"These are the deeds that win Empires?" so ran the argument in his favour. "Are they of the character to maintain Empires?" ran the counter question.

Seven years pass by, and then we find Matey Weyburn an instructor of youth at the house of Lady Charlotte Eglett, Lord Ormont's sister, and Browney (as Aminta had been nicknamed by the boys), living with Lord Ormont as his Countess. Some sort of marriage ceremony took place at Madrid, but never since has Lady Ormont been presented to her lord's relations as his lawful and wedded wife. Lord Ormont, angry and piqued at his treatment by the authorities of his country, contracts this alliance with the lovely Aminta, on the understanding that they shall spend their time travelling abroad; but when the beautiful Countess tires of travel, and they return to London, Lord Ormont insists upon living a retired life, and his sister, Lady Charlotte, failing to understand his incomprehensible behaviour, refuses to believe that there has been a marriage ceremony at all. Thus we have at the beginning of the novel all the elements of romance—the young wife sacrificed to her elderly husband's caprice and unconscious egotism, and Mathew Weyburn, her old lover and friend, appearing upon the scene as secretary to Lord Ormont, recommended by his sister, Lady Charlotte. But Matey and Browney are a brave pair, and the story of their strivings against their re-awakened love and their heroic struggles between the calls of duty and inclination are described with the pen of a master of literature, and a profound and sympathetic knowledge of female

*"Lord Ormont and his Aminta." By George Meredith. 3 vols. 30/- (London: Chapman & Hall. 1894.)

human nature, for no living writer of this century has such a scientific knowledge of women's characters and idiosyncrasies.

Lady Charlotte, with her crusted character, prejudices of rank, and headstrong temper is as much alive as Aminta, Countess of Ormont. On one occasion she says:—

"I suppose there never was a man worthy of the name who roared to be a woman. I know I could have shrieked half my life through to have been born a male."

And yet how womanly she is, is revealed to us in the following passage:—

"I hate old age—hate it; but I should despise myself if I showed signs like a worm under heel. Let nature do her worst. She can't conquer us so long as we keep up heart."

Many interesting episodes occur during the working out of the story which culminates in the much discussed chapter entitled "A Marine Duet, when Matey and Browney take a wonderful "symbolic swim" together. This chapter is most daring, and, indeed, by many people who have not read and studied sufficiently, Mr. Meredith's philosophy will be pronounced surprising and startling, and altogether to be blamed.

One day, while Aminta swims, Matey passes in a vessel, bound to start his great International College in Switzerland. Seeing Aminta, he plunges overboard, and together they breast the Atlantic, and old Triton, with the tradition and simple customs of the sea, performs the marriage service between their souls. "He joins hands. We say 'Browney-Matey' and its done."

Now this is truly surprising, and I acknowledge to a shiver of astonishment when I read this chapter equal to the shock of the sea-water itself if one had fallen from a comparatively safe boat into the ocean itself. I can express no opinion about it nor about the equally astounding *dénouement* of the story when Matey and Browney start a school together in Switzerland, and Lord Ormont sends his great nephew to be instructed by them, and, doubtless, the reader will feel in the same perplexity as myself, but I would ask readers of this slight review not to judge of this strange chapter and ending to a peculiar situation without reading the book itself carefully. Lady Ormont's unrecognised situation as the unacknowledged wife of her elderly husband was a peculiar one, and she had no children whose lives she would blast by her action.

Mr. Meredith tells us "that laws are needful, but that in every generation there are those individuals who transcend the laws of the multitude . . . but upon such lies the burden of a portentous responsibility." Matey warned Aminta "that they do not go together into a garden of roses," and told her "that they must have great hearts," and "if the world is hostile, that they are not to blame it," and "if the world is against us, it will not keep us from trying to serve it."

"Hypocrites may fear God: honest sinners have no fear" we are told in the latter end of this novel, and there is a kernel of bright truth in the saying; but these are dangerous doctrines for the multitude, and whether their propaganda will do more good than harm must be doubtful to any thoughtful mind. Matey Weyburn considers that they were not (under all the circumstances) "offending against Divine law,"

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