

## A Book of the Week.

### "EMBARRASMENTS."\*

SOME years ago, I was staying in a country house filled with a large party of gay people, and we were discussing a list of books which our hostess was preparing to forward to Mudie's Circulating Library. Pen in hand she begged for suggestions, and one of the party remarked that it would be better to wait a couple of days till Mr. "Dash" (an eminent critic) came down to stay, as he would tell her the titles of all the newest publications. The son of the house, who was perched with his tennis racket on the back of the sofa, thereupon exclaimed, "Oh! pray don't wait for old Dash, as he will only recommend *literary* books, and really *literary* books are not suitable reading for summer weather."

Candidly, I must admit that the book under our consideration this week is a "literary" book, and some people may find it stiff reading on a sultry afternoon in a garden. I admit that I read it myself under such difficulties, and found myself dozing over it, and laying it aside willingly to indulge in frivolous gossip. "Why, then," readers of this weekly review will exclaim, "do you recommend it for our consideration?" For this reason. In spite of dawdling over its perusal, I found myself thinking about the stories and incidental remarks therein after I had laid the book aside, and if only the garden had been less delectable—the company less engaging—the book must have been readable, or else these phrases would not have lingered in the memory.

Mr. Henry James has been often accused of over-fastidiousness. He has educated his style so carefully that, though his stories have gained intellectually by his labours, they have lost the spontaneous charm of his earlier work. Like delicate miniature, they require a powerful lense with which to appreciate their merits—the lense of acute attention. Now, there are many worthy people who resent having to attend to "mere stories and novels." They remark that they read tales for purposes of relaxation, and don't want to be required to brace up their minds, and string tight their attention before they can comprehend. To such readers the names of Meredith, Browning, and Carlyle, are like red rags to the proverbial bulls. No sooner are these names mentioned than the enraged baulked novel-readers indulge in lengthy diatribes against "literary" authors of all sorts and conditions. Such readers will prove keen appreciators and buyers of the average shilling shocker and two-shilling railway publication. But the more studious will comprehend that, for the most part, what is written with brains, as well as hand, requires brains as well as eyes to perceive and appreciate. The first of Mr. James' four "Embarrassments" is entitled "The Figure in the Carpet." It relates the story of how a great literary personage wrote a series of literary novels which the average British public did not appreciate at their full value. A certain youthful critic wrote a review thereon, and was told by (we fear) the bombastic author that he had entirely failed to see the great idea and purpose of his writings—the string on which all his pearls of writings were strung. The following pages relate how that miserable young man

struggled for months and years with that problem, and never, never succeeded in solving it. Apparently, the only man capable of elucidating the inner meaning of the great Panjandrum writings perished prematurely before he was able to publish his great discovery. This story has a comic element which, I think, Mr. Henry James did not intend to introduce; but what poor critic would ever venture to state boldly in print what Mr. Henry James did intend?

The second "Embarrassment" is a finer story, and contains some subtle writing which is well worth the trouble of reading.

The third concerns itself again with an unfortunate author that the obtuse public would not, or could not, comprehend. As he was saddled with an unsympathetic mother-in-law, a delicate wife, and several children he nearly starves. He has a lady friend who writes obvious stories that the silly public enjoy reading, and this is what the discriminating critic says of her latest publication: "Why does she suppose that she has been 'artistic'? She hasn't been anything whatever, I surmise, that she has not inveterately been. What does she imagine she has left out? What does she conceive she has put in? She has neither left out nor put in anything. . . . The book doesn't exist, and there's nothing in life to say about it. How can there be anything but the same faithful old rush for it?"

A superficial reader of these stories would certainly gather from them that, in order to be a really artistic and literary workman, it is necessary to be entirely uncomprehensible to anyone but a very exclusive handful of readers. In "The Figure in the Carpet," apparently, the only man capable of comprehension died of colossal effort. (Perhaps it would be well to remind our readers that the great classics of our English literature—Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton, have been not only comprehended, but robustly enjoyed by millions of readers of all ages and estates.) The fourth "Embarrassment," I admit, I have not yet had energy enough to peruse.

A. M. G.

## Bookland.

### WHAT TO READ.

"A History of Mankind," by Professor Friedrich Ratzel. Translated from the Second German Edition by A. J. Butler, M.A., with Preface by E. B. Tylor, D.C.L.

"The Exploration of the Caucasus," by Douglas Freshfield. Illustrated by Vittorio Sella. (London: Edward Arnold.)

"A Fool of Nature," by Julian Hawthorne.  
"The Recovery of Jane Vexcoe, and Other Tales," by Miss Quiller Couch.

"Day Books," by Mabel Wotton. (Lane).  
"Artists' Wives," by Alphonse Daudet. Translated by Laura Ensor. "Kings in Exile," by Alphonse Daudet. Translated by Laura Ensor and E. Barton. (London: Dent).

"Behind the Magic Mirror," by Olive Birrell. (Osgood, McIlvaine & Co.)

"The God who promised Victory to the Matabele," by Joseph Millerd Orpen, M.L.A., Cape Colony. (*Nineteenth Century.*)

\* "Embarrassments," by Henry James. (Cs. Heinemann. 1896.)

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