

Notes on Art.

THE ENGLISH ART OF THE MIDDLE AGES.

ONE of the most curious features of modern England is its state of hopeless ignorance about its own history from an artistic point of view. This is a great pity. Nothing is more absorbing—more interesting, or a finer specific against dulness—than a taste for antiquities. It is a fresh hold on happiness, and, as Jane Austen says: "It is well to have as many holds on happiness as possible."

How many middle-class English people thoroughly know the National Gallery? How many have seen Canterbury Cathedral? Nobody seems to realise that we possess in our quiet little Kentish town, one of the greatest European monuments of Ecclesiastical art, a Cathedral finer than the Cologne, Antwerp, and Bruges which people flock to see.

And not only the Cathedral, but the whole town of Canterbury teems with relics of the days when the huge monasteries were in full working order, and thousands of pilgrims from all parts of England thronged into the "dim rich city" to the shrine of St. Thomas à Becket. How we think of those pilgrims as we gaze upon the worn steps up which they crawled, the stone all uneven and hollowed out by the knees of our own ancestors! How Chaucer's words ring in our memory, and how we recall the immortal dictum of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "All the railways that shall intersect the spoilt earth for ever cannot drown the echo of the 'tramp, tramp,' of their horses' feet!"

Canterbury owes much to the enthusiasm and learning of Canon Holland. To stand in the "Martyrdom" and hear his account of the murder of Becket is to be fired with enthusiasm for a man who died magnificently for a truth which he believed to be essential.

But the Canon's finest achievements are in St. Anselm's Chapel. Twenty years ago it was in ruins, and a third part of its apse was blocked by a solid mass of masonry four feet thick, placed there as a buttress in the time of William Rufus, when the weight of the new choir roof threatened the chapel with destruction. Mr. Pearson having pronounced that this might be removed, it was taken away, stone by stone, with infinite care, and there appeared behind it, as fresh as if painted yesterday, a beautiful little fresco, wonderfully well drawn, of St. Paul, shaking the snake into the fire.

So this work of art is conclusively proved to have been executed in England, before Cimabue was born. We had then artists among us far superior to any in Italy. Likewise there was found a vivid, though faulty sketch of a head in red chalk, lightly sketched upon a stone, by the artist, in a playful mood.

One more good story—interesting to Nurses! Tradition affirmed that, in the South wall of this Chapel lay buried Archbishop Bradwardine, who perished in the terrible visitation of the "Black Death" in the reign of Edward II. To ascertain the truth of the legend excavations were made, and, contrary to expectation, a skeleton was actually found. To it there clung pieces of dark, glutinous material, which were a puzzle, until when tested with a match a strong aromatic odour suggested the theory that they were *antiseptics*. This, on analysis, they proved to be; and a record afterwards examined testified to the fact that the good Bishop's body was entirely surrounded with antiseptics when buried.

A Book of the Week.

"THE GODS: SOME MORTALS AND LORD WICKENHAM."*

JOHN OLIVER HOBBS is a remorselessly brilliant writer; this statement sounds like a paradox, nevertheless, it has truth in its veins. John Oliver Hobbes, under which pseudonym Mrs. Cragie publishes her novels, writes the most biting satire in diamond pointed phrases, her reputation at present as a keen thinker and wit is very great, but it is a question whether her books will have a lasting fame. It seems to me that she is too essentially a novelist of the day, up-to-date in every instinct and aspiration, and possessed of the very newest fashion in epigrammatic, "compressed tabloid" style, yet lacking the qualities that endure, and endear the author to the hearts and memories of the people. The person who interested me most in the story under consideration to-day is Lord Wickenham; unfortunately we don't hear much about him, but what we do hear is very agreeable, for the man was so human, and such an ideal friend. The chief character of the novel is an "Anne Passer," about her we hear a great deal, and in the delineation of her attractive personality and repulsive mind and nature, John Oliver Hobbes has proved herself a worthy rival of some of the greatest of modern French writers, yet I doubt if any man could have drawn a woman so remorselessly; her wretched husband, the victim of her beguilements, occasionally feels pity for her, but her creator feels none; with a merciless scalpel every nerve and every motive of this abnormal woman is laid bare for our inspection, and her pen never falters for an instant, even those softer feelings and prayerful moments that flit across Anne's evil wanton nature are shown to be mere evidences of her underlying sensuality and love of ease of mind, as well as comfort and adornment of body. I know nothing in modern literature with which to compare this terrible study of a wicked woman, except perhaps Madame de Bovary, but then Plaubert was so much greater than John Oliver Hobbes, for though possibly he was equally remorseless, yet he was possessed of the eagle mind that soars above, and looking down from the heights of genius has a truer perception of the proportions of life, so that though Madame de Bovary sinks into miry abysses of sin, and is apparently to outward human understanding hopelessly corrupt, we never quite lose our sympathy for her, and the pity of it, the hopeless sorrowful wickedness of her life makes this dreadful novel one of the most profoundly moral stories that ever was written in this world, but there is none of this genius shown in the depicting of Anne Passer. Most readers before they end the book will hate her, she is a detestable character without a saving grace of mind, and without "one spark of original righteousness in her." I don't believe such a hopelessly wicked and wanton woman ever existed; if she did she was an abnormal creation, into whom for some wise purpose of His own God did not put a soul, but sent her upon earth as a warning. After reading her life and acts, one felt like Mr. Andrew Lang, after he had perused seven modern French novels and then

* "The Gods: Some Mortals, and Lord Wickenham." 6s. (Henry and Co., London, 1895.)

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