

A Book of the Week.

"MERE STORIES."

ANY visitor seeing this last volume of Mrs. Clifford's writings lying on the table would think at once that it was a French novel, for it is clothed in the familiar yellow paper, and is of the same size and shape as that in which Messieurs Loti, Bourget, Zola et Cie elect to issue their publications. The price of it is only 2s. *not net*, so that it can be procured from a discount bookseller for the modest sum of 1s. 6d.

Contemporary writers and publishers will doubtless watch with interest this new departure. Personally I much dislike the curled edges that paper-bound books always acquire, and the broken backs and generally dissipated air of a well-read French novel is not a pleasant spectacle. Of course it *can* be bound, but then it is so difficult, in this busy, hurried life of ours, to arrange to have books bound, and, alas, the generality of bookbinders are so dear and so very unsatisfactory. I know one or two excellent bookbinders, and one or two cheap ones, but never have I yet succeeded in finding the two combined, and if anyone has had a more fortunate experience than mine I should be grateful for information.

Taking the annoyances of bookbinding into consideration, it is preferable to pay a little more in the first instance, and thus own a book that will lie flat on the table, and not curl up its edges at its possessor after the first reading!

It must be owned that Mrs. Clifford's stories are very good reading, for she is possessed by the spirit of fun, which is accentuated by the pathos that often lies at the back of her laughter, so that these stories are somewhat like April showers, and the reader is often perplexed to know whether to laugh or sigh over their perusal.

The first tale is called "The Dominant Note," and relates how three gentlemen arranged to have a happy bachelor time of it at a little house in the country, and how they were all found writing on the first Sunday afternoon to feminine correspondents, and all discovered on the Monday morning that pressing business engagements obliged them to leave at once and return to their homes. The fun of the story lies in their conversation, for all the time they rail at female companionship, and keep remarking how much they are enjoying themselves without it.

"Women are such a worry," Laurence said. 'I wonder why God made them. Men get on much better alone.' 'They are useful of course to people who want to be born,' put in Martin. 'When some scientific swell discovers spontaneous generation we shall be more independent.'"

Towards the end of the delectable little tale one of the grass bachelors remarks:—"No matter how you shun women, or what you do to them, whether you run after them or whether you don't, they contrive to keep a finger of some sort in every pie of your life."

"Mr. Webster" is another excellent story with what many people will consider a most immoral ending. Mrs. Clifford has described, in a few pages, the life of a poor, aspiring middle-class woman married to an unsympathetic husband, and who finds life, under the conditions that she has foolishly undertaken to live it, impossible. But we cannot help suspecting that in

this tale, as in "The Flash of Summer," the authoress's previous novel, she has done injustice to the husband. I really don't think any man could be so tactlessly brutal as the men-beings in these two stories.

In "Juliet," the story is related of how a man's guilty French "past" arrived by train from Paris and lured him to lunch with her in a restaurant in Regent Street, and the man enjoyed her conversation uneasily, as he kept wondering all the time what "Emily" would say. This story is full of subtle little touches of fun, and is most enjoyable reading. The respectable grown Englishman is no match for the wily Julie, but somehow it is impossible to regret that he was taken in by the paste diamonds, as is related.

On the whole, "Mr. Webster" and "Julie" are the best of the collection of tales, all of which have seen the light of day before in various magazines and Christmas papers. But Mrs. Clifford's stories are well worth reading more than once, as the second perusal reveals the delicate irony that is missed at first, because, the tales being so humanly engaging, readers hurry along their pages to see what is going to happen in the end. "Mere Stories" will be found an excellent companion for the summer holidays, and I advise all our readers to procure it as part of their travelling equipment.

A. M. G.

Bookland.

WHAT TO READ.

"The Political Life of William Ewart Gladstone." Illustrated. (Bradbury, Agnew.)

"Brother and Sister: Memoirs and the Letters of Ernest and Henriette Renan." Translated by Lady Mary Loyd. (London: William Heinemann.)

"Evolution in Art," by Alfred C. Haddon. (London: Walter Scott.)

"Egyptian Decorative Art," by W. M. Flinders Petrie. (London: Methuen and Co.)

"The Midsummer of Italian Art." (London and New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.)

"The Problem of Prejudice," by Mrs. Vere Campbell. (Unwin.)

"Bohemia." ("Story of the Nations" Series), by C. Edmund Maurice. (Unwin.)

"Animals at Work and Play: their Activities and Emotions," by C. J. Cornish, Author of "Life at the Zoo," &c. (Seeley.)

"Margaret Grey." An Episode in my Life, by H. Barton Baker. (London: T. Fisher Unwin.)

"Criminals' Confessions," by Sir Herbert Stephen, Bart. (*New Review*).

Olive Schreiner, in her South African Article in the *Fortnightly* gives the following interesting description of the rapidly disappearing Bushmen. She writes:—"So small in size are they that an adult Bushman is not larger than an ordinary European child of eleven; they have tiny wizened faces, the wool on their heads growing in little balls, with naked spaces between. Some organs of the female differ materially in structure from those of any other human female; while round the skull is a curiously indented line, forming what is called by the Boers a double head; and their ears, as looked at from the back, seem to grow out on small pedestals. These people seem to resemble, not so much a race of children as a race caught in the very act of evolving into human form."

*"Mere Stories," by Mrs. W. K. Clifford. 2s. (A. and C. Black, 1896.)

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