

## TOPICS OF THE TIME.

### Central Park in Danger.

WE have a comely city, we of New York,—a city of extraordinary natural advantages, some of which remain neglected, but many of which we have skillfully availed ourselves of for purposes of beauty and recreation. The trouble with us is that we do not fully know, appreciate, and cherish what we have. New Yorkers, as a class, seem to be more bent upon getting on in the world,—reaching out for something beyond,—than upon enjoying, providing for, and jealously guarding what they already possess. The city, collectively considered, is supposed to be proud, for instance, of its Central Park, and yet for years it has permitted the affairs of this same much-vaunted and really much-enjoyed pleasure-ground to be grossly mismanaged—until, to-day, notwithstanding the existence of a Board of Commissioners charged with the custody of its affairs, the only trustworthy and vigilant guardians of the Park are the newspapers of the city, which keep a sharp look-out, and now and again sound a note of alarm when some new act of vandalism is threatened.

At the moment of writing, the press is once again in full cry. The Board of Commissioners has succeeded in getting rid, one after another, of the two eminent experts, Messrs. Vaux and Parsons, whose engagement in the service of the Board was, not long ago, hailed as the beginning of a new *régime*; and, meantime, the Commissioners, it seems, propose to go to work and destroy, for the purposes of a menagerie, one of the prettiest and rarest spots in the whole Park. There being now no expert connected with the management of the Park, the proposed desecration is, of course, not recommended by any official whom the public are willing to accept as both competent and responsible; and it is known that the experts who have recently been forced to resign their positions would never have consented to the ruin of the meadow which the newspapers have been trying so hard to save.

We say that the newspapers are looking after the affairs of the Park with commendable zeal. But on the part of the general community there appears, at least, to be an apathy which we suspect would not exist, under the same circumstances, in any other large city of this continent. Park management by newspaper evidently works better in New York than park management by commissioners,—as said commissioners have been managing these many years. (Or shall we call it park butchery, tempered by newspaper criticism?) But if the people of this city had the proper feeling of citizenship, they would long ago have done something more effectual than grumbling by proxy. Yet, that the public are displeased with the present state of affairs there is not the slightest doubt. That the indignation is gathering force and intensity there is some reason to hope.

When the public does become thoroughly aroused, we believe that it will demand a more radical cure for the present evils of park management than has yet

been applied. One trouble with the Board, as at present constituted, is that the number of commissioners established—namely, four—makes it difficult to arrive at a majority vote for any measure. It has been found by experience that the Board is much more likely to be at a dead-lock of two to two than it is to reach a decision by a majority vote of three to one. This is in part the origin of the pitiable wrangling that, for the past half a dozen years (with rare intervals of apparent peace), has made the published proceedings of the Board of Commissioners of the Department of Public Parks a disgrace to the city. Of late, secret executive sessions have been instituted, and newspaper readers have been spared those grotesque accounts of meetings of the Board, which, at times in the past, have seemed more like reports of the inelegant altercations of pot-house politicians than the recorded debates of high public officials having in charge a costly and magnificent work of art.

When the public does act in good earnest—and, judging by analogy, it is sure to do so sooner or later—it will, we say, insist upon a radical cure. It will strike both at the membership and organization of the Board; and it will insist, moreover, upon the retention in the management of the Park of the very best and the very best known experts. Landscape gardening, architecture, and tree-planting are arts and occupations which ordinary business men, or politicians, or engineers, no matter how well trained and competent in their own lines, should not undertake without skilled and responsible advice. It happens that, just at present, one of the ruling four has more knowledge of a kind which should be valuable to a Commissioner than has often been the case with members of the Board. But this gentleman does not, we are sure, claim to be an expert on all the points covered by Messrs. Vaux and Parsons, nor has he the definite authority of an expert with his compeers of the Board, nor has his reputation as an “expert” been increased in the community by his having countenanced the installation of the menagerie in the South Meadow, and the consequent ruin of what we are inclined to believe the most beautiful glade of the whole Park.

In a word, the Department has forfeited the confidence of the public; every man in the Board pulls his own way; the experts are gone; the entire service is demoralized; and the Central Park is daily and hourly in danger.

### The Spiritual Effects of Drunkenness.

THE curse of drunkenness, on the side of its physical devastations, has been abundantly depicted by the advocates of the temperance reform. The amount of grain consumed in the manufacture of intoxicating liquors; the number of men whose labor is worse than wasted in producing and in vending them; the number of lives destroyed by them; the number of paupers and insane persons whose woes are traceable to this source;

the effects upon the health of individuals of the habitual use of intoxicants,—all these things are frequently set forth with sufficient fullness in impressive rhetoric. Some allowances must be made for the over-statement of zealous advocates; but there are facts enough, of an appalling nature, in these representations, to call for the most serious thought.

But the worst side of drunkenness is not that which appears in these familiar figures. The most frightful effects of the drink-habit are not those which can be tabulated in statistics and reported in the census. It is not the waste of corn, nor the destruction of property, nor the increase of taxes, nor even the ruin of physical health, nor the loss of life, which most impresses the mind of the thoughtful observer of inebriety. It is the effect of this vice upon the characters of men, as it is exhibited to him, day by day, in his ordinary intercourse with them. It is in the spiritual realm that the ravages of strong drink are most terrible.

Body and mind are so closely related that when the one suffers the other must share the suffering; and the injury of the physical health resulting from intemperate drinking must, therefore, be accompanied by similar injury of the mental and moral powers. But the inclination of the popular thought is so strongly toward the investigation of physical phenomena, that the spiritual consequences of drunkenness are often overlooked. Degeneration of tissue is more palpable than degeneracy of spirit; a lesion of the brain more startling than a breach of faith; but the deeper fact, of which the senses take no note, is the more important fact; and it would be well if the attention of men could be fixed upon it.

The phenomena to which we have referred often report themselves to the quickened perceptions of those who stand nearest to the habitual drinker. Many a mother observes, with a heart that grows heavier day by day, the signs of moral decay in the character of her son. It is not the flushed face and the heavy eyes that trouble her most; it is the evidence that his mind is becoming duller and fouler, his sensibilities less acute, his sense of honor less commanding. She discovers that his loyalty to truth is somewhat impaired; that he deceives her frequently, without compunction. This effect is often observed in the character of the inebriate. Truthfulness is the fundamental virtue; when it is impaired the character is undermined; and strong drink makes a deadly assault upon it. Coupled with this loss of truthfulness is that weakening of the will which always accompanies chronic alcoholism. The man loses, little by little, the mastery over himself; the regal faculties are in chains. How many of his broken promises are due to a debilitated will, and how many to a decay of his veraciousness, it would be impossible for the victim himself to determine. Doubtless his intention to break off his evil habit is sometimes honest, and the failure is due to the paralysis of his will; doubtless he often asseverates that such is his purpose at the moment when he is

contriving how he shall obtain the next dram. It is pitiful to mark the gradual decay of these prime elements of manliness in the character of the man who is addicted to strong drink.

This loss of self-respect, the lowering of ambition, and the fading out of hope are signs of the progress of this disease in the character. It is a mournful spectacle—that of the brave, ingenuous, high-spirited man sinking steadily down into the degradation of inebriety; but how many such spectacles are visible all over the land! And it is not in the character of those alone who are notorious drunkards that such tendencies appear. They are often distinctly seen in the lives of men who are never drunk. Sir Henry Thompson's testimony is emphatic to the effect that "the habitual use of fermented liquors, to an extent far short of what is necessary to produce intoxication, injures the body and diminishes the mental power." If, as he testifies, a large proportion of the most painful and dangerous maladies of the body are due to "the use of fermented liquors, taken in the quantity which is conventionally deemed moderate," then it is certain that such use of them must result also in serious injuries to the mental and moral nature. Who does not know reputable gentlemen, physicians, artists, clergymen even, who were never drunk in their lives, and never will be, but who reveal, in conversation and in conduct, certain melancholy effects of the drinking habit? The brain is so often inflamed with alcohol that its functions are imperfectly performed; and there is a perceptible loss of mental power and of moral tone. The drinker is not conscious of this loss; but those who know him best are painfully aware that his perceptions are less keen, his judgments less sound, his temper less serene, his spiritual vision less clear, because he carries every day a little too long at the wine. Even those who refuse to entertain ascetic theories respecting these beverages may be able to see that there are uses of them that stop short of drunkenness, and that are still extremely hurtful to the mind and the heart as well as the body. That conventional idea of moderation, to which Sir Henry Thompson refers, is quite elastic; the term is stretched to cover habits that are steadily despoiling the life of its rarest fruits. The drinking habit is often defended by reputable gentlemen to whom the very thought of a debauch would be shocking, but to whom, if it were only lawful, in the tender and just solicitude of friendship, such words as these might be spoken: "It is true that you are not drunkards, and may never be; but if you could know, what is too evident to those who love you best, how your character is slowly losing the firmness of its texture and the fineness of its outline; how your art deteriorates in the delicacy of its touch; how the atmosphere of your life seems to grow murky and the sky lowers gloomily above you,—you would not think your daily indulgence harmless in its measure. It is in just such lives as yours that drink exhibits some of its most mournful tragedies."

## OPEN LETTERS.

### Recent American Novels.\*

I WONDER if others have noticed as I have the large crop of novelists which has sprung up of late, and the number of works of fiction we have been favored with? I imagine that some of us are prone to underrate both the quality and the quantity of current fiction. It is true that Mr. Cable and Mrs. Burnett have been silent for the time being, though Mr. Cable's silence is now broken. But without these two the list is far from short. There is Mr. Bret Harte speaking again with all his early vigor and point in a story of the Carquinez Woods. A rare impressionist in his own way, is he not, as he tells how tremendous influences of sunset and atmosphere overshadow the mighty forest of redwoods, and how in those shadows a deeper shade moves restlessly to and fro? A delightful bogey of the night turns into a wild beast no less thrilling; and when its slayer, the half-breed Cherokee and hero, steps from the flies—the heart of a redwood—on to the big stage of the forest so well described, one has the sensation that only boys are supposed to feel when they read their first dime novel. Mr. Harte appears to be able to take what is fine in the adventurous and thrilling quality of the dime novel and clothe it in English that charms one with its exactness and has the indefinable touch that constitutes style. Sometimes the dramatic is very near being overdone in the Carquinez Woods; perhaps the close is indefensibly hurried. It is an error one forgives because of other admirable qualities. Mr. Hawthorne is less forgivable. In "Fortune's Fool," he opens with strong and romantic figures, three in number, carries them through far too many adventures, unless he meant to write a "juvenile," and crushes all sympathy by a blood-and-thunder series of useless crimes. Judge Tourgée would also be dramatic, if possible, in "Hot Plowshares"; but while the dramatic is introduced unnecessarily, there are other passages which are successful in the same attempt, and which will serve as excuse for the abundant failures. Not the dramatic, but the historical, is the aim of Judge Tourgée, and in this field there are few authors who seek to rival him. Perhaps Mr. Hawthorne may be called historical in his other novel, "Dust," a charming but very irregular romance of London in the early part of the century, in which the author has, for

\* In the Carquinez Woods. By Bret Harte. Houghton, Mifflin & Co.

Fortune's Fool. By Julian Hawthorne. James R. Osgood & Co. Hot Plowshares. By Albion W. Tourgée. Fords, Howard & Hulbert.

Dust. By Julian Hawthorne. Fords, Howard & Hulbert. The Gentle Savage. By Edward King. James R. Osgood & Co. The Siege of London; The Pension Beaurepas; The Point of View. By Henry James. James R. Osgood & Co. A Woman's Reason. By W. D. Howells. James R. Osgood & Co.

For the Major. By Constance Fenimore Woolson. Harper & Brothers.

Mr. Isaacs. By F. Marion Crawford. Macmillan & Co.

A Newport Aquarelle. Roberts Brothers.

But Yet a Woman. By Arthur Sherburne Hardy. Houghton, Mifflin & Co.

Dr. Claudius. By F. Marion Crawford. Macmillan & Co.

the sake of picturesqueness, taken the liberty of giving to Englishmen of 1825 the ways and looks of men of 1750. The perspective of Judge Tourgée in "Hot Plowshares" is crude but bold; his coloring is somewhat lurid; his plots are needlessly crowded with incident; his text is out of all kindness long. Yet he gains continually one good trait or another, and shows at his best in this novel, which is the last in time of production, although the first in point of chronology, of his series of historical novels. Still another novel, midway between the historical and the romantic, is Mr. King's "Gentle Savage," who is more soberly a half-breed than the heroes of Mr. Harte and Mr. Hawthorne.

Among the realists, Mr. Henry James comes forward with "The Siege of London," a work by no means among his best, but interesting and able, as all his work is. Have you remarked how Mr. James brings lessons to bear on small but important points of etiquette? He is a Chesterfield in a gentle and roundabout way. One might suspect in him, hidden carefully under the assumption of art for art's sake, a mind not a little didactic in its leanings. Mr. Howells does not so impress me. And yet Mr. Howells really does set out to instruct much more than Mr. James; he hardly conceals, under "A Woman's Reason," a lesson peculiarly fitted for the time, for the country, and above all for his home by adoption, Massachusetts. The upshot of the troubles of his heroine, while trying to earn her own living, is that most women are only fitted by nature to aid a man in the struggle for existence, and when there is no man to lean on, and the woman must work, it generally turns out that her education has been such as to unfit her pretty effectually for any labor for which demand exists in the markets of the world. Much the same conclusion was reached in "Dr. Breen's Practice"; but it was not so clearly, not so finely, put. I have hardly anything but admiration for "A Woman's Reason." Unquestionably Mr. Howells has never before written so finely as regards diction and style nor so acutely as regards observation of the ways of women in his part of the world. I forgive him gladly the exaggerated morality of his heroine. I forgive him, too, the making such an odious prig as Ray anything but a poor stick; such hypocritical humility as his deserves at least one good chastisement to make a gentleman of him, and it is hard to take him for a gentleman as he is. A little well-dressed "cad," our cousins of London would call him. I forgive, also, the unreality of the auctioneer's trick and the qualms of conscience incidental thereto. What may not be forgiven a writer who can set so quietly and handsomely before the people that read his work the radical error in the education of their daughters? Few girls would have the pluck to fight so long against fate as Helen Harkness did, even if they strained ideas of honesty and honor so near to cracking as she. Still fewer, so few as not to be worth reckoning, are those who will even have a chance at a Lord Rainford. Mr. Howells has lived in Massachusetts, where "cultured" and "educated"