

REVIEWS.

BEYOND CRITICISM.

"Cleg Kelly, Arab of the City." By S. R. Crockett.
London: Smith, Elder, & Co. 1896.

THE extensive sale of the works of Messrs. Crockett and Ian Maclaren is one of the simplest things in the world to explain. So far, however, the present reviewer has never come upon the correct explanation, and he gives it here without any pride, expressing indeed a certain surprise at the lateness of his discovery. It is Sunday afternoon does it, Sunday afternoon in the serious household. Time was when the serious household permitted nothing to be read on that day but sermons and the verse of Mrs. Hannah More; and the sermons were read for the most part clairvoyantly, eyes closed and the book on the diaphragm or thereabouts. In those days the young people, chiefly in couples, got as far away as possible from the old, and being forbidden games or exercises of any overt kind, passed their time, it is believed, in reciting original verse to one another—a practice leading in many cases to early and happy marriages.

But the world moves, and the reading habit slowly permeated every class. The surreptitious perusal of works of fiction on the Sabbath became a problem of the gravest importance in the serious household. The elders raved at "idle novels" and "trashy reading," but the irresistible nature of the invasion was speedily manifest. Nevertheless, the serious people contrived to make terms, and just as quite godly little boys are nowadays allowed to build churches on Sunday with their toy bricks, so for the adolescent and adult the compromise of the Sunday magazine and the novel about ministers was arranged. In the earlier days of the Sabbath-novel it was violently sectarian; witness "Father Clement," the work of Charles Kingsley, and to a lesser degree the earlier George MacDonald. But in these days of liberalism in thought, unsectarian teaching and a vague full-bodied piety is considered sufficient. This kind of thing: "But the Pleasance doctor, a little fair man, and the minister of McGill-Gillespie, a tall dark man, remained with the small-pox. Also God was there—not very evidently or obtrusively, perhaps; but so that the minister of McGill-Gillespie knew where to find Him when He was wanted." That is wonderfully typical. In addition, it is stipulated that the author must be a man of unblemished reputation and preferably a minister of religion.

The dissemination of this compromise has made a distinct and peculiar book market. The public in that market reads scarcely anything during the week, except perhaps a newspaper, and on Sundays it reads only in the afternoon, the morning and evening being devoted to the essentials of religion. It knows of Thackeray, Hardy and Meredith as it knows of Shakspeare, by hearsay, as authors clever but essentially worldly. Dickens, perhaps, it knows better, protesting a little at the caricature flavour of Chadband, and weeping sympathetically over Little Nell. It regards Miss Braddon and "Ouida" as "trashy"—sensational; which qualities it is also strongly disposed to impute to Stevenson. Mrs. Henry Wood, with her previsions and her angel-dreaming children, has a place in that literature as a really great writer; but the highest honours of it are to the ministers, Archdeacon Farrar and Messrs. Maclaren and Crockett, and to Mr. Hall Caine. And for the best of reasons: their pages are peppered with the name of the Deity, and they display an almost archangelic familiarity with the working of His mind. It is by no means a remarkable coincidence that each of these four writers has either written a "Life of Christ," or is stated to have one in hand.

Now it is evident that the standards of criticism that apply to mere students of life like Meredith and Hardy, mere humourists like Street and Kenneth Graham, or mere students of picturesque or sensational effect like Kipling, Crackanthorpe, the Stevenson of the romances, Morley Roberts or Marriott Watson, would be unsuitable in this case. It is not required of Mr. Crockett that he should be either true, humorous, or effective. It is simply stipulated that he should be fit to read on a

Sunday afternoon. He may steal his jokes without reproach: in this book Mr. Crockett makes the best part of a chapter out of Wilde's "Don't mention it, Miss Briggs." Certain things these people want, under the sanction of the Deity's name—novelette love-making for the most part, kissing, a bit of murder, and a braying jest now and then—and these they get. The desire for these things shows a pathetic revolt of humanity against seriousness that Heine would have enlarged upon. A few extracts from the stuff they read, under God, on Sunday afternoons in the serious household will form the best possible proof of our hypothesis. Here is the screaming jest of the Leg of Mutton. Conceive the human being who could laugh at it if you can:—

"Tam Luke, the baker's boy, had come along. And in pursuit of the eternal feud between butchers' boys and bakers' boys, he had overturned the basket and rolled the meat on the road. . . .

"When half way across the field the butcher's boy observed the insult to his basket. Yet he said nothing till he came quite near. Then, in the most friendly manner possible, he seized the defiled leg of mutton, destined for the dinner of an eminent Doctor in Divinity, and hit Tam Luke a swingeing blow over the head with it, which not only broke that youth's pipe, but for a season spoiled the shape of his mouth, and tumbled him incontinently over the fence.

"The baker's boy rose, shedding freely bits of clay pipe and exceedingly evil words. A battle royal seemed imminent to any one who did not know the common-places of friendly intercourse among these worthies. But the baker's boy contented himself with stating over and over in varied and ornamental language, highly metaphorical in parts, what he would do to the butcher's boy if he hit him again. However, the butcher's boy had too great an advantage in handling Professor Hinderland's leg of mutton, and the tempest gradually blew itself out."

It is curious how humorous the serious class of people find any allusion to violent blows, obscene language, or the more indelicate parts of the human anatomy, a kind of guilty exultation over themselves, one suspects. For instance:—

"The next time he saw him come home drunk he clouted him with a paving-stone from behind the yard wall." . . .

"During this interval Tim Kelly expressed his opinions upon things in general. The details are quite unfit for publication."

"A straight line is the shortest distance between two points, and that was the course described by the pound weight on which Cleg Kelly dropped his hand. It sped fair and level from his fingers, flung low as many a time he had skimmed stones on Saint Margaret's Loch in the hollow under the Crag.

"'Ouch,' said suddenly Mistress Roy, taken, as she herself said, 'in the short of the wind.' The hearth-brush with which she had been wont to correct her former message-boys fell helplessly on the ground." . . .

"Then Cleg's language became as bad as that of an angry Sunday School superintendent. The wise men say that the Scots dialect is only Early English. Cleg's was of that kind, but much debased by an admixture of Later Decorated." . . .

". . . and as soon as Cleg set foot within the square, he saluted him with a rotten egg, carefully selected and laid aside for such an emergency." . . .

"Before he was fairly down the steps, he yelled three times as loud as he could, and turned Catherine-wheel after Catherine-wheel, till at the last turn he came down with his bare feet in the waist-belt of a policeman. The good-natured officer solemnly smacked the convenient end of Cleg with a vast *plantigrade palm*, and restored him to the stature and progression of ordinary humanity, with a reminder to behave, and to mind where he was coming if he did not want to get run in." . . .

"There was, indeed, in times prehistoric, a certain literary man whose wife averred that her husband's toilet consisted ordinarily of 'four paper knives, four smuts, and no pocket-handkerchief.' But this person has not usually been held up in Sunday Schools as a shining example. In fact, quite the contrary." . . .

"But Big Smith stood on the steps, still holding Tam Luke, and with a foot like a Sutton's furniture van he

tripped up each one impartially as he passed, till quite a little haycock of Knuckle-Dusters was formed at an angle of the stair.

"Then Big Smith, in a singularly able-bodied way, argued with the heap in general for the good of their souls; and the noise of the oak stick brought out all the neighbours to look on with voluble approbation."

"So Muckle Alick juist arched a back that was near as braid as the front of the engine itself, and he gied a kind o' jump to the side. The far buffer o' the engine took him in the broad of his hinderlands, and whammed him and the bairns in a heap ower on the grass on the far bank. . . . But what was oor astonishment to see him rise up wi' the bairns baith in his ae arm, and gie his back a bit dust wi' the back o' the ither as if he had been dustin' flour off it."

"Cleg Kelly's hand dropped upon a stone. The stone whizzed through the air and took effect on the third button of the man of straw's new waistcoat.

"The laugh ended in a gasp. The gasp was succeeded by a bad word, and then the young man gave chase."

"I juist kened it," said Mistress Frazer, drawing up wisdom from the mysterious wells of her experience; 'muckle men and wee wives aye start aff wi' a lassie—contrarywise they begin wi' a laddie. Noo me and my man—'"

"Our hero's cause was so bad, and his lapse into heathenism became at this point so pronounced, that for the sake of all that has been we decline to report the remainder of his speech."

"As she came with the poker stiffly uplifted against the evening sky, Mistress McWalter looked exceedingly martial. But, as Cleg afterwards expressed it, 'a woman shouldna try to fecht. She's far ower flappy about the legs wi' goons and petticoats.' Swift as a duck diving, Cleg fell flat before her, and Mistress McWalter suddenly spread all her length and breadth on the ground."

But this is as much of Cleg Kelly as any intelligent human will desire. This kind of thing chiefly, occasional jokes about and familiarities with the Deity, of which the one quotation already made must suffice, scraps stolen from here and there—Poe's dead body in the box, for example—make up this book. Criticism? One could as well criticize a marine store.

SHAKSPEARE AND HIS PREDECESSORS.

"Shakspeare and his Predecessors." By F. S. Boas.
London: John Murray. 1896.

MR. BOAS, whose name we do not remember to have met before as a contributor to critical literature, is plainly an accomplished scholar, a cultured and intelligent critic, and an indefatigable student of that vast literature which has gathered round Shakspeare both in Germany and England. But unless we are much mistaken he has been very cruelly treated. He has been forced to attempt an impossibility, to compress within the compass of one monograph matter which should have occupied at least two. When we say that the history of the English drama from the Conquest to the appearance of Shakspeare—including an account of the lives and works of Marlowe, Greene, Peele, Lyly, Kyd, and others—fills only 88 pages out of the 550 which make up the volume, it will easily be seen that the title "Shakspeare and his Predecessors" is simply a misnomer. The work would have been more properly described as a biographical and critical account of Shakspeare, with an introductory sketch of the origin and development of the English drama. It is greatly to the credit of Mr. Boas that he has done his very best to satisfy the impossible conditions which have evidently been imposed on him, but in attempting to satisfy these conditions he has materially impaired the value of his work. He has given us at once too much and too little. He has entered into a detailed account of particular writers and of particular works, but he has not explained the evolution of the romantic drama. He has devoted whole pages to information which could be obtained from any biographical dictionary, but he has not defined and

summed up what tragedy, comedy, and tragi-comedy as perfected by Shakspeare owed respectively to Marlowe and Greene, to Lyly and Peele, to Kyd and to the authors of "Arden of Faversham" and of "A Warning for Fair Women." He has had to dwell on individuals, but to leave unmarked and uncharacterized whole schools of dramatists and whole species of drama. These are grave defects, but they are defects for which Mr. Boas is plainly not responsible, for they have arisen, as is abundantly clear, neither from ignorance nor from lack of insight and grasp.

There is much excellent criticism in the remarks made, cursory as they necessarily are, on the work of Shakspeare's chief predecessors, particularly on that of Marlowe and Greene. This, for instance, is very happily said: "When Marlowe's genius withers Greene's puts forth its finest flower; the difference is largely due to moral contrast." Again: "Marlowe is the rapturous lyrist of limitless desire, Shakspeare the majestic spokesman of inexorable moral law." But we cannot at all agree with Mr. Boas's praise of that wretched travesty of the Fourth Æneid, "Dido, Queen of Carthage," and to speak of "popular sympathies" with reference to Shakspeare, and to observe that with him "rank is never the measure of merit," is, to say the least, most misleading. Shakspeare is literally the most anti-democratic of all great poets, being in sentiment essentially autocratic; with regard, indeed, to rank, his note is always, to quote his own words, "Clay from clay differs in dignity whose dust is all alike."

If Mr. Boas's readers had had any choice in the matter, they would probably have wished that the proportion assigned respectively to Shakspeare and his Predecessors had been exactly reversed—that the expansion had been on the side of the Predecessors, and the retrenchment on the side of the great man. For the truth is that in dealing with Shakspeare the problem must always be at this time of day at least what *not* to say. To write his biography, when biographies, leaving nothing to be desired, exist in myriads, is a mere work of supererogation; and to epitomize the plots of plays which are in everybody's hands, and with which every intelligent person with a taste for literature is perfectly familiar, is surely equally superfluous. To point out the sources of his plots, to discuss the probable date of the appearance of a given play, or its bibliography, or its textual variants, or its characters, or its ethics, is simply to transcribe what may be found on almost every bookstall. Even the problem of the Sonnets, unsolved though it be, has been worn threadbare. It is the same with critical commentary. All that is best and soundest in it is now little more than mere commonplace. What can be added to the criticism of Coleridge, Lamb, Hazlitt, and the other English authorities; to that of Lessing, Goethe, Schiller, Schlegel, Gervinus, Ulrici, Elze, Kreyssig?—all of which, filtered and disseminated through handbooks, monographs, editions, and popular lectures, is now common property. But this cannot be said of the fathers of the romantic drama. A history of that drama between the appearance of "Ralph Roister Doister" and the death of Marlowe is still a desideratum. Much has, it is true, been written about Marlowe and Greene, but much remains to be corrected and much to be added; and what is true of them is true also of Lodge, of Peele, of Lyly, and pre-eminently of Kyd, and of the work of the school represented by the authors of "Arden of Faversham" and the "Warning for Fair Women," and of Robert Yarrington. This is what we wish Mr. Boas had given us, and this we are very sure he could, and probably would, have given us had he been free to choose.

But to turn from what might have been to what is. All that portion of Mr. Boas's book which is devoted to Shakspeare is one of the most creditable pieces of work which it has ever been our good fortune to meet with. He has plainly spared no pains to make his book as complete as possible. Much of it is necessarily mere compilation, but it is no ordinary compilation. It is no *réchauffé* of current handbooks, but the result of a patient and judicious collation of the best and most authoritative contribution to Shakspearian biography, bibliography, and criticism which have appeared both in Germany and England. Industry and judgment are