

# THE ACADEMY FICTION SUPPLEMENT.

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 1897.

## NEW NOVELS.

*A Woman of Moods: a Social Cinematographe.* By Mrs. Charlton Anne (Ellam Fenwicke Allan). (Burns & Oates.)

We have all heard of the novel with a purpose: this is a novel with at least half a dozen. In short, Mrs. Charlton Anne is a lady with a certain number of ideas and a taste for propagandism, who looks upon prose fiction as the most convenient means of converting society to her doctrines. To begin with, she is a devout Roman Catholic, and her heroine restores two lost sheep to the fold of that communion, besides delivering herself of a good many *obiter dicta* upon the necessity of reforming Catholic schools. She has a great deal to say about falconry, which (for reasons not specified) is "the only natural sport" now available for man; and also about the provincial woman, conventionality, and county society. Her remarks upon the last I am disposed to quote:

"They are the best people in the world. They all have splendid balances at their banks, and the women all get their clothes from the best places in Paris. They do not consider London things good enough for them, even in these days of Cresser, Redfern, and Fenwick. They are all very kindhearted too. They vie with each other as to who shall give the biggest subscriptions to the local charities, and they entertain each other with great liberality. But they are just a set, a *clique*, not known out of their own narrow radius, and they do not become intimate with anyone who is not one of themselves. They never dream of asking anyone to stay with them who is not in a position—through want of means—to ask them back. This is the way they show their exclusiveness. They are the county people now, and have a right to pick and choose."

But the main thesis of the book is that it is very wrong for people with any hereditary taint to marry and have children; and in support of that view is set out the tragical story of Valeria Villiers, *née* de Salustri. Valeria was the daughter of a Yorkshire lady married to an Italian marquis: she was sent home to England quite young, was brought up in a convent, went out as a lady companion, and, being very beautiful, innocently supplanted her dearest friend, Clare Isham, in the affections of Ambrose Villiers. Clare, being a saint, perceived the situation, joined their hands, and withdrew into the community of the *Bonnes Chrétiennes*. Valeria was married and became the ideal mistress of an ideal house in Yorkshire (which the authoress prefers to call Talkshire, as she calls Eton Drinkley). In this ideal house nobody has breakfast—not, at least, a formal breakfast—and everybody is charming and unconventional. Here Valeria's mother comes to her; the marquis is dead, so is the other sister, and except for an occasional letter from the mother, Valeria has known nothing of her belongings since she was a child. In an evil hour she questions the Marchesa about them, and learns the fatal secret that her father died in a madhouse. Instantly this excessively sane and composed lady gives way to a burst of frenzy:

"Mad! mad! Yes, that was it. I dreamed it a long time ago. Of course, you are quite right. Mad! what is that? Why, nothing!"

From that day forward she became a little unlike herself; but that was readily explained by the fact that she was *enceinte*. In reality, however, she was shutting herself up and studying books upon mental disorder. Finally came the tragedy. Valeria was a woman of great energy and business capacity, but what she accomplished on the last night of her life is a record. At an hour not stated, but it was after her husband had gone to sleep, she got out of bed, put on a dressing-gown, took a razor from a drawer, came over to her husband and, after some moments of reflection, kissed him and uttered a few prayers. Then she went to her mother's room and cut that lady's throat; tried the nursery door, but it was bolted;

retired to her oratory, where she became the mother of a still-born child; laid it out carefully, wrapped in her bridal veil, with candles and crucifixes; wrote a note to her husband, and by four o'clock was on her way to the river, at some distance from the house; jumped in, and was pulled out by a casual passer-by, and brought to the priest's house. Before she died, she remembered to send a message to a friend, whom she had been hypnotising, urging him to leave his wife on a fixed date. This, one would think, must have filled up her time; but in addition to this—for I decline to regard it as possible that she foresaw the case—she wrote two letters to her two elder children, to be given to them when they were fourteen, in which the circumstances of her death were narrated, and the duty enjoined upon them of vowing celibacy. Also she composed two still bulkier documents to be made over still later to the young people, one of which contained the scheme of a "new Order," in which all young ladies disqualified for marriage by disastrous lineage are invited to enrol themselves. Details of the working of this Order, under the superintendence of Valeria's daughter, are furnished in the last chapter.

It will sufficiently appear, I hope, from this analysis that Mrs. Charlton Anne is not a great novelist.

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*Kirkham's Find.* By Mary Gaunt.  
(Methuen & Co.)

After having read forty pages or so of this story I very nearly threw it aside. But conscience made me brave, and I persisted. And now I admit that I very nearly threw aside a book which is quite worth reading if you can get safely over the foolish and vulgar Australian family into whose circle we are forced at the beginning of the book. The family turns up again at intervals to annoy you, especially Phoebe Marsden, who determines to "do something" in the world, and keeps bees. But you will find some admirable sketches of life in the back-blocks of Australia, the search for gold, the fights with the aborigines, and so on. Here is a specimen of Miss Gaunt's descriptive style. It is a sketch of Ned Kirkham after a spell in his solitary out-station with no human being within five-and-twenty miles:

"How the night passed he could hardly have told, only it did wear away somehow, and when the moonlight began to pale before the rosy light of morning, and the sun rose up behind the jagged peaks in the east, he found himself away out on the plain, watching, with eyes that saw not, the glorious gold and grey of the sunrise, while he himself was an object of interest to hundreds of crows, who sat on the ground in rings round him, and flew cawing over his head. He laughed aloud as the sunlight shone on their handsome blue-black plumage.

"Why, they think I'm mad or lost," he said aloud, and he waved his hands at them, and made some of them move lazily and leisurely into a back row. "Not yet, mates, not yet. Have a little patience; I dare say your turn will come by and by," and he turned round and went slowly back to his hut. And it angered him and worried him not a little that the crows came too.

Had they ever followed him before—had they? He tried to think. They were always there, of course, always ready to pounce on a poor sick sheep, or tear out the eyes of an unprotected lamb, but they had never looked at him like that before; he was sure they never had. They knew—oh, the crows were wise—that he would never go away from here now, that he would die here, and then they would pick out his eyes. Yes, they knew it very well. That would be the end, only it would not be just yet, and he must get back to see to the well, for that was what he was here for. The sheep would die if they had no water.

But when the windmill was fixed up, he ran hurriedly to his hut, looking furtively over his shoulder to see that the crows were not following him, and once inside he shut the door fast and pulled a box across it, and felt a sense of triumph in the fact that he had successfully outwitted them."

Now this strikes me as a fine bit of writing. The bush, the