

OUR SHAKESPEARE SOCIETY.

DEAR MR. EDITOR,—The next Society that I shall introduce to the readers of THE GIRL'S OWN PAPER is the type of a class now rapidly becoming popular. Or if "popular" is not exactly the word for a Society that requires a considerable amount of intelligence to enjoy and profit by its meetings, I may say that at any rate one of these gatherings is pretty sure to spring up wherever a knot of friends have a taste for reading aloud, and a common love for the King of poets.

I read the other day of a man who was always embarrassed when he was asked, by young ladies whom he took in to dinner, and other social inquisitors, who was his favourite poet. For to speak truthfully, he would have answered "Shakespeare," and yet the answer seemed so extremely trite and commonplace, showing such a lack of originality, and appearing as though it were given by rote, that he knew it would at once awaken suspicion. There is, to tell the truth, a great deal of sham homage surrounding the great Master. He is "taken for granted," his works are volumes "which no gentleman's library should be without," and if you ask anyone, "Do you admire Shakespeare?" a gaze of pitying scorn is turned upon you, and the answer, if given at all, is "Shakespeare? why, of course." Yet I venture to hint that in many such cases further inquiry on your part will discover a lamentable amount of ignorance as to the treasures of ineffable beauty which his name suggests; and if you quote sententious lines in very blank verse, they will quite possibly be vaguely referred to him, as the general fountain-head of all quotations.

But I would say to everyone above the age of childhood—study Shakespeare; not because it is the proper thing to do, but because his works yield never-failing strength, delight, and inspiration. The characters he draws are living creations, whose springs of thought and action repay unending study. For the more they are scrutinised, the more wealth they will yield to the earnest, inquiring seeker.

I touched in my last paper upon some Shakespearian debates that form a very interesting part of the programme of our "Ladies' Discussion Society," but the Society I am about to describe is of an altogether different character. It exists chiefly for the purpose, not of discussing the plays, but reading them aloud; it is formed of both ladies and gentlemen; and it meets in the evening.

Our gathering, like many others of the sort, has for its moving spirit a young lady, and hence a description of it seems specially appropriate to THE GIRL'S OWN PAPER, for very likely some earnest reader, with a little time on her hands and a love for Shakespeare, may be inspired to form one of the same kind.

A young lady, then, pretty, clever, and charming, the daughter of indulgent and sensible parents, with plenty of time at her command, hears of a Shakespeare Reading Society in another part of London. "Would it not be delightful to have one here?" she exclaims; and consults her father and mother, brothers and sisters on the point. The father, mother, sisters approve; the brothers are a little inclined to be sceptical, but graciously intimate that they will not oppose the scheme if she chooses to set it on foot.

The next step is for our young lady, whom we will call Perdita, to consult Mr. and Mrs. Campion, young people with literary tastes, who have had considerable experience in this direction, as they have belonged already to four such societies in various parts of town. With their assistance, she draws up a list of people who would be likely to further the

scheme, and proceeds to communicate with them. When she has received sufficient promises of co-operation, the Society is formed, and by common consent receives its title, "The Eversfield Shakespeare Society," from the name of the house where it originated.

Our first meeting is fixed for half-past seven upon a winter evening. We assemble to the number of about sixteen guests, who, with the family of Mr. and Mrs. Leigh, our host and hostess, make up a sufficient total. The business to-night, however, is not the reading of a play, but the arrangement of various necessary details; the editions to be used, the time to be occupied, the election of a president and secretary, and the definition of their functions.

Our hostess is a gracious middle-aged matron, who has a kindly sympathy with the aspirations of her daughter, and who, moreover, possesses a sincere love for literature upon her own account. Our host is a City merchant of sterling common-sense, who, without a large share of imagination, is nevertheless willing to further any scheme that does honour to the poet for whom he entertains a real, though vague, reverence. He remembers how he used to recite Mark Antony's oration over the body of Caesar, at school, long ago, and he also entertains a shadowy recollection of taking a part in the Quarrel Scene between Brutus and Cassius. Therefore he is anxious that all should prosper with the new Society. He will not, however, accept the office of president, nor, to tell the truth, is it very appropriate that he should occupy the post.

Mr. Campion, who is a Shakespeare student, is unanimously elected to that position, and the earnest Perdita is chosen secretary. To her it will fall to allot the parts, and make the necessary abbreviations in the play. If she is in any difficulty, she will consult Mrs. Campion, who offers her services freely; but Perdita is wise and sensible, and will not need guidance in the matter as if she were a mere school-girl.

It is agreed that one of the numerous school editions, published at 6d. to 1s. 6d. per play, shall form the standard for reading. As a list of the omissions will be sent round beforehand with the notices of the meeting, it is easy for any who prefer to use their own copies to mark them in accordance with the model.

I may say here that, with a little forethought, and the use of these school editions, there is not the slightest difficulty in reading most of Shakespeare's plays in a mixed company; the coarsenesses that here and there tell of the ruder age in which the plays were written have nothing to do with the actual subject-matter, and can be omitted without attracting attention, by means of proper revision beforehand, and ordinary common-sense at the time.

The president has to propose the plays that shall be read, and to exercise a general control over the affairs of the Society, which he does with a great deal of zest, and perhaps an unnecessary display of authority. Everyone likes him, however, and he orders the members about to his heart's content during his subsequent career. It is decided that *King Richard II.* shall be the first attempted; that the Society shall meet on the last Thursday evening in every month, at the houses of the different members in rotation; and that the next reading shall take place in a fortnight's time, at "Eversfield."

Perdita is very busy allotting the parts in the interval, and sends them round to each member. As she has not heard yet how they can read, it must of necessity be rather an affair of guess-work; but she assigns to Mr. and Mrs. Campion the parts of the King and the Queen, takes the subordinate part of Lady-in-Waiting herself, and does the best she can with the rest.

On the appointed evening the members assemble at half-past seven for tea and coffee. There are a few married couples, some attractive girls in pretty evening dresses, and several young men. The latter look rather uncomfortable, and afraid of each other, as though they were going to commit themselves. One or two, to hide their nervousness, refer loudly to the supposed fact that they "really haven't had time to look at it." Mr. Campion is perfectly self-possessed, orders the whole party about, and marshals them into the drawing-room without ceremony before they have finished the introductory chat over the tea and coffee cups.

The question now arises, "Shall we sit or stand to read?" Mr. Campion is very decided. "Stand," he says; and the characters engaged in each scene are to come forward into the middle of the room as they enter upon their parts.

The host, who has nothing to do but to mark the exits and entrances, reads, in a ringing voice—

"Act I., Scene i. London; King Richard's palace. Enter King Richard, John of Gaunt, with other nobles and attendants."

Mr. Campion and a Mr. Falconer step forward into the middle of the room. The latter is a retired member of the Indian Civil Service. He has scarcely reached middle life, and is a man of rare acquirements. Without active occupation now, he spends his time in study for the love of it, and is willing to further anything in the way of intellectual effort.

Mr. Campion renders the speeches of Richard II. with admirable force and dignity. Mr. Falconer responds with equal ability in the character of John of Gaunt.

Enter Bolingbroke and Mowbray, personified by two young men, Mr. Chambers and Mr. Westlake. The former reads with excellent force and intelligence; his companion, who is well educated, and ought to know better, delivers the sentences of Mowbray in a high uniform tone, without modulation or expression.

The passion of the dispute grows intense, when King Richard, breaking through his calm dignity of manner, exclaims with stern emphasis—

"Norfolk, throw down. WE BID; there is no boot!"

The effect is rather spoiled by the falsetto monotone in reply—

"Myself I throw, dread sovereign, at thy foot."

And Perdita inwardly resolves that she will not give Mr. Westlake any more important parts until he has learnt to read.

The next scene is shared between Mrs. Leigh and Mr. Falconer. She reads with expression and feeling the lament of the hapless Duchess of Gloucester, which strikes the sad key-note to the play.

The tournament scene goes well, with the assistance of Mr. Chambers, who delivers Bolingbroke's speeches with true expression, and evidently appreciates them.

"Aumerle," in Scene iv., is read by a young man, Mr. Cunningham, who joins to a large amount of solemn self-conceit an utter incapacity for the task. He declaims in a loud, wooden, expressionless tone, with a jerk at the end of every sentence. "Green" is taken by one of Perdita's sisters, who reads fairly well. There are so few female parts in *King Richard II.* that many ladies are silent to-night, and one or two undertake male characters.

The grand Scene i. of Act II. is really impressive. Mr. Falconer throws the power of finished elocution and deep feeling into the beautiful words of old Gaunt upon his death-bed—

"O, but they say the tongues of dying men Enforce attention, like deep harmony:

Where words are scarce, they are seldom spent
in vain,
For they breathe truth, that breathe their words
in pain.

He that no more must say, is listened more
Than they whom youth and ease have taught
to glose;
More are men's ends marked than their lives
before:

The setting sun, and music at the close,
As the last taste of sweets is sweetest, last
Write in remembrance more than things long
past."

The King, when he enters, furnishes, with his
flippant, indignant retort, a striking contrast
to the moving appeal of his dying uncle.

The gentleman who reads the part of the
Duke of York, Dr. Arnold, calls for special
notice. His grey hairs tell of the advance of
years, but as yet he is old neither in body nor
in mind. Of rare intellectual culture, he is one
of those men who do perfectly whatever they
undertake; yet he is modest and kind, always
ready to help the backward and shrinking, and
to suggest schemes by which those anxious for
self-improvement may make their way. He is
an especial friend to the young, who find in
him an ever-ready sympathiser and guide.
When Perdita timidly told him of her plan, he
offered at once to help her, and is now, with
his wife and daughter, in the party. Mrs.
Arnold's bright eyes speak of talent and
energy; she is a clever, capable, intelligent
woman, and the daughter, Helen, is a quiet,
graceful, sweet maiden, who reads the small
part assigned to her with great tact and ex-
pression. As for Dr. Arnold, he reads as ad-
mirably as he does everything else, and his
worthy host, Mr. Leigh, regards him with a
species of affectionate awe.

The close of Act II., Scene i., from "*Excunt*
King, Queen," &c., is omitted, and now Mrs.
Campion, slight and graceful, steps forward with
Mr. Raleigh to read Scene ii. Mr. Raleigh is
a thoughtful, cultivated man, who needs, as a
rule, more energy in reading, but takes the
slight part of Bushy creditably. Mrs. Campion
has a sympathetic voice and a thorough love for
her author. She throws exquisite pathos into
the words of the poor Queen, which are uttered
with a mournfulness and delicate inflexion of
emphasis that touch the hearts of all listeners.
"Green," alias Alice Leigh, interrupts with his
hurried speech, and shortly a dreadful pause
occurs, for a Servant should enter, and does
not. The part, being slight, has been over-
looked, and Perdita supplies the omission by
"entering" herself with a very rosy face, when
she sees the hiatus.

So the play goes on, through the sad story
of the King who believed in his own Divine
right to rule, and relied upon the fiction until
he found himself ruined and forsaken. Mr.
Chambers is inspired, and contrives to impart
some of his enthusiasm to his hearers, when he
comes to the words—

"See, see, King Richard doth himself
appear,
As doth the blushing discontented sun
From out the fiery portal of the east;
When he perceives the envious clouds are
bent
To dim his glory, and to stain the track
Of his bright passage to the occident."

Mrs. Campion and Perdita read, with touch-
ing effect, the conversation between the Queen
and her Lady in Waiting, which begins—

"What sport shall we devise here in this
garden,
To drive away the heavy thought of care?"

and Mr. Raleigh, who takes the gardener's
part, throws heartfelt pity into his concluding
words:

"Here did she fall a tear; here, in this place,
I'll set a bank of rue, sour herb of grace:
Rue, even for ruth, here shortly shall be
seen,
In the remembrance of a weeping queen."

But by far the chief episode of the evening
is the heartrending scene of farewell between
the disrowned King on his way to the Tower
and the agonised wife—

"And must we be divided? must we part?"
"Ay, hand from hand, my love, and heart
from heart,"

where the pathos stirs many of the softer
hearers very nigh to tears.

The Duchess of York is represented by
Mrs. Schreiber, a German lady who is in-
tensely anxious to be thought English and
throws an immense amount of energy and
expression into her part. She, like very many
of her nation, is a real student of Shake-
speare, and were it not for the strong accent,
which excitement renders the more percep-
tible, her reading would be most enjoyable.
She has but an ungrateful task, for "*Aumerle*"
is more jerky and wooden than ever, and
shows no emotion or gratitude for her at-
tempts to win his pardon. Her husband, Mr.
Schreiber, is reading Percy very creditably,
only with the same peculiarity as his wife.

But it is late, and the omissions, made by
an unpractised hand, have been too few to
bring the play within a reasonable compass.
This may be defined as from two to two and a-
half hours, and the latter limit has been
reached. The beautiful soliloquy of King
Richard in the Tower—

"I have been studying how I may compare
This prison, where I live, unto the world"

is cut short, and with his death the reading
ends.

An adjournment now takes place to
the dining-room for refreshments, and ani-
mated and vigorous conversation sets in, all
the more actively because of its enforced
cessation during the evening. It is felt that on
the whole the play has been a success; a little
too heavy and long, perhaps, but this will not
be the case next time, when *As you Like It*
will be read.

And the Society, under Mr. Campion and
Perdita's able management, goes on and
flourishes. If we were to look into Mrs.
Campion's drawing-room twelve months
afterwards, when *Twelfth Night* is being
read, a great improvement would at once be
discovered. The same members are there;
but Mr. Westlake has altered his high mono-
tone, and can scarcely be distinguished as the
reader who murdered the part of Mowbray.
A treasure has been found in Mr. French, a
young barrister, who had a subordinate part
on the first evening, but who has unexpectedly
displayed a perfect genius for humour, and is
delighting the audience by his rendering of
Malvolio. No Shakespeare Society is com-
plete without a member of this kind, who will
read humorous parts well, and who will bring
forth the real, radiant fun that, apart from its
coarser manifestations, lies hid in Shakespeare's
plays.

Mr. Cunningham is still there, but is silent.
He has formally requested the secretary to
allow him to withdraw from active service; his
reading, he is sensible, does not come up to
the standard, &c., &c. Instead of trying
to do better, he therefore sits in gloomy
grandeur, mute and useless. There are several
ladies who had not a part on the first evening,
but who from time to time have shared the
chief honours with Mrs. Campion, Miss
Arnold, and Perdita. For it is by no means
desirable that one lady should have all the
best parts; however charmingly she reads,

the Society gets tired of her voice, and others
like to have an opportunity for study. There
is a gentleman, Mr. Dale, who goes by the
name of "*The Critic.*" He is by no means
sparing in his remarks on the various readers,
and passes for a great authority on the sub-
ject of dramatic expression. He will go up
to a reader at the end of a scene, and say,

"Excuse me, but if I may say what strikes
me, you are giving an American instead of a
Jewish twang to Shylock's speech."

Or,
"You are reading Celia, pardon me, a
great deal too fast."

These criticisms are usually taken in good
part, and as Mr. Dale will not read much
himself, there is little opportunity for retalia-
tion, while his remarks have, as a rule, enough
justice in them to strike home. So great is
the improvement in the reading that friends
have been known to ask to be allowed to
come and listen, and when they do this, they
usually come a second time.

Occasionally papers are read on some points
arising out of the plays. For instance, a very
beautiful essay on the true character of the
Maid of Orleans, by Dr. Arnold, followed the
reading of the First Part of *King Henry VI.*
From the same hand came a paper on the
suggestion that Lord Bacon wrote the plays
usually known as Shakespeare's, in reply to
which Mr. Falconer contributed an essay.
Similar topics from time to time suggest in-
teresting discussions, which, of course, occupy
an entire evening, and form a pleasant change
from the reading. Perdita is regarded with
chivalrous allegiance by the gentlemen of the
Society, who bow to her will as law, as she
goes gravely and wisely on her secretarial
course.

I may conclude with a few hints for the
help of those who wish to form a similar
Society.

Reading aloud is a most agreeable, but
also a very rare accomplishment. It is extra-
ordinary how few people understand the
proper management of the voice, and the
inflexions suitable to the varying shades of
emotion. Now, few things can be more dreary
than to sit still and hear Shakespeare badly
read for a whole evening; therefore the mem-
bers chosen must either know how to read, or
be willing to learn. A few hints by one who
really understands elocution will be taken by
sensible people in good part, or they will even
learn from imitation. Hence, in every case,
one or two good readers are indispensable.
It is scarcely necessary to add that none but
those who can appreciate their author should
be admitted to the Society; for, in all prob-
ability, no others would care to come. Still,
the hint may be found useful.

The secretary, or a small committee chosen
for the purpose, should have absolute and un-
disputed control over the giving of parts.
The only other plan is to draw lots, which has
ludicrous results, but if people are so childish
as to want the best characters, and to be
offended if they do not get them, it is the
sole alternative.

No one who has not tried it can imagine
the delight of reading and hearing Shake-
speare's plays in an appreciative circle. Dra-
matic poetry needs to be rendered aloud to
catch the true spirit and beauty it contains.
When all the members are inspired by a
common enthusiasm, do their very best to
fling themselves into the parts they are read-
ing, and show that they love and revere the
Master they are studying, few quiet social
evenings can offer more attraction than "*Our*
Shakespeare Society." L. W.

