

**Chapter 1 : MRS. DENYS OF COTE.\* Â» 30 Oct Â» The Spectator Archive**

*MRS. DENYS OF COTE.\* THERE is something amazing in the amount of ability expended on the invention and writing of novels not of the first class. The stars of.*

The stars of imaginative literature-are, of course, few; but there is, beside and around them, a kind of Milky Way, composed of an incredible number of smaller luminaries, called into existence, we suppose, by a demand of the present half-century, and now as much a matter of course! Smith, Elder, and Co. We believe one reason of this body of middle-class literature to be the indolent style of reading now perpetually practised. The supply must needs be abundant that can meet all these various demands; and these are not all. There are multitudes who habitually read a good deal, and much to their own satisfaction, whose provision of books is almost entirely drawn from the middle and lower classes of literature. Very many of them, indeed, have read Dickens, some few Thackeray, wholly, or partially; but for them, Miss Austen wrote drivel, and Sir Walter Scott prosy inanity. Craik well enough, because, though didactic, she is sentimental; and few of them, probably, would confuse her as a contemporary review did lately with her sister-in-law, Miss Georgiana Craik. They take Miss Braddon and Ouida as the salt and spice of their reading; but what they live upon is the enormous mass of novels and stories which fill the pages of cheap periodicals, and serve as ballast to the circulating libraries. It seems, then, that the laws of demand and supply account for the existence of thousands of novels, and since thousands of novels are required and manufactured, it is reasonable enough to expect that they should lose the character of works of art, and be as common-place as the daily bread to which we have already likened them. Critics supposed to be a superior race complain continually about the dreariness of the books they have to review; but we must say it, even at the risk of incurring the contempt of our brethren-the marvel appears to us to be that so many of these books do retain traces of the higher origin of their species; that such a vast number of writers should possess a spark-even the feeblest spark-of the sacred fire that makes a good novelist. The present writer has been from babyhood a devourer of novels-good, bad, and indifferent, all have had their turn-and the result is a profound conviction that a great deal too much ability is absorbed by this one metier, a great deal, perhaps, which might be profitably distributed over others. That absolutely incapable people do write novels and get them printed is a melancholy fact, but the novels that are unmitigatedly bad are a small minority when compared with the great assembly of those that have something good in them. Of the quite worthless ones we can say, as Virgil did to Dante respecting the Spirits that in their earthly life had done neither good nor ill, "Fama di loro il mondo esser non lassa; Misericordia e Giustizia gli sdegnâ; Non ragionam di lor, ma guarda e passa;" but the better ones are often not a little aggravating. This or that in them is good, but the whole is not good. We feel that if we could pound two or three of the authors up together, we should do them a service; whereas, until Science shall teach us how to do this, the most successful of them must needs go on writing books of what we may call the upper middle-class; or, to revert to our first simile, their novels can only represent those stars which, though not plain to the naked eye, require but little telescopic aid to disengage themselves from the nebulas around them. Among the best known of these lesser lights, a good many are the creation of Holme Lee, from whose pen they have come in sober succession through a good many years. They have attained to a moderate, but steady reputation-popularity would, perhaps, be too strong a word-and no one can say that they do not deserve it. The one recently published is full of incident, written in fair English with a slight flavour of quaintness, and with sufficient vividness of colouring to make the characters individual and interesting. The three houses in which the story unrolls itself are charming and exceedingly real, and there are momentary glimpses of the actors which make their personality almost as distinct as actual sight could do. All these ideas are vaguely shaped in turn, but none of them are sharpened and driven home; and there is yet another, which we venture to think wholly unnecessary to the interest of the book, dealt with in a half-bold, half-timid fashion, constantly forcing itself on our notice, and yet leaving us doubtful, after all, whether the author means to advocate the immunity from social penalties of those who choose to live "in open defiance of social order," or merely to say that the innocent should not suffer for the guilty. The House with the Golden Gables-too

suggestive of Hawthorne's is the home of a long-descended, but not rich family, an old Judge, his wife, their eldest son and his wife, and numerous children. There is but one girl in the house, Delia, afterwards Mrs. She is the darling of all, for her beauty, spirit, and warmheartedness ; but though it hardly seems as if her creator meant her to be so she is inordinately vain and headstrong, as well as imperious and exacting. We have a little picture of her, as one day her brother Walter came upon her suddenly, on the great oak staircase: Room there for Mistress Pride! Delia started, almost imperceptibly modified her majesty of gait, and passed him with a sweeping indignation that he forgot the next hour, but Delia did not forget it, nor that he had mocked her. She loved him the less for it, and she feared him. James Herrick, of Knowle, though everybody but herself can see that his affections are fixed on her cousin Fanny, while her own are certainly not concerned in the matter at all. She goes away with her grandfather quite unsuspecting, and presently gets the news in a letter from her mother. She is extremely shocked, but within twenty-four hours "her fancy, impatient of a vacuum, begins to disport itself round a new object. Denys, "a bachelor of great estate, arrived at the age when a man must make haste to marry, if he means to marry well," but whose name, though he and one of his estates belong to her own county, she had never heard till she met him in London a week or so. The Judge "knew him by reputation, and was not of a mind to know more of him ;" accordingly, after an evening when he has shown himself ready to be attracted, Delia is reproved "not unreasonably" for her facility. Next time they meet, Mr. Denys obtains such positive encouragement that he writes her two letters, both favourably received, and then a third, accompanied by a gift of jewels, which she accepts and hides. For a week they correspond incessantly, and then the Judge takes his grand-daughter home, perfectly convinced that she has repented of her folly about James Herrick, and is really the sensible and honest girl she appears. She has, at least, the grace to be very uncomfortable when she finds herself in the loving circle at the old house ; but she consoles herself by reading all the county history can tell her of Mr. She has her way, marrying Mr. Denys the day after her twenty-first birthday, in spite of the utter disapproval of all her own family, who certainly spare no means, good or bad, of dissuading her from the match. They set before her clearly the fact that Mr. Denys had suffered a severe reprimand from her grandfather in his capacity of Judge, to the effect that, "while hearkening to the constituted authorities and the laws, he had appeared to have but a dull perception of those other laws which, though never formally enacted, all men hold it shame to violate. We have seen how she does choose ; and what we now want to do is to protest against the incongruity we are tempted to say the immoral incongruity between this beginning and the sequel of the story. We deny that a young woman so capable of deceiving, disobeying, and forsaking tender and careful parents for the sake of a stranger, of whom she knows little but evil, could suddenly develop into a faithful, wise, and loving wife. Denys out of a mingling of spite and ambition. He turns out a thousand times better than she deserved; and when, at the end of the book, having buried him, and seen her son in possession of his estates, she marries again, we can hardly help hoping her second husband may pay her a fair wage for the misbehaviour of her youth.

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