

TWO READABLE NOVELS.*

Miss Howard's new story possesses, like her most ambitious effort in fiction, "Guenn," an entirely foreign atmosphere; and the New England woods and home-like folk and the surroundings that lent their every-day attractiveness to her sprightly maiden-apart "One Summer" seem further apart from her primal tastes as a writer than ever. Her new story is decidedly successful in the quality of interesting its readers with its picture of life in a German household, of a social clique in a German city, and by a small group of clearly defined personages. These characters are, however, rather types than characters, and a certain air of familiarity hangs about nearly all of them; a reminder of these American readers have met in Mrs. A. L. Wister's translations of Marlitt and Werner. The title of Miss Howard's book, *The Open Door*, contains a clever allegorical significance. The Countess of Kronfels, elderly, but unwilling to grow old, and absorbed in a volatile social life and in fashionable whims (of which her affection for her lap-dog "Mousey" is an amusingly important matter in the novel), has a son and heir, Hugo. He has been suddenly reduced from splendid health and strength to pitiful invalidism by a fall from his horse. With no home life to cheer his solitude, and entirely out of sympathy with his frivolous mother, he is in a state of blank despair. As the story opens, and is seriously considering suicide. He has no scruples about the right of a man, whose future is blasted by fate, to take himself out of mortal existence, his creed being the passage of Epictetus: "Above all remember that the door is open. . . . When everything begins to pall upon you retire. But if you stay do not complain."

But the very belief is that he has the right to remove himself from earthly life and suffering, and the repetition to himself that the "door" is "open" and that he can go when he chooses, holds him back. He will wait a while, and in the mean time, school himself to more perfect endurance. He undertakes this stoical process. A distant cousin, Gabrielle von Dohna, comes to pass a year at the castle. She is the companion of his flighty mother, and a tormenting and a vivid life begins for her. But little by little, Gabrielle interests Count Hugo, and acquires a positive moral influence over his morbid mind. They meet more frequently and get to know and appreciate one another, in spite of the quiet opposition of Countess von Kronfels, to this unnecessary element of her niece's residence with her. Gabrielle brings to the invalid new thoughts and purposes. An intelligent stone-carver, Dietz Bernhard, employed near the Count's chambers, also becomes, little by little, a valuable agent of sweetness and light to the sick-minded man. In the social circles to which she is introduced, Gabrielle carries her own sincerity and high aims and views. At last, just when the Countess tells her she is no longer enough in sympathy with her "quixotic" ideas to wish her presence under her and her son's roof, Gabrielle and Hugo reach a frank, happy understanding. She discovers that sympathy for him has created a love in exchange for his, and the story ends with their ardent betrothal. In a scene in which it may be added, Gabrielle's honest tongue and ingenuous nature does most of the courtship. The "open door" is guarded by love henceforth, and Hugo's consideration of Roman philosophers' views of suicide are over. There is much movement and life in the book and the incidents follow in rapid succession; the none are particularly startling there is novelty and vivacity to them. The tall and coquettish old Countess, with her French bonnets and juvenile airs and affectations is a diverting portrayal; and the dog aforesaid, "Mousey," is so active a participant in at least two or three important crises that he deserves recognition as a character. The gentle Princess Mercedes and Bernhard are also skillfully sketched. The best piece of study of human nature in the story, however, is the Frau Major, a politic, affectionate, exceedingly popular society woman, the bosom friend of Countess Adelheid von Kronfels; and a portrait that will be recognized by hundreds of readers as "precisely like Mrs."—So and So, whoever she may be or of whatsoever nationality. *The Open Door* is less smoothly constructed in its course, and savors a trifle too much of extravagance in some elements and in the development of sundry incidents, to stand

comparison successfully with "Guenn"; but it is on the whole little to be censured for the literary license of exaggeration, and it is a bright and wholesome addition to the summer's catalog of agreeable stories.

About a dozen years ago Frances Mary Peard put forth a graceful and sympathetic novel "One Year," which won an unobtrusive literary success. We have not kept an observant record of Miss Peard's later stories; but a new one which came out only some months ago in England, has now been transferred to this side, *The Country Cousin*, and is a proof that her sharp perceptions in the study of human nature and her light yet firm touch as a writer have undergone no diminishment. *The Country Cousin* is an excellently entertaining novel of English society life with a marked degree of originality in its pages. In Miss Peard's story, the "cousin" is of an unconventional sort—a girl possessed of extreme loveliness of face, a gift of which she has little appreciation; for her developing nature is kept in wearisomely tight leading-strings by a nervous and fussy father, Lord Medhurst. Coming up to London for her first spring, Joan Medhurst's self-consciousness and exquisite face fascinates one of the great matrimonial fish in the season—Sir Henry Lancaster. He is a marked man—a rising politician, well-disposed to be a benedict, but loth to take to himself a young wife to whom fashion and flirtation are important objects of existence—the type he sees most represented about him. He recognizes in Joan an unformed nature, and comes to the conclusion which many men adopt as to women, that "not having experienced, she will not desire." He marries her to the surprise of every one. Thereupon Joan shows a taste for frivolity and for the most volatile social career with surprising quickness. Her marriage has completely revolutionized her. Conscious of her beauty and her position with the way once open to her feet she dances merrily onward, taking to every sort of "smart" dissipation in a "smart" set with the avidity and talent of a woman who is born for just that sort of existence and has only now found it out. By degrees, her grave husband is disappointed and made wretched. There is nothing in common between him and his pretty wife. Every month separates them more unhappily. His political success is embittered by his sense of a painful matrimonial error. He has not married a helpmeet and a woman to appreciate him; but a giddy child, who admires him, but has no relish for his tastes and views. Joan presently goes further. In her insouciance of the social world she allows an indiscreet flirtation with a cousin of her husband, Basil Grey, to be the topic of wide gossip. She resents all counsel and interference. Suddenly her husband's health breaks down and he is at the point of death. Grey proves his worthlessness and superficiality compared with Lancaster. The spell of the world upon her breaks, and she realizes whither she is thoughtlessly drifting. Her affection for her husband and her recognition of his talents is quickened; they are reconciled and come to mutual understandings and concessions, and the story ends with the prospect of a new order of things for them. Miss Peard's book is well written throughout. Joan and Sir Henry Lancaster are admirably drawn; and Lady Millicent, secretly attached to Lancaster and apparently just the wife for him, but not the one he elects to marry, is a strikingly refined and spirited sketch. There is plenty of humor in the story and a good deal of delicate satire. It is a summer novel well worthy the leisure hour, and, by the by, a capital one to read aloud.

**THE OPEN DOOR*. By BLANCHE WILLIS HOWARD. Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co. *THE COUNTRY COUSIN*. A Novel. By FRANCES MARY PEARD. New York: Harper & Bros. ("Franklin Square Library," No. 642.)