

ECONOMICS IN A NOVEL

C. R. FAY.

WHEN Malthus was being examined by the Emigration Committee of 1827, the following questions and answers were exchanged:

Q. If cheap tracts were written and given to the poor, and in some instances taught in the School, explaining the doctrines you have just laid down with respect to the conditions of the poor, do you imagine they would be able to understand them, and that they would apply what they learned to their own case?

A. I think they are not very difficult to be understood, but they are perhaps rather difficult to apply. I believe some tracts of that kind have been occasionally distributed.

Q. Have you any knowledge of the effects produced?

A. I have understood that many of the labouring classes, particularly the artisans, acknowledge the doctrines which have been laid down on the subject of population.

A woman essayed the teaching task, and took England by storm, (or rather that part of it above the masses for whom it was intended). In the course of two and a half years, Miss Harriet Martineau issued thirty-four numbers of *Tales Illustrating Political Economy and Taxation* ("Political Economy and Taxation" was the title of the Ricardian bible). And to oblige Lord Brougham she wrote a further batch for the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, in support of the new Poor Law. Brougham guaranteed a part of the remuneration, but forgot to pay. In 1831 she could not get a hearing from a capital distracted by cholera and Reform bills. But long before she concluded her series in February, 1834, she found herself a lioness—a rôle which to her credit she shunned. Cabinet ministers, newspaper editors and politicians vied for the privilege of having their proposals supported by her stories.

Miss Martineau's methods were simple. The perusal of Mrs. Marcet's *Conversations on Political Economy*, 1816—a tame but gushing forerunner—revealed "the curious fact that in my earlier tales about wages and machinery I had been writing Political

Economy without knowing it." So she furnished herself with the standard works; mapped out her scheme, read as far as was necessary to the number in hand, and allowed the plot to develop as she wrote. As tales, they are insufferable. Only in the last, *The Farrers of Budge Row*, is there the glimmer of a plot. A miserly grocer dies of terror at the prospect of paying Pitt's income tax; and to avoid taxation his miserly daughter takes her capital abroad, abandoning home and kindred, and risking her fortune in foreign funds. To atone for the unusual excitement, she ends it with a Moral of Many Fables, which advertises the heart of the matter thus:

The conditions of labourers may be best improved,—

1. By inventions and discoveries which create capital: and by husbanding instead of wasting capital: for instance by making savings instead of supporting strikes.
2. By adjusting the proportion of population to capital.

The master and disciple were close friends, and both became famous, only to be abused. When she came to her number on Population, she knew there was trouble ahead. "While writing *Weal and Woe in Garveloch*, the perspiration many a time streamed down my face, though I knew there was not a line in it which might not be read aloud in any family." But she took comfort for the "tomahawking", which Messrs. Croker and Lockhart administered in the *Quarterly Review*, from the example of Mr. Malthus. "I wonder whether it ever kept you awake a minute," she asked him. "Never after the first fortnight", was his reply. To minimize the excitement of authorship, she was careful never to glance at a number again, once the proofs had been returned to the printer. So beautifully in one number did she portray the blessedness of domestic life, that Malthus called around to thank her. Noble are those who marry when they love; and still nobler are those "who let it go by for conscience sake, and do not ask for it again"—so ran the moral of the tale.

One would give much to have been present at this interview—he with his hare-lip, she with her ear-trumpet, two of the kindest creatures that ever lived, and so spiritually akin that she did not need her trumpet to catch his mild and resonant vowels.

Miss Martineau's *Autobiography* is among the books that one should read.