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Fiction.

Mr. Barrie's Way.

THE LITTLE WHITE BIRD. By J. M. Barrie. (Hodder and Stoughton. 6s.)

AN engaging and, at the same time, an annoying book. It is neither a novel, nor a collection of short stories, nor a book for children, nor a book for adults. It is shapeless; half of it could be omitted, and nobody would notice the omission. It is sentimental, and sometimes childish; no other living writer could have treated the subject without making it nauseous. Which is merely another way of saying that "The Little White Bird" is another book by Mr. Barrie, another example of Mr. Barrie's way.

Writers who pine for recognition, gushing praise, and large cheques, and fail to find them, must often ask themselves, what is this way of Mr. Barrie's that has made him, both as author and playwright, so prosperous an individual? The answer would seem to be that he has resolutely refused to observe life, or to grow up. When he was quite young, a few types of character, a few pretty and obvious phases of the sentimental life, made a vast impression on him. Time has not blurred their outlines, or dulled their fragrance. Add to that an unwearying and very subtle study of the artistic temperament as exemplified in himself, and you have Mr. Barrie's material. His view of life is still that of the nice, well-conditioned school-girl who adores animals and children; who will talk by the hour about fairies to a younger sister, and who will grow tearful and immensely interested in any love story of loyal, unsophisticated hearts. Life and criticism of life, growing in interest as they grow older, that other authors work their wits upon, do not exist for Mr. Barrie. His subjects are the subjects that wait just beyond the school-room door. He turns to them again and again, and he has only to turn to add to his popularity.

But the author who would attempt to imitate him would be a foolish fellow. For Mr. Barrie has rare gifts that are not to be simulated. First and foremost he has humour, the real kind of humour that bubbles from the narrative without any apparent effort—the humour of the artistic temperament's other self, that, mildly amused, mildly contemptuous, watches its master's moods. Mr. Barrie knows perfectly well that he is an incurable sentimentalist, but he cannot help it any more than he can help mocking at himself for being one. Also he has pathos, comprehension of the minds of children, including that elder child, the artist, and perfect sympathy with all simple and unspoiled natures, whether they are women, boys or dogs.

This meandering book, chapters of which are sheer padding, shows all Mr. Barrie's merits and all his limitations. Half of it is weariness, in the other half there are passages, indeed chapters, that in humour, whimsicality, and a delicate narrative power no living writer could rival. The dog Porthos lives; Mary lives. The boy David lives. The few pages called "An Interloper" describing the night David spent with his second father are a triumph of literary art and observation. The chapter called "A Confirmed Spinster," a study of an imaginative lover's imaginary regrets for an imaginary lost love, could not be better done. Most men have lived down this kind of emotion by the time they are out of their teens; all other writers at twenty-five have ceased to regard such whimsies as "literary copy." They are still fresh and fragrant to Mr. Barrie. All the book is like that. Mr. Barrie treats his bread and butter themes as if he thought they were the only subjects in life. And he does it so well, that if we were not very severe with ourselves, we should believe him.

Four Types of Fiction.

THE ROMANTIC ADVENTUROUS — THE SOCIAL — MURDER AND SUDDEN DEATH—THE AMATEUR.

POPULAR fiction, in the main, falls very readily into certain divisions, and those divisions are not many. Now and then a book makes a place for itself, refuses to be labelled, and is too often regarded with the doubt bred of unfamiliarity. But about most books there is no doubt at all; they supply a market demand, and the market likes plain figures and no experiments. This, no doubt, simplifies trade, but it cannot be considered good for literature; it tends to strangle spontaneity and turns a delicate art into a kind of clumsy mechanics. We know exactly what the pattern is to be; there is never any such doubt as there was about the pattern in the carpet concerning which Mr. Henry James once wrote. We have selected four such novels: they are typical of this season's production just as they might have been typical of last season's or of the season before. It is long since the formulas have varied materially.

THE ROMANTIC ADVENTUROUS.

"Flower-o'-the-Corn" (Clarke) brings Mr. Crockett's published books up to a round two dozen, but with increase of numbers we have no increase in variety, no natural development. "It was thus that he first saw her, blue and white among the gold, and ever after in his heart of hearts he called her, like those others, 'Flower-o'-the-Corn.'" Her father was Mr. Patrick Wellwood, chaplain to Ardmillan's regiment, and the man who saw her "blue and white among the gold" was Captain Maurice Raith, on the personal staff of my Lord Marlborough. We know what is to follow, and it follows. Raith is sent to the Cevennes secretly to encourage the Camisard revolt; the chaplain, being a Protestant, goes as well, taking his daughter with him. Adventure tumbles over the heels of adventure. Enter Yvette Foy, daughter of a fanatic inn-keeper. Raith's allegiance to "Flower-o'-the-Corn" totters. Yvette is beautiful and unscrupulous, so beautiful, indeed, that she has succeeded in catching the Maréchal de Montrevel for a husband. The conclusion is blood, gross melodrama, and the chanting of psalms. But to leave the matter there would be to do the author injustice. Mr. Crockett writes with extraordinary facility and assurance; he is never in doubt; his invention never forsakes him. Occasionally, too, he has broad descriptive passages which touch off a scene with a kind of masterful intimacy. Now and then he approaches strength, now and then he has an episode almost moving. But the general effect is strained, unreal, over-coloured, and always the sentiment is too young womanish, too cloying. The note is the note of sensationalism, not of truth.

THE SOCIAL.

No two writers could be more unlike than Mr. Crockett and Mr. Thomas Cobb, yet the work of each conforms to a particular convention. In "The Head of the Household" (Chapman) Mr. Cobb shows himself to be more than ever dominated by his own method; he willingly resigns himself to it; it is as though he had made up his mind to give up struggling. This is not to say that Mr. Cobb is not amusing; he is: but it is the lightest of amusement, and it grows out of the most improbable and arbitrary circumstances. There was a time when Mr. Cobb seemed to take more pains to find reasonable pretexts for his deft and well-managed dialogue; in "The Head of the Household" he has taken so little pains that the whole affair is essentially unreal; in detail there are passages true enough, but we never recover from the effect of the beginning. When Ursula's father dies intestate, she comes into a huge fortune and a house full of impecunious relatives; impecunious relatives are common enough, but these of Ursula's are not. There are her father's