

A Book of the Week.

LIFE'S LITTLE IRONIES.

MR. HARDY is a writer who possesses the rare quality of unexpectedness, and a style at once original and yet full of distinction. Admirers of his peculiar genius will welcome this "Set of Tales," although most of them have appeared before in the pages of monthly magazines. On the whole, it may be said that "Life's Little Ironies" are worthy of the Author of "Tess," and that, in spite of a certain coarseness of atmosphere from which even the immortal "Tess" is not free, are most enjoyable reading.

There is a peculiar something in Mr. Hardy's descriptions of love-making that jars and spoils his work. It is exceedingly difficult to define, because many stories and novels that are far "stronger in their situations," and infinitely more passionate, can be read without a qualm; while it is seldom that any of Mr. Hardy's love scenes are softened by the touch of poetry that dignifies passion, nor by the touch of human simplicity that arouses sympathy and interest. When Mr. Hardy's lovers make love, there is just that something about their love-making that makes even the most hardened novel-reader feel squeamish. For instance, in the fascinating story called "On the Western Circuit," we find a most ingenious plot powerfully developed in the description of the bored and imaginative wife of a tradesman in a little country town. Mated to an uncongenial husband, she longs for experience and excitement. She is the mistress of a pretty maid whom a fine gentleman-barrister "on the Western Circuit has got into trouble." The maid receives letters from her lover which she can neither read nor answer, so her mistress reads them for her, and then, from a half-kindly and half-romantic impulse, answers them. She pours all her passionate, impulsive nature into the writing of these love letters, so that she turns the fine gentleman's idle pastime into a genuine passion, for he never dreamt of finding such a rich intelligence in his rustic beauty. The result is that he marries the maid, and then follows the ironic sequel. She cannot write even the simplest note without printing every letter and mis-spelling every word. So far the story is most delectable reading, every line, phrase, and paragraph tells, and there is not a superfluous word, but immediately after the marriage, Raye, the Barrister has a scene with the real writer of the letters, who of course has fallen desperately in love with him.

"He drew her towards him and bent over her. 'If it were all pure invention in those letters,' he said, emphatically, give me your cheek only. If you meant what you said, let it be lips. It is for the first and last time, remember! She put up her mouth and he kissed her long."

There is something to my mind peculiarly loathsome in the phrasing of "Let it be lips." Something that ruins the whole situation and spoils just at the climax what would be otherwise an exceedingly fine story.

In a writer of less genius than Mr. Hardy, we should merely cast aside the volume with contempt; but, entranced with the author's marvellous power of painting a picture and telling a tale, however slight, so that it is endowed with the supreme quality of life, we are

fascinated with his irresistible genius, and such a sentence arouses in us a sense of artistic indignation at the flippancy which at such a turning point in the story can coarsen a powerful situation. Nevertheless, "On the Western Circuit" is perhaps the best short story that Mr. Hardy has written. It is certainly the best in this volume.

"The Son's Veto" is a rather pathetic tale of a woman who marries above her, and is left a widow with a priggish son, who will not allow her to marry the lover of her youth. Her life became insupportably dreary, and she longed inexpressibly for her greengrocer and his comfortable cheery shop and market cart. She was not a lady, but, unfortunately for her, her son considers himself a gentleman, and therefore persuades her that alliance with a tradesman is impossible.

"For Conscience Sake" is a powerful story and most original in its ironical treatment of the failure of a man's endeavour after long years, to right a wrong.

"The Fiddler of the Reels" is a tale of a village Orpheus, who, by the power of his fiddle, captured the hearts of the rustic maidens; one of them, Carline, hypnotised by his music, loves him, and forsakes her former lover, for

"He could not play the fiddle so as to draw your soul out of your body like a spider's thread, as 'Mop' did, till you felt as limp as withy wind, and yearned for something to cling to."

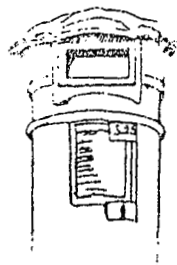
The description of Carline's journey to London at the time of the great Exhibition of 1851, and her recapture of her former lover after she had been deserted by the false musician, are splendid writing, though the ending of the story does not strike me as nearly so engaging.

I have left myself but little space to write of the stories at the end of the book, which are collected under the title of "A Few Crusted Characters." The characters journey to the village of "Longpuddle" in a Wessex diligence, half carrier's cart, half omnibus. The Longpuddle pilgrims tell story after story to beguile the tedious and lengthy journey, and their idiosyncrasies are described with a skilful pen and much power of characterisation, and there is about the whole journey a pleasing Chaucerian reminiscence that by no means lessens its interest. Taking it altogether in spite of the blemishes spoken of "Life's Ironies" is to be recommended as well worth acquiring at the moderate price of 4/6.

A. M. G.

Letters to the Editor.

(Notes, Queries, &c.)



Whilst cordially inviting communications upon all subjects for these columns, we wish it to be distinctly understood that we do not in ANY WAY hold ourselves responsible for the opinions expressed by our correspondents.

PRIVATE NURSES.

To the Editor of "The Nursing Record."

MADAM,—May I be allowed space in the NURSING RECORD to make a few remarks on Private Nurses and their training. I quite agree with Sister Marian that there are many excellent clever women, invaluable in the wards of an

"Life's Little Ironies, A Set of Tales with some Colloquial Sketches entitled, A Few Crusted Characters." By Thomas Hardy. 6s. (Osgood McIlvain & Co., 1894.)

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