A Book of the Week.

JOHN DAVIDSON'S BALLADS.*

Mr. Davidson is nothing—if not original. In his last book two lines of dedication to his friend are followed by these two lines of dedication to his enemy :—

" Unwilling friend, let not your spite abate :
Help me with scorn, and strengthen me with hate."

There is a strong personality behind those lines that is attractive. Indeed, from the first volume he ever published, the majority of critics have had little doubt about Mr. Davidson's strength ; the question was if he was endowed with any other qualities at all that would appeal to posterity and give him a permanent place among the poets of England, for Mr. Davidson's ballads are disfigured by blemishes that are distressing and annoying, because in spite of his "hoarse note," strained imagery, and a certain music-hall cadence that he is apt to drop into at times, they are full of vigour and inspiration; and occasionally he writes verses of such great beauty, felicity of expression, and metaphor, that the imagination is taken captive by them, and the lines linger in the memory and become a joyful possession. "The Ballad of a Nun," which attracted so much attention when it first appeared in that Apotheosis of Ugliness, known among men as "The Yellow Book," is full of lines of rare quality and distinction, such as the following stanza :—

" The adventurous sun took heaven by storm,
Clouds scattered largesses of rain ;
The sounding cities, rich and warm,
Smouldered and glittered in the plain "

—which paints a perfect picture to the mind's eye ; or this cry of the cloistered nun, which strikes so terrible and profound a note of human yearning :—

" For still night's starry scroll unfurled,
And still the day came like a flood :
It was the greatness of the world
That made her long to use her blood."

The idea of the " Ballad of a Nun " is borrowed from Adelaide Procter's " Legend of Provence," but how different is the treatment. Most women will infinitely prefer Miss Procter's poem, but it would be unjust not to realise the power and poetic inspiration of Mr. Davidson's version of the story. Many religious-minded people will resent, and I think justly resent, the idea that Mary the Mother of God should kiss and bless the totally unrepentant sinner who falls at her feet, and in spite of her distorted life in the world, one would like to think that the Nun herself had gained something more from her wider knowledge of humanity than is apparent from the ending of the poem. The ballads respectively entitled "Heaven" and " Hell " are types of the style of cantering rhythm in which Mr. Davidson writes of serious subjects, and which are distressing to those who care for style, and who appreciate the great art of reticence in literature. "Thirty Bob a Week" has claims for our admiration ; for instance,

" But the difficultest go to understand,
And the difficultest job a man can do,
Is to come it brave and meek with thirty bob a week,
And feel that that's the proper thing for you,"

gives a true conception of the yeasty ideas of a socialist labourer. While speaking of his poems I should like to draw our readers' attention to a little prose poem written by Mr. Davidson two years ago. It is a novel called "Baptist Lake," and it is full of charming bits of descriptive writing and is well worth reading, though the story as a whole is not an entire success. Those people who like pantomime may be referred to his "Scaramouch in Naxos," a piece of fantastic nonsense that is full of startling originality. I admire Mr. Davidson's writings, but I do so grudgingly ; he annoys quite as much as he pleases me, and I wish never to read anything more of his, yet I know I shall read every line he writes and dislike it, and then read it again to confirm that dislike. A. M. G.

* " Ballads and Songs," by John Davidson. 5s. nett. (John Lane, 1894.)

Reviews.

OLD FRIENDS IN NEW FACES.

The public, owing to the never-ceasing issue of new books, is in danger of forgetting, if indeed they ever remember, some of the earlier gems of novel writing. Sometimes this is not their fault unless they have the run of an old library, and even certain standard books are no longer procurable, save by the wary hunter among second-hand book stalls. Till recently Miss Edgeworth's books were of this class ; now, however, there is a charming edition issued by Messrs. Macmillan (Bedford Street, Strand), of " Castle Rackrent" and " The Absentee," beautifully illustrated by Chris Hammond, who has brought to his taste a full artistic appreciation of the life Maria Edgeworth depicted. This edition has yet other attractions—an introduction from the pen of Mrs. Thackeray Ritchie, daughter of the author of " Vanity Fair," in which she describes a visit she paid to Edgeworthstown, the family seat of the Edgeworths. But stripped of such accessories what is to be said of these two books, so different in character ?

" Castle Rackrent " is, in its way, a masterpiece, for therein Miss Edgeworth has, by the creation of honest Thady, done more to vindicate and explain the Irish peasant character, vilified in every fifth-rate play, than could have been achieved by volumes of argumentative essays. Thady, the aged, faithful retainer, is made to give in his own natural style, with its quaint reasoning and more than questionable logic, a history of the Rackrent family, which by its thoughtless, devil-may-care extravagance, brought down the inevitable Nemesis, ruin—ruin, not only to itself, which was well deserved, but the grinding poverty and degradation of the tenantry.

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