

A Book of the Week.

THE HISTORY OF SIR RICHARD CALMADY.*

Ever since the memorable appearance of "Colonel Enderby's Wife," Mrs. St. Leger Harrison has taken her place as one of our more serious fiction writers—one whose works are worth far more than the somewhat superficial reading we accord to the mere novelist of the hour. Heiress of literary traditions, Lucas Malet is worthy of them, and her books reveal a many-sided talent and a depth of thought which are alike rare and excellent. To be confronted with the history of Sir Richard Calmady is, we must suppose, to be confronted with the ripest work of the writer's genius. One feels that the work of a long period must have gone to the carefully thought-out construction of this remarkable book. (By the way, the proper pronunciation of the hero's patronymic bids fair already to be the bone of contention this autumn. The Calmady family, this reviewer is credibly informed, calls itself Calmady. Lucas Malet, it is equally positively asserted, calls it Calmady. Here is fruit for large discussion.)

On the very threshold of the book we are met with material for discussion of a far more serious nature. This book raises the whole question,—Is everything under heaven, everything, good or bad, ugly or lovely, hideous, sordid, repulsive, or godlike, food alike for the mills of Art? Is Art justified in choosing a theme of the most innate privacy, of the most exceptional infrequency, of the most painful or most repellent horror, and spreading it out for our consideration during the extent of six hundred and odd pages? If it be conceded that to art all is lawful, and that absolutely anything is a suitable subject for a novel, then Sir Richard Calmady is an artistic production.

But there are still left among us some who would draw the line somewhere, and these will certainly find an alloy to their pleasure in the pages of this romance.

Considered as a story the book labours under an exaggeration of that defect which the severe canons of the French stage completely disallow. It spreads itself out over the complete compass of two lives, so that there is never throughout a centre of interest; the period, the atmosphere, is always changing, making the book a chronicle, and not, properly speaking, a novel at all.

The hereditary curse, which used to be considered as the exclusive property of the *Family Herald*, has had quite a remarkable new lease of life of late among the literary novelists; and it is a family curse which works upon the innocent unborn child of Catherine Calmady. A far off ancestor betrayed a girl upon his estate, who bore him a son. Afterwards, when he brought home a wife to the house, the mother of his child appeared, to enter a protest. The boy, who was with his mother, climbed up on the steps of his unknown father's coach; he was pushed off, the horses started, and the wheels went over him, amputating both legs above the knee: whereupon the bereaved mother prophesied that all the Calmadys should meet with violent deaths, until a saviour should be born, half angel, half monster, who should never wear a shoe. He was to be fatherless at the time of birth to have neither brother nor sister, and to be the possessor of red gold hair and blue eyes.

* By Lucas Malet. (Methuen.)

In the year 1842 young Richard Calmady brings home a bride. She is young, noble, lovely, and life to both is a dream of happiness. But Sir Richard is thrown from his horse five months before the birth of his child, and though they amputate his leg above the knee he dies. The baby is born with abortive legs—stumps with no knees, and a pair of feet stuck on.

Of the medical question thus raised—that is, of the physical possibility of such deformity, in consequence of the mother's anguish of sympathy for her husband, the present writer cannot speak.

Whether it is possible that the intermediate portion of the limbs of a healthy fœtus could disappear in the fifth month of pregnancy, is a question. If such a thing could happen, one wonders that it does not happen far more frequently. When one considers the shocks endured by women when in that condition, it would be a wonder that anyone comes into the world unmarked by maternal emotion of some sort.

But, granted that it is possible, and that such a monstrosity as poor Catherine's child were really born, the thing is so exceptional as considerably to deaden sympathy. No human laws can fit in perfectly with entirely unforeseen combinations of circumstances. But, if the reader wishes to know, as a matter of interest, what were the feelings and what the trials of the mother of such a being, what were his temptations and what his tragedies, he will find it all here. The character of Richard's mother is a masterpiece. The faults as well as the virtues of Catherine are chronicled for us, and we love her for them all. She should remain in fiction by the side of Rachel Esmond, as a portrait of consummate skill.

The portrait of Richard is not so convincing; but then, one has never met anybody in Richard's circumstances. One of the reviewers, in a recent notice of the book, remarked that a deformed hero was a novelty of Lucas Malet's own invention. Some of our readers may recall the work of a very different type of writer—Miss Mulock, and her "Story of a Noble Life." The self-sacrifice which animates the hero of that simple tale would certainly never have occurred to Richard Calmady.

We have changed all that, and the modern way is to curse an untoward fate for our limitations, and like Richard to wring out all that the world holds for us, in defiance of law, or to submit like a dumb beast, with no voluntary surrender of the will. In all which respects the book is allegorical, though it is doubtful whether the author so intended it.

G. M. R.

What to Read.

"Bagsby's Daughter." By Marie and Bessie Van Vorst.

"The Fourth Estate." By A. Palacio Valdés.

"The Testament of A Man Forbid." By John Davidson.

"The Idler Out of Doors." By Walter Raymond

"The Strange Disappearance of Lady Delia." By Louis Tracy.

"Marion Darche." A Story without Comment. By F. Marion Crawford.

"One of the Red Shirts." A Story of Garibaldi's Men. By Herbert Hayens.

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