A Book of the Week.

ARBEIT.*

This is a German novel about a German woman worker. It is a sympathetic study of the influence of intellectual work on an emotional nature.

We do not recommend the book to the tired or to the conventional mind. It is restless and fatiguing, and some of the scenes are, from a British point of view, at any rate, unnecessarily unpleasant. But some people will find it easy to ignore the passages in doubtful taste and will discover the book to be stimulating, helpful and full of imaginative insight.

Josephine is the wife of a clever doctor of weak character. The book opens just after he has been condemned to some years of penal servitude for a grave offence. She finds herself left with four young children to support. Her girlish illusions are dispelled, her affection is cast in the mire, but, in her misery, she clings to the memory of the man she once loved. She has a passionate pity for his feebleness and misery; an innate loyalty makes her refuse the suggestions of divorce, which step is taken to be a matter of course by her father. For the same reason she will not make a home with the old man "where she will hear Georges reviled." She determines to study medicine, so as to be able to support the children. She has also the quixotic intention of keeping her husband's practice alive until his return, and will not even allow his doorplate to be removed. We must suppose this resolution to be made in the blindness of pain, for a practice will hardly wait until the necessary studies are completed to produce a fully-fledged doctor, even if medical law permitted a released convict to resume his position. However, that is a mere incorrectness in practical detail. The spirit is true enough.

Josephine, in spite of all difficulties, completes her studies and becomes a successful doctor. The descriptions of hospital life at Zürich have raised a storm of indignation. They are indeed a mistake, from an artistic point of view, because the note of bitter dislike of the German professors draws attention to itself and away from the real theme of the story.

I translate the worst of these scenes :—

"The German professor, steeped in self-sufficiency, looked at her. He saw the reproach on Josephine's lips. He saw disapprobation on many faces, particularly on those of the women students. He hated these women students. Their disapprobation threw doubt on his self-sufficiency—that is why he disliked them.

"And he blinked angrily at Josephine—only wait!

"A sick man lay in the lecture room.

"The self-sufficient professor told the attendant to strip the patient.

"Further! More! Altogether!

"He told the naked man to stand on a chair, which was clearly visible to everyone.

"Then he looked round and called Josephine—to perform the most painful and offensive examination.

"The examination was unpleasant for the patient.

"It was unpleasant for the examiner.

"It was unpleasant to the attending nurse.

"It was unpleasant to the students.

"And this most painful and offensive examination was completely useless; it was only a punishment, a coarse revenge on the part of the German professor who hated women."

It is a pity that the author should have stooped to such a description. Whether she has facts to support her statements is another question. We do not think that anyone would even dream of recounting such an incident as taking place in an English hospital.

Josephine took up work with a definite object in view, but she soon learned to love it for its own sake—sometimes for its intrinsic fascination, sometimes because it is a stiller of pain.

In such a moment she says :—

"Work! work! even the dullest and most monotous! Work, the most painful and the most hopeless! Work, the anodyne, the giver of life!

"A wild haste from minute to minute, from thought to thought! Never a moment's rest, physically or morally!"

And in time Josephine got peace and strength from work.

In spite of an ardent love for her children, she sometimes feels that they are slipping away from her—for, in spite of all her affection and conscientiousness, she has but little time for play—that bond of union with the child mind. But she is too strong to lose her hold on them. The boy is the son of his father—weak and unprincipled; and he is fain to retain a respect for the mother, who can accomplish so much; the girl is imaginative and passionate, and clings to the mother of the strong head and steady heart. Probably an indulgently-devoted mother would have ceased to be an object of veneration to such natures.

Josephine is not one of those happy people who can live from day to day. She must have an ideal aim. Domestic devotion has failed her. The support of her family has been achieved. When she crawls out from beneath the ruin, where, maddened by pain, she had hailed work as an anodyne, she begins to construct for her soul "a lordly treasure house." She, with her new powers, will help to alleviate the misery of mankind. That shall be her mission.

Then comes discouragement. She realises the shortcomings of science, and concludes it to be empty and vain. The memory of her cynical, low-minded husband haunts her and poisons her belief in human goodness.

Then one day, unexpectedly, the released convict returns to his home. He is half-idiotic, feeble, and resentful. Josephine receives him as a large, forgiving nature would. Love is impossible with such a being, but he shall be helped to regain his self-respect and power of work. He hates his wife for her superiority, and longs to make her subject to him. An impotent rage takes possession of him, and he dreams of every base revenge.

Josephine's pluck never fails her, in spite of her own illness and her son's lapse into the ranks of the vicious. She takes comfort from the tokens of affection which she receives from her patients, though the world seems to her but an aimless chaos of antagonism and stupidity.

And then one bright spring day she is called to see a youth who for eighteen years has been a hopeless invalid. He has sent for her, not to help himself—and that is the point—but to get her assistance for others who are in great misery. Rudolf Fischer's nobility of mind and altruism come as a precious revelation of moral beauty, in the existence of which she had almost ceased to believe.

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