

to the majority of persons, including Hudson himself, for he says "the albatross has no soul to haunt its murderer." That is an old vanished superstition. While referring to the subject of Coleridge's poem of the Ancient Mariner, it is worth while to add that Melville did not know at first the name of the bird which made so mystical an impression on him, nor had he then even read Coleridge's rhyme.

But why all this fuss, some one may ask, about killing an albatross. If the bird is shot at once and not cruelly tortured is it any worse than to kill a domestic fowl? Have not both the same feelings?

Hudson's feeling of distress is hardly so much for the victim as for its destroyer. He deplores the want of imagination which prefers to kill or capture the bird rather than to glory in its life and freedom, just as he pities the woman who can love "the ornament of a gay-winged bird and is able to wear it with a light heart because it calls up no mournful image to her mind; no little tragedy enacted in some far-off wilderness, of the swift child of air fallen and bleeding out its bright life, and its callow nestlings, orphaned of the breast that warmed them, dying of hunger in the tree."

But Hudson is no sentimentalist. Speaking of "so-called hardness," he says if it is due to something like insensibility to sufferings that are not preventable, better that than the intense feeling which tends to become morbid. "Let us have no mawkish weepings and ravings of disordered minds, however beautiful the writing may be." He believes that among the lower animals misery can result from two causes only—restraint and disease; consequently animals in a state of nature are not miserable. They are only made so by man. True, there is the "struggle for existence," but the strife, short and sharp, is not misery, although it results in pain, since the pain soon kills or is out-lived. When death comes, it comes unexpectedly; it is not the death we know even before we taste of it, thinking of it with apprehension, perhaps, all our lives long. "Man alone, of all creatures, has 'found out many inventions,' the chief of which appears to be the art of making himself miserable, and of seeing all Nature stained with that dark and hateful colour."

A Book of the Week.

THE VAGABONDS.

This novel besides being exceedingly well written, possesses the great merit of being very interesting. From the opening sentence the characters are alive to the reader who follows their various and varied fortunes with attention, and a sort of sympathetic comprehension of their trials and troubles. The story is all about a Circus Company and their sayings and doings, and the incidents peculiar to their calling are depicted with the skill of an artist, but above the undoubtedly literary merit of the book, "The Vagabonds" must appeal to a large circle of readers who never trouble themselves about such comparatively unimportant trifles as style and language, just because these "Vagabonds" are so very human, and one touch of real human unsophis-

ticated nature will (experience teaches) awaken interest at once in the average British reader. Hence the great and well-deserved popularity of such books as Dickens' "David Copperfield" and George Eliot's "Adam Bede."

"The Vagabonds" will not be one of the great books of the century, but it is certainly one of the best stories published this year. Joe and his wife are excellently drawn characters, and their tempers and tiresome little ways which try each other so much are amusing as well as pathetic, for it is strange in books as indeed in life how near the ludicrous and the pathetic are to each other. The cords of the emotions are like spilkens, they all lie near together, and it is difficult to move one without jarring all the others! The description of the circus performances, the showy processions on entering the towns, and the sordid life of tawdry existence behind the scenes gives the reader a life-like picture of acrobatic and equestrian men and women's existence, and yet beneath the spangles and the tinsels there are many true and loyal natures among them.

The first note is struck when Susan, the well-loved wife of Joe, the clown, objects to his costume and clowning. She thinks it is not refined enough; and, though poor Joe earns far more money by his pantomime, his wife would have preferred to see him walking round the ring in the elegant livery of one of the circus grooms. Not suddenly, but little by little, she detaches her affection from her clown husband, and then topples into love with one Fritz. How Joe's first and forgotten wife turned up as "La Belle Mexican," and all their ensuing history, I leave readers to find out for themselves. Towards the end of the book there is a fine scene in a hospital, where Joe and his rival Fritz lie side by side in two little narrow beds. The Matron of this Hospital, Sister Honora, has to lay aside her life-work and die a painful death. The description of her patience, and of her impatience, is one of the finest things in the book. Chang, the circus elephant, plays a most important and exciting part in the narrative. The adventure in which he is the principle personage, proves that Mr. Woods excels as much in descriptive writing as in character drawing. Topsy and Jane are each, in their way, good studies of primitive human nature, and the German Fritz is a flesh and blood creation, not merely pen and ink—just as would be then felt, thought, and acted. Susan is, however, to my thinking, the best conceived of all the characters. She is a bundle of inconsistencies, and yet how natural in all her motives of action and behaviour. Her strivings to be true to the father of her child, and her relief (some people will think, her unhuman relief), when the baby dies—she feels free, and shakes from her all feelings of gratitude and affection to the devoted and long-suffering clown. We feel true to that aspect of woman's nature, which lives only for the comfortable present, and merely refrains from downright wickedness, either because a sufficiently strong motive is not present, or because of the dread of an unpleasant conscience, and a disapproving audience among friends and relations. Taken as a whole, "The Vagabond" is well worth recommending; it is amusing, suggestive, and in parts quite exciting reading.

A. M. G.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)