

## A Book of the Week.

NICHOLAS HOLBROOK.\*

For sincerity and for insight, for delicacy of style, and a certain fine austerity of feeling which is as rare as it is beautiful, commend us to Olive Birrell.

It seems a strange thing that in these days, when readers do begin to flatter themselves that they are critical, Miss Birrell should not have a far, far larger public than seems to be actually the case. It is difficult to say what is lacking in her books, except that sensation which people crave for in one form or another. It was said to the present reviewer the other day by a well-known woman novelist, that the public will have its sensation in one form or another; and now that the "Lady Audley's Secret" style is played out—now that we no longer lean towards sensational circumstances, we must have sensational situation, such as we get in "Red Pottage" or "Sir Richard Calmady."

There would seem to be much truth in this. It may be at once conceded that there is nothing abnormal in the writings of Miss Birrell; they are "realistic" in the true sense of the word—that is to say, they are true to life; not in the current sense of the word, which would simply mean that they are unpleasant.

It is the heritage of wrong with which Miss Birrell deals in "Nicholas Holbrook." His greatgrandfather bought some low-lying marsh land near the docks, because he foresaw that in less than half a century, the poisonous site would be worth much for building purposes. The hero of the tale, brought up in the lovely Sussex home which his father, the M.P., who married a woman of birth, purchased, has never so much as seen the dismal swamp out of which his riches were derived by the cunning old pawnbroker who saw so far ahead.

But one day he gets word that there are relations of his own in Rivington, who are in circumstances of extreme destitution. His agent is afraid that this fact may be laid hold of by the enemies of Nicholas at the forthcoming election; and so he goes down to find out these young people and do what he can for them. They consist of a young man, Jim, and a young girl, Dulcie; and they have one friend, a man named Alexander, on the staff of the *Radical Messenger*.

It is upon the character of this young man, this Alexander, *alias* Dendracis, that Miss Birrell had lavished all her skill. Nicholas is charming; but then he has a charming mother, and all the world has been at his feet ever since he could remember. Dendracis is the son of a scoundrel—a man who made England unpleasantly familiar with his name. He himself had had to leave Oxford, in consequence of having been found untrustworthy in a question of club funds. His life has been loveless, drear, anything but clean; and now his love for Dulcie—for penniless, helpless Dulcie, has been slowly regenerating him, making him capable of the last degree of self-sacrifice, depriving him wholly of the desire, even of the capacity, to take up again his old life of fraud, as he easily might, and is indeed tempted to do by his old associates.

It so happens that Nicholas was at Oxford at the same time with young Dendracis; was actually present in the room at the sickening moment when the Union

\* By Olive Birrell. Smith Elder.

made known its sentence to the culprit. Is it anything but natural that it should horrify him to see Dulcie with whom he proceeds to fall most deeply and wholly in love, in the company of this man, and under deep obligations to him?

Here is the situation. Everything is in favour of Nicholas; but the young radical, with the keen pen, on the staff of a violent revolutionary organ has the will and the power to hurt the candidate for Parliament; and Dulcie stands between the two.

With a total absence of sensationalism, but with strength and mastery, does Miss Birrell handle her subject; the working out shall not be told here.

All the characters are excellent; the group of aunts, the workman mystic, Hewlett, Dulcie's brother Jim, are all as keenly felt and as ably set forth as were all the characters in Miss Birrell's last beautiful story, "Love in a Mist."

The book leaves a feeling a sadness, but also the hope that lies beyond human pain. "God fulfils himself in many ways," and we cannot believe that Nicholas had an unhappy life. G. M. R.

## Coming Events.

*April 28th.*—The Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress "At Home" at the Mansion House at 5, to meet Princess Louise and the Duke of Argyll on the occasion of the Centenary Commemoration of the London Fever Hospital.

Afternoon Concert at 50, Grosvenor Square, under the special patronage of the Princess of Wales and the Princess Louise Duchess of Fife, in aid of the funds of the Hospital for Women, Soho Square, at 3.30.

Sir John Cockburn presides at the Annual Festival of King's College Hospital at the Whitehall Rooms Hotel Metropole.

*May 1st.*—Concert at Grosvenor House, 3 o'clock, under the patronage of their Royal Highnesses the Duke and Duchess of Connaught, for the Rebuilding Fund of the Hospital and Home for Incurable Children, Maida Vale.

*May 6th to 9th.*—Sale of Genuine Bric-à-Brac in aid of poor gentlewomen at 28, Brook Street, by kind permission of Miss Woollan.

## What to Read.

"The German Empire of To-day." Outlines of its formation and development. By Veritas.

"State Trials: Political and Social." Selected and edited by H. L. Stephen. With four photogravures.

"Woodside Farm." By Mrs. W. K. Clifford.

"The Lady Paramount." By Henry Harland.

"The Confessions of a Matchmaking Mother." By Lillias Campbell Davidson.

"In Troubled Times." A Romance of the Netherlands. By A. S. C. Wallis.

"Tommy Cornstalk." Being some account of the less notable Features of the South African War from the point of view of the Australian Ranks. By J. H. M. Abbott.

"The Dark o' the Moon." By S. R. Crockett.

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