

A Book of the Week.

IN THE VALLEY OF DECISION.*

The previous work of Mrs. Wharton, though we have followed it with deep interest, has hardly prepared us for a study of such depth and breadth as the very able book now before us. Her work has been subtle and esoteric, rather than broad and vital; but it may fairly be said that this book establishes her claim to be placed high among novelists.

Italy, the fair woman-country which inspires so many lovers, has caught Mrs. Wharton, and laid its loving hand upon her heart. Readers of this paper know well enough that, as a rule, the present reviewer is not in favour of books which have a carefully got up background. "In the Valley of Decision" has such an one, and in a pre-eminent degree, but the tale emerges from this carefully studied scene, a triumphant whole, breathing, in a curious way, the very atmosphere of that eighteenth century which has so possessed its author. Read the pages of this record of an Italian Court before the Revolution. Read of the duly recognised *cicisbeo* who attends each wife, the calmly accepted mistress who charms each husband. Read of the culture and the superstition, the luxury and the starvation, the bold freedom, the starched artificiality, the religious fervour, the stark atheism of those times, and then go to the Guildhall and look on the faces of the men and women of France of that day. Look at the beauties of Nattier and Largillières, the pastorals of Fragonard and Boucher, and the whole of the scene will move before you in reality; you will understand the great "Why?" of the Revolution, and you will wonder how those beautiful, careless women, looked, when the mob was heard outside their delicately curtained windows howling for their blood!

Odo, a noble boy, a cadet of the reigning house of Pianura, is the hero. We find him first, a neglected foster child, on the farm of one Filomena, who, receiving no money for the care of her nursling, treats him with blows and contempt. Hence, his father's death calls him, to receive something more like the education of a gentleman. And next, by the death, through treachery, of the second life between himself and the succession, he goes to the Capital, where he is embroiled in court intrigues; and where we see the deadly forces at work, the Holy Office, trying to suppress, by the merciless exercise of a tremendous power, all secular knowledge, especially that of the natural sciences; and the counter forces of the Socialists and Revolutionaries, meeting in secret and at midnight for the study of geology and biology, as though they were political conspirators.

Odo becomes the friend of the poet Alfieri, and is by him introduced to the woman who sways his destiny, Fulvia Vivaldi, daughter of a man of science, on whom the Holy Office has its eye. This part of the story—the friendship of the two, the stratagem of Fulvia, to turn the spies of the Church off the scent, by making them believe that it is as her lover, not as a conspirator, that Odo frequents her father's house, which indeed is the truth, though she knows it not—then their parting, and the strange meeting in Venice, where she emerges from a convent of dissolute nuns, a sort of dumping-ground for the unwanted

daughters of good families,—all this is romance of a high order.

Breathless we follow their flight, heartily we acclaim Fulvia's greatness of renunciation. The two have risen to the heights of self sacrifice which love makes possible. And they both believe in the perfectibility of man, and that their own strength shall carry them on always.

Then comes the downfall of the high ideal, and with it the very, very gradual deterioration of both Odo and Fulvia.

This is a really good situation, and most ably handled. Odo is left at last, on the brink of the great revelation, that man needs the support of God, and that, behind all the externals and all the superstitions of the Church, there lies a great truth. The entire quietness and lack of exaggeration which mark this writer's work make it very convincing.

G. M. R.

Verses.

HAUNTED.

From out the wood I watched them shine—
The windows of the haunted house;
Now ruddy as enchanted wine,
Now dim as flittermouse.

There went a thin voice piping airs
Along the grey and crooked walks—
A garden of thistledown and tares,
Bright leaves and giant stalks.

Lichen and moss the lone stones greened,
Green paths led lightly to the door.
Keen from her lair the spider leaned,
And dusk to darkness wore.

Amidst the sedge a whisper ran,
The west shut down a heavy eye,
And like last toppers, few and wan,
The watch-stars kindled in the sky.

By WALTER RAMAL.

From "Songs of Childhood."

What to Read.

"David Livingstone: The Best Friend of Africa." By Mary E. Palgrave.

"Women's Suffrage: a Record of the Woman's Suffrage Movement in the British Isles." With Biographical Sketches of Miss Becker. By Helen Blackburn.

"The Way of Escape." By Graham Travers (Margaret G. Todd, M.D.).

Coming Events.

May 30th.—Meetings re State Registration 11 a.m. and 3 p.m., at Morley Hall, 26, George Street, Hanover Square, W. Miss Louisa Stevenson, of Edinburgh, will preside and give an Address. Members of the general public will be welcomed at the meeting at 3 p.m.

June 5th.—Two Pastoral Plays at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Regent's Park, 3.30 and 8.30, in aid of Mrs. Gladstone's Free Convalescent Home at Mitcham. For particulars apply to Lady Frederick Cavendish, Falconhurst, Edenbridge, Kent.

*By Edith Wharton. John Murray.

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