

## Book of the Week.

MARIE CLAIRE.\*

Mlle. Audoux, the author of "Marie Claire," has achieved a triumph in her first book, which comes to us translated from the French by Mr. John N. Raphael. Yet, perhaps, achieved is scarcely the right word, for it is a work of genius, and Mlle. Audoux the medium through which that genius finds expression. Her translator tells us that she "does not understand what people mean when they ask her 'how' she 'writes.'" She opens her weak eyes very wide at the question, laughs as a child laughs when it does not understand, and says 'But I don't know. The thoughts come, and I write them down. I only wish that I could spell them better.'

So it has come to pass that from the pen of a working sempstress in Paris there has come to us a book which for beauty of language, simplicity, purity, and descriptive power has seldom been equalled. Greatness has spoken to us through Mlle. Audoux, who has given us her autobiography in this marvellously beautiful epic, which, as Mr. Arnold Bennett says in his introduction, "makes no sort of pretence to display those constructive and inventive artifices which are indispensable to a great masterpiece of impersonal fiction. It is not fiction. It is the exquisite expression of a temperament. It is a divine accident."

Let us then accept the book with thanksgiving for a gift so wondrously beautiful. Happy are those who can read it in the original French, for the best translation can only be compared to a painstaking copy of an exquisite masterpiece. Yet Mlle. Audoux has been fortunate in her translator, who tells us that he has "tried hard to translate into English the uneducated, unspoilt purity of language, the purity of thought, which are characteristic of the French," and who has been successful because he appreciates the beauty of the original, and has striven to share his pleasure in it with others.

The story is simplicity itself. Just the true record of the life of an obscure girl, who lost her mother and was deserted by her father when almost a baby, was brought up in an orphanage, and early sent out into the world to earn her living as a shepherdess. It might seem that there is nothing worthy of note in so simple a life. Yet from babyhood Marie Claire looks out on the world with discerning eyes, has a great capacity for hero-worship, an ennobling gift associated with an equally great capacity for suffering, that intense love of nature which is the especial dower of sincere, simple, and large-hearted souls, and a power of expression as rare as it is lovely.

Listen to the impressions of a mere baby.

"One day a number of people came to the house. The men came in as though they were going into church, and the women made the sign of the Cross as they went out.

"I slipped into my parents' bedroom and was surprised to see that my mother had a big lighted

candle by her bedside. My father was leaning over the foot of the bed, looking at my mother. She was asleep with her hands crossed on her breast.

"Our neighbour, la mère Colas, kept us with her all day. As the women went out again she said to them, 'No, she would not kiss her children good-bye.' The women blew their noses, looked at us, and la mère Colas added 'That sort of illness makes one unkind, I suppose.' A few days afterwards we were given new dresses with big black and white checks."

The torture the child endured at the hands of her big sister, who used to come home with her pockets full of creatures of all kinds is vividly described. Most hated by her were the earth-worms, "the red elastic things filled me with horror." But the sister met with her Nemesis when one day after more than usual cruelty la mère Colas "promised her a good slapping, and called to the sweeps, who were passing, to come in and take her away. All three of them came in with their black bags and their ropes." Like all bullies when their sin comes home to them she "howled and cried for mercy."

At the orphanage Marie Claire made many friends, but the dominating factor in her life was her love for Sister Marie-Aimée, an affection warmly reciprocated by the Sister, who thus found an outlet for the mother-love which surged warm and human in the heart of the woman for whom—dedicated to the religious life at the age of fifteen—human love was forbidden.

The story of the advent to the orphanage of the new curé, and of the tragedy of Sister Marie-Aimée is told with admirable restraint and delicacy.

Take the following incident: "At recreation next day she drew me towards her, took my head in her two hands, and bent towards me. . . I felt as though a soft warmth was all round me, and I felt comfortable. She gave me a long kiss on the forehead, then smiled at me, and said, 'There, you are my beautiful white lily.' I thought her so beautiful, and her eyes shone so with several colours in them, that I said to her 'And you, too, mother; you are a lovely flower.' She said in an off-hand way, 'Yes; but I don't count amongst the lilies now.'"

After a time, Sister Marie-Aimée, who had not been well for some time, became quite ill, and two months elapsed before Marie Claire was summoned to her room. "She was a little better, but I noticed that her eyes did not shine at all. They made me think of a rainbow which had almost melted away. She made me tell her funny little stories, about what had been going on, and she tried to smile while she was listening to me, but her lips only smiled on one side of her mouth. She asked me if I had heard her screaming. 'Oh, yes,' I said, I had heard her during her illness. She had screamed so dreadfully in the middle of the night that the whole dormitory had been kept awake. . . Her cries got worse and worse. One of them was so terrible that it seemed to come right out of her vitals. Then we had heard her moaning, and that was all. A few moments afterwards

\* By Marguerite Audoux. (Chapman and Hall, Ltd., London.)

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