

BOOK OF THE WEEK.

"THE NEW BOOK OF MARTYRS."*

No one should miss "The New Book of Martyrs," from the French of Georges Duhamel, by Florence Simmonds, in which a French surgeon tells with touching simplicity and limpid clarity the story of his work, and of divers of his patients in hospitals, on the French front. Every nurse who reads this book must realise that the personality of the doctor, his tender humanity, his consideration of each individual patient was a matter of supreme importance to their welfare, and, in the same way, that for herself professional skill and dexterity are only part of the necessary equipment for her work; that to meet the human needs of her patients she too needs knowledge of the world—that she may deal wisely with all manner of men—infinite sympathy, and deep tenderness. Nurses need indeed to be super-women as well as highly skilled technically, to cope with the task before them; they need also to realise, with humility, the supreme honour which is theirs in caring for the heroes broken on the cruel wheel of the Juggernaut of war.

This French surgeon tells us that "from the disfigured regions where the cannon reigns supreme to the mountains of the South, to the ocean, to the glittering shores of the inland sea, the cry of wounded men echoes throughout the land, and a vast kindred cry seems to rise responsive from the whole world.

"Someone who had been visiting the wounded said to me: 'The beds are really very white, the dressings are clean, all the patients seem to be playing cards, reading the papers, eating dainties; they are simple, often very gentle, they don't look very unhappy. They all tell the same story. . . . The war has not changed them much; one can recognise them all.'

"Are you sure that you recognise them? You have just been looking at them, are you sure that you have seen them? Under their bandages are wounds you cannot imagine. Below the wounds, in the depths of the mutilated flesh, a soul, strange and furtive, is stirring in feverish exaltation, a soul which does not readily reveal itself, which expresses itself artlessly, but which I would fain make you understand."

M. Duhamel has chosen the best way to make us understand them by presenting to us a series of vignettes of individual patients.

Listen while he tells the story of Carré and Lerondeau:—"They came in like two parcels despatched by the same post—two clumsy, squalid parcels, badly packed, and damaged in transit. Two human forms rolled up in linens and woollens strapped into strange instruments one of which enclosed the whole man, like a coffin of zinc and wire.

"They seemed to be of no particular age—

rather, each might have been a thousand and more, the age of swaddled mummies in the depths of sarcophagi.

"We washed, combed and peeled them, and laid them very cautiously between clean sheets; then we found that one had the look of an old man, and that the other was still a boy.

"They did not come from the same battlefield, but were hit almost at the same time, and they have the same wound. Chance brought them together in the same distant ambulance, where their wounds festered side by side. Since then they have been kept together, till now they lie enfolded by the blue radiance of the Master's gaze.

"He looks at both, and shakes his head silently. Truly a bad business! He can but ask himself which of the two will die first, so great are the odds against the survival of either.

"The white-bearded man considers them in silence, turning in his hand the cunning knife. . . .

"So the two comrades go to sleep, in that dreadful slumber wherein each man resembles his own corpse. Henceforth we enter upon the struggle. We have laid our grasp upon these two bodies; we shall not let them be snatched from us easily."

Carré went ahead at once. He made a veritable bound, whereas Lerondeau seemed still wrapped in a kind of plaintive stupor. Yet after all Carré "could not succeed in carrying along his body by the generous impulse of his soul. Everything about him save his eyes and his liquid voice foreshadow the corpse." His leg, infected to the very marrow, seemed to be slowly devouring him, and when the doctor spoke to him in veiled words of the troublesome gangrenous leg, he gave a toothless laugh, and settled the question at once:

"Well, if the wretched thing is a nuisance we shall have to get rid of it."

Carré's leg has been sacrificed, but he is ill—terribly ill.

"That valiant soul of his seems destined to be left alone, for all else is failing.

"He had one sound leg. Now it is stiff and swollen.

"He had healthy, vigorous arms. Now one of them is covered with abscesses.

"The joy of breathing no longer exists for Carré, for his cough shakes him savagely in his bed.

"The back, by means of which we rest, has also betrayed him. Here and there it is ulcerated; for man was not meant to lie perpetually on his back, but only to lie and sleep on it after a day of toil.

"There was mischief in the bowel, too. So much so, that one day Carré was unable to control himself before a good many people who had come in.

"In spite of our care, in spite of our friendly assurances, Carré was so ashamed that he wept. He who always said that a man ought not to cry, he who never shed a tear in the most atrocious suffering, sobbed with shame on account of this accident. And I could not console him. . . .

"Could you have imagined such a martyrdom,

* William Heinemann, 21, Bedford Street, Strand, W.C. 5s. net.

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