

BOOK OF THE WEEK.

"THE WANDERERS."*

It is some time since Mary Johnston first made her bow to the public. Her name is sufficient guarantee of the quality of her writings. She has given the world twelve books of great literary merit. This, her latest production, is a work of genius. It is essentially a book to be "chewed and digested"; it cannot be "swallowed" like a story book; it is not what is known as *light* literature, yet neither is it heavy; it is arresting in style. The theme likewise is bound to make a strong appeal to readers of thoughtful and progressive minds. Not less attractive is the form it takes. Each of the nineteen chapters comprises a story complete in itself and illustrates the gradual evolution of the human race in the realm of thought with special emphasis on the equality of the sexes and the status of women. With a suggestiveness that the reader cannot miss the first chapter is devoted to a description of the ways and antics of the mother monkey, and yet, so cleverly is the narrative told, that the word monkey is *not once used*.

Each chapter deals with some evolutionary advance; we watch with deep interest the gradual growth and development of the human race, from the earliest and most primitive times. Thought working in the minds of untaught people. Reason and initiative are at work. Community life begins. Soon it is found that in order to obtain sufficient food for the family in difficult times, the men must dispossess their neighbours, rob and kill them, or make slaves of others. The women are the acknowledged mistresses of the homes. "The group reckoned descent and took name from the side of the mother." Groups grow into tribes and populations increase in numbers and wealth. Then, having tasted of the pleasures of authority, became jealous of the women, whose power they fear.

"Women, the makers and possessors of children, the original devisers of houses and clothes and such things; the earliest lawgivers and gatherers of people into societies, were yet, through the greater range of matters, the authoritative sex. They were the mothers, the instinctively turned-to even after childhood, the dimly deified. But men were powerful encroachers, and they encroached." The status of women is thereby lowered, and the long and persistent subjugation of women throughout the world begins, which has lasted down to our time, differing only in degree in some countries more enlightened than others.

In Chapter VIII, the scene is laid in Babylon, a rival of Egypt in its ancient civilisation. The uplifting religion of this enlightened people, which taught them self-control and self-respect, taught also respect due to priestesses. "The priestesses of the temple taught, judged, divined, exorcised, healed, performed works of scribe and

notary . . . much as did the priests and as we 1. They received honour as did the priests. From their status there fell a fairly broad shaft of warmth of light upon all women of their land."

To point a contrast, the clever authoress transports her readers to ancient Greece, where, in spite of enlightenment, the status of women is low. The more spirited women rebel. Myrina says to the Philosopher who can give no answer:—

"Why, Myrrus, when the sculptors make great forms of goddesses who are women, and why, when the poets write with so great beauty of goddesses who are women, and why, when all hearts grant to those who are surely women, powers and attributes—why do the Hellenes rate women so low?"

The writer gives her readers a kind of mental panorama; from Greece she shows them India and the cruel custom of ostracizing the young widows; then a picture of Rome is given, and again a spirited woman speaks who feels her fetters and wants to break them:—

"There is much cause for wonder in this world. . . . How did it ever come that men have over women the whole power of law and State? I have read that Zeus said 'all men are by nature equal' 'He said so, Valeria. And so say all the Stoics his followers."

"And women, and women, Faustus?"

"They also, Valeria." Her husband Valerian becomes impatient. "I value peace, let us stay there." "You make a slavery and call it peace," she retorts scornfully.

Then the writer brings us back to our own country and shows us a picture of the status of women at the time of the Fourth Crusade. A wife is the mere slave and chattel of her husband, part of his fief; she has no rights. "The Baron was Beatrix's lord and husband . . . now and then he thought of his castle and fief and his son. His wife was there to keep the castle and to care for the son she had borne. He loved her no more than another, but he knew that castle and son would get from her right watch and ward. Tannecy struck his hands together. "I am weary of the unfreedom of women," he said. In Chapter XVII we are shown Germany and her "Kultur!" in the time of Martin Luther. The characters of old Gabriel Mayr and his daughter Thekla are cleverly drawn; they are both apostles of freedom, and far in advance of their time:—"I remember," says Mayr, "years when it seemed that the world began to say, 'we shall not get there (to freedom) unless we move faster . . . Freedom is a great word. . . . Martin Luther has burned the Pope's Bull. Now will the Pope bid the Emperor put him under ban? Maybe he will be slain as a heretic and all persecuted who look for freedom.'"

Thekla: "Dawn for women, dawn for women . . . men have stood between women and fulness of knowledge, and action, and sharing."

In Chapter XVIII the readers are brought once more back to their own country and shown the impassioned Richard Osmond speaking boldly to the multitude about freedom which they do not

* By Mary Johnston. (London: Constable.)

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