

BOOK OF THE WEEK.

"A FOOL IN HER FOLLY."*

Rhoda Broughton's last book, "A Fool in Her Folly," brings back, as Mrs. Belloc Lowndes tells us in her Foreword, "a breath of that pungent wit, that quick, delightful glancing humour, which made her stand out among the women of her brilliant and, alas! now vanished generation."

We are grateful that "we are once more shown a picture, composed with a thousand sure touches, of that English county society which, at least in its Victorian form, is fast becoming a dim and gracious memory."

The book takes the form of the autobiography of the "fool," and demonstrates the extent of folly to which a nice girl of twenty can go in her investigation of the passion of love. So long as that investigation was confined to the classics in her father's library it was not very important, though the idea she conceived of writing a three volume novel on the subject, in which the hero should be rescued from the depths of dissipation by the elevating influence of a good and pure woman (the heroine) landed her in sore disgrace; but when, as the result of her banishment from home to the care of a most charming aunt, who had about as much idea of supervising a girl obsessed by love, as a mouse has of keeping a cat in leading strings, the situation became distinctly grave. For the scene shifted from the general to the particular, and the inexperience and sentimental vanity of the "fool" might well have involved her ruin.

It was unfortunate for "Char" (her family's abbreviation for Charlotte) that her *opus magnum* should have been discovered by the German governess when only the first volume was finished, and the hero in the depths of his degradation, with the remainder of the plot as yet undisclosed. Her father was no doubt right in characterising it as "disgusting trash" and "pestilential balderdash." But some responsibility must be placed upon parents who brought up their daughters in complete ignorance of the vital facts of life, with the classics as their only source of information. But if they were, in common with many parents of that day, unappreciative of their duty in this respect, they taught their children much that was of value—amongst them, rigid truthfulness, courtesy, and care for the feelings of others.

The book abounds in realistic pictures of persons and things from which we could quote indefinitely.

The various members of the Hankey family are vividly described. "Papa occasionally committed a very bad pun, and we always made a point of laughing at it. This was not because we were at all afraid of him, or because—to do us justice—we thought it in the least funny; but because we felt it to be kind and respectful. The 'slump' in

parents, now so pronounced, was then as far ahead as the word which describes it."

"Mamma was inveterately pleasant, most of all to her husband and children. She was that natural phenomenon, a Strass Engel and a Haus Engel too. Papa was not an angel, either of street or house; but a little of her quality had rubbed off her wings on to him."

Then there was the eldest sister, Harriet, "engaged to the Vicar, of whom she was as fond as he either desired or deserved." In this prosaic courtship the "nearest approach to a quarrel at which the easy-going Vicar and my placid sister had ever arrived was as to the exact spot to be chosen for the site of the new pigsties." But on another occasion, when Harriet had "seen" her fiancé to the first gate into the modest park, and come back "with one cheek redder than the other as if it had been kissed," Char remarks, "Ambrose was a kind fellow, and had given us all really good presents at Christmas; but how could any created cheek redder for *him*?"

Then there is the youngest sister, Sophy, whose discovery of Char's manuscript novel was the latter's undoing, and tender-hearted Aunt Florinda, charming and kind to everyone, but with about as much moral fibre as a jelly-fish, a condition to which she had been reduced by a bullying husband who happily predeceased her. "You could not say Aunt Florinda was kind to the poor. They were as much her 'little brothers and sisters' as were the birds to St. Francis. Injudicious she was in a high degree, indiscriminating, gullible; and it was impossible to make her understand that drunkenness and immorality stood on a different plane as objects of compassion from consumption and cancer. She never resented being taken in. In fact, I think she felt a lurking sympathy for people who told lies."

Other characters are, somewhat unconvincing Bill Drinkwater, and St. John Delaval, charming and benevolently autocratic, loyal in love, as in all else, to his "dear lady," Aunt Florinda.

Fate ordained that when Char went to stay with her aunt she found that Drinkwater lived only a few miles away. Excluded from her aunt's house for reasons which she did not understand—but in point of fact because her aunt was in his own words, "You whom I have idolised," "the only human being I have ever cared a straw for"—he frequently met Char outside, and made violent love to her, and owing to her willing weakness placed her in some highly compromising situations, from which she had a rude awakening before any real harm happened.

It is a pleasant book—reminiscent, to those whose memories go back over half-a-century, of pleasant days, when life had reached for the upper and middle classes a high standard of comfort and refinement, when times were leisurely, and manners charming; and should be read by those of the present generation, so that they may realise both their good points and their limitations.

* Odhams Press Limited, 39, King Street, Covent Garden, W.C. 2.

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