

BOOK OF THE WEEK.

"MOUNTAIN BLOOD."*

Those of our readers who are already acquainted with the novels by Mr. Hergesheimer will be prepared for the stormy atmosphere that prevails throughout the book now under discussion. One might almost say that nothing tender or true finds place here, if we except the rough consideration of Gordon Makimmon for his invalid sister whose life terminates early in the story.

It is in the main a chronicle of unscrupulous men pitted one against the other, and allowing neither honour nor consideration to stand in the way of their desires. Love, or anything worthy of its name, finds no place here. Lettice's attraction to Gordon would have resulted in disaster had he had any real feeling towards her, and their subsequent marriage was the result of the girl's pliability where he was concerned, and, on his side, avarice of her father's wealth.

Soon, very soon, she felt for him only a cold contempt, and he a weariness of her somewhat colourless character.

The scene is laid in Virginia, and, as might be expected, local colour is not the least fascinating part of the book, which holds one, while it repels; for of the power and force of the writer there can be no question.

Gordon Makimmon had been the driver of the stage for many years, and the opening chapters describe a particular journey, introducing many of the characters which loom in the story.

"The driver lunged forward, skilfully picking flies with his whip from the horses' backs. He had a smooth countenance, deeply tanned, and pale, clear blue eyes. He had known Lettice Hollidew, now speaking in little girlish rushes behind him, since her first appearance in a baby carriage, nineteen or twenty years back. He had watched her without any particular interest, the daughter of the richest man in Greenstream, grow out of sturdy, bare-legged childhood, into the girl he had now for five years been driving in early summer and fall, to and from the boarding school at Stenton. She was different, he noticed, from the other girls he drove; there was neither banter nor invitation in her tones as she addressed him."

By her side sat Buckley Simmons, whose father kept the store, and who closely ran Lettice's father in the matter of wealth.

"He was elaborately garbed in grey serge, relentlessly shaped to conform with an exaggerated passing fashion, a flaring china silk tie, with a broadly displayed handkerchief to match. Gordon, with secret dissatisfaction, compared himself with this sartorial model. His own attire was purely serviceable, not to say slovenly. He relieved his feelings before the end of the drive by laying open Buckley's face with his whip. They had walked up the hill to ease the horses, and Buckley persuaded Lettice to try a short cut through the wood. Gordon was surprised to see the girl re-appear

shortly alone. Her face that had been so creamily pale, placidly composed, was now hotly red; her eyes shone with angry unshed tears. A mounting anger against Buckley possessed Gordon. She had been in his, Gordon Makimmon's, care. The anger touched his pride, his self-esteem, and grew cold, deliberate. He watched with contracted jaw for Simmons' appearance.

"'Why,' he exclaimed in a lowered voice, 'that lown tore your pretty shirtwaist?'"

"A little shiver ran over her. 'He . . . held me and kissed . . . hateful!'"

Gordon swung himself on to the stage at Buckley's re-appearance. He grasped the whip, swept the heavy thong in a vicious circle. It whistled above the horses, causing them to plunge, and the lash, stopped suddenly, drew across Buckley Simmons' face. This same man stopped at the stores on the way home to buy (on account) a pair of entirely unsuitable but pretty shoes for his unattractive sister.

One hoped from these incidents to find underneath this primitive man instincts of chivalry and protectiveness, but such hopes are dispelled by his heartless marriage and subsequent treatment of Lettice, who died at the birth of her child in consequence of his neglect. The marriage perhaps might have turned out differently but for the intervention of the teacher, Meta Beggs, one of the most brazenly wanton women, surely, in fiction.

The meeting of the two women at the sap-boiling, a ceremony which lasted all night, and where Gordon had arranged to meet Meta, his wife being near her time, is described in forceful and arresting language. Lettice having become suspicious, and full of fear at her approaching trial, follows him in the buggy in the early morning.

Standing in the flooding blue flame of day they opposed to each other the forces fatally locked in the body of humanity. Lettice, with her unborn child, her youth haggard with apprehension and pain, the prefigurement of the agony of birth, gazed, dumb and bitter in her sacrifice, at the graceful, cold figure that, as irrevocably as herself, denied all that Lettice affirmed.

She charges Gordon with the gift of pearls to Meta, and he cannot deny.

"Why . . . why that's bad, Gordon. You're married to me: I'm your wife. Miss Beggs oughtn't . . . she isn't anything to you."

Remorse seizes Gordon, and the desire of Meta fades during the long drive with his young wife, with the pains of childbirth upon her.

On the night of her death "he stood gazing absently into the darkened valley at the few lights of Greenstream village, the stars like clusters of silver grapes on high, ultra-blue arbours. The whip-poor-Wills throbbed from beyond the stream, the stream itself whispered in pervasive monotone. But no other Makimmon would ever listen to the persistent birds, the eternal whisper of the water, because he, the last, had killed his wife . . . he had killed their child."

The story concludes with his tragic death.

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* Joseph Hergesheimer. (Heinemann.)

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