

BOOK OF THE WEEK.

"THE ALTAR STEPS"*

Mr. Compton Mackenzie is a versatile writer who can with equal convincingness write of the underworld as of the higher flights of religious experience. It is of the latter point of view that he asks the reader's attention in his latest work. He traces the steps of young Mark Lidderdale from his impressionable childhood until he attains the summit of his ambition—his ordination.

He introduces Mark in his father's vicarage, Notting Hill.

"Frightened by some alarm of sleep that was forgotten in the moment of waking, a little boy threw back the bedclothes and with a quick heart and breath sat listening to the torrents of darkness that went rolling by. He dared not open his mouth to scream lest he should be suffocated; he dared not put out his arm to search for the bell-rope lest he should be seized; he dared not hide beneath the bed clothes lest he should be kept there; he could do nothing except sit up trembling in a vain effort to orientate himself. Had the room really turned upside down? Was it an earthquake, or was it the end of the world? 'Guardian angel!' he shrieked."

His cry was answered in the person of his mother.

"Oh! Mother," he sighed, clinging to the soft sleeves of her dressing gown, "I thought it was being the end of the world."

Mark's father was an ascetic clergyman of the ultra High Church party. He made a better parish priest than he did husband and father. Mark was an only and a lonely child, and few luxuries came the way of the poverty-stricken vicarage in the slum parish.

When he was about seven years old his embittered father became impossible to live peaceably with, and his mother took refuge with quite another kind of clergyman—her father—and found comparative happiness in her girlhood's home in Cornwall. In due course, old Parson Trehawke and Mark's mother died and the boy was left practically penniless except for a few hundred pounds.

He ate the bitter bread of dependence with his uncle and aunt Lidderdale until his education at school was finished. At that time he was large for his age, or at any rate so loosely jointed as to appear large. A swart complexion, prominent cheekbone and straight, lank hair gave him a melancholic aspect—the impression that remained with the observer until he heard the boy laugh in a paroxysm of merriment that left his dark blue eyes dancing long after the outrageous noise had died down. Uncle Henry found his laughter boisterous and irritating; if his nephew had been a canary in a cage he would have covered him with a tablecloth. Aunt Helen, if she was caught up in one of Mark's narratives, would twitch until it was finished, when she would rub her forehead with an acorn of menthol and wrap herself more closely in a shawl of soft Shetland wool. If it had not been for the

family of a neighbouring clergyman, a Mr. Ogilvie, Mark would have grown up in a wholly uncongenial atmosphere, and as it was he was driven to far too much introspection.

He went through many phases in his religion and joined in the first place a monastery where he became a lay brother.

His candid description of life as he found it there is very interesting, and he does not attempt to gloss over its little foibles and jealousies.

There are some charming passages in the book, and we will conclude with a characteristic one describing an old Cathedral town.

The bells chimed from early morning until sombre eve; ancient clocks sounded the hour with strikes rusty from long service of time; rooks and white fantail pigeons spoke with the slow voice of creatures that are fairly content with the slumbrous present and undismayed by the sleepy morrow.

In summer the black-robed dignitaries and white-robed choristers themselves not much more than larger rooks and fantails, passed slowly across the green Close to their dutiful worship. . . . In spring there were daisies in the close and daffodils nodding among the tombs, and on the grey wall of the Archdeacon's garden a flaming peacock's tail of Japanese quince.

This is not a book for everyone, but we are sure that there are many among our readers who will appreciate it, and to such we commend it.

H. H.

A JIGGE.

Those of our readers with a literary turn will welcome "A Pepysian Garland," edited by Dr. H. E. Rollins and published by the Cambridge University Press. It contains some eighty ballads, published between the years 1595 and 1639, and preserved in the Pepysian Library at Cambridge. The selection covers the best period of the English black-letter broadside ballad; and the book, as a whole, is an important revelation of the treasures of the Pepys collection.

The jig, "A Country New Jigge betweene Simon and Susan, to be Sung in Merry Pastime by Bachelors and Maydens," is a gem.

SIMON.

O mine owne sweet heart
And when wilt thou be true;
Or when will the time come
That I shall marry you,
That I may give you kisses
One, two or three,
More sweeter than the hunny
That comes from the bee.

SUSAN.

My father is unwilling
That I should marry thee,
Yet I could wish in heart,
That so the same might be;
For now methinks thou seemst
More lovely unto me;
And fresher than the Blossomes
That bloomes on the tree.

But as her mother is "most willing," she pleads for consent, and "all's well that ends well."

* By Compton Mackenzie.

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