

BOOK OF THE WEEK.

THE TREE OF THE GARDEN.*

There are, perhaps, few novels of contemporary writers which can in truth be termed "great," but we can unhesitatingly apply it to the book under review this week.

Mr. Booth may be called the Hardy of Yorkshire. His virility, pathos, and exquisite language, his intimate local knowledge and his high ability to express it, in terms at once realistic and sympathetic, cannot fail to charm any intelligent reader.

Briefly, the whole story lies in the romance of the only son of a wealthy widow and the beautiful primitive Thursday—"Hardripp's lass." The boy, idolised by his mother, at the age of thirteen developed some delicacy of constitution, and it was decreed that he should for a time run wild on a farm belonging to his mother and tenanted by the Suddabys.

The Suddaby family is a masterpiece of descriptive genius. Mrs. Openshaw's arrival with Guy, whom she is to leave behind, emmeshes the reader at once into the warm, homely atmosphere of farm life. It is all so delightfully engrossing that it is difficult to select a passage from which to quote.

"Mrs. Openshaw's interest, torn relentlessly from her son, to whom alone in this last hour it sought to cling, was whirled in a vortex of welcomes and regrets. Mrs. Suddaby politely depreciative and apologetic; Suddaby, brimful of hospitable enthusiasm, absorbed in his task like a terrier in a rat hole, so that the plainest signs of fatigue would have been lost on him. He interrupted his garrulity to bid his wife not 'chatter.'

"Missus is a real farmer's wife for talking, marm. Nobbut words was ploughs and harrows, there'd be some grand crops, you may depend."

How delightful is the picture of the family meal in the kitchen. Mrs. Openshaw and Guy occupying the honoured place in the parlour, conversation taking place through the open door.

It was during this visit that Guy first met Hardripp's lass, and young as they were they were both aware of a strong affinity. True, on Guy's part, he was for the most part conscious of repulsion to the dirty unkempt "love child."

He sees her returning in the dilapidated farm cart with her dissolute old grandfather.

By his side, nursing a basket on her lap and gazing forward with a face devoid of all expression, as though indifferent to the old man's state and oblivious of the revilement he roared at her, sat the girl whose face Guy had first seen reflecting the gleams of the blacksmith's fire. She wore the same dirty cloth cap upon her tangled head, the same sunburnt brown frock; her eyes displayed the same look of shy and obstinate curiosity in Guy's direction.

An accident, which resulted in the girl being thrown into the road, began this strange intimacy—

on the part of the girl, a dog-like devotion; and on Guy's, a strange mingling of fascination and repulsion.

"At every turn, to the boy's discomfiture, did this strange girl haunt him. There was no spot so unlikely but that it formed a covert for her undesired person; no fence seemed stout enough to restrain her; she drifted through blackthorn and bullace as lightly as the breath of cattle. It is hard to see how such encounters forced upon him can have yielded any satisfaction to old Hardripp's lass, since they displayed Guy ill at ease and scant of speech, and obviously restless for his freedom."

It befell one afternoon, when the girl encountered him on a sudden between the green hedge and sulphur-tinted wheat, an incensed voice broke through his lips and charged the lass abruptly—"Why don't you wash your face? It's all dirty."

At this time, they were, of course, both children, but the girl shrunk as from a righteous wrath that bade her go.

Five years elapsed before Guy again met Thursday Hardripp, when he returned to Whinsett to camp out by himself near to Suddaby's farm.

The years had not conferred much height on Hardripp's lass, but her proportions were sufficiently harmonious to need no further inches for their justification. Deep eyes, from which soft looks unclosed, brought instantaneous trouble to Guy's soul. The transition between the slattern child of his remembrance and this figure of reality confronting him across the camp fire was so violent that all connection between the two identities seemed lost. The attitude of Hardripp's lass can only be compared to a young animal wooing the mate it has selected for itself, and Guy's position was one of extreme difficulty. He scarcely knew at first whether to be amused or apprehensive. His old boyish fear of her was gone, but vaguer misgivings crept into his mind. He was sensible of a physical intoxication without a cause—the vague remembrance of beauty daunting his courage to look at.

His visit to Thursday at the farm revealed to him the extent of his expressed indignation of her dirty face five years before. Her poor surroundings gave evidence of her care. She herself stood in the morning light, a thing of beauty.

"Where the thick brown hair rested on her neck, loosely tied, the flesh was tinted by the sun to the colour of ripe corn, but it bleached before it reached her open neck band and passed out of sight with the ivory whiteness of one of his hair brushes."

It speaks highly for Guy that he came well out of such severe temptation as was innocently afforded him by Hardripp's lass. But, alas, the story closes with poignant tragedy and suffering, both on the part of the beautiful, faithful child of nature, and of young, chivalrous Guy. We regret deeply the sordid finale of this very beautiful book.

* By Edward C. Booth. (Duckworth.)

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