

BOOK OF THE MONTH.

RICEYMAN STEPS.*

On an autumn afternoon in 1919 a hatless man with a slight limp might have been observed ascending the gentle broad acclivity of Riceyman Steps in the great Metropolitan industrial district of Clerkenwell.

He was rather less than stout, and rather more than slim. His thin hair had begun to turn from black to grey, but his complexion was still fairly good, and the rich, very red lips under a small greyish moustache were quite remarkable in their suggestion of vitality. He was certainly entitled to say that he was in the prime of life. Very neat, he gave an appearance of quiet, intelligent, refined, and kindly prosperity.

Such was the outward man of Henry Earforward trading under the name of his ancestors, Riceyman, as a second-hand book-dealer. Knowing persons said with surprise, "You don't know Riceyman Steps, King's Cross Road? Best hunting ground in London."

We have said such was Henry Earforward's outer man. It is for Mr. Arnold Bennett's amazing talent to disclose his real personality. The author knows better than most how significant are the ordinary commonplace habits of life and how extraordinarily interesting they can become in relation to character.

Henry is not the only person that comes under the microscope. Mrs. Arb, the newly arrived widow in the confectioner's shop opposite, who at her very advent is the object of Henry's desire. An ordinary woman enough, yet made to be absorbing, even amazing.

And Elsie, the twenty-year-old widowed charwoman, who worked mornings for Henry and afternoons for the widow, what a creation is she!

She was a strongly built wench, plump, and fairly tall, with the striking carriage of one bred to various and hard manual labour. Her arms and bust were superb. She had blue-black hair and blue eyes, and a pretty curve to her lips. Her clothes were cheap, dirty, slatternly, and dilapidated. The sacking apron she wore over the soiled white one was an offence—it was an outrage.

She was the means of introducing Henry to the widow. During one afternoon she made an unaccustomed visit to the bookshop.

Mrs. Arb was thinking of going in for sandwiches in her business. Had Mr. Earforward a good cheap cookery book? Elsie gave the cue: "Snacks like."

It was the conclusion of this incident that riveted Henry's bonds to the widow. The price of the book was one shilling. Mrs. Arb refused to pay more than sixpence, although it contained nearly seven pages about sandwiches.

Mr. Earforward blandly replaced the book on its shelf, but he was exhilarated, even inspired, by the conception of a woman who, wishing to brighten her business with a new line of goods was not prepared to spend more than sixpence on the indispensable basis of the enterprise. The conception powerfully appealed to him, and his regard for Mrs. Arb increased. Increased so much that he shortly after married her.

We must for brevity put in crude language the fact that Mr. Bennett so skilfully unfolds.

Henry was a miser, and Mrs. Arb also inclined to "nearness." In spite of this factor in the courtship, their affection for one another was quite genuine.

Henry's education and origin were superior to that of his wife, and his interest in the history of the neighbourhood was not shared by her, though it should be one of the attractions of the book to the reader.

Their honeymoon was spent at Madame Tussaud's, where Henry spent a not altogether blissful time trying to dodge

expenditure. Their arrival home before the expected hour interrupted the activities of the vacuum cleaner, which Violet's love of cleanliness triumphing over prudence had caused her to enlist to remove the heavy covering of dust and dirt in Henry's shop and dwelling-place.

"What do you do with the dirt?" he inquired of one of the men.

"Oh, we take it away, sir. We shan't leave any mess about."

"Do you sell it? Do you get anything for it?"

From the first Violet had felt some sinister influence in the house for which she could not altogether account, and it remained for good, lovable Elsie to dispel it momentarily from time to time. As, for example, when she showered rice on the home-coming couple (which Henry felt to be dissipating good rice pudding), and by producing a wedding cake bought out of her hardly earned money.

The pair were so disturbed that they could not look at one another.

"You must cut it, m'm," said Elsie, returning with a knife and flat dish.

Elsie was not an inconsolable widow; in fact the passion of her life was given to Joe, a shell-shocked youth of her own age, who had mysteriously disappeared one evening without leaving any clue.

How extraordinarily Mr. Bennett combines pathos with almost absurd trivialities and makes it sentient with human appeal.

Elsie, owing to the miserliness of master and the nearness of mistress, to both of whom she was so touchingly loyal, had eaten an egg to which she was not entitled, as she felt "sinking" during the afternoon.

Violet burst into tears, to her own surprise and shame.

"Nobody could make out these servants. They might be very faithful, and all that, but there was always something—always something. And Elsie, seeing the proud spirit bowed down, cried also. And they were very close together in the small kitchen and in the tragedy, and the contrast between the wrinkled, slim, mature woman, and the sturdy, ingenuous young widowed girl was strangely touching to both of them; and the twilight was falling and the gas-rings growing brighter. And Elsie was thinking neither of the ruined saucepan nor the egg. She was most illogically crying because of her everlasting sorrow, and because, with constant folding and unfolding, Joe's letter, which she read every night, had begun to tear at the creases."

Perhaps "atmosphere" is the word that best describes this fascinating book. One feels wrapped in it in every page—the atmosphere of Clerkenwell—of the old bookshop and its occupants. Truly the culmination in no way falls off from this characteristic. Violet's removal to St. Bartholomew's Hospital in the taxi that should have conveyed Henry to the same institution but to which he refused to go; his death at Riceyman's Steps, tended only by Elsie, who has to filch sixpence from the safe for urgent reasons; Joe's dramatic return, half dead with malaria, whom she conveys to her own miserable bedroom to nurse, all escape triviality and become vital and intense.

All should read this book—that is, all who can feel that the commonplace is full of the allure of that most entrancing of all studies—human character.

H. H.

WHAT TO READ.

- "A Cure of Souls," by May Sinclair.
- "The House that Died," by Henry Bordeaux.
- "Priscilla Severac," by Marcelle Tinayre.
- "Told by an Idiot," by Rose Macauley.
- "The House Made with Hands," Anonymous.
- "The Letters and Journals of Anne Chalmers."
- "Defeat," by Geoffrey Moss.

* By Arnold Bennett. (Cassell & Co.)

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