

BOOK OF THE MONTH.

"SMITH."*

"Smith," a book with a purpose, incidentally of many purposes, is Mr. Warwick Deeping's latest novel, for in it he has devoted the skilful pen which the world recognizes as that of a "best seller," his expert knowledge and his human sympathy to the promotion of a cause concerning which he feels intensely.

While it is pre-eminently a book with a purpose, we might, with equal justice, call it a study in social economics, and very up-to-date economics, too. At times its plain speaking somewhat daunts us as being unnecessarily plain. It is a book of which, in the past, one would have said that a mother would not put into the hands of her daughter, but we realize that nowadays things which were hidden from our mothers and grandmothers are, to the modern girl, an open book, and they fall into their right perspective when we realize their intention.

Keir Hardie Smith was a craftsman with an artistic soul which he put into his work, and this makes him unpopular with the slackers, for the "world distrusts the unusual." He had ambition and his ambition urged him towards separateness and independence. Samson and Hoad, the firm of builders for whom he worked, were a non-union firm; it might gather yet another S. and become in due season Samson, Hoad and Smith. Mr. Samson had no children and Mr. Hoad—Sneak Hoad, as the men called him—had one small daughter, and the firm was prosperous. And, indeed, later, the offer was made to Smith, for Mr. Samson realised his value, and then, within a few days of the contract being signed, the "boss" was run over and killed by that modern juggernaut, a motor lorry, and Keir's fortunes completely changed.

The one bright spot in Keir's life at this time, and, indeed, throughout, was his devoted, unselfish and steadfast wife, and his little daughter Joanna. Incidentally, we come up against the subject of birth control, when Sybil, a simple creature, urges that Joanna ought to have a little brother, and Keir insists that they cannot afford it—they must wait.

A fundamental lesson of the book is the supreme importance of the health of the worker. It was a lesson the Smiths were to learn thoroughly. They learned also that his fellow-workers were not altogether ill pleased that they should have reverses, and how "very few people are pleased when life hands you a laurel wreath."

The housing question is another of which the urgency impresses us. The difficulty of finding *any* house, the purgatory to people fundamentally fastidious of living in a row of shoddy built houses, where every sound of drunken quarrels was so plain that sleep was impossible, and the maternal anxiety of Sibyl concerning the little Joanna—"I don't want her to grow up here."

The resentment of next-door neighbours of the aloofness of "Lord and Lady Smiff," as they called Keir and Sybil, led eventually to his venturing to build, partly with his savings and partly on money borrowed from a building society, a little house of his own, and this brought them happiness, but also anxiety and trouble when they fell on evil days.

When reverses came "those other men, watching for signs of revolt and for the sulkiness of a conceit that had been chastened, were disappointed. He came and went among them and worked with them as though he had known no other world, or dreamed of no other accomplishments. They divined in him that which a more understanding observer would have described as dignity. Being plain fellows, they confessed in the vernacular "that Keir had guts."

* Cassell & Company, Ltd., La Belle Sauvage, London.

"He had some understanding of the men's attitude of passive resistance. They gave themselves, and all that they could deny their employer was a portion of themselves. They subscribed to that futile supposition that by limiting effort they enlarged the potential opportunity. If you did less work there would be more work for you and for others. He resented their stupidity—as he saw it, even as they resented his strenuousness. He would have said that men like Sparks (a trades-union official) truckled to the indifferent man, and both flattered and exploited him. Sparks offered to spread a vast feather-bed and to invite the whole world to recline on it."

But the men who worked contentedly under Samson were restless under the new methods of Hoad, and Sparks had his opportunity and was able to hand Mr. Hoad an ultimatum. "The firm would agree to employ union labour and nothing but union labour. Yes, the men were solid."

"And Keir understood that he was in a corner between Sparks and Hoad, and of the two men he preferred Sparks."

Tragedy came to the Smiths when Keir received the doctor's fiat, "I'm afraid it's phthisis, Smith . . . It's an early case. There is always hope for an early case." A sanatorium was prescribed for Keir. "Unfortunately the accommodation was inadequate and there was always a waiting list. . . . It might be six months!"

So Keir went to the sanatorium and Sybil went out to work. His right lung was periodically deflated and made to rest, and in six months' time Keir returned home with the disease arrested. Full of hope he returned to work, but when he happened upon two or three of the old hands in the yard it seemed to him that they looked at him askance.

He went to see Mr. Hoad.

"I'm sorry, Smith, but we can't take you back. . . . I may as well tell you at once. Two or three of the men told me very plainly that they would down tools if you were put back. And, after all, there is reason in it. . . . Isn't it natural that a man might shirk being at the same bench with you?"

So Keir returned to Merrow with the news, "I've been sacked," to join the queue outside the Labour Exchange. He was fortunate before long in securing work through the good offices of a friend.

Alas! "Keir did not realize it then, but he was confronting the tragic problem of the man in whom tuberculosis of the lung has been arrested. He had rushed back to the working world to compete with fit men. He was under tension. He was trying to keep step with men who had not a trouble about the pace or the length of the day's march, and if his heart laboured and his breath failed him, he had to surrender or endure. A second breakdown would be fatal.

"At the end of six weeks his cough returned, followed shortly by an attack of hæmorrhage. And with no improvement and the prospect of re-admission to the sanatorium, inevitable pessimism. 'Supposing they give me another six months' treatment and send me out patched up—what's the use of it? I've had my lesson. I know now that I can't go back to the old job. I can't keep up with fit men, and the industrial system doesn't legislate for crocks.'"

And then Keir's wife, in despair, went to take counsel with a former employer, who happened to be interested in Papworth, and through his good offices Keir was admitted there. Papworth, organized by that man of vision, understanding and courage, Sir Pendrill Varrier Jones, who realised that not only must the disease be arrested, but that the convalescents must live and work in conditions suited to their delicacy, if it is to stay arrested. Papworth is the answer. With the doctor at its head and Miss Borne with her "wise and capable kindness" as Matron, hope once more kindles in the hearts of the hopeless. The work rooms, the cottages for the workers and their families, all

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