

A Lord of Lands

HERE is a book of real adventure,* not an ornamental narrative where the hero seeks excitement and danger for the diversion he gets out of it, but it is an adventure in living that should help to solve the problem of existence for the miserable million who live in the sinks of poverty in the great cities. The author is an Irishman with a burning peat spirit in him. He claims to be an uneducated man, who has trouble with his subjunctive mood and his verb "to be"; but if about ten thousand of the men and women who are writing in this country had his personal kinship with his new, earth-nourished, wind-freshened, sun-cleaned ideas, we could bear better than we do with their exasperating grammatical perfections.

Mr. Benson says that he was a switchman, with a wife and five children, and a salary of fifty dollars per month when he realized that something must be done. He takes up a fourth of his book explaining the conditions of his class in the great cities, not as a social economist deals with them, writing from the confirmed luxury of his study chair, but with the definite mind of a desperate man, and with the literal calculations of one who knew how many chances were in favor of his becoming, some time later on in life, at best, a semi-pauper. It is always a bold and startling miracle when the man in the treadmill of poverty steps out, shakes himself and calls upon his own mind to guide and defend him against the common fate of his kind. If enough of them awoken at the same time the miracle becomes a revolution, but if it is only one he becomes a martyr, or a leader, and in every instance he is a kind of squalid hero. The description Mr. Benson gives of the switchman's awakening and of his efforts to arouse his neighbors to a sense of the situation is more thrilling than an African jungle story, and it is not lacking in humor or pathos. The patient smile with which he interprets the stolid goodness of his

German wife sheds a new light upon matrimonial relations.

He spends another fourth of the book telling how he and fifteen other families, numbering eighty souls in all, bought a square mile of land in the Northwest from a railroad, how they built their village in the midst of it, moved out and faced the wilderness with their ignorance and need and courage. Nothing is more wonderful than the way he makes the commonest details of the expense of the adventure, down to the cost of the family cow, contribute to the homely interest of the narrative, just as long ago we were fascinated by the diligence and thrift of the famous "Swiss Family Robinson."

The remainder of the story relates how they suffered and succeeded. Nothing extraordinary is recorded, but it is the author's heroic way of bringing the natural and ordinary to pass that is inimitable and full of charm, as if by it he conferred a hope upon every poor man in the cities. His colonists endured homesickness and a locust plague before they were fairly started, but they endured. They practised those measures of economy and industry which made our ancestors the best pioneers in the world, and which we are accustomed to regard with something like contempt now in the Scandinavian immigrants who are settling upon the "wild land" and "worn out" land that we have abandoned. The author indicates rather than sets down the success of his undertaking. He shows how they avoided that error against the possessive case in all human nature which Socialists are inclined to ignore, by keeping each man the title to his own part of the land, how the crossing of strains in the human stock improves it, especially where one is Irish and the other German, and over all he casts the twinkling, contemplative eye of one who is both a humorist and a philosopher.

If any rich man with too many ignoble dollars to his credit wishes to do the country a real service let him buy a hundred thousand copies of this book and distribute them among the poor who have not yet despaired.

*A LORD OF LANDS. By Ramsey Benson. New York: Henry Holt & Co. \$1.50.