

MR. HARBEN'S "ABNER DANIEL."*

A book of the type called wholesome, genuine, simple, is this recent production by the author of that successful novel, *Westervelt*. The sincere quality of *Abner Daniel*, its faithfulness in external details, at least, to the life and people described, and that admirable unobtrusiveness of Mr. Harben's manner—these are virtues of the kind to inspire the reader with a considerable warmth of good feeling toward the novel that possesses them. Unhappily, however, there is little beyond these excellent manifestations of a temperament right-minded in its attitude toward life to recommend *Abner Daniel* as an important reflection of life in general, in Northern Georgia, the section where the scenes are laid, or elsewhere; its scheme is commonplace—this everlasting business about an investment and a mortgage; and the depiction of character is not deep.

But to the home-bred taste of the public that runs the sale of many novels a hundred times inferior, artistically, to the top notch of the market, the weakness of the book may be said to constitute its strength; for, first of all, it is a story, not a development of character, and the plot of the story is well manipulated, so that one never would feel quite sure, were it not for the established precedents of these cases, that old Bishop had not utterly ruined his family by his wildcat speculation until the very end is reached.

The sentiment surrounding Abner himself, and Pole Baker, the good desperado that he is, and young Alan's sweetheart, Dorothy, who is inconceivably frank and helpful, for a woman enmeshed in difficult circumstances by her love for Bishop's son,—this is something which a willing admirer of Mr. Harben's work must wish at the bottom of the sea. They are so like Sunday-school characters at times that the reader is tempted to forget his interest in them at the start, to ignore the

striking faithfulness to life of the opening scenes of the novel, and even the admirable realism and moving quality of some of the dramatic moments.

With humour and unsparing precision in detail, Mr. Harben gives us a picture of the social life in a little North Georgia town; how the people who could go to the big hotel, the single one that the village boasted, without paying for their supper (that is, on occasions when entertainments were going on in the old-fashioned rambling structure) belonged to the most exclusive, the "hotel" set; how the young men of this exclusive circle met and took a vote on the question of wearing "spike tails" at a given function, and voting in the affirmative on this important proposition, appeared at the hotel in all manner of curious fits and misfits of borrowed evening clothing; and how throughout this apparently rudimentary social condition the young men, some of whom chanced to be shoe clerks, comported themselves with that peculiar well-bred, charming ease which to praise is to patronise, but which those who have been surprised by its presence in some way-back district of the South, will not fail to recognise in Mr. Harben's chapter. The village street in which Rayburn Miller's law office was located, and where everybody left the door open that his neighbour might run in and take away his time or his belongings, this is as clear to the mind's eye as if the reader, too, did business in the row. In all such suggestions of atmospheres and places Mr. Harben excels. This makes the book worth reading.

The natural thought that Abner is perhaps another edition of Eben Holden is dispelled as soon as the reader has gone far enough into the book to see that the old man is by no means tongue-tied to proverbs or other trite sayings clothed in homespun, as the phrase goes; he is really an original of the country-side, marked by his free thought and liberal sense of the absurd. The truth is, he is constantly repeating himself.

Carl Hovey.

**Abner Daniel*. By Will N. Harben. New York: Harper and Brothers.