

A Book of the Week.

THE HOSTS OF THE LORD.*

If there is a fault to find with Mrs. Steel's latest, it is that it is a little too reminiscent of her last and ablest, "Voices of the Night."

The underlying idea of both is the same—namely, the very thin ice over which the English Government is continually skating in dealing with the native, through want of comprehension alike of his weakness and his strength.

The idea is an impressive one; but, after all, when one comes to consider it, it does not amount to much. The forces now at work in India were equally, nay, more potently at work, when the English conquered the country. There is a new danger now—the educated native—but in Mrs. Steel's present book, the danger comes from the superstition of the lower classes; and the lower classes will always be held in check by their rulers, if the past is any law at all for the present. Surely it was this power of the dominant race over the minds of the vast population of Hindustan, which prevented the Mutiny from being a Rebellion. For it cannot be too often remembered that the Mutiny never *was* a rebellion. If it had been, the English would have been swept off the face of the land.

But, with this only proviso, that Mrs. Steel uses the same motive for both her new books, the story is most admirable. From first to last it is most interesting, most impressive, most artistic. A little more native dialect, a little more of the harem and the street corner than the average novel reader will have patience for; but this impatient person need not be too much regarded. The central figure of the book is the Jesuit father, Ninian Bruce, who, in all his years of life in India has never proselytized. In sharp contrast to this fine old figure, soldier, courtier, and priest, we have the ill-regulated zeal of the Protestant sectarian mission, shrieking aloud to one of the most religious peoples on the face of the earth that they are blind, deluded idolaters, knowing nothing, and to be instructed by those whose own Scriptures are Oriental, and who themselves know nothing whatever of Oriental faith or Oriental literature, sacred or profane.

Erda Shepherd, lady member of this mission, is the heroine, and the love story of her and Lance Carlyon is a charming one. We needs must confess that Erda, uncompromising Protestant though she is, shows up in most favourable contrast to poor Laila, the ward of Father Ninian, who has Hindu blood as well as Italian in her veins.

Roshan Khan, a native officer, related to the Royal family, whose heiress Laila is, conceives the idea that he should marry his cousin. Laila, meanwhile, prefers an English officer. Roshan sees the girl, whose nearest living relation he is, giving Vincent Dering a clandestine meeting. The author makes one understand, very finely, how terribly this sight works upon the mind of the Mahometan. Laila wears, at her tryst, the costume of a secluded Mahomedan lady; that such an one should be giving secret audience to a lover is, to Roshan the lowest, most unbearable depth of degradation. The sight sweeps away all his carefully learnt European ideals; he is the Mahometan man, with his own social ideas of what is seemly for women. Yet, in the final outbreak, when the maddened *Risaldar* leads on his

* By Flora Annie Steel. Heinemann.

men against the English, he finds that the English ideas of fairplay which for so many years he has imbibed, have spoiled his ardour in the fight, and that, despite every effort of hatred and malice, his sympathies are with the men he is fighting, not against them.

The sketch of Mrs. Walsall Smith and her pre-occupied husband is most delicately given; the attack upon the gaol an undeniably fine piece of writing, stirring the blood. A wonderful piece of work throughout; written by one thoroughly mistress of her subject; a genius which the English nation has not yet appreciated as it deserves.

G. M. R.

The Haunted Oak.

The arraignment by Paul Dunbar, the negro poet, of the civilisation which tolerates lynch law is a forcible bit of writing in December's "Century." We quote the opening and closing stanzas from the ballad which is called "The Haunted Oak":—

"Pray, why are you so bare, so bare,
O bough of the old oak tree;
And why, when I go through the shade you throw,
Runs a shudder over me?"

"My leaves were green as the best, I trow,
And sap ran free in my veins,
But I saw in the moonlight dim and weird
A guiltless victim's pains.

"I bent me down to hear his sigh;
I shook with his gurgling moan;
And I trembled sore when they rode away
And left him here alone.

"They'd charged him with the old, old crime,
And set him fast in jail;
Oh, why does the dog howl all night long?
And why does the night wind wail?"

* * *

"I feel the rope against my bark,
And the weight of him in my grain,
I feel in the throe of his final woe
The touch of my own last pain.

"And nevermore shall leaves come forth
On a bough that bears the ban.
I am burned with dread, I am dried and dead,
From the curse of a guiltless man."

What to Read.

- "Some Verses." By Gertrude Green.
- "Wings," a Book of Verses. By Margaret Ethel Ashton.
- "The Times History of the War in South Africa, 1899-1900." Vol. I. Edited by L. S. Amery.
- "The Rulers of the South." Sicily, Calabria, Malta, Two Vols. By Francis Marion Crawford.
- "Woman: A Scientific Study and Defence. Adapted from the French by the Rev T. A. Seed.
- "The Lady of Dreams." By Una L. Silberrad.
- "Pharaoh's Daughter, and Other Stories." By William Waldorf Astor.
- "A Son of Judith, a Tale of the Welsh Mining Valleys." By Joseph Keating.
- "The Sway of Philippa." By James Blyth Patton.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)