

A Book of the Week.

"LAO-TI THE CELESTIAL."*

Miss Bird's first book, "The Seeker," was so clever and promising that I eagerly sent for her new one as soon as it appeared.

She still goes for her inspiration to that little known and mysterious Cathay, which is almost virgin soil as far as the novelist is concerned.

Lao-Ti is a very interesting person. He is the elder son of a Chinese family in comfortable circumstances; to him will fall the father's business and the house they live in; his younger brother must therefore make a rich marriage and he is betrothed to Sien-Sha, the pretty little daughter of their next-door neighbour. But, alas! Sien-Sha and Lao-Ti have already made acquaintance "over the garden wall," and to Lao-Ti it is the bitterness of death to contemplate the marriage day of his brother with the woman he loves.

All this part of the story is very good; the miserable young man puts all his trust in the gods of his ancestors; they will, they must interfere to prevent this hideous mistake. But moment after moment passes, the wedding takes place, and no miracle has intervened. Lao-Ti goes into the family chapel and wrecks the altar of the gods.

Then he flies from his home to seek his fortune elsewhere, unable to remain and endure the spectacle of his beloved little Sien-Sha married to another.

His escape from home is cleverly told; but there is throughout this story an element almost of "guide-book," which was absent from Miss Bird's first work. She gives with minute exactness the Chinese scenery, the Chinese religious observances, the Chinese manners and customs; and in consequence, as is the case with many other authors, her background becomes a burden to her instead of an assistance. It is related of Rubens that a father once brought his son to the studio of the master, and begged that he might be employed. "Of course, he is not a finished artist," said he, "but he can paint in your backgrounds for you." "My friend," replied the great man, "if he can do that he can teach me." There are many novelists who fall into the error of the student; and Miss Bird's background is too apt to intrude itself into the foreground of her romance.

But for all that, the book is interesting. It is, of course, to European ears a trifle jarring that a man should marry his brother's widow, and the manner in which Lao-Ti, faithful to his own social creed, first starts off to avenge the murder of his brother, is nothing short of revolting. Sien-sha's husband has met his end at the hands of a European sailor in an opium den, and, guided by an old servant of the family, Lao-ti goes to make things equal by murdering the murderer. He has no evidence whatever of the man's identity except the sole testimony of the old servant in question, but he hunts the man down and compasses his destruction with a fiendish deliberation which justifies all that one is wont to think or say of Chinese cruelty. How do those moralists who believe in the intrinsic goodness of human nature account for things like this?

He returns to Sien-sha, his hands clear of all sin, according to their social code; but he returns only just in time to prevent herself from an act of Buddhist widow self-immolation—the attempt to hang herself in order that her husband's unburied spirit may have rest.

By M. Bird. Hutchinson and Co.

The picture of the life of Lao-ti on the duck-barge is a very curious and striking one. A whole colony of duck farmers live there together, duck being apparently the staple food of the Chinese peasant. The wide river, the flat shores, the swimming crowds of ducks, are all well presented. Lao-ti is represented as being dimly aware that there is a fault somewhere in his national ideal of honour and morals; but the story as a whole is unsatisfying, and leaves one with a curious sense of failure to achieve. G. M. R.

Bookland.

The *Academy* announces its awards to authors for what it calls its "Crowned Books"—books considered notable for promise, sincerity, and thoroughness in literary art. The following is the award list: Poetry, 25gs. to Mr. W. B. Yeats for "The Wind among the Reeds"; fiction, 25gs. to "Zack" (Miss Gwendoline Keats) for "On Trial"; biography, 25gs. to Mr. Hilaire Belloc for "Danton: a Study"; history, 25gs. to Mr. G. M. Trevelyan for "England in the age of Wycliffe"; translation, 25gs. to Mrs. Garnett for her translation of the novels of Turgenev; miscellaneous, 25gs. to the Rev. H. G. Graham for "The Social Life of Scotland in the Eighteenth Century."

In Memoriam.

GEORGE WARRINGTON STEVENS.

LONDON, DECEMBER 10TH, 1869.

LADYSMITH, JANUARY 15TH, 1900.

We cheered you forth—brilliant and kind and brave,
Under your country's triumphant flag you fell,
It floats, dear heart, over no dearer grave—
Brilliant and brave and kind, hail and farewell.

W. E. HENLEY.

—From "Daily Mail."

WHAT TO READ.

- "Notes on Sport and Travel." By George Henry Kingsley, M.D., F.G.S., &c. With a Memoir by his daughter, Mary H. Kingsley.
- "The Daughter of Peter the Great." By R. Nisbet Bain, Author of "The Pupils of Peter the Great." With numerous Illustrations.
- "In the New Promised Land." By Henryk Sienkiewicz. Translated from the Polish by Count de Soissons.
- "Folly Corner." By Mrs. Henry E. Dudeney.
- "Lao-Ti, the Celestial." By M. Bird.
- "She Stands Alone." By Mark Ashton.

Coming Events.

January 26th.—Women's Local Government Society. Conference on the Position of Women in the Administration of Secondary Education, in the East Conference Room, Imperial Institute. The Countess of Aberdeen in the chair. 3.30.

January 30th.—Concert in Aid of Famine Relief Fund in Western India, St. Martin's Town Hall. 8.30.

February 1st.—First public meeting of the newly constituted London Council for the Promotion of Public Morality, in St. Martin's Town Hall. The Bishop of London, chairman of the Council, will take the chair, and Mr. Asquith, M.P., Sir Edward Clarke, M.P., and Mr. J. Compton Rickett, M.P., will take part in the proceedings.

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