## BOOK OF THE WEEK.

### "THE MERCY OF THE LORD."*

"The Mercy of the Lord," by Flora Annie Steel, is the first of a collection of short stories of India, in the writing of which Mrs. Steel is a past master. Because each story is a gem, and a short review quite inadequate to do justice to all, it seems best to select one for special notice, and to leave those who are attracted by its mystery—of which the explanation is, after all, so simple—to read the rest for themselves.

To those upon whom the East has laid its spell a new book by this author is a good thing to be received with thanksgiving, though it must be owned that there are those who do not fall under her spell; and official India will remark to English relatives, "I hope you do not take your ideas of India from Mrs. Steel." But official India lives on the surface of things, regarding that great Empire chiefly as the place where good honest work brings security for old age at home, in the form of adequate pensions.

The average Englishman, indeed, desires to know no more of it, for things that are incomprehensible make him vaguely uncomfortable and are an affront to the cocksureness which should be able to solve everything presented to it for solution by perfectly rational means.

To understand India one must get below the surface of things, and be in sympathy with her peoples, and it is because Mrs. Steel has both these qualities and has got nearer the mysterious heart of things Indian than any living writer, that her books are a delight to her disciples.

Of all the stories in the present collection we select for brief notice, "The Wisdom of Our Lord Ganêsh," especially commending to the notice of our readers "The Gift of Battle" and "The Value of a Vote." Be it known that Ganêsh is the Indian God of Wisdom, for we are introduced to the narrator of the story, an old resident in India, half delirious with fever—a half forgotten legacy of many years of Indian life—in a little sketching tent off a high road in Wales "hard-happed round and round with the curious content which comes, as the chills and aches are passing into the fire flood of fever that thrills the finger tips and sets the brain fizzling like champagne."

"The wisdom of Sri Ganêsh—the wisdom of our Lord Ganêsh."

"Why on earth should that haunt me here in Wales, on a piece no doubt of Nat Gwynne's property?"

Then the sick man remembered. It was because he had seen Nat Gwynne in the distance that day, driving a pair of grey ponies, tandem, with a pretty young girl beside his coarse, heavy, good looks. And they were to be married to-morrow! Couldn't anyone save her, as the wisdom of Sri Ganêsh had saved that other one. . .

It all came back to him—the brassy blue sky of India. The shooting party, including Nat Gwynne in the howdah on the back of Ganêsh, the Rajah's finest elephant, the fancy of the elephant—as elephants curiously do take fancies—for himself, the bitter hatred of his *mahoot* Mahadeo for Nat Gwynne, and Gwynne's inexplicable rage with him, the presence in the camp at night of the old man's grand-daughter, then a sudden trumpet, a rattle as of chained front feet, one little sob, and then the moonlight on the small upturned face which was all Ganêsh's feet had spared. Gwynne on his knees beside the dead girl, his face all working with horror and dismay, and the old man's voice, quiet and restrained, explaining that she was "but a light thing." All this came back to the sick man on the Welsh high road, and then suddenly through a chink in the tent flap the sight of something sinuous, that curved and bent caressingly, and earth and air alike blocked by a huge mass that quivered all over with delight. Incredible but true, it was Ganêsh, sold because of his great height to an English showman, and old Mahadeo, who would not leave his charge, and so had come over the black water. Mahadeo explained that the animal had "always loved the Huzoor even as his master, and must have nosed him out as he passed, the Lord of Elephants having ever a scent, as of rose gardens—which was well since now the Huzoor would be able to get a doctor-*sahib* and medicine."

Was it in the delirium of fever that the sick man saw Gwynne of Garthgwynne abroad that night after the orgie with which he celebrated his last night of bachelordom, lifted into the howdah; and later, soft as a snake, the elephant's trunk round the drunken man's neck as he lay asleep?

"Then in a clarion voice the words came, 'By the order of the Lord Ganêsh, kill.'

"The softness, the tenderness of the snaky coil, so sensitive that the finest thread in God's world can scarce escape it, changed suddenly to iron. There was no cry, no struggle. Gwynne of Garthgwynne's body swung high in the air, then flung from it with all leviathan's strength fell, and fell, and fell . . . "

When the roaring of the distant sea in the sick man's ears ceased a fortnight afterwards, the nine days' wonder of Gwynne of Garthgwynne's disappearance on his wedding night had died down.

"Was it then all a dream? Even if it were not. . . Was it not the wisdom of our Lord Ganêsh?"

But surely it was "vendetta." The old *mahout* had bided his time to avenge the betrayal of his grandchild, though he himself had decreed the death penalty for her "lightness."

Some months later the narrator of the story was hailed with a glad cry by the doctor of a cottage hospital in the Midlands. "I've got a poor soul here who won't die. . . He's an Indian or something, and we can't speak the lingo. You can, I expect."

It was old Mahadeo. "He lay tucked up

* William Heinemann, London.

previous page next page