

LITERARY NOTICES.

THE EARTHWARD PILGRIMAGE. By Moncure D. Conway. London: John Camden Hotten. 1870.

Mr. Conway in this book has accomplished a rare feat of intellectual daring in a country where acts of such positive religious non-conformity have to be paid for, even by such men as John Stuart Mill, with a seat in Parliament. Indeed, the sincerity, the plainness of speech, and fearlessness as to all consequences, which mark each line of this book, cannot sufficiently be commended, as manifested amid a people whose mental health is mortally injured by the cancer of cant. The practical value of the work is, moreover, enhanced by the popular method in which the subject is treated, which will probably insure it a wide circle of miscellaneous readers.

The introductory chapter is a very clever parody of Bunyan's allegory. The pilgrim has, according to immemorial prescription, journeyed to the domain of the prince of other-worldliness; where, after having overcome the well-known difficulties, he finds himself comfortably settled on a purple cloud, blowing a golden trumpet:—

“For a time this was pleasant enough. The purple cloud acted as a screen against many disagreeable objects. The dens of misery and vice, the hard problems of thought, the blank misgivings of the wanderers amid worlds unrealized, were all shut out from view; and though I was expected, as a matter of course, to say I was a miserable sinner, it was with the distinct understanding that I was all the more our Prince's darling for saying so.”

This existence, however, becomes somewhat stale. He is also struck by some new facts about him. He notices that the wayfarers who now enter the celestial city in crowds, so far from being worn out from their painful journey, have a sleek and fat appearance. He converses with some of them, and learns “that the celestial railway had been opened, and that this had led to a tide of immigration. The pilgrim could now travel in a first-class carriage, and his pack be checked through. A pilgrim has since made the world familiar with this result of the enterprise of Mr. Smooth-it-away. His account, however, is, as I have learned, not entirely accurate; for instance, the Slough of Despond was not filled up by volumes of French and German philosophy, but by enormous editions of an English work, showing the safest way of investing in both worlds. Moreover, it is but just to say that the engineering feat by which the Hill Difficulty was tunneled is due to Prof. Moonshine, whose works, showing that the six days of creation mean six geological periods, and that miracles are due to the accelerated workings of natural law, also furnished the patent key by which many pilgrims are enabled to pass with ease through Doubting Castle.” The dangers and difficulties now, on the contrary, beset the travelers who would

journey from, not to, the Celestial City; and our pilgrim, therefore, prepares to bend his steps in the direction of the city of Destruction, to which he must go through the tedious paths of study, ideality, and devotion.

Thus by a glittering thread of fun are we lured on to face the grave problems of the present. The pilgrim lifts the mask from the apparently flourishing creed and beholds a death's head grinning behind. Wherever you touch what looks like a solid body, the seeming substance, as though you handled a mummy, crumbles into dust. There in Canterbury Cathedral an archbishop is consecrated to the music of the very chant, probably, which was sung by Augustine and his monks as they marched from the sea-shore to Canterbury. But now what a mere farce it is, not influenced by nor influencing the stirring realities around it! Here in St. Albans the ritualists believe that with the revival of mediæval candles and vestments they can also rekindle the old fervent faith that has for ever passed out of them. Wherever we turn we may see in fact, what the poet has revealed by the searing lightnings of lyric wrath, how —

Mouldering now, and hoar with moss,
Between us and the sunlight swings
The phantom of a Christless cross,
Shadowing the sheltered heads of kings.

But Mr. Conway does not rest contented with exposing the purely forced existence of the Christian religion in this country, which, by a capital stroke of fancy, he likens to the fauna or flora of the tropics, only flourishing in an English park by the help of an artificial habitat. In his effort to act as a dissolvent on petrified dogmas he seeks to deprive Christianity of part of its prestige by demonstrating how its roots have derived their nourishment from the buried remains of Hindu, Greek, Scandinavian mythologies. So far from being a direct and abrupt revelation, it is an organic religious development which has absorbed into its life the spiritual and ethical sap of bygone faiths. Thus the cross, that most characteristic symbol of what is deepest in Christianity, casts its shadow far back on the first glimmer of religious thought. Christmas, believed to be hallowed by the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, has sacred associations and holly and mistletoe entwined round it by a gray pagan past, now buried sphynx-like beneath the accumulated sands of centuries. The evil spirits haunting the hill and river sides of mediæval Europe were but the transformed shapes of gods and goddesses now luring the ill-starred wanderer on to eternal perdition. Even the pitiless ugliness of those images that leer in stone from portal and crypt of the Gothic dome are but gracious Nix and Elf pressed into the service of Hell.

The author, however, does not confine his onslaught to the religious petrifactions of thought. Secular forms of prejudice rouse his indignation no less. The Madonna is the starting-point which leads him to the Woman's Suffrage. He contends that woman's influence on politics would be of incalculable benefit, and aptly remarks: "She is inharmonious with every

remnant of barbarism, with all that is passing away — with war, with hustling mobs ; but how stands she related with the society for which good men are striving ?”

From Moses to Shelley seems also a wide leap, yet the author boldly takes it, and asserts that wherever a right and true man stands there is Mount Sinai. Shelley, of course, offers the best possible occasion to castigate that spirit of narrow bigotry which was so rampant in school, university, church, and state, and is still sufficiently thriving to convert the English Sunday to a period of monotonous gloom and lethargy. We cannot here refrain from pointing out the remarkable influence exerted by Shelley over different classes of minds. Whereas Mr. Morley, for example, in his excellent article on Byron, speaks of the “abstract humanitarianism” of Shelley, Mr. Conway, on the other hand, selects him as the most typical figure of the revolutionary poet. The fact is that his genius transcends either of these estimates. So far from having less fellow-feeling for the sufferings of humanity than Byron, he was so tortured that he might well say, —

“I am but as a nerve o'er which do creep
The else unfelt oppressions of the earth.”

But he had imbued himself too deeply with the inmost spirit of nature not to feel the unity of life at all moments of it, and that is a temper of mind incompatible with the aggressive rebellion which moans and thunders through Byron's verse. Shelley, however, brings not “the first streak of the day of Humanity,” as Mr. Conway says : his soul rather projects the rays of its genius into an incalculably remote future where the transposed paradise of Dante and Milton lure on the lagging feet of mankind with the divine magic of ideal beauty.

From Shelley the transition to Mary Wollstonecraft is natural enough. This truly brave-hearted woman, the first to agitate the question of the subjection of women in that large, liberal spirit more characteristic of the close of the last century than of our age, should never be named without reverence as having inaugurated the movements whose influence is but now positively manifest. Her name inextricably connected with the protest against our present marriage laws, she herself an example of the persecution dealt inexorably by society against any one who dares attack its cherished strongholds, leads Mr. Conway on to treat of some of the drawbacks and injurious consequences of that institution. That such but too truly exist no one who unites perfect sincerity with clear-sightedness will deny. Sensuality, hypocrisy, and moral corruption, are but too often the direct result of a union which was doubtless intended to act as a safeguard against much misery and vice. But it is not so much a liberation from without as from within that must be effected ere there can be any hope of a beneficial renovation in the relations between the sexes. Else probably confusion, misery, and a thousand-fold increase of degradation, would be the result of a change. An effective re-adjustment of the laws relating to marriage can only be hoped

for when the entire position of the female sex will have undergone a radical transformation through the changes which are even now taking place. Woman, who has hitherto found her most sacred place in the marriage tie, will never wantonly loosen it; but with her delicate perceptions of moral rectitude, she will also, sooner or later, come to the conclusion that her apparently fair domain flourishes at present over bottomless morasses of human putrescence; and, if she has but once thought the thought to the end, she will not stay her feet for any moral cowardice as to the possible effects of change. There can be no doubt then that this question, like many others, should, from time to time, be theoretically aired. Though the accumulated dust which will be set flying in all directions by that process may prove rather trying to weak lungs and sore eyes, there is no doubt that the act is a salutary one, and the more disagreeable it is the more should the author be thanked for taking the office into his own hands.

From a literary point of view we cannot award the same unqualified praise to "The Earthward Pilgrimage," which most unreservedly we give to its moral qualities. We find in it a certain crudity of material and a diffuseness of expression which often seems to grope around its object rather than hit straight at the heart of it. In one word, the matter collected by vast and varied reading has not exactly been fused in the heat of the writer's own mind, and hence to emerge a re-shapen whole. The parts might, like ore which has particles of its original bed still clinging to it, be tracked back to various layers of thought.

But this, we fancy, is less a characteristic of Mr. Conway's method than of the American literary process generally. It seems as if the boundlessness and wealth of the world possessed such an irresistible charm for this young, impetuous nation, that its writers rush headlong to the four quarters of the globe to gather in their multitudinous facts, while scarcely allowing themselves sufficient time to let the accumulated seeds germinate afresh in the soil of their own minds. What their literature chiefly lacks (with some remarkable exceptions of course) is that distinguishing flavor which imparts to a product of the intellect somewhat of the quality of good wine, where the peculiar earthy qualities which nourished it now linger on the palate, transmuted into an ethereal bloom of taste.

It would, however, be ungracious and hypercritical to dismiss a book, which will doubtless do more effectual work than many more labored productions, with any words of dissent or dispraise. What is urgently required in England is precisely work of a kind that shall leaven the thought of the great mass of readers. In Germany and France the modern era of free thought has long ago been victoriously ushered in by such master minds as Lessing and Voltaire. In England, on the other hand (though at one time in the van of both these nations as regards philosophical speculation of the boldest kind), the fact of the body of the people being steeped in Puritanism necessitates that the work shall be done over again in a more popular form. The surest way of accomplishing this is by propelling the shafts aimed at

superannuated myths and dogmas on the light breath of *persiflage*. The chapters in which Mr. Conway has succeeded in raising a hearty laugh at the cost of the venerable anachronisms that still flourish amongst us are, in our opinion, the most useful as well as the most brilliant ones of his book.

MATHILDE BLIND.

SONG-TIDE, and other Poems. By Philip Bourke Marston. Boston: Roberts Brothers. 1871.

Mr. Marston, who here prints his first volume of poems, is a son of the editor of "The London Atheneum," and has been afflicted with blindness from an early age. As we read, however, we are disposed to imagine that he would resent our saying he has been afflicted; for the day shines in these verses, the color of roses and the sky are revealed as by sight, the forms of women, the outlines of landscapes, are clearly defined. This objective life is a rather surprising element to observe here. But the poems chiefly deal with the moods of love, absence, anticipation, the joys of music, the subjective life of passion. Sometimes the page is a little too Swinburnish. Where? asks instantly the reader who dotes upon being referred to an indelicacy, and likes a critic whose deprecation points a passage clearly with page and line.

There are fifty or more sonnets, which seem to us the best, though not, perhaps, the most highly colored and attractive portion of the volume. They show a refined and gentle taste, and a musical ear. And their simplicity is a good omen for Mr. Marston, for when he reaches a more mature expression, and busies himself with subjects of a longer breath, he will be fore-armed against the new tendency to verbal dexterities and conflagrations of style.

J. W.

LITTLE MEN. By Louisa M. Alcott. Boston: Roberts Brothers. 1871.

A delightful book for the young — and the oldest grow young as they turn its pages. Miss Alcott deserves and receives, we know, the heartfelt thanks of all little men and women the world over where her books have found their way. The publishers' report shows that everybody who read "Little Women" is reading "Little Men," and they will not regret it, we are sure.