

## LITERARY NOTES

## THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS.

MRS. H. A. MITCHELL KEAYS is a novelist of Canadian birth and early residence but her recent home has been California. Her story, *He That Eateth Bread With Me*, published five years ago, was more widely read than most novels of the season, for, in spite of occasional sensational touches, it went deeper in its treatment of modern social problems than most works of fiction which attempt to deal with them. Since then, Mrs. Keays has contributed further writing to the "novel counters" of the day but her latest book, just issued, *The Road to Damascus*, is undoubtedly the best work she has yet done.

Mrs. Keays does not belong to that coterie of feminine novelists who revel in the nasty and whose books are mentioned by their readers with an ugly and significant smirk. She does not exploit the sensual, even for the purposes of advertising her literary wares. Her novels have been called "problem" but whatever problem they may contain is worked out in clean and wholesome terms. The quality of her work which appeals to her public is its quiet earnestness—not the shrieking of Mr. Hall Caine's *The Christian* but the gentle yet intense tone of one who has more than a financial or a sensational end in view. The Biblical nature of her titles is in keeping with the undertone of the narrative. The writer is not a materialist; she believes in the eternal struggle in humanity towards the higher and yet there is no repelling tinge of the didactic in her treatment of those who are "on the road to Damascus."

The woman, whose mistaken magnanimity makes her a sort of martyr heroine, is given the curious name of *Richarda Homfrey*, which is in keeping with her decidedly Quixotic nature. *Richarda* adopts a boy who is her husband's child but whom his mother, a trashy type of womanhood, wishes to abandon. *Homfrey*, strangely enough, remains in ignorance of the small protegee's parentage but takes an inordinate dislike to the young intruder. *Richarda* is the sort of woman who has a mania for overwrought and unnecessary renunciation, but, unlike most of such women encountered in everyday life, she is distinctly charming, even in her most wrong-headed moments. In the closing chapter when she enunciates a matrimonial philosophy which is absolutely absurd, the reader feels that *Richarda*, through her very loveliness, is a means of grace and edification.

The story is somewhat strained in emotional situations, but the writer will probably gain in the reserve which satisfactory literary development demands; but the vitality of the characters is such as to compensate for occasional extravagance of situation. The author possesses a sense of humour, which is a corrective for such excess. The paragraph descriptive of Mrs. Dawson, a matron of the finest domestic ability, is delightfully keen and kindly:

"It was her opinion that of men in the mass, the less said the better. They appeared to be born with an objection to folding up the newspaper after they had read it, and with a desire to know what you had done with what they had lost, which you had never even seen. The fact that women like herself were occasionally their mothers and wives was presumably all that made them possible from one generation to another."

In certain respects, this story bears a resemblance to *Her Son*, the novel by Mr. H. A. Vachell which formed

an exciting serial feature in a New York magazine last year. The resemblance is not such as to suggest imitation and the divergence of treatment is significant of temperamental contrast. *Richarda* and *Dorothy*, in their high-strung attempt to accomplish impossibilities, in their superior fashion of ignoring that they are treading on superfluous thorns, might be sisters—separated by the "salt, estranging" Atlantic Ocean. Their determination to give themselves an exceedingly unpleasant quarter-of-an-hour is somewhat maddening at times; but, as Mr. Frederic Harrison has said concerning certain mad schemes of Ruskin's: "Magnanimity owes no apology to prudence—no, nor to common sense."

The most interesting character in the book is a Scottish professor, *Maxwell*, who, in the atmosphere of a United States university, utters some marvellous teaching. Every once in a while, a university professor (usually in Chicago) sets all the newspapers astir with a strange doctrine, while the sophisticated murmur that the professor probably said nothing of the sort. But if *Maxwell* is drawn from the life, then university lectures must occasionally vary from the dull, drab material of which they are supposed to consist. *Maxwell* is somewhat overdrawn, he is a heroic villain of woman's invention and in his most tempestuous moments may remind one of that savage creature, *St. Elmo*, whom every school-girl reader has adored. Yet, *Maxwell* has his moments of fascination when he appears as a curious conglomeration of Robert Burns and John Knox. When he declares: "The tragedy of human existence is in the gulf forever fixed between what a man is, and what he would be," one realises that *Maxwell* is not so dangerous a firebrand, after all.

*The Road to Damascus* is much better stuff than the author's first venture, showing a stronger grasp of dramatic elements and a finer use of literary material. The novel will probably be widely read and its successor will show whether Mrs. Keays has become one of the social novelists whose analysis is both sane and sympathetic. Boston: Small, Maynard and Company.

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## A NOVELTY IN PRIZES.

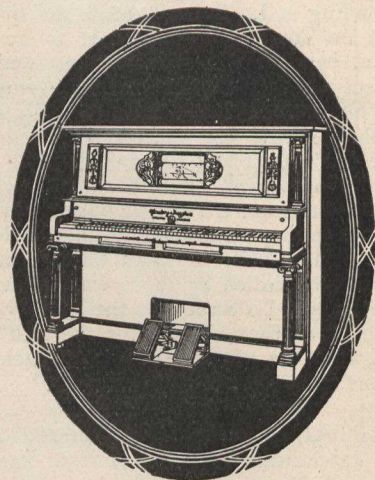
IT is rash to use the adjective "new" regarding anything which happens on this experienced old planet. Yet Miss Irene Osgood, an English novelist, seems to offer a novelty by way of three prizes, amounting to twenty pounds for "the three best criticisms of her new novel, *Servitude*." Miss Osgood declares that she wishes to get at the opinions and advice of the reading public and further remarks: "By best criticism, favourable criticism is by no means implied—a thorough 'slating' of the book, if fairly and critically presented, will have as much chance of a prize as a criticism of the 'could not lay the book down until the last page is reached' variety." A magazine editor is to be judge of the criticisms. This is a decided departure for a rising author and will no doubt prove stimulating, by way of suggestion.

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The poem, *Canada*, by Mr. W. A. Fraser has been given a French version by Mr. Paul Balbaud and set to music by Dr. Ham, making a fine expression of national feeling. This composition is published in Toronto and Winnipeg by Whaley, Royce and Company.

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