

MY CONTEMPORARIES IN FICTION.

BY DAVID CHRISTIE MURRAY.

X—THE PROBLEM SEEKERS—SEA CAPTAIN AND LAND CAPTAIN.

IT is so long a time since Mr. W. H. Mallock published the "Romance of the Nineteenth Century" that the book might now very well be left alone, if it were not for the fact that in a fashion it marked an epoch in the history of English literature. It was, so far as I know, the first example of the School of the Downright Nasty. For half a year it ran in "Belgravia" side by side with a novel of my own, and under those conditions I read as much as I could stand of it. Its main object appears to be to establish the theory that a young woman of refined breeding may be an amateur harlot. The central male figure of the book is a howling bounder, who has a grievance against the universe because he can't entirely understand it. Within the last two or three years it has occurred to Mr. Mallock to recast the book, and in a preface dated 1893 (I think) he informs the world that on re-reading the story he personally has found portions of it to be offensive. These portions he declares himself to have eliminated, and he now thinks—or thought in 1893—that there is nothing on that score to cavil at. All I remembered of the story was that a certain Colonel Stapleton debauched the mind of the heroine by lending her obscene books with obscene prints attached. This episode is retained, in spite of the work of purification which has been performed; and it may be said that if the original novel were nastier than this deodorised edition of it, it is very much of a wonder how the critical stomach kept it down.

It is a refreshment to turn from this particular problem seeker to the work of a writer like Mrs. Humphry Ward, who, if she invests the questions she handles with more importance than

actually belongs to them, is as wholesome and sincere as one could ask. She has read both deeply and widely, she thinks with sanity and clearness, she discerns character, she can create and tell a story, her style is excellently succinct and full, and any book from her pen may safely be guaranteed to fill many charmed and thoughtful hours. She is still a seeker of problems, and shares the faults of her school, inasmuch as she sets herself to the solution of themes which all thoughtful people have solved for themselves at an early age. It would be difficult perhaps to find a better and more salutary stimulant for the mind of a very young man or woman than "Robert Elsmere," to cite but one book of hers, but to the adult intelligence she seems a day behind the fair. She expends something very like genius in establishing a truth which is only doubted by here and there a narrow bigot—that truth being that a man may find himself forced to abandon the bare dogma of religion, and may yet conserve his faith in the Unseen and his spiritual brotherhood with men. "Robert Elsmere" is a very beautiful piece of work, and it is impossible not to respect the ardour which inspires it, and the many literary excellencies by which it is distinguished. But, all the same, it leaves upon the mind a sense of some futurity. It would be easy to write a story which would prove—if a story can be imagined to prove anything—the precise opposite of the truth so eloquently preached in "Robert Elsmere," and the tale might be perfectly true to the experience of life. There are men who, parting with dogmatic religion, part with religion altogether, and whose only chance of salvation from themselves lies in the acceptance of a hard and fast creed. It would be easy enough, and true enough, to show such