

LITERARY NOTES



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"WHEN a clergyman writes an article on novel reading he almost inevitably provokes the remark, 'much better that he should write about Bible reading,' says the Rev. J. Paterson Smyth, Rector of St. George's, Montreal, in a discussion of the modern novel and its attitude toward religion, in the *Canadian Magazine* for September. Mr. Smyth frankly confesses that the Bible today is rapidly becoming superseded by the novel in teaching ideals and conduct of life. It is not unusual for a novelist to claim the attention of a hundred thousand readers. What preacher has the magnetism to draw an audience of that magnitude? Because of the remarkable influence exerted by the man who preaches through the medium of romance, it becomes a duty of paramount importance, and one too frequently neglected to consider the manner and matter of a novelist's sentiments before permitting his books to influence the un-moulded characters of the young.

Mr. Smyth perceives that a great number of the books which are regarded as of the better class, persistently ignore religion. His opinion of this type he sums up in these words: "But when the book persistently shuts out all high thought, when the whole tone of the book shows you that religion has no place in the writer's scheme of life, it must have an evil influence."

But it is not the worldly novel of which Mr. Smyth entertains the greatest fear; it is the book with the theological tinge—the so-called religious novel. Mr. Smyth's thoughts in this connection may be worth repeating:

"But this religious novel, as it is called, may be very dangerous. In dealing with theological questions, it often deals with them from the point of view of the sceptic, and when the writer is a good man with high ideals and very shaky beliefs, he may do grave harm to the faith of young people, especially if he be a novelist of great literary reputation. Unconsciously people will be impressed by his position in the literary world. So clever a man seems so likely to be right. That is the danger.

"You see there are now before the public two rival teachers of religion, the preacher and the novelist. The novelist has the advantage of the larger audience and the more attractive way of putting his views. The people are more inclined to listen to him, and therefore if he be a well taught, spiritually-minded man his influence must be enormous for good. Owing too to the power of imagination and the wide sympathy which makes him a successful novelist, he is often more in touch with the throbbing heart of the world, with its cravings and longings and aspirations than many a learned theologian.

"But for the most part he has one great disadvantage in teaching theology. As a rule he knows very little about it. To teach the things of God requires a lifetime of study. If you knew the feeling of shame and incompetence with which some of us clergy address people on Sundays, you would understand my statement. After a lifetime of thought and study one feels like a little child gathering pebbles on the shore of the infinite ocean of God's truth. We know God's truth so little. We see it so imperfectly. We teach it so stupidly. We know that after twenty years more we shall be but a little more competent—just a little.

"Now, when you meet a novel with high ideals but suggesting doubts about Christianity, don't let the reputation of the novelist carry you away. Remember that the brilliant novelist

can claim no exemption from the common lot. He must remain ignorant on subjects which he has not carefully studied. When you meet a novel like "Robert Elsmere," showing how easily a good clergyman had all his deepest beliefs shattered by sceptical arguments, it may frighten you. And when you meet another well-known novel where clever people talk pathetically about the sweet sadness of poor humanity's mistaken fancies about a life to come, it may disturb you. But always remember that a man may be a brilliant novelist and yet have a very superficial acquaintance with Christianity and Christ. Many men's faith has been shaken by forgetting this. Because the writer has a great name as a novelist they forget that he may know very little about Christianity."

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There are a goodly number of women in England who consider that they know everything about our sister colony, India, listening to their husbands' evening disquisitions over the dining table, but Mrs. Flora Annie Steele, according to the opinion of Mr. Balfour, is the one woman who possesses a knowledge of the real India. Mrs. Steele is the author of one of the greatest novels of Indian life, "On the Face of the Waters." This book was the culmination of her long sojourn in the East. For twenty-five years Mrs. Steele inspected the Government schools of the Punjab. Whenever, for a period, she snatched short respites from her inspectorial duties, Mrs. Steele engaged in journalistic work, assisting during the hot spells an overburdened newspaper editor. Often it happened she wrote and issued the whole paper. In this way she gained invaluable knowledge of technique and practice of composition. In due time she considered publishing a book. Her first work was a masterpiece of its kind, "The Complete Cook and Housekeeper." In succeeding efforts Mrs. Steele found her place in fiction. Her novel "On the Face of the Waters," was written with painstaking attention to detail. Mrs. Steele revolved the plot in her mind for months, and then, that her picture of native life should not lack in realism, exiled herself to the Mussulman quarter of a Punjab town, for close observation.

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Baroness d'Anethan, the sister of Mr. Rider Haggard, has just published a novel entitled "Two Women."

Algiers Soberer than Canada
(*Kingston Standard*)

MR. COX, an enterprising Englishman, who has been a wine grower in Algiers for the past thirty years and is now setting up his son as a horse rancher on the foothills of Alberta, in a recent interview contrasted the soberness of Algiers with the lack of it in Canada. He stated that he had seen as much drunkenness on the railway train from the Crow's Nest Pass to Medicine Hat as he had seen in thirty years in Algiers. This is probably true. Drinking is certainly a vice of only too many Englishmen whether at home or in the colonies; but there is a steady improvement in that regard in Canada. If Mr. Cox had visited Canada thirty years ago he would have found drunkenness even more noticeable than he does now. The world is growing steadily better, and we here in Canada are doing our part to help in the good work. We are not only a more sober people, but we are a more sane and rational people than we were thirty years ago.



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