

LIFE AND LETTERS OF DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI.*

IN these two superb volumes Mr. William Michael Rossetti has brought together all the facts of his distinguished brother's life which he has deemed of public interest, and has added a great number of family letters containing matter more or less autobiographical. It is upon the whole a remarkable record tho by no means altogether pleasing. We are not sure that such exposure of human weakness, folly and distress, as is here made in connection with the workings of a great artistic force, can ever fail to do harm. At all events the sense of distress is uppermost during the perusal of both the Memoir and the Letters.

The Rossetti family has been singularly distinguished among the artists and literati of London during the past third of a century. Dante Gabriel Rossetti was easily the foremost of the "Pre-Raphaelite school of painters," so called, in which medievalism was expressed in terms peculiarly rigid and conventional and yet with fascinating, romantic energy. In both painting and poetry he was a master whose narrow limitations could not be hidden; but within these he was absolute. As a man he exerted a powerful influence over a small but brilliant coterie of artists, poets, critics and connoisseurs from the middle of the present century until his death in 1882. To the public generally he is best known as a poet, from the fact that his books have been accessible, while his paintings, which he was always averse to exhibiting, are mostly in private collections.

The life exposed by the Memoir and Letters under consideration was a miserable one. Like Poe, Maupassant, Verlaine and Beaudelaire, Rossetti wrecked himself upon stimulants and became, in the latter part of his comparatively short career, a hopeless, half maniacal slave to chloral and whisky. But, quite independently of this sad feature, his life shows forth a morbidness not to be mistaken. Moreover, the whole atmosphere surrounding him and his sympathetic following was of a sickly and alien cast, all out of keeping with modern civilization. There is nothing robust and red-blooded in any of his pictures or poems, albeit a peculiarly restricted sensualism often predominates.

Rossetti was of Italian descent, and his genius was Latin. Early in life he fell under the influence of Poe, and what is, perhaps, his finest poem, was written in his teens confessedly as a counterpart of "The Raven." This was the celebrated "Blessed Damozel," one of the most exquisite poems in English literature. He wrote many dainty lyrics and sonnets, some of them strangely marked with what may be best described as badges of abnormal cerebration. The truth is, he never wrote with a perfectly healthy pen-stroke a single letter in any of his poems. They are clearly the fine yet unnatural crystals of a mind fevered, distorted, and never quite in sympathy with health, strength and happiness.

As to the book in hand, there is a wonderful fascination in its story, and the numerous glimpses it gives of London literary and artistic life are interesting. It will be strange reading to the average intelligent American, and we are not sure that it will not give a dangerously erroneous impression of what London's literary life really means. Surely this Rossetti circle is not here shown to be a very desirable one to make pattern of. One does not confess a philistine prejudice in rejecting an influence which is in every way unpleasant to a sound and clean judgment. Rossetti's paintings and poems are a part of art, and they stand for a considerable force; but Rossetti's private life is quite another thing, and very much of it might well have been left out of print. We cannot but wonder what would have been the result if the editing of these volumes had been committed, as was at one time proposed, to Mr. Theodore Watts. In a case like this an editor so near of kin is always liable to be haunted with the morbid fear that brotherly feeling may carry him too far in concealing a brother's fault.