WILLIAM JAMES'S LETTERS

By Henry A. Lappin

OF William James it may truthfully be said that few Americans have made a richer contribution than he to the national culture. In a plenary degree he had the gift of intellectual imagination and his mind was ever mobile, progressive, and responsive. So elastic and vivacious a personality could not but exert a special and vitalizing influence, and William James was believed in and beloved by many who drew upon his stores of generosity and brotherliness and sought strength at that unfailing spring of energy and of joy. His impulsive boyishness of character, his rare selflessness and guilessness, were the delight of all who knew him. He had an indubitable genius for friendship and an exquisite avidity for life in all its perplexing variety. He wrote with excellent lucidity, and what he wrote never failed to charm and stimulate even those who were least inclined to accept his central theses. It was impossible for him ever to be dull or dismal.

These letters—arranged in two comely volumes by the sure and skilful hand of William James's son—are full of wise and occasionally profound little annotations upon contemporary American life and manners. Chautauqua made him melancholy. There was "hardly a pretty woman's face in the lot, and they seemed to have little or no humor in their composition. No epicureanism of any sort.... I say unto you: 'Smooth out your voices if you want to be saved!!!' " The "enthusiasm, the literary swing and activity" of the Italian Pragmatists he met at Florence made him ponder mournfully over the "damned academic technics and Ph. D.-machinery and university organization" which effectually frustrated the emergence of such high intellectual ardors in America. He had no illusions about the alleged "moral weight" of his native country as an international influence, and declared: "Dream! Human nature is everywhere the same; and at the least temptation all the old military passions rise and sweep everything before them." Yet he loved America and bent the knee to her greatest. "I can hardly ever think of Abraham Lincoln," he writes, "without feeling on the point of blubbering. Is it that he seems the representative of pure simple human nature against all conventional additions?" And although he was sure that the blundering precipitation of the Boer War by the British Colonial office was "only outdone by our still more anti-psycholog-

ical blundering in the Philippines", he is quick to insist that America is not as black as she is cheaply and ignorantly painted by those who point to her as the terrible example of modern political corruption. "We don't know what the word corruption means at home, with our improvised and shifting agencies of crude pecuniary bribery, compared with the solidly entrenched and permanently organized corruptive geniuses of monarchy, nobility, church and army, that penetrate the very bosom of the higher kind as well as the lower kind of people in all the European states (except Switzerland) and sophisticate their motives away from the impulse to straightforward handling of any simple case. *Témoin* the Dreyfus case!" *There* was a word that needed saying.

He was quick to record and praise the best work of his contemporaries in the field of pure literature. In the letters addressed to his brother, Henry James, there are many deeply interesting critical passages, and upon such writers as Howells, Richard Jefferies, Kipling, and Wells, his verdicts are nearly always sound and illuminating. To Wells he declares: "You're a trump and a jewel, and for human perception you beat Kipling, and for hitting off a thing with the right word you are unique...you are now an eccentric, perhaps 50 years hence you will figure as a classic." One wonders; fifteen years have elapsed since James said that, and Mr. Wells is now merely a habit. He lauds to the skies Jefferies's great essay "The Pageant of Summer", an essay of which the present reviewer had never, before this, read high enough praise. He pricks the Renan bubble beautifully when he refers casually to that writer's "sweetness and mere literary coquetry". His diagnosis of Kipling's trouble is penetratingly right: "I wish he would hearken a bit more to his deeper human self and a bit less to his shallower Jingo self.... If the Anglo-Saxon race would drop its snivelling cant it would have a good deal less of 'a burden' to carry. Kipling knows perfectly well that our camps in the tropics are not college settlements or our armies bands of philanthropists slumming it; and I think it a shame that he should represent us to ourselves in that light."

These letters will be treasured for the simple and delightful bits of self-revelation that they afford. James's life had its pathos: incessantly working, lecturing, writing, to supplement his inadequate professor's salary, he was constantly praying for leisure to think and study. His health was curiously uncertain; he suffered frequently from acute nervous tension, and then "his sleep went to pieces". But fortunately his little cottage in the Adirondacks seems to have been a never-failing restorative, the days he spent at Chocorua were among his happiest, and when he returned to Harvard he worked all the harder. Of all his labors perhaps the writing of his great "Principles of Psychology" was the most strenuous, and very moving is the letter in which he describes his sensations the day after finishing it. Long before America suspected it he was famous in Europe, and in later years it rejoiced his heart to be called a master by some of the most distinguished of the young thinkers of France and Italy. Even already, what is after all his cardinal contribution to the literature of philosophy, his work on psychology, is very far from being the last word on the subject. But William James was finer and greater than anything he wrote. Through a life that was much too full of the sort of

toil that a lesser man could perhaps have accomplished nearly as well, James was unswervingly a force for all that was fair and honorable. We who survive him are the richer for this distinguished chronicle of an abundant life nobly planned and finely lived.

The Letters of William James. Edited by his son Henry James. Two volumes. Atlantic Monthly Press.