

SMETHAM'S LETTERS.*

JAMES SMETHAM was a Yorkshireman, born in 1821, the son of a Methodist preacher. The first things he remembered were the garden gate of his father's home, the distant blueness of the hills, and the shaking of the laurels in the wind. He thought his older brother the cleverest of mortals because he could paint a horse and a dog in water-colors; and he took to art himself at the age of eight with a fourpenny paint-box which he had succeeded in buying for threepence. Thenceforth, he too was a painter. At boarding-school he copied Raphael's cartoons from the *Penny Magazine*. On leaving school he was articled to an architect at Lincoln, but was always drawing Comuses and Satans, and after a year's work on the figures about the great Cathedral had his articles cancelled and set up for himself in Shropshire as a portrait painter. In 1843 he came up to London and was entered as a probationer at the Royal Academy; in 1847 he "exhibited" at Liverpool, and in 1851-1854 at the Academy; for three years he was teacher of drawing at the Normal College, Westminster. In 1854 he married; in 1889 he died. The rise of photography interfered with his painting of portraits; he tried book illustration, but not with great success. Having a ready pictorial invention, he formed the plan of etching his own designs and issuing them quarterly at a cheap rate. This he did for three years to six hundred pleased subscribers. "Wonderful and beautiful," Ruskin called them, who was his friend. Among his important works were "The

* Letters of James Smetham. With an Introductory Memoir. Edited by Sarah Smetham and William Davies. With a portrait. Macmillan & Co. \$2.50.

Hymn of the Last Supper," which Watts considered "a great picture, though it is a small one;" "The Dream of Pilate's Wife," a large and serious conception, showing the woman raising herself on her couch in the dead of night, with closed eyes, groping "in uneasy perplexity;" and "The Women of the Crucifixion." He had warm friendships with the few, with Rossetti as with Ruskin; but he failed of popularity and praise and profit, and his life went out, so to speak, in disappointment.

Such was the man—a tender, sensitive, poetic, retiring, artistic nature—whose letters are here collected. His portrait is pathetic—a face of pensive intellectuality, a face to associate with a man who should write of Lincoln Minster in these words:

Ah me! great town of Lincoln, with the white moon shining on thee—"whiter than my true love's shroud"—how can I forget thee, and all that thou beholdest? O pealing organ, rolling waves of melody among the roof-trees! O wind, breathing solemnly against the vast chancel window, where the youth gazed with wide eyes through at the horizon! O place of dreams, warm leaden roof of transept or tower, where many a summer hour was dreamed away!

Such, hastily sketched, are the outlines of the pleasant memoir with which the friendly hand of William Davies introduces Smetham's letters. They fill about three hundred pages, and date from 1853, when he was thirty-two, to 1877, when his health began to fail. A vein of Methodist piety runs through them all, but there is no touch of cant; their fiber is honest and strong, their feeling kindly, their tone occasionally playful; they are always thoughtful, alive with vivid perceptions of the outward world; reflective, patient, and grateful in spirit; tender and affectionate, genuine in feeling, and often deeply suggestive. We give some extracts which exemplify these various qualities:

When Mahomet got one convert thoroughly made it was a great step. It was then Mahomet and Co.

The other day I met a scholastic prosaic man who said, "Now I should like to know what Tennyson meant by

Spinning forever down the ringing grooves of change.

A friend of mine did ask him, and he said, 'It was to be understood figuratively; it was an ideal expression.' Humph! Now I should like to know what sort of an explanation *that* is!"

It is one of the signs of the true connoisseur not to talk much in the presence of pictures.

I seldom see a thing at once; I wake up to it, and then it becomes a strong idea.

When you have begun to force yourself to paint there is something wrong.

The little joys of life give more satisfaction than you would think. You recollect at supper-time that you "got your hair cut today;" too long delayed, but done at last. What a serenity steals over you as you sit down to supper! You give your razor and knife to a grinder, and tomorrow morning what a delight it is to find that your razor *cuts*. You cut your pencil, and for a week you feel like a free man as you handle your penknife.

Got Hawthorne's notes. His minute notice of small incidents suggests what a blessing it is to be able to sketch.

On the beach under Hunstanton. The sun a

round plate of red gold dipping near the Sea among lilac-gray clouds—the Sea itself steel color with a touch of yellow in it. Due north it is grand to think there is nothing between yourself and the icebergs:

Secret continuance sublime
To the Sea's end.

N. B.—Always spell "Sea" with a capital S. It is only right.

We are tempted to quote much more from these agreeable and suggestive letters. The book is one in which many readers will mark many passages. It testifies that the ancient and fine art of letter-writing was not a lost art during the third quarter of the nineteenth century.
