

“The Friendships of Mary Russell Mitford.” *

WE owe the Rev. A. G. L'Estrange two 'debts of gratitude': one for his 'Life of Mary Russell Mitford', the other for this volume of her correspondence. Miss Mitford's capacity for forming friendships was something remarkable. She lived in a little village, a long distance from London, yet she had almost as many visitors as if she had lived in the heart of the metropolis. Her house was unpretentious, but her garden was large and filled with rare flowers and plants. Her strawberries were famous among her friends, and the road leading

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to her cottage was often gay with the carriages of those who came on special occasions to partake of her strawberries and cream. Mr. Ruskin is so delighted with the place that he wants to take his bride there :

You are better and the spring is come, and I hope, for I am sure you will allow me, to bring my young wife to be rejoiced (under the shadow of her now grievous lot) by your kind comforting. But pray keep her out of your garden, or she will certainly lose her wits with pure delight, or perhaps insist on staying with you and letting me find my way through the world by myself ; a task I should not *now* like to undertake. . . . I have just finished 'Atherton', to my great regret, thinking it one of the sweetest things you have ever written, and receiving from it the same kind of refreshment which I do from lying on the grass in spring. My father and mother, and an old friend and I, were talking it over to-day at dinner, and we were agreed that there was an indescribable character about it, in common with all your works, —an indescribable perfume and sweetness, as of lily-of-the-valley and honey, utterly unattained by any other writer, be it who he or she may.

It is singular that so enthusiastic and extravagant a writer as Mr. Ruskin should ever have come to be regarded as a critic. 'I am sure', he continues, 'that your writings will remain the type of this peculiar character of thought. They have the playfulness and purity of the "Vicar of Wakefield", without the naughtiness of its occasional wit, or the dust of the world's great road on the other side the hedge, as it always is there. I don't know where one can get a *perfectly* innocent laugh except with you'. Miss Mitford's writing certainly has a charm of its own ; but it has not proved potent with the present generation. The author of 'Our Village' and 'Atherton' will doubtless, in common with some other once popular writers, be best known to posterity by her Life and Letters.

Among Miss Mitford's many correspondents we find Mrs. Browning, Harriet Martineau, Bayard Taylor, J. G. Whittier, Mrs. Trollope, J. T. Fields, and Maria Edgeworth. Of Americans she liked Mr. Fields and N. P. Willis the most and Bayard Taylor the least. She pronounced Willis an 'elegant young man, and more like one of the best of our peers' sons than a rough republican.' 'A very clever person, and a very remarkable one,' she writes, 'is Bayard Taylor, and I doubt not as good as he is clever ; but yet I did not fancy him. Mr. Fields has spoiled me. He [Taylor] is shy and gawky, long rather than tall (you know what I mean) and with a total absence of that strange delightful thing which we call charm, which is to conversation what scent is to the rose'. Of Mr. Stoddard, then under thirty, she wrote :

This poor lad—an American, too—not only shows the highest genius—other low-born youths have done that—but a degree of taste and refinement rarely matched in modern poetry. More than that, some of his smaller and less powerful verse has about it an aroma of fashion and high breeding absolutely marvellous.

Dr. Holmes, though she knew him only through his writings, is called her 'pet of pets'. Tupper is a 'singularly good-natured man, though I cannot read his books'. These bits are in Miss Mitford's own letters. Of the letters from her friends, there are none more interesting than those from Mrs. Browning, some of which were written before her marriage. There is one, dated 1837, in which she says :

I have been going through heaps of poets ('oh, the profaned name!') laid up in Dr. Johnson's warehouses—Duke and Smith, King and Sprat (never christened in Hippocrene), and Pomfret with his choice, not mine, and his Pindaric odes, not Pindar's, in which he exclaims in a rapture :

'Good Heaven would be extremely kind,
Either to strike me dead or strike me blind.'

when striking him dumb would be more to my mind ! By the way, I am not sure at all of that not being as good a line as either of his. Thank you for your most interesting remarks upon the drama ; Victor Hugo's plays I never read, but will do so. His poems seem to me not very striking, more bare of genius than such of his prose writings as I have happened to see.'

The book abounds in exceedingly amusing anecdotes and bits of personal criticism, and we believe will long hold a place on the library table with Mr. L'Estrange's Life of Miss Mitford, Mrs. Kemble's autobiographical Records, and Caroline Fox's 'Memories of Old Friends'.