

*The charming
letters of an
English painter.*

THE "Letters of James Smetham"
(Macmillan), edited, with a brief
Memoir, by W. Davies, is an alto-

gether charming collection, fresh, unstudied, full of frank self-disclosure, random fancies, and independent views on art, letters, and life. The writer had in a marked degree the epistolary gift of letting the pen run with the thought; hence we are not surprised to learn that "of all his numerous correspondents scarcely one is known ever to have destroyed a letter he wrote." James Smetham was a painter of respectable standing, but of limited vogue; not at all, as it seems, a *marketable* painter. One suspects, after reading Mr. Davies's Memoir, that Smetham's artistic career was the old story (a familiar one in the annals of British art) of disparity between conception and execution, between the teeming mind and the half-trained fingers. That there was merit in his work — intellectual merit dimly shining through the haze of imperfect *technique* — men like Ruskin and Rossetti have testified; and the half-dozen or so finely imaginative, Blake-like poems appended to the "Letters" suggest that could Smetham's eye and hand have kept touch with his fancy, he must have taken high rank in his profession. A sentimentalizing, moralizing fashion of "art criticism" (save the mark!) has obscured the fact, greatly to the detriment of English art, that a painter's first business is to be articulate, to be master of those special dexterities by virtue of which he *is* a painter, and not a poet or verbal story-teller. The grand Masters in the "Grand Style," the Michael Angelos, Raphaels, Leonardos, Rembrandts, Dürers, were not only men of mind, they were first of all consummate workmen, experts in the mechanical business of laying colors deceptively on a flat surface, artisans who had served an arduous apprenticeship to a hand-soiling, back-aching, ill-smelling handicraft. A further clew to the secret of James Smetham's life failures seems to lurk in the following sketch of him, which is rather suggestive, by the way, of Dickens's "Father of the Marshalsea": "There was a sort of wavering or undulating motion in his gait, slightly expressed, and sometimes a certain movement with the hands indicated — how may it be described? — as if feeling or groping towards the Unknown in the effort to seize something not wholly out of reach, but still eluding the grasp." Men who waver through life "groping towards the Unknown," seldom have change for a guinea in their pockets, or credit at the grocer's. But whatever may have been James Smetham's limitations as a painter and as a bread-winner, his quality as a letter-writer is beyond question; and with all his turn for dreaming, he sometimes hits the nail of debate on the head with a homely force and precision worthy of honest Sancho himself. There is a sound kernel in the following outbreak, for example: "Don't get into the focus of Criticism. Many men spoil their en-

joyment of Art by looking on it as something to pull in pieces, rather than something to enjoy and to lead them to enjoy nature, and through nature to enjoy God. How wretched is that feverish, satiated, complaining spirit of criticism. Never contented, never at rest. 'Is this better than that, these than those? Is this a great man, and if great, *how* great? Is he as great as Rossetti, or as great as Raphael? or is he little, like Brown, Jones, and Robinson?' all the while avoiding *The Thing* and its relish: not thinking art, but about art: not conversing with nature, but with names. When they talk of their Raphaels, Correggios, and stuff, continue to shift your trumpet and only take snuff, and ask them with some earnestness if the Atlantic cable is likely to work again." The volume is carefully edited, and it contains a good portrait of the author after a painting by himself.