LETTERS OF EMILY DICKINSON.*

IN the poetry of Emily Dickinson there was a quality so unique and so penetrating as to awaken keen interest in the writer's personality. To this desire for further acquaintance her sister has responded by permitting her letters to be published under the editorship of her appreciative friend, Mrs. Mabel Loomis Todd, who says:

> It was with something almost like dread that I approached the task of arranging these letters, lest the deep revelations of a peculiarly shy inner life might so pervade them that in true loyalty to their writer none could be publicly used. But, with few exceptions, they have been read and prepared with entire relief from that feeling and with unshrinking pleasure; the sanctities were not invaded. Emily kept her little reserves, and bared her soul but seldom even in intimate correspondence. It was not so much that she was always on spiritual guard as that she sported with her varying moods and tested them upon her friends with apparent delight in the effect, as airy and playful as it was half unconscious.

Her letters more freely than her verses indicate "the dainty humor, the frolicsome gayety, which continually bubbled over in her daily life. The somber and even weird outlook upon this world and the next, characteristic of many of the poems, was by no means a prevailing condition of mind; for, while fully apprehending all the tragic elements in life, enthusiasm and bright joyousness were yet her normal qualities and stimulating moral heights her native dwelling place." All this we must believe since her friend so assures us, yet such sensitiveness as clearly was Emily Dickinson's means great capacity for suffering; and the intensity of her attachment to kindred and friends, as well as the seclusion into which she shrank after her earlier years, suggest that she was instinctively protecting herself by love and withdrawal from currents and counter-currents that would sadly have hurt her in their buffeting.

The letters begin soon after the fourteenth birthday. The difference in style between these and later ones is even more marked than usual. Many people in their youth have written as diffusely as Miss Dickinson, but few in maturity have used forms so condensed and incisive. After

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* Letters of Emily Dickinson. Edited by Mabel Loomis Todd. Two volumes. Illustrated. Roberts Brothers. $2.00.

attending school in her native town of Amherst she spent a year at Mt. Holyoke Seminary. Among her mates she is remembered as a writer of extraordinary compositions and teller of intensely funny stories. At Amherst, as at the seminary, there was "plain living and high thinking." Emily Dickinson always had choice society, and throughout life received from her loyal friendships some of her keenest pleasures, as is shown by her letters to Dr. and Mrs. J. G. Holland, Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Bowles, and many others. Yet she was hardly more than thirty when her growing shyness sometimes prevented her from seeing her dearest friends when they came to her house. "Her happiness in their love and trust was at times almost too intense to bear, . . . and disproportionately great pain was caused by even comparatively slight separations." To the Hollands she wrote: "We talk of you together, then diverge on life, then hide in you again as a safe fold. Don't leave us long, dear friends! You know we're children still, and children fear the dark."

How epigrammatic Miss Dickinson's letters were can easily be guessed by the readers of her poems. At Christmastime she wrote, "God bless the hearts that suppose they are beating and are not, and infold in his infinite tenderness those that do not know they are beating and are." To one friend she paid this tribute, "You have the most triumphant face out of paradise, probably because you are there constantly instead of ultimately." To another she wrote, "Is not the sweet resentment of friends that we are not strong more inspiriting even than the strength itself?" Her love for nature was as intimate as that of Emily Brontë — a source of sweet trouble and exquisite consolation. Here is a note of thanks, "In a world too full of beauty for peace I have met nothing more beautiful." A spirit vibrating like hers to the touch of subtle truth and loveliness could by no possibility accept any current ideas which made God a far-away and dreary power:

> Her garden was full of His brightness and glory; the birds sang and the sky glowed because of Him. To shut herself out of the sunshine in a church, dark, chilly, restricted, was rather to shut herself away from Him; almost pathetically she wrote, "I believe the love of God may be taught not to seem like bears'."

"In essence no real irreverence mars her poems or her letters," but some expressions in each are as startling as those often uttered by children.

Although this writer of a thousand poems refused all invitations to publish — that being "foreign to her thought as firmament to fin" — she showed a wish for competent and impartial judgment by writing to Col. T. W. Higginson, an entire stranger, and asking him, "Are you too deeply occupied to see if my verse is alive?" Selections from this correspondence have been given by Colonel Higginson in the *Atlantic Monthly* of October, 1891. The other letters of the pupil to her "master" are now added. Obviously she could not have chosen a better critic, one who would more fully appreciate her individuality and at the same time suggest whatever might broaden and enrich it. Mrs. Todd says, "It is hard for many persons to believe even now that Emily Dickinson had nothing to do with the Saxe Holm stories, and certainly some of their incidental poetry bears strong evidence of her unique touch."

After her father's death Miss Dickinson's retirement became almost complete, notes being the chief links that bound her to the world. Yet she never denied herself to children, who looked upon her as a kind of fairy guardian. Something elf-like, indeed, there seems to be in the composition of this rare, sequestered nature. New England has produced many original growths to puzzle and fascinate the student of psychology. None is more sure to move recurrent wonder than this recluse of Amherst. To her should be accorded a scrutiny as delicate and keen as that which is given to Jones Very or Emily Brontë or William Blake.