LITERATURE.

Stevenson's Letters.*

THE letters of a thorough-going artist are always deeply interesting, no matter what vexatious faults we may find in them; so interesting are they, indeed, that even the coldest and most judicious editor is apt to lose heart (when he comes to winnowing them) and let everything go into his collection. Perhaps, after all, the open sieve is best. What some of us would wish to see eliminated may be just the tidbits of which others would be most fond. Mr. Sidney Colvin has edited these letters with signal ability. His introduction, not only good, but superexcellent in taste and in style, prepares the reader for a literary feast scarcely equaled since Boswell spread his table. Not that Stevenson's letters make up a body at all like Boswell's gossip; the difference is extreme; but the richness, the fragrance, the variety, the wringing of life down to its threads and the fine self-conscious hospitality of thought are here even in a greater profusion.

After these letters we do not care to read a set biography of their author; we suspect that to know more of him would be to feel a splendid illusion fall away at many points. His was a captivating personality; the nameless magnetism of genius hung a charm over him, so that he made friends wherever he passed, and left behind him a glowing wake of enthusiasm with which his influence was perpetuated. Some things in his life were not pleasant to contemplate, and it is well to read of him and think of him as poet, artist, wizard of the pen, an invalid making a great fight for life, and a friend loyal and true. Remember him for the greatness of the beautiful side of his life, and let the other side disappear. We want no biography.

These letters contain a liberal education for the young aspirant in the literary field, if the aspirant will but extract it and lay it to heart. Never before has the terrible struggle for money, with the pen for implement of conquest, been so forcibly and frankly exhibited. Stevenson received good pay for his writings, as such pay goes, but his intimate epistles lay bare a sad scene of grinding toil, and continually more than hint of a never ending anxiety about his financial future. Indeed, so great is this stress that every reader must feel it tugging at him while he passes from page to page of a record strangely pathetic, yet strangely exhilarating. It is romance pure and simple, the immitigable romance of the life lived by a sadly stricken, divinely gifted man.

Stevenson belonged to the class of geniuses to whom maturity is impossible. He lived and died a boy. No matter how finished and of what almost classic superiority many creations of his imagination may be, not one among them all quite rises to the supreme dignity of a really great work. They lack the largeness of spirit, the steadfastness of countenance and the noble permanence of structure with which the greatest masters distinguish their works; but, on the other hand, they are imbued with a contagious enthusiasm; they present wonderful perfections of conceit and most alluring vistas of beauty seen through rifts in a diction so charming that we are almost deprived of critical standing-ground so great is the buoyancy imparted to our judgment.

We are already far enough away from the collected works of Stevenson to see clearly that they are very light, very beautiful, very much saturated with what, in the best sense of the word, is puerility undiluted. "Treasure Island" was what began his fame; it is a boy's story for boys. Most of the poetry that we shall remember him by has the ring and tone of the dreaming child. His manly *dramatis personæ* are mostly of the romantic, over-virile type beloved of imaginative youngsters, or of that other class whose adventures appeal to a devil-may-care immaturity of taste. And this characteristic immaturity breaks out all through these let-

*THE LETTERS OF ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON TO HIS FAMILY AND FRIENDS. *Selected and edited by Sidney Colvin.* Two volumes. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons

ters. It is delightful; we read and enjoy; we read and sympathize; we read and regret. There is so much of manliness and unselfishness, so much of persistence and unflinching devotion, so much of almost hopeless self-sacrifice, that we notice all the more a weakness just at the central core of the artist's life. He sees art with a perfect vision; but he sees life most imperfectly; this is everywhere evident. In his stories we have not a single admirable and fully rounded picture of a feminine character. Clearly he could not realize a woman of the best type —a woman of women, sweet, pure, loftily feminine, the glory of the world. No more could he strike a living sketch of the veritable gentleman, the strong, irreproachable, loving, world-saving man. A beach-comber, a pirate, a vagabond, an adventurer, a picturesque victim of unusual circumstances or impossible conditions he could project with amazing effect. Even in his inimitable essays there is a kinking of the thought too often around certain quirks and fancies which, if they are not valueless, must be classed with mere bric-à-brac of the intellectual show-room.

The letters display and accentuate this weak side of Stevenson's life; but they also open up the thousand-fold beauties of his mind and character and make us feel how richly endowed in its own peculiar way was his fascinating genius. Like all genius his must be taken just as it is. We could not change it if we would, and if we could what hand would dare touch to alter the structure erected by a workman not equaled since Poe and Hawthorne? What most attracts us in the letters is the golden thread of sunshine —the continuous filament of outdoor life— woven through them. Stevenson loved the winds, the sea, the mountain lines, the flowers, birds, all the sensuous apparitions of nature, with a love pure and childlike. Many of the reflective and descriptive touches are marvelously appealing. He loved children and pets of the human sort, writing of which brings out a most attractive side of his character.

From his many places of exile, on account of a progressive consumption, Stevenson sent forth his romances, stories and essays along with these letters. It was, however, after he went to live and die in Samoa that the most interesting part of his correspondence was written. There he did some of his best work, and Mr. Colvin tells us that between 1887 and 1894 his annual income from his pen was between twenty and twenty-five thousand dollars! But the curious part of the story is that he spent every cent of it and was constantly worried lest he should die and leave his wife without means of support. From beginning to end these large volumes ring with a double voice—one a wail about ill health and want of money, the other a clear, sweet, unselfish cry of delight in life and of warm devotion to family and friends. Everywhere the literary note predominates. Stevenson thought of nothing so much as the making of books and of what effect they would have. Never was artist more violently self-conscious; he gnawed his heart and crucified his soul for the sake of literary production. And never was man more jolly in the constant presence of death. Ofter there was danger that a deep breath or an energetic phrase of speech would cause fatal hemorrage; he mentions this lightly, almost too lightly, and then falls to work on a new romance as cheerfully as if going to dinner.

Upon the whole, it is a fascinating, yet infinitely saddening book—two great volumes quivering with a strange, keen, sweet, bitter, jocund, harrowingly pathetic life. Everywhere Stevenson shows himself a philanthropist, a tender-hearted, generous, loving soul, a vastly gifted yet singularly limited artist and a many-sided, lovable, captivating and by no means great man in the largest sense of greatness. As a stylist he would be distinguished had we nothing but these letters to measure him by; as a story-teller he would be a wonder if only "Treasure Island" stood to his credit; as an essayist we could set him among the best if we but counted a half dozen pieces. And yet in these letters, as in all of his works, there is distinctly lacking the mighty domination of the great master. What we get from Stevenson through his letters is unquestionably *l'homme même*, the very soul of the man. Such a personal revelation, such a true-ring-ing lyrical cry, has not been uttered before in this century. In many places we have felt while reading that the revelation should have

been less insistently frank; but then, even the points of bad taste seem to help make up the picture, and a remarkable picture it is.
