

Mr. Yeend King's "Lynmouth" (No. 26) is a pleasant example of this artist.

There is one very quaint picture, "The Beautiful Castle," by Mr. Cayley Robinson (No. 56); it is in Strudwick's most severe manner and represents a knight riding past the open door of the Castle of Romance. Just within the Castle is a maiden, of the most attenuated and anæmic description, whose one idea evidently is to thrust herself into the wall behind her, but this wall is the noticeable part of the picture. It is of slabs of green porcelain, most marvellously well painted, and instantly recalls to mind the weird green porcelain museum described in that fascinating flight of fancy called "The Time Machine."

There is a beautiful study of early light upon water, called "A Bright Summer Morning, Holland," by G. S. Walters, and a particularly clever little bit of *genre*, in deliberate imitation of the Flemish painters, in "A Dutch Interior," by Sherwood Hunter (No. 73).

Much imagination and consequent power to touch the feeling is in "The Last Faint Pulse of Quivering Light," by Frank Spenlove-Spenlove (No. 112). The wan gleam at the brink of the fast-darkening mere gives an almost uncomfortable warning of being immediately benighted; it would be a depressing picture to live with.

There are two, I think only two, noticeable portraits. "A Portrait," by H. T. Schäfer (No. 131) was, as far as I could see, a very forcible impression of a girl in a black dress, but the lighting was atrocious.

The other, "Madame Veuve, J. M." (No. 148) is an obviously truthful record of an expressive face, painted in that half light so much affected nowadays, so that there is no colour anywhere—in lips, eyes or complexion; and the face is only accented at all by absolutely black surroundings. I was astonished at the great inferiority of the other portrait (No. 143) by the same artist, Mr. Arthur Buckland.

"First Come, First Served," by William Strutt (No. 152) is a ludicrous subject, rendered not without cleverness. Some ladies have arranged a picnic; they are all devotees of art, and their back views, on camp stools, are visible towards the horizon, busy with their easels. The groom, having laid out the lunch, lies upon his face, fast asleep in the heat, and a drove of young turkeys is advancing noiselessly and eagerly upon the appetising "spread," which evidently will be speedily demolished.

"A Friend in Need" (No. 157), by Sydney Muschamp, is a graceful little composition, somewhat in the style of Stainland. G. M. R.

A Book of the Week.

"THE VAILIMA LETTERS."*

THE correspondence of these last four years of Stevenson's life gives a sad record of endurance and brave work under exceptional difficulties. There are gleams of fun and "wise, witty and tender sayings" scattered through the letters, nevertheless the perusal of them leaves a somewhat painful impression upon the mind of the reader, and those who loved Stevenson

personally will almost regret their publication; I say *almost*—for they would prefer that his engaging and sympathetic personality should dwell in the memories of his admirers, unclouded by the published record of the painful weakness, many anxieties, scrivener's cramp, and other minor troubles which cast a shadow over his later years. *Almost*, but not quite, for surely no one can read these letters without feeling braver after their perusal. Last week I wrote about Hardy's terribly pessimistic novel, and I think if anybody wanted a tonic against despair, they could not possibly do better than read the "Vailima Letters," and mark and learn what a wonderful optimist Stevenson was in spite of his bodily weakness. At times even he could not help being well nigh overcome by the difficulties of his life, yet when things seemed to him at their darkest he wrote to Sidney Colvin:—

"Life is not all Beer and Skittles. The inherent tragedy of things works itself out from white to black and blacker, and the poor things of a day look ruefully on. Does it shake my cast-iron faith? I cannot say it does. I believe in an ultimate decency of things, aye, and if I woke in Hell, I should still believe it! But it is hard walking, and I can see my own share in the mis-steps, and can bow my head to the result, like an old, stern, and unhappy devil of a Norseman, as my ultimate character is. . . . Well, *il faut cultiver son jardin*. That last expression of poor unhappy human wisdom I take to my heart and go to St. Ives."

(N.B. "St. Ives" was the name of the novel he was then writing—which title, however, will not, I believe, be retained at its ultimate publication.)

A great deal has been written about Stevenson's style—a style which we know he had acquired by means of the most arduous and constant study. In the "Vailima Letters," there are, of course, traces of his admirable and flexible use of the English language, and paragraphs and passages of excellent writing, but these letters were not in the first instance written for publication, and they are besprinkled throughout with slang. Side by side with learned criticisms of current literature and exquisite descriptions of Samoan scenery, we find expressions that would rejoice the heart of a schoolboy. Indeed, Stevenson to his last hour possessed the spirits of a school boy, he enjoyed all the expeditions into the country, the downs as well as the ups of his settler's life. And how, some days, he enjoyed writing his own books! "Catriona" seems to have given him the purest pleasure, for this is what he says: "Really, I think it is spirited; and there's a heroine that (up to now) seems to have attractions: *absit omen*. . . . David is on his feet, and doing well, and very much in love. . . . and the tale interferes with my eating and sleeping; the join is bad. I have not thought to strain too much for continuity; so this part be alive, I shall be content."

Mr. Sidney Colvin contributes a sympathetic preface and epilogue to the letters, the last words of which are well worth quoting, as I think they give such a true estimate of the legacies of literature, example and memories that Stevenson has left behind him. "To the English-speaking world he has left behind a treasure which it would be vain as yet to attempt to estimate to the profession of letters, one of the most ennobling and inspiring of examples, and to his friends an image of the memory more vivid and more dear than are the presences of almost any of the living."

The frontispiece to the book is an excellent portrait

* "The Vailima Letters," being correspondence addressed by Robert Louis Stevenson to Sidney Colvin, Nov., 1890, to Oct., 1894. 7s. 6d. (Methuen & Co., 1895.)

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)