

LITERARY CHAT

LETTERS OF DEAD AUTHORS.

When next Mr. Andrew Lang, making copy out of his own vexations, attacks those thrifty souls who attempt to make a living out of literature without being themselves writers, it is to be hoped that he will turn his attention to the publishers of the letters of authors who have recently died.

There has been an epidemic of the disease lately, and very tiresome it has been. When the relatives and friends and creditors and autograph hunters and casual entertainers and all others who happen to hold scraps of notes from authors, make a book of them, readers can at least avoid it. There is no compulsion to buy the neatly bound and indisputably labeled epistles of any one. But when a magazine devotes nearly half of two successive issues to the letters of authors not long dead, it is not so easy to avoid them.

There are many things to be urged against this indiscriminate ransacking of desks. The chief one is that it seldom furnishes interesting reading. One acquires the amiable feeling of a listener at keyholes without any compensating advantage. It does not require a particularly supersensitive nature to feel some embarrassment at plunging into the intimate letters of a man or woman whom one might have met a few years ago.

It is a question whether a few years' absence from this sphere destroys all obligations of courtesy and honor toward those who have left it. One would have felt distinctly like, and would have expected the treatment of, a sneak thief to have been found reading Mrs. Browning's letters to Robert, or Stevenson's letters to his friends, or Sidney Lanier's letters to his wife, during the lifetime of any of them. It seems illogical that their deaths and the pecuniary needs of their survivors should so revolutionize standards as to put one at his ease in reading them today.

However, it is not mainly because of a prejudice in good society and in the penal code against meddling with other people's mail that this flood of the correspondence of recently departed authors is tiresome. It is uninteresting. To our great grandchildren a judicious selection of these letters might afford an enlightening glimpse of our habits and customs. It is not so with us. Neither do they afford us illumination in regard to the mind and method of the individual genius which is not more directly and more worthily to be obtained from the work into which the genius put his heart and soul.

Letters should be saved until time makes it clear that a life of their author is desirable. Then they should be placed in the hands of a biographer, not for themselves alone, but that the information they contain may be judiciously welded into the story of his career.

It might not be quite so profitable a course for the heirs and assigns of the author, but it would certainly be a relief to the reading public, which, after all, has letters of its own, and finds those of even a heaven born genius to his mother and his duns extremely like its own.

"WAR IS KIND."

"What is the matter with Stephen Crane?" This is a question that a good many readers of "War Is Kind" have been asking during the past few months. A queerer book has rarely been put on the American market.

Those who have closely followed Crane's work are not altogether surprised by the new volume. Several years ago, before "The Red Badge of Courage" made the young author mildly famous, he had sent out, through one of the dilettante publishing houses, a little volume called "The Black Riders, and Other Lines." But all of the poems in that collection had a definite meaning and a strong point. The work in the new volume is much more obscure and crude. One literary critic, who has been acquainted with Stephen Crane for several years, declares that the author received his poetic inspiration from the untrammelled genius of Emily Dickinson. "The Black Riders" read like an up to date and a masculine expression of the Emily Dickinson style of writing. After a time, however, Mr. Crane evidently forgot about Miss Dickinson, and made his style so ugly and rough that, if the New England poetess were alive today, she would unquestionably shudder away from it.

To those who study "War Is Kind," it becomes clear that Mr. Crane put into it a good deal of thought and feeling and dramatic intensity. But a glance at the first few lines is likely to prejudice most lovers of verse against it. So it is not probable that it will add to Mr. Crane's literary reputation.

MR. CHAMBERS AND "THE OUTSIDERS."

The function of a novel is to amuse—not necessarily to amuse in the lighter and more common sense, but to entertain. A writer has first to decide into what class his book is to fall, whether it is to make people laugh lightly or laugh deeply, but in either case the subject depicted must come within the possibility of

amusement. After a book is written and read we have often to ask, was it all worth while?

It is true that "outsiders" exist. It is too true, and it is doubtful if we can thank Mr. Chambers for showing us this particular *demi monde* in the unartistic, unromantic light of the "iron city." We do not want to shut our eyes to all but the beautiful in our heterogeneous metropolis, and we could not if we would, for the ugly forces itself upon us through the cracks of every one of our senses.

"The Outsiders" leaves you with much the same feeling as do certain plays that send you away from a realistic representation of the sad side of every day life in tears instead of laughter. If the story were enlivened by a little hope for the outsiders, with a bit of the happy hunting ground promised for this life, we could the better excuse the doleful tale. But it is marked by the peculiar streak of morbidness that runs through the otherwise joyful disposition of many Americans. The only characters in the book that are left happily, are the ones that die.

What may have been meant for the primary element of the narrative, its unflattering account of authors, critics, and publishers, can hardly be taken seriously, because it is utterly overdrawn. For the rest, the plot is slight, and such charm as it possesses is mainly that of its clever diction.

"MEN'S TRAGEDIES."

One of the most curious books published in this country in several years is called "Men's Tragedies." It is written by Mr. R. V. Risley, a young man who passed four years in Denmark as the secretary of his father, at the time our minister at Copenhagen. It is plainly a very serious literary effort. The introduction, however, makes it difficult for the reader to take the book seriously, for it is to the last degree sophomoric and self conscious. As for the stories themselves, they give the impression that Mr. Risley is altogether on the wrong track; save when they are commonplace, they have no relation whatever to human life. It is plain that, from the start, he wanted to write a sad, even a morbid book; so he became sad and he kept sad at any cost, even at the cost of common sense. His story of "The Man Who Hated," far from being grimly horrible, as it is designed to be, is really amusing.

Mr. Risley, in other words, has made the mistake of treating the ludicrous and the preposterous as if they were serious and impressive, even awesome. A glance at the stories is enough to show that their young author has been steeping himself in German romanticism, doing the very worst thing for his

artistic development. He would have done far better if he had studied the short stories of his own countrymen, not to speak of the even finer art practised among the short story writers of France. It seems almost grotesque that his long drawn out tales, wholly lacking in skill, in characterization, and in conscious humor, should be offered to readers who have in their midst some of the most brilliant short story writers in the world. Mr. Risley takes three or four pages to describe a character that a more skillful writer could make luminous with a phrase. Moreover, he has a most curious habit of dropping into sententious phrases, which apparently contain kernels of truth, but are discovered on examination not to be true at all. It is a pity that such an earnest young man, and so devoted a workman, should so misdirect his energies. If he would write about what he sees and knows, and try to be faithful to it, instead of trying to be a prose Byron, he might be able to produce work of genuine value.

SINCERITY IN LITERATURE.

If there be one quality which is an absolute essential in successful writing of every kind, it is that of sincerity. The young writer cannot be too strongly impressed with the fact that if he desires to succeed, he must believe in everything that he writes. This literary self respect, as it might be called, has animated almost every writer who has ever made a name, whether by bad or by good literature. Thackeray believed in what he wrote, and so does Hall Caine. Dickens was absolutely sincere in his work, and so is Miss Laura Jean Libbey, whose books sell by the hundreds of thousands. The country editor, if he desires to retain his subscribers, must be thoroughly in earnest when he describes the exhibits at the county fair, or chronicles the loss of Judge Carbuncle's collar button on the road between Jericho and East Mountain.

It is probable that at least once during every day in the year some dolt will remark of a popular play or book or song, "Well, that's the worst yet. I could write one as good as that myself."

The dolt is probably mistaken. He could no more write the novel in question—called, let us say, "The Mad, Mocking, Mysterious Marriage at Midnight"—than he could compose the song, "Potted Pansies on Her Grave," or construct the sensational drama, "Hell Hounds Let Loose." Bad as play, song, and story may be when judged from any decent artistic standard, the chances are that each one of them contains that germ of sincerity which alone can hold the public attention.

It may seem to the scoffer an easy thing to compose a maudlin, mushy song about somebody who died and crossed to the golden shore, but he might do the author of those verses the justice to remember that the words and tune, commonplace as they may be, and reeking with bathos, nevertheless are effective enough to hush into momentary silence a common, vulgar, cheap music hall audience; to awaken memory in callous hearts, and set tears to coursing down cheeks that may be bronzed with wind or sea, or thick with rouge and powder.

It is not merely the words and the tune that produce this result, but the sincerity that permeates both. The author of the song believed in himself and his work when he put his pen to paper; of that we may be pretty sure.

So it is with the cheap and sensational novel. It may seem easy enough to string together a score of lurid incidents on a mere thread of plot, carried out by characters of the most conventional type; and in truth, that part of the work is easy. But it is not easy to put them together in such a manner that they will cast their magic spell over the cigarette girl going down town to her day's work with a volume in her lap, or cause the district messenger boy to forget that it is important for the doctor for whom he has been sent to receive and answer the summons in the shortest possible space of time.

As for the melodrama made up of scenes and situations that have done duty a thousand times before, with a comic element in the shape of the most preposterous stage Irishman that ever wore red whiskers, let us not forget that it completely fulfils the entire mission of the stage—which is to keep people awake. Those keen witted boys in the gallery know too much about finance as well as the drama to pay their hard earned dimes for an entertainment that will not interest them. Any one who believes that playgoers of this class are easily satisfied knows very little about the New York newsboy. Moreover, the difficulty of constructing any sort of a plot that will hold together for two hours and a half is something that only a professional playwright can appreciate.

No, our friend the scoffer could not write that drama, or one like it, if he were to devote ten years to the task, because he would go about his work in the same contemptuous spirit that characterizes his criticism; and his play, even if it were to pass with the manager, would certainly fail when it encountered an audience, for they would know that it was entirely lacking in sincerity.

It is not an easy matter for one who is accustomed to writing for magazines of the higher grade, and who has consequently studied the tastes of the refined and educated

classes, to learn the trick of producing cheap or sensational literature, designed to interest the unformed, uneducated mind. Nevertheless, there have been persons of cultivation who have done this successfully, and it is probable that in every case the writer has forced himself into a sincere belief in what he was writing. For it must be remembered that the district messenger boy is just as particular about what he reads as the college professor, although his standards are not the same; and the shrewd editor or publisher will seldom buy anything of a writer who undervalues his own work.

A chance visitor in the office of a successful periodical noticed recently that two persons who offered manuscript were politely informed that no more contributions were desired at present. Now, there is always a market for contributions of the highest class in this particular office; but it happened that one of these would be contributors was a dull faced literary hack who offered to do "all the kid stuff" that was wanted at a reduced rate; while the other, an offensively "bright" specimen of the modern newspaper woman, observed cheerfully that she could do "any kind of woman's page slush." The editor of this periodical, who is a person of much acumen and long experience, knew perfectly well that nothing good in the way of manuscript would ever be offered in such a manner.

And if it be a difficult task to fool the public with an insincere detective or pirate story, how much more difficult to fool it with one of those insincere imitations of meritorious work that are so common nowadays! And yet an immense amount of work of this description is not only produced every year, but actually marketed, published, and in many cases reprinted in book form and highly praised by such critics as have a little manuscript to sell themselves.

For work of this sort we are indebted to that industrious band of writers of the simian school who are always to be found squatting near the heels of genius. Not one of these men can create anything, but the very moment that the genius of a Kipling wins popular recognition, a score of them begin to move their arms and feet, and, in a limited degree, their brains, saying: "This Anglo Indian business seems to be all the go. I guess I'll have to jump in and do something of the sort myself."

The "something of the sort" thus evolved in imitation of another man's genius, and with the guidance of encyclopedias and books of travel, is generally pitifully weak in quality. And yet, to the shame of the reading public be it said, it frequently finds a profitable market. It has no powers of endurance, however, for although it may fool

the editors all of the time and the public part of the time, it is sure to be found out eventually and cast into outer darkness, for one reason only—its utter lack of sincerity.

THE SLAUGHTER OF THE INNOCENTS.

Nowadays every writer of fiction works with one eye on his editor or publisher and the other on the stage, hoping that the story which he is creating will prove available for dramatic purposes. Indeed, a novel that achieves a great success is likely to attract the attention of some theatrical manager, for ever since those astute and learned persons ascertained that "Trilby," "The Prisoner of Zenda," "Under the Red Robe," and "The Little Minister" were dramatized from novels, they have been on the lookout for stories that would bear transplanting to the difficult atmosphere of the stage.

The writer who is fortunate enough to produce a novel of dramatic interest is likely to receive two or three propositions from hack dramatists and managers; the first named offering to put it into proper dramatic form for, let us say, half the royalties, and the latter proposing to give it a production should the dramatic version prove satisfactory. In nine cases out of ten the manager's offer makes a more favorable impression on the writer than does that of the dramatist, for he sees no reason why, if he can write a successful book, he should not be capable of transforming that book into an equally successful play. Thereupon, elated by this sudden demand from a new and golden source, he sets about the work of dramatization, priding himself as he goes along upon the skill with which he contrives to construct a drama without sacrificing in an appreciable degree the various characters and situations that have proved so successful in their original form. He cheers himself with the thought that when his play is put upon the boards he will receive all the royalties, and will not be obliged to divide with the "mere stage hack" who could do nothing but put his material into proper acting form.

It generally requires the bitter lesson of failure to teach the novelist that half a success is worth infinitely more than an exclusive interest in a fiasco, and it is seldom that even that lesson, mortifying though it may be, teaches him that he is no more capable of putting his novel into dramatic shape than his office boy is of writing the novel.

The truth is that the preservation of the original characters and incidents is of very small consequence in comparison with the difficult work of fulfilling the requirements of the stage. The despised "stage hack" will change, and even altogether sacrifice, the original characters and incidents in order to strengthen the drama, while the literary man

will sacrifice his play for the sake of his story. He cannot bring himself to a "slaughter of the innocents"—a sacrificial offering, in honor of Thespis, of the situations which have been devised through such hard, patient work, and the characters which have sprung from his brain and grown under his pen until he has learned to love them as any author should love the children of his fancy. It tears his very heartstrings to be told that one of these innocents must suffer in order that the leading lady may have a call at the end of the third act, or the humor of the funny scene be intensified.

And yet that is precisely what the author must do in order to produce a successful play. Like Virginius, he must nerve himself to destroy the best beloved of his offspring lest they fall into the hands of the ravishers, the critics; and as there are very few authors of the Virginius stamp of character at the present day, it is much better to call in an experienced dramatist to act as executioner. The dramatist who knows his business would no more think of sparing these luckless innocents, or even of considering the feelings of their parents, than a railroad surveyor would think of diverting the course of his road to spare a pretty garden.

No, unless characters can be made to conform to the new order of things, and adapt themselves to the inexorable demands of dramatic form, they must be swept away like the hollyhocks and lilac bushes, and it often happens that the very qualities which endeared them to readers of the story make them absolutely impossible when there is an audience to be entertained.

A London magazine has been holding a serious symposium on the subject, "What is the best month's holiday for a literary man of moderate means?" And many opinions over valuable signatures have been obtained. Yet, after all, why should it be supposed that literary men enjoy the same class of holiday? A talent in common does not mean tastes in common, and the literary man is as diverse in his make up as the butcher—and more so, for the Marketmen's Picnic is a popular event, while authors have not even that delight in common. They might meet on the universal ground of shop, but shop being distinctly barred by the very term holiday, there is nothing to bind the incongruous assembly together.

Perhaps the best result in the symposium was the take off it inspired in another London magazine, which rounds up the literary opinions with wit and impertinence, from Mr. Richard Le Gallienne's pale, wan "So many things may be done in a moon," to Mr. Dooley's explosive "Holidays, Hinnissy! Holidays is it, for a lithry man?"

THE FROTH OF NEW YORK SOCIETY.

BY JAMES L. FORD.

OUR SOCIAL CHRONICLERS HAVE TOLD US MUCH OF THE LOWER MILLION, MUCH OF BOHEMIA, AND MUCH TOO MUCH OF THE UPPER FOUR HUNDRED, BUT THERE IS ONE INTERESTING FIELD THAT THEY HAVE HITHERTO NEGLECTED.

THE broad fields of metropolitan life have been so sedulously cultivated of late years by our active and enterprising literary husbandmen that in many cases the soil has become exhausted and the toilers have found themselves forced to seek their harvest elsewhere. It is true that the city grows each year in population and in the variety of its life, but it does not begin to keep pace with the demands made upon it through the increase in the number of those writers who find in New York their favorite and most profitable field of fiction. The meadows which lay fallow until long after the Civil War are cultivated today by scores of eager and keen scented toilers, while the search for new territory has thrown open to the world innumerable phases of existence which a quarter of a century ago were practically unknown to the reading public.

It seems strange, in view of the fierce competition, that there should still remain within the limits of Greater New York any considerable extent of territory untouched by plow or harrow. Nevertheless, there are in the metropolis certain very distinct circles of society which are perhaps more in evidence than any other that the town can boast of, and which, so far as my knowledge goes, have never yet gained admittance to the pages of American literature.

The men and women who constitute the social strata to which I refer are continually before our eyes. They patrol Broadway every fine afternoon; they are constant in their attendance at the race track and theater, and they form the greater part of the summer population at Long Branch and Saratoga. Restaurants of the medium and higher grades would not survive if they were to lose their patronage, while those which do a late supper trade on Broadway are devoted to them almost exclusively.

Just now, owing perhaps to the flush times and the rapid growth and development of the town, this class is larger and more in evidence than it ever was before. In theaters and music halls its members surround us on all sides. During the entr'actes we can hear their amiable and intimate chatter about the players on the stage and the conspicuous persons in the audience. The first represen-

tation of a new piece, especially one in a lighter vein, brings them out in full force; and if we hearken to their gossip, we are likely to learn a great deal about the cost of the piece, the financial standing of the manager, the personal traits of some of the performers, and the real reason why Gussie Quicklime, who rehearsed the rôle of *Polly* for two weeks, was taken out of the cast at the last minute and her part given to "Baby" Vinton, who happened, by the merest chance in the world, to be "dead letter perfect" in the lines. Miss Quicklime's severe illness was recorded in the newspapers at the moment of her retirement from the company, and she is believed by the public to be in a critical state at this very moment; but the chatterers about us smile as they point to the box in which she sits, half hidden from public view and with a face of supernatural sourness and disgust.

There is something else that is likely to attract our attention if we choose to study these well groomed, cheerful looking men and women who seem to be always in whatever place of amusement we attend, and that is the fact that they form a most important element in the audience, not alone from their numerical strength, but because of the eager attention with which they follow the performance, and the quick appreciation of artistic merit which manifests itself when anything of unusual excellence occurs on the stage. As a class, they possess what is known as the "artistic temperament" in a very high degree, these men and women of the "Froth of Society," and they have emotions which are easily reached by the actor or singer who knows how to strike the right key. Some of us, in fact, can well afford to watch them closely on a first night, if only to learn what there is in the play to applaud and what deserves censure.

When I speak of the froth of society I do not refer to the vicious and hopelessly depraved element, but rather to those persons who are connected in one way or another with the lighter and more entertaining phases of metropolitan life. In many cases they make their living by it—and the number of those who gain their daily bread from the many sided business of providing the public