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Содержание

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PAPER-KNIFE PLEASURES

One is for ever hearing enough and to spare about old books and those who love them. There is a whole literature of the subject. The men themselves, from Charles Lamb downwards, have over and over again described their ecstasies – with what joy they have pounced upon some rare edition, and with what reverence they have ever afterwards regarded it. It is some time since Mr. Buchanan drew his quasi-pathetic picture of the book-hunter, bargaining for his prize,

> 'With the odd sixpence in his hand,
> And greed in his gray eyes;'

having, moreover, in his mind's eye as he walked

> 'Vistas of dusty libraries
> Prolonged eternally.'

Mr. Andrew Lang, too, has sung to us of the man who 'book-hunts while the loungers fly,' who 'book-hunts though December freeze,' for whom

> 'Each tract that flutters in the breeze
> Is charged with hopes and fears,'

while

> 'In mouldy novels fancy sees
> Aldines, Bodonis, Elzevirs.'

There are periodicals which cater solely for old-book adorers; and while on the one hand your enthusiast will publish his 'Pleasures' and 'Diversions,' on the other a contemporary will devote a volume to the subjects which attract and interest 'the Book Fancier.'

Meanwhile, is there nothing to be said of, or by, the admirer of new books – the man or woman who rejoices in the pleasant act of turning over new leaves? At a time when volumes are issuing by the dozen from the publishers' counters, shall not something be chronicled of the happiness which lies in the contemplation, the perusal, of the literary product which comes hot from the press? For, to begin with, the new books have at least this great advantage over the old – that they are clean. It is not everybody who can wax dithyrambic over the 'dusty' and the 'mouldy.' It is possible for a volume to be too 'second-hand.' Your devotee, to be sure, thinks fondly of the many hands, dead and gone, through which his 'find' has passed; he loves to imagine that it may have been held between the fingers of some person or persons of distinction; he is in the seventh heaven of exaltation if he can be quite certain it has had that honour. But suppose this factitious charm is really wanting? Suppose a volume is dirty, and ignobly so? Must one necessarily delight in dogs' ears, bask in the shadow of beer-stains, and 'chortle' at the sign of cheese-marks? Surely it is one of the merits of new leaves

that they come direct from the printer and the binder, though they, alas! may have left occasional impressions of an inky thumb.

It might possibly be argued that a new volume is, if anything, 'too bright and good' – too beautiful and too resplendent – for 'base uses.' There is undoubtedly an *amari aliquid* about them. They certainly do seem to say that we 'may look but must not touch.' Talk about the awe with which your book-hunter gazes upon an ancient or infrequent tome; what is it when compared with the respect which another class of book-lover feels for a volume which reaches them 'clothed upon with' virtual spotlessness? Who can have the heart to impair that innocent freshness? Do but handle the book, and the harm is done – unless, indeed, the handling be achieved with hands delicately gloved. The touch of the finger is, in too many cases, fatal. On the smooth cloth or the vellum or the parchment, some mark, alas! must needs be made. The lover of new books will hasten, oftentimes, to enshrine them in paper covers; but a book in such a guise is, for many, scarcely a book at all; it has lost a great deal of its charm. Better, almost, the inevitable tarnishing. All that's bright must fade; the new book cannot long maintain its lustre. But it has had it, to begin with. And that is much. We feel at least the first fine careless rapture. Whatever happens, no one can deprive us of that – of the first fond glimpse of the immaculate.

But the matter is not, of course, one of exterior only. Some interest, at least, attaches to the contents, however dull the subject, however obscure the author. A new book is a new birth, not only to the æsthetic but to the literary sense. It contains within it boundless possibilities. There are printed volumes which are books only in form – which are mere collections of facts or figures, or what not, and which do not count. But if a volume be a genuine specimen of the *belles lettres*, the imagination loves to play upon it. What will it be like? What treasures lie concealed in it? What delights has it in store for us? In our curiosity we are like the boy in Mr. Pinero's farcical comedy: 'It is the 'orrible uncertainty wot we craves after.' No one can tell what may nestle in the recesses of new leaves. Not even in reference to well-known writers can we be positively sure. They may belie their reputation. The illustrious Smith may make a failure; the obscurer Brown may score a hit. For once in a way Robinson may have produced something we can read; to everybody's surprise, the great Jones has dropped into the direst twaddle. And if this uncertainty exists in respect to those we know, how much more auspicious is it in the case of those who are quite new to us? What gems of purest ray serene may repose within the pages of the unopened book before us!

And, talking of unopened books, how much of the pleasure we derive from newly-published volumes lies in the process by which we first make their acquaintance. There are those who would have all books issued with the edges of the pages cut. The reasons why are obvious. To begin with, some labour is thereby saved to the purchaser; a certain measure of time, too, is saved. The reviewer, who has no moments to spare, may anathematize the leaves he has to separate with the paper-knife; the traveller by rail may condemn to Hades the producers of the work which he cannot cut open – because he has not the wherewithal about him. Everywhere there are eager and hasty readers who chafe at the delay which an uncut book imposes upon their impatient spirit. On the other hand, your genuine book-adorer, your enthusiast, who loves to extract from a volume all which it is capable of yielding, cannot but approve a habit which enables him to linger delightedly over his new possession. What special sweets may not be hidden within just those very pages which are at present closed to him! *Omne ignotum* is, for him, *pro magnifico*– here may be the very cream of the cream. And so the adorer dallies with his prize. First he peeps within the leaves, and gleans a sentence here and there. And then he begins to use the cutter – slowly, slowly – dwelling with enraptured tardiness upon each page which he reveals.

Who shall say that new leaves have no drawbacks? Verily, they have them. It cannot be supposed, for instance, that they are always wholly acceptable to the aforesaid professional censor. The reviewer, sitting surrounded by them, tier on tier, may rail at the productiveness of the age, and wish that there might not be more than one new book each week. And the omnivorous reader, anxious

to keep up with the literature of the day, might fairly re-echo the aspiration. Who, indeed, can hope to turn over a tithe of the new leaves which are issued daily? Nor can an unlimited consumption of them be recommended. Mr. Lowell is to a certain extent justified when he says that

> ‘Reading new books is like eating new bread;
> One can bear it at first, but by gradual steps he
> Is brought to death’s door of a mental dyspepsy.’

Assuredly new books are so far like new bread, that we should not consume them in too rapid succession. At the same time, let us be thankful for them, inasmuch as they have the unquestionable gift of novelty. Lord Beaconsfield’s Lady Montfort said she preferred a new book, even if bad, to a classic. That was a strong saying, but there are points of view from which it is perfectly defensible.

RUSKIN AS POET

It was lately rumoured that Mr. Ruskin was about to issue a volume of poems, consisting mainly of pieces already published. The statement was probably the first intimation received by many that the author of 'Modern Painters' had ever written anything in the shape of verse. That he has always been, like Sidney, a 'warbler of poetic prose,' has lately been emphasized by a magazine-writer; but it is not at all universally known that between the years 1835 and 1845 Mr. Ruskin figured somewhat largely as a poet, in the popular sense of that much abused word. During that time he produced a good deal of verse, in addition to the prize poem which has always been readily accessible by his admirers.

Even if one had not known, it would not have been difficult to have assumed, from the rhythmic character of Mr. Ruskin's prose, that he had at one time 'dropped into poetry.' Such a master of rhetoric could hardly have gone through life without wooing the Muse of Song, however temporarily or unsuccessfully. It would not have been natural for him to have done so. And, indeed, it is probable that no great prose rhetorician has failed to pay the same homage to the charm of verbal melody and cadence. In all the most sonorous prose turned out by English authors there will be found a lilt and a swing which would without difficulty translate themselves into verse. 'Most wretched men,' says Shelley, 'are cradled into poetry by wrong.' Most literary men have been cradled into it by their irresistible feeling and aptitude for rhythm, together with that general poetic sensibility which is rarely absent from the nature of the literary artist. Certain it is that practice in verse has always been recognised as the best of all preparation for work in prose, and no doubt much of Mr. Ruskin's success as prose-producer has been owing to his early devotion to the Muse.

He himself tells us, in the course of his tribute to his 'first editor' (W. H. Harrison), that

> 'A certain capacity for rhythmic cadence (visible enough in all my later writings), and the cheerfulness of a much-protected but not foolishly-indulged childhood, made me early a rhymester.'

And he adds – the tribute was paid in 1878 —

> 'A shelf of the little cabinet by which I am now writing is loaded with poetical effusions which were the delight of my father and mother, and which I have not got the heart to burn.'

A much fuller account of the poetic stages through which he passed in childhood is given by Mr. Ruskin in his 'Præterita,' where he tells us of the six 'poems' he brought forth in his seventh year (1826), one of them being on the subject of the steam-engine, and rejoicing in such couplets as:

> 'When furious up from mines the water pours,
> And clears from rusty moisture all the ores.'

Another, on the rainbow, was in blank verse and impressively didactic in its tone. Then, when he was nine years old, he broke out with yet another effusion, called 'Eudosia;' and when only eleven he began the composition of an elaborate 'poetical' description of his various journeyings, under the title of 'Iteriad.'

It is easy to understand how this fondness for the rhythmical was fostered by the aforesaid parental admiration, and how it was still further increased by the boy's admiration, successively, for Scott and Byron. Certain early friendships held out to the young versifier the prospect of publication, and thus it is that we find him, in his sixteenth year, figuring as a contributor to 'Friendship's Offering and Winter's Wreath: a Christmas and New Year's Present' for 1835. This was the era of the old-fashioned 'annuals,' and 'Friendship's Offering' was one of the most notable of its kind. In the issue for

the year named we note Barry Cornwall, John Clare, William Howitt, and H. F. Chorley among the writers of whom the youthful Ruskin was one. Here, by the side of really excellent steel-engravings, portraying languishing ladies in corkscrew curls, and illustrating literary matter not always unworthy of the embellishment given to it, we discover Mr. Ruskin's first published verses – 'Salzburg' and some 'Fragments' of a poetical journal, kept on tour. In the former we seem to detect the influence of Rogers, rather than that of Scott or Byron. It opens thus:

'On Salza's quiet tide the westering sun
Gleams mildly; and the lengthening shadows dun,
Chequered with ruddy streaks from spire and roof,
Begin to weave fair twilight's mystic woof;
Till the dim tissue, like a gorgeous veil,
Wraps the proud city, in her beauty pale.'

A little further on we read:

'Sweet is the twilight hour by Salza's strand,
Though no Arcadian visions grace the land;
Wakes not a sound that floats not sweetly by,
While day's last beams upon the landscape die;
Low chants the fisher where the waters pour,
And murmuring voices melt along the shore;
The plash of waves comes softly from the side
Of passing barge slow gliding o'er the tide;
And there are sounds from city, field, and hill,
Shore, forest, flood; yet mellow all, and still.'

Herein, it will be seen, is something of the power of description which the writer was afterwards to exhibit so much more effectively in prose.

Four years later Mr. Ruskin's initials were to be seen appended to a couple of pieces in verse contributed to 'The Amaranth,' an annual of much more imposing presence than the 'Offering' – edited by T. K. Hervey, admirably illustrated, and happy in the practical support of such literary lights as Horace Smith, Douglas Jerrold, Sheridan Knowles, Thomas Hood, Praed, and Mrs. Browning. One of the two pieces in question is 'The Wreck,' in which Mr. Ruskin's poetic capability, such as it is, is visible in one of its most attractive moods. The last verse runs:

'The voices of the night are mute
Beneath the moon's eclipse;
The silence of the fitful flute
Is in the dying lips!
The silence of my lonely heart
Is kept for ever more
In the lull
Of the waves
Of a low lee shore.'

To the same year belong contributions to the *London Monthly Miscellany* and the prize poem ('Salsette and Elephanta') before-mentioned. In the *Miscellany* appeared some lines which, in certain respects, are a species of anticipation of the Swinburnian manner; as, for example:

‘We care not what skies are the clearest,
What scenes are the fairest of all;
The skies and the scenes that are dearest
For ever, are those that recall
To the thoughts of the hopelessly-hearted
The light of the dreams that deride,
With the form of the dear and departed,
Their loneliness, weary and wide.’

It may be assumed that ‘Salsette and Elephanta’ has been read by all who care about the undertaking. It was recited in the theatre at Oxford, printed in the same year (1839), and reprinted exactly forty years afterwards. It is a by no means unattractive piece of rhetoric.

Another of the annuals to which Mr. Ruskin contributed in those days was the *Keepsake*, in which he figured in 1845, under the editorship of the Countess of Blessington, with Landor, Monckton Milnes, Lord John Manners, and the future Lord Beaconsfield as fellow-contributors. He was also welcomed to the pages of *Heath’s Book of Beauty*. Five years later he collected his fugitive pieces, and, adding a few new ones, included the whole in a volume privately circulated in 1850. Copies of this book are said to have been bought at sales, at different times, for £31 and 41 guineas. Six years ago, a selection from the ‘Annual’ verses was published, together with the prize poem and other matter, in America.

Glancing through Mr. Ruskin’s verse, one is forced to admit that it has no special individuality or charm. It deals with conventional subjects in a more or less conventional manner. There is a classical element, and a flavour of foreign scenery, and an occasional excursion in the direction of such topics as ‘Spring,’ ‘The Months,’ ‘The Old Water Wheel,’ ‘The Old Seaman,’ ‘Remembrance,’ ‘The Last Smile,’ and the like. The rhythm is always regular and flowing, and the descriptive passages have light and colour; but the ‘lyric cry’ has no particular tone that could attract the public. The longest piece ever written by Mr. Ruskin was, not the prize poem, but that entitled ‘The Broken Chain,’ with an extract from which I may conclude this brief survey of a great prose-writer’s verse-production: —

‘Where the flower hath fairest hue,
Where the breeze hath balmiest breath,
Where the dawn hath softest dew,
Where the heaven hath deepest blue,
There is death.

‘Where the gentle streams of thinking,
Through our hearts that flow so free,
Have the deepest, softest sinking,
And the fullest melody,
Where the crown of hope is nearest,
Where the voice of joy is clearest,
Where the heart of youth is lightest,
Where the light of love is brightest,
There is death.’

ELECTIONS IN LITERATURE

It is not surprising that Parliamentary contests should have figured largely in the English plays, stories, and poems of the past. That they will hold so prominent a place in them in future is, of course, by no means certain. If elections have been made purer than they were, they have been made less picturesque. They have now but little romance about them. Nearly everything in them is precise and practical. The literary artist, therefore, is likely to find in them few things to attract him, and will be, to that extent, at a disadvantage as compared with those who have preceded him. There were days when the preliminary canvassing, the nomination and the polling days, had features which invited treatment on the stage or in print. The whole atmosphere of electioneering was different to that which now exists. Those involved in it went about their work with a reckless jollity productive of results eminently interesting to students of character and manners. A battle at the polls brought out all which was most characteristic in the Englishmen of the times, and to describe such a conflict was naturally the aim of many a man of letters.

Several theatrical pieces have been based almost wholly upon the varied incidents of such a contest. There was, for example, that 'musical interlude,' 'The Election,' written by Miles Peter Andrews, and produced at Drury Lane in 1774. In this, Trusty and Sir Courtly are candidates for a seat, and, while one John, a baker, would fain vote for the former, his wife is desirous that he should support the latter. As she wheedlingly remarks,

> 'Sir Courtly says, if you'll but vote for him,
> He'll fill your pockets to the very brim.'

But John is not to be corrupted:

> 'Honest John no bribe can charm;
> His heart is like his oven, warm;
> Though poor as Job,
> He will not rob,
> Nor sell his truth to fill his fob.'

Nay, not though by so doing he may secure a husband for his daughter Sally. He votes for Trusty, and Sally's sweetheart respects him all the more for it. As the lover says to the lady:

> 'Your father's merit sets him up to view,
> And more enhances my esteem for you.'

And, in truth, everybody is delighted, for, as they sing in chorus:

> 'What to a Briton so grateful can be,
> As the triumph of Freedom and Virtue to see?'

Then there is that forgotten play of Joanna Baillie, also called 'The Election,' printed in 1802, and turned into an opera in 1817. Here, again, we have two candidates – one Baltimore, of ancient but decayed family, and one Freeman, a *nouveau riche* of equally familiar type – neighbours, but not friends, and rivals for the representation of the borough of Westown. Of Tom Taylor's 'Contested Election,' produced in 1859, most people have heard, if they have not had an opportunity of seeing it performed. It gives a fairly faithful picture of the unreformed method of carrying on electoral warfare.

There is an attorney, originally played by Charles Mathews, who undertakes to secure the success of Honeybun, and is quite prepared to pay for the votes which may be promised to him. There is also one Peekover, President of the Blue Lambs, who is equally prepared to accept the proffered payment for himself and friends. Honeybun does not get in, but that is hardly the fault of his attorney, or due to any general unwillingness to sell votes to the highest bidder. Bribery, it will be remembered, is an important element in Robertson's 'M.P.,' which dates no further back than 1870, though the action of the comedy, if I remember rightly, belongs also to pre-reforming times. Cecilia is willing to buy votes for Talbot, and three typical electors are willing to dispose of her money to the best advantage. The last scene is tolerably exciting. Talbot addresses the crowd from his window, and there is much exhilaration when the result of the contest is announced. To more recent representations of elections on the stage, it is scarcely necessary to allude.

Turning from drama to song, one thinks at once of the poem 'in seven books' which its author, Carlyle's John Sterling, dubbed 'The Election' and published in 1841. Sterling had been anticipated, a few years previously – in 1835 – by the author of a satire called 'Election Day,' which supplied quite an elaborate description of such a day under the respective heads of 'The Inn,' 'The Hustings,' 'The Chairing,' and 'The Dinner.' 'Although,' said the writer, in his preface, 'there are some great improvements in the manner in which elections are now conducted, still the immoral and degrading principles that accompany them appear to remain nearly the same.' According to this earnest and depressed observer —

'Mud and stones and waving hats,
And broken heads and putrid cats,
Are offerings made to aid the cause
Of order, government, and laws.'

But especially is he struck by the amount of eating and drinking that appears inseparable from an election in his time:

"Tis strange how much a splendid larder
Lights up electioneering ardour;
You soon awake to *patriæ amor*
When stirred about with ale and clamour.'

Sterling, though singing of

'Those high days when Aleborough proudly sent
Her man to sit in England's Parliament,'

makes the plot of his poem turn upon a love affair in which one of the candidates embarks, and for the sake of which, indeed, he pretends to solicit the votes of the electors. There are, however, a few passages descriptive of electioneering phenomena. We are told, for instance, how one of the candidates went out to canvass:

'With smiling look and word, and promise bold,
And dainty flatteries meet for young and old,
The tender kiss on squalling mouths impressed,
The glistening ribbon for the maiden's breast,
Grave talk with men how this poor Empire thrives,
The high-priced purchase for their prudent wives,

The sympathizing glance, the attentive ear,
The shake of hands laboriously sincere.'

We have, too, a graphic picture of the nomination day, telling how

'Ten public-houses opening for the Blues
Their floods of moral influence diffuse,
And each of seven its blameless nectar sheds
To nerve the spirits of the valiant Reds.'

By-and-by we read:

'And now the poll begins. The assessors sit
Sublimely sure that what is writ is writ.
The lawyers watch the votes. The skies look down
Unpardonably calm, nor heed the town.'

In how many novels elections figure, I need not say. The name of political tales is legion, and merely to enumerate them would occupy a fair amount of space. Who, for example, does not remember the contest pictured by George Eliot in 'Felix Holt' – that which leads to the riot in which Felix becomes unintentionally and unfortunately embroiled? 'The nomination day,' says the novelist, 'was a great epoch of successful trickery, or, to speak in a more parliamentary manner, of war-stratagem, on the part of skilful agents.' And she goes on to describe

> 'the show of hands, and the cheering, the bustling and the pelting, the roaring and the hissing, the hard hits with small missiles and the soft hits with small jokes.'

Of the polling day, she writes:

> 'Every public-house in Treby was lively with changing and numerous company. Not, of course, that there was any treating; treating necessarily had stopped, from moral scruples, when once "the writs were out;" but there was drinking, which did equally well under any name.'

This was in 1832. In 1840 there was published at Dublin a tale, entitled 'The Election,' in which the author bluntly declared that 'bribery and perjury are the returning officers.' He was, in truth, a very 'high-toned' writer, for we find him declaiming vigorously against that which Sterling mentions as one of the canvassing weapons of a candidate – 'the practice of shaking hands with all and every person whose vote is solicited, whether they be old friends or the acquaintance of the moment.' There are, we are told, 'cases when such buxom familiarity is out of place – when it assumes too much the appearance of vulgar cajolery to be received as a compliment.' Elsewhere we come across an instructive bit of talk between an Irish maiden lady of a certain age, and one of the gentlemen who desires her 'vote and interest.' The lady protests that she does not know the difference between the Whigs, the Tories, and the Radicals:

> 'I know two of them are in the history of England, where they gave trouble enough, whatever they were. But as for the Radicals, it is a newspaper word that I can't say I'm well acquainted with.'

Whereupon the candidate replies that all he can say for the Whigs is that

> ‘they are very fair spoken, when it suits their convenience. But the Radicals are a foul-mouthed race, on all and every occasion, and are the bitter enemies to Church and State.’

Nevertheless, the contest (of course an Irish one) which forms the main feature of the tale, ends in the return of Sir Andrew Shrivel, the Radical, together with Thaddeus O’Sullivan Gaffrey, Esq., representing the Nationalists.

FAMILIAR VERSE

There is a species of verse, hitherto not classified distinctively, for which it seems desirable to find a name. In the first place, it may be necessary, perhaps, to emphasize once more the simple distinction between verse and poetry. There are, indeed, excellent and happy people for whom there is no difference between the two – for whom all that is not prose is poetry, and who recognise no other varieties in literature. Fortunate are they, and great is their reward. They are not disturbed by the necessity of distinguishing between this and that – of pronouncing upon what is poetry, and what is not. And, no doubt, if the critic were careful only for his individual comfort, he would adopt this rough-and-ready classification, and say no more about it. Unluckily, the distinction must be made. Rhythmical poetry must needs be in verse of some sort, but verse need not be poetry. What rhythmical poetry is in essence, the critics have not yet agreed to say; but, roughly speaking, it may be described as the language of imagination and of passion, as opposed to verse which is the vehicle, merely, of fancy and of feeling. Many can attain to the latter; the former is open only to the few. The one is the natural expression of poetic genius; the other is that of the natures which can lay claim only to poetic sentiment. The one is exceptional; the other, luckily, is tolerably widespread. The writers of verse which is not poetry have been many and able, and much enjoyment is derivable from their work.

They must not, however, all be grouped together under one embracing appellation. If there is poetry and verse, there is also verse and verse. Poetry may be said to be a fixed quality; but that is not so with the inferior article. There are many different sorts of verse. There is that which is strongly sentimental, there is that which is broadly comic, and there is that which is something between the two – neither over-sentimental nor over-comic, but altogether light in tone, and marked in the main by wit and humour. Now, to this last class of verse has been given, in general, the name of *vers de société* or *vers d'occasion*– verse of society or for the moment. Mr. Frederick Locker, nearly twenty years ago, thus labelled his volume of 'Lyra Elegantiarum' – still, even at this distance of time, the best available collection of our lighter verse. But the label is not sufficiently distinguishing; it is too haphazard and too narrow. The term *vers de société* will not include all that is commonly ranged under it. For what, in reality, is *vers de société*? It is what it professes to be – it is the verse of society, the verse which deals with the various phenomena of the fashionable world. The writers of genuine *vers de société* have themselves been men and women of society, who had caught its tone and could reproduce it in their rhythmic exercises. Mr. Locker's 'St. James's Street,' Mr. Dobson's 'Rotten Row,' Prior's lines 'To a Child of Quality,' and Sir Charles Hanbury Williams's 'Ode to Miss Harriet Bunbury' – these are the true *vers de société*, the true 'poetry' of the ball-room and the *salon*.

What, then, is to become of the large amount of verse which remains unaccounted for – which is neither distinctively sentimental nor distinctively comic, and yet has no right to the designation of society-verse? Well, this is the class of verse which, as we have said, has hitherto not been christened, and for which it is desirable to find a name. It is a very delightful species of rhythmic work, and deserves a denomination of its own. It has the tone, less of society and of the Court, than of the familiar intercourse of every day – of the intercourse, that is, which goes on between people of ordinary breeding and education. It does not dabble in the phrase of drawing-rooms, nor does it rise to the height of sentiment or sink to the depths of low comedy. It is 'familiar, but by no means vulgar.' Its first quality is ease – absence of effort, spontaneity, freedom, a *dégagé* air. It is in rhythm what the perfect prose letter should be and is – flowing and unpremeditated without slovenliness – having the characteristics of the best conversation, as differentiated from mere argument or harangue. Its second quality is playfulness – a refusal to be too much in earnest in any direction, and a determination not to go to any unwelcome extreme. It has touches of sentiment and traces of wit and humour; but its dominant note is one of tempered geniality. Sometimes it may lean to the sentimental, sometimes to

the witty, sometimes to the humorous; but always the style and atmosphere are those of familiar life, of everyday reunions; and hence the suggestion that it should be recognised as 'Familiar Verse.'

I have said how numerous are its producers. Often it has been written by those who were poets as well as verse-writers; often by those who are well-known as wits and humourists. It has flourished, naturally, in, periods of tolerance rather than in strenuous times, and has been at its best, therefore, in the Caroline, Augustan, and Victorian ages of our literature. There was not much of it in the Elizabethan days, though some bears the signature of rare Ben Jonson. It came in, in full force, with the mob of gentlemen who wrote with ease – with Suckling, whose 'Prithee, why so pale, fond lover?' is in exactly the right tone; and with Dorset, whose 'To all you ladies now on land' is another typical specimen. By-and-by Dryden showed how well he could write in the familiar style, when he composed the song about fair Iris:

'She's fickle and false, and there we agree,
For I am as false and as fickle as she;
We neither believe what either can say,
And neither believing, we neither betray.'

Then came the reign of Pope, and Swift, and Prior, and Peterborough – Pope, with his truly playful 'What is Prudery?' Swift, with his charming lines to Stella; Prior, with his 'Dear Chloe, how blubber'd is that pretty face!' and Peterborough, with that masterpiece of the familiar *genre*:

'I said to my heart, between sleeping and waking,
Thou wild thing, that always art leaping and aching,
What black, brown, or fair, in what clime, in what nation,
By turns has not taught thee this pit-a-pat-ation?'

Then there were the Lady Wortley Montagu, with her lines to Congreve; and Chesterfield, with his 'Advice to a Lady in Autumn'; Fielding, with his inimitable epistles to Walpole; and Goldsmith, with his incomparable 'Retaliation.' Later, again, came Cowper, with his 'Nose and Eyes' and 'Names of Little Note'; Byron, with his verses 'To Tom Moore'; Moore himself, with his 'Time I've Lost in Wooing'; Barham, with his 'Lines left at Hook's'; Peacock, Canning, James Smith, Praed, and Mahony; and, still later, Hood, with his 'Clapham Academy'; Brough, with his 'Neighbour Nelly'; Mortimer Collins, with his tribute to his 'Old Coat'; and a hundred others, all of whom could play delightfully on the familiar string.

And, happily, the manufacture of familiar verse still goes on swimmingly. The Laureate has engaged in it, and even Mr. Browning has condescended to it. It has never, in the whole course of its career, been written better than by Mr. Holmes and Mr. Lowell, and, among ourselves, by Mr. Frederick Locker and Mr. Austin Dobson. No age, indeed, was ever more favourable than our own for the composition of verse which should, above all things, never be betrayed into exaggeration – which may have, if it please, a *soupçon* of wit and humour, and even of sentiment, but which should, in particular, be tolerant and urbane.

SHAKESPEARE'S ENGLAND

It was with true instinct that one of our most vigorous orators, desiring the other day to emphasize by quotation an appeal to the patriotic sentiments of his audience, went to a play of Shakespeare's for the passage. For the bard of Avon is *par excellence* the poet of England. Keen as, in later years, has been the love of country displayed by such men as Thomson, Wordsworth, Lord Tennyson, and Mr. Swinburne, it is in the pages of Shakespeare that we find the most magnificent outbursts of national feeling. Let it be granted that the poet has not hesitated to throw a few satiric pebbles at his countrymen. Everybody will recall the amusing colloquy in 'Hamlet,' in which the Gravedigger humorously reflects upon the sanity of the English people, declaring that, if Hamlet be mad, it will not be noted in England, for there the men are as mad as he is. And then there is that other diverting colloquy in 'Othello,' wherein Iago stigmatizes Englishmen as 'most potent in potting,' asserting that they 'drink with facility your Dane dead drunk,' so expert is your Englishman in his drinking.

But these be the gibes of Danes and Italians – not of the man Shakespeare or of Englishmen speaking with his voice. True it is that if Shakespeare was strongly patriotic, he was so only in common with the Englishmen of his day. He lived in an age when the English people were consumed with a spirit of burning affection for the isle which they inhabited – when the great religious upheaval which we call the Reformation had set the blood coursing through their veins, and infused new life into their heart and brain – and when the fear of Spanish domination had joined all classes in an indissoluble bond of love and loyalty. Probably the English nation never was more thoroughly united, more profoundedly in earnest, more closely attached to its traditions and its soil, than in those spacious times of great Elizabeth. And if Shakespeare produced play after play dealing with the history of his country, and presenting on the boards many of the most famous Englishmen of the past, he was led to do so, no doubt, not only because the topic had attractions for him, but because the Englishmen of his day revelled in such reminders of the stirring years gone by – of the great soldiers, statesmen, clerics, and the like, who had shed lustre on the national name. There must have been a decided and continuous demand for these elaborate chronicle-dramas, and it may be argued that the poet, in supplying them, did but comply with the call made upon him by his public patrons.

The fact, however, that Shakespeare found historical plays a paying product will not wholly account for the powerfully patriotic strain in which they were composed. It is not only that the long series stretching from 'King John' to 'Henry VIII.' pulses from beginning to end with love of, and pride in, country; it is not only that the poet makes great Englishmen speak greatly – that, placing them in positions in which declarations of patriotism are natural and necessary, he makes those declarations eloquent and thrilling; – it is that he charges all his passages about England and the English with a passion of enthusiasm which can be explained only on the hypothesis that he was throwing his whole heart into the work, and sympathized deeply with the utterances of his creations. There is, for instance, something more than mere appropriateness to the character and the occasion in that marvellous piece of eulogy of which, in 'Richard II.,' John of Gaunt is made the spokesman. The poet seems unable to hold his admiration within bounds:

'This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden – demi-paradise – …
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in a silver sea…
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,
This nurse, this teeming womb of Royal Kings…

This land of such dear souls, this dear, dear land,
Dear for her reputation through the world' —

on what other country has such magnificent praise been poured out by her poets? One can see, too, how sincere Shakespeare was in his feelings as an Englishman by the phrases and the epithets he everywhere bestows upon his fatherland. There is Chorus's famous description of it in 'Henry V.' as 'Little body with a mighty heart;' there is the Queen's allusion, in 'Henry VI.,' to its 'blessed shore.' Now it is called 'fair,' now 'fertile,' and now 'happy.' 'Dear mother England,' cries the Bastard in 'King John.' Bolingbroke rejoices that, though banished, he yet can boast that he is 'a true-born Englishman;' and elsewhere we read of 'our lusty English,' our 'noble English,' our 'hearts of England's breed' – Rambures, the Frenchman, admitting that 'that island of England breeds very valiant creatures.'

And mark how Shakespeare causes one and all of his patriots to congratulate themselves that Britain is an island. Tennyson has called upon his countrymen to

'Thank Him who isled us here, and roughly set
His Briton in blown seas and storming showers;'

and elsewhere has made a 'Tory member's elder son' say —

'God bless the narrow sea…
Which keeps our Britain whole within herself.'

Thomson, too, tells how 'the rushing flood' turned 'this favoured isle' 'flashing from the continent aside,' 'its guardian she.' But Shakespeare had been before both in these expressions of gratitude for our insularity. The Archduke of Austria, in 'King John,' speaks of England as

'That pale, that white-faced shore,
Whose foot spurns back the ocean's roaring tides,
And coops from other lands her islanders…
That England, hedged in with the main,
That water-wallèd bulwark, still secure
And confident from foreign purposes.'

So, in 'Richard II.,' John of Gaunt describes England as

'This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war.

'The silver sea,' he says, serves it

'In the office of a wall,
Or, as a moat, defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands;

while once again he refers to England as

'Bound in with the triumphant sea,
Whose rocky shore beats back the envious siege
Of watery Neptune.'

There is one thing, however, without which, in Shakespeare's view, even our lucky isolation cannot avail to save us, as a nation, from destruction. 'If they (the English) were true within themselves they need not to fear, although all nations were set against them.' So wrote Andrew Borde, when Henry VIII. was King; and in the old play of 'John, King of England' the author made one of his *personæ* say:

'Let England live but true within itself,
And all the world can never wrong her state.'

So Shakespeare, when he came to treat of the same subject, made the Bastard declare that

'This England never did, nor never shall
Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror,
But when it first did help to wound itself…
Nought shall make us rue,
If England to itself do rest but true.'

There is much virtue in an 'if,' and the poet repeats the warning in another play. In '3 Henry VI.' Hastings says:

'Why, knows not Montague that of itself
England is safe, if true within itself?'

That, again, which most troubles John of Gaunt, in the passage already quoted, is the fact that England, which was wont to conquer others, 'Hath made a shameful conquest of itself;' while Chorus, in 'Henry V.,' laments that France has found in England 'a nest of hollow bosoms, which he fills with treacherous crowns,' adding,

'What might'st thou do, that honour would thee do,
Were all thy children kind and natural?'

Here, then, is a lesson for our times. What Shakespeare felt to be true in his own day is equally, nay more, true now – that England, 'set in a silver sea,' is safe from all assaults, save those which she may suffer at the hands of her own 'degenerate and ingrate' sons.

HEREDITY IN SONG

It is said that the verses in a recent number of *Macmillan's Magazine*, entitled 'In Capri,' and signed 'W. Wordsworth,' are from the pen of a grandson of the famous author of 'The Excursion.' They are gracefully written, in an agreeable rhythm, and with much command of felicitous expression. If, therefore, the writer has indeed the relationship to the great Wordsworth which rumour assigns him, the fact is interesting, and suggests some considerations as to the transmission of the poetic faculty from one generation to another.

One might have thought that this transmission would have been tolerably common; that the sons at least, if not the grandsons, of a genuine poet could scarcely fail to inherit something of their progenitor's peculiar powers. One might even have supposed that poetry would run – as other things have run – in families, making the 'bards' almost a *gens*, or class, by themselves. Poetry, after all, is an affair mainly of the temperament – of fancy and imagination, of feeling and passion; and these are qualities which one might have imagined would be handed down, not greatly impaired, from father to son, and so on, for at least a fairly prolonged period.

There have, indeed, been instances in which literary capacity has been a special characteristic of persons in close relationship to each other: one thinks at once of the Sheridans, the Coleridges, the Wordsworths, and others who have been notable for their productiveness in prose and verse. But the cases in which the purely poetic gift – the vision and the faculty divine – has been inherited and exercised are few indeed. A certain intellectual power will mark the members of a family, and exhibit itself in various attractive ways, but less in the domain of poetry than any other. It would seem that sheer mental force can be communicated, but that the higher qualities of the human spirit are not so readily transmitted; are, in fact, hardly transmissible, at any rate in quite the same degree. Not only are the examples of poetic heredity rare, but there are still fewer, certainly in the history of English literature, in which the son or the daughter has equalled the parent in poetic capacity.

The case of the Colmans and the Dibdins is one of literary rather than poetic faculty. In each instance the father and son wrote verse, much of it excellent in its way, but assuredly not of the first order. The one name will always be associated with admirably humorous performances, while the other will continue to shine resplendent on the roll of writers of sea-songs. But work of that sort is a matter of knack rather than of inspiration, and 'poetry' is a word hardly to be mentioned in remote connection with it. Very different are the circumstances when we come to the children of Samuel Taylor Coleridge – to Hartley and to Sara, and to Hartley in particular. Sara had less than a half share of the poetic patrimony. She penned very pleasant rhymes for children, and some still linger in the collections; but they are not of singular merit. Much better than these are the lyrics which are to be found scattered through her prose romance, 'Phantasmion' – lyrics which undoubtedly have imaginative value. They are much less known than they deserve to be, though a few of them have recently been reprinted. They are not, however, to be compared with the best that Hartley furnished. Sara had ideas, but her mode of expression inclined to the turgid. Hartley was clearer and smoother in his style, and now and then, as in some of his sonnets, and especially in the lines beginning,

> 'She is not fair to outward view,
> As many maidens be,'

he actually attained perfection. The last-named gem is likely to last as long as anything written by the elder Coleridge.

Mrs. Norton and Lady Dufferin are instances of ability descending from grandfather to granddaughters, and of ability, moreover, which, as regards poetical writing, grew and improved in the process of descent. The author of 'The Duenna' produced a number of neat and lively rhymes, but,

great as Sheridan was as a dramatist, he was certainly not a poet. Now, his granddaughters were really poets, though by no means of the front rank. Scarcely any of Mrs. Norton's verse is now habitually read, but some of it is well worth reading. On the other hand, Lady Dufferin, who published much less than her sister did, is much better remembered, if only because she was the author of 'Katie's Letter' and 'The Irish Emigrant's Lament.' These pieces are distinguished by true human feeling, and hence their continued popularity. Of Adelaide Anne Procter, daughter of 'Barry Cornwall,' it is not necessary to say much, for certain of her lyrics are familiar (in feminine mouths, at any rate) as household words. Everyone, alas! knows 'The Lost Chord;' many of us wish that we did not. That the 'Legends and Lyrics' of Adelaide are considerably more widely known than anything produced by her father is, it is to be feared, only too true; and yet, full as they are of tenderness and grace, they have not the claims to attention possessed by the songs and dramatic fragments of 'Barry Cornwall.' The latter are unduly neglected; while the songs are among the most virile and vigorous in the language. The father's was altogether the stronger nature; the daughter set an example of gentle lachrymoseness, which has been followed, unfortunately, by too many female rhymers.

Of more recent years, several examples of heredity in song have been vouchsafed to us. The younger Hood had his father's fluency, but, apparently, very little of his imaginative power. Philip Bourke Marston was, in the lyric vein, as successful, perhaps, as Dr. Westland Marston had been in the dramatic, and it is probable that he will always be more largely read, 'sicklied o'er' though his poetic outcome be 'with the pale cast of thought.' The works of the present Lord Lytton and of Mr. Aubrey de Vere are too well appreciated to need much characterization. These writers would no doubt deprecate any comparison of their products with those of the first Lord Lytton and Sir Aubrey de Vere, but it is one from which, on the score of absolute merit, they would have no occasion to shrink. Mr. Oscar Wilde and Mr. Eric Mackay have written verse, no doubt, because Lady Wilde and Dr. Charles Mackay wrote verse before them; and the Hon. Hallam Tennyson has shown, in a rhythmical version of a nursery tale, that some measure of poetic faculty has been meted out to him.

STINGS FOR THE STINGY

Few frailties of mankind have been more bitterly scouted than that of meanness in money matters. Of the two, prodigality has been thought the better. The man who is poor has not been censured for being careful; rather has he been praised for not being ashamed to own his poverty. But the spectacle of the rich man hoarding his wealth and not living according to his means has always excited the displeasure of mankind – not only, perhaps, because money kept in store seems for the time useless, but because if expended it would be very acceptable to its recipients. The world has commended the man who gives out of his superfluity, but it has condemned him who keeps too much to himself. All literature, from the earliest times, is full of denunciation of such a character. The miserly and the stingy have been impaled over and over again on the sword of the satirist.

Meanness has not been confined to the obscure; it has had some distinguished votaries – as, for example, his Gracious Majesty King James I., whose economical propensities were notorious. Of him it was admirably written that

> ‘At Christ Church “Marriage,” done before the King,
> Lest those learn’d mates should want an offering,
> The King himself did offer – What, I pray?
> He offer’d, twice or thrice, to go away.’

Take, again, the great Duke of Marlborough, whose two chief qualities of mind were very happily hit off in the couplet ‘On a High Bridge over a Small Stream at Blenheim’:

> ‘The lofty arch his high ambition shows,
> The stream an emblem of his bounty flows.’

Garrick was accused of money-grubbing, and his weakness in that respect was the subject of more than one smart jest by Foote. When somebody, *àpropos* of a remark made by Garrick on the parsimony of others, asked, ‘Why on earth doesn’t Garrick take the beam out of his own eye before attacking the mote in other people’s?’ – Foote replied, ‘He is not sure of selling the timber.’ And again, when Garrick, after dropping a guinea and failing to find it, said it had ‘gone to the devil, he thought,’ Foote remarked, ‘Well, David, let you alone for making a guinea go farther than anybody else’ – a repartee which was perhaps in the mind of Shirley Brooks when, referring to the excellence of Scotch shooting at long distances, he wrote:

> ‘But this we all knew
> That a Scotchman can do —
> Make a small piece of metal go awfully far.’

Then there was Lord Eldon, whose nearness was proverbial, and whose unwillingness to spend displayed itself markedly in his commissariat department. An anonymous epigram professed to record an ‘Inquest Extraordinary’:

> ‘Found dead, a rat – no case could sure be harder:
> Verdict – Confined a week in Eldon’s larder.’

We are also told that, when Eldon and Sir Arthur Pigott quarrelled over the proper pronunciation of the legal term 'lien' – the former calling it 'lion,' and the latter 'lean' – Jekyll produced the following:

'Sir Arthur, Sir Arthur, why what do you mean
By saying the Chancellor's *lion* is *lean*?
D'ye think that his kitchen's so bad as all that,
That nothing within it can ever get fat?'

Of Lord Kenyon, another judge of like inhospitable tendencies, someone said that in his house it was always Lent in the kitchen and Passion Week in the parlour. On another occasion it was remarked that 'in his lordship's kitchen the fire is dull, but the spits are always bright;' to which Jekyll, pretending to be angry, replied, 'Spits! in the name of common-sense, don't talk about his spits – for nothing turns on them!' When his lordship died, the words 'Mors Janua *Vita*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.