

THE REVIEWER

BY

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THE REVIEWER

EDWIN MARKHAM'S POEMS

IN Edwin Markham's book, *The Man With the Hoe and Other Poems*, many of the "other poems" are excellent, some are great. If asked to name the most poetic—not, if you please, the "loftiest" or most "purposeful"—I think I should choose "The Wharf of Dreams." I venture to quote it:

Strange wares are handled on the wharves of sleep;
Shadows of shadows pass, and many; a light
Flashes a signal fire across the night;
Barges depart whose voiceless steersmen keep
Their way without a star upon the deep;
And from lost ships, homing with ghostly crews,
Come cries of incommunicable news,
While cargoes pile the piers a moon-white heap—
Budgets of dream-dust, merchandise of song,
Wreckage of hope and packs of ancient wrong,
Nepenthes gathered from a secret strand,
Fardels of heartache, burdens of old sins,
Luggage sent down from dim ancestral inns,
And bales of fantasy from No-Man's Land.

Really, one does not every year meet with a finer blending of imagination and fancy than this; and I know not where to put a finger on two better lines in recent work than these:

And from lost ships, homing with ghostly crews,
Come cries of incommunicable news.

The reader to whom these strange lines do not give an actual physical thrill may rightly boast himself impregnable to poetic emotion and indocible to the meaning of it.

Mr. Markham has said of Poetry—and said greatly:

She comes like the hush and beauty of the night,
And sees too deep for laughter;
Her touch is a vibration and a light
From worlds before and after.

But she comes not always so. Sometimes she comes with a burst of music, sometimes with a roll of thunder, a clash of weapons, a roar of winds or a beating of billow against the rock. Sometimes with a noise of revelry, and again with the wailing of a dirge. Like Nature, she "speaks a various language." Mr. Markham, no longer content, as once he seemed to be, with interpreting her fluting and warbling and "sweet jargoning," learned to heed her profounder notes, which stir the stones of the temple like the bass of a great organ.

In his "Ode to a Grecian Urn" Keats has supplied the greatest—almost the only truly great instance of a genuine poetic inspiration derived from art instead of nature. In his poems on pictures Mr. Markham shows an increasingly desperate determination to achieve success, coupled

with a lessening ability to merit it. It is all very melancholy, the perversion of this man's high powers to the service of a foolish dream by artificial and impossible means. Each effort is more ineffectual than the one that went before. Unless he can be persuaded to desist—to cease interpreting art and again interpret nature, and turn also from the murmurs of "Labor" to the music of the spheres—the "surge and thunder" of the universe—the end of his good literary repute is in sight. He knows—does he know?—the bitter truth which he might have learned otherwise than by experience: that the plaudits of "industrial discontent," even when strengthened by scholars' commendations of a few great lines in the poem that evoked it, are not fame. He should know, and if he live long will know, that when one begins to be a "labor leader" one ceases to be a poet.

In saying to Mr. Markham, "Thou ailest here and here," Mrs. Atherton has shown herself better at diagnosis than he is himself in telling us what is the matter with the rich. "Why," she asks him, "waste a beautiful gift in groveling for popularity with the mob? . . . Striving to please the common mind has a fatal commonizing effect on the writing faculty." It is even so—nothing truer could be said, and Mr. Markham is the best proof of its truth. His early work, when he was known to only a small circle of admirers, was so good that I predicted for him the foremost place among contemporaneous American poets. He sang because he "could not choose but sing," and his singing grew greater and greater. Every year he took wider outlooks from "the peaks of song"—had already got well above the fools' paradise of flowers and song-birds and bees and women and had invaded the "thrilling region" of the cliff, the eagle and the cloud, whence one looks down upon man and out upon the world. Then he had the mischance to publish "The Man with the Hoe," a poem with some noble lines, but an ignoble poem. In the first place, it is, in structure, stiff, inelastic, monotonous. One line is very like another. The caesural pauses fall almost uniformly in the same places; the full stops always at the finals. Comparison of the versification with Milton's blank will reveal the difference of method in all its significance. It is a difference analogous to that between painting on ivory and painting on canvas—between the dead, flat tints of the one and the lively, changing ones due to inequalities of surface in the other. If it seem a little exacting to compare Mr. Markham's blank with that of the only poet who has ever mastered that medium in English, I can only say that the noble simplicity and elevation of Mr. Markham's work are such as hardly to justify his admeasurement by any standard lower than the highest that we have.

My chief objection relates to the sentiment of the piece, the thought that the work carries; for although thought is no part of the poetry conveying it, and, indeed, is almost altogether absent from some of the most precious pieces (lyrical, of course) in our language, no elevated composition has the right to be called great if the message that it delivers is neither true nor just. All poets, even the little ones, are feelers, for poetry is emotional; but all the great poets are thinkers as well. Their sympathies are as broad as the race, but they do not echo the peasant's philosophies of the workshop and the field. In Mr. Markham's poem the thought is that of the labor union—even to the work worn threat of rising against the wicked well-to-do and taking it out of their hides.

Who made him dead to rapture and despair,
A thing that grieves not and that never hopes,
Stolid and stunned, a brother to the ox?
Who loosened and let down this brutal jaw?
Whose was the hand that slanted back this brow?
Whose breath blew out the light within this brain?

One is somehow reminded by these lines of Coleridge's questions in the Chamouni hymn, and

one is tempted to answer them the same way: God. "The Man with the Hoe" is not a product of the "masters, lords and rulers in all lands": they are not, and no class of men is, accountable for him, his limitations and his woes, which are not of those "that kings or laws can cause or cure." The "masters, lords and rulers" are as helpless "in the fell clutch of circumstance" as he—which Mr. Markham would be speedily made to understand if appointed Dictator. The notion that the sorrows of the humble are due to the selfishness of the great is "natural," and can be made poetical, but it is silly. As a literary conception it has not the vitality of a sick fish. It will not carry a poem of whatever excellence through two generations. That a man of Mr. Markham's splendid endowments should be chained to the body of this literary death is no less than a public calamity.

For his better work in poetry Mr. Markham merits all the praise that he has received for "The Man with the Hoe," and more. It is not likely that he is now under any illusion in the matter. He probably knows the real nature of his sudden flare of "popularity"; knows that to-morrow it will be "one with Nineveh and Tyre"; knows that its only service to him is to arrest attention of competent critics and scholars who would otherwise have overlooked him for a time. The "plaudits of the multitude" can not long be held by the poet, and are not worth holding. The multitude knows nothing of poetry and does not read it. The multitude will applaud you to-day, calumniate you to-morrow and thwack you athwart the mazzard the day after. He who builds upon the sea-sand of its favor holds possession by a precarious tenure; the wind veers and the wave

Lolls out his large tongue—
Licks the whole labor flat.

If the great have left the humble so wise that the philosophies of the factory and the plow-tail are true; if the sentiments and the taste of the mob are so just and elevated that its judgment of poetry is infallible and its approval a precious possession; if "the masses" have more than "a thin veneering of civilization," and are not in peace as fickle as the weather and in anger as cruel as the sea; if these victims of an absolutely universal oppression "in all lands" are deep, discriminating, artistic, liberal, magnanimous—in brief, wise and good—it is difficult to see what they have to complain about. Mr. Markham, at least, is forbidden to weep for them, for he is a lover of Marcus Aurelius, of Seneca, of Epictetus. These taught, and taught truly—one from the throne of an empire, one writing at a gold table, and one in the intervals of service as a slave—the supreme value of wisdom and goodness, the vanity of power and wealth, the triviality of privation, discomfort and pain. Mr. Markham is a disciple of Jesus Christ, who from the waysides and the fields taught that poverty is not only a duty, but indispensable to salvation. So my *argumentum ad hominem* runs thus: The objects of our poet's fierce invective and awful threats have suffered his *protégés* to remain rather better off than they are themselves—have appropriated and monopolized only what is not worth having. In view of this mitigating circumstance I feel justified in demanding in their behalf a lighter sentence. Let the portentous effigy of the French Revolution be forbidden to make faces at them.

I know of few literary phenomena more grotesque than some of those growing out of "The Man with the Hoe"—that sudden popularity being itself a thing which "goes neare to be fomy." Mr. Markham, whom for many years those of us who modestly think ourselves *illuminati* considered a great poet whose greatness full surely was a-ripening, wrote many things far and away superior to "The Man," but these brought him recognition from the judicious only, with which we would all have sworn that he was content. All at once he published a poem which, despite some of its splendid lines, is neither true in sentiment nor admirable in form—which is, in fact, addressed to peasant understandings and soured hearts. Instantly follow a blaze and thunder of notoriety, seen

and heard over the entire continent; and even the coasts of Europe are “telling of the sound.” Straightway before the astonished vision of his friends the author stands transfigured! The charming poet has become a demagogue, a “labor leader” spreading that gospel of hate known as “industrial brotherhood,” a “walking delegate” diligently inciting a strike against God and clamoring for repeal of the laws of nature. Saddest of all, we find him conscientiously promoting his own vogue. He personally appears at meetings of cranks and incapables convened to shriek against the creed of law and order; speaks at meetings of sycophants eager to shine by his light; introduces lecturers to meetings of ninnies and femininnies convened to glorify themselves. When he is not waving the red flag of discontent and beating the big drum of revolution I presume he is resting—perched, St.-Simeon-Styliteswise, atop a lofty capital I, erected in the market place, diligently and rapturously contemplating his new identity. All of which is very sad to those of us who find it difficult to unlove him.

The trouble with Mr. Markham is that he has formed the habit of thinking of mankind as divided on the property line—as comprising only two classes, the rich and the poor. When a man has acquired that habit he is lost to sense and righteousness. Assassins sometimes reform, and with increasing education thieves renounce the error of theft to embrace the evangel of embezzlement; but a demagogue never gets again into shape unless he becomes wealthy. I hope Mr. Markham’s fame will so promote his pecuniary interest that it will convert him from the conviction that his birth was significantly coincident in point of time with the Second Advent. Only one thing is more disagreeable than a man with a mission, namely a woman with a mission, and the superior objectionableness of the latter is largely due to her trick of inspiring the former.

Mr. Markham seems now to look upon himself as the savior of society; to believe with entire sincerity that in his light and leading mankind can be guided out of the wilderness of Self into the promised land of Altruria; that he can alter the immemorial conditions of human existence; that a new Heaven and a new Earth can be created by the power of his song. Most melancholy of all, the song has lost its power and its charm. Since he became the Laureate of Demagogy he has written little that is poetry: in the smug prosperity that he reviles in others, his great gift “shrinks to its second cause and is no more.” That in the great white light of inevitable disillusion he will recover and repossess it, giving us again the flowers and fruits of a noble imagination in which the dream of an impossible and discreditable hegemony has no part, I should be sorry to disbelieve.

1899.

“THE KREUTZER SONATA”

I

NOTHING in this book directly discloses the author’s views of the marriage relation. The horrible story of Posdnyschew’s matrimonial experience—an experience which, barring its tragic finale, he affirms not to be an individual but a general one—is related by himself. There is no more in it to show directly what Tolstoi thinks of the matters in hand than there is in a play to show what the playwright thought. We are always citing the authority of Shakspeare by quotations from his plays—in which every sentiment is obviously conceived with a view to its fitness to the character of the imaginary person who utters it, and supplies no clew to the author’s convictions.

In *The Kreutzer Sonata*, however, the case is somewhat different. Whereas Shakspeare had in view an artistic (and commercial) result, Tolstoi’s intention is clearly moral: his aim is not

entertainment, but instruction. To that end he foregoes the advantage of those literary effects which he so well knows how to produce, confining his exceptional powers to bald narrative, overlaid with disquisitions deriving their only vitality from the moral purpose everywhere visible.

A man marries a woman. They quarrel of course; their life is of course wretched beyond the power of words to express. Jealousy naturally ensuing, the man murders the woman. That is the "plot," and it is without embellishment. Its amplification is accomplished by "preaching"; its episodes are sermons on subjects not closely related to the main current of thought. Clearly, the aim of a book so constructed, even by a skilful literary artist, is not an artistic aim. Tolstoi desires it to be thought that he entertains the convictions uttered by the lips of Posdnyschew. He has, indeed, distinctly avowed them elsewhere than in this book. Like other convictions, they must stand or fall according to the stability of their foundation upon the rock of truth; but the fact that they are held by a man of so gigantic powers as Tolstoi gives them an interest and importance which the world, strange to say, has been quick to recognize.

Some of these convictions are peculiarly Tolstoi's own; others he holds in common with all men and women gifted with that rarest of intellectual equipments, the faculty of observation, and blessed with opportunity for its use. Anybody can see, but observation is another thing. It is something more than discernment, yet may be something less than accurate understanding of the thing discerned. Such as it is, Tolstoi has it in the highest degree. Nothing escapes him: his penetration is astonishing: he searches the very soul of things, making record of his discoveries with a pitiless frankness which to feebler understandings is brutal and terrifying. To him nothing is a mere phenomenon; everything is a phenomenon plus a meaning connected with a group of meanings. The meanings he may, and in my poor judgment commonly does, misread, but the phenomenon, the naked fact, he will see. Nothing can hide it from him nor make it appear to him better than it is. It is this terrible power of discernment, with this unsparing illumination compelling the reluctant attention of others, which environs him with animosities and implacable resentments. His is the Mont Blanc of minds; about the base of his conspicuous, cold intelligence the Arve and Arvieron of ignorance and optimism rave ceaselessly. It is of the nature of a dunce to confound exposure with complicity. Point out to him the hatefulness of that which he has been accustomed to admire, and nothing shall thenceforward convince him that you have not had a guilty hand in making it hateful. Tolstoi, in intellect a giant and in heart a child, a man of blameless life, and spotless character, devout, righteous, spectacularly humble and aggressively humane, has had the distinction to be the most widely and sincerely detested man of two continents. He has had the courage to utter a truth of so supreme importance that one-half the civilized world has for centuries been engaged in a successful conspiracy to conceal it from the other half—the truth that the modern experiment of monogamic marriage by the dominant tribes of Europe and America is a dismal failure. He is not the first by many who has testified to that effect, but he is the first in our time whose testimony has arrested so wide and general attention—a result that is to be attributed partly to his tremendous reputation and partly to his method of giving witness. He does not in this book deal in argument, is no controversialist. He says the thing that is in him to say and we can take it or leave it.

The Kreutzer Sonata is not an obscene nor even an indelicate book: the mind that finds it so is an indelicate, an obscene mind. It is not, according to our popular notions, "a book for young girls." Nevertheless, it is most desirable that young girls should know—preferably through their parents who can speak with authority of experience—the truth which it enforces: namely, that marriage, like wealth, offers no hope of lasting happiness. Despite the implication that "they lived happily ever after," it is not for nothing that the conventional love story ends with the chime of wedding bells. As the Genius vanished when Mirza asked him what lay under the cloud beyond

the rock of adamant, so the story teller prudently forestalls further investigation by taking himself off. He has an innate consciousness that the course of true love whose troubled current he has been tracing begins at marriage to assume something of the character of a raging torrent.

Tolstoi strikes hard: not one man nor woman a year married but must wince beneath his blows. They are all members of a dishonest conspiracy. They conceal their wounds and swear that all is right and well with them. They give their Hell a good character, but in their secret souls they chafe and groan under the weight and heat of their chains. They come out from among their corruption and dead men's bones only to give the sepulchre another coating of whitewash and call attention to its manifold advantages as a dwelling. They are like the members of some "ancient and honorable order," who gravely repeat to others falsehoods by which they were themselves cheated into membership. The minatory oath alone is lacking, its binding restraint supplied by the cowardice that dares not brave the resentment of co-conspirators and the fury of their dupes.

No human institution is perfect, nor nearly perfect. None comes within a world's width of accomplishing the purpose for which it was devised, and all in time become so perverted as to serve a contrary one. But of all institutions, marriage as we have it here, and as they evidently have it in Russia, most lamentably falls short of its design. Nay, it is the one of them which is become most monstrously wrenched awry to the service of evil. To have observed this—to have had the intrepidity to affirm it in a world infested with fools and malevolents who can not understand how anything can be known except by the feeble and misleading light of personal experience—that is much. It marks Tolstoi in a signal way as one eminent above the cloud-region, with a mental and spiritual outlook unaffected by the ground-reek of darkened counsel and invulnerable to the slings and arrows of defamation. Nevertheless, while admiring his superb courage and attesting the clarity of his vision, I think he imperfectly discerns the underlying causes of the phenomena that he reports.

Schopenhauer explains the shamefacedness of lovers, their tendency to withdraw into nooks and corners to do their wooing, by the circumstance that they plan a crime—they conspire to bring a human soul into a world of woe. Tolstoi takes something of the same ground as to the nature of their offence. Marriage he thinks a sin, and being a religionist regards the resulting and inevitable wretchedness as its appointed punishment.

"Little did I think of her physical and intellectual life," says Posdnyschew, in explanation of conjugal antagonism. "I could not understand whence sprang our mutual hostility, but how clearly I see now! This hostility was nothing but the protest of human nature against the beast that threatened to devour it. I could not understand this hatred. And how could it have been different? This hostility was nothing else than the mutual hatred of two accessories in a crime—that of instigation, that of accomplishment."

Marriage being a sin, it follows that celibacy is a virtue and a duty. Tolstoi has the courage of his convictions in this as in other things. He is too sharp not to see where this leads him and too honest to stop short of its logical conclusion. Here he is truly magnificent! He perceives that his ideal, if attained, would be annihilation of the race. That, as he has elsewhere in effect pointed out, is no affair of his. He is not concerned for the perpetuity of the race, but for its happiness through freedom from the lusts of the flesh. What is it to him if the god whom, oddly enough, he worships has done his work so badly that his creatures can not be at the same time chaste, happy and alive? Every one to his business—God as creator and, if he please, preserver; Tolstoi as reformer.

For his views on the duty of celibacy, it is only fair to say, Tolstoi goes directly to the teaching of Jesus Christ, with what accuracy of interpretation, not being skilled in theology I am unwilling to say.

From his scorn of physicians it may be inferred that our author is imperfectly learned in their

useful art, and therefore unfamiliar with whatever physiological side the question of celibacy may have. It is perhaps sufficient to say that in the present state of our knowledge the advantages of a life ordered after the Tolstoian philosophy seem rather spiritual than physical. Doubtless “they didn’t know everything down in Judee,” but St. Paul appears to have had a glimmering sense of this fact, if it is a fact.

To attribute the miseries which are inseparable from marriage as the modern Caucasian has the heroism to maintain it to any single and simple cause is most unphilosophical; our civilization is altogether too complex to admit of any such cheap and easy method. Doubtless there are many factors in the problem; a few, however, seem sufficiently obvious to any mind which, having an historical outlook wider than its immediate environment in time and space, with

extensive view
Surveys mankind from China to Peru.

The monogamous marriage ignores, for example, the truth that Man is a polygamous animal. Of all the men and women who have been born into this world, only one in many has ever even so much as heard of any other system than polygamy. To suppose that within a few brief centuries monogamy has been by law and by talking so firmly established as effectually to have stayed the momentum of the original instinct is to hold that the day of miracles is not only not past, but has really only recently arrived. It implies, too, and entails, a blank blindness to the most patent facts of easy observation. With admirable gravity the modern Caucasian has legislated himself into theoretical monogamy, but he has, as yet, not effected a repeal of the laws of nature, and has in truth shown very little disposition to disregard them and observe his own. The men of our time and race are in heart and life about as polygamous as their good ancestors were before them, and everybody knows it who knows anything worth knowing. But not she to whom the knowledge would have the greatest practical value; the person whom all the powers of modern society seem in league to cheat; the young girl.

Another cause of the wretchedness of the married state—but of this Tolstoi seems inadequately conscious—is that marriage confers rights deemed incalculably precious which there is no means whatever of confirming and enforcing. The consciousness that these rights are held by the precarious tenure of a “vow” which never had, to one of the parties, much more than a ceremonial significance, and a good faith liable, in the other, to suspension by resentment and the vicissitudes of vanity and caprice; the knowledge that these rights are exposed to secret invasion invincible to the most searching inquiry; the savage superstition that their invasion “dishonors” the one to whom it is most hateful, and who of all persons in the world is least an accomplice—all this begets an apprehension which grows to distrust, and from distrust to madness. The apprehension is natural because reasonable: its successive stages of development are what you will, but the culmination is disaster and the wreck of peace.

Of the sombre phenomena of the marriage relation observable by men like Tolstoi, with eyes in their heads, brains behind the eyes and not too much scruple in selecting points of view outside the obscurity and confusion of a personal experience, a hundred additional explanations might be adduced, all more valid, in my judgment, than that to which he pins his too ready faith; but those noted seem sufficient. With regard to any matter touching less nearly the unreasoning sensibilities of the human heart, they would, I think, be deemed more than sufficient.

What, then—rejecting Tolstoi’s prescription—is the remedy? In view of the failure of our experiment should we revert to first principles, adopting polygamy with such modifications as

would better adapt it to the altered situation? Ought we to try free love, requiring the state to keep off its clumsy hands and let men and women as individuals manage this affair, as they do their religions, their friendships and their diet?

For my part I know of no remedy, nor do I believe that one can be formulated. It is of the nature of the more gigantic evils to be irremediable—a truth against which poor humanity instinctively revolts, entailing the additional afflictions of augmented nonsense and wasted endeavor. Nevertheless something may be done in mitigation. The marriage relation that we have we shall probably continue to have, and its Dead Sea fruits will grow no riper and sweeter with time. But the lie that describes them as luscious and satisfying is needless. Let the young be taught, not celibacy, but fortitude. Point out to them the exact nature of the fool's paradise into which they will pretty certainly enter and perhaps ought to enter. Teach them that the purpose of marriage is whatever the teacher may conceive it to be, but not happiness. Mercifully reduce the terrible disproportion between expectation and result. In so far as *The Kreutzer Sonata* accomplishes this end, in so far as it teaches this lesson, it is a good book.

II

Tolstoi is a literary giant. He has a "giant's strength," and has unfortunately learned to "use it like a giant"—which, I take it, means not necessarily with conscious cruelty, but with stupidity. Excepting when he confines himself to pure romance, and to creation of works which, after the manner of Dr. Holmes, may be described as medicated fable—the man seems to write with the very faintest possible consciousness of anything good or even passably decent, in human nature. His characters are moved by motives which are redeemed from monstrous baseness only by being pettily base. In *War and Peace*, for example,—a book so crowded with characters, historical and imaginary, that the author himself can not carry them in his memory without dropping them all along his trail—there is but one person who is not either a small rascal or a great fool or both. Such a discreditable multitude of unpleasant persons no one but their maker—in whose image they are not made—ever collected between the covers of a single book. From Napoleon down to the ultimate mujik they go through life with heads full of confusion, hearts distended with selfishness and mouths running over with lies. If Tolstoi wrote as a satirist, with obvious cynicism, all this would be easily enough understood; but nothing, evidently, is further from his intention; he is essentially a preacher and honestly believes that his powerful caricatures are portraits from life; or rather—for that we may admit—that the total impression derived from a comprehensive view of them is a true picture of human character, charged in its every shadow (there are no lights) with instruction and edification. I can not say how it goes with others, but all that is left to me by this hideous "march past" of detestables; this sombre tableau of the intellectually dead; this fortuitous concourse of a random rascally unlawfully begotten of an exuberant fancy and a pitiless observation—"all of it all" that remains with me is a taste in the mouth which I can only describe as pallid.

In his personal character Tolstoi seems to be the only living Christian, in the sense in which Christ was a Christian—whatever credit may inhere in that—of whom we have any account; but in judging his books we have nothing to do with that. He has a superb imagination and must be master of a matchless style, for we get glimpses of it, even through the translations of men who are probably familiar enough with Russian and certainly altogether too familiar with English. The trouble with him is, as Mr. Matthew Arnold said of Byron, he doesn't know enough. He sees everything, but he has not freed his mind from the captivating absurdity, so dominant in the last

generation, that human events occur without human agency, individual will counting for no more in the ordering of affairs than does a floating chip in determining the course of the river. The commander of an army is commanded by his men. Napoleon was pushed by his soldiers hither and thither all over Europe; they by some blind, occult impulse which Tolstoi can not understand. He goes so far as to affirm that an army takes one route instead of another by silent consent and understanding among its widely separated fractions; infinitinely unaware that not one of them could move a mile without a dozen sets of detailed instructions to commanders, quartermasters, chiefs of ordnance, commissaries of subsistence, engineers and so forth. Tolstoi has entered the camp of History with a flag of truce and been blindfolded at the outpost.

When Tolstoi trusts to his imagination and doesn't need to know anything, he is inaccessible to censure. *The Cossacks*, one of his earlier works, is a prodigiously clever novel. About a half of the book, as I remember it, concerns itself with the killing of a single Circassian by a single Cossack. The shadow of that event is over it all, ominous, portentous; and I know of nothing finer nor more dramatic in its way than the narrative of the death of the dead man's avengers, knee to knee among the rain-pools of the steppe, chanting through their beards their last fierce defiance. What to this was the slaughter at Austerlitz, the conflagration at Moscow, flinging its black shadows over half a world, if we have not Hugo's eyes to see them through? Only the gods look large upon Olympus.

But do me the favor to compare Tolstoi at his worst with other popular writers at their best. It is eagle and hens. It is sun and tallow candles. From the heights where he sits conspicuous, they are visible as black beetles. Nay, they are slugs; their brilliant work is a shine of slime which dulls behind them even as they creep. When one of these godlets dies the first man to pass his grave will say: "Why has he no monument?"—the second: "What! a monument?"—the third: "Who the devil was he?"

1890.

EMMA FRANCES DAWSON

IN nearly all of Miss Dawson's work that I have seen is an elusive something defying analysis, even description—something that is not in the words. I do not know how she gets it where it is; I never could either surprise her secret by swift strokes of attention, come upon it by patient still-hunting, nor in any way get at the trick of it. I can name it only in metaphor as a light behind the words; a light like that of Poe's "red litten eyes"; a light such as falls at sunset upon desolate marshes, tingeing the plumage of the tall heron and prophesying the joyless laugh of the loon. That selfsame light shines somewhere through and under Doré's long parallel cloud-bands along his horizons, and I have seen it, with an added bleakness, backgrounding the tall rood in the Lone Mountain cemetery of San Francisco. I dare say it is all very easy;—to Miss Dawson: she simply writes and some "remote, unfriended, melancholy" ancestor stands by to "do the rest"

The publication of Miss Dawson's *An Itinerant House and Other Stories* is an event, doubtless, which does not seem at present—at least not to that cave-bat, "the general reader"—to cut much of a figure, but I shall miss my guess if it do not hold attention when Father Time has much that the world admires snugly tucked away in his wallet—"alms for oblivion." This is a guess only: I am not a believer in the doctrine that good literary work has some inherent quality compelling recognition and conferring vitality. Good literary work, like anything else, endures if the conditions favor, perishes if they do not; so my guess, upon examination, dwindles to a hope compounded of rather more desire than expectation.

Miss Dawson's book is not to be judged as other books. It will help the reader to a just

appreciation of this wonderful woman's work in letters if he understand beforehand that the world she sees is not the world we see; that her men and women are as unearthly as their environment, making no demands whatever on our sympathies, our affections, our admiration. Indeed, she cares nothing for them herself, putting an end to their strange, unhuman existence when done with them as indifferently as a tired player removes the chessmen from board to box. This, for example, is how she disposes of a few that have become superfluous:

"Mrs. Anson proved a hard-faced, cold-hearted Cape Cod woman, a scold and drudge, who hated us as much as we disliked her. Homesick and unhappy, she soon went East and died. Within a year Anson was found dead where he had gone hunting in the Saucelito woods, supposed a suicide; Dering was hung by the Vigilantes and the rest were scattered on the four winds."

But when Miss Dawson's narrative flows with a loitering current you may commonly hear the sound of slow music and get glimpses of a darkened stage.

These stories have all a good deal of the supernatural and very little of the natural. The lover of "realism" (who is sometimes pleased to call himself a "veritist") may with great profit diligently let them alone; as may also the mere idler, who reads with a delinquent advertence, to pass the time. Miss Dawson is too true an artist to write for a slack attention: every page of her book is rich with significances underlying the narrative like gold in the bed of a stream. And this is especially true of the poems.

Those poems, by the way—how came they there? Why is there a poet in every story, whose verses have nothing to do with the action of the piece, though always in harmony with its spirit? I think I know the secret of this irrelevant feature of the work, and a pathetic one it is: Miss Dawson puts her poetry into her prose because she can not get it published otherwise—the more shame to our schools and public. Not all her verse is as good as the prose that carries it. Some of it is ungrammatical, and two whole pages of one piece have only the finals "ain" and "aining"—an insupportable performance. Much of it lacks ease, fluency; but all is worth reading and reading again; and in the "Ballade of the Sea of Sleep" are an elevation and largeness that no living poet has excelled.

The scene of all Miss Dawson's stories is San Francisco—her San Francisco—San Francisco as she sees it from her eyrie atop of "Russian Hill." To her it is a dream city—a city of wraiths and things forbidden to the senses—of half-heard whispers from tombs of men long dead and damned—of winds that sing dirges, clouds that are signs and portents, fogs peopled with fantastic existences pranking like mad, as is the habit of all sea-folk on shore leave—a city where it is never morning, where the birds never sing, where children are unknown, and where at night the street-lights at the summits of the hills "flare as if out of the sky," signaling mysterious messages from another world. In short, this sister to Hugo has breathed into the gross material San Francisco so strange a soul that to him who has read her book the name of the town must henceforth have a meaning that never before attached to any word of human speech. Wherefore I say of this book that it is a work of supreme genius; and I try to have faith to believe that whatever else may befall it, while the language in which it is written remains intelligible to men it will not fail to challenge the attention and engage the interest of the judicious.

To those who have feared the effect upon Miss Dawson's powers of time, sorrow, privation and hope deferred, it is a joy to note that her latest and longest story, "A Gracious Visitation"—the one written especially for this volume, the others being from twenty to thirty years old—is the best. It is indeed a marvelous creation, and I know of nothing in literature having a sufficient resemblance to it to serve as a basis of comparison. In point of mere originality, I should say it is unsurpassed and unsurpassable; the ability to figure to oneself a story more novel and striking

would, in a writer, imply the ability to write one—which I think the most capable writer would be slowest to claim. The best of the other stories is by no means the one that gives its title to the book. I shall not undertake to say which is best, but shall conclude by quoting the “envoy” of “The Ballade of the Sea of Sleep”;

Archangels, princes, thrones, dominions, powers,
Which of you dwarf the centuries to hours,
Or swell the moments into aeons' sweep?
Is it the Prince of Darkness, then, who cowers
Below the dream-waves of the Sea of Sleep?

1897.

MARIE BASHKIRTSEFF

UPON the cover of the English translation of this young artist's journal is displayed Gladstone's judgment that it is “a book without a parallel.” That is not very high praise, certainly; it may be said of many books which the judicious would “willingly let die”; and in this case the judicious will hope that a parallel work may be long denied to the taste that craves it. The book from cover to cover is distinctly unwholesome. It has the merit of candor; its frankness is appalling. Yet one can not help suspecting the quality of that frankness. Did this young girl, who began at twelve, and for a dozen years—almost to the day of her death—poured into her journal her heterogeneous and undigested thoughts, fancies and feelings with a view to publication and a hope of fame as a result of it—did she after all make as honest a record as she doubtless supposed herself to be doing? It will hardly seem so to one who has written much for publication.

Such a one may justly enough distrust, although he can not altogether reject, the evidences of the text, which are necessarily studied and interpreted in the light of the text itself; but knowing something of the conditions of literary composition he will be slow to believe that the young diarist could at the same time remember and forget that she was writing to be read. Nor will it seem to him that his doubt if she put down all that came into her head is too hardy an assumption of knowledge of how Russian young women think and feel. Something doubtless must be allowed for individual character and disposition in this case as in another, but then, too, one must be permitted to remember that even a Russian young woman of more or less consuming self-consciousness and sex-consciousness is merely human, belonging to the race which daily thanks its Maker for not putting windows in breasts. Even a Russian maiden with a private method of estimating her intellectual importance who should write all her thoughts would probably be invited to stay her steps toward the Temple of Fame long enough to make acquaintance of the police.

But if the diarist has not written down all her thoughts and feelings, how can the reader be quite sure that she has accurately reported those of them that she professes to give?—how that they are not afterthoughts, some of them, at least, evolved in the process of revision for the press? I do not know if upon this point there is any other than internal evidence and the probabilities; my reading in the somewhat raw and raucous literature of the subject has not been quite exhaustive. The internal evidence and the probabilities point pretty plainly to revision of the text, for which the reader might have been more grateful if it had been more thoroughly made. Much of the book, in truth, might advantageously have been revised out of existence—much of what is left, I mean.

Marie Bashkirtseff was born in 1860 and died of consumption in 1884. She was given a good education and knew some of the advantages of travel. Having a love of art—which she mistook for ability to produce works of art—she became a painter and by dint of study under the spur of vanity

performed some fairly creditable work which, while the fashion of reading her journal was “on,” commanded fair prices and brought gladness and sunshine into the homes of good Americans of long purses and short schooling. She was perhaps rather more than less successful in painting than in expounding the excellences of the paintings of others. In such criticism as she gives us in her journal one does not detect any understanding. “This is not art; it is Nature herself”; “the face is real; it is flesh and blood”—such judgments as these are sprinkled all through the book, recalling the dear old familiar jargon of the “dramatic critics” of the newspapers; “Jonesmith was no longer himself but Hamlet”; “Brown-Robinson completely identified himself with his role, and it was Julius Caesar himself that we saw before our eyes.” The crudest and most meaningless form of art criticism is to declare the representation the thing represented, and poor Marie Bashkirtseff seldom goes further in accounting for her adoration of the works of such masters as Bastien-Lepage, Corot and Duran.

There must have been something engaging in the girl, for she seems to have acquired the friendship of such men, and to have retained it. Her account of those last days when she and Bastien-Lepage—each with a leg in the grave, like a caught fox dragging its trap—caused themselves to be brought together to compare the ravages of their disorders in silence is pathetic with the pathos of the morgue. One would rather have been spared it. It leaves a bad taste in the memory and fitly concludes a book which is morbid, hysterical and unpleasant beyond anything of its kind in literature—“a book without a parallel.” It enforces and illustrates a useful truth: that when suffering from internal disorders one can not afford to turn oneself inside out as an exercise in literary calisthenics.

1887

A POET AND HIS POEM

(From “The Cosmopolitan” Magazine, September, 1907)

WHATEVER length of days may be accorded to this magazine, it is not likely to do anything more notable in literature that it accomplishes in this issue by publication of Mr. George Sterling’s poem, “A Wine of Wizardry.” Doubtless the full significance of this event will not be immediately apprehended by more than a select few, for understanding of poetry has at no time been a very general endowment of our countrymen. After a not inconsiderable acquaintance with American men of letters and men of affairs I find myself unable to name a dozen of whom I should be willing to affirm their possession of this precious gift—for a gift it indubitably is; and of these not all would, in my judgment, be able to discern the light of genius in a poem not authenticated by a name already famous, or credentialed by a general assent. It is not commonly permitted to even the luckiest of poets to “set the Thames on fire” with his first match; and I venture to add that the Hudson is less combustible than the Thames. Anybody can see, or can think that he sees, what has been pointed out, but original discovery is another matter. Carlyle, indeed, has noted that the first impression of a work of genius is disagreeable—which is unfortunate for its author if he is unknown, for upon editors and publishers a first impression is usually all that he is permitted to make.

From the discouraging operation of these uncongenial conditions Mr. Sterling is not exempt, as the biography of this poem would show; yet Mr. Sterling is not altogether unknown. His book, *The Testimony of the Suns, and Other Poems*, published in 1903, brought him recognition in the literary Nazareth beyond the Rocky Mountains, whose passes are so vigilantly guarded by cis-montane criticism. Indeed, some sense of the might and majesty of the book’s title poem

succeeded in crossing the dead-line while watch-worn sentinels slept “at their insuperable posts.” Of that work I have the temerity to think that in both subject and art it nicks the rock as high as anything of the generation of Tennyson, and a good deal higher than anything of the generation of Kipling; and this despite its absolute destitution of what contemporary taste insists on having—the “human interest.” Naturally, a dramatist of the heavens, who takes the suns for his characters, the deeps of space for his stage, and eternity for his “historic period,” does not “look into his heart and write” emotionally; but there is room in literature for more than emotion. In the “other poems” of the book the lower need is supplied without extravagance and with no admixture of sentimentality. But what we are here concerned with is “A Wine of Wizardry.”

In this remarkable poem the author proves his allegiance to the fundamental faith of the greatest of those “who claim the holy Muse as mate”—a faith which he has himself “confessed” thus:

Remiss the ministry they bear
Who serve her with divided heart;
She stands reluctant to impart
Her strength to purpose, end, or care.

Here, as in all his work, we shall look in vain for the “practical,” the “helpful.” The verses serve no cause, tell no story, point no moral. Their author has no “purpose, end, or care” other than the writing of poetry. His work is as devoid of motive as is the song of a skylark—it is merely poetry. No one knows what poetry is, but to the enlightened few who know what is poetry it is a rare and deep delight to find it in the form of virgin gold. “Gold,” says the miner “vext with odious subtlety” of the mineralogist with his theories of deposit—“gold is where you find it.” It is no less precious whether you have crushed it from the rock, or washed it from the gravel, but some of us care to be spared the labor of reduction, or sluicing. Mr. Sterling’s reader needs no outfit of mill and pan.

I am not of those who deem it a service to letters to “encourage” mediocrity—that is one of the many ways to starve genius. From the amiable judgment of the “friendly critic” with his heart in his head, otherwise unoccupied, and the *laudator literarum* who finds every month, or every week—according to his employment by magazine or newspaper—more great books than I have had the luck to find in a half-century, I dissent. My notion is that an age which produces a half-dozen good writers and twenty books worth reading is a memorable age. I think, too, that contemporary criticism is of small service, and popular acclaim of none at all, in enabling us to know who are the good authors and which the good books. Naturally, then, I am not overtrustful of my own judgment, nor hot in hope of its acceptance. Yet I steadfastly believe and hardily affirm that George Sterling is a very great poet—incomparably the greatest that we have on this side of the Atlantic. And of this particular poem I hold that not in a lifetime has our literature had any new thing of equal length containing so much poetry and so little else. It is as full of light and color and fire as any of the “ardent gems” that burn and sparkle in its lines. It has all the imagination of “Comus” and all the fancy of “The Faerie Queene.” If Leigh Hunt should return to earth to part and catalogue these two precious qualities he would find them in so confusing abundance and so inextricably interlaced that he would fly in despair from the impossible task.

Great lines are not all that go to the making of great poetry, but a poem with many great lines is a great poem, even if it have—as usually it has, and as “A Wine of Wizardry” has not—prosaic lines as well. To quote all the striking passages in Mr. Sterling’s poem would be to quote most of the poem, but I will ask the reader’s attention to some of the most graphic and memorable.

A cowed magician peering on the damned

Beside a caldron vext with harlots' blood,
The stars of that red Sign which spells her doom.

halls

In which dead Merlin's prowling ape hath spilt
A vial squat whose scarlet venom crawls
To ciphers bright and terrible.

ere the tomb-thrown echoings have ceased,
The blue-eyed vampire, sated at her feast,
Smiles bloodily against the leprous moon.

Of that last picture—ghastly enough, I grant you, to affect the spine of the Philistine with a chronic chill if he could understand it—I can only repeat here what I said elsewhere while the poem was in manuscript: that it seems to me not inferior in power upon the imagination to Coleridge's

A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon lover,

or Keats's

magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faerie lands forlorn—

passages which Rossetti pronounced the two Pillars of Hercules of human thought.

One of a poet's most authenticating credentials may be found in his epithets. In them is the supreme ordeal to which he must come and from which is no appeal. The epithets of the versifier, the mere metrician, are either contained in their substantives or add nothing that is worth while to the meaning; those of the true poet are instinct with novel and felicitous significances. They personify, ennoble, exalt, spiritualize, endow with thought and feeling, touch to action like the spear of Ithuriel. The prosaic mind can no more evolve such than ditch-water in a champagne-glass can sparkle and effervesce, or cold iron give off coruscations when hammered. Have the patience to consider a few of Mr. Sterling's epithets, besides those in the lines already quoted:

"Purpled" realm; "striving" billows; "wattled" monsters; "timid" sapphires of the snow; "lit" wastes; a "stained" twilight of the South; "tiny" twilight in the jacinth, and "wintry" orb of the moonstone; "winy" agate and "banded" onyx; "lustrous" rivers; "glowering" pyres of the burning-ghaut, and so forth.

Do such words come by taking thought? Do they come ever to the made poet?—to the "poet of the day"—poet by resolution of a "committee on literary exercises"? Fancy the poor pretender, conscious of his pretense and sternly determined to conceal it, laboring with a brave confusion of legs and a copious excretion of honest sweat to evolve felicities like these!