

## A VISIT TO WHITTIER

When I was in Boston in 1884, my brilliant and hospitable friend, Mr. W. D. Howells, received a letter from the poet Whittier, expressing a most kind wish that I should visit him. It would have been a great satisfaction to me to have seen him in summer, and in his own beautiful home at Amesbury, where he settled in 1836, and where he resided until his death in 1892, although at the moment of his demise he happened to be visiting at Hampton Falls. It would have been delightful to carry away an impression of that noble, calm figure in the midst of his household gods. But, if I remember rightly, the mansion at Amesbury was at that time being altered in some way; at all events, Mr. Whittier was staying with friends at a house called Oak Knoll, near Danvers. It was, moreover, in the depth of the hard New England winter; all the landscape was choked with snow. Certainly, the visitor's attention would be the more exclusively concentrated on the appearance and conversation of his celebrated host. Accordingly, an appointment was made, and on the 6th of December I set forth on quite an arctic expedition to discover the author of "Snow Bound."

I have a superstition that all very agreeable adventures begin with a slight mishap. I was not prepared to believe Mr. Whittier so difficult to reach as I found him. We arrived early at the dismal station of Danvers, and a hack was persuaded to drive us to the entrance of Oak Knoll. All this Massachusetts landscape, doubtless enchanting at other times of the year, is of a most forbidding bleakness in mid-winter. The carriage drove off, leaving us to struggle up to the homestead, and we arrived with relief under the great pillars of an ample piazza. Doubtless, in leafy seasons, Oak Knoll may have its charms, but it was distinctly sinister that December morning. We rang, and after a long pause the front door opened slightly, and a very unprepossessing dog emerged, and shut the door (if I may say so) behind him. We were face to face with this animal, which presented none of the features identified in one's mind with the

idea of Mr. Whittier. It sniffed unpleasantly, but we spoke to it most blandly, and it became assured that we were not tramps. The dog sat down, and looked at us; we had nowhere to sit down, but we looked at the dog. Then, after many blandishments, but feeling very uncomfortable, I ventured to hold the dog in conversation while I rang again. After another pause the door was slightly opened, and a voice of no agreeable timbre asked what we wanted. We explained, across the dog, that we had come by appointment to see Mr. Whittier. The door was closed a second time, and, if our carriage had still been waiting, we should certainly have driven back to Danvers. But at length a hard-featured woman grudgingly admitted us, and showed us, growling as she did it, into a parlour.

Our troubles were then over, for Mr. Whittier himself appeared, with all that report had ever told of gentle sweetness and dignified cordial courtesy. He was then seventy-seven years old, and, although he spoke of age and feebleness, he showed few signs of either; he was, in fact, to live eight years more. Perhaps because the room was low, he seemed surprisingly tall; he must, in fact, have been a little less than six feet high. The peculiarity of his face rested in the extraordinary large and luminous black eyes, set in black eyebrows, and fringed with thick black eyelashes curiously curved inwards. This bar of vivid black across the countenance was startlingly contrasted with the bushy snow-white beard and hair, offering a sort of contradiction which was surprising and presently pleasing. He was careful to keep on my right side, I noticed, being presumably deaf in the right ear; even if this were the case, which he concealed, his hearing continued to be markedly quick in a man of his years.

His generosity to those much younger and less gifted than himself is well known, and I shall not dwell on the good-natured things which he proceeded to say to his English visitor. He made no profession, at any time, of being a

critic, and his formula was that such and such verse or prose had given him pleasure,—“I am grateful to thee for all that enjoyment” was his charming way of being kind. But I will mention what he said about one book, the *Life of Gray*, because I do not remember that Gray is mentioned in any of the published works of Whittier. He said that he had delighted in that narrative of a life so quiet and so sequestered that, as he put it, it was almost more “Quakerly” than that of any famous member of the Society; and he added that he had been greatly moved by the fulness and the significance of a career which to the outside world might have seemed absolutely without movement. “Thee were very fortunate,” he went on, “to have that beautiful, restful story left to tell after almost all the histories of great men had been made so fully known to readers.”

He asked me what and whom I had seen. Had I yet visited Concord? I responded that I was immediately about to do so, and then he said quickly, “Ah! thee should have come a little sooner, when we were still united. There were four of us a little while ago, but two are gone, and what is Concord without Emerson?” He spoke with great emotion of Emerson—“the noblest human being I have known,” and of Longfellow, “perhaps the sweetest. But you will see Holmes,” he added. I said that it was my great privilege to be seeing Dr. Holmes every day, and that the night before he had sent all sorts of affectionate messages by me to Mr. Whittier. The latter expressed great curiosity to see Holmes’s short *Life of Emerson*, which, in fact, was published five or six days later. With reminiscences of the past, and especially of the great group of the poets his contemporaries, my venerable host kept me long entertained.

He presently said that he would leave me, that he might search for a portrait of himself, which he was so kind as to offer to me as a memorial of my visit. I proposed to take my leave, but he insisted that I must not go; he was absent about twenty minutes, resting, as I gathered, from the exertion of speaking, which had caused a noticeable hoarseness. He returned, entirely refreshed, and was once more delightfully communicative. I know not how he was in-

duced to go back to the early anti-slavery days, but, this subject having been started, he pursued it with the greatest vivacity. I was left with the impression that on his sedentary and noiseless existence the troubles of 1835 had left an indelible impression—that these formed, indeed, the most exciting pivot for his reminiscences. He told the story of the Concord riots eagerly and merrily; no doubt in almost the same words he had often told it before. His eyes flashed, he slapped his knees, he may almost be said to have gesticulated, and there was something less than Quakerly quietism in his gusto at the exciting incidents of the narrative. He was met, he said, in the street of Concord by the rioters, who were looking for George Thompson, the abolitionist lecturer; Thompson was a man of about his own age, and the mob, supposing Whittier to be he, pelted the poet with rotten eggs, and, worse than that, with stones. Their aim was bad, for they scarcely touched Whittier with the more serious missiles, which rattled instead on the wooden fence behind him. He said it made him feel like the Apostle Paul. Another abolitionist, a Mr. Kent, at this moment providentially opened his street-door, and Whittier was pulled in out of the angry crowd. I forget exactly what happened next, but there was a great deal of shouting and firing, and in process of time George Thompson seems to have joined the anti-slavery men in their refuge. At all events, Mr. Whittier described, with immense animation and spirit, how it became necessary at length to make a dash, and how Thompson and he were brought in a carriage to a side-door, and the horse suddenly whipped through the unexpected crowd out of the town and far away before any one thought of pursuing them. At this final recital, the old gentleman could remain seated no longer, but started from his chair and fought his battle o’er again. No doubt it was all recorded history, and could be reconstructed with clearer accuracy from the books, but it was a delightful and quite sufficing experience to hear it thus told, by the most distinguished person engaged, after an interval of nearly fifty years.

If it is not too trifling, I must men-

tion, in connection with his magnificent, lustrous eyes, that, the conversation turning upon the hues of things, Mr. Whittier greatly surprised me by confessing that he was quite colour-blind. He exemplified his condition by saying that if I came to Amesbury I should be scandalised by one of his carpets. It appeared that he was never permitted, by the guardian goddess of his hearth, to go "shopping" for himself, but that once, being in Boston, and needing a carpet, he had ventured to go to a store and buy what he thought to be a very nice, quiet article, precisely suited to adorn a Quaker home. When it arrived at Amesbury there was a universal shout of horror, for what had struck Mr. Whittier as a particularly soft combination of browns and greys proved, to normal eyes, to be a loud pattern of bright red roses on a field of the crudest cabbage-green. When he had told me this, it was then easy to observe that the fullness and brilliancy of his wonderful eyes had something which was not entirely normal about them.

He struck me as very gay and cheerful, in spite of his occasional references to the passage of time and the vanishing of beloved faces. He even laughed, frequently and with a childlike suddenness, but without a sound. His face had none of the immobility so frequent with very aged persons; on the contrary, waves of mood were always sparkling across his features, and leaving nothing stationary there except the narrow, high, and strangely receding forehead. His language, very fluid and easy, had an agreeable touch of the soil, an occasional rustic note in its elegant colloquialism, that seemed very pleasant and appropriate, as if it linked him naturally with the long line of sturdy ancestors of whom he was the final blossoming. In connection with his poetry, I think it would be difficult to form in the imagination a figure more appropriate to Whittier's writings than Whittier himself proved to be in the flesh.

Two days later I received from Mr. Whittier a very kind letter, and the gift of his latest volume of poems, *The Bay of Seven Islands*. It was far from being his last, for it was to be followed by two more in his lifetime and by a gleaming of posthumous verses. But it was the

book of an old man, and in reading it one was reminded that fifty-three years had passed since *Legends of New England* had first given the name of Whittier to the lovers of poetry. In saying that *The Bay of Seven Islands* is an old man's book, however, I do not mean that it shows marks of senile failure, but only that the eye of the writer is constantly on the past, counting the sheaves, watching the red colour in the western sky. In verses, not less sincere because they are a little rough, he offers his own apologia. He desires, he says, that it shall be said of him when he is gone:

Hater of din and riot  
He lived in days unquiet;  
And, lover of all beauty,  
Trode the hard ways of duty.

To all who dumbly suffered  
His tongue and pen he offered;  
His life was not his own,  
Nor lived for self alone.

This, we can clearly assert, will always be admitted of Whittier. But what will impartial criticism, which is deaf to all the virtues if their expression is not enshrined and kept fresh in really fine literature, decide about the poetry of this good and graceful man?

Mr. Whittier was composing verses all his life, and the difference of quality between those he wrote at twenty and at eighty is remarkably small. He was a poet in the lifetime of Gifford and Crabbe, and he was still a poet when Mr. Rudyard Kipling was already famous. During this vast period of time his style changed very little; it had its ups and downs, its laxities and then its felicities, but it bore very little relation to passing conditions. There rose up beside it Tennyson and Browning, Rossetti and Swinburne, but none of these affected Whittier. His genius, or talent, or knack—whichever we choose to call it—was an absolutely local and native thing. It was like the Indian waters of strange name of which it sang, Winnebaukee and Merrimac and Katahdin; it streamed forth, untouched by Europe, from among the butternuts and maples of the hard New England landscape. The art in Whittier's verse was primitive. Those who love his poetry most will wish that he had possessed a better ear, that he could have felt that "mateless" does not rhyme to "greatness." In all his

books there is a tendency to excess, to redundancy; he is apt to babble on when he has nothing very inspired to say.

But when all this is acknowledged, none but a very hasty reader will fail to recognise Whittier's lasting place in the history of literature. He is not rich, nor sonorous, nor a splendid artist; he is even rather rarely exquisite; but he has an individuality of his own that is of durable importance. He is filled with moral enthusiasm as a trumpet is filled with the breath of him who blows it. His Quaker quietism concentrates itself until it breaks into a real passion-storm of humanity, and when Whittier is roused he sings with the thrilling sweetness of a wood-thrush. By dint of simplicity and earnestness, he frequently hits upon the most charming phrases, instinct with life and truth; so that the English poet with whom it seems most natural to compare him in the lyrical order is the epic and didactic Crabbe. If the author of "The Borough" had

been dowered with the gift of writing in octosyllabics and short stanzaic measures, and had been of stern Puritan stock in Massachusetts, and had been roused by the sight of a public iniquity, such as slavery, recognised and applauded in society, he might have presented the world with a talent very much resembling that of Whittier. But, as it is, we look around in vain for English or American poet of anything like the same merit who shares the place of Whittier.

The grave of the admirable Quaker poet at Amesbury is said to be hemmed in by a hedge of vigorous arbor vitæ. His memory, in like manner, depends for its protection, not on the praise of exotic communities which can never, though they admire, rightly comprehend it, but on the conscience of New England, shy, tenacious, intrepid, to which, more than other poet has done, Whittier made a direct and constant appeal.

Edmund Gosse.

## MR. THEODORE WATTS-DUNTON'S ROMANTIC NOVEL\*

It is more than fourteen years since the publication of *Aylwin* was promised. The book was then entitled *Aylwin: an Open Air Romance for Poets, Painters, and Gypsies*. It was dedicated in a sonnet "to the beloved memory of George Borrow, the Great High Priest of the Ungenteel." It is significant that the sub-title and the sonnet have been dropped, and that Mr. Watts-Dunton adds to the title of *The Coming of Love* (published a year ago), "The Story of Rhona Boswell."

In reading *Aylwin* it is interesting to those who have long studied Mr. Watts-Dunton's theory of æsthetics to be frequently reminded of the principles he has steadily inculcated. The preliminary paragraphs in this instance, almost more misleading than usual, would induce most people to look for a work, rich indeed and powerful, but scarcely a novel to anticipate a story in which the digressions should be more important

and more entertaining than the actual narrative. These anticipations are most agreeably disappointed. Mr. Watts-Dunton has held fast to his memorable rule, "In art every work is a failure that does not reach its own goal, howsoever brilliant may be its passage along alien paths." As we hope to show, the work is full of various charm, but it is in the first place a vivid, entralling, absorbing love-story, full of movement and life and vigour. Its open-air freshness, its thrilling interest, and its intense and noble passion will make it one of the most eagerly read novels of recent years. We have no hesitation in saying that for variety and charm and brightness this book has few rivals, and it will be read with delight by multitudes who may scarcely reflect at all on its deeper meaning.

It is impossible to explain the *motif* of *Aylwin* without indicating the nature of the story. Aylwin's father, a memorable figure, evidently drawn in part from life, is driven into mysticism by the

\**Aylwin*. By Theodore Watts-Dunton. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. \$1.50.