

The Bookman

"I am a Bookman."—James Russell Lowell.

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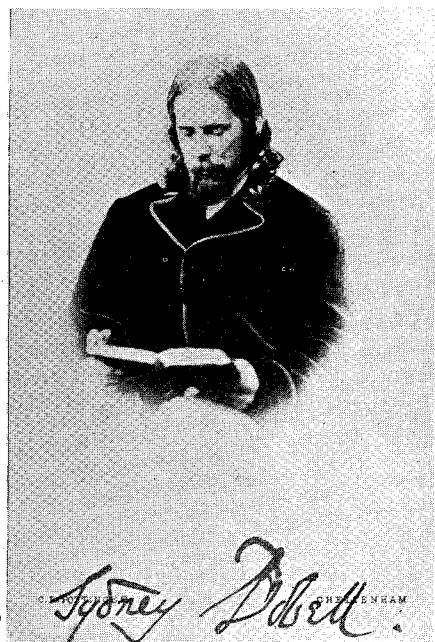
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SYDNEY DOBELL—THE POET OF THE COTSWOLDS.

By S. M. ELLIS.

SYDNEY THOMPSON DOBELL is the pre-eminent poet of Gloucestershire, or more particularly of that beautiful district of the Cotswold



Sydney Dobell
about 1870.

From a photograph given to Miss Violet Hunt.

Hills rising from the Vale of Gloucester to Cleeve Hill, Leckhampton, and Birdlip above Cheltenham, and so to Amberley and Nailsworth, and finally to Painswick, where the mortal part of the poet rests. Dobell's intense love for the county of his adoption (for he was born at Cranbrook, in Kent, on April 5th, 1824) was an essential factor of his

inner or spiritual self, colouring the best of his literary expression. And no poet was ever more responsive to the influences of scenery and Nature. As he once wrote, in view of that verdant portion of the Cotswolds guarding his best-loved home, Coxhorne House, at Charlton Kings:

"Sitting here at my little study window, the hills above, the orchards beneath, the rich, sweet valley spread out in—shall I say intolerable?—loveliness, Nature is before me like an effable Temple."

He had what he called "a country soul." Large towns distracted and bewildered him; in London, he said, "I could not hear myself think." His lifelong love for rural things he expressed with his characteristic poetical melancholy in "Balder":

"... The very stones
Of old memorial have been dear to me,
Sitting long days on ancient stiles worm-worn,
And gazing through green trees o'er grassy graves
Upon the living village and the dead ...
Or on the leafy and live-long repose
Of country labour, and the unhasted life
That plods with equal step the wonted way,
A-field at morn and homeward slow at eve ...
Or on lone homesteads and the untrespassed rest
Of immemorial pastures ...
And all the dewy leisure of the meads."

The fortunate chance which brought Sydney Dobell to Gloucestershire occurred in 1835, when the boy was eleven years old. His father, John Dobell, a wine merchant, finding his business in London not very successful, decided to remove to Cheltenham, at that date a rapidly growing town and at the zenith of its prosperity. The saline springs had become famous about 1740, and the visit of George the Third in 1788 established Cheltenham as a rival spa to Bath, though only two years previously the little river Chelt had flowed openly along the middle of the present High Street. The fine new spa of Pittville was opened in 1830,* five years before the Dobells came to Cheltenham. At first the family lived in a large old house, once an inn, at the extreme end of the High Street (where it becomes the Tewkesbury Road), and which is still the head-quarters of John Dobell & Co., wine merchants. Here was born, I believe, the poet's younger brother, Clarence Dobell, who later achieved some distinction as an artist and also as a friend of Miss Mulock, for he was instrumental in introducing that author to Tewkesbury and other Gloucestershire scenes which are described in "John Halifax, Gentleman." One of the sisters, Mary Alice Dobell, married Briton Riviere, R.A., in 1867. With an increasing family John Dobell found it desirable to live more in the

* The Cheltenham Waters are not very pleasant in taste, and it will be remembered they "astonished the stomach" of the hard-drinking Jorrocks. It was no doubt the poet of a jealous rival commodity who invented the famous "epitaph":

"Here lie I and my two daughters,
Died of drinking the Cheltenham Waters;
If we had stuck to Epsom Salts,
We shouldn't be lying in these here vaults."

An excellent picture of life in Cheltenham in the Thirties will be found in "My Life and Recollections," by Grantley Berkeley.

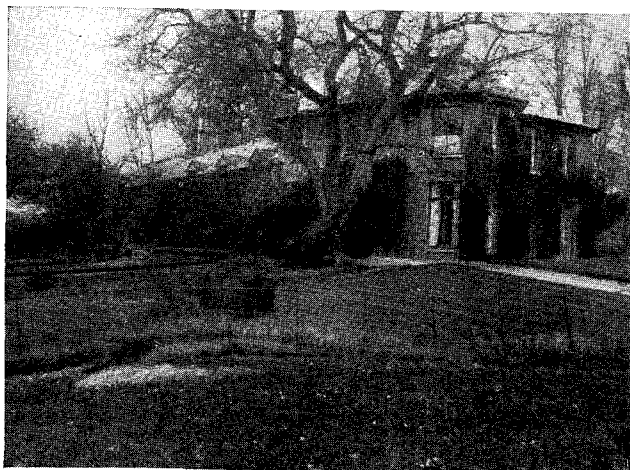


Photo by Mr. Leonard Mott.

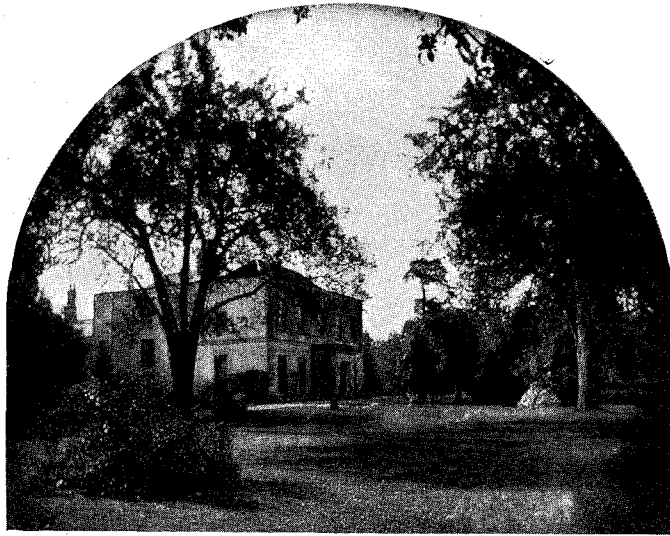
"Detmore," Charlton Kings, Cheltenham.

The early home of Sydney Dobell, and the "Longfield" of Miss Mulock's "John Halifax, Gentleman."

country and away from his place of business. One of the early homes of Sydney Dobell consequently was Battle Down House, on the high ground east of Cheltenham, commanding a glorious view across the great vale to the Malvern Hills.

The Dobells' social position in Cheltenham was rather isolated and self-centred owing to the peculiar religious views inculcated by the wife and mother, who carried on the tenets and practices of the "Church" founded in 1799 by her father, Samuel Thompson (1766-1837), a man of great ability and a leader of political reform in the City of London. The basic principles of his sect of Free-Thinking Christians were those of the Primitive Christians, who sought to follow the simple life of Christ, with the addition of disbelief in the doctrine of the Trinity. As time went on schism and secession rent Thompson's "Church of God," and eventually caused its extinction. Some of his followers elaborated theories he had not advocated, and in particular his daughter and son-in-law, John Dobell, adopted the old Judaic idea of a peculiar and superior people, favoured by God, whereby their community was separate from the world, and that intercourse with other people not so consecrated was to be avoided as far as possible. Consequently the ten children of John Dobell were not sent to any school but received their education at home. In the case of Sydney it was mainly on lines of reading laid down by himself.

It had originally been the intention of Sydney Dobell's parents to train him to be the apostolic successor of his grandfather Thompson, to be the new evangelist of the Free-Thinking Christians. Thus the records of his over-stimulated childhood make pathetic reading. At three years of age he was described as possessing a "very astonishing understanding," with "literary powers extensive," and "preferring mental diversion to eating and drinking." At seven years of age, when living at Islington, he wrote little notebooks wherein he dissertated on the meaning of Trinitarian, the quantity of calcareous earth in marble, and similar problems not usually of interest to infants. At nine years of age the father relates that "Sydney reads all Miss Martineau's books on Political Economy, and devours any other book I



**Coxhorne House,
Charlton Kings, Cheltenham.**

The home of Sydney Dobell, 1848-1853, and where he wrote the first part of "Balder."

give him"; and then, after writing a meditative poem on "God we'll obey and God alone," the poor child was struck down by a violent fever.

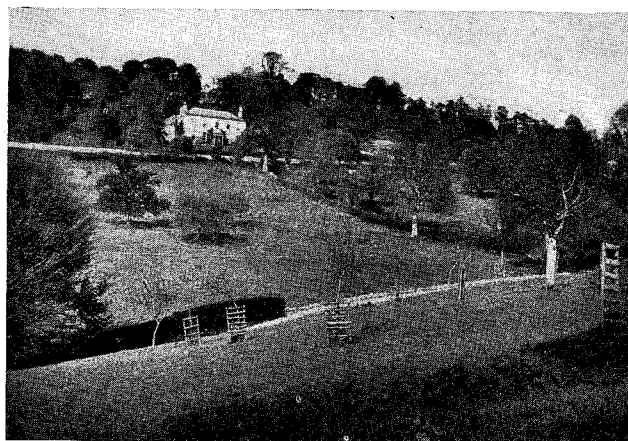
Such were the curious circumstances that combined to create this wistful poet, this sensitive Nature lover and lifelong invalid, one whose power over language and phraseology, in an atmosphere of passion, was akin to that of Shakespeare and Shelley, as Dobell's critics, Professor John Nichol and Westland Marston, have pointed out. In manhood Sydney Dobell progressed

from his parents' creed into a wider, far-embracing Christianity. His was a brave and generous nature, tender yet often vehement. He was hospitable, and possessed a keen sense of humour, though the latter quality is not often visible in his poetry. But the disastrous effects of his precocity were never eradicated from his physical system. For he was precocious in all things. At the age of twelve he was in his father's counting-house daily from ten till four, and conducting a great part of the personal side of the business; the rest of the day he was studying Greek, Latin, and French, reading of course also every variety of English literature. Two years later he had begun to write poetry, some of which was published in the Cheltenham papers. A drama called "Napoleon" was submitted to Campbell, the poet, who pronounced a favourable opinion; when in Cheltenham a few years later Campbell called to see the youthful Sydney Dobell several times.

When only ten years of age Sydney Dobell fell precociously in love with a little girl named Emily Fordham* (he became engaged to her when he was fifteen, and they were married when he was twenty). All these abnormal excitements and continuous brain-work caused another serious illness. It was typhus, and he emerged from the fever a "gentle, quiet, wasted creature . . . so tall, so thin, so old-looking," though

he was but fourteen. From the age of sixteen to twenty he was in a continuous state of unrest. His father thought his love-affair too much for his nerves. Sydney Dobell in later years attributed the breakdown of both his own and his wife's health to "an excessive practice of prayer" during this period, 1840-1844. Both he

* Her father, George Fordham, of Sandon Bury Manor House, Cambridgeshire, had been a member of Mr. Thompson's Church of Free-Thinking Christians. He was a friend of Cobbett and Godwin.



**Barton End House,
Nailsworth.**

The last home of Sydney Dobell, and where he died in 1874.

and Miss Fordham were obsessed with their religious beliefs; as Mrs. Dobell stated in after years: "The more we loved, the more we prayed."

However, amid all this mental turmoil there were many happy days—visits to Miss Fordham's home in Cambridgeshire, riding, and all the delights of Detmore, the charming little house at Charlton Kings where the Dobells lodged, and which became the permanent home of the family in 1846. Miss Mulock has faithfully pictured Detmore for all time as "Longfield" in "John Halifax, Gentleman"—the low, quaint house on the rise of a richly-wooded meadow, with the little river Chelt running through a thicket below, and all around exquisite glimpses of the Cotswold Hills. Sydney Dobell loved Detmore, and his thoughts ever turned to the spot when he was absent from England. "Send me," he would write, "close accounts of the progress of spring in the dear remembered fields . . . send me word when the very first snow-drop comes up in the garden." Often he recalled Detmore in his poems. Thus in "Home, Wounded":

"Wheel me down to the meadow,
Down to the little river,
In sun or in shadow
I shall not dazzle or shiver,
I shall be happy anywhere.
Must I choose? Then anchor me there
Beyond the beckoning poplars, where
The larch is snooding her flowery hair
With wreaths of morning shadow.
Among the thicket hazels of the break
Perchance some nightingale doth shake
His feathers, and the air is full of song;
In those old days when I was young and strong,
He used to sing on yonder garden tree,
Beside the nursery."

And in the lovely "Even-Song":

"Where in the twilight, in the coloured twilight,
I sit beside the thorn upon the hill.
The mavis sings upon the old oak tree
Sweet and strong,
Strong and sweet,
Soft, sweet, and strong . . .
And sounds of lowing kine,
And echoes long and clear,
And herdsman's evening call,
And bells of penning folds,
Sweet and low."

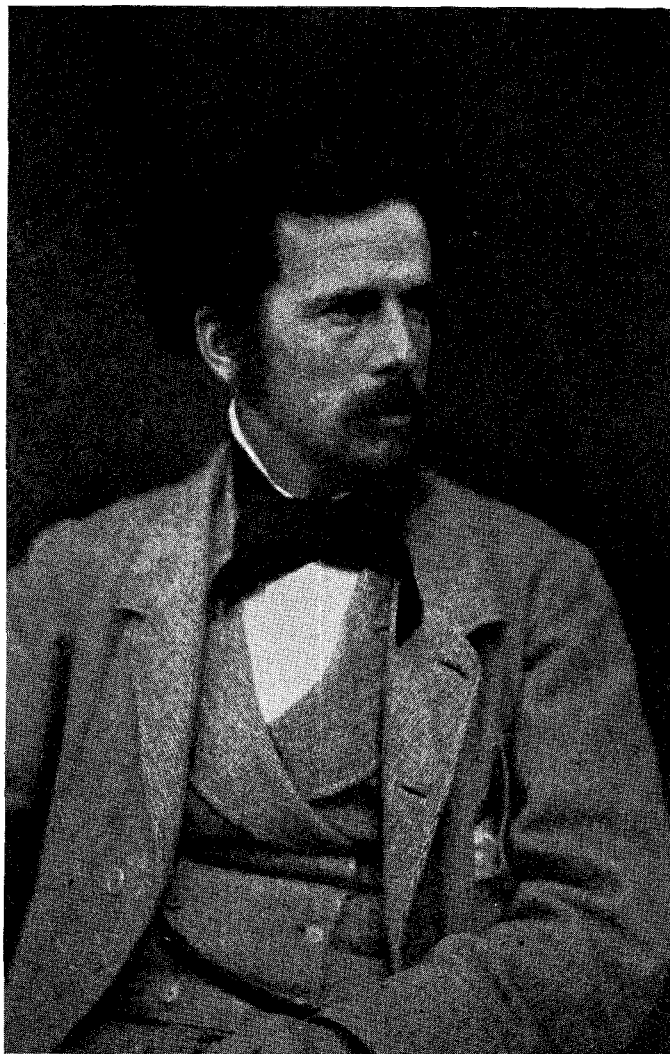
Sydney Dobell and Emily Fordham were married on July 18th, 1844, and their union was an ideally happy one despite the chronic ill-health of both parties through all its thirty years. During that long period husband and wife were never separated for a day and a night. The glamour of their early-found romance never faded, and here may be traced the source of Sydney Dobell's inspiration as the singer of the rapture of young love, a phase of his poetry which challenges Meredith—the Meredith of "Love in the Valley" and "Oh! Briar Scents." It is Dobell's theme again and again. In "Love":

"Smile on him again, and turn
With him thro' the sweet-briar glade,
With him thro' the woodbine shade;
In the sweet-briar wilderness,
To his side, ah! closer creep,
In the honeysuckle walk
Let him make thee blush and weep . . .
And shy airs with soft caresses
Letting down thy golden tresses,
Marry those dear locks with his . . .
Kiss and redden into roses.
Oh, you Lovers warm and living!
Love on, plight on, we cannot hear or see.
Oh beautiful and young and happy! Ye
Have the rich earth's inheritance."

And pre-eminently in "The Song of the Milkmaid," waiting for her Cotswold lad, is heard the full melody of the joyous abandon of young love:

" . . . He's crossed the hill,
I can see him down by the stile,

He's passed the hay, he's coming this way,
He's coming to me, my Harry!
My Harry! my lad! my lover!
Set the sun and fall the dew,
Heigho, merry world, what's to do
That you're smiling over and over?
Up on the hill and down in the dale,
And along the tree-tops over the vale . . .
Oh, world, have you ever a lover?
You were so dull and cold just now,
I could not see a leaf on the tree,
And now I could count them, one, two, three,
Count them over and over,
Leaf from leaf like lips apart,
Like lips apart for a lover.
And the hill-side beats with my beating heart,
And the apple-tree blushes all over,
And the May-bough touched me and made me start
And the wind breathes warm like a lover . . .
Harry is near, Harry is near,
My heart's as sick as if he were here,



Sydney Dobell.

From an early portrait in the possession of his niece, Miss Lilian Mott.

My lips are burning, my cheeks are wet,
 He hasn't uttered a word as yet,
 But the air's astir with his praises . . .
 Oh, Harry! oh, Harry! my love, my pride,
 My heart is leaping, my arms are wide!
 Roll up, roll up, you dull hill-side,
 Roll up, and bring my Harry!
 They may talk of glory over the sea,
 But Harry's alive, and Harry's for me,
 My Love, my lad, my Harry!"

Such emotional intensity commands the spring of tears.

After their marriage Sydney Dobell and his wife went to live in a small house in Jersey Place, Cheltenham. They later removed to Welling Hill, a farm near Detmore, and it was here in January, 1847, that Dobell was struck down by a nearly fatal attack of rheumatic fever, from the effects of which he never entirely recovered. His period of convalescence was spent at Birdlip amid the beech woods, and he ever later associated the beauty of this spot in May, as he beheld it after leaving his fever-phantom haunted sick-room, as symbolical of his return from death to quick-springing life. For Sydney Dobell held Life and all its beauty and joy very dear; he was, though often melancholy in his literary expression—the melancholy that is inspired by autumn and decay—never one of the Churchyard School of Poets who profess to long for the eternal rest of the grave. The Joy of Life was as important to him as the Duty of Life.

In 1848 the Dobells took up their residence at "Lark Hay," a house on the old Roman Road at Hucclecote, in order to be near Gloucester, where Sydney was to manage a branch of his father's business. At Lark Hay he wrote "The Roman" in his study looking over fields and rich orchards to his loved Cotswolds. The volume was published by Bentley in April, 1850. Although the author appeared under the pseudonym of "Sydney Yendys," the identity of the new poet soon became known, and Sydney Dobell was famous at the age of twenty-six. "The Roman" voiced the cause of Italy's struggle for freedom, the same theme which a few years later inspired Swinburne and Meredith. Mazzini wrote to Sydney Dobell:

"You have written about Rome as I would, had I been born a poet. And what you did write flows from the soul, the all-loving, the all-embracing, the prophet-soul. I shall feel happy whenever circumstances will enable me to shake hands with you."

The poet and the patriot duly met, and Sydney Dobell soon numbered among his friends and acquaintances Carlyle, Tennyson, Browning, Ruskin, Holman Hunt, Westland Marston, Alexander Smith and John Stuart Blackie. This date, 1851, marks Sydney Dobell's crossing the Rubicon from a life of almost cloistered religion and prayer to the publicity and honours of an acclaimed poet and a thinker whose opinions counted in the great arena of the world's affairs. As he wrote to his sister, he looked back to his former life "with a kind of self-reverence—as to an impossible saintdom, to which I would not return, but which I can never equal on this side death. I see that I have a wider mission and a rougher excellence before me." How seriously he regarded his new responsibilities as poet and prophet can be read in his letters to Charlotte Brontë, whose acquaintance he made owing to his long review of the Brontë novels in *The Palladium*, September,

1850, wherein he expressed the curious belief that "Currer Bell" was the one and same author of "Wuthering Heights," "The Tenant of Wildfell Hall," and "Jane Eyre," the books being written in the sequence given. Dobell was not at his best in review work. The vast stores of learning and immense vocabulary of words he had acquired in his precocious youth here found full vent, with the result that his thesis often became obscured by the verbosity of his style and his discursive reflections. Always he desired the power to sway the minds of other men.

A visit to Switzerland in 1851 suggested some of the scenes of his next great poetical work, "Balder," an epic designed to analyse and exhibit the egotism of the intellect in the person of a poet, naturally good, but overcome by circumstances and the strife of sorrow. Such a subject is not likely to have a popular appeal, but to avoid "Balder" is to miss some of Dobell's most beautiful imagery and pictures of Nature. The early part was written at Coxhorne House, Charlton Kings, where, he said, "Every breath of inspiration is of Charlton air." In inviting Charlotte Brontë to Coxhorne he wrote: "I cannot tell you how lovely a place we live in. This garden rookery, with its dreamy music . . . and all around our house this quiet green valley, shut in everywhere by orchard hills." Coxhorne was Sydney Dobell's home from 1848 to 1853, and when he was obliged to leave finally he kissed its outer gate farewell with tears in his eyes.

During the next eighteen years he and his wife were wanderers, ever seeking new climates and expert medical advice for the benefit of their mutual health. "Balder" was finished on the high land of Amberley—I think probably at Rose Cottage, where Miss Mulock also stayed at this time (1853). By the time "Balder" was published at the close of the year, Dobell and his wife had arrived in Scotland, where they remained for nearly four years. The poet regarded it as a time of exile, though he valued and enjoyed the cultured society of notable people resident in Edinburgh. In an Edinburgh paper of 1854 first appeared Sydney Dobell's best-known poem, the famous "Keith of Ravelston," his brilliant essay in balladry which has been reprinted again and again in anthologies, and under the title of "A Nuptial Eve" in Dobell's *Collected Works*.

"The murmur of the mourning ghost
 That keeps the shadowy kine,
 'Oh, Keith of Ravelston,
 The sorrows of thy line!'"

The strange allure of those sad, melodious, haunted cadences! No wonder that their author related:

"I am receiving praises of 'Ravelston' from all quarters, and from critics of all sorts and sizes. Their enthusiasm amuses me, because it is sometimes warmest in those in whom 'Balder' awoke but little regard. Now I could, I believe, engage to supply 'Ravelstons' on easy terms by the dozen, while 'Balder' was the highest effort of my poetic faculties."

Sydney Dobell was affected intensely by the Crimean War. In spite of his early training he had always been keenly interested in military matters, and in later life he more often advocated the sword rather than arbitration in international quarrels. "Fight! you mad, magnificent, foolish nation," he advised Italy when humiliated by France in 1867. His interest in the

Crimean War found expression in a series of ballads intended, as he said, "to catch the various home-reflections of that blazing affair in the East." Published in 1856, "England in Time of War" contains Dobell's best work. It was his last book, for during the remaining years of his life he only wrote a few stray poems and prose papers. His intellect was as brilliant as ever, but some strange mental languor debarred him from concentrated composition and the physical labour of writing. His literary career thus comprised only about eight years.

Sydney Dobell and his wife returned to Detmore in 1857 for the spring, passing on to Wales before spending the winter at St. Catherine's House, Niton, in the Isle of Wight. In 1858-1860 they were back in the loved Cotswolds, living in a romantic little house called Cleeve Tower, renamed Balder Tower by Blackie, who with his wife visited his friends here. In 1861 the Dobells stayed on Leckhampton Hill; at the old inn at Birdlip; and then at a house on Crickley Hill, which commands from its woodland height a wonderful view of the Vale of Gloucester and away to the hills of the Forest of Dean and Wales. Sydney Dobell said he had seen nothing in France or Italy "so beautiful as the road between Birdlip and Crickley." He visited France, Spain and Italy in the winters of 1862-1865. The house on Crickley Hill was given up in 1864, after another attack of rheumatic fever which prostrated the poet. In the following summer he took Noke Place on Chosen Hill, near Gloucester, in a charming situation of orchards and meadows. The Dobells revisited Scotland, and some time was spent at Clifton and in a



Emily Fordham,
Wife of Sydney Dobell.

From an early portrait in the possession of the Misses Mott.

house on Hampton Common above Stroud. In 1869, on Hampton Common, he met with a serious riding accident, his horse falling on him, and the injuries, combined with the effects of a heavy fall he suffered in Italy a few years previously, hastened his end.

Sydney Dobell's last home in the Cotswolds was Barton End House, near Nailsworth, on a hill-side and possessing beautiful grounds. Here, as he said, he had a fitting "home to live and to die in, this lovely home." He came in August, 1871, and was only fated to be there for three years. His mysterious illness advanced a stage and caused extreme weakness, though at first he was able to enjoy the society of friends who visited him. As of old, he loved children; Miss Violet Hunt recalls how

as a little girl she stayed with Mr. and Mrs. Dobell at Barton End House, and how kind the poet was to her, though he was then a dying man. He preserved his interest in his horses and dogs, and in every topic of the day, though unable to read himself in his last weeks. He would lie by the window gazing on the beech woods and the hills he had loved so long. The end came on August 22nd, 1874, when "as his favourite rooks, winging home, were crossing the sky in front of his windows, his last breath was quickly drawn. Rest came to him. The last sunshine of a gorgeous August evening lay rich and deep upon the scene he loved so dearly. The arms of his wife were round him, his hand was held by his mother."

A beautiful and enviable passing: and yet not so, for how doubly hard to die in full summer-tide on Cotswold.

MR. GUEDALLA PRESENTS LORD PALMERSTON.*

BY GEORGE SAMPSON.

THE lot of Mr. Philip Guedalla is hard. He is really to be pitied, even though some may think he is to be envied. He suffers from a superfluity of gifts, and unfortunately he can shed none of them. Thus he was born to be an historian; but he was also born to be a wit. "An insular country subject to fogs, and with a powerful middle class, requires grave statesmen." So said the only Prime Minister of this land who ever wrote an epic poem. Mr. Guedalla should consider that precedent. It has taken over a century to convince the Opposition that a statesman with wit and imagination was not

necessarily a cheap jack or a pickpocket or both. And some are unconvinced even unto this day.

The country that requires grave statesmen also requires grave historians. Gibbon has not yet lived down a suspicion of levity, and Macaulay is rebuked for readability by almost every undergraduate engaged in what is called "research." Mr. Guedalla, being an historian, is capable of mole-like industry in the dust; but, being a wit, he is incapable of admitting to labour. His historical brow pours with honest sweat, but he flings his achievements at you elegantly as an airy impromptu. Being an historian, he has a plain tale to tell; being a wit, he cannot tell it plainly. Do you

* "Palmerston." By Philip Guedalla. 25s. net. (Ernest Benn.)