

To a Songster

BY JOHN B. TABB

O LITTLE bird, I'd be
A poet like to thee,
Singing a native song,
Brief to the ear, but long
To Love and Memory.

Editor's Easy Chair.

IT is a sad condition of criticism that the critic, when he has striven faithfully to do his part by an author, may be as little pleased with his censure as some reader who likes it least. His reasons for discontent will not always be the same as the reader's, but they will be good reasons, and probably better than the reader's, for criticism is always over-saying or undersaying the thing it means with a fatality which might well incline the critic, upon second thought, to the contrary of his own opinions. This, at any rate, has been the long experience of the Easy Chair as a critic in various guises; and what is one's experience for if it is not to form the background on which one may imagine the predicament of another as if drawing from the fact? The result may not be like the fact at all, it may be nothing but a semblance which is more like the artist than the subject, but in that case the artist has the consolation of knowing that he has paid the subject the greatest possible compliment.

I

We have been reading Mr. George Rice Carpenter's all too little life of Longfellow with a pleasure which we will not conceal from our own readers, any more than the fact that our pleasure in it would have been greater if we could have constantly agreed with the author. We like agreeing with people, not merely because it makes us feel they are right, but because it saves trouble; it saves the labor of convincing them they are wrong; and we are sorry to find ourselves

agreeing with people so seldom: it seems to put mankind at a disadvantage. Not that we should disagree with Mr. Carpenter as to his manner of telling the tale of the poet's life. Rarely does a little book like a little brook run so limpidly along, reflecting the shores in its course, and taking the skies overhead into the depths of the water-grasses, the rocks, the sands underneath. It portrays admirably the poet in his environment, in his time and place, in his companionships as he chose them, and as they chose him; we could hardly wish it better done. But when it comes to the poet's work, its worth and place among other poets' work, our misgivings, our differences, our distinctions begin; and they insist the more because a hundred years hence, or a thousand, there will still be the same misgivings, differences, distinctions in the varying minds of men according to their several ways of thinking and feeling.

Speaking roughly, (and yet not roughly, we hope,) Mr. Carpenter's thinking and feeling about the poetry of Longfellow is that it is the poetry of sentiment; that it is the poetry of the library and not of the street or field; that its pictorial effects are compositions of generalized phases rather than the representation of actual features; that it is imageryative (the adventurous word is ours, not Mr. Carpenter's) rather than imaginative; that it is didactic rather than artistic, smooth and pleasing rather than strong and moving; gentle, cultivated, refined, rather than bold, native, and robust. All this he says or intimates, while recog-

nizing the unique value of such poems as *Evangeline*, *Hiawatha*, and *The Courtship of Miles Standish*; and all this in a certain measure we may allow, while denying that it is the measure of Longfellow's work, except in a partial and occasional sense. In a partial and occasional sense it is true of his work; and it is also true of his work that it was partially and occasionally prosaic when it ought to have been always poetic. But this is true, partially and occasionally, of the work of all poets, except perhaps Keats alone, and he was not one of the greatest poets.

Lowell once said to the present Easy Chair that coming into a room where some one was reading aloud to a company of people, he thought that he was listening to prose, till presently it turned out to be the poetry of Tennyson's *Idyls of the King*. He held that Shakspeare had set a pace of poetry which few others could keep up with; and one may be forgiven for adding that Shakspeare did not always keep up with it himself. The highest poets in all languages lift to the skies long levels of prose with here and there peaks of song. Goethe abounded in prose; Dante renders his moments of poetry precious by his hours of prose; Wordsworth was terribly prosaic, and Shelley at times was worse; as for Byron, he was at times worse still, he was journalistic. Yet all these were great poets, and the presence of prose in verse is no proof that the verse on the whole is not poetry. It is certainly present in Longfellow's *New England Tragedies*, and in *The Golden Legend*; and only the diction of the *New Testament* saves *The Divine Tragedy* from being largely prose. Nevertheless these pieces severally express with the high authority of poetry the spirit of the supreme human event, the travail of the darkened mediæval soul, and the emergence of the world out of theologic darkness into religious liberty and light.

II

By the conditions of production what a man writes remains the man; not part of what he writes but all of what he writes, just as all that he is is he, and not merely his fine moments. Critics have sometimes vainly supposed that time

would so sift or winnow a man's work that only the pure grain would be left, but it seems to be the law that though the grain be separated from the chaff and tares, the chaff and the tares endure with it. If a man could be kept from setting down anything but poetry when he wrote verse, then the world would not be littered with so much metrical prose; but apparently he never could, and so we have had to take the bad along with the good. The question with most is what they shall judge him by, and whether they shall condemn him for the bad or acquit him for the good. We think they should do neither the one nor the other. The only justice we can render is not to forget his poetry in the midst of his prose, and we must make inquiry of our conscience and our consciousness whether there has been more of the one or more of the other. This will not be simple, for the two are sometimes as inextricably mixed in his lines as they are in our own lives.

Mr. Carpenter seems to us unusually well equipped for the inquiry, for he has shown himself in this little book able beyond most other critics to understand Longfellow through a sense of his art, and has known how to suggest what may not be precisely defined, as "an impersonal artistic product, having a form and individuality of its own, apparently separate from the author's experience, though created by it." Yet having so admirably intimated the nature of the thing, Mr. Carpenter is sometimes, as we think, insensible of it where its effect is apparent, especially among the poems of Longfellow's later period. In other words, the balance of this scrupulous critic's mind is on the side of the criticism which makes the poet now suffer rejection because of the acceptance that came to him too widely before his best work was done.

The art of Longfellow is something too precious among our heritages from the past not to be valued at its full worth. It was the hardly saving grace which Hawthorne owned in the American literature of his time, and it is the art of Longfellow which takes from the American poetry of his generation the aspect of something fragmentary and fugitive, Whatever else it had from others, from Emerson, from Bryant, from Whittier, from Holmes, from Lowell, it had stand-