

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-

ing and presence and recognition among the world literatures from the art of Longfellow. We had other poets easily more American than he, but he was above all others the American poet, and he was not the less American because he accepted the sole conditions on which American poetry could then embody itself. As far as he ever came to critical consciousness in the matter he acted upon the belief, which he declared, that we could not be really American without being in the best sense European; that unless we brought to our New World life the literature of the Old World, we should not know or say ourselves aright. It seems to us, therefore, that Mr. Carpenter's speculations as to what sort of poet Longfellow might have been if he had been differently environed, or had been obliged in the West, or elsewhere, to enter more hardily into the struggle of life, are beside the question. Longfellow was what he was, and as it is probable that no man is idly or unmeaningly born of certain parents and not of certain others, so it seems reasonable to suppose there is some sort of order in a man's place and time which he can scarcely be even imagined outside of. Longfellow's place was in Cambridge among apparently smooth things, and his life was apparently tranquil and even, but these appearances cannot conceal the fact that his life included in its course all the sorrow and all the tragedy that can educate a man to sympathy with other human lives. Longfellow's time was that period which Mr. Carpenter calls sentimental, but which we should rather call ethical and emotional, and which Longfellow certainly reflected in the poetry of his early and middle manner. But beneath its surface aspects his art was instinctively seeking the meanings of its aspects. These were what the meanings of humanity are in every time, whether the time is optimistic or pessimistic, ethical or scientific: they were very simple meanings, the eternal desire of the race to orient itself aright with love and death, with sin and sorrow, with hope and despair. The soul is apparently busy with many other things, with war, money, office, letters, arts, ambitions, interests, but it is really the mind that is busy with such things; the soul, the very man, moves in the round

of those elemental meanings, and it is the affair of poetic art to find them out and report them in the language of the day. Its task is a process of translation out of the old dialects of the past; and he who shows himself aptest in the new version is the greatest poet of his age. Did Tennyson add anything to the thinking and feeling of England in his day, or did he merely surprise his fellow-Englishmen with a new gloss of the thoughts and feelings which have always been in the world, but which the time required in terms more intelligible than those of the past? If Tennyson expressed the most of thinking and feeling Englishmen to themselves, in the same measure Longfellow expressed the like Americans.

If he was emotional and ethical, it was because they were so. His art of that period had the color and complexion of the contemporary mood; but the most interesting fact concerning Longfellow is one of the least recognized, and appears to have been scarcely recognized at all by Mr. Carpenter. He did not remain of any given time. He grew from his youth to his manhood, and from his manhood to his age, and his art won a greater fineness and firmness with the passing of the years. It responded to the temper of his later time as it had responded to the temper of his earlier time. It was senescent as the century itself was, and it was saddened with the wisdom of science, as once it had been cheered with the wisdom of faith. It is difficult, it is dangerous to allege proofs; the instance which you summon to your help, to prove your case and stand your stead, may turn upon you and play you false when it comes to testifying. But there are some of Longfellow's sonnets which seem to us such trustworthy evidence of what we have been saying that we shall venture to call them into court, and to ask certain of them to testify. Shall the first be, among the three sonnets to three dead friends of the poet, that perfect one in which his grief has a pathos as of some lament caught and fixed in antique bronze—shall it be that unsurpassable sonnet to the memory of Agassiz?

I stand again on the familiar shore,

And hear the waves of the distracted sea

Piteously calling and lamenting thee,

And waiting restless at thy cottage door.

The rocks, the seaweed on the ocean floor,
The willows in the meadow, and the free
 Wild winds of the Atlantic welcome me;
 Then why shouldst thou be dead, and come
 no more?
 Ah, why shouldst thou be dead, when
 common men
 Are busy with their trivial affairs,
 Having and holding? Why, when thou
 hadst read
 Nature's mysterious manuscript, and then
 Wast ready to reveal the truth it bears,
 Why art thou silent, why shouldst thou
 be dead?

Here is fancy, if you will, but here is imagination too, if there is any unforced difference between the two; and here is the last effect of a most instructed art. The thing is single, adequate, absolute; it has the unmoralized completeness of a sigh. It is very personal; it is grief that is speaking, and grief is personal; but if any critic objects to having it so, then the sonnet on Agassiz, which should fit no other, is at fault in sentiment for that critic. Personality, in fact, is the note of all these noble sonnets, and perhaps for that reason, which so enriches them, they will not prove our case. Then let us summon this one, which expresses as electly a more universal, but not more generous pang:

"A soldier of the Union mustered out,"
 Is the inscription on an unknown grave
 At Newport News, beside the salt sea
 wave,
 Nameless and dateless; sentinel or scout
 Shot down in skirmish, or disastrous rout
 Of battle when the loud artillery drave
 Its iron wedges through the ranks of
 brave
 And doomed battalions, storming the re-
 doubt.
 Thou unknown hero sleeping by the sea
 In thy forgotten grave, with secret shame
 I feel my pulses beat, my forehead burn,
 When I remember thou hast given for me
 All that thou hadst, thy life, thy very
 name,
 And I can give thee nothing in return.

The plainness of the words, the utter simplicity of the mental pose, the passion of unselfish regret, constitute the terms on which an emotion of the noblest poetry here imparts itself. There is no pretence of consolation where consolation is impossible; there is no didactic or homiletic endeavor; there is only the explicit ac-

ceptance of the human case within the strict bound of human experience. We doubt if there is anything more simple or direct in the language. The note struck is the dominant of all Longfellow's later song, in which the wisdom of the man humbled him to the universal conditions, and the imperative sincerity of his nature forbade him to feign the hope and faith he no longer felt. The form is to our thinking faultless, but we are aware that all our saying so cannot make it so to others, and that any insistence to such an effect would be unworthy of the art itself.

III

The beauty of such art and the truth of it in these later poems, and especially in the sonnets, are traits which become more apparent to the reader's later years, when impartial chance decimates the rank in which he stands, and leaves him safe only till the next round at best. They who fall become the closer friends to those who remain untouched, and as "everything is dearer since it dies," all memories of such as have lived and labored within touch of us take the tinge of a personal grief, and we know too late how much they were to us who can be nothing more.

Since the last of these papers was written two very different men whose loss leaves our literature the poorer have died, though perhaps each had done his best for letters before he died. Clarence King, indeed, belonged rather to science, if that is distinguishable in a final scrutiny from literature, and for many years he had done nothing in the sort in which everything he did was done so brilliantly. He was said always to have a novel in hand, which would be the great American novel we all desire if he finished it, but there was no need of this belief to keep him in mind as a literary man with those who knew how to value literary excellence. His early sketches of "Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada" remain his contribution to the study of national life, which he keenly felt in its frontier quality, and put before his reader with a vivid and unerring touch. He was equipped with the sunniest humor, the quickest poetic sympathy, with instinctive knowledge of men and wide acquaintance with the world, for a true

vision of the character that charmed him and that charmed his readers after him, but he turned aside and gave to geology the talent that had evinced itself so much in psychology. He was no more in error, probably, than Curtis was in devoting his fineness to politics, or Mr. Hay in ignoring his æsthetic gifts for statecraft; mistakes as to their highest calling are not predicable of such men, and Clarence King was probably better instructed as to his than any of us who felt the deprivation to literature. He did so little after those early sketches that it seemed as if he had almost a passion for obscurity in the sort where he had once shone so; but this passion, if it existed, was baffled whenever he put pen to paper. One slight study of the *Don Quixote* country which he printed in a magazine but never reprinted, keeps in our memory the spacious impression that a masterpiece of any dimension makes; and doubtless if a fragment of the novel he was believed to have begun could be given to the world we should have full confirmation of his early promise. As it is, his work cannot be ignored by the historian of our literature, and his name is secure of the remembrance which he seemed to care for so little, which he sometimes seemed whimsically to deprecate.

IV

To say that Horace E. Scudder died at the moment most fortunate for his future, when no chance could impair the effect of his best and highest endeavor, is so easy that one shrinks from saying it. But nothing else would duly represent the fact. He had given the world, as it were in the hour of leaving it, a book which crowned his life's ambition in literature with memorable achievement, and united his name with one of the greatest in our history. We have already spoken of his biography of Lowell in this place, and we need not recur to it. But we cannot do less than cite its finest qualities in proof of the conscience, the intelligence, and the devotion which the author brought to all the work of a life given to literature with a sort of glad eagerness, and a love unalloyed by any sordid motive. A certain gayety of heart carried him buoy-

antly through a career which was one of frequent struggle against heavy odds, as well as of constant fidelity to high aims. The gifts of invention were not his, and confronted with life on the terms of imagination, he failed to see it accurately; but as a critic of books, and of men in books, at that remove from reality in which the student often realizes them best, he had few equals among us. In this quality all the best traits of his talent evinced themselves. He had the clear vision of what an author intends, and the conscience to recognize his intention; he had a humor which played over the scheme and lighted it with a friendly sympathy; or, when this was not possible, let it show itself for what it was unlit by those baleful gleams that also scorch; he had the wide acquaintance with literature and the scholarly equipment for which mere insight, however subtle and profound, cannot substitute itself. What he attempted of more synthetic temper was done with scrupulous truthfulness and inextinguishable zest, and with that interest in the matter which alone makes it interesting again. He might be right or he might be wrong in a criticism; you could agree or you might disagree with him in an affair of taste; but you must always own that he was saying what he believed and what he felt. He belonged by birth and training to that New England school of which so few survive to witness the glories of the past, and on whatever level he shall find for himself he will be associated with the men of Cambridge, the chief of whom he has studied in his chief work. If it were for the present writer to speak yet a little more personally, and to lament in his death one of the friends whose loss no fortuity of earth can compensate; to indulge a retrospect of years through which their beginnings ran parallel; to recall the serious moods that broke into laughter, and from laughter rose again to serious moods; to remember differences without enmities—it would be to feel again the influences of stars long set, and in the question of the future begun for the vanished comrade in letters to realize how far the unknown transcends the what we know.

Editor's Study.

I

WRITERS who have offered articles that have been declined often wonder why this or that contribution which they see in the Magazine has been preferred to their own. The editor has before him a letter from a writer who is vexed by this problem, and who asks for help in its solution. He encloses two printed articles which he had unsuccessfully offered to all the best American magazines, and which were finally published in a respectable weekly paper, yielding him little profit and a slender satisfaction to a legitimate aspiration. His surprise, occasioned by his failure with the magazines, seemed to him justified by the high estimate put upon these articles by a man of considerable literary reputation to whom they were shown, and who deemed them worthy of publication in the very periodicals from which they were excluded.

The gentleman who participated in this author's wonder was not himself an editor. Though not, as we think, justified in his opinion, he might very well have been, notwithstanding the unfavorable editorial decisions. For, as contributors are frequently advised in the polite editorial scripts returned with their "unavailable" offerings, an article is not necessarily declined for want of merit; it might lie beyond the proper scope of the magazine; it might be of undue length; it might be too acutely timely for a monthly publication; it might be very good and yet lack novelty in theme and treatment; or it might cover ground occupied by contributions already published, accepted, or arranged for.

As a matter of fact, this author's articles did, in a general way, cover ground occupied by contributions that have appeared in this Magazine during a twelvemonth. But, apart from this consideration, we think they should have been declined for publication in any first-class magazine, for two reasons. They were nature-studies, in the first place, containing scientific statements, and the author had no such general recognition

as a scientific authority as would carry conviction to the reader. But, granted this conviction, these studies would have missed a lodgement in this Magazine because, in the second place, while they were made up of observations that would be interesting to a special class of readers, they had no organization with reference to any central idea or dominant suggestion that would give them either unity of effect or a general appeal to the interest of thoughtful readers.

II

It is this last-mentioned consideration that has led the editor to advert to this particular case—a case in which the author might have much to say for himself, and in which, indeed, the editor's judgment as to the literary merit of the contributions may have been at fault. The principle, nevertheless, holds—that, however happily chosen the theme of an essay or the *motif* of a story may be, and however interesting in itself may be the mere substance or material entering into the composition (the facts in the article, the incidents in the story, the impressions in the poem), the organization of the material is a determining factor. In this it is that the author shows such mastery and distinction as he may have. Pre-eminent in this, even if he deals with scientific facts and observations, he will be given a chance to gain for himself authority, though at the start he lacks it, and much more than this, since it is not merely the facts he uses that are important, but mainly his use of them, his imaginative co-ordination of them, or, as in the case of James Hinton, his spiritual leading through and from them.

We say *even if* he deals with the things of science; but, in fact, there are no other things of so far-reaching suggestiveness, no other things of such imaginative use in relation to our thought concerning questions of the greatest moment and interest.

In all things the human interest is ultimate; whatever lies outside of this is alien. We are not willing to leave