



# EDITOR'S EASY CHAIR

W. D. HOWELLS

WITHIN a month or two of this writing, there died in Cincinnati a poet of such rare, and of such genuinely Western, quality that not to note his loss would be to fail of duty to a phase of our literature which the Easy Chair feels tenderly bound to honor. This poet was old, as the young count such things; he was eighty-two years old, and the last three of these years he lay paralyzed and helpless after a fall from a carriage still three years earlier. His accident marked the end of his literary activity, but he remembered from time to time, though less and less, the desire of his poetic youth; he faded rather than wasted, and when the end came, it came so softly that nothing less vigilant than the love that watched and tended him could have known it for the end. Then, on one of the morrows that follow the early days of grief, this love found, "in an old box where he had put it," a dateless poem, which some anonymous Greek of the Anthology might have written, and which for younger readers will be as strange as if some anonymous Greek had indeed left it the record of his beautiful courage, though the time was when the name it bears was bright with contemporary welcome.

## MY LAST DAY

How far? How near? What mortal eye  
can see

How dark, how bright, that day far-fixed  
for me?

Enough when'er it dawns if I can say  
Let the sun rise, it brings me my Last Day.

JOHN JAMES PIATT.

Piatt's Last Day came to him when, following long exile, he had long been at home in his native air. He was born in Indiana, but most of his youth was passed in Ohio, where, after his boyhood on his father's farm, with whatever schooling could be the chance of a farm-

boy, he was apprenticed to the craft which has been the university of so many Americans from Franklin onward. Types and letters were at one in his instruction, but he was richer than most of these printers in the learning that not only good neighborhood schools, but even an Ohio college, could give. Later, he was fortunate in the companionship of a man uncommon of his kind anywhere and at any time, and perhaps not more uncommon in Kentucky in the days before the Civil War than he would be now. Piatt became the secretary of George D. Prentice, and he wrote many pieces of verse under the kind eye of the editor, himself a poet, for the *Louisville Journal*. Then, when Lincoln was elected, the Secretary of the Treasury gave Piatt a place in his department as fitting for the poet as Lamb's place in India House was for the essayist. But it was livelihood and opportunity, and it was no bad preparation for the consular posts which he afterward held. He was sent first to Cork, and then promoted to Dublin, where he so endeared himself to the whole community that the chief citizens joined in appealing to an imagined ideal of civil-service reform in an adverse administration, for his continuance in his office.

But a petition signed by the Protestant and Catholic bishops, the professors of Trinity College, all the Irish men of letters, and all the Irish Members of Parliament, with Parnell first, could not avail to have him reinstated. He came home and passed the rest of his life on his farm overlooking the Ohio River, with winter changes to the city which used to be called "The Queen City of the West," before Chicago had forged so far ahead of Cincinnati as to leave her indefinitely behind in population as well as in the repute of literature and art. Cincinnati, indeed, could

hardly have been counted a literary center, even before our literary centers had become countless, but among her people there were those who loved books if they did not write them, and were hospitable to the arts and sciences. From the beginning she was Western in the best and truest sort, and she was the metropolis of the region which was Piatt's native scene, reflected in his earliest verse and in whose light his earthly vision ceased when his Last Day came.

But his rare quality was not recognized first in the West of his day. The actual West is perhaps superconscious of its literary importance, both creative and critical, but in the days of the years of the eighteen-fifties and 'sixties it was diffident of its merits and powers. It waited very modestly for the East to say whether the thing it did was good or not, as the East used to wait for English recognition before it valued American performance; and if Chicago now gives the law to Boston in the brave matter, say, of free verse, the prior fact was in the order of nature. The West is still an indefinite term, and many things have been called Western which more strictly were Far-Western. The efflorescence of California in the brilliant satire of Bret Harte, to name him only who was first of the Californians, was an effect of the East in the new conditions of the Pacific slope. It had no root in the soil, and none of the poets who formed the San Francisco School of Harte's day were of California birth, much less culture; they were only Western by sojourn. Harte himself, who was first of them, had greater originality in his verse than in his prose, but he was born and grew up in Albany; the literary atmosphere which he breathed in the West was, as it were, piped from the East, and his ambition was, as the generous expectation of his fellow-exiles was for him, to suggest in his prose the literary art of Doctor Holmes.

The poetry of the West is really native in the Middle West, the West of the Ohio Valley, or the easternmost region of the Mississippi Valley, and it is this region which has given our literature three names of peculiar worth: the names of John James Piatt, of James

Whitcomb Riley, and of Madison Cawein. The first is at least first in point of time, though it will not be first in the thought of the youthful student of our literature. It is a simple matter for a poet who is loved as soon as he is read and finds himself at home in the hearts which he has touched; it is a simple matter, too, with the poet who renders the beauty of a new land in the terms of the old, and who makes its lover feel that Kentucky and Arcady are finally the same and that you have only to go deep enough to find the one in the other; but it is not so simple with the poet who comes earliest to a new land and asks it to feel the beauty of eld and faery in its homely antiquity and the memorials of its every-day life. This was the office of Piatt's poetry, and his name has not the prompt appeal of Riley's or Cawein's. He came feeling the pathetic charm of the past which was so nearly the present that his generation still knew the irk of its hardship and rudeness. When he sang of the prairie fire and the old cabin and the pioneer chimney, he touched the hearts of those who remembered them from their early days, but not the fancy of the young who turned impatiently from them and were perhaps tired of hearing of them from their elders.

The spirit of his poetry was the first voluntary expression of the Western life in the love of the Western earth and sky, and when most young American poets were trying to write Tennyson, Piatt was trying to write himself and, in spite of the ruling ideals, doing it. There is something of the movement, though scarcely the manner, of Tennyson's bucolics in "The Mower in Ohio," which came later, and which remains one of the best poems of the Civil War. "The Pioneer Chimney" recalls Wordsworth in its sober simplicity, but it is as wholly Western as if Wordsworth had never been; and "The Morning Street" is of a note quite new in its emotionalized thoughtfulness.

Eventually, Piatt became the author of three or four books of verse; but he is best represented by the little volume called *Sunshine and Firelight*, unless we are to own a fondness—or call it a

weakness—for a first volume called *Poems of Two Friends*, where he dared publicity with another boyish rhymers of his time and place.

*Sunshine and Firelight* does not give his whole range, but it fairly suggests it, and, as we turn its leaves, the quality of his poetry breaths from them again and again; from many a lovely rhyme gleam or glow colors of that elder West which the poet's verse remembers tenderly rather than passionately. In a certain sonnet called "September," the picture is the whole poem, which we give in great part, underscoring a line or two as Leigh Hunt used to do when he wished his reader to like them as much as himself.

## SEPTEMBER

All things are full of life this autumn morn!

The hills seem glowing under silver cloud;

A fresher spirit in nature's breast is born.

*The woodlands are blowing lustily and loud;*

*The crows fly cawing among the flying leaves;*

On sunward lifted branches struts the jay;

The fluttering brooklet, quick and bright,

receives

\*Bright, frosty silverings slow from ledges

gray

Of rock in buoyant sunshine glittering out;

*Cold apples drop through orchards mellowing.*

This is purely Piatt, but not more purely than another sonnet in which his imagination finds intellectual maturity and possesses his reader with no help from his art of picturing.

## TRAVELERS

We may not rest content; it is our part

To drag slow footsteps after the far sight;

The long endeavor following up the bright,

Quick aspiration; there is ceaseless smart,

Feeling but cold-hand surety for warm heart

Of all desire; no man may say at night

His goal is reached; the hunger for the

light

Moves with the star; our thirst will not

depart

Howe'er we drink; 'tis what before us goes;

Keeps us aweary, will not let us lay

Our heads in dreamland, though the

enchanted palm

Rise from our desert, though the fountain

grows

Up in our path with slumber's flowering

balm.

The soul is o'er the horizon far away.

Of the three Western poets whom we think the most representative, James

Whitcomb Riley is incomparably the most popular. He keeps mostly to the simpler, almost the simplest, interests. Passion, as we understand it from the novels and the covers of the magazines, enters scarcely at all in his winning appeal which has to do with children, their pathetic little fears and hurts, their quaint ideals and superstitions, their world, as they know it and as their elders tenderly sympathize with them in it. The little boy who has curvature of the spine, "Little Orphant Annie," and her frightening conception of a universe abounding in "gobbelins"—these and the like of them are the heroes and heroines of the lovable poet's fancy, and we cannot think at the moment of his yielding to the claim of any "love interest" more poignant than that of the father whose daughter has eloped, but who remembers that he, too, eloped in his youth, in the recurrent refrain, "I 'ain't got nothin' to say, darter, I 'ain't got nothin' to say." One must have heard Riley (we shall never hear him more!) recite this exquisite and truthful poem to value him fully. He was a perfect artist in that kind, and renewed on democratic terms the mediæval tradition of the bards who chanted the verses they had made.

Cawein's divination of the unity of all beauty and the identity of the past and present, wrought acceptance for him with a public which was rather far than near. Yet one feels that he is as genuinely Western as Riley; and that his courage for the kind of thing he did in air empty of tradition and waiting for his instinct to give it voice was a poem which he lived.

In the West there can be no talk of origins, but only of derivations, and from their names it is plain that Riley's derivation was Irish and Cawein's German. Piatt's name does not so clearly spell his French ancestry, but he was of the race which first settled the Middle West, and his family fought such autochthons as the Indians were, for its possession. By ancestry as well as by nativity he had the right to be the first of the Western poets to feel the beauty of that newer world and translate it in the terms of the art which can never be old.



## EDITOR'S STUDY

HENRY MILLS ALDEN

THE really significant words we use seem to have, each, two sides, corresponding to body and soul. The soul side ordinarily escapes notice, not being linked by any laws of association with the visible environment, but impinging obliquely upon the consciousness in irresponsible fashion, like an apparition. We might call it the ghost of the word, that independently of its body comes to haunt us from its hidden realm. An intuition of the creative reason comes to us like that, only not out of darkness, but from the unseen source of light.

The terms we use in common parlance are ordinarily sensed as indicating definitely apparent relations, as if they had the power of position only. What this power of relative position is it is the office of the grammarian to schematize in cases, voices, moods, and tenses. Usually in our schools the mental regard of language by the pupil is fixed wholly upon this scheme, as expressed in parsing—a sacred rite for exorcising the ghosts we were just speaking of, or rather for guarding against their approach, since they never appear to any but those in quest of real meanings.

The technical philologist is usually satisfied in tracing derivations and distinguishing between the primary and the secondary meaning of a word, having little sense of his real business. That is, he falls short of the psychical intuition—an easy lapse, for in the creation of a language the intuition is not apparent, but only its shadowy implication. Thus the primary sense of the term "intuition" itself is veiled, being indistinguishable from any other that signifies the physiological function of vision, except by its later selection distinctly limiting it to the psychical act of direct inward beholding.

Language, in its primitive stage, was

created long before instinct had been to any appreciable extent supplanted by conscious mental processes, in a period when, because of the insulation and immediacy of instinct itself, subject and object blended. There was only a glimmering of analysis in this twilight of the mind. The mental functions seemed quite identical with their physiological analogues. Thus the same word, "to see," was used for physical as for mental vision. The organs and functions of the physiological structure were burdened with meanings afterward discerned as supersensuous. *Anima*—whether as mind or soul—was an immediate implication of *animal*. With the progressive specialization of consciousness, from the first a mental detachment of subject from object, this blending was loosened. The detachment of the soul, in our modern psychical sense of the term, from the body was much later.

We know, or think we know, what living is for our individual selves, by conscious awareness, in sensation, perception, feeling, thinking, and willing, and we supplement this knowledge by observation so as to include the entire "land of the living," prompted by our social instincts, our interests, our sympathies, and our curiosity. We study physiology, metaphysics, history, and sociology. And as we speculate imaginatively in philosophy and poetry concerning the possibilities of living, so our faith overleaps the term of our visible existence and, penetrating the land of death, creatively shapes invisible habitations in which, by reason of our convictions, we dwell more surely than in those that are visible.

The images, concepts, notions, fancies, beliefs, and intuitions, attendant upon this expansion of consciousness, mark successive stages of mental and psychical detachment, at variance with