

V E R S E

The Revenge

All night I read a little book,
A very little book it was.
It had a pretty, shimmering look
Like silver threaded into gauze.

I read it till the windows turned
Into blue ghosts which stared at me.
The fire tittered as it burned.
A dwarfish sneer perched on my knee.

Who was it put the poison there?
Who has conceived this hellish thing—
To lay a sightless, soundless snare
Amid its lovely whispering?

So gently came the rush of rhymes,
So lightly breathed the poison in—
Who thinks of cinquecento crimes,
White hellebore on jessamine?

I took that little shy, sleek book
And set a crimson match to it.
It crinkled like a freshet brook,
And flaked and vanished, bit by bit.

There was no book my hands could hold,
No book my eyes could ever see,
But round my head it ran, a bold
Ironical phylactery.

I cannot read the book again,
But there's no need, it scalds my head,
A strip of livid, living pain
I shall not lose till I am dead.

For hate is old as eagle peaks,
And hate is new as sunrise gulls,
And hate is ravening vulture beaks
Descending on a place of skulls.

Hate is a torch, hate is a spur,
Hate will accomplish my design:
The author's first biographer!
I pray, O Hate, that task be mine.

I shall not need to criticize
Nor look the subject up at all,
But simply turn round both my eyes
And gaze at my brain's inner wall.

There I shall see a fresco wreath
Of letters moulded of dried tears,

And annotated underneath
The things I've thought and thought for years.

'Twill be a pleasant job, I think,
To crumble up those dusty tears,
And stir them thickly in my ink:
Hate paid at last his long arrears.

My footnotes will enrich the brew
With colours I've brought back from Hell.
I'll write down all I ever knew.
By Satan's ears, I'll write it well!

By Satan's tongue! I'll tell the truth,
And not one word will add to it,
From his egregious, twisted youth
To his last frozen torture fit.

I'll write down his biography
So that the world will die of laughter.
I'll pin him like a squirming fly,
A comic spasm of hereafter.

I'll make his sins a jig of mirth,
His loves so many masterpieces
Of high derision. I will dig
Bare the cold roots of his caprices.

I'll sling about him every soul
He squeezed and drained to give him drink.
His wife gone mad—I'll make it droll.
Bless the Hell colours in my ink!

I'll leave him not a decent rag
Of tragedy to wrap about him.
I'll hang him up as a red flag
Till every street boy learns to shout him.

I've taken up a pretty whim,
But, tit for tat, he had his chance.
And I may end by blessing him,
My partner in this ghoulisn dance.

He slew me for a time—admitted;
But I shall slay him for all time.
Poor shrivelled clown whom I've outwitted,
I pardon you your poisoned rhyme.

Go peacefully, for I have done
With you, and your false book is dead.
There's sorrow, too, in having won.
Go softly then, and go wellsped.

AMY LOWELL.

Books and Things

IN what key shall I pitch this novel of mine, which at last, after all these years, I am ready to begin? Surely the answer is easy. Larrabee the Blest—which my novel insists upon calling itself, although my dislike of punning titles is as inveterate as yours—Larrabee the Blest must have the color and the tone which real life has had, in my ears and eyes. Larrabee the Blest must be a faithful report of what life has said to me. I am sufficiently a child of my time, albeit rather an elderly child, to be incapable of aiming at any other mark.

But what is it that life has said to me? This question, to which I thought I knew the right answer, has put every conceivable answer clean out of my head. Life has said: "I am here, I am now, I shall not last. For you, when for you I am over, the past—both your private past and all the past of all the world—will be as if they had never been. The future—what a pretentious word for what a small affair! For you the only future lies between the present hour and your hour of death." Since man was conscious of life there has not been a moment when life was not saying this to somebody. To me, as to every one else, life has said different things at different moments. Nobody can report the whole of life verbatim. The most I can hope for, at my hopefulest, is that a fairly accurate description of my novel may be this: "On such a day, in such a place, addressing a small and restless audience, Life said, in substance and in part. . . ."

On second thoughts, perhaps I had better strike out "in substance," since what life has said to me "in substance" is just what I most don't know. But "in part"! There lies the only goal I can be sure of making. The flow of time and life, that odd stream in which individual human drops are always being born and dying—this I must not try to represent, since the greatest novelists have tried and failed, each in his degree, to represent it. Nor shall I try to draw characters as inconsistent as the people one knows, who are as centreless, as incoherent, as a bunch of grapes. That way failure lies. But wait a minute—how stupid of me—do not all guide-books to the art of fiction keep repeating, with an iteration more or less damnable, that there is one part of life, and only one, which a novelist can report verbatim? He can report talk. What men and women say. Set though they must be in oceans of misty falsification, I can still by merely listening and remembering and taking notes give my readers small islands of reality. Dialogue.

Every scrap of dialogue in my novel, if I will have it so, can be something I have heard somebody say. But I have not heard enough to furnish, according to this specification, a single novel with dialogue. What nonsense! Every man hears enough in one month to supply all the dialogue necessary to all the novels he can write in a lifetime. Every man hears. Nobody listens. Of the few best listeners none remembers more than a tenth of one percent of what he has paid attention to. What I need, in order to equip my short novel—Larrabee the Blest won't run to more than fifty or sixty thousand words, I suppose—what I need, if my dialogue is to be restricted to things I have heard people say, is an attention more acute and less selective, plus a more retentive memory, than any novelist, or any playwright, has possessed, ever. That is all I need.

Well, suppose I imagine myself supplied with the

material which such gifts would bring along. On the stage, as M. Maurice Donnay once reminded us, nothing would seem less natural than a dialogue which copied life exactly. He said this twenty odd years ago. Is it true today? Aren't we approaching a moment when, to the excluding, narrow, starved, unhappy children of that moment, no speech will seem natural in novels or plays except a stenographic report of their own chatter? But this predicament toward which we are moving seems always itself to be on the move. The distance which separates us from it will still be long, after no matter how much shortening, and the rest of the way will always be impassable. The more accurately a novelist listens, the more faithfully he reports, the fewer the readers who will perceive that he has listened well.

Nothing would sound, in a novel, less like a stenographic report of real talk than a stenographic report of real talk. True today, it will be less true tomorrow, less true the day after, and it will always be true. This, if I am not mistaken, is the hypothesis I arrive at, which I ought to have started from. And "it is the nature of an hypothesis, when once a man has conceived it, that it assimilates everything to itself, as proper nourishment; and, from the first moment of your begetting it, it generally grows the stronger by everything you see, hear, read, or understand." And Mr. Tristram Shandy immediately adds: "This is of great use." It is indeed. By the help of my hypothesis I am enabled to say that those living novelists are not stenographic whose dialogue sounds most like stenography. They are merely selective in a way more or less new, and they do their selecting from material that is new more or less. What we call, in novels, an approximation to stenography, is usually an exaggeration of the traits which give current speech its banality.

Besides, if you had forgotten nothing, or had taken notes of everything, and if you wished to give your stenographically reported talk a good chance of sounding lifelike, you would have to give the other parts of your novel a surface, a tone, a movement such as no novel has had yet. Better I don't say and don't mean, but different, certainly different. What I am trying to get at, the buoy I hope to round by all this tacking, is that although I cannot make more than a small proportion of my dialogue stenographic, I can easily make so much of it stenographic that a child can't fail to distinguish what I've heard from what I've made up, and that the rest of my novel will sound less naturalistic than even the invented parts of the dialogue. So unflattering is the light thrown by what we can do upon what we can't.

Well, what is the answer? That I had better give up my plan, better not try to write a naturalistic novel at all? I don't think so. Why not postpone the dialogue until the last of all, write the rest of my novel as naturalistically as I can, and then try to get the dialogue into the picture? Or perhaps, since dissonance of dialogue and narrative is one of the means to burlesque, and since I am bound to achieve this dissonance any way, why not exaggerate the dissonance, why not go in for burlesque, openly? Can't I say what I have to say, show what I have to show, as accurately in burlesque as otherwise? After all, there is a burlesque technique of saying, while quite seriously believing, that life is short and death is long, that each of us is part of this earth's perishable freight.

P. L.