

THE HISTORY OF A POEM.

BY EDMUND GOSSE.

COVENTRY PATMORE died, at the age of seventy-three, on the 26th of November last. In another place I have endeavored to recall the personal characteristics of this extraordinary man, and something of his conversation. To-day I hope to make some additions to the knowledge of his famous poem, *The Angel in the House*, the history of which has been almost without a parallel for its vicissitudes. There have been published exaggerated statements as to the sale of this book, but I believe it is well within the mark to say that 200,000 copies have, during these forty years, been circulated in England and America. It has been extravagantly praised and unjustly scorned, but it certainly has not been neglected by the great public, and some account of the circumstances in which so popular a poem was produced may not be unwelcome to the readers of this review, especially as Patmore lived a life of extreme seclusion, and rigorously barred his doors against interviewers. With the statement that for sixteen years I enjoyed the intimate friendship of this great writer, I close these words of necessary introduction.

In his twenty-third year Patmore became acquainted with the lady who was to become his wife and his Muse. At this time he was a thin and hungry-looking youth, the author of one small volume of unsuccessful poems. A lady who recollects him at this time tells me that she never saw him eat a mutton chop without wondering if it would be the death of him, so starved and haggard did he appear. In point of fact, however, although frail and sometimes hypochondriacal, Patmore had then, and preserved through life, a fund of muscular and constitutional health. Like many men of imagination, he was a tireless walker and a voracious eater, but indulged in no manner of games or athletic

exercises. His brother and he were admitted in 1845 to the house of Mrs. Orme, the daughter of a prominent and popular Nonconformist divine, then lately dead, Dr. Andrews. With Mrs. Orme resided a young sister of twenty-one, Emily Augusta Andrews, whose carven features and rich color survive for us in the art of Woolner and of Millais. Coventry Patmore fell in love with her, but he had no fixed income at that time. He told me, long afterwards, that £75 represented what he had to live upon in the year which closed November, 1846, when, through the instrumentality of Lord Houghton (then Mr. Monckton Milnes), he was appointed a supplementary assistant in the Library of the British Museum.

The official salary thus secured was not wealth, and hardly comfort, but it was a competence, and on the strength of it Patmore proposed to Emily Andrews and was accepted. On the 11th of September of the next year the young people were married in Hampstead.

Dr. Garnett, whose acquaintance with Patmore began in 1851, tells me that the poet was once speaking to him of these events, when he added the quaint information that, wishing to be sure that a congeniality of taste existed between Emily Andrews and himself, he had lent her Emerson's "Essays"—still rather a new book in 1845—asking her to mark the passages that had struck her most, and, on getting the book back, was delighted to find that the marked passages were those which had also particularly struck himself. The story is characteristic, yet who shall say whether a man, genially in love, could fail to admire the thoughts which had attracted the lady of his affections? In any case, whether Emerson was their hymeneal *flamen* or no, the marriage was made in Heaven. All who have consented to recall their memories of that household unite in describing it as the most cheerful, the most graceful, the most dignified that ever was supported on such a tiny pittance. Mrs. Patmore was "a Mary in the House of God, a Martha in her own," one of the simplest, sweetest, and most inspiring women that ever contrived to make a poet happy.

In spite, however, of the unity between Patmore and his wife, there existed differences which were of essential importance. Serene and gentle as she was, Emily Patmore had very distinct views about religious matters. Her father, at the time

when he presided over the services at Beresford Chapel, had been one of the most influential leaders among those who called themselves Independents or Congregationalists. With this Christian body, Emily Patmore preserved her sympathy, and she was, in particular, opposed to all approach of the English Protestants to Rome, holding the new-fangled tenets of the Puseyites in abhorrence. Her husband, on the other hand, was a churchman, and one whose proclivities were "high"; by the very tenor of his mind and his leaning towards ascetic mysticism, Patmore was foredoomed to become a Catholic. Long before he took the step to Rome, in 1865, he was half-persuaded to do so, and it was certainly nothing but the presence of that Protestant angel in his house which kept him a professing Anglican during her lifetime.

It would be a mistake to search the private history of the young Patmores for an exact parallel to the adventures of Felix and Honoria, but there were not a few touches which were strictly autobiographical. The name of the heroine was not, indeed, as has been incorrectly stated, that of Mrs. Patmore herself, but of her mother. In the Dean of Salisbury, Honoria's dignified and gentle parent, Patmore was drawing from fancy and report a portrait of his own father-in-law, Dr. Andrews, whom he had never seen, since he died in 1841. In lifting the whole scene a little higher in the social grade, and in particular in making his heroine the daughter of a dignitary of the Established Church, instead of a dissenting minister, Patmore was probably yielding something not merely to poetic display, but to his own superior interest in the ritual of the Church of England. Patmore told me that his wife and he spent their honeymoon at Hastings, and that an exclamation of hers, on descending to the beach for the first time, inspired, long afterwards, the beautiful lines with which "Amelia" opens:

" Whene'er mine eyes do my Amelia greet
It is with such emotion
As when, in childhood, turning a dim street,
I first beheld the ocean."

The earliest instalment of the *Angel in the House* was published late in 1854, by a firm of publishers long since extinct, Messrs. John W. Parker & Son. It was anonymous, and the reason, Dr. Garnett tells me, why Patmore did not put his name

on the title page was that his father's book of reminiscences, *My Friends and Acquaintance*, had just received so bad a reception from the critics that the son thought his name would prejudice his cause. The authorship, however, was a poor secret, for a number of fragments, including the beautiful piece beginning, "Lo! when the Lord made North and South," had appeared in 1852, under the author's name, in the volume called *Tamerton Church Tower*. But the name certainly was a disadvantage, for Peter Patmore, who had been Colburn's reader, and who had now fled the country to escape his creditors, was perhaps the best-hated man of letters then flourishing in Europe.

This earliest instalment was simply entitled *The Betrothal*, and it was followed in 1856 by *The Espousals*, a volume of not quite so many pages. In 1884 Coventry Patmore, knowing my great interest in the history of *The Angel in the House*, very kindly presented to me copies of these original editions as altered and arranged by him for the second edition of the united work. This precious relic lies before me as I write, and the alterations, all in the poet's beautiful handwriting, are so very numerous that in many cases, for pages together, the manuscript entries exceed the print in bulk. In later reissues Patmore was incessantly tinkering the text, so that to form a variorum edition of *The Angel in the House* would be a task before which the boldest bibliographer might shrink. But the main radical changes were made in 1857, and since then the poem has been, in essential form, what it is to-day.

One change which must strike every one who studies the abundant alterations made, particularly between 1854 and 1857, is a metrical or rather a rhythmical one. When Patmore, as a young man of twenty, began to write verses, he seemed to possess a most defective ear. How far the extraordinary eccentricities which mar his volume of 1844 were willful or accidental, I am unable to say, but to read many of those early lyrics is like riding down a frozen lane in a springless cart. He had his peculiar theories of stress and accentuation, but I think, also, that he had much in the Art of Poetry to learn. When he came to publish *The Betrothal*, in 1854, the lesson was already half prepared, and I attribute the increase in smoothness and felicity to the close companionship with Tennyson which he had been enjoying.

But in 1856 Patmore gave his mind closely, for the first time, to the study of English metrical law, and the proofs of the results lie scattered broadcast over the pages of his MS. One example will show this as well as a hundred. In 1854 he had printed :

“ For thus I think, if any I see
Who fall short of my high desire,”

but this could not satisfy the fastidiousness of 1857, and it was changed to:

“ For thus I think, if one I see
Who disappoints my high desire.”

As everyone knows, *The Angel in the House* is written in a uniform measure of alternate rhyming eights, the commonest metre for humble hymns and ballads that has ever been invented. Patmore was often attacked by the critics for using this humdrum, jiggling measure, and I once ventured to ask him why he had chosen it. He replied that he did so of set purpose, partly because at that particular time the poets were diverging into the most quaint and extravagant forms, and he wished to call the public back to simplicity; but partly because it was a swift and jocund measure, full of laughter and gaiety, suitable, not to pathetic themes, but to a song of chaste love and fortunate marriage. No doubt there is truth in this, and the simplicity of Patmore's measure pleases us still when the fantastic variety of his friend Woolner in *My Beautiful Lady* (1863), a poem which once threatened to be a serious rival, has long ago become a weariness.

That Patmore, as he used hotly to aver, did not neglect the polishing and fashioning of his facile metre, a comparison of the different texts amply proves.

But the alterations which he made were of a far more radical kind than any mere rhythmical ones. He cancelled long passages, added new ones, removed stanzas from one part of the structure to another, and almost in every case these bold and essential changes were improvements. There can be no question, and the point is one of great interest in the career of a poet, that in 1857 Patmore was in enjoyment of a new flush of creative talent. There is, therefore, a peculiar interest in what he wrote at that time, and I do not scruple to print here one or two fragments which occur in my MS., but which I cannot discover were then or have ever since been printed. What whim constrained the

poet finally to exclude this exquisite little "epigram," with which he had closed the seventh canto of his work ?

"REJOICE EVERMORE."

"I err'd this day, oh Lord, and am
Not worthy to be called Thy son ;
But if Thy Will be, Heavenly Lamb,
That I rejoice, Thy Will be done !
Death I deserve ; I am yet in life ;
Ill is my wage, thou pay'st me good ;
These are my children, this my wife,
I feel the Spring, I taste my food.
Thy Love exceeds, then, all my blame.
O grant me, since Thou grantest these,
Grace to put 'Hallow'd be Thy Name'
Before 'Forgive my Trespasses.' "

Still less reason does there seem to have been for ultimately rejecting "Love of Loves":

" 'The Man seeks first to please his Wife,'
Declares, but not complains, Saint Paul
And other loves have little life
When she's not loved the most of all.
We cannot weigh or measure love,
And this excess, assure you well,
If sinful, is a sin whereof
Only the best are capable."

It cannot, on the other hand, but appear to me probable, that Mrs. Patmore, in her rigid antagonism to Popery, would decree that the following beautiful and highly characteristic section savoured too much of Rome to be preserved. As the poet composed it, it should have come between "Love and Honour" and "Valour Misdirected":

THE VESTAL FIRE.

"Virgins are they, before the Lord,
Whose hearts are pure: 'the vestal fire
Is not,' so runs the Poet's word,
'By marriage quench'd, but flames the higher ;'
Warm, living, is the praise thereof ;
And wedded lives, which not belie
The honorable heart of love
Are fountains of virginity."

One more epigram is far too delightful to be lost:

NOTA BENE.

"Would'st thou my verse to thee should prove
How sweet love is ? When all is read,
Add 'In divinity and love
What's worth the saying can't be said.' "

fac. Light is a big fool.

There is plenty of evidence of the great seriousness with which Patmore composed and revised all portions of *The Angel in the House*. He did not regard it as a mere work of entertainment, or even as an artistic experiment, but as a task of great social and moral importance which he was called upon to fulfil. This sense of the gravity of his mission took, in 1854, a form which he proceeded immediately to reject, no doubt because the expression of his feeling, though natural to himself, might strike a reader as arrogant. The canto now called "The Friends" was originally intended to begin with these lines :

" May these my songs inaugurate
The day of a new chivalry,
Which sha'll not feel the mortal fate
Of fashion, chance or phantasy.
The ditties of the knightly time,
The deep-conceiving dreams of youth,
With sweet corroboration chime,
And I believe that love's the truth."

The expression here might not be judicious from the lips of a very young writer, but it was essentially justified. The curates and the old maids, who were presently to buy the poems of Patmore as the sweetest, safest sugar plums of the sheltered, intellectual life, were themselves responsible for the view they took of *The Angel in the House*. They imagined the grim and rather sinister author to be a kind of sportive lambkin, with his tail tied up in bows of blue ribbon. But Patmore was a man of the highest seriousness; he aimed at nothing less than an exposition of the divine mystery of wedlock, and no one should consider that he has fathomed, or even dipped into, the real subject of the poem, until he has mastered the wonderful sections at the close, called "The Wedding" and "The Amaranth." Here the ideal of nuptial love is described and expatiated upon, as perhaps by no other modern poet, with the purity of a saint and the passion of a flaming lover.

In the original draft, Vaughn, the supposed writer of the poem, and his wife confess that they expect it to be cruelly cut up by the reviewers, but anticipate the consolation of a warm letter of praise from the laureate. Of this latter satisfaction, they were at least certain; since 1846 Tennyson had been the nearest and the most admired of Patmore's friends, and the influence of his comments and encouragements is certainly marked in the tex-

ture of *The Angel in the House*. But Patmore had good reason to dread the cruelties of the professional critics. His earlier volumes of 1844 and 1852 had received abuse of a kind such as we can now hardly conceive of. *Blackwood's Magazine*, which had sent Keats back to his "gallipots," had learned no lesson from the passage of years; it had called Patmore's verses "slime," "the spawn of frogs," and "the ultimate terminus of poetical degradation." It is only fair to say that, before his death, Professor Wilson apologized for the virulence of this disgusting article. Other reviews, without being so offensive as this, had been very disagreeable. In those days, a young poet had to fight for his place, and the more original he was, the harder was the struggle. There was none of the gentle dandling of the immature which is now the fashion in our literary sheets.

On the whole, however, the reception of *The Angel in the House* was not unkind. The *Athenæum*, it is true, published a very cruel article, which began as follows:

"The gentle reader we apprise That this new Angel in the House Contains
a tale not very wise About a Person and a Spouse. The author, gentle as a
lamb, Has managed his rhymes to fit. And haply fancies he has writ
Another *In Memoriam*."

If this is read aloud, it will be seen to be a not uningenious parody of the measure of the original. The whole review was composed in this form, and was the work of the then famous musical and literary critic, H. F. Chorley.

This, however, was far from being the general attitude of the press, and several of the leading literary papers gave warm recognition to the merits of the new poem. More important, by far, was the reception of it by the leaders of thought, and in this Patmore was greatly helped by his social *entourage*. His sister-in-law, Mrs. Orme, delighted in the company of intellectual people, and gathered them about her. Mr. Ruskin, who was, I believe, a connection of Mrs. Patmore's by marriage, was from the first an enthusiastic believer in *The Angel in the House*, and he wrote that he wished all English girls to know its pure and beautiful language by heart. Mr. Ruskin was a warm and persistent admirer; in many of his writings he insisted on the ethical value of the poem, and as late as the publication of *Sesame and Lilies*, when Patmore and he had ceased to be in personal sympathy, Mr. Ruskin wrote: "You cannot read Pat-

more too often, or too carefully. As far as I know he is the only living poet who always strengthens and purifies" Mr. Ruskin must be considered as having given more in private conversation than in writing the start-word to the success of *The Angel in the House*.

The Patmores were not disappointed of their letter from the laureate, but a less expected admirer was Carlyle. With him, too, they had become acquainted through Mrs. Orme. He slipped *The Angel in the House* into his portmanteau, as he was starting on a journey to Scotland, and wrote a number of letters on the subject to the gratified poet. It is characteristic that Carlyle considered the book would have been more serviceable if it had been written in prose instead of verse, but he was outspoken in commendation of its spirit and tendency. Meanwhile, the sale of *The Betrothal* of 1854 and *The Espousals* of 1856 was slow, and it was not till these two were combined in *The Angel in the House* that the wider public took up the tale. I have mentioned that on the MS. title page of the united work, which I possess, the date is 1857; but the breaking out of the Indian Mutiny, I believe, caused the poet to delay publication for a year. In 1858, after so many sorrows and such a shedding of the nation's best blood in Russia and in India, the public mind in England was eager for domesticity and rest. The tender purity of Patmore's poem, its direct appeal to the primitive emotions of the heart, precisely suited English feeling. *The Angel in the House* began to sell in hundreds, then in thousands, and it soon became the most popular poem of the day.

The author proceeded to expand it. In 1860 he published *Faithful for Ever*, in which Frederick Graham, the rejected suitor of the Angel, marries a woman not his social equal; but one who, by dint of worthiness of soul and a striving after higher things, becomes a help-meet in the best sense. It cannot be said that this theme lends itself well to poetry, and the form Patmore now adopted, that of letters in octosyllabic rhyme passing between the characters, was ill adapted to his purpose. *Faithful for Ever* was soon melted into its successor, *The Victories of Love*, and it is now by no means easy to detach it from the general texture of the whole.

All this time the health of Emily Patmore had been steadily undermined by consumption. On the 5th of July, 1862, she

passed away, and the Angel in the House was buried in Hendon Churchyard. Whether or not the final section of his poem *The Victories of Love*, in which the pathetic parting of married lovers is dwelt upon with exquisite tenderness, was written before the death of Emily Patmore, appears to be doubtful, but the dates suggest that it was largely composed in premonition of that event. Without dwelling on so private and so delicate a subject, there can be no indiscretion now in saying that certain of the most poignant odes in the *Unknown Eros* embalm memories and episodes of this long-drawn, sad farewell. *The Victories of Love* was composed in a vein more resigned, if not less ardent, and in the sermon near the close of it Patmore distinctly prophesied of those psychological mysteries to which, under the influence of his second marriage, his intellect was to give itself so freely.

It is worth noting that "The Victories of Love" appeared in 1862 in successive numbers of *Macmillan's Magazine*, where they must have greatly surprised the readers of that periodical, utterly unaccustomed to so strange a sort of serial. But I am told by Dr. Garnett that the offer of £100 for this use in the magazine was gladly accepted by Patmore, who was somewhat overborne by the expenses of his wife's long illness. In the next year *The Victories of Love* appeared as a small volume, and in course of time, having long swallowed up *Faithful Forever*, it has itself been absorbed in the general text of *The Angel in the House*.

The success of the poem now seemed more assured than ever. The cult of it had spread to America, where Emerson and Hawthorne cordially recommended it. But at the very height of its popularity, Patmore himself struck a double blow at it, from which it was long in recovering. In 1865 he married a second time, and he became a Roman Catholic. The ordinary sentimental person, who used the poem as a kind of litany of nuptial aspiration, and the conventional country matron or curate, to whom it represented literature purified from all worldly dross and dedicated to Church and State, were equally scandalized and disgusted. The real ethical beauty of Patmore's ideas, the charming art of his best illustrations—what, in short, constitute him a poet of a high order—had never touched these deciduous admirers, and they determined, in their thousands, never

again to turn the pages of a favorite who had become the husband of a second Angel, and a Papist into the bargain.

This offence given to the common mass of readers was attended by a change of front among the real admirers and censors of poetry. About 1865 a new poetical school had arisen, with Mr. Swinburne at its head, which demanded more refulgent color, more fiery emotion, a more revolutionary aspect of life and manners than Patmore chose to encourage. There had always been present in *The Angel in the House* elements which laid themselves open to ridicule; there were realistic touches which went out of fashion with the chignon and the crinoline. Young critics took heart to laugh at Patmore; young parodists made themselves very entertaining at his expense. With singular rapidity the poem which had been in universal favor from 1858 to about 1868, within ten years more sank into almost complete desuetude, an object of critical contempt, a book to be mentioned in the same breath with Tupper's *Proverbial Philosophy*. The first sign of recovery was given, perhaps, by Dr. Garnett's *Florilegium Amantis*, a collection of extracts from Patmore's collected poems in 1879. Gradually the public and the critics came back to him; the sales of *The Angel in the House*, which had fallen to almost nothing, rose to heights unknown in the days of its early success, and when Coventry Patmore died the other day, the event was chronicled by every serious organ in England as one of great literary importance. He lived to see his name placed high among those of the immortals. There is, perhaps, no modern work which can be named the reputation of which has suffered such vicissitudes during the lifetime of its author.

EDMUND GOSSE.

HOW TO REFORM BUSINESS CORPORATIONS.

BY V. H. LOCKWOOD.

It has been said about business corporations that "upon the character of their future, more than upon anything else, depends the nature of the conclusion of the industrial revolution" that is in progress. It is my belief that the selfish and dishonest management of business corporations has been the chief cause of the great inequality in the distribution of wealth during the past forty years; whereas, if they were honestly and safely conducted, they would afford a safe and satisfactory investment for small sums and thus tend to equalize the wealth of the people.

A railway president, by bearing or bulling the stock of his railway company, of whose interests he is the chief trustee, can in a few days and without any consideration transfer to his own pockets a million dollars from the pockets of the little holders of stock who stand shivering on the outside of the management. By prostituting his position of trust to his own ends, the director or officer can readily enrich himself at the expense of others. He can indirectly prefer himself as creditor, and if he desires he can paralyze the company for the benefit of another company in which he has a greater interest.

Stock can be watered, assets diverted, stockholders frozen out, the management put in control of nearly all the stock, a huge sham structure can be reared upon a really invisible and infinitesimal base, often to do a business that needs no corporation at all, whereby creditors are peaceably robbed and the holdings of the poor are confiscated. The directors and officers, who are actual trustees of a legal trust fund, are not in most States required to hold more than one share of stock, or to be worth seven cents, or to have any skill for the business, or to give a bond or other