

Prayer to the Florence Madonna

BY CORNELIA OTIS SKINNER

MARY, most serenely fair,
Hear an unbeliever's prayer.

Nurtured in an austere creed,
Sweetest Lady, she has need

Of the solace of your grace;
See the tears that stain her face

As she kneels to beg your love,
You whom no one taught her of.

Tender me the secret art
How you ponder in your heart

All the turns of soul and mind
Of this thing called womankind,

Never telling any one,
Smiling gently at your Son.

Mary of a thousand graces,
Show me how to find such places

As the countries where you dwell,
(Woman too I shall not tell).

Let me too know Tuscan rills,
Little Perugino hills,

Glades that man-saint never trod,
Too serene for even God,

Where wee common flowers grow
That quiet painters seem to know

Twine into your garlands best.
Mary, let me be your guest.

I am lonely, I am tried
By this ever-surgin tide

That they tell me I should breast.
Is it sin to pray for rest?

Surely yours was not a life
Filled with struggle, filled with strife;

What you did was little known
Once your Son was weaned and grown.

Nothing that you ever said
Down the centuries has spread. . . .

Merely that a creature mild
Married God and had a child,

That she tended him with pride,
That she sorrowed when he died,

That her life to peace was given,
So they made her Queen of Heaven.

Teach me in a world that ever
Prizes only what is clever

How to see with lowered eyes,
How to hide that I am wise,

How receive and how impart
The quiet language of the heart,

How to wait and how to will,
How to love divinely still.

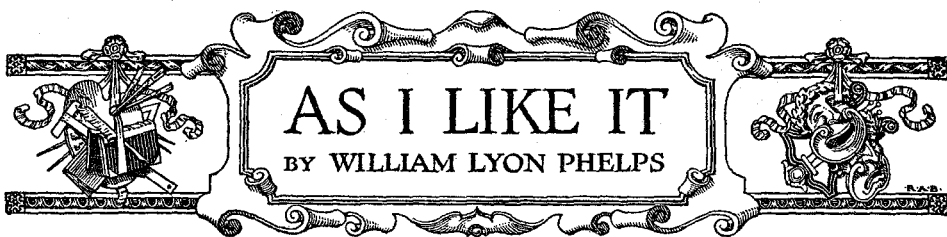
Mary, most serenely fair,
Hear an unbeliever's prayer.

Sickened by a world of greed,
Tranquil Lady, she has need

Of the beauty of your grace;
See the tears that stain her face

As she kneels to beg your love,
You whom no one tells her of.

Amen.



AS I LIKE IT

BY WILLIAM LYON PHELPS

IS any work of art flawless? The choral portions of the Ninth Symphony are an anticlimax, the female saint in the Sistine Madonna has a simper, and if "The Rugged Pyrrhus" was intended to be perfect, it should have been so; if meant for a burlesque, Hamlet ought not to have admired it. Andrea del Sarto was called errorless, but was he? "Heaven's gift takes earth's abatement."

To please the Pope, Giotto drew a perfect circle, but when finished it was zero. There is a certain imperfection about perfection—there is something unsatisfying, something missing. In ecclesiastical architecture, the Gothic is more appealing than the Classic, partly because of its apparent irregularity. "There is no excellent beauty," said Bacon, "that hath not some strangeness in the proportion."

Nature is more sublime than art, because the works of Nature are in accordance with law but not with rules. To the discerning eye and ear, an inner harmony has more beauty than superficial regularity. The greatest works of art are perhaps the most natural. All creative artists hate the Beckmessers, and the Beckmessers hate them, but for opposite reasons. The Beckmessers hate the original artists because they do not understand them, and the artists hate the Beckmessers because they understand them only too well.

To say that perfection is unsatisfying does not mean that we love blemishes, uncouthness, or crudities; the majority of contemporary novels are disappointing not because they are perfect, but because they are immature. They lack dignity. They lack sincerity. They are not written with soberness of mind. Among living novelists, Thomas Hardy is in a class by himself, because of his austerity. Apart from the dominating interest of his narrative and characters, the outline of his (say) "The Return of the Native" is almost as beautiful to contemplate as

sculpture. His training and experience as an architect served him well.

Among the novels of the past, I can at this moment recall only four that in construction approach perfection; that can almost be called flawless. There are greater novels than any of these, but few so nearly ideal in form. The four I have in mind are "The Scarlet Letter," "Madame Bovary," "Fathers and Children," and "The American." To all aspiring novelists I recommend them as models. Perhaps my readers will suggest other works of fiction fit to stand with these.

An American book that has justly awakened the enthusiasm of so fastidious a critic as Mr. Santayana is "The Golden Day," by Lewis Mumford. It is an essay in criticism, a criticism of American art, letters, and life. Every man and woman who wants to live on a higher intellectual plane should read this book. It is a book with a core, and the core is a "divine discontent." For complacency is the brake on development.

In a time when many American books are slovenly and vulgarly written, the style of "The Golden Day" is singularly refreshing. Mr. Mumford has at his command the resources of the English language, and knows how to make the most of them. Every reader should feel complimented, not because the author has endeavored to please him, for he has tried to please no one but himself; but because he has assumed that those who read this book deserve the best.

Every chapter is filled with penetrating ideas, luminously expressed; one really ought to read such a book repeatedly, for one cannot begin to exhaust its richness in one perusal. Furthermore, I believe that in this instance the whole is considerably less than the sum of its parts.

If I understand the thesis, I do not find it convincing. It is perhaps well enough to call the Middle Ages the Age