

THE PASSING OF GERALD MASSEY

The Veteran Bard of Freedom

(Selected)

The recent passing from earth life of Gerald Massey, which occurred on October 29th, marked the departure from our midst of the last of the notable band of Anglo-Saxon poets of the people whose championship of justice and freedom through their ringing verse, in the first half of the nineteenth century, was one of the most positive and effective agencies for democratic advancement on both sides of the Atlantic. With us were Whittier, Lowell, Whitman and Longfellow. In England Elliott, Shelley, Byron, Massey, Mackaye, Hood and Mrs. Browning voiced the higher aspirations of the people, their yearning for freedom, for justice and the right to that larger life, which should give the opportunity necessary for the soul to grow and the brain to be nourished.

It is doubtful whether any poet of England during the forties of the last century did anything like so effective work as did Massey in arousing the people to a sense of their God-given rights, the importance of the fundamental demands of democracy, and the necessity of recognition of the law of solidarity. On one occasion he voiced this then little recognized truth in regard to the oneness of life in the following striking words:

"Humanity is one. The Eternal intends to show us that humanity is one. And the family is more than the individual member, the Nation is more than the family, and the human race is more than the Nation. And if we do not accept the revelation lovingly, do not take to the fact kindly, why then 'tis flashed upon us terribly, by lightning of hell, if we will not have it by light of heaven—and the poor, neglected scum and canaille of the nations rise up mighty in the strength of disease, and prove the oneness of humanity by killing you with the same infection.

"It has recently been shown how the poor of London do not live, but fester in the pestilential hovels called their homes. To get into these you have to visit courts which the sun never penetrates, which are never visited by a breath of fresh air, and which never know the virtues of a drop of cleansing water. Immorality is but the natural outcome of such a devil's spawning ground. The poverty of many who strive to live honestly is appalling."

He saw with almost prophetic vision what Henry George later so splendidly elucidated in his great economic works touching the right of all the people to the land, and with no less clarity of vision he recognized the necessity of public-ownership of natural monopolies,—something which the ablest and wisest statesmen and economists of the day are everywhere beginning to recognize as the only true solution of this great question, which will safeguard the people's rights and interests and protect them from exploitation at the hands of the few who through monopoly rights levy a cruel tax on industry. On this question, more than half a century ago, he said:

"We mean to have a day of reckoning with the unjust stewards of the earth. We mean to have the national property restored to the people. We mean that the land, with its inalienable right of living, its mineral wealth below the soil and its waters above, shall be open to all. We mean to have our banking done by the state, and our railways worked for the benefit of the whole people. We mean to temper the terror of rampant individualism with the principles of co-operation. We mean for women to have perfect equality with men, social, religious and

political, and her fair share in that equity which is of no sex. We mean also that the same standard of morality shall apply to the man as to the woman. In short, we intend that the redress of wrongs and the righting of inequalities, which can only be rectified in this world, shall not be put off and postponed to any future stage of existence."

There was something in Massey's poems of freedom that reminded one of the grand old prophets of Israel, who dared to speak against entrenched wrongs and to lift up their voices fearlessly for the oppressed. In one of his many poetic appeals to the people he thus strives to awaken the masses, who were paralyzed and soddened by poverty, oppression, and the arrogance of privilege.

"Thus saith the Lord: You weary me
With prayers, and waste your own short years;
Eternal truth you cannot see
Who weep, and shed your sight in tears!
In vain you wait and watch the skies—
No better fortune thus will fall;
Up from your knees I bid you rise,
And claim the earth for all.

"Behold in bonds of mother earth,
The rich man's prostitute and slave!
Your mother earth, that gave you birth,
You only own her for a grave!
And you will die like slaves and see
Your mother left a fettered thrall!
Nay, live like men and set her free
As heritage for all."

But Massey, like all the great reformers, was a man of faith. He dared to boldly uncover wrongs, to turn his back on the lure of wealth and popularity, in order to champion the cause of the exiles of society and the down-trodden ones, because he had an unshaken faith in the advent of a nobler day and a better economic order. Where in all the popular poetry of democracy and social justice can we find two more inspiring or finer little gems than the following, the first depicting the advent of full-orbed democracy?

"Immortal liberty! we see thee stand
Like morn just stepped from heaven upon a mountain,
With beautiful feet, and blessing-laden hand,
And heart that wellet love's most living fountain!
Oh, when wilt thou draw from the people's lyre
Joy's broken chord? and on the people's brow
Set empire's crown? light up thine altar-fire
Within their hearts, with an undying glow;
Nor give us blood for milk, as men are drunk with now?

"Old legends tell us of a golden age,
When earth was guiltless—gods the guests of men,
Ere sin had dimmed the heart's illumined page,—
And prophet-voices say 't will come again.
O happy age! when love shall rule the heart,
And time to live shall be the poor man's dower,
When martyrs bleed no more, nor exiles smart—
Mind is the only diadem of power.
People, it ripens now! Awake, and strike the hour!

"Hearts, high and mighty, gather in our cause;
Bless, bless, O God, and crown their earnest labor,
Who dauntless fight to win us equal laws,
With mental armor and with spirit sabre!
Bless, bless, O God! the proud intelligence
That now is dawning on the people's forehead,—
Humanity springs from them like incense,
The future bursts upon them, boundless, starried—
They weep repentent tears, that they so long have tarried."