

THE POET'S FUNCTION AS INTERPRETER.

PEOPLE are apt to talk as if the poet had no function in the modern world, or at any rate as if his only function were to amuse and entertain, and as if the State, in its higher and political aspect, had no need of him. The poet, we are told in effect, is an anachronism in an age like the present,—a mere survival from more primitive times. Those who argue thus are badly instructed, and are reasoning from the imperfect premises afforded by the early and middle Victorian epoch. For a moment the world was exclusively occupied with industrial and other utilitarian objects, and naturally enough the poet seemed out of place. He proved nothing, he made nothing, and he discovered nothing,—or at any rate nothing in the regions of science and invention. But this overshadowing of the poet's function in the State was not real, but merely accidental and temporary. Though people thought so for the moment, machinery is not everything; nor is it the least true to say that the song of the singer is never something done, something actual. Tennyson put this with splendid insight when, in his plea for the poet, he reminded the world that—

“The song that stirs a nation's heart
Is in itself a deed.”

While the possible need for a Tyrtæus exists, and that need can never be wholly banished, the poet must always have a real use. But there are other functions no less real, and hardly less important, which a poet may perform in the modern State. He may act as interpreter to the nation, and show it, as only he can, the true relations and the true meaning of the different parts which make up the whole. The great difficulty of every nation is its inability

to realise and understand itself. Could it do this truly a nation could hardly take the wrong road, and bring itself to ruin and confusion. But few nations have this faculty, and therefore then need so sorely an interpreter; one who by his clear vision shall show them what they are, and whither they tend. And for the mass of mankind, only the poet can do this. The ordinary man, whether rich or poor, educated or uneducated, apprehends very little and very vaguely, save through his senses and his emotions. Maps and figures, dissertations and statistics, fall like water off a duck's back when you talk to him of the British Empire, of the magnitude of our rule in India, and of the problem of the dark races; of the growth of the English speaking people in Canada and in Australia; and of how our fate, as a nation, is inextricably bound up with the lordship of the sea. He hears, but he does not mark. But the poet, if he has the gift of the interpreter, and without that gift in some shape or form he is hardly a poet, whether he works in prose or verse, can bring home the secrets of Empire and the call of destiny to the hearts of the people. Of course he cannot touch all, but when he does touch he kindles. He lays the live coal on men's minds; and those who are capable of being roused have henceforth a new and different feeling and understanding of what he tells.

Mr. Kipling's fascinating poem, “The Native Born,” published in Monday's *Times*, is a reminder to us of how large a share he possesses of this interpreting power. His work is of extraordinary value in making the nation realise itself, especially as regards the Empire and the oneness of our kin. One of the great difficulties of the mere politician who knows