

OF ENGLISH BLANK VERSE.

(Concluded.)



WHILE the leaven of Italian influence in Surrey's songs and sonnets at once made itself felt, and such verse as that of a Skelton became impossible, we scarcely wonder that the new, unpolished measure was little heeded, for as yet it was as an uncut diamond, refracting the sunlight from hardly a facet. But it was not wholly unheeded, for almost with tears we

read that Roger Ascham, with his pure eye, detected in the rugged verse its cunning virtue, and, like an aged Simeon, blessed it. One Nicholas Grimald, too, chief editor, if not originator, of *Tottel's Miscellany*, employed the measure for the first time in original poetry. All this, however, was but feeble leafing; the tree seemed as if it might die. But its roots were striking deep into British soil and absorbing substance; and, in Thomas Sackville, an Englishman to his inmost fibre, blank verse gripped the foundation rock of British legend and of British life. Its branches, then, obedient to some principle of elective affinity, were soon intertwining with those of the rising drama, and in "Garbadne," the first English tragedy, the two became one in a pleasing harmony of leaf and flower. But they had begun to bloom ere the winter was over, and little wonder that the wild March winds should hurl the blossoms to the earth, and sunder the interlacing twigs. Torn apart, however, they both flourish—blank verse in "The Steel Glass" of George Gascoigne, the drama in the "Damon and Pythias" of Richard Edwards; but, true to their instincts, they again began to feel after each other, and ere long in the "Tamburlaine" and in the "Faustus" of Christopher Marlowe, the drama and its proper measure are so knit together that wild will be the storm which will tear them asunder. With splendid promise, too, the intertwining branches now burgeon and bud, and in Shakespeare they burst into a glory of leaf and blossom that filled the land with beauty and the world with fragrance.

In the presence of Shakespeare we can but bow the head in silence, for how can we speak when we cannot comprehend? We are on the plain, and the mountain top on which he stands is too near heaven to be free from cloud. Easy it is to see how a path was being prepared for him by the preceding dramatists, notably by Marlowe, who, wild and sombre, was to Shakespeare what Perugino was to Raphael, but truly it was a divinity who went along that path after they had cast it up, leaving the barren wayside rosy with flowers, the trim-cut hedge-rows wild with blossom, and the air loud with the voices of birds.

In the hands of William the Master, the rugged jewel left by Surrey to his country began to flash with a thousand eyes; the iron stiffness of Sackville was transmuted into the pliancy of damask steel; and blank verse was perfected as a dramatic measure. So strong and free has it become, that it is as new after Shakespeare has spoken in it as the orchestra was when Beethoven, who had so much to say, said what he could and said no more. The form is compelled of the thought; the instrument must submit to the singer.

After the Shakespeare glory the Elizabethan drama continued to blossom in such men as Massinger and Fletcher, but with fading beauty and waning sweetness. Ere long it was all decay and death; for the land began to swarm with children of corruption, venal versifiers and licentious scribblers, whose cramped thoughts and wire-drawn conceits formed for themselves cramped expression and disjointed verse, and made them fain to set off their wretched matter with rhyme. A loathsome herd they were, with straightened foreheads and bloated faces, building for themselves flimsy structures of rotten wood, and gilding over their worm-eaten fronts.

But a soul was created under these ribs of death, and from amidst the tinsel'd *bagnios* there rose a vast cathedral, conceived by a master who, in the deep of night, had

listened to celestial minstrelsy, and who built to the strains of heaven. A sublimer spectacle this world has never seen than Milton, in loneliness and self-reliance like a god, raising, amid the hell-babel of a licentious rabble, that stately minster, whose beauty the wind and the rain of the centuries would only perfect, and along whose vast aisles all through the years would roll symphonies of loftiest music, to die far off in the cadenced surge of some unknown sea, only to gather again into a sullen roar and reverberate through nave and chancel, in the sweep and thunder of a mighty wind.

In "Paradise Lost" blank verse reached its fullest growth and greatest development, and, rooted in what is deepest in our social and religious life and entwined with the highest reaches of England's ideality, became at once our national and characteristic metre, and the measure of the greatest epic of the modern world.

We have been tracing the development of blank verse, which after all is but an instrument that was slowly perfected to help men to utter their thoughts, and we have now considered the form it took in the hands of the master within whose diapason all subsequent artists have found room to express themselves. It is needless to trace its history further. What interest has it for us that an hundred fingers have touched the keys since, when we stand by the instrument that was played by a master? The blank verse of Wordsworth is stately and impressive, that of Tennyson sad and musical, but how far they are within the mighty utterance and majestic harmony of the verse of Milton! Yet when I consider the history of the measure and realize its capabilities to be as strong and beautiful as the highest thought, I seem to hear within the measure itself, as if in murmurs within a sea-shell, the sonorous cadences of the past mysteriously suggesting what is yet to be; and, as I look out on the tide of the coming years, I feel vaguely yet certainly that, as it will roll in bearing golden barges, freighted with all the wealth of knowledge, and throwing back the wrack and drift-wood of a world's experience, it will bring to men those who will yet show nobly the harmony of souls immortal within these muddy vestures of decay, and whose genius and passion will push the frontiers of Blank Verse into regions of light and power that were beyond the ken even of a Milton.

CHARLTON BLACK.

UNIVERSITY CREST.

The heraldic bearings of the University and College tell their story very lucidly to those who are familiar with the venerable art of blazonry. The Crown, the symbol of King's College, is borne in chief on the University shield; and as indicative of subordination, on a chevron on that of the College. The open books need no interpretation; and the beaver emblem of Canada, aptly completes the symbolic presentment. When the two shields are impaled, as in the beautiful carving over the main doorway of the University buildings, the University and College are presented as bound in sacred and indissoluble union. The burning lamp, the College symbol of intellectual illumination, with its apt motto: "*parum claris lucem dare*," is more familiarly known than the University crest, though they are both sculptured on the dedicatory tablet at the head of the grand stair in the tower. The crest of the University is an umbrageous maple, with the motto: "*crescit velut arbor aëvo*," which with the supporters Minerva and the Dolphin of Arion are blazoned on the memorial window in Convocation Hall.

The symbolic lamp of University College has not been lighted in vain; the maple tree, fitting emblem of our Canadian seat of learning, has put forth vigorous branches, and its alumni repeat with pride, as well as with brightest anticipation, the prayer of its motto: "*crescit velut arbor aëvo*."

SIR DANIEL WILSON, IN 1886.