

Canada's Poet Laureate — Bliss Carman

(By R. W. Douglas.)

PART II.

Some of the critics find it a difficult task to characterize Carman's poetry in comparison with other writers. One of them, Mr. J. G. Marquis, says that he is a sort of twentieth century blend of Omar Khayyam, Shelley and Robert Browning, with Tennyson's art thrown in to give delicate flavour to the whole. Is not this but another way of stating that Carman has an individuality of his own and is a great poet himself? It may be true that he has Omar's love of sensuous beauty, some of Shelley's lyrical power and sweetness, Browning's force and sometimes his elusiveness, a good deal of Tennyson's skill in concentrating an idea or scene into a single word or phrase. But that is far enough from saying that his writings imitate any of them. He would naturally possess the great poets' qualities or he would not be a great poet. His poems may show reflections of great works of other writers, but they are the distinctive product of Carman's own individuality. Marquis thinks that "The Pipes of Pan" is Carman's supreme effort in poetry. For myself, I think that his short lyrics are his greatest glory, but "The Pipes of Pan" is a splendid poem. It is Greek, pagan and true in its interpretation of nature. Carman has entered thoroughly into the spirit of the morning of the world in which every stream, grove, tree and mountain have their inhabitants. The colour, movement and thought make a harmonious whole. I shall take the liberty of quoting two of the stanzas, though it is unfair to the poem not to quote it all.

"This is something that I heard,
"Half a cry and half a word,
"On a magic day in June,
"In the ghostly azure noon,
"When the wind among the trees,
"Made mysterious melodies.
"Such as those which filled the earth,
"When the elder gods had birth.

"Ah, the world is growing old;
"O, the joys it used to hold!
"Love and beauty, naught have I
"But the fragrant memory.

"Once, ah once, (ye know the story),
"When the earth was in her glory,
"Ere man gave his heart to breed
"Iron hate and heartless greed.
"Near a meadow by a stream,
"Quiet as an ageless dream,
"As I watched from the green rim,
"Of a beech grove cool and dim,
"Musing in the pleasant shade,
"The soft, leafy sunlight made,
"What should gleam and move and quiver
"Down by the clear pebbly river,
"Where the tallest reeds were growing
"And the bluest iris blowing—
"Gleam a moment and then pass,
"(Ah, the dare-to-love she was,
"In her summer-fervid dress
"Of sheer love and loveliness!)
"Wayward, melting, shy and fond,
"Lissome as a bulrush wand,
"Fresh as meadow sweet new blown.
"Sandal lost, and loosened zone.
"Our own white Arcadian
"Touched with rose and creamy tan,

"Eyes the colour that might fleck
"The red meadow-lily's neck.
"Hair with the soft silky curl,
"Of some stray patrician girl,
"Beech-brown on the sun-lit throat,
"Cheek of tawny apricot,
"Parted lips and breast aglow,—
"Who but Syrinx, as yet know."

poem. Pan becomes the soul of the world, which in all things and through all things is ever endeavouring to give lovely colour to its desire for perfection. The spirit which lends music and colour to the life of nature is never forgetful of its colour:

"Think you Pan forgets the tune
"Learned beneath the slim new moon,
"When these throbbings all were blent
"To the dominant intent."

"There we have the explanation of the spell that nature casts over us, and a means offered whereby we may regain our heritage in her dominion of joy. Love, then, is the first and last word of creation. The pipes of the wood-god charm us because of the love that thrills through them, and it is only by attuning ourselves to their music and letting loose the love in our hearts in a like manner that happiness can be reached and beauty be brought to birth."

"Marsyas" which develops the theme of "Pipes of Pan," is every whit as beautiful. Such a splendid passage of classical description as that of the fourth stanza cannot be paralleled by any other writer since Shelley's time. Marsyas has heard the flute of the goddess:

"And he followed. Heart of wonder,
"How the keen blue smoke upcurled
"From the shepherd huts to heaven!
"How the dew lay silver-pearled
"Where sleek-sided cattle wandered
"Through the morning of the world."

"The Magic Flute" is a variation of the same subject, drawing its mythology from Egypt, rises, if possible, to a still higher level of beauty. The story is splendidly told and the passages which interpret it are full of poetic power.

A detached poem, "A Vision of Sappho," forms artistically the prelude to the Sappho lyrics. Whether or not as certain lines in it seem to suggest, the poet was at the time of its composition either meditating or working upon the project of restoring the lost songs of "Sappho," does not greatly matter; the "Vision" is in any case most interesting in itself, and well worth careful study.

I now come to the volume of poems called "Behind the Arras." This is quite different from all that Carman had previously published, and is a singular collection. The poet has forsaken the green world of nature for the gray world of men, and those harpies of civilization, doubt and despondency, appear to have struck their talons into his soul. Certainly no poet, Canadian or American on this continent, has ever sounded the dreadful depths which Carman's plummet reached in this book. Before I had read it, I always considered James Thomson's "City of Dreadful Night" as the supreme conception or expression in modern literature of awful disillusionment with latter day civilization. But I no longer think so. A greater writer than James Thomson has