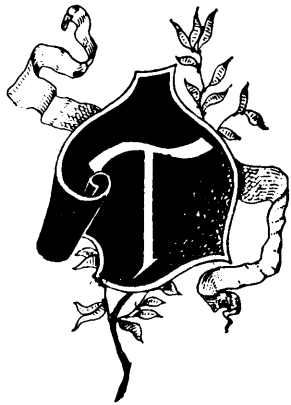




CHERRYFIELD, December 16th, 1891.

DEAR DOMINION,—



O YOU, and all the staff and craft, a day off—a brush with St. Nick, and plenty of spoils—enough fat in the goose, and sweet suet in the pudding—a sprig of holly to remind you of that land where Christmas is best observed,—in a word, a merry and a happy season! Don't let the day pass without proper ritual, amid which let Milton's "Hymn" of the Nativity be read, and the Introduction to Canto Sixth of "Marmion."

THE MASTER.

VI.

Full well they laughed....
At all his jokes, for many a joke had he.

All this is of the past, school-fellows; and well it is, I hear you say, if we have gone on to that which is better. I grant it, there should have been a more gracious spirit; and nobler, sweeter manners should have been moulded there. Well had we been instructed under the rule of Him who breaks not and bruises not wantonly. Yet we were not always shy and fearful of our teacher; for, after all, there was little or nothing in him of the coldly-cruel or satirical mood, and he was, in the main, a kindly hearted man, abounding in cheerfulness. A merry sparkle was often in his eyes, and well he loved his joke and his story. He did not sing; but his life was not devoid of all music. There went and came the occasional storms, which passed, perchance leaving the atmosphere of the school the clearer, when the rolling thunders sounded like echoes laughing into distance; while the vanishing cloud-wreaths were but the murky foil to the sun's returning splendour. There was a certain spice of humour even in his severity; and he who suffered most would now confess he deserved most of what he suffered.

Often in the later hours of a winter afternoon, when the younger scholars were few, and the older had put aside their slates and books, he would unbend himself. Then, seated near the rusty stove reddening with heat along its bulging sides, he would entertain us with some anecdote or reminiscence of an earlier day, while we forgot to notice the swiftly falling shadows, and troubled not ourselves with unpleasing memories of chores undone awaiting us at home. Then would he tell us how in his boyhood, among the sugar-camps tending the boiling sap, he encountered the mysteries of mensuration, wrestled with trigonometry, and mastered in his sleep the insoluble problem which had baffled his waking powers. At any rate, there was the result in the morning! Or he chuckled to tell us how the scholars in a certain district locked the boozing Irish master in the school-house, then went to the woods for a half-holiday, to come shouting back in the late afternoon with branches of wild-cherry in full blow,—apt tokens of victorious independence; and how they let their sobered but wrathful captive out, who, just then a little chap-fallen, made them smart for their mischief next morning. All these things were given with peculiar gusto. And do you not remember his vagrant of the Emerald Isle, who would call at a farm-house and state his case so ambiguously? "Ye haven't a dhrop o' wather that ye'd give a poor thraveller a sup o'—mi-lkk, row?" finishing up his request with a doubtful quaver, and adding—"no-o-o?" as anticipative of refusal, in a drawling, lugubrious tone, quite delicious, to hear our master's imitation of it. Or he told us of the mill-man who had gone struggling down into the chill water between the rolling logs by the mill and had seen unspeakable visions, before strong hands could draw him up to light and air and the agony of returning consciousness. With the thought of him comes Locke Amsden's romance of love and lore among Vermont's green hills, and the wonderful African story of Kallulah, all of which helped to nourish those seeds in my mind, of the fanciful and remote, which have flourished more than any others. How we all listened;

meanwhile the whistling wind sifted the snow against the windows, and howling round the corners of the house gave by contrast an added sense of homely security.

School-fellow! didst ever discover the secret of the dark loft? And, being left behind alone to become weary of thy solitude in the room below, didst scale the wall, force the trap, and enter through the ceiling that stifling penetralia of dust and cobwebs? There I see thee lie, brimful of thy mischief and shaking with stifled mirth, to give the master a momentary surprise when he—thy gaoler—should unlock the door. Better thou hadst been busied with thy already too-much-neglected spelling-book. Thou wast already at the foot of thy class, and this is but one of thy summer tricks! Or thou art, perchance, the luckless fellow who—when evening darkened on thy captivity, and thou wert hungering more for thy supper than were the cows thou shouldst bring home,—didst stealthily lift the sash and creep into surreptitious liberty, only to smart for it the next morning, and find thyself at evening again in double bondage.

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A pocket-tome of some choice author [you do well to keep a precious lot of them around you, remembering with Johnson how superior in serviceableness they are,] is an agreeable companion to bring to the fireside, or carry for company on some solitary walk. I found it so, for more, I suspect, than the thousandth time, when, the other day, I had occasion to take a tramp through a bit of woodland familiar to me, on my parish rounds. I picked this up by chance, but was the more pleased to find it that most admirable piece of writing in its kind, the "Thoughts on the Present Discontents," by Edmund Burke; and, the more so, because of the revival of my interest in him by Mr. Davin's late allusions, in the *Week*, to that great commoner. What an expansion of thought and feeling is the result of such a refreshment from this fountain of pure English; and how your narrow notions and feeble prejudices drop away, like quills loosened from the back of the "fretful porcupine," while you come in contact with such large and luminous views and expositions of great principles. He was classed among the impracticables, by the liminary utilitarians and place-seekers of his day; but his were no flimsy schemes, no cobweb fancies, but the patterns of just designs in the heavens, that the political ages are to work out. In the domain of intelligence—

"He dreamt not of a perishable home
Who thus could build."

Under the green arches, the interlacing branches of pines, and through all that winding road, the shadow of this ever-living man,—the Abdiel of unassailable faith and of superb ideals,—went before me, and illumined the way. He is of that rare order of minds that grow the more upon the world the nearer it advances goalward along the parabolic path of progress toward a virtuous intent and a right reason. Though for generations the grave-rust has had leave to gather above his bones, there is none upon his fame; and he is better known and understood by the men of to-day, than by those in the midst of whom he lived and moved. And his are the future centuries, with still warmer love and deeper knowledge; for the better and wiser the times become the more will he be to them. Yet in the days that were his among men, his lot was one infected with evils bitter to such a spirit, and far from palmy. His were few prizes and no spoils,—for which he did not conspire or waylay. To be rich, or titled, or fawned upon, was not his political mission on the earth. For long years, sitting upon opposition benches, seldom in office, and never high in favour or estate; too far beyond the aims and principles of his time for popularity, too rigorous in character and thought for adaptability to a British House of Commons of that date, his feet went not upon roses, though they turned not back because of the thorns. Never nobler lips, with prolonged sentences of loftier import, met the insult of empty benches, or the impertinent interruptions of hostile hearers. He was not, indeed, without the frailties of men of his order, and from which even the frame of the majestic Milton was not exempt,—such as a growing impatience, mingled with disdain, of the littleness and miserable follies with which so many beset him. It is the infirmity we might wish spared a noble mind, that, in the perpetual siege of indignities, misunderstandings and neglects, it may become embittered, incur the stigma of uncharitableness, and develop an extreme, and,—to most men,—an absurd, irritability, quite impossible to a lower organization. So, while the devotee of faction chafed in secret, for the security of place and the repletion of pocket, this man spake with dreadless energy the thing that burned in his heart and fermented in his mind. Spake it, too, as none others could speak it. Such a man cannot fail to be

well hated: let him be incorruptible as an angel, his enemies multiply in the gate. Let him dream of serpents the night long, he cannot see so many as his foes shall be. Yet it was not venality, or any baseness that brought corrosion to his mind; if anything, this petty abuse, perpetual disappointment, poverty, illness and sorrow. His most enduring and satisfying friendships were among the literary men of the age. But these things are of the past; and, as for most of the arrogants of his time, we know them not, for they have nothing to impart. What, however, is he to us, that he should live the life of lives, while others die? We know him as the loftiest spirit of his time, and one of the first of all times. Aside from his character, his intellect makes futurity immensely his debtor; for, as has been truly said of him, "he made the ablest speeches that were ever heard in the British Parliament." He connected himself and his history by the most indissoluble of ties, with a number of the greatest subjects that ever were discussed and debated by man: with the contest between England and her American Colonies; with Catholic Emancipation; with the Trial of Warren Hastings, and generally with all East Indian affairs; with the French Revolution, and with other matters:—while the dozen volumes which contain his writings and speeches belong to the very first rank of British political and historical literature, and are read by every man who aspires to understand history and politics."

* * *

The enthusiasm of self-sacrifice (proportionate, not only to the greatness of the need and the sacredness of the cause, but to the unworldly devotion of the devotee,) is capable of begetting sympathy in the breasts of a host of followers, beside the most exquisite pleasure to be derived from a moral source, in the mind so upborne by generous resolution. For is not such an one the chosen—the elect of the times, called unaware, maybe, to a leadership of suffering,—to represent illustriously what many are content to cherish obscurely,—freedom, honour, truth, purity; not as abstractions, or words, but as parts of their inmost spiritual being. But this divine intoxication is more uplifting with the swell of the popular wave, and at its summit, than after that crisis is past. The building of the pile is like a holiday, and martyrs have borne themselves like seraphs; but the hymn is amidst the flame, not amongst the ashes. The most bravely-ordered heart is human still, and capable of faintness, when the cause seems gone by default, and injustice temporarily triumphs, and its heroic defender is consigned to solitude and forgetfulness, while the public attention is turned away. Then, indeed,

"When Nature sinks, as oft she may,
Through long-lived pressure of obscure distress,
Still to be strenuous for the bright reward,"

nourishing faith and inward rectitude,—this is the sovereign remedy; looking to the morning, when the shadows shall flee, and the sufferer shall come forth amid the all-hails of good his constancy has established, "true yoke-fellow of Time," openly the approved of God and the people.

"He henceforth shall have a good man's calm,
A great man's happiness; his zeal shall find
Repose."

* * *

We know not yet what will be the event with Mr. John P. Whelan; but, if a just man and just cause,—as we believe,—in any event he is happier than most men deem. If Mr. Mercier shall attain his purpose, Mr. Whelan will have some private opportunity of comparing the purity of his motives with Mr. Mercier's, and of resolving whether he will abandon the standard he has lifted up. Among the blessed things which are the nutriment of just souls in solitude we will then commend the inspiration of heroic literature, and those ideals and examples by which the finest spirits in adversity have ever been sustained. A brief but excellent instance is the Sonnet of Keats, addressed to Leigh Hunt,* when incarcerated under conditions similar:

What though, for showing truth to flattered state,
Kind Hunt was shut in prison, yet has he,
In his immortal spirit been as free
As the sky-searching lark, and as elate.
Minion of grandeur! think you he did wait?
Think you he nought but prison-walls did see,
Till, so unwilling, thou unturn'dst the key?
Ah, no! far happier, nobler was his fate!
In Spenser's halls he stray'd, and bowers fair,
Culling enchanted flowers; and he flew
With daring Milton through the fields of air:
To regions of his own his genius true
Took happy flights. Who shall his fame impair
When thou art dead, and all thy wretched crew?

* Upon reference, I find that the sonnet was "written on the day that Mr. Hunt left prison;" and, as the reader will see, it is not in the form of an address or apostrophe.