

Contributions.

THE SONNETEERS.

In looking back on those rhymists who have given us thoughts and images worthy of lasting remembrance within the narrow compass of fourteen lines, I am by no means disposed to adopt the Johnsonian meaning of the word "Sonneteer" as implying "a small or petty poet." To countenance such a heresy would be to proclaim that, while "brevity is the soul of wit," diffuseness is the spirit of poetry.

All our best poets, those whose more extended flights of genius have been the happiest, have excelled in the sonnet. Witness Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, and numerous others, to say nothing of Petrarch and his brother poets abroad. Within the restricted fourteen lines, the cause of the despised sonnet has been nobly defended by the poet Wordsworth:—

"Scorn not the sonnet; critic, you have frown'd,
Mindless of its just honours; with this key
Shakespeare unlock'd his heart; the melody
Of this small lute gave ease to Petrarch's wound,
A thousand times this pipe did Tasso sound;
Camoëns smoothed with it an exile's grief;
The sonnet glitter'd a gay myrtle-leaf
Amid the cypress with which Dante crown'd
His visionary brow; a glow worm lamp,
It cheer'd mild Spenser, call'd from Faery-land
To struggle through dark ways; and, when a damp
Fell round the path of Milton, in his hand
The thing became a trumpet, whence he blew
Soul-animating strains—alas, too few!"

The sonnet, from its very brevity, and from its completeness within itself, has an advantage over other forms of poetry in its power of readily ingrafting itself on the memory; and, when in its perfection, it possesses a charming selection of cadences which find their echo in the awakened poetic sense long after its music has died upon the ear. Who can read aloud Milton's fine sonnet, on the *Massacre in Piedmont* without feeling stirred as by the clang of some far-off battle? With the opening lines, the majestic flow of the verse sweeps over the sense with a peal like the distant roll of artillery:—

"Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughter'd saints, whose bones
Lie scatter'd on the Alpine mountains cold!

Even them who kept thy truth so pure of old,
When all our fathers worship'd stocks and stones,
Forget not; in Thy Book record their groans
Who were thy sheep, and in their ancient fold
Slain by the bloody Piedmontese that roll'd
Mother with infant down the rocks. Their moans
The vales redoubled to the hills, and they
To heaven. Their martyr'd blood and ashes show
O'er all the Italian fields, where still doth sway
The triple tyrant, that from these may grow
A hundred fold, who, having learn'd thy way,
Early may fly the Babylonian woe."

Even those master-minds that, in spite of their undoubted claim to the divinity of poetic inspiration, have been justly accused of obscurity and mysticism in their more prolonged efforts, have yet rayed out perfectly clear and transparent when using the sonnet form of versification as the medium of thought. The more ambitious works of these brilliant but fitful geniuses confuse us with their very wealth of imagery and wild license of commingling fancies. To attempt to fathom their "deep obscure" is bewildering. It is like gazing on a summer-night's sky when the myriads of heaven's lesser lights are glancing, crowd upon crowd, from the deep blue above us, till the sense aches with the diffused splendour of those countless worlds of beauty. But, closer to the moon's orb, we see perchance some planet of a more distinct and concentrated glory,—and here we have a type of that gem of poetic creation, the scorned and despised sonnet. Within its narrow scope of words, but wide-reaching realm of thought, the singer no longer runs heedlessly after a meteoric fantasy; he has neither time nor space to go in search of a mere Will-o'-the-wisp. The Puck of Fancy, that freaksome, tricky sprite, must be caught, caged and tamed; imagination must be the slave, reason the lord-paramount of the hour.

What a world of forceful thought lies in our grandest sonnets! These are the truths that speak to the soul through the medium of a few ringing words more powerfully than all the field-preaching in the universe. Who, after reading them, could go incontinently and commit an unworthy action? There is a sonnet of Byron's whose recollection lingers with us in our moments of higher musing, and which exhibits a striking