

Pessimistic poetry cannot but be harmful; and yet how constant is the popularity of poets whose preoccupation with death and misery seems abnormal to a healthy mind. A. E. Housman is an exemplar of this. His attitude towards life cannot be ascribed to the effects of the war. Knowing this, anyone who has the least glimmerings in his mind, of the daily hazards taken by the youth of today, in the new callings created by science, cannot but lament that he centred his dramatic genius on such things as the gallows and the hangman's noose—things which are neither lovely nor desirable, nor even necessary, and which in the new world we are hoping to build, will be unknown, or remembered only as things of execrable taste. And yet his art is so cunning, his magic so irresistible, that one forgets in the sheer beauty and strangeness of his verses, the agnosticism as well as the unpleasantness of his subjects.

Perhaps some of you will smile when I say that Wilhelmina Stitch is the only living poet that I can call to mind, who is equally obsessed with the joy and beauty of common lives, and who is at the same time, attracting an even greater popularity; but her matchless poems in miniature, her lovely "Fragrant Minutes," are real poetry, and not to be classed for a moment with the genial effusions of Edgar Guest. I have no prejudice against Mr. Guest or his verses—quite the contrary. Whatever we may think of the quality of his greatness, his best poems are the real reflections of a brave and inspiring life.

The old Puritan tendency to brood over the sad and diseased conditions of life is passing away. In spite of our lapses into morbidness, there could be little demand for such a gloomy and monotonous poem as Blair's "Grave," and yet, in its time it was read and re-read with such intellectual pleasure and sentimental joy, as no modern poem is expected to evoke.

Now there is a healthier spirit abroad, the ancient spirit of joy tempered by the sobriety of modern experience. There will always be a touch of sadness in the highest poetry—it is inseparable from beauty—but we are realizing that to think healthily, is to be healthy, and this new and brighter feeling is, in part, reflected in our poetry.

Tragedy we must have—it is omnipresent in life—but an obsession with joy, while strengthening immeasurably the imagination, is not incompatible with a rare sensitiveness to the sorrows of others; with these we may have a passionate sympathy.

The elemental joy in Walt Whitman's poetry is marvellous, and not even his profound knowledge of the sadness and horror of the world could dim that joy for more than a moment. No one expresses more sympathy with the poor and down-trodden, but joy alone became, and remained, his master. Perhaps that is the reason why his admirers are so certain that his "barbaric yawp" will resound over the "roofs of the world" when men shall have become deaf to the "tinkling of the classic harp."

III.

The responsibilities of a poet are many and various. In this connection, William Arthur Deacon says, "Put all your heart into your poems, and they will be great. Our generation must find the soul of Canada and be its mouthpiece, and set the tradition fairly, for whether we set it well or ill, our influence will be lasting and determining. The hour has struck. Canada will have greater writers than we, but never again for centuries, will it be given to any, as it is given to us, to mould a people, a great nation, that will surely lead the world some day in thought and spiritual aspiration. "All that you have for Love's sake spend." as my great master, Edward Carpenter, has written. This is the time to give and give and give without thought of reward, or even of results. It is one of the great, heroic tasks of this world, and we have little time for literary embroidery. . . . We are all drawing closer and closer very rapidly, and the difference between those with the vision, who are laboring like navvies, and those who are playing aimlessly with literature, is as marked as that between white men and black."

Mr. Deacon preaches only as he practises. Labouring himself like a navvy, no one has done more, nor dreamed greater dreams for Canada. He has "that freedom of the soul" of which Fenelon speaks, "which looks straight on in its path, losing no time to reason upon its steps, to study them, or to contemplate those already taken, and which is true simplicity."

Many changes are imminent in our national life, and once begun, how far-reaching those changes may be, is beyond the power of any of us to foretell. Some nonsense verses of Edward Lear's come into mind—

"There was an old man who said
"Hush,

I perceive a young bird in that bush,
When they said "Is it small?"

He replied "Not at all,

It is four times as large as the bush."

Whatever changes lie before us, no one will be more affected by them than

our poets. It is to them that we look for that breadth and nobility of vision, which is so essential for an increase of national consciousness, and for the great outpouring of emotion which may so easily become destructive.

I like to think that Canada's supreme mission in the world is to add to its joy, and not to add to its pain and confusion. No other land has so many blessings in excess of its responsibilities, and that fact alone puts upon us a serious obligation.

It is the fashion to say that the "man in the street" cares nothing for poetry, but out of the thousands of books which are so laboriously written for him, and so carelessly read by him, there are, perhaps, a few lines of poetry which will stay with him as long as he lives, when all the rest is forgotten, to be the unknown factor in forming his character and career, and that is why our work is so important. With all its pains and penalties, it is its own exceeding great reward—there are more "Rewards and Fairies" for the poet, than for anyone else in the world.

There is a Russian legend that when Christ, the Guardian of Beauty, was about to ascend to Heaven, some troubador approached Him, and said to Him, "Our Lord Christ, to whom art Thou leaving us? How can we exist without Thee?"

Christ turned and answered, "My children, I will give you golden mountains and silver rivers and precious gardens, and you shall be nourished and happy." But then St. John approached and said, "Lord, give them not mountains of gold and rivers of silver. They know not how to watch over these treasures, and someone rich and powerful will steal them away. Rather leave Thy children but Thy name, and Thy beautiful songs, and command that all who value Thy songs, and love Thy singers, shall find the open gates to Paradise."

And Christ agreed, and said, "I will give them not golden mountains nor silver rivers, but My songs, and whoever appreciates them shall find the open gates to Paradise."

We, in Canada, have the mountains of gold, the rivers of silver, and the precious gardens in abundance, but, it is the rarer treasure, the simplicity, joy and fragrance of song, which will eventually open the gates of Paradise for us all.

Please God, we shall never again hear in our country the fierce "Song of the Sword," but we may have all the rhythmic songs of the world, the labour-songs of the earth, twined into one great national song; the song of the fishing-boat, and the song of the plough; of the coopers, the longshore-