

LONDON LETTER.

NOTES BY THE WAY: ON CHRIST CHURCH MEADOWS.

WE were rowed across the strip of water to the spit of land near Hengistbury Head by a brown-faced, blue-eyed, long-legged girl, who occasionally rested on her oars and allowed the boat to be drifted sideways by the current in order to devote her whole attention to asking questions of the great world from which we had come. There was something of Little Em'ly in her face (the Little Em'ly who runs along the breakwater with her hair flying while David looks on with wonder at her courage) which made her very familiar. Backed by three or four small friends, allowed after a deal of cuffling to scramble into the bows just as we were starting, and who crouched about her, their round eyes fixed on the strangers, the eager girl, in her picturesque attitude and with her quick, intelligent tongue, was a contrast indeed to the others gathered round who did no work and were cumberers merely. She could write and read a little, accomplishments painfully learnt at night when the boys were asleep; and she was past fifteen and wanted to go out to service. She must go away soon, she said, with a quick look of dislike at the four or five cottages with the inn in their midst which we had left on the mainland. Even in fine weather when they could paddle in the sea it was dull, but in wet when they had to bide in she didn't know what to do sometimes. There were plenty of children to play with if one wanted them, for "there are ten in under we" she said in her peculiar vernacular, meaning that so large a family occupied the ground floor of the cottage in which she lived; but she was tired of playing; she would like some work to do. It was difficult to arrive at any part of her history for she wished to hear our experience and not tell her own, and it was amidst a hailstorm of questions that our boat reached the shore, and was nearly tipped over, by the way, in consequence of the rapid and awkward disembarkment of most of our crew. At last, all danger passed, we stood firm on the sandy beach, and turned to watch our conductress pull fast across the water back to the group of squalid cottages she calls Home.

How can I best describe this rough bleak spot on the Hampshire coast? Figure to yourself a grey lake, formed by the meeting of the Avon and the Stour. On the left rise low melancholy hills on which here and there stands a solitary house. On the right a broken chain of small villas runs along the water-edge from Christ Church to Mudeford. In front, across the weird still lake over which the sea-birds hover, is the beautiful Priory Church, planted among pleasant heather lands, and which wonderful building has been a part of the landscape for these six hundred years. At our back are low drives, effectual barriers for the most part between lake and sea, except in the one place over which we have just been rowed, and where the rivers, having broken through the sand wall, ripple briskly straight to the salt waves.

And it was on this dismal spot, that unfolding my paper (for like the Old Soldier I am a poor creature without news) I read of the death of Wilkie Collins.

On ahead my companion, a tremendous naturalist, had wandered off with eyes bent on the ground, spying all sorts of treasures in the short grass and low bushes. The loss of a writer more or less would be as nothing I know to the fact that on the mead yonder quantities of gulls were feeding and that against that ledge of sand were a heap of empty crab shells, each of which had to be examined separately. So I sat on alone, looking into the lake (an occasional shout informing me of the wonders I was ignoring), and thinking of the days that are no more.

And what good days they were! The water, the hills, and the far-stretching meadow-land disappears, and, instead, in the light of a great north window, I see an easel laden with a many-coloured canvas. In place of the scent of the bog-myrtle, I smell the delightful odours of turpentine and cigar smoke, and, instead of the scream of the curlews, I hear the voice of the painter of the Derby Day as, working busily the while, he describes a recent visit to Gadshill, where also was Wilkie Collins, and tells me what a charming, delightful creature is the author of the "Moonstone"—"the best of all his books to me" says Frith, a remark to which I cry, Hear, hear. Often though I have lounged by the side of the easel I yet never heard anything that interests me more than the vivid little sketches of Dickens and his friends (are not these things written in the Reminiscences?); and it was here that first I listened with a vague wonder as "The Woman in White" was discussed (do you remember Leech's drawing and Walker's poster?), and later, "No Name," in which Edward Fitzgerald delighted, and later still the incomparable story, with the thrilling epilogue, of the "Indian Jewel." Is the present generation of critics just to the novelist whose pages their fathers read so attentively? It isn't proposed, no one could seriously propose, to put Wilkie Collins on a level with such a giant as Thackeray, with the great Dickens, or even with one or two of his men and women contemporaries—I am thinking of Mrs. Gaskell and of certain careful, excellent work of Trollope's—but are the papers in the right to give the author of the "Moonstone," of "Armada," of "The New Magdalen," such scant praise, and treat so many of his later books with contempt? Gentle, kindly, modest Wilkie Collins, who spoke evil of none, and of whom everybody, however hard and worldly, had something affectionate to say, how little you would care for the opinion of the present-day young gentlemen of the press when in the past you possessed an enthusiastic, friendly

critic in the person of Dickens himself! To-day we are told you were an imitator of the author of David Copperfield; an absurd accusation—never were two manners so dissimilar. To-day they want us to believe your method was all wrong; they insist you had no power of reproducing nature in your characters; they cry out at the melodramatic element in all your books. Personally I think it is the critics who are in the wrong and not your method, and I think most of us will still keep well within reach the "All the Year Rounds" in which so many of your delightful stories appeared, and when we want amusement—I won't say instruction—will go to them sooner than to certain well-puffed, modern volumes which I could name if I chose.

And before my companion has time to wander back to me I read in another sad little paragraph of the death of Miss Amy Terry, who wrote the "Romance of a Shop," and "Reuben Sachs." "Of all who pass us in Life's drear descent," says Landor, "we grieve the most for those who wished to die," amongst whom we must reckon the clever Jewish young lady who was in such delicate health that life was a burden to her. Rapidly become blind and deaf, they say, she was not strong enough to fight against such fearful odds. I remember the interest with which in "Reuben Sachs" I read of a society of people of whom till then I had known nothing. How I read of their dances and dinners, and listened to their conversations, and felt at the end of the third volume as if I had known them all my life. These are real people, these women, flippant, empty-headed, over-eating, and over-dressing for want of some other way to make the days pass, these men with their heads filled with the ambition of money-making. The book has no plot—it is too like a bit of life to have a plot—and no distinctive style, and is to be recommended only for its extraordinary air of truth. These are by no means the Jews that George Eliot drew—those grand natures ever dreaming of their religion, their race, yearning for the coming of the Messiah, for Jerusalem. They are portraits of the under-sized, ill-bred, middle-class Hebrew inhabitants of the Maida Vale Terraces that lie near to the Bayswater Synagogue; or of the richer class about Porchester Terrace, of the very rich set in Portland Place, all so alike in spite of their money. They are most of them rapacious, narrow-minded, greedy, hard, and if one met them in society one would give them a wide berth. Miss Levy, with her clear, direct manner of repeating this episode in the life of an ambitious Jew, this catastrophe in the life of a young Jewess, has made of her unpromising material something so uncommonly good that one feels regretful indeed that the author of "Reuben Sachs" will never tell us any more about these men and women whom she knew so well. No one will take her place, I think. It is impossible, they say, to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear; but it is a feat that Miss Levy has certainly accomplished.

The Naturalist came strolling back with hands full of rare flowers, with bits of weed, and shining shells. The deaths of neither the young girl or old man had, as I imagined, much effect on a person who does not touch a novel if she can help it, and finds the wonders of that unseen world so absorbing that she can think of nothing else. "See," she said, as she laid a small closed shell on my hand, "do you remember that Frank Buckland declared that He who had been so good to the fish would be good, too, to the fisherman"—which was all the answer I could get from this placid philosopher when I lamented the absence of all knowledge of that bourne into which these two, friends of all the reading world, have just turned their tired steps.

WALTER POWELL.

THE FALL OF THE LEAF.

AND now the ripened fruitage of the year
Is garnered ere the icy winds come forth;
Which lurk around the grim fields of the north,
And long to crisp the leaves now brown and sere.
See where the lordly maple spreads its shade!
No kingly robe of richest Tyrian dye,
Or queenly gem resplendent to the eye,
But pales before this monarch of the glade.
The fierce wind sweeps across the arid lea,
The grey clouds flit along the pallid sky,
The foaming billows surge upon the sea.
Swift is the southward flight of birds, and high,
Afar they seek on strong unwearied wing
For warmth, and rest, until returning spring.

Toronto, October, 1889.

T. E. MOBERLY.

TWO CANADIAN POETS.*

THOSE patriotically constituted people—a little "off," if we are to believe some pessimistic critics of the day—who from time to time declare a faith in the poetical future of their country will read with pleasure the "Voices and Undertones" of William P. McKenzie and "Lake Lyrics" by William Wilfred Campbell. And, indeed, these verses will be read, not only with pleasure but with something more, something infinitely higher and more improving than the mere sensuous gratification at easy correct rhyming and hackneyed pictures of life and nature which require very little trouble to be understood and appreciated. Those who desire to become acquainted with the verse—nay, the poetry recently offered to the public

* "Voices and Undertones." By William P. McKenzie. New York: Equity Publishing Co.; Toronto: Hart & Co. "Lake Lyrics and Other Poems." By William Wilfred Campbell. St. John, N.B.: J. & A. McMillan.

by these two comparatively young writers, must bring something more with them than the mere habit of reading, than the mere grasping of facts presented. To quote Mr. McKenzie's excellent motto "All this time and all times wait the words of true poems—the words of true poems do not simply please." This is a truth too much neglected by the average reader and the average critic alike.

In reviewing these two volumes together, it may be said that it was suggested by the character of the verse itself, and was not done simply because the volumes "came in" at the same time. Indeed, in the work of all the rising Canadian poets there is a striking *vraisemblance* in three or four essential particulars. Thus, Mr. Lampman, Mr. Duncan Scott, Bliss Carman, and the two writers whose works are at present under discussion, possess in common that absence of personality, for one thing, which is sometimes the hall-mark of the truest genius. Again, all these writers lean to an intense objectivity. They are, in their realization of what Nature is and of what she does for them, almost Pantheistic, certainly a little—Pagan. And they are all wisely conspicuous because they avoid the narrative or epic form. They have all, very likely, composed blank-verse epics, new Iliads, potential Childe Harolds, but they sensibly refrain from putting them on exhibition, for which we cannot be too thankful. A fine restraint, a sensitive judgment is revealed at least in these two new works, as well as great literary instinct.

Nature, then, is the chief inspiration which appears to have guided Mr. McKenzie in his choice of subjects, and his best efforts are those in which minute observation of natural phenomena occurs, amounting almost to scientific correctness, almost taking up descriptive work where Tennyson and Wordsworth left it off. For it will be conceded that the advanced modern poets, Morris, Swinburne and Rossetti, and the society-verse songbirds, Dobson and Lang, have done very little towards swelling the record of painstaking observers of natural phenomena. This is always to be deplored, for we have it on the very highest authority that scientific poetry—a veritable contradiction of terms to many minds—is to be the poetry of the future. To Wordsworth first—speaking of this century only—we owe that "harvest of a quiet eye" and those thoughts that often lie too deep for tears, which turned our attention to the beautiful sights of Nature as a whole, and to Tennyson in the second place, who taught us how to reconcile the miraculous mechanism existing in the smallest object, or most commonplace or trivial with all that is divine and magical in life. The late Professor Shairp quotes from the learned and estimable Stopford Brooke when he remarks that if on the scientific insight of a Faraday could be engrafted the poetic genius of Byron, the result would be a poem of the kind "for which the world waits." Further, he says, that "to write on the universal ideas of science, through the emotions which they excite, will be part of the work of future poets of Nature."

Therefore, in recognizing the ability of our rising writers in this one direction of interpreters of Nature, we not only do them an honour, but lift Canadian verse—as yet only in its infancy—into a position of something very much like dignity and value.

Let no one, however, rush to the conclusion that Mr. Campbell and Mr. McKenzie are in the habit of concocting Lucretian verse which sets forth doctrines, either of atomism or of evolution, and of ornamenting their pages with hard scientific terms—

Stony names
Of shale and hornblende, rag and trap and tuff,
Amygdaloid and trachyte,

such as beat the life from out young pages, fresh with youth and spirits. The science is only suggested. An instance of what is meant may here be given. A Canadian poet, Mr. George Martin, of Montreal, causes his heroine Marguerite, niece of Roberval, to say that her lover on the Isle of Demons has twined her a bridal braid of pale yellow lilies, river buds and pinks, modest snow-drops pearly white, and lilies of the vale. Now, some of these flowers do not grow in Canada at all, and certainly they could not have been growing ever in the locality pictured by the poet. But because snowdrops, lilies of the vale *et hoc genus omne* are factors in poetry—that of the old world and a rapidly-decaying type, they are used on the occasion referred to. It is altogether likely that the poet hardly stopped to think about the matter at all, as very many, perhaps, more famous poets have done too in their time. Such *properties* as occasional trees and flowers and clouds and birds do not matter to some minds. But note the difference when, as in a poem entitled "October Wind," Mr. McKenzie has evidently been careful as to minute facts, and his crystallization of the same afterwards in verse:

He rushes through the poplar trees
Whose quivering leaves no longer dance in green
But, blotched like parchment old, are seen
To flutter sad and yellow in the breeze.

O'er broad, brown hills the wind-waves pass,
Bowing on withered stem the seed-filled head.

In "The Homeless Sea" occurs a fine presentation of the idea of the tides:

The moon is far, her light is cold
To her my being floats away
Then backward sinks defectively
Thus forth and hither from of old.

I joy in grapple with the winds,
With fierce delight I fling my spray,
And crash my shores in lordly play;
No longer pain my spirit binds.

My soul to leave the earth is fain
To float unchained in upper air
But wings of cloud when I prepare
The winds do shred them into rain.