

Notches on The Stick

From Charles Sangster, the Canadian poet, two years before his death, the present writer had, beside several cordial letters, still treasured as memorials of their gifted writer, received for examination a copy of Dr. Dewar's Collection of Canadian Poetry, and of a curious scientific, philosophical, and fanciful poem, "Daydreams By A Butterfly," written by Joseph Antisell Allen, of Kingston, Ontario. The easy stanzas, which went so trippingly, we have not now before us; but we were at the time impressed with the ingenuity and erudition of the poet, and the gracefully musical flow of his verses. Dr. Allen, who is an Anglican clergyman, highly esteemed for his talents and personal character, and in friendly association with some of the foremost literary and scientific persons of the time, has the additional distinction of being father of one of the most versatile and popular of modern authors, Grant Allen. He is of Irish extraction, having been born at Arbor Hill, Tipperary, Feb. 27, 1814; and entered at Trinity College, Dublin, though he did not complete his course in that institution. After some time spent at London, England, he came to Canada, in 1842, and, having been ordained by Bishop Mountain of Quebec, he was put in charge of Huntingdon and afterward at Christville, P. Q. After his marriage, in Sept. 1843, to Charlotte Grant, daughter of the Fourth Baron de Longueuil he lived in an ideal retreat for an author, at Ardath, Wolf Island. For some time he performed clerical service, without remuneration, in Trinity church, built by the Baroness de Longueuil. Upon discontinuing this work he went with his family to New Haven, Conn., but subsequently returned to Canada, where he has since remained. He lives on an estate known as "Alwington," Kingston, Ont., at a venerable age. His useful achievements in science and literature are worthy of honorable mention; for it has not attained the popular favor accorded to his son, that son's, nevertheless, in substantial quality of character and intellect, scarcely the superior of the father. Beside the poem mentioned, issued in a single volume (1854), he is author of "The Lambda-nu-Tercenary Poem on Shakespeare," (1864); "Orangeism, Catholicism, and Sir Francis Hincks," (1877); "The True and Romantic Love Story of Colonel and Mrs. Hutchinson," a versified drama, (1884); "A Reply to a Speech of the Hon. Edward Blake, Against the Orange Incorporation Bill," (1884); "Dr. Ryerson: A Review and study," (1884); "The Church of the Pope and Primitive Christianity," (1891). Joseph Antisell Allen, whether as preacher, lecturer, or author, commands the attention and respect of the most enlightened Canadians, and is as favorably considered in his native as in his adopted country.

To gaze on the torrent that thundered beneath,
Or the mist of the tempest that gathered below,"
and—

"A way ye gay landscapes, ye gardens of roses!"

Again I meditated these first notes of the poet of the stormy soul, and mused upon his opening life. I saw him in his brightest, purest, most untrammelled hours; the lover of the wild "Lachin Y Gair," who exulted in

"The mountain's craggy side,
And sought the rocks where billows roll."

Again I recalled George Gilfillan's eloquent association of Byron's memory with this Scottish mountain, upon the occasion of a visit to it, many years ago: "It was 'dark Loch nager.' And only think how fine it was to climb up and clasp its cairn to lift a stone from it—to sing the song which made it terrible and dear—to snatch a fearful joy, as we leaned over and hung down, and saw far beneath the gleam of eternal snow shining up from its hollows and columns, or perpendicular seas of mist, streaming up upon the wind—

"Like foam from the roused ocean of deep hell,
Where every wave breaks on a living shore."

Lord Brougham's concentrated sneer, mildly diluted in all subsequent criticism, of the "Hours of Idleness," has caused us to suspect a little flatness in the best of these first fruits of the muse of Byron. He waited for a taunt in order to have something to say. It was a lion uncaged at whom the hot iron was poked. Nevertheless there are a few ringing strains—at least a few—in the school-boy collection, that sound in our memory and still make the appeal of youth and enthusiasm.

Sitting in my little back room on a recent Sabbath evening, gazing in a brain-weary sort of mood on the gift of an artist friend, a canvas on which is portrayed boldly enough a bit of cliff and ocean scenery upon the coast of Maine,—the

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thought came to me of Byron's great passion for the mountains and the sea, the gigantic and venerable in this world's scenery. Most of the recollected lines were from that despised poetry "which neither gods nor men are said to allow, such as—
"When I roved a young Highlander o'er the dark heath,
And climbed thy steep summit, O Morven of snow!
tinged, too, here and there, on their tops, by gleams of sunshine, the farewell beams of the dying day. It was the grandest moment in our lives. We had stood upon many hills—in sunshine and in shade, in mist and in thunder—but never had before, nor hope to have again, such a feeling of the grandeur of this lower universe—such a sense of horrible sublimity. * * *

No poet since Homer and Ida has thus, everlastingly, shot his genius into the heart of one great mountain, identifying himself and his song with it. Not Horace with Soracte—nor Wordsworth with Helvellyn—not Coleridge with Mont Blanc—not Wilson with the Black Mount—not even Scott with the Eildons—all these are common property, but Lochnagar is Byron's own—no poet will ever venture to sing it again. In its dread circle none durst walk but he. His allusions to it are not numerous, but its peaks stood often before his eye: a recollection of its grandeur served more to color his line than the glaciers of the Alps, the cliffs of Jura, or the thunder hills of fear which he heard in Chimari; even from the mountains of Greece he was carried back to Morven, and

"Lochnagar, with Ida, looked o'er Troy"

Young Leigh Hunt had some opportunity of getting into odd and pleasant corners. An aunt of Mrs. Hunt had married the American painter West, who was in England painting pictures for George III and others, largely for the glory of the thing. In their home the poet was, with his mother, a sometime visitor; and he has left us some graphic pictures of their family life, with the color of his own sentiment. We see the "gallery terminating in a couple of lofty rooms," which were a continuation of the hall passage, and together with the rooms, formed three sides of a garden, very small, but elegant, with a grass-plot in the middle, and busts upon stands under an arcade." We are shown the gallery "hung with his sketches and pictures all the way," and the study in its lower part, "with casts of Venus and Apollo on each side of the door; and, usually in his place, "the mild and quiet artist at his work; happy, for he thought himself immortal."

"As Mr. West," Hunt writes, "was almost sure to be found at work in the farthest room, habited in his white woollen gown, so you might have, predicted, with equal certainty, that Mrs. West was sitting in the parlor reading. It was a good sized room, with two windows looking out of the little garden I spoke of, and opening into it from one of them by a flight of steps. The garden, with its busts in it, and the pictures which you knew were on the other side of its wall, had an Italian look. The room was hung with engravings and colored prints. Among them was the "Lion's Hunt," by Rubens; the Hierarchy, with the Godhead, by Raphael, which I hardly thought it right to look at; and the two screens by the fireside containing prints from Angelica Kauffman, of the Loves of

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Angelica and Modoro, which I could have looked at from morning till night."

While the poet was gathering these impressions, Mrs. West and Mrs. Hunt sat and talked like sisters,—not differing much in age,—bringing back old Philadelphia days. West rarely made his appearance till the dinner-bell or tea-bell rang, and then retired to his painting room, where he was absorbed. "The talk," Hunt says, "was quiet; the neighborhood quiet; the servants quiet; I thought the very squirrel in the cage would have made a greater noise anywhere else. James the porter, a fine athletic fellow, who figured in his master's pictures as an apostle, was as quiet as he was strong. Even the butler, with his little twinkling eyes, full of pleasant conceit, vented his notions of himself in half tones and whispers." There is a touch of very quiet humor in West's attempt to mystify the boy by asking him such questions as,—
"Who was the father of Zebedee's children?"

But the place where Hunt really had his fill of heart-felt delight was at the Thornton's. An ideal household must have been that of Godfrey Thornton, the merchant,—after whom a son of the poet was afterwards named. "If not so artistically attractive, it was more so, socially." "There was quiet in the one," he says, "there were beautiful statues and pictures; and there was my Angelica for me, with her intent eyes at the fireside. But besides quiet in the other, there was cordiality, and there was music, and a family brim full of hospitality and good-nature; and dear Almeria T., now Mrs. P—e, who in vain pretends that she is growing old. These were holidays indeed on which I used to go to Austin Friars. The house, according to my boyish recollections, was of the description I have been ever fond of; large, rambling, old-fashioned, solidly built; resembling the mansions about Highgate and other villages. It was furnished as became the house of a rich merchant and sensible man, the comfort predominating over the costliness. At the back was a garden with a lawn; and a private door opened into another garden, belonging to the Company of Drapers; so that, what with the secluded nature of the street itself, and these verdant places behind it, it was truly rus in urbe, and a retreat. When I turned down the archway, I held my mother's hand tighter with pleasure, and was full of expectation, and joy and respect. My first delight was in mounting the staircase to the rooms of the young ladies, setting my eyes on the comely and sparkling face of my fair friend, with her romantic name and turning over for the hundredth time the books in her library." Very charming this description, to one who was himself a rover, and to whom the congenial home has often been open. "With respect to more than one, we feel also like exclaiming,—
"Blessed house! May a blessing be upon your rooms and your lawn, and your neighboring garden, and the quiet old monastic name of your street; and may it never be a thoroughfare; and may all your inmates be happy! Would to God one could renew, at a moment's notice, the happy hours we have enjoyed in past times with the same circles, in the same houses!"

At sixteen a volume of his school-boy verses was published, by the partial father, who in his fondness would say to the public: By these buds you will know how to expect a harvest. Still the "Juvenilia" did not flatter the ripper judgement of the poet, and he could have wished for more hesitation on the parental part. And now at once his muse was mewed "in the law office of his brother, Stephen. Of course this was a most congenial place for a man of his temperament and growing aims! And equally so, when he succeeds to a clerkship in the War Office! But these things will do for temporary make shifts; for the young, at least, must have expedients. The lawyer's quarters were to him filled with the "gloomiest of all darkness palpable;" but he can lighten it up by really valuable theatrical criticisms that have saved salts of sense and truth, published in that newly started paper, The News. Ah! now he is getting into his place! When he is through with all this experimenting, he commences business in earnest, with his brother's far-famed newspaper, The Examiner. Now, from an idealist's point of view, he will write up the times; he will be a piquant quoter of public men and measures; if the Cromwells of the time have wens or warts they are apt to be painted. But the full liberty of the press was not at that time. The "Adonis of fifty," as he described the Prince Regent at his levee, or wherever, would rather deserve rebuke than receive it, and would by no means brook being made by that nasty scribbler a butt of public scandal. In other words,—
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ly needed by the public interests." This unwitting stab of a poet's pen was felt "by flattered state," and so "he was soon visited with the attentions of the attorney general; who, twice prosecuting him for libel, branded him 'a malicious and ill-disposed person.'" This is very much like a partisan newspaper's rankest editorial, made law! Hunt, we don't want to annihilate you quite, but we must squelch your too presumptuous newspaper. Only retract, and be civil hereafter, according to our notions of civility, and we will let you alone. But the Hunts had not British blood, spiced by a West Indian sun, to no purpose; and truth is inexorable. So Hunt pays up, and has two glorious years in Horse-monger-lane jail, and all the lettered sympathy he desires. Keats soothed him with one of his luxurious sonnets. Visitors he did not lack. Byron and Moore dined with the "wit in the dungeon" as his lordship styled him. Hunt had a place fit for such guests; without was a garden bower; within was a palace. Horse-monger-lane jail was for the time Arcadia. He had two rooms on the ground floor, and this is what he did with them:

"I papered the walls with a trellis of roses; I had the ceiling colored with clouds and sky; the barred windows were screened with Venetian blinds; and when my bookcases were set up, with their busts and flowers, and a piano forte made its appearance, perhaps there was not a handsomer room on that side of the water. I took a pleasure, when a stranger knocked at the door, to see him come in and stare about him. The surprise on issuing from the Barrough, and passing through the avenues of a jail, was dramatic. Charles Lamb declared there was no other such room except in a fairy tale. But I had another surprise, which was a garden. There was a little yard outside railled off from another belonging to a neighboring ward. This yard I shut in with green pallings, adorned it with trellis, bordered it with a thick bed of earth from a nursery and even contrived to have a grass plot. The earth I filled with flowers and young trees. There was an apple tree from which we managed to get a pudding the second year. As to my flowers, they were allowed to be perfect. A poet from Derbyshire (Moore) told me he had seen no such hearts-ease. I bought the 'Parnass Italians' while in prison, and used often to think of a passage in it, while at his miniature piece of horticulture:
"My little garden,
To me, thou'rt vineyard, field, and wood and meadow."

Here I wrote and read in fine weather, sometimes under an awning. In autumn my trellises were hung with scarlet-runners which added to the flowery investment. I used to shut my eyes in my arm-chair, and affect to think myself hundreds of miles off. But my triumph was in issuing forth of a morning. A wicket out of the garden led into the large one belonging to the prison. The latter was only for vegetables, but it contained a cherry tree, which I twice saw in blossom."

The grave may still smile at this, as fantastic; and the wise and dignified are ever apt to discount the man of feibles and to think that even a poet should soon cease his childishness; but what was the record in his journal, of Byron, about this time?

"Hunt is an extraordinary character, and not exactly of the present age. He reminds me more of the Pym and Hampden times; much talent, great independence of spirit, and an austere, yet not repulsive aspect. If he goes on quills ab incepto, I know few men who will deserve more praise, or obtain it. He has been unshaken, and will continue so. I don't think him deeply versed in life; he is the bigot of virtue (not religion), and enamored of the beauty of that 'empty name,' as the last breath of Brutus pronounced and every day proves it." Put this together with the finicking artificial poet of Cockayne, the laughable creature made up of fooleries and pectadillos, pictured by the makers of bon mots, and the purland critics of the period and what individual have you? meanwhile the real man and poet sat in his prison-bower, with his friends:

"In Spenser's halls he strayed and bowered fair,
Cutting enchanted flowers; and he flew
Witch darning Milton thro' the fields of air:
To regions of his own his genius true."

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