

A Visit to Whittier.

By "FIDELIS."

It was with a feeling of excited expectancy, that, in fulfilment of a previous appointment, I found myself gliding out of the Old Colony Station at Boston and steaming away into the pleasant pastoral country of northern Massachusetts, which Whittier's muse has made almost as classic as the Ayrshire of Burns. Old, quaint New England towns with familiar names were passed one after another, and then the bracing air of the sea made itself felt, and one could discern, in the distance, the long, indented line of coast that Whittier's flowing lines have taught us to love. How that soft, distant blue, contrasted with the line of yellow sand that outlined bay and promontory, with their background of sloping woodland, suggested the lines from "The Tent on the Beach":

"Northward, a great bluff broke the chain
Of sandhills; southward stretched a plain
Of salt grass, with a river winding down,
Sail-whitened, and beyond the steeple of the town."

Quiet old Newburyport, with its placid river, Wenham, recalling one of Whittier's most striking ballads,—Beverly (a favourite haunt of both Whittier and Holmes), are passed; and then we branch off from the main line on a road which seems private for Amesbury itself, as it rambles amid green pastures and still waters, beside purling brooks and among dusky pine-woods, till, with a whistle that seems rudely to break on the charmed quiet, we draw up at a little station, and dismount into the old-world quietude of old-fashioned Amesbury.

Now, the writer, in her simplicity, expected that every man, woman and child in Amesbury would know all about the man who has made the place a household word with so many readers. But the old story of the prophet in his own country seemed to be at least partially true, even with regard to so popular a poet as Whittier, and it was only after repeated inquiry that, at last, I took my way, as directed, along the winding main street, somewhat recalling the "High Street" of old-country towns, and past a quaint old clock-tower, which seems to date back to the palmy days of Fanueil Hall. Then, turning into a quiet, shady street or lane,—in which neat wooden houses stand at dignified intervals,—each embowered in the shady seclusion of its own 'door-yard'—I stood at length at the door of the modest, but typical pale buff mansion, its doors and windows picked out with white, and its gateway shaded by a magnificent maple; which I ascertained was the one I sought.

"Yes! Mr. Whittier was at home," and I was ushered by a grave elderly domestic into an immaculately neat, but somewhat prim parlour, evidently the 'best parlour' and not in the habit of being lived in. I had scarcely time to scan the old family portraits on the walls, one of them a fine crayon portrait of the poet's mother, when the door opened, and I stood up to be cordially greeted by a tall, spare, but dignified old man, in old-fashioned attire, as befitted his age, with the combined dignity and simplicity of the true Quaker. It too often happens, alas, that the first meeting with some cherished hero of the imagination is fraught with disappointment; but there was nothing disappointing about meeting with John Greenleaf Whittier. The tall, erect form, unbent by his eighty years; the simple, unconscious dignity of

quaint old Quaker "thee," which he used, after the oddly ungrammatical Quaker usage, with the verb in the third person singular. It was a point in which he tenaciously clung to the habit of his people and the traditions of his youth.

He led the way at once into his study—a pleasant room occupying the whole breadth of the house, and having in front a glass door opening into a front piazza, and at the rear two windows looking into the plum and apple trees of an old-fashioned garden. Everything in it was in quiet tones of drab and brown, and, like the rest of the house, it gave the impression of immaculate neatness. On the walls was a modest working collection of books, chiefly poetry. As he told me, most of his books were at Oak Knoll, the beautiful country residence of some relatives, which he latterly made his chief place of abode. But notwithstanding the beauty of its woodland surroundings, as he described them, Amesbury was the fitting place to meet him in, for it was the place where he had worked and written during the greater part of his busy life; ever since he had left the old homestead at Haverhill, which he has so tenderly immortalised for us in "Snow-bound," Amesbury was the place where he had 'beaten his music out,' where his genius had matured from that of the dreamy young versifier into that of the man of action and passion, and finally into the seer and prophet who has left us some of the noblest spiritual lyrics in the English language. Here, too, he had helped to fight and win the battle for the freedom of the slave, and that other battle against a false public opinion which, at first despising the ardent young Abolitionist, as it did all his brothers-in-arms, ended by venerating, as he deserved, the Nestor of American poets.

Seating his visitor, with careful courtesy, in a comfortable chair, on his left side, he explained playfully, "my right ear is my wrong ear," for a slight deafness was apparently the only sign of failing faculties. In the pleasant two hours of friendly talk which followed, he touched on many subjects, but among the most interesting was his reference to his early days in the old Quaker home, with its dearth of anything that could be called literature, especially of poetry, of which indeed there was none outside of the Bible. He spoke of the never-to-be-forgotten evening when his friend, the young school-master of "Snow-bound," brought in the magic volume of Burns' immortal lyrics, the reading of which first introduced him into the enchanted realm of poesy, and set his own muse at work. He has left us, in his own lovely poem to Burns' memory, a vivid record of the witchery of this music over the impressible young poetic soul, whose genius had so much in common with that of the Ayrshire poet.

"I have never been in Scotland," he observed (for, strange to say, in this age of travel he had never crossed the sea); "but if I were to go there, I should know every spot Burns has sung."

Then he began to put his own fancies into verse; and it was through his sister, without his knowledge, sending one of his productions to the country newspaper, that he first came into contact with its editor, his future friend and comrade, Garrison; and also, with the aid

mien; the soft, yet keen and penetrating dark eyes; the thoughtful, spiritual, yet kindly and sympathetic expression, seemed to fit harmoniously with one's ideal of the author of "Snow-bound" and "The Eternal Goodness."

So did the of Garrison's persuasion, gained his father's consent to proceed with his hardly won education.

"Then," he said, "I got into the Abolitionist campaign," and for a time he threw the whole force of his being into the conflict, which brought out all his latent powers, and, while it diverted for a time his poetic genius into polemical channels, nevertheless made Whittier a nobler man than the mere poetic hermit he might have otherwise become. To the storm and stress of that contest we owe such stirring poems as "The Old South," and the noble burst of thanksgiving entitled, "Laus Deo." It roused him from a dreamer into the poet-seer.

And the passionate sympathy with the oppressed—the passionate protest against wrong—could still be seen to flash from the dark, deep-set eyes, when he touched upon the sins of the age and the failure of the Church at large to discharge her mission against the natural selfishness of humanity.

"To me," he said, "the selfishness of the very rich—the token of moral poverty—is more painful to witness than the material poverty of the very poor." And it was difficult for him to understand how men could so forget the claims of human brotherhood—not to speak of the commands of Christ—as to grind riches for themselves out of the sufferings and necessities of their suffering brothers and sisters. Yet he was thankful, too, for the growth of that purer spirit which he has defined as the essence of Christianity:

"Who holds his brother's welfare
As sacred as his own,
Who loves, forgives and pities,
He serveth Me alone."

In Canada he had evidently a strong interest—though on learning that his visitor was a Canadian by birth, he playfully remarked, "Then thee is an American!" He himself, he said, just missed being Canadian by birth, for he told how his father, when a young man, had planned to go with a band of others into the Canadian wilderness, but was deterred by the accounts they heard of wild beasts and Indians,—and inclement winters. And so we thus missed the chance of claiming Whittier for our first Canadian poet.

Of Tennyson, he spoke as of an acknowledged master in poetical art, and referred to his exquisite poem, "Crossing the Bar," as a perfect lyric. "I wish I could have written that poem," he said, with a half sigh which made one feel that Whittier, as one said of him, 'was a very human man,' true saint as he was! Two portraits on his wall he pointed out, one of his friend Emerson, a gift from himself, and the other, of his 'favourite hero,' Gordon, of Khartoum. He also showed me the portraits of his mother, whose eyes he inherited, and of the sweet early-lost young sister, whose memory so inspired some of the most beautiful lines of "Snow-bound."

"And yet, dear heart, remembering thee,
Am I not richer than of old?"

It was in the very spirit of these lines that he said reflectively, "I value the friends I have left, but I think most of those who are gone; and I am waiting!" It was only about fifteen months after that that he had to wait: and who can doubt his welcome!

The happiest visit must come to an end, and with his kindly words of farewell and patriarchal benediction still in my ears, I caught from the gate my last glimpse of the venerable face and form of him to whose life and works we may so fitly apply the closing stanza of his own poem on Wordsworth:

"Art builds on sand; the works of pride
And human passion change and fall;
But that which shares the life of God
With Him surviveth all!"