KEATS: HIS MEDIEVAL AND CLASSIC TENDENCIES.

LTHOUGH belonging, in date, to the second decade of the century, the poetry of Keats holds a position midway between the first, broadly romantic movement led by Scott, and that peculiarly modern growth known as the æsthetic school, which reached its height in the painter-poet Dante Rossetti. Of the former movement, indeed, the medieval poems of Keats are but a delicate and faint after-glow: in relation to the general effect of his work they strike us rather as an accidental expression of that catholic instinct of an essentially external beauty by which, in spirit at all events, he is so nearly allied to the genius of the ancient Greeks—that genius of which modern æstheticism, says one critic, is "like some strange second flowering after date." One marked characteristic of these modern disciples of the beautiful is at variance with the classic conception—the tendency, namely, to recognize in all natural objects something of a human affinity, to represent them to us by their emotional side, to make them, in short, the vehicle of the poet's individual mood. It is his share of this spirit which causes Keats to resemble so closely certain poets of our own day: barely perceptible beneath the rich web of imagery of the longer poems, it is only in the odes that it finds adequate expression. There the effect is to create in us a vivid sense of pure, sensuous beauty, deeply infused with that wistfulness never wholly absent from this sceptical generation.

The two poems selected for our study of Keats appeared in the poet's third and last volume, published in 1820. Keats was then in his twenty-fifth year. He had already published two slim volumes, "Miscellaneous Poems" and "Endymion," in 1817 and 1818 respectively. Of the contents of these earlier volumes it is unnecessary to speak. They contained many passages of true poetic beauty, and their defects could in no wise excuse the harsh criticism, still less the coarse personalities, of the Edinburgh reviewers. Before publishing his third volume Keats subjected its contents to his own finely critical judgment. He felt that it was to be the touchstone of his poetic gift, and on the eve of its appearance wrote to a friend as follows: "My book is coming out, with very low hopes, though not spirits, on my part. This shall be my last trial. Not succeeding, I shall try what I can do in the apothecary line." Of this same volume, which contains some of the masterpieces of English poetry, he wrote a month later: "My book has had a good success among literary people, and I believe has a moderate sale." Its successor, however, never appeared. In the early spring of the following year Keats was laid in his grave in the Protestant cemetery at Rome.

It is easy to understand the attraction which medievalism would exercise on such a mind as that of Keats. For us of the nineteenth century the Middle Age has that charm peculiar to all seasons of half-lights. To our view its contradictions are subdued, its ugliness becomes merely grotesque, its loveliness ideal. It is this ideal side of medievalism that Keats has succeeded in rendering with amazing accuracy and tact. He gives poetic expression to the distinctive, somewhat mystic spiritual life of the age, just as Scott introduces us to its most practical external activity. Perhaps this characteristic of the medievalism of Keats may be shown more clearly by a short survey of that conception of it which he has embodied in the "Eve of St. Agnes."

And, first, throughout the poem we are conscious of a sense of contrast more or less prominent, which extends beyond the mere scenes to the characters themselves. Thus, the personality of Madeline is thrown into relief by comparison with that of Angela, and the same effect is produced, but more remotely, in the persons of Porphyro and the Beadsman.

The figure of Madeline is one of the most delicate and characteristic of the poet's maturer creations. She is the embodiment of the *naïveté*, of all that is most pleasant in the gentle mysticism of the period. Nothing, perhaps, in all the poem so thoroughly reveals to us that curious, contradictory inner life of the Middle Age as the picture of Madeline moving, "hoodwink'd with faery fancy," among the "sweeping trains" and "amorous cavaliers." There is a perfect fitness in that epithet of "thoughtful" applied to her by the poet. The unconscious graciousness of her nature is discovered when, on the very threshold of the chamber where the vision is to be fulfilled, she turns aside to light the "aged gossip" down the stair. The sweetness of her youth is emphasized by Angela, who with the beadsman is an excellent example of a type of old age peculiar to the times: herself full of a darker superstition, she can yet indulge in a grim, sceptical humor when the vision of Madeline, "asleep in lap of legends old," rises in her memory. One of the most finely conceived pictures of the poem is that of the little moonlit room, whither every stray echo of revelry carries dismay to Angela, closeted there with Porphyro, a very image of ignorant and not unkindly age—with its sudden fears, its frequent ejaculations, half pious, half profane; its uncanny mirth and proneness to evil conjecture In Porphyro, again, we have the chivalry of the age—adventurous, hot headed and devoted. One phase of this character, however, strikes us as somewhat incongruous. Porphyro, after heaping up the magic banquet at his lady's bedside, indulges in a profusion of sentiment that is rather a malady of the nineteenth century than of medievalism. Even granting the situation, we cannot help feeling that this swooning propensity of Porphyro is scarcely consistent with the spirit that has already carried him so far. Lastly, the figure of the beadsman—at appearing very briefly, within the narrow gothic chapel, at the opening and close of the poem—completes this picture of medieval society with a reflection of the harsh asceticism of the monkish spirit.

In spite of the delicate suggestiveness of the figures the great charm of the poem lies not in these. It is the result of the spontaneity and richness of the language of its admirable adaptation to the musical inflexion of the Spenserian stanza—more than anything, perhaps, of the Keats's power of scenic presentation. The æsthetic side of Keats's genius reveals itself in the pictorial character of the poem. He has to an extraordinary degree the gift of conveying to us that local coloring which we mean when we speak of the genius of the place. He accomplishes this at times by the use of a single apt expression, often by a dexterous suiting of sound to sense. This is very noticeable in the opening stanzas. There is a greyness and austerity about the Saxon phraseology that harmonizes well with the cold frigid outlines of the Gothic chapel, as it is presented to us in the following lines:—

> His prayer he saith, this patient, holy man;
> Then takes his lamp, and riseth from his knees,
> And back returneth, meagre, barefoot, wan,
> Along the chapel aisle by slow degrees;
> The sculptured dead, on each side, seem to freeze,
> Imprisoned in black purgatorial rails;
> Knights, ladies, praying in dumb ora'tries,
> He passeth by; and his weak spirit fails
> To think how they may ache in icy hoods and mails.

Compare this, in point of language and substance, with the following:—

> And still she slept an azure-lidded sleep,
> In blanched linen, smooth, and lavender'd,
> While he from forth the closet brought a heap
> Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;
> With jellies soother than the creamy curd,
> And lucent syrops, tinct with cinnamon;
> Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd
> From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one
> From silken Samarcand to cedar'd Lebanon.

In its appreciation of the purely musical properties of words, in its heaping up of epithets that introduce into the