

“ Then Christ sought out an artisan,
A low-browed, stunted, haggard man,
And a motherless girl, whose fingers thin
Pushed from her faintly want and sin.

“ These set He in the midst of them,
And as they drew back their garment-hem,
For fear of defilement, ‘Lo, here,’ said He,
‘ The images ye have made of Me ! ’ ”

It is evident that this view of the religion of humanity haunted Lowell. It was no passing mood of sentiment. He had imbibed the conception of Christ's identification of Himself with the lowly, the suffering, and the oppressed as the cardinal and distinctive feature of the Christian faith. He was not content with such embodiment of the truth as his shorter poems contained. He gathered up his forces for a longer and more perfect effort. That poem we have in his well-known “ Vision of Sir Launfal.” According to Mr. Underwood,* “ this was composed in a kind of fury, substantially as it now appears, in the space of about forty-eight hours, during which time the poet scarcely ate or slept. It was almost an improvisation, and its effect upon the reader is like that of the outburst of an inspired singer.” The theme of the poem is the legendary search for the Holy Grail, the cup out of which Jesus partook of the Last Supper with His disciples. This theme has been a favorite one with the poets, but none of them, not even Tennyson, has given so poetic a rendering to the legend, and none has brought into it more of a tender and true religious feeling. The power of Lowell's rendering lies in the contrast between the closing stanzas of Part I. and Part II. In Part I. Sir Launfal, with mourning in his heart, goes forth from the castle gate on his long search; his eye falls on a leper, loathsome and moaning, crouched hard by. He tossed the leper a piece of gold in scorn.

“ The leper raised not the gold from the dust :
‘ Better to me the poor man's crust,
Better the blessing of the poor,
Though I turn me empty from his door.
That is no true alms which the hand can hold ;
He gives nothing but worthless gold
Who gives from a sense of duty ;
But he who gives but a slender mite,
And gives to that which is out of sight,
That thread of the all-sustaining Beauty
Which runs through all and doth all unite—
The hand cannot clasp the whole of his alms,
The heart outstretches its eager palms,
For a god goes with it and makes it store
To the soul that was starving in darkness before.’ ”

Sir Launfal has returned from his quest,

“ An old, bent man, worn out and frail,”

* Sketch, p. 59.