

For the EDUCATIONAL REVIEW.]

English Literature in the Lower Grades.

Two poems in the new fourth reader, now in use in New Brunswick schools, are Tennyson's "St. Agnes' Eve" and "Sir Galahad." Poems of greater charm it would be hard to find, but for full understanding we need to know the stories upon which they are founded.

St. Agnes was a Christian girl, who suffered martyrdom in the persecution of Diocletian. Many legends have been told about her innocence and purity, and she is sometimes depicted with a lamb, owing probably to the name, *Agna*, a lamb. Her feast was kept on the 21st of January, and there was a popular superstition connected with it in England, that is like the one commonly attached to Halloween, the eve of All Saints Day, namely, that by observing certain rites and customs, maidens might have a sight of their future husbands. The poet Keats has a beautiful poem founded on this superstition. "They told her how upon St. Agnes' Eve, young virgins might have visions of delight." The "vision of delight" which Tennyson's heroine is granted, is not of this earth. She is a saintly nun, and through faith and earnest prayer she wins a vision of the Heavenly Bridegroom.

In teaching this poem to a class of average children I would tell them the story of the superstition. Then, letting them read the poem, guide them to find out who, or what, the speaker is, try to have them picture the scene, the "snows sparkling to the moon," "the frosty skies," "the starlight keen," and let them notice the details themselves, asking some such questions as these: What do the lines make you see? If you were painting a picture to illustrate them, what would you paint? Many pupils will take pleasure in learning the poem by heart. They will see that the first two verses are a prayer, and the last an answer, but I would leave the deeper meaning until after a study of the following and companion poem, "Sir Galahad."

The story which serves as foundation for this poem, as Tennyson used it, is briefly as follows. The Holy Grail was the cup from which our Lord drank at the Last Supper. Joseph of Arimathea was said to have brought it to Glastonbury in Somersetshire, and there awhile it abode; and if a man could touch or see it, he was healed at once by faith, of all his ills. But then the times grew to such evil that the holy cup was caught away to Heaven and disappeared. But in the time of King Arthur, the cup appeared to the little sister of one of the Knights of the Round Table, Sir Percivale. She told her brother, and bade him pray that they might all see the vision and so be healed of all evil. Sir Galahad was the youngest, the most beautiful and the most

innocent of all the knights, and to him, first, the Grail appeared.

This short poem is like a sketch, or study, for the idyl of "The Holy Grail." It was published in 1842, and "The Holy Grail" in 1869.

The teacher should be familiar with the longer poem, in order to feel the spirit of "Sir Galahad," and especially with Galahad's account of his quest, the lines beginning "I, Galahad, saw the Grail." As with St. Agnes' Eve, I would have the pupils grasp the surface meaning first. Who is it who speaks? What does he describe? See the succession of pictures, the tournament. What was a true knight bound to fight for? "Dieu et ma dame" was the old motto, and remember Douglas's words to Wilton in "Marmion" "For king, for church, for lady fair see that thou fight." The dark forest, the secret shrine, the vision on the lonely lake, the sleeping towns, the winter storms. I would not lose the opportunity of letting the children express their sense of enjoyment of the beautiful *sounds* in both these poems; but would spend some time in hearing what they have to say about the rhymes, the metre, the fitting of sound to sense, as in lines 4 to 7, of "Sir Galahad." I would not tell them that they ought to enjoy the poems, but I would let them see that their teacher did. Lastly, and very carefully, I would lead them to see the link between the two poems; but I would be satisfied with suggesting it, if they do not find it for themselves. It is, of course, to be found in the sixth beatitude. It is one of the glories of art that it does not force great truths upon us, but, rightly studied, helps us to see them; and if we can teach our pupils the outward beauty of great literature, we may safely leave the inner lesson to "steal in silence down."

SUGGESTIONS FOR DETAILED STUDY.

The contrast in sound between lines 5-9 and 11, 12, in verse 1. Alliteration. Tennyson's use of "shrill" as a verb (see "The Passing of Arthur," lines 10 and 18). For descriptions of tournaments see "Ivanhoe" and "Elaine." Explain "the tide of combat *stands*," "*shame* and thrall," "crypt and shrine," "the stormy crescent," "stoles of white," "the cock crows ere the Christmas morn," (see Hamlet, Act I., Sc. I., 159, etc. The teacher may like to compare with "My spirit beats her mortal bars," Lorenzo's speech in the "Merchant of Venice" V. I, 61, etc. The fancy of "the music of the spheres" as treated by the poets, is suggested in connection with these two poems, and may be looked up in Milton. See "Arcades," 62-7. "Comus," 112-4, 241-3, 1021, "At a Solemn Music," and many references in "Paradise Lost."

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