

PROMINENT CANADIANS.—XI.

ALEXANDER McLACHLAN: THE BARD OF AMARANTH.

ALEXANDER McLACHLAN was born in the year 1820, in the village of Johnston, Renfrewshire, Scotland. His father was a mechanic, and his mother was of a good local family. Both possessed a good deal of Scottish caninness and sturdiness of character. The poet was largely self-educated. He was fond of reading, and gained at an early age a goodly acquaintance with history and current literature. For some years he followed tailoring for a livelihood. He took an active interest in the Chartist movement, as it was an emphatic agitation against oppression and wrong. Many of his early efforts in verse were full of sympathy for those who were struggling for more freedom, and were tinged with bitter denunciations of those who were forging new chains for British freemen. In 1840 he emigrated to Canada, and went to work on a farm. In his poem, *The Emigrant*, he graphically and truthfully describes the pleasures and pains, the toils and struggles, of an early settler. In 1861 he published a small volume of his poems, which were appreciated by many of his literary friends, but, on the whole, did not receive the recognition their merit deserved. In 1874 a second and larger edition of his works was given to the public. This issue commanded some attention from many who had never heard of him until this time. The press began to take notice of his poems, and gave many of them a place in the "poets' corner." At this time the poet revisited his native land, and delivered a number of lectures and addresses on Canada and on various literary subjects. These showed him to be a well-read man. On his return to Canada he again went to the plough and to the Muse. His farming was not a success, largely because of the pooriness of the soil, and of the rocky appurtenances thereunto belonging. The writer knows him to be the most genial of men. He has a pawky humour of a sympathetic nature. There is no "dourness" about him, for he is full of human sympathy and of an abiding faith in the future well-being of our race. There come up to me the racy anecdotes, the Scottish and Irish ballads, and shrewd philosophy, which he poured out with great unction and ready memory, as we drove through woods and over country roads together. Of a truth he is not a mere rhymester, but a veritable poet.

The Greek root for the word *poet* means a composer, a maker, a creator. The true poet has a creative individuality, as distinct in its peculiarities and outlines as is each human face. The mere copyist of style, whose modes of utterance and verbal imitation may ape in lame rhymes an antecedent son of the Muse, is no poet any more than is the mechanic who makes a structure from a model he had never planned. His echoes of the great thoughts of the minds which burn with poetic ardour are faint and doomed to die away. To such egotistic versifiers there is not born that native Muse whose glowing apocalypse of song is filled with gems of beauty, which,

On the outstretched finger of all time,
Sparkle forever.

Jingling rhymes may be pleasant to the ear, and smooth measures may command attention, but if a soul has not been breathed into the nostrils of any such creation, it is no child of immortality. Unfortunately nowadays young climbers of Parnassus, or critical literary prigs, too often covet and fall in love with the wordy *nothingnesses* of the transcendental school, so fashionable to-day. The glory of these poetic Bunthornes is to dilute an idea—good enough in itself—until it is lost sight of in a wordy rhyme, or a vapid sentimentalism. It is sickening and maddening to see "the guano mountains of cant and rubbish," or to read the windy and gushing prattle of inane versifiers and would-be poets seeking temporary notoriety in the "poets' corner" of some newspaper, or launching out into all the gay trappings of *bookdom*. Some rhymers vainly imagine if they can rave about "rosy-fingered morn," or "azure skies," or "the thunder's crash and the lurid lightnings' flash," that a divine *afflatus* has in some fortuitous way fallen upon them, and that the gift of poetic prophecy or lyric power has descended upon them, which the world must of necessity applaud and admire, and which will be read with rapturous pleasure by generations yet unborn. There is no doubt a sort of rhythmic music in some nook or cranny of the souls of such, which even in mediocrity is not to be condemned, if kept within reasonable bounds. The contrast between these classes and the true poet is striking when gauged by that best of all tests, namely, the effect their works make upon our affective and emotional natures, however diverse these may be in original construction. The true poet clothes everything he descants upon with pathos, beauty, or sublimity. His natural bent of mind may urge him to seek these in psychical man or in external nature, but he searches and finds. The phenomena of man's inner nature may attract his attention, or he may sing in rapture of the sparkling dewdrop, the beautiful flowers, the rippling brook, the roaring cascade and cataract, the hoary mountains, or the spangled heavens. It matters not if it be the tragic Muse in which is delineated human passion in its deepest earnestness—the comedy full of glee and gladness—the epic, graphic in its graceful measures, or Runic rhymes recording doing and daring in the ages of legend and chivalry—or lyric song, fit for harp and ladies' bower,—all full of inspiration and musical thought.

In the midst of so much that is vapid and trashy in machine-made poetry, it is refreshing to read the simple, direct, and unassuming lays of Alexander McLachlan. He writes in honest phrases of much beauty and deep feeling from the pure love of giving vent to his imaginings. As well attempt to check the morning song of the lark or the murmur of a mountain burn in its pathway to the sea. He has longed after and peered into what Goethe calls "the open secret"

within the range of all, but sought for by the few. It is Nature's mysterious book, the title page of which is scarcely read by the myriads of humanity—the divine idea, which Fichte says is "the profound deep" of which few know the appearance, but is to some extent within the reach of all. McLachlan feels that, and in almost every line of earnestness there is an *aura* of sadness, a fretting for more knowledge of the unseen, and an urgent search for some key to unlock the door of the great unknown. We see this in such sweet fragments as *Mystery* with its "heart-throbs of anguish." The seeker after truth and light wails in half despair:—

Mystery! Mystery!
All is a mystery.
Mountain and valley, woodland and stream,
Man's troubled history,
Man's mortal destiny,
Are but a phase of the soul's troubled dream.

We perceive the same longings and gropings in the dark in *Who Knows?* Take such an extract as the following:—

From deep to deep, from doubt to doubt,
While the night still deeper grows:
Who knows the meaning of this life?
When a voice replied, Who knows?

Shall it always be a mystery?
Are there none to lift the veil?
Knows no one aught of the land we left,
Or the port to which we sail?

Poor shipwrecked mariners driven about
By every wind that blows:
Is there a haven of rest at all?
And a voice replies, Who knows?

O why have we longings infinite,
And affections deep and high;
And glorious dreams of immortal things,
If they are but born to die?

Are they but Will-o'-Wisp's that gleam
Where the deadly night-shade grows?
Do they end in dust and ashes all?
And the voice still cried, Who knows?

The poet must have been under a cloud when drawing such sad pictures and when framing such hypotheses of man and of his destiny. It is cheering to see standing in front of these sombre forebodings, such emphatic convictions as those in the fine monograph, *Man*.

A spark from the Eternal caught
A living, loving thing of thought.
A miracle in me is wrought!

A being that can never die,
More wonderful than earth and sky,
A terror to myself and I.

My spirit's sweep will have no bound,
O, I shall sail the deep profound,
A terror with a glory crowned!

And from this dust and demon free,
All glorified, these eyes shall see
The All in All eternally.

The ballad *Mary White* would not do discredit to Tannahill. There is human experience in—

It couldna be love, but
A nameless delight
Which thrilled through my bosom,
My dear Mary White.

And Oh! do ye e'er think on me,
Mary White?
O, then, does the tear blin' your e'e,
Mary White?

Or hae ye lang wak'd frae
That spell o' delight,
And left me still dreaming,
My dear Mary White?

External nature is, however, our poet's most natural theme. He revels in it, and like the true limner that he is, rejoices in singing its praises and painting its glories. What can be finer than these two stanzas from *May?*—

The cataract's horn
Has awakened the morn.
Her tresses are dripping with dew:
O hush thee, and hark!
'Tis her herald the lark
That's singing afar in the blue,
Its happy heart's rushing,
In strains wildly gushing,
That reach to the revelling earth:
And sinks through the deeps
Of the soul till it leaps
Into raptures far deeper than mirth.

O crown me with flowers,
'Neath the green spreading bowers,
With the gems and the jewels May brings.
In the light of her eyes,
And the depth of her dyes,
We'll smile at the purple of Kings.
We'll t'row off our years,
With their sorrows and tears,
And time will not number the hours
We'll spend in the woods
Where no sorrow intrudes,
With the streams, and the birds, and the flowers.