

ONE VICE OF THE POETS.

A VICE into which the poet is in danger of falling at every point of his career is dullness. If it be objected that dullness is not a vice, the reply may be that certainly it is not generally recognized as such. An old lady sitting out the remainder of her days, with endless knitting work, in a window adorned by a cat and a plant, and commanding a view of the graveyard, may present a spectacle inconceivably dull, though scarcely vicious. But neither is it poetic. With regret be it said that tiresomeness, rhythmically expressed, is not yet considered "a monster of a frightful mien." On the contrary, it is eminently correct and proper. It is an embodiment of all the virtues, and not to respect it, argues oneself unworthy of respect. It is well exemplified in one of Jane Taylor's "Original Poems for Infant Minds:"

One honest John Tompkins, a hedger and ditcher,
Although he was poor, did not want to be richer;
For all such vain wishes in him were prevented
By a fortunate habit of being contented.

Behold with what neatness and skill the deft poetess takes the trailing robes of the Muse, and shapes them into serviceable blouse and overalls for this model British workman. It would seem as if even an infant mind might recoil before such profanation, and, indeed, children are much more susceptible to such things than they are given credit for. The parent who too rigidly draws the line between the books of poetry read by himself and those of his children is in danger of resembling the farmer who is said to have provided a large door in his barn for the cow and a small one for the calf. It is the infant minds in mature bodies that take pleasure in the productions of the poetical hedgers and ditchers. The name of these is Legion. In the poet's corner of every paper we read their initials, their published volumes crowd our bookshelves, and their contributions are sometimes found in the leading magazines. No part of the flowery field of literature is safe. The trail of Tompkins is over it all. Some people do not resent this. To their minds everything that rhymes is poetry, and everything with wings is a bird. If there is any difference between the barnyard hen and that "blithe spirit,"

That from heaven, or near it,
Poureth its full heart
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art,

it is considered greatly to the advantage of the domestic fowl. A good Dorking or Leghorn is valued all the more for not being elusive, remote, and *spirituelle*.

If only we might put John Tompkins and his innumerable followers in one class, and the blithe spirits who live in heaven, or near it, in another, how it would simplify matters; but the followers of the divine Homer will nod sometimes, and their sympathetic readers cannot choose but drowse with them. In the first edition of Wordsworth's "Blind Highland Boy," the poet makes his hero set sail in

A household tub, like one of those
Which women use to wash their clothes (1)

Jeffrey, of the *Edinburgh Review*, characterized another poem of Wordsworth's as "a rapturous, mystical ode to the cuckoo, in which the author, striving after force and originality, produces nothing but absurdity." One wonders what Jeffrey thought of the household tub. Unutterable things, no doubt; but he could scarcely accuse it of being rapturous and mystical. Even the ordinary reader is relieved by the knowledge that this prosaic craft is changed in a later edition to

A shell of ample size, and light
As the pearly ear of Amphitrite.

Other passages might be quoted from Wordsworth, tempting one to think that for him a primrose could never be anything more than a primrose; but so long as, looking through his eyes,

Our souls catch sight of the immortal sea
That brought us hither,

we can afford to forget some of the commonplace obstacles with which he occasionally obscures our view.

But we do not need to look to the poets of a bygone generation for examples of unmitigated prose placed in a setting of verse. Browning has been accorded the supremacy in this direction, though the dullness of which he is accused may often exist only in the mind of his reader. His indifference to form, wilful obscurity, and abstruseness, make him the least perspicuous of poets. "What is not clear," says Voltaire, "is not French." Apparently, Browning thinks it is English, and his readers can only regret that he thinks so. In his verse we discover no lack of depth and originality, but a frequent lack of prepositions and relative pronouns. And yet, it remains impossible for any poet to escape some felicities of phrase. There is a luminous clearness in the following excerpts from him, who has been called "the poet of the opaque":

Her face looked down on me,
With a look that placed a crown on me.
She was the smallest lady alive,
Made in a piece of Nature's madness;
Too small, almost, for the life and gladness
That overfilled her.

Occasional lapses into dullness, frigidity, and commonplace may be forgiven; but what can be said of Tennyson, who persists in singing after his voice is gone, of Whittier and Lowell, whose muse for years suffered under the heavy yoke of the anti-slavery cause, of Dr. Holland, on whose poetic pages the thinly-disguised form of "Timothy Titcomb" is painfully visible, of Coventry Patmore, who burdens his "Angel in the House" with a wedding sermon that might make an angel weep, of George Eliot, who philosophizes in rhyme, of Tupper, who does that and worse, of Emerson, whose essays are alive with inspiration and whose verse falls dead, of every one who writes "occasional poetry"—Dr. Holmes alone excepted—of all the preachers and teachers who persist in turning the swords of poetic speech into the ploughshares of prosaic works?

The aim of the poet is to please, not by appealing to the senses, but to the sensibilities and imagination. How beautiful are the poetic feet of those passages, of which even the spiritually deaf and blind can in some sort dimly feel the charm. Nor do they need to dwell upon remote, unusual, or transcendental topics. The poet glorifies the common things of life. The golden rod is "only a weed," and yet, of late years, no flower has received so many poetic tributes. Night and day, sun and stars, heart and mind, life and love—what words are more common in the language? what things more common upon earth? Yet these are the elements of the eight lines by means of which F. W. Bourdillon leaped into fame. Sunrise is literally an everyday affair, but its glory is never fully revealed to us until we read how

Jocund day stands tiptoe on the mountain top.

The poets are the true seers. They alone look round them,

But, for all the rest,
The world, unfathomably fair,
Is duller than a witling's jest.

And it is to them that the world looks to redeem it from the burden of sordid cares that daily oppresses it. Great is Dullness, and she shall prevail. She rules the court, the legislative hall, and the social assembly. Sermons, market reports, and after-dinner speeches, are hers by natural right; her solid and highly respectable bulk occupies most of the space in our school-rooms, and her breath vitiates the air of our dwellings. But, when her little fingers rest upon the poet's eyelids, his spirit has taken its flight just as surely as though they were weighted by the copper coins of the undertaker.

AGNES E. WETHERALD.

OUR PARIS LETTER.

THE mediocre predominates in this Salon of 1886. If few works rise far above, at least few fall far below, a fair level. There is the usual number of Arcadian maidens and surprised bathers, jolly nymphs, and tempted saints, and there is an unusual number of horrors. We have mad girls, and famished girls, and asphyxiated girls; we have "Judiths" and torturing scenes, and ghastly battle fields, without end. If this morbid taste continue, the morgue and the abattoirs will be far more cheerful exhibitions to visit. The French artist stops at nothing. Instead of calm and beauty, purity and strength, emanating from these works before us, we find ourselves peering into a mirror held up to a humanity cruel, sensual, or horrible. That the colouring and drawing here are exceedingly good it must be confessed, indeed the flesh tints are very often delicious; but Art has yet spoken only half her message: the final words must not be for the boulevard idler and the butcher boy. All the more welcome—we have had to pass so many atrocities to reach them—are the delightful "Spring" and "Love Disarmed" of Bouguereau: such softness and warmth—a group of very Rubens-children in the one, a most ideal Cupid in the other! Then we have a wonderful portrait of Monsieur Pasteur by Bonnat, and two other portraits by Cabanel. Bourgeois's "Martyrdom of St. Andrew" is destined for the convent of the Grey Nuns at Montreal. Of Puvis de Chavannes there is a huge triptych: 1. Antique Vision; 2. Christian Inspiration; 3. Rhône and the Saône, symbolizing Force and Grace. But the palm must go to Benjamin Constant's "Justinian," which, for richness and power, is unsurpassed in the present Salon. It is a huge picture. The emperor, seated on a marble throne, between two columns, is surrounded by his councillors. A dash of sunlight here and there falls upon the exquisitely painted robes and stonework. The various expressions on the faces of the "clarissimes" are wonderfully depicted. But especially is Justinian's figure a study. We have in this work a mediæval wealth of colour, tempered by modern taste, and all a modern's skill in drawing.