

THE SKETCH BOOK

IN RESPECT TO FEMALE POETS

By Louise Townsend Nicholl

I FOUND it on a high and dusty shelf in an ancient little town in New Jersey — this big, red book, indented generously in gold with morning glories and twisty lines. It is "American Female Poets" by Miss May, published in 1848 by Lindsay and Blakiston, Philadelphia. In an oval on the red cover, also in gold, there is a serenely distracted looking young woman with hair flying Medusa-like to show divine afflatus, and with a gold rose set squarely at the beginning of her part, which is in turn squarely in the middle of her hair. She is, I *think*, nude. At any rate a large bracelet on one upper arm is the only covering one can be sure of, although it is barely possible that the many fine lines of the artist were meant to suggest tight-drawn gauzy garbing instead of skin.

In the genteel preface Miss May, in her discreet, apologetic way (so that you can almost see her, head down and eyes up coyly, smiling gingerly, and smoothing a black silk skirt with a careful finger) says:

No women of refinement, however worthy of distinction — and the most worthy are always the most modest — like to have the holy privacy of their personal movements invaded. To say where they were born seems quite enough while they are alive. Thus, several of our correspondents declared their fancies to be their only facts; others that they had done nothing all their lives; and some — with a modesty most extreme — that they had not lived at all.

Strange that the symbol of these

ladies (her calling them women in the foregoing paragraph was an exception) should be a nude woman without even a hair net to govern her most unruly waves! How quaint, how inconsistent were the conceptions of those days when the Queen, in response to the many requests to that effect, was living long! For that matter, was it entirely nice to bring to mind the questionable fact that ladies, like the rest of humankind, had to be born?

They were so much more modest — those female poets of the 'forties — than we are now! But, really and truly, did they have so much to be immodest about as we? Miss May says, in her lead, "One of the most striking characteristics of the present age is the number of female writers, especially in the department of belles-lettres." But their fame has not come down. And even the then unborn science and art of publicity would not have helped them much; their poems were not good enough. Of the seventy-three women whose poems are given, with a brief and delicate "biographical and critical notice", I had heard of only two as poets, Maria Brooks and Maria Lowell, wife of James Russell Lowell. Of Anne Bradstreet, wife of Simon Bradstreet, governor of Massachusetts Colony, with whom Miss May historically begins, I had heard, but not as a poet.

Another book very like this, though green and even bigger, and without the nude Medusa, I found on that same high dusty shelf — "Female Poets of America" by Thomas Buchanan Read, brought out in 1887 by Worthington Company, 747 Broadway,

New York. The only other familiar names in it are those belonging to the Cary sisters, Phœbe and Alice, Julia Ward Howe, Charlotte Cushman, actress, and "Miss May" herself, Caroline by name, who did not list herself as poet in her own anthology.

A glance at the titles is enough; they tell the tale — "Lines to Grief"; "Contemplation"; "On the Death of a Young Gentleman of Great Promise"; "To an Amiable Friend Mourning the Death of an Excellent Father"; "The Obedient Love of Woman Her Highest Bliss"; "Cheerful Content"; "Infancy"; "The Cloud Where Sunbeams Soft Repose"; "He Was Our Father's Darling", and so forth. They are almost all about the same things — melancholy, religion, thwarted love, nature, grief; and they are all written in the very same way. Yet one cannot laugh. They are filled with real things — all the deeper and the more pathetic because the emotions of a lady then were so limited and so without uniqueness of expression. It hurt just as much then to have a lover jilt you, or to have a baby die, even if the trite lines which tell of it do seem to take all life and feeling quite away. Perhaps it even hurt a little worse, without more adequate relief!

Only two of the whole lot of females seem interesting now — Sara J. Clarke, who at one time "conducted The Lady's Paper for Mr. Godey of Philadelphia", and who wrote a fine, spirited rhyme about riding horseback in the morning; and Amelia B. Welby, born in Maryland in 1821, whose poems appeal much more than all the rest. She writes one to "My Sisters", in which she describes herself as "the youngest, wildest one".

And in another poem, "Seventeen", about a girl she loves, she says,

I do not know if round her heart
Love yet hath thrown his wing,
I rather think she's like myself,
An April-hearted thing.

How wonderful, how good! This one at least was not a lady — she was "an April-hearted thing"!