From The Gentleman's Magazine.

THE QUAKER POET.[1]

THE life of the Quaker is in many respects an ideal life; but it is not exactly in these that we should call ideal the life of the American poet who has just gone to his rest. Those of the younger generation who know anything of Whittier at all, know him only as a kindly, courteous old gentleman, upon whom the marches and changes of time had left no shadow or tinge of sadness, who awaited the inevitable call with as much complacency as the "Good Grey Poet" who went before him, and who, now that he has gone, has left behind him a poetic legacy in which there is not a little that the world will willingly let die. But the Whittier of the early days—he is as far removed from the present as that turmoil of the great Abolition struggle which so far has been the most memorable chapter in the history of the United States. The advocacy of a good but intensely unpopular cause was what he once recommended as the best discipline for a young man of earnest aspirations; and that was just the method by which the poet himself emerged from the obscurity of his humble home at Haverhill to become a force almost equal to that of Abraham Lincoln and William Lloyd Garrison.

According to his own confession, it never had been his desire to found a school of poetry, or even to write with the definite object of influencing others. He wrote, as his fellow-Quakers prayed, only when the spirit moved him, unable often to give utterance to the best that was in his heart; but he held it to be the crowning glory of a life prolonged beyond the allotted span that he could look back to having been of some value in helping forward those reforms in the laws of his country which made so many millions of bondmen free. When the minister of religion, holding the Bible in his hand, sought to prove that the white man had a right to traffic in human flesh, it needed that some Tyrtæus should gird the sword on the thigh, and go forth in combat against the powers of tyranny and oppression. The ambition to make a free man of every negro within the bounds of the States was a noble one, and John Greenleaf Whittier was fired by it. Exchanging the plough for the pen, he helped to rouse the nation by marching-songs which made the blood move quicker as the step hastened onwards to liberty; and before he sheathed the sword he had the satisfaction of seeing that there had been secured to every man the rice in his own pot. For this must the Quaker poet be held in honor; if we cannot call him great, we can at least call him good; and his name should assuredly be kept on the borders of the living land for his noble faith and his worthy deeds. As Mr. Lowell has said in his "Fable for Critics:"—

> All honor and praise to the right-hearted bard
> Who was true to The Voiee when such service was hard,
> Who himself was so free he dared sing for the slave
> When to look but a protest in silence was brave.

To the very last the cause of the colored man and the oppressed contin-

[1] The Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier, with Life, Notes, etc. F. Warne & Co.

ued dear to him; though for the solution of the problem he had come to look largely to the education and elevation of the negro himself.

When some one asked Whittier as to the date of his birth, he replied: "I cannot say positively from my personal knowledge when I was born, but my mother told me it was on December 17, 1807, and she was a very truthful woman." There is no reason to doubt the good lady's veracity, either as to this, or as to the further fact that the place of birth was the farmhouse of Haverhill, on the Merrimac River, Massachusetts. The parents were, of course, members of the Society of Friends, so that the poet inherited with his birth little more than the memory of centuries of persecution, which had, however, no doubt some share in putting the iron in his blood which was to make of him the poetic warrior for a downtrodden race. Whittier, like Burns and Hogg, was brought up to the life of the farm, working so hard that only during occasional intervals was he able to get to school. The family acres were neither many nor very productive; and thus it was that during the long winters the household revenues had to be increased by some kind of indoor industry suited to the place and season. The making of shoes, as a rule, employed the elders, while the boys did the work of the barn, and brought home from the meadows the "sharp, sickle-edged grass" which the young cattle would eat in midwinter. The poet himself has told us of the wonder and terror of those wide and perilous meadows over which he used to wander and toil in his earlier years. They were full of snakes — striped, green, dingy water-snakes, adders and black snakes — creatures of which he had "an almost Irish hatred." All this inured him to honest homely labor, and although it prevented him getting much of regular schooling, he yet employed his evenings to such advantage that by and by he had taught himself so well that he was able to teach a little to others. When he came of age he "drifted into journalism" as the editor of the *Boston Manufacturer*, and with journalism he remained connected, more or less, for several years, having all the time, like a cautious Quaker, a second string to his bow in the shape of a farm. His literary work was mainly in connection with obscure and poor journals, and his salary is said never to have amounted to more than four hundred dollars a year.

It was in 1836, that, as some one has put it, Whittier "received a call." The *Newburyport Free Press*, edited by William Lloyd Garrison, had been an important medium of early culture to the young poet, and at the age of nineteen his own first verses had appeared in its Poets' Corner. The lines were entitled "The Exile's Departure," and opened thus: —

Fond scenes that delighted my youthful existence,
With feelings of sorrow I bid you adieu —
A lasting adieu, for now, dim in the distance,
The shores of Hibernia recede from my view.

Farewell to the cliffs, tempest-beaten and grey,
Which guard the loved shores of my own native land!
Farewell to the village and sail-shadowed bay,
The forest-crowned hill, and the water-washed strand.

In the editor's Notices to Correspondents, the poet was told that "If 'W.' at Haverhill will continue to favor us with pieces as beautiful as the one inserted in our poetical department of to-day, we shall esteem it a favor." Not often is the budding poet thus addressed by the editor, even of the provincial paper, and Whittier, staid and sober Quaker though he was, must have felt an honest pride rising in his bosom as he read the flattering lines. Speaking of those days he once said: "The ability to make rhymes then was rare. The principal poets when I was young who were doing anything were Bryant, the elder Dana, and Percival. One of the remarkable things in literature to-day is that there are so many

and so good writers of verse. Many of them, had they lived earlier, would have been regarded as something wonderful.

Having once gained a place in the Poets' Corner, other verses followed as a matter of course, and before long Mr. Garrison was on his way to visit his unknown contributor, not thinking to find him a youth on an outlying farm. Shortly afterwards Garrison started the *Liberator*, an anti-slavery organ, and thenceforward all Whittier's energies as well as his verses were consecrated so the deliverance of his countrymen from the narrowing despotism which was then the national curse of America. It was no small matter in those days to take the side of right against might in the interests of the negro. As Bryant has pointed out, the Quaker poet championed the slave when to say anything against slavery was "to draw upon oneself the bitterest hatred, loathing, and contempt of the great majority of men throughout the land." Once the office of the newspaper of which the poet was editor was sacked by an angry mob; once he had to flee one way while Garrison fled another, both being pursued by a crowd which would have as readily strung them up to the lamp-posts as they had strung up the negroes who already dangled there. When he was living on the paternal farm at Haverhill, an old friend from Boston came to inform him that he had been appointed a delegate to a convention about to be held at Philadelphia for the purpose of forming a National Anti-Slavery Society. From this time onward for many a year the poet led the life of a martyr. Soon after he was at Philadelphia editing the *Pennsylvania Freeman*, and assisting to erect Pennsylvania Hall, which was being reared in order that there might be in the city at least one edifice in which the principles of liberty could be discussed freely and without fear. The hall had barely been dedicated when it was fired by an angry mob, and with it perished the books and papers of the editor of the *Pennsylvania Freeman*.

The battle was fierce and obstinate, for the enemy was strong, and long was the issue dubious, but in the darkest hour the poet never faltered. As the author of "Letters to Living Authors" remarks, with a faith as unflinching as that of our own Cromwell, he and the noble company whose cause was his held on, growing ever the more determined the heavier the odds against him. When Church and State opposed him, he defiantly and scornfully asked regarding the free citizen:—

Must he be told his freedom stands
On Slavery's dark foundations strong—
On breaking hearts and fettered hands,
On robbery and crime and wrong?
That all his fathers taught is vain—
That Freedom's emblem is the chain?

The moneyed opposition, stung into defiant rage, after prophesying failure, asked who and what was this young poet that he should presume to disturb the economy of nature—that he should dictate to his superiors, the holders of human property, whose rights were perhaps equal to those of the Deity himself? He was unknown, this young poet, he was obscure, he was without influence. It was all true; but the young poet was not without zeal, and so he fought on, never despairing, till at last the head of the hydra was crushed—and in view of the band of evil prophets, many of them, strange to say, hailing from our own land, he sheathed the sword and put on the victor's crown.

It was a glorious triumph, but that it was bought at the cost of much excitement and nervous strain we can easily see from the poet's "Voices of Freedom." There we have many powerful if sometimes not too poetical verses, struck off as it were at white heat, like the "Marseillaise," and full of the most impassioned pleading and burning denunciation.

What ho! *our* countrymen in chains!
The whip on WOMAN'S shrinking flesh!
Our soil yet reddening with the stains
Caught from her scourging, warm and fresh!
What! mothers from their children riven!
What! God's own image bought and sold!
AMERICANS to market driven,
And bartered as the brute for gold!

The fugitive slave might seek a refuge in the village church, but there is no sanctuary for her even there, and the parson calls out to the pursuing owner:

Of course, I know your right divine,
To own and work and whip her;
Quick, deacon, throw that Polyglot
Before the wench, and trip her!

So the poor girl is caught, and the poet tells us how

Shriek rose on shriek — the Sabbath air
Her wild cries tore asunder;
I listened with hushed breath to hear
God answering with his thunder!

Another girl is put up to auction, and the man of the hammer commends her to the expectant bidders as "a good Christian."

A Christian! going, gone!
Who bids for God's own image? — for his grace,
Which that poor victim of the market-place
Hath in her suffering won!

My God! can such things be?
Hast thou not said that whatsoe'er is done
Unto thy weakest and thy humblest one
Is even done to thee?

The "Quaker maid" is persecuted and offered for sale by "dark and haughty Endicott, the ruler of the land;" but some chivalry is still left in the breast of the old sea-captain, who speaks out: —

Pile my ship with bars of silver — pack with coins of Spanish gold,
From keel-piece up to deck-plank, the roomage of her hold;
By the living God who made me! I would sooner in your bay
Sink ship, and crew, and cargo, than bear this child away!

So the girl receives her freedom, and immediately her voice rises to heaven in a song of praise for her deliverance: —

Thanksgiving to the Lord of life! — to him all praises be,
Who from the hands of evil men hath set his handmaid free;
All praise to him before whose power the mighty are afraid,
Who takes the crafty in the snare which for the poor is laid!

Trenchant and telling are the satirical denunciations of the clergy who gave their countenance to a great meeting held at Charleston in favor of slavery.

Just God! and these are they
Who minister at thine altar, God of Right!
Men who their hands with prayer and blessing lay
On Israel's Ark of light!
. . . . . .
What! servants of thine own
Merciful Son, who came to seek and save
The homeless and the outcast — fettering down
The tasked and plundered slave!

These and other verses of a like kind show the moral purpose of Whittier's early work, which is perhaps the most important element for the critic who would duly determine his ultimate position as a singer. And in that connection, as has been before remarked, one cannot miss the resemblance between him and the other two distinguished American poets whom after so short an interval he has followed to the Silent Land. The names of Lowell, of Whittier, and of Whitman are all associated more or less with the Abolition struggle. The "Biglow Papers" and the "Harvard Commemoration Ode," the "Monody on Lincoln," and the "Drum Taps," are the best literary expression of the enthusiasms which "nerved the North to the great battle for freedom and for the Union, and which carried it victoriously through the fight." As with Whitman, so with Whittier, these enthusiasms were the inspiration not only of the poet's lyrics, but of his life as well. His whole man was enlarged and formed into a permanent mould by the influence of these early days of struggle; and it is undoubtedly as one of the last veterans of this struggle that he has merited the praise and the reverence that are receiving expression now that he has passed away.

And yet there is very little, if, indeed, there is anything at all, among these anti-slavery productions that is destined to live. They served but a passing need, and have already lost much of their value as literature. A sympathetic critic has well said: "Mr. Whittier can afford to own that he has sometimes failed to rise above the level

of the verse-maker. A writer who celebrates the events of the passing hour must expect the lustre of some performances to fade with the interests which called them forth, and in the mass of Mr. Whittier's productions, representing as it does the fruitage of a long and busy life, there is much, undoubtedly, of an ephemeral character; but there is an abundance of durable work of a peculiar and rare quality, and there are certain themes which, by right of discovery, this writer has made his own." His last work came from those later days passed in the quiet of great peace, when the poet had already entered on the reward which comes from the consciousness of duty well done. There are times when the spirit of poetry seems to have possessed him utterly, when the best thought is worked out in a terse and telling form, with all the true fire and magic of genius. There are lines where the musical effect, the seemingly effortless and inevitable aptness of word and rhythm, with their perfect and crystalline clearness of thought, disclose the highest quality of poetical art. They move with the same unconscious volition as when the bird hovers over the meadow's surface, or darts with unerring swiftness at its mark. On the other hand, as even the kindly American critic has admitted, there are whole pages which resemble the same bird with folded wings, hopping aimlessly here and there upon the ground — pages of purely commonplace and mechanical jingle, such as any versifier with an ordinary metrical ear can produce by the ream.

No writer, however, should be judged by his least successful efforts, and it is enough that Whittier has left us a number of poems which for musical charm, for lyric passion, for concentrated and exquisite expression of high poetic feeling, are equal to anything which America has produced. There is, as some one has remarked, a haunting melody about many of his verses which comes back to us like the scent of birches and bog-myrtle.

The pines were dark on Ramoth hill,
  Their song was soft and low;
The blossoms in the sweet May wind
  Were falling like the snow.

This beautiful poem, by the way, serves to remind us how little of the inspiration of love there is in the Quaker poet. The only poem, besides "My Playmate," in which he refers to the tender passion is that entitled "Memories." Mr. Whittier has been in love, and for a moment he takes us into his confidence. The glimpse is valuable, if only to assure us of his common clay. As has been said, there is something unhuman if not inhuman about a man who has never been in love, but the American poet has been "there," and has profited by the experience, as all good men, especially old bachelors, do.

I feel its glow upon my cheek,
  Its fulness of the heart is mine,
As when I leaned to hear thee speak,
  Or raised my doubtful eye to thine.

I hear again thy low replies,
  I feel thy arm within my own,
And timidly again uprise
The fringèd lids of hazel eyes,
  With soft brown tresses overblown.

Ah! memories of sweet summer eves,
  Of moonlit wave and willowy way,
Of stars and flowers and dewy leaves,
  And smiles and tones more dear than they!

His poems dealing with individual characters are notable, as the *Times* remarked, for their individuality and their graphic force. Take "Cassandra Southwick" for example, where we see portrayed a veritable woman, noble in her tribulations and glorious in her triumph; or "Randolph of Roanoke," a splendid tribute to the memory of a great man, and all the more praiseworthy that it was wrung from the lips of an opponent. The Quaker poet saw the Virginian slave-holder as he was — a man to be known and respected. Some of his ballads are among the best that the century has given us, full of charm and pathos, and as pure and fresh as the mountain breezes. That one of "Annie and Rhoda" brims over with the feeling which appeals most strongly to the emotions. One sister has a lover, and in the quiet of the

night the younger one hears him call upon her name as he is drowning at sea. "Thou liest!" says the elder girl; "he never would call thy name."

If he did, I would pray the wind and sea
To keep him ever from thee and me!

But the younger girl is assured her sister's betrothed is really dead, and she can now avow the love she had never told. The ballad ends thus: —

The wind and the waves their work have done;
We shall see him no more beneath the sun.

Little will reck that heart of thine;
It loved him not with a love like mine.

I, for his sake, were he but here,
Could hem and broider thy bridal gear,

Though hands should tremble and eyes be wet,
And stitch for stitch in my heart be set.

But now my soul with his soul I wed —
Thine the living, and mine the dead!

In this branch of his work it may almost be said of him that what Sir Walter Scott did for his country Whittier did for New England.

The religious sentiment runs through most of Whittier's poems. His typical teaching seems to be that religion is a present active belief; that it should be exemplified in the life, whatever the future may bring; the call of duty must be obeyed, but in obedience will be found solace, consolation, hope, and trust. "I am, and always have been," he once said, "an orthodox Friend, but I am profoundly convinced of the terrible realities of life, and as I grow older I become more and more convinced that the God who brought all these souls into the world will not disown his ultimate responsibility for them." Many of his devotional lyrics recall those of Cowper, and some of them have now taken a permanent place in English hymnology. The Christian philosophy of "My Psalm" is such as might be accepted by the most rigidly orthodox.

No longer forward nor behind
I look in hope or fear;
But, grateful, take the good I find,
The best of now and here.

I plough no more a desert land,
To harvest weed and tare;
The manna dropping from God's hand
Rebukes my painful care.

I break my pilgrim staff, — I lay
Aside the toiling oar:
The angel sought so far away
I welcome at my door.

. . . . . .

For death seems but a covered way
Which opens into light,
Wherein no blinded child can stray
Beyond the Father's sight.

His cheery view of life, even as it nears the end, comes out in "My Birthday:" —

Beneath the moonlight and the snow
Lies dead my latest year;
The winter winds are wailing low
Its dirges in my ear.

I grieve not with the moaning wind,
As if a loss befell;
Before me, even as behind,
God is, and all is well.

Such, then, was John Greenleaf Whittier. His work, if not great, has at least been earnest and genuine, and there is surely enough in it to hand down his name to future generations along with the names of Longfellow and Lowell, Bryant and Poe, Whitman and Holmes. In any case, he will always be entitled to the honor of having used his talents in the highest service to which it was possible to put them. As a writer addressing him once said, "You have done what you could for your fellow-men; you have fought the battle of the weak, and helped to raise the downtrodden and the oppressed. There is a glory higher than the laurel of the poet — the glory of good deeds done in behalf of suffering humanity; and it is yours. You are a poet, a true and sweet one, and something better."

T. CUTHBERT HADDEN.