A REMINISCENCE OF EMILY DICKINSON

By Clara Bellinger Green

THE revived interest in Emily Dickinson and the recently published biography by her niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, have recalled an incident of my schooldays which I have always held as my choicest memory, it being the one occasion on which I, though one of her townsfolk, was permitted to meet her. Hitherto she had been a mythical member of the family, whose existence was accepted but unsubstantiated. The experience was unique and had the element of unreality.

It chanced that Emily Dickinson had expressed a desire to have my sister sing for her a solo which had formed part of a memorable service in the village church. Her wish was expressed to us by her sister Lavinia Dickinson, the "Vinnie" so often mentioned in the "Letters", herself a most original personality, with the humorous turn of speech characteristic of the family. As young girls we used often to drop in after school to have a chat with "Miss Lavinia" as we called her, sure to be entertained by her droll, vivacious, and individual views on men and things. I remember once asking her if she could not induce her sister Emily to go out occasionally.

"But why should I?" she said. "She is quite happy and contented as she is. I would only disturb her."

"I, you must know," she remarked one day, 'am the family inflater. One by one the members of my household go down, and I must inflate them." And she was well equipped by nature with courage, cheer, and vivacity to buoy up any who came within her radius, though the office of inflater may at times have exhausted her own spirit.

It was a warm June evening when we made our way to the Dickinson home, our young imaginations eagerly picturing our unusual audience. How would she look? What would she say?

But we had no audience. In the long, Colonial drawing room, its windows thrown wide upon the piazza to let in the summer breeze, we were left alone, Miss Lavinia joining her sister on the floor above. Left to ourselves, we — my sister, my brother, and myself — clustered about the old piano at the end of the room conscious that we were qualifying as "the choir invisible".

At the close of the singing a light clapping of hands, like a flutter of wings, floated down the staircase, and Miss Lavinia came to tell us that Emily would see us — my sister and myself — in the library. If we had been inspired to our best effort by our unseen audience, we were now in a flutter of anticipation at the prospect of seeing her. In the library, dimly lighted from the hall, a tiny figure in white darted to greet us, grasped our hands and told us of her pleasure in hearing us sing.

"Except for the birds", she said, "yours is the first song I have heard for many years. I have long been familiar with the voice and the laugh of each one of you, and I know, too, your brother's whistle as he trudges

by the house." She spoke rapidly, with the breathless voice of a child and with a peculiar charm I have not forgotten.

She told us of her early love for the piano and confided that, after hearing Rubinstein — I believe it was Rubinstein — play in Boston, she had become convinced that she could never master the art and had forthwith abandoned it once and for all, giving herself up then wholly to literature. As she stood before us in the vague light of the library we were chiefly aware of a pair of great, dark eyes set in a small, pale, delicately chiseled face, and a little body, quaint, simple as a child and wholly unaffected.

There is a reference to this evening in one of her published letters: "The last song I heard except the birds was: 'He leadeth me, He leadeth me'; and then the voices dipped." A letter to my sister from Lavinia Dickinson mentions this incident:

> I often recall the song I heard you sing the Sunday our pastor said adieu to my church. A pall hung over the big audience, and the stillness was heart-breaking, when you rose and chanted the grandest of songs [the twenty third psalm]. And all the people said, Amen. I can see you as freshly as yesterday as you stood so noble and solemn pronouncing the farewell words. How much has happened since that day. And where *are* all the dear ones that filled the atmosphere then? . . . I hope you are interested in the "third series" of Emily's poems.

It is hard to reconcile my memory of Emily Dickinson with the portrait in the biography, which appears to be Emily Dickinson modernized — becurled, beruffed, and brought up to date. One scans it and recalls the child picture which graced the frontispiece of the poems edited by Mabel Loomis Todd — the thin, slightly compressed lips with a hint of pain in them, the thoughtful, delicately lined features, the great, dark, unfathomable eyes, and the finely molded head.

Yet one welcomes anything new concerning perhaps the most individual poet and exceptional character New England has produced: a nature so shrinking that contact with her fellows was intolerable to her, so sensitive that the sight of a line of her own in print would upset her, yet who possessed a mental balance and courage quite as extraordinary as her timidity. I remember hearing her sister-in-law, the "Sister Sue" mentioned in the biography, tell of having once sent a poem of Emily's to the Springfield "Republican" without her knowledge. Its appearance in the paper nearly caused a breach in the close friendship of the two. The lines, as I recall them, were those she called "The Snake" — the "narrow fellow in the grass". The closing verse reads:

> I never saw this fellow
> Attended or alone,
> Without a tighter breathing
> And zero at the bone.

When Emily Dickinson's poems first appeared, I wrote to Miss Lavinia from New York and received a characteristic reply — unfortunately too securely packed away in storage to be available — in which she said that, to her surprise, upward of seven hundred poems were found in Emily's portfolio after her death, neatly tied together in groups. Owing to the illegible writing, the task of reading, arranging according to subject, and preparing for publication these many poems was most arduous. It was first undertaken by Emily's lifelong friend and appreciator "Sister Sue", but in the end relinquished into the hands of the more enduring Mabel Loomis Todd, who so admirably and sympathetically edited them and gave them to the world.

It is surprising and somewhat disconcerting to read the story of Emily Dickinson's love affair as interpreted by her niece. The version accepted was that the young man was not looked upon with favor by Emily's stern New England parent, and that he subsequently became a prominent lawyer and married late in life. As given out by the family to Mrs. Todd, Emily's life as a recluse was the natural, indeed inevitable expression of a nature so preternaturally sensitive that even the unavoidable intrusions of social life were unbearable to her.