

POEMS IN PASTEL

ONE WAY OF LOVE. *By Cuthbert Wright. 12mo.*
71 pages. *Elkin Mathews.*

SOME time past, as we were philanthropically engaged in boxing up books for the Merchant Marine, we had occasion to comb over our acquisitions of the past ten years. Pride of possession vanished in a welter of half-forgotten volumes of verse, each with its first fly leaf duly inscribed with our own name (and sometimes, we remember modestly, with someone's else) and a date we once had reason to believe would be significant. Turning over hundreds of leaves, we found infallible evidence of careful perusal: bright stanzas bracketed, lively figures underlined, asterisks placed over against such verses as we had thought distinctly good, possibly because they reminded us of something better. Here had been industry decidedly aesthetic, and all to no purpose, apparently, for try as hard as we could (once we had nailed up our boxes of volumes for the high seas) only wide breakers of Spenser, and Shelley, and Swinburne came rolling in from our historic past. Bob as bob would the rickety skiff of our memory, it was always to such surf as surges across the footlights at Corneille, for instance. We smiled to think what pain and embarrassment this acknowledgement would once have cost us.

As some men choose friends we choose causes: for the enemies they have made. So it is that the poetical stir of the last ten years has left us glowing with an ardent admiration for the grand manner: for prose and verse in buskins. No fashion of well-informed futility can alter our perversity: our corruption is personal and hopeless. What pets men keep involve vexed questions of character, for pet poems are like pet cats: sooner or later they come back unbidden; night and morning one is apt to find them on the stoop of the brain, friendly even familiar. Sometimes, gazing at the gorgeous angoras of our neighbours, we feel ashamed

of common cats like "Comus," "Adonais," and "Hero and Leander."

Yet these are good cats. Calculation would convince us if form failed, for all back-fence serenading to the contrary, the birthrate in verse has not been what we should have expected. Litters of lyrics are becoming so perishable, or infrequent, that poetry, like modern society, bids fair to wither away at the top. So it was, rummaging among the remnants of our first editions, we were not altogether shocked to find how generous we had been with our sailors. If there was anything to be ashamed of about the few books we had kept for sale at our decease, ownership, we reflected, was scarcely the word. As we glanced over these reminiscently, we found ourself gazing into pools, peeping at reflections—not our own exactly, rather composite images, vague and colourless, very much like that sort of photograph one will wire, some day, to dear friends. Narcissus, we seemed to remember, perished in youth; how was it that poets were almost invariably long-lived? Thus it was, we argued, that the older they grew the more bitterly they smirked at their first ventures.

Only mock modesty, however, could make the author of *One Way of Love* coy of his parenthood—at so early a date. Candour compels us to confess that these poems are of unequal merit: at least two of Mr Wright's efforts are quite as bad as the worst of the best of poets. Yet two short lapses, together with a few distinctly unfortunate passages, is surely no very large allowance for the generous, if rotund, passions of youth. And one other lyric, for its severe grace and inevitable simplicity is unforgettable: no mean praise in these busy days when the bulk of rememberable poems could be wadded in a walnut shell. The colours of this book are pastel, sometimes plain grey; these poems are some of them boyish, literary, even grandiose. For us, the most ambitious, *Ballad of a Factory Town*, is unhappily stained with a persistent memory of teas and tempests of ten years ago. Precisely in this poem—by far the most worldly successful of them all—does the finest quality of Mr Wright's verse, felicitous simplicity, become a trifle arch. A certain demureness of method here falters into sly speech and prim effects. Obviously (we contend that this platitude has become a troubled creed) the most deadly solvent for whatever magic verse may own, is even a faint suspicion of insincerity

or pose. Mr Wright goes down fighting on the nobler side, for splurge it is that most frequently becomes ridiculous, not economy. From a Study by Flandrin holds the essence of spare poetry, winning us, if ever, with the power of austere expression—winning us completely in this instance.

One Way of Love belongs to days when musicians, for instance, were not ashamed of a resolution of chords. Within the last ten years writers of all varieties have spread the fashion of working with hints, winks, and jokes, paring down their words to the last refinement of the ineffable. Because affection for self-expression is a barren love, poets grow wise by growing weary of themselves. Thereupon they fall desperately in love with life (beyond or above them, however they may choose to phrase their sainthood) and come back to their youth, with a difference. Swinburne is a case in point: rarely has man been so thorough a dupe of words as he. Against all forms of the belly worship of holy India stands for ever the verbal balance of great style.

Nine years ago Mr Wright was hardly ready for a conversion to mature expression, being quite naturally concerned with how he looked against the unalterable background of the world. Yet bits of these poems, stray verses flooded with the long level light of autumn afternoons, suggest the inevitable evidence of success with words: a sensation of recoil toward rest. What tricks he has are innocent, because they are never shrewd enough to hide his failures. Even before the secondary sentiments of reflection the storm and stress of egotistic contrariness vanish. Some poets are so happy as occasionally to speak quickly and exactly; unlucky ones never succeed without tinsel and bunting. Unwillingly as we should advise Mr Wright to go on exactly as he began, seriously as we hesitate to say anything that might augment the current downpour of verse, we suggest that according to the faith of poetry, the sin against the holy ghost is silence.

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