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JEAN INGELOW.

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To have succeeded in the realms both of Poetry and Prose is a lot which has fallen to few, even in these latter days when "of making books there is no end"; and in this hurrying life it is almost equally remarkable that a woman who possessed the double gift should have refrained her soul and kept it low until she had attained the maturity of forty-three years.

Even then it seemed almost by accident that the public was admitted into the confidence of Jean Ingelow, for it was only through the brothers' pride in her prolific writings that they were ever printed.

To write poetry on the inside of a shutter is an original mode of procedure, but poets are a law unto themselves, and it is possible that somewhere or other some future poet-laureate is even now immortalising himself in some such droll fashion.

Every one knows Napolean's famous words about mothers; and Mrs. Ingelow, being a very clever woman herself, was well able to understand and

to encourage the talents of her clever family, and to recognise their literary abilities.

Their father was originally a banker in Boston, Lincolnshire, where Jean was born; but subsequently he removed to Ipswich, where they remained for many years. He was a staunch Evangelical, and consistently upheld the traditions of that section of the English Church. We wonder why Banking and Evangelicalism so often go together. For they do. Baring, Bosanquet, Coutts, are all pillars of the Church. Not "flying buttresses," as some one has wittily called those who are more ornamental than useful, but staunch supporters, by words and works, of all that is now so unworthily sneered at as "Protestantism." Possibly there is a *realness* about both, which may account for the association; for there is no romance about either the one or the other. Both are, or should be, "upright and downright and true to the backbone." No ambiguities can be tolerated; no hair-splitting sophistries can hold a place in either; and the straightforward, perpendicular character of both has helped to make England what she is, whether from a religious or a financial point of view.

All the young Ingelows must have had a natural gift for versifying and for writing generally, or the production of a little home-periodical would have been impossible. Probably, however, it was Jean

whose contributions were the mainstay of the paper; for, as she naively expressed it in the after-days, "I could not help writing."

There is a striking contrast here between this happy group of bright, clever children, growing up in healthy surroundings amid merry friends, and the little pale-faced, motherless trio in the bleak Haworth parsonage, who wrote their "secret plays" and vivid word-pictures in the long lonely evenings, with only the blaze of the kitchen fire and their own glowing fancies to distract them from the dreary monotony of their daily lives.

What a contrast!

And the pathos that surrounds the childhood of the Brontes does but deepen as the years go on.

This gift for writing poetry was with Jean Ingelow not merely a passing inspiration, of which, as "Aurora Leigh" declares,

> "Near all the birds will sing at dawn,"

and

> "Many tender souls have strung their losses on a rhyming thread
> As children cowslips— the more pains they take
> The work more withers."

Rather did she strive against it, feeling, as so many have felt, that the capacity for writing in some sort set her apart from other people. Some natures have as much horror of eccentricity as they have of crime, and in their falsely conceived interpretation

of the word have strangely perverted it from its real meaning. To be "eccentric," after all, is but to be out of the one orbit which conventionality has prescribed.

"There is one glory of the sun, another glory of the moon, another glory of the stars, and one star differeth from another star in glory."

To every man his own orbit, would be a safer axiom, with more interesting results, than that every man should have the same orbit, in which to revolve at greater or less velocity.

"It's the way of the world." "Everybody says so." Then, in God's name, do not go that way,—say something else; and there are nine chances to one that the world itself will end by blessing you.

Her reluctant diffidence, however, having been overcome, the next step was to take the "Poems" to a publisher, and the one selected by her brother and mother was Mr Longman, who at once recognised their unusual merit, and did his utmost to promote the sale of the modest volume. He had no cause to regret its publication, for edition after edition has been called for; and in America even more than in England the music of her style has been sincerely appreciated. In the first year, 1863, four editions of a thousand each were sold, and since that time nearly thirty thousand copies have circulated throughout the length and breadth of the land.

The second edition of her Poems came out, however, under somewhat unusual circumstances, which are worthy of notice. In spite of the fact that the first edition was exhausted, the cautious publisher did not seem inclined to issue a second. Mrs and Miss Ingelow called to propose it, but left his office somewhat crestfallen. In the passage they met a man with a slip of paper in his hand, and two or three minutes later a messenger hurried after them to say that this man had come with an order for five hundred copies, so that another edition would have to be printed immediately.

Henceforward, success— embodied in the persons of publishers— waited upon her. Book after book was eagerly caught up, and her name and fame spread steadily not only in England but in America.

It is possible that, had her poems appeared fifty years later, their success would not have been so immediate or so great, for the public taste of 1906 is very different from that of even a few years ago. It is less demurely simple— more sensational, more dramatic. Nowadays there is a continual cry for "strong" work— less landscape painting and sunshine, more dash and flare and lime-light.

But the touch of nature would perhaps have redeemed them, even in the eyes of the most "up-to-date" critics; for there is a healthy humanness about her simplest verses which must surely

appeal to most men, and many of her poems are gems of their kind.

Rumour in those days would seem to have been as unreliable as now; for in a letter, dated December 31, 1863, Christina Rossetti speaks of the "wonderful poet — aged twenty-one," who had just risen upon the literary horizon. This rumour of extreme youth may have had something to do with the extraordinary interest and success with which Jean Ingelow's first volume was greeted; but, as the truth leaked out, there was no diminution of the popularity which she so justly deserved. Jean Ingelow was in reality Miss Rossetti's senior by ten years, but the latter had made for herself a permanent place in the literary world before the former had published a line.

It is safe to say that 'Barrack-Room Ballads' would have found in her no admirer, and the "Absent-minded Beggar" would have been Anathema Maranatha — as it probably is to Kipling himself by this time. War was to her only a huge blunder, an unfathomable "woe," for which she could find no justification, and of which no word of praise or sympathy is to be found throughout her writings.

Her love of children is evinced in many a tender line, but she never left the shelter of her own home save for cosy expeditions on the Continent with some of her family.

A curious feature in her poems is the absence of all allusions to her foreign experiences. Nearly all poets have drawn inspiration from foreign sources, but Jean Ingelow is essentially English throughout. In spite of many winters spent abroad, and exhaustive visits to every cathedral in France in the company of her brother, who was an "ecclesiastical architect" — whatever that term may comprehend — we find scarcely any mention of things outside England. To Longfellow and many others travelling was an inspiration; but possibly her brother's architectural interests may have dominated the trend of her thoughts. At any rate, nothing less than the "dread purity of Alpine snows" seems to have lifted itself above the stern outside influences of stone and structure, even when glorified into immortal monuments, in the time when "Art was still Religion." She has sung of "the nobility of labour— the long pedigree of toil," but on English soil only: and it is probably as the fisherman's poet that she will be longest remembered. Many of her poems seem to "smell of the sea," and she is at her best when writing about it.

The 'Atheneum' gives rather an amusing account of a needlework competition which was proposed between Dora Greenwell, Christina Rossetti, and Jean Ingelow in the year 1863, in which year the latter first signalised herself as a poet. Each of these ladies determined to show the others that she could

work with the needle as well as with the pen, but there is no record of Christina Rossetti's "Meister-stuck," though Dora Greenwell presented her with a well-made reticule of her own handiwork. The pattern of the bag which Jean Ingelow gave to Dora Greenwell was designed by herself, and seems to have given as much pleasure to the donor as to the recipient; while Jean Ingelow was much gratified by the gift of a very superior kettle-holder worked by Dora Greenwell's adaptable fingers.

A letter of hers with regard to children's books, published about this time, gives us a clue as to her own ideas of literary work. "Mystical fancies," she says, "are a mere luxury. They never do us any good."

On the principle of the meeting of extremes, Jean Ingelow and Christina Rossetti should have been great friends, but, as far as we are aware, nothing but a "very slight acquaintance" and a mutual admiration existed between them. Jean Ingelow's poems are full of a "detailed knowledge of nature," and the hopefulness of spring permeates most of her works; and this quality no doubt greatly commended her to Miss Rossetti, whose life was dominated by the Cross rather than by the Anchor.

Tennyson and Ruskin were among her earliest and kindliest critics; but away in the Fen country, where first she saw the light, many a man has hung

over her pages as he seemed to see the eddying waters of the high tide at Enderby, and to hear the song of the Northern Sea as it chanted its long dirge for the dead fishermen.

All the characters in her more dramatic poems were very real to her, many of them being probably drawn from the life.

Her poor people are never written of as a class. They are just units of the world's big family who happened to be born poor; and there is no tinge of patronage in her tones, only the frank friendliness which characterised her whole nature. She knew but little of the world's great sorrows from personal experience, but that did not prevent her from entering with wide sympathy into the sorrows of others, and her advice and counsel were eagerly sought by many whose faces she had never seen. The following sweet lines epitomise in some measure her beliefs in this respect:—

"And even I, who know
But little of earth's woe,
Can take from other hearts into my own
Reflected griefs that bring,
With every tear they wring,
Knowledge that love must seek for peace in heaven alone."

Set as they were to most harmonious music, her songs will long be remembered, when perhaps her more ambitious efforts are forgotten. "When Sparrows build" is full of an indefinable pathos, and one wonders how a woman who apparently

led such a sheltered and emotionless life could write such lines. Many a desolate soul has craved for *just one* glimpse through the gates into the City, and has thrilled to the yearning of Tennyson's passionate aspiration—

"Oh God, that it were possible
For one short hour to see
The forms we love, that we might know
How and where they be !"

But there is almost a more subtle knowledge of human nature in those two lines of Jean Ingelow—

"Is there never a chink in the world above
Where they listen for words from below?"

They just express the natural repulsion of us poor mortals to the belief that those who have crossed the bar are so absorbed in their own bliss as to be wholly oblivious of all that is befalling their best beloved on earth. The stillness may be unbroken betwixt us and them, but to be justified in believing that we are not forgotten and unheeded, would be some pale sort of consolation, even to the most spiritually minded mourner. The great undertow of life must surely have been dragging at her heart, and she could hear the minor, which is present in all nature's music, even amid the joyous harmony of her own peaceful existence. But she was still strong to say—

"No man can be always sad,
Unless he wills to have it so,"—