

## THAT KEATS WAS MATURING.

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(Editor of *Sonnets of Three Centuries*).

THE lack of proportion, which was the distinctive characteristic of Keats's early artistic method, had almost disappeared before the close of the four years that covered his active literary career. Perhaps his genius would ever have hovered over such an exquisite sense of the luxurious in animated imagery as would have made the chaste shapeliness of a balanced creation a difficult thing to him. But the tissues of his sensuous fantasy were being rapidly separated by keen experience. His earliest works sparkled with the many-coloured brightness of a prism; his latest works began to glow with the steady presence of a purer light. Scheme, in his first efforts, was often subordinated to incident, incident to image, image to phrase. It is significant that, in the days when Keats was yet within what he has named the 'Infant Chamber of Sensation' in the mansion of life, he was more intoxicated with the delight of Spenser's allusion to the 'sea-shouldering whale' than with the Titanic sublimities of *Macbeth*. Shakespeare's own youth ran riot with a like wantonness. Before Marlowe's strong influence had shaped to artistic forms his abundant fancy, or yet the revelation of life's misery, pain, and oppression had come on him with a sad suddenness in the atmosphere of the Chamber of Thought, Shakespeare, like Keats, had revelled in mere love of poetic luxury. But signs are not wanting that even before the completion of 'Endymion' judg-

ment was doing its work with Keats. The fulness of fantasy became greater, and yet the disposition unduly to yield to it became less. Then each after each of the few poems that followed—'Hyperion,' 'Lamia,' 'Isabella,' the 'Eve of St. Agnes'—revealed Keats's strengthening power over the fixed laws of proportion, and his increasing command over the universal sensuousness that ran wild in the days that had gone by.

We cannot see more clearly to what perfectness the artistic method of Keats had attained than by glancing at a poem which, though little known and less talked of, was one of the last and the loveliest he gave us. The ballad, 'La Belle Dame sans Merci,' is wholly simple and direct, and informed throughout by reposeful strength. In all the qualities that rule and shape poetry into unity of form, this little work strides, perhaps, leagues in advance of 'Endymion.' That more ambitious work was in full sense poetic—soft and rich and sweetly linked. This harmonious gem is higher than poetic—it is a poem. As a tale of midday witchery, it is, though slight, as flawless as the first part of 'Christabel,' and immeasurably in advance of its own author's 'Lamia.' As a work of complete beauty, there are few poems to match it:

'O, what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,  
Alone and palely loitering?  
The sedge has withered from the lake,  
And no birds sing.

\* \* \* \*

I see a lily on thy brow,  
 With anguish moist and fever dew,  
 And on thy cheeks a fading rose  
 Fast withereth too.'

Here is no waste of creative force; no transparent suasion of rhyme, such as in earlier days was wont to break the spell of vision; no starting off to the two-and-thirty palaces of sublimity; no flinging forth of half-realised pearls of conception. The cool fancy weaves its web with contained purpose; and the unexhausted imagination sees rising up before it the woe-begone face of him who lingers long in solitary places, that are silent of the song of birds, and who is desolate as are the groves they haunted. The ballad is simple and direct, but not of a simplicity and directness proper to prose. In this poem the poet moves through an atmosphere peculiar to poetry, lacing and interlacing his combinations of thought and measure, incorporating his meaning with his music, thinking to the melody of his song, and listening to the beat of rhythm echoing always ahead of him. The beautiful fragment, the 'Eve of St. Mark,' will furnish the necessary supplement to these remarks; and if it be objected to what is here advanced that the Ariosto-like 'Cap and Bells,' and the loosely-knit 'Otho the Great,' do not prove that Keats's method was maturing, it must be replied that the structural imperfections of the latter should not be charged against him, and that the poor babble of the former shows only that Keats, like every lesser man, was subject to hours of inequality such as may not fairly be measured against his best and happiest moments.

The sonnets evidence his progress. The fine one on Chapman's 'Homer' came early, it is true, as also did the fanciful one on the 'Flower and Leaf;' but these came leashed with many a sorry draft,

such as no judicious lover of Keats would grieve much to see suppressed. Later came 'The Day is gone,' 'As Hermes once,' 'On the Elgin Marbles,' 'Why did I laugh to-night?' and 'To Homer,' a sonnet containing that, perhaps, finest single line in Keats:

'There is a budding morrow in midnight;'

and lastly came 'Bright Star.'

If, then, it is allowed that Keats was advancing in all that constituted his glory as an artist, and that, had he lived to the average age of man, he would have perfected his hold on that direct simplicity of method which is a treasure no true artist may forego, what shall we say of his progress and his prospect in all that constituted his value as a teacher? The word may startle some to whom Keats has seemed simply an imaginative youth, sometimes ecstatically inspired, moving forward in the world in moods intellectually and sensuously vacillating, and scarcely known to himself. And, indeed, it is easy to waste words in digging beneath the surface of his poetry for ethical meanings that were never hidden there; but it is quite as easy to undervalue his sense of what was due from him as a man. 'True,' he said, 'we hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us, and, if we do not agree, seems to put its hands into its breeches-pocket;' but in a higher and happier moment he said, 'I find earlier days are gone by; I find I can have no enjoyment in the world but continually drinking of knowledge; I find there is no worthy pursuit but the idea of doing some good to the world. Some do it with their society; some with their art; some with their benevolence; some with a sort of power of conferring pleasure and good-humour on all they meet; and in a thousand ways, all

dutiful to the command of Nature. There is but one way for me. The road lies through application, study, and thought. I will pursue it.' Indications are not wanting that Keats, at one period, did, indeed, turn all his heart to the love of philosophy. He was never a weakling; his earliest prose quite clearly proves that the romantic boy, who seemed to live in a world of naiads and sirens, might have reached distinction in any—the most austere—literary walk. Year after year feeling and experience did their work with him. Perhaps his political leanings were primarily towards Toryism (he did not join very heartily in Hunt's assaults on the Liverpool-Castlereagh administration); and perhaps his ultimate political opinions were influenced by personal friendships, and accentuated by the abuse he received at the hands of Tory organs. Perhaps, too, at the beginning, and, indeed, even until the end, he overrated the Paradise of Sensation in contrast with the Paradise of Mind:

'Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to  
know.'

Certainly he did not join Shelley on his moral side in hatching every year a new universe down to his death. But Keats was far from indifferent to the problems of human life and destiny. By gradual transition he was daily rising to where the 'burden of the mystery' no longer weighs on us. Here is moral teaching which, though concrete, not abstract, in expression, is possessed of almost philosophic definiteness:

'Stop and consider! Life is but a day,  
A fragile dew-drop, on its perilous way  
From a tree's summit; a poor Indian's  
sleep,  
While his boat hastens to the monstrous  
steep  
Of Montmorenci. Why so sad a moan?  
Life is the rose's hope while yet unblown;

The reading of an ever-changing tale;  
The light uplifting of a maiden's veil;  
A pigeon tumbling in clear summer air;  
A laughing school-boy, without grief or  
care,  
Riding the springy branches of an elm.'

It may be true that Keats's mind, with its loving yearning after loveliness, seemed always to have a look southwards. Or it may be true that his whole nature, saturated in sensuousness, appeared 'to follow, like the sunflower, the sun constantly,' and to fly from the chill north, unvisited by the sun's rays. But Keats could look steadfastly on the gray shadows of life:

'Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget  
What thou among the leaves hast never  
known;  
The weariness, the fever, and the fret  
Here, where men sit and hear each other  
groan;  
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray  
hairs;  
Where youth grows pale and spectre-  
thin, and dies;  
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow  
And leaden-eyed despairs;  
Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous  
eyes,  
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-  
morrow.'

Keats knew the full bitterness of the shadowed valley. About his own steps there fell but too frequently the beat of misery's many feet. On him also, however, wrapped in poetic luxury, the storm and stress of city life weighed heavily. Even by stern poverty itself he was not wholly unvisited. Perhaps he fled to his ideal world from the very fangs of London misery. Certainly as much may be said for his first great and obvious imitator, Hood, whose 'Whims and Oddities' were not more humorfully spontaneous than designed as foils to the excesses of a sympathetic temperament which, in view of the thousand sore trials of life, sometimes steeped the poet to the lips in pathos. Within that Chamber of Maiden Thought, into which Keats had but newly entered when his end came, he felt the

atmosphere heavy with the sobs of the multitudes of the oppressed; and to him, as to Seneca, the voice of the suffering was sacred, and seemed, through the mist of good and evil, to go up to God. Out of the darkened passages in the mansion of life he saw no outlet; but he believed he would one day see his way there clearly, for he knew the veil of so much mystery, behind whose folds he walked darkling, must yet be drawn aside. He says, 'To this point was Wordsworth come, as far as I can conceive, when he wrote *Tintern Abbey*; and it seems to me his genius is explorative of those dark passages. Now, if we live and go on thinking, we too shall explore them. He is a genius, and superior to us in so far as he can, more than we, make discoveries and shed a light on them.'

Perhaps, as Keats himself hinted, the chance of leaving the world suddenly impressed a sense of his duties upon him. We may sometimes see what self-reproaches were wrung from him at but too opportune moments. How soon Keats would have risen above the bias of his own nature to the heights of a

great purpose, we may not know. Already in the fragment 'Hyperion' (of which, for the sooth, the *Edinburgh* could not advise the completion) we see him sitting at the feet of Milton, than whom no man held his fantasy under stronger command. Keats was a true heir of Shakespeare's early fancy: would he have inherited something of Shakespeare's maturer imagination? We know that he was learning to know and love the early Italian poets: would he at length have put by his fretful restlessness and stood where Dante sat, and laved his tired forehead in the same river of resignation? We may not know; but at least we see him, before the completion of his twenty-third year, already conscious that the 'Infant Chamber of Sensation,' wherein he at first thought to delay for ever, must very soon be abandoned. This at least is certain, and it is much: 'I take poetry to be the chief, yet there is something else wanting. . . . I find earlier days are gone by. . . . I find there is no worthy pursuit but the idea of doing some good to the world. . . . There is but one way for me. . . . I will pursue it.'