

KEATS



YS WITH THE POETS

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A day with John Keats.



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A Day
with
Keats.

To Louisa,
from
Wice.

1814

—

Painting by E. W. Haslehurst.

KEATS' HOME AT HAMPSTEAD

“About eight o'clock one morning in early summer, a young man may be seen sauntering to and fro in the garden at Wentworth Place . . . The clean countrified air of Hampstead comes with sweet freshness through the garden.”



E. W. MASLEHUST

A · DAY · WITH
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A DAY WITH KEATS.



ABOUT eight o'clock one morning in early summer, a young man may be seen sauntering to and fro in the garden of Wentworth Place, Hampstead. Wentworth Place consists of two houses only; in the first, John Keats is established along with his friend Charles Armitage Brown. The second is inhabited by a Mrs. Brawne and her family. They are wooden houses, with festooning draperies of foliage: and the clean countrified air of Hampstead comes with sweet freshness through the gardens, and fills the young man with ecstatic delight. He gazes around him, with his weak dark eyes, upon the sky, the flowers, the various minutiae of nature which mean so much to him: and although he has severely tried a never robust physique by sitting up half the night in study, a new exhilaration now throbs through his veins. For, in his own words, he loves the principle of beauty in all things: and he repeats to himself,

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as he loiters up and down in the sunshine, the lines into which he has crystallized, for all time, sensations similar to those of the present:—

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet
breathing.

Therefore, on every morrow, are we wreathing
A flowery band to bind us to the earth,
Spite of despondence, of the inhuman dearth
Of noble natures, of the gloomy days,
Of all the unhealthy and o'er-darken'd ways
Made for our searching: yes, in spite of all,
Some shape of beauty moves away the pall
From our dark spirits. Such the sun, the moon,
Trees old and young, sprouting a shady boon
For simple sheep; and such are daffodils
With the green world they live in; and clear rills
That for themselves a cooling covert make
'Gainst the hot season; the mid-forest brake,
Rich with a sprinkling of fair musk-rose blooms:
And such too is the grandeur of the dooms
We have imagined for the mighty dead;
All lovely tales that we have heard or read:

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An endless fountain of immortal drink,
Pouring unto us from the heaven's brink.
Nor do we merely feel these essences
For one short hour; no, even as the trees
That whisper round a temple become soon
Dear as the temple's self, so does the moon,
The passion poesy, glories infinite,
Haunt us till they become a cheering light
Unto our souls, and bound to us so fast,
That, whether there be shine, or gloom o'ercast,
They alway must be with us, or we die.

Endymion.

Yet John Keats is in some respects out of keeping with the magnificent phraseology of which he is the mouthpiece. "Little Keats," as his fellow medical students termed him, is a small, undersized man, not over five feet high—the shoulders too broad, the legs too spare—"death in his hand," as Coleridge said, the slack moist hand of the incipient consumptive. The only "thing of beauty" about him is his face. "It is a face," to quote his friend Leigh Hunt, "in which energy and sensibility" (*i.e.*, sensitiveness) "are remarkably mixed up—an eager power, wrecked and made impatient by ill-health. Every feature at once strongly cut

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and delicately alive." There is that femininity in the cast of his features, which Coleridge classed as an attribute of true genius. His beautiful brown hair falls loosely over those eyes, large, dark, glowing, which appeal to all observers by their mystical illumination of rapture—eyes which seem as though they had been dwelling on some glorious sight—which have, as Haydon said, "an inward look perfectly divine, like a Delphian priestess who saw visions."

And he *is* seeing visions all the while. Some chance sight or sound has wrapt him away from the young greenness of the May morning, and plunged him deep into the opulent colour of September. His prophetic eye sees all the apple-buds as golden orbs of fruit, and the swallows, that now build beneath the eaves, making ready for their departure. And these future splendours shape themselves into lines as richly coloured.

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness !

Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;

Conspiring with him how to load and bless

With fruit the vines that round the thatch-
eaves run;

Painting by W. J. Neatby.

AUTUMN

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—
While barrèd clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir, the small gnats mourn
Among the river salallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies . . .



A DAY WITH KEATS

To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
 And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
 With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
 For Summer has o'er-brimmed their
 clammy cells.

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
 Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
 Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,
 Drowsed with the fume of poppies, while
 thy hook
 Spares the next swath and all its twined
 flowers;
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
 Steady thy laden head across a brook;
Or by a cider-press, with patient look,
 Thou watchest the last oozyings, hours
 by hours.

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are
 they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,

A DAY WITH KEATS

While barrèd clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river sallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or
dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly
bourn;
Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble
soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft,
And gathering swallows twitter in the
skies.

Autumn.

The voice of Charles Brown at the open window, hailing him cheerily, breaks the spell; Keats goes in, and they sit down together to a simple breakfast-table, and Brown "quizzes" Keats, as the current phrase goes, on his inveterate abstractedness. The young man, with his sweet and merry laugh, defends himself by producing the result of his last-night's meditations, in praise of the selfsame wandering fancy.

"Ever let the Fancy roam,
Pleasure never is at home:
At a touch sweet Pleasure melteth,

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Like to bubbles when rain pelteth;
Then let wingèd Fancy wander
Through the thought still spread beyond her:
Open wide the mind's cage door,
She'll dart forth, and cloudward soar.
O, sweet Fancy! let her loose;
Summer's joys are spoilt by use,
And the enjoying of the Spring
Fades as does its blossoming:
Autumn's red-lipp'd fruitage too,
Blushing through the mist and dew,
Cloys with tasting: What do then?
Sit thee by the ingle, when
The sear faggot blazes bright,
Spirit of a winter's night;
When the soundless earth is muffled,
And the caked snow is shuffled
From the ploughboy's heavy shoon. . .
Fancy, high-commission'd:—send her!
She has vassals to attend her:
She will bring, in spite of frost,
Beauties that the earth hath lost;
She will bring thee, all together,
All delights of summer weather;
All the buds and bells of May,
From dewy sward or thorny spray;
All the heapèd Autumn's wealth,

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With a still, mysterious stealth:
She will mix these pleasures up,
Like three fit wines in a cup,
And thou shalt quaff it. . . .

Fancy.

Breakfast over, the business of the day begins: and that, with Keats, is poetry, and all that can foster poetic stimulus. He takes no real heed of anything else. A devoted son and brother, one ready to sacrifice himself and his slender resources to the uttermost farthing for his mother, brothers, sister and friends—yet he has no vital interest in other folks' affairs, nor in current events, nor in ordinary social topics. Other people's poetry does not appeal to him, except that of Shakespeare, and of Homer—whom he does not know in the original, but who, through the poor medium of translation, has filled his soul with Grecian fantasies.

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his de-
mesne:

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Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies

When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He stared at the Pacific—and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—
Silent upon a peak in Darien.

Sonnet.

This is what he wrote after sitting up one night till daybreak with his friend Cowden Clarke, shouting with delight over the vistas newly revealed to him. And from that time on, he has luxuriated in dreams of classic beauty, warmed to new life by the sorcery of Romance. Immortal shapes arise upon him from the "infinite azure of the past:" and he sees how

Deep in the shady sadness of a vale
Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,
Far from the fiery noon, and eve's one star,
Sat gray-hair'd Saturn, quiet as a stone,
Still as the silence round about his lair;
Forest on forest hung about his head
Like cloud on cloud. No stir of air was there,
Not so much life as on a summer's day

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Robs not one light seed from the feather'd grass,
But where the dead leaf fell, there did it rest.
A stream went voiceless by, still deadened more
By reason of his fallen divinity
Spreading a shade: the Naiad 'mid her reeds
Press'd her cold finger closer to her lips.

Hyperion.

He is studying French, Latin, and especially Italian—all with a view of furthering his poetic ability: though no great reader, he has soaked himself in the atmosphere of old Italian tales, and the very spirit of mediæval Florence breathes from the story, borrowed from Boccaccio, “an echo in the north-wind sung,” which narrates how the hapless Isabella hid away the head of her murdered lover.

Then in a silken scarf,—sweet with the dews
Of precious flowers pluck'd in Araby,
And divine liquids come with odorous ooze
Through the cold serpent-pipe refreshfully,—
She wrapp'd it up; and for its tomb did choose
A garden pot, wherein she laid it by,
And covered it with mould, and o'er it set
Sweet Basil, which her tears kept ever wet.

Painting by W. J. Neatby.

ISABELLA

And she forgot the stars, the moon, the sun,
 And she forgot the blue above the trees,
And she forgot the dells where waters run,
 And she forgot the chilly autumn breeze ;
She had no knowledge when the day was done,
 And the new moon she saw not : but in peace
Hung over her sweet Basil evermore,
And moisten'd it with tears unto the core.





A DAY WITH KEATS

And she forgot the stars, the moon, and sun,
And she forgot the blue above the trees,
And she forgot the dells where waters run,
And she forgot the chilly autumn breeze;
She had no knowledge when the day was done,
And the new moon she saw not: but in peace
Hung over her sweet Basil evermore,
And moisten'd it with tears unto the core.

Isabella.

Keats has brought himself with difficulty, however, to the perusal of modern poets. His boyish enthusiasm for Leigh Hunt's work has long since evaporated: and after reading Shelley's *Revolt of Islam*, all he has found to say is, "Poor Shelley, I think he has his quota of good qualities!" But, for the rest, he is not attracted to any kind of knowledge which cannot be "made applicable and subservient to the purposes of poetry,"—his own poetry. For his one desire is to win an immortal name—and he has begun life "full of hopes, fiery, impetuous, and ungovernable, expecting the world to fall at once beneath his pen. Poor fellow!" (Haydon's diary).

But "men of genius," Keats himself has said, "are as great as certain ethereal chemicals,

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operating in a mass of created matter: but they have not any determined character." That indefiniteness of literary aim—that want of will-power, without which genius is a curse, which have hampered the young man all along—are now still further emphasised by the restlessness of a passionate lover. John Keats cannot stay indoors this fine May morning, "fitting himself for verses fit to live," when the girl who is to him the incarnation of all poetry is visible in the next-door garden. He throws down his pen and hurries out to join her.

Contemporary portraits of Fanny Brawne have not succeeded in representing her as beautiful: and at first sight Keats has complained, that, although she "manages to make her hair look well," she "wants sentiment in every feature." Propinquity, however, has achieved the usual result; and now the young poet believes his *inamorata* to be the very apotheosis of loveliness: he is never weary of adoring her

Sweet voice, sweet lips, soft hand, and softer
breast,
Warm breath, light whisper, tender semitone,
Bright eyes, accomplished shape!

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If the truth be told, Fanny Brawne is a fairly good-looking young woman, blue-eyed and long-nosed, her hair arranged with curls and ribbons over her brow: she has a curious but striking resemblance to the draped figure in Titian's "Sacred and Profane Love": and for the rest, she is by no means poetic or sentimental, but a voluminous reader, whose strong point is an extraordinary knowledge of the history of costume. She accepts the homage of Keats, much as she accepts the fact of their tacit betrothal, and the fact that her mother disapproves of it—without taking it too seriously in any sense. And now, though not particularly keen on open-air enjoyment, she accepts his daily suggestion of a walk with her; and they go out into the beautiful meadows which were part of Hampstead a hundred years ago.

Keats is in his glory in the fields. Always, the humming of a bee, the sight of a flower, the glitter of the sun, have "seemed to make his nature tremble: then his eyes flashed, his cheek glowed, his mouth quivered." Peculiarly sensitive, as he is, to external influences, his chief delight is to "think of green fields . . . I muse with the greatest affection on every flower I

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have known from my infancy." The man who is so soon to "feel the daisies growing over him," takes one of his intensest pleasures in watching the growth of flowers; and now, as an exquisite music, "notes that pierce and pierce," descends through the young green oak-leaves, the poet seizes this golden moment of the May world and transmutes it into song.

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had
drunk,

Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had
sunk:

'Tis not with envy of thy happy lot,
But being too happy in thine happiness,—
That thou, light-wingèd Dryad of the
trees,

In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Singing of summer in full-throated ease.

O, for a draught of vintage, that hath been
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delvèd earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country-green,
Dance, and Provencal song, and sunburnt
mirth!

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O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the
brim,
And purple-stainèd mouth;
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

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 grey 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. . . .

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard

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In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when sick
for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
That same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fabled to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:—do I wake or sleep?
Ode to a Nightingale.

The poet is recalled from these rapturous flights to the fugitive sweetness of the present: he is wandering in May meadows, young and impetuous, on fire with hopes, and his heart's beloved beside him. It is almost too good to be true. "I have never known any unalloyed

Painting by W. J. Nealby.

THE NIGHTINGALE

Thou, light-wingèd Dryad of the trees,
 In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
 Singing of summer in full-throated ease.





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happiness for many days together," he tells Fanny; "the death or sickness of someone has always spoilt my home. I almost wish we were butterflies, and lived but three summer days—three such days with you I could fill with more delight than fifty common years could ever contain." He talks to her earnestly of his dreams, his aspirations, his ambitions: and then the sordid facts of every-day life begin to cast a blighting shadow over his effulgent hopes. What has he, indeed, to offer, worth her taking? A young man of twenty-three, ex-dresser at a hospital, who has abandoned his surgical career without adopting any other: with slender resources, and no occupation beyond that of producing verses which are held up to absolute derision by the great reviews. "I would willingly have recourse to other means," he tells her again, as he has told his friend Dilke, "I cannot: I am fit for nothing else but literature." He talks of taking up journalism—but in his heart he feels unfit for any regular profession, by reason both of physical weakness and a certain lack of system in mental work. The future becomes blackly, blankly overcast; the *res augusta domi* descend like a curtain between the sublimity of Keats and the calm

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commonsense of Fanny. They turn homewards in silence, the poet revolving melancholy musings.

“But when the melancholy fit shall fall
Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,
That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,
And hides the green hill in an April shroud;
Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,
Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,
Or on the wealth of globèd peonies;
Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,
Emprison her soft hand, and let rave,
And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips.
Ay, in the very temple of Delight
Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine,
Though seen of none save him whose strenuous
tongue
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;
His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
And be among her cloudy trophies hung.
Ode to Melancholy.

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Fanny Brawne enters her mother's house, and John Keats goes into his room and sits down, brooding, brooding. "O," he says, "that something fortunate had ever happened to me or my brothers! Then I might hope—but despair is forced upon me as a habit." And he is only too well aware, that although he is naturally "the very soul of courage and manliness," this habit of despair is growing upon him, and eating his energy away. A wintry chill settles down upon the May-time, and his misery finds vent in lovely lines—

In a drear-nighted December,
 Too happy, happy tree,
Thy branches ne'er remember
 Their green felicity:
The north cannot undo them,
With a sleety whistle through them;
Nor frozen thawings glue them
 From budding at the prime.

In a drear-nighted December,
 Too happy, happy brook,
Thy bubblings ne'er remember
 Apollo's summer look;

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But with a sweet forgetting,
They stay their crystal fretting,
Never, never petting
 About the frozen time.

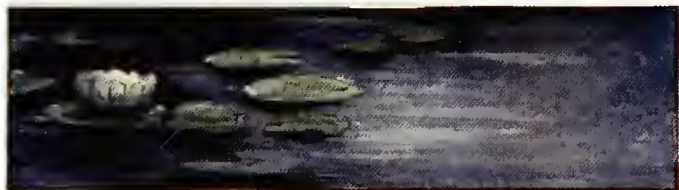
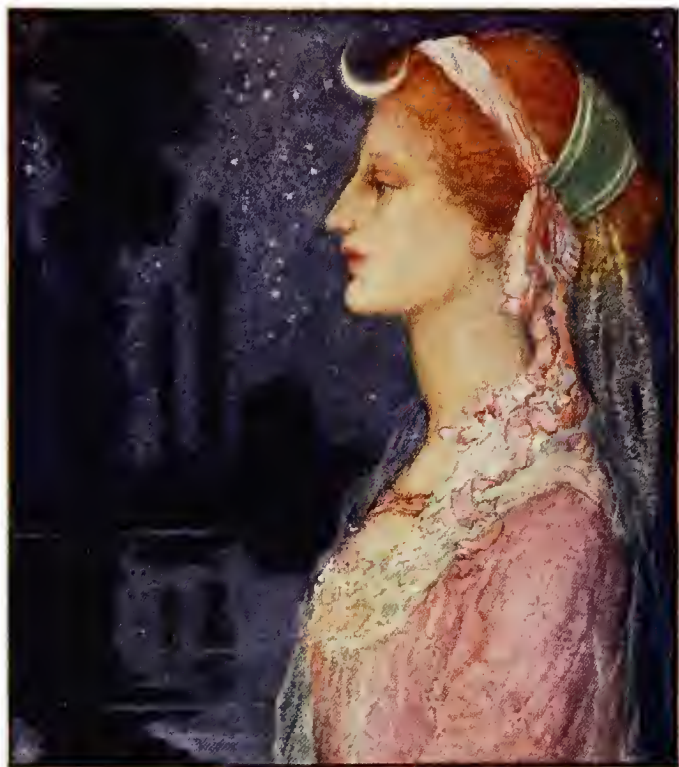
Ah! would 'twere so with many
 A gentle girl and boy!
But were there ever any
 Writh'd not at passed joy?
To know the change and feel it,
When there is none to heal it,
Nor numbed sense to steal it,
 Was never said in rhyme.

Yet Keats is young, and youth means buoyancy. With an effort—increasingly difficult—he is able to shake off this sombre fit for awhile; and he makes use of the simplest means to that end. “Whenever I feel vapourish,” he has said, “I rouse myself, wash, and put on a clean shirt; brush my hair and clothes, tie my shoe-strings neatly, and in fact adonize as if I were going out: then, all clean and comfortable, I sit down to write.” These very prosaic methods adopted, he abandons himself to the full flood of inspiration, and lets his mind suffuse itself in antique glory. As Endymion, he

Painting by W. J. Neatby.

ENDYMION

As she spake, into her face there came
Light, as reflected from a silver flame,
. . . In her eyes a brighter day
Dawn'd blue and full of love.





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receives the divine commands of the passionately bright Moon-Lady, as she stoops at last to bless him.

And as she spake, into her face there came
Light, as reflected from a silver flame:
Her long black hair swelled ample, in display
Full golden: in her eyes a brighter day
Dawn'd blue and full of love.

Endymion.

Or, as Lycius, he succumbs to the serpentine grace of Lamia; or as Porphyro, hidden in the silence, watches Madeline at prayer.

A casement high and triple-arch'd there
was,
All garlanded with carven imageries
Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot
grass,
And diamonded with panes of quaint device,
Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,
As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings;
And in the midst, 'mong thousand heraldries,
And twilight saints, and dim emblazonings,
A shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of
queens and kings.

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Full on this casement shone the wintry moon,
And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair
breast,

As down she knelt for heaven's grace and
boon

Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest,
And on her silver cross soft amethyst,
And on her hair a glory, like a saint:

She seem'd a splendid angel, newly drest,
Save wings, for heaven: Porphyro grew
faint:

She knelt, so pure a thing, so free from mortal
taint.

Eve of St. Agnes.

But the inspiration does not well up to-day: its flow is frustrated, in view of the mountainous difficulties which hedge him in. Ill-health, stunted means, hopeless love, and continual lack of success—these are calculated to give the bravest pause. And presently Keats, snatching a few hurried mouthfuls of lunch, is off to the studio of his friend, the painter Haydon—the one man among all his acquaintance who is capable of really understanding him. He sits down morbid and silent in the painting room: for a while nothing will evoke a word from him,

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good or bad. But his keen interest in matters of art, and the entry of various friends one by one—Wentworth Dilke, Hamilton Reynolds, Bailey and Leigh Hunt—soon arouse him to animated conversation. Keats is shy and ill at ease in women's society: but a "delightful combination of earnestness and pleasantry distinguishes his intercourse with men." He says fine things finely, jokes with ready humour, and at the mention of any oppression or wrong rises "into grave manliness at once, seeming like a tall man." No wonder that his society is much sought after, and himself greatly beloved by these congenial spirits; no wonder that here, at least, he meets with that appreciation of which elsewhere his genius has been starved. In this young fellow of twenty-three, who unites winning, affectionate ways, and habitual gentleness of manner, with the loftiest and most nobly-worded ideals, few would discover that imaginary "Johnny Keats, the apothecary's assistant," upon whom the *Blackwood* reviewer had lavished such vials of vituperation. He is here openly acknowledged as one of the "bards of passion and of mirth," and his poems are each accepted, as

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Not a senseless, tranced thing,
But divine melodies of truth,
Philosophic numbers smooth,
Tales and golden histories
Of heaven and its mysteries. . . .

“No one else in English poetry, save Shakespeare, has in expression quite the fascinating felicity of Keats, his perfection of loveliness.” (Matthew Arnold). But only these few friends of his are able to recognise that perfection. Outside their charmed circle, lies an obstinately unappreciative world.

The afternoon wears on, and the friends disperse. Keats, returning to Wentworth Place flushed with hectic exhilaration, finds a veritable douche of cold water awaiting him, in the shape of a letter from his publishers. They refer to his unlucky first volume of poems, brought out in 1817. “By far the greater number of persons who have purchased it from us,” they say, “have found fault with it in such plain terms, that we have in many cases offered to take the book back, rather than be annoyed with the ridicule which has time after time been show-

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ered upon it. In fact, it was only on Sunday last that we were under the mortification of having our own opinion of its merits flatly contradicted by a gentleman who told us that he considered it 'no better than a take-in.'

For a few minutes the pendulum swings back to despair. A man whose whole business in life is the creation of the best work, who "never wrote a line of poetry with the least shadow of public thought," who believes that after his death he will be among the English poets, and that if he only has time now, he will make himself remembered—that such a one should be merely the butt and laughing-stock of his readers! It is an unendurable position. Not that Keats attaches undue importance to popular applause. "Praise or blame," he says, "has but a momentary effect upon the man whose love of beauty in the abstract makes him a severe critic on his own works . . . In '*Endymion*' I leaped headlong into the sea, and thereby have become better acquainted with the soundings, the quicksands, and the rocks, than if I had stayed upon the green shore and took tea and comfortable advice. I was never afraid of failure:

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for I would sooner fail than not be among the greatest."

But what will Fanny think of such a letter? He falls to miserable meditation over the slings and arrows of outrageous Fortune, and the constant erection of new obstacles in the course of his luckless love. And of Fanny's love he always has had a smouldering doubt: yet he remains her vassal, from the first, as he has told her—irrevocably her slave. He conceives himself an outcast on the wintry hillside, exiled from all his heart's desires.

Ah, what can ail thee, wretched wight,
Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge is wither'd from the lake,
And no birds sing.

Ah what can ail thee, wretched wight,
So haggard and so woe-begone?
The squirrel's granary is full,
And the harvest's done.

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

Painting by W. J. Nealby.

LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI

I met a lady in the meads
Full beautiful, a faery's child;
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild.





A DAY WITH KEATS

I met a lady in the meads
Full beautiful, a faery's child;
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild.

I set her on my pacing steed,
And nothing else saw all day long;
And sideways would she lean, and sing
A faery's song.

I made a garland for her head,
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;
She look'd at me and she did love,
And made sweet moan.

She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna dew;
And sure in language strange she said,
I love thee true.

She took me to her elfin grot,
And there she gaz'd and sighed deep,
And there I shut her wild sad eyes—
So kiss'd to sleep.

And there we slumber'd on the moss,
And there I dream'd, ah woe betide,
The latest dream I ever dream'd
On the cold hill side.

A DAY WITH KEATS

I saw pale kings, and princes too,
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
Who cried—"La belle Dame sans merci
Hath thee in thrall!"

I saw their starv'd lips in the gloam
With horrid warning gaped wide,
And I awoke, and found me here
On the cold hill side.

And this is why I sojourn here
Alone and palely loitering,
Though the sedge is wither'd from the lake,
And no birds sing.

La Belle Dame sans merci.

And now he hears the voice of his Belle Dame ringing light across the garden; while he sits here, a prey to every distress, she is gaily gossiping with her next-door neighbour Brown. At once the unhappy Keats is tormented by a thousand jealous fears. Fanny is transferring her affection to Brown: of that he is quite certain. He rushes out: his black looks banish the much-amused Brown, and very nearly produce an immediate rupture between Fanny and himself. But after a few bitter words, he

A DAY WITH KEATS.

permits himself to be reassured—or is it cajoled?—and tells her, “I must confess that I love you the more, in that I believe you have liked me for my own sake and for nothing else.” The poor boy, from a worldly point of view, has “nothing else” to offer.

The lovers' quarrel is over for the nonce. Visitors begin to drop in for the evening; there is music and singing in Brown's little drawing room. Keats is very fond of music, and can himself, though possessing hardly any voice, “produce a pleasing musical effect.” He will sit and listen for hours to a sympathetic performer: but his ear, like all his faculties, is abnormally sensitive: and a wrong note will drive him into a frenzy. As the room grows fuller, he becomes restive. “The poetical character,” he has observed, “is not itself—it has no character. When I am in a room with people, the identity of everyone in the room begins to press upon me so that I am in a little time annihilated.”

In the light chit-chat of small talk and badinage he has no part: it bewilders and annoys him. Those about him—especially the

A DAY WITH KEATS

women—seem to show up in their worst colours. Fanny herself appears, as he has described her at their first meeting, an absolute *minx*. And presently he contrives to slip stealthily away, and seats himself in some quiet chamber, alone with the darkness and the May-scents of leaf and blossom. “I hope I shall never marry,” he groans once more; “the roaring wind is my wife, and the stars through the window-panes are my children: the mighty abstract idea of Beauty I have in all things, stifles the more divided and minute domestic happiness. I do not live in this world alone, but in a thousand worlds. No sooner am I alone, than shapes of epic greatness are stationed round me, and serve my spirit the office which is equivalent to a King’s Bodyguard.”

The young man now lights his candles, and takes up a familiar and favourite occupation;—the writing of a long letter to his brother George in America. This epistle is, as one might expect, almost entirely concerned with the art of poetry—what else has Keats to write about?—whether from the side of technique, or inspiration. He dwells on the adroit management of open and close vowels—he shows how “the

A DAY WITH KEATS

poetry of earth is never dead;" he discusses the need of constant application to work, and how "the genius of poetry must work out its own salvation in a man." And meanwhile, as fitful strains of song reach him from the distance, and his roving gaze rivets itself upon a Wedgwood copy of a Grecian vase—one of Brown's chief treasures—the fleeting wafts of sound, and the lovely symmetry of shape, and the golden chain of figures, blend themselves into one harmonious whole of word-music.

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our
rhyme:
What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? what maidens
loath?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild
ecstasy?

A DAY WITH KEATS

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play
on;

Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not
leave

Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou
kiss,

Though winning near the goal—yet, do not
grieve;

She cannot fade, though hast not thou thy
bliss,

For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,

For ever piping songs for ever new;
More happy love! more happy, happy love!

For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
For ever panting, and for ever young;

All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high sorrowful and
cloy'd,

A DAY WITH KEATS

A burning forehead, and a parching
tongue.

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands
drest?

What little town by river or sea-shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of its folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and trodden weed;
Thou, silent form! dost tease us out of
thought

As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other
woe

A DAY WITH KEATS

Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou
say'st,

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

Ode to a Grecian Urn.

The “shapes of epic greatness” throng
closer and mightier around him. The storm
and stress of the day's thoughts have utterly
drained his small reserve of strength. Outworn
by the vehemence of his own conflicting
emotions, John Keats lays his aching eyes and
dark brown head upon his arm as it rests along
the table, and sinks into a dreamless slumber of
exhaustion; while, a

“Happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever singing songs for ever new,”
the nightingale chants on outside.

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