

CHAPTER XII

WRITERS OF SOCIETY VERSE

WE ought to consider one department of light verse, very difficult indeed for the student in Japan to understand in itself, but very important for him to understand as a literary fact. I mean what is called society verse, or to use the French words, *vers de société*. Long ago the French invented and perfected this kind of poetry, but it has been within our own time only that we have been able to produce it successfully in English.

Let me now try to explain what it is. Society verse must reflect the life and thought of the refined classes in a realistic way; it must mirror the peculiar ideas of the time, the fashions of dress, the fashions of thought, the fashions of speech. As all these constantly change, one characteristic of such poetry must necessarily be impermanence. Its value, compared with serious poetry, must be ephemeral; but it may always have another kind of value, that of preserving for future generations both the material and the moral fashions of a moment.

The difficulty of writing this kind of verse is a difficulty created by limitations. The writer must belong to society, and must understand society very well indeed in order to attempt such composition. Now, I need scarcely tell you that in every country the most refined class has a particular life of its own, a particular morality of its own, a particular and minute discipline which everybody within its ranks must obey every hour of his or her life. I cannot pretend to tell you all about this; I would only suggest that it will be well for you to figure to yourselves the difference between the aristocratic life of Japan in other days, and that

of the common people, in order to appreciate the extent of the corresponding difference in western society. Without going into needless particulars I may observe that the rules of conduct in the upper classes do not necessarily correspond with the rules of conduct in the lower classes. Altogether the man or woman is much less free. Also we may notice that the moral condition is peculiar, much more peculiar in western aristocracy than it ever was in the aristocracy of the Far East. By way of example, I would say that certain breaches of morality which are never forgiven by ordinary society may be pardoned in superior society, provided that they do not become too public; but things which in everyday life we should consider trifles are never pardoned at all. If you know how to do it you may break several of the commandments in high society and remain there; but if you are once caught in a dishonourable action, however small, in playing at cards, for example, there is no hope for you. I make these remarks only by way of introduction to the fact that society life is quite apart from other life; and that it has its own special rules for action, called by modern philosophers, "aristocratic morals."

Now one of the things generally understood in society is that everybody must possess perfect self-control. Strong emotions must never be publicly shown. To show extraordinary admiration would be almost as bad as to show great anger. In that atmosphere you must always keep very cool indeed. As in climbing a mountain, the higher you go the colder the air becomes, so in the higher society. This does not mean that the persons belonging to that world should have less affection, less emotion, less susceptibility to beautiful things, than ordinary persons; nor does it even mean that the indulgence of emotion under proper circumstances is condemned. It only means that in public, in company, the society man or woman must act differently from other persons, just as in military life the discipline ceases only when the officer, entering his private room,

takes off his uniform. Now the poetry which pictures the life of this refined world, is denied most of the privileges accorded to serious poetry. Commonly the poet can choose any form that he pleases; he is permitted to express, with all the forces at his command, and with all the sincerity of his heart, every normal passion of human nature. Not so in society verse. In society verse he must only suggest that the emotion is there, that it is alive, and that it is under perfect control and will never be allowed to utter itself openly. The subject of love ought to furnish us with the best example, because that is considered by western psychologists the most powerful of all passions. Well, how does society verse express love? Always playfully, so that the reader cannot be quite sure whether the utterance is in jest or in earnest. If you find anything passionate, anything like the song of a nightingale, in light verse, that is not society verse; the rule of restraint has been broken. I have spoken of one emotion only, but you must remember that the same discipline must be extended over all emotion in the writing of society verse.

Really the society idea, with all its faults, and in spite of all that may be said against it, is the highest of which human nature is capable so far as conduct is concerned. The general principle is to meet and endure all influences, pleasurable or painful, precisely as a soldier meets the fire of the enemy, except that society judges a yielding to pleasure a weakness just as disgraceful as a yielding to fear or pain. "Take the world as it is," society says; "enjoy quietly, suffer quietly, and never strip your heart naked—that is vulgar!" Of course this life has its tragedies—tragedies more terrible, more pitiless, than any others, because they are moral; but they must not be spoken of. Extremes of pleasure and pain are to be kept out of sight. Under all circumstances, even in the face of death, a pleasant or an absolutely placid exterior must be preserved. And as in battle soldiers may joke or sing as much as they please, but any exhibition of fear or pain would be con-

sidered disgraceful, so in every phase of society life mirth and jest are permitted. Here also, however, there are limitations. Joviality must be kept within exact boundaries; it must never become coarse, it must never be stupid, and, although it may be cutting, it must not be too cruel. In one sense social discipline changes with every generation. But in another sense it never changes. Whatever the fashions or the rules, the object is always the same — to train human nature to moral strength by self-suppression. Often we have a right to laugh at the rules and to mock at the fashions. But we have no right to laugh at the purpose; and as a matter of fact no sensible man ever does laugh at it.

I have said enough to show you what society verse must reflect, and how much its scope is confined. We may now turn to the verse-makers and to the verse itself. There are only three names in English literature of real importance in this field. All three belong to Victorian poetry, and all three have taken a very high rank as delicate artists. They have not confined their work altogether to society verse; but they especially represent it, and remain unequalled at it, except by the French; whereas their efforts in other directions have been not only equalled but excelled by greater poets, by the poets of the first rank.

The founder of this school, if we can call it a school, was Frederick Locker, born in 1821. He became at an early age a clerk in the British Admiralty, and kept that position until late in life. In 1857 he produced a very small volume of society verse called "London Lyrics," which at once took the fashionable as well as the literary world by storm. The playful, delicate grace of the compositions, their strange mixture of light cynicism and suggested tenderness, the supreme art that kept their expression always balanced upon the difficult line between laughter and tears, well deserved the praise which they obtained. Publishers at once made tempting offers to Locker, but he proved absolutely indifferent to money and to commendation; he would not

write except when he pleased. This is the best and truest literary policy, but very few authors can afford it. Locker remained silent for nearly twenty-two years before he printed anything else; then he brought out a little book called "Patchwork," a charming mixture of poetry and prose. His daughter was married to Lionel Tennyson, son of the poet, and his literary friendships were very numerous. After the death of his first wife he married the daughter of Sir Curtis Lampson; and on the death of his father-in-law he assumed the family name of the latter, so that upon the title page of the later editions of his books you find that the name of the author is given as Frederick Locker-Lampson. He wrote nothing more of poetry; but he edited a volume of verse called "Lyra Elegantiarum," which proves him to have been possessed of an excellent critical faculty. His death occurred but very recently.

The second name to which I call your attention is that of Henry Austin Dobson, more generally known as Austin Dobson,—who was born in 1840, and has at the present time a very great reputation both as poet and critic. He also was in the government service, a service which in England would seem to have done a great deal for literature, simply by enabling men of ability to obtain a fair amount of leisure together with a good salary and a certain position. Dobson is not so much known for society verse as for exquisite literary work in other directions; but he certainly comes nearest to Locker in this kind of composition. Recently a new edition of his poems has been issued in one volume; but previously they filled three volumes which became very famous both in England and in America—"Old-World Idyls," "At the Sign of the Lyre," and "Proverbs in Porcelain." Besides society verse, Dobson has especially excelled in imitating difficult French forms in English poetry, and not forms only, but the very tone and spirit of former periods of French art. Nor has he been less successful in imitating certain old-fashioned English forms. He has written poems exactly in the style of the men of

the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and he is generally admitted to be the greatest living authority upon the literature of Queen Anne's day.

Neither of the above mentioned poets was an English university man, though Dobson appears to have received very superior literary training abroad. The training for the English civil service is of a special character, and the ordinary university course is not the best preparation. The third name in our category is, however, that of a university man, of a Fellow of Oxford, Andrew Lang. Lang was born in 1844, and has devoted his life so far altogether to literary and critical work. He is one of the chief figures among the active men of letters still living; and the range and variety of the subjects in which he has won literary distinction are surprising. For example, he is a folklorist, and the author of an excellent little book of folklore studies entitled "Custom and Myth"; then he is an exquisite classical scholar, who has given us, with the help of other scholars, the best translations ever made in prose of Homer, Theocritus, Bion, and Moschus; and he is also the author of some admirable translations from the French. Besides all this, he has produced at intervals extraordinary and ingenious books, written in imitation of the styles of other centuries, such as his "Letters to Dead Authors." Poetry is therefore but one, and not the greatest, of his occupations, but he has written very pretty things in verse, and by his "Ballades in Blue China," and "Rhymes a la Mode," he has attached himself especially to the circle of society verse poets.

Having said so much about society verse and its three most eminent representatives, I shall try to give you some examples of the best work done by each of these. Some of the best of this kind of verse I fear you could not understand, especially the humorous quality of it, which depends so much upon perfect knowledge of the fashion, the tone and the time. So some of the subtler refinements of this poetry I cannot attempt to explain; but there are composi-

tions which I think will please you and which I have selected especially with this end in view. First, I shall call your attention to an example from Frederick Locker, entitled “A *Nice* Correspondent.” The reader must remember that the poem is supposed to be a letter, and a letter from a wife, most probably — perhaps from a betrothed — to her absent husband or lover.

The glow and the glory are plighted
 To darkness, for evening is come ;
 The lamp in Glebe Cottage is lighted,
 The birds and the sheep-bells are dumb.
 I'm alone, for the others have flitted
 To dine with a neighbour at Kew :
 Alone, but I'm not to be pitied—
 I'm thinking of you!

I wish you were here! Were I duller
 Than dull, you'd be dearer than dear ;
 I am drest in your favourite colour—
 Dear Fred, how I wish you were here!
 I am wearing my lazuli necklace,
 The necklace you fasten'd askew!
 Was there ever so rude or so reckless
 A Darling as you?

I want you to come and pass sentence
 On two or three books with a plot ;
 Of course you know “Janet's Repentance?”
 I am reading Sir *Waverley* Scott.
 That story of Edgar and Lucy,
 How thrilling, romantic, and true!
 The Master (his bride *was* a goosey!)
 Reminds me of you!

You will observe the charming mixture of playful mischief and tenderness in this letter—tenderness evidently very deep, but kept under perfect restraint. Terms of endearment are used, and strong ones, but they are used with faultless taste and always with just a touch of affectionate banter. Also

the colloquial is used, exactly as in real conversation, yet never except as a refined lady could use it. By colloquial I mean especially such expressions as “flitted” instead of “gone”; “dull” instead of “melancholy” or “tired”; and the playful “pass sentence” instead of “tell me your opinion.” The universal woman is nevertheless to be very plainly and charmingly discerned behind the society woman. Everything noble and good that she reads about reminds her of the man she loves and idealizes, for woman’s love always idealizes. Her husband or lover is a poet; therefore it is no use to tell her that he is not the greatest poet in the world. Of course she would not say so too seriously, but she hints quite prettily—

They tell me Cockaigne has been crowning
 A Poet whose garland endures;—
 It was you that first told me of Browning,—
 That stupid old Browning of yours!
 His vogue and his verve are alarming,
 I’m anxious to give him his due,
 But, Fred, he’s not nearly so charming
 A poet as you!

We may omit a very pretty verse showing how she admires her Frederick’s skill in shooting, riding, speech-making, and even in fascinating other women—harmless fascination, she knows very well; and she is not in the least jealous, for she is perfectly sure of Frederick’s heart. Nevertheless sometimes society tires her a little, because its exactions keep her too much away from the man she loves best.

Alas for the World, and its dearly
 Bought triumph, its fugitive bliss;
 Sometimes I half wish I were merely
 A plain or a penniless Miss;
 But, perhaps, one is best with “a measure
 Of pelf,” and I’m not sorry, too,
 That I’m pretty, because it’s a pleasure,
 My Darling, to you!

Although weary of society and of the attraction that her own beauty and wealth make about her, she remembers that her money, or "pelf" as she playfully calls it, may help to make her husband more happy; and as for her beauty, she must take care of that too, only because *he* loves her. The poem ends with a simply delicious touch about the letter itself—

Your whim is for frolic and fashion,
 Your taste is for letters and art;—
 This rhyme is the commonplace passion
 That glows in a fond woman's heart:
 Lay it by in some sacred deposit
 For relics—we all have a few!
 Love, some day they'll print it, because it
 Was written to You!

The suggestion, of course, is that her Frederick will some day become so famous that people will be only too glad to find and print anything written about him by anybody. As for the society-tone about which I have been telling you, notice its appearance even in this tenderest of all the stanzas, where she speaks of her affection as "commonplace," and uses the word "fond" in the old sense of foolish. The reference to relics perhaps you may not understand. "Relics" here means those letters, locks of hair, photographs, little presents received from persons dear to us or persons dead, which we preserve all our lives as affectionately and as reverently as if they were relics of saints.

It is curious that this subject of relics is the subject also of the representative poem by Austin Dobson which I selected for you, without thinking that the pleasant juxtaposition was to come about. The title of this piece is "A Gage d'Amour," which all of you studying French know means a pledge of love. Western lovers have been for hundreds of years in the habit of giving each other little things to be remembered by—a glove, a handkerchief, a lock of hair, or even a flower. In this case the pledge is a scarf of rich lace, showing that the beloved must have be-

old music-box, out of order, which plays old-fashioned music that nobody of the present age cares to hear. Such a music-box should not be played in polite society; but unfortunately, the machinery has got a little damaged, and the slightest touch sets it into discordant motion. The comparison is very witty, but also very touching. It is as if he were saying to us, "I am an old man, and my memories, my experiences of love and all that sort of thing, ought not to be talked about or noticed; but, just because I am old, the machinery of my heart is a little broken, and makes music sometimes when nobody wishes to hear it." And he goes on, half merrily, half tenderly—

Laugh, if you like. The boy in me,—
 The boy that was,—revived to see
 The fresh young smile that shone when she,
 Of old, was tender.

Once more we trod the Golden Way,—
 That mother you saw yesterday,
 And I, whom none can well portray,
 As young, or slender.

She twirled the flimsy scarf about
 Her pretty head, and stepping out,
 Slipped arm in mine, with half a pout
 Of childish pleasure.

Where we were bound no mortal knows,
 For then you plunged in Ireland's woes,
 And brought me blankly back to prose,
 And Gladstone's measure.

Paraphrased, this means, "You may laugh at me if you please; I do not care about that, because I am strong enough to laugh at myself. But when I saw that old scarf, I could not help thinking about the beautiful face of the young girl whom I loved when I was a boy, and the ghost of my boyish feeling came back again to haunt me. I thought of the bright morning forty or fifty years ago, perhaps, when we took a walk together, she leaning upon my arm. I saw her face just as it was in those days, yet she is the old

as that single stanza by Dobson; but it is beautiful, and it is an excellent example of the quality of this kind of poetry.

THE SPINET

My heart's an old spinet with strings
 To laughter chiefly tuned, but some
 That Fate has practised hard on, dumb,
 They answer not whoever sings.
 The ghosts of half-forgotten things
 Will touch the keys with fingers numb,
 The little mocking spirits come
 And thrill it with their fairy wings.

A jingling harmony it makes
 My heart, my lyre, my old Spinet,
 And now a memory it wakes,
 And now the music means "forget,"
 And little heed the player takes
 Howe'er the thoughtful critic fret.

This kind of play with emotion, light as it seems, is very strong, and you know that gracefulness is the result of the combination of lightness with strength. Unless society verse have these qualities, it is poor stuff. You should notice also that such play has its rational value; its fancies come very close at times to scientific thought. In a scientific sense the nervous system of man—the heart, as the poet calls it, in the emotional sense—has a life history very closely resembling that of a musical instrument. And I should like to remind you that the finest illustration in the whole of Spencer's "Psychology," is a comparison of the combinations of thought and emotion to the combinations produced upon a piano.

I shall not say anything more about society verse, my object being only to awaken your interest in it, and to prompt you to see for yourselves whether there is anything that can be learned from it.