CHAPTER XXIX

NOTE ON THOMAS CAMPBELL

THE importance of the poet Campbell in a very particular way deserves more attention than we were able to give it in the course of last year's general lectures. You may remember that we then mentioned Campbell as one of the few who had become famous through the writing of war-songs, — especially national war-songs. It is upon this kind of composition, indeed, that his fame chiefly rests; but although fame is more or less necessarily based upon popularity, there is something to be said for a merit beyond fame, with which popularity has nothing to do. It is the men of letters alone who are capable of making the best estimate of the high esteem; and these have generally agreed *to put the lyric poems of Campbell* — nearly all of them — *among the best things.* And I doubt very much whether they would accord the palm to his war-songs. I do not mean to say that Prof. Saintsbury has praised his war-songs too much: the professor was only speaking of their excellence as compared with other war-songs. We may very justly doubt whether songs of war can be said to occupy, as to subject, even a second place in lyric poetry; and some of Campbell's poems which are not war-songs at all, take more than a second place. What I am going to speak of now are his lyrical poems of another kind.

The whole of them might be put in about twenty pages. Campbell's longer compositions are not very great: his strength is not in epic, but in short narrative poetry, in lyric and ballad,—and you know that the ballad is properly related to lyrical poetry. *There are about fifteen pieces of such compositions in which Campbell is so individual and so precious*

that he cannot be compared with anybody else. When *he is most simple*, he is most haunting; and the simplicity is of the delusive kind,—the kind that you think anybody can do when you first read it, yet which can really be done but very few times in the course of a century. Most of us make our early acquaintance with Campbell through the little ballad called "Lord Ullin's Daughter;" and I think you know by heart the opening verse,

A chieftain, to the Highlands bound,
Cries, "Boatman, do not tarry!
And I'll give thee a silver pound
To row us o'er the ferry."

That may look very easy to write, but it is not; and much less easy is such a stanza as that in which we read the words:—

And in the scowl of heaven each face
Grew dark as they were speaking.

Only the best of artists would have used such a word as "scowl" in that verse to describe the darkening of the day before a terrible storm. For "scowl" means much more than frown — it means a *threatening* frown, the look that comes before the attack. And do you not remember the stanza:—

"And fast before her father's men
Three days we've fled together,
For should he find us in the glen,
My blood would stain the heather."

A shallow critic might imagine that the word "heather" had been chosen only because of the difficulty of finding a rhyme for "together;"—there are very few rhymes for this word in English, "feather," "weather," are almost the only others, except "tether." You will find in the ballad of "The Blessed Damozel" the way Rossetti attacked this rhyme — not without criticism. But in the case of the Scotch poem, of which the scenes are laid in a country all covered

with heather, the same plant, you know, from which the word "heather" is derived or, at least, its near relation (the plant of a heath), the use of the rhyme is masterly. You can take any stanza of that little ballad to pieces like the works of a fine watch,—and wonder at their workmanship and restore them to their original places without finding a flaw. Now you cannot do that with many poems.

I think the poem about the parrot* is less familiar to you; and in any case it is worth studying:

The deep affections of the breast,
That Heaven to living things imparts,
Are not exclusively possess'd
By human hearts.

A parrot, from the Spanish Main,
Full young, and early caged, came o'er
With bright wings, to the bleak domain
Of Mulla's shore.

To spicy groves where he had won
His plumage of resplendent hue,
His native fruits, and skies, and sun,
He bade adieu.

For these he changed the smoke of turf,
A heathery land and misty sky,
And turn'd on rocks and raging surf
His golden eye.

But, petted, in our climate cold
He lived and chatter'd many a day:
Until with age, from green and gold
His wings grew grey.

At last, when, blind and seeming dumb,
He scolded, laugh'd, and spoke no more,
A Spanish stranger chanced to come
To Mulla's shore;

He hail'd the bird in Spanish speech;
The bird in Spanish speech replied,

* *The Parrot of Mull: A Domestic Anecdote.*

Flapp'd round his cage with joyous screech,
Dropt down, and died.

The little poem will probably never die—every word in it is exactly the right word, the best word, and the story founded upon fact, was worthy of the art. To feel all the beauty of it you should know something about the conditions described — the intense contrast between tropical life and the almost arctic dreariness of the northern islands of Scotland. The term "Spanish Main" not quite properly explained in the editing of the poem—means something more than the coast of South America. Originally the term "Spanish Main" may have been equivalent to Spanish mainland, by which South America was known; but the word "main" also means the high sea, and all the sea about the coast of South America and the West Indies came to be known as the Spanish Main. The South American and West Indian parrots, not like the African parrots, which are gray, have very brilliant colours,—among which green predominates. In the tropical forests the green foliage is much brighter than any green which you have seen in Japan—not because there are no dark greens, but because the general tone of the colour is made by the plants, whose leaves shine like emeralds. The colour of the bird is certainly "protective": when it is perched high up in a tree, among the lights and shadows, you can scarcely distinguish the green of its feathers, and the gold of them, from the green and gold of the foliage and the sunshine. And the poet is only stating a natural fact when he speaks of "the golden eye;" for the eye is really of burnished golden yellow. These birds which are social, live mostly upon the aromatic nuts and fruits of the tropics. They eat spices to such an extent that their flesh takes the odour of the perfumed fruits. They live for a very long time — not less than 14 or 15 years, if kindly treated; and they can be taught to speak — though not so well as the gray parrots of Africa.

Well, such a bird was taken away from its natural home

where it had been taught to talk Spanish, and it was taken by its new master—probably the Scotch sailor—to his home in Mulla. Mulla is a dreadfully cold and dreary place;—there are no trees at all, only some heather in the country; and a sea, which is always rough there, roars night and day upon a frightful coast of rocks. This was all the bird had to look at, with those golden eyes accustomed to view the splendour of eternal summer in a tropical forest. There were no trees to look at, no flowers; and there was no perfume,—but instead of it the "smoke of turf." I have told you they have no trees in Mulla, and so there is no firewood, but people cut the turf into squares shaped something like bricks and dry it in the sun, and use it for fuel. It makes a dense acrid smoke—you never forget the smell, though it is not altogether disagreeable. Of course, all this was a terrible change for the bird; and to have to talk English instead of Spanish. Otherwise he was kindly treated and lived so long that he became blind and dumb—at least apparently dumb, for he would not talk. Then one day a Spanish sailor happened to come there in a ship — saw the parrot — saw that it was a Spanish parrot, called to it in Spanish just for fun. But the sound of the Spanish words awakened the memory of the bird; — he remembered again his early masters, and the tropical sunshine, and the summer, and the fruits. But, though he answered in Spanish, and screamed for delight, the emotion was too strong for him — and he dropped dead. Perhaps anybody could tell such a story touchingly; but I doubt very much whether any other poet could have done it as Campbell did. And notice how very briefly he does all these things, never wasting a word. A smaller poet could have made twenty pages with that story; — a greater poet could not have told it in less pages than Campbell and it gains immensely by the compression.

Do you know "The Soldier's Dream"? It is European only in the sense that it describes a few things which are local rather than general,—such as the bleating of goats on

the mountain tops. Leave out the goats and one or two unimportant touches of the same thought, and you have a poem describing the heart of the soldier in all countries. I think this has been translated into Japanese. What a splendid subject it is! — a soldier in a foreign land dreams of home after the battle and before the dawn that must bring another battle. Of course a soldier has no business to think of home when he is awake. He knows better than to do that. But no man is master of his heart in the time of sleep; it is the illusion of dreams that brings him back to the village of his fathers. And, sleeping there surrounded by blood and death, with great fires burning to frighten away the wolves that come to eat the corpses, he sees his children playing and his home, and hears the sweet singing of the peasants working in the fields. I have no doubt that many a Japanese soldier in China a year ago had just such an experience; and the Scotch poet is describing something that we all know — touching a common chord of tenderness. Like a good artist he makes no comment about the emotion—the poem abruptly breaks off with the awakening; and leaves the thrill of the dream and the pain of the awakening to haunt our minds. It is quite as short a composition as "The Parrot."

Less familiar I imagine is the poem about "The Last Man." It is longer, more ambitious, and less successful, but there is great power in it, and it is upon a most curious subject. Only Byron, I think, among English poets attempted the same subject; — and it would be interesting to compare Byron's "Darkness" with Campbell's "Last Man." Both are original — so original that all we can think of comparing is the pictorial part of the poems, the ghastly landscape. Of course you know the scientific prediction that the time must come in which the human race must disappear from the face of the earth. How the vanishing will occur cannot be known, — only the fact is certain! Some folks propose that the gradual drying up of seas and rivers may bring about universal death. Some imagine a cosmic

Winter, of which the extra severity would render life impossible. A French artist has made a picture of the last man and woman perishing in a freezing world—and this is perhaps the least likely thing to happen. In Campbell's day very little was known about the force of the laws regulating the life and death of suns and planets; and poets were free to imagine what they liked about the thing, without being afraid of scientific criticism. So Byron could describe the going out of the sun — which no mortal man will ever live to see; and Campbell could represent facts, nearly as inconsistent with natural laws. Nevertheless it is well that both poems could be written—though it is certain that nobody will dare to write in the same way again;—

All worldy shapes shall melt in gloom,
  The Sun himself must die,
Before this mortal shall assume
  Its Immortality!
I saw a vision in my sleep,
That gave my spirit strength to sweep
  Adown the gulf of Time!
I saw the last of human mould,
That shall Creation's death behold,
  As Adam saw her prime!

The Sun's eye had a sickly glare,
  The Earth with age was wan,
The skeletons of nations were
  Around that lonely man!
Some had expired in fight—the brands
Still rusted in their bony hands;
  In plague and famine some!
Earth's cities had no sound nor tread;
And ships were drifting with the dead
  To shores where all was dumb!

Yet, prophet-like, that lone one stood,
  With dauntless words and high,
That shook the sere leaves from the wood
  As if a storm pass'd by,

Saying, We are twins in death, proud Sun!
Thy face is cold, thy race is run,
'Tis Mercy bids thee go:
For thou ten thousand years
Hast seen the tide of human tears,
That shall no longer flow.

What though beneath thee man put forth
His pomp, his pride, his skill;
And arts that made fire, flood, and earth,
The vassals of his will?—
Yet mourn I not thy parted sway,
Thou dim discrowned king of day:
For all those trophied arts
And triumphs that beneath thee sprang,
Heal'd not a passion or a pang
Entail'd on human hearts.

Go, let Oblivion's curtain fall
Upon the stage of men,
Nor with thy rising beams recall
Life's tragedy again:
Its piteous pageants bring not back,
Nor waken flesh, upon the rack
Of pain anew to writhe;
Stretch'd in disease's shapes abhorr'd
Or mown in battle by the sword,
Like grass beneath the scythe.

This is the best part of the poem: there are three more stanzas—but they express, notwithstanding such splendid lines as

The majesty of Darkness shall
Receive my parting ghost!

only conventional religious sentiment,—the declaration of the Last Man's faith in the immortality of his soul, which is to outlive the sun. A modern thinker would not refuse sympathy with the last man's belief in the immortal principle within him; but he would feel very much inclined

to question the statement about the death of the sun and of the universe, in the sense of eternal disparition. He would say that all life is one; and that even dead suns and dead worlds are born again, millions of times, even though the conditions be never exactly the same.

But what a fancy the poem is! And what strong verse is it embodied in! — you do not forget those stanzas easily, nor can you refuse to admire them, even while knowing that the subject of the poem is utterly impossible, scientifically absurd. The verse of Campbell has a certain magical quality that, like the colour of a morning mist, makes everything seen through it beautiful. It is not only because he was a great *natural* poet that he could make such verse;— it is also in part because he was really an English scholar. What most surprises us is the manner in which he combines polysyllables of Latin origin (or, as we might call them, Latinisms) — with the plainest Anglo-Saxon. Even in his simplest poems we sometimes find him doing this with extraordinary skill. I know of only one other English poet who possesses the very same faculty in the same degree— perhaps even in a higher degree, — that was the mad poet Christopher Smart. Smart, you know, was a scholar, a fellow of Cambridge, and he put his classical knowledge to the same ingenious use when he wrote the wonderful "Song to David." Take, for example, these little stanzas from Campbell's poem about "Napoleon and the British Sailor"— I think you have read them before:—

He hid it in a cave: he wrought
  The live-long day laborious; lurking
Until he launch'd a tiny boat
  By mighty working.

Heaven help us! 'twas a thing beyond
  Description wretched: such a wherry
Perhaps ne'er ventured on a pond,
  Or cross'd a ferry:—

For ploughing in the salt-sea field,
A thing to make the boldest shudder;
Untarr'd, uncompass'd, and unkeel'd,
No sail—no rudder.

From neighb'ring woods he interlaced
His sorry skiff with wattled willows;
And thus equipp'd he would have faced
The foaming billows.

You know the story how a sailor, a prisoner in France, made a little boat for himself out of a barrel and tried to escape for which action the penalty was death. But when he told Napoleon that he wanted only to see his mother, Napoleon sent him to England in a war-ship and gave him a present besides. Now look at these verses, in illustration of what I mean. In the first stanza which I quoted please draw a line under the word "laborious"—another line under the word "description" and under the word "ventured" in the next stanza. Only those words are of Latin origin: the rest is the purest Anglo-Saxon. In the third stanza the third line is composed entirely of false Latinisms—words of English or Latin origin compounded with a prefix of Latin origin—but not really Latin words, though they give a like effect. There are two Latin words in the succeeding stanza —"interlaced" and "equipped"—at least the second of them came from the Latin through the French. When Campbell uses Latinisms he does so always for the purpose of gaining two things — increased melody of rhythm and increased force of expression. Two such words "serene" and "attitude" are magnificently used in the following lines.

With folded arms Napoleon stood,
Serene alike in peace and danger;
And, in his wonted attitude,
Address'd the stranger.

But it is in the "Battle of Hohenlinden," that the scholarly effect of this Latinism in construction can best be

seen. The measure is very unusual, and before Campbell's time was not often used in English poetry. The last word of every fourth line taken by itself is a perfect dactyl. You cannot analyze the verse, — cannot scan it, so as to get the dactyl: it is very irregular, purposely irregular. But the dactylic effect is there and it has the strength of Latin verse rather than English. It is the splendid sound of these lines which accounts for the fact that almost every English boy knows by heart such lines as

"Far flash'd the red artillery;"
"And charge with all thy chivalry;"
"To join the dreadful revelry;"
"Of Iser, rolling rapidly."

By the way there is a good story about some student of Cambridge or Oxford, who, having drunk too much wine, fell downstairs in the night. The proctor called out, "Who is there?"—And the student wittily answered by quoting the last line of the first stanza of Campbell's poem, which (so far as sound goes) might also be written:

"O, I, Sir!—rolling rapidly."

As I said everybody knows that poem. But everybody does not know the grand "Ode to Winter" which can be compared with nothing else of its time except the very best work of Gray and does not suffer by the comparison. Let me quote one stanza only — for the sake of illustrating the effects of the sound:—

But howling Winter fled afar,
To hills that prop the polar star,
And loves on deer-borne car to ride
With barren Darkness by his side,
Round the shore where loud Lofoden
  Whirls to death the roaring whale,
Round the hall where Runic Odin
  Howls his war-song to the gale;

Save when adown the ravaged globe
He travels on his native storm,
Deflowering Nature's grassy robe,
And trampling on her faded form:—
Till light's returning lord assume
The shaft that drives him to his polar field,
Of power to pierce his raven plume
And crystal-cover'd shield.

The effects of sound in this poem are chiefly given by pure English words, containing the vowel o and a in various combinations — the o's predominate. But the effect made is greatly helped by some Latin words, such as "assume." That stanza, as for sonority, may be compared with anything by Gray or by Dryden. In the stanza following Latin words prevail:—

Archangel! power of desolation!
Fast descending as thou art,
Say, hath mortal invocation
Spells to touch thy stony heart?

Such alteration of method shows certainly the ode may be called old-fashioned; but there are old-fashioned things which cannot be too highly praised and we must grant to this ode of Campbell's the same value that we accord to the odes of Dryden and to the odes of Gray.

I have told you about the particular mastery of sound characterizing Campbell's verse; but I have not yet said anything about his colour. As a matter of fact Campbell seldom exerted himself merely to produce effects of colour. He uses colour sparingly,—though I pointed out to you the excellent touches of the poem describing the parrot and its "golden eye." But sometimes, in love poems, or tender meditative verse, Campbell makes his language as chromatically rich as any poet before or since his time. Let us take some verses from the address "To the Evening Star" as an example. This is a kind of love poem, which you will find in most of the good anthologies.

Gem of the crimson-colour'd Even,
  Companion of retiring day,
Why at the closing gates of heaven,
  Beloved star, dost thou delay?

So fair thy pensile beauty burns,
  When soft the tear of twilight flows;
So due thy plighted love returns
  To chambers brighter than the rose:

To Peace, to Pleasure, and to Love,
  So kind a star thou seem'st to be,
Sure some enamour'd orb above
  Descends and burns to meet with thee.
. . . . . .
Shine on her chosen green resort,
  Whose trees the sunward summit crown,
And wanton flowers, that well may court
  An angel's feet to tread them down.

Shine on her sweetly scented road,
  Thou star of evening's purple dome,
That lead'st the nightingale abroad,
  And guid'st the pilgrim to his home.

And thereafter having described the bower of his sweetheart, he tells us about herself—about her rosy cheek—

Where, winnow'd by the gentle air,
  Her silken tresses darkly flow,
And fall upon her brow so fair,
  Like shadows on the mountain snow.

Except Tennyson, I do not think that any English poet has given us such delicious touches of light and colour in a simple poem of this kind.

Here we have colour enough — crimson, and roses, and brilliant greens, and purples, — not to speak of a beautiful figure with dark hair and snowy skin. But, the artist must note that all these colours give us the idea of *transparency.* The crimson sunset is so described that we see what is

shining through it; the lucidity of jewels enhances most delicately the tints of them. If you try to take the poem, detail by detail, perhaps you will see where the charm is. In very truth it is not in any one detail, but in the effect left upon the mind by all of them. Ask yourself why do you find pleasure in the life and colour of a beautiful summer evening. The reading of this poem produces the effect of the same quality of pleasure. Every word is indeed a gem, chosen by a great jewel smith. Please remark the beautiful use of the word "pensile" in the second stanza. It signifies hanging or suspended — gives us the notion of a lamp hanging aloft. But it so nearly resembles the equally soft word "pensive" — meaning melancholy or thoughtful, and especially thoughtful, that its sudden appearance in the line creates in our mind the sense of both words.

If I have given you some idea of the value of Campbell's shorter poems, I hope that you will try to study them for yourselves. But, bear in mind that his longer poems are not worthy of the same attention; you could employ your time with better reading. Better reading, however, than the shorter poems there is not, and that is what I have been attempting to prove.