CHAPTER XI

POEMS ABOUT CHILDREN

OF course it will seem from this title that we are going to deal only with a minor quality of verse. You will think that it requires a very great poet to write a good poem on the subject of patriotism or heroism,—whereas almost any poet can write poetry about children. And, to some extent, such a criticism would be correct. There are tens of thousands of English poems about children—most of which are of very little value. The seeming easiness of the subject tempts even the smallest and weakest poet to write about it. Yet the fact remains unchanged that it requires a very great poet to write a great poem about any subject, and that only great poets have succeeded with the subjects of children. I shall not quote to you many examples of this kind of poetry, because many great examples do not exist. But what I shall offer will represent some of the finest work ever done in English emotional verse.

No man has so well succeeded in the writing of poems about children as Robert Bridges. Robert Bridges is a very great poet—as great as any English poet now living perhaps, with the single exception of Swinburne; but he needed a long time in obtaining recognition. He was a doctor, a country doctor; and a very silent modest man who never figured at all in what is called literary society. Between the intervals of his duty as a physician, he has found time to make three beautiful volumes of poetry which men of letters delight in, but which the public knows scarcely anything about. Such poetry is a little too fine for the common class of reader; and, besides, the method of Dr. Bridges is not at all according to popular

ideas. He is neither a philosopher nor a romantic;—he is quite classic in his notion of correct composition; his subjects are old-fashioned; and he avoids the use of what we call strongly coloured adjectives, as well as the use of melodious effects. When you first try to read Robert Bridges, you feel as if you were under a cold grey sky. But after you read him two or three times you begin to discover that there is a very deep and true beauty in his work—far below the plain surface of it. After really learning to feel the beauty of one of his little poems you never can forget it.

I shall quote at least two pieces from him. The first is simply entitled "On a Dead Child."

Perfect little body, without fault or stain on thee,
With promise of strength and manhood full and fair!
Though cold and stark and bare,
The bloom and the charm of life doth awhile remain on thee.

Thy mother's treasure wert thou;—alas! no longer
To visit her heart with wondrous joy; to be
Thy father's pride;—ah, he
Must gather his faith together, and his strength make stronger.

To me, as I move thee now in the last duty,
Dost thou with a turn or gesture anon respond;
Startling my fancy fond
With a chance attitude of the head, a freak of beauty.

Thy hand clasps, as 'twas wont, my finger, and holds it:
But the grasp is the clasp of Death, heartbreaking and stiff;
Yet feels to my hand as if
'Twas still thy will, thy pleasure and trust that enfolds it.

So I lay thee there, thy sunken eyelids closing,—
Go lie thou there in thy coffin, thy last little bed!—
Propping thy wise, sad head,
Thy firm, pale hands across thy chest disposing.

So quiet! doth the change content thee?—Death, whither hath he taken thee?
To a world, do I think, that rights the disaster of this?

The vision of which I miss,
Who weep for the body, and wish but to warm thee and awaken thee?

Ah! little at best can all our hopes avail us
To lift this sorrow, or cheer us, when in the dark,
Unwilling, alone we embark,
And the things we have seen and have known and have heard of, fail us.

We must understand that the father is washing, with his own hands, the dead body of his little boy; and these are his thoughts which the poet expresses. Very probably this is the record of a personal experience—though I am not sure. The first stanza refers to the beauty of the little unconscious body. A dead child, well-formed, is a beautiful object within a few hours after death and appears only as if asleep. The second stanza suggests how the father suddenly thinks of the mother's future suffering, and then of the necessity of firmness of mind to bear the pain of this loss. But it is very difficult for him to bear it while he is actually washing the little corpse; for, at every moment, the head turns, or the limbs, as he moves them, take perfectly natural positions—so that the boy seems only moving in his sleep; and this obliges the father to remember that he is not asleep. Presently as he begins to wash one of the little hands, its fingers close about his own fingers, just as in life,—just as in the time when he and his little son used to take walks together. At last the washing is done; the little body is placed in the coffin, with a little pillow under the head to prop it up—then, how wise and sad the little face looks! Does the child really know anything now? Where has the life gone? Can the father believe that he has gone to a better world? He cannot believe as other men believe;—therefore he can only weep for the loss of his boy in this world—he cannot help wishing that he could bring him to happy life again,—which is a proof of his doubt. For if we really believe that our dead are happier and in a better world, it would be wrong for us to regret so much. And

the parent reflects on this—he thinks to himself how little any knowledge or any human faith can really help in the moment of such pain. The man must bear his trouble alone—there is no one to comfort him;—there is no one who could possibly comfort him. So he is like one lost at sea, in the dark, in a little boat—without anything to guide, anything to strengthen, anything to assure.

The pathos of this little poem is almost unapproachable —though later on, in another poem, we shall find something even more strangely touching. But death is a subject which is always pathetic;—it will perhaps seem to you strange to find in another child poem the pain of life treated just as tenderly as the pain of death. I do not know whether it is another chapter in the story of the same boy or not; but that makes no difference, because the composition expresses the deeper feeling of every generous parent—the love of the child shadowed by the terrible fear of all the pain that he must bear in order to obtain success in life. The thought is this:—the child in his innocence and sweetness of heart, knowing no evil, wishing to please everyone, is almost like a divine being. There is yet no passion there, no hate, no envy, no deceit. All is frank, true, beautiful, and tender in the little heart. But all this goodness and sweetness must be destroyed. Why? Partly because as the child grows up, other emotions and feelings than those possible to a child must be developed and all of these are not good. Some of them will be very bad. That is one reason. But the chief reason is simply that this is a wicked world and that it does not allow a person to be perfectly good, even if he has the will of the perfect good, and the capacity into the bargain. For example, a perfectly honest man—a man as honest as a child is—would not be able to succeed very well in the world of commerce. A perfectly truthful man—truthful as a child is—would not make a successful diplomat. A perfectly kind man—gentle as the child is—would not be able to defend himself in the least from aggression and would very probably have an extremely unhappy end. Everybody praises the

quality of a good child; yet everybody reproaches a man who happens to retain the quality of his childhood. Strange contradiction! But the contradiction itself is a proof that one cannot succeed in life by being too good. Because we reproach a man for being childish, innocent, and all that—it does not follow that what we blame him for is wrong. We are really blaming him for his good qualities; we are condemning the best moral part of him. We are simply saying to him, "You are not fit to compete with other men because you are not untruthful, cunning and malicious." All these thoughts are suggested by the poem. They are very sad thoughts; but few parents can escape from them. The poem bears the Latin title of "Pater Filio" meaning "The Father to his Son." We need not suppose the words to be really addressed to the child,—for the child could not understand them. They are addressed rather to the spirit of the child: we might imagine the boy asleep, and the father bending above the bed, and thinking these things:—

> Sense with keenest edge unusèd,
>   Yet unsteel'd by scathing fire;
> Lovely feet as yet unbruisèd
>   On the ways of dark desire;
> Sweetest hope that lookest smiling
> O'er the wilderness defiling!
>
> Why such beauty, to be blighted
>   By the swarm of foul destruction?
> Why such innocence delighted,
>   When sin stalks to thy seduction?
> All the litanies e'er chaunted
> Shall not keep thy faith undaunted.
>
> I have pray'd the sainted Morning
>   To unclasp her hands to hold thee;
> From resignful Eve's adorning
>   Stol'n a robe of peace to enfold thee;
> With all charms of man's contriving
> Arm'd thee for thy lonely striving.

Me too once unthinking Nature,
  —Whence Love's timeless mockery took me,—
Fashion'd so divine a creature,
  Yea, and like a beast forsook me.
I forgave, but tell the measure
Of her crime in thee, my treasure.

The first stanza and the second refer to the possible future:—"O ye fresh and exquisitely delicate little senses, not yet hardened by the terrible pain of the fire of life;—O pretty little feet that have not yet felt the roughness, and the torture of walking upon the path of passions; O gentle and hopeful little soul, looking before you without any fear over the horrible and foul wilderness of human struggle!

"Why should such beauty as yours ever have been made at all since it must be sooner or later destroyed by the forces of sickness and sorrow? Why should such happy innocence as yours exist at all, since the power of sin and shame are waiting to destroy you if they can? Why should you now have such trust, such faith,—believing everybody, believing that all is good? No matter how much you may pray in the years to come, no prayer can prevent you at last from doubting and fearing—doubting God, fearing evil.

"I have prayed to Her, the divine Mother, whom they call the Star of the Morning, to unfold her compassionate hand for a little time, only to embrace you, and protect you!—I have put about you the same robe of innocence which Eve long ago laid aside, in order that you may have peace and no fear!—and with all the knowledge that civilization has given me—knowledge of the world, magic of science, wizardry of experience, I have tried to prepare you for the terrible battle into which you must some day enter, without help;—for I cannot always be with you.

"Once very long ago, blind Nature, indifferent Nature, made me just as divine a creature as you now are. By Love's accident I was taken out of Nature's being, and shaped into just such a little boy—all by the chance of Love who is the eternal mocker, the Eternal Illusion. Yes, Nature

once made me as fair and as innocent as you are, and then she forsook me, abandoned me as an animal abandons its young when the time of suckling is past. I could forgive Nature—but how great her cruelty was to me, I now can judge by looking at you, my treasure—by loving you, and fearing for you."

Now we shall take one more poem from the same writer. The first of our quotations was about the feelings of the father while preparing the body of his own child for the grave;—our second quotation refers to parental fear and love, bestirred by thoughts regarding the future of a son;—now our third example shall be a poem describing the feelings of a man on seeing his own picture when a little boy. The last stanza of the last poem naturally introduces this subject. It is only when looking at one's own child that one can really understand how beautiful a thing, how divine a thing childhood is. And having once really understood this fact, it becomes a very strange experience, in adult life, to gaze upon the picture of oneself when a child. One can scarcely believe one's eyes. "Was this really I?" is the first question that comes to the mind. The poem describing these feelings has no title: it is simply No. 39 of the collection of sonnets entitled "The Growth of Love:"—

A man that sees by chance his picture, made
As once a child he was, handling some toy,
Will gaze to find his spirit within the boy,
Yet hath no secret with the soul pourtray'd:
He cannot think the simple thought which play'd
Upon those features then so frank and coy;
'Tis his, yet oh! not his: and o'er the joy
His fatherly pity bends in tears dismay'd.

Proud of his prime maybe he stand at best,
And lightly wear his strength, or aim it high,
In knowledge, skill and courage self-possest:—
Yet in the pictured face a charm doth lie,
The one thing lost more worth than all the rest,
Which seeing, he fears to say *This child was I.*

A man who happens to see a picture of himself as a child—taken while he was playing with his toys—riding a little horse of wood, for example,—looks into the child-face in the picture, in order to try to find something of his old character there. But no matter how long he looks at that picture, he cannot quite discover himself in it. There is a little soul there—shy, gentle, full of joy,—the soul of a boy; but the soul of the man now has no secret relation with the soul of the boy. It was his own soul; but he cannot now understand it in the least. He cannot think in the same way, he cannot feel in the same way as the little boy in that picture thought and felt. The soul of the man has grown away from the soul of the boy so far that comprehension is impossible. The picture is the picture of himself; but it is in another way not the picture of himself—and bending above it, to look at the happy childish face, he weeps—out of pity for himself.

Yet why should he pity himself?—Is he not wiser and stronger and nobler and altogether superior to the boy? Is he not now in the very prime of his life, in the very best period of his existence? Perhaps he is so strong that he fears nothing in this world, and needs nothing;—perhaps again he is ambitious, and justly proud of his strength in overcoming obstacles—proud of his knowledge, proud of his experience, proud of his courage, always sure of victory. Nevertheless there is something in the face of that child that is higher and nobler and better and rarer than all his strength and all his knowledge. There is something in the face of the child that is worth more than all that he can ever hope to be. But it is gone—lost for ever. And as he looks at the picture, he becomes at last afraid and ashamed to say, "This was myself." Because there is a something divine and supremely pure in childhood—something that, when childhood is past, never can come back again.

There is no doubt that if a man could actually meet and talk to—not the picture of himself as a boy, but to his own very self as a boy—the two would not be able to understand

each other at all. They might love each other, like an elder brother and a younger brother, or like father and son, but they could not possibly comprehend each other's thoughts. Children themselves know that big people cannot understand them. There are two little boys and a little girl playing in the street—sitting down there in the sun and playing with little stones or little sticks. Just go and stand behind them and watch them and try to understand how they feel. You cannot understand. And if you ask them, they will never tell you—never in this world. Why will they not tell you? Because they know that you cannot understand if they did tell. Now I wonder very much why some great poet or story-teller does not try to give us a story about a man meeting with a little boy that was once himself, and trying to understand the mystery of childhood. There is a splendid literary subject. But it requires a psychologist to treat it really well.

Now I shall take an example of child poetry from another poet—a very original and curious poet, Coventry Patmore. Patmore was altogether an extraordinary person. For the subject of his first book of importance he took the story of his own married life. He related in verse how he first met, first liked, and first loved the girl whom he afterwards married; and all the details of the wooing, the engagement and the wedding he made poems about. Only a very clever man and a very delicately minded man could do such a thing without offending good taste. But Patmore could do it: he did it so charmingly that his book quickly became famous. This was the book called "The Angel in the House." Afterwards he wrote beautiful poems upon other subjects—several of which doubtless refer to his own life. Among these there is one poem about a child—probably, or possibly, his own child, which is perhaps the most touching thing of the kind ever written. It is entitled "The Toys"—and it needs no comment at all:—

My little Son, who look'd from thoughtful eyes
And moved and spoke in quiet grown-up wise,
Having my law the seventh time disobey'd,

I struck him, and dismiss'd
With hard words and unkiss'd,
His Mother, who was patient, being dead.
Then, fearing lest his grief should hinder sleep,
I visited his bed,
But found him slumbering deep,
With darken'd eyelids, and their lashes yet
From his late sobbing wet.
And I, with moan,
Kissing away his tears, left others of my own;
For, on a table drawn beside his head,
He had put, within his reach,
A box of counters and a red-vein'd stone,
A piece of glass abraded by the beach
And six or seven shells,
A bottle with bluebells
And two French copper coins, ranged there with careful art,
To comfort his sad heart.
So when that night I pray'd
To God, I wept, and said:
Ah, when at last we lie with tranced breath,
Not vexing Thee in death,
And Thou rememberest of what toys
We made our joys,
How weakly understood,
Thy great commanded good,
Then, fatherly not less
Than I whom Thou hast moulded from the clay,
Thou'lt grieve Thy wrath, and say,
'I will be sorry for their childishness.'

The father is evidently at the sea-side with his little boy. We may suppose the child to be from five to seven years old—probably between six and seven. Something which he has been told not to do, the little boy does several times; and at last the father, losing patience, slaps him, and sends him away to bed without kissing him. As it is the English custom to kiss a child before putting him to bed, a little boy becomes very unhappy if his father refuses this good-night caress. After the boy is gone, the father feels sorry

for having slapped him—remembers how patient the dead mother used to be: she never would have slapt him. So, feeling suddenly remorseful, the father walks very softly into the child's room, to comfort him. But the little boy is asleep. His face is still wet with tears; but as the father bends over him, he sees something that makes his own tears flow. For, the little child, being left all alone, tried to amuse himself with his playthings, and these he had put on a little table, and then pulled the little table close to the bed so that while lying in the bed he might be able to play with them. And what funny little playthings they were—wonderful only to a child's mind. A little stone, picked up on the sea-shore, because it had a curious colour; a bit of glass that had been rolled about by the waves so long that the broken edges had become quite smooth; a tiny glass bottle with some wild flowers in it; some counters; and to childish imagination the most wonderful of all, two beautiful French coins worth about ten *rin* probably! From this point the merely touching part of the poem suddenly deepens into religious seriousness. The father, touched by the child's pleasure in small things, suddenly hopes that God will afterwards forgive him, just as he is now willing to forgive the child—and for the same reason. After all, what right had he to punish the little boy so harshly? "If God were to judge me, as severely as I judged this child,—would he not find me incomparably more to blame? But, after all, in the sight of the Supreme, the wisest man may be only like a little boy, playing with shells and wild flowers; and perhaps all men will be forgiven for their faults merely because they are only like little foolish children under the eyes of the Infinite Wisdom."

The verse in which this poem is written appears to be very irregular. This measure is called catalectic, from a Greek word καταληκτικός, "katalektikos," signifying "pause;" in other words we might say that this sort of irregular poetry is called "pause-poetry." The measure allows extraordinary freedom to the poet. He can use the pause

almost wherever he pleases and he can use or not use rhyme. Nevertheless, easy as this sort of verse appears, it is really very difficult to write well. You may also notice that the lines can be varied in length from three to five feet. A great part of Patmore's work is composed in this form.

Hitherto our examples have chiefly been of the melancholy sort. At this point I may appropriately quote a little sonnet by Longfellow, which may be considered as the best possible consolation for those who fear their children's future and are over-anxious about them:—

A SHADOW

I said unto myself, if I were dead,
 What would befall these children? What would be
 Their fate, who now are looking up to me
 For help and furtherance? Their lives, I said,
Would be a volume wherein I have read
 But the first chapters, and no longer see
 To read the rest of their dear history,
 So full of beauty and so full of dread.
Be comforted; the world is very old,
 And generations pass, as they have passed,
 A troop of shadows moving with the sun;
Thousands of times has the old tale been told;
 The world belongs to those who come the last,
 They will find hope and strength as we have done.

This charming sonnet needs no paraphrasing nor explanation; it is very simple, but it is very appropriate and consolatory. There is no other answer indeed to the fear that all parents must feel; yet perhaps this is answer enough. For we must not attempt to find fault with the eternal order of the universe.

I am now going to quote a few poems dealing with child-psychology—I mean with the manner in which a child thinks and feels. So far I have been giving poems only relating to the way in which parents feel. I acknowledge

that they are the most beautiful poems upon the subject. But that is for an obvious reason. Nothing is more difficult for a grown-up person than to be able to think and to feel like a child—even to understand the mind of a child. And therefore many scientific books have been written of late years in England, in France, in Italy, in Germany and in America to teach people how to study and how to try to understand the minds of children. It is not nearly so easy a matter as you might think and it is a very strange thing that there are very few really good books written for children,—I mean books that contain thinking like the thinking of children. I even doubt whether there are half a dozen such books in the whole of English literature. The best books of the kind produced during the last century is, strangely enough, the production of a professor of mathematics. I do not think that his mathematics helped him in this respect; and I am not at all sure whether scientific psychology can help any man to really sympathize with a child's thinking. In order to write as a child feels one must either be born with an astonishing faculty of intuition, as that professor of mathematics certainly was; or else one must have an extraordinary memory enabling him to recollect how he felt as a child. Poets who write about child-thoughts usually seem to depend upon memory, and memory certainly created the next poem that I am going to quote a part of. It is a translation from the Danish; I shall give you only the best verses—omitting several which treat of religious thoughts and having nothing to do with the real merit of the composition. I think you will find it very true, and also simply beautiful.

CHILDHOOD

There was a time when I was very small
When my whole frame was but an ell in height,
Sweetly as I recall it, tears do fall,
And therefore I recall it with delight.

I swerved in my tender mother's arms,
And rode a horse-back on my father's knee;

Alike were sorrows, passions and alarms,
And gold and grief, and love unknown to me.

Then seemed to me this world far less in size,
Likewise it seemed to me less wicked far;
Like points in heaven, I saw the stars arise,
And longed for wings that I might catch a star.

I saw the moon behind the island fade,
And thought, "O were I on that island there,
I could find out of what the moon is made,
Find out how large it is, how round, how fair."

With childish reverence my young lips did say
The prayer my pious mother had taught me,
"O gentle God! O let me strive . . . .
. . . . and follow thee!"

So prayed I for my mother and father
And for my sister and for all the town,
The king I know not and the beggar-brother,
Who, bent with age, went sighing up and down.

They perished, the blithe days of boyhood perished
And all . . . . , all the peace I knew.
Now have I but their memory fondly cherished,
God! May I never, never lose that too!

The simplicity of this does not prevent it from being beautiful: it gives us not a few of the happy feelings and thoughts of a child in the truest possible way. What child does not at times wish that he could take the stars into his hands,—or go to the exact place where the moon sinks down, and take hold of it and feel what it is like,—or go to the place where a rainbow seems to be touching the ground. Again, what child does not at some time believe that all the world is good—that all men are big brothers, and all women big sisters? Now if we could really all of us continue to think in the same way about the world, what a very much better world it would be! But I shall take now an equally simple subject treated with an art that is not at all simple.

The poet was a brother of the poet Tennyson; and the subject is a little girl playing with a terrestrial globe. She is much too young to understand geography; but she pretends that she does in order to please her father and mother, and pleases them more by this little hypocrisy than she could have done by any display of precocious knowledge. One of the prettiest things to study in the conduct of a child is the manifestation of an intuitive desire to please. For the child understands us very much better than we understand the child—it understands very quickly what you wish it to do or to say or to tell; and it will immediately try to do or to say or pretend to think or pretend to feel what is desired. You may say that this is acting and not sincere. Quite true. A child is a very great actor. But as for the insincerity—what a pretty insincerity it is, how generous, and how unselfish!

LETTY'S GLOBE

When Letty had scarce pass'd her third glad year,
And her young, artless words began to flow,
One day we gave the child a color'd sphere
Of the wide earth, that she might mark and know,
By tint and outline, all its sea and land.
She patted all the world; old empires peep'd
Between her baby fingers; her soft hand
Was welcome at all frontiers. How she leap'd,
And laugh'd and prattled in her world-wide bliss;
But when we turn'd her sweet unlearned eye
On our own isle, she rais'd a joyous cry,
"Oh! yes, I see it, Letty's home is there!"
And, while she hid all England with a kiss,
Bright over Europe fell her golden hair!

This needs no paraphrase—though it is a finely complicated piece of work, a very fine sonnet. But it has that clearness which attaches to the great work of correct poets. Notice how natural it is. Of course you know that Western children will almost instinctively kiss anything which they are fond of—birds, cats, little dogs, even inanimate objects, such

as a favourite toy or a pretty picture. In Sully's beautiful book of child life, there is another ugly story about a little boy who wanted to kiss a big watch-dog of which he was very fond; but unfortunately the dog was eating at the time, and becoming angry bit a piece out of the child's cheek. Nevertheless the little fellow would not let the dog be killed and showed no resentment. The impulse of the little girl to kiss the map of England on the globe is perfectly natural and we may suppose that the whole incident is taken from life. Although the poem is of an elevating kind, there is just a touch of delicate humour all through it, most marked, perhaps, in the playful use of the compound adjective "world-wide" in the ninth line.

In a lecture upon Wordsworth given last year, I quoted Wordsworth's best poems upon children—"Anecdote for Fathers," and "We are Seven." It will not be necessary to treat them again. Also I quoted for you last year, a very pretty poem by Barnes—who rarely writes in the same pure English—concerning a mother's dream about her dead boy. These I only mention now, so that you may not forget where to find them if you wish. In the category of poems relating to child-characters I would also place that famous poem by Southey, "The Battle of Blenheim," which I suppose you have all read, so that we need not quote it here. Let me observe, however, that the object of this poem is to show how the simple moral sense of the child can put problem to an old man which all his experience will not enable him to answer. The boy, playing with the skull, and the little sister looking at it, really show themselves wiser beings than the grandfather who knows all about the battle in which the owner of the skull lost his life. He can only say, "'Twas a famous victory"—and even this he says only because he heard other people say it. But when the little girl exclaimed, "Why, 'twas a very wicked thing!" the old man is nonplussed. He thinks that she ought not to say that; but he fails to prove to her that war can be anything else than wicked.

A little while ago I spoke to you about the use of memory in compositions of this class; and it is rather strange to observe how the most serious of men occasionally turn back to the recollection of their childhood, and find in such recollection a source of pleasure or a religious inspiration. Take, for example, the case of Newman, the Oxford scholar who, changing his religion, became a Roman Catholic and afterwards a cardinal. He was a very cold and serious person, whom many persons thought incapable of affection or of any warm feeling. He was of a logical temperament; and the only remarkable book that he ever wrote was a book of controversy in which he showed a great deal of cleverness in a bad cause. Although a great master of precise English, and a writer occasionally of fiction, there is not a particle of feeling in his work. But this cold, and almost unpleasant person could think and write beautifully in verse when he remembered his childhood. He did very little composition of this kind; but what he did is very good. Listen to this little poem entitled "The Trance of Time:"—

In childhood, when with eager eyes
The season-measured years I view'd,
All, garb'd in fairy guise,
Pledged constancy of good.

Spring sang of heaven; the summer flowers
Bade me gaze on, and did not fade;
Even suns o'er autumn's bowers
Heard my strong wish, and stay'd.

They came and went, the short-lived four;
Yet, as their varying dance they wove,
To my young heart each bore
Its own sure claim of love.

Far different now;—the whirling year
Vainly my dizzy eyes pursue;
And its fair tints appear
All blent in one dusk hue.

Then what this world to thee, my heart?
Its gifts nor feed thee nor can bless.
Thou hast no owner's part
In all its fleetingness.

The memory of the happiness of childhood and the painful contrast between that past of love and this painful present naturally leads to a reflection upon the impermanency of all earthly things. The thought may be religious; but in this poem no definite allusion to religion exists—which leaves it all the more perfect, because we are able to share in both emotions, no matter what our opinions may be.

This needs paraphrasing, for it is a very deeply suggestive thing. Perhaps you think it is easy verse. But I hope that you will not think so;—nothing could be harder to write, and every word and every syllable is the best possible that could be used in such a composition.

"When I was a child, I used to watch for the coming of the season very eagerly. The years seemed much longer than they now do; and as I measured them by the seasons, the seasons also seemed to me very, very long. But they also seemed very, very beautiful—beautiful as fairies; and all of them filled me with hope, and with the idea that I would always be happy.

"The spring-time always made me think about Heaven: and the singing of the birds appeared to me almost divine. In the summer-time the flowers seemed to ask me to look at them; seemed to say, 'Do not be afraid to look at us, and to find pleasure in us: we are not going to die very soon.' And they did not die very soon. No: when I was a boy the flowers lived much longer than they do now. So the summer was beautiful for me and very long; and the autumn was also long and beautiful. When the winter was said to be approaching, I used to wish that the autumn would last longer; and the great autumn sun seemed to know my wish, and granted it and made the seasons longer just to please me.

"So the four seasons that now seem so short, then came slowly and went slowly. The ancient poets represented them

as a bevy of beautiful nymphs dancing—my seasons also seemed to circle in one ever happy dance. But not one passed by me without bringing some gift of love, something to make me happy.

"How different the world now seems! how fast the years go!—so fast that it makes me dizzy nearly to watch them go. And the seasons are not now as they used to be, full of azure light and golden sun;—they are all, all of them, dark, dark—one dull grey colour. My soul is becoming grey: I can no longer see and feel Nature's beauty.

"Then why should I care about the world? Does not the memory of my happy childhood teach me that everything is impermanent, even the power to be happy? What has the world to give me now that could make me happy? Nothing. It does not belong to me. It is an illusion, a phantom that passes away."

There was a man who died only a few years ago who was much happier than Newman in one regard,—namely, that he remained until the moment of his death as fresh-hearted and as happy as a child. I mean Robert Louis Stevenson, perhaps the best romance writer of the century—certainly the best writer of fiction during the Victorian era. Stevenson was asked to write books for children, because he remained always such a happy boy that he seemed to understand children better than any body else. And he wrote a book of poems for children,—just to please the publishers. These poems are almost all little memories of his own childhood, and from a psychological point of view they are so interesting that great men of science have written learnedly about them. But I think that the publishers made a mistake. They ought not to have asked Stevenson to write poetry, but only to write prose. If he had written a little book of prose stories or fancies for children, he would have done something very beautiful, but he was not a poet; he did not have the inborn gift of verse, he could not have written such a thing as Newman wrote under any circumstances. So I can only tell you in regard to his "Child's Garden of Verses," that

the garden is pretty but not well cultivated. I mean that there are only two or three little bits in the book which I can quote to you as good poetry, and even these are more of interest psychologically than poetically. I shall only quote two. But there can be no mistake about the truth of the feeling they express. Children like them; and children are the best critics in regard to the truth of such things. I think that everyone of you can remember, when a child, having played with his bed covering. In this country we may call them *futon* and in England we call them quilts and blankets and sheets and counterpanes; but that makes no difference at all so far as the experience is concerned. I think that you have all of you at some time fancied that the folds of your bed covering looked like valleys and mountains—perhaps you have imagined forests on the mountains and rivers in the valleys. Stevenson wrote one little bit called "The Land of Counterpane" which excellently expresses the feelings of the child while imagining such things.

When I was sick and lay a-bed,
I had two pillows at my head,
And all my toys beside me lay
To keep me happy all the day

And sometimes for an hour or so
I watched my leaden soldiers go,
With different uniforms and drills,
Among the bed-clothes, through the hills;

And sometimes sent my ships in fleets
All up and down among the sheets;
Or brought my trees and houses out,
And planted cities all about.

I was the giant great and still
That sits upon the pillow-hill,
And sees before him, dale and plain,
The pleasant land of counterpane.

Ask any child, any little Tokyo boy or girl what this means and I think that little boy or girl will reply that he or she has thought and played in the same way among the bed-clothes. Here is another little bit of excellent psychology entitled, "My Kingdom:"—

Down by a shining water well
  I found a very little dell,
    No higher than my head.
The heather and the gorse about
In summer bloom were coming out,
    Some yellow and some red.

I called the little pool a sea;
  The little hills were big to me;
    For I am very small.
I made a boat, I made a town,
I searched the caverns up and down,
    And named them one and all.

And all about was mine, I said,
The little sparrows overhead,
    The little minnows too.
This was the world and I was king;
For me the bees came by to sing,
    For me the swallows flew.

I played, there were no deeper seas,
Nor any wider plains than these,
    Nor other kings than me.
At last I heard my mother call
Out from the house at evenfall,
    To call me home to tea.

And I must rise and leave my dell,
And leave my dimpled water well,
    And leave my heather blooms.
Alas! and as my home I neared,
How very big my nurse appeared,
    How great and cool the rooms!

Because, after this kind of playing, in which the child makes a little world for himself, imagines a puddle of water

to be a sea and the little bit of clay to be like Mt. Fuji, if you suddenly break his little dream and recall him to the realities of life, his little imagination is almost frightened by the change. A moment ago he fancied himself bigger than a mountain; but now, the nurse-girl comes for him—and how enormous she looks, and how enormously big and cold and dismal even the house looks when he gets home. If you think this is not true, just ask some little brother or sister or nephew about it.

So far as suggestive poetry is concerned, I am not sure whether we have in English anything better on the subject of children than certain pieces by William Blake. But last year I gave a lecture upon this great mystic poet;—therefore I do not think it advisable to quote from him now. I shall only remark that the most original of his poems upon children, and the most touching, are to be found in the two divisions of his poetry entitled "Songs of Innocence" and "Songs of Experience." Perhaps I may also call your attention to the fact that the poem about "The Little Girl Lost" —telling us how a lion took care of her, and afterwards took care of her parents—has also been an inspiration to foreign poets. There is a curious medieval superstition behind the poem. Formerly it was believed that a lion, a tiger, or any wild beast would not injure a child or a virgin. If there had been lions and tigers in Europe such a superstition could scarcely have existed. What is very curious is that the belief was directly opposed to Christian hagiography, for there are, on the rolls of cannonized saints, many names of virgins said to have been devoured by lions and other wild beasts, in the amphitheatre at Rome. However, the fancy was a romantic one; and poets will continue, perhaps, to find inspiration in it for many years to come. Probably Victor Hugo took his idea from Blake, modifying it considerably, when he wrote the story about a lion who spared the life of a little child because a baby brother told him to give up his prey. The medieval idea related only to a virgin, a girl; Victor Hugo extends it to the child consider-

ed in the abstract as a holy being.

There is one more division of poetry related to children which ought at least to be mentioned—I mean that which is usually called "society verse," a term borrowed bodily from the French "vers de société." The rule about this kind of verse is that it should represent the fashionable way, the aristocratic way, of speaking about life and about all serious matters. You must talk about serious things in a non-serious way; you must not directly express strong emotion, but you may suggest it; and the best way to suggest it is by so completely repressing it that the repression itself becomes suggested. I might say that such poetry is written upon the same principle that causes a brave man or woman to smile when speaking of some great misfortune—a death, ruin of property, loss of high position, etc. In other words, this is very genteel poetry—too genteel for common people to care about. But it is often beautiful. The best of the later poets who adopted this kind of verse was Frederick Locker, who died only a few years ago. His cleverest things are about grown-up children, girls of fourteen or fifteen; but he has some pretty things on the subject of real children; and I shall quote part of one, just to show you what this kind of verse means:

Baby mine, with the grave, grave face,
Where did you get that royal calm,
Too staid for joy, too still for grace?
I bend as I kiss your pink, soft palm;
Are you the first of a nobler race,
Baby mine?

You come from the region of *long ago*,
And gazing awhile where the seraphs dwell
Has given your face a glory and glow—
Of that brighter land have you aught to tell?
I seem to have known it—I more would know,
Baby mine.

Your calm, blue eyes have a far-off reach,
Look at me now with those wondrous eyes,
Why are we doom'd to the gift of speech

While you are silent, and sweet, and wise?
You have much to learn—you have more to teach,
Baby mine.

One of the most extraordinary things about the face of a beautiful child is the strange expression of seriousness which it has—a great appearance of knowing and understanding what it cannot possibly know or understand. Even when asleep the face of a child has this extraordinary expression. Artists noticed this fact long ago, and gave to the faces of their gods the calm and placid smile of the child. Among Christian artists the great Italian sculptor Michaelangelo made the most remarkable study of childish calm in two famous pictures of angels, which he painted for the interior of a church. The faces of these angels and the bodies of them are childish; but you can see in the eyes of those children, all the wisdom of eternity, all the knowledge that ever was or is or ever could be. And the way in which the artist obtained such effect consisted merely in idealizing a little—only a little—the real expression of a beautiful child's face. Poets and philosophers, too, long ago imagined that the appearance of supreme calm and supreme knowledge in the face of a little child might signify that the soul of the child has not yet forgotten the wisdom of former lives in heaven or upon earth. Of course the baby could not talk: if he could talk, it might be able to tell us everything that we wish to know;—therefore the gods do not allow it to talk until it has quite forgotten all about its former states of existence. I am just telling you in a very vague way only, some of the old theories, which are too beautiful in themselves to be laughed at, even though we know very well why the child looks wise without being the least bit wise. Wordsworth put one of these old theories into new form when he wrote his "Intimations of Immortality;" but hundreds of poets have done the same thing. Since Wordsworth, Victor Hugo repeated the fancy at least a hundred times, and Frederick Locker utters the same thought in the little poem I have just read to you. But he has done

it in so original a way that no one can say that he imitated Wordsworth. Notice the use of one syllable words to express ideas. In the first stanza of the poem there are only three words of more than one syllable, "royal," "nobler" and "baby." But no other adjectives could express the repose of a child's face better than the monosyllables, "staid," "grave" and "still." But easy as the poem looks we had better paraphrase it for the sake of the inner meaning which is not simple at all:—

"Child, with that strangely serious face, how did you learn to look so calm, like a king, like an emperor? That calm of yours does not come from joy: it is too solemn for joy. Nor is it the calm of mere beauty and goodness: it is too motionless, too impassive for that. Perhaps it is that calm which is divine. Divine or not, I bow down before you, and kiss your little pink palm, and wonder whether you are really human,—whether you may not be the first of a new race of beings, higher than man, a race of creatures divine, demigods.

"Wherever you come from, you certainly have come to us out of the past—out of the very far past—out of all eternity. Very possibly you have been in heaven, where the seraphs, the angels of love are said to be; and perhaps it is the light of heaven that even now makes your face seem so luminous and beautiful. But do you remember anything about heaven? When I look at you I can almost feel as if I had once been in heaven, and had forgotten it. I wish that you could tell me something more about it.

"You do not appear to be thinking of what you look at—you see; but your thoughts are not with your eyes. Your eyes appear to see beyond this world, beyond space and time. Will you not look at me for just one little moment with those wonderful eyes? Why should we men and women be obliged to know how to talk, and be obliged to talk to each other in this wicked world? For, much evil is made by speaking. But you cannot speak, do not speak, you do no wrong. You are silent; you are all gentle; and

you are certainly wise—for half of our study in this world is only to learn what it is that we ought not to say. Of course, as you are only a baby, you will have to learn a great many things. But there are a great many things which the sight of you can teach to any man who can understand."

I should close this lecture with the last quotation, were it not that I have been asked by some of you to quote some French poems upon children by Victor Hugo. Before attempting this, however, I want to tell you frankly that I do not think that Victor Hugo was a great poet on this particular subject of children. Victor Hugo was a supremely great poet on the subject of love; he was a great poet on the subject of humanity, liberty, fraternity; he was a great poet when he attacked Napoleon the Third, and he was a great poet when he attacked the Jesuits. But he was not a great poet, in my opinion, on the subject of children. His character was not of that kind which really enables a man to understand the heart of a child. And, therefore, although he has written a large number of poems about children, there is very little in these poems except beautifully sounding words and rather commonplace thoughts. As to thinking about children, Victor Hugo seldom equals Blake, never equals Wordsworth. However, let us see how he treats the very same subjects on which Locker made the poem we have just paraphrased:—

LES ENFANTS PAUVRES

Prenez garde à ce petit être;
Il est bien grand, il contient Dieu.
Les enfants sont, avant de naître,
Des lumières dans le ciel bleu.

Dieu nous les offre en sa largesse;
Ils viennent; Dieu nous en fait don.
Dans leur rire il met sa sagasse
Et dans leur baiser son pardon.

Leur douce clarté nous effleure.
Hélas, le bonheur est leur droit.

S'ils ont faim, le paradis pleure.
Et le ciel tremble, s'ils ont froid.

La misère de l'innocence
Accuse l'homme vicieux.
L'homme tient l'ange en sa puissance.
Oh! quel tonnerre au fond des cieux,

Quand Dieu, cherchant ces êtres frêles
Que dans l'ombre où nous sommeillons
Il nous envoie avec des ailes,
Les retrouve avec de haillons!

"Care well for this little creature;—he is really great—very great; for he contains God. Children before being born into this world, are lights in the blue heaven.

"God offers them to us out of his bounty;—they come; God makes us the gift of them. Into their laughter he puts his wisdom, and into their kiss he puts his pardon.

"Their sweet light faintly touches us. Alas! happiness is their right. If they be hungry, paradise weeps; and if they be cold, heaven trembles.

"The misery of innocence itself accuses the vicious man. (That is to say that the unhappiness of an innocent child proves the parents to be vicious). Man holds for a moment an angel in his power.

"O what thunders will be heard from the depth of the heavens when God seeking for those frail beings which he sends to us with wings—sends to us into that gloom in which we sleep—finds them again with only rags to clothe them."

Now I do not say that this is not beautiful; it is really about the best poem on children in the whole volume entitled "L'Art d'être Grand-Père" (the art of being a grandfather). But does it contain a single new thought, or a single deep thought? I do not think so—unless we grant that the line in reference to the child being an angel temporarily put into the power of man, be a new thought. It is rather a playing upon a very old fancy; and the rest of the poem certainly contains nothing that we have not heard before, except its musical sound and bright colour. Now half of

Victor Hugo at least, is mere sound and colour: he is never a great thinker—and it requires a great thinker to do justice to the subject of children—although he is often a great painter and a grand poet in the expression of strong emotion. He has written hundreds of poems about children—chiefly about his own children,—and there is nothing great in them, except the mere mastery of verse. Translated (and remember that translation is the best test of the value of poetry), they prove to be little more than well expressed commonplaces. I may say that the only way to get any value out of Victor Hugo's poems on children is to pick out a few beautiful lines here and there of the mass of platitude which he has written about them. Nobody admires Hugo at his best more sincerely than I do; and therefore I find it even painful to tell you that he is never at his best on the subject of children. We can get beautiful lines, beautiful single stanzas, out of these poems, but no great composition. As for stanzas, here are three which I think beautiful, taken from a composition* in the volume entitled "The Leaves of Autumn." †

Car vos beaux yeux sont pleins de douceurs infinies,
Car vos petites mains, joyeuses et bénies,
N'ont point mal fait encor;
Jamais vos jeunes pas n'ont touché notre fange,
Tête sacrée! enfant aux cheveux blonds! bel ange
A l'auréole d'or!

Vous êtes parmi nous la colombe de l'arche.
Vos pieds tendres et purs n'ont point l'âge où l'on marche,
Vos ailes sont d'azur.
Sans le comprendre encor vous regardez le monde.
Double virginité! corps où rien n'est immonde,
Ame où rien n'est impur!

Il est si beau, l'enfant, avec son doux sourire,
Sa douce bonne foi, sa voix qui veut tout dire,
Ses pleurs vite apaisés,

* *Lorsque l'enfant paraît.* † *Les Feuilles d'Automne.*

Laissant errer sa vue étonnée et ravie,
Offrant de toutes parts sa jeune âme à la vie
Et sa bouche aux baisers!

"For your beautiful eyes are full of infinite sweetness; for your little hands, happy and blessed little hands have never yet done wrong;—never have your young steps touched the foul slime of this world of ours,—O holy head! O blond haired child! fair angel with your aureole of gold!

"Among us you are like the Dove of the Ark. Your pure and tender feet are not yet old enough to walk; your wings are azure. You look at the world without yet being able to understand it. O double virginity!—body in which there is nothing unclean, soul in which there is nothing impure!

"He is so beautiful, the child, with his sweet smile,—with his sweet trust,—with that little voice of his, desirous of telling everything,—with his tears so quickly dried;—everywhere turning his wondering gaze in astonishment and delight; everywhere offering his young soul to life, and his mouth to kisses!"

I think these verses have a certain beauty outside of the mere beauty of sound and form, because they express the emotion of a man looking upon the innocence and charm of his own children. There is here a certain sincerity—not always to be found in Victor Hugo. Then the idea about the "double virginity" of the child is certainly fine,—fine at least if we do not attach any commonplace religious meaning to the world "virginity." If virginity in itself were a holy condition of being, we should expect that a person who always remains a virgin would be morally better than other people. But this is not the case; on the contrary, the men and the women who never marry are apt to become morally deficient, and to develop those peculiarly irritating faults which are generally classed under the name of "old-maidishness." An old maid is not apt to be an agreeable person; and a man who has never had any sexual life is not likely to be much of a man in other respects. There is nothing

whatever intrinsically holy about virginity in the religious sense—on the contrary it means both moral and physical deficiency. But the poet means virginity in another sense, —that absolute purity both of blood and of mind which we may find in a healthy good child. To that extent his thought is delicate and new. But when we consider the rest of what he says we find that there is nothing at all deep in it. It is true; but its truth adds nothing to our stock of knowledge, nor does it move our emotion in any new way.

One can look through fifty volumes of English poetry without finding five poems of real value upon the subject of children; but you can find four poems. You can look through a hundred volumes of French poems without finding even one really great poem about children. Why is this? I am not very sure of being able to answer correctly; but I do not think that the Latin races have the same feelings in regard to children as the Northern races;—I do not think that they have the same depth of domestic affection; I do not think that they have the same sense of the mystery of the universe; they are less thoughtful in the deeper sense of thinking. To understand an artistic truth I should question an Italian or a Frenchman, never an Englishman. To obtain the best possible impression of beauty, I should consult French masters or Italian masters, never English masters. But when we leave the mere world of sensation, and seek for the great depths of emotion—that emotion which is the least selfish and most like to religious feeling, then I should never seek French or Italian inspiration. For the deeper sense of life I should always question German thought, or English thought, or Scandinavian thought. The older races see the world more clearly, but they feel less deeply. That may be one reason for the deficiency which I have mentioned. But there must be another.

I think it is this:—one must have children in order to write a great poem about them. Those English authors whose poems I have quoted to you were all fathers, loving fathers. They have children of their own, and they have

suffered and enjoyed for the sake of their little ones. Also observe that none of the great poems were written by young men. I very much doubt whether a young man could write a good poem about children. A young man cannot understand children—unless he be an exceptional genius like the great story-teller Andersen. Now the grand romantic movement of the nineteenth century in French poetry was the work of young men, who were busy with ambitions and ideas having nothing to do with the life of children. Look through the poems of the great French singers of that movement—Gautier, Baudelaire, Alfred de Musset, Leconte de Lisle, José-Maria de Heredia, Sully-Prudhomme,—all the school in fact, which came to be known as the Parnassiens, —and you will find nothing worth mentioning about children in the whole mass of their work. Victor Hugo, the chief of the romantic movement, only began to write about children in his old age. The other men gave their youth to the study of sense-beauty chiefly; and, somehow or other, it seems to me that a tendency toward the sensuous is always antagonistic to the proper understanding of children and of domestic affection. A sensual man cannot love a child,—cannot understand a child. Now I do not wish to imply that the romantic poetry of France is inferior to the romantic poetry of England; and I do not wish to suggest that it is not to be admired because it is much more sensuous. We must take it as we find it. But I do mean to say that there has been a sensuous element in French poetry incompatible with such forms of deeper and more generous emotion as find expression in English poems about children. They are emotions which necessarily exclude one another. Perhaps this is in itself a proof that there is something divine in childhood; and that we must become more or less unselfish in order to understand the charm of it.