

CHAPTER XXVII

A NOTE ON JEAN INGELOW

AS the term is drawing to a close, so that we shall have only two or three more days together, I have thought it better, having completed the last lecture, not to begin a new lecture upon the same scale, but to give a short lecture about some single famous poem. And I have chosen for this purpose Jean Ingelow's famous poem, "The High Tide on the Coast of Lincolnshire." Sometimes a poet becomes celebrated by the writing of one poem only. This happens to be the case with Miss Ingelow. She wrote several volumes of poems which were very popular in England and even in America. But popularity, during the lifetime of a writer, is no proof of literary merit; and it was not so in Miss Ingelow's case. She really wrote only one great poem; and by that one poem her name will always be preserved in the history of English literature.

The subject of this poem ought to interest you. The subject is only too familiar in Japan—a tidal wave (*tsunami*). There are few more terrible things possible for man to endure, in the form of what are called "natural visitations," than earthquakes and tidal waves. These two dreadful forms of calamity have been more common in this country than in Europe; but Europe has not been entirely exempt from them. There is only one other kind of natural calamity which can be at all compared with them—a volcanic eruption. But it is seldom indeed that a volcanic eruption, in any civilized country, produces such destruction of life as may be caused by an earthquake or a tidal wave.

It is about three hundred years since England had a great cataclysm of this sort; and it has never been forgotten

by the people of the coast where it happened. That coast happens to be quite low. At one time, indeed, it was little better than a great salt-marsh. But several miles inland there was very good farm-land, and plenty of farms and towns and villages. Miss Ingelow herself lived very near the scene of her poem. You must imagine a river flowing through the low country, widening very much toward the mouth—the river Lindis; Boston town stands near the bank. When the tidal wave came, the immediate effect was to force the river back, so that even distant parts of the country which the sea could not reach were flooded by the river. There is only one more thing to tell you about the poem—that it is written in English of the sixteenth century, yet there are only two or three queer words in it; everything is easy to understand. The verses are of different form, and the stanzas of irregular length.

The old mayor climb'd the belfry tower,
 The ringers ran by two, by three;
 "Pull, if ye never pulled before;
 Good ringers, pull your best," quoth he.
 "Play uppe, play uppe, O Boston bells!
 Ply all your changes, all your swells,
 Play uppe 'The Brides of Enderby.'"

The church tower of St. Botolph's, which still stands, is the belfry tower here referred to. That was long before the time of telegraphs and railroads, and the only way of quickly sending news of danger through the country used to be to ring the great bells of the churches. It was therefore very important to have good bells; and every great church had a number of them, all of different sizes, so arranged that different tunes could be played upon them. You can still hear this kind of ringing in many parts of Europe. The tunes are usually very simple tunes known to all the people, and commonly hymn tunes, but not always. In time of danger it was agreed that particular tunes should be played. In the district of Lincolnshire, the tune that

meant danger was the tune of an old ballad, called "The Brides of Enderby," and when people heard the church bells play it they knew that something terrible was going to happen. I believe you know it requires a number of men to ring the bells in this way; and it used to be a regular calling. The word "changes" in the sixth line means variation in the modern musical sense; the word "swells" refers to a particular way of ringing two or more bells together, so that the sounds of all would blend into one great wave of tone.

You must understand that the whole story is being told by an old grandmother; she relates everything as she saw it and felt it, in a simple and touching way.

Men say it was a stolen tyde—
 The Lord that sent it, He knows all;
 But in myne ears doth still abyde
 The message that the bells let fall:
 And there was naught of strange, beside
 The flights of mews and peewits pied
 By millions crouch'd on the old sea wall.

I sat and spun within the doore,
 My thread brake off, I raised myne eyes;
 The level sun, like ruddy ore,
 Lay sinking in the barren skies;
 And dark against day's golden death
 She moved where Lindis wandereth,
 My sonne's faire wife, Elizabeth.

"Cusha! Cusha! Cusha," calling,
 Ere the early dews were falling,
 Farre away I heard her song.
 "Cusha! Cusha!" all along;
 Where the reedy Lindis floweth,
 Floweth, floweth;
 From the meads where melick groweth
 Faintly came her milking song—

"Cusha! Cusha! Cusha!" calling,
 "For the dews will soone be falling;

Leave your meadow grasses mellow,
Mellow, mellow ;
Quit your cowslips, cowslips yellow ;
Come uppe Whitefoot, come uppe Lightfoot ;
Quit the stalks of parsely hollow,
Hollow, hollow ;
Come uppe Jetty, rise and follow,
From the clovers lift your head ;
Come uppe Whitefoot, come uppe Lightfoot,
Come uppe Jetty, rise and follow,
Jetty, to the milking shed."

The expression "stolen tyde" in the first stanza is strange to you, I think ; it is strange even to English readers who are not aware that country-folk often use the word "stolen" in the sense of contrary to nature, monstrous, magical. Now you have the old grandmother talking to you, recalling her memories. She tells you that upon the evening of the great tidal wave, the first thing that startled her was the sound of the church bells signalling danger. It startled her so that she broke the thread which she was spinning at the door ; then she looked up to see if there was anything unusual in sky or field. Nothing in the sky ; it was what she called "a barren sky"—that is, a sky without a single cloud ; and the sun was sinking beautifully, making all the west full of gold light. Nothing in the field—no, but what was that upon the sea-wall ? Of course you know what a sea-wall is ; they are very common in Japan, built to protect fishing villages or low coasts against the surf of heavy storms. Yes ; there was something strange on the sea-wall ; millions of sea-birds were crowded there—white gulls, and parti-coloured gulls, called peewits from their melancholy cry. The danger was probably from the sea—but what was it ? While wondering what it could be, the old woman heard her son's wife singing to the cows. I am not sure whether you know about this custom. Milk-cows, in England, are left all day to graze in the meadows, when the weather is fine ; and at evening they are called home, milk-

ed, and put in their stables. The men or boys who take care of them, or the girls—dairymaids as they are termed—often sing a kind of song to call the animals home; they come at once when they hear the song. Names are given to them, usually names indicating the appearance of the cow, or something peculiar about it. In this song, the name Whitefoot probably means a red or a black cow with pure white feet. The name Lightfoot might mean a thoroughbred cow—that is, a cow of very fine race—with a particularly light quick walk. The name Jetty probably refers to a perfectly black cow, black as jet. There is nothing else to explain, except the queer old word “melick,” the name of a particular kind of grass. “Cowslips” are, you know, long yellow flowers, very common in European fields.

If it be long, ay, long ago,
 When I beginne to think howe long,
 Againe I hear the Lindis flow,
 Swift as an arrowe, sharpe and strong;
 And all the aire, it seemeth mee,
 Bin full of floating bells (sayth shee),
 That ring the tune of Enderby.

Alle fresh the level pasture lay,
 And not a shadowe mote be seene,
 Save where full fyve good miles away
 The steeple tower'd from out the greene;
 And lo! the great bell farre and wide
 Was heard in all the country side
 That Saturday at eventide.

The swanherds where their sedges are
 Moved on in sunset's golden breath,
 The shepherde lads I heard afarre,
 And my sonne's wife, Elizabeth;
 Till floating o'er the grassy sea
 Came downe that kyndly message free,
 The “Brides of Mavis Enderby.”

Then some look'd uppe into the sky,
 And all along where Lindis flows

To where the goodly vessels lie,
 And where the lordly steeple shows,
 They sayde, "And why should this thing be?
 What danger lowers by land or sea?
 They ring the tune of Enderby!

"For evil news from Mablethorpe,
 Of pyrate galleys warping downe;
 For shippes ashore beyond the scorpe,
 They have not spared to wake the towne:
 But while the west bin red to see,
 And stormes be none, and pyrates flee,
 Why ring 'The Brides of Enderby'?"

The conditional mood at the beginning of the first of the stanzas just quoted, is only suggested; there is no sequence, no main clause. You must understand the meaning to be something like this: "You ask me if it was long ago. If it was long ago! Ah, perhaps, it was long ago—yet when I try to think how long ago it was, I see and hear everything so plainly that it seems to me even now." In the fourth line, the adjectives "sharp and strong" refer, of course, to the arrow—a heavy war-arrow would fly much faster and with a louder sound than the sporting arrow. Archery was still kept up in the sixteenth century. But the old woman is not thinking only of the arrow; she is thinking of the sound made by the strong current of the river. It had a sharp sound, she tells us, like the sound of a heavy arrow. Notice in the sixth line the use of "bin" for "is." In the following stanza, you need only observe the curious old perfect "mote" used where we would now say "might" or "could." In the third line, you will find the term "good miles." Why should people speak of a good mile or a good distance? In such places the word "good" has the sense of "at least," "fully," "not less than."

The description goes on very vividly; after speaking of the beautiful clear weather, with nothing in all the level of the flat country to break the skyline, except the far-away

shape of the church steeple, the old woman speaks of the swans in the high river grass, the shouting of the shepherd boys, calling home their sheep, and the sweet song of the young wife waiting to milk the cows as they return from pasture. There was nothing at all of danger visible; and the peasants wondered why the bells sounded danger. Observe in the fourth of this group of stanzas the use of the word "lowers" in the sixth line. To-day we more commonly spell it "lour"—though originally the meaning was very much the same. When clouds hang down very low, it is a sign of storm; when brows are lowered in a frown it is a sign of anger. So when we speak of a lowering sky we mean a threatening sky; but however we spell the word, we pronounce it with a very full sound of "ow" in the sense of "to threaten." "What danger is threatening us from the land or from the sea?" That is what the people ask each other. Why do they ring the bells in that way? If pirates had attacked the neighbouring port of Mablethorpe, or if there were any ships wrecked beyond the rock-line (scorpe), then there would be some reason for calling up all the people. The expression "wake" the town, does not mean to awaken, but to summon, to call. This is a quaint idiom.

Very suddenly, though, the old grandmother learns what the danger is:

I look'd without, and lo! my sonne
 Came riding downe with might and main:
 He raised a shout as he drew on,
 Till all the welkin rang again,
 "Elizabeth! Elizabeth!"
 (A sweeter woman ne'er drew breath
 Than my sonne's wife, Elizabeth.)
 "The olde sea-wall (he cried) is downe,
 The rising tide comes on apace,
 And boats adrift in yonder towne
 Go sailing uppe the market-place."
 He shook as one that looks on death:

“God save you, mother!” straight he saith;
 “Where is my wife, Elizabeth?”

“Good sonne, where Lindis winds away,
 With her two bairns I mark’d her long;
 And ere yon bells beganne to play
 Afar I heard her milking song.”
 He looked across the grassy lea,
 To right, to left, “Ho Enderby!”
 They rang “The Brides of Enderby!”

With that he cried and beat his breast;
 For, lo! along the river’s bed
 A mighty eygre reared his crest,
 And uppe the Lindis raging sped.
 It swept with thunderous noises loud;
 Shaped like a curling snow-white cloud,
 Or like a demon in a shroud.

In the fourth line of the first of the above stanzas occurs the word “welkin,” much less often used now than formerly. It most commonly signifies the sky, the vault of heaven. But we may often understand the word merely in the sense of atmosphere, the whole expanse of blue air. Indeed the word chiefly lingers in modern use in this meaning, as is illustrated by the common idiom “to make the welkin ring.” This simply means to make all the air shake and resound with a noise or a shout. It is thus that the word is used in the present poem.

In the following stanza observe the word “apace”—it is now very old-fashioned. The meaning is “very quickly” or “suddenly”—so that it does not at all appear to be what it means. We are apt to think of the verb “to pace,” meaning to walk slowly with full strides; but apace is exactly the contrary of slowly. In the next stanza the word “bairns,” meaning young children, is familiar to anybody acquainted with Scotch dialect; and we have got accustomed to think of the word as purely Scotch. But it is not: it is very old English, and is much used in the provinces outside of Scotland. In the next stanza we find an especially

curious and very ancient word, "eygre." This word can be found in the most ancient Anglo-Saxon poems, and it still lingers in various English provincial dialects. But it is not often spelt in this way; the common spelling is "eagre." It means an immense wave or billow; and it has a very weird effect in this stanza. For it is the real tidal wave that the old woman describes by that terrible word. All the flood that had come before was only the precursor of the great sea-rising to follow. Now it comes roaring up the river, with a sound of thunder—all black below, all white above with foam, so that it suggests to the old grandmother's terrified fancy the idea of a great black demon moving with a funeral shroud thrown over his head. You must understand that she sees the wave at an angle, not in front. Now comes an excellent description of the immediate result of the wave.

And rearing Lindis backward pressed,
Shook all her trembling bankes amaine;
Then madly at the eygre's breast
Flung uppe her weltering walls again.
Then bankes came downe with ruin and rout—
Then beaten foam flew round about—
Then all the mighty floods were out.

So farre, so fast the eygre drave,
The heart had hardly time to beat,
Before a shallow seething wave
Sobbed in the grasses at oure feet:
The feet had hardly time to flee
Before it brake against the knee,
And all the world was in the sea.

You must understand that the Lindis River flowing through a very low country, constantly liable to inundation, has to be confined between artificial banks to provide against accidents. In England there are but very few rivers to which it has been found necessary to furnish artificial banks; but in America many great rivers have to be thus banked for immense distances. For instance, the great Mis-

Mississippi River flows between artificial banks for a distance of many hundreds of miles; and when you read of terrible floods in the Southern States, it generally means that the banks have been somewhere broken. These banks rise much above the surrounding country, like great walls. So it was in the landscape of the present poem—the river was flowing between high banks like walls. When the great wave came from the sea, moving at a tremendous speed, the first effect was to check and throw back the river current; and this made a great counter wave. But the counter wave could not resist the pressure of a sea wave; and the consequence was that the whole force of the river was diverted sideways, with the result that the banks were at once broken to pieces. That caused an immediate inundation of fresh water; but the fresh water inundation was almost instantly followed by the rush of the sea, a much more dangerous and terrible affair.

In the fourth line of the stanza about the rising of the river, you must understand the word “weltering” to have the meaning of the word “liquid;” and the term “weltering walls” to signify only high waves rising like walls in vain opposition to the mighty tidal wave. In the stanza following, the term “shallow seething wave” refers to the first burst of the fresh water over the country; but the last three lines of the same stanza refer to the rush of the sea following after. Before a person had time even to move, the water was up to his knees; the next minute it was high enough to cover the greater part of the houses.

Upon the roofe we sate that night,
 The noise of bells went sweeping by;
 I marked the lofty beacon light
 Stream from the church tower, red and high—
 A lurid mark and dread to see;
 And awsome bells they were to mee,
 That in the dark rang “Enderby.”
 They rang the sailor lads to guide
 From roofe to roofe, who fearless rowed;

And I—my sonne was at my side,
And yet the ruddy beacon glowed;
And yet he moaned beneath his breath,
“O come in life, or come in death!
O lost! my love, Elizabeth!”

Some of the houses, of two or three stories and strongly built, withstood the flood for a time, and people took refuge upon the roofs. Then from the neighbouring port sailors came with boats, and went from roof to roof, to take the people away. The phrase “sailor lads” does not necessarily mean sailor boys or young sailors, though the English “lad” strictly means a person between the ages of boyhood and of manhood—let us say from sixteen to twenty-one. That is the strict meaning; but for a very long time this word had a caressing meaning, when it is attached to another word so as to make such compounds, as for example, soldier-lads, sailor-lads. In these instances the word “lad” has a meaning something like “dear” or “good.” The beacon fire, lighted upon the top of a church tower, is described as “lurid.” This word “lurid” has somewhat changed its meaning in modern times. It is from the Latin, and the Latin meaning was a dim green or a very dim yellow. The idea suggested by the Latin word was the gloomy light in a deep forest, or the indistinct light in a time of eclipse. But modern writers have used it a great deal, and somewhat incorrectly, in the signification of red light—light having an awful colour; for the ancient word always conveyed some idea of fear, and this idea has never been lost in English. Whenever you see in literature something described as lurid, you may be sure that the meaning is a terrible and unnatural light. Of course the church tower, used for a beacon light, had a square flat roof. As a matter of fact, when we see the word “church tower” used in English, a flat-topped tower is meant; the pointed form being more correctly indicated by the word “spire.”

So much for the scene described—the tragedy continues with the lamentation of the sorrowing husband for his lost

wife and children. He asks her to come to him alive or dead, so that he may at least know what has become of her in that awful night. If you think a moment about the matter, you will see that the expression is quite natural; people usually almost expect that those whom they loved will give them some signs in case of sudden death—such as a visit in dreams, or an apparitional visit. In this case the wife comes to her husband dead, but not as a ghost:

And didst thou visit him no more?
 Thou didst, thou didst, my daughter deare;
 The waters laid thee at his doore,
 Ere yet the early dawn was clear.
 Thy pretty bairns in fast embrace,
 The lifted sun shone on thy face,
 Downe drifted to thy dwelling-place.

Many poets have used this fancy, in poetry about death by drowning, and perhaps the idea first came into superior poetry with the study of the popular ballads. In many English ballads we read about the corpse of a mother and a child being carried by some flood or storm to the door of the husband; sometimes the floating body which thus returns is that of a betrayed girl. The idea is artistically excellent, because it is so natural that no amount of use can wear it out. It was a favourite incident with Rossetti. The narrative continues, with certain reflections:

That flow strew'd wrecks about the grass,
 That ebbe swept out the flocks to sea;
 A fatal ebbe and flow, alas!
 To manye more than myne and mee:
 But each will mourn his own (she saith).
 And sweeter woman ne'er drew breath
 Than my sonne's wife, Elizabeth.

In this stanza you must understand that the word "flow" means the incoming tide, as ebb means the outgoing tide, though the use of the word "flow," all by itself, in the first

line is a little unusual. The fifth line is the line to which I particularly wish to call your attention:

But each will mourn his own.

This line, simple as any commonplace, simple as the most trite of household phrases, is nevertheless, by reason of its opportune use in this place, a very fine bit of human poetry. The old grandmother remembers and relates the great destruction of life, both of animals and human beings; and in the recollection of that immense calamity, with the vision of a thousand past sorrows before her, she suddenly feels like reproaching herself for talking so much about her own particular grief. She apologizes for this involuntary selfishness by citing the old saying that each person feels his or her own sorrow most:—"each will mourn his own." Perhaps it is bad, yet who can help it, and who can fail to find a kindly excuse for it?

Really that is almost the best line in the poem; and I want to talk about it, because it suggests so many things. It is quite true that each person best understands sorrow or joy by his or her sorrow and joy; and in a certain way, a person is not wrong in imagining his joy or pain to be the greatest joy or the greatest pain in the whole world. There are many proverbial sayings, quoted in opposition to the indulgence of personal feeling; I suppose that they really serve a good purpose by checking a tendency to over-ef-fusiveness. For example, you have heard many sayings about the admiration of a mother for her child, to the effect that every mother thinks her own child to be the very best child alive. So a son invariably thinks that his own mother is the best of all mothers; he may not say so, but he is very likely to think so. And there are household phrases relating to a corresponding feeling on the part of brother and sister, husband and wife, father and son. The tendency to laugh at or to repress expressions of such innocent feeling certainly have their special use: we must so think of them. But most people utter the mockery, and there stop

—without asking themselves anything about the reason and about the truth of such feeling. After all, there is a great deal of truth in it. The value of an affection, the value of a personality, to each of us is quite special. The son who thinks of his mother as the best of all mothers thinks quite truly so far as the relation of that mother to himself is concerned. She is the best of all mothers for him; and no human being could ever take her place. So with the relation of the child to the parent. It is a question of relativity. Everybody feels this—though it is not easily expressed by simple minds, which can only think as the old grandmother thinks in the story, that each one cannot help “mourning his own,” and faintly justify by an appeal to universal experience, the declaration that no one could be sweeter or better than the one who has been lost.

The poem concludes with the memories of the song and the singer:

I shall never hear her more
 By the reedy Lindis shore,
 “Cusha! Cusha! Cusha!” calling,
 Ere the early dews be falling;
 I shall never hear her song,
 “Cusha! Cusha!” all along,
 Where the sunny Lindis floweth,
 Goeth, floweth;
 From the meads where melick groweth,
 When the water winding down,
 Onward floweth to the towne.

I shall never see her more
 Where the reeds and rushes quiver,
 Shiver, quiver;
 Stand beside the sobbing river,
 Sobbing, throbbing, in its falling
 To the sandy, lonesome shore;
 I shall never hear her calling,
 “Leave your meadow grasses mellow,
 Mellow, mellow;
 Quit your cowslips, cowslips yellow;

Come uppe Whitefoot, come uppe Lightfoot;
Quit your pipes of parsley hollow,
 Hollow, hollow;
Come uppe Lightfoot, rise and follow;
 Lightfoot, Whitefoot,
From your clovers lift the head;
Come uppe Jetty, follow, follow,
Jetty, to the milking shed."