

CHAPTER XXXII

NOTE UPON THE POETRY OF JAMES THOMSON, "B. V."

THE other day when speaking to you of the fourth group of Victorian minor poets, I said something to you about the life of the author of "The City of Dreadful Night"—so it will not be necessary to repeat any facts about him here. He deserves some notice apart. His faults are so very great that five-sixths of his poetry should not be mentioned at all,—never should have been printed. And I hope that none of you will try to read them. But in "The City of Dreadful Night" and one or two other pieces that I told you about the matter is quite different. Any person with imagination can derive not only certain pleasure—especially the pleasure of fear—from reading it, but also a certain amount of poetical profit.

A word first about the general subject of this vague and monstrous poem. It is the picture of a vast city on which the sun never shone,—a city situated by the shore of the sea on which no ships ever sailed, and surrounded on the land side by spaces of black desert over which no foot could pass. Of course this is allegory. The city represents human life as Thomson saw it in his gloomy hours—without faith, without love, and without hope,—life, not as a blessing, but as a curse, as a nightmare. The allegory is not very distinct, not easily outlined, but the terror of the composition gains from this very want of definition, just as terrible objects seen in the dusk appear more terrible than if seen in the light. It is possible that the fancy was suggested to Thomson by the line from Dante which he puts at the beginning of the poem. Dante spoke of Hell as the dolorous city.

Thomson conceived of modern life as a hell; and Dante helped him to outline his terrible imagination in this allegorical poem.

There is no beginning in this poem, there is no end to it, there is no middle. It is only a succession of awful pictures—glimpses of the Inferno, but some of these glimpses will never fade from the memory of the reader. They have their value for the poet or the story-teller who understands the use of horror and awfulness in literary art. They have the same kind of value as the dreadful stories of Edgar Allan Poe. And just as it happened that the most terrible of Poe's stories and studies are those in which his prose reaches its greatest strength and its finest rhythmical effect—so in these glimpses Thomson's poetry has a force and a sinister beauty not exactly like anything else in literature. Even the metre in the bulk of the poem has a form of its own: the effect of doubling certain rhymes is that of a tolling or booming, as of death bells. Whether you would like, would find pleasure in all these pictures I am by no means sure; but some of them could scarcely fail to appeal to you. I am going to give you what I think to be the most original and terrible part of the poem,—beginning with the words "As I came through the desert."

This part of the poem is the story of a man who reached the City of Dreadful Night by passing through the black desert surrounding it, and reaching at last the shore of that tremendous sea upon which no ships can ever sail. The traveller probably represents the poet himself,—the state of a despairing mind. I suppose this,—because the vision of the woman on the seashore seems to refer to an episode of Thomson's youth. As he passes through the desert to reach the city, all kinds of horrors gather about him,—nightmare, demons, monsters. But a man who has lost all hope cannot have any fear; and his fearlessness of despair saves him from the spectres and the wild beasts and all the dangers of the desert. At last he reaches the awful sea;

Enormous cliffs arose on either hand,

enormous waves were rolling in over a beach of leagues in width: for a moment on that vast beach he beheld the sun through a break in the cloud; but it was a burnt-out sun, all burned out except the edges of the disk,

A bleeding eyeless socket, red and dim.

As I came through the desert thus it was,
 As I came through the desert: From the right
 A shape came slowly with a ruddy light;
 A woman with a red lamp in her hand,
 Bareheaded and barefooted on that strand;
 O desolation moving with such grace!
 O anguish with such beauty in thy face!
 I fell as on my bier,
 Hope travailed with such fear.

Then, at sight of that phantom woman, a strange thing happened. The man becomes two men—divides as it were into two selves,—as if one self had been forcibly drawn out of the other by the attraction of the advancing shape. And this inner self drawn away from the other, falls prostrate upon the sand, at the feet of the figure.

As I came through the desert thus it was,
 As I came through the desert: I was twain,
 Two selves distinct that cannot join again;
 One stood apart and knew but could not stir,
 And watched the other stark in swoon and her;
 And she came on, and never turned aside,
 Between such sun and moon and roaring tide:
 And as she came more near
 My soul grew mad with fear.

So hopelessness itself is conquered at last,—a new fear reveals itself that no despair is proof against. As a nightmare this is certainly one of the strangest ever experienced by an English dreamer: but this is only the beginning.

As I came through the desert thus it was,
 As I came through the desert: Hell is mild
 And piteous matched with that accursèd wild;

A large black sign was on her breast that bowed,
 A broad black band ran down her snow-white shroud;
 That lamp she held was her own burning heart,
 Whose blood-drops trickled step by step apart:
 The mystery was clear;
 Mad rage had swallowed fear.

As I came through the desert thus it was,
 As I came through the desert: By the sea
 She knelt and bent above that senseless me;
 Those lamp-drops fell upon my white brow there,
 She tried to cleanse them with her tears and hair;
 She murmured words of pity, love, and woe,
 She heeded not the river rushing flow:
 And mad with rage and fear,
 I stood stonebound so near.

As I came through the desert thus it was,
 As I came through the desert: When the tide
 Swept up to her there kneeling by my side,
 She clasped that corpse-like me, and they were borne
 Away, and this vile me was left forlorn;
 I know the whole sea cannot quench that heart,
 Or cleanse that brow, or wash those two apart:
 They love; their doom is drear,
 Yet they nor hope nor fear;
 But I,—what do I here?

I cannot undertake to explain very literally what this means: I am not even at all sure that the meaning is of much consequence. It seems to me that this division of the man's self represents, allegorically, the difference of the guileless youth and the hardened and vicious man. The younger self was good—could be loved by a good woman; but it became befouled and distorted by long association with the later and more vicious self. When the apparition of the woman comes the older self cannot approach her; but the other is drawn to her, to be comforted perhaps. The conclusion of the vision does not quite bear out my interpretation, but I state only what the fancy suggests, and

I cannot undertake to define it further. Yet as I said before, the exact meaning of such fancies need not concern us any more than the fancies of "The Arabian Nights." The relation of such dreams to literature is not dependent upon any profound meaning, but upon the art with which the picture is drawn and the emotion communicated—whether it be the emotion of fear, despair, horror, or the emotion of joy, merriment, delight, really need not make any difference. You must try to think of Thomson as you think of a great painter of dreadful pictures. Just as the Japanese painter Ôkyo became celebrated, and remains celebrated as a great painter of ghosts and goblins, so I think that in Victorian poetry Thomson may be considered worthy of fame as a sort of English Ôkyo.