CHAPTER XI

NOTE ON COVENTRY PATMORE

A FEW years ago, although Coventry Patmore was still a popular poet with the middle class in England, you would not have found his name in any English anthology; and you would have found that some great poets and critics had not spoken very highly about him. Popular success does not mean literary success. Coventry Patmore had as a young man written many dainty and pretty things,—even some great things, — but he had also some dreadfully poor stuff. Ruskin had indeed called attention to this talent in a very beautiful way — in the book called "Sesame and Lilies," — but Rossetti used to groan when Patmore's name was mentioned. After his first book Patmore remained silent for twenty years. Then again he put forth a little volume of verses — and curious, tender, mystical verses, all written in the measure of the ode. This contained a good deal of the extraordinary in poetry; but it was not popular at all. It was too good to be popular. It is only now that the finer talent of the man is recognized, and that he has really become a lasting part of English literature. He was born in 1823, and died only in 1896. Something about his life will interest you; for, in his case, the life and the poetry are more closely mingled together than in the case even of Rossetti. There is very little to say on the subject of his career. Like the poet O'Shaughnessy he was an assistant in the British Museum. Those who entered the British Museum (it is very hard to get in there unless you have powerful friends) are assured of a fair income and easy work during their lives, with perhaps a small pension in their old age: and much good literary work has been done by the clerks of the Museum.

The principal fact about Coventry Patmore will seem strange to you,—for it seems strange even to the English who are not so curious in regard to such matters as Oriental people are. Coventry Patmore loved his wife very much; and he took for the subject of his book of poems the whole story of his love and marriage, — describing how first he met the girl at the home of her parents,—how he courted her,—how he experienced all the emotions common to lovers,—how he felt on the wedding morning,—and finally the happiness of married life. You will perceive that it is a very daring subject,—something which must have been done exceedingly well and most delicately to be tolerated by public opinion. Well, it was done exceedingly well and most delicately in parts. The public, at first, was amazed, — perhaps a little shocked,—soon saw the beauty of the thing, and forgave the faults. The book was called "The Angel in the House." The angel is of course woman — woman in the abstract, to some extent, but principally concrete in the personality of the one who became Mrs. Patmore. I need scarcely tell you that the poet did not use real names,—and that he did not speak about domestic things after a fashion which would have been like an indecent betrayal of private life. No, he managed the matter very wisely — so nicely that only intimate friends could have known much about the lady, or her parents or the various persons mentioned from the poem itself. There is an old English proverb: "He that kisses his wife in the market place shall have plenty to tell you." But in the case of Coventry Patmore we have an exception. The kissing was so nicely done that scarcely anyone found fault with it.

It would not be possible for you to care much about this poem as a whole. It is too descriptive of English social life,—drawing-room life, ball-room life, church-going life. The English is quite simple; but almost every incident mentioned would require a great deal of explanation to make you understand. It is only those who know such life well that could be pleased by the merely narrative portions of the

composition. But these narrative poems are mixed with a great deal of emotional reflection, and curious beauties of sentimental verse. I will not keep you long upon the subject of "The Angel in the House." But we may quote a few lines from it here and there, so that you may see what sort of thing it is. I imagine that the very best fragment in the entire two books, is the quotation long ago made by Ruskin, whose literary judgment here was not at fault.

UNTHRIFT

Ah, wasteful woman, she who may
  On her sweet self set her own price,
Knowing he cannot choose but pay,
  How has she cheapen'd Paradise;
How given for nought her priceless gift,
  How spoiled the bread and spill'd the wine,
Which, spent with due, respective thrift,
  Had made brutes men, and men divine!

This is what we call sweet:—the suggestion is that if all good women only knew how much their love was worth to man, and would only give that love upon condition that men would make themselves worthy of it—then men would become almost like Gods. Of course it is the young lover who thus speaks. As a matter of fact, women generally do know their own value, and they have done a good deal to make men more gentle than in ancient times. But one cannot help thinking of that terrible Greek mocker — Aristophanes, who in his two famous comedies the *Ecclesiazusae* and the *Thesmophoriazusae* also considered the possible results of woman's attempting to put a value upon herself. I do not mean that the satire of Aristophanes makes the verses of Patmore any less beautiful to an intelligent mind; but it is difficult to read the latter without thinking about the poem. This also is beautiful.

THE WIFE'S TRAGEDY

Man must be pleased; but him to please
  Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf

Of his condoled necessities
  She casts her best, she flings herself.
How often flings for nought, and yokes
  Her heart to an icicle or whim,
Whose each impatient word provokes
  Another not from her, but him;
While she, too gentle even to force
  His patience by kind replies,
Waits by, expecting his remorse,
  With pardon in her pitying eyes;
And if he once, by shame oppress'd,
  A comfortable word confers,
She leans and weeps against his breast,
  And seems to think the sin was hers;

* * * * * *

She loves with love that cannot tire;
  And when, ah woe, she loves alone,
Through passionate duty love springs higher,
  As grass grows taller round a stone.

As this really pictures something of the sweeter type of woman in every country under the sun, it is really a most successful little bit of verse. Sometimes the poet becomes playful,—though not often. Here is a famous example: it is often quoted because of the curious use of the same verb three times in succession:

THE KISS

'I saw you take his kiss!' ''Tis true.'
  'O, modesty!' ''Twas strictly kept:
'He thought me asleep; at least, I knew
  '*He thought I thought he thought I slept.*'

Two sisters are speaking. One says to the other, "I saw him kiss you." The other answers, "Yes, he did; but I did not kiss him back again — I knew that he supposed that I believed that he imagined that I was asleep."

A verse about the human spirit seeking self-completion through marriage is also worth noticing;—you will re-

member how often Tennyson has touched upon the same subject in "The Princess."

> For as the worm whose powers make pause,
> And swoon, through alteration sick,
> The soul, its wingless state dissolved,
> Awaits its nuptial life complete,
> All indolently self-convolved,
> Cocoon'd in silk fancies sweet.*

Here the reference is to an insect with which you are probably better acquainted than most English poets, — the silkworm. The soul of the young man is compared to the caterpillar, which, as you are well aware, grows for a time very fast, then becomes a little sick and sleeps, then again grows a little more and eats a little more, and at last begins to swathe itself in silk,—making the cocoon in which it lies and dreams, perhaps, about becoming a butterfly when the Spring arrives. The word "convolve" is not common, and signifies wrapped up. The poet says "self-convolved," because the larva wraps itself; and there is a play upon the word. The young man begins to think about *self*—to become absorbed in self,—just at the time when he begins to fall in love. It is true that he becomes unselfish in one direction at such a time, but he also becomes all selfish in another.

Now you will find scores of pretty things like these scattered through "The Angel in the House," and if you care to take the trouble to pick them up, I do not think that you will be sorry for it. But it is not upon "The Angel in the House" that Patmore's real fame rests;—it is upon various poems in "The Unknown Eros,"—and we shall turn at once to his immortal masterpiece which you will think very beautiful.

THE TOYS

> 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,

* *Love in Idleness*, vi.

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 trancéd 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 leave Thy wrath, and say,
'I will be sorry for their childishness.'

This has been called "exquisitely touching" even by so great a critic as Prof. Saintsbury. I should go further and venture to call it the most touching thing ever written about childhood by any Englishman. Of course I need not explain why. But I may ask you to remark how much is said in a very few words,—how vivid the images,—how supremely natural and straight from the heart the whole thing is. In two lines we are given, first of all, a picture of the child more perfect than any painting or photograph;

for it moves and speaks. I think we have all seen the kind of child described, — always making for himself a happy little world of imagination; made serious by his fancies and by the new wonder of the world about him; acting almost with the gravity of a grown-up person, though innocent as a bird of the realities of existence. We know that such children, charming as they are, are not strong; in them the imagination is almost the principal part of life; they are highly sensitive little creatures; such as may become afterwards poets or painters. I may mention, by the way, that this type of child has been especially considered in Mr. Sully's new book upon child psychology,*—itself one of the most touching books ever written by a scientific man, and illustrated with examples of the foolish funny little pictures that children draw. In the last part of the poem, we have purely Christian fancy, it is true; but it is so beautifully uttered that it takes almost the finer universal quality of religious emotion. I need scarcely say that the thought is that God may regard the faults of men with the same pity and love with which a father regards the faults of his child, and forgives them because of their childish innocence.

There is nothing else in Coventry Patmore's poetry like this. The greater part of the volume entitled "The Unknown Eros" is mystical poetry. After the death of his wife, Patmore gave up his situation and spent the remainder of his life in comparative solitude, in the country. He also became extremely religious—perhaps his grief may have had much to do with this religious spirit. Very possibly it was in the country that the little incident happened which he tells of in "The Toys." As for "The Unknown Eros," the subject is very peculiar. One of the most exquisite of all the old Greek stories is the old story of "Cupid (Eros) and Psyche,"—as related in that wonderful book of Apuleius,—"The Golden Ass." In this story, the beautiful maiden Psyche is supposed, by many writers to represent the Greek idea of the soul of man. I need scarcely remind you that it is the

* *Studies of Childhood* (New Edition. 1896)

same name which has been preserved in such English words as 'psychic' and 'psychology.' At an early time the Greek Platonists treated this myth as an allegory; they regarded Eros or Cupid as symbolizing divine love, and Psyche as the soul. Patmore followed these Platonists, so far as suggestion goes, but not much further. His "Unknown Eros" is pure Christian mysticism, with a strange mixture of beautiful sensuous images. Probably this is the only part of his work which is not altogether taken out of his life experiences. All that he has written represents what he enjoys and suffers in his everyday life. I do not think there would be much use in quoting from the mystical poem; but we can cite one fragment from the volume that contains it,—a little verse consisting chiefly of reflections about the mystery of the Universe.

THE TWO DESERTS

Not greatly moved with awe am I
To learn that we may spy
Five thousand firmaments beyond our own.
The best that's known
Of the heavenly bodies does them credit small.
View'd close, the Moon's fair ball
Is of ill objects worst,
A corpse in Night's highway, naked, fire-scarr'd, accurst;
And now they tell
That the Sun is plainly seen to boil and burst
Too horribly for hell.
So, judging from these two,
As we must do,
The Universe, outside our living Earth,
Was all conceiv'd in the Creator's mirth,
Forecasting at the time Man's spirit deep,
To make dirt cheap.
Put by the Telescope!
Better without it man may see,
Stretch'd awful in the hush'd midnight,
The ghost of his eternity.
Give me the nobler glass that swells to the eye

The things that near us lie,
Till Science rapturously hails,
In the minutest water-drop,
A torment of innumerable tails.
These at the least do live.
But rather give
A mind not much to pry
Beyond our royal-fair estate
Betwixt these deserts blank of small and great.
Wonder and beauty our own courtiers are,
Pressing to catch our gaze,
And out of obvious ways
Ne'er wandering far.

I have quoted this especially because it shows the limitations of the poet as well as some of his merits. The tone of banter in which the beginning of the poem is written is not worthy of a thinker; and Patmore was not a thinker outside of his small but very beautiful sphere of imagination — outside of his domestic life. Furthermore, the first part of this poem shows the narrowness of the religious spirit, — the old religious spirit that hates science, and that does not want to believe that there are other worlds besides this. It would be interesting to know what Mr. Patmore would have to say about the later discoveries in relation to the planet Mars. But the last part is beautiful and true,— but close to us, all about us, are wonder and inexpressible loveliness, if we will give ourselves the trouble to look for them. Indeed, a large thinker would have still better developed this thought. Carlyle did so—when he says that every man carries the Infinite within him.

The place of Coventry Patmore in English literature is, of course, only that of a minor poet who wrote one thing of immortal beauty,—the thing which you read this morning, and which will appear to you more and more beautiful every time that you read it again. But in another way, Patmore must be considered as a very singular figure in the world of letters. He must have been very gentle and simple,

and very sincere in everything which he did or wrote. No other man ever has been in England quite childishly frank in speaking of himself, of his faults, his admiration, his affection, his sentiment. Life seemed to him good and beautiful; and his own home appeared to him as it ought to have done, the most delightful place in the Universe. So he says to himself, "Why should I not write about my home, my wife, my affection?" — "Everybody else does the same thing; only they have not courage or the truthfulness to do it in the First Person." Well, it is true that the great poets and novelists and dramatists, all the world over, who have written about love and courtship must have drawn their best inspiration from their own experience, although they have concealed this with consummate art. You may be quite sure that the rich melancholy and passionate regret of Rossetti's poems express his own sorrow for the death of the woman whom he worshipped. You may be sure that several of the most exquisite pages in Tennyson and in Browning were pages torn out of their own lives. But always it has been the rule to conceal this. Now the question is whether it ought to be concealed or not. Is there any irrefragable rule upon the subject? I think that there is only one,—never do this unless you are sure of being a very great genius. Coventry Patmore succeeded in doing it tolerably well once; and the world forgave him. But I doubt whether the world would forgive a man imitating him. And we may even doubt whether the thing was worth doing. We cannot go out of ourselves;—we are unable to express anything except ourselves. But it is perhaps better that this self should always be made to wear a mask, except when it can do what is perfect and eternal—something like that poem of "The Toys."