# CHAPTER XXVI

## KEATS

JOHN KEATS, unlike Shelley and Byron, was not of gentle birth. He was the son of a livery-stable keeper—that is, a man who keeps horses and carriages for hire, not considered a very respectable occupation in those days. But the livery-stable keeper was well-to do, and tried to give his son a decent education. Keats, who was born in 1795, was sent to an ordinary school, and received an ordinary course of instruction until the age of fifteen, when he was apprenticed to a surgeon. His position corresponded pretty much to that of the Japanese graduate of an ordinary middle school who might become a doctor's assistant, through inability to bear the expenses of the higher medical course. A very clever boy may succeed at such an apprenticeship provided that he has strong nerves, great patience, and great capacity for work. Keats had not these things. He was slender and weak; the sight of blood made him sick; and under any circumstances he never could have made a good doctor, much less a surgeon. He soon gave up the attempt and took to literature. You must remember that he did not have a very good training—no Greek or Latin to speak of, and only a limited amount of reading. But he had what made up for these,—a passionate love of truth and beauty, and an exquisite ear for the music of words. And therefore, even without the higher education, he was able to influence English literature more than any other poet of his time.

Keats began to write poetry quite early, and published his first book when he was yet almost a boy, in 1817. He had a little money, just enough to live on, and was thus saved from much of the cruel suffering which is apt to visit

those who attempt a literary career without independent means. Still, he had no opportunities like those of Byron or Shelley, nor enough money to buy many books. He lived in a little room in the great city, dreaming the dreams which translations of the old Greek authors inspired him with—inhaling the smoke of London into his delicate consumptive lungs, but full of hope and enthusiasm. These hopes and this enthusiasm were brutally suppressed for a time by the violent, ignorant and mean attacks upon his work made in the great reviews. They not only said that his book "Endymion" was bad as poetry, they not only ridiculed the writer in his work, but they attacked him personally, after a fashion which would not be tolerated to-day. They had found out that Keats had been a doctor's apprentice, and they abused his vocation—told him that no man in his position had any right to attempt poetry—told him to go back to the doctor's office, and try to make himself useful there. All this, remember, to a delicate sensitive boy, who had never done any harm to any one, and who could scarcely, in the generosity of his nature, understand the meaning of unkindness. But it is not true that the criticism caused his death—that is a literary fable. It hurt him very much, no doubt, but he was brave and sensible, and went to work again. Nothing could show the beauty of his character better than the fact that he blamed himself instead of blaming his malicious and cowardly reviewers. He said that his work *was* bad, but that he would try to do better. Observe that there was no one to give him sympathy. His poetry was altogether a new thing, a strange thing that nobody had even seen the like of before, and that nobody for that very reason could immediately understand. Byron could not understand it. Wordsworth and Coleridge remained indifferent to it—indeed, Wordsworth contemptuously spoke of it as "pretty paganism," showing how much of English cant really existed in Wordsworth's soul. Shelley was not at once able to persuade himself that Keats was really a poet. The only friends that Keats had in literature

were men like Leigh Hunt, who had very little real poetry in their composition. In spite of everything, Keats did not lose confidence in himself. Consumption attacked him, but he toiled on. Then his first great sorrow, greater than the sorrow of the cruel reviews, came upon him—an unhappy love affair with a girl remembered in literature as Fanny Brawne. He fell passionately in love with her at the most passionate age, and she seems to have at one time thought of marrying him. But she was a sensible woman; she saw that the boy was dying, and very probably she did not like the prospect of being left a widow within a year or two after her marriage. Perhaps we had better say that she was not a woman capable of very great love, the sort of love that delights in sacrifice. For that she cannot be blamed. But she might have been kinder to her poor worshipper; she excited his jealousy in many needless ways, and kept him in a state of perpetual torture. Between his constant literary work and this devouring and overmastering passion, his life began to melt away like wax before a fire. In 1821 the doctors told him that he must go to Italy as soon as possible. Before embarking, he said, with a sudden flash of hope, "I think I shall be among the English poets after I am dead." In Italy he lived but a little while. Just before his death he would seem to have lost all of his hope again, probably through the weakness of disease, and he said that his name was "written in water." Now it is very strange that the boy whose career we have thus briefly glanced at should have been the literary father of Tennyson, of Browning, and, to some degree, of Rossetti. There are critics who declare more than this—that Keats is the father of all the best poetry of the century since the period of Byron and Shelley. I do not think that so sweeping a statement is to be accepted without further proof than has been given. But there is no doubt of this,—that the two greatest poets of the Victorian era owe him almost everything, and that all the Victorian poets of importance owe him something. What is very sad is to know that he died

without any idea of what he had accomplished.

Immediately after his death Shelley perceived what Keats was, and wrote the beautiful poem "Adonais" as an elegy upon Keats and a reproach to his reviewers. Byron, too, was sorry for his death. Gradually the public woke up to the fact that it had been deaf and blind and stupid, and Keats's poetry became a subject of new enthusiasm.

Keats is too important a poet to be fully considered in the course of this lecture; we must make his work the subject of a special study. But enough can be said now to show you the greatness of the place he occupies. He is not a poet easily appreciated; he is too exquisite for that. This was his misfortune. If he could have been immediately understood, his life might have been happier, if not longer. But even to-day, he does not appeal to the young. This is not because he is obscure, but because of the extraordinary finish and fulness of his lines, which demand constant effort of imagination and fancy to read correctly. You tire of reading many pages of Keats in quick succession, just as you tire quickly of eating very sweet cake. Young people like to read poetry for the story, and there is scarcely any story in the larger part of Keats's work. It ought to have been understood by men like Wordsworth and Shelley at once; but the probability is that, having heard that the author was a boy, they did not give his poetry serious attention at first. We ought not to blame them too much for this dullness, however, because to-day the rule is that Keats appeals only to mature judgment. Rossetti, for example, did not care for Keats when he was very young; later in life he placed Keats above all the other poets. Tennyson's first loves were Byron and Shelley, but Tennyson learned to write great poetry only after he had learned to rank Keats above Shelley. And the same extraordinary fact is true of Robert Browning.

So we must consider Keats as giving the greatest living impulse to nineteenth century poetry. But why? When we look at his work, we do not find him inventing new

measures. The rhymed lines of "Endymion" are very similar to those used by other poets; the structure of his sonnets and of his odes is not new; the blank verse of "Hyperion" is just like the blank verse of Wordsworth; and his only ballad, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," — one of the sweetest and weirdest things in English literature — is not different from the form of the ballad used by Coleridge and others. In short, Keats did not give us anything new in the way of form. The secret of his power must be sought elsewhere. It is in his quality. I have said that the blank verse of "Hyperion" is in form the same as the blank verse of Wordsworth, but when you study any part of the poem carefully you will find that everything in it reminds you of Tennyson, and that nothing in it reminds you of Wordsworth. Really the qualities of Tennyson with which you have become by this time somewhat familiar are the same that make the character of Keats's poetry—sonorousness of phrase, splendour of colour, and a sort of divine intuition in choice of words, as in the famous line—

Sat gray-hair'd Saturn, quiet as a stone.*

What Keats did was this—he studied and absorbed the best of everything that had been done by Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott, Byron, and Shelley before his time, everything belonging to the romantic movement; and by his natural genius he was able to fuse all this together into a totally new form of expression. He summarized and utilized all the forces of the moment, and so taught the generations after him how to do the same thing. He was especially the electic poet of his time. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, Byron, Shelley, even Scott, had all been working on individual lines; Keats worked in all the best of those lines at once, with perhaps the exception of the religious line taken by Wordsworth. He had no sympathy with that. His feeling was that beauty itself was a kind of religion; and he was one of the first to proclaim boldly the doctrine that

* *Hyperion*, Book I. Line 4.

beauty is truth. In this he had something of the old Greek feeling; and although he was no Greek scholar, not even an educated man, when he touched Greek subjects he managed to get closer to the feeling of Greek life, the sense and the charm of the beautiful old paganism, than any other poet before him. After his death somebody asked Shelley, who was a very fine Greek scholar, how it was that a man without education, like Keats, could have described Greek life so exquisitely; and Shelley instantly answered, "Because he *was* a Greek" — meaning, of course, that the soul, not the blood, of Keats was Greek.

Now the charm of the Greek poets, in spite of their immense intellectual superiority, was a charm of the most childlike kind, perhaps because the wiser a man grows the simpler he becomes in the best sense. You will find the same fact exhibited in the history of the evolution of any complicated piece of machinery — say, a sewing machine, a steam engine, a watch, or a rifle. The first forms of these were very complex indeed, but with every new improvement their structure becomes simpler and simpler, and the tendency now is ever in the direction of greater simplicity combined with higher power. Well, in the mind of the old Greeks, who saw great truths perfectly, the beauty of utterance consisted in expressing the largest truth in the most direct and frank way, and in language that a child could understand. Keats had this exquisite gift of "lucidity" — a word meaning clearness and distinctness, like that of an object seen in a strong light. There is never any vagueness about Keats, as there is about Wordsworth. Unfortunately his earlier work shows some defects that are not to be reconciled with Greek art-feeling at all,—over-elaboration, too much ornament, too many images. But even in this earlier work—I refer especially to "Endymion" — you will find one quality in Keats that is very distinct—straightforward boldness in the use of common words. Classic rules had indeed been broken by Wordsworth and Coleridge, but this was chiefly when they wrote in the lighter forms of lyrical verse.

Keats was not afraid to break classical rules even in solemn and serious verse, and critics were astonished to find colloquialisms mixed up with classical phrases. But presently it was recognized that these simple expressions were in perfect harmony with the graver terms which they accompanied, and that their use lent to the verse not only additional force, but also additional beauty, because, after all, beauty must be natural. I shall now only mention to you the names of those poems of Keats which I think that you ought to know; — as we are going to consider the texts at another time and place. I should not advise you to read "Endymion" nor "Hyperion"; these you would find very difficult and unsatisfactory to begin with. "Hyperion" is the best, but it remains a fragment. "Calidore" is also a fragment; had it been completed we might have something like Scott's "Lay of the Last Minstrel" or Coleridge's "Christabel." These you can very well skip for the present, because there is a great deal of Keats worth reading. Of the longer poems I should especially recommend "Lamia." This is the best modern poem upon the old Greek story of Philostratus,—though in prose the same idea has been taken up by a great French writer with even more splendid results. Lamia is a phantom woman, really a serpent or dragon. She takes the form of a woman only to entice a young man to love her. Being detected by the philosopher and magician Apollonius on her wedding night, she vanishes, leaving the bridegroom dead of love and sorrow. It was a great stroke of art on Keats's part to make the reader sympathize with Lamia, rather than with the young man; and the French romantic writers have followed the same line of treatment. Then we have the poem "Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil," founded upon a terrible story from Boccaccio. Keats's treatment of it is very delicate,—making appeal altogether to the pathetic sentiment, and judiciously hiding the horror as far as possible. But the very daintiest of the longer poems is the wonderful "Eve of St. Agnes," — founded upon the pretty superstition that if a maiden fasts

and prays on the evening before the feast of St. Agnes, she will be able to see her future husband in a vision during the night. The treatment here and the scenery are mediæval, much in the style of Coleridge's "Christabel," but we have none of the Gothic harshness or gloominess—all is love and tenderness and beauty. I need say nothing farther here about the longer poems; but you can already surmise that Keats worked upon a great variety of subjects. What is absolutely necessary for the literary student to know are a few of the shorter pieces, which remain matchless in their originality and exquisiteness.

Of these I should call the "Ode to a Nightingale" the very greatest—greater even than Shelley's wonderful poem on the skylark. Next we have the famous "Ode on a Grecian Urn," which has become one of the classics of nineteenth century literature. And the "Ode to Psyche" is not inferior in beauty or emotional power. Those three odes alone would represent sufficiently the greatness of Keats without mentioning any others.

Besides the odes there are a number of sonnets which you ought to know; for example, the beautiful poem "On the Grasshopper and Cricket"—one of the few examples in European literature of interest in a subject much loved by Japanese poets; then the sonnet beginning "To one who has been long in city pent"; the piece beginning "When I have fears that I may cease to be"; the splendid composition entitled "The Human Seasons"; the first of the two sonnets entitled "Fame"; the poems upon Autumn, upon Melancholy, upon Fancy; and the exquisite picture of adoring love beginning—

> Asleep! O sleep a little while, white pearl!

Besides these, and the much-quoted sonnet on Chapman's Homer, Keats has given us a cluster of light and dainty lines,—half-song, half-poem, that have taken their place among the treasures of English verse, and that are too often quoted from to be ignored. Such are the verses on Robin

Hood, and those on the Mermaid Tavern, which almost every Englishman knows by heart — the beautiful piece beginning "Bards of Passion and of Mirth." And lastly I think that everybody ought to know "La Belle Dame sans Merci." Very probably this charming ballad was inspired by the unhappy love of its author; at all events it represents the pleasure-pain of unhappy passion as no other modern ballad has ever done. The theme, the phantom woman whose love is death, is almost as old as the world; thousands of poems have been produced upon it. But in simple weird beauty I do not know of anything in all English literature exactly like this.