CHAPTER XXVII

ON THE LYRICAL BEAUTIES OF KEATS

WE shall not have time to say much regarding the longer poems of Keats; we must confine ourselves to the shorter poems, which really are much more important to literature and to the student of literature. But you should at least know something about the plan of these poems which we cannot consider in detail, so I shall make a few remarks about the subjects of "Endymion" and of "Hyperion." Endymion was, in Greek mythology, a beautiful youth of divine descent. Sleeping one night under the moon, on the top of Mount Latmos, he looked so beautiful that the moon came down out of the sky and kissed him. According to some poets, she kept him asleep by divine power for a long time. This story made strong appeal to the young and passionate fancy of Keats, and while yet a boy he began his poem on the subject. But he changed the Greek story a great deal. Endymion is not put to sleep by the moon, but is courted by her in various disguises. Sometimes she appears to him in dreams like a woman all made of light; and in his waking hours she appears to him sometimes as an Indian maiden, dark and beautiful. He finds himself accordingly in love with two beings at the same time, never suspecting that both are one and the same. At last, one day, while he is speaking to the Indian maiden, the transformation takes place; the dark woman suddenly becomes a being all made of silver light, and she takes her lover away with her. During these episodes Endymion has his sister Peona for a confidante; and various other personages of Greek mythology appear upon the scene. As to plot, the narrative is not very successful. It is prodigiously

complicated, and quite as difficult to read as Spenser's "Faerie Queene." Also the mythology is not the mythology of the scholar, nor is the description of Greek life such as a scholar would have made. Altogether the thing reads much like the fairy romances of the Middle Ages. The faults of the poem are likely to prevent it from ever becoming a text-book for students; we can feel that it is only the work of a boy, and that many lines in it show immaturity. But it will always remain among the classics on account of the strange beauties which can be picked out here and there, and which give us a foretaste of the splendour of Tennyson's expression. It is perhaps unfortunate that in this poem Keats did not attempt blank verse. The rhyme which he thought fit to use must have been a great fetter upon him, and must have more than doubled, if not tripled, the difficulty of the work.

Hyperion is an old name for the solar divinity; but the subject of the poem is the dethronement of Saturn—by the Greeks called Cronos, the deification of Time, and the father of all the Gods. According to Greek mythology, there were two divine ages, the age of the old gods and the age of the new. Saturn was dethroned by his own children; then began the reign of the new gods. You have all heard about the old war between the giants, or Titans, and the gods. Keats, taking these myths, intended to fuse them together, and to make the battle between the giants and the gods an episode of an attempt to restore Saturn to his place of power. Disheartened by criticism, he never carried out his intention. Hyperion opens with a description of the sorrow of Saturn after his dethronement, and an attempt to console him on the part of the various divinities, fallen like himself. We are introduced into an assembly of the Titans and the older gods; then Hyperion appears upon the scene, and the poem suddenly stops. Thus in "Hyperion" there is nothing about Hyperion — or at least a very little. The fragment has been beautifully compared to the gateway of a great temple. We ascend the steps; we look at

the carpet; we admire the architecture; we imagine the splendour of the edifice beyond; and, entering the temple court, lo! there is nothing! Nevertheless this is a grand piece of blank verse, and I would recommend you to read this poem in preference to "Endymion." But the beauties of what has been called "the Greek tone" of Keats, will be found rather in the short pieces to which we shall now turn.

I should say that the most Greek of Keats's short poems is the "Ode to Psyche." If you do not know the story of Psyche, perhaps you will not see how very beautiful this poem is. Psyche is said to represent the human soul in Greek mythology, but you must not allow this fact to deceive you as to the very real nature of Psyche as a divinity in the Greek mind. She was a person, always represented as a slender pretty girl with the wings of a butterfly growing from her shoulders. She was one of a numerous family, and her sisters were jealous of her because she was prettier than they. Presently she began to receive visits at night from a divinity. This divinity was Cupid, or Eros, the god of love; but Psyche never saw him — she only felt his caresses and heard his words. He said she must never try to find out who he was, or to light a lamp in the room when he came, and that if she did either, he would never see her again. But her sisters jealously suggested that her lover was not a god, but a monster; and that she must try to see him. So one night she lighted a lamp and looked at her lover asleep, and saw the most beautiful of all the gods. But a drop of oil from the lamp fell upon his shoulder; he woke up, reproached her, and flew away. Then she wandered over all the world to find him, and was very unhappy; and the story of her wanderings and her sorrows has been deliciously told by the great Roman author Apuleius, who wrote the book called "The Golden Ass," which all of you ought to read some day, because it is still one of the world's great books. It was from this story that Keats got his inspiration for the "Ode to Psyche." Perhaps it is too long to allow reading the

whole of it now; but I shall quote the exquisite closing stanza as an example of the rest.

Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane
  In some untrodden region of my mind,
Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain,
  Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind:
Far, far around shall those dark-cluster'd trees
  Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep;
And there by zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees,
  The moss-lain Dryads shall be lull'd to sleep;
And in the midst of this wide quietness
A rosy sanctuary will I dress
With the wreath'd trellis of a working brain,
  With buds, and bells, and stars without a name,
With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign,
  Who breeding flowers, will never breed the same:
And there shall be for thee all soft delight
  That shadowy thought can win,
A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,
  To let the warm Love in!

Now beautiful as this is in itself, the beauty is greatly enhanced by the philosophy of the old Greek myth, which the poet feels. The Greeks held that the story of Psyche and her lover was a story of the relation between the divine and the human,—the seeking of the human for the divine, and the ultimate union of both in a spiritual world. And we must fancy the poet here to be addressing not merely the Greek girl with the butterfly wings at her shoulders, but his own soul.

The faculty of instantly seizing the very centre and core of an emotional fact, and of setting it before the reader in one lightning-flash of dazzling verse, is equally visible in the famous "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Keats had seen such an urn, or more properly, as we should say, vase (the word urn being especially used for stone-vases); and the beautiful figures upon it touched him deeply by their grace and pathos. Here was the relic of a civilization utterly vanished,

a civilization of exquisite beauty, joyous, simple, and nature-loving. Its cities have disappeared from the face of the earth; its gods exist only in museums; its people are nowhere;—but on this vase we see the thought and feeling of two thousand or three thousand years ago, just as fresh as if it had been painted only yesterday. The subject is a religious festival, a *matsuri* — exactly such as we have in this country at times; there is a thronging of happy people to the temple — children and old men and maidens, and youths, with a priest or two among the crowd. A musician plays upon a flute. A boy tries to kiss a girl; and she tries to run away from him. Everything is just as real as if we saw it; the humanity of three thousand years ago was not so very much unlike the humanity of to-day. And the boy-poet, looking at this relic, thinks in sorrow for a moment of the impermanency of this world. But, as suddenly, there comes to him a new sense of the immortality of art. Everything is gone but the art of that time; it preserves the memory of that festal day; it leaves the musician still blowing his flute, and the boy still trying to kiss that girl after three thousand years. Notice how beautifully Keats speaks of this ghostly music and that ghostly love — I am quoting only the second stanza:

> Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
> Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
> Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
> Pipe, to the spirit, ditties of no tone:
> Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
> Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
> Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
> Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;
> She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
> For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

Shall we paraphrase this golden verse? Music heard by the ear, however sweet it may be, is never so sweet as music heard by the imagination only. Therefore how delightful

it is to fancy the melodies being played by those old Greek flutes thousands of years ago; grateful to the soul is this soundless music. O young man, standing under those trees, you have been standing there for many, many centuries; and you can never go away! But that does not make any difference to you; because the leaves of those trees never will fall. Young lover, for many, many centuries you have been vainly trying to kiss that little maiden; and your lips are very close to her lips; but they will never touch, never! Still, you must not be sorry; there is a recompense. She will always be young, always beautiful, through the thousands of years, and you will always love. Such love is like the loves of the immortals! Human beauty soon withers and passes, but never the beauty of the being that you will love upon that vase.

In simpler subjects we find the same grace, the same vividness, and I think you will appreciate this little poem upon insects, a theme with which I suppose you are very familiar in your own literature.

ON THE GRASSHOPPER AND CRICKET

The poetry of earth is never dead:
  When all the birds are faint with the hot sun,
  And hide in cooling trees, a voice will run
From hedge to hedge about the new-mown mead;
That is the Grasshopper's—he takes the lead
  In summer luxury,—he has never done
  With his delights; for when tired out with fun
He rests at ease beneath some pleasant weed.
The poetry of earth is ceasing never:
  On a lone winter evening, when the frost
    Has wrought a silence, from the stove there shrills
The Cricket's song, in warmth increasing ever,
  And seems to one in drowsiness half lost,
    The Grasshopper's among some grassy hills.

As the heat increases, the song of the English cricket always becomes louder. The suggestion of the poet is delicious truth; drowsing by the fire, the warmth enables the

body to forget winter, and the shrilling of the little insect near the fire brings back to the dreamer impressions of summer, the light of the sun, and the smell of the flowers. Here again we find an example of the poet's capacity to seize and express the central fact of an emotion.

This he sometimes accomplishes with a simple straightforward utterance of ecstasy. A charming example is from the posthumous pieces. It represents only the strong affection mingled with admiration which comes upon a lover watching the girl whom he loves asleep; and there are only seven lines. But more could not be said in seven lines.

> Asleep! O sleep a little while, white pearl!
> And let me kneel, and let me pray to thee,
> And let me call Heaven's blessing on thine eyes,
> And let me breathe into the happy air,
> That doth enfold and touch thee all about,
> Vows of my slavery, my giving up,
> My sudden adoration, my great love!

One of the most beautiful things about a boy's love, when healthy and true, is the sudden desire that it aspires to be unselfish, to sacrifice everything for the person loved, to welcome pain or trouble if by either some happiness can be given to the object of affection. And that is the central thing expressed in these pretty verses. There is also a charming touch of the shyness which characterizes a boy's love — the almost religious timidity which he feels in the presence of the person inspiring it. I refer especially to the lines in which he envies the air of the chamber—"the happy air"—happy because it can touch her, as he dares not do. There is a very chaste beauty in all the expressions of passion by Keats, — because he had the heart of the child, true and noble. We have been accustomed in poetry to admire chiefly the expression of love in young girls, but as a matter of fact the phenomenon in a boy, just entering upon manhood, when he loves without exactly knowing why, is quite as beautiful and quite as sacred; and it is the

boyish quality in the love of Keats that gives so many of his poems their extraordinary sweetness and freshness. No mature man would pray to become a star for the reason that Keats so prayed; but how pretty it is! It is supposed to be the last poem he wrote, when the hand of death was on him.

Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art—
  Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night
And watching, with eternal lids apart,
  Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,
The moving waters at their priestlike task
  Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,
Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask
  Of snow upon the mountains and the moors—
No—yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,
  Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
  Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
And so live ever—or else swoon to death.

The comparisons in the sonnet are peculiarly beautiful; it is a specialty of Keats's poetry, this large, sublime and original imagery in speaking of nature. It qualified even his prose. There is a beautiful passage in one of his letters which I may cite by way of illustration: "In truth, the great Elements we know of, are no mean comforters: the open sky sits upon our senses like a sapphire crown; the air is our robe of state; the earth is our throne; and the sea a mighty minstrel playing before it." These similes were caught up afterwards by Swinburne, and worked into one of his poems about sun, wind and sea.

There is a darker side to Keats's love, however — the disappointment and the pain, together with the certainty of death. The gloom inspired by this sorrow found expression in the only ballad which he wrote, "La Belle Dame sans Merci." The title Keats probably got from some of the old romances of chivalry; there are many "fair ladies without

pity" in the stories of the French mediæval writers. But the ghostly part of the fancy is probably northern. There were a great many strange northern beliefs about fairy women who loved men to death, — one of the oldest being rather a terrible superstition of the El-woman. She sat by the roadside in lonesome places; and when she saw a young man approaching, she smiled upon him and made herself beautiful to attract him. But if he kissed her, he at once became mad, and remained mad until he died. The El-woman was a woman only in front; her body behind was hollow, like an empty shell; but she took good care not to allow young men to see her back. Besides the El-woman, there were many other amorous phantoms believed in during the Middle Ages—vampires and demons, many of which we can trace back to Greek and Roman myths. The church never taught that the old gods did not exist: they did exist, she said, but they were evil spirits, constantly tempting men to love them in order to destroy those whom they could deceive. Taking these different beliefs together, Keats fused them all into one new poetical conception,—his Fairy Lady without Pity. Perhaps the ballad will seem to you very simple; emotionally, however, it is not simple at all, but one of the weirdest things we have in English verse. The style, of course, is that of the mediæval ballad.

O what can ail thee, Knight-at-arms,
  Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge is withered from the lake,
  And no birds sing.

O what can ail thee, Knight-at-arms,
  So haggard and so woe-begone?
The squirrel's granary is full,
  And the harvest's done.

I see a lilly on thy brow,
  With anguish moist and fever-dew;
And on thy cheek a fading rose
  Fast withereth too.

I met a lady in the meads,
  Full beautiful—a faery's child;
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
  And her eyes were wild.

I made a garland for her head,
  And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;
She looked at me as she did love,
  And made sweet moan.

You should know one peculiarity of El-women was that they could not speak distinctly; they only made little moaning sounds. They might sing the air of a song, not the words.

I set her on my pacing steed,
  And nothing else saw all day long;
For sidelong would she bend, and sing
  A faery's song.

She found me roots of relish sweet,
  And honey wild, and manna-dew;
And sure in language strange she said—
  "I love thee true!"

Notice the word "sure"—which proves doubt. The knight is trying to persuade himself that she really did speak to him those words. But she did not, she could not; she only made inarticulate sounds which he imagined to be words.

She took me to her elfin grot,
  And there she wept, and sighed full sore,
And there I shut her wild, wild eyes
  With kisses four.

And there she lulled me asleep,
  And there I dreamed, ah! woe betide!
The latest dream I ever dreamed
  On the cold hill's side.

I saw pale kings and princes too,
  Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;

They cried—"La Belle Dame sans Merci
Hath thee in thrall!"

I saw their starved lips in the gloam
With horrid warning gaped wide,
And I awoke, and found me here
On the cold hill's side.

And this is why I sojourn here,
Alone and palely loitering,
Though the sedge is withered from the lake,
And no birds sing!

He cannot go away, even after the warning; the enchantment is upon him, and we know that he will wander about there until he dies. In writing this poem certainly poor Keats must have thought himself in a like condition, hopelessly loving, with a love that was killing him, a being who could never be anything more to him than a kind of fairy lady without pity.

We may now turn to another miscellaneous class of poems, which we shall find to be nowise inferior to those that we have already read. For example, we must read the "Ode to a Nightingale," and a part of the beautiful verses upon Autumn—some descriptions which will, I think, remind you as much of autumn scenery in your own land as it reminds English readers of the English harvest time. Except for the mention of sheep, and the names of a few birds or plants that are not Japanese, we might imagine ourselves watching the same scenery in the neighbourhood of Tokyo. I think the last stanza of the ode "To Autumn" will be the most impressive for you; the picture is not unlike a drawing by Hiroshige or Toyokuni.

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn

Among the river sallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

The lines I have put in italics seem to be especially beautiful and truthful. It is especially in autumn that we see at sunset clouds making long bars or streaks in the west, right across the great yellow or red glow of sunset, and taking strange colours with the changing of the light. At such times even a stubble-field, so ugly in the full glare of day, looks beautiful because of the splendid light of colour which falls upon it. In Japan, as in England or America, autumn is also especially the time of water insects — mosquitoes, gnats, and dragon-flies; and it is also a time of singing insects that do not appear earlier in the year. Of course we have no sheep on the hills about us, and we do not hear the bleating of lambs; but we have the same gathering of swallows, and if we have not the redbreast, we have other autumn birds uttering the same kind of melancholy whistle. The expression "wailful choir" is especially suggestive, and the reference to the sallows of willow trees along the river bank shows observation; for you must have noticed that the clouds of little insects that haunt our autumn evenings are thickest in the shelter of trees.

Let us now take the "Ode to a Nightingale." It is a little long, but it is the finest thing of its kind in all English poetry, and the time we give to it will not be wasted. I shall dictate a paragraph on each stanza.

1

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,

But being too happy in thine happiness,—
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,
In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

The first effect of beautiful music is pleasure, perhaps mingled with surprise; but as the sound continues to affect the hearer, the pleasure may grow to the intensity of pain. The first stanza of this ode has for its subject such pleasure-pain. Nothing is more mysterious than the effect of certain music upon the senses, and I think that nineteenth century philosophy has alone succeeded in offering an explanation of this mystery. Spencer was the first to put the explanation into scientific form. He declares that no personal experience in this life could account for certain effects of music—that the pleasure can only be accounted for by the experience of millions of previous lives, experience in some sort transmitted to us by inheritance. The whole theory, which is most interesting and beautiful, cannot be summarized in these few remarks; but I should advise you to read Spencer's essay on the subject, entitled "The Origin and Function of Music." Now it is this ecstasy of musical delight which the poet is trying to describe, as aroused in him by the song of a nightingale. "I feel," he says, "a heaviness in my heart as of grief; I feel a kind of sleepy weight upon me, as if I had drunk the juice of hemlock, or had swallowed a cup full of some narcotic even to the dregs, just a moment ago, and had begun to sink in death towards the River of Forgetfulness. And this feeling, I know, is not one caused by wishing to be as happy as that bird—no, it is quite the contrary; it is because the happiness makes me too happy, because I hear him singing about summer, like some Greek tree-spirit, in the musical space of beech-tree leaves and shadows, with all the power of his little voice, in absolute fearlessness of man."

2

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!
O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,*
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stained mouth;
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

The next feeling of delight expressed by the poet may seem rather boyish; but it was in the style of the time, and very correctly classical. The Greeks and Romans considered joy incomplete without wine, without drinking just enough to put one into a pleasant glow by quickening the circulation, and thus enhancing the illusion of the moment. So the poet says, "O for a drink of wine—old wine that has been cooled for a hundred years in some deep cavern—wine that by its taste makes you think of the goddess of flowers, and the delight of green nature in the country, and dances of country youth, and the songs of Provence, the great country of wine-making and of passionate song, — that makes you think also about the merriment of the brown-faced peasants and peasant girls at the time of the harvest dances! O let me have a very large cup of such wine—a beaker full of it, and full of all the southern warmth and happiness that seems to be in such vintages—full of the true water of the Muses' spring—red as a blush, with pretty bubbles in a row like beads, shining like little eyes along the edge of the cup—the cup on which lips are red like blood from the stain of the brightly coloured wine. Having such a drink, and hearing your music, then I should want nothing more than

* Hippocrene: On the mountain of Helicon in Greece, which was sacred to the Muses, there was said to be a wonderful fountain called Hippocrene or the Horse-fountain; for it was brought into existence by a stroke of the hoof of the winged horse Pegasus, a divine steed. Whoever could drink of that fountain, it was believed, would become a great poet.

this—to follow you unseen into the dark forest, and never return!"

Why this desire to go away? I think that everything beautiful and gentle sometimes gives us this desire to leave the busy world of men,—simply because the beauty or the sweetness that we see contrasts so painfully with the cruelty and the selfishness of the world's struggle. And this is the poet's thought.

3

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

It is not only the desire to forget the life of cities that comes upon the poet with this ecstasy of delight in the bird's song; he is not only vexed with the world because of its harsh side; he is tortured also by the sudden feeling of its impermanency, of the perishable nature of the few things that men can love—health, strength, youth, joy and affection. "Yes," he repeats, "I wish that I could go away, far away, and disappear—nay, that I could even melt away, and by ceasing to exist as a man, forget all the pain and trouble of this world, forget all that you, O happy bird, know nothing about—the weariness and the excitement and the torment of city life, where men, striving to live and work, must hear all about them sounds of sorrow and pain; where old age comes upon men like a paralysis, leaving them trembling gray wrecks; where even young men fail, and turn white like ghosts and as weak, and die before knowing anything about happiness;—where it is impossible to

think about reality at all without pain and despair; where no woman can long remain beautiful, and where even the passion of a lover cannot last more than a day."

4

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

The poet rises up, and goes out into the wood, under the trees, to listen. "I will go to you, without the inspiration and joy of wine; I can have no such luxuries; I cannot ride in the chariot of Bacchus, drawn by leopards; the god of wine is not my friend. But I will go to you, full of the wine of poetry, lifted by poetry as upon wings, however feeble, confused or slow be the motion of my poor dull brain. And now I am with you. The night is all beautiful and gentle. Perhaps the moon is enthroned in the sky like a queen-fairy, and the stars are shining like little fairies all around her. But, here, under the trees, there is no light, except what comes through the branches when the wind blows the leaves apart, as it passes through the leafy darkness and the mossy winding paths of the garden."

5

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
White hawthorne, and the pastoral eglantine;
Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,

The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

"It is here too dark for me to see the flowers at my feet, or the fragrant blossoms above me on the trees; but in this odorous darkness, I can guess what they must be—judging from the month of the season—for each month gives gifts of fruit or flowers to the grass and the low wild shrubs and the wild fruit trees. There should be the white blossom of the hawthorn tree, and the flower of the eglantine, famous in old pastoral poetry, and violets, already dying, because the spring is passing away, and I suppose they are hidden now under the leaves;—then there ought to be musk-roses, for these are the first born flowers of the middle of May—full of perfumed sweetness—an intoxication of perfume, making fragrant even the dew upon them. Later, in summer evenings, all about these musk-roses the flies will gather with a musical humming."

6

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod.

"Here in the growing gloom I listen. Many a time before now I have found myself wishing to die, and I have thought of Death as a beautiful and lovable power, giving ease of heart to all men; I have called him affectionate names in many a verse composed in my mind, in order to persuade him to take my calm life away from me, into the beautiful air about me. And now, here listening, O bird! I feel as if it were very delightful indeed to die, I feel it more than

I ever did before. I should like suddenly to cease to be, in the middle of the night, to die now without any pain, while you are singing there all your soul, and with such extreme joy in your own song. And if I were to die now, how strange it would be! You would still keep on singing, and I should not be able to hear you—I should be as insensible to the sweetness of your music as the sod, as the earth and grass under my feet. I think that I should like to live a little longer and hear you sing."

7

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

The last six lines of this stanza are especially famous, forming two separate but familiar quotations. The first refers to the story of Ruth in the Bible; the second to the poetry of fancy, especially of supernatural fancy. "The Book of Ruth" is quite different from anything else in the Bible; it is a kind of gentle love story, and full of simple pathos; whereas the story of Esther is more like a novel, containing both tragedy and comedy. These are the only approaches to pure story-telling in the Old Testament, and "The Book of Ruth" is the only really beautiful story in the Bible. There is nothing very religious about it; it is simply the narrative of how a widow and her only daughter went to a strange country after the death of the husband and father, and tried to make a living by gleaning in the fields, until they met with a relative, who took pity upon them, and finally married Ruth. The other reference may be less easy for

you to understand without explanation. Many of the mediæval romances and fairy-tales describe enchanted castles situated in the middle of dangerous seas. If a brave knight of pure life can get to the castle, and preserve himself by his virtue from all the temptations of the magician, he can obtain some great reward, such as treasures of gold and silver, or a princess for wife. But he must first encounter the storms on those perilous seas. The expression about charming magic casements does not of course mean charming a casement, or window, but some person behind the window, who throws it open perhaps to listen. The suggestion is of some princess, confined in the enchanted castle, and waiting for the good knight to come who shall free her from the power of the wizard or giant.

"I shall die and utterly pass away — perhaps my songs, my poems will quickly be forgotten. But you, happy bird, are immortal; you were not born to die as I am. No hungry generations (devouring Time) shall silence your voice. The song you are now singing, on this very night, was heard thousands of years ago. Emperors heard it, and peasants. It has been celebrated in the poetry of all times and all countries. Perhaps it was the memory of such a song as this that touched the heart of Ruth when she mourned for her lost home, and stood weeping in the cornfields of strangers in a strange land. And it was this song that so often, in the old romances, charmed the hearts of princesses and fair ladies in their castles, as they stood at windows opening upon the dangerous seas, in their enchanted home, in lonesome fairyland."

8

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
  To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
  As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf!
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
  Past the near meadows, over the still stream,

Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?

Very possibly in speaking of hungry generations in the preceding stanza, Keats may have been thinking of the struggle of the world as well as of ravening time, and about his own sense of loneliness in a community that gave him neither the love nor the sympathy for which his nature longed. At all events, his use of the word "forlorn"—meaning left alone, abandoned, deserted—still more forcibly reminds him of his own position, and brings him back, with a sudden shock, to the world of realities.

"Why, the very word forlorn, like the sudden clang of a very great bell, breaks my meditation and brings my mind back from thinking about you, O nightingale, to the subject of my lonesome self. Good-bye, it is not true that a poet's imagination can deceive him altogether about the world and himself. Imagination is a deceiving fairy, but her magic is not strong enough to keep us from feeling the pain of life. Farewell, O bird! Now your sad song is becoming faint beyond the next fields, now I hear it on the other side of the river, now it is far away up the side of the further hill. And now I do not hear it at all; the bird must have gone far down into the next valley, among the trees. Now it seems to me as if I had been dreaming, either asleep or awake. The music is gone. Am I dreaming or not dreaming?"

We have lingered somewhat over this wonderful poem, but if a student even knows only the "Ode to a Nightingale," he knows the best of Keats, and I think it was worth the time. Presently we must bid good-bye to Keats, and take up another subject — not without regret; for Keats is really worth many months of study. Before concluding, however, I want to call your attention to a historical mistake in one of the sonnets of Keats, which you will find in almost any anthology. I mean the sonnet upon the poet's

first impression of reading Chapman's translation of Homer. Really Chapman's translation of Homer requires a great deal of patience for anybody to read to-day, but it was a more faithful translation than that of Pope, whom Keats detested as an artificial poet. Were he alive to-day, Keats would certainly prefer our modern prose translation of Homer to Chapman's, but there were no good prose translations then. Keats was able to get an idea of Homer's beauty from this version, and he expressed his delight with it in the very beautiful sonnet I am referring to. He said that he had felt

> like some watcher of the skies
> When a new planet swims into his ken;
> Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
> He star'd at the Pacific.

Critics have repeatedly objected that the reference to Cortez is wrong, because it was not Cortez but Balboa who first reached the Pacific by way of Darien. The error, I presume to say, is not an important one; but what I especially wish to observe is that by substituting the name Balboa for the name of Cortez, the verse would still be absolutely correct, if we leave out the word stout; for Balboa, having the accent on the second syllable, can be so read into the line as to make the verse right. Yet I do not think that any true poet would ever agree to do this, because although accuracy might be gained, the effect would be greatly diminished by the loss of the splendid adjective "stout," used in the old Biblical meaning of strong and bold. Critics are very fond of picking out little faults and dwelling upon them. When their opinions are put into practice the result is generally dismal. It was dismal in the Revised Version of the Bible. It would be dismal also in the case of Keats. The mistakes of a great poet like Keats have more literary value than the corrections of his critics. We shall next make a short study of the very curious and unequal poet Thomas Hood.