

CHAPTER XXX

CHARLES KINGSLEY AS POET

YOU may remember my having told you that the best examples of the hexameter in English were written by the admirable novelist Charles Kingsley. I may have also said something in a general way about Kingsley's place in the nineteenth century, but time did not permit of a special lecture in regard to his verse—which, nevertheless, is of very great importance, and is constantly obtaining wider recognition. No man of the century who figures in English literature had more of the soul of the poet than Kingsley; and a very great poet he might have become had he possessed sufficient means to devote all of his powers to poetry. He had very little time for poetry. But little as the time was that he could devote, it sufficed him to write the best hexameters of an English poet, and to compose songs which have been translated into almost every modern language. "The Three Fishers" has been translated into Japanese, so I need not repeat it to you. "The Sands of Dee" has been translated even into Arabic. Kingsley had the divine gift of exciting the deepest emotions with the simplest words, and it is to this faculty in particular that I will call your attention to-day. Later on we shall study some of his hexameters; but these do not show how great a poet he was nearly so well as do the things which read so simply that you might fancy a young boy had written them, until their magic begins to stir the emotions.

Let us first take "The Sands of Dee." It is only a little song about a peasant girl being drowned by a high tide, which rose unexpectedly off the coast where she was tak-

ing care of her father's cows; but the whole world has learned it.

'O Mary, go and call the cattle home,
And call the cattle home,
And call the cattle home
Across the sands of Dee;'
The western wind was wild and dank with foam,
And all alone went she.

The western tide crept up along the sand,
And o'er and o'er the sand,
And round and round the sand,
As far as eye could see.
The rolling mist came down and hid the land:
And never home came she.

'Oh! is it weed, or fish, or floating hair—
A tress of golden hair,
A drown'd maiden's hair
Above the nets at sea?
Was never salmon yet that shone so fair
Among the stakes on Dee.'

They rowed her in across the rolling foam,
The cruel crawling foam,
The cruel hungry foam,
To her grave beside the sea:
But still the boatmen hear her call the cattle home
Across the sands of Dee.

But for the grazing cattle, this incident might happen upon any coast in the world; everywhere you see the nets and the stakes, and the "cruel crawling foam." It is curious that John Ruskin found fault with this poem, declaring that sea-foam did not seem to crawl. He was contradicted, indeed, by many observers; but his criticism must be mentioned, as it is so well known. "Crawling" means moving like a creeping worm or a slow winding serpent; and it is true that you do not see this stealthy motion of

the foam upon all coasts. To see it, you must be upon a coast where there is a wide beach of smooth sand; you may then see it at the time of a rising tide. The great waves are yet very far away, but over the smooth shallows you see the water gradually rising and spreading, edged with foam that really seems to crawl. I have often seen this on parts of the English and the Irish coasts; and I think that the word crawling, so far from being wrong, is one of the very happiest words in the song. I suppose you know that the salmon is a very beautiful large fish, and can be seen shining like silver, or rather like pale gold, at a very considerable distance.

Now observe the extraordinary brevity with which the tale is told. There are indeed four stanzas, but several lines of each stanza are repeated, or partly repeated, so that the telling of the story is really done within eight lines less than the total number of the poem. Yet within this little space we have two very definite pictures created in the reader's mind. The first is of the darkening of the evening sky, the rising of the sea-fog over the sands, and the scents and colours of the coming storm. We are not told about the girl's being drowned; it is implied much more effectively by the statement that she never came home. The second little picture, the appearance beyond the breakers of the gold hair, together with the reference to the stakes of the fishermen, is a perfect water-colour made with a few strokes. Even this would be enough to make the poem remarkable; but the supernatural touch at the end of the recital, the reference to the fishermen's belief that the ghost of the girl can still be heard at night calling to the cows, completes the work in such a way as to leave it unmatched among modern songs. It is not scholarship (though Kingsley was a good scholar) that can enable a man to produce such a gem as this; one must be born with the heart of a poet.

You will remember that, during our lecture upon Keats last year, I quoted for you the ballad of "La Belle Dame sans Merci," as one of the most weirdly beautiful things in

English literature. Now there are not many poets who have the ability to give the feeling of weird beauty, of ghostliness and æsthetic charm at the same time. But Kingsley had this gift, and his poems offer many examples of it. One of these I think to be very nearly if not quite equal to Keats's poem. You might say that Keats's poem probably inspired it; you would be partly right. But the treatment is so different and so many original elements have been introduced, that it is certainly a very original poem. Besides, we have in it a Christian element which is treated in a totally new and startling way. It is something like the story of Urashima, but the ending is unique of its kind.

THE WEIRD LADY

The swevens came up round Harold the Earl,
Like motes in the sunnès beam;
And over him stood the Weird Lady,
In her charmèd castle over the sea,
Sang, 'Lie thou still and dream.'

'Thy steed is dead in his stall, Earl Harold,
Since thou hast been with me;
The rust has eaten thy harness bright,
And the rats have eaten thy greyhound light,
That was so fair and free.'

Mary Mother she stooped from heaven;
She wakened Earl Harold out of his sweven,
To don his harness on;
And over the land and over the sea
He wended abroad to his own countrie,
A weary way to gon.

Oh but his beard was white with eld,
Oh but his hair was grey;
He stumbled on by stock and stone,
And as he journeyed he made his moan
Along that weary way.

Earl Harold came to his castle wall ;
The gate was burnt with fire ;
Roof and rafter were fallen down,
The folk were strangers all in the town,
And strangers all in the shire.

Earl Harold came to a house of nuns,
And he heard the dead-bell toll ;
He saw the sexton stand by a grave ;
'Now Christ have mercy, who did us save,
Upon yon fair nun's soul.'

The nuns they came from the convent gate
By one, by two, by three ;
They sang for the soul of a lady bright
Who died for the love of a traitor knight :
It was his own lady.

He stayed the corpse beside the grave ;
'A sign, a sign !' quod he.
'Mary Mother who rulest heaven,
Send me a sign if I be forgiven
By the woman who so loved me.'

A white dove out of the coffin flew ;
Earl Harold's mouth it kist ;
He fell on his face, wherever he stood ;
And the white dove carried his soul to God
Or ever the bearers wist.

We have here a story which has been told in a hundred different ways by hundreds of different poets, both foreign and English, yet perhaps no one ever told it more touchingly. The legend is found in Danish, Swedish, German, and old French literature. Some knight, betrothed to a fair lady, is tempted to break his vow by a strange woman, a fairy or enchantress. He yields to the temptation, and thereafter falls into a magical sleep. Returning home after his waking, he finds that many years have passed, that

everything is changed, and that all his people are dead. In this case the Virgin Mary interferes to wake the sleeper; but this is quite a new idea. In most of the old Northern ballads the knight who meets a fairy lady meets misfortune. If he loves her, she enchants him, and he never returns home until centuries had passed. But on the other hand, if he refuses to love her, he dies the same night. The singers of the Middle Ages would have made a very long romance out of such a version as that which Kingsley adopted; yet he has condensed all the possibilities of the romance into nine little five line stanzas.

A peculiarity of Kingsley's work is the extraordinary novelty of its method, even when the subject happens to be of the most commonplace kind. A good example of this original part is presented in his famous "Ode to the North-East Wind," a piece which it is said no Englishman can read without feeling his heart beat faster. The east wind in England, particularly the north-east wind, is the bitterest and coldest of all winds, bringing death to the weak, and suffering even to domestic animals, so that there is an old English proverb which every child learns by heart in the nursery :

When the wind is in the East
'Tis neither good for man nor beast.

The west wind, you know, is tempered by the warm gulf-stream. But Kingsley remembered that it was by the north-east wind that the Norsemen and the ancient English first sailed to Britain, and perhaps he was thinking also of the evolutionary fact that northern strength has been developed by cold and hardship. Perhaps you know that northern plants when taken to southern countries multiply at the expense of southern plants. The strength of the Western world is from the North; that is the philosophy of Kingsley's ode.

Welcome, wild North-easter !
 Shame it is to see
 Odes to every zephyr ;
 Ne'er a verse to thee.
 Welcome, black North-easter !
 O'er the German foam ;
 O'er the Danish moorlands,
 From thy frozen home.
 Tired we are of summer,
 Tired of gaudy glare,
 Showers soft and steaming,
 Hot and breathless air.
 Tired of listless dreaming,
 Through the lazy day :
 Jovial wind of winter
 Turns us out to play !
 Sweep the golden reed-beds ;
 Crisp the lazy dyke ;
 Hunger into madness
 Every plunging pike.
 Fill the lake with wild-fowl ;
 Fill the marsh with snipe.

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Let the luscious South-wind
 Breathe in lovers' sighs,
 While the lazy gallants
 Bask in ladies' eyes.
 What does he but soften
 Heart alike and pen ?
 'Tis the hard grey weather
 Breeds hard English men.
 What's the soft South-wester ?
 'Tis the ladies' breeze,
 Bringing home their true-loves
 Out of all the seas :
 But the black North-easter,
 Through the snowstorm hurled,
 Drives our English hearts of oak
 Seaward round the world.

Come, as came our fathers,
Heralded by thee,
Conquering from the eastward,
Lords by land and sea.
Come; and strong within us
Stir the Vikings' blood;
Bracing brain and sinew;
Blow, thou wind of God!

Of course the whole force of the poem is in the last seven or eight lines, but these are grand. There is an allusion here to the old Viking custom of going to sea in a storm. They did not attack a coast in fine weather; they came only in the time of terrible storms, when nobody was expecting them, and when the watchmen were driven away from the coasts by the wild weather. Somewhere or other Prof. Saintsbury criticized the last line of the poem as very strange, probably because it was written by a Christian clergyman; for here destroying force is called divine—a creed much more of the old Norse than of Christianity. But Kingsley's Christianity was very Norse in many respects; he would have said that might is right, when the might has been acquired by self-control and power to bear pain. And, after all, we find a very similar thought even in the poems of the gentle Quaker Whittier:

The vigour of the Northern brain
Shall nerve the world outworn.

At all events, Kingsley's influence in making Englishmen proud of their Norse ancestry has been a healthy one, however it might be judged from a severely orthodox standpoint. As a clergyman and a teacher he was never afraid to take up any subject that he thought beautiful, whether very religious people approved of it or not. A fair example is the story of the search for King Harold's body on the field of battle. The body was so disfigured by wounds that even his own mother could not recognize him. There was only one person in the world who could identify Harold's corpse

—that was his mistress. She was sent for. The story is very beautifully told in Kingsley's verse :

Evil sped the battle play
On the Pope Calixtus' day ;
Mighty war-smiths, thanes and lords,
In Senlac slept the sleep of swords.
Harold Earl, shot over shield,
Lay along the autumn weald ;
Slaughter such was never none
Since the Ethelings England won.

Thither Lady Githa came,
Weeping sore for grief and shame ;
How may she her first-born tell ?
Frenchmen stript him where he fell,
Gashed and marred his comely face ;
Who can know him in his place ?

Up and spake two brethren wise,
'Youngest hearts have keenest eyes ;
Bird which leaves its mother's nest,
Moults its pinions, moults its crest.
Let us call the Swan-neck here,
She that was his leman dear ;
She shall know him in this stound ;
Foot of wolf, and scent of hound,
Eye of hawk, and wing of dove,
Carry woman to her love.'

Up and spake the Swan-neck high,
'Go ! to all your thanes let cry
How I loved him best of all,
I whom men his leman call ;
Better knew his body fair
Than the mother which him bare.
When ye lived in wealth and glee
Then ye scorned to look on me ;
God hath brought the proud ones low
After me afoot to go.'

Rousing erne and sallow glede,
Rousing grey wolf off his feed,
Over franklin, earl, andthane,
Heaps of mother-naked slain,

Round the red field tracing slow,
Stooped that Swan-neck white as snow ;
Never blushed nor turned away,
Till she found him where he lay ;
Clipt him in her armés fair,
Wrapt him in her yellow hair,
Bore him from the battle-stead,
Saw him laid in pall of lead,
Took her to a minster high,
For Earl Harold's soul to cry.

Thus fell Harold, bracelet-giver ;
Jesu rest his soul for ever ;
Angels all from thrall deliver ;
Miserere Domine.

This is of course an imitation of the old ballad forms, so far as language goes, hence the few curious Middle English words. But without any appearance of effort, and without any attempt at decorative expression, the result is very pathetic and powerful, all the more powerful, perhaps, because we know that the incident is true. "Swan-neck" was a pet name only, given because she had a very beautiful long neck. The poet has not mentioned one cruel fact, that William the Conqueror would not allow Harold to be buried in a churchyard. So he was buried on the seashore.

By this time I think you will see how very clever Kingsley is in the art of touching emotions with simple words. Had he had the time to devote himself to the ballad form, which he loved, I think he would have done much greater things than Whittier, in the same direction of emotional and religious song. As it is, a few of the things which he did in this form are puzzlingly beautiful; it is hard to find out how the effect has been produced. It is not art of words so much as pure feeling, always expressed in the briefest possible way. I do not know any simple ballad, in modern poetry, more touching than the little composition called "The Mango-Tree." But how the emotion is produced, how the art is inspired, you must feel for your-

selves. The subject is the commonest possible, the story of a soldier's wife in India. She followed the army in its wanderings about the world, and she lost her husband and all her children by fever at some Indian station. I suppose you know that common English soldiers are allowed to marry under certain conditions, and the government pays for the travelling expenses of the woman and the children. We have here only the thoughts of a very simple mind, remembering the past, but how touching the remembrance is:

He wiled me through the furzy croft;
He wiled me down the sandy lane.
He told his boy's love, soft and oft,
Until I told him mine again.

Probably a village on the Scotch coast is here intended; it is certainly suggested by the use of the adjective furzy; and the term "sandy lane" suggests the proximity of the sea. Observe there is a very little in this first stanza as it stands; but at the end of the poem you will see what use it really has.

We married, and we sailed the main;
A soldier, and a soldier's wife.
We marched through many a burning plain;
We sighed for many a gallant life.

But his—God kept it safe from harm.
He toiled, and dared, and earned command;
And those three stripes upon his arm
Were more to me than gold or land.

Sure he would win some great renown:
Our lives were strong, our hearts were high.
One night the fever struck him down.
I sat, and stared, and saw him die.

I had his children—one, two, three.
One week I had them, blithe and sound,
The next—beneath this mango-tree,
By him in barrack burying-ground.

I sit beneath the mango-shade ;
I live my five years' life all o'er—
Round yonder stems his children played ;
He mounted guard at yonder door.

'Tis I, not they, am gone and dead.
They live ; they know ; they feel ; they see.
Their spirits light the golden shade
Beneath the giant mango-tree.

All things, save I, are full of life :
The minas, pluming velvet breasts ;
The monkeys, in their foolish strife ;
The swooping hawks, the swinging nests ;

The lizards basking on the soil,
The butterflies who sun their wings ;
The bees about their household toil,
They live, they love, the blissful things.

Each tender purple mango-shoot,
That folds and droops so bashful down ;
It lives ; it sucks some hidden root ;
It rears at last a broad green crown.

It blossoms ; and the children cry—
'Watch when the mango-apples fall.'
It lives : but, rootless, fruitless, I—
I breathe and dream ;—and that is all.

Thus am I dead : yet cannot die :
But still within my foolish brain
There hangs a pale blue evening sky ;
A furzy croft, a sandy lane.

The pathos here is not so much in the natural thoughts, touching as these are ; it is in the sudden return to the Scotch memory described in the very first stanza, the sudden contrast between the burning colours and the fantastic splendour of that tropical scenery beheld with the eyes, and that pale Scotch scenery of five years before beheld in the

mind. This is a bit of great poetical skill; and I do not know whether Wordsworth was ever equally successful in the use of the same art of contrast. I suppose that you remember his study of the servant girl in London hearing a caged bird sing, and seeing at once through the gloom of the ugly streets the bright fields where she used to play as a child. Nevertheless, that little poem about the servant girl and the thrush does not reach the heart like the last stanza of Kingsley's "Mango-Tree."

I shall make only one more quotation before turning to the subject of Kingsley's classical verse. Both in his novels and in his poems he appears to us as a constant observer of small things having philosophical meanings. Nature spoke to him with the lisp of leaves, the murmuring of streams, the humming of bees; even the sunlight upon the rocks had a message for him. But sights and sounds which are beautiful in themselves influence every poet. The surprise is when we find Kingsley extracting poetry from the vulgar or the commonplace. What is less poetical than a field of potatoes or turnips or cabbages? Yet there is poetry even here for a thinker, as Kingsley teaches us.

THE POETRY OF A ROOT-CROP

Underneath their eider-robe
Russet swede and golden globe,
Feathered carrot, burrowing deep,
Steadfast wait in charmèd sleep;
Treasure-houses wherein lie,
Locked by angels' alchemy,
Milk and hair, and blood, and bone,
Children of the barren stone.

How many of you must have sometimes had a thought like this, without perhaps developing it, while walking about the field of a farmer, either in winter or in summer. The vegetables below there mean many great strange things to the modern dreamer. The substance of them is indeed to become milk and hair and blood and bone, but it is to

become even more than that—human feeling, human thought. Kingsley calls vegetables children of the stones, because only vegetables can extract the substance of life, protoplasm, from the soil. But even in the dead clay and stones there is life hidden, the same life that beats in our hearts and thinks in our minds. All is life; there is no grander discovery of modern science than the knowledge that the sentient issues from the non-sentient, the conscious from the unconscious. But there is even more than this thought in the sight of a vegetable field. Not only will all that substance be changed into future human life; but it has been life before, thousands of times, millions of times. Nor are the elements of life within those vegetables derived only from the earth in which they grow; they are not only children of the barren stone; they are also

Children of the flaming Air,
With his blue eye keen and bare,
Spirit-peopled smiling down
On frozen field and toiling town—
Toiling town that will not heed
God His voice for rage and greed.

The vegetable grows, you know, not only by taking into itself material from the earth, but also by absorbing material from the great blue air, which the poet describes for us as a blue-eyed spirit gazing down upon the world. Such, too, is our own growth, from air and clay. Dying, all life-shapes melt back again, partly into the ground, partly into gasses that mingle with the atmosphere. Thus not only the ground on which we walk is old life, but the air all about us and above us is life also that once was and that will again be. There is really very much to think about in these little verses, not at all so simple in meaning as they might at first appear.

Now let us turn to Kingsley's classical poems. As a dramatist, his long play called "The Saint's Tragedy" is a failure; perhaps it is a failure because it was written for a

particular argumentative purpose. Poetry written for any didactic or special purpose is likely to prove a failure. Quite otherwise was it when Kingsley attempted to write great poetry only for the joy of writing and for the beauty of the thought in itself. He is, as I told you before, the writer of the best hexameters in the English language, and that is a very great glory. I suppose you know that the hexameter is not considered altogether possible in English; it is a Greek measure, and most of the poets who have tried to write English hexameters have failed. Longfellow's "Evangeline," a beautiful poem emotionally, is a proof of the difficulty of the hexameter, for it is somewhat a failure in its verse form. Tennyson wisely left the hexameter almost alone. Swinburne succeeded with it upon a small scale; Kingsley succeeded with it upon a very considerable scale. But in both cases this success will be found due, in great part, to the use of Greek words and words of Greek derivation. Even so, the feat is very remarkable in Kingsley's case. He chose for his subject the story of "Perseus and Andromeda," a subject which he has also treated with wonderful beauty in prose; I refer to the story of Perseus in his Greek fairy tales, "The Heroes," one of the most exquisite books ever written. You ought to know something of this story before we make quotations from the verse. The whole of it is too long to tell now, nor is it necessary to tell all, because Kingsley in the poem treats of one episode only, the delivery of Andromeda.

Andromeda was the most beautiful of maidens in the old Greek story, the daughter of Queen Cassiopea. One day the Queen rashly said that her daughter was more beautiful than the gods, more beautiful than the divinity of the sea. Thereupon the divinity of the sea became angry, and sent a great sea-monster to ravage the coast, as a punishment for the Queen's words. When the cause of this visitation was discovered, the priests decided that Andromeda should be given to the sea-monster in expiation of the mother's words. Accordingly the girl was chained

naked to a rock by the sea-shore. But when the sea-monster came to devour her, she was delivered by the hero Perseus, who came flying over the sea to save her, moving through the air on winged sandals of gold, the gift of the gods. The poem treats of the discovery of the Queen's words, the sentence of the priests, the chaining of the maiden to the rock, her despair, the passing of the sea-gods, refusing to save her, the coming of Perseus, and the promise of marriage. You know that the Greeks named constellations after their heroes and divinities; and it may interest you to remember that the characters of this beautiful old story appear in the figures of the celestial globe even in these days of modern astronomy.

Perhaps the best idea of Kingsley's excellence in this verse can be obtained by quoting the passage describing the sea-gods. It is rather long; but I shall only quote a few lines of the best:

Far off, in the heart of the darkness,
Bright white mists rose slowly; beneath them the wander-
ing ocean
Glimmered and glowed to the deepest abyss; and the knees
of the maiden
Trembled and sank in her fear, as afar, like a dawn in the
midnight,
Rose from their seaweed chamber the choir of the mystical
sea-maids.
Onward toward her they came, and her heart beat loud at
their coming,
Watching the bliss of the gods, as they wakened the cliffs
with their laughter.
Onward they came in their joy, and before them the roll of
the surges
Sank, as the breeze sank dead, into smooth green foam-
flecked marble,
Awed; and the crags of the cliff, and the pines of the
mountain were silent.
Onward they came in their joy, and around them the
lamps of the sea-nymphs,

Myriad fiery globes, swam panting and heaving; and rain-
bows
Crimson and azure and emerald, were broken in star-
showers, lighting
Far through the wine-dark depths of the crystal, the gardens
of Nereus,
Coral and sea-fan and tangle, the blooms and the palms of
the ocean.
Onward they came in their joy, more white than the foam
which they scattered,
Laughing and singing, and tossing and twining, while eager,
the Tritons
Blinded with kisses their eyes, unproved, and above them
in worship
Hovered the terns, and the seagulls swept past them on
silvery pinions
Echoing softly their laughter; around them the wantoning
dolphins
Sighed as they plunged, full of love; and the great sea-
horses which bore them
Curved up their crests in their pride to the delicate arms of
the maidens,
Pawing the spray into gems, till a fiery rainfall, unharmed,
Sparkled and gleamed on the limbs of the nymphs, and the
coils of the mermen.

This is a fair example, not so much to be admired because it is like a picture by Titian or Giorgione, but because it represents a triumph over a supremely difficult form of verse. I have chosen the extract also because it contains fewer Greek words than other parts of the poem, which are otherwise more beautiful — such as the description of the maiden's first sight of Perseus, at the very moment when she is reproaching the gods for their cruelty:

Sudden she ceased, with a shriek: in the spray, like a
hovering foam-bow,
Hung, more fair than the foam-bow, a boy in the bloom of
his manhood,
Golden-haired, ivory-limbed, ambrosial; over his shoulder

Hung for a veil of his beauty the gold-fringed folds of the
goat-skin,
Bearing the brass of his shield, as the sun flushed clear on
its clearness.

The most beautiful word in the above lines is the Greek "ambrosial;" it is the value of this word that makes the line in which it occurs so much more perfect than the other four. Of course, without the use of many Greek words the poem could not have been written at all; but the longer extract which I gave you contains remarkably few.

My object was to show you by extracts the really important place that Kingsley occupied in nineteenth century literature. It is not a small thing to have written the best songs of the period, songs which have been translated into so many languages; and it is not a small thing to have written the best English hexameters. Nor is it common that a man capable of writing an immortal song should also be capable of severe verse. Altogether Kingsley must be considered as a very extraordinary phenomenon, a true genius whose powers were unfortunately prevented by the difficulties of life from fully developing themselves. He was like a bird whose wings were clipped. To study him will reward you richly, if you will remember his limitations. Do not read his dramatic poem; and do not be shocked by discovering in the rest of his work some short poems of no importance. It has happened to very few poets in this world to produce work uniformly good. Tennyson did this; Rossetti did this, or very nearly did it; but scarcely any other has done it. You do not read the whole of Wordsworth, nor of Coleridge, nor of Byron, nor even of Shelley. And for the same reason I should not advise you to read every bit of verse that Kingsley wrote. There is some rubbish. But the jewels among that rubbish have a peculiar colour and splendour that distinguish them from everything else written during the same period.