

IN SEARCH OF AN IDEAL.

AN ENTHUSIAST WHO SOUGHT THE MEANING OF "EXCELSIOR."

His Illusions and Disillusions—A Meeting with the Benignant Village Pastor, and the Final Restoration of the Young Man to Happiness.

[NOTE.—A portion of this paper has appeared elsewhere. It expresses the sorrows of an enthusiast, who is, by contact with the poetic advisers to whom he applies, deprived of his ideal. Fired with the conception of a poet in "Excelsior," he goes successively to the grocer and cabinet-maker, demanding of them the meaning of that talismanic word, getting from them very mundane, tradesman-like, yet varying, definitions. With the one it is a sort of tomato, and with the other a stuffing for a lounge. In sheer exhaustion of spirit, he turns away from his latest disillusioning, and this is what follows.]

He hastened out. In one short hour blight had come over his blooming spirit; his ghostly presence, as we intimated, had grown gray in less

"A single night, As men's have grown from sudden fears." Had his ghost been disembodied, yet visible, I doubt not its ethereal tresses would have been seen white, and his spiritual features peaked and wan: as this was out of sight, we confine ourselves to facts, merely pausing to aver that the fine gold of his fancy was dimmed to the most vulgar, ill-smelling brass.

As he left the doorway from the last cavern of disillusion, hopeless, loveless, dreamless, sunless, careless, lawless and aweless, resolved to break something—to rend, to ruin, to light a torch, to fling a bomb, or else to hold himself cheap to the first Midianite he met; he came face to face with the village pastor, Father Pacificus. The stately, benignant old man, with wise and kindly face, was like a sun-rising to our benighted enthusiast. The pastor halted, and clasped both outstretched hands of him who plunged into deep seas had already begun to go down.

Dear old man! the world had need of him—a need, I doubt, it never will out-grow. And passing well he met the need. His wisdom had come through pure and peaceful years; and many a "deep distress" of his own and others, had "humanized his soul." He was celestially magnetized into an electric link between God and man, when, in his high pulpit, on the Sabbath—

His looks adorned the venerable place; but when dismounted from that pedestal, there was a sweet sociality about him, a heart-magnetism that called child, and bird, and all the dumb things into his presence. He loved to pat the children he met—chubby-cheeked girls in leafy lanes, or rude and ragged urchins on the dirty highways, alike found favor in his eyes. When he went his afternoon rounds, for one little Pat he met, he gave a dozen of them love, when he did it. It is not necessary to observe that he had a noticeable stoop of the shoulders, doubtless contracted in bowing to raise the fallen—indeed, it may not be necessary; yet we do it.

No more fortunate man could the enthusiast have met; he was one of earth's fallen ones, needing picking up; he was one of its sickly children—let him be patted on the back. He was to our poet as congenial a refuge as some venerable, pensive oak might seem, far down in the smile of sunset; for his voice was heartening, and his face became sunnier as he spoke.

"What aileth thee, my son?"—for the youth had striven to speak, but seemed incapable of utterance: "You appear distressed; may I not aid you?"

"Good father!" cried the disheartened visionary, breaking at last into passionate speech, "I am ruined!—they have robbed me!—I am a spiritually impoverished man, turned out to die and without help, I perish! What is the body's dissolution, compared with the murder of ideals, the suffocation of hopes, the dismemberment of the soul? A broken-down horse with an empty crib and a sand-pasture, is the child of Bounty's self, when you look at me! I, who felt upon me the sheen of angels, and the scented dew of paradise, must rot and moulder alive. I had a beautiful dream-land kingdom once,—a realm in which Thought and Feeling ever moved unhindered, where the young man and the maiden freshened and rejoiced, and beautiful maturity withered not, nor faded; where Imagination ever brightly built his lofty castles, and reared palaces, and peopled paradises, and hung rainbows, and bridged torrents, and painted sunsets. Ah, where is bright-eyed Fancy gone. Her luminous, painted wings are gray as the moth, and some miserable hand has crushed them! The barbarian and the vandal have broken into my enchanted realm, and it is desolate! The City of Mansoul is sacked!—first the newspaper men made a breach in its walls; and they were closely followed by two vulgar spirits, that read their spells backward, now the ruin is nearly complete. Save me! As you value the life of a soul, prevent the stars from being bullets,—give back its soul to the daisy,—tell me the meaning of Excelsior!"

The old pastor began to look serious; his brows became painfully arched, and his skin was lined with meditative wrinkles. Then he bent, and unbent, while his face was overspread with a smile, triumphant and compassionate: compassionate, because he recognized an unseen wrong—the wound of the world's ignorance and malice;

triumphant, because he believed in the survival of noble aims and ideas. "This is, indeed, a noble word, my son!—an aspirate of godlike breath; a symbol to have, to hold and hold fast by! It goes up by pyramid stairs to the Eternal,—Higher! Higher! Highest! The sublime is one of the lowest of its bases; it groans inarticulately up through the muffled human chrysalis; it exclaims exultantly in the expiring spirit; it sings halleluias from archangelic lips; it shouts along the embattled mountain from side and summit; it plunges into the

"Azure deep of air," and sails there "with supreme dominion." That wonderful word was by the Poet well-chosen. His brave, battling hero, whatever the nature of his enterprise, had set his mark far above the mean and interior. I should joy, O my son! to know that thou—that thou hadst chosen that word, and taken its meaning into thine own soul, for its inspiration.

A glad stream flushed the heart of our crippled enthusiast—it was Hope! Joy lighted his face, from that of his benefactor. O, sir, you give me confidence again!—you rebuild Paradise; I have a glimpse—a gleam of that which had vanished! You have saved an enthusiast from becoming a cynic—which is, according to some sage, only a sentimentalist soured; but while I am deeply grateful you will pardon me if I note down a few maxims, worthy of Colton or Rochefoucauld, that formed themselves within me during that spiritual phase, from which you have so happily delivered me. Pray, pause a moment, and allow me to do so.

The poet produced a tablet, and wrote thereon:—"This is what I once believed, and which seems too good to be lost: "Be not much elated by hope when you have met her prophet; but remember "her prophecies shall cease." "Be not much depressed though Despair also have her apostolate; for joy hath her sure and sweet returns. "Settle it in your mind that there are fewer pearls than oysters. "But be also sure that as soon as a genuine prize is brought up, the celebrated critic, Jeffrey Macaulay Conservative, will put on her spectacles, and, pretending an examination, declare it spurious. "The critic's function is to declare to the nineteenth century that Shakespeare and Milton are the poets, and to bid you swear by them. There are no others. "And settle it that as soon as the pearl is recognized and appraised, Honestus Wiseacre Owl, being no diver, will put on his smoker's-cap, and, in after-dinner leisure, deliberately try to carve one out of an oyster-shell—just like it. He means the public shall accept his counterfeit as a genuine thing. "The broken arm and battered nose of an Apollo or Venus betoken the existence of the fool and vandal; but argues not the absence of artist skill and sculptured beauty. "Preserve your individuality. If in you runs a pure, sweet stream of thought and feeling let it run. "Such gulf-currents flowing through the cold, brackish ocean of artificial human existence, are none too numerous; but be not over-confident yours can sweeten it. "And if you cannot give freshness and warmth to that around you, at least by an accelerated onward motion preserve yourself from being lost forever. The bitter, brimming mass is biggest, and hungry to swallow you down. "On some shore, lying far in the winter region, your summer current may break in blessing. "This is the end of my cynic-philosophy." Let me observe, that the pastor would not have written the like of this; he is too full of human-kindness to be cynical; he, however, promised the enthusiast a perusal of one of his sermons, dealing rather amply with the word "Excelsior." I was about to give a liberal extract; but looking up, my eye caught the astonishment of the editor's, and I was awed by those potent deterrents, the shears of fate and the wastebasket. More might be added, always; but, being arithmetical, as well as poetical, we put down so much, and carry the remainder.

P. S.—It was a sensible and loving woman who finally restored the enthusiast. PASTOR FELIX.

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