

LONDON'S BANKER-POET.

PASTOR FELIX WRITES ABOUT SAMUEL ROGERS.

Some of Rogers' Characteristics—His Early Home at Newington Green—Early Poems—"The Pleasures of Memory"—Visits to France, Italy and Scotland.

As these papers have been desultory, and rather reminiscent and sympathetic than formally critical, it has been the writer's habit to mingle personal references and notes of individual preference. Rogers happens to be a poet instrumental in the formation of his taste, and one to whom he is gratefully indebted, not only for hours of personal pleasure, but for the deeper appreciation of pure, perspicuous and harmonious writing. It is not common, in our hurried, garish, scientific and story-telling age, always straining after new, startling, and other superficial effects, to find people who care enough for reflective poetry to give it the careful attention which the masterpieces of this order will well repay. We have a modern horror of didacticism and of classic diction: that, having run to its rapid extreme, may in time make way for the appreciation of such writings as improve the mind while they enrich the heart. The writer of these sketches confesses an undiminished regard for the poet-banker, who was, in truth, more a poet, litterateur and connoisseur, than a counter of reals or shillings. There are hours in which the "Pleasures of Memory" and "Human Life" have their old charm; while "Italy" is still an exemplar of terse, chaste, perspicuous, yet picturesque English. The story of "Genevra" is signal for the influence it had on the writer's imagination when, as a child, he first met it in his school-reader. It haunted him long and gruesomely: for many a previous night he turned on the pillow, entering the woeful estate of the merry maiden entombed in the old trunk, and perished with her fancifully in her hideous despair. Rogers still holds his own with us, along with Goldsmith and Campbell. Their places are unique, and in their departments they are not easily to be superseded. How well says Howitt: "Of the writers, and especially the poets, who charmed our young and inexperienced spirits, how few are those whose works will bear the test of time; how few to whom we can turn at a mature age, and find them all that we ever believed them to be." To this test Rogers answers well. He never dazzles, and, taken for what we expect of his genius, he rarely disappoints.

Samuel Rogers, the long-enduring link between two poetic eras,—was happily born July 30, 1763, the third son in a large family, most of whom came to maturity. His father, Thomas Rogers, lived in suburban London, and was partner in a banking house, to which partnership his son succeeded. His mother was Mary Radford; and the home the poet first knew was the old ancestral mansion of the Radfords, at Newington Green, Middlesex. This intelligent and pious mother, who died while her poet-son was a youth of thirteen, was a descendant of the celebrated nonconformists Philip and Matthew Henry; and the Rogers family were whigs in politics and dissenters in religion. We say he was happily born; for he was born to the advantages of wealth without its perils. His temperament and disposition yielded him the greatest amount of delight, with the least of pain. For passion he had sentiment; for the creative imagination, taste, almost amounting to genius. He was equally fortunate in intercourse and association: the most diverse were his friends. So was he in his domestic relationships: for in his father's house he was not less admired than loved, and in the beginning he had in his tastes and pursuits aid and sympathy.

Newington Green was a place congenial to the poetic temperament. It bore the marks of an old, long-settled locality, and was enriched to the fancy with traditions of the Tudor family, who made the neighborhood a hunting-ground. Here, and at Canonbressy and Islington, Elizabeth Tudor, mounted, would chase the fallow deer, when all around was yet forest. Kingsland, now built over, had its walk of Henry VIII., and its walk of Elizabeth; but if their spirits walk there now they must be without power of recognition. Built round, in that day, with ancestral homes embowered in shade, and with a park-like seclusion and quietude, Newington Green seemed to have a sense of its former importance as a royal haunt, and so to impress the beholder. The Rogers home was on the south gate road, west side the green, and nearest London. It was a large house of red brick, covered with stucco; in an old garden, ample and full of shade; having a row of elms in front and a field at one side.

At Stoke Newington is the old Presbyterian chapel where the family attended and listened to Dr. Price, revered for his character, and admired for his classic tastes. The family pew was in the south-east corner, on the left hand side, facing the pulpit. Here then sat Mary Wollstonecraft, a teacher at that time. Here in earlier days, Daniel Defoe attended worship; while here at a later date sat Mrs. Barbauld, from Sabbath to Sabbath, while her husband was in the pulpit as the officiating minister.

Here in the home of Newington he grew, and formed his taste: here with eagerness he turned the pages of the Gentleman's Magazine, to find, with a satisfaction long remembered, his essays, counted worthy of a place; here, where his grandfather had

lived before him, he remained, to witness the death of mother, brother, and father; and here the "Pleasures of Memory" was written.

The boy lived in stirring times. While only eleven the news of the American Revolution and the riots in Boston came to him. He would recall how, one night, his father, after reading the Bible to his family, closed it solemnly, and explained to them the cause of the rebellion, and how the British nation was wrong and deserved to fail in their attempt to subjugate the colonists. Such lessons he was quick to receive and slow to forget.

He was very fortunate in his schoolmasters; particularly in Mr. Burgle, whose mind, enlarged by reading and observation, made a strong impression upon him. At Hackney school he contracted a friendship with William Maltby which was lifelong. Founded on mutual respect and similarity of tastes, it continued for eighty years; and when Maltby died in 1854, shortly before the poet, Rogers set a memorial tablet over his grave in Norwood cemetery. He took to books with avidity. When, through the failure of health and eyesight, he sought the sea-side, and kept holiday at Margate and Brighton, Goldsmith and Grey were carried with him. His admiration and study of these poets need not be assumed to any one familiar with his own writings. These were his classics; and while he cared nothing for Greek or mathematics, English poetry and prose made the perpetual banquet to which his mind sat down. Of all works of power he was an ardent and catholic admirer.

The works of Samuel Johnson, who had not ceased to be a king of letters, were also admired by him. He loved to recall the day, when, with his friend Maltby, he went to Johnson's door in Bolt Court, Fleet street, intent on calling on the surly philosopher. But with hand upon the knocker fancying they heard the old man's shuffling tread in the hall, their hearts misgave them, and they fled away.

Rogers' first poetic venture was "An Ode to Superstition," published in 1786. This had an encouraging reception with the critics, and the praise of the Monthly Review was especially gratifying. "In these pieces," said the critic, "we perceived the hand of an able master." Rogers was grateful to his then unknown critic, whom he afterwards understood to be Dr. Enfield, and of whom in his latest days he often spoke in terms of respect and affection. The other pieces in the volume came in for their share of praise; these were "A Wish," "The Sailor," "A Sketch of the Alps at Daybreak," and "To a Lady on the Death of her Lover."

In 1792 appeared the "Pleasures of Memory," on which he had been for six years engaged, upon his return to Newington Green, after banking hours. He was from the first a careful literary workman, who wrought with diligence, and in the exercise of a fastidious taste. It was hailed on all hands with critical applause. That reeling organ "The Monthly Review," predicted that its correctness of thought, delicacy of sentiment, variety of versification, "being the characters which distinguish this beautiful poem," could not fail to ensure success. In fact Rogers was always treated with critical courtesy. He, however, Howitt assures us, "met with that species of Mobaw criticism, that scalping and scurrying literary assault and battery, which so many of his contemporaries have had to undergo. There was a generous and calm suavity about his writings which disarmed the most eager assailant of merit. There was in him an absence of that militant and antagonistic spirit which provokes the like animus. There was felt only the purity of taste, the deep love of beauty in art and nature, the vivid yet tender sympathy with humanity which put every one dreadfully in the wrong who should attempt to strike down their possessor." It may be said, in addition, that Rogers did not abruptly depart from the poetic school in vogue; but slowly varied in his style, to accommodate the changing taste of his time. He began with the diction of Gray and Goldsmith; and ended his poetic career with a free and easy blank-verse,—reminding us of the Elizabethans,—and the most limpid prose.

When this poem was issued Rogers stepped immediately to the front. There were no poets in Britain, of true vitality and moment, saving Cowper, in England, and Burns, in Scotland. In the same year that the "Ode to Superstition" appeared, the Kilmarock edition of Rogers' poems started his magic name on its career of immortality; and the Band of Olney had chanted his sweetest strains. Otherwise, Mason, Beattie, Hayley, Joseph Wharton, and William Whitehead, were the poets of the time, who are known to the curious now only by a stray feather or two of the languid wings wherewith they flew to oblivion. All except Beattie. Of his "Minstrel" the writer has pleasant recollection; but as he has not met gentle Edwin since childhood, he knows not how that once loved phantom might now appear. Crabbe had, indeed, appeared as a poet, but obscurely; so that Rogers then shared with Cowper poetical supremacy in England.

There are three poems, which, from their titles we instinctively associate in mind,—Akenside's "Pleasures of the Imagination," Rogers' "Pleasures of Memory," and Campbell's "Pleasures of Hope"; but only the two latter are closely akin. As Rogers follows Goldsmith, so Campbell follows Rogers,—and that closely, as a parallelism of passages might show. In his highland home of Kermans, this soft and silvery music stole into the young Scotchman's soul, and fired him with emulation. Campbell is the most vigorous, but Rogers the most correct. Campbell has a lottier ringing music; Rogers the more mellifluous and heart-soothing line. You think of "The Deserted Village," almost as soon as you begin to read:—

"Twilight's soft dews steal o'er the village green,
With magic tints to harmonize the scene,
Sullied is the hum that thro' the hamlet broke,
When round the ruins of their ancient oak
The peasants flocked to hear the minstrel play,
And games and carols closed the busy day.
Her wheel at rest, the matron thrills no more
With treasured tales and legendary lore.
All, all are fled; nor mirth nor music flows
To chase the dreams of innocent repose.
All, all are fled; yet still I linger here;
What secret charms this silent spot endear?"

And yet there is a superior freshness in the earlier poem, a heart-charm, a charm of naturalness—that we miss here.

Rogers' nephew, Samuel Sharpe, (son of his sister, Maria, to whose death he refers so feelingly in his "Hieman Life"), in a brief life of his uncle, gives some account of the localities from whence he drew the scenic descriptions in the poem: "While living as a boy at Newington Green, Sam-

uel and his brothers and sisters were taken from time to time to pay a visit to their grandfather and aunts at the Hill near Stourbridge, and these two houses, his grandfather's near Stourbridge, and his father's on Newington Green, most likely together supplied him with the scenery that his poem on the 'Pleasures of Memory' opens with. The house on the hill, from which the aunts removed soon after their father's death, may have been

"You old mansion frowning thro' the trees"; and have given him

"The garden's desert paths," and

"That hall were once in antiquated state,
The chair of justice held the grave debate."

On the other hand,

"The village greens"

may have been that in front of his father's house, where he was within the sound of Mr. Burgh's school-bell, which he describes as

"Quickening my truant feet across the lawn."

The Hill is in the parish of Old Swinford; and there in the churchyard are the tombstones of the Rogers family. There he had thoughtfully traced the name of Rogers.

"On your grey stone, that fronts the chancel-door,
Worn smooth by busy feet nor seen no more."

This churchyard the poet had in his mind when he said—

"Here alone
I search the record of each mouldering stone."

The visits to the hill also sometimes led him to the Leasowes, lately the picturesque seat of the poet Shenstone, who had been intimate with his father. At that time Shenstone's artificial additions to the natural beauties of the place had not fallen to decay; and the visits to Worcester-shire gave the following couplet to the "Pleasures of Memory."

Thus, thro' the gloom at Shenstone's fairy-grove
Maria's urn still breathes the voice of love.

The poet on several occasions visited France and Scotland. He saw the reigning King, and the beautiful Queen, before the French revolution; then when they were in the dust, he had the first consul, Napoleon, pointed out to him, standing on the steps of the Tuilleries. In the Louvre he gratified his passion for art, and studied the masterpieces, till his knowledge was much enlarged, and his taste improved. In Italy he gathered the material for his most interesting poem,—or series of poems, and procured many of the antique artistic treasures with which his London home was decorated. His first excursion through England into Scotland was made on horseback. He had letters that introduced him to Dugald Stewart, Henry MacKenzie, Robertson the historian, Dr. Blair, Prof. Playfair, and others. He was there to hunt out genius and to study greatness. Strange to say of one man he saw and heard nothing. Did no one utter in his ear the name of Robert Burns? That "burning and shining light" had dazzled Edinburgh and gone; and now was he silent about him, when the stranger came to her gates asking,—Who are your poets? Just then the greatest man in Scotland, and the greatest poet Scotland in a thousand years had been seen gauging ale-casks in Ayrshire. Before Rogers came again, the sod in St. Michael's Kirk-yard at Dumfries had covered that splendid head; and it was a life-long regret with the bard of memory that the fame of the Scottish minstrel did not reach him till it was too late to see him on his native soil, or anywhere in this world.

PASTOR FELIX.

A Town That Pays No Rates.
The town of Klingenberg-on-the-Main, Bavaria, occupies that enviable position. The town makes so much money out of its argill-pits that not only are no rates exacted at all, but every inhabitant receives a yearly sum out of the surplus town funds. In fact, the authorities are not only rich but generous, and on last New Year's Day they sent an official gift of fifteen shillings to a young Klingenberg who is serving his time with the army in a distant part of Germany. The County Council of the North Riding of Yorkshire decided in 1893 that they would not levy any rates during the next twelve months; the balance at their bankers being so large that they required no more money for a year. Chamaret, a small French township of about 600 inhabitants, received in 1892 a legacy which will for ever relieve it from taxation. The will of an old miser bequeathed them his whole hoarded wealth, 600,000 francs, equal to about £25,000, which will bring in a yearly revenue of about £1,000, sufficient, it is said to defray all parochial expenses, and leave a surplus of about £400 to be expended as the municipality may determine. The only conditions to the bequest are that a stone tower, 90 ft. high, with a clock and huge bell, shall be erected in memory of the testator. Taxation seems to be least in China, the average there being only 3s. per inhabitant; the other extreme is France, with 74s. per inhabitant.

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A FRIEND

Speaks through the Boothbay (Me.) Register, of the beneficial results he has received from a regular use of Ayer's Pills. He says: "I was feeling sick and tired and my stomach seemed all out of order. I tried a number of remedies, but none seemed to give me relief until I was induced to try the old reliable Ayer's Pills. I have taken only one box, but I feel like a new man. I think they are the most pleasant and easy to take of anything I ever used, being so finely sugar-coated that even a child will take them. I urge upon all who are in need of a laxative to try Ayer's Pills. They will do good."

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AN AUTHOR'S AGONY.

William Dean Howells' First Experience With Realism.

Mr. Howells' first experience with realism was not altogether a happy one. The young man, while paying his first visit to his Boston publishers, was paid in gold for a poem he had contributed to "The Atlantic," and was permitted to look at the proof sheets, which had just come from the printer. "It was 'The Pilot's Story,'" he writes in the July Harper, "which, I suppose, has had as much acceptance as anything of mine in verse (I do not boast of a vast acceptance for it), and I had attempted to treat a phase of the national tragedy of slavery, as I had imagined it on a Mississippi steamboat. A young planter has gambled away the slave girl, who is the mother of his child, and when he tells her she breaks out upon him with the demand:

"What will you say to our boy when he cries for me, there in Saint Louis?"

"I had thought this very well and natural and simple, but a fatal proof-reader had not thought it well enough, or simple and natural enough, and he had made the line read:

"What will you say to our boy when he cries for me, 'Ma' there in Saint Louis?"

"He had even the inspiration to quote the work he preferred to the one I had written, so that there was no merciful possibility of mistaking it for a misprint, and my blood froze to my veins at sight of it. Mr. Fields had given me the sheets to read while he looked over some letters, and he either felt the chill of my horror, or I made some sign or sound of dismay that caught his notice, for he looked around at me. I could only show him the passage with a gasp. I dare say he might have liked to laugh, for it was cruelly funny, but he did not; he was concerned for the magazine, as well as for me. He declared that when he first read the line he had thought I could not have written it so, and he agreed with me that it would kill the poem if it came out in that shape. He instantly set about repairing the mischief, so far as could be. He found that the whole edition of that sheet had been printed, and the air blackened round me again, lighted up here and there with baleful flashes of the newspaper wit at my cost, which I provisioned in my misery; I knew what I should have said of such a thing myself if it had been another's. But the publisher at once decided that the sheet must be reprinted, and I went away weak, as it in the escape of some deadly peril. Afterward it appeared that the line had passed the first proof-reader as I wrote it, but that the final reader had entered so sympathetically into the realistic intention of my poem as to contribute the modification which had nearly been my end."

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