

Notches on The Stick

It may not be needful, in this day of literary clubs and multitudinous authorship, to commend the study of poetry; and yet there may be some who condemn such study, from an ultra-religious or an ultra-utilitarian stand-point. Many consider poetry not, as science or philosophy, a subject for meditative thought, but merely as an easy recreation. The poetic art, however, equires study, and implies mental growth and development. If you have never become a student in the school of the Muses it is not too late to begin.

This is a wide domain, and the product therein of great variety. There is more-over, that which is adaptable to the present taste and capacity of all. Cast about and find what is suitable for you; gather your mixed treasures;—now a glint of gold hints of auriferous possibilities before you, now a single pearl, or a red or purple gem, will declare the crown be-starrad, or the robe encrusted, which you may don by and by. You need not begin with Dante, or Milton, or Browning;—above all, do not feel that you must affect a liking for these, or knowledge of them. But when you have arrived at them, in your real appreciation, in the development of judgement and taste, claim them yours, as far as you do really appropriate them. Meanwhile do not be afraid to acknowledge the plainer muse who can charm you now. The grains of gold today—gather them in your hand; you will come to the mossy yellow bar in some tomorrow, and lift that, too.

A man of real talent, a strong, elemental man, with a vein of poetry in him,—con-fessed to me he could not be interested by Shakespeare, but that Burns delighted him. I could not blame or despise his taste, finding many points where I was in sympathy with him. I could not tell him, except by the little enthusiasm I could ex-press, that there was something in the great Briton of which he had never con-ceived. I knew I had only seen a little of that mighty realm the poet's magic had opened up. But I liked the honesty of the man who would not profess a knowledge he did not possess, and a taste he had not seriously tried to educate. But he who now cultivates his Longfellow may one day ar-rive at the profundities of Dante, or Browning, or to the universal truth of Shakespeare.

It was formerly more the practice of re-ligious people to condemn the study of po-etry, and especially the drama, than it is at present. Sometimes books of this kind are still denounced with true Puritanic re-probation; but, on the whole the Church is too enlightened for the trumpet of the phil-istine-b bigot to sound this note over loudly. We read, not long ago, of a young South-erner who was brought summarily to hook for a complimentary allusion to Shakes-peare, in illustration of his point "with regard to the Bible as literature." Some mental kinsman of Lichlan Campbell, doubtless, forthwith arose in church and "delivered a very severe Paillipic against Shakespeare and others of his tribe," say-ing that they had done incalculable harm to the cause of sound morality and religious instruction." This literary iconoclast found a prompt ally in the pastor of the church, who presently declared that he "had never read but one play of Shakes-peare's, and very little else of secular litera-ture." The minor critics of the church immediately followed the major, as the flock follows the bell-wether through a gap in the fence; so that the young man, over-whelmed by the majority, "went to his home a sadder but, perhaps a wiser man."

The reverse of such opinion is given in a quotation from Farrar, in the article from which we quote [Edwin Mims, M. A. in his article, in the Southern Methodist Review, on "Poetry and the Spiritual Life,"] therefore we will reproduce it. It is the testimony of a mature and highly-developed man, who is able to appraise the value of poetry as a study. "I dare to say that I have learned more of high and holy teaching from Dante and Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth, Browning and Tennyson, than I have learned from many of the professed divines. The poets have given me more consolation in sorrow, more passion for righteousness, more faith in the divine goodness, more courage to strive after the attainment of the divine ideal, more insight into the sacred charities which save us from despairing over the littleness of man, than I have derived from other men. . . . Next to these [Christ and the prophets and apostles of the Bible,] of all human teachers I would place the illumined souls of the few Christian poets of the world who, sweeping aside the sham and rubbish of Pharissism, lead us to realities and to the living Christ." How like is the

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testimony of the Pleacher to that of the most helpful and healing of all poets!

"Blessing be with them, and eternal praise,
The poets—who on earth have made us heirs
Of truth and pure delight by heavenly lays!
Oh! might my name be numbered among theirs,
I ten gladly would I end my mortal days."

Mr. Mims, on his own part, declares that Shakespeare "more than any man that has ever lived, had a vision of the life of man in its entirety," and he seconds the opinion of Dr. Broadus, delivered before the students of Vanderbilt university, that the scholars of the church "could not afford to leave Shakespeare out of their libraries." Next, he maintains, Wordsworth "had a vision of nature as the revelation of God and as the teacher and comforter of man. . . . To an age of materialism he spoke a message of spiritual life; to the age of doubt and skepticism he brings the calm and rest of a sublime faith in God and man and nature." Tennyson, too, he exalts, for he "has many a message for those who are seeking for the truth;" and as for Browning, his "faith in God and immortality and Christ was never shaken; his poetry is a triumphant assertion of those fundamental facts of the spiritual life."

As for the effect of the study of poetry upon the intellect, it should not be neces-sary to argue, that, in due proportion, with scientific, mathematical and logical studies it has an influence ennobling, strengthen-ing and refining. The poetic passion is in itself pure, and may have a modifying effect upon a character in which much of evil may exist. Byron, though a poet, may in-deed be a bad man; but Byron, the man, might have been worse but for the poetic element, which, in spite of the earthy and even lurid tinge it took, we hold to have been a saving quality. With the best of men, however, poetry has been a lamp lit with celestial fire, a smile of the godlike face, more radiant and beneficent than the one at his rising.

A man of character and intellect, able in executive matters, and a reasoner, but with scant imaginative endowment, de-clared to us that he never read a piece of verse without wishing it had been written in prose, that he might the better under-stand it. He had several times attempted an epic, but soon desisted, feeling that he, and not the epic, was deficient, for it he could he would willingly understand and enjoy it. We have, indeed, thought it a good practice for the students of poetry, that of recasting verse into prose form, as an analytic exercise. There is some verse indeed, which would be just as poetic in substance, if cast into limpid prose,—and this is an exceedingly good test of its quality. Take, for example, a few lines from William Sharp's "Sospiri Di Rome, which by the transposition of a few words may be rendered as follows:

"Through the tall corn of the Sabine valleys, and through the seeding, goes the nimble-footed wind. I hear a blithe voice calling. What says the wind as it passeth by,—the shepherd-wind? Low laughed he, far and near, and the red poppies lift their heads, tossing them in the sun. A thousand, thousand blooms, in the air tossing banners of joy; for it is the shepherd-wind that in passing by singeth low and laugheth through the seeding grass and the tall corn."

Our reader will have read—and will he not instantly recall it?—Wordsworth's description of a bank of daffodils in motion blithe as that of the poppies:

"I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Flattering and dancing in the breeze."

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,

They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of the bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

"The waves beside them danced, but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:—
A poet could not but be glad
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
The wealth the show to me had brought."

But here follows the stanza—holding the poet's central idea, as a husk the kernel—that makes of the piece a poem, instead of merely a bit of bright description:

"For oft when on my couch I lie,
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude,
And then my heart with pleasure fills
And dances with the daffodils."

A correspondent speaks in commenda-tory terms of "The Seven Seas" by Rad-yard Kipling: . . . "You will like them better than the 'Barrack-Room Ballads.' Part of these, indeed, are 'Barrack-Room Ballads,' but the greater poems are not. His ballads are unique in their kind, how-ever,—real ballads, and presenting the life of the British soldier. But the other poems are all alive with imaginative beauty and invention. I think you will like them."

"The Forge in the Forest," by Charles G. D. Roberts, we are glad to learn is well spoken of in the press, and is success-ful in the market. In ten days 1000 copies were sold. We expect to treat this work in a future paper; and also "The Book of the Native," by the same author, which is received with much favor.

Charles and Mary Dickens, son and daughter of the great novelist, are dead. While the brother was being buried at Mortlake, the sister was lying at Farnham, a small village in Surrey famed for its castle and Episcopal palace. "Mamie" Dickens,—so called by her father—is familiarly known on this side the sea through her writings. She was the elder of the two daughters of Dickens, and was born in 1838 when he was in the throes of writing "Oliver Twist."

Balzac, the French writer, is to be com-memorated by a statue at Tours, the city in which he was born. On the house made signal by so important event a tablet has been placed, and on the notary's office where he served his apprenticeship another. The statue is designed to occupy one of the public squares, and will be welcome ad-ornment to the city in which are statues also of Descartes and Rabelais.

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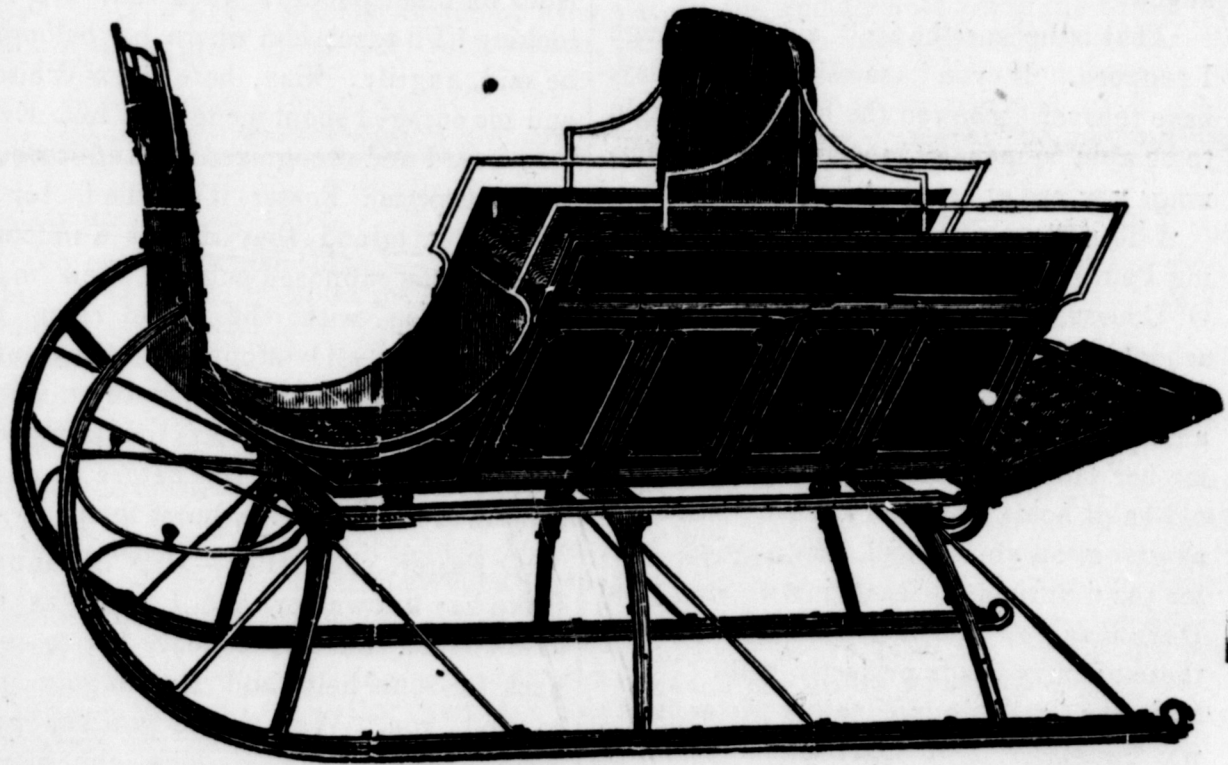
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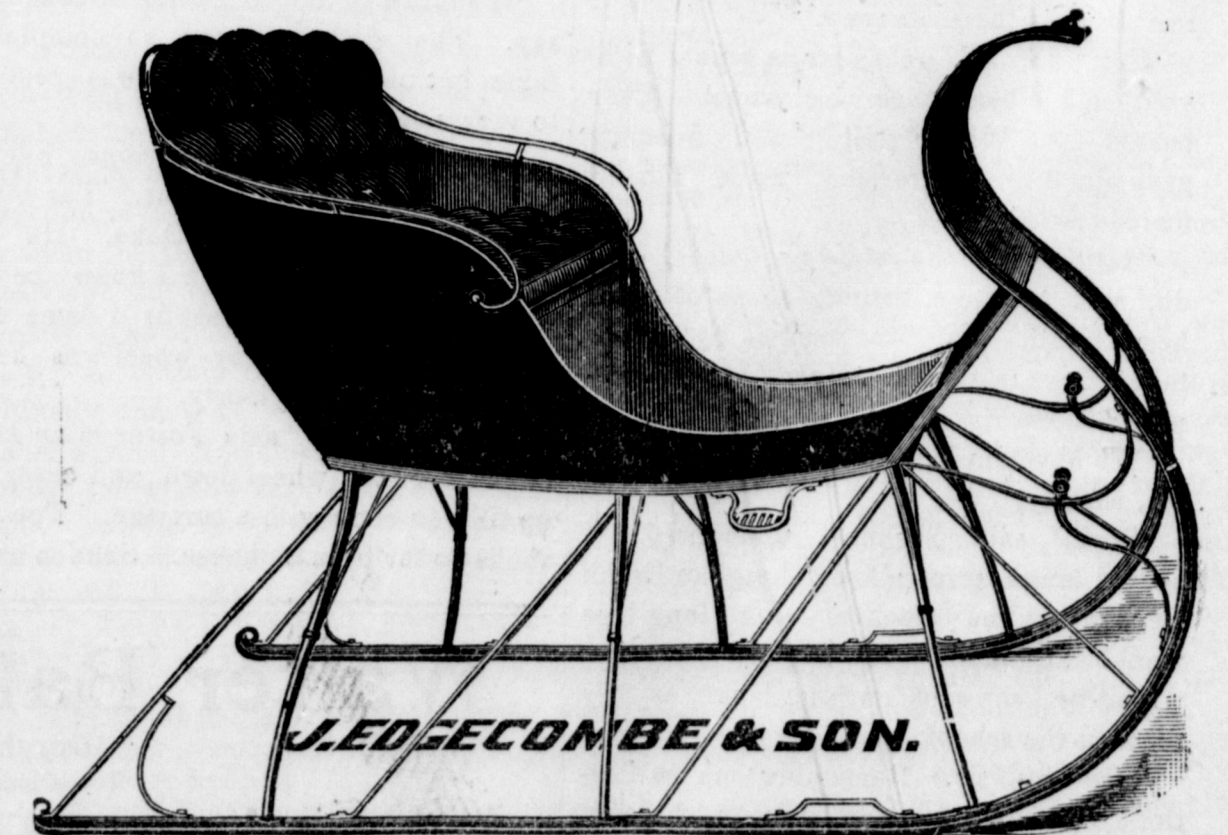
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