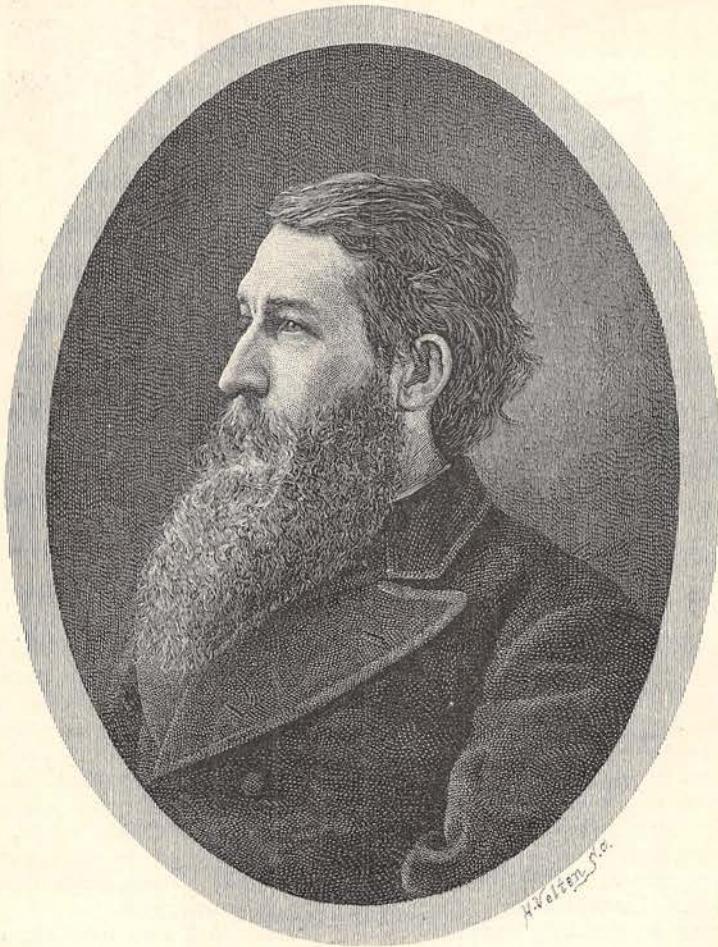


SIDNEY LANIER, POET.



SIDNEY LANIER. (ENGRAVED BY H. VELTEN FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY KUHN & CUMMINGS.)

THERE are few to whom is due the creative name of poet. The forest of newspaper and magazine is full of birds. They chirp on every bough. But the true artist-singers are very rare and very dearly to be prized. Such a one was Sidney Lanier.

The sparrow and the lark are both birds, and both have their song; and there is a sense in which every writer who can marry beautiful thoughts to beautiful words, with skill enough to please, is a poet, even though thought and form have been heard a thousand times. They sing with easy variations the old songs which we have learned to understand, and they give us pleasure. The cleverness is not in the theme, but in the variation; and most of us are satisfied with clever-

ness. There is not much else in the literary world. Literature comes chiefly by knack and practice and facility. Little of it requires fresh eyes, or a passion for the truth one sees for himself, or a soul that tells the world what is beauty, and is not content to be told. And so it happens that pupils do not flock to the new teacher. He does well if he finds twelve disciples. He must live long enough to teach a second generation, or be content with his own silent confidence that the poetry is good poetry, the art good art, and that the world will find it out by and by. Is human nature so much more hospitable to the new, or is criticism so much keener-eyed than in the days of Shakspeare, or Milton, or Keats, that nowadays the singer of a new song will

find room and welcome and be heard? I am not sure.

I venture to say that Sidney Lanier was a poet; something other than a rhymers of clever convention. While we do not talk so much now about genius as we did thirty years ago, we can yet recognize the difference between the fervor of that divine birth and the cantering of the common Pegasus forth and back, along the common post-roads over which facile talent rides his daily hack. The poems on which Lanier's fame will rest are not numerous, nor are they yet gathered into a volume. He is better known by his two courses of lectures in Baltimore, "The Science of English Verse" and "The English Novel," and by "The Boy's Froissart," "The Boy's King Arthur," and "Mabinogion," three books belonging to a series he had planned which should teach again our boys and girls the old tales of chivalry. But these were only his interludes, tasks which he set himself,—tasks, though done with much love, for the day's bread. His best heart was put, as daily toil would allow, on higher work.

Sidney Lanier's father was a lawyer in Macon, Georgia, where our poet was born, February 3d, 1842. As a child his first passion was for music, and it was his last. He never quite settled in his own mind whether poetry or music is the higher art. While still a boy he played the flute, banjo, guitar, violin, piano, and organ. On the flute he was recognized as one of the most brilliant performers in the country. The revelation of music came to him before that of poetry. It seemed to him the larger part of life. How it is to be explained psychologically I do not pretend to say; but he seemed to hear music always sounding in his ears, and he had only to withdraw his attention from other thoughts for a moment, to listen to strains that came without will of his. In the one novel that he wrote, at the age of twenty-five, he makes one of his characters say:

"To make a *home* out of a household, given the raw materials,—to wit, wife, children, a friend or two, and a house,—two other things are necessary. These are a good fire and good music. And inasmuch as we can do without the fire for half the year, I may say music is the one essential." "Late explorers say they have found some nations that had no God; but I have not read of any that had no music." "Music means harmony, harmony means love, love means — God!"

At the age of fifteen young Sidney entered the Sophomore class of Oglethorpe College, Midway, Ga., from which he graduated with the valedictory honors three years later, in 1860. He was immediately called to a tutorship in the same institution, where he remained during that eventful year before the

outbreak of the civil war, devoting his studies to languages and philosophy, and trying his hand at verse. He was a hungry student all his life. He did not believe that art comes all by instinct without work. In one of his keen criticisms of poets, he said of Edgar A. Poe, whom he esteemed more highly than his countrymen at large are wont to do: "The trouble with Poe was that he did not *know* enough. He needed to know a great many more things in order to be a great poet." Lanier had a passion for the exact truth, and all of it. When the opportunity came to him at last to study, and the Peabody library was opened to him in the winter of 1874 and 1875, he worked with the eagerness of a famished man; and that date formed an epoch in his literary growth. Here he made himself a profound student of Anglo-Saxon and early and later English poetry, developed his keen critical power, and prepared himself for his courses of lectures on the Science of English Verse, the English Novel, and Shakspeare, which he delivered the three last years of his life before the Peabody Institute and the Johns Hopkins University.

The war closed the colleges of the South, and at the age of nineteen Lanier went eagerly from the class-room to the camp. When a child, he had formed a military company of boys from eight to twelve years old, armed with bows and arrows; and so thoroughly did he drill them that they had an honored position assigned them in the anniversary parades of the city military organizations. He served as a private in the Confederate army through the whole war. Three times he was offered promotion and refused it, because it would separate him from his younger brother, who was his companion in arms, as their singularly tender devotion to each other would not allow them to be parted. The first year of service in Virginia was easy and pleasant, and he spent his abundant leisure in music and the study of German, French, and Spanish. He was in the battles of Seven Pines, Drewry's Bluff, and the seven days' fighting about Richmond, culminating in the terrible struggle of Malvern Hill. After this campaign he was transferred with his brother to the signal service, the joke among his less fortunate companions being that he was selected because he could play the flute. His head-quarters were now for a short period at Petersburg, where he had the advantage of a small local library, but where he began to feel the premonitions of that fatal disease, consumption, against which he battled for fifteen years. The regular full inspirations required by the flute probably prolonged his life. In 1863 his detachment was mounted,

and did service in Virginia and North Carolina. At last the two brothers were separated, it coming in the duty of both of them to run the blockade. Sidney's vessel was captured, and he was for five months in Point Lookout prison at Fortress Monroe, until he was exchanged (with his flute, for he never lost it) near the close of the war. Those were very hard days for him, and a picture of them is given in a chapter of his "Tiger Lilies," the novel which he wrote two years afterward, published by Hurd & Houghton. It is a luxuriant unpruned work, written in haste for the press within the space of three weeks, but one which gave rich promise of the poet. A chapter in the middle of the book, introducing the scenes of these four years of struggle, is wholly devoted to a remarkable metaphor which becomes an allegory and a sermon, in which war is pictured as "a strange, enormous, terrible flower," which "the early spring of 1861 brought to bloom, besides innumerable violets and jessamines." He tells how the plant is grown; what arguments the horticulturists give for cultivating it; how Christ inveighed against it, and how its shades are damp and its odors unhealthy; and what a fine specimen was grown the other day in North America by "two wealthy landed proprietors, who combined all their resources of money, of blood, of bones, of tears, of sulphur, and what not, to make this the grandest specimen of modern horticulture." "It is supposed by some," says he, "that seed of this American specimen (now dead) yet remain in the land; but as for this author (who, with many friends, suffered from the unhealthy odors of the plant), he could find it in his heart to wish fervently that this seed, if there be verily any, might perish in the germ, utterly out of sight and life and memory, and out of the remote hope of resurrection, for ever and ever, no matter in whose granary they are cherished!"

When peace was declared, Mr. Lanier returned to his father's home in Macon; and after nearly three years spent in teaching and other pursuits, he entered upon the study of the law, and was associated with his father in the practice of that profession until December, 1872.

It was not merely because he felt that his sphere was something else than law that he escaped from it. His health had become exceedingly precarious, and, leaving his wife and little family, he went to San Antonio, Texas, hoping to recover his strength in an outdoor life. But he found no benefit from it, and, now fully determined to give himself wholly to music and literature so long as he could keep death at bay, he sought a land of books.

After some months in New York, he settled down in Baltimore in 1874, where he made his home, except for absences in search of health, until his death, September 7th, 1881.

If poetry is the wedding of music and high thought, the union of beautiful sentiment and beautiful expression, not all poets have had the fine art of marrying the two in equal wedlock. The soul of Emerson's poems gave Sidney Lanier the keenest delight, the purest exaltation; he called him the wisest of his contemporaries; but his poetic form he found very deficient, especially in the sense of music. Our own age is recovering in Tennyson and Swinburne this music of verse, almost lost since Milton's youth. Not only did Lanier have their keen sense of it, but he made it a scientific study, as no other poet or critic has ever done, and devoted to it a whole course of lectures before the Peabody Institute, which are published in his "Science of English Verse." It is well within the truth to say that it is the most complete and thorough original investigation of the formal element in poetry in existence. It breaks away from the classic grammarian's tables of trochees and anapests, and discusses the form of poetry in terms of music, treating of rhythm as measured time, and of feet as the equal divisions on a bar, and showing how the recurrence of euphonic vowels and consonants secures that rich variety of tone-color which music gives in orchestration. I think these investigations in the science of verse bore their fruit in the poems written in the last three or four years of his life, during which time his sense of the solemn sacredness of Art became more profound, and he acquired a greater ease in putting into practice his theory of verse. And this made him thoroughly original. He was no imitator either of Tennyson or of Swinburne, though musically he is nearer to them than to any others of his day. We constantly notice in his verse that dainty effect which the ear loves, and which comes from deft marshaling of consonants and vowels, so that they shall add their suppler and subtler reinforcement to the steady infantry tramp of rhythm. Of this delicate art, which is much more than mere alliteration, which is concerned with dominant accented vowels as well as consonants, and with the easy flow of liquids and fricatives, and with the progressive opening or closing of the organs of articulation, Tennyson's "Brook" is an example for minute study perhaps unequaled in English verse, though some verses in Milton's youthful "Hymn to the Nativity" are well worthy to be compared with it. Of the same rare quality Lanier quotes as a brief illustration two wonderful lines from "The Princess":

"The moan of doves in immemorial elms,  
And murmuring of innumerable bees."

As an example of this same merit, Mr. Lanier's own "Song of the Chattahoochee" deserves a place beside Tennyson's "Brook." It strikes a higher key, and is scarcely less musical. The river is singing how it escaped the luring dalliance of weed and pebble that would hold its streams as they hurried from their mountain sources to turn the mills and water the parched plains below :

"All down the hills of Habersham,  
All through the valleys of Hall,  
The rushes cried, 'Abide, abide,'  
The willful water-weeds held me thrall,  
The laving laurel turned my tide,  
The ferns and the fondling grass said 'Stay,'  
The dewberry dipped for to work delay,  
And the little reeds sighed, 'Abide, abide,  
Here in the hills of Habersham,  
Here in the valleys of Hall."

The last poem he ever wrote, his "Sunrise on the Marshes," penciled while lying in what seemed the death-fever from which he could not rise, when too weak to lift his food to his mouth, the largest and perhaps the greatest of his mature poems, is full of this elusive beauty. Take these lines which describe the steady sinking away of the eastern horizon as the sun rises out of the sea :

"Not slower than majesty moves, for a mean and a measure  
Of motion, not faster than dateless Olympian leisure  
Might pace with unblown ample garments from pleasure to pleasure,  
The wave-serrate sea-rim sinks, unjarring, unreeling,  
Forever revealing, revealing, revealing,  
Edgewise, bladewise, halfwise, wholewise—'tis done!  
Good-morrow, lord Sun!"

As another example of the highest art in the sound-element of poetry, we may take from the same poem the lines which find the poet standing by the open forest marshes, in the overarching beauty and tense silence of a starry morning, before a sign has come of the dawn which he expects and awaits :

"Oh, what if a sound should be made?  
Oh, what if a bound should be laid  
To this bow-and-string tension of beauty and silence  
a-spring,  
To the bend of beauty, the bow, or the hold of  
silence, the string!  
I fear me, I fear me yon dome of diaphanous gleam  
Will break as a bubble o'erblown in a dream;  
Yon dome of too tenuous tissues of space and of  
night,  
Overweighted with stars, overfreighted with light,  
Oversated with beauty and silence, will seem  
But a bubble that broke in a dream,  
If a bound of degree to this grace be laid,  
Or a sound or a motion made."

Mr. Stedman, poet and critic, raises the question whether Lanier's extreme conjunc-

tion of the artistic with the poetic temperament, which he says no man more clearly displayed, did not somewhat hamper and delay his power of adequate expression. Possibly; but he was building not for the day, but for time. He must work out his laws of poetry, even if he had almost to invent its language; for to him was given the power of analysis as well as of construction, and he was too conscientious to do anything else than to find out first what was best and why, and then tell and teach it as he had learnt it, even if men said that his late spring was delaying bud and blossom. The sharp criticism and unthinking ridicule which his Centennial Cantata received from those who did not understand its musical purpose made him believe, sometimes, that he could not hope to be understood generally without educating his audience; and the task was irksome to him. But so long as "the poetic art was suffering from the shameful circumstance that criticism was without a scientific basis for even the most elementary of its judgments," he believed his study of art and form necessary for the world if not for himself.

But it would be a great mistake to find in Lanier only, or chiefly, the artist. He had the substance of poetry. He possessed both elements, as Stedman says, "in extreme conjunction." He overflowed with fancy; his imagination needed to be held in check. This appeared in "Corn," and still more in "The Symphony," the first productions which gave him wide recognition as a poet. Take these chance lines from the latter poem :

"But presently  
A velvet flute-note fell down pleasantly  
Upon the bosom of that harmony,  
And sailed and sailed incessantly,  
As if a petal from a wild rose blown  
Had fluttered down upon that pool of tone  
And boatwise dropped o' the convex side,  
And floated down the glassy tide,  
And clarified and glorified  
The solemn spaces where the shallows bide.  
From the warm concave of that fluted note  
Somewhat half song, half odor, forth did float,  
As if a rose might somehow be a throat."

The intense sacredness with which Lanier invested Art held him thrall to the highest ethical ideas. To him the most beautiful thing of all was the Right. He loved the words, "the beauty of holiness," and it pleased him to reverse the phrase and call it "the holiness of beauty." When I read Lanier I think of two writers, Milton and Ruskin. These two men, more than any other great English writers, are dominated by this beauty of holiness. Lanier was saturated with it. It shines in every line he wrote. It is not that he never wrote a maudlin line, but that every thought

was lofty. Hear his words to the students in Johns Hopkins University :

"Cannot one say with authority to the young artist, —whether working in stone, in color, in tones, or in the character forms of the novel,— so far from dreading that your moral purpose will interfere with your beautiful creation, go forward in the clear conviction that unless you are suffused —soul and body, one might say —with that moral purpose which finds its largest expression in love — that is, the love of all things in their proper relation — unless you are suffused with this love, do not dare to meddle with beauty; unless you are suffused with beauty, do not dare to meddle with love; unless you are suffused with truth, do not dare to meddle with goodness; in a word, unless you are suffused with beauty, truth, wisdom, goodness, and love, abandon the hope that the ages will accept you as an artist."

And so it came into his verse,— a solemn, reverend, worshipful element, dominating it everywhere, and giving loftiness to its beauty. For he was the democrat whom he described in contrast to Whitman's mere brawny, six-foot, open-shirted hero, whose strength was only that of the biceps :

"My democrat, the democrat whom I contemplate with pleasure, the democrat who is to write or to read the poetry of the future, may have a mere thread for his biceps, yet he shall be strong enough to handle hell; he shall play ball with the earth; and albeit his stature may be no more than a boy's, he shall still be taller than the great redwoods of California; his height shall be the height of great resolution, and love, and faith, and beauty, and knowledge, and subtle meditation; his head shall be forever among the stars."

Illustrations could be taken at random from his poems. I select the shortest I can find, a pure lyric, the "Ballad of the Trees and the Master," intended first for an interlude in his partly completed "Hymns of the Marshes." The communion of the trees suggests their sympathy with the Master in Gethsemane :

"Into the woods my Master went,  
Clean forspent, forspent;  
Into the woods my Master came,  
Forspent with love and shame.  
But the olives, they were not blind to Him,  
The little gray leaves were kind to Him,  
The thorn-tree had a mind to Him,  
When into the wood He came.

"Out of the woods my Master went,  
And He was well content;  
Out of the woods my Master came,  
Content with death and shame.  
When death and shame would woo Him last,  
From under the trees they drew Him last:  
'Twas on a tree they slew him —last  
When out of the woods He came."

Though not what would be called a religious writer, Lanier's large and deep thought took him to the deepest spiritual faiths, and the vastnesses of Nature drew him to a trust in the Infinite above us. How naturally this

finds expression in his "Marshes of Glynn," the "Marshes" being, as ever, the wide coast marshes of Georgia, with their belts of live oaks and their reaches of sand and sea-grass :

"Tolerant plains, that suffer the sea and the rain and the sun,  
Yet spread and span like the Catholic Man who hath mightily won  
God out of knowledge, and good out of infinite pain,  
And sight out of blindness, and purity out of a stain.

"As the marsh-hen secretly builds on the watery sod,  
Behold I will build me a nest on the greatness of God!  
I will fly in the greatness of God as the marsh-hen flies  
In the freedom that fills all the space 'twixt the marsh and the skies.

"By so many roots as the marsh-grass sends in the sod  
I will heartily lay me a-hold on the greatness of God; Oh,  
like to the greatness of God is the greatness within  
The range of the marshes, the liberal marshes of Glynn."

It is this quality, high and consecrate, as of a palmer with his vow, this knightly valiance, this constant San Grail quest after the lofty in character and aim, this passion for Good and Love, which follows him rather with Milton and Ruskin than with the less sturdily built poets of his day, and which puts him in sharpest contrast with the school led by Swinburne,—with Rossetti and Morris as his followers hard after him, and Oscar Wilde far behind,—a school whose reed has a short gamut, and plays but two notes, Mors and Eros, hopeless death and lawless love. But poetry is larger and finer than they know. Its face is toward the world's future; it does not maunder after the flower-decked nymphs and yellow-skirted fays that have forever fled —and good riddance—their haunted springs and tangled thickets. It can feed on its growing sweet and fresh faiths, but will draw foul contagion from the rank mists that float over old and cold fables. For all knowledge is bread to a genius like Lanier. A poet genius has great common sense. He lives in to-day and to-morrow, not in yesterday. Such men were Shakspeare and Goethe. The age of poetry is not past; there is nothing in culture or science antagonistic to it. Milton was one of the world's great poets, but he was the most cultured and scholarly and statesmanlike man of his day. He was no dreamer of dead dreams. Neither was Lanier a dreamer. He came late to the opportunity which he longed for, but when he came to it he was a tremendous student, not of music alone, but of language, of science, and of philosophy. He had all the instincts and ambitions of this nineteenth century. But that only made his range of poetic thought wider, and its success

deeper. The world is opening to the poet with every question the crucible asks of the elements, with every spectrum the prism steals from a star. The old he has and all the new.

But how short was his day, and how slight his opportunity! From the time that he was of age he waged a constant hopeless fight for life. For months he could do no work. He was driven to Texas, to Florida, to Pennsylvania, to North Carolina, to try to recover health from pine breaths and clover blossoms. He was supported by the implicit faith of his devoted wife, who fully believed in his genius, and was willing to suffer everything if he could only find his opportunity; but there was, from the time he left Macon, the constant pitiful struggle not for health alone, but for bread which he must earn for his babes. Notwithstanding the generous help of his father, which was more than could be asked, there were long periods of the very slenderest support from chance writing for a magazine, or a few lectures or lessons when his strength would allow. But his courage and that of his wife never failed. He still kept before him first his ideal and his mission, and he longed to live that he might accomplish them. It must have been in such a mood that he wrote to his wife in 1874:

"So many great ideas for art are born to me each day, I am swept away into the Land of All Delight by their strenuous, sweet whirlwind; and I feel within myself such entire, yet humble, confidence of possessing every single element of power to carry them all out save the little paltry sum of money that would suffice to keep us clothed and fed in the mean time.

"I do not understand this."

As also the following sketch for a poem which he never put into rhyme:

"O Lord, if thou wert needy as I,  
If thou shouldst come to my door as I to thine,  
If thou hungered so much as I  
For that which belongs to the spirit,  
For that which is fine and good,—

Ah, Friend, for that which is fine and good,—  
I would give it to thee if I had power.  
For that which I want is first bread—  
Thy decree, not my choice, that bread must be first;  
Then music; then some time out of the struggle for  
bread to write my poems;  
Then to put out of care Henry and Robert, whom I  
love.  
O my God, how little would put them out of care!"

At last, when his strength was utterly gone, he seemed to have conquered success enough to assure him a livelihood, and a chance to write his poems. Then he died. It was with a terror, almost, that his friends listened to the last course of his lectures, fearing he might not live out the hour. He had risen from the sick-bed which he was not expected to leave, and with great pain and in much weakness he wrote out his notes. He was taken in a close carriage to the University, read the lectures sitting in the chair, too weak to rise, and then suffered a chill of exhaustion on the way home. Three months after, he died. Why was no Mæcenæ found who would gladly give the cost of an evening's party to supply him the rest which might prolong a life worth millions of common lives?

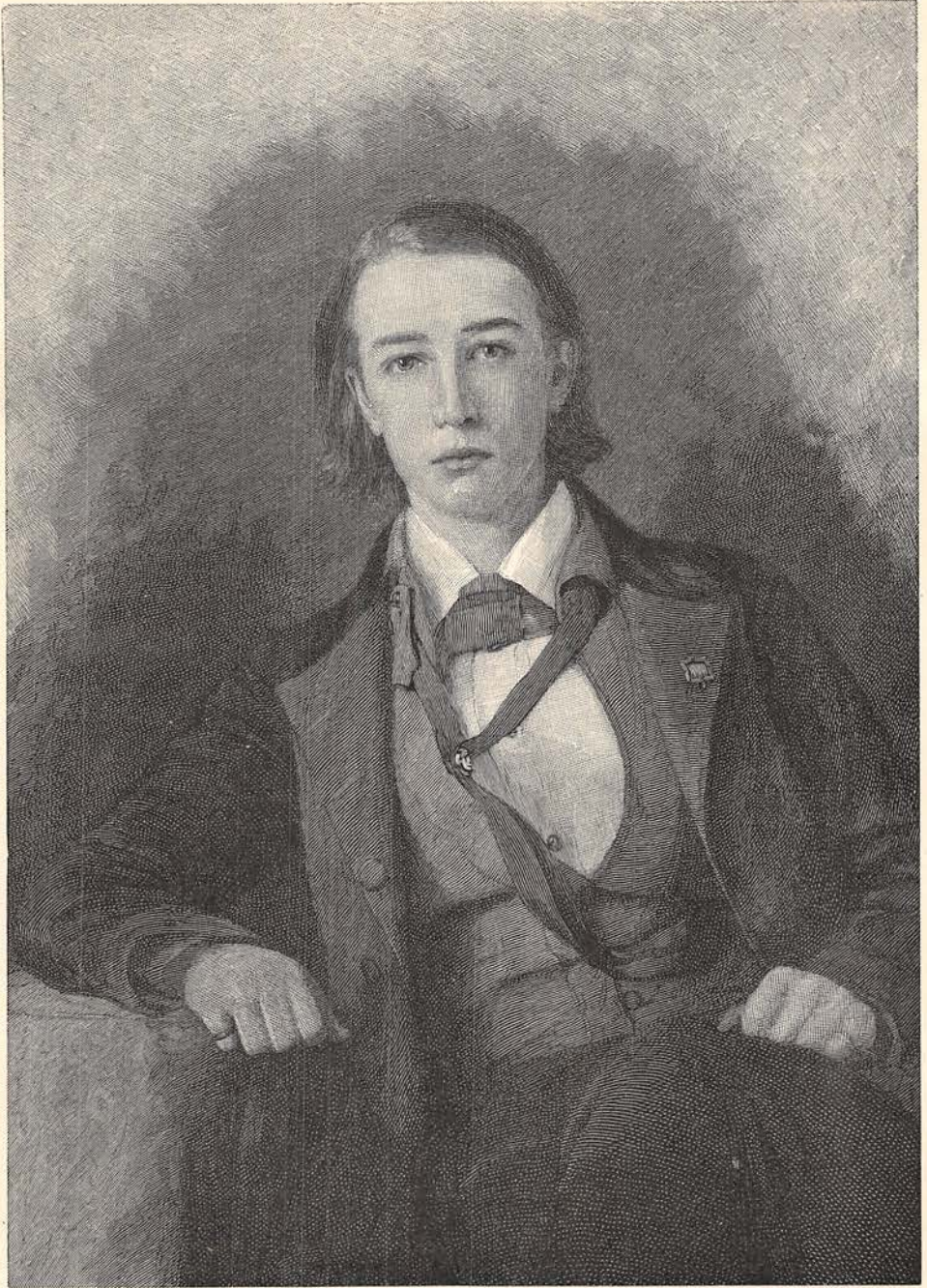
A man with real genius must know it, just as we know we have talent or shiftiness or resource. In 1874, at the very time of his new baptism into art, he wrote to his wife:

"It is of little consequence whether *I* fail; the 'I' in the matter is a small business; '*Que mon nom soit flétri, que la France soit libre!*' quoth Danton; which is to say, interpreted by my environment: Let my name perish; the poetry is good poetry, and the music is good music; and beauty dieth not, and the heart that needs it will find it."

How many hearts need it and will find it, it may be too soon to guess. For my part, I believe it will find a larger and a yet larger audience, and that his short half-dozen years of literary life, though much hindered, will fill a great space in our history of poetry and art.

*William Hayes Ward.*

[As we go to press, a complete edition of the poems of Sidney Lanier is announced by his publishers, Messrs. Charles Scribner's Sons. The volume will be edited by his wife, and Dr. William Hayes Ward will furnish an introduction.—EDITOR.]



Sidney Lanier.