



“**F**OR a poet is something light and with wings.” No one ever said the difficult thing better than Plato, after all. “And cannot,” proceeds the same authoritative voice,—“and cannot compose verses unless he be inspired.”

In our own immediate times verse-writing has become something more of the nature of a disease than of an honor. A species of rhympophobia pervades the cultivated world. Like the bite of the bitten victim, fashionable forms of construction extend. There is contagion in them. The strain for effect has become virulent. We feel, perforce, a sympathy with the half-playful but wholly earnest revolt of Dr.

Holmes against the epidemic character of our debilitated verse.

That overbalanced struggle for perfection of manner which stifles the spirit; the renaissance of obsolete forms which vitiates the modernness of sympathy so necessary to healthful work; the endless tricking and decking of little thoughts; the apparent unconsciousness of whether one's thought be large or little, or whether it be worth thinking at all, or if worth thinking, whether worth thinking in poetry—these qualities characterize so much of the verse of our day that one may be pardoned for becoming more aware of them than of some other and better traits which undoubtedly accompany them. It may be said that

there is a certain loss of the sense of proportion in our poetic power. By this I mean that higher proportion which is to proportion of form as the soul is to the human body. We do not build loftily. We do not live to last. We do not always know why we build at all. The result is a lack of architecture. But we have plenty of verse-carpentering; done as neatly as the service of Adam Bede, who thought the world was to be saved by conscientious day's labor. But the paper cap of the workman looks over the whole job.

There is a fatal gap in human energy which Emerson described as "the step between knowing and doing." This gap is nowhere deeper or steeper than in the step between rhyming and singing. But once taken, the step is as much of a fact as a bridge. Inspiration may falter, blunder, weaken. It can never be undone.

The first thing which one finds it natural to say about the writer whose beautiful work looks at us like half-blossomed flowers from his new-made grave is, that he did beyond all critical question take this step. Plato's great and simple definition includes him. He was outside of the ceramics of the poetic art. He did not give us bric-à-brac. We do not look for him in the department of household art decoration. He expressed himself, so far as he was expressed at all, by pure inspiration. One must not mistake the slight assumption of his work, its modesty, its reticence, its way — so like the author's own — of keeping in the background till sought, for the features of what we are most apt to mean by minor poetry. By pure quality, he was outside of this dead line.

In saying this we do not forget the incompleteness of his achievement in point of some respects which go to fix a man's place or his phase in the poetry of his times. His self-distrust may be called almost pitiful, in view of his creative quality. One might fancy that Death had his eye on that shrinking, exquisite nature which had but just rooted itself in our garden of poetry, and had suffered it to unfold only so far as to taunt us with a singular sense of our loss and the Destroyer's power. There is more pathos in his life and more irony than most lives and deaths could provide material for if they tried. And this true poet and true man never "tried." His life was as simple and as honest as that of a tree. He could not attitudinize. He never posed. His literary "effect" was the last thing he ever thought of. He cared more about being a genuine man than a recognized poet.

Nevertheless the truth remains that he had come at the hour of his untimely death to an enviable recognition, and that it was the recognition of a faith in his promise surpassing that in his performance. When he left us we

knew that we had a new poet. But we knew that we did not know how much we had in having him. His beautiful work was a prophecy. His best was yet to be. It was said by one of the greatest of critics of one of the greatest of poets that he "kept stern faith . . . with his fame." To keep faith with the promise of one's fame is a thing perhaps as much to be remembered; and this Sill has "sternly" done.

Edward Rowland Sill was a New England boy, with the suggestive antecedents which compose the best New England stock. His ancestry was English and Welsh — an affiliation which is apt to produce peculiarly interesting American character. The noticeable fact in the genealogy of the poet is its union of the scientific and the religious. His mother's father and grandfather were the pastors of the Congregational church in the little Connecticut village where the boy was born; the united ministry of these two covered a period of thirty-eight years. The child's grandfather went by the picturesque name of "Priest Rowland"; he was a man of great personal dignity both in appearance and character — a Puritan such as the Connecticut Valley loves. The father and grandfather of Sill were physicians and surgeons; and thus the fine combination of forces and the fierce conflict of elements begin. Impressive character and troubled faith follow such a heredity as naturally as commerce follows water, or the mists the meadows. Here again we find the well-established hereditary law, that the mother gives the guiding principle of being. It was immediately to his mother that the boy owed his poetic temperament. We are told that she was "an intellectual, quiet woman, fond of the few good books of the day, wrote verses, and had a tendency to melancholy." Whether because he was born his mother's son, or whether because he was born "light and with wings," need not be decided on the spot; but the "tendency to melancholy," as well as the tendency to "writing verses," came down to the sensitive little boy taking his first taste of life in sober Windsor. Sadness remained easy all his life. Yet he was a merry lad; he brimmed with mischief, and, like the saddest natures, continued to effervesce as the gladdest do, all his days. Such a temperament is like a marble gladiator hiding behind the spray of a fountain.

There seems to have been in his early history enough of those sources of melancholy by which domestic affliction feeds the temperament of sensitive children. We hear of the death of a brother by drowning; "an event which left Edward the only and idolized child." It is more than enough to add, that at twelve he lost his mother. His father soon followed her.

The orphan boy found his home with relatives to whom he seems to have been truly dear. He always attached people easily to himself. He was as lovable as Shelley. To those who knew him well enough to understand it, I might say that he was as lovable as Ariel. His preparatory education was obtained at Phillips Exeter Academy. His college was Yale. He graduated in 1861—the poet of his class, remembered by all Yale men of his time as the author of what it is safe to call one of the most remarkable class poems of collegiate history. It was the work of a man; it was the song of a poet. That poem was the one sure, young stroke, giving the ring which makes men watch each other's careers. Something was always expected of Sill after that. Yet he achieved late. His life went like the lives of other American teachers, in the daily struggle. Song was rare.

In college began the conflict which his heredity was sure to agitate as it was to give him his sad and strong blue eye. The religious and the scientific brain-cells challenged each other. The boy abandoned the faith of his fathers, and after some experience in teaching went to Harvard Divinity School to become the liberal preacher. This purpose, however, he put behind him quickly. "I can't ever preach," he writes to a friend; "that has slowly settled itself in spite of my reluctant hanging on to the doubt. I can't solve the problem: only the great school-master Death will ever take me through these higher mathematics of the religious principia. . . . I never can preach. I shall teach school, I suppose." The profession thus chosen he dignified and idealized to the end.

He was happily married in February, 1867, to his cousin Elizabeth N. Sill, and immediately thereafter moved to Brooklyn, New York, where he taught in a boys' school and did something as literary critic on the New York "Evening Mail." The high school and other experimental stages followed, ending in his acceptance of a call to the University of California as professor of English literature. This position he filled with honor and success for eight years. As a teacher, if not always "popular," he was passionately beloved. His scholars cherish his memory with the reverence which we give to the decisive spirit of our lives. He had genius for imparting wisdom as well as knowledge. He took the lives of his pupils to his heart. He controlled, he rebuked, he inspired, as one having authority that does not end in the class-room. His work was cheerful, healthful, vigorous. No one who loved him could mope or abandon the battle. As a teacher he illustrated Emerson's definition of a friend—"One who makes

us do what we can." His California life was brought to an end by his breaking health.

In Cleveland, Ohio, in February, 1887, on the 27th of the month, suddenly and unexpectedly, he died.

Mr. Sill's better work was done within the last few years of his life; as has been said, it was but the prologue to his best. His prose contributions to the magazines, especially to "The Atlantic Monthly," *THE CENTURY*, and to the "Contributor's Club" of the former periodical, were of a remarkably fine texture. He thought alertly, with a certain French graciousness and gracefulness of mind. His wide reading fortified his native power without encumbering it. The gift was too genuine for the pedagogic error. His English was that of the professor, pure and simple. But it was the poet's, varied, rich, delightful. It was the style of a poet trained in a class-room.

In the lost art of private correspondence he was an expert. In an experience not devoid of valuable correspondence with suggestive minds it has never been my personal lot to read such letters as Professor Sill's; they were crammed to the brim with vitality and vivacity. Thought enough went into them to have made the basis of those unwritten volumes which he was wont satirically to call "works." Style enough was hidden—I was going to say wasted—in them to have made the literary reputation of half a dozen authors of the economic kind; and heart enough—but his heart "was always with him." His intellect was passionate, sensitive; it throbbed. The beautiful memorial tribute published by his friends in California contains such material selected from Mr. Sill's correspondence as one does not remember to have seen since the letters of Frederick Robertson. It is a literary loss that so many of his letters are destroyed, or are of too personal a nature for present memorial publication. He had that leisure of the soul which is independent of all other leisures, temperamental, dominant and graceful; it is this which creates letters, it is this which moves a man to give to his friends as good as he gives to his publisher, or better. For this reason much of Sill's best prose we shall never have. The little that is ours carries us on like the best correspondence of the best French manner. They are quotable letters; in the detective phrase, they "shadow" us.

"It was music only to look at it," he says of the great organ in Boston.

A comet is "the spirit of a world hovering about and waiting to be incarnated."

I almost feel like deploring all fame when I see the fools that worship it. I always understood why Emerson made his poems rough—and I sympathize more than ever.

I am very sorry to hear of Mr. Lanier's death. His

book on English verse is the only thing extant on that subject that is of any earthly value. I wonder that so few seem to have discovered its great merit.

As to snow landscapes, — says it always looks like a Christmas card. Slaty blue woods, slaty blue sky, whity blue snow (and if you go softly into the woods, a slaty gray rabbit or two, with a slaty blue shadow on the snow).

Let a man write about himself. It's the only fellow he knows anything about.

My great comfort is that man can't take his learning or his culture out of this life with him — Death pushes back everything from the gate except the naked soul. Hence it does n't much matter that one can't study, and know this or that.

I am supposed to be entered on a mad career of literary work. Have so far only written some very mild verse — suitable for nursery use in some amiable but weak-minded family. But then I've been skating twice!

There's nothing here anyway except weather. Some it is fluid, and some it is frozen, and eke sometimes the mixture yeclst slush — but always weather. We sit down at breakfast and discuss the prospects of the day as to — weather. We report to each other the observations each has made casually during the night as to — weather. Some one tells how the barometer stands. . . . Some one else reports the direction of the wind — this is disputed by some one else. . . . At dinner there is a whole forenoon's weather to discourse upon and various prophetic intimations concerning the afternoon weather. At tea the day's weather furnishes the piece of resistance, with entrées of conjecture as to the morrow's prospect. You do not buy anything at the stores till you have compared views on this subject. Then you buy, and before you can get your change (cents you know, carefully counted) you must disclose your innermost and private views concerning not only to-day's weather, but yesterday's and that of the season in general. You also give your views briefly before you get to the door on the weather of Ohio compared to that of the Pacific slope. Then you hastily make a pacific slope out of the door.

The charm of his poetry is much more familiar to the public than that of his prose; and of the two charms it is the more his own and will be the more enduring. The most widely appreciated of his poems, "The Fool's Prayer," is too well known to need quotation in this magazine.

The fine stroke in "Opportunity" seems to me equally strong:

This I beheld, or dreamed it in a dream:
There spread a cloud of dust along a plain;
And underneath the cloud or in it raged
A furious battle, and men yelled, and swords
Shocked upon swords and shields. A prince's banner
Wavered, then staggered backward, hemmed by foes.
A craven hung along the battle's edge
And thought, "Had I a sword of keener steel —
That blue blade that the king's son bears — but this
Blunt thing! —" he snapt and flung it from his hand,
And lowering crept away and left the field.
Then came the king's son, wounded, sore bestead,
And weaponless, and saw the broken sword
Hilt-buried in the dry and trodden sand,
And ran and snatched it, and with battle shout
Lifted afresh he hewed his enemy down
And saved a great cause that heroic day.

To many of us one of his nearest poems is that plea for immortality which he called "The Invisible." It is too long for transcription here. A fragment stamps the porcelain:

If there is naught but what we see,
The friend I loved is lost to me. . . .

Because he never comes and stands
And stretches out to me both hands,
Because he never leans before
The gate when I set wide the door
At morning, nor is ever found
Just at my side when I turn round. . . .

For all this shall I homage pay
To Death, grow cold of heart, and say:
"He perished and has ceased to be;
Another comes, but never he?"
Nay, by our wondrous being, nay!
Although his face I never see
Through all the infinite To Be,
I know he lives and cares for me.

In another mood we have "Her Explanation":

. . . I am a lost illusion. Some strange spell
Once made your friend there, with his fine disdain
Of fact, conceive me perfect. He would fain
(But could not) see me always as befell
His dream to see me, plucking asphodel
In saffron robes on some celestial plain.
All that I was he marred and flung away
In quest of what I was not, could not be —
Lilith, or Helen, or Antigone. . . .

A woman best understands this poem. But it needs a poet to appreciate the workmanship of the last line.

The poem written for the Commencement at Smith College in 1883, and which added perceptibly to Mr. Sill's poetic reputation at the time, shows a quotation vitality which would have gained upon him, and which many of his poems have not:

Life is a game the soul can play
With fewer pieces than men say.

Were women wise, and men all true —
And one thing more that may not be,
Old earth were fair enough for me.

Not out of any cloud or sky
Will thy good come to prayer or cry.
Let the great forces wise of old
Have their whole way with thee.

. . . . the better day
Gone not in dreams, nor even the subtle desire
Not to desire;
But work is the sober law.

But one drops the white "booklet" in which these delicate poems are now first collected for the public, with a conviction that reviewers and reviewing cannot do much better by Sill than they can by an oriole. He sings evasively, willfully; he sits upon the lightest, if not upon the farthest, twig, and mocks us. Most of his poems are complete strains; they cannot be interrupted; they do him no justice if caught in notes. He needs to be read and loved — or loved and read. Pascal said of "divine things" that they "must be loved to be known;" whereas other things are known to be loved. Sill is an individuality so delicate that one needs love it to understand its secret

strength; it is pliable, fine, finished; when you think that you have brushed a beautiful cobweb you find yourself held by a golden wire.

I began this paper, which assumes to be no more than the tribute of a friend to one whose "singing is all done," by saying that Sill stands among our poets upon the claim of pure inspiration. I am confident that a study of his delicate, fragmentary work will bring the reader at the end to the same conviction. He is a truly spontaneous being; he has no "made voice"; he sings because he cannot help it; as the birds do, as the waves do, like the winds; he is of his time, of his country, and of himself. The professional reviewer of that future into which the astral personality of this half-embodied poet may project itself will give us some day a study in comparison between Sill and that other, greater, but not dissimilar poet to whom in heart his friends have thought to liken him. Had he lived to do his best Sill might have been called the American Shelley. Temperamentally there is a kinship between the two. "Shelley," says Dowden, "was the most sensitive of human beings."—"One would at once pronounce of him that he was different from other men."—"There was an earnestness in his manner, and such perfect gentleness of breeding and freedom from everything artificial, as charmed every one."

Something in the countenance of Sill used to give us at moments the fancy of this likeness; they were the elfin moments, the elusive, evasive, perverse; when the eye lifted and lightened and the whole man withdrew from all men, and was apart from us, conforming but rebelling.

If Shelley had been born in Windsor, Connecticut, and taught school for a living, what should we have had? A kinship perhaps less difficult to defend between the English genius and the American professor.

And after all this brings us to say, it is not so sad a matter for even a poet to conform, even at the cost of being born in the Connecticut Valley, and of working out the daily task that chokes the singing sometimes. The heart of his friends holds Sill's memory precious, because he was simply so good, so true, so dear a man. He was all these things in measure beyond the common measure; this we know, who ever knew him. He was so brave, he was so patient, he forgot himself so easily, he remembered everybody else so instinctively, he had such supreme unselfishness, he had such sweetness of soul, that he stands among the few in our calendar of private saints. He called himself no saint. He groped for his religious faith and knew not that his blind hands grasped an ideal of Duty which might add consecration to the life of any believer of us

all. This fact was more Christ-like than too many of our ideals which dare take the Christian name upon them. I used to think that his awful struggle after Truth had brought him near to the altar of his unknown God, and that it was well to live as nobly as he did before one criticised him for the nominal loss of a faith whose second great commandment he did habitually and happily obey, and whose essential principle he touchingly and unconsciously represented.

He was a true poet; our literature is poorer for his untimely loss. But he was a true man; our lives are sadder for lack of his. Many who knew him mourn for him as for the dearest comforter they ever had. Friends in sorrow, young people in perplexity, shy people, poor people, the over-sensitive, neglected, lonely, misunderstood, he ministered to as only souls like his know how. It was a precious ointment that he poured from a costly box.

Dante, when asked at Santa Croce what he sought, said only: "Peace."

There was a look in Sill's sad eye which no one who ever saw it can ever forget. What he went seeking, as Nature forces search when she "makes a poet out of a man"—that, life never could have given him. Death is richer. Death is generous.

'T is not in seeking,
'T is not in endless striving,
'Thy quest is found:
Be still and listen;
Be still and drink the quiet
Of all around.

Not for the crying,
Not for the loud beseeching,
Will peace draw near:
Rest with palms folded;
Rest with thine eyelids fallen—
Lo! peace is here.

Of his poems on death, which were strong and many, one other was indefinitely like him, and has been dear to many to whom he was dear:

What if some morning when the stars were paling
And the dawn whitened, and the East was clear,
Strange peace and rest fell on me from the presence
Of a benighted Spirit standing near:

And I should tell him, as he stood beside me,
This is our Earth — most friendly Earth and fair;
Daily its sea and shore through sun and shadow
Faithful it turns, robed in its azure air:

There is blest living here, loving and serving
And quest of truth and serene friendships dear;
But stay not, Spirit! Earth has one destroyer—
His name is Death; flee, lest he find thee here!

And what if then, while the still morning brightened
And freshened in the elm the Summer's breath,
Should gravely smile on me the gentle angel
And take my hand and say, "My name is Death."

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps.