


BÉRANGER.

IN Paris, full of misery and gold,
In seventeen eighty,— read
and you shall see,
At my grandsire's, a tailor
poor and old,
A new-born babe, what hap-
pened unto me.
Around my head there shone
no glory, lying
In a bare cradle, destitute of charms;
But my grandfather, running to me crying,
Found me one day within a fairy's arms.
And thus that fairy with her gay refrain
Calmed my first cries, and soothed my earliest
pain.

In this fashion, and by this charming song, "The Tailor and the Fairy," Béranger in 1822, at forty-two, with a smile that bordered on sadness, modestly and proudly took up again his life and his work. He has said that his songs are himself. His history might be written by tacking two or three marginal notes to his couplets, and giving you in their order some others, which are also biographical. Adding to these the more celebrated of his strophes, and choosing from others less known but as beautiful, I should have a study of Béranger from his verse alone of which neither you nor I could think of complaining.

You would know his youth, so wretched and so gay; his love-affairs; his dreams; his first songs, full of rude Gallic strength, passing later to satire, and always following the precepts of the master, light in pursuit, and firm in encounter; then raising himself little by little through his patriotism to higher inspirations, you would hear in turn his pipes, his vielle, his trumpet; you would see him stir a revolution, then greet it, then quiet it; you would follow him in his retirement, hearing the weakened, trembling, but sometimes prophetic, voice of his muse from the chimney-corner; and you would admire him in his death,—as simple as his life,—and you would go forth deeply moved, repeating his passionate adieu to his country.

Unhappily my task is not so plain. This Béranger, the veneration of our fathers, must to-day be defended, since he is attacked; he must be brought forward, since he has been neglected—he whose prophecies were so true, he who was the Nostradamus of the republic.

That he would be forgotten, he himself prophesied, and he resigned himself to the thought

with that wise tranquillity born of self-knowledge. Ingratitude, however, he did not foresee, and undoubtedly he could not have looked forward to it with resignation, yet it has reached that point. It reaches it now, and it is to relieve myself from that reproach—to contribute what I can toward purging us all of it—that I find myself obliged to accompany my essay with a commentary, and to show as briefly as possible the true Béranger—as he should be for us, the sons and grandsons of those whom he roused to combat, consoled in defeat, and



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P. J. DE BÉRANGER.



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P. J. DE BÉRANGER.

led back to victory. To that end, then, let us mingle our prose with his verse; and first let us finish the sketch of his life.

Behold him, then, come into the world in mid Paris, in the Rue Montegueil. One could say, like the poor little waif of the streets, that his mother was not there when he was born, for she never gave him her breast, troubled herself very little about him, and he saw her in all only for a few days seventeen years later. His father, moreover, an unsettled and thoughtless adventurer, cared but little more for him; we shall meet this parent again, however.

The child was put out to nurse at Auxerre in Burgundy. When nature's fountain failed, the

foster-father, a good-natured old fellow, replaced the lost milk by pieces of bread steeped in wine. The child took to it kindly. Two years later, returned to the grandfather at Paris, the child grew—he has told us how—ill-favored, wretched, and suffering. They sent him to school in the Faubourg St. Antoine, where he was believed to be a dunce. We have two memories of that time. The little Béranger caught a glimpse of the aged Favait under an arbor of nasturtiums and sweet-peas—Favait, the octogenarian, who had a son there—he whom Marshal Saxe had called “the ballad-maker of the army,” and he was moved without knowing why. And the other, one bright, sunny day of

which he sang, on the 14th of July, the taking of the Bastille, an operation in which he assisted from the roof of the school.

Soon after this his father took him, not to take care of him, but to send him away by *diligence* to Péronne, to a paternal aunt who kept an inn there called "L'Épée Royale"—another omen. He must have remembered the sign when he sang to King Denys—that is to say, Louis XVIII.—"The Sword of Damocles,"

Old Denys, I laugh at your sword,
I drink, and I sing, and I whistle your songs.

What fell on his head was not the sword, but a whole thunderbolt. He escaped being killed, was a long time unconscious, and at last, coming to himself, the first words that he said to his frightened aunt, whom he remembered having seen sprinkling the house to avert the tempest, were, "What's the good of your holy water, anyhow?" He asked that question all his life, and even admitted once that

Sometimes, taken in small doses,
Holy water does no harm.

He never decided, however, to mix it with his wine. The good aunt meant well, though she believed in holy water, and was a good and solid republican. She it was who found the heart of the boy—she and the foreign cannon, the cannon at the siege of Lille, whose echoes made the child stamp with rage.

In 1792 he received his hasty education in the printing-office of Father Laisney, where he was bound as an apprentice. Unable to teach him spelling, the good man taught him verse: it is always the way. In 1796, his father, bethinking himself of him, came to Péronne. Royalist and conspirator, he was much discountenanced to find his son an ardent patriot, an orator listened to in the clubs. There is in "My Biography" a conversation between the brother and sister which is worthy of Molière. This is the end of it:

The brother: Sister, on the return of the Bourbons I shall present my son to our excellent princes.

The sister: Take care that he does not sing the "Marseillaise" to them.

Notwithstanding the prediction, the father took Béranger to Paris, and founded there a bank of discount which at first did a magnificent business—thanks to whom? Why, to Béranger himself, strange as it may seem. The young man showed such abilities that the father, somewhat reconciled, began to prophesy on his own account, saying, "You will be the

greatest financier of your day." Nor was he blinded by paternal tenderness, for he told him later, observing that he was always thin and coughing: "You have not long to live. I shall bury you before long." "We shall not sorrow for each other," added Béranger, in the same strain. The worthy father concerned himself with conspiracies, and so the young man, mixed up in these intrigues, with open eyes and sharpened senses studied the monarchists, M. de Bourmont, Mme. Clermont Gallerande, and many others. When Sainte-Beuve reproached him for his opposition to the nobility, he forgot that Béranger had seen them close at hand and at work. The truth is that they flattered the poor father a good deal, who was weak enough to believe himself well-born, and who was the banker of all their enterprises. But they ruined him very nearly; the bank failed—a bitter blow to Béranger, who was already oppressed with a scrupulous sense of honor, and who was for a long time embittered by the fall.

And now his days of misery began—days when for the luxury of a pleasure which cost only 100 sous he was condemned to a week of bread and water—days when he wept in his neglected chamber, alas! sleepless through wretchedness. But, thanks to his youth, these were the days when the spirit of poetry in him was awakened, and with her the spirit of love—the days of the first Lizette, the days sung later in "The Garret."

Yes; 't is a garret,—let him know 't who will,—
There was my bed—full hard it was and small;
My table there—and I decipher still

Half a lame couplet charcoaled on the wall.
Ye joys that Time hath swept with him away,
Come to mine eyes, ye dreams of love and fun;
For you I pawned my watch how many a day
In the brave days when I was twenty-one.

One jolly evening when my friends and I
Made happy music with our songs and cheers,
A shout of triumph mounted up thus high,
And distant cannon opened on our ears;
We rise,—we join in the triumphant strain,—
Napoleon conquers—Austerlitz is won—
Tyrants shall never tread us down again,
In the brave days when I was twenty-one.

Let us be gone—the place is sad and strange.
How far, far off, these happy times appear;
All that I have to live I'd gladly change
For one such month as I have wasted here—
To draw long dreams of beauty, love, and power,
From founts of hope that never will outrun,
And drink all life's quintessence in an hour,—
Give me the days when I was twenty-one.

—Thackeray's translation.

We prefer the other, the true Lizette, she of the darning-needle, as described in "My

Coat"—Mlle. Judith Frère, who became his devoted companion for more than sixty years, though unblest by the bans of the Church.

One evening, somewhere in 1803, she shuffled the cards for him. Béranger let her do it. When one is young one expects much; there is always a vein of superstition. He had just made a great attempt. He had tied together all his verses, his essays, and his poems,—“The Deluge,” “The Restoration of Religion,”—and had sent them all to Lucien Bonaparte, who was a republican, and also a maker of verses. And while he was waiting Lizette spread out the cards. She predicted a letter and good fortune, and then Béranger mounted the six flights of stairs and slept happily, awakening to see again his patched boots and ragged trousers—trousers that he himself had mended. His spirits were lowered a bit as he handled the needle of his grandfather. Suddenly there was a rap at his door—oh, joy! this the promised letter, and, oh, happiness unspeakable! the fortune too. Yes, the fortune; for, three days after that letter and the interview with Lucien which followed it, the brother of the First Consul gave the unknown poet a position as Member of the Institute, something like 1200 francs, which Béranger received up to 1812. Is n't that a fortune at twenty, and don't you see that the cards are always right? It should be said at once that when, shortly after this, Lucien, suspected of republicanism, was exiled by the First Consul,—become emperor and all-powerful,—Béranger wished to pay his debt by the publication of his poems with a very noble and brilliant dedication. The censor rejected the edition. He threw the book into the fire.

Let us go on. In 1804 he lost his father, whom he had loved in spite of everything; and for him, at a great risk, he had become a rebellious recruit, having omitted to be enrolled. Be it said in passing that one thing saved him from scrutiny—his precocious baldness. He was bald at twenty-three, the result of obstinate headaches. When, therefore, he passed near gendarmes he took off his hat. From his shining head, and his round shoulders, no one would have believed him less than forty, and the conscript was saved.

Later, in 1814, for the defense of Paris he demanded the gun which he had once avoided. But Marmont would not permit Paris to defend herself, and the patriot was refused his gun. In 1809 M. de Fontanes, the head of the university, to whom he had been recommended, gave him a position. He made him a copying clerk in his office at a salary of 1000 francs. It was a place for which Béranger felt himself best fitted—excepting always that of the national song-writer. As he wished for no

advancement, he received none. Even the thought of being head clerk frightened him. However, he obtained several times an increase of salary, and at the end of twelve years was in receipt of 2000 francs.

It was about 1821 that he ceased to go to his office for fear of being dismissed. At the time when this excellent situation failed him he was still undecided as to his literary career. He had tried comedy, epic poetry, idyls, and between times had composed songs for relaxation and amusement, not even taking the pains to write them down. They took, however, and won a way for him to the wine-vaults in 1813. Here he met Désaugiers. These songs, the first which came into his mind, were in a measure all wanton, and, as he said himself, “broad-mouthed.” He persevered when he found that they caught the popular ear, and some of them are veritable *chefs-d'œuvre*, such as “The Grandmother”; “The Little Gray Man,” fat-cheeked and gay; “Madame Grégoire,” the best perhaps, so fresh and full of verve, a jet of old French wine falling with the measure as in glass brimful; “The Good-natured Girl”; “Roger Bontemps”; and many more which have but one fault, that they are easier to sing than to say, and that they require for their singing the end of the supper, and to moisten the refrain something more than sugared water. In some of them there is a shade of sadness.

The end of the empire was approaching, and a sense of opposition was aroused in the gay strains of our poet. In 1812 he wrote “The Beggars,” that marvel of lightness, spirit, and grace. He did better yet in 1813; he dared to criticize the empire, in the only fashion that was permitted, alas! He held up for the consideration of the giant of battles, cribbed and cabined in Europe itself—whom? “The King of Yvetôt.”

If e'er he went into excess,
'T was from a somewhat lively thirst;
But he who would his subject bless,
Odd's fish!—must wet his whistle first;
And so from every cask they got,
Our King did to himself allot

At least a pot:
Sing ho, ho, ho! and he, he, he!
That's the kind of King for me.

—Thackeray's translation.

To Attic wit he added compactness of form, cleverness of method, and the force of rhyme. The race woke again. In Béranger there lived again Regnier, La Fontaine, Rabelais, Villon even. Our land had another son in her own image. Then came the invasion. From his high garret—another garret perched up in the Rue Bellefond—he assisted at the battle of Paris.

Meanwhile, tired of imperial despotism, he asked himself for a moment if the people and the bourgeois would not listen to him. The song of "Good Frenchmen" spoke of hope, but it quickly vanished. Satire appeared in "Old Clothes, Old Gold Lace," in which he sang the carnival of apostacies. Nevertheless, he was not deceived by the return from Elba. He had scant belief in Napoleon grown wise, in Napoleon a convert to liberty; and it was almost as a spectator, feeling the powerlessness of humanity, that he assisted at the last catastrophes.

1815 has come to an end. A new era begins for the country, and at the same time opens for Béranger. At the time when these new plans sprang up in his mind, as if to take leave of his earlier vein, he collected and published his songs. He has taken *them* for his work. It is decided; he definitely abandons poetry as such,—elegiac, epic, or dramatic,—save a slight return to it at about forty, which leaned toward tragedy, but was not repeated. He devoted himself entirely to that popular form, the song. Up to that time light and wanton, sometimes amorous and tender, always gay, it had been the lark, the robin, the nightingale. He knew now that it could give to him the wing of an eagle, and furnish him with, not a thunderbolt assuredly, but crackling grape-shot for the service of liberty. His political rôle began. They offered him in 1816 neither more nor less than the dramatic department of the "Débats." He refused,—refused every preferment.

To his declination he added in postscript "The Marquis of Carabas," another *chef d'œuvre*, to which he appended, four years later, that "Marquis Prétintaille," so proud of his quarterings that the lower orders had no fears for him, even in love-affairs—two satirical masterpieces which were accompanied by others, fearless, political, full of biting jest, which inflicted smarting wounds upon Bourbon royalty, and that other enemy then so much feared—the Church.

One of the first of these serious songs, which Benjamin Constant has called odes, was "The Good Fellow's God," from which Chateaubriand quoted a couplet as approaching Tacitus, and in which Sainte-Beuve, even in his narrowest days, found inspiration.

In 1821 Béranger published his second collection. The absurd author of "The Poetic Gaul," M. de Marchangy, in a public address attacked "Mathurin Bruneau" for outraging the majesty of royalty; "The Opinion of These Young Women," "The Old Bachelor," "The Neighbor," for outraging public morals; and "The Good God" for outraging religion. Poor "Good God." But it is always thus. His minis-

ters have always found him dangerous. M. de Marchangy also attacked—I do not know under what head—two lines of stars replacing ten verses suppressed by the publisher.

Yet Béranger, accused of so many crimes, suffered three months' imprisonment, which he passed with great cheerfulness at St. Pélagré. "The prison is going to spoil me," he said.

The fact is that the gourmand did it again. Not at once, however. Even his second collection (1825) was treated with much consideration by M. de Villèle. It was only for the third collection, in 1829, that he obtained from the authorities what he called "gilding on the edges,"—that is to say, a rigid trial, nine months in prison, and 2000 francs fine. This time Béranger chose La Force for his prison. He was visited by all those whom France counted among her most celebrated, from the oldest of politicians to the youngest of litterateurs—Lafayette among the older politicians, Victor Hugo among the younger poets. His popularity was very great. He smiled at it. He was a real power, displeasing to the aristocrats and ideologists of his own party, to whom he said so cleverly, "Don't thank me for the songs that I write against my enemies; thank me for those that I don't write against you."

Attacked by corruption, inflexible in his probity, sustained by the heart of the people, he lived modestly on the income from his songs, having quitted his office, and long since given back to the father-in-law of Lucien, now ill and poor, the pension that Lucien had given him.

It will be seen by the titles that I shall cite presently that in the second collection Béranger had attempted nearly all the veins that he believed possible for the *chanson*. Sainte-Beuve has divided them into five, with slight modifications, as follows:

The humorous vein: I have mentioned the best in this line. Béranger held this vein very late, but with age it was touched with fancy, and then it is that we have "The Keys of Paradise," "Margot," "The Blind Man of Bagnolet," and that admirable "Oration of Turlupin." In the second place, political satire, anti-clerical, almost always exceedingly animated, sometimes very crude, here and there bitter, as in the "Adieu to Glory," with its superb refrain:

Sigh lower, ye who 'neath burdens sink;
What is it to us who eat and drink
If the universe tremble on ruin's brink?
Farewell, Glory, a last good-by;
Tear out the records of triumphs gone by.
Hasten, Cupid! our cups are dry.

A third vein is that of romance, or rather of the elegy in the Latin sense of the word: for it can be both a plaint and a song of joy, like the love-lays of the old French, with some of

the older purity of form — “Wretched Spring-time,” “The Humming-Bird,” “The Love-Potion,” “Homesickness,” and finally “The Swallows,” over which so many tears have been shed. I cannot resist the pleasure of quoting it.

A convict who toiled in the mines of the north
Thus spoke to the swallows that flew o'er his head:
“Welcome, thrice welcome, dear birds of the summer,
Who tell me the reign of the winter is dead.
Did Hope plume your wing that you flew thus to find me,
Perhaps from my fatherland over the sea?
As on light wing and free wing you hover above me,
Oh, say, of that land are you speaking to me?”

“Maybe as a fledgling you first tried your pinions
'Neath the eaves of that roof under which I was born,
Where my mother still thinks of the boy who has left her —
Aye, thinks of him often, and thinks but to mourn.
Weeping, she listens to each passing footfall,
And, half hoping, whispers, ‘Perhaps it is he.’
As on light wing and free wing you hover above me,
Oh, say, of her love are you speaking to me?”

After the humorous vein, the satire, and the elegy, came the *ballade*, sometimes purely poetic, sometimes social and political. Béranger's imagination found its refuge in the poetical ballad. For he had a touch for the supernatural, a fondness for dreams, a love for the fancy that springs from the woods and fields, and touches the heart of the peasant. Remember “The Falling Stars,” “Louis XI.,” “The Wandering Jew,” and “Happiness,” so many little dramas with a touch of legendary coloring, and those happy refrains which at once, to use his own expression, “lodge in the memory, to awaken there who knows what thoughts and echoes.”

Again, again a star that falls,
That falls, falls, and disappears.

As to the political ballad, which forms the fifth of the divisions into which Béranger's work can be separated, it is the most numerous, and it is that which has left the deepest impression upon the memory of the people. This, with its satirical touch, was the most powerful instrument of war. Therefore, as their author has said, it would be unjust to judge them without taking into account the influence which they had exerted; or, in other words, by isolating them from the history of which they are a part. There are times for a nation when the best music is that of the drum which beats the charge. This is the strain which sounds in

“The Old Flag,” “The Old Corporal,” and “The Memories of the People,” and to what extent did it quicken the beat of our fathers' hearts when we to-day cannot listen to it unmoved? Let us hear “The Old Sergeant.”

Near to the wheel where his daughter was spinning,
Forgetting the roar and the rattle of guns,
The old sergeant smiled, with his maimed hand beginning
To rock in their cradle his twin grandsons.
Here, where the tranquil scene is giving
Peace after war, sometimes he saith,
“It is not all in being or living, —
God send you, my children, a glorious death!”

But what does he hear — hark! a drum is beating,
His gray locks tremble, his pulses stir,
As he waves to the passing regiment greeting,
For the old war-horse has felt the spur.
But alas! as he watches the colors flying,
“That is not the flag that I know,” he saith;
“If you ever avenge your country, dying,
God send you, my children, a glorious death!”

“As they swept on to victory, foremost in battle,
They were touched with a glory, those blouses of blue,
And Liberty heard through the cannonade's rattle
The crush of the thrones that our arms overthrew.
And the nations we saved, they crowned us all glorious,
And strewed flowers in the path of our soldiers,” he saith;
“They are happy who died in that moment victorious.
God send you, my children, a glorious death!”

Later than this (after 1830), Béranger followed the political ballad by the social ballad. The year 1830 dates the climax of his career, the culminating point of his existence. It was here that he had his highest view of men and affairs. Here, taking stock of humanity, he stopped, fixed his life and his works, and took those final resolutions from which he never departed. He had aroused, he had prepared, that revolution. It was certainly as much — it was more — his work than that of the most illustrious of that day who gloried in it. But though he had part in the work, he would bear no part in the triumph. He helped to install the monarchy of July, believing it to be a useful transition, a passage without fall or shock from the Bourbons to the republic. He spoke of it as “the plank that street boys put across a gutter on a rainy day. Only the street boys ask a sou from every one who crosses the plank.”

He asked nothing, even refusing what they offered him. The portfolio of Public Instruction! He laughed at the notion. “I will accept it at once,” he said; “but I warn you that

as soon as I am installed, I shall have my songs adopted as text-books in all young ladies' boarding-schools." At least they wanted to drag him to court. Louis Philippe wished to thank him. He refused to go.

"But people are admitted without ceremony. You can go in boots."

"Yes, yes; in boots to-day, in silk stockings a fortnight from now. The song is dethroned. I am good for nothing now."

He did in fact go into retirement—a retirement which, political at first, he made absolute in 1833. It was at that date that he published his fifth collection, announcing in the preface that it would be his last, and that he should thereafter keep silence. He kept his word. The last collection seems the work of a genius in its fullest activity. Yet the character is changed. Gaiety, almost absent, has given place to meditation. There are no more political ballads, no more warlike satires, and the poet no longer concerns himself with government, but with society. It is against society that he launches his songs, almost all of them consecrated to the humble, to the poor, to the wretched. To Jacques on his pallet, ruined by usury and crushed by taxes,—

Quick, up with you, Jack, and bow:
Look, the bailiff's coming now!

"The Old Vagabond" is a complaint and malediction of savage strength.

Here in this gutter let me die;
I finish old, infirm, and tired.
"He's drunk," will say the passers-by;
'T is well,—their pity's not desired.
I see some turn their heads away,
While others toss to me their sou's.
On to your junket! run, I say!
Old tramp,—in death I need no help from you.

Yes, here I'm dying of old age:
Of hunger people never die.
I hoped some almshouse might assuage
My suffering when the end was nigh.
But filled is every retreat,
So many people are forlorn,—
My nurse, alas! has been the street.
Old tramp,—here let me die where I was born.

The poor—is any country his?
What are to me your grain, your wine,
Your glory, and your industries,
Your orators? They are not mine.
And when a foreign foe waxed fat
Within your undefended walls,
I shed my tears, poor fool, at that!
Old tramp,—his hand was open to my calls.

I have called these social ballads. Evidently our poet thought that with the Bourbons the old régime had passed away forever, and that all that was needed now was to reor-

ganize the new. The love of humanity became his occupation. No Utopia startled him if it had happiness for its aim. It was then that he wrote the song of "The Fools," one of those poems which honor and immortalize the language in which they are written.

The torch which should light the future would be love. This was the end of which he dreamed, which he asked, which he predicted in that other meditation, "The Four Historic Ages," a résumé from sublime heights of the world's past. It was by love that men were to be more closely joined to heaven; and the sublime task would devolve upon France, hers would be the honor.

To arouse the world to thy shining,
God made thee burn, oh morning star!

Only—and here again he became political—it was necessary, in his eyes, that France should be a republic. And, notwithstanding all the doubts, bitterness, and irony that crossed his thoughts here and there (in "The Suicide," for example, that tragic lamentation), he had confidence that it would come, he read it in the stars, and, wrapping himself in the robe of Nostradamus, he predicted it for the year 2000. Such was Béranger's poetic legacy.

"What! you will write no more songs?"

"Not quite that. Listen: I promise to publish no more."

In fact, he wrote several others, something like a hundred, in the twenty-four years more that he lived. Not many. But he has confessed that it was always a difficult work for him; and in his most fertile time months passed sometimes without his writing a line.

From 1833 we shall see him sometimes leaving, sometimes approaching, Paris, as he is moved in turn by the fear of becoming misanthropic through mingling with his fellows, or the desire of once more seeing his friends and the smoky chimneys of the great city. He leaves Paris for Passy, Passy for Fontainebleau, Fontainebleau for Tours, where, from that garden—later celebrated, too, by Balzac—he wrote his charming verses "My Garden." And in this garden, this very paradise of which he sings, do you know what he sought? A love-affair: the love-affair of an old man, unhappy as that of Corneille at the same age, and of which he nearly died. He hides his grief for a moment at Fontenay-sous-Bois, then returns to Passy to revive and spend the peaceful evening of his life with his good Judith, found again to be kept forever.

Presently 1848 bursts upon us, and the republic is born. But was it that for which he had watched? The good man shook his head. "We had a staircase to descend by," he said;

"and behold, we have jumped out of the window!" He feared catastrophes. Meanwhile the people remembered him. It was no longer as in 1830, when Béranger, one of the authors of the revolution, found himself on the morrow neither elected nor eligible for election.

The régime of that era had fallen. Béranger declined to be a candidate. He had not fewer than 204,471 votes. His resignation, which he offered almost immediately, was not accepted. He served some months. More than ever he felt himself useless. Moreover, he was sixty-eight, and at that age one hardly learns to govern. He handed in his resignation for the second time, and it was accepted. Many reproached him for it as a defection, and bitter words began to be whispered behind his back. He resolutely continued to live in obscure retirement, doing all the possible good he could around him. He sadly saw the realization of his fears, and the fall of the republic, and soon the chill of the tomb struck him. His loved Lizette died first. It would soon be his time. Then he wrote his admirable "Adieu." It was on July 16, 1857, that he died. Some time afterward his "Last Songs" and his "Biography" appeared. Neither of these works, it must be confessed, answered the expectation which had been formed of it. The "Biography" contained some finely written pages, but no revelation of men, no new views of things; while in the collection one recognized at once the singular weakness of the numerous songs consecrated to Napoleon, and even the rest were of varying and unequal value. Was he right, then, in keeping silence since 1833, and beginning this posthumous collection with that melancholy confession, "More Verses"? At the same time it was in excellent verse that he complained of his inability to write; and there are in the "Last Songs" some pearls, like "An Idea." Notwithstanding the beauty of some of the poems, this last collection of Béranger met with lively criticism, and an extraordinary concert of attack and re- crimination was raised against the poet, hardly cold in his humble grave. Sainte-Beuve had already, in 1850, attached the bell, and presented Béranger as a clever trickster, facile at capturing popularity without any risk. From right and left they threw themselves with sharp teeth on the man and his work. Excellent names were mingled in the movement — M. Renan, M. Eugène Pelletan, the refined and the pure. Some reproached him for his irreligion, others for his deism; these for having forced the people into revolution, those for having encouraged the *coups d'état*. He had sung Napoleon, then called back the empire; deceitful and false.

They went so far as that, and presented him

— Béranger — as a *poseur*, as a hypocrite, as an egoist. It is too much, you say. In pleading error and calumny, nothing can be too much. And as the result of that campaign, a dark shadow was thrown upon the features so familiar to the people. Then came the scorn of his work, and almost the forgetfulness of the masses; and thus it is that he who was the national poet has as yet no statue; thus it is that the country which he loved so well has neglected his glorious genius.

It has been necessary to review this in order to show its injustice. Béranger's reputation should be a national one. He an egoist? As if his whole life had not protested against the accusation! Yes; he was of the family of La Fontaine, but he was La Fontaine's superior, as "Figaro" has said. Children knew him well, for no one loved children more than Béranger. In his eloquent and generous study of the poet, my friend Claretie relates a charming anecdote. One day, in 1857, a little boy, the son of a poor working-man, a poet whom Béranger had aided by his advice, came to him to read a fable. He gave him a box of bonbons. "Be sure, now," he said, "and don't eat them all at once." The child promised, and prolonged the pleasure with such effect that seven months after Béranger's death there were still some sugar-plums in the box. The father had left his work to devote himself to verse-making, and was poorer than ever. One evening, when he came home tired and weary, the child threw himself into his arms, laughing in a house without bread. "Look here, father; I have finished the sugar-plums. See what there is in the bottom of the box." There was a bill for two hundred francs; and, since Béranger was dead, the father could say with justice that the bill had fallen from heaven. There are a hundred like traits in his life. When he was not doing good with his own hands — he who lived on an income of twenty-four hundred francs, which he received from his publishers — when he was not doing good with his own hands, I say, he did it through others.

Here is a letter to Lafitte:

MY DEAR FRIEND: Please lend 5000 francs to X. I know him, and will be responsible for him. Please also lend 5000 francs to B. L., whom I also know, and will not be responsible for.

Lafitte lent the 10,000 francs.

And his letters to Rouget de Lisle, the author of the "Marseillaise," who, reduced to misery, was on the point of killing himself. Béranger saved him, drew him out of his misery, watched over him like a child, taking care of his wardrobe, and letting him feel his superiority only in repairing rents and sewing on buttons. "Retire

into your memories," he said to the moody and dull poet; "live backward, and make a spring-time of the winter which comes." This counsel he followed for himself.

Is the poetry of Béranger that of an egoist? No; but it is that of an altitudinarian, say some. The pose of disinterestedness; the pose of poverty. Ah, what a pity it is not met with more frequently! When Manuel died,—Manuel, the true and intimate friend of Béranger, the solid republican who alone might have persuaded him to consent to preferment had he lived,—Manuel left to Béranger by will an income of a thousand francs. He refused that also, and asked only for the hair-mattress on which his friend had died, and on which he himself died twenty years later. What a pose! Ah, what a pose! But acknowledge that it would have been much easier to have accepted the income, and died on a feather-bed.

Yes; but, say the purists, with his Bonapartist songs he reëstablished the empire, and twice, in 1830 and in 1848, by discarding the robe of a politician he neglected his duty.

In the first place, I say that his songs on Napoleon were not Bonapartist. What he celebrates in the man—who dazzled him, I admit—is his genius, never his system. It is the revolution, it is equality—it is glory, in short. And why not pardon Béranger as we have pardoned Victor Hugo? It has been said that Béranger reëstablished the empire. It is false. Here is a proof. About 1853 Dumas was publishing in the "Presse" his amusing memoirs. Béranger was told that the next chapter would be devoted to him, and that in it Dumas would depict him as shifting his course. At once he wrote to his "dear son" (it will be remembered how delighted Dumas was to hear himself thus called by Béranger): "Who has been able to put such an idea of me into your head? I am sure that you believe nothing of it; you are only trying to pay off some of my bad jokes by this new trick, which will be a very serious thing for me, whose whole life ought to suffice for an answer to such an accusation." And he asked, he demanded (so the letter runs), that Dumas, if he published the attack, should furnish him the means of answering by opening to him the columns of the "Presse." "I am sixty-three," he said in conclusion; "and it is a trifle hard to be obliged at that age to furnish a certificate of good conduct and morals. You will do as I ask? Answer as soon as possible, and pardon me for having used this sheet upside down." This last detail, which is charming, shows in what a friendly spirit he wrote.

Dumas published an article full of clever compliments, and Béranger thanked him by another letter, as bright as the first was earnest, in which he still showed his determination to

risk his repose — his dear repose — for the purpose of ridding himself of the offense which they had endeavored to fasten on him. "I subscribed to the consulate, I never subscribed to the empire," he affirmed. And his songs concerning Napoleon remind me of the coins struck after 1804, where one sees on one side the image of Napoleon emperor, and on the other side the inscription "République Française." No; he never shifted his course. Is his funeral forgotten? The menaces of Pietri, the police confiscating the coffin, the soldiers in arms keeping his nearest friends at a distance, and Paris alarmed!

What! The empire trembled lest the republic should rise from that grave, and you pretend that it entombed a friend of the empire!

But as to his retirement, then, his desertion. What must be thought of that? Ah, nothing more than Béranger himself has said. And he knew how useless it was to speak. He kept silence. Béranger — and this is the foundation of his nature — offers the phenomenon of a mind at the same time modest and wise, knowing very exactly its own measure, feeling with the utmost certainty what it can do and what it cannot do; and that once seen, keeping to what it can do, determined that nothing in the world shall compel it to do less or persuade it to undertake more. It is undoubtedly a rare character in this epoch of overweening conceit, when every one believes himself mightier than he is, when we impatiently demand of our heroes just the things that they cannot give us, when we wish the vaudevillist to be a philosopher, the philosopher a business man, the business man a poet, and the poet a politician. But it is that exact knowledge of himself, that defiant attitude, if you will, which is the key to Béranger. Even when he was a child, the idea of becoming a man oppressed him, and he wished to remain a child. Having heard that the beard would not grow if it were cut with scissors, he took up the habit, and never shaved with a razor. He grew up to be a man, however; and at one time he believed that he might be a poet like Molière or like Corneille.

But toward 1815, at thirty-eight, having reached his maturity, he paused, and recognized the fact that, if he elevated the tone of the song, he might through its medium say all that he had to say (not enough, perhaps, for an epic or dramatic poem), and that by so doing he would gain an originality which he certainly could not attain in elegiac or dramatic attempts. From that time his resolution was taken. He would be a singer of songs, and nothing more. To that personal reason full of wisdom is added another full of patriotism. In the times of an enslaved press songs for the people were needed. A journal could be suppressed, a song cannot

be suppressed. Once lodged in the memory, who can take it out?

Observe that in 1833 he felt himself already grown old. With a secret sadness he perceived that his vigor was exhausted, that his inspiration was extinguished. He would not stammer ill-formed verse. He determined to be silent. His posthumous volume shows that he was right. Could he continue his vocation when it was only with infinite pains that he could rhyme a dozen couplets? He would no longer have been Béranger; and, moreover, what could he say that he had not already said, and said so nobly, so distinctively? Should he go into political life, then? But he felt with the same sorrow that he was not of the stuff that makes statesmen. An orator? He was even less adapted to that. When he found himself in public,—and ten people constituted a public for him,—his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. Should he essay the tribune? The very ones who had reproached him for having deserted it would have sent him back to his Muse. But one rôle remained possible for him, that of a counselor. He essayed it. He gave advice that nobody followed, and on account of which things went neither better nor worse. In short, he had in his retirement only the consolation of knowing that he had declined a task which he had not the power to do—a rare merit, after all.

Is Béranger dimmed by these avowals? I think not. He made himself what it was his ambition to be—the song-writer of France. One can be that only by being a great poet. Who can read him and doubt that he was a great poet? Ah, his faults! I know them. His brevity, which makes his couplets sometimes, as Sainte-Beuve says, “an overloaded trunk”; an obsolete vocabulary, too many inversions, with also certain faults in the refrain—“that movable post where, willy-nilly, the bark must be tied up, though it asks nothing better than to sail free at the will of the wind.” Something should, however, be said in parenthesis concerning this post of a refrain, of which he seems to complain, and which was, however, so useful to him. For it is the refrain which adds force to the song, and the people love songs with refrains. It was necessary to his purpose that he should be able to repeat the end of the couplet as a chorus. So all the life of the song had to be condensed thus. Béranger understood that well, and therefore he sought first for his refrain. Possessed of his idea, he sought to give it expression, to sum it up in one or two verses,

and for these verses he searched among popular and well-known airs—airs that everybody sang—to find the one best adapted to his purpose. Thus the refrain, words and music, was struck out by a single blow. None the less is he a poet of delicacy, of health, and of power, giving us to taste of Gallic wine in a Greek vase. In fact, he had much in common with those Athenians whom he loved so well.

One fact concerning Béranger which has not been noted is that after Molière he is our poet who has created the most types. We know Madame Grégoire, Le Roi d'Yvetôt, Roger Bontemps, Le Marquis de Carabas, Paillasse Frétilton, and twenty others, as we know Arnolphe, Célimène, or Tartuffe. What force and strong strokes of the brush, what verses that are proverbs, what profound and graceful prefaces! “Power,” he says, “is a bell, preventing those who ring it from hearing any other sound.”

Was he not kindred with Montaigne, whose curiosity, vivid expression, independence, and good faith he had? And, like Montaigne, he had his *Le Boëtie* in Manuel.

He was independent to the point of folly; but above all, like the firm and upright Manuel, Béranger was a friend of the people, was a democrat, was a patriot. Listen to the reason he gives for having given up the biographies which he had promised to write. “If it is pleasant to overthrow unjust judgment by contradicting accusations that have been erroneous or too severe, how much suffering would there be when to speak the truth would be to diminish the luster of a life that neither virtue nor intelligence has preserved from all faults, particularly if one is convinced, as I am, that to destroy unnecessarily day by day the admiration of the people is to work for their demoralization!” Just and generous words, which I repeat to those who have tried to blot him out of the heart of the people. But he will retake his true place, since he wished for the republic and had a passionate love for France, because his songs are a school where one can learn to love him; because when he speaks of his country a hymn mounts to his lips—a hymn always true, like his “Children of France,” whose strophes of tears and fire seem to have been written yesterday. Yes, honor to the children of France; and above all, honor to him who sings of them so well! Honor to the good old poet, to the sage, to that happy foster-father who so early made him drink of liberty in his little cup. Honor to the good man, to the great man. Honor to Béranger!

C. Coquelin.

[We are indebted to Mr. Walter Learned for the foregoing translation—not only of M. Coquelin's text, but (except in the case of Thackeray's lines) of the Béranger songs as well.—EDITOR.]