

A FAMOUS RECITER AND HIS ART:

A CONVERSATION WITH MR. CLIFFORD HARRISON.

BY ARCHIBALD CROMWELL.

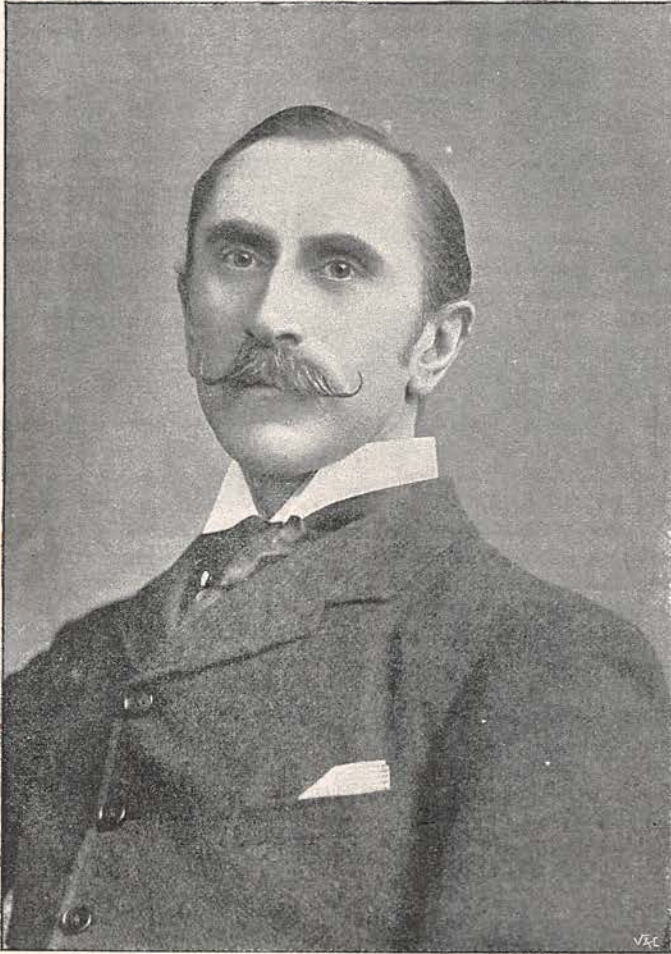


EVERY spring, when the primroses are appearing in the carpet of our woodlands, and every autumn, when fogs make Londoners forget the sunshine of the summer, the "Steinway Saturdays" commence. You may

ask what are the "Steinway Saturdays," to which question the answer will be long. Primarily they are the recitals given by Mr. Clifford Harrison on successive Saturday afternoons in Steinway Hall, near Portman Square. But they are much more than this; they are occasions when the greatest elocutionary art is allied with exquisite musical accompaniment, to the delight of as select an audience as you will find anywhere in London. Before three o'clock has struck the little hall will be filled with "the faithful," who come year

after year to listen to Mr. Harrison. There you will see the most influential dramatic critic of the day, and near him one of the most eloquent of London preachers. Here a notable authoress, there a leading Q.C., and while the moments fly a hum of subdued conversation shows how many acquaintances

have discovered each other in the audience. There is the atmosphere of a private party rather than of a public entertainment, and the beautiful decoration of the platform with flowers and books and draperies suggests the drawing-room rather than the hall. Every seat is filled when, punctual to the moment, Mr. Harrison makes his appearance carrying two or three volumes in his hand. After the applause has died away the programme commences. Perhaps the first piece may be a stirring ballad by Rudyard Kipling, delivered with therestrained



From a photo by]

[Barrauds.

*Yours faithfully
Clifford Harrison*

power of an actor who knows how to gain his effects without noisy declamation. Then, seated at the grand piano, Mr. Harrison may give Browning's "Abt Vogler," elucidating its meaning with the ripple of music which accompanies his voice. And succeeding this he will cause constant irrepressible laughter by a selection from Dickens, afterwards carrying everyone's thoughts into a region of seriousness by some solemn prose poem.

The position held by Clifford Harrison is so unique that it is difficult to analyse it. And although ill-health has precluded his going through the length and breadth of the land, his fame is widespread enough, I think, to give an interest to the following conversation which he permits me to publish in the WINDSOR MAGAZINE.

"When did you give your first recital, Mr. Harrison?"

"Ah! that is a question. It is not very pleasant looking through such a distant vista at the end of which lies my first appearance as a reciter. I used to give recitations when I was an actor, and my debut on the stage was made at the age of seventeen, so you will guess how long ago is the date you require. But it was in St. George's Hall—so linked with the memory of the German Reeds and that wonderful man Corney Grain—that I gave, on February 14, 1877, my first real recital, urged thereto by Lady Combermere and a few other intimate friends. One of my father's friends, an old playgoer, had years before written me a letter, which I read now with peculiar satisfaction, urging me to be a reciter. And it was by such advice that I made my earliest venture. During the week that followed my recital I was inundated with invitations to go to private houses, and while I was in good health I went to numberless parties. No, I did not much enjoy such functions, although none of the petty discourtesies of which one reads ever befell me. The only unfortunate mishap that occurred was at a house where the hostess asked me, instead of a band, to entertain her seven hundred friends! Most of them had no chairs, and altogether my attempt to recite to such a crowd was a fiasco. So I went up to my hostess and said, 'To recite under these conditions is obviously impossible. Your guests cannot hear me, and very few can even see me. Let me cancel the engagement and allow me to remain as a guest.' And to this she agreed. What used to surprise me was the peculiar choice that would be made of a programme. Such a piece as

'Billy's Rose,' or 'Curfew must not ring to-night' would be a success, while to listen to 'The Faithful Soul' would be thought just too *too* intellectual. I am glad to say that my choice of serious pieces—mostly culled from great literature—never scares the Steinway audiences. Yes, you are right in supposing that I particularly enjoy reciting prose. I give, you may recollect, selections from Carlyle, 'John Inglesant,' 'George Eliot,' in whose humour I particularly delight, Thackeray, Kingsley, Ruskin (by the way I have just prepared a piece on 'Flowers, Grass and Moss' by him) Rudyard Kipling, and others."

"How do you set your pieces to music?"

"I really can hardly say, for you see I don't understand the composition of music, having no knowledge of thorough bass. It would be impossible to write down my accompaniments, which now number about one hundred. When I take up a new selection I simply drift into what I consider the fitting pianoforte comment, as one might call it, not so much on the poem itself as on my conception of it. And the recitation is always my chief interest; never do I allow the accompaniment to be more than subordinate to my voice. I have often doubted whether such a style of reciting can rightly be considered an art. What do you think?"

"In my opinion, after hearing all the reciters of the day, I have come to the conclusion that your ability to combine the reciter with the accompanist is the only successful and artistic method. When a man can thus express vocally and musically his own version of a poem, then I believe he practises an art."

"Well, perhaps so; but I have a lingering feeling that one's personality dominates such work too much for it to be quite an art. To have a separate accompanist is to me frankly impossible, and yet that has been tried again and again. You are sure to have a duel between two personalities—the reciter and the pianist—each desirous of achieving his own success. A clever young man was introduced to me the other day as a composer of accompaniments. Well I offered to try and recite to his music. No use, for before I had said three verses he was far behind me. Take a piece like Kingsley's 'Lorraine.' Well there is a part where I must have a pause. No amount of prior arrangement could ensure my getting that perfect silence just at the proper moment. I want my reciting to music to be the expression of my idea of what was in the poet's mind, and

wherever the music threatens to be too prominent it has to be ruthlessly cut out. Just lately I have been setting Keats' exquisite 'Ode to a Nightingale.' It has been simply delightful to myself, but full of difficulty. No mere imitation of bird-notes could be artistic, so I have tried to suggest a background of woodland emotion from which the poem will emerge."

"Have you been imitated, Mr. Harrison?"

"A few have tried musical accompaniments, not, however, playing them themselves. Sir Henry Irving heard me and recited to music, but, I was told, the result was not satisfactory to his good taste. Madame Schumann told me that her distinguished husband had composed accompaniments for recitations by some famous German actress, but the lady wanted to alter them to suit her style, and Madame Schumann would not allow this, so they have practically fallen to the ground. The perfect accompanist is he who uses his own talent to enhance the value of the performance. Listen, for instance, to Mr. Henry Bird at the Popular Concerts and you will see the beautiful manner in which he subordinates his art to that of the vocalist. But how rare is such a fine pianist."

"Can you give me any idea how you learn your recitations?"

"I am afraid I am rather unmethodical. Though my memory is good, no actor would call me 'a quick study.' One is always conscious of roughnesses that need smoothing, delicate *nuances* that require indication, glances, gestures, that some of my pieces have taken me three months to learn. Even then, before giving them in public, they have to be rehearsed afresh. For instance, I shall go over each of the pieces which are in the programme for next Saturday, though they are all old favourites. The music for each piece is not altered, but every now and then some improvement suggests itself which has to be incorporated. It is all known and learnt to a note and the accentuation of a syllable. I do not in the least believe in anything haphazard in art."

"You must have had some curious incidents at recitals?"

"Well, not many lately, for my health since my illness seven years ago only allows me to do a strictly limited amount of work, and I usually am abroad for the winter, when otherwise one might extend one's public in the provinces. As it is I never recite in Liverpool, Glasgow, Manchester, and such centres, for in the summer when I

am in England they don't have recitals in the provinces. In fact I wonder always how on Saturday afternoons, when society has so many engagements, I manage to get good audiences at Steinway Hall. But my friends are very faithful. I get to expect certain faces and very rarely are they missing. Yet sometimes one cannot help wishing that when better health would have permitted one had gone further afield. More than once there have been tempting offers to go to America, and Mr. Smythe, 'the much-travelled,' was most pressing and generous in wanting me to give a tour through Australia. But it was not to be. I have to be content with doing what I can, not what I would like, and so little Steinway Hall has to be my chief platform."

"You like that hall, I suppose, because it is so quiet?"

"Yes; I have tried all the halls in London, and Steinway is the least affected by the sound of outside traffic. Never shall I forget reciting Alfred Austin's 'In the Month when Sings the Cuckoo' at Prince's Hall one hot summer afternoon. It is in my opinion one of the Poet Laureate's finest poems, and you will perhaps know my accompaniment to it is particularly quiet and restrained. Well, hardly had I started reciting it than through the open windows came a strident voice calling, 'Straw — berrees — six — pence — a — baskate!' You know that terrible pronunciation, and every verse had this cry as its pendant. It reminded me of an incident at one of Rubinstein's recitals in St. James's Hall. No; it was not the muffin-man this time. The great pianist was playing a dreamy Chopin most exquisitely when a harsh cornet sounded on his ears. He stopped suddenly, as if brought back out of his heaven of music back to the earth and St. James's Hall, and he could not resume till the cornet solo had been finished. Speaking of the 'Cuckoo,' don't you think it is Austin's best, although it begins with comedy and ends with tragedy — plunging you without warning as it were into cold water? But it is a piece that offers admirable opportunities for the reciter to exercise his art. Have you ever heard me recite Rossetti's 'Sister Helen'? I think that is the most difficult piece both for the recitation and for the accompaniment that I give."

"You must be aware, Mr. Harrison, how many preachers and thinkers attend your 'Steinway Saturdays'?"

"Indeed I am. Only the other day there was a row of clergy right in the front. That programme contained 'Abt Vogler,' and one

of them complimented me afterwards in the kind way that people have. I could not help telling him that it was singular he should admire a Rosicrucian like Abt Vogler. But he did not see the point. One lady told me she used to say she attended the Steinway Mission when she came to hear me. Well, if it stimulates any higher aspirations I am satisfied. I preach no creed save that which you find expressed in my little poem, 'The Song that has no Sound.' No sound. You see I do not desire to teach any theory or creed, or to give my work any definite voice save one—'Excelsior!'"

I cannot find any conclusion more suitable as expressive of the man and his thoughts than these words. If I wanted a phrase to portray Clifford Harrison truly it would be found in one of his own lines. He has "the greatness that this great world values not." Loving his work and caring little for notoriety, he is satisfied with the affectionate admiration of his friends, to whom as the years roll on he remains unique as poet, musician, reciter, combined in one charming personality.

His father, Mr. William Harrison, will go down to posterity as the creator of the tenor parts in "The Bohemian Girl" and "Maritana," and one of the most famous actors of the period. His mother, *née* Ellen Clifford, was an actress before her marriage with Mr. Harrison, and could look back with pride on the days when she played with Macready. What wonder then that Clifford, one of three sons, should develop early a decided taste and ability for the stage. He fulfilled a six months' engagement at the Theatre Royal, Sheffield, before he was nineteen, appearing in ten different rôles in one week. But a certain delicacy, shyness, a fear of over-doing a part, ultimately deprived the stage of an actor and enriched the ranks of elocutionists. After the glare of the foot-lights at Sheffield came a happy rest at lovely Eversley Rectory, the home of Charles Kingsley, whose daughter subsequently married his brother, the Rev. Wm. Harrison, vicar of Clovelly. She has, under the pseudonym of "Lucas Malet," followed with brilliant success in the steps of her father as a story writer of uncommon power. From peaceful Eversley, where he became the hero-worshipper of Kingsley, Clifford Harrison went to Cambridge. After that period his career as a reciter is public property.

He has a right to be considered as a poet and author. Rarely does he delight his friends by placing his own poems in his pro-

grammes, and the remark that used to be made to the late Rev. Henry White, of the Chapel Royal, Savoy, might legitimately be put to Mr. Harrison, "Why don't you give us more of yourself?" If you take up his volume entitled "In Hours of Leisure," you are speedily impressed with the graceful poetry it contains. Here are to be found such favourites as "The Bells of Is" (which, by the way, supplied the Bev. F. B. Meyer, an ardent admirer of Mr. Harrison, with the title of a popular book) and the pathetic "Carcassonne," beside other poems less familiar. Or in the recently published book, "On the Common Chords," you may enjoy the charming "Song that has no Sound," "The Silver Bell," and the dramatic story of "Orpheus" beset by wolves.

In an age of "reminiscences," one rarely finds so choice a volume written in such excellent taste as Mr. Harrison's "Stray Records," in the four hundred pages of which one sees the influence of his mother, for whose eyes its pages, culled from thirty notebooks, were first and solely intended. I extract a story told by Mr. Harrison and Mrs. Browning's poem, "The Dead Pan." He was about to recite it when a lady was heard asking, "What is the next piece? Something funny, I hope. Oh yes, I see, 'The Dead Pan.' Dear me, how odd! Of course it's funny; something about bad cooking I suppose!"

The handsome volume, "Lines in Pleasant Places," reveals Mr. Harrison's skill as an artist—a talent which has drawn several commendations from John Ruskin. The great critic wrote a few years ago: "The drawings of Alpine wooded mountains are a pleasure to me such as no man ever gave me before, and the light and shade is a lesson to me in the management of half-tints such as I never got before, and which I haven't got to the bottom of yet." The poems on the ample pages are all reflective of the author's spirit. I must limit myself to one specimen:—

A MOONLIGHT NIGHT AT MENTONE.

It shines for all—that moonbeam on the sea.
I at Mentone, you at Nice, behold
Each his own path of rippling molten gold.
But yours is all your own, and mine to me
Is wholly mine. Could our thoughts flee
Over that luminous track they would not fold
Their wings to meeting till the waves had rolled
To yon horizon. Fact or fantasy,
It shines for all!

The beam is where you see it;—radiates
From one spot truly; but the vision waits
Upon our eyes—goes with us as we go.
There is a symbol written on its glow.
But few, I think, accept the lesson, though
It shines for all!