

John Greenleaf Whittier.

BY THE REV. CANON VAUGHAN, M.A.

IT is not our purpose in the present paper to write a biography of Whittier, whose life was an uneventful one, and passed for the most part beside the still waters of peace. We desire rather to dwell upon the various aspects of his poetry, to recognize the forces which lay behind his noble and fearless character, and to point out what seems to be of most permanent value in the not inconsiderable volume of his writings. And in attempting to form an estimate of Whittier as a poet, it may not be inappropriate to regard his writings under three distinct aspects: his poems of freedom, his poems of rural description, and his religious poems. But while the subjects are distinct, there is one characteristic which marks them all, and without recognizing which it is impossible to enter into the spirit of his poetry. We mean the deeply religious spirit which pervades them. With our own Wordsworth, he felt in Nature a presence that disturbed him with the joy of elevated thoughts. As a devout and earnest member of the Society of Friends he accepted as the essential points of Christ's revelation the two supreme doctrines of the Fatherhood of God and of the Brotherhood of man. This latter conviction lies at the root of his stirring and passionate appeals on behalf of the wretched slaves; while his unflinching acceptance of the reality of God's Fatherhood, as emphasized in a large number of his poems, will probably remain as the most valued heritage of his teaching.

John Greenleaf Whittier came of a Quaker stock, the founder of which settled at Haverhill, near the Merrimac River, about the middle of the seventeenth century. The sufferings of the early Quakers in New England under the Puritan Fathers and their descendants form a dark chapter in the history of religious persecution, and must be borne in mind as an important factor in estimating that fierce hatred of tyranny and intolerance which

marks Whittier's "Poems of Freedom." The incidents of that persecution, of which we have illustrations in "The Exiles," the "King's Missive," and in "Barclay of Ury," grated, we are told, on the poet's memory, and he refused to regard as "saintly religionists the rigid oppressors who had wielded the scourge and the branding iron for Quakers, and at whose bidding Friends, male and female, dangled from gibbets." For many years the saintly Society of Friends had played an honourable part in the great movement for emancipation. Owing in a great measure to the life and labours of John Woolman, they had as a body emancipated their slaves. Their example however was not followed, and the appalling evil continued. In 1833, following the example of his friend William Lloyd Garrison, of whom Lowell sang—

"In a small chamber, friendless and unseen,
Toiled o'er his type one poor unlearned man,
The place was dark, unfurnished, and mean,
Yet here the freedom of a race began"

—Whittier, at the age of twenty-six, threw in his lot with the Abolitionists. He published a pamphlet, entitled "Justice and Expediency," which marks his entrance into the fray. The story of the great Anti-Slavery struggle which ended in civil war need not be here dwelt upon, except to emphasize the part that Whittier took in it. That part lives in his poems and lyrics, written between the years 1833 and 1848, and published under the title of "Voices of Freedom," which, it has been well said, are animated with "the hate of hate, the scorn of scorn, the love of love." The first of these "Voices," was the noble dedication to William Lloyd Garrison :

"Champion of those who groan beneath
Oppression's iron hand."

These lines were quickly followed by a poem called "Stanzas," beginning "Our fellow-countrymen in chains!" a poem written in the white heat of burning indignation. Nothing, however, roused Whittier's anger more than the part taken by the clergy

in supporting slavery. In 1835, he tells us, a great pro-slavery meeting was held in Charlestown, on the fourth of the ninth month, when *The Courier* stated that "The clergy of all denominations attended in a body, lending their sanction to the proceedings, and adding by their presence to the impressive character of the scene!" This incident called forth the scathing indictment of "Clerical Oppressors," beginning—

"Just God!—and these are they
Who minister at thine Altar, God of Right!"

In the same spirit of burning indignation is written "A Sabbath Scene," in which the poet describes how an escaped female slave, "with dusky brow and naked feet," fled for refuge into a church during the performance of Divine service—

"Like a scared fawn before the hounds
Right up the aisle she glided,
While close behind her, whip in hand,
A lank-haired hunter strided."

With the help of a deacon who trips her up with a Polyglot, and of the parson, who acknowledges the right divine "to own and work and whip her," the hapless wretch is bound hand and foot, while shriek rose on shriek, and rent the sabbath air. And then—

"My brain took fire: 'Is this,' I cried,
'The end of prayer and preaching?
Then down with pulpit, down with priest,
And give us Nature's teaching.
"Foul shame and scorn be on ye all
Who turn the good to evil,
And steal the Bible from the Lord,
To give it to the Devil!"

In a tenderer strain we have the pathetic farewell of a Virginian slave-mother to her daughters sold into southern bondage, one stanza of which may be quoted—

"Gone, gone,—sold and gone
To the rice-swamp dank and lone.
There no mother's eye is near them,
There no mother's ear can hear them ;

Never, when the torturing lash
 Seams their back with many a gash,
 Shall a mother's kindness bless them,
 Or a mother's arms caress them.
 Gone, gone,—sold and gone
 To the rice-swamp dank and lone,
 From Virginia's hills and waters—
 Woe is me, my stolen daughters."

Among other notable Voices of Freedom may be mentioned "The Christian Slave" and "The Branded Hand."

A few words only will be necessary with regard to Whittier as a poet of Nature. It is, of course, impossible to compare his writings with those, for instance, of our own Wordsworth. Still, in his descriptions of quiet landscape, and familiar home scenes, of "simple life and country ways," he has secured a high place among his contemporaries. As illustrations of his powers in this direction we would instance "The Grave by the Lake," the opening verses of "The Witch's Daughter," and the fine poem on "The Merrimac," beginning "Stream of my fathers!" Neither would we forget to mention what is probably the most distinctive and popular of Whittier's poems. In the winter idyll, "Snow-Bound," dedicated to the memory of the household it describes, the poet paints in exquisite colours the home of his early days. Few more perfect pictures of quiet rural life exist in the language. It has been compared with Goldsmith's "Deserted Village," and with Burns's "The Cotter's Saturday Night," and it hardly loses by the comparison.

Beautiful, however, as are many of Whittier's descriptions of scenery and simple country ways, it is as a religious poet that his name will be chiefly remembered. His sympathetic Introduction to "The Journal of John Woolman"—an autobiography declared by Channing to be "the sweetest and purest in the language," and of which Charles Lamb said, "get the writings of John Woolman by heart,"—strikes the note of his religious teaching. John Woolman's religion, we are told, "was love. His whole existence and all his passions were love." And his "Journal" deals with the practice of Christian benevolence—the life of Christ manifesting itself in purity and goodness—

rather than with the dogmas of theology. He wrote, says Whittier, as he believed, from an inward spiritual prompting, and he evidently felt that his work was done in the clear radiance of that

“Light which never was on land or sea.”

And “the entire outcome of this faith was love manifested in reverent waiting upon God, and in that untiring benevolence, that quiet but deep enthusiasm of humanity which made his daily service to his fellow-creatures a hymn of praise to the common Father.”

These words from Whittier’s appreciation of John Woolman exactly describe his own religious position. No man ever realized more clearly the deep responsibility of life, and the accountability of the individual soul to God. Witness such poems as “My Soul and I,” and “Ichabod,” which has been called “the purest and profoundest *moral* lament in modern literature, whether American or European.” And with Whittier, as with John Bunyan, “the essence of Religion is the practick part,”—in doing justly, in loving mercy, and in walking humbly with God. He recognized with the old Greek Father that “it is the heart and not the head that makes the theologian,” and he would have endorsed the words of William Penn, that “The true and the just and the pious and the devout are all of one religion, and they shall see and recognize each other when their masks and liveries are stripped aside.” In the fine ballad of sweet “Mary Garvin” he makes the old father say—

“Creed and rite perchance may differ, yet our faith and hope be one.”

For the service that God requireth at His earthly children’s hands is not “the poor offering of vain rites, but rather the simple duty man from man demands.” This conception of “true worship” is nowhere more emphatically taught than in the following striking stanzas :

“Our Friend, our Brother, and our Lord,
 What may Thy service be ?
 Nor name, nor form, nor ritual word,
 But simply following Thee.

“ We bring no ghastly holocaust,
 We pile no graven stone,
 He serves Thee best who loveth most
 His brothers and Thy own.

“ Thy litanies, sweet offices
 Of love and gratitude ;
 Thy sacramental liturgies,
 The joy of doing good.

“ The heart must ring Thy Christmas bells,
 Thy inward altars raise ;
 Its faith and love Thy canticles,
 And its obedience praise !”

And the foundation of this service to man was the belief, which no apparent contradictions could shake, in the loving Fatherhood of God. This faith was the rock on which he anchored his hopes. That God is the Father of all men, that He hateth nothing that He hath made, that “ His nature and His Name is love,” that “ His erring child may be lost to himself, but never lost to Him ”—this with Whittier was the cardinal revelation of the Gospel. Any dogma, no matter how strongly supported by authority, which seemed to contradict this fundamental proposition, stood with him self-condemned. “ His human hands were weak to hold such iron creeds.” In the light of Christ’s teaching, “ he dared not fix with mete and bound the love and power of God.” Hence the following beautiful lines of unruffled confidence and peace :

“ And so beside the Silent Sea
 I wait the muffled oar ;
 No harm from Him can come to me
 On ocean or on shore.

“ I know not where His islands lift
 Their froned palms in air ;
 I only know I cannot drift
 Beyond His love and care.

“ And Thou, O Lord, by whom are seen
 Thy creatures as they be,
 Forgive me, if too close I lean
 My human heart on Thee.”

And this knowledge of the love of God as the Universal Father led him without hesitation to adopt those views of the

future which have come to be associated with the teaching of Eternal Hope. It was, perhaps, easier and more natural for a Quaker to arrive at this conclusion, than for those brought up in more rigid schools of thought. For, as he remarks in a note to one of his poems, as believers in the universality of the Saving Light, the outlook of early Friends upon the heathen was a very cheerful and hopeful one. God was as near to them as to Jew or Anglo-Saxon; as accessible at Timbuctoo as at Rome or Geneva. Not the letter of Scripture, but the spirit which dictated it, was of saving efficacy. Robert Barclay, he adds, "is nowhere more powerful than in his argument for the salvation of the heathen, who live according to their light, without knowing even the name of Christ. William Penn thought Socrates as good a Christian as Richard Baxter; and early Fathers of the Church, as Origen and Justin Martyr, held broader views on this point than modern Evangelicals." As a firm believer, then, in that "Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world," and holding fast to the doctrine of the Fatherhood of God, the popular opinions about hell were to Whittier inconceivable. In one of his most beautiful poems he represents the famous German preacher, Tauler, walking one autumn day without the walls of Strasbourg, pondering the solemn miracle of life. And as he walked, he prayed, "While teaching others, I myself am blind; send me a man who can direct my steps." And among the dry dead linden leaves that lay along his path he heard a sound as of an old man's staff, and looking up he saw a stranger, "weak and poor and old." "Peace be to thee, father," Tauler said. "God give thee a good day." The old man raised slowly his calm blue eyes. "I thank thee, son. But *all* my days are good, and none are ill." Wondering, the preacher spoke again, "God give thee happy life." The old man smiled. "I never am unhappy." And then the aged stranger spoke of God's will, and God's love, and of his own calm trust in "the Holy Trinity of Knowledge, Goodness, and Almighty Power." Silently wondering, for a little space, stood the great preacher; then he spake as

one who, grappling with a haunting thought, drags it into light.
 "But what if God's will consigns thee hence to hell?"

"'Then,' said the stranger cheerily, 'be it so.
 What Hell may be I know not; this I know—
 I cannot lose the presence of the Lord:
 One arm, Humility, takes hold upon
 His dear Humanity; the other, Love,
 Clasps His Divinity. So where I go
 He goes; and better fire-walled Hell with Him,
 Than golden-gated Paradise without.'"

Tears sprang to Tauler's eyes. A sudden light clave the dark shadow of haunting fear. His prayer was answered. God had sent the strange old man to teach him by his simple trust wisdom the weary schoolman never knew.

Such was the sublime faith of the saintly Quaker poet of America. Accepting with all his heart the revelation of God as seen in the life and teaching of the Son of Man, that belief became the touchstone of his religion. It explained the burning hatred of intolerance and wrong which found expression in his poems of liberty. The enthusiasm of humanity was but the logical outcome of a living faith in the all-loving Fatherhood of the Creator. The service of that Creator, as outwardly manifested in the world, was found to be identical with the service of man. And in the light of this great central revelation that "the All-Great is the All-Loving, too," there crept into the poet's soul a peace that no earthly contradictions could disturb. "What is dark below is light in heaven." And "heaven is love as God Himself is love."

"All souls are Thine; the wings of morning bear
 None from that Presence which is everywhere,
 Nor hell itself can hide, for Thou art there."

And this faith remained unshaken to the end. In some exquisite lines, entitled "At Last," written not long before his death, which occurred in September, 1892—lines which, it is interesting to remember, cheered the last days of Dr. Vaughan, the Master of the Temple and Dean of Llandaff, in his weary

waiting for the end—we note the same calm and holy confidence that had marked his earlier years :

“I have but Thee, my Father ! let Thy spirit
Be with me to comfort and uphold ;
No gate of pearl, no branch of palm I merit,
Nor street of shining gold.

“ Suffice it if—my good and ill unreckoned,
And both forgiven through Thy abounding grace—
I find myself by hands familiar beckoned
Unto my fitting place.

“ Some humble door among the many mansions,
Some sheltering shade where sin and sorrow cease,
And flows for ever through heaven’s green expansions
The river of Thy peace.

“ There, from the music round about me stealing,
I fain would learn the new and holy song,
And find at last, beneath Thy trees of healing,
The life for which I long.”

