

In Memoriam

Whittier

REV. DEWITT S. CLARK

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JOHN G. WHITTIER

A Sermon

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JOHN G. WHITTIER

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*Thy statutes have been my songs in the house
of my pilgrimage."*

With these words, our most honored and loved citizen of county and state—not to say New England—might well have greeted the spectral boatman, for whose coming, with "muffled oar," he waited "beside the Silent Sea." There was no mistaking the sweet singer, whose voice, sounding out over the waste, guided the grim messenger to him, for whom the heavens had need.

John G. Whittier, the Quaker poet, patriot, philanthropist, Christian commoner is with the Immortals,—has joined "the Choir Invisible"—and earth is poorer for that one of its rarest souls has vanished. We should not be paying due respect to simplicity, to worth, to heroism, to talent, to piety, did we not, in the Lord's house, make

mention of one whose holy ambition he confessed,
when forecasting the hours of oblivion,

“ Therefore with yearnings vain
And fond I still would fain
A kindly judgment seek,
A tender thought bespeak.

And while my words are read,
Let this at least be said :
Whate'er his life's defeatures,
He loved his fellow creatures.

If of the Law's stone table,
To hold he scarce was able
The *first* great precept fast,
He kept for man, the last.”

Yes ! sainted soul, the agreeing testimony of
all who knew, will write thee, “as one who loved
his fellowmen !” So conspicuous an example of
this virtue and grace, we shall not willingly sur-
render without unitedly voicing our gratitude for
the beautiful life, and dwelling awhile on its plain
lessons.

Every land and every age has had its singers.
From the rude chants and war-cries of the savage,
to the weird and mystic frenzy of the Vedic
hymnists, from Scandinavian skald to Arthurian
legend spinner, from the days of the Mosaic

odes to this of our latest commemoration, great
thoughts and deeds have found poetic utterance.
The bard has made the laws of the nation by
first making its songs. The Psalmist was the
greater King for that he could set the popular
heart to feeling and the mouth to phrasing, after
him, its unshaken faith in the existence, care, jus-
tice, wisdom, and love of God for His children,
and for His earthly Zion. Whatever the outward
fortunes of His people, this man of vivid fancies
and fervor was able to declare them. Was evil
threatening, he could measure it in graphic sen-
tences, and lead, as Miriam did by the Red Sea,
the exultant company of the delivered. Was
there glory in sky, and mountain, and wood, and
fertile plain and tossing sea, his spirit, sensitive
to it, was set to joyous and rhythmic hymning.
Was sorrow and affliction sweeping over his own
life, or of those dear to him, in mournful ca-
dences the wail went forth upon the still air
and was caught and kept for every mourner since.
Did the vanity and brevity of existence here
weigh heavily at times, its emptiness and dis-
appointment seemed to oppress him, till he could
tell it all, in strains full of pathos, which are our

readiest utterance still. And always, his tongue and pen had been guided by the Divine Statutes. The abiding word of the Lord had been his counsellor and he was ever magnifying it.

With a variety and richness of imagery, with a glow which kindles the soul of every reader, he set forth the impartial, yet minute justice of the Almighty, and then His marvelous mercy and delicate interest in the feeblest life; the heavy hours he had beguiled as he touched his lyre and, with plaintive voice, poured his deepest longings into the ear of the Infinite. With rugged and masterly verse, at other moments, he gave praise unto Him who ruled in righteousness. As a traveler homeward journeying, he kept the visions of its fair land, and echoed here the anthems of the adoring hosts, which his quick ear caught. Men recognized them then as unearthly, and their celestial character is evident to those who, as he, regard this world but as the house of their pilgrimage.

Well said Dean Church, of the Psalms, "they carry to the highest point, whatever there is in a religion; they mark the level to which in idea and faith, in aspiration and hope it can arise."

And "contrasting the Veda with them," he further says, "is to pass at a bound, from poetry, heightened certainly by a religious sentiment, to religion itself in its most serious mood and most absorbing form."

Ever since, choice servants of God have been moved by a like influence, and have sung almost as grandly and tenderly and helpfully. Theories of inspiration are being revised, in our time, by the patent facts which the intelligent and godly are aware of. We do not care to wrangle over definitions. We admit the influence of the Holy Spirit upon willing and gifted intellects. We do not wish to add to the Sacred Scriptures, the compositions even of minds profoundly wrought upon by Him. A closed canon and closed list of authors serve the church and world well enough, for all their needs present or prospective. But, assuredly, we may reverently cherish with it, as the ancient Jews did, beside the acknowledged word, the writings of lofty and cultured spirits which have affected and impelled men of our own time to the worthiest efforts and deeds. Truths' messages from whatever lips they come are precious. They have a

holy purpose, no better stated than by another, whom many have styled our national poet.

“ God sent his singers upon earth
With songs of sadness and of mirth,
That they might touch the hearts of men
And bring them back to heaven again.”

The sermon which in plain prose is naught, in the winning guise of verse has penetrated to the very heart and arrested, or convinced, or broken or soothed it.

But none in our national history I believe, has had a wider or more blessed sway over the popular life, than the aged one who has just fallen asleep. This is due to several causes.

I. *His charming simplicity and naturalness.*

In an age of tinsel and show and artifice, when multitudes are trying to pass for more and other than they are, one plain, self-respecting personality is refreshing. Homely scenes and homely virtues, exalted to a rank with the proudest displays, and shown to have equal merit with them, come to be universally admired. They appeal to an inward judgment and do not fail to obtain its sanction. Our friend, like his model, Burns,

whose works were put in his hand while yet a youth, and for whom he retained through life his early enthusiasm, was a genuine country boy. He never cared to be a city man or became fond of its ways and standards. For ordinary people and ordinary employments he had an unfeigned love, and thought them as grand as any. His Scotch teacher had clearly shown him, by his charming lyrics on the least and most despised objects, that, as he said, “the things out of which poems came were not, as I had always imagined, somewhere away off in a world and life lying outside the edge of our New Hampshire sky; they were right here about my feet and among the people I knew. The common things of our common life, I found were full of poetry. It was a new and perfect revelation.” To this revelation he was ever after true. So that whether it be in the kitchen or barn, or in the fragrant hay field, or in the gathering of bronzed and clumsy farmers, or in the plain Friend’s meeting house, he found ample theme and suggestion for his genius and service. Faithful pictures they are, which his hand drew, and which no artist, born in more easy and luxurious surroundings, is clever enough to equal.

Experience over against imagination was his ally and so he gave us "The Barefoot Boy," and that matchless pastoral "Snow-Bound," having for us of this western world, the fascinating reality which "The Cotter's Saturday Night" and "The Deserted Village," have for our kin over the sea.

This child-hearted, strong-minded man, it is said, while listening to a public speaker, was much delighted with a stanza quoted, and warmly cheered it, when one sitting by his side asked him if he knew whose it was, "No!" he replied, "but it is good" and was made to blush like a girl when told it was from one of his own poems. His entire lack of self-appreciation and perfect modesty, won, as friend, everyone who beheld it. In the midst of more active and cosmopolitan labors, we hear him sighing for the renewal of

"Boyhood's painless play,
Sleep that wakes in laughing day,
Health that mocks the doctor's rules,
Knowledge never learned of schools."

Into that eternal freshness of being, he has entered.

II. *His earnest use of such advantages as were given him.*

The weather-beaten farm house on the side of

a bleak New England hill, with its meagre offerings of amusement, and stern duties for each and every member there, its absence of books and literary atmosphere, furnished to the thoughtful youth all he needed in the springtime of life for the great and honorable career he was to enter upon. The winter's schooling gave him a training which others, with larger chances for education, fail to improve. The diligent habit, however, soon made him facile in myth and lore, which is the special province of the Spensers' and Milton's, Tennyson's and Longfellow's by which his verse gained point and polish, spite of his protest,

"The rigor of a frozen clime,
The harshness of an untaught ear,
The jarring words of one whose rhyme
Beat often Labor's hurried time,
Or duty's rugged march through storm
And strife, are here.

His patient, quiet, constant study brought its reward to his alert sight, of which he is all unaware, but which we note and cannot agree with his judgment, as again he disclaims it,

"Unskilled the subtle lines to trace,
Or softer shades of natures' face,
I view her common forms with unappointed eyes."

If ever a mortal's eyes were opened to see the

beauties God has hidden in unnoticed or hackneyed things, his were, and he has taught us how to reverence them. Let no one reading his story, deplore that all doors of fame or power are closed to himself. This shy but steadfast man found them shut quite as tight for him, yet they opened to largest opportunity and blessing for mankind, simply because he went on his way as God beckoned. As he heard the imperative word of the Lord, he was ever after repeating it, in tuneful measures, to which many a hard, careless or despairing one stopped to listen. This minstrel reached multitudes he never saw. None know whither a well spoken word or an exquisite chord is wafted. Neither are wasted in God's perfect economy.

III. *His philanthropy.*

This, beyond dispute, was his chief characteristic. It was spontaneous and genuine. Burns himself could not more forcibly or happily declare the inherent worth of the individual, whatever his fortunes or place in the world. He held himself under bonds to do every man good. Where a gigantic wrong insolently defied a class

or a nation, his soul burned at the affront and his challenge was quick and loud. It did not matter that it was a helpless Indian maiden, or a valiant Hungarian leader, or a gray haired prisoner for debt, or the chained millions of a dusky race, with such might as he could, nerved to its utmost by a loving anxious heart, he struck. And his peaceful blows paralyzed, as no weapon of the armorer could, the haughty and secure offenders. Hear him assailing the clerical oppressors, attending in a body and giving their sanction to a pro-slavery meeting!

“ Woe! then to all who grind
Their brethren of a common Father down,
To all who plunder from the immortal mind,
Its bright and glorious crown.

Woe to the priesthood! woe
To those whose hire is with the price of blood—
Perverting, darkening, changing as they go
The searching truths of God.”

Again, in withering sarcasm, he makes the fawning minister of the Gospel, upholding the fugitive slave law, reply to the master who has chased his chattel into the very Sanctuary.

“ Of course I know your right divine
To own, and work, and whip her,
Quick, Deacon! throw that Polyglott
Before the wench and trip her.”

Nor, know we a more complete apostrophe than his to Democracy,—the ideal—unstained by political associations, and which his white soul dictated,

“ The generous feeling pure and warm
Which owns the rights of *all* divine,
The pitying heart, the helping arm
The prompt self-sacrifice are thine.

Through all disguise, form, place or name
Beneath the flaunting robes of sin,
Through purity and squalid shame,
Thou lookest on the man within.

And there is reverence in thy look,
For that frail form which mortals wear,
The spirit of the Holiest took,
And veiled His perfect brightness there.”

Or, if a beleagured garrison in the distant East, was praying and straining every sense if it might detect the approach of the relieving column, he too, watched just as eagerly.

“ Oh! they listened, looked and waited
Till their hope became despair,
And the sobs of long bewailing
Filled the pauses of their prayer.

Then upspoke a Scottish maiden
With her ear unto the ground:
‘ Dinna ye hear it—dinna ye hear it
The pipes o’Havelock sound!’ ”

The whole round earth had no troubled creature anywhere, that he would not haste to bring such relief as he could.

Samaritan indeed! singular in these selfish days, when greed or harshness makes us hasten by the wounded, bleeding, perishing brother, trusting some less busy will minister to him. That holy statute of loving thy neighbor as thyself, was ever vibrant in his songs as he went along our strange and tragic paths. For one such generous nature to perish from our midst is to dull the hope and narrow the bliss of many a sufferer who may not know why their expectation perishes. Shall such a saintly presence vanish and leave no imitators? Nay! Shall we not be ashamed at our littleness and failure any more to follow in his footsteps who “went about doing good?”

IV. *His patriotism.*

Love of country is, next to love of family, a divine passion which can count for it no offering too dear. America has had no more devoted son within her borders, who

“ Through the centuries felt the beat
Of Freedom’s march in Cromwell’s heart.”

or who laid his life more willingly on her altar of sacrifice. When Cavalier Virginia would send her summons to Massachusetts to return her escaped slaves, he it was, who framed her magnificent answer,

“ We wage no war we lift no arm, we fling no torch within
The fire-damps of the quaking mine beneath your soil of sin.
We leave ye with your bondmen, to wrestle, while ye can,
With the strong upward tendencies and godlike soul of man.

But for us and for our children, the vow which we have
given

For freedom and humanity, is registered in heaven.
No slave hunt in our borders! no pirate on our strand,—
No fetters in the Bay State,—no slave upon our land.”

For such brave words as these, he was called again and again in the early days to witness. Attacks upon his property, stoning by the mob, insulting cries and threats of shameful handling, all these he accepted as the price which truth and righteousness must pay for their place in society. Their enlisted servant and apostle he openly claimed to be. Smiting in return, not with the sword of steel, but with the keener and more piercing sword of the spirit, enduring without a murmur the tempest of abuse falling upon him—in true gospel fashion, turning to receive yet

further blows from a maddened but weakening adversary we hear him singing, still in the midst of the fray,

“ So let it be, in God's own might
We gird us for the coming fight,
And strong in Him whose cause is ours
In conflict with unholy powers.
We grasp the weapons He has given—
The Light and Truth and Love of Heaven.”

And when the horrible conflict came, and armed thousands met in desperate battle, and every home had some heavy bloody shadow fall athwart it, he sung,

“ We take with solemn thankfulness
Our burden up, nor ask it less,
And count it joy, that even we,
May suffer, serve, or wait for Thee,
Whose will be done.

Strike! Thou the Master! we Thy keys
The anthem of the destinies!
The minor of Thy loftier strain,
Our hearts shall breathe, the old refrain,
Thy will be done.”

To Englishmen, mistaking the meaning and magnitude of our struggle, he sent the stinging rebuke,

" You flung your taunt across the wave
We bore it as became us."

To the gray-haired old woman, waving the flag
of the union in the face of rebel soldiers, he
shouted a cheery and ringing greeting in the
name of a loyal nation, and whenever a crisis
came, in the terrible years of strife, his strong clear
tenor like a bugle blast was heard, from north to
south and east to west, rallying the fainting and
despairing, for one more effort as he cried,

" I read the lesson of the Past
That firm endurance wins at last
More than the sword."

and in the same breath praying,

"O! clear eyed Faith and Patience, thou
So calm and strong!
Send strength to weakness, teach us how
The sleepless eyes of God look through
This night of wrong!"

Underlying all these notable traits and graces,
giving impulse and direction to them, making
his the symmetrical, well-orbed majestic charac-
ter we discover, was

V. *His profound religious life.*

Associated from birth with the society of

Friends, he grew up used to their simple forms of
expression, and seeking as they are so generally
taught, the indwelling and enlightening of the
Spirit Divine. Flippancy was an unknown expe-
rience with him. Queries on the vast themes
which engage mortal thought, concerning the
present and future life were common with him,
but he had to exclaim

" The same old baffling questions! O! my friend
I cannot answer them. In vain I send
My soul into the dark where never burn
The lamps of science, nor the natural light
Of Reason's sun and stars!

* * * * *

I have no answer for myself or thee,
Save that I learned beside my mother's knee,
All is of God that is, and is to be;
And God is good."

No such keen observer and thinker as he,
could fail to find a perplexing problem in the
doctrine of the Trinity. He called it a "riddle"
and prayed for its solution and was given at last
to behold it,

" Revealed in love and sacrifice,
The Holiest passed before thine eyes,
One and the same, in threefold guise.

The equal Father in rain and sun,
His Christ in the good to evil done,
His Voice in thy soul, and the three are one.

And my heart answered, ' Lord I see
How, Three are one and one is Three,
Thy riddle hath been read to me.' "

He wore the symbol of the cross on breast and forehead, and in his inmost soul he felt its sacred impress. The Christ was his precious Saviour, as the hasty readers of his lines would hardly discern, so caught are they by his close following the Master, as he went about breaking every chain on limb and class and mind and heart. The slave driver, the hard bargainer, the creed-maker and conventionalist, these each and all found him undoing the burdens they had bound and put on others' shoulders. It is this life-long championship of the shackled which chiefly engages us when looking upon him, but the secret of it all lay, in that he had stood with the astounded sorrowing disciples on that great day, before the dying Son of God. While the momentous sacrifice for human guilt is clearly witnessed, he can only appeal in memory of it.

" And shall the sinful heart alone
Behold unmoved the atoning hour,

"When nature trembles on her throne
And Death resigns his iron power?
O shall the heart—whose sinfulness
Gave keenness to his sore distress,
And added to His tears of blood—
Refuse its trembling gratitude!"

With serene and winning bearing he has been sitting in the long even-tide of life, on the shore of the Eternal Sea, not looking out into blankness and extinction—not into an "everlasting perhaps." Having heard the great voice of infinite love, assuring his trembling spirit and making it strong, he testified,

" As long my fires of drift-wood burn,
I hear that seas' deep sounds increase,
And, fair in sunset-light, discern
Its mirage-lifted Isles of Peace."

With the sorrowing friends of his nearer circle we lay his precious dust beneath the sod, and catch from his pale lips still, the accents of a victorious faith.

" Alas! for him who never sees
The stars shine through his cypress trees!
Who, hopeless, lays his dead away,
Nor looks to see the breaking day
Across the mournful marbles play!
Who hath not learned, in hours of faith,

The truth to flesh and sense unknown,
That Life is ever lord of Death,
And Love can never lose its own!"

Is it not better to die a Christain than a philosopher, a scholar, a millionaire, an emperor, a blasphemer, a skeptic, a trifler? He has taught us it is. For him it was *gain*. With even purer and stronger tones we can almost hear him, rendering now in our Father's house, the statutes, with which, in sweetest song, it was his wont to beguile his friends, in the house of his pilgrimage.

