

A FRUSTRATED POET

This study of the effect of Industrialism on a great poet will be read with interest by every worker interested in literature.

PROFESSOR HOUSMAN'S new book of poems proves him again not merely a fine poet, but a poet of wide and general appeal.* This new volume has the same restraint and the same marvellous perfection, in its limited scope, that sold the *Shropshire Lad* through twenty editions. The whole output of Mr. Housman, so far as the non-classical world is concerned, consists now of two volumes of poems, very small, and published at an interval of twenty-seven years. They need no words of mine to recommend them; they have forced their way into the pockets of readers who refuse to read any other poet, or only Mrs. Wilcox; they have discomfited the superior person by being both undeniably good and immensely popular.

But there is more in these little volumes than a handful of some of the most charming songs in the English language. There is a dead soul. One of the leaders of the unemployed (who and where I cannot remember) recently said that the industrial machine affected men in three ways. Some it made into rebels. Some it degraded into brutes. But "there is a third class, who are not strong enough to be rebels and whose minds are too fine to let them become brutes—they commit suicide." Mr. Housman's mind was one that revolted, but he had not, like Morris, the temperament or desire to turn him into a rebel. As he was not poor, he did not commit suicide, but hid himself away and turned his mind to other things, hiding from his eyes what he was not strong enough to alter.

If these poems are autobiographical—and they seem to be unquestionably such—that story of frustration rises plainly from them. The last thing I wish to do is to be impertinent to one who is a fine writer as well as probably the greatest living classical scholar, but it seems to me clear that here we have a case where our present industrial system has destroyed, for all practical purposes, one of the finest minds of this country. Capitalism could not use Mr. Housman, so it sterilised him.

* The books of A. E. Housman's referred to in this article are: *Last Poems*, 5s. (just published), *A Shropshire Lad*, 1s. 6d., *M. Manilii Astronomicon I recensuit*, A. E. H., 4s. 6d. (in Latin). All published by Grant Richards.

The earlier poems (most of those in the later book are of the same date—1895) tell us of the life of a Shropshire farmer's boy. Externally, there is nothing to trouble him but the ordinary troubles which have troubled men for all time—too much drink and money spent at Ludlow fair, and girls who are loose with the other fellow ; nothing very much to attract him but the countryside, the earth and sky, and the occasional passing of a regiment of redcoats that suggests far distant lands and adventures. But all the same, there is the disquiet that all of us feel, some time, and either choke it down or follow it where it leads. To him it called to the battle, but it gave no hope :

What evil luck so-ever
For me remains in store,
'Tis sure much finer fellows
Have fared much worse before.

So here are things to think on
That ought to make me brave,
As I strap on for fighting
My sword that will not save.*

The only thoughts that the call brought to him were thoughts of Thermopylæ, where three hundred Spartans held up the hundred thousands of the Persian King in the narrow pass between sea and mountain, till they were overwhelmed and died and there was an end :

*The King with half the east at heel is marched from lands of morning ;
Their fighters drink the rivers up, their shafts benight the air ;
And he that stands will die for nought, and home there's no returning .
The Spartans on the sea-wet rock sat down and combed their hair. †*

The attitude of heroic despair, the obstinacy of Thermopylae, cannot last a lifetime. There must be some hope, or if not hope, at least some conviction of the possibility of victory afterwards, maybe after one's death. But Housman never felt this. His poems tell us only of a desire to struggle, an impulse to do the impossible, and a foreknowledge of defeat :

We for a certainty are not the first
Have sat in taverns while the tempest hurled
Their hopeful plans to emptiness, and cursed
Whatever brute and blackguard made the world.‡

He told us, in the earlier volume, that the Shropshire Lad at home, had homely comforters ; the earth, the standing hills, " the beautiful

* *Last Poems*, p. 14.

† *Last Poems*, p. 51.

‡ *Last Poems*, p. 24.

and deathstruck year," but that it was when he came to the city, to London, that he was helpless, alone and defeated :

Here in London streets I ken
No such helpers, only men ;
And these are not in plight to bear,
If they would, another's care....
Undone with misery, all they can
Is to hate their fellow man ;
And till they drop they needs must still
Look at you and wish you ill.*

The country boy's longing for the countryside he has left, and his hatred of the town that is breaking him, has given us some of the best of modern songs. To quote one, just for its beauty :

'Tis time, I think, by Wenlock town
The golden broom should blow ;
The hawthorn sprinkled up and down
Should charge the land with snow.

Spring will not wait the loiterer's time
Who keeps so long away,
So others wear the broom and climb
The hedgerows heaped with may.

Oh, tarnish late on Wenlock Edge,
Gold that I never see ;
Lie long, high snowdrift in the hedge
That will not shower on me.†

Nevertheless, this was but the prelude to defeat. Mr. Housman's mind had instinctively turned to defiance of old custom, and to the search for truth in spite of all. It is said that when he delivered his inaugural address on taking up his present post (Professor of Latin at Cambridge) he gave great offence by saying : " It is customary for those in my position to praise the former occupants of this chair. Of my predecessor I said when he was alive that he had only touched the fringe of his subject. I shall not unsay it now that he is dead." But he might insult the Senate of Cambridge University ; he could not fight the industrial system of Great Britain. " Man and God " together were too strong for him :

How am I to face the odds
Of man's bedevilment and God's ?
I, a stranger and afraid
In a world I never made.‡

* *Shropshire Lad*, p. 59.

† *Shropshire Lad*, p. 57.

‡ *Last Poems*, p. 28.

Thence it is an easy descent ; from a consciousness of defeat to an abandonment of the struggle. He had begun by a genuine desire to right injustice, to avenge innocent suffering ; he abandoned the struggle.

Ay look, high heaven and earth ail from the prime foundation ;
 All thoughts to rive the heart are here, and all are vain ;
 Horror and scorn and hate and fear and indignation
 Oh, why did I awake ? When shall I sleep again ? *

And in the same poem we find the final surrender, in these ghastly lines, which a reviewer has inappropriately called " noble " :

Be still, my soul, be still : it is but for a season :
Let us endure an hour and see injustice done.

But it is not in man's power to endure even an hour and *see* injustice done ; he must turn away to where he cannot see it, and can pretend it does not exist. So Mr. Housman turned himself away. He shut and double-barred and bolted the doors of his mind against the call :

Our only portion is the estate of man.
 We want the moon, but we shall get no more.

He turned to editing and studying the obscurer Latin poets, and his best and most remarkable scholastic work was an edition of Manilius. Now Manilius is a very obscure, very dull, almost forgotten Latin poet, whom very few read and none desire to read. His subject is Astronomy : his poem is very long and its lack of merit had secured to it no more than a passing attention. Here, in studying Manilius, was surely peace and quiet. Nothing in the subject could recall the struggle he had abandoned ; among rival scholars he would find no face he had met outside. The noise of the battle would never come through his study doors.

In Housman's astonishing preface to his *Manilius* are strewn numerous and important indications of his frame of mind, and the reason why his genius has given us only two chips of gold instead of the untold wealth it might have produced. There are reminiscences of what drove him back in defeat ; it is shown again to have been the apathy and lack of desire for truth of his fellow-men. " Error, if allowed to run its course," he observes, " secures its own downfall and is sooner or later overthrown, not by the truth but by error of an opposite kind." On the same page, he has occasion to refer to " the average man " in classical criticism, and says of him : " His opinions are determined not by his reason,—' the bulk of

* *Shropshire Lad*, p. 74.

mankind' says Swift, 'is as well qualified for flying as for thinking'—but by his passions; and the faintest of all human passions is the love for truth. He believes that the text of ancient authors is generally sound, not because he has acquainted himself with the elements of the problem, but because he would feel uncomfortable if he did not believe it; just as he believes, on the same cogent evidence, that he is a fine fellow, and that he will rise again from the dead" (p. xliii).

The work which he did on Manilius, and elsewhere, undoubtedly placed him in the first rank of classical learning. It showed him to be a scholar of the calibre of Scaliger, Bentley and Madvig—in a world that no longer cared at all even to know who Scaliger, Bentley and Madvig were. But he had not the serenity of those great men. He had closed the doors of his mind, but he was not at rest. He was tormented, and every page of his preface bears the marks of a furious, unceasing rage, a bitterness that does not know its own origin and fastens on any adversary. It may involve a little tedious explanation, but let us glance at some examples. Manilius, like other classical authors, is preserved for us in various manuscripts, whose texts differ and are in some cases obviously all wrong. To correct these errors the editor will compare the readings of the various manuscripts, giving to each the weight that the reliability and age of the manuscript demands, judging it by sense and grammar, and if necessary, rejecting all the existing readings and correcting by conjecture. But recent editors of Manilius (it appears) being unfit for their jobs, have taken the simpler course of assuming one manuscript to be always correct and following it in disregard of probability, and sometimes even of sense or grammar.

An editor of no judgment, perpetually confronted with a couple of MSS. to choose from, cannot but feel in every fibre of his being that he is a donkey between two bundles of hay. What shall he do now? Leave criticism to critics, you may say, and betake himself to any honest trade for which he is less unfit. But he prefers a more flattering solution; he confusedly imagines that if one bundle of hay is removed he will cease to be a donkey. (p. xxxi.)

These editors he treats with a violence and savagery that would be notable even in an election address. The style is formal and polished, but the abuse is deadly:—

If a man is acquainted with the Latin tongue and the speech of poets, he is sharply warned of corruption in a Latin poet's text by finding that he can make neither head nor tail of it. But Mr. Vollmer and his fellows receive no such admonitory shock; for all Latin poets, even where the text is flawless, abound in passages of which they can make neither head nor tail. Thus they gradually come to regard Latin poetry as having absurdity for its main characteristic; and when they encounter in a corrupt passage the bad grammar or nonsense that they habitually impute to an author by misunderstanding what he has written, they encounter nothing unexpected. (p. 1.)

His (*i.e.*, this type of critic's) trade is one which requires that it may be practised in perfection, two qualifications only; ignorance of language and abstention from thought. The tenacity with which he adheres to the testimony of scribes has no relation to the trustworthiness of that testimony, but is wholly dictated by his inability to stand alone. . . . And critics who treat MS. evidence as rational men treat all evidence, and test it by reason and by the knowledge they have acquired, these are blamed for rashness and capriciousness by gentlemen who use MSS. as drunkards use lamp-posts—not to light them on their way but to dissimulate their instability. (p. liii.)

And who are these people overwhelmed with such a torrent of deserved abuse? They are adversaries who are just alive, just not ghosts—Messrs. Ehwald, Vollmer, Birt and others, small German professors who had crept into comfortable obscure jobs in virtue of a presumed scholarly capacity that nobody cared to question. They are just sufficiently real to struggle and squeak before they are killed, and in this battle with shadows, Housman has poured out more energy and ferocity, more embittered, soured fury than most of us could spare for the real struggles of to-day.

His last book gives us the full sum of what he has produced of creative work during this whole later period. Most of the book dates, as has been said, from 1895. The later stuff stands out fairly clearly. There is an *Epithalamium*, a pleasant and moving imitation and recollection of Greek originals. There is the record of a nightmare (*Hellgate*) which, like all dreams, ends without a meaning. There are a few astronomical poems—by-products of Manilius. There is finally a poem on an event that penetrated to even the quietest study, and the eight lines of the Simonidean *Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries* stands for ever as another reminder of the great poet that we lost.

At first, it seems, his abandonment of the struggle produced disquiet and wretchedness in his own soul. The poet and great man did not die easily, and this period is the period of the tormented and furious editor of Manilius, a ravening lion among classical scholars, a man whom it was bad to cross or annoy, because his soul was dying. Now the work that the industrial system began the chloroform of Manilius has completed, and the trouble in the heart of a man who might have been a great poet is ended. In his preface, Mr. Housman says:—"I can no longer expect to be revisited by the continuous excitement under which in the earlier months of 1895 I wrote the greater part of my other book, nor indeed could I well sustain it if it came." It is true. Mr. Housman must now be nearing seventy, and it is twenty-seven years since he laid down his sword. Weapons go rusty in so long a time; the mind that has spent more than a quarter of a century on Malinius cannot if it would turn to resume the battle it abandoned.

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