

## John Barlas's Poetry

By Henry S. Salt

C RITICS of the present phase of democracy in England have remarked that, whatever else it may have produced, it has not produced poets. The judgment is only partly true. It is true that the lines on which the "social question" is nowadays argued are largely scientific; the battle is one of economics rather than heroics, and the atmosphere of economics is not inspiring to singers. Therefore, as might have been expected, song has not played anything like the same part in the Socialist as in the Chartist propaganda, or as in the Irish struggle of the Forties; there have been no popular song-writers at all comparable to those who inspired the enthusiasts of half a century ago. On the other hand it must be remembered that in democratic poetry, even more than in other poetry, the really original writers—those who aim at something beyond an expression of the common sentiments of their comrades—are apt to be unrecognised, or very slowly recognised, by contemporary opinion; so that the literature of a social movement still in course of development may turn out to be more important than at first sight appears.

For example, at the present time, very few of the "reading public," and perhaps not many of the "leading critics" (leading, in the sense of the blind leading the blind), know anything at all  
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of such very notable poems as Edward Carpenter's "Towards Democracy" and Francis Adams's "Songs of the Army of the Night," two powerful and characteristic works alone sufficient to distinguish the period that produced them. But even under such conditions, it seems strange that the poetry of John E. Barlas ("Evelyn Douglas") is read and valued by none but a few fellow-enthusiasts. For, as a set-off against the disadvantage of obscure publication, Barlas's style, unlike that of Carpenter and Adams, is not, externally at least, a novel or unfamiliar one, but is framed on established literary canons; so that there should have been one obstacle the less to a recognition of his rich and brilliant genius.

Of all rebels against the existing state of society, none perhaps are so irreconcilable as the passionate lovers of beauty and nature who, like Richard Jefferies, are for ever contrasting the actual with the ideal, the serfdom of the present with the freedom of the years to come. It is to this order of heart and mind, children of a golden past or a golden future, that Barlas belongs. He is, if ever poet was, a Greek in spirit, but he possesses also, in a high degree, the modern sense of brotherhood with all that lives. A fiery impatience of privilege, authority, commercialism, breathes through all his writings; and therefore, like all poets who have held these burning thoughts, he is lonely, a stranger, an exile, as it were, from some Hid Isle of Beauty, who has been stranded on savage shores. This marked characteristic, the isolation of a proud but loving heart, will not be overlooked by any careful student of the eight small volumes of verse published by Barlas between 1884 and 1893.\*

It is in the earliest and the latest of these volumes that, in my  
opinion,

\* All of these books are more or less difficult to obtain. The British Museum has a complete set. Mr. F. Kirk, 42 Melbourn Street, Leicester, has some of the volumes on sale.

opinion, he is seen at his best. The *Poems Lyrical and Dramatic*, which appeared in 1884, but were written at various dates from 1877 onward, are indeed in many ways imperfect, but the author's apology for the immaturity of these "February flowers" was not needed; if immature, they are still flowers of which any lyric poet might be proud, and they could have been grown in no other garden than that wherein they stand. The influence of other poets, Shelley and Swinburne and Poe, for instance, may be noted in this early work; but the resemblance is only a superficial one, and there is no mistaking the originality of the thought and workmanship, the deep heartfelt humanity by which the poems are informed, or the gorgeous tropical splendour of the imagery and diction. There are stanzas in "The Golden City," "The River's Pilgrimage," "Ode to Euterpe," and elsewhere, which are steeped in a rich fantasy of feeling and colour quite peculiar to Barlas, and not to be surpassed, in its own way, in all the range of our literature. Witness the following verses from "The Golden City":

"I dreamed once of a city  
 Of marble and of gold,  
 Where pity melts to pity  
 And love for love is sold,  
 Where hot light smokes and shivers  
 Round endless sweeps of rivers,  
 A home of high endeavours  
 For the stately men of old. . . .

And under tower and temple,  
 By minarets and domes,  
 With burning waves a-tremble  
 The stately river foams,

Lapping

Lapping the granite arches  
 Of the bridges, while it marches  
 Through rows of limes and larches  
 By many hearths and homes.

By buttresses and basements  
 And pillared colonnade,  
 By open doors and casements  
 In festal wreaths arrayed,  
 By stair and terrace wending  
 In windings without ending,  
 Sunlight or moonlight blending  
 With massy squares of shade.

By gardens full of fountains  
 And statues white as snow,  
 Nymphs of the seas and mountains,  
 And goddesses a-row,  
 Where the deep heart of the roses  
 Its secret sweet uncloses,  
 And the scent, like heat, reposes  
 On the beds that bask and glow."

If it be thought that this is mere "word-painting," take the passionate cry for rest and healing from "Santa Cecilia," surely one of the most true and beautiful lyrics in modern English song:

" Ah Santa Cecilia  
 Touch me and heal me,  
 Me, storm-swept, even me,  
 Beyond life's utmost sea ;  
 Kiss me and seal me,  
 Santa Cecilia.

## John Barlas's Poetry

Sweet music and melody,  
 Ye only left me  
 Far to my heart outweigh  
 Love, hope, faith, reason's ray,  
 All things bereft me,  
 Music and melody. . . .

Ah Santa Cecilia,  
 Never forsake me,  
 In white calm and white storm,  
 Cold winds and weathers warm,  
 Let thy voice wake me,  
 Santa Cecilia.

Sweet music and melody,  
 Take me and lift me  
 Above where baser tides  
 Under sheer mountain-sides  
 Drive me and drift me,  
 Music and melody.

Ah, Santa Cecilia,  
 Touch me and heal me,  
 Me, storm-swept, even me,  
 Beyond life's utmost sea ;  
 Kiss me and seal me,  
 Santa Cecilia."

Nor is this youthful volume wanting in poems which show a firm grip and a power of concentrated expression. In all that poets have written of Freedom, it would be difficult to find a nobler picture than the following from "Le Jeune Barbaroux" :

"Freedom,

Freedom, her arm outstretched but lips firm set,  
 Freedom, her eyes with tears of pity wet,  
     But her robe splashed with drops of bloody dew,  
 Freedom, thy goddess, is our goddess yet,  
     Young Barbaroux.

Freedom, that tore the robe from kings away,  
 That clothed the beggar-child in warm array,  
     Freedom, the hand that raised, the hand that slew,  
 Freedom, divine then, is divine to-day,  
     Young Barbaroux.

We drown, we perish in a surging sea ;  
 We are not equal, brotherly, nor free ;—  
     Who from this death shall stoop and raise us ? who ?  
 Thy Freedom, and the memory of such as thee,  
     Young Barbaroux.”

In the volumes that succeeded these early *Poems*, it would seem that John Barlas, in his characteristic recoil from the ugliness of modern realities, lapsed too far in the contrary direction of poetical mysticism. His *Phantasmagoria*, or *Dream-Fugues*, is a wonderful attempt at depicting, with huge prodigality of language and metaphor, his haunting sense of a strange vast dreamland, in which, as in De Quincey's opium-visions, the colossal features of the East loom vague and portentous.

“Hast not sailed in dreams upon a mystic river  
 Through caverns, and through mountains, and through palaces ?  
 Seen the sunrays fall, the moonbeams quiver,  
 On the roofs of Tripolis and Fez :

Drifted far 'mid many a granite column,  
 Through the brazen gates, on waves that shone,  
 In the awful hush of moonrise soft and solemn,  
 Into Babylon ?

Hast thou never strayed through China's mystic regions,  
 Lamplit gardens cool with waft of many a fan,  
 Seen their silken girls in silver legions,  
 Or the gorgeous ladies of Japan,  
 Heard the small feet patter, long robes sweeping,  
 Kissed the laughing lips, shocked as it seemed ?—  
 Ah, thou hast not known the joys of sleeping,  
 Thou hast never dreamed !”

There is a turbid excess of imagery in these weird fantasies that somehow mars their effect. A similar, but worse exaggeration of tone and treatment is noticeable in the two dramas, *Punchinello and his wife Judith* and *The Queen of the Hid Isle*, which, in spite of some very beautiful lines and passages, quite fail to realise their author's high conception of the subjects chosen by him. Lack of humour, which in a dream-fugue can perhaps be tolerated, since dreamland is not often humorous, is fatal to a drama ; and much that is over-wrought and feeble-forcible in this part of Barlas's work is due to this deficiency. That he possessed any of the essential qualities of a dramatist will hardly be asserted, even by those who most admire the richness of his lyrics ; but humour would at least have saved him from the mannerisms and affectations which make the reading of his dramas a somewhat weary task.

But when we leave his blank verse behind us, and turn to the later lyrics and sonnets of 1887-1889, there is a change indeed ; for in this maturer work there is all the fire of the youthful poems,  
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but purged and clarified into a calmness and simplicity of expression which lend it new strength. This increased power, which is first observable in the charming little volume of *Bird-notes* (1887), is seen at its best in the *Songs of a Bayadere* (1893), from which I take the following lyric entitled "The Mummy's Love-Story," a masterpiece of passionate feeling clothed in simplest words :

"Where in a stone sarcophagus  
Lay in embalmed repose  
A shape with robes luxurious,  
They found a faded rose.

Perhaps it was an amorous boy  
That to a princess gave  
Some token of their secret joy,  
That she wore to the grave.

Perhaps it was a murdered youth  
Sent on the eve of doom  
An emblem of forgiving truth,  
His queen wore to the tomb.

Who knows ? But there it speaks for her  
Of sorrows long past now,  
When neither joy nor pain can stir  
The arch of her calm brow.

And so, when you have let me die,  
And you too are at rest,  
Some trinket of my gift may lie  
On your repentant breast.

And



And when our language is forgot,  
 Some lover of old scenes  
 May find it in a haunted spot,  
 And wonder what it means."

But it is in the Sonnet, perhaps, that Barlas's genius reaches its fullest development. I speak advisedly when I say that his sequence of *Love Sonnets* (1889), quite unknown as it is to ninety-nine out of a hundred readers of poetry, deserves to take rank, and will some day take rank, with the greatest sonnet-structures of the century. For serenity of tone, mastery of style, and deep personal pathos, it would be hard to surpass many of the sonnets in this book, which has drawn from no less an authority than George Meredith the opinion that, in this form of writing, Barlas "takes high rank among the poets of his time." Here is the concluding sonnet of the series, which as Mr. Meredith justly observes, is "unmatched for nobility of sentiment, and the workmanship is adequate."

"When in the lonely stillness of the tomb  
 I voiceless lie and cold, omit not thou  
 To sing and dance as merrily as now :  
 Bring roses once a year in fullest bloom,  
 And rather than that thou should'st come in gloom,  
 Bring thy new love with thee : together bow  
 O'er the green mound that hides the quiet brow—  
 Yea I would bless his babe within thy womb.  
 How can love be where jealousy is not ?  
 How shall I say ? This only : I have borne  
 That cruel pain : yet would I never blot,  
 Living, with selfish love the loved one's lot,  
 Nor, dead, would have my dear love live forlorn,—  
 Yet would not wish my own love quite forgot."

In speaking of a writer who is practically unknown, I have been compelled to trust in large measure to quotation. The passages quoted, though in themselves but brief and fragmentary, will at least have given some indication of the qualities that distinguish their author—a rare splendour of imagination and melody of utterance; a spirit of intense devotion to beauty and freedom, intense hatred of oppression and wrong, which rises, in his latest poems, through unrest of pain and disappointment, to a note of high calm unselfishness, “a great peace growing up within the soul,” which few poets have attained to. In the words of one of his noblest sonnets :

“ Yet love, for thee, yet, love, for thy dear grace,  
I walk in dreams as toward the morning star,  
Through clouds that shine and open out above ;  
And all the future flames about my face,  
And all the past lies looming low afar  
To me emerging on the heights of love.”

Indirectly, too, what has been quoted may have given some faint hint of the self-revelation that every true poet perforce leaves in his verses, intelligible to those only who can read between the lines with sympathy and understanding—in this case a sad record of a troubled life, now prematurely darkened by disease. Of one thing the reader has absolute conviction, that no singer was ever more true to his faith and his vocation; though, as he himself cries in his ode to his goddess, Euterpe :

“ To me thou hast given the pangs, and the chaplet of  
bay-leaf withheld.”

That the homage due to the great heart of a real poet will be  
permanently

permanently denied to John Barlas, I do not believe ; and even as I have been writing this short article, designed to draw attention, however inadequately, to a neglected fount of song, has come the welcome news that a volume of selections from his poems is about to be laid before the public. No more interesting book of verse will have appeared for many a year.