

Mr. Stevenson's Forerunner

By James Ashcroft Noble

FOR a long time—I can hardly give a number to its years—I have been haunted by a spectre of duty. Of late the visitations of the haunter have recurred with increasing frequency and added persistence of appeal ; and though, like Hamlet, I have long dallied with the ghostly behest, like him I am at last compelled to obedience. Ghosts, I believe, have a habit of putting themselves in evidence for the purpose of demanding justice, and my ghost makes no display of originality : in this respect he follows the time-honoured example of his tribe, and if peace of mind is to return to me the exorcism of compliance must needs be uttered.

Emerson in one of his gnomic couplets proclaims his conviction that

“One accent of the Holy Ghost
This heedful world hath never lost”—

a saying which, shorn of its imaginative wings and turned into a pedestrian colloquialism, reads something like this—“What deserves to live the world will not let die.” It is a comforting belief, yet there are times when Tennyson's vision of the “fifty seeds,” out of which Nature “often brings but one to bear,” seems nearer to the common truth of things ; and all the world's
heedfulness

heedfulness will not exclude Oblivion with her poppies from some spot which should have been sacred to Fame with her amaranth and asphodel. Still there will always be those who will stretch out a hand to repel or evict the intruder—even as in Mr. Watts's noble allegory Love would bar the door against Death—and I would fain play my little part in one not inglorious eviction.

I want to write of a wholly-forgotten prose-man (forgotten, that is, by all save a solitary enthusiast here and there), but I must first speak of a half-forgotten singer. Only people who are on the shady side of middle-age can remember the intense enthusiasm excited by the first work of the young Glasgow poet, Alexander Smith. He had been discovered by that mighty hunter of new poets, the Rev. George Gilfillan; and in the columns of Mr. Gilfillan's journal *The Critic* had been published a number of verses which whetted the appetite of connoisseurs in the early fifties for the maiden volume of a bard who, it was broadly hinted, might be expected to cast Keats into shadow. The prediction was a daring one; but the fifties, like the nineties, were a hey-day of new reputations; and when that brilliant though somewhat amorphous work, *A Life Drama*, saw the light, a good many people, not wholly indiscriminating, were more than half inclined to think that it had been fulfilled. The performance of the new poet, taken as a whole, might be emotionally crude and intellectually ineffective, but its affluence in the matter of striking imagery was amazing, and the critical literature of the day was peppered with quotations of Alexander Smith's "fine passages." Very few people open *A Life Drama* now, though much time is spent over books that are a great deal poorer; but if any reader, curious to know what kind of thing roused the admiration of connoisseurs in the years 1853-4, will spend an hour over the volume, he will come to the conclusion that it is a very remarkable specimen

specimen of what may be called the decorated style of poetic architecture.

“An opulent soul
Dropt in my path like a great cup of gold,
All rich and rough with stories of the gods.”

“The sun is dying like a cloven king
In his own blood ; the while the distant moon,
Like a pale prophetess that he has wronged,
Leans eager forward with most hungry eyes
Watching him bleed to death, and, as he faints,
She brightens and dilates ; revenge complete
She walks in lonely triumph through the night.”

“My drooping sails
Flap idly 'gainst the mast of my intent ;
I rot upon the waters when my prow
Should grate the golden isles.”

“The bridegroom sea
Is toying with the shore, his wedded bride,
And, in the fulness of his marriage joy,
He decorates her tawny brow with shells,
Retires a space to see how fair she looks,
Then, proud, runs up to kiss her.”

These and such things as these were what the admiring critics loved to quote, and that they were indeed “fine passages” could not be denied even by people whose tastes were for something a little less gaudy. What was denied by those who were able to preserve some calmness of judgment amid the storm of enthusiasm was that this kind of fineness was the kind that goes to the making of great poetry. The special fine things were ingenious, striking,
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and sometimes beautiful conceits ; they were notable *tours de force* of poetic fancy ; but they bore little if any witness to that illuminating revealing imagination of which great poetry is all compact. The young writer's images were happy discoveries of external and accidental resemblances ; not revelations of inherent and interpretative affinity. Howsoever graceful and pretty in its way were the figure which likened the sea and the shore to a bridegroom and his bride, it gave no new insight into the daily mystery of the swelling and ebbing tide—no such hint of a fine correspondence between the things of sense and of spirit as is given in the really imaginative utterance of Whitman :

“Surely whoever speaks to me in the right voice, him or her I shall follow,

As the water follows the moon silently with fluid steps anywhere around the globe.”

What was most characteristic therefore in the verse of Alexander Smith was a winning or arresting quality of fancy ; and, in poetry, fancy, though not to be despised, exercises a subordinate sway—“she is the second, not the first.” It may be that Smith came to see this : it is more probable that he came to feel it, as a man feels many things which he does not formulate in a clearly outlined thought : at any rate, after the publication of *Edwin of Deira*, his third volume of verse, he ceased almost entirely from song, and chose as his favourite vehicle of expression a literary form in which his special gift counted for more, and carried greater weight of value, than it could ever count or carry in the poems by which he first caught the world's ear.

And yet, curiously enough, while Smith's reputation as a poet still lingers in a faint after-glow, the essays in which he expressed himself

himself with so much more of adequacy and charm cannot be said to have won fame at all. They have had from the first their little circle of ardent admirers, but it has never widened; its circumference has never touched, never even approximated to, the circumference of that larger circle which includes all lovers of letters. To be unacquainted with Lamb or Hunt, Hazlitt or De Quincey, would be recognised as a regrettable limitation of any man's knowledge of English literature: non-acquaintance with Alexander Smith as a writer of prose is felt to be one of those necessary ignorances that can hardly be lamented because they are rendered inevitable by the shortness of life and the multiplicity of contending appeals. The fact that Smith as a poet achieved little more than a *succès d'estime* may have prejudiced his reputation as an essayist; but whatever theory be constructed to account for it, recent literary history presents no more curious instance of utter refusal to really admirable work of deserved recognition and far-reaching fame.

For it must be noted and insisted upon that the essays of Alexander Smith are no mere caviare literature. They have neither the matter nor the manner of coterie performance—the kind of performance which appeals to an acquired sense, and gives to its admirer a certain pleasing consciousness of aloofness from the herd. He is in the true line of descent from the great predecessors just named; and as they were his lineal forerunners, so are Mr. Robert Louis Stevenson and Mr. Richard Le Gallienne his lineal descendants. Indeed the name of Mr. Stevenson suggests, or rather re-suggests, a thought which is more or less familiar to most of us—that in the world of letters there are seasons uncongenial to certain growths of fame which in another spring and autumn might have blossomed and borne much fruit. Only by some such consideration is it possible to account for the

curious fact that while *Virginibus Puerisque* and *Men and Books* found their audience at once, *Dreamthorp* and *Last Leaves* are still so largely unknown, and can now only be procured by diligent search of the catalogues of the second-hand booksellers. The fact is all the more curious because Alexander Smith may be roughly described as a Stevenson born out of due time. Roughly, of course, for the individuality of thinking and utterance which is so important in all pure literature is, in the essay, not only important but essential—the one thing needful, apart from which all other things are, comparatively speaking, of no account; and in both Smith's work and Mr. Stevenson's the note of personality always rings clear and true.

Their essays are what the essay in its purest form always tends to be—the prose analogue of the song of self-expression, with its explicit or implicit autobiography, that touches us as we are never touched by external splendours of epic or drama. In Montaigne, the father of the essay, the personal confession has an almost boyish incontinence of frankness: in Smith, as in all the modern men, it has more of reticence and reserve, but it is there all the time; and even when the thought seems most abstract and impersonal the manner of its utterance has not the coldness of disquisition, but the warmth of colloquy. We learn something of the secret of this quality of the work from a few sentences in which Smith discourses of his favourite craft and of his fellow-craftsmen. Just as two or three of our best sonneteers—Wordsworth and Rossetti to wit—have written admirable sonnets in celebration of the sonnet, so Alexander Smith is seldom seen to greater advantage than in the pages where he magnifies his office and makes himself the essayist of the essay.

“The essay, as a literary form, resembles the lyric, in so far as it
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is moulded by some central mood—whimsical, serious, or satirical. Give the mood, and the essay, from the first sentence to the last, grows around it as the cocoon grows around the silkworm. . . . The essayist is a kind of poet in prose, and if harshly questioned as to his uses, he might be unable to render a better apology for his existence than a flower might. The essay should be pure literature, as the poem is pure literature. The essayist wears a lance, but he cares more for the sharpness of its point than for the pennon that flutters upon it, than for the banner of the captain under whom he serves. He plays with death as Hamlet played with Yorick's skull, and he reads the morals—strangely stern, often, for such fragrant lodging—which are folded up in the bosoms of roses. He has no pride, and is deficient in a sense of the congruity and fitness of things. He lifts a pebble from the ground, and puts it aside more carefully than any gem; and on a nail in a cottage door he will hang the mantle of his thought, heavily brocaded with the gold of rhetoric."

It may be remarked in parenthesis that the above sentences were published in 1863, and they provide what is probably the first statement by an English writer with any repute of the famous doctrine "Art for art's sake" to which Smith seems to have worked his own way without the prompting of Gallican suggestion. Indeed, even in 1869, when Mr. Patrick Proctor Alexander edited Smith's posthumous volume, *Last Leaves*, he remarked in his introduction that he had thought of excluding the essay entitled "Literary Work," in which the same doctrine was more elaborately advocated, apparently on the ground that it was a new heresy which might expose Smith to the pains and penalties of literary excommunication. How curious it seems. In ten years the essay which Mr. Alexander printed with an apology became the accepted creed of all or nearly all the younger men of letters in England, and now it is no longer either a
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dangerous luxury or an article of orthodox faith, but one of those uninteresting commonplaces which applied in one way is a truism, in another a fatuous absurdity. So does fortune turn her wheel for theories as well as for men and women.

In the passage just quoted Smith deals with the essay mainly as simple literature, but he loves and praises it not as literature only, but as autobiography; not merely as something that is in itself interesting and attractive, but as a window through which he can peer in upon something more interesting still—the master who built the house after his own design and made it an architectural projection of himself.

“You like to walk round peculiar or important men as you like to walk round a building, to view it from different points and in different lights. Of the essayist, when his mood is communicative, you obtain a full picture. You are made his contemporary and familiar friend. You enter into his humours and his seriousness. You are made heir of his whims, prejudices, and playfulness. You walk through the whole nature of him as you walk through the streets of Pompeii, looking into the interior of stately mansions, reading the satirical scribblings on the walls. And the essayist's habit of not only giving you his thoughts, but telling you how he came by them, is interesting, because it shows you by what alchemy the ruder world becomes transmuted into the finer. We like to know the lineage of ideas, just as we like to know the lineage of great earls and swift race-horses. We like to know that the discovery of the law of gravitation was born of the fall of an apple in an English garden on a summer afternoon. Essays written after this fashion are racy of the soil in which they grow, as you taste the lava in the vines grown on the slopes of Etna, they say. There is a healthy Gascon flavour in Montaigne's Essays; and Charles Lamb's are scented with the primroses of Covent Garden.”

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In the first of these passages Alexander Smith speaks of the mantle of the essayist's thought "heavily brocaded with the gold of rhetoric," and he himself was a cunning embroiderer. It was a gift of nature, but he did not learn at once how he could best utilise it. He brocaded his poetry, and on poetry brocade even of gold is an impertinence, just as is paint—*pace* Gibson—on the white marble of the sculptured group or figure. In the essay he found a form which relies less exclusively upon body of imagination and perfectness of pure outline—which is more susceptible to legitimate adornment by the ornamentation of a passing fancy. It is a form in which even the conceit is not unwelcome: to use the language of science the conceit finds in the essay its fit environment. Thus, in Smith's pages Napoleon dies at St. Helena "like an untended watch-fire"; Ebenezer Elliot, the Corn Law rhymer, is "Apollo, with iron dust upon his face, wandering among the Sheffield knife-grinders"; the solitary Dreamthorp doctor has a fancy for arguing with the good simple clergyman, but though "he cannot resist the temptation to hurl a fossil at Moses," "he wears his scepticism as a coquette wears her ribbons—to annoy if he cannot subdue—and when his purpose is served, he puts aside his scepticism—as the coquette puts her ribbons." When the black funeral creeps into Dreamthorp from some outlying hamlet, the people reverently doff their hats and stand aside, for, as Smith puts it, "Death does not walk about here often, but when he does, he receives as much respect as the squire himself." There is, in this last sentence, a touch of quiet Addisonian irony; and, indeed, Smith reminds us at times of almost all his great predecessors in the art of essay-writing—of his prime favourites Montaigne and Bacon ("our earliest essayists and our best" is his own eulogium); and also of Addison, Steele, Lamb, Hazlitt, and Leigh Hunt. But it is never a reminder that

that brings with it a suggestion of imitation. The methods and graces of these distinguished forerunners are to be found in Smith's pages only by patient analysis, and then never in their crude state, for his personality fuses them into a new amalgam and stamps them with a new hall-mark.

Perhaps the most purely individual qualities of Smith's work are given to it partly by his remarkable aptitude for the presentation of his thought in simile and metaphor; partly by his fine feeling for colour, and, indeed, for all the elements of picturesqueness; and partly by a native tendency to sombreness of reflection which makes such a theme as that of the essay, "On Death and the Fear of Dying," attractive rather than repellent, or—to speak, perhaps, with greater accuracy—repellent, yet irresistibly fascinating, as is the eye of the rattlesnake to its prey. The image-making endowment makes itself manifest in almost every passage that it would be possible to quote as characteristic; and it may be noted that the associative habit of mind betrays itself not merely in the sudden simile which transfixes a resemblance on the wing, but in the numerous pages in which Smith showed his love for tracing the links of the chain that connects the near and the far, the present and the past, the seen and the unseen. Thus he writes in his *Dreamthorp cottage*:

"That winter morning when Charles lost his head in front of the banquetting-hall of his own palace, the icicles hung from the eaves of the houses here, and the clown kicked the snowballs from his clouted shoon, and thought but of his supper when at three o'clock the red sun set in the purple mist. On that Sunday in June, while Waterloo was going on, the gossips, after morning service, stood on the country roads discussing agricultural prospects, without the slightest suspicion that the day passing over their heads would be a famous one in the calendar. . . . The last setting sun that Shakspeare saw reddened the
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windows here, and struck warmly on the faces of the hinds coming home from the fields. The mighty storm that raged while Cromwell lay a-dying, made all the oak-woods groan round about here, and tore the thatch from the very roofs that I gaze upon. When I think of this I can almost, so to speak, lay my hand upon Shakspeare and upon Cromwell. These poor walls were contemporaries of both, and I find something affecting in the thought. The mere soil is, of course, full older than either, but *it* does not touch one in the same way. A wall is the creation of a human hand ; the soil is not."

Smith's picturesqueness is fully in evidence here, though the passage was not quoted to illustrate it. Indeed, there are few writers who satisfy so largely the visual sense of the imagination. Even his literary appraisements—witness the essays on Dunbar and Chaucer, and that charming paper "A Shelf in my Book-case"—have a pictorial quality, as if he must *see* something as well as *think* something. Here is Dreamthorp where the essayist, the transfigured Alexander Smith—"Smith's Smith" as the Autocrat of the Breakfast-table would put it—lives his ideal life :

"This place suits my whim, and I like it better year after year. As with everything else, since I began to love it I find it growing beautiful. Dreamthorp—a castle, a chapel, a lake, a straggling strip of grey houses, with a blue film of smoke over all—lies embosomed in emerald. Summer with its daisies runs up to every cottage door. From the little height where I am now sitting I see it beneath me. Nothing could be more peaceful. The wind and the birds fly over it. A passing sunbeam makes brilliant a white gable-end, and brings out the colours of the blossomed apple-tree beyond, and disappears. I see figures in the street, but hear them not. The hands on the church clock seem always pointing to one hour. Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine. I make a frame of my fingers and look at
my

my picture. On the walls of the next Academy's exhibition will hang nothing half so beautiful."

This is the *tout ensemble*, but every detail has its own pictorial charm. There is the canal—a prosaic unpicturesque thing is a canal; but this particular canal has "a great white water-lily asleep on its olive-coloured face," while to the picture-making eye "a barge trailing up through it in the sunset is a pretty sight; and the heavenly crimsons and purples sleep quite lovingly upon its glossy ripples. Nor does the evening star disdain it, for as I walk along I see it mirrored as clearly as in the waters of the Mediterranean itself."

The sombreness of reflection noted as one of the characteristic features of Smith's work as an essayist gives to that work a recognisable autumnal feeling. It is often difficult to think of it as the work of a young man full of the ordinary buoyant life of youth; though when the difficulty presents itself one may remember also that the young man was destined to die at thirty-seven—that fatal age for the children of imagination—and it is, perhaps, not too fanciful to indulge the thought that some presentiment of early doom may have given to Smith's meditative moods much of their pensive seriousness. However this may be, it is certain that Alexander Smith, with a constancy which the most careless reader cannot fail to note, recurred again and again, both when opportunity offered and when opportunity had to be made, to the theme of death, its mystery, its fear, and its fascination. In one of his poems, which I quote from memory, he speaks of his life as a highway which, at some unknown point, has his grave cut across; and even in the joyous "Spring Chanson" the poet, addressing the singing merle, drops suddenly from the major into the minor key, and ends upon the note by which the key is dominated:

"Men

“Men live and die, the song remains ; and when
I list the passion of thy vernal breath
Methinks thou singest best to Love and Death—
To happy Lovers and to dying Men.”

Autumn and death must needs be naturally allied in human thought, though to the joyous-minded even autumn will be associated with its present fruitage rather than with its presage of dissolution ; but this intrusion of death into a celebration of the life and growth of spring seems irrelevant, almost morbid : it may even seem artificial, as if the poet were deliberately striving after a strong literary effect by the expedient of an unnatural juxtaposition of incongruous ideas. To a man of Smith's mind and temperament it has certainly neither irrelevance nor artificiality ; whether we can rightly call it morbid depends upon the meaning we attach to a word to which the personal feeling rather than the common reason gives a definition. Smith's habit was to endeavour to realise death that he might more fully and richly realise life. “To denude death of its terrible associations,” he writes, “were a vain attempt, the atmosphere is always cold around an iceberg” ; and yet in imagination he loves to draw near the iceberg for some shivering moments that he may enjoy more exquisitely the warmth of summer sun or piled-up winter fire. To his constant thought

“There are considerations which rob death of its ghastliness, and help to reconcile us to it. The thoughtful happiness of a human being is complex, and in certain moved moments which, after they have gone, we can recognise to have been our happiest, some subtle thought of death has been curiously intermixed. And this subtle admixture it is that gives the happy moment its character—which makes the difference between the gladness of a child, resident in mere animal health and impulse, and too volatile to be remembered, and the serious joy of a man,

man who looks before and after, and takes in both this world and the next. Speaking broadly, it may be said that it is from some obscure recognition of the fact of death that life draws its final sweetness. . . . This recognition does not always terrify. The spectre has the most cunning disguises, and often when near us, we are unaware of the fact of proximity. Unsuspected, this idea of death lurks in the sweetness of music ; it has something to do with the pleasure with which we behold the vapour of morning ; it comes between the passionate lips of lovers ; it lives in the thrill of kisses. 'An inch deeper, and you will find the emperor.' Probe joy to its last fibre and you will find death."

To preserve always in the background of the mind some great thought or momentous interest, tends to ensure a certain fine justice in a man's estimate of the relative proportions of smaller things lying in the front of it, and Alexander Smith's essays have a restful quality of measure, balance, and sanity. In the "Essay on an Old Subject," published in *Last Leaves*, the young man who had but recently gone into the thirties writes with imaginative prescience—or possibly from a premature experience—of the joys and gains of middle-age (by which he means the forty-fifth year or thereabouts) ; and there is in most of his essays, especially in the *Dreamthorp* papers which came earliest, a middle-aged maturity which charms and satisfies, and never disturbs. But it is not a middle-age which has ossified into routine and become dead to youth's enthusiasms—witness the fine ardour of the concluding sentence of the essay in which he "memorises" Carlyle's appearance at Edinburgh to deliver his Rectorial address : "When I saw him for the first time stand up amongst us the other day, and heard him speak kindly, brotherly, affectionate words . . . I am not ashamed to confess that I felt moved towards him as I do not think, in any possible combination of circumstances, I could have felt

felt moved towards any other living man." And yet, though he has not lost youth's ardour, he has freed himself from youth's arrogant impatience ; he can be moved by enthusiasms, but not driven helplessly before them ; he can project himself from himself and survey his own thought "in the round" ; he has learned the lessons of Clough's pregnant words, "and yet—consider it again." At the same time his manner is never that tantalising, irritating manner of explicit guards, reserves, limitations—the manner of the writer who is always making himself safe by the sudden "but" or "nevertheless" or "notwithstanding." The due limitation is conveyed implicitly, in the primal statement of the thought—in the touch of irony or humorous extravagance which hints with sufficient clearness that this or that is not to be interpreted *au pied de la lettre*. The delightful essay "On Vagabonds," at the close of the *Dreamthorp* volume, might be described roughly as a glorification of the life of Bohemia, and an impeachment, or at any rate a depreciation of commonplace Philistine respectability. In dealing with such a theme with such a bent of mind, the temptation to force the note, to overcharge the colour, would be to most men—to all young men, impatient of restricting conventions—well-nigh irresistible ; but Smith resists it with no apparent effort of resistance. There is no holding of himself in lest he should speak unadvisedly with his tongue ; on the contrary, he lets himself go with perfect abandonment. The "genuine vagabond," he says, "takes captive the heart," and he declares it "high time that a moral game law were passed for the preservation of the wild and vagrant feelings of human nature" ; but just when we expect the stroke of exaggeration there comes instead the light touch of saving humour, and we know that the essayist is in less danger even than we of losing his head, or, as the expressive cant phrase has it, "giving himself away."

Some

Some of the few (and if I could succeed in increasing their number I should be greatly content) who know Alexander Smith's prose well, and love it even as they know, have probably favourite papers or favourite groups. Some may feel especially drawn to the essays of pure reflection, such as "Death and the fear of Dying" and "The Importance of a Man to Himself"; others to that delightful group in which the familiar simplicities of nature supply texts for tranquil meditation—"Dreamthorp," "Christmas," and "Books and Gardens," in which last there is also some delightful character-portraiture in the vignettes of the village doctor and clergyman; others to the essays in literary appreciation, such as "Dunbar," "Geoffrey Chaucer," "Scottish Ballads," and "A Shelf in my Bookcase." In the words applied by Charles Lamb, with a certain free unscrupulousness to the whole world of books, I must say with regard to Alexander Smith's essays, "I have no preferences." To me they all have a charm which somewhat dulls the edge of discrimination, for the writer rather than the theme is the centre of interest; he is the hero of the play, and he is never off the stage. Still in some torture chamber of inquiry certain names might be extracted from me, and I think they would be "Dreamthorp," "Books and Gardens," and "A Lark's Flight." This last study, which has not been previously named, is one of the most noteworthy of Smith's essays, and will be grateful to the more lazy readers inasmuch as it tells a story. It is the story of a murder and an execution, the murder vulgar and commonplace enough—a crime of brutal violence, the execution a sombrely picturesque function, with one striking incident which seized and held the imagination of the boy who witnessed it; and the story is told with an arresting vividness to which I know only one parallel in English literature, the narrative appendix to De Quincey's famous essay,
"On

“On Murder, considered as one of the Fine Arts.” The execution took place, after the old custom in Scotland, on the spot where the crime had been committed—a lonely stretch of grass-land, some distance outside the city of Glasgow. The criminals were Irish navvies, members of a large gang employed in the neighbourhood, and as there were some rumours of a rescue, a detachment of cavalry, supplemented by field-pieces, surrounded the scaffold. Of the scene itself, and the one occurrence round which its latent pathos crystallised, Smith gives the recollections of boyhood. The men were being brought in a cart to the place of execution, and when they reached the turn of the road where they could first see the black cross-beam with its empty halters, the boy noted the eager, fascinated gaze the doomed men cast upon it. At last the place was reached, and Smith writes :

“Around it a wide space was kept clear by the military ; the cannon were placed in position ; out flashed the swords of the dragoons ; beneath and around on every side was the crowd. Between two brass helmets I could see the scaffold clearly enough, and when in a little while the men, bareheaded and with their attendants, appeared upon it, the surging crowd became stiffened with fear and awe. And now it was that the incident, so simple, so natural, so much in the ordinary course of things, and yet so frightful in its tragic suggestions, took place. Be it remembered that the season was early May, that the day was fine, that the wheatfields were clothing themselves in the green of the young crop, and that around the scaffold, standing on a sunny mound, a wide space was kept clear. When the men appeared beneath the beam, each under his own proper halter, there was a dead silence,—every one was gazing too intently to whisper to his neighbour even. Just then, out of the grassy space at the foot of the scaffold, in the dead silence audible to all, a lark rose from the side of its nest, and went singing upward in its happy flight. O heaven ! how did
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that song translate itself into dying ears? Did it bring, in one wild burning moment, father and mother, and poor Irish cabin, and prayers said at bedtime, and the smell of turf fires, and innocent sweet-hearting, and rising and setting suns? Did it—but the dragoon's horse has become restive, and his helmet bobs up and down and blots everything; and there is a sharp sound, and I feel the great crowd heave and swing, and hear it torn by a sharp shiver of pity, and the men whom I saw so near but a moment ago are at immeasurable distance, and have solved the great enigma,—and the lark has not yet finished his flight: you can see and hear him yonder in the fringe of a white May cloud. . . . There is a stronger element of terror in this incident of the lark than in any story of a similar kind I can remember."

Gasps of admiration are amateurish, provincial, ineffective, but after reading such a passage as this, the words that come first—at any rate to me—are not in the least critical but simply exclamatory. It is wonderful writing! Then comes a calmer and more analytical moment in which one discovers something of the secret of the art in what has seemed at first not art at all but sheer nature. Mr. Pater, in one of his most instructive essays, has shown that the "classical" element in art is "the quality of order in beauty," and that "it is that addition of strangeness to beauty that constitutes the romantic character," romantic art at its best being moreover distinguished by a fine perfection of workmanship. This surely then is an impressive miniature example of romantic art with its combination of strangeness and beauty, and its flawless technique—its absolute saturation of the vehicle of expression with the very essence of the thing, the emotion that is to be expressed. Note the directness and simplicity of the early narrative sentences; they are a mere recital of facts, and their very baldness only mitigated by a single emotional phrase, "the
surging

surging crowd became stiffened with fear and awe," prepares the mind for what is to follow. And then, the sudden break in the second sentence beginning "Did it,"—how perfectly natural it seems, and yet how dexterous it really is ; how it renders perfectly and at a single stroke what the best-chosen words of narrative would have rendered jumblingly, the brevity of the interval between the lark's rising and the consummation of doom—the sharp bewildering suddenness of the end. Then, lastly, the curious in these things may notice a certain peculiarity in the construction of the concluding sentence of the story—the penultimate sentence of the quotation. There are in the volume barely nine lines, and in these lines the word "and" occurs eleven times. All frequent and close repetitions of a single word are generally avoided by good writers, and the repetition of an insignificant conjunction such as "and" is, as a rule, something to be specially avoided. Smith habitually avoided as carefully as any of us, but here he had to give the feeling of impetuosity, of eager hurry to get the ghastly story told, and the "and" which rapidly accumulates detail upon detail recurs as naturally and inevitably as in the voluble speech of a little child bursting into her mother's room with some marvellous recital of adventure encountered in her morning walk. This is the high literary art which instinctively and perfectly adapts the means of language—of word, sound, pause, and cadence—to the end of absolute expression.

Alexander Smith himself is never wearisome ; and it would ill become me to weary those whom I would fain interest by surplusage of comment ; but I should like to add a word or two concerning those essays in which he appears as a critic of literature. Mr. Oscar Wilde has said that all good criticism is simply autobiography—that is, I suppose, a statement of personal preferences. I accept the definition if I may enlarge it by saying that

that criticism is not merely a statement of personal preferences but of justifications for such preferences presented with a view to persuasion. Of course even with this rider the definition still leaves autobiography the main element in criticism, and of such autobiographical appraisal Smith was a master. Whether he formulated the rule never to write of any authors whose work he did not enjoy I cannot say : he certainly acted upon it with the most delightful results. So keen in his gusto, so adequate and appetising his expression of it, that one may dare to say the next best thing to reading Montaigne, Bacon, Chaucer, and the Scottish Ballads, is to read what Alexander Smith has to say about them. His talk about books is always so human that it will delight people whom one would not think of calling literary. He discourses on *The Canterbury Tales* not as a man weighing and measuring a book, but as a wayfarer sitting in the inn-yard of the Tabard at Southwark, watching the crowd of pilgrims with the eye of an acute and good-natured observer, taking notes of their appearance, and drawing from it shrewd inferences as to habit and character. He has certain favourite volumes upon which he expatiates in the essay entitled "A Shelf in my Bookcase" ; and the principle of selection is obvious enough. They are books full of a rich humanity ; beneath their paragraphs or stanzas he can feel the beating heart. The literary vesture is *simply* a vesture which half reveals and half conceals the objects of his love—the man or woman who lives and breathes behind. He reveals in the old Scotch ballads and German hymns, for in them the concealing veil is thin, and the thoughts and loves and pains of simple souls in dead centuries are laid open and bare. He prefers Hawthorne's *Twice-told Tales* to his longer and more elaborate works, such as *Transformation* and *The Scarlet Letter*, because he finds more of the man in them, the solitary author who had no public to think of,

of, and who wrote because he must. He has a genuine catholicity, but it is not that uninteresting catholicity which lacks defined circumferences; and his general sensibility to excellence is emphasised by frank confession of his limitations. The author of *Paradise Lost* evidently lies a little outside the reach of Alexander Smith's tentacles of sympathy.

“Reading Milton is like dining off gold plate in a company of kings; very splendid, very ceremonious, and not a little appalling. Him I read but seldom, and only on high days and festivals of the spirit. Him I never lay down without feeling my appreciation increased for lesser men—never without the same kind of comfort that one returning from the presence feels when he doffs respectful attitude and dress of ceremony, and subsides into old coat, familiar arm-chair, and slippers. After long-continued organ-music the jangle of the ew's harp is felt as an exquisite relief.”

There is a trace of Philistinism here—the Philistinism which is not ashamed but rather complacent; and it may seem a strange whim on the part of one who loves Smith's work to choose as a final sample of it a passage which, some of the elect may think, does not show him at his best. But Danton's commendation of audacity, though not universally valid, is a word of wisdom to the advocate with a strong case. Alexander Smith's best is good with such a rare and delightful quality of goodness that his appreciator shows no great temerity in abandoning all reserves and concealments. He is not afraid of painting the wart, because it is overpowered by strength of feature and charm of expression. Alexander Smith, as he shows himself in his prose—in *Dreamthorp*, in *Last Leaves*, and in that entrancing book *A Summer in Skye*—is one of those writers concerning whom even a lover may tell not only the truth, but the whole truth. For myself, I read his essays when I was young and

found them full of stimulation ; I have read them again since I have become middle-aged, and have found them satisfyingly rest-giving. At no time have they been found wanting in something of rare and delicate delight. If criticism be indeed autobiography, no verdict upon the essays of Alexander Smith could well be at once more critical or more praiseful than this confession. I love Mr. Stevenson and my later contemporaries ; but I think I must confess that I love my early contemporary, Mr. Stevenson's countryman and forerunner, better still.