

THE KIPLING HYSTERIA.

Only the hardihood of intense conviction, coupled with a stern sense of duty, impels men, as a rule, to advance an opinion diametrically opposite to the general, at a time when that general opinion has developed into a cult, and a cult militant to boot. But there is always high need, in all matters human, of men who are willing to stand alone or with few at their side.

In the domain of letters proper there is perhaps no such constant necessity for this as in civics, politics, or religious affairs. Yet we note in literary annals how frequently the protesting voice of one period becomes the commanding voice of another. The voices of Wordsworth and Shelley, for example, though promulgating different protests and artistic preachments, combined to influence for the better the makers of English verse in the last half century. To less trivial themes, to loftier views of the function of Art, they directly and indirectly incited; and to a straightforwardness and simplicity of style, in the main, that reached its highest and most shining point in the calm work of Tennyson, concerning whom our best critical writer has said: "His alone are idiosyncratic poems. By the enjoyment or non-enjoyment of the 'Morte D'Arthur' or of the 'Enone' I would test anyone's ideal sense. Other bards produce effects which are, now and then, otherwise produced than by what we call poems; but Tennyson, an effect which only a poem does."

Now we have recently been commanded by a storm of tongues to consider that the true poetic heir of Alfred the Great has arrived in the picturesque person of Rudyard Kipling. He has been acclaimed the laureate of the Anglo-Saxon race — which, however, as an ethnic entity has about as much vital value as Sairy Gamp's mysterious chum, Mrs. Harris; and a prodigious amount of hysterical and chimerical stuff has been written of him, and even to him, by disciples and imitators toward whom he doubtless entertains a feeling compound of *ennui* and contempt.

To this hysteria of unreasoned admiration, to this toy tempest of flatulent adulation, the dangerous illness of this forceful and brilliant writer has naturally given increase. But already signs of a reaction are appearing. Trained minds are beginning to question the new gospel of poesy and morals, art and ethics, as enunciated by and personified in this immensely clever and uniquely interesting Englishman. Dr. Felix Adler recently, while cheerfully admitting the talents of Kipling, dared to denounce his teaching as a gospel of force, pernicious in the extreme and antagonistic to the true spirit of democracy and of civilization. It is not, however, with Kipling's jingoism and frank cynicism toward inferior races, as the Apostle of Force, of Might against Right, that literature is concerned, except inasmuch as these essentially pagan and very antiquated sentiments might be shown to affect his art.

Since the writer of this was one of the first, if not the very first, of American reviewers to call attention to Kipling's powers as a composer of short stories, he cannot be accused of any animosity on this point. Indeed, he maintained stoutly the rare promise indicated in the early output, when other critics were deriding it, and even Mr. Howells — to adopt the amusing phrase of a New York journal — was "refusing Kipling a niche in the Temple of Fame," probably because Mr. Howells had been too lavish of his niches, and had n't any fresh ones on hand just then, with the varnish dry and warranted not to erack.

But how has that early promise been kept? Better than most early promises, beyond a doubt; yet, while in the realm of the short story Kipling stands with Cable and Bret Harte, can he sanely be said to overtop them; and has he as a presenter of human character come anywhere near Thackeray or George Eliot — to say nothing of Balzac? Stress is laid on the extraordinary familiarity he shows with the technics and terminologies of different occupations and trades. But all that sort of stuff can be easily "crammed." Any first-rate journalist will turn out a story on a subject of which he knew nought forty-eight hours before, if he can get access to a good library or even mingle socially for a few hours with men who have the terms of that subject at their tongue's end.

In the loftier region of poetry, what has Kipling done that should make him a laureate of the Anglo-Saxon race, even supposing there were such a thing? Can any calmly critical mind regard the "Barrack-Room Ballads" as more than clever ephemeralities, destined not even to the same place in future literary estimation as Lowell's "Biglow Papers" now hold? The "Last Chantey," though marred by several serious blemishes in technique, strikes a bold, high note, and makes a felicitous nuptial of the grotesque and sublime which would have delighted that master in similar effects, Edgar Poe. The "Mary Gloster," though somewhat too risqué, *virginibus puerisque*, is a piece of rare power; and some other things in like wise undoubtedly entitle Kipling to serious consideration as a poet.

But, on the other hand, are not the most of his verses on the same plane with the work of many minor English and American poets; and are not some, which have achieved wide popularity, echoes of other bards? Such phrases as "Euchred God Almighty's storm," "Bluffed the Eternal Sea," must have raised an amused and flattered smile on Bret Harte's face; and the metrical manner of "The Vampire" is that of Poe in his ballad of "Annabel Lee" — a rather bad manner, too, in some thinking, or, at least, one close to triviality. The phrase "hank of hair," by the bye, is "reminisced" from Browning's poem "James Lee's Wife."

As for the much-belauded "Recessional," while the sentiment, aside from laying claim to Jehovah as peculiarly the God of the English, is far healthier,

saner, and more to the purpose of civilization, than much of Kipling's, who will seriously assert that so far as technique or style goes there are not a dozen Englishmen who could have put the case as well or better? Mr. Austin doesn't count for much, of course, though that luckless official laureate has written some good verses; but, surely, Henley, or Rennell Rodd, has given earnest of better work than this. And if we may venture to consider critically that jingo jingle, "The White Man's Burden" entirely apart from its horrible cynical indifference to the plainest facts of modern history, what can be said in defense of its style? Taking the same measure as that of Heber's noble hymn "From Greenland's Icy Mountains," to do which in itself seems like a covert sneer against the spirit of Christianity, the laureate of the Anglo-Saxon myth falls far behind the good, unlaureled bishop in technique, as anyone can see by comparing the two productions. Heber's is double-rhymed, flowing, musical: and without rhetorical inversions of phrase. It leaves on the inner ear of the mind, as on the outer, a sense of beauty as well as a sense of benevolence. Kipling's is calculated to make those who "learn Messiah's name" learn it chiefly to curse with.

Must not a great poet be a reflector, at least, if not an inspirer, of the noblest passions of his age and of the unfolding spirit of general humanity?

How much nobler than anything Kipling has casually emitted in his glorifications of force or his clanging apotheoses of machinery, British muscle and British trade, are these quiet lines of Rennell Rodd — a name dimly known to his own countrymen, and not at all to us! Singing to future men of Future Man, this poet declares:

"They shall build their new romances, new dreams of a world
to be;
Conceive a sublimer outcome than the end of the world
we see;
And their maids shall be pure as morning and their youth
shall be taught no lie;
But all shall be smooth and open to all men beneath the
sky.
And the shadow shall pass that we dwell in, till under the
self-same sun
The names of the myriad nations are writ in the name of
one."

Not writ by the sword, O ye semi-civilized Apostles and Disciples of Force and Fraud, but by the pen. It is this lamentable large lack in the spirit, in the outlook and the insight, in the foresight, if you will, of the richly-endowed man of talent, now recipient of so much loose laudation in American-speaking lands, which moves a warm admirer of his talent, and of all talents, to assert that, unless that lack shall be remedied, he has not the making of a great, enduring poet. That he may break away from false ideals, and renounce bad literary manners, remains a hope. He is yet gloriously young, and to youth all things are possible.

HENRY AUSTIN.