

REVIEWS AND LITERARY NOTICES.

May-Day and other Pieces. By RALPH WALDO EMERSON. Boston: Ticknor and Fields.

WE wonder whether those who take up Mr. Emerson's poem now, amid the glories of the fading summer, are not giving the poet a fairer audience than those who hurried to hear his song in the presence of the May he celebrates. As long as spring was here, he had a rival in every reader; for then we all felt ourselves finer poets than ever sang of the season, and did not know that our virtue was but an effect of Spring herself, — an impression, not an expression of her loveliness, which must pass with her. Now, when the early autumn is in every sense, and those days when the year first awoke to consciousness have grown so far away, we must perceive that no one has yet been allowed to speak so well for the spring of our New World as this poet. The very irregularity of Mr. Emerson's poem seems to be part of its verisimilitude, and it appears as if all the pauses and impulses and mysterious caprices of the season — which fill the trees with birds before blossoms, and create the soul of sweetness and beauty in the May-flowers under the dead leaves of the woodlands, while the meadows are still bare and brown — had so entered into this song, that it could not emulate the deliberation and consequence of art. The "May-Day" is to the critical faculty a succession of odes on Spring, celebrating now one aspect and now another, and united only by their title; yet since an entire idea of spring is evolved from them, and they awaken the same emotions that the youth of the year stirs in us, we must accept the result as something undeniably great and good. Of course, we can complain of the way in which it is brought about, just as we can upbraid the New England climate, though its uncertain and desultory April and May give us at last the most beautiful June weather in the world.

The poem is not one that invites analysis, though it would be easy enough to instance striking merits and defects. Mr. Emerson, perhaps, more than any other modern poet, gives the notion of inspiration; so that one doubts, in reading him, how much to praise or blame. The most exquisite effects seem

not to have been invited, but to have sought production from his unconsciousness; graces alike of thought and of touch seem the unsolicited gifts of the gods. Even the doubtful quality of occasional lines confirms this impression of unconsciousness. One cannot believe that the poet would wittingly write,

"Boils the world in tepid lakes,"

for this statement has, for all that the reader can see to the contrary, the same value with him as that preceding verse, telling how the waxing heat

"Lends the reed and lily length,"

wherein the very spirit of summer seems to sway and droop. Yet it is probable that no utterance is more considered than this poet's, and that no one is more immediately responsible than he. We must attribute to the most subtle and profound consciousness the power that can trace with such tenderness and beauty the alliance he has shown between earth and humanity in the exultation of spring, and which can make matter of intellectual perception the mute sympathies that seemed to perish with childhood: —

"The pebble loosened from the frost
Asks of the urchin to be tost.
In flint and marble beats a heart,
The kind Earth takes her children's part,
The green lane is the school-boy's friend,
Low leaves his quarrel apprehend,
The fresh ground loves his top and ball,
The air rings jocund to his call,
The brimming brook invites a leap,
He dives the hollow, climbs the steep."

Throughout the poem these recognitions of our kindred with external nature occur, and a voice is given to the blindly rejoicing sense within us when the poet says,

"The feet that slid so long on sleat
Are glad to feel the ground";

and thus celebrates with one potent and satisfying touch the instinctive rapture of the escape from winter. Indeed, we find our greatest pleasure in some of these studies of pure feeling, while we are aware of the value of the didactic passages of the poem, and enjoy perfectly the high beauty of the pictorial parts of it. We do not know where we should match that strain beginning,

"Why chidest thou the tardy spring?"

Or that,

"Where shall we keep the holiday,
And duly greet the entering May?"

Or this most delicate and exquisite bit of description, which seems painted a *tempera*, — in colors mixed with the transparent blood of snowdrops and Alpine harebells: —

"See, every patriot oak-leaf throws
His elfin length upon the snows,
Not idle, since the leaf all day
Draws to the spot the solar ray,
Ere sunset quarrying inches down,
And half-way to the mosses brown;
While the grass beneath the rime
Has hints of the propitious time,
And upward pries and perforates
Through the cold slab a hundred gates,
Till green lances, piercing through,
Bend happy in the welkin blue."

There is not great range of sentiment in "May-Day," and through all the incoherence of the poem there is a constant recurrence to the master-theme. This recurrence has at times something of a perfunctory air, and the close of the poem does not seal the whole with any strong impression. There is a rise — or a lapse, as the reader pleases to think — toward a moral at the close; but the motion is evidently willed of the poet rather than the subject. It seems to us that, if the work have any climax, it is in those lines near the end in which the poet draws his reader nearest his own personality, and of which the delicately guarded and peculiar pathos scarcely needs comment: —

"There is no bard in all the choir,
Not Homer's self, the poet sire,
Wise Milton's odes of pensive pleasure,
Or Shakespeare, whom no mind can measure,
Nor Collins' verse of tender pain,
Nor Byron's clarion of disdain,
Scott, the delight of generous boys,
Or Wordsworth, Pan's recording voice, —
Not one of all can put in verse,
Or to this presence could rehearse,
The sights and voices ravishing
The boy knew on the hills in spring,
When pacing through the oaks he heard
Sharp queries of the sentry-bird,
The heavy grouse's sudden whirl,
The rattle of the kingfisher;
Saw bonfires of the harlot flies
In the lowland, when day dies;
Or marked, benighted and forlorn,
The first far signal-fire of morn.
These syllables that Nature spoke,
And the thoughts that in him woke,
Can adequately utter none
Save to his ear the wind-harp lone.
And best can teach its Delphian chord

How Nature to the soul is moored,
If once again that silent string,
As erst it wont, would thrill and ring.

"Not long ago, at eventide,
It seemed, so listening, at my side
A window rose, and, to say sooth,
I looked forth on the fields of youth:
I saw fair boys bestriding steeds,
I knew their forms in fancy weeds,
Long, long concealed by sundering fates,
Mates of my youth, — yet not my mates,
Stronger and bolder far than I,
With grace, with genius, well attired,
And then as now from far admired,
Followed with love
They knew not of,
With passion cold and shy."
O joy, for what recoveries rare!
Renewed, I breathe Elysian air,
See youth's glad mates in earliest bloom, —
Break not my dream, obtrusive tomb!
Or teach thou, Spring! the grand recoil
Of life resurgent from the soil
Wherein was dropped the mortal spoil."

Among the other poems in this volume, it appears to us that "The Romany Girl," "Voluntaries," and "The Boston Hymn" are in their widely different ways the best. The last expresses, with a sublime colloquiality in which the commonest words of every-day parlance seem cut anew, and are made to shine with a fresh and novel lustre, the idea and destiny of America. In "Voluntaries" our former great peril and delusion — the mortal Union which lived by slavery — is at first the theme, with the strong pulse of prophecy, however, in the mournful music. Few motions of rhyme so win and touch as those opening lines, —

"Low and mournful be the strain,
Haughty thought be far from me;
Tones of penitence and pain,
Moanings of the tropic sea," —

in which the poet, with a hardly articulate sorrow, regards the past; and Mr. Emerson's peculiarly exalted and hopeful genius has nowhere risen in clearer and loftier tones than in those stops which open full upon us after the pathetic pleasing of his regrets: —

"In an age of fops and toys,
Wanting wisdom, void of right,
Who shall nerve heroic boys
To hazard all in Freedom's fight, —
Break sharply off their jolly games,
Forsake their comrades gay,
And quit proud homes and youthful dames,
For famine, toil, and fray?
Yet on the nimble air benign
Speed nimbler messages,
That waft the breath of grace divine
To hearts in sloth and ease.

So nigh is grandeur to our dust,
So near is God to man,
When Duty whispers low, *Thou must,*
The youth replies, *I can.*

"Blooms the laurel which belongs
To the valiant chief who fights ;
I see the wreath, I hear the songs
Lauding the Eternal Rights,
Victors over daily wrongs :
Awful victors, they misguide
Whom they will destroy,
And their coming triumph hide
In our downfall, or our joy :
They reach no term, they never sleep,
In equal strength through space abide ;
Though, feigning dwarfs, they crouch and creep,
The strong they slay, the swift outstride :
Fate's grass grows rank in valley clods,
And rankly on the castled steep, —
Speak it firmly, these are gods,
All are ghosts beside."

It is, of course, a somewhat Emersonian Gypsy that speaks in "The Romany Girl," but still she speaks with the passionate, sudden energy of a woman, and flashes upon the mind with intense vividness the conception of a wild nature's gleeful consciousness of freedom, and exultant scorn of restraint and convention. All sense of sylvan health and beauty is uttered when this Gypsy says, —

"The wild air bloweth in our lungs,
The keen stars twinkle in our eyes,
The birds gave us our wily tongues,
The panther in our dances flies."

"Terminus" has a wonderful didactic charm, and must be valued as one of the noblest introspective poems in the language. The poet touches his reader by his acceptance of fate and age, and his serene trust of the future, and yet is not moved by his own pathos.

We do not regard the poem "The Adirondacks" as of great absolute or relative value. It is one of the prosiest in the book, and for a professedly out-of-doors poem has too much of the study in it. Let us confess also that we have not yet found pleasure in "The Elements," and that we do not expect to live long enough to enjoy some of them. "Quatrains" have much the same forbidding qualities, and have chiefly interested us in the comparison they suggest with the translations from the Persian: it is curious to find cold Concord and warm Ispahan in the same latitude. Others of the briefer poems have delighted us. "Rubies," for instance, is full of exquisite lights and hues, thoughts and feelings; and "The Test" is from the heart of the severe wisdom

without which art is not. Everywhere the poet's felicity of expression appears; a fortunate touch transfigures some dark enigma with color; the riddles are made to shine when most impenetrable; the puzzles are all constructed of gold and ivory and precious stones.

Mr. Emerson's intellectual characteristics and methods are so known that it is scarcely necessary to hint that this is not a book for instant absorption into any reader's mind. It shall happen with many, we fancy, that they find themselves ready for only two or three things in it, and that they must come to it in widely varying moods for all it has to give. No greater wrong could be done to the poet than to go through his book running, and he would be apt to revenge himself upon the impatient reader by leaving him all the labor involved in such a course, and no reward at the end for his pains.

But the case is not a probable one. People either read Mr. Emerson patiently and earnestly, or they do not read him at all. In this earnest nation he enjoys a far greater popularity than criticism would have augured for one so unflattering to the impulses that have heretofore and elsewhere made readers of poetry; and it is not hard to believe, if we believe in ourselves for the future, that he is destined to an ever-growing regard and fame. He makes appeal, however mystically, only to what is fine and deep and true and noble in men, and no doubt those who have always loved his poetry have reason to be proud of their pleasure in it. Let us of the present be wise enough to accept thankfully what genius gives us in its double character of bard and prophet, saying, when we enjoy the song, "Ah, this is the poet that now sings!" and when the meaning is dark, "Now we have the seer again!"

An Historical Sketch of Sacerdotal Celibacy in the Christian Church. By HENRY C. LEA. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co. 1867.

THIS exhaustive treatise of Mr. Lea upon ecclesiastical celibacy we take to possess, like his excellent work upon "Superstition and Force," all the capital requisites of an historical monograph, — an immense body of information and of reference on the subject in hand, a sufficiently cool and dispassionate manner of presenting facts, and a