

Review of Bret Harte's Poem

Author Name

1871

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3. — *Poems.* By BRET HARTE. Boston: Fields, Osgood, & Co. 1871. 12mo. pp. 152.

OUR first acquaintance with Mr. Harte was through the "Idyll of Red Gulch," which was floated to us one morning among the drift-weeds of the newspaper. We found a new and singular interest in it, a power and pathos (and those worked up from the simplest material), that moved us deeply, and above all we were conscious of that most delightful of all literary sensations,—a new flavor. Here was our Theocritus at last, and from California, whence we least expected him. Our experiment in this instance had been so satisfactory, that we at once proceeded to read Mr. Harte's volume of prose. We found it unequal, it is true, but there were in it unmistakable evidences of original power. Mr. Harte had divined the poem that lay hidden in that wonderful border life, Homeric in its simple savagery, in its emphasis of the manlier qualities. It was plain, too, that here was a humorist of no mean quality, perhaps the first who had pushed to its utmost allowable limits that contempt for all received conventions which is the leading characteristic (as it is also the danger) of the purely American type of the humorous.

In the volume before us we meet Mr. Harte as a professed poet, and it amply justifies his title to the name. There is hardly a page where we do not find some new evidence of his sensibility to what is picturesque in character or scenery.

"For seven months had the wasted plain
Known no moisture of dew or rain,
The wells were empty and choked with sand;
The rivers had perished from the land;
Only the sea-fogs, to and fro,
Slipped like ghosts of the streams below.
Deep in its bed lay the river's bones,
Bleaching in pebbles and milk-white stones,
And tracked o'er the desert faint and far,
Its ribs shone bright on each sandy bar."

Even amid his humor there is a gleam of the poetic eye now and then:—

"Ai! for the fleecy flocks, — the meek-nosed, the passionless faces."

But what we value even more highly is the power of suggesting a whole character through its own unconscious self-revelation, as in the striking bit of moral and physical scenery, "Dow's Flat." "Cicely," in its quaint way, is full of poetry, and might be taken as typical of the author, who seems to have found his poetry by accident, as it were, in the motley life around him, and to have hardly known how to save it from his own relentless humor. We could wish indeed that Mr.

Harte had sometimes shown more respect for a gift so eminent in many ways as his. Some of the pieces here collected are of a flimsy texture when compared with his best work, and we find ourselves a little impatient, now and then, with the Mrs. Gampian *ambages*. But we do not care to haggle with one who so often unexpectedly touches us with something more abiding than any superficial emotion. Mr. Harte has a feeling for what is noble in character, and a faith in the final perseverance of humanity under the most adverse circumstances, which endear him to us, and which we should like to call essentially American, the best outcome of democracy. Not less noteworthy is his admirable good sense, shown in such pieces as "Plain Language from Truthful James," which, with a deadly thrust of humor, gave the *coup de grace* to the barbarian cant on the Chinese question.

4. — *The Commercial Laws of the States.* New York: Office of the Bankers' Magazine. 1870.

"Of making many books, saith Solomon, there is no end; which is to be understood of such books as are written without an end." We are reminded of this saying of Lord Coke by the increasing mass of quasi-legal literature to which this work is the latest addition. Why such a book is produced is a mystery; why it is bought passes all understanding; yet still it comes.

"The Commercial Law of the States" is a large subject to be treated so briefly; especially as the compiler includes under this head divers excellent points of learning as to dower, probate, competency of witnesses, practice of courts, and other things indispensable to every commercial man. Space is gained for these, however, by leaving out most of the subjects which belong strictly to commercial law. We look in vain for any information as to ships, carriers, bills of lading, etc., and the laws of the United States are ignored utterly. As a specimen of the accuracy of the work, we will take the six pages devoted to Massachusetts.

An account is given of the State insolvent laws, which are all superseded by the United States Bankrupt Act of 1867. There is a summary of the usury laws. On turning the page, the reader finds that they are repealed. The damages on foreign bills are stated as they were seven years ago, not as they are now. It is said that one witness is necessary to a deed. In fact none are needed. It is said that an affidavit of merits is required in civil actions. This is done away with by a late statute. The jurisdiction of the Supreme Court