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Two Poetic Friendships.

By MARY BRADFORD WHITING.

STANDING in the Piazza di Spagna, the glories of Rome dazzling the eye, the historic associations of Rome crowding in upon the mind, it is yet impossible to look at the modest house at the foot of the stairs which ascend to the Trinità dei Monti without pausing to think of the devoted young artist who there watched over the death-bed of his friend. It is well that the house should be purchased and maintained as a memorial of one of our greatest poets, but it is no less a memorial of that friendship which Severn, throughout his long career, looked upon as the crown of his life.

The story of Keats is in many respects similar to that of his Italian contemporary, Giacomo Leopardi. Both were distinguished from their early days by an intense love of books; both suffered from the effects of uncongenial surroundings; both were a prey to hopeless disease; both endured the pangs of unsatisfied love; both were laid in an early grave by a friend who had tended them in their last sickness. But at this point the resemblance ceases. The friend of Leopardi was Antonio Ranieri, who was no sooner quit of his charge, than he hastened to inform the world of the numerous sacrifices that he had made; while the friend of Keats was Joseph Severn—the faithful Severn—who in the closing years of his life attributed all his prosperity to the lost companion of forty years ago, and who in dying asked to be laid beside him, with the record of his affection graved upon his tombstone.

The idea of accompanying Keats to Rome was first suggested to Severn by their mutual acquaintance William Haslam. On August 14, 1820, Keats had written to his friend and publisher, John Taylor, asking him to obtain a passage for him, as he had been recommended to try what the Italian climate would do for his health. It was in September that, hearing that the journey had been arranged, Haslam said to Severn:

"Why should you not try and go with him, for otherwise he must go alone, and we shall never hear anything of him if he dies."

With generous enthusiasm Severn threw himself into the idea, and set to work to overcome the obstacles in the way. The fact that the only money that he had in his possession was "a solitary £25, fortunately paid me for the miniature of a lady in a white satin bonnet and feathers," would have deterred most men from the enterprise, but the thought of his friend, sick in heart and sick in body, alone in a foreign land was too much for his affectionate nature to bear, and he broke his intention to his father and mother. The storm of opposition that arose was terrible, but it was not altogether unreasonable. Severn's family were poor, he had his way to make and his Art studies to complete, and it was not wonderful that his father should look upon such a step as utter madness, and point out to his son that it would probably mean the ruin of his whole career.

The task so resolutely undertaken was carried out unflinchingly to the close, though its difficulties were at times overwhelming. On arriving at last at their destination, they saw Dr. Clark, the English physician whom they had been recommended to consult, and were installed by him in a house near his own, No. 26, Piazza di Spagna.

At first Severn was hopeful; the change of scene and climate promised to be beneficial, and Keats was not only able to enjoy life, but even to study, and to make plans for future poems. This brief gleam of happiness was, however, soon eclipsed: a severe attack of hæmorrhage reduced his strength in an alarming manner; but, even so, Severn did not realize that his days were numbered.

"This bitterly painful position was not without a redeeming point," he writes. "I mean that it was not utter misery, for I was at least the nurse of Keats, however unworthy and whatever my deficiencies; and, moreover, I was sustained by the delightful hope of my beloved friend's recovery, if God so willed. This hope enabled me to encounter every difficulty, and supplied the place of sleep sometimes, and even food, for I was obliged to

devote myself wholly to him, by night and day, as his nervous state would not admit of his seeing anyone but Dr. Clark and myself."

Dr. Clark's kindness was great, but, what with lack of means and lack of helpers, poor Severn was sometimes at his wit's end.

It was during one of his wakeful nights that he made the well-known portrait of his dying friend, so exquisite in its pathos, on which he wrote the words: "Three o'clock, morning; drawn to keep me awake. A deadly sweat was on him all this night."

The difficulties, always great, of nursing a patient in the last stages of consumption were increased tenfold by the mental misery which Keats experienced in his separation from Miss Brawne, and in the downfall of his literary hopes. Severn was sometimes obliged to prepare his food six times over before he could induce him to take it, and his services were received with an impatience that might have alienated a less devoted friend. But, in spite of all, Severn's care and tenderness remained unaltered, and gradually he saw a change stealing over his friend's mind.

"Little or no change has taken place in Keats," he writes to Mrs. Brawne on February 14, 1821, "except the beautiful one that his mind is growing to great quietness and peace. I find that this change has its rise from the increasing weakness of his body, but it seems like a delightful sleep to me. I have been beating about in the tempest of his mind so long."

That the strain of this day and night attendance was terrible may well be believed, but the love that filled Severn's heart inspired him with strength to endure it all.

The occupation was soon to be taken from him; on the very next day the end came, and the few broken words in which he communicated the news to his friend Brown show that his strength was almost exhausted.

And yet, great as Severn's devotion had been, he never for a moment looked upon it in the light of a sacrifice; to have been allowed to serve his dying friend was in his eyes a privilege

for which he could never be sufficiently grateful. As he wrote in after-years to Haslam:

"It seems to me that his love and gratitude have never ceased to quicken with cool dews the springs of my life. I owe almost everything to him—my best friends as well as my artistic prosperity, my general happiness as well as my best inspirations. He turned to me suddenly on one occasion, and, looking fixedly at me with a fiery life in his eyes, painfully large and glowing out of his hollow, woe-wrought face, said: 'Severn, I bequeath to you all the joy and prosperity I have never had.' I have often remembered those words, and I do believe the dear fellow has never ceased to help me. I thank God I am so happy as to live in his growing fame."

For his fame Severn had always been jealous, and it may well be believed that the cruel jest on his epitaph, "Here lies one whose name was writ in water, and his works in milk and water," cut him to the quick.

The lines engraved upon the medallion let in the wall of the cypress-shaded cemetery, where the friends lie side by side, might have been written by Severn himself:

> "Keats, if thy cherished name be writ in water,
> Each tear has fallen from some mourner's cheek,
> A sacred tribute such as heroes seek,
> Though oft in vain, for dazzling deeds of slaughter.
> Sleep on, not honoured less for epitaph so meek!"

"I am proud, as well as grateful, to be British Consul in Rome," wrote Severn towards the close of his life; "but I think I would gladly slip back forty years to be once again travelling to Rome with my beloved Keats, and even to be in Rome tending him again, for all the suffering and anxiety of that bitter time."

Never could he pass the house where that suffering and anxiety had been endured "without a throb as of a wound" in his heart; but we, as we pass the house to-day, may surely feel that thrill of emotion which uplifts the heart and soul

> "Whene'er a noble deed is wrought."

How different is the friendship which is described in Ranieri's book, "Sette anni di Sodalizio" (Seven Years of Companionship)! Giacomo Leopardi, although the eldest son of a noble house, was confronted with struggles as great and disappointments as keen as those of John Keats, the poor medical student. His father, the Conte Monaldo Leopardi, was a narrow-minded pedant, while his mother, the Contessa Adelaide, was of a hard and unsympathetic nature, whose one idea was to build up the fortunes of the family, and who devoted herself entirely to business. A visit to Recanati cannot fail to produce sad thoughts in the minds of those who know the poet's story. Perched on its olive-clad hill, the little town overlooks the Adriatic on one side, and on the other the fertile plains of the Province of Ancona. But, picturesque as its position is, it was no better than a prison to the ardent young poet, who longed to escape into the world beyond. The library of the studious Conte Monaldo is still intact; the desk at which his son sat, the pen with which he wrote, may still be seen; but though he had an ample store of books at his command, it was intellectual sympathy and encouragement for which he longed, and for which he entreated in vain. By day and night he pored over his studies, but an ever-increasing melancholy devoured him, until the seeds of disease were firmly planted in his constitution, and he was taunted by his fellow-townsmen with the nickname of "Il Gobbo" (the Hunchback).

In 1822, when he was twenty-four years old, he at last succeeded in gaining permission from his parents to leave home, but though the family finances were now in a flourishing condition, the allowance made to him was so small that he was at once obliged to seek for work. His sister-in-law, the wife of Carlo Leopardi, contradicts this in her book, "Notes biographiques sur Leopardi et sa Famille," on the ground that when Bunsen and Niebuhr, who became acquainted with him in Rome, offered to get him an appointment in the Papal Court, he declined to avail himself of it. She omits to mention, however, that the appointment would have necessitated his entering

the priesthood, a step to which he was resolutely opposed, although he had received the first tonsure at the age of twelve.

His "Ode to Italy," and his lines on the monument of Dante in Santa Croce, in Florence, had already made him widely known, and his extraordinary scholarship soon procured him employment from the publishers, but his health could not stand the strain of work, and he was obliged to appeal to his father for an increased allowance. To this, as to every subsequent request, his father returned the same answer—"Come home, and you will be surrounded with all the comforts you can desire"! But though his suffering body might have had its needs supplied, his spirit would have starved and pined in that uncongenial atmosphere, and he preferred to continue his labours for Stella, the publisher of Milan, who had engaged him to edit the classics. It was at this time that he wrote the beautiful poem known as "Aspasia," which tells the story of his hopeless love for a lady who has never been identified, but who is supposed to have been the widowed Princess Charlotte Buonaparte, daughter of the ex-King of Spain, who had been married to Napoleon, son of the ex-King of Holland. His love for her, like lesser loves that he had known before, was doomed to disappointment, and in the lines "To his Lady," he expresses his belief that he will never find the ideal love whose vision had haunted his life-long dreams.

Harshly treated by his parents, spurned by the woman he loved, and unfit for the strain of work, it was little wonder that his health rapidly deteriorated. His hearing and eyesight failed, his bones softened, and his blood degenerated; heat and cold were alike injurious to him; any chill caused him the severest suffering, yet if he went near a fire his discomfort was unbearable, and during one sharp season in Bologna he was obliged to plunge himself up to the armpits in a sack of feathers in order to keep any warmth in his frame. The curvature of the spine, which had been induced by his constantly bending over his books when he was growing, developed into absolute deformity, and

Ranieri speaks of it at last as a double curvature (*doppia curvatura*), which was completely crippling in its effects.

It was at this period that he met Antonio Ranieri, a young man of literary tastes and independent means, who was so struck with compassion at the poet's hapless state that he offered to devote time and purse to his service. Leopardi's acceptance of the offer filled his family with indignation ; but the fact was he had again appealed in vain to his father for aid, telling him that his health necessitated his going south, and begging for a supply of money.

No course seemed open to him, therefore, but to accept Ranieri's offer, and the two friends established themselves in rooms in the Via Ghibellina in Florence, in company with Antonio's sister, Paolina. In the first sentence of the " Sette anni di Sodalizio " Ranieri states that he and Paolina had made " the greatest sacrifice that any human beings could make for another." These words give the keynote to the book, and mark the difference between their devotion and that of Severn. He and his sister did indeed give themselves up night and day to their friend, but a more agreeable idea of them would be conveyed if a little less were made of the sacrifice. The phrase " la mia angelica Paolina " is repeated until it absolutely palls upon the reader. Angelic, Paolina may very probably have been, but it is hardly for her brother to insist upon it. The same stricture might be applied to many other assertions in the book: the sharing of his purse with the impoverished poet was a noble and generous deed, but it is impossible not to feel that he is somewhat lacking in delicacy of feeling when he enlarges upon the details of his liberality. A move to Naples was decided upon, and Ranieri describes his own anxiety that nothing should be spared for Leopardi's comfort, and the exertions made by the angelic Paolina to provide the necessary furniture.

But the part of the book which perhaps creates the most jarring effect is that in which he dilates on the ingratitude with which Leopardi received the sacrifices made for him. Good air and comfortable quarters, he says, were of no avail, when " our

dear invalid" insisted on going his own way with regard to diet and treatment, and made difficulties about every arrangement that was proposed. Leopardi was, no doubt, a difficult patient, and his habit of turning night into day must have been irritating in the extreme; but, after all, it was Ranieri's own doing that he had a dying genius to nurse: he undertook the task voluntarily, and there is a decided want of taste on his part in rushing into print to tell the world that his friend had left "an unamiable memory behind him."

But it was not for long that Leopardi was to inflict his woes upon friends who found them a burden grievous to be borne. With each month his sufferings increased, and on June 14, 1837, he passed away, and was buried in the Church of San Vitale, near the reputed grave of Virgil.

It was not until nearly half a century had gone by that Severn's love for Keats was recorded above his grave, but Leopardi was no sooner dead than Ranieri hastened to place upon his tombstone the fact that he had been united to his adored friend for seven years, and that he had never left him to the last hour of his life.

Great as were the sufferings Keats was called upon to bear, he was vouchsafed two blessings which were denied to Leopardi —the woman he adored returned his affection, and the friend who tended his sick-bed loved him with a love that was generous and disinterested. To live in hearts we leave behind is not to die, and the contrasted fate of the two poets makes us feel that it is for Leopardi rather than for Keats that we should dry our tears with the thought that Death has stilled the sorrows of his soul. Of Leopardi, rather than of Keats, might Shelley's lovely lines have been written:

> "He has outsoared the shadow of our night.
> Envy and calumny and hate and pain,
> And that unrest which men miscall delight,
> Can touch him not and torture not again.
> From the contagion of the world's slow stain
> He is secure; and now can never mourn
> A heart grown cold, a head grown grey, in vain—
> Nor, when the spirit's self has ceased to burn,
> With sparkless ashes load an unlamented urn!"