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The Cycle of English Song.

I.

ANCESTRY AND BIRTH.

WHEN the Persian hosts, under the command of Datis and Artaphernes, threatened, neither for the first nor for the last time, the independence of Attica, but the critical moment had arrived for vindicating Athenian freedom, each of the ten generals deputed to share the guardianship of her liberties voted, firstly, that command should be concentrated in his own hands, and, secondly, in those of Miltiades. Thus did the son of Cimon receive, even before Marathon, a conclusive superiority of his military and strategic

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with English poetry. The gift of divine, so universal a veneration is paid to its lofty an estimate prevails of its intellectual utility, and of its part in shaping the destination would willingly confess itself a lag-me a prize. To be a great poet is perhaps may not command during life the loudest t homage, ensures after death the most r; and to be a nation which boasts the o survive in the love and veneration of the

human race ages after the speeches of statesmen have ceased to be read and the discoveries of philosophers have ceased to be true; when the victories of kings have become but sounding brass, and the soaring triumphs of laurelled architects but gaping ruins. Nor is it only, as Horace has finely said, that ante-Agamemnonic heroes have perished out of remembrance because no Homer has chanted their praises, and that the greatest of active heroes must be forgotten unless his deeds be embalmed in sounding verse. The patriotic bard in vain strives to perpetuate the glories of his compatriots rather than his own; it is his strains, rather than their struggles, which survive. The rash and impetuous Ajax, the vindictive yet chivalrous Achilles, the wise but crafty Ulysses, the sagacious Mentor, Agamemnon king of men, the blustering Hector, the seductive Paris, even the fair glowing Helen herself—what are all these but shadows of shades, echoes of an echo, invisible ghosts haunting an uncertain coast? Whilst, for all the erudition of critics, the doubts of Pyrrhonists, and the hammers

of iconoclasts, there lives in this sublunary world no more actual, lasting, immovable entity than

“The blind old man of Scio’s rocky isle.”

In the long run it is by its literature that a people is glorified, and poetry is the crown and summit of literature. What does the world at large know of Tyre? What of Sidon? What of Carthage? Carthage may thank a Roman historian that Hannibal’s name is still in the mouths of men. What of Egypt? It is due to the Bible of a race she despised, that archæologists are still fumbling amongst her buried palaces. There have been conquerors as potent as Philip and Alexander of Macedon, only they did not conquer Athenians, and history knows them not. Leuctra, Marathon, Salamis, Thermopylæ—these are watchwords for all time; but only because the same blood that coursed in the veins of Epaminondas, of Miltiades, of Themistocles and of Leonidas, warmed an Alcæus, a Pindar, a Euripides, and a Sappho. The triumphs of barbarians, be they ever so brilliant or ever so faithfully recorded, linger only in the dusty and cobwebbed corner of men’s minds, because barbarians can point to no literature, no verse, that for ever enthralles human attention. Take away the spice of song, and you will in vain attempt to embalm the past.

Well therefore may nations, whose passion for immortality is yet stronger and deeper than that of individuals, hug each the flattering unction to its soul that it has produced great, nay the greatest, poets; and it would be unnatural to expect them to take the laurel off their own brows to encircle with it the head of a rival. Italy would be slow to concede that the Muses have had a fairer offspring than Dante, Petrarch, and Ariosto. Spain would not willingly allow that the genius of Calderon and Lope de Vega has ever been surpassed. Germany would certainly refuse to rank Goethe and Schiller below even the most favoured children of the Muses vaunted by other lands. Even France would hesitate to own inferiority whilst she can cite such names as Racine, Corneille, De Musset, and Victor Hugo. But it is pretty certain—nay it is indubitable—that if competent Italians, Spaniards, Germans, and Frenchmen were asked to name the country, apart from their own, which had produced the greatest poets and the greatest number of them, they would one and all point to this island, which, though sung round by no syrens, has been a perfect nest and woodland of song, now soft and melodious, now shrill and piercing, now full and vocal, ever since the formation of the English language gave English hearts a voice.

Of the correctness of this assertion we have some direct and much presumptive evidence. Dante undoubtedly has been translated into every civilised tongue, but it is only the mere truth that the world at large is far more familiar with his name than with his works, and that

he is rather the favourite of scholars and the study of earnest lovers of Italy than the companion of the average man or woman of culture. Yet he is the only Italian poet who can be fairly said to have earned for himself, on the mere strength of his works, a world-wide reputation. The genius of Calderon is universally acknowledged, but that of Lope de Vega has been questioned, and though, thanks to Goethe and Schiller, their works have been more or less popularised in Germany, in England they are unread, in Italy they are unknown, and in France they are unprized. It is probable that it is in this country rather than in any other that Goethe and Schiller are studied and appreciated by foreigners; yet, whilst no one here arrogates for the latter an even rank with the first names in literature, the English admirers of Goethe are to be found mainly in the ranks of those who are critics, not to say pedants, rather than sympathising lovers of poetry, and to whom philosophic poetry is the most agreeable form of composition. As for Corneille and Racine, they have nowhere excited enthusiasm out of their own country, whilst De Musset and M. Victor Hugo, though widely and justly extolled, have not been entered among the Olympians save by such prose rhapsodists as Mr. Swinburne, and the source of their inspiration, as we shall see directly, flows in this country and can scarcely be regarded as a native fountain.

But it will be said, one nation may be more enlightened and catholic in its tastes than another; and the fact of a poet not being highly thought of in a foreign country may prove the crassness of the country and not the inferiority of the poet. There is truth in the observation, and we are far from wishing to imply that foreign estimates are conclusive, or anything approaching to conclusive, in any particular case, though it must be rarely that they are of no value. But the general foreign estimate—that is to say, the estimate of every foreign country—of any particular poet, must necessarily count for much; and the general foreign estimate, or the estimate of any foreign country, of the entire body of a particular nation's poetry, must necessarily be as valuable an opinion as is to be obtained outside that nation itself. But by the very terms of our search the opinion of the nation itself must perforce be excluded, since, as in the case of the Athenian generals, every nation's opinion would be given in its own favour. It is an enormous testimony to the accuracy of the judgment of Englishmen that their body of poetic literature is the finest and most complete ever yet produced, if we find that all other nations consider it, in those respects, second only to their own. For no nation is smitten by general blindness, or afflicted with undeviating special partiality or affinity in the matter. Frenchmen may not care much for Shakespeare, but they enthusiastically admire Milton, Pope, and Byron. They may talk as Boileau did of "*le clinquant de Tasse*," but they entertain

a genuine reverence for Dante. We may be more or less indifferent to the stately tragedies of the time of the Grand Monarque, but we recognise the signal poetical qualities of 'La Légende des Siècles;' and whilst the sonnets of Laura's lover may be caviare to most Britons, they incline their head when they hear the Divine Comedy mentioned. We need not pursue our illustrations, for we have surely said enough to establish the fact that nations are competent to form an opinion of the relative value of each other's poetic literature, and to corroborate the theory that when they conspire to adjudge the second place to one and the same nation, their own respectively alone excluding it from the first, that nation's claim to the first place is as conclusively established as anything well can be in this world, outside the arena of rigid demonstration.

That second place, which is practically the first, has assuredly been adjudged by universal consent to English poetry; and it has, moreover, as would naturally be expected, more than any other exercised the pens of foreign critics and translators. The whole of Chaucer has been translated, and translated admirably, into French. Nearly the whole of Shakespeare has been translated into German, some of the most distinguished names in German literature busying themselves with the task, and so successful have they been that some Germans like to flatter themselves that their version of the greatest of dramas is superior to the original. We may smile at the pretension; but it testifies to the enthusiasm of those who advance it, for the author on whom they thus attempt to fasten the character of complete acclimatisation. It is no less a name in French annals than that of Chateaubriand with which we have to associate the continental triumphs of Milton; the whole of the 'Paradise Lost' having been rendered into his native tongue by that brilliant man of letters. Byron, the most universally popular of all English poets, by reason of that cosmopolitanism which Goethe so shrewdly and accurately ascribed to his works, has been translated into every European language, that of Russia not excepted; whilst his influence in moulding the style and themes of foreign poets in Russia, Germany, Italy, Spain, and France, is one of the most remarkable facts in literary history. Indeed it may be said that it is only since Byron died that France has boasted poets proper at all: Lamartine, De Musset, and M. Victor Hugo, being his natural children.

It has further to be remarked that critics have vied with translators in doing justice to the splendid merits of our long line of English bards. We cannot say that criticism is a lost art in this country, for it never existed; but on the Continent, and notably in France and Germany, it has been cultivated and pursued by some of the best-equipped intellects and some of the most accomplished pens; and they have never been more enthusiastically, and we

may add, more successfully and popularly employed, than when absorbed in the endeavour to explain to their countrymen the meaning and merits of English poetry. When we want an interpretation of one of the subtleties of Shakespeare, we can turn to a Gervinus; and when we are in need of an unanswerable testimony to the genius of Byron against the stupidity or jealousy of some of his own compatriots, we have only to turn to our shelf which holds the prose opinions of Goethe.

The latest tribute, and the most important one of our time, to the eminence of English poetry comes to us from France, the classic land of criticism, and is to be found in that long and admirable work which the author justly calls a 'History of English Literature.*' A scholar, a traveller, a worshipper of the arts, a man of letters in the best sense of the word, M. Taine has undertaken to survey the literary products of this island, both in prose and verse, from the time of Chaucer to our own day; but it is the poets on whom he chiefly and most lovingly dwells, and we shall go beyond his example, not only by dwelling exclusively upon poets, but by illustrating our theory solely from the most salient and characteristic poets in each of the epochs into which the cycle of national song naturally divides itself. Yet our standpoint will be the same as his, whilst we pass over numberless objects which have attracted his scrutiny; and we cannot give a better account of the central idea upon which, as on a pivot, all our reflections and conclusions will turn, than is to be found in the preface written by M. Taine himself to the talented translator's English edition of his work.

"A nation," writes M. Taine, "lives twenty, thirty centuries, and more, and a man lives only sixty or seventy years. Nevertheless, a nation in many respects resembles a man. For during a career so long and, so to speak, indefinite, it also retains its special character, genius and soul, which, perceptible from infancy, go on developing from epoch to epoch, and exhibit the same primitive basis from their origin up to their decline. This is one of the truths of experience, and whoever has followed the history of a people, that of the Greeks from Homer to the Byzantine Cæsars, that of the Germans from the poem of the 'Niebelungen' down to Goethe, that of the French from the first and most ancient versified story-tellers down to Béranger and Alfred de Musset, cannot avoid recognising a continuity as rigid in the life of a people as in the life of an individual. Suppose one of the five or six individuals who have played a leading part in the world's drama—Alexander, Napoleon, Newton, Dante; assume that by extraordinary good chance we have a number of authentic paintings, intact and fresh—water-colours, designs, sketches, life-size portraits, which represent the man to us at every stage of life, with his various costumes, expressions,

* 'History of English Literature.' By H. A. Taine. Translated by H. Van Laun, one of the Masters at the Edinburgh Academy. Edinburgh: Edmonston & Douglas.

and attitudes, with all his surroundings, especially as regards the leading actions he has performed, and at the most telling crises of his interior development. Such are precisely the documents which we now possess enabling us to know that big individual called a nation, especially when that nation possesses an original and complete literature."

Without expressing any opinion here as to how far a "science of history" may be constructed out of the accumulation of human records, we may affirm our assent to so much of the scientific method of regarding human affairs as is expressed in the foregoing passage. A nation has a term of existence, a character, a development, a history, and will therefore pass through those stages which mark the growth and decline of a particular man; and if there be a nation peculiarly endowed with the poetic temperament, and betraying at every period of existence the rare possession of poetic faculties, we may be sure that its poetic literature will be marked by that steady and continuous progression, broken by definite landmarks, which we recognise in the individual. We trust that before we desist from the task we have set ourselves, it will be conceded that, in this instance, facts and theory agree.

It is a fact deserving of note that the earliest specimen extant of composition in the Saxon tongue is a fragment of Cædmon, a monk of Whitby, who lived in the eighth century after Christ, and who, "for want of learning," was compelled to write his for the most part religious poetry in his mother tongue. Want of learning, as most people understand that term, has far more often than not been the portion of poets. On the one side we have a Dante and a Milton—and they were not very learned, after all, the first more especially—and on the other, all the world of great poetic names, whose owners, judged by any real scholarly or scientific standard, were extremely ignorant. The late Lord Lytton has argued, in one of his delightful 'Caxtoniana,' that a poet ought to know everything, and that the best poets have been remarkable for the variety of their acquirements. We must dissent from the doctrine; and though of course it would, logically, be inconclusive to point to that great master's learning and then to his poetry, and to insist on the disproportion between the two, still we should be disposed to go so far as to affirm that, for a poet, not a little, but a great deal of learning, might possibly be a dangerous thing. Perhaps, to the greatest poets of all nothing is dangerous. But what in our opinion, distinguishes the poet from ordinary persons, what specifically characterises his mind and stamps his productions, is, not a greater knowledge than his neighbours, but a different sort of knowledge. He knows the same things as the herd, only he knows them in a distinct and peculiar fashion. He apprehends them differently, and in rendering them gives a totally different account of them. He may be as ignorant as a Burns, as superficial as a Keats; but what little he

knows, he knows poetically. There is a soul in his knowledge, and you can never make mere library faggots of it. It is not lore got from without; it is inner wisdom. There have been people stupid enough to fancy that Bacon must have been the author of Shakespeare's plays and poems on account of the amount of learning there is in them. All the learning in Shakespeare could be got at a grammar-school, in the woods and fields, and in the streets of men, so that there was the right person to get it. Eyes, heart, and tongue, with or without a bookshelf, furnish forth a poet.

And so this Cædmon of whom we spoke, had, for want of 'learning,' to write in his native homely Saxon language. There was as yet no other for him. It was a case of Latin or mother tongue, and he knew only the latter. By-and-by a finer and more familiar weapon was to be forged for the use of the great souls fired with the yearning to go out of themselves and speak, not for themselves alone, but for their own time; and not for their own class alone, but for all ranks of the nation. But the nation had to be made first; and, as usual, it was a small band of aristocrats who made it. In the tenth century the bettermost folks of this country used to send their children to France to be educated; but before another hundred years had passed away the schoolmaster crossed the Channel and the necessity disappeared. The Normans brought with them not only laws and the art of governing, but likewise the art of elegant speaking and writing. Never, however, that we know of, has Saxon blood or Saxon speech utterly disappeared before the conqueror; there is something too sturdy in them for that. The tongue of the French troubadours had to accept an alliance with the tongue of Cædmon, the Saxon monk of Whitby, before it could get itself accepted as the speech of the people, and still more as the speech of the poet.

The alliance, moreover, was not one solely of speech. A union likewise was effected, firstly of race and secondly of caste, which has had an unspeakably profitable influence upon English song. In the blending of races, moreover, we must not leave out of the account a third stock, neither Saxon nor Norman, and singularly different from either, and by no means abolished either then or now, though the linguistic traces of it have almost wholly disappeared, and which lent and still lends its valuable properties, as perhaps a minor but still important contribution towards the formation of the full-grown English temperament, and therefore to the complete character of English poetry. We allude, of course, to that despised and humbled race, Celtic in origin and tongue, which first possessed our island; but which, soon after the dawn of its history, was driven westwards and northwards, and there only now survives in visible and tangible shape. Yet who can doubt that neither extermination nor ostracism was complete, and that Celtic units and even Celtic families remained

largely dotted over England during the period of Saxon domination, and that their blood was already intermingled with that of the Teutonic master, when the final lord, the Norman, arrived? Both fact and probability support the supposition, and English poetry is perpetually sounding a note which reminds us that there runs in our veins, be it in ever so small a degree, the blood and tears of a pathetic, subdued, and melancholy people.

It is all the more necessary to dwell and to insist in this place, before dealing with the origin and consequences of the amalgamation of the Saxon and Norman elements, upon the Celtic drop in our poetical compositions, since, after that amalgamation, several centuries had to pass before its minor key was heard in English literature. It is of the very nature of soft, gentle and melancholy characters, races, and feelings, to seem to be suppressed by the sterner and more practical ones, which are perpetually striving to extrude them or to trample them underfoot; but it is equally of their very nature never in reality to be so. They bend, but they never break. These are too supple, too elastic, too yielding, ever to be snapped in twain and so disposed of. They survive neglect, contumely, persecution, and get the upper hand of their conquerors in moments least expected, moulding the speech, the modes of thought, even the policy of the latter, when they cannot aspire to occupy the seats of influence and authority. Thus Athens, as a Roman poet acknowledges, had its triumph over masterful Rome; thus, as we shall see, the Celtic type of feeling, though utterly crushed and lost for a long while under the waves of Saxon and Norman domination, crept up again in the works which are the historical exponent of the feelings of the English nation; and thus, in a minor degree, we are beginning to see the "mild Hindoo" influencing, and destined yet more to influence, the sturdy western conqueror of his country.

The Saxon crassness, which is at present so dominant amongst us, caused a year or two ago a grin of self-sufficient stupidity to adorn the faces of many of our journalistic wiseacres, when Mr. Disraeli, peculiarly endowed with the faculty of comprehending ethnic idiosyncracies, alluded to the influence exercised upon the Irish people by the melancholy sea with which their small island is surrounded. Yet the fact—for fact unquestionably it is—had never escaped the observation of anybody deserving the epithet of thinker. M. Renan, himself of Celtic origin, speaks, in his essay upon Celtic Poetry, of the "*mer presque toujours sombre,*" which forms on the horizon of Brittany "a circle of eternal sighs." "*Même contraste,*" he proceeds, "*dans les hommes: à la vulgarité normande*"—of course the "*vulgarité normande*" here spoken of has nothing to do with the aristocratic Norman element which exists in England, and of which we shall have occasion to speak so often—"à la vulgarité normande, à une popula-

tion grasse et plantureuse, contente de vivre, pleine de ses intérêts, égoïste comme tous ceux dont l'habitude est de jouir, succède une race timide, réservée, vivant toute au dedans, pesante en apparence, mais sentant profondément et portant dans ses instincts religieux une adorable délicatesse. Le même contraste frappe, dit-on, quand on passe de l'Angleterre au pays de Galles, de la basse Ecosse, anglaise de langage et de mœurs, au pays des Gaëls du nord, et aussi, mais avec une nuance sensiblement différent, quand on s'enfonce dans les parties de l'Irlande où la race est restée pure de toute mélange avec l'étranger. Il semble que l'on entre dans les couches souterraines d'une autre âge, et l'on ressent quelque chose des impressions que Dante nous fait éprouver quand il nous conduit d'un cercle à un autre de son enfer."*

It is this combined retreat and resistance, this apparent yieldingness, ending in an obstinacy that never surrenders, which constitutes the strong and enduring character of the Celtic influence. It can not ever be said of it that it dies in a corner; for though it falls back before every fresh inroad into nooks and retreats ever and ever more obscure, it does not perish there. Roman civilisation drove Celtic races before it, as it drove other races; but these it ended by civilising—the Celtic race, never. The great Teutonic invasion which followed hurled the Celtic tribes back, but never really broke their lines. Modern civilisation fares no better against them, and all the efforts of England to impregnate the Irish people with modern ideas of progress have generated nothing better than disgust and disaffection. Without giving itself fine classical airs, or troubling itself much with what to more ambitious people is exalted as philosophy, the Celtic race is as sublime in its selection of sides as was the Roman Cato. It loves the losing cause, and is invariably found shedding its blood in campaigns that are desperate. Never to attack, but always to defend—such seems its allotted part in history. It is the conservative race, fated never to win, but never to be wholly conquered. It has a delicate presentiment of its perpetual doom, and bears its destiny with a fatalistic resignation. It believes unchangingly in God, but does not expect God to fight for it. As has been finely observed, one would hardly think, to see how slightly endowed it is with audacious initiation, that it belongs to the race of Japhet—the *Iapeti genus, audax omnia perpeti*.

What is the character that we should expect to find in the poetry of such a people? Precisely that which strikes the most cursory observer. Celtic poetry, when undefiled with all alien admixture, is lyrical and sad. It is for the most part a threnody; a dirge, like the play and plash of melancholy waves. Not victories, but defeats, are the theme of its bards; and its metrical stories are stories of

* 'Essais de Morale et de Critique.' Par Ernest Renan, Membre de l'Institut. Deuxième édition. Paris: Michel Lévy Frères.

exile and flight. If gaiety for a moment intrudes, it appears only as a relief to the deep current of melancholy tears. For the Celtic race has too enduring a consciousness of the world we do not see ever to accept gladness as the natural condition of man. It has the religious fibre in a remarkable degree in its composition, and the air it breathes is for ever haunted with shadows and intangible phantoms. It clings to the infinite, and is "an infant crying in the night." Too devout, too resigned, too averse from sustained and concentrated thought to strive, like the laborious Teuton, to solve the mysteries which surround us, it is content to recognise their existence, to feel their influence, to acknowledge them as a law of life, but humbly to respect their insolubility. It never presumes to lift the veil, though it never forgets how little there is on this side of the veil to satisfy the human soul. Thus its melancholy, its undying sadness, the plaintiveness of its poetry, ever remains vague and indefinite. Its most realistic strains are but a wandering voice.

The melancholy natures are usually gentle; and the Celtic race, besides being sad, and what in these days is called superstitious, has a feminine quality in it especially noteworthy. Just as, though it nourishes an undying reverence for the awful mysteries beyond the tomb, its annals swarm with apparitions, with witchcraft; and all the apparatus of demonology; so, whilst it can be wrought by the injustice of the invader to stubborn defence and even to terrible reprisals, it asks nothing better than to be left alone, and, womanlike, to bury itself in the pursuits of home. The contrast between its early compositions and those of the Germanic peoples can scarcely be exaggerated. In the Edda and the Niebelungen we find heroes who rejoice in slaughter for slaughter's sake, who revel in blood, as some men have revelled in lust, and to whom carnage and the bloody reek of battle are a goodly savour. Savage strength, gigantic rudeness, horse-play in peace, unlimited and joyous vengeance in strife, these are the main elements of early Teutonic grandeur. In the Celtic Mabinogion, on the contrary, though bloodshed abounds, though the recitals swarm with tales of pitiless cruelty, these are used only as the foils to gentler sentiments and more feminine scenes.

But in the formation of what we know as the English tongue Celtic influence had little or no share; and many generations were to elapse after its formation before Celtic influence was to creep into its poetry. Using the terminology of a science prevalent amongst us, we may say that whenever and wherever we find the Celtic element in our poetical literature, it is there by the law of reversion to a remote and indirect ancestry. Its two immediate parents are the Saxon and the Norman. If, as Mr. Coventry Patmore has asserted, metaphorically embodying an old and popular theory, "marriage-contracts are the poles on which the heavenly spheres revolve," the union

between the conquered Saxon and the conquering Norman, such as we find them towards the close of the eleventh century, ought indeed to have produced celestial results; and there are few who will deny that it has done so. We need not here concern ourselves to inquire whether the two were not, after all, not very far distant in blood. Whatever their original consanguinity, circumstance, and that something which, because we cannot thoroughly scrutinise it, we call accident, had ended by placing them, in character, in habits, in tongue, poles asunder.

“Of all barbarians these are the strongest of body and heart, and the most formidable.” Such is the testimony of a civilised contemporary concerning the Saxons. Their own account of themselves sounds over-flattering; but at bottom it tells the same tale and signifies the same thing: “The blast of the tempest aids our oars; the bellowing of heaven, the howling of the thunder, hurt us not; the hurricane is our servant, and drives us whither we wish to go. We smite with our swords,” sings one narrator of the deeds of himself and his fellow sea-kings. “To me it was a joy like having my bright bride by me on the couch. He who has never been wounded leads a weary life.” To slay and be slain was with them the whole duty of life. It was for that that they came into this world; that was their *raison d'être*; that alone reconciled them to existence. Death had no terrors for them, unless it came upon a bed. “What a shame for me not to have been permitted to die in so many battles, and to end thus by a cow’s death! At least put on my breastplate, gird on my sword, set my helmet on my head, my shield in my left hand, so that a great warrior like myself may die as a warrior.” So spoke Siegwald, Duke of Northumberland, Henry of Huntingdon tells us, when dysentery overtook him in the midst of a brief truce.

Evidently a pugnacious and battle-loving race; cherishing their bodies, not for the pleasure and blandishment of ease, but in order that in the din and stress of battle they might press heavily against and overbear the foe. For this they ate voraciously, drank hard, and slept without turning. Their existence was an animal one, relieved only by those furious passions known but to man. But the conquest by them of an island kingdom slowly but surely wrought a modification in their temperament. With a whole continent before them, they would have gone on conquering, or at least ravaging, as long as there was a rood of ground left not visited by their stormy footsteps; and in England they never paused from the work of havoc, slaughter, and the constant acquisition of sway, until they found themselves stopped either by the mountains or the sea. Then they began to feel the pinch of their own success. What were they to do next? Were they, like Alexander, to weep because there were no more worlds to devastate? Had they not better turn and rend each other? They

found some relief in that course; and the whole world knows to whom the reproach of their history being a history of kites and crows was addressed. The Saxon Heptarchy was a praiseworthy attempt to introduce peace and order among successful savages; but that in the short space of a hundred years, out of fourteen kings of Northumbria seven were slain and six deposed, is a conclusive proof of what difficulties legislators and law-preservers had to contend with.

Still, a something like settled government at length supervened; and a wandering, adventure-seeking, battle-loving, brutal, though at heart not unkindly people, had to find other vents for their turbid temperaments than surprising their neighbours and dismaying their foes. Generally they settled down into fixed families, villages, communistic states, kingdoms; and social life commenced. But society, it long remained apparent, was not the natural condition of these sturdy and moody children of the forest and the foam. Non-gregarious, they isolated themselves whenever the opportunity arose, drawing a sort of ring-fence round what they could call their own, and so dividing it all from the outer world, which, by the law of inherited association, they still regarded as their natural enemy. Tacitus had observed how in Germany they lived the solitary life, each one near the wood which pleased him. Self-detached and self-contained, each man would fain be his own master, develop and give play to his own character, and rule his own world. Neither law nor state should crush him. War being no longer open to him, he would find his way out in some other fashion, but still his own; or rather, since an outward vent for his huge nature was denied him, he would nurse his feelings and desires at home. Thus the active, vagrant, aggressive, despoiling Saxon of the European mainland, gradually toned down to the domestic, passive, silent, defensive, half-gloomy, meditative Saxon of this island. He still indulged in enormous and frequent meals, still gave himself the luxury of swinish intoxication, and corrected these excesses of animal life by an out-door existence, hunting, and every sport that field, or air, or river could afford him.

Man is not long in erecting his necessities into preferences, and the step is not a far one which leads him to exalt his preferences into virtues. Since he was compelled to lead the domestic life, this soon became the English Saxon's ideal; and with it naturally grew up a great respect for property, for clear distinctions between *meum* and *tuum*; a high regard for the usefulness and fidelity of women; a strong sanction of reverence and of implicit obedience in children, and, though to a less degree, in all subordinates. Home life thus established itself, and with it flourished home-keeping wits. Slow, deliberate, cautious, practical, full of solid sense, with a strong sense of right and justice; implacable, but from conscience, not from anger; exacting,

not easily moved to pity, putting heavy burdens upon everybody, but bearing them unflinchingly himself, the Saxon in England was perhaps the noblest and the most respectable savage the world has ever seen.

Indeed, it is only in deference to modern ideas that he can be regarded as a savage at all. With all his stolidity, he had within him a deep well of enthusiasm, and the seriousness of his temperament compelled him to be religious. Thus Christianity found in him an easy if not a tractable convert. He readily accepted the idea of one God, for indeed he possessed it already; but for outward symbols and expressions of each particular religious passion or sentiment he manifested, even then, an unmistakable aversion. What the Roman Catholic church calls piety and the Protestant church superstition had no seductions for him. He was without idols when Augustine found him; for his earnest nature regarded such minor objects of veneration as childish trifling. He recognised the universe, the necessity of things, the difficulties of life, duty, conscience, heroism, and the obligation of asserting himself. Religion was to be serviceable to him, not he to religion.

It is not difficult to see what must be the contribution of such a race to a composite poetical literature. To the Celt English poetry owes its pathos, sweetness, sadness, its lyrical faculty, its touches of ineffable melancholy, that returning of the singer upon himself, that minor key struck ever and anon in the midst of the strain, its notes of wail, its cadence drowned in tears, its sighing for what is not. The charm of our poetry is Celtic; but its force is Saxon. The Celt says Ah! the Saxon says Oh! From the first we get our sentiment, from the second our sublimity. But as the Saxon is perhaps the most complex of all known characters, so are his contributions to the elements of our poetry the most numerous and the most varied. To this source must be traced not only all that is sounding and soaring in it, but all on the one hand that is didactic and all on the other that is deeply tragic. Much of English poetry, in the opinion of foreign critics, is spoiled by its too evident and intentional moral tone. To a Frenchman or an Italian, much of Cowper, more of Wordsworth, and no little of Milton, are as tiresome as the lesson taught by a schoolmaster. They are perpetually discoursing, playing the pedagogue, laying down the law, inculcating moral truths, or what they believe to be such. Yet no Englishman at least will doubt that, here and there, our didactic poets, Wordsworth more especially, have reached rare heights of song, even in the act of preaching, and wherever they have done this, they were indebted to their Saxon blood and spirit.

To the same source must be traced that almost savagely tragic spirit which permeates our best and most famous dramas. The Greeks did not shrink from supping of horrors; but then they threw the

responsibility of slaughter, of parricide, matricide, fratricide, upon the gods, upon fate, upon Necessity; and the human agents were victims, rather than instigators or willing perpetrators, of bloody deeds. The pages of Shakespeare swarm with furies, but they are furies in human shape, men, mere men, governed by human motives, forgetful of heaven, uninfluenced by hell, needing no goad but their own tremendous passions, no goal but their own insatiable desires. Here we see the old sea-kings at work; fighting, slaying, conquering, dying, stamping with rage, rolling out sesquipedalian periods, and venting themselves in prodigious metaphors.

But the Saxons were essentially stutterers. They had much to say, more especially when they were no longer allowed to act, or at least to act on the large scale and in obedience to their big carnage-loving promptings; but they experience almost unconquerable difficulty in saying it.

"Time after time," M. Taine observes, "they return to and repeat the same idea. The sun on high, the great star, God's brilliant candle, the noble creation—four times they employ the same thought, and each time under a new aspect. All its different aspects rise simultaneously before the barbarian's eyes, and each word was like a shock of the semi-hallucination which excited him. Verily, in such a condition, the regularity of speech and of ideas is disturbed at every turn. His phrases recur and change; he emits the word that comes to his lips without hesitation; he leaps over wide intervals from idea to idea. The more his mind is transported, the quicker and wider are the intervals traversed. With one spring he visits the poles of his horizon, and touches in one moment objects which seem to have the world between them. His ideas are entangled; without notice, abruptly the poet will return to the idea he has quitted, and insert in it the thought to which he is giving expression. It is impossible to translate these incongruous ideas, which quite disconcert our modern style. At times they are unintelligible. Articles, particles, everything capable of illuminating thought, of marking the connection of terms, are neglected. Passion bellows forth like a great shapeless beast."

We may perhaps suspect that M. Taine, a Frenchman in spite of all his breadth and toleration of mind, had in his mind, when he wrote the above passage on the Saxon literature, less the Anglo-Saxon fragments made familiar to us by Turner, Conybeare, Thorpe, and others, than those tragedies of Shakespeare which so many of his countrymen have found "barbarian." It is to our Saxon blood that we mainly owe our genius, our extravagance, the "eye in fine frenzy rolling"—that, indeed, which distinguishes what is best in our poetical literature above all the poetical literatures of the human race.

But it may well be doubted if it ever would have attained the height on which it now sits enthroned before the eyes of men, had not another and most necessary element been introduced, an indispensable corrector, a chastiser, a moulder, a beneficent wielder of discipline. From the Celt, as we have said, our sweetness; from the Saxon, our

strength ; but from the Norman, to use Mr. Arnold's phrase, our light. The point may be put yet more clearly, though with every advance in precision we necessarily exaggerate the truth. The Celt contributes the spirit, the Saxon, the substance, the Norman, the form ; and without the latter, it may safely be affirmed, we should never have succeeded in pleasing anybody but ourselves.

As it is, we have accepted it unwillingly, but it has proved a useful and wholesome restraint, just as the conquered Saxons unwillingly received Norman laws and discipline, but were enormously improved by them. As Mr. Froude says, "through all the arrangements of the conquerors, one single aim was visible ; and that was that every man in England should have his definite 'place and definite duty assigned to him, and that no human being should be at liberty to lead at his own pleasure an unaccountable existence. The discipline of an army was transferred to the details of social life." For a long time the conquered resented this uncongenial treatment, and it was in conformity with their proud and sullen nature that they should display their resentment rather in silence than in song. The Normans brought their troubadours with them, and the Norman court in England boasted its jongleurs, who were after all but feeble imitators of what was scarcely worth imitating. But they had at least the secret of form and of articulate speech. They were devoid of ideas, idle triflers, court sycophants, ticklers of the fancy of lords and fine ladies, spurious glorifiers of spurious passions ; but they could put words and sounds together. They knew, moreover, what it was to be joyous, and they gave to their craft the very name of "the gay science." Witty moreover, and irreverent, they relieved their stilted and affected sentiments with gibes and delicate laughter.

Hence, when the time came, which was so long in coming, when Saxon and Norman were to be one in race, one in nation, one in manners, one in language, the Saxon had given up nothing, and had acquired much. One in language, do we say ? Whose language ? It was mainly the Saxon ; but the Norman had taught him how to use it. Its ponderosity had been laid aside, and the conqueror had adopted it as his own.

Thus was brought about a triple union ; a union of race, a union of caste, and a union of tongue. Even by the time of Henry the Second no one asked who was Norman and who was Saxon ; all freemen were Englishmen. The distinction was lost of subduer and subdued. The former might yet retain more than his fair share of the soil and of the administration of the laws, but he had practically confessed that the latter were his equals. The places laid waste by the Conquest become gradually re peopled. Charters are granted ; arbitrary taxes are got rid of ; burgesses are summoned from the towns to Parliament ; political as well as social life makes its appearance. So that an English

king, speaking to a pope, uses as his argument that "it is the custom of the kingdom of England, that in all affairs relating to the state of this kingdom, the advice of all who are interested should be taken."

It was impossible that, under such circumstances as these, the French verse imported at the Conquest should not disappear. At the beginning of the twelfth century, Saxon was heard only among the "degraded franklins, outlaws of the forest, swineherds, peasants, the lower orders." It was no longer written; everybody who wrote, wrote French, everybody who read, read French. Many did it clumsily and ill, and eked out their imperfect knowledge with Saxon words. Gower apologised for his bad French style, adding, "*Je suis Anglais.*"

Nevertheless, the stronger always wins in the long run; and the despised and down-trodden tongue, slowly but surely, got the upper hand. When the Norman Barons began to send their sons across the Channel to prevent them from learning English from their nurses the beginning of the end was near. The Saxons would not—perhaps could not—learn the language of their masters. There was but one alternative: in order that the two might communicate, the master had to learn the language of his inferior. There were limits to the invasion of the one upon the other. Law, philosophy, and such science as there was, requiring abstract terms, necessarily borrowed from the tongue which was indebted to Latin for its culture and expression, but the rude necessities of life and the simple emotions of the heart refused to embody themselves, as far as the nation was concerned, in any but native words. In two centuries or so, the process was complete. There was an English nation and an English language, and they only waited for an English poet.
