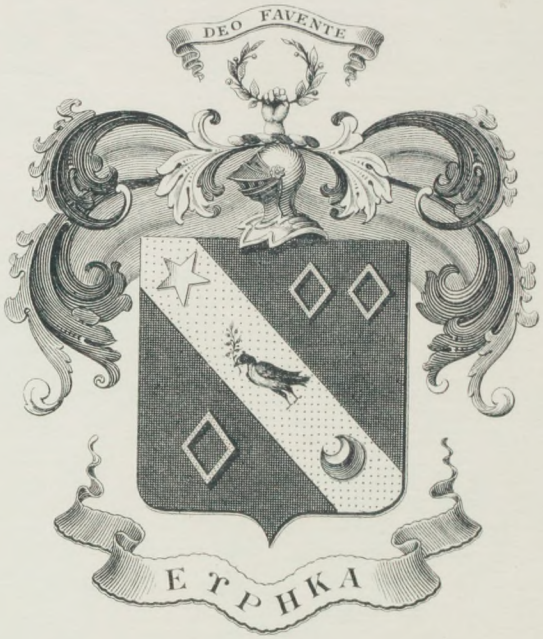

David Scott Mitchell.

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JAMES BRUNTON STEPHENS.

It is an instinct rather than an effort of reason which induces men to reverence poetry as the crown of a nation's literature, and therefore also of its civilization. It is not because the majority of them appreciate poetry, but because it is universally felt that only in that way can we express our highest aspirations, only in that way can the deepest feelings of one human heart be made to reach another. And, in spite of Macaulay's dictum, it is a fact that the general excellence of a nation's poetry has been directly proportional to its advance in civilization. We therefore all feel a satisfaction in being able to point to a few worthy poets as being the emanations of our own country, and though Australians have shown no great alacrity in purchasing the works of Gordon, Kendall, and Brunton Stephens, we are all more or less gratified that these writers did produce works which we might have bought if we had felt so inclined. That is a state of things far from satisfactory to the poets, but it is well known to exist in every community. Even in wealthy and cultured England only one or two men can be said to obtain a reasonable income out of poetry, and even these not till middle age at least has stolen upon them.

Thus no special charge of neglect can be laid against Australia, though her poets have not been greatly honoured and sat in high places. Nevertheless, we wish there had been something more like a reasonable market for their wares. Gordon and Kendall are gone, after battling through short and troubled lives. Stephens is still with us, but he owes little of the worldly comfort he enjoys to the poetry he has written, though that is the real life's work he has done, a work that will stand fast after several generations have gone by. What will happen when generations have rolled on into

centuries I will not undertake to prophesy; but there seems no reason to doubt that in the immediate future Brunton Stephens will rank as one of the founders of our literature.

We claim him as a distinctly Australian poet, though he was neither born nor educated here, for all his verse was written among us, and is thoroughly characteristic of Australia. It is not an exaggeration to say that most of it is more strictly localized even than that. It belongs definitely and unmistakably to Queensland, in which it was wholly written.

James Brunton Stephens was born on the shores of the Firth of Forth, fifteen miles distant from Edinburgh. Borrowstowness is the full title of his native town, but Bo'ness is the name by which people know it. In 1835, when the three thousand odd inhabitants of that ancient borough were increased by the advent of the poet that was to be, it was by no means a pretty place, lying on flat ground, little raised above high-water mark; its old streets and lanes winding in dark confusion between lines of gaunt, ill-fashioned houses, dingy, stained with damp, defiant of hygiene. But the two long piers that it thrust out into the shining waters of the Forth were always frequented by vessels from Norway, Denmark, and Holland, and a growing boy would find a thousand sources of interest among the foreign shipping. The county of Linlithgow, which stretches all around, is a land of farmers, and is closely cultivated, but it has stretches of wild mossy moors and heathery hills, together with a charming coast, wherein a lad with an eye and an ear for the sights and sounds of nature would find abundant sources of education. Doubtless he took his place in the dimly lighted parish school, and joined the noisy circle that kept it in a constant hum within, or tumbled pell-mell out of the door when school was over, banging each other vigorously with their calf-bound Bibles, always handy weapons with Scottish schoolboys. Doubtless he loosened his teeth and exaggerated his bumps on the school "slide," always coaxed into existence with bucketsful of water when frosty weather came round. But only a few winters thus passed when the lad was removed to Edinburgh, where his life was spent till early manhood.

There he followed the usual scholastic course, and in due time found himself at the University. At this time Adam Lindsay Gordon was leading a jovial life at Merton College, giving "wines," indulging in racehorses, and squandering a handsome little income. Very different the life of the Scottish student, who, in the words of

Sydney Smith's famous translation, cultivated the muses on a little oatmeal. Stephens earned, while the classes were not in session, enough to support himself frugally all the year, and devoted himself, in a way that would astonish the average Oxford student, to his studies, taking Greek, moral philosophy, and mathematics at the University; Latin, logic, and metaphysics at the New College; everywhere securing an honourable position, with occasional prizes by the way.

On leaving college he accepted a position as travelling tutor, and so added to the education of the class-room the culture that is to be had in the sight of many lands and by mingling in varying customs. A year was spent in Paris, and then some six or seven months in Italy; a winter in Egypt, and visits to Turkey and the Black Sea, to Smyrna and the Holy Land, and then to Sicily, made the trip extend to three years, and must certainly have had no inconsiderable share in forming that easy knowledge of the world which is very evident in his writings. Then to more prosy work. Greenock, at the mouth of the Clyde, is decidedly the least poetic spot in Her Majesty's dominions. Its dim, gloomy streets have their roadways kept ever muddy by a drizzle that falls steadily for about twelve hours out of the twenty-four, giving abundant excuse for the dingy, sailor-frequented public-houses. There to dwell for six years, teaching in "academies," drilling the Psalms of David and the Catechism, the multiplication table and the Latin accidence, into a score of unappreciative lads, certainly was not the chosen life of a poet. But relief was possible; a three miles' walk on a pleasant sandy beach would lead to Ashton and fine heathery hills; or a five miles' row over the Clyde to the Gareloch, to the splendid reaches of the winding Loch Long, and to the foot of Ben Lomond, rising in wild grandeur less than eighteen miles away.

But in 1866 he took a bold plunge. His health was failing, and he was advised to seek a warmer climate; so he bade adieu to the fogs of Scotland and landed beneath the sunny skies of Queensland, to make the antipodes his home. He writes:—

"A town—a river, hills and trees,
Blue-bounded by the boundless sky;
Is this the strange antipodes
That baffled young credulity?

"Once on a time, of childhood's dreams
This was the very cap and crown;
But now how natural it seems
That down is up and up is down!"

The first few years of his colonial experience were spent in the bush; he was tutor to the children of squatters, and so had abundance of opportunity for observing the scenery of Australia and becoming conversant with the really characteristic phases of Australian life.

It must have been during this period that he wrote his finest poem, the only work in which he has put forth all his strength. "Convict Once" is too thoroughly Australian to have been the work of earlier years, but it appeared in 1871, or only five years after his arrival in the colony. Macmillan, in London, was the publisher, and the little book had all the charm that a careful printer can give. The English press was, on the whole, most encouraging; but it needs no great acquaintance with the fate of poetry, as a commercial commodity, to guess that the author's worldly fortunes did not improve to any considerable extent by the venture.

Yet the poem is one such as few men of our generation could have produced. Its voluptuous rhythm, its magnificent descriptions, vague, but glowing with poetry, the powerful touches by which the inner workings of the proud, bold heart of the heroine are laid bare, must stamp it as the work of no ordinary hand. Its value is in no way to be assessed by the impression it has made on the public, for this poetry of intricate mental analysis does not commend itself to the popular taste. Nevertheless, it may be asserted with confidence that it is the grandest production of the Australian muse.

The heroine stands before us free after serving her seven years of convict life. At first we are inclined to pity the girl of sixteen, who had been led into crime by the passionate fervour of her girlish love; but soon it is evident that this is no case for pity. Her strong defiant soul crushes out for ever the memory of that "scarce escaped halter." We see her changed in name, but little changed in nature; resolving to face the future boldly, to win for herself a position, in the hope of eventually drinking deeply of the world's pleasures. She is now the governess in a squatter's family, with three tender little maidens to be her care. Behold her, then, stepping forth in the "peace-speaking night of the South."

"Die, then, sad memories, leaving behind you nor token nor relic!
Hark how the tremulous night-wind is passing in joy-laden sighs!
Soft through my window it comes, like the fanning of pinions angelic,
Whispering to cease from myself and look out on the infinite skies.

"Luminous streams of delight in the silent immensity flowing,
Journeying surgelessly on through impalpable ether of peace.
How can I think of myself when infinitude o'er me is glowing :
Glowing with tokens of love from the land where my sorrows shall cease ?"

But when she pictures to herself the calm and placid life that lies immediately before her, she confesses to herself that it seems tame and flat. The instinct of her heart is to be loved. She longs to secure the homage of a man's soul strong enough to be a match for her own. Yet life is happy—very happy.

"Pleasantly, almost too pleasantly, blendeth to-day with to-morrow.
Hours are as moments, a twinkle of white wings, and, lo, they are gone !
Day bringeth work without bondage, and night bringeth dreams without sorrow :
Pleasantly, almost too pleasantly, life is meandering on."

Her eldest pupil, Hyacinth, though a mere school-girl, wins the love of Raymond Trevelyan. The governess detects her secret long before she has herself guessed it. She surprises the gentle girl on the river's bank with her lover, and an unworthy envy enters her heart.

"Even as she passed from my sight, while the branches yet shook from her presence,
Rose in unblest resurrection the sepulchred passions of yore.
I to go dreaming of life while this novice is drinking its essence !
I to be almost content with the dregs, while her cup runneth o'er !"

When she discovers that this Raymond's father had been a convict, and that Hyacinth's father, though still utterly unsuspicious of the girl's unconscious preference, had expressed his utmost abhorrence of the idea of being in any way allied with a tainted family, her dormant passions begin to wake ; she longs for some such lover for herself. Yonder she sees him :—

"Down in the vines he is sitting, the fruitage leaf-shadowed above him,
Lending concomitant charm to the ripeness that flushes his cheek.
There is the glory of summer about him. I see him and love him ;
Asking not why. I but know that the strong one is come to the weak."

She resolves to conquer him for herself, half excusing her conduct under the plea that Hyacinth's father never would let her marry a convict's son. From the first she felt she had a certain influence over him. She now deliberately sets to work to convert this into love, and to supplant her pupil.

"She is a child : I a woman ; and he ! could he fill up the measure
Of the great longing I read in his eyes with a kiss or a song ?
Greatness of heart soon outgrows the milk-dainties of infantile pleasure,
Weak silly-winning young ways are poor wiles for the wise and the strong."

Her success at first goes no further than intrusion between the lovers, she becoming to a certain extent their confidante. But she is carefully proceeding with her plans, and, among other things, persuades the father that Hyacinth would benefit by a year at school in the city. The poor girl goes off, promising her lover abundance of letters, trusting to the connivance of her governess to have them delivered; she duly writes, but the letters never reach her lover's hands. On the contrary, Raymond's mind is poisoned by dark hints as to the weakness of Hyacinth's love when it comes into conflict with the determined resolution of her father. He is eventually persuaded that paternal threats have gained the victory, and that he has been abandoned.

By slow degrees the wiles of the cunning woman begin to work on him—the direction of his fancy wavers ; ere long she has reason to consider herself the object of his warm devotion :—

"Thou hast the wish of thine heart. Wouldst have more ? See 'twixt finger and finger
Lo, how he twineth thy hair, and then lifts it to amorous lips !
See on the yielding delight of the breast doth the conquered head linger,
And 'neath the veil of the tresses lies hid in enamoured eclipse."

It is not long, however, before her own success disgusts her,

"Now is no life at my heart save the life of the serpent that hisses
Coiled round its roots, giving slime for all moisture, and poison for dew.
Now I but mourn o'er a grace unrenewed. All in vain do his kisses
Press on a passionless cheek that is cold as the conscience I slew."

Hyacinth's mother dies unexpectedly.

"Surely we know she is dead to our reverence and muffled dissembling,
Past all our little proprieties in unprofanable spheres,
Yet we walk softly, and whisper, and do our least office with trembling,
As if the vibrating air yet made converse of sound in her ears."

This calamity recalls Hyacinth from school. Her appearance fills with remorse the governess, who has been gazing on the calm features of the departed mother. The wretched woman sees disgrace imminent; she broods on the thought of death. The sea would calm for ever those wild passions of hers; but the sea is far away. Up there among the hills lies a deep cool pond—

" Thither I'll hie me, and lay down my burden of sin and of sorrow ;
Cast me therein with one instant and ultimate thrill of release ;
And the great world shall go round to renewing of days ; but to-morrow
I shall be deep in the heart of the hills, at the centre of peace."

A storm is raging as she sallies forth to effect her purpose. The bough of a tree blown down by the wind falls on her, and stuns her. She is borne home unconscious ; passes through a time of fever and delirium ; and when she wakes—

" Lo, by my side, all in white, it was Hyacinth, fair as the morning,
And on her face were the meekness and peace of an angel of heaven.
Keener than anger is pity, and love than the weapons of scorning ;
Lifting her finger, she smote me with 'Hush ! all is known and forgiven.'"

Hyacinth generously tends her ; but the physician has imparted news that relieves her from any necessity for self-destruction. She suffers from heart disease, and cannot hope to live long :—

" Now I can smile with the flowers, for to-day I have learned what hath brought me
Nearer akin to them. Ere this same summer hath numbered its hours,
I shall be mixed with their roots. There came one here to-day who hath taught me
How there is that in my heart which shall lay me ere long with the flowers."

The new prospect calms down her wild passionate nature ; she looks forward with repentant, yet with expectant feelings to the coming release :—

" It is but closing the eye for repose, ere we wake to the wonder
Waiting our vision, through slumber made strong to behold the divine :
It is but turning the web we have seen as yet only from under,
That we may look on the tissues of life in completed design :
'Tis but the fall of the seed when the season of blossom is over,
Dying to spring up anew from the womb of its burial clod :
'Tis but the clasp of the die on the coin which the mould must once cover,
Ere it shines forth with the bright superscription and image of God."

Her closing days she spends in securing the reconciliation of Raymond and Hyacinth, and partly by her intercession the father is induced to withdraw his opposition :—

" When he brought them together and blessed them in union,
There was a note in my heart that rang death."

Shortly after, the death she hopes for strikes her suddenly as she kneels.

The story is by no means remarkably novel, but it has never before been treated in the style of this poem, which is not only distinctively Australian, but also thoroughly characteristic of Mr. Brunton Stephens himself. The glow of a warm imagination pervades it from beginning to end; the richness and ease of the language lull the reader into a sensation of dreamy splendour as though of opium; the descriptions, though without the freshness and vigour of direct studies from nature, are yet in their way eminently pleasing as being the fruits of a high and delicate culture.

Still, with all its excellent qualities, it will never stir the hearts of ordinary men as Gordon's verses do. It has none of that nervous, passionate force, which drives the rougher lines of the Victorian poet right home, and gives them an abiding place in the most secret corners of memory. This poetry of introspection, with its intricate analysis, and the subtle delicacy of its finish, will never be popular in Brunton Stephens any more than it is in Robert Browning.

But there are, in particular, two serious hindrances to the popularity of the poem. There is a feeling of vagueness and indirectness in the way in which the story is told, and this, though it heightens the charm of the poetry, is a source of perplexity to the reader, who has to peruse the whole carefully at least three times before he can really profess to follow the narrative. Then there is the awkwardness of the metre. Many writers have tried to foist on the English language these hexameters after the Greek and Latin fashion, but have failed. They sound of exquisite sweetness in the Georgics or the Fasti, but there the syllables produce an ever varying cadence by the difference in the times during which they linger on the ear. But in English we do not really recognize any such difference of times—we recognize only accent; and so hexameters in our language consist necessarily of nothing but dactyls, one accented and two unaccented syllables occurring six times in a line; a sort of polka measure that grows monotonous when it extends, as in this poem, to over a thousand lines. The result of the attempt to introduce into English the classic hexameter, pure and simple, will be seen in Southey's "Vision of Judgment," over which Byron made so merry. Longfellow, in his "Evangeline" and "The Courtship of Miles Standish," uses nothing but dactyls, and the impression of most readers is that a few pages of these otherwise charming poems are enough to weary.

It is a strong assertion to make, but to me it seems that Stephens has handled his hexameters more effectively than any of them. He has introduced a novelty by making alternate lines rhyme, and so combining curiously the ancient and the modern systems:—

"Linger, oh sun! for a little, nor close yet this day of a million.
Is there not glory enough in the rose-curtained halls of the west?
Hast thou no joy in the passion-hued folds of thy kingly pavilion?
Why should'st thou only pass through it? Oh! rest thee a little while, rest!"

There can be no doubt that here the classical measures are handled with much skill, and that the rich glow of Stephens's manner is more in keeping with them than the prose-like simplicity of Longfellow or the impoverished prolixity of Southey. But though Milton, and Lamb, and Moore, and a dozen others have produced some fine effects by building English verse on classical metres, it has been in only very short pieces, and the system has by no means commended itself to English readers.

Mr. Stephens's experience in the bush was storing his mind with thoroughly Australian pictures, which he eventually employed in numerous little poems. But for some time after the publication of "Convict Once" he occupied his pen with a subject in no way connected with Australia. "The Godolphin Arabian" is dated "Tambookam Station, Logan River, 28th May, 1872." What a transition from the passionate earnestness of the one poem to the amusing frivolities of the other! "The Godolphin Arabian" is called on the title page "the story of a horse, manipulated from the French prose of Eugene Sue." It relates the story of the famous sire of modern thoroughbreds, a horse which is said to have been employed in drawing a cart in France, but eventually passed into the stud of the Earl of Godolphin, who did not appreciate him till the prowess of his son Lath gave him the foremost place in England for breeding purposes. In a quotation from Youatt which is prefixed to the book all this is mentioned, and also the fact that a singular friendship existed between this horse and a certain cat,

"Which either sat on his back when he was in the stable, or nestled as closely to him as she could. At his death she began to refuse her food, and pined away and died."

On this foundation of fact Eugene Sue built what seems to be an interesting romance, dealing with the adventures of the horse, his friend the cat, and his groom, Agba, a negro dwarf.

All the characters, and every incident of the poem, are to be found in the French original; and so there is comparatively a small share of the merit of the work due to the poet. But the handling of the story deserves no little praise. The rhythm is that which Byron has made for ever notable in his "Don Juan," "Beppo," and "Vision of Judgment;" any other who uses it of necessity reminds us of the firm, bold, powerful pen that wrote these poems, though Byron was himself but an imitator. The comparisons that are naturally instituted form a trying ordeal to the more recent writer. Mr. Stephens is quite on a level with Byron so far as concerns the freedom of his lines, the daring inventiveness of his rhymes, and the firework-like coruscations of his sarcastic wit. But Mr. Stephens is merely doing for a second time what has already been done, and certainly not done it any better; and the world rightly declines to accord anything like a distinguished position to such imitative efforts. But, besides this, "Don Juan" constantly breaks most unexpectedly into flights of the highest imagination or into passages of touching beauty, these rapid transitions being of a kind to delight the reader even by their apparent ease and the assumed indifference of their author. There is nothing of this kind in the "Godolphin Arabian." There is no poetry, no imagination, not even the quasi-philosophical undercurrent that gives peculiar value to many of Byron's verses; and the reputation of a poem cannot be very high when its story is not original, and it has nothing but felicitous rhyming and frequent humorous digressions to recommend it. Hookham Frere, who introduced this style of poetry to English readers, did the same thing better than Stephens, and he is forgotten.

This little book was published in Brisbane in 1873. Though the subject belonged to England, and to the beginning of last century, it is very evidently a colonial product; there is a great deal of slang introduced, much of it being colonial. It would have little attraction for an English reader; to us it seems merely amusing, and nothing more.

Shortly after the publication of this poem Mr. Brunton Stephens accepted a situation as a teacher under the Department of Public Instruction, and was for some years head-master of a large school in Brisbane. Meantime he had become connected with the press, and contributed to the *Queenslander* the agreeable novelette, entitled, "A Hundred Pounds," which was afterwards (1876) republished in separate form by Mr. Mullen, of this city. It is a charming little

story, with one thoroughly good character, and the rest of fairly average merit. Old Sandie Scott, who sits receiving pennies at his ferry, is attracted by the modest look of a pretty girl who constantly crosses and recrosses by his ferry. She is a new arrival in Brisbane, or Brisborough, as the place is called in the book. Sandie observes that, week after week, she grows poorer and poorer. He observes her trinkets, and then her wardrobe, disappear, evidently in the direction of the pawnbroker. He becomes interested, and, before he knows it, has fallen absurdly deep in love. At length her resources fail; she has to pay one morning with a penny stamp, and after that does not again appear.

"He spent a weary day. He reviewed his case and her case a thousand times over. He could no longer doubt her extreme need. He could no longer refrain from active resolution. Nothing could be clearer than that she needed help; nothing could be clearer than that he was far more than willing to give it, if only he might find some palatable form in which to embody his assistance without scaring the object of it. He pondered long and deeply. Pennies dropped in unheeded. 'Good mornings' changed to 'good days,' and 'good days' declined to 'good afternoons' unanswered. He gave thirteen pence for a shilling, and when convicted of the mistake put down a penny more."

The object of all this meditation was to discover a plan of assistance. But the fair maid did not return. She must be found. Sandie resolved to post on his office a notice that he wanted an assistant. The composition of that notice was a work of enormous labour; at last it stood forth—"Wanted within, immediately, a female party, to mind the till." He posted it during the night. Next morning six applicants stood in front of him, and an amusing scene follows, in which each of the six insists that she is just the one to suit his "anner's prahclamation." At length he slams down the window, stating that he has "a party in his eye." After some strategy Sandie gets the young girl, Mary Drysdale, fairly installed behind the till, clearing out his own stretcher, and replacing it by a bed which folds up and looks like a chest of drawers by day. There, day after day, he sits in inexpressible happiness, scarcely daring to speak to the object of his adoration; and at night, when she is gone, unfolds his bed, on which to dream of her.

But, meanwhile, another thread of the story is going forward. Shiress Braithwaite is of most ignoble origin, having in Scotland been the hangman's son. But he had been adopted by an uncle, and had tried to suppress all knowledge of his undesirable parentage. He had been well brought up, and he and Mary

Drysdale had been in the parish school together, and had formed a boy and girl attachment. When Shiress left for Brisbane, they swore eternal faith. Shiress entered Government service, and had begun to rise in the world. But he still remembered his sweetheart, and sent home a hundred pounds to bring her out. Meantime, however, he has been asked to the house of the Minister at the head of his department. The daughter of the house smiles on him, and he sees excellent prospects in that direction which almost incline him to break off his engagement. This feeling is intensified on the arrival of Mary herself. She is pretty, no doubt, but very rustic and unsophisticated. He sets himself deliberately to alienate her affections, which he readily does. Finding she is not to be married, as she expected, she indignantly leaves the boarding-house where he had placed her, and so begins that downward course to abject poverty which Sandie noted from day to day as she sought for something to do. The position in the ferry-house is the very place for her, and Sandie, in his infatuation, gives her three times the ordinary wage, she saving every halfpenny she can scrape together in order to gather one hundred pounds, with which to clear off her obligations to Shiress, who has completely lost sight of her. How Shiress's plans are interfered with by the appearance of his old uncle in a crazy condition; how he is tempted into the murder of the old man in order to keep himself right with the Minister and his daughter, to whom he is now engaged; how Mary is, unwittingly, the discoverer of his crime; how he flees, and is drowned in the Clarence River, must all be learnt from the book itself. All we can say is, that Mary Drysdale eventually marries Sandie, as every reader must anticipate she will.

Here again the plot is not strikingly novel, and it is marred by too great a number of improbable coincidences, such as one tolerates in melodrama, but not in a tale that is supposed to represent real life. Yet the story is singularly pretty, its effectiveness being due to the excellent character of Sandie Scott—a careful old fellow, putting penny to penny with a most unromantic circumspection, yet fervidly devoted to Mary—a man of the most commonplace character and surroundings made interesting by his genuine goodness of heart, and amusing, by his utter ignorance of what a person in love should do, and the clumsiness of his efforts at wooing.

The style of the story reminds one faintly of Oliver Wendell Holmes. There is a little of the racy manner, the genial jest, the digressions, half entertaining, half meditative, which give Elsie Venner

a distinctive character. But the work is too short to produce the finest effect of fiction. It is felt to be rather like a sketch than a finished novel. The reader does not feel himself transported to another world, and living with living people. Still, as a simple tale, it is exceedingly beautiful.

In the same year that saw the publication of this work, its author was married to Rosalie, the eldest daughter of the late Thomas Willet Donaldson, of Danescourt, County Meath. The curious reader turns naturally to his works to see what token of the man is to be found in his love verses; but there are none. Probably he declines to "wear his heart upon his sleeve for daws to peck at," but time may bring to light rich poetry on the old but ever-stirring subject.

Mr. Stephens continued from time to time to enrich the journals, chiefly those of Brisbane, with his careful work. The *Australasian* published some of the best, and this *Review* produced a poem, written in his loftiest style, entitled "Mute Discourse." In 1880 the best of these scattered pieces were collected into a volume of "Miscellaneous Poems," printed in Brisbane, on toned paper, in a manner that pleases the eye of the book-lover. The volume opens with two humorous pieces, more popular than meritorious, and reminding one of the style of those well-known American writers whose verses have given genuine but ephemeral pleasure to millions of readers. "My Chinee Cook" is piquant in its rhythm, and is handled with much fun. "My Other Chinee Cook" is in the same style, but less effective in its manner. The ode "To a Black Gin" is decidedly clever, but will eventually do no more for the name of Stephens than the "Ingoldsby Legends" have done for the name of Barham. Even a humorous poem requires a somewhat deeper foundation to be permanent. As an average specimen, take these lines:—

> "This in the retrospect. Now, what's before thee?
> The white man's heaven, I fear, would simply bore thee—
> Ten minutes of doxology would floor thee.
>
> "Thy Paradise should be some land of Goshen,
> Where appetite should be thy sole devotion,
> And surfeit be the climax of emotion:
>
> "A land of bunya-bunyas towering splendid—
> Of honey-bags on every tree suspended:
> A Paradise of sleep and riot blended."

The pieces entitled "A Picaninny," "Big Ben," "A Brisbane

Reverie," "The Squatter's 'Baccy Famine," and half a dozen others are cast in the same slight vein, humorous and entertaining—nothing more. But the volume has sterling work in it. The piece entitled "The Dark Companion" ought to be a favourite: the idea of it is a bold and original simile, cast in language of the utmost elegance. The poet tells how astronomers long guessed that a star existed which they were unable to see, and which they called the Dark Companion:—

> "But when, through new perfection of appliance,
> Faith merged at length in undisputed sight,
> The mystic mover was revealed to science
> No dark companion, but a speck of light.
>
> "No dark companion, but a sun of glory;
> No fell disturber, but a bright compeer;
> The shining complement that crowned the story,
> The golden link that made the meaning clear."

The poet finds in this a hint of the true aspect of Death.

> "Oh, dark companion, Death, whose wide embraces
> O'ertake remotest change of clime and skies.
> Oh, dark companion, Death, whose grievous traces
> Are scattered shreds of riven enterprise.
>
> "Thou, too, in this wise, when our eyes unsealing
> The clearer day shall change our faith to sight,
> Shalt show thyself in that supreme revealing
> No dark companion, but a thing of light."

"Spirit and Star" recalls by its metre, and its wild and daring imagery, Hogg's exquisite poem "Bonny Kilmeny."

> "Through the bleak cold voids, through the wilds of space,
> Trackless and starless, forgotten of grace;
> Through the dusk, that is neither day nor night;
> Through the grey, that is neither dark nor light;
> Through thin chill ethers, where dieth speech,
> Where the pulse of the music of heaven cannot reach,
> Unwarmed by the breath of living thing,
> And for ever unswept of angel's wing—
> Through the cold, through the void, through the wilds of space,
> With never a home or a resting place.
> How far must I wander, oh God! how far?
> I have lost my star, I have lost my star."

Nothing could be sweeter or more suggestive than "The Story of a Soul," which is throughout of equal merit with the following verse—

"And I heard the world pass by me with a far-off dreamy cadence
Of an alien music uninformed with meaning to mine ears;
And all sweet melodious laughter in the voice of men and maidens
Come with distance-saddened undertone, a mockery of tears."

"To Cape Byron," "For My Sake," and "The Goths in Campania" are poems that would take an honourable place in the volume of any English poet now living. The last of these is especially noble in treatment. It is nowise Australian, but we may be pardoned for feeling proud that it was written in Australia.

The piece which closes this volume bears the title "Mute Discourse," a name which would do little to suggest an idea of its contents. It deals with a train of thought which occupies a part of "In Memoriam;" the writer is under the influence of those modern tendencies which are rapidly rendering concrete forms of religion untenable to any mind capable of untrammelled thought. The poet represents man as longing for a voice from Heaven, some inspired Book or Word which may encourage his timid soul:—

"Oh men! it is the child's heart in the man's
That will not rest without a lullaby—
That will not trust the everlasting arm
Unless it hears the voice in tale or song.
It is the child's heart in the man's that seeks,
In elements of old Semitic thought,
And wondrous syllables of Grecian tongue,
Recorded witness of another way
Of things than that which God hath willed to be
Our daily life."

The following passage recalls two well-known parts of "In Memoriam," yet there is no reason to consider it a plagiarism. It has individuality enough to make us certain that we are looking in upon the troubled meditations of the author's own bosom:—

"Believe no more
In final triumph of concreted sin
In any soul that cometh forth from God,
And lives and moves and hath its being in Him.
Read thus, and pray the while that he who writes
Reck his own rede.
Oh sister! would I bruise
The snowy petals of thy prayerful faith,
Or chill the tendril twinings of thy hope
With evil influence of wintry scorn?

Oh sister ! though thou dost believe in wrath,
Though shapes of woe flit through thine imagery,
Though thou has ta'en the cloud into thy faith,
The little reft of blue that breaks thy dark
Brings thee more comfort and more fixed hope
Than unto me this cloudless open vast,
Wherein my soul floats weary and alone !"

The length of these extracts is justifiable when we reflect that however well known and popular Mr. Stephens may be by reason of his "Chinee Cook" and his "Black Gin," his poems that are of exalted feeling are little known. These humorous pieces are, after all, only adaptations to Australian surroundings of the metres and manners of American writers. But a poem like "Convict Once" is of infinitely greater value.

Since the publication of his last volume Mr. Stephens has continued to write for the journals. The *Queenslander* published "Marsupial Bill, or the Bad Boy, the Good Dog, and the Old Man Kangaroo." It is certainly not poetry, but it exhibits Mr. Stephens's extraordinary knack of throwing rhymes together in a way that interests. The piece begins thus:—

"It was the time when geese despond
And turkeys make their wills,
The time when Christians to a man
Forgive each other's bills.
It was a time when Christmas glee
The heart of childhood fills.

"Alas ! that when the changing year
Brings round the blessed day,
The hearts of little Queensland boys
Wax keen to hunt and slay,
As if the chime of Christmas time
Was but a call to prey."

The story is a warning to boys that smoke and chew tobacco and spend their time in shooting innocent creatures. It was highly successful on its first appearance, but being republished in book form, it failed to hit the public taste. The *Queenslander* also produced "Drought and Doctrine," a poem after the style of Will Carleton. The mother, whose baby is ill, is in dread lest it should die unbaptized, and so lose its salvation. But they live far up-country, where parson never comes. What is to be done? Suddenly she hears that a service is to be held at "Blue Grass Creek." The father and mother, with the child and a pair of sponsors, set out on their two hours' ride; but having heard that

Blue Grass Creek is dried up, and not a drop of water to be had there, they take a bottle of that fluid for the baptism. The day is exceedingly hot, and one of the sponsors empties the bottle of all but the trifling quantity needful for sprinkling. However, when they get to the church, a miner, who sees a bottle in front of him labelled "Old Tom," applies the mouth of it to his lips, and before he discovers his mistake the baptismal water is all gone. The story is well managed, and the various perplexities depicted in a lively fashion.

But of late years the *Australasian* has been the receptacle of Mr. Stephens's more valuable pieces. "The Dominion," an ode on Federation, which appeared in that journal last November, must have struck readers who care for poetry by its fire and vigour. "The Angel of the Doves" is a beautiful, though highly mystic, attack on the atrocious custom of shooting pigeons by the hundred in the cruel wantonness of "sport."

> "For memory woke at the flowers' sweet breath,
> And my spirit yearned to the earth again,
> And I cried, 'Can'st thou tell, oh Angel of Death,
> How fare my doves at the hands of men?'
>
> "'Sad is their lot,' the angel sighed,
> 'For the pleasure of man they suffer pain,
> And the heart of the cruel taketh pride
> To slay thy doves and to number the slain.'"

Few men have ever contrived to earn a living by writing poetry; none of these few are or have been resident in Australia. With Mr. Stephens literature has been the occupation of his leisure, and the leisure of a schoolmaster cannot be in a high degree conducive to sustained poetic effort. There is, therefore, some reason for gratification that at the beginning of last year the Queensland Government gave a helping-hand to the cause of literature by making him corresponding clerk in the Colonial Secretary's office in Brisbane. Let us hope that the duties of this office are not too onerous, and that Mr. Stephens, still in the prime of life at the age of forty-nine, has some masterpiece in course of construction. If he will only beware of his great facility in imitating, surely the author of "Convict Once" could make himself, easily, first among Australian poets, and render us all his debtors by assisting to make Australian literature respectable in the eyes of the world.

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