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## Willis's Poems

Lucian Minor

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To live with them is far less sweet  
Than to remember thee !'

Mr. Willis has expanded the thought, and given it new illustrations :

'As, gazing on the Pleiades,  
We count each fair and starry one,  
Yet wander from the light of these  
To muse upon the Pleiad gone—  
As, bending o'er fresh gathered flowers,  
The rose's most enchanting hue  
Reminds us but of other hours  
Whose roses were all lovely too—  
So, dearest, when I rove among  
The bright ones of this foreign sky,  
And mark the smile, and list the song,  
And watch the dancers gliding by,  
The fairer still they seem to be,  
The more it stirs a thought of thee !'

The 'Lines on leaving Europe' have three stanzas almost worthy of Moore's happiest mood. The last of them refers to the author's young wife, whom he had married in England :

'Adieu, oh fatherland! I see  
Your white cliffs on th' horizon's rim,  
And though to freer skies I flee,  
My heart swells, and my eyes are dim!  
As knows the dove the task you give her,  
When loosed upon a foreign shore—  
As spreads the rain-drop in the river  
In which it may have flowed before—  
To England, over vale and mountain,  
My fancy flew from climes more fair—  
My blood, that knew its parent fountain,  
Ran warm and fast in England's air.  
My mother! In thy prayer to-night  
There come new words and warmer tears!  
On long, long darkness breaks the light—  
Comes home the loved, the lost for years!  
Sleep safe, oh wave-worn mariner!  
Fear not, to-night, or storm or sea!  
The ear of heaven bends low to her!  
He comes to shore who sails with me!  
The wind-tost spider needs no token  
How stands the tree when lightnings blaze—  
And by a thread from heaven unbroken,  
I know my mother lives and prays!

'I come—but with me comes another  
To share the heart once only mine!  
Thou, on whose thoughts, when sad and lonely,  
One star arose in memory's heaven—  
Thou, who hast watch'd one treasure only—  
Watered one flower with tears at even—  
Room in thy heart! The heart she left  
Is darken'd to lend light to ours!  
There are bright flowers of care bereft,  
And hearts that languish more than flowers—  
She was their light—their very air—  
Room, mother! in thy heart!—place for her in  
thy prayer!'

English Channel, May, 1836.

'The Dying Alchemist' is a successful representation of well-imagined horrors. The lonely and comfortless chamber in a solitary tower; the agony of death, trebled by disappointment in the visionary's quest of that mysterious essence which had been the hope of his lifetime; are depicted with great truth and power. The aged sufferer gasps out a soliloquy, of which the following is the commencement;—the italics, ours, to mark what we think extraordinary beauties:

## WILLIS'S POEMS.\*

The prose writings of Mr. Willis contain much to prove that he is a poet: but whoever has failed to find the evidences of it there, needs only read a few pieces in the volume mentioned below, to be satisfied of their author's claim to that title. It is not intended to assert for him a very high place on the Muses' hill. His own sound taste and good sense would be among the first to revolt at an association of him with Byron, Scott, or Campbell; far more with the great, earlier masters of song. Perhaps he cannot be raised quite to the level even of James Montgomery, Mrs. Hemans, Rogers, Halleck, and Bryant: but the place he merits, if below these, is just below them. His poetry does not excite the deepest or stormiest emotions. Scarcely a sublime passage is to be found in it—either of the calm, or of the terrible kind: none, for example, possessing in ever so small a degree, either the quiet grandeur of the stanzas to the ocean, in *Childe Harold*, or the awful magnificence of those describing a tempest and shipwreck, in *Don Juan*. The gentle and tender affections are those moved by his strains. His breathings of filial, fraternal, and parental love; his picturings of mental suffering; his exhibitions of human feeling, in whatever form he has occasion to display it; are true, forcible, and touching. The images he presents are sometimes of exquisite beauty, and the most happily appropriate to the subjects they are designed to illustrate.

The poem especially named in the title page, is one of the longest in the book; being of nearly 22 pages' length—loose, wide-lined pages, however. We cannot much praise its plot; its catastrophe is the instantaneous death of the heroine, Melanie,† at the altar, where she discovers that the lover she is about to marry, is her own brother! The next, "Lord Ivon and his daughter," of 24 pages, is a better conceived tale, and more thrillingly told. Both these contain passages worth quoting; but we hasten on to shorter pieces.

The first stanza of the lines 'To —,' written during a long sojourn in Europe, has been often copied, and justly admired. Its turn of thought bears some analogy to that contained in Shenstone's pathetic sentence,—

'Hou, quanto minus est cum reliquis versari,  
Quam tui meminisse !'

which Moore has translated;

'Though many a gifted mind I meet,  
Though fairest forms I see;

\* *Melanie and other Poems*. By N. P. Willis. New York. Saunders & Otley. pp 242. 12mo.

† To be pronounced *Mel-a-nie*, in three syllables; the accent on the first.

'I did not think to die  
Till I had finished what I had to do ;  
I thought to pierce th' eternal secret through  
With this my mortal eye ;  
I felt—Oh God ! it seemeth even now  
This cannot be the death-dew on my brow.

'And yet it is—I feel  
Of this dull sickness at my heart afraid ;  
And in my eyes the death-sparks flash and fade ;  
And something seems to steal  
Over my bosom like a frozen hand,  
Binding its pulses with an icy band.

'And this is death ! But why  
Feel I this wild recoil ? It cannot be  
Th' immortal spirit shuddereth to be free !  
Would it not leap to fly,  
Like a chain'd eaglet at its parent's call ?  
I fear—I fear that this poor life is all !'

The scene is closed by these fearfully graphic passages :

'Twas morning, and the old man lay alone.  
No friend had closed his eyelids, and his lips,  
Open and ashy pale, th' expression wore  
Of his death-struggle. His long silvery hair  
Lay on his hollow temples thin and wild,  
His frame was wasted, and his features wan  
And haggard as with want, and in his palm,  
His nails were driven deep, as if the throes  
Of the last agony had wrung him sore.

'The storm was raging still. The shutters swung  
Screaming as harshly in the fitful wind,  
And all without went on—as aye it will,  
Sunshine or tempest, reckless that a heart  
Is breaking, or has broken in its change.

'The fire beneath the crucible was out ;  
The vessels of his mystic art lay round,  
Useless and cold as the ambitious hand  
That fashioned them, and the small silver rod,  
Familiar to his touch for threescore years,  
Lay on th' alembic's rim, as if it still  
Might vex the elements at its master's will.

'And thus had passed from its unequal frame  
A soul of fire—a sun-bent eagle stricken  
From his high soaring down—an instrument  
Broken with its own compass. Oh how poor  
Seems the rich gift of genius, when it lies,  
Like that adventurous bird that hath out-flown  
His strength upon the sea, ambition-wrecked—  
A thing the thrush might pity, as she sits  
Brooding in quiet on her lowly nest !'

But of all his compositions, Mr. Willis has been most happy in some blank verse narratives of several Scriptural incidents. The titles of these pieces are 'The Leper,' 'Christ's Entrance into Jerusalem,' 'The Healing of the Daughter of Jairus,' 'The Baptism of Christ,' 'The Shunamite,' 'Absalom,' 'Hagar in the Wilderness,' and 'The Widow of Nain.' Three of them strike us with especial admiration: 'The Leper,' 'The Widow of Nain,' and 'The Healing of the Ruler's Daughter.' He must have very strong eyes, or a very weak head (as Sterne said, with reference to the first scene of *Samson Agonistes*), who can read any one of the three, without tears. At the hazard of over-quotation, we shall copy one of them; founded upon the incident in *Luke's Gospel*, chapter vii.

'THE WIDOW OF NAIN.'

'The Roman sentinel stood helmed and tall  
Beside the gate of Nain. The busy tread

Of comers to the city mart was done,  
For it was almost noon, and a dead heat  
Quiver'd upon the fine and sleeping dust,  
And the cold snake crept panting from the wall,  
And bask'd his scaly circles in the sun.  
Upon his spear the soldier lean'd and kept  
His idle watch, and, as his drowsy dream  
Was broken by the solitary foot  
Of some poor mendicant, he rais'd his head  
To curse him for a tributary Jew,  
And slumberously dozed on.

'Twas now high noon.

The dull, low murmur of a funeral  
Went through the city—the sad sound of feet  
Unmix'd with voices—and the sentinel  
Shook off his slumber, and gazed earnestly  
Up the wide street along whose pav'd way  
The silent throng crept slowly. They came on,  
Bearing a body heavily on its bier,  
And by the crowd that in the burning sun  
Walk'd with forgetful sadness, 'twas of one  
Mourn'd with uncommon sorrow. The broad gate  
Swung on its hinges, and the Roman bent  
His spear-point downwards as the bearers past  
Bending beneath their burthen. There was one—  
Only one mourner. Close behind the bier  
Crumpling the pall up in her wither'd hands,  
Follow'd an aged woman. Her short steps  
Falter'd with weakness, and a broken moan  
Fell from her lips, thicken'd convulsively  
As her heart bled afresh. The pitying crowd  
Follow'd apart, but no one spoke to her.  
She had no kinsmen. She had lived alone—  
A widow with one son. He was her all—  
The only tie she had in the wide world—  
And he was dead. They could not comfort her

Jesus drew near to Nain as from the gate  
The funeral came forth. His lips were pale  
With the noon's sultry heat. The beaded sweat  
Stood thickly on his brow, and on the worn  
And simple latchets of his sandals lay  
Thick the white dust of travel. He had come  
Since sunrise from Capernaum, staying not  
To wet his lips by green *Bathsaida's* pool,  
Nor wash his feet in *Kishon's* silver springs,  
Nor turn him southward upon *Tabor's* side  
To catch *Gilboa's* light and spicy breeze.  
*Genesareth* stood cool upon the East,  
Fast by the sea of *Galilee*, and there  
The weary traveller might bide till eve,  
And on the alders of *Bethulia's* plains  
The grapes of *Palestine* hung ripe and wild,  
Yet turn'd he not aside, but gazing on  
From every swelling mount, he saw afar  
Amid the hills the humble spires of Nain,  
The place of his next errand, and the path  
Touch'd not *Bethulia*, and a league away  
Upon the East lay pleasant *Galilee*.

Forth from the city-gate the pitying crowd  
Follow'd the stricken mourner. They came near  
The place of burial, and, with straining hands,  
Closer upon her breast she clasp'd the pall,  
And with a gasping sob, quick as a child's,  
And an inquiring wildness flashing through  
The thin, gray lashes of her fever'd eyes,  
She came where Jesus stood beside the way.  
He look'd upon her, and his heart was moved.  
"Weep not!" he said, and, as they stay'd the bier,  
And at his bidding laid it at his feet,  
He gently drew the pall from out her grasp  
And laid it back in silence from the dead.  
With troubled wonder the mute throng drew near,  
And gaz'd on his calm looks. A minute's space  
He stood and pray'd. Then taking the cold hand  
He said, "Arise!" And instantly the breast

Heav'd in its cerements, and a sudden flush  
 Ran through the lines of the divided lips,  
 And, with a murmur of his mother's name,  
 He trembled and sat upright in his shroud.  
 And, while the mourner hung upon his neck,  
 Jesus went calmly on his way to Nain.'

'The Leper' is perhaps even superior still, in beauty and pathos.

Throughout the volume, are many pieces of uncommon excellence; and detached passages, embodying thoughts fine enough to be enrolled among those uttered by the best poets in the language. How expressive is this image of a lovely woman:

'Never swan  
 Dreamed on the water with a grace so calm!'

And this, of a young girl's innocent buoyancy, contrasted with the blighted hopes and seared feelings of one who had experienced how 'all is vanity.'

'But life with her was at the flow,  
 And every wave went sparkling higher;  
 While mine was ebbing, fast and low,  
 From the same shore of vain desire.'

The following lines, from the 'Healing of Jairus' Daughter,' present a water scene with more than the vividness of painting:

'It was night--  
 And softly o'er the sea of Galilee,  
 Danced the breeze-riden ripples to the shore,  
 Tipp'd with the silver sparkles of the moon.  
 The breaking waves play'd low upon the beach  
 Their constant music; but the air beside  
 Was still as starlight.'

And where can be found a more exquisite picture of Jesus than follows?

'On a rock  
 With the broad moonlight falling on his brow,  
 He stood and taught the people.' \* \* \* \* \*  
 \* \* \* \* \*  
 'His hair was parted meekly on his brow,  
 And the long curls from off his shoulders fell  
 As he leaned forward earnestly, and still  
 The same calm cadence, passionless and deep,  
 And in his looks the same mild majesty,  
 And in his mien the sadness mix'd with power,  
 Fill'd them with love and wonder.'

A great merit of Mr. W.'s poems, is the admirable moral tone that pervades them. There is not an indecent word or allusion: no holding up of villainy, or gentlemanly vice, to admiration; no attempt, by sneer or innuendo, to throw ridicule upon any of man's good affections. On the contrary, no one can read the volume, with clear understanding and proper feeling, without having the generous principles of his nature refined and strengthened. Nor is Mr. W.'s always a tearful or pensive muse, like that of Mrs. Hemans. Serious, she generally is: but now and then, her frolic step and joyous note shew a just consciousness that life has a due mixture of gladness with its gloom. The piece called "Saturday Afternoon," is an instance of this. The supposed speaker is a cheerful old man:

'I love to look on a scene like this,  
 Of wild and careless play,  
 And persuade myself that I am not old,

And my locks are not yet gray;  
 For it stirs the blood in an old man's heart,  
 And makes his pulses fly,  
 To catch the thrill of a happy voice,  
 And the light of a pleasant eye.

'I have walked the world for fourscore years;  
 And they say that I am old,  
 And my heart is ripe for the reaper, Death,  
 And my years are well nigh told.  
 It is very true; it is very true;  
 I'm old, and "I bide my time:"  
 But my heart will leap at a scene like this  
 And I half renew my prime.

'Play on, play on; I am with you there,  
 In the midst of your merry ring;  
 I can feel the thrill of the daring jump,  
 And rush of the breathless swing.  
 I hide with you in the fragrant hay,  
 And I whoop the smothered call,  
 And my feet slip up on the seedy floor,  
 And I care not for the fall.

'I am willing to die when my time shall come,  
 And I shall be glad to go;  
 For the world at best is a weary place,  
 And my pulse is getting low;  
 But the grave is dark, and the heart will fail  
 In treading its gloomy way;  
 And it wiles my heart from its dreariness,  
 To see the young so gay.'

Notwithstanding all this praise, however, there is some ground for censure.

Our first quarrel is with the metre which Mr. Willis often uses. It is so much out of the common way, that ordinary readers cannot find in it half the pleasure which the same thoughts would afford, if couched in rhyming couplets, or in quatrains with alternate rhymes;—those old-fashioned, but smoothest, most transparent, and most captivating forms of poetical diction. Writers who adopt either the spenserian stanza, or the more new-fangled one preferred by our present author, may be assured that they diminish very much their chances of popularity; for both the latter are unmanageable and with difficulty understood, by readers whose ear is charmed by the melody while their minds are alive to the meaning, of Campbell, Goldsmith, and Pope. How much better are the metrical forms of these poets adapted to quotation, and therefore how much more likely to win that fame which all poets long for, than the really beautiful ideas embodied in the following stanzas! They are a part of some lines 'On a picture of a girl leading her blind mother.'

'But thou canst hear! and love  
 May richly on a human tone he pour'd,  
 And the least cadence of a whisper'd word  
 A daughter's love may prove—  
 And while I speak thou know'st if I smile,  
 Albeit thou canst not see my face the while!

Yes, thou canst hear! and He  
 Who on thy sightless eye its darkness hung,  
 To the attentive ear, like harps, hath strung  
 Heaven and earth and sea!  
 And 'tis a lesson in our hearts to know—  
 With but one sense the soul may overflow.'

There is an occasional want of exactness in Mr. Willis's rhymes. In the last extract, 'love' and 'prove,' 'pour'd' and 'word,' are unnaturally yoked together.

Elsewhere, 'love' is made to rhyme with 'wove;' and 'flow' with 'bow' (to bend the body.) Let us not be misunderstood. We would not alter a syllable, an accent, or a pause, in several of the pieces here, which vary from the modes of versification we generally prefer. "Saturday Afternoon," above quoted, is not more exquisite in conception, than musical and appropriate in its bounding numbers. Many of Moore's poems,—'Birth Days,' for instance—are unsurpassably melodious; and print themselves in the memory without an effort, and almost without volition on the reader's part. And who can be insensible to the varied flow of Walter Scott's epic verse, so happily commingling sweetness and strength? But even there, our favorite forms predominate; and are only sometimes departed from, to prevent monotony.

The sense of his verses is not always clear. It was only after thrice reading, that we could discern what the last six lines of the following stanza mean; and even now, they seem a jumble of ill assorted and infelicitous metaphors, leaving no distinct idea in the mind:

'I fear thy gentle loveliness,  
Thy witching tone and air,  
'Thine eye's beseeching earnestness  
May be to thee a snare:  
The silver stars may purely shine,  
The waters taintless flow—  
But they who kneel at woman's shrine,  
Breathe on it as they bow—  
Ye may sling back the gift again,  
But the crushed flower will leave a stain.'

But the greatest fault in the whole book, is the honorary tribute to Benedict Arnold. In boyhood, he was selfish and cruel: in riper years, he added speculation and swindling to increased selfishness and cruelty: later still, he grafted upon those vices, constantly growing more intense in his bosom and in his practice,—a treason unparalleled in its blackness and enormity: and the sun of his life went down amid clouds of just contempt, and storms of revenge, drunkenness and avarice. Yet in 'The Burial of Arnold,' Mr. Willis calls this prodigy of crime 'the noble sleeper!' and 'the noblest of the dead!' Of him, whose childhood, like Domitian's, was signalized by torturing brutes and insects, as well as by oppressing his weaker playmates,\* Mr. Willis asks and answers,

'Whose heart, in generous deed and thought,  
No rivalry might brook,  
And yet distinction claiming not?  
There lies he—go and look!'

So far from not claiming his share of distinction, Arnold was greedy even of that which properly belonged to others.

Of him, whose last years were those of a drunkard, and whose eyes were therefore probably bloodshot, his eye-lids inflamed, and his features discolored and bloated, in accordance with the usual effect of drunkenness,—Mr. W. says (beautifully, were it not so untruly,)

'Tread lightly—for 'tis beautiful,  
That blue-veined eye-lid's sleep,  
Hiding the eye death left so dull—  
Its slumber we will keep.' [!]

\* See Mr. Sparks' Life of Arnold.

We have no objection to fancy-pictures, when they are happily conceived and well drawn: but when they falsify Nature or History, they deserve ridicule or reprobation, accordingly as the untruth is merely ludicrous, or positively mischievous. The latter imputation, certainly, rests upon the verse, which crowns treason and all baseness, with the laurels of patriotism and virtue: which says of Arnold, almost all that could be said of Washington. We entreat Mr. Willis, if he loves historic truth and justice, to blot out this piece from his book.