On the Cockney School of Poetry Vol. IV

John Gibson Lockhart

————————OF KEATS,

THE MUSES' SON OF PROMISE, AND WHAT FEATS

HE YET MAY DO, &c.

CORNELIUS WEBB.

Of all the manias of this mad age, the most incurable, as well as the most common, seems to be no other than the *Metromanie*. The just celebrity ofRobert Burns and Miss Baillie has had the melancholy effect of turning the heads of we know not how many farm-servants and unmarried ladies; our very footmen compose tragedies, and there is scarcely a superannuated governess in the island that does not leave a roll of lyrics behind her in her band-box. To witness the disease of any human understanding, however feeble, is distressing, but the spectacle of an able mind reduced to a state of insanity is of course ten times more afflicting. It is with such sorrow as this that we have contemplated the case of Mr John Keats. This young man appears to have received from nature talents of an excellent, perhaps even of a superior order —talents which, devoted to the purposes of any useful profession, must have rendered him a respectable, if not an eminent citizen. His friends, we understand, destined him to the career of medicine and he was bound apprentice some years ago to a worthy apothecary in town. But all has been undone by a sudden attack of the malady to which we have alluded. Whether Mr John had been sent home with a diuretic or composing draught to some patient far gone in the poetical mania, we have not heard. This much is certain, that he has caught the infection, and that thoroughly. For some time we were in hopes, that he might get off with a violent fit or two; but of late the

symptoms are terrible. The phrenzy of the “Poems” was bad enough in its way, but it did not alarm us half so seriously as the calm, settled, imperturbable drivelling idiocy of “Endymion.” We hope, however, that in so young a person, and with a constitution originally so good, even now the disease is not utterly incurable. Time, firm treatment, and rational restraint, do much for many apparently hopeless invalids; and if Mr Keats should happen, at some interval of reason, to cast his eye upon our pages, he may perhaps be convinced of the existence of his malady, which, in such cases, is often all that is necessary to put the patient in a fair way of being cured.

The readers of the Examiner newspaper were informed, some time ago, by a solemn paragraph, in Mr Hunt’s best style, of the appearance of two new stars of glorious magnitude and splendour in the poetical horizon of the land of Cockaigne. One of these turned out, by and by, to be no other than Mr John Keats. This precocious adulation confirmed the wavering apprentice in his desire to quit the gallipots, and at the same time excited in his too susceptible mind a fatal admiration for the character and talents of the most worthless and affected of all the versifiers of our time. One of his first productions was the following sonnet, “*written on the day when Mr Leigh Hunt left prison*.” It will be recollected, that the cause of Hunt’s confinement was a series of libels against his sovereign, and that its fruit was the odious and incestuous “Story of Rimini.”

“What though, for shewing truth to flattered state

Kind Hunt was shut in prison, yet has he,

In his immortal spirit been as free

As the sky-searching lark, and as elate.

Minion of grandeur! think you he did wait?

Think you he nought but prison walls did see,

Till, so unwilling, thou unturn’dst the key?

Ah, no! far happier, nobler was his fate!

In Spenser’s halls! he strayed, and bowers fair

Culling enchanted flowers; and he flew

With daring Milton! through the fields of air;

To regions of his own his genius true

Took happy flights. Who shall his fame impair

When thou art dead, and all thy wretched crew?”

The absurdity of the thought in this sonnet is, however, if possible, surpassed in another, "*addressed to Haydon*" the painter, that clever, but most affected artist, who as little resembles Raphael in genius as he does in person, notwithstanding the foppery of having his hair curled over his shoulders in the old Italian fashion. In this exquisite piece it will be observed, that Mr Keats classes together WORDSWORTH, HUNT, and HAYDON, as the three greatest spirits of the age, and that he alludes to himself, and some others of the rising brood of Cockneys, as likely to attain hereafter an equally honourable elevation. Wordsworth and Hunt! what a juxta-position! The purest, the loftiest, and, we do not fear to say it, the most classical of living English poets, joined together in the same compliment with the meanest, the filthiest, and the most vulgar of Cockney poetasters. No wonder that he who could be guilt of this should class Haydon with Raphael, and himself with Spencer.

"Great spirits now on earth are sojourning;

He of the cloud, the cataract, the lake

Who on Helvellyn's summit, wide awake

Catches his freshness from Archangel's wing:

He of the rose, the violet, the spring,

The social smile, the chain for Freedom's sake:

And lo!—whose stedfastness would never

A meaner sound than Raphael's whispering.

And other spirits there are standing apart

Upon the forehead of the age to come;

These, these will give the world another heart,

And other pulses. Hear ye not the hum

Of mighty workings?———

Listen awhile ye nations, and be dumb."

The nations are to listen and be dumb! and why, good Johnny Keats? because Leigh Hunt is editor of the Examiner, and Haydon has painted the judgment of Solomon, and you and Cornelius Webb, and a few more city sparks, are pleased to look upon yourselves as so many future Shakspeares and Miltons! The world has really some reason to look to its foundations! Here is a*tempestas in matulâ* with a vengeance. At the period when these sonnets were published Mr Keats had no hesitation in saying that he looked on himself as "*not yet* a glorious denizen of the wide heaven of poetry," but he had many

fine soothing visions of coming greatness and many rare plans of study to prepare him for it. The following we think is very pretty raving.

“Why so sad a moan?

Life is the rose’s hope while yet unblown;

The reading of an ever-changing tale;

The light uplifting of a changing veil;

A pigeon tumbling in clear summer air;

A laughing school-boy, without grief or care,

Riding the springing branches of an elm.

“O for ten years, that I may overwhelm

Myself in poesy; so I may do the deed

That my own soul has to itself decreed.

Then will I pass the countries that I see

In long perspective, and continually

Taste their pure fountains. First the realm I’ll pass

Of Flora, and old Pan: sleep in the grass,

Feed upon apples red, and strawberries,

And choose each pleasure that my fancy sees.

Catch the white-handed nymphs in shady places,

To woo sweet kisses from averted faces,—

Play with their fingers, touch their shoulders white

Into a pretty shrinking with a bite

As hard as lips can make it: till agreed,

A lovely tale of human life we’ll read.

And one will teach a tame dove how it best

May fan the cool air gently o’er my rest;

Another, bending o’er her nimble tread,

Will set a green robe floating round her head,

And still will dance with ever varied ease,

Smiling upon the flowers and the trees:

Another will entice me on, and on

Through almond blossoms and rich cinnamon:

Till in the bosom of a leafy world

We rest in silence, like two gems upcurl’d

In the recesses of a pearly shell.”

Having cooled a little from this “fine passion,” our youthful poet passes very naturally into a long strain of foaming abuse against a certain class of English Poets, whom, with Pope at their head, it is much the fashion with the ignorant unsettled pretenders of the present time to undervalue. Begging these gentlemens’ pardon, although Pope was not a poet of the same high order with some who are now living, yet, to deny his genius, is just about as absurd as to dispute that of Wordsworth, or to believe in that of Hunt. Above all things, it is most pitiably ridiculous to hear men, of whom their country will always have reason to be proud, reviled by uneducated and flimsy striplings, who are not capable of understanding either their merits, or those of any other *men of power*— fanciful dreaming tea-drinkers, who, without logic enough to analyse a single idea, or imagination enough so form one original image, or learning enough to distinguish between the written language of Englishmen and the spoken jargon of Cockneys, presume to talk with contempt of some of the most exquisite spirits the world ever produced, merely because they did not happen to exert their faculties in laborious affected descriptions of flowers seen in window-pots, or cascades heard at Vauxhall; in short, because they chose to be wits, philosophers, patriots, and poets, rather than to found the Cockney school of versification, morality, and politics, a century before its time. After blaspheming himself into a fury against Boileau, &c. Mr Keats comforts himself and his readers with a view of the present more promising aspect of affairs; above all, with the ripened glories of the poet of Rimini. Addressing the manes of the departed chiefs of English poetry, he informs them, in the following clear and touching manner, of the existence of “him of the Rose.” &c.

“From a thick brake,

Nested and quiet in a valley mild,

Bubbles a pipe; fine sounds are floating wild

About the earth. Happy are ye and glad.”

From this he diverges into a view of “things in general.” We smile when we think to ourselves how little most of our readers will understand of what

follows.

“Yet I rejoice: a myrtle fairer than
E’er grew in Paphos, from the bitter weeds
Lifts its sweet head into the air, and feeds
A silent space with ever sprouting green.
All tenderest birds there find a pleasant screen,
Creep through the shade with jaunty fluttering,
Nibble the little cupped flowers and sing.
Then let us clear away the choaking thorns
From round its gentle stem; let the young fawns,
Yeaned in after times, when we are flown,
Find a fresh sward beneath it, overgrown
With simple flowers: let there nothing be
More boisterous than a lover’s bended knee;
Nought more ungentle than the placid look
Of one who leans upon a closed book;
Nought more untranquil than the grassy slopes
Between two hills. All hail delightful hopes!
As she was wont, th’ imagination
Into most lovely labyrinths will be gone,
And they shall be accounted poet kings
Who simply tell the most heart-easing things.
O may these joys be ripe before I die.
Will not some say that I presumptuously
Have spoken? that from hastening disgrace
’Twere better far to hide my foolish face?
That whining boyhood should with reverence bow
Ere the dread thunderbolt could reach? How!

If I do hide myself it sure shall be

In the very fane, the light of poesy.”

From some verses addressed to various amiable individuals of the other sex, it appears, notwithstanding all this gossamer-work, that Johnny’s affections are not entirely confined to objects purely etherial. Take, by way of specimen, the following prurient and vulgar lines, evidently meant for some young lady east of Temple-bar.

“Add too, the sweetness

Of thy honied voice; the neatness

Of thine ankle lightly turn’d:

With those beauties, scarce discern’d,

Kept with such sweet privacy,

That they seldom meet the eye

Of the tattle loves that fly

Round about with eager pry.

Saving when, with freshening lave,

Thou dipp’st them in the taintless wave;

Like twin water lilies, born

In the coolness of the morn.

O, if thou hadst breathed then,

Now the Muses had been ten.

Couldst thou wish for lineage higher

Than twin sister of Thalia?

At last for ever, evermore,

Will I call the Graces four.”

Who will dispute that our poet, to use his own phrase (and rhyme),

“Can mingle music fit for the soft ear

Of Lady Cytherea.”

So much for the opening bud; now for the expanded flower. It is time to pass from the juvenile “Poems,” to the mature and elaborate “Endymion, a Poetic

Romance." The old story of the moon falling in love with a shepherd, so prettily told by a Roman Classic, and so exquisitely enlarged and adorned by one of the most elegant of German poets, has been seized upon by Mr John Keats, to be done with as might seem good unto the sickly fancy of one who never read a single line either of Ovid or of Wieland. If the quantity, not the quality, of the verses dedicated to the story is to be taken into account, there can be no doubt that Mr John Keats may now claim Endymion entirely to himself. To say the truth, we do not suppose either the Latin or the German poet would be very anxious to dispute about the property of the hero of the "Poetic Romance." Mr Keats has thoroughly appropriated the character, if not the name. His Endymion is not a Greek shepherd, loved by a Grecian goddess; he is merely a young Cockney rhymester, dreaming a phantastic dream at the full of the moon. Costume, were it worth while to notice such a trifle, is violated in every page of this goodly octavo. From his prototype Hunt, John Keats has acquired a sort of vague idea, that the Greeks were a most tasteful people, and that no mythology can be so finely adapted for the purposes of poetry as theirs. It is amusing to see what a hand the two Cockneys make of this mythology; the one confesses that he never read the Greek Tragedians, and the other knows Homer only fromChapman; and both of them write about Apollo, Pan, Nymphs, Muses, and Mysteries, as might be expected from persons of their education. We shall not, however, enlarge at present upon this subject, as we mean to dedicate an entire paper to the classical attainments and attempts of the Cockney poets. As for Mr Keats' "Endymion," it has just as much to do with Greece as it has with "old Tartary the fierce;" no man whose mind has ever been imbued with the smallest knowledge or feeling of classical poetry or classical history, could have stooped to profane and vulgarise every association in the manner which has been adopted by this "son of promise." Before giving any extracts, we must inform our readers, that this romance is meant to be written in English heroic rhyme. To those who have read any of Hunt's poems, this hint might indeed be needless. Mr Keats has adopted the loose, nerveless versification, and Cockney rhymes of the poet of Rimini; but in fairness to that gentleman, we must add, that the defects of the system are tenfold more conspicuous in his disciple's work than in his own. Mr Hunt is a small poet, but he is a clever man. Mr Keats is a still smaller poet, and he is only a boy of pretty abilities, which he has done every thing in his power to spoil.

The poem sets out with the following exposition of the reasons which induced Mr Keats to compose it.

"A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:

Its loveliness increases, it will never

Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet-breathing.
Therefore, on every morrow, are we wreathing
A flowery band to bind us to the earth,
Spite of despondence, of the inhuman dearth
Of noble natures, of the gloomy days
Of all the unhealthy and o'er-darkened ways
Made for our searching: yes, in spite of all,
Some shape of beauty moves away the pall
From our dark spirits. Such the sun, the moon,
Trees old and young, sprouting a shady boon
For simple sheep, and such are daffodils
With the green world they live in, and clear rills
That for themselves a cooling covert make
'Gainst the hot season: the mid forest brake,
Rich with a sprinkling of fair musk-rose blooms:
And such too is the grandeur of the dooms
We have imagined for the mighty dead;
All lovely tales that we have heard or read;
An endless fountain of immortal drink
Pouring unto us from the heaven's brink.
"Nor do we merely feel these essences
For one short hour, no, even as the trees
That whisper round a temple become soon
Dear as the temple's self, so does the moon,
The passion poesy, glories infinite
Haunt us till they become a cheering light

Unto our souls, and bound to us so rest,

That, whether there be shine, or gloom o’ercast,

They alway must be with us, or we die.

“Therefore ’tis with full happiness that I

Will trace the story of Endymion!!!

After introducing his hero to us in a procession, and preparing us, by a few mystical lines, for believing that his destiny has in it some strange peculiarity, Mr Keats represents the beloved of the Moon as being conveyed by his sister Peona into an island in a river. This young lady has been alarmed by the appearance of the brother, and questioned him thus:

“Brother, ’tis vain to hide

That thou dost know of things mysterious,

Immortal, starry, such alone could thus

Weigh down thy nature. Hast thou sinn’d in aught

Offensive to the heavenly powers? Caught

A Paphian dove upon a message sent?

Thy deathful bow against some deer-herd bent,

Sacred to Dian? Haply, thou best seen

Her naked limbs among the alders green;

And that, alas! is death. No, I can trace

Something more high perplexing in thy face!”

Endymion replies in a long speech, wherein he describes his first meeting with the Moon. We cannot make room for the whole of it, but shall take a few pages here and there.

“There blossom’d suddenly a magic bed

Of sacred ditamy, and poppies red:

At which I wonder’d greatly, knowing well

That but one night had wrought this flowery spell;

And, sitting down close by, began to muse

What it might mean. Perhaps, thought I, Morpheus

In passing here, his owlet pinions shook;
Or, it may be, ere matron Night uptook
Her ebon urn, young Mercury, by stealth,
Had dipt his rod in it: such garland wealth
Came not by common growth. Thus on I thought
Until my head was dizzy and distraught.
Moreover, through the dancing poppies stole
A breeze, most softly lulling to my soul," &c.
"Methought the lidless-eyed train
Of planets all were in the blue again.
To commune with those orbs, once more I rais'd
My sight right upward: but it was quite dazed
By a bright something, sailing down apace,
Making me quickly veil my eyes and face:
Again I look'd, and, O ye deities,
Who from Olympus watch our destinies!
Whence that completed form of all completeness?
Whence came that high perfection of all sweetness?
Speak, stubborn earth, and tell me where, O where
Hast thou a symbol of her golden hair?
Not oat-sheaves drooping in the western sun;
Not—thy soft hand, fair sister! let me shun
Such follying before thee—yet she had,
Indeed, locks bright enough to make me mad;
And they were simply gordian'd up and braided,
Leaving, in naked comeliness, unshaded,
Her pearl round ears,"
"'She took an airy range,

And then, towards me, like a very maid,

Came blushing, waning, willing, and afraid,

And press’d me by the hand: Ah! ’twas too much;

Methought I fainted at the charmed touch,

Yet held my recollection, even as one

Who dives three fathoms where the waters run

Gurgling in beds of coral: for anon,

I felt upmounted in that region

Where falling stars dart their artillery forth,

And eagles struggle with the buffeting north

That balances the heavy meteor-stone;—

Felt too, I was not fearful, nor alone,”

Not content with the authentic love of the Moon, Keats makes his hero captivate another supernatural lady, of whom no notice occurs in any of his predecessors.

“It was a nymph uprisen to the breast

In the fountain’s pebbly margin, and she stood

’Mong lilies, like the youngest of the brood.

To him her dripping hand she softly kist,

And anxiously began to plait and twist

Her ringlets round her fingers, saying, ‘Youth!

Too long, alas, hast thou starv’d on the ruth,

The bitterness of love: too long indeed,

Seeing thou art so gentle. Could I weed

Thy soul of care, by Heavens, I would offer

All the bright riches of my crystal coffer

To Amphitrite; all my clear-eyed fish,

Golden, or rainbow-sided, or purplish,

Vermilion-tail’d, or finn’d with silvery gauze;

Yea, or my veined pebble-floor, that draws

A virgin light to the deep; my grotto-sands

Tawny and gold, ooz’d slowly from far lands

By my diligent springs; my level lilies, shells,

My charming rod, my potent river spells;

Yes, every thing, even to the pearly cup

Meander gave me,—for I bubbled up

To fainting creatures in a desert wild.

But woe is me, I am but as a child

To gladden thee; and all I dare to say,

Is, that I pity thee: that on this day

I’ve been thy guide; that thou must wander far

In other regions, past the scanty bar

To mortal steps, before thou can’st be ta’en

From every wasting sigh, from every pain,

Into the gentle bosom of thy love.

Why it is thus, one knows in heaven above:

But, a poor Naiad, I guess not. Farewell!

I have a ditty for my hollow cell.’“

But we find that we really have no patience for going over four books filled with such amorous scenes as these, with subterraneous journeys equally amusing, and submarine processions equally beautiful; but we must not omit the most interesting scene of the whole piece.

“Thus spake he, and that moment felt endued

With power to dream deliciously; so wound

Through a dim passage, searching till he found

The smoothest mossy bed and deepest, where

He threw himself, and just into the air

Stretching his indolent arms, he took,

O bliss! A naked waist: “Fair Cupid, whence is this?
A well-known voice sigh’d, ‘Sweetest, here am I!’
At which soft ravishment, with doting cry
They trembled to each other.—Helicon!
O fountain’d hill! Old Homer’s Helicon!
That thou wouldst spout a little streamlet o’er
These sorry pages: then the verse would soar
And sing above this gentle pair, like lark
Over his nested young: but all is dark
Around thine aged top, and thy clear fount
Exhales in mists to heaven. Aye, the count
Of mighty poets is made up; the scroll
Is folded by the Muses; the bright roll
Is in Apollo’s hand: our dazed eyes
Have seen a new tinge in the western skies:
The world has done its duty. Yet, oh yet,
Although the son of poesy is set,
These lovers did embrace, and we must weep
That there is no old power left to steep
A quill immortal in their joyous tears.
Long time in silence did their anxious fears
Question that thus it was; long time they lay
Fondling and kissing every doubt away;
Long time ere soft caressing sobs began
To mellow into words, and then there ran
Two bubbling springs of talk from their sweet lips.
‘O known Unknown! from whom my being sips
Such darling essence, wherefore may I not

Be ever in these arms,’”

After all this, however, the “modesty,” as Mr Keats expresses it, of the Lady Diana prevented her from owning in Olympus her passion for Endymion. Venus, as the most knowing in such matters, is the first to discover the change that has taken place in the temperament of the goddess. “An idle tale,” says the laughter-loving dame,

A humid eye, and steps luxurious,

When these are new and strange, are ominous.

The inamorata, to vary the intrigue, carries on a romantic intercourse with Endymion, under the disguise of an Indian damsel. At last, however, her scruples, for some reason or other, are all overcome, and the Queen of Heaven owns her attachment.

She gave her fair hands to him, and behold

Before three swiftest kisses he had told,

They vanish far away!—Peona went

Home through the gloomy wood in wonderment.

And so, like many other romances, terminates the “Poetic Romance” of Johnny Keats, in a patched-up wedding.

We had almost forgot to mention, that Keats belongs to the Cockney School of Politics, as well as the Cockney School of Poetry.

It is fit that he who holds Rimini to be the first poem, should believe theExaminer to be the first politician of the day. We admire consistency, even in folly. Hear how their bantling has already learned to lisp sedition.

“There are who lord it o’er their fellow-men

With most prevailing tinsel: who unpen

Their baaing verities, to browse away

The comfortable green and juicy hay

From human pastures, or, O torturing fact!

Who, through an idiot blink, will see unpack’d

Fire-branded foxes to sear up and singe

Our gold and ripe-ear’d hopes. With not one tinge

Of sanctuary splendour, not a sight

Able to face an owl’s, they still are dight

By the blear-eyed nations in empurpled vests,

And crowns, and turbans. With unladen breasts,

Save of blown self-applause, they proudly mount

To their spirit’s perch, their being’s high account

Their tiptop nothings, their dull skies, their thrones—

Amid the fierce intoxicating tones

Of trumpets, shoutings, and belaboured drums

And sudden cannon. Ah! how all this hums

In wakeful ears, like uproar vast and gone—

Like thunder clouds that spike to Babylon,

And set those old Chaldeans to their tasks.—

Are then regalities all gilded masks?”

And now, good-morrow to “the Muses’ son of Promise,” as for “the feats he yet may do,” as we do not pretend to say, like himself “Muse of my native land am I inspired,” we shall adhere to the safe old rule of *pauca verba*. We venture to make one small prophecy, that his bookseller will not a second time venture £50 upon any thing he can write. It is a better and a wiser thing to be a starved apothecary than a starved poet; so back to the shop Mr John, back to “plasters, pills, and ointment boxes,” &c. But, for Heaven’s sake, young Sangrado, be a little more sparing of extenuatives and soporifics in your practice than you have been in your poetry.

Z.