

# The Daily News.

LONDON, SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 1902.

ONE PENNY

# HOURS IN A LIBRARY.

(By W. E. Garrett Fisher.)

An interesting relic of one of the great Victorian poets was sold by auction this week in London. This was Dante Gabriel Rossetti's boyish version of Burger's "Lenore," the original manuscript of which, on twelve quarto pages, brought £47 in the Ellis sale. Mr. W. M. Rossetti did not consider that *juvenilia* of this kind ought to find a place in the collected edition of his brother's work which he published in 1888, though the very proper feeling that every scrap of so great a poet's writing extant should be made accessible to students caused it to be separately printed two or three years ago. It was not, of course, Rossetti's first essay in the art of verse. That place must probably be assigned to "The Slave," a "drama" which Rossetti composed when he was about six years old, and which his brother has frankly described as "simple nonsense." In reading Shakespeare the child's fancy had been taken by the fascinating words "slave" and "traitor," which he accordingly conferred on his two leading characters. I do not know whether a copy of "The Slave" is still in existence, but if it is, one would like to see it printed when the time comes for a really definitive edition of Rossetti's work—a name which, with all deference to the editorial ability of Mr. W. M. Rossetti, can hardly be given to the edition of 1888. There are, no doubt, two possible opinions on this, as on most subjects. Some critics, who dislike to think that a poetical genius did not spring full-fledged upon the world, hold that *juvenilia* should be suppressed whenever it is possible, and go so far as to apply to them the slighting judgment which Uncle Toby passed on the early work of the great Lipsius. Charles Lamb, the best example in our literature of the critic who is guided by sentiment rather than by science, expressed this opinion forcibly in his complaint against the Cambridge authorities for exposing the MSS. of Milton to public view. "I wish," he said, in a passage which was suppressed by his better judgment, "they had thrown them into the Cam, or sent them after the latter cantos of Spenser, into the Irish Channel."

This is one view of the matter which modest authors themselves are inclined to share. But there is also the point of view which is taken by all serious students of literature, to whom the evolution of a writer's genius or of a masterpiece is hardly less interesting than the final result of all the labour of the file. In spite of Charles Lamb, many of us find a keen interest in admission to the artist's studio or the author's library, and delight in seeing the careful and painstaking manipulations which gradually bring the book or the picture to its state of ultimate perfection. It is for such readers that complete editions are issued, that the early novels of Balzac continue to be printed, that the Cambridge Shakespeare was edited, that facsimiles of the first editions of books like the "Compleat Angler" and "Paradise Lost" are prepared. When a writer attains that artistic level of achievement which entitles him to rank among the classics—"where Orpheus and where Homer are"—there is no scrap of his writing, however unworthy of his matured powers, which has not its interest and value for the critic who holds with Browning that nothing is so interesting to study as the development of a soul. From this point of view one may utter a plea for the preservation and publication not only of "Lenore," and of its immediate predecessor, "Sir Hugh the Heron," which was printed by the enthusiasm of the young poet's grandfather in the year of its composition, but of "The Slave," if it is still extant, and every other scrap of Rossetti's writing that can be unearthed, in that definitive edition which one trusts to see before long—perhaps at the hands of that eminent poet and critic who has already given us, in "Aylwin," the most perfect picture of Rossetti's strange and elusive personality which has yet been produced.

It is a curious sign of the change in literary fashions that we nowadays think of Burger chiefly for the sake of the great poets who have tried their prentice hands at the translation of his once famous ballad. We have just seen that he inspired Rossetti; his influence on our literature in an earlier generation was so great that it can never be forgotten or ignored by the student. The most popular German poet of the last third of the eighteenth century, Burger, counts for a good deal in the history of our own romantic revival—the movement which Mr. Watts-Dunton has so happily called the Renaissance of Wonder. We cannot, indeed, be expected to remember the sumptuous translations of his ballads which were published by that sweet singer, the Hon. Mr. Spencer, and adorned with pictures by the fair but frail Lady Di Beauclerk, whom Boswell championed on a memorable occasion with the result of eliciting one of Johnson's bluntest ethical propositions. But it is difficult to overrate the effect produced on our poetry in general by Burger's work, if only because the attempt to translate "Lenore" first revealed to Scott that he too was a poet. No doubt Scott would never have remained a mere advocate. Had Burger never existed, we should still have had a "Lady of the Lake" and a "Rob Roy." All the same, Burger deserves the honour always paid—except by insurance offices—to the little spark which kindles a great fire. Scott himself has told us how the ballad with which—in William Taylor's version—Mrs. Barbauld electrified her Edinburgh hosts in 1793 or 1794 fired his imagination, especially with the two lines which—as Scott adapted them—most boys have since declaimed with delight—

Tramp! tramp! along the land they rode,  
Splash! splash! along the sea.

After completing his version, and reading it to a friend, Scott was heard to exclaim, "I wish to Heaven I could get a skull and two cross-bones," which accordingly long continued to decorate his dressing-room at Abbotsford. It would be interesting to know if Burger's cheerful work produced a similar effect on the imagination of young Rossetti.

The weird and romantic influence of "Lenore" made itself equally felt in England. It has never been satisfactorily explained why Burger's ballad, which was published about 1775, took nearly twenty years to make its way to this country. No doubt the psychological moment did not arrive until the waves of the French Revolution had begun to spread. When it did reach us it found our poetry at a very low ebb indeed. The death of Gray and Goldsmith had left this country—at any rate south of the Border—almost without a great poet. In 1794 the state of our poetry was fairly represented by Porson's charming quatrain—

Poetis nos lætatur tribus,  
Pye, Petro Pindar, parvo Pybus;  
Sic ulterius ire pergis,  
Adde hic Sir James Bland Burgess.

Cowper, indeed, had made his mark, and Burns was speedily to "flame in the forehead of the morning sky;" but otherwise the lover of poetry could find little pleasure in the tuneful but common-place sonnets of Bowles, or even in the powerful iambs of Crabbe. Thus when Burger's singular compound of romance and diablerie reached England, the seed fell upon rich ground that had long lain fallow.

Seven or eight English versions of "Lenore" made their appearance within a few months, and every one was talking about them. Coleridge had read it, and it is not impossible to detect its influence in "Kubla Khan" and the "Ancient Mariner." Monk Lewis also read "Lenore," and though he is so entirely forgotten nowadays, Byron's journal survives in proof of the influence that Lewis once had on our literature at a critical period. Burger, in fact, was the sensation of the hour, and that at the very moment when English poetry was preparing for a new outburst little less remarkable than the Elizabethan. His ballads were not only stirring in themselves, but they set men asking where their inspiration came from, and so Percy's Reliques and similar collections were again brought into vogue, with results of which the Border minstrelsy was a small part. It is quite characteristic of the vagaries of fame that Burger himself is said to have been troubled all his life by the popularity of his early and hastily-written ballads, as compared with the cool reception of the later work by which he would have elected to take his place among poets. These things will happen, and it is but an extension of the same tendency which makes the clown aspire to the glories of tragedy and lately led Mr. Kipling to announce—if he was correctly reported—that his highest ambition was to write a good story for the nursery.