

(October 27, 1913.)

Shakespeare Poietes, Fashioner of Fate.

BY MR. F. R. BENSON.*

AT a special meeting of the Canadian Club held on the 27th October, 1913, Mr. Benson said:

Mr. President and Gentlemen,—As is usual, I take it, on the part of the guests at your hospitable board, I commence with an apology. The President has kindly said some very complimentary things, and it is for me to try to show the gratitude and appreciation that Mr. Flower, the Chairman of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, and myself feel at this warm welcome. Also I have to make a little personal explanation. I sensed, when I came into this room, that there was a kind of feeling that the President was a little late. He was a little late, let this not be a bone of contention between us—(laughter)—he surprised me in the act of trying to remedy, not only the ravages of time, but of the hardness of Canadian water, at any rate, of the river bed on my face.

The President said, "I see you are a little cracked." I wish to explain that this cracked forehead, broken nose and black eyes are due to the exploration of the depths and shallows of your waters, not necessarily your strong waters. They are due to not looking before I leapt, a dive into the dark, while bathing, not to any difference of opinion between the President and myself. (Laughter.)

The President said that some of the thought and some of the work of this city took cognizance of that which the birds of the air and the beasts of the field and the angels were doing. Now, that only leaves me the opportunity of speaking for another power. (Laughter.) In doing this, I may find some justification in the magic letters D-L, which, thanks to one of your great universities, I have now the right of adding to my name. That degree which, I need not say, I count as a very great honor, I shall hope to try to deserve

*Mr. Benson has managed the Annual Festivals at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford-on-Avon for the past thirty years, and his repertoire company has become famous as a school of acting. His company was the vanguard in the movement to provide for Canada more plays from Great Britain.

by service in the future more than I can pretend to at the present moment. Be that as it may, it gives me the pleasure and the privilege of addressing you as a brother Canadian. (Applause.)

What song have I to sing before this illustrious, this inspiring meeting of practical poets? To sing it aright would need the genius of my master, the Bard of Stratford-on-Avon. I will begin by telling you a little story. A well-known bishop, in the course of his diocesan visitation in Warwickshire, found himself the guest of a large farmer, the best agriculturist of the district. — In the course of a morning walk, the farmer took him along a pathway. On the right, there was a very good crop of wheat; on the left, some enemy had sown tares. Needless to say, the field on the right belonged to the farmer. The bishop, who had failed up to this moment to draw his host into conversation, asked, "To what do you attribute the difference between these two crops?" The farmer, with a dramatic gesture, pointed first to the smiling field on the right and then to the blue sky above, as he replied, "Muck and Him." Now, I think that English yeoman, worthy descendant of that Merrie England, which has written the noblest pages in our history, had gotten near defining the basis on which the English-speaking Empire has been reared—that is, a close connection with Mother Earth, an ear to listen to that mother's many voices, the practical power to make use of her wise messages, the eye that reads the signs of the times, the far vision that obtains strength for manly purpose by lifting its gaze to the hills. The farmer went on to say, "I owe my success as a farmer, above everything else, to what I have learned from Shakespeare." I wonder how many members of the English speaking race say that. Marlborough, on the Field of Blenheim,—"Shakespeare taught me to win my victories." Just as Condé, in another land, of another dramatist, said,—"Of course, I won my battles because I knew Corneille's plays." Or, again, an engine driver, after his first visit to the theatre, where he saw the play of "Macbeth," made the following comment: "That will just help me to drive my engine better to-morrow."

So much for the practical value of the poet's message, the quickening life-rhythms that help us to accomplish our daily tasks. What is the meaning of this word, poet? The Greeks invented it because, to that strenuous people, with their intense love of liberty under the law, having as their ideal the freedom of the world, whether under republic or a

constitutional monarchy, there was little difference between thinking and doing, and so they called the singer, "Poietes," the man who thinks and does, the man who fashions destiny for himself and for the world. "We Greeks defeated the Persians at Marathon because we have ever loved the beautiful." And we, who speak the rhythmic measure of Shakespeare's tongue, pride ourselves above everything on being a practical people who love doing and being, who love the strong, full, free life that pulses through the melody of Shakespeare's verse. Of us has it been well said that our empire depends on the boundless capacity of its members for poetry. "Show me a nation's laws and I will tell you the measure of her decadence; let me hear her song and I will tell you the glory of her achievement." (Applause.)

A friend, who was describing to me the organization of one of the trans-continental railways, referred to one of its chiefs, who also happened to be the founder of a great university, as the poet of the party. "What," I asked, "has he published?" "Oh, no books," replied my friend. "I mean that he had the poet's vision and imagination, the stout heart and strong right hand that express thought in terms of action whereby he was able with spade and axe and dredger to carve out his long poem; using the earth as his parchment, he traced channels of communication by bridge and tunnel and inland sea for the thought and commerce of the nations. Just as to-day is being done at Panama, where the East meets the West; where the turbulent waters of the Atlantic are being mated to the peacetide of the rising and the setting sun.

In this sense, you above all people, are poets, fashioners of fate, in that you are pioneers making roadways, *ad astra*, toward the stars, building up a brave new world. Shakespeare stands out pre-eminent for all time, king of the poets, prince of pioneers.

He was also a member of the dramatic profession. As a humble follower of the same craft, a sort of cheap kodak wandering through many lands, taking various sense impressions of many varying phenomena, I venture to address you this afternoon.

Here let me say, it was the actor's side of Shakespeare's genius that places him supreme upon his throne, even more than his gift as a thinker and a writer. It was this that enabled him to sympathize with and to live the life of all the various beings whose story he sings for us. He was able to enter into and identify himself with the being of bird and

beast of man, woman and child, God, devil or angel, also with that touch of Hellenic and Indian pantheistic paganism which gives him so much of his power, he was at one moment the essence of the storm, the lightning, the wind, at another the wave, the river, the tree, or the flower.

Son of a strenuous age, his art is that of expressing thought and feeling in terms of action. He knew all the opportunities of life and used them. He combined intimate knowledge of the particular with an understanding of the universal truths of which they are the expression. Surely a practical man for his generation, and for all the generations to come. I have thus quite inadequately tried to define the meaning of the word poet. Let me, if I am not trespassing too long on your time and patience, give you a few concrete examples of the influence this man exercises on to-day as I have seen it at our Shakespeare festival at Stratford-on-Avon. The festival we wish to make a race festival for the sons of the King folk—the men who can—around the shrine of the representative genius of the Anglo-Celtic race. Such as was the shrine of Delphi or the Olympic festival for the Grecian States.

The little theatre on the banks of the Avon, within a stone's-throw of the church where three hundred years ago Shakespeare was buried, stands in what I suppose might be called a village, one of the cradles of the strong, home-loving people of England. It was built mainly by Mr. Flower's uncle and some friends; quietly, in the face of much opposition they did for themselves that which they believed worth doing, but could get few others to do. (Applause.) Mr. Flower and these men thought that Sir Philip Sidney was right when he said "the drama was the art that gives noble pleasure to a noble people which shall thereby become nobler." They thought there was some fear lest Shakespeare's successors should become less noble if they ceased to listen to his song. And so the pilgrims come from all over the world for the message of the master singer of his own land and his own time and of every land and all-created space, and they read in this festival something of the Pax Britannica. The striker reads harmony and cessation of industrial strife and useless wars of aggression. He also reads some message of the need of readiness (on the part of all who speak the English tongue) to strike a blow, if need be, when the homestead is in danger. The striker saw what our festival meant, saw that it leads back to harmony, to a sense of proportion, to that sense of beauty which is the chief constituent of com-

mon sense, which is always uppermost in the minds of a people who preserve their reverence for nature and a love of art. "Sir," said he, "I tell my union things in the words of Shakespeare, which if I said myself they would do me in as I went home in the dark." Another, an old man, came out of his cottage and said, "God bless you, Sir, you have shown me in those history plays how we Britishers became what we are and how we can keep so." And the Indian Rajah comes, and he says, "I will take back to my people the story of your festival, I will tell them of your rejoicing in drama, in folk song, in folk dance of Back to the Land of the Garden City, and then our two nations will understand each other's religion better than they do." And another, a learned sage of the elder Aryan stock, went through India, and said, "I have found the heart of England by Shakespeare's grave and it is gentle, kind and tolerant, as well as proud and strong." (Applause.)

And so while we are singing Shakespeare's songs at Stratford, we dream of many things, that seem coming with the rising of to-morrow's sun. Among them of a great Aryan empire or confederation that shall embrace all those who speak the tongue in which Shakespeare sang, America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, South Africa, and all our sons and cousins in the Dominion over sea, together with that old Land of India, wise in counsel, valiant in war. Such is the empire dimly shadowed in Shakespeare's verse, the empire of the King folk, the strenuous, dominant people who are always busy doing in the drama of life. One of the melodies of the drama is the ceaseless swing of the pendulum between freedom of expression for the individual, as represented by the singer and the artist, and the adjustment of that individual note to the collective interests of the common weal, the work of the law giver, liberty under the law. (Applause.) An empire or confederation, call it what you will, founded on principles of association and expansion, not of exploitation, harmonizing with our poet's song that sounds for ever as a challenge, a trumpet call to the peoples to care for those things that really matter, those things that never pass away, the only practical foundation on which an empire can be built. And what does one mean by an empire builder? What does this splendid institution, the Canadian Club, exist for? What do the King and the constitution exist for? What does drama exist for? For nothing but what your chairman said, "to spread among others and understand for ourselves, to make our own and the property of our brothers and our children's children, the full joy of the strong, free

life. I know nothing of art for art's sake, or law for law's sake, or song for song's sake, I only know these things for life's sake. (Applause.)

My theme would tax the ability of a far abler speaker than myself to describe, or, if possible, a still busier and more strenuous people than my audience, to carry out in action. My halting remarks are so lamentably crude and inefficient, I must refer you again and again for better confirmation to the life rhythms of Shakespeare, which we have come here to sing.

If a certain note were uttered clearly and harmoniously in this room all the finger bowls on the table, all the glasses on the shelves, would ring out that triumphant sound and be shattered into fragments. Such is the physical power of the word. If you expand this principle, you will readily understand how when the hosts of the mightily shouted the walls of Jericho fell prone, or the topmost stone of the Pyramids settled in its place. One night at a concert in the Albert Hall, above the massed orchestra, above the thousand voices singing in the chorus, I heard one clear, ringing, thrilling note, that of Madam Albani, the soprano. And so is it always with the power of song. The balanced harmony of one true musical note soars like the eagle above all the rest of the winged tribe and seems to reach the centre of the sun. Such is the pureness and the truth of the notes that Shakespeare sang. Here let us remember that the master singer blends with his own song, the song words of his folk and of his times. Do we sing now as our forefathers sang? Have we not in accepting the service of machinery, without understanding its limitations, lessened our capacity for singing? Has the factory with the dust and clatter, the jarring and the groaning, produced melodies for the laborer that will compare with the work songs still remembered, still chanted among us, of harvest, of the loom, of the shipyard, the hammer, the forge, the village green? Do not the wheels of our industrial machine creak over much to be truly economical? Does not noise and ugliness mean waste of power, waste of life? Cannot the artist and the singer do something to amend? (Hear, hear.)

Sir William Crooks has shown us that if we strike a glass tube with different colored hammers, the note will vary in accordance with the difference of color. Further that no two persons in the whole of the world can evoke the same note, though they use the same hammer. Has not the law giver of to-day something to learn from the artist and the scientist

on the value of the personal equation? And again, it has been shown by science that the musical note of an Albani, the song of any true singer, the note of every one of us in our capacity of poets, rings out beyond the realms of the earth's atmosphere, and when it has reached the regions of infinite space which are tuned to the music of the spheres its vibrations become so rapid that they pass into the form we call light. It is no far stretch of the imagination to think of the Shakespeare melody blending with the brilliance of the rainbow and your Northern Lights, shedding a beam of freedom, hope and courage across the paths of the children of men. (Applause.)

Is it a vain dream? Sometimes I fancy the Arch-Priest and Poet of the world's destiny saying to the angel of fate as he holds the balance of men's history between his finger and his thumb, "to which of the sons of the mighty shall be entrusted the future shaping of my world?" You and I at any rate believe that those who speak the tongue in which Shakespeare sang, who won the right of freedom through years of agony, by their Catholic sympathy, by their infinite capacity and courage, that finds inspiration in the hour of disaster, that laughs at death with a stout heart, that never knows when it is defeated, and therefore can rest assured of ultimate victory, that ours is the right to undertake this poet task. So through the measure of Shakespeare's matchless music rings out the call of the blood. Oh yes, we singers from the old sleepy mother land are beginning to feel the inspirations sent us by our children over the sea. Dimly are we waking up to the richness, the limitless possibilities of our inheritance.

A quotation from Service:

"The men, aye, of undying love to the Motherland,
We hear at last and soon shall understand."

We are weary and faint by the way because we have not always listened to our singers, we have not trained our eyes to the revelation of the poet and the artist of to-day and long ago. We have accepted without question a mechanical and soulless attitude towards material progress, an attitude unworthy of true empire makers, but you have sent us a summons to new exertion and the motherland is preparing to respond. We realize something of what is meant by being the "melting pot" of the world. Something of the privilege and responsibility of saying every day to two thousand immigrants, "Bread and salt, brother." "There are no strangers in this land. It is a land so large that hate dies out in its

borders." And so on the neutral ground of art and song will be forged the chain impalpable but permanent, that links the Aryan races together. An empire founded upon truth and justice and beauty, so strong that none dare quarrel with her, so just that none will wish to, so free that men will gladly die for her, so lovely that the women and children will embroider with joyful patterns the hem of her sheltering robe. (Applause.)

The sound of Shakespeare's song has gone out unto all nations. Great is the power of the word. Greater still is the power of the fair thought, of which it is the symbol. "What a piece of work is man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god, the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals." This was brought very near home to me on the occasion of my first visit to America, when I saw the fair thought of new world citizenship altering expression, and color-moulding contour prevailing over artificial distinctions of creed and caste, redeeming from the curse of heredity or of hate. In a moment, as Masfield phrases it, "a word can become a star or a spear for all time." A morning star of promise, a spear to strike down error and flash the light of progress into the uttermost darkness. So of Shakespeare, the seer and the singer of our race. His genius, as the Saga tells, must be able to see the wind as it sweeps through the trees and the grasses, to hear the wool grow on the sheep's back. Thus attuned, can he catch the rhythm of the red blood liltng through the veins of men and women, of the west wind as it caresses the smallest flower, the roar of the thunder, the tramp of the warrior, the joy leap of the dancer, the murmur of the brooks, the ceaseless surging of the sea, the still small voice, and the mighty heart-beat of the world. So equipped like Odin can he march to the edge of the world, dare to look over into the beyond, the back of God's speed, if need be he will give his eye as the price of wisdom, and with what remains of sight will look the future squarely in the face. On wandering with the will to the good from East to West will find that there is no East and no West, only a globe circling through space in harmony with eternal law. Full of courage he returns after reading his runes, undismayed at the fate which he himself is helping to fashion.

One other note will you catch if we sing our song aright. The melody of the great peace for which the world is always waiting; the realization of the brotherhood of man, the "touch of nature which makes the whole world kin," not in terms of

abstract intellect, or pink-blooded copy-book headings, but of a common humanity realized through patriotism and intensification of national life. (Applause.)

As we drew near your shore the stars were suddenly paled in a flood of opal radiance and one said, "see the halo of the Northern Lights." And then the icebergs swept down toward us, the silent sentinels of the Northern Sea, and just as Orpheus with his lute, "did make the trees and the mountain tops that freeze, bow themselves when he did sing," so did they open up their ranks and give passage to Shakespeare's messengers; and then the river led us hundreds of miles along its splendid channel, and the maple leaf, red as the blood of all the people of all the world, flashed out a welcome; and we passed through orchards, through gardens and farmsteads and smiling wheat fields; through groves and woods and the busy hum of varied industry till it seemed to us that we came into the presence of the Queen of the Snow-Land, sitting in the sun on a throne of precious metals and gems, in a bower of oak and cedar and pine, of twining plants and flowers, with a canopy of azure over her head. At her feet were piled up apples, red, gold and green, corn and oil, olive and vine. The mists of night and morning were her garment. In her hair glinted the flame of the woods, in her eyes gleamed the fires of earth and of heaven, in her right hand was the sceptre of courage, in her left was the orb of hope. The guards at her gates were strong and gentle, the women of her train were very beautiful, and the children exceeding glad. On her banner was emblazoned "free opportunity of life for all," across her shield was written, "Service is power." In her courts, we the latest pilgrims to her shrine, kneel down and humbly pray for her benison as we offer our tribute of Shakespeare's song, the singer, of whom, it may be said in the words of the Wandering Piper, "And I will lead you forth to play high in the sunshine, close to the waterfall, into a land of sun and vines, yea and of men that sing, sing far away forever."—"The Song of the Pioneers." (Long applause.)