FRANCIS SHERMAN

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THE subject of this article is one whom I cannot but consider a Canadian poet of the first rank—of the rank of Carman and Lampman—hitherto unknown in Canada except to the very few, but recognized and rightly appraised, again by the few, in England and America. I refer to Francis Sherman, who was born in Fredericton in 1871, and died in Atlantic City in 1926. The neglect of his work by the critics, till within the last two or three years, may be accounted for, though hardly excused, by the fact that his poems are in mere bulk so slender, and issued in such extremely limited editions that they seemed hardly to bid for any general recognition. They have none of them been published in Canada, and the scattered copies that found their way across to us came into the hands of poetry-lovers and collectors who were content to cherish them in private. I should mark one notable exception, however. In March, 1927, the year following Sherman's death, that great collector and fine critic the late Rufus Hathaway published an article in *Willison's Monthly*, calling the attention of the Canadian public to the beauty of Sherman's poetry. But the Canadian public refused to take notice. When Sherman's first book, "Matins", appeared, (Boston, 1896), I sent a copy to Kipling, who wrote me about it with warm admiration. Carman, needless to say, praised it without qualification. But Sherman, besides being a poet, was a banker of special distinction, (he established the foundations of Canadian banking in Cuba), and I suppose it never occurred to Canadians that a man could achieve a like distinction in two such unlike fields of endeavour as poetry and banking.

Dr. Lorne Pierce has prepared for early publication the first collective and complete edition of Francis Sherman's poems. As the introduction to this edition, he has written an admirable monograph, a sketch of Sherman's career and personality, with a brief critical appraisal of his genius, gathering the material with painstaking care from many authoritative sources. This address of mine will serve merely as a supplement to Dr. Pierce's monograph, giving my own personal reminiscences of Sherman, whom I knew intimately and loved and admired, and attempting a more or less detailed estimate of certain of the poems, which I propose to read to you.

When in 1874 my father was appointed Rector of Fredericton, and I forsook Westcook and the wide horizons of the Tantramar country to live in the beautiful little city of elms on the River St. John, the eager schoolboy of fourteen was, of course, quite unaware of the existence of three-year-old Frankie Sherman, though his home was only four blocks away from the Rectory, as was the home of Bliss Carman in another direction. But though little Frankie was all unknown to us schoolboys, the name of Sherman was one to conjure with among us, because of "Sherman's Wharf". This massive old structure, since fallen to decay and removed, lay along the riverside in front of the Cathedral and Parliament Buildings, only a couple of hundred yards from the Collegiate School; and throughout the spring, summer and autumn it was the very centre of our schoolboy activities, our favourite resort. Around it, under the shelter of the high bank, we swam, we launched our birch canoes, we explored for spruce gum the great log-rafts sometimes tied up below it. And once there I was saved from drowning by the heroism of a senior school-mate, Frank McInnis, who, when I was sucked beneath the raft by the strong current, with splendid daring plunged under and dragged me forth into life. There at Sherman's Wharf the lumber-tugs and snub-nosed wood-boats used to tie up. I have a far-off memory of Sherman's father, a tall, heavy-shouldered, grave-eyed man with, I think, a flowing light moustache, standing on the bank and thoughtfully contemplating his storied wharf. Of Sherman's mother at that time I have a more vivid memory—a dark, black-browed, strikingly handsome woman, Spanish-looking as it seemed to my boyish imagination, though she was of United Empire Loyalist stock. Sherman's home, wherein he was later to write the immortal "Matins", stood near the river end of St. John Street within a stone's throw of "The Wharf".

It was not till 1895, when I resigned my professorship at King's College, Windsor, and returned to Fredericton to live, that I came into close personal contact with Sherman, though I had heard of him from time to time, from Carman, Fred St.J. Bliss, and others of my Fredericton relations and friends, as someone who was going to count heavily in our circle,—as already, though so much younger, a "kindred spirit". He was then twenty-four years of age, and held the position of cashier of the Fredericton Branch of the Merchants' Bank of Nova Scotia; and such was his genius for banking that three years later he was made manager of the Fredericton branch—"the youngest man holding that office in Canada," to quote Dr. Pierce;—and in February of 1899 he

was promoted to Assistant Manager, at the head office in Montreal, was transferred in May to Havana as Assistant Agent, and in November of the same year was appointed First Agent, which put him in charge of the whole Cuban business. I mention this *en passant*, to show the impression his financial abilities had made on the authorities of the Bank, and also to explain the scantiness of his poetic output. With business responsibilities so vast upon so youthful a pair of shoulders, it is not strange that his poetry was all but smothered in the bud.

But to return to Fredericton in 1895! I had looked forward with special interest to meeting Sherman, after all I had heard of him; and he more than fulfilled my anticipations. In appearance he was tall, lean, very dark with heavy black eye-brows like his mother, and with the large, wistful eyes of the poet rather than the banker:—in all he was good to look upon, and had a very definite air of distinction. I found him most congenial, not only in his devotion to poetry, in which our tastes consistently agreed, but also in his passion for canoeing and for the life of the wilds.

But at this period Sherman had very little time for his masculine friendships, however congenial. He had become engaged. I knew his fiancée, Miss May Whelpley, who was a singularly beautiful girl with great charm both of manner and of character. I used to think that, in that Fredericton which prided itself on its beautiful girls, she was perhaps the loveliest and the most altogether desirable; and Sherman was deeply devoted to her. I don't remember that she was a hiking enthusiast, but they were accustomed to go on long drives in the country together, in her carriage, after banking hours; and in the long, bland summer evenings there was his birch canoe for them, and all the lovely world of the winding Nashwaak and Nashwaaksis. They never married, because just about the time when he was becoming able to marry—I cannot place the exact date, but I think it was sometime in 1898—Miss Whelpley was stricken with a deadly tubercular disease which crippled her and some years later caused her death. Until the end Sherman remained devoted to her. I believe she was the one great and inspiring romance of his life until, after a long lapse of years, he was to meet Miss Ruth Sullivan of Philadelphia, the lady who in 1921 became his wife.

When Sherman was living in Cuba, I several times ran down to Havana to visit him. These visits shine in my memory. Heavily engrossed though he was in his banking affairs, out of hours he threw them off completely. Our concern, our conversation was, to paraphrase Horace, about *libros, venerem, vinum.* Over our

fragrant "green Havanas" and the potent golden distillage of Bacardi rum, we discussed everybody's poetry except our own,—for in regard to his poetry he was always extremely reticent. Sometimes we would drive out to the lovely silver-sanded bathing beach of the Marianao, which was protected from the sharks of those infested seas by a broad, shelving bar of white sand which the man-eaters feared to cross. I had misgivings lest some shark more individual and exploratory, and more voracious, than his fellows might venture in over the bar; but I pretended to be content with Sherman's assurance that this was, as he casually phrased it, "rather improbable". And the swimming there was so delightful that I almost forgot the remote but uncomfortable possibility of sharks!

My other memories of my visits to Sherman in Havana seem to be chiefly of gay dinners, and of moonlight drives beneath the palms of the Malecon. But one episode stands sharply outlined. It was at the great annual function of the Masquerade Ball at the Takon Theatre. Frank and I went in ordinary evening dress, but most of the other men, and all the women, were in costume, and masked. We were both enthusiastic dancers, and, of course, with partners unlimited and unrecognized to choose from, we enjoyed ourselves immensely. In the course of the evening we made the acquaintance of a pair of slender and flowerlike girls, gracefully and scantily costumed and heavily masked. We danced with them, and Frank and I got separated for a time. I was enraptured with my partner. She danced exquisitely. She helped me sweetly with my halting Spanish—she herself knowing no English. She initiated me into the difficult and impassioned steps of the Cuban *Valson*. We stayed together through four or five dances. Then, to my keen regret, a tall cavalier in scarlet came and carried her off—but it would be only for a little while, she sweetly assured me. I felt that I had made a great hit with her. And in very truth I had. When I came down to earth, I presently realized that I had made such a hit with her that she had been unable to tear herself away from me without a keepsake. In the close embrace of that last *Valson* the dear child had relieved me of a gold matchsafe and of my gold watch,—the one and only gold watch I have ever possessed.

Fortunately I am always able to be amused at my own follies. A few minutes later, when I met Frank at our rendezvous under the boxes and told him about it, he did not jeer at me as I expected. "*My* little partner," said he thoughtfully, "was rather a sweet thing too. I'd like to meet her again. I had left my watch at

home. It would have been just as well if I had left my money and my cigarette case at home also. They have gone to keep your watch company".

We did not see our two merry maskers again. They had evidently gone home and changed their costumes, to be ready for other romantic adventures. But Frank and I remained, and continued to enjoy ourselves. For I, fortunately, had had my money in an impregnable trousers pocket where not the daintiest fingers could get at it.

Shortly after my last visit to Cuba I went to London to live, and I never saw Frank Sherman again. We just dropped out of each other's lives—though not out of each other's hearts. During the Great War, (like myself, he joined up as a private at the very beginning of it, but was speedily promoted), our lines nearly crossed at times, but he was in the Canadian service and I for a long period was in the Imperial service, so we never managed to meet, which is a matter of deepest regret to me. After the War I stayed in Europe, while he returned to Canada and presently betook himself to Philadelphia, where he married. After my own return to Canada in February, 1925, I heard of him, but never from him. And then, in June, 1926, I was shocked by the news of his most untimely death.

The chief influence to be detected in Francis Sherman's verse is that of William Morris,—the early Morris, of the "Defence of Guenevere". This influence is shown in certain ballads, such as "The Kingfisher", "A November Vigil", "The Quiet Valley", "The Window of Dreams", and "The Relief of Wet Willows". These have Morris's wistful and homesick aloofness from the actual and the contemporary. They have the flavour of old tapestries. They sing longingly of knights in armour, and of lovely ladies whose red lips have long, long vanished into the kingdom of dream. They are of the very stuff of romance. They have a haunting beauty of cadence and colour. And they are of meticulously perfect craftsmanship. But in a sense they are Sherman's 'prentice work. Almost at once he threw off the unreal enchantment, the moonlit glamour of the Morrisian romance, and made his contact with the realities of life and human emotion, and also with the authentic austerities and sharp, strong sweetness of his own New Brunswick landscape. But he held fast to the directness and lucidity of utterance, the extreme verbal simplicity which he had learned from Morris. Much of Morris's yearning imagination he has always, but he applies it to the emotions and aspirations of to-day. In his attitude toward life, in his "philosophy of life"

as we say, he is profoundly at odds with Morris. He looks forward, not backward. He does not, like Morris, adjure us to

> forget six counties overhung with smoke;

but rather speaks with the high faith, the considered optimism (a rather characteristic note of Canadian poetry, by the way) of "At the Gate" and "Let us rise up and live".

> *Let us rise up and live.* Behold, each thing
> Is ready for the moulding of our hand.
> Long have they all awaited our command;
> None other will they ever own for king.
> Until we come, no bird dare try to sing,
> Nor any sea its power may understand;
> No buds are on the trees; in every land
> Year asketh year some tidings of some Spring.
> Yea, it is time,—high time we were awake!
> Simple indeed shall life be unto us.
> What part is ours? To take what all things give;
> To feel the whole world growing for our sake;
> To have sure knowledge of the marvellous;
> To laugh and love.—*Let us rise up and live!*

For Sherman's fidelity in description of typical Canadian landscape, combined with music and with that emotional quality which lifts description into essential poetry, I would select such a poem as "The Rain", and call attention to the plain, blunt words, and the beauty which bathes their austerity. His poem entitled "Between the Winter and the Spring" is, it seems to me, in its infinite tenderness, its reticence and its elusive suggestiveness, a quite flawless lyric expression of love surviving the transition of death. The same intense reticence, veiling a poignancy too keen for tears, is displayed in "The Mother", which seems to me second to no poem of its class in the language. W. W. Campbell's poem of the same title, very widely and very rightly praised, appears melodramatic beside it.

The poems which I refer to are all from "Matins". Sherman's next little volume, called "In Memorabilia Mortis", is a collection of sonnets in memory of William Morris. In mastery of the sonnet form, in beauty of cadence, in verbal felicity and adequacy of thought content, (with the 19 sonnets of lofty faith published in 1899 under the title of "The Deserted City"), they fully establish him in the same rank with Lampman, our master sonnetteer. I must resist the temptation to quote, except for such haunting lines as—

"I comfort him who suffered yesterday," and "The young June grasses seem Quite still that keep the edge of the still stream",

and "Where love hath lived, never hath Beauty died", and "When age knocks at the inn of youth's desire", and "Lead me beyond the dominance of death", and "But I between dead suns must peer, and grope Among forsaken worlds".

"The Prelude", published in 1907, is a sustained contemplative poem of nature interwoven with human interest, inspired with that seriousness, that unawareness of the trivial, so characteristic of all Sherman's work. It is written, with unfaltering technique throughout, in that most exacting Italian verse form, the *Terza Rima*, which scarcely anyone else, except Shelley, has known how to handle so successfully.

In April of 1900 the *Atlantic Monthly* published, as its leading feature, Sherman's most ambitious poem, "An Acadian Easter". This is an attempt—a very successful attempt—to present a heroic and supremely tragic episode of Canadian history, the episode of Madame La Tour and the fall of Port Royal, and to present it not in direct narration but impressionistically and by allusion. It is written in firmly woven but intensely emotionalized blank verse interspersed with plangent lyrics. It is a poetical, but hardly a popular, triumph. It will be, I think, greatly loved by the few, but always "caviar to the general".

In the "XII Lyrics" of "The Canadian Calendar" issued at Havana, Christmas, 1900, there is to be found Sherman's most mature and deepest work. Life has marked him inescapeably. The tragedy of his great love and his great loss inspires every one of the twelve poems, but always it is expressed interpretatively in terms of the changing season, and always with that reserve of expression which is so much more poignant than ungoverned outpouring of grief. Always there is the long dwelling upon the gladness of the remembered love—and then the short, sharp awakening to the irremediable loss.

When all are so fine and of the very essence of poetry, it seems invidious to choose, but I have no space here for more than one brief, haunting lyric and two or three excerpts. This lyric is called "The Watch":

THE WATCH

Are those her feet at last upon the stair?
Her trailing garments echoing there?
The falling of her hair?

About a year ago I heard her come,
Thus; as a child recalling some
Vague memories of home.

Oh, how the firelight blinded her dear eyes!
I saw them open and grow wise.
No questions, no replies.

And now, to-night, comes the same sound of rain.
The wet boughs reach against the pane
In the same way, again.

In the old way I hear the moaning wind
Hunt the dead leaves it cannot find,—
Blind as the stars are blind.

She may come in at midnight, tired and wan.
Yet,—what if once again at dawn
I wake to find her gone?

and these stanzas are from "The Ghost":

THE GHOST

Where the poplars quiver endlessly
And the falling leaves are grey,
I saw her come, and I was glad
That she had learned the way.

She paused a moment where the path
Grew sunlighted and broad;
Within her hair slept all the gold
Of all the golden-rod.

* * * * *

All this was long ago. To-day
Her hand met not with mine;
And where the pathway widened out
I saw no gold hair shine.

I had a weary, fruitless search.
—I think that her wan face
Was but the face of one asleep
Who dreams she knew this place.

I will close by quoting Sherman's last poem, entitled "So, after all":

So, after all, when all is said and done,
And such is counted loss and such as gain,
For me, these many years, the tropic rain
That threshes through the plumèd palms is one
With the next moment's certitude of sun.
Indolent, without change, insurgent, vain—
So my days follow; long have the old hopes lain
Like weeds along the road your feet have run.

Now I know not what thing is good, what bad;
And faith and love have perished for a sign:
But, after I am dead, my troubled ghost
Some April morn shall tremble and be glad,
Hearing your child call to a child of mine
Across the northern wood it dreams of most.

There is a note of finality about this exquisite sonnet, and so far as we know at present, it was the last piece of verse Sherman ever wrote. It bears the date of July 2, 1901. But knowing Sherman's strange reserve about his poetry—Dr. Pierce says that even his wife never knew he wrote verse till after they were married, and he had known her for years—there is some hope that more such treasure, such "infinite riches in a little room", may yet be discovered.