

MARJORIE PICKTHALL

IN MEMORIAM

E. RITCHIE

THE death of Marjorie Pickthall has brought a sense of personal loss to many of her fellow Canadians, even among those who knew her only through her literary work. The reason for this lies in something in the work itself. That the genuine poet gives expression to his own individuality and shares his peculiar outlook upon nature and life with those who can receive his message, is a somewhat obvious truth. His mission is one of self-utterance. In proportion to the richness and depth of his thought and emotional experience, and the adequacy of his art to give these a beautiful form, is the value of his song to the world. But we are conscious of differences in kind as well as in degrees of worth among those who have such gifts for us, and a critical and intellectual appreciation of excellent quality in poetry does not always carry with it a corresponding feeling of personal indebtedness. There may be admiration for the work, yet but a moderate enthusiasm for its creator. To Miss Pickthall however, more than to some much greater poets, was it granted to bring her reader into a very intimate relation with her own mood and her own imaginative vision, so that—if susceptible to such influences at all—he could not fail to have his own sense of beauty renewed and quickened by the spiritual contact. Hence her verse possessed a quality which, without exaggeration, we may call lovable.

Born in England, but coming to Canada as a young child and passing there most of the years of her comparatively short life, it might have been supposed that she would have given to Canadian sentiment and Canadian scenery prominent places in her poetry, but only to a very slight extent are such influences apparent. Contemporary events seldom inspired her pen; and there is little of what is commonly called "local colour" in her lyrics, except where, as in "Père Lalemant," the theme itself requires it. Even the birds and flowers which she weaves so deftly into the web of her fancy are not quite realistically treated; they are not the product of "Nature study," but of that artistic imagination which is creative as well as receptive. It is, indeed, only in that world which we half perceive and half

create that such a lyrical poet feels at home. It was not realistic accuracy, but the deeper and higher truths of emotional life, at which she aimed; so that whether she writes about Palestine or Japan, of Canada or Greece, while the "mise en scène" is indicated with much skill, the delicate charm which gives atmosphere to the verse comes more from the soul of the writer than from the environment described.

For Marjorie Pickthall as for Keats, Beauty is Truth,—Truth, Beauty. In all her verse whatever the theme, beauty is the inspiring motive: religion, love, sorrow and death,—all come to her clothed in beauty as in a garment: She sings—

Beauty is still immortal in our eyes;
 When the last moon burns low, and, spark by spark,
 The little worlds die out along the dark,
 Beauty that rosed the moth-wing, touched the land
 With clover-horns and delicate faint flowers,
 Beauty that bade the showers
 Beat on the violet's face,
 Shall hold the eternal heavens within their place,
 And hear new stars come singing from God's hand.

There are no doubt clearly marked limitations to her work. It is graceful rather than vigorous, and emotional rather than intellectual. But, within its limits, it is good work. It shows no carelessness in technique, no over-emphasis in expression, no indulgence in mere sentimentality. She gave us of her best in her song.

In her prose she was less successful. Her short stories and novels are written with characteristic refinement and delicacy of feeling, and contain not a few passages of real charm, but she was lacking in that firm grasp of character and mastery of incident that belong to the true teller of tales. It is by her lyrical genius that Marjorie Pickthall will be remembered. To indicate which are the best of her poems can only be to express a personal preference. Time, like a good gardener, "thins out" the too plentiful growths that spring from the soul of even the best of poets. Some things the world willingly, and rightly, lets die. But surely such lyrics as "The Little Fauns to Proserpine," "A Mother in Egypt," "Swallows," and "Mary Shepherdess," are destined to endure. Marjorie Pickthall's verse had the sweet freshness that comes with the dawn in springtime, and her voice will be sadly missed from our too scanty choir of singing birds.