

MORE REMINISCENCES OF BLISS CARMAN

CHARLES G. D. ROBERTS

IN the previous chapter of these reminiscences I omitted to speak of Carman's trip to England which he made soon after his graduation from the University of New Brunswick. There were two reasons for this omission. I was not in close personal touch with him at the time,—1881-82; and those months spent in London and Oxford and Edinburgh seem to have left so slight a mark on his development. But the fact that they did affect him so slightly calls for some explanation.

He was not yet ripe for the experience. He knew neither what he wanted to get from it nor how to get anything from it. He was, as I have already pointed out, slow to mature; and moreover, then—as always throughout his life to the very end—he was peculiarly dependent upon personal contacts. Sympathetic companionship meant everything to him. He had no gift for solitude. In Robinson Crusoe's place I don't think he would have taken the trouble to survive.

When he reached London he felt himself utterly alone,—except for the books to which he fled for refuge in the bookshop of John Bumpus on Oxford Street. Daunted and homesick, he moved on to Oxford, which called to him with the ardent voice of Parkin and the haunting cadences of "The Scholar Gipsy." But even here, after the first thrill of finding boyish dreams come true, and satisfying himself that the tranquil Isis and the storied piles of Magdalen and Oriel were even lovelier than their names, he was presently homesick again. He made no real personal contacts. And suddenly he knew what he wanted.

Away in the misty North, in Edinburgh, at this moment was a living, breathing bit of Fredericton. Herbert Pickard, a college mate of Carman's and head of his class, having won the Gilchrist Scholarship for New Brunswick, had elected to carry on his studies at Edinburgh University. Carman turned his back on Oxford, joined Pickard in Edinburgh, and settled himself down contentedly to study. I am under the impression that he took

lectures in English and Mathematics, but they seem to have left no very vivid impression upon him, for afterwards in his talks with me about those Edinburgh days he never referred to them. All his talk was of his quiet life in lodgings with Pickard, and their unadventurous prowlings about the grey old city. Pickard had a gentle and lovable personality, and an able intellect. But he was interested in books rather than in life. Unlike Carman, he was in Edinburgh with a definite purpose and ambition. He was fitting himself for a professorial career. He gave himself up to his studies with an ardour which was ultimately to sap his vitality and cut him down before he reached his goal. As far as fresh cultural influences were concerned, these two young exiles from their beloved little city on the St. John, shut in upon themselves by their inexperience and strangeness, might as well have been in a monastery. And so it was that when, in 1883, Carman returned to Fredericton, he brought with him little more than a few surface impressions, and a confirmation of his own restlessness and uncertainties.

The Muse, set on shaping a poet to her taste who should own no divided allegiance, kept diplomatically heading him off from the entanglements of anything like a settled career. Back in Fredericton, after experimenting, as I have said, with school-teaching, and incuriously sniffing at the musty tomes in a law office, he tried his hand at surveying for a while, which was more congenial to him because it took him into the wilds and he could make-believe he was just "camping-out." But meanwhile he was fitting himself, whether consciously or unconsciously, for his destined work in life. He was writing quantities of verse, all in intricate and rigid forms which he taught himself to handle not only with ease but with severest exactness. He had got hold of a little volume on "Ballades and Rondeaux" and other French verse-forms, by Gleeson White, which fired him by the fascinating difficulties it presented. Presently he was turning out a profusion of perfectly wrought ballades, rondels, rondeaux and triolets,—but the last two especially. That most unyielding of verse-forms, the rondeau, was plastic as wax in his hands. When I was editor of the *Toronto Week*, (in 1884, I think), I printed a column-and-a-half poem of his, called "Ma Belle Canadienne, Julie," of which every stanza was a rondeau. That frail and tricky trifle, the triolet, light as a thistle-down, yet unbending as glass, was complaisant to his touch. He addressed to me a triolet beginning—

My glad Greek boy, in love with life,
Wake the old echoes with your song—

which my memory, alas, stubbornly refuses to recall in full. It was written on the fly-leaf of one of my own books which has been "borrowed"—I fear irrevocably. At this period also he wrote some polished sonnets and quatrains. One of these quatrains, entitled "Bulrushes", I sent to my friend Richard Watson Gilder, editor of the *Century*, who accepted it with warm praise, and paid for it with a cheque which Carman modestly considered beyond its deserts. We were both of us fairly modest then.

In all this prentice-work, through which Carman gained that simplicity and easy mastery of form so characteristic of his verse, there was not only consummate craftsmanship, but a wealth of essential poetry. Yet none of these early compositions—exercises he considered them—are to be found in any of his printed volumes. Where *are* they to be found? Here, surely, are riches to be unearthed by the fortunate treasure-seeker.

For some years after my move from Fredericton to Toronto I saw nothing of Carman, and our correspondence was casual. In 1886 he went to Harvard, and there he began to find himself. Dr. Cappon says "His academic studies there do not seem to have won him any specific distinction." But that, indeed, was the last thing he was looking for. He took lectures. I don't think examinations concerned him at all. He got what he was looking for,—stimulating personal contacts, and a sudden clarifying of his ambitions, and a philosophy of life which, with modifications of his own, was to serve him faithfully throughout all after years. He took up philosophy under Professor Royce, who gave him just what his spirit craved. The influence of Royce, in my judgment, was second only to that of Parkin in the shaping of Carman's genius. But not less significant were certain of the friendships which he made. The name of Richard Hovey, of whom I shall speak more fully later, will always be associated with that of Carman. He and Carman were to become the closest of comrades. He was a broadening and emancipating influence. He had the effect of liberating those robust elements in Carman's character, inherited from a very virile and large-moulded ancestry, which had hitherto lain dormant.

There is no apparent excuse for talking of my own affairs at this point,—which is perhaps the reason I feel impelled to do so. At least it will serve to bridge a gap, and lead me onward to the point where my own intimacy with Carman was happily renewed. My experiment in journalism, when I was editor of *The Week*, could not be regarded by my most indulgent critics as a shining success. When that great (and sometimes greatly mistaken) man,

Goldwin Smith, started *The Week*, as an organ for the advancement of culture and for the promulgation of his own peculiar views as to the destiny of Canada, he made one of his mistakes when he called me up from Fredericton to Toronto to take the post of editor. My chief qualification for the post was a touching but quite unjustified faith in my fitness for it. I had a much more vivid realization of the importance of editors than I had of the importance or the rights of proprietors. Also my views as to the destiny of Canada were passionately, and vocally, opposed to those of Goldwin Smith. My heart goes out in sympathy to him when I think of the annoyance I must have caused him,—and that for so much longer than I could have expected! Then, with generous compensation, he dispensed with my services, and I returned to Fredericton, the richer by an interesting, if strenuous, experience. About a year later I was appointed to the chair of English at the old U. E. Loyalist University of King's College, at Windsor, Nova Scotia, where I was to spend perhaps the most fruitful ten years of my life—and where I was to find the opportunity of renewing my old intimacy with Carman.

Of all my sins of omission, the one for which I am most often moved to do penance is my neglect to keep a diary. Any kind of diary, however haphazard and fragmentary, is infinitely better than none. How I wish I were able to give now the date of Carman's first visit to me at King's College! I remember only that I had been several years at King's before I succeeded in luring him away from his journalistic and other adventurings in New York to the lovely and storied Acadian land, which was to stamp its colour and its emotional atmosphere so ineffaceably into the texture of much of his greatest poetry. That first visit was to give us, eventually, "Low Tide on Grand Pré" and a long line of kindred poems. He came, saw, and was conquered. Thereafter he came often and often lingered long, knowing well that the latch-string of Kingscroft-in-the-Firs was always hanging out for him with eager expectancy.

It was natural that Carman should feel himself at home here from the first. King's College, founded by the Loyalists, modelled on Oxford, and first of all colonial universities to be endowed with a Royal Charter, had a gracious, old-world atmosphere peculiarly contenting to Carman's distinctly aristocratic spirit. The College building itself, standing grey and venerable among its elms on the brow of a park-like westerly slope, and looking out across wide green dyke-meadows toward the far-off misty purple of the Ardise Hills, was screened off from view of the town of

him as an agreeable mystery, and never got very intimate with him. When they saw him prowling aimlessly about or around the house, loose-jointed, riotous-haired, and the fair blue eye unseeing, while he murmured and mumbled inarticulately, ("like a big bumble-bee", as they put it), they would decide that he was composing a "pome" and would drift off, much impressed, to some far corner of the woods or the football field, that their play might not disturb the sacred process. They seemed to understand this sacred process instinctively. But to my wife it was a never-ending source of mild amusement. She approved of him, —but it seemed to her such a queer way to write poetry.

Different as are Carman's methods from my own, and much as we differ in some fundamental characteristics, there was always such a degree of sympathy between us that in all our years of association we never got on each other's nerves, or had anything like a misunderstanding. We disagreed quite widely on many important points. But that was of no more consequence to us than the difference in our stature or in the way we wore our hair. His method of composition, as a rule, was to write right on,—leaving gaps when he came to obstacles which could not be taken in his stride,—and afterwards to revise with meticulous care. My own method has always been to write very slowly, finishing and condensing as I go, and stopping to deal with each difficulty as I come to it. I cannot think that the one method is better or worse than the other. It is a matter of temperament. When Carman conceived a poem, it was likely to grow in the writing to a greater length than he originally intended. When I plan a poem, it is likely to turn out much shorter than I expected, my idea of revision being to cut out everything that can be spared.

Over and above the innate sympathy which existed between us, there seemed to be at times a sort of telepathic contact. One morning at breakfast I told Bliss that in the night I had dreamed a poem, of which on waking I could remember nothing except the two opening lines. I said these lines were good enough, but I couldn't do anything with them. They meant nothing to me, and did not seem to belong to me. They ran this way:—

Buried alive in calm Rochelle,
Six in a row, by the crystal well.

Bliss pounced upon them at once. "Give them to me, Old Man," he exclaimed eagerly. "I feel them all right. That dream got into your brain by mistake. It was intended for me. I'll capture the whole poem."

"Go to it," said I. And the result, within a few days, was the fantastically haunting ballad of "The Kelpie Riders."

But not always was I so ready to hand over to him my loot from the treasuries of dream. On another occasion (it was a spring morning, and we were vagabonding together) when he was mumbling to himself in the effort to catch a poem that was playing hide-and-seek in his brain, I broke in on his preoccupation to tell him a few lines which had just come to me out of the Unknown. They were the opening lines of my poem "A-foot," beginning

Comes the lure of green things growing,
Comes the call of waters flowing,
And the wayfarer Desire
Moves and wakes and would be going.

Bliss's eyes gleamed, and his long arms grabbed me.

"That's mine," he exclaimed exultantly. "That's what I was just going to write. Give me those lines, and I'll finish the poem."

"Not on your life" said I with decision. "I'm writing this poem."

He tried to argue the point with me, and finally, with reckless extravagance, tried to *buy* the lines from me with one of his rare and valued ten-dollar bills. But I shut my eyes to the bait, and stood firm.

"Very well then," said he with his characteristic spacious grin, "keep your rotten old lines. I'll go 'round the other side of those bushes, so you can't tap my brains again, and I'll write a lot of better verses on the same subject." And he did. So it comes that we each have to our credit a piece of spring poetry bearing the title of "A-foot."

But there are sundry other poems of ours which bear identical titles. On several of Carman's visits to me he brought Richard Hovey with him, much to my content. Hovey was both a delight and an inspiration. One of the first things he did to stimulate the output of verse amid the pleasantly astonished shades of King's College was to invent a game for poets, which was to have an enduring vogue in the Kingscroft circle. Carman and Hovey, like myself, were much given to inventing picturesque or suggestive titles. We held, I think rightly, that a good title, planted in the right soil, might germinate and grow to a good poem. We kept lists of titles in our note-books, and every now and then one would prove to be just what was wanted. For my own part, I have titles enough to keep me supplied for the next hundred years or so,—and I am continually adding to my list. Apropos of the subject,

let me digress for a moment to recall one night in New York when Carman and I were dining with Gilbert Parker at Monquin's. Carman said something about a poem he was going to write, to be called "The Gift of The Simple King." Parker instantly fell in love with the title, and begged for it. Carman was inexorable. At last Parker said "I want it for a story. That won't prevent you using it for your poems. I'll put it in quotation marks if you like. Here's twenty-five dollars for it. But if you won't sell it to me, I'll commit highway robbery and take it."

"I couldn't bear to be responsible for your moral downfall," said Bliss, and contentedly pocketed the cash.

But to return to Dick Hovey's game for poets. This was the manner of it. First we would agree as to what form of poem we were to exercise our craftsmanship upon, whether a fixed form, —sonnet, quatrain, dizain, as might be chosen,—or a piece of verse of any form, or of any length up to about a hundred lines. We limited the length because we limited the time,—usually to forty-eight hours. Never less than that, because we took the game very seriously, and would not encourage the perpetration of any slap dash impromptus. These weighty points settled, we would each select three titles upon which we would like to write. Each title was written on a separate slip of paper, folded minutely, and dropped into a hat. Then some unprejudiced hand would draw one slip, and read out the title. After that it was a go-as-you-please until the appointed hour, some days later, when we would meet in my study and compare the fruits of our labours.

And these labours were not altogether unfruitful. Among the compositions thus produced we each of us found two or three which we judged worth preserving, and afterwards included in our collections. Of the three, Hovey was rather the best at the game. He always managed to turn out something worth while, at the same time conforming strictly to the rules with which we deliberately fettered ourselves. Carman was the most lawless in this respect. If a quatrain or a sonnet was the form called for, he might start upon it conscientiously enough, but suddenly burst the bars and express himself in a forty-line lyric. On one occasion the title which had been given him by the fortune of the draw proved so much to his liking that he came to the show-down with a hundred-line fragment, which he said was merely the introduction to his poem. We frowned, at first, on this reckless infraction of the rules. But when he read us what he had written, we enthusiastically forgave him. That poem ultimately ran to between three and four hundred lines, and appeared in one of his volumes of

the "Pipes of Pan" series; but the title, alas, has slipped my memory, and I could not identify it without going through the volumes, which I have not by me at the moment.

The next time Bliss and Dick came to Kingscroft together, we dropped our game and buckled down to serious undertakings. It was in 1892, the year of the Shelley Centenary. We were all three very much in earnest that summer, all three engaged on some of our most important work. Hovey was composing "Seaward", his great elegy on the New England poet Thomas William Parsons, a poem which has been so far amazingly overlooked by students of American literature. I am weighing my words carefully when I say that, in my judgment, it is the greatest elegiac poem, in the classical tradition, which America has produced. It belongs in the august company of "Adonais" and "Thyrsis." Carman was at work on his Shelley memorial poem, "The White Gull,"—a poem crowded with passages of poignant and haunting beauty, but not, it seems to me, quite reaching the first rank among his works by reason of some diffuseness of thought and incoherence of structure. For my own part, I was writing ardently on the "Ave", my own tribute to the adored memory of Shelley. During those days of ecstatic self-absorption, we were given to prowling apart and treating each other with an understanding aloofness which was somewhat puzzling to those about us. But in the evening we would foregather again, and produce for mutual commendation and criticism (the commendation greatly predominating), what the day's delighted travail had brought forth.