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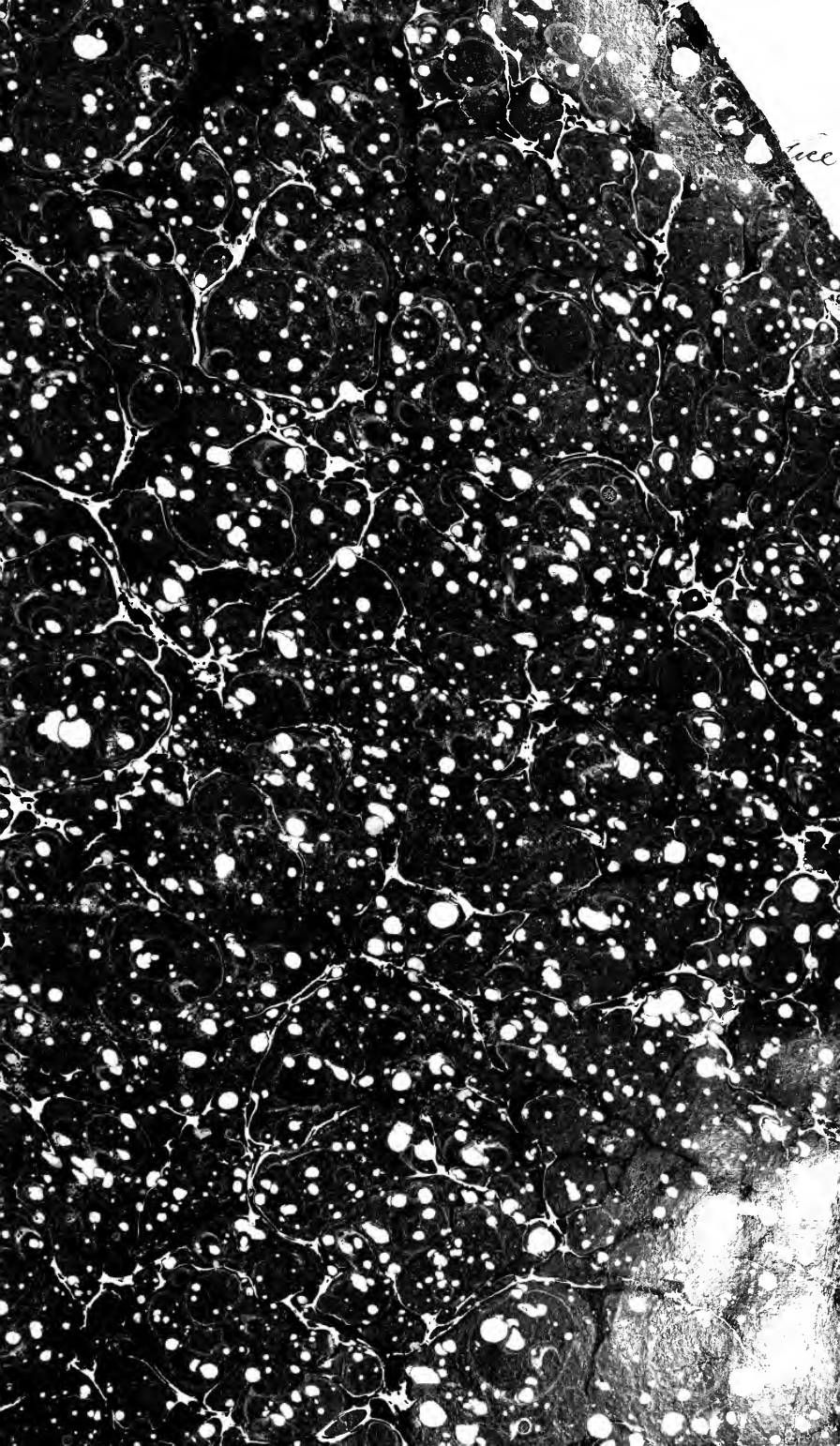
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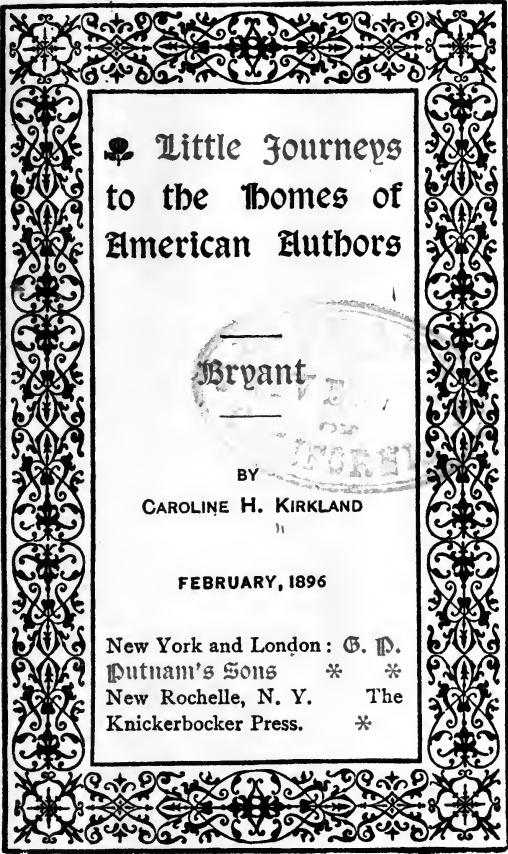
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Little Journeys
to the Homes of
American Authors

Bryant

BY

CAROLINE H. KIRKLAND

FEBRUARY, 1896

New York and London: G. P.
Putnam's Sons * *
New Rochelle, N. Y. The
Knickerbocker Press. *

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BRYANT

His youth was innocent ; his riper age
Marked with some act of goodness every day ;
And watched by eyes that loved him, calm and
sage,
Faded his late declining years away.
Meekly he gave his being up, and went
To share the holy rest that waits a life well spent.

The Old Man's Funeral.

FOREWORD

THERE is a tender tribute to the memory of Mrs. Kirkland, written by Mr. Bryant at the time of her death, in 1864. "A beautiful soul," wrote the Editor of *The Post* . . . "one whom I was proud to call my friend."

In the sketch presented here, friend writes of friend. Mr. Bryant had done much in bringing Mrs. Kirkland's books before the public, and it was meet that gratitude and affection should flow when she took up her pen to write of him. But Bryant's name deserves all the good and gracious things that Mrs. Kirkland says, and if Mr. Bryant's judgment was a bit blinded by friendship when he called Mrs. Kirkland's books "sublime" and "immortal," why, what boots it? Love is ever blind and friendship is quite near-sighted—and I am glad

E. H.



BRYANT.

BY CAROLINE H. KIRKLAND.*

IF ever there were poet of whom it is not necessary to ask whether he lives in town or country, it is Mr. Bryant. Not even Burns gives more unmistakable signs of the inspiration of rural sights and sounds. Winds breathe soft or loud; sunshine or shadow flits over the landscape; leaves rustle and birds sing wherever his verses are read. The ceiling overhead becomes a forest with green boughs waving; the carpet turns to fresh grass, and the air we breathe is moist and fragrant with mosses and hidden streams.

* Written in 1853 for Putnam's *Homes of American Authors*.

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No need of carrying the book out-of-doors to aid the illusion ; its own magic is irresistible, and brings out-of-doors wherever it goes. Here is a mind whose

Raptures are not conjured up
To serve occasion of poetic pomp,
But genuine—

and such as could not be excited or satisfied with pictures of what it loves.

It is consistent, therefore, when we find the poet's home a great, old-time mansion, so embosomed in trees and vines that we can hardly catch satisfactory glimpses of the bay on which it lies, through the leafy windows, of which an overhanging roof prolongs the shade. No greener, quieter, or more purely simple retreat can be found ; none with which the owner and his tastes and occupations are more in keeping. It would be absurd to say that all appearance of show or style is carefully avoided for it requires very little observation to perceive that these are absent from the place simply because they never entered its master's mind.

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I suppose if anything could completely displease Mr. Bryant with this beloved home, it would be the addition of any outward costliness, or even elegance, calculated to attract the attention of the passing stranger. Friend Richard Kirk—a Quaker of the Quakers, if he may be judged by his works—little thought, when he built this great, ample, square dwelling-place, in the lap of the hills, in 1787, that he was fashioning the house of a poet—one worthy to be spared when temple and tower went to the ground, because it is the sanctuary of a priest of Nature.

Whether any captain, or colonel, or knight in arms did spare it, from a prophetic insight into its destination, we cannot tell; but there was wild work in its vicinity, and stories of outrages perpetrated by “cow-boys” and other desperadoes are still fresh in old families. The wide region still called Hempstead was then inhabited for the most part by loyalists, devoutly attached to the parent

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government, and solicitous, by means of town meetings passing loyal resolutions, and conventions denouncing the spirit of rebellion against "his most gracious majesty, King George the Third," to put down the dangerous agitation that began to threaten "our civil and religious liberties, which can only be secured by our present constitution"; and this northern part of the township, in particular, held many worthy citizens who felt it their duty to resist to the last the unhal- lowed desire of the people to govern themselves.

In September, 1775, an official reports that "without the assistance of Col. Lasher's battalion" he "shall not be able, in Jamaica and Hempstead, to carry the resolutions of Congress into execution," as "the people conceal all their arms that are of any value." The disaffection of the district was considered important enough to justify a special commission from Congress, then sitting at Philadelphia, requiring the resitants to deliver

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their arms and ammunition on oath, as persons "incapable of resolving to live and die freemen, and more disposed to quit their liberties than part with the small portion of their property that may be necessary to defend them."

This seems to have had the desired effect, for the people not only brought in their arms, but were "much irritated with those who had led them to make opposition," says a contemporary letter. The lovers of peace and plenty, rather than commotion and scanty harvests, were, however, still so numerous in Queen's County, that on the 21st of October, 1776, about thirteen hundred freeholders presented a most humble petition to Lord Howe, entreating that he would "declare the County in the peace of His Majesty," and denouncing "the infatuated conduct of the Congress," as having "blasted their hopes of returning peace and security." Among the names appended to this petition we find that of Richard Kirk,—a lover of comfort, doubt-

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less, like his brethren in general,—and who, when once the drum had ceased to outrage the mild echoes of that Quaker region, returned to his farming or his merchandise, and in due season, being prospered, founded the substantial dwelling now known as Spring Bank, destined to last far into the time of freedom and safety, and to prove, in these latter days, fit harbor for a poet whose sympathies are anywhere but with the signers of that humble petition.

The house stands at the foot of a woody hill, which shelters it on the east, facing Hemstead Harbor, to which the flood-tide gives the appearance of a lake, bordered to its very edge with trees, through which, at intervals, are seen farm-houses and cottages, and all that brings to mind that beautiful image, “a smiling land.” The position is well chosen, and it is enhanced in beauty by a small artificial pond, collected from the springs with which the hill abounds, and lying between the house and the edge of the harbor, from which it

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is divided by an irregular embankment, affording room for a plantation of shade-trees and fine shrubbery. Here again Friend Richard was doing what he little thought of; for his only intention was to build a paper-mill—one of the earliest in the United States, whose wheel for many a year furnished employment to the outlet of the pond. The mill was burnt once and again—by way of hint, perhaps, that beauty is use enough,—and the visitor cannot but hope it will never be rebuilt.

The village at the head of the harbor was long called North Hempstead, but as there were already quite Hempsteads enough in Queen's County to perplex future topographers, the inhabitants united in desiring a more distinctive title, and applied to Mr. Bryant for his aid in choosing one. This is not so easy a matter as it seems at first glance; and in defect of all express guidance in the history of the spot, and desiring, too, a name at once musical in itself and agreeable in its associations, Mr. Bryant pro-

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posed Roslyn,—the town annals declaring that when the British evacuated the island in 1781, “The Sixtieth, or Royal American Regiment, marched out of Hempstead to the tune of Roslyn Castle.” The name is not too romantic for the place, for a more irregular, picturesque cluster of houses can hardly be found, perched here and there on the hillsides, embowered in foliage, and looking down upon a chain of pretty little lakes, on the outlet of which, overhanging the upper point of the harbor, is an old-fashioned mill with its pretty rural accessories. One can hardly believe this a bit of Long Island, which is by no means famed for romantic scenery.

After Richard Kirk’s time, other Quakers in succession became proprietors of the great farm-house and the little paper-mill, but at length they were purchased by Joseph W. Moulton, Esq., author of a history of New York, who, not relishing the plainness of the original style, surrounded the house with square columns

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and a heavy cornice. These help to shade a wide and ample piazza, shut in still more closely by tall trees and clustering vines, so that from within, the house is one bower of greenery, and the hottest sun of July leaves the ample hall and large rooms cool and comfortable.

The library occupies the northwest corner—and we need hardly say that of all the house this is the most attractive spot, not only because, besides ample store of books, it is supplied with all that can minister to quiet and refined pleasure, but because it is, *par excellence*, the haunt of the poet and his friends. Here, by the great table covered with periodicals and literary novelties, with the soft, ceaseless music of rustling leaves, and the singing of birds making the silence sweeter, the summer visitor may fancy himself in the very woods, only with a deeper and more grateful shade. And when wintry blasts are piping loud and the whispering leaves have changed to whirling ones, a bright wood-fire lights

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the home scene, enhanced in comfort by the inhospitable sky without; and the domestic lamp calls about it a smiling or musing circle, for whose conversation or silence the shelves around afford excellent material. The collection of books is not large, but widely various; Mr. Bryant's tastes and pursuits leading him through the entire range of literature, from the Fathers to Shelley, and from Courier to Jean Paul. In German, French, and Spanish he is proficient, and Italian he reads with ease; so all these languages are well represented in the library. He turns naturally from the driest treatise on politics or political economy to the wildest romance or the most tender poem, happy in a power of enjoying all that genius has created or industry achieved in literature.

The library has not, however, power to keep Mr. Bryant from the fields, in which he seeks health and pleasure a large part of every day that his editorial duties allow him to pass at home. To explore

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his farm, entering into the minutest details of its cultivation ; to thread the beautiful woodland hill back of the house, making winding paths and shady seats to overlook the water or command the distant prospect ; to labor in the garden with the perseverance of an enthusiast—these ought, perhaps, to be called his favorite occupations ; for as literature has been the business of his life, these out-door pleasures have all the charm of contrast together with that of relaxation.

And it is under the open sky, and engaged in rural matters, that Mr. Bryant is seen to advantage, that is, in his true character. It is here that the amenity and natural sweetness of disposition, sometimes clouded by the cares of life and the untoward circumstances of business intercourse, shine gently forth under the influences of Nature, so dear to the heart and tranquilizing to the spirits of her child. Here the eye puts on its deeper and softer lustre, and the voice modulates itself to the tone of affection, sympathy,

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and enjoyment. Little children cluster about the grave man's steps, or climb his shoulders in triumph ; and serenest eyes meet his in fullest confidence, finding there none of the sternness of which casual observers sometimes complain. It seems almost a pity that other walks should ever draw him hence ; but perhaps the contrast between garden walks and city pavements is required for the perfection and durability of rural pleasures.

There can hardly be found a man who has tried active life for fifty years, yet preserved so entire and resolute a simplicity of character and habits as Mr. Bryant. No one can be less a man of the world—so far as that term expresses a worldly man—in spite of a large share of worldly travel and extensive intercourse with society. A disposition somewhat exclusive, and a power of living self-inclosed at will, may account in part for the total failure of politics, society, or ambition to introduce anything artificial upon a character enabled by natural courage to

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face opposition, and by inherent self-respect to adhere to individual tastes in spite of fashion or convention.

And the simplicity which is the result of high cultivation is so much more potent than that which arises only from ignorance, that it may be doubted whether, if Mr. Bryant had never left his native village of Cummington, in the heart of Massachusetts, he would have been as free from all sophistication of taste and manners as at present. It is with no sentimental aim that I call him the child of Nature, but because he is one of the few who, by their docility and devotion, show that they are not ashamed of the great Mother or desirous to exchange her rule for something more fashionable or popular.

The father of Mr. Bryant was a man of taste and learning—a physician and an habitual student ; and his mother—not to discredit the general law which gives able mothers to eminent men—was a woman of excellent understanding and high char-

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acter, remarkable for judgment and decision as for faithfulness to her domestic duties. And here, in this little village of Cummington,—where William Cullen Bryant was born in 1794,—he began at ten years of age to write verses, which were printed in the Northampton newspaper of that day—the *Hampshire Gazette*. A year earlier he had written rhymes, which his father criticised and taught him to correct.

Precocity like this too often disappoints its admirers, but Bryant went on without faltering, and at fourteen wrote a satirical poem called the *Embargo*, which is, perhaps, one of the most wonderful performances of the kind on record. We know of nothing to compare with it except the achievements of Chatterton.

Here are a few of the lines—would you think a child penned them?

E'en while I sing, see Faction urge her claim,
Misled with falsehood, and with zeal inflame ;
Lift her black banner, spread her empire wide,
And stalk triumphant with a Fury's stride.
She blows her brazen trump, and, at the sound,

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A motley throng, obedient, flock around ;
A mist of changing hue o'er all she flings,
And darkness perches on her dragon wings !
O, might some patriot rise ! the gloom dispel,
Chase Error's mist, and break her magic spell !
But vain the wish, for, hark ! the murmuring
 meed

Of hoarse applause from yonder shed proceed ;
Enter, and view the thronging concourse there,
Intent with gaping mouth and stupid stare ;
While, in the midst, their supple leader stands,
Harangues aloud, and flourishes his hands ;
To adulation tunes his servile throat,
And sues, successful, for each blockhead's vote.

This poem was published in company with a few shorter ones, at Boston, in 1808. A short time afterward the author entered Williams College, and greatly distinguished himself during two years, at the end of which time he obtained an honorable discharge, intending to complete his education at Yale—a design which was, however, never carried into effect. He studied law, first with Judge Howe of Washington, afterwards with Mr. William Baylies of Bridgewater, and in 1815 was admitted to the bar at Plymouth. He practised law a single year at Plainfield, near his native place, and

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then removed to Great Barrington, in Berkshire, where, in 1821, he married Miss Frances Fairchild, whose portrait is exquisitely shadowed forth, to those who know her, in that tenderest, most domestic, and most personal poem that Bryant ever wrote, *The Future Life*. In the whole range of English literature there can hardly be found so delicate and touching a tribute to feminine excellence—a husband's testimony after twenty years of married life, not exempt from toils and trials.

The poem of *Thanatopsis* was written in 1812, when the writer was eighteen. I once heard a family friend say that when Dr. Bryant showed a copy to a lady well qualified to judge of such things, saying simply: "Here are some lines that our William has been writing," the lady read the poem, raised her eyes to the father's face, and burst into tears, in which that father, a somewhat stern and silent man, was not ashamed to join. And no wonder! It must have seemed a

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mystery, as well as a joy, that in a quiet country life, in the heart of eighteen, had grown up thoughts that even in boyhood shaped themselves into solemn harmonies, majestic as the diapason of ocean, fit for a temple-service beneath the vault of heaven.

The poem of the *Water Fowl* was written two years after, while Mr. Bryant was reading law at Bridgewater. These verses, which are in tone only less solemn than *Thanatopsis*, while they show a graphic power truly remarkable, were suggested by the actual sight of a solitary water-fowl, steadily flying towards the northwest at sunset, in a brightly illumined sky. They were published, with *Thanatopsis* and the *Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood*, in the *North American Review* of the year 1816.

In 1821 Mr. Bryant delivered the poem called *The Ages* before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge. At the suggestion of his friends it was published the same year, at Cambridge, together with the

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three poems just mentioned, and a very few others, among which was that called *Green River*, which he had a short time before contributed to the *Idle Man*, then in course of publication by his friend Dana.

In 1824 Mr. Bryant wrote a considerable number of papers for the *Literary Gazette*, published in Boston; and in 1825, by the advice of his excellent and lamented friend, Henry D. Sedgwick, he removed to New York, and became one of the editors of the *New York Review*, in conjunction with Henry James Anderson. At the end of six months this gentleman, between whom and Mr. Bryant there has ever since subsisted a strong friendship, was appointed Professor of Mathematics in Columbia College, and Robert C. Sands took his place as associate editor of the *Review*. The *Review*, however, was not destined to as long a life as it deserved—the life of *Reviews* as well as of men depending upon a multitude of contingencies—and at the end of the year Mr. Bryant was engaged as an

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assistant editor of the *Evening Post*. The next year he became one of the proprietors of that paper, and has so continued ever since.

In 1827, and the two years next succeeding, he found time to contribute a considerable share of the matter of an annual of superior character, called the *Talisman*, the whole of which was written by three persons—Sands, Verplanck, and Bryant. He also furnished several stories for a publication called *Tales of the Glauber Spa*, published by the Harpers. The other writers were Miss Sedgwick, Paulding, Sands, Verplanck, and Leggett. Mr. Bryant's contributions were *The Skeleton's Cave* and *Medfield*.

The first general collection of his works was in 1832, when he gave to the world in one volume all the poems he was willing to acknowledge. His publisher was Mr. Elam Bliss, now no more, a man of whose sterling goodness Mr. Bryant loves to speak, as eminent for exemplary liberality in dealings, and for a most kind and

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generous disposition. It was for him that the *Talisman* was written.

In 1834 Mr. Bryant sailed with his family to Europe, leaving the *Evening Post* in the charge of his friend Leggett. His residence abroad was mostly in Italy and Germany, both of which countries he found too interesting for a mere glance. Here the pleasure and improvement of himself and his family would have detained him full three years—the allotted period of his sojourn abroad—but news of Mr. Leggett's illness, and of some disadvantage arising from it in the affairs of the paper, compelled him to return home suddenly in 1836, leaving his family to follow at more leisure under the care of Mr. Longfellow, who had been abroad at the same time. The business aspect of the *Post* was unpromising enough at this juncture, but sound judgment and patient labor succeeded, in time, in restoring it to the prosperous condition which it has enjoyed for half a century.

In 1842 appeared *The Fountain*, gravely

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sweet, like its predecessors, and breathing of Nature and green fields, in spite of editorial and pecuniary cares. In 1843, Mr. Bryant refreshed himself by a visit to the Southern States, and passed a few weeks in Florida. The *White-Footed Deer*, with several other poems, was published a year after. In 1845, Mr. Bryant visited England, Scotland, and the Shetland Isles for the first time; and during the next year a new collection was made of his poems, with the outward garnish of mechanical elegance, and also numerous illustrations by Leutze. This edition, published at Philadelphia, is enriched with a beautiful portrait by Cheney—the best, in our opinion, ever yet published. This graceful and delicate head, with its fine, classic outline, in which taste and sensitiveness are legible at a glance, has a singular resemblance to the engraved portraits of Rubens, taken in a half-Spanish hat of wavy outline, such as Mr. Bryant is fond of wearing in his wood-rambles. Add the hat to this exquisite miniature

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of Cheney's, and we have Rubens complete—an odd enough resemblance, when we contrast the productions of the painter and the poet.

Only one still more characteristic and perfect likeness of Bryant exists—the full-length in Durand's picture of the poet standing with his friend Cole—the eminent landscape-painter—among the Catskill woods and waterfalls. This picture is particularly to be prized, not only for the sweetness and truth of its general execution, but because it gives us the poet and the painter where they loved best to be, and just as they were when under the genial influence and in the complete ease of such scenes. Such pictures are half biographies.

In 1848 Cole died, and Mr. Bryant, from a full heart, pronounced his funeral oration. Friendship is truly the wine of the poet's life, and Cole was a beloved friend. If Mr. Bryant ever appears stern or indifferent, it is not when speaking or thinking of the loved and lost. No man chooses

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his friends more carefully ; none prizes them dearer, or values their society more—none does them more generous and delicate justice. Such attachment cannot afford to be indiscriminate.

March, 1849, saw Mr. Bryant in Cuba, and in the summer of the same year he visited Europe for the third time. The letters written during his various journeys and voyages were collected and published in the year 1850 by Mr. George Palmer Putnam. They comprise a volume embodying a vast amount of practical and poetic thought expressed with the united modesty and good sense that so eminently characterize every production of Mr. Bryant ; not a superfluous word, not an empty or a showy remark. As a writer of pure, manly, straightforward English, Mr. Bryant has few equals and no superiors among us.

In the beginning of 1852, on the occasion of the public commemoration held in honor of the genius and worth of James Fenimore Cooper, and in view of a monu-

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ment to be erected in New York to that great American novelist, Mr. Bryant pronounced a discourse on his life and writings, marked by the warmest appreciation of his claims to the remembrance and gratitude of his country. Some even of Mr. Cooper's admirers objected that the poet had assigned a higher niche to his old friend than the next century will be willing to award him ; if it be so, perhaps the peculiarly manly and bold character of Cooper's mind gave him an unsuspected advantage in Mr. Bryant's estimation. He looked upon him, it may be, as a rock of truth and courage in the midst of a fluctuating sea of dilletantism and time-serving, and valued him with unconscious reference to this particular quality, so rare and precious. But the discourse was an elegant production, and a new proof of the generosity with which Mr. Bryant, who never courts praise, is disposed to accord it.

Mr. Bryant's habits of life have a smack of asceticism, although he is the disciple of

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none of the popular schools which, under various forms, claim to rule the present world in that direction. Milk is more familiar to his lips than wine. He eats sparingly of animal food, but he is by no means afraid to enjoy roast goose lest he should outrage the names of his ancestors, like some modern enthusiasts. He loves music, and his ear is finely attuned to the varied harmonies of wood and wave. His health is delicate, yet he is very seldom ill; his life laborious, yet carefully guarded against excessive and exhausting fatigue. He is a man of rule, but none the less tolerant of want of method in others; strictly self-governed, but not prone to censure the unwary or the weak-willed. In religion he is at once catholic and devout, and to moral excellence no soul bows lower.

Placable we can perhaps hardly call him, for impressions on his mind are almost indelible; but it may with the strictest truth be said, that it requires a great offence, or a great unworthiness, to make

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an enemy of him, so strong is his sense of justice. Not amid the bustle and dust of the political arena, cased in armor offensive and defensive, is a champion's more intimate self to be estimated, but in the pavilion or the bower, where, in robes of ease, and with all professional ferocity laid aside, we see his natural form and complexion, and hear in placid and domestic tones the voice so lately thundering above the fight.

So we willingly follow Mr. Bryant to Roslyn; see him musing on the pretty rural bridge that spans the fish-pond; or taking the oar in his daughter's fairy boat; or pruning his trees; or talking over farming matters with his neighbors; or—to return to the spot whence we set out some time ago—sitting calm and happy in that pleasant library, surrounded by the friends he loves to draw about him, or listening to the prattle of infant voices, quite as much at home there as under their own more especial roof—his daughter's—within the same enclosure.

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In person Mr. Bryant is tall, slender, symmetrical, and well-poised; in carriage eminently firm and self-possessed. He is fond of long rural walks and of gymnastic exercises—on all which his health depends. Poetical composition tries him severely—so severely that his efforts of that kind are necessarily rare. His are no holiday verses; and those who urge his producing a long poem are, perhaps, proposing that he should, in gratifying their admiration, build for himself a monument with a crypt beneath.

Let us rather content ourselves with asking “a few more of the same,” especially of the later poems, in which, certainly, the poet trusts his fellows with a nearer and more intimate view of his inner and peculiar self than was his wont in earlier times. Let him more and more give a human voice to woods and waters; and, in acting as the accepted interpreter of Nature, speak fearlessly to the heart as well as to the eye. His countrymen were never more disposed to hear him

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with delight; for since the public demand for his poems has placed a copy in every house in the land, the taste for them has steadily increased, and the national pride in the writer's genius become a generous enthusiasm, which is ready to grant him an apotheosis while he lives.

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Not so terrible to the enemy as it is!*
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