BLISS CARMAN

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IT is not my purpose here to attempt anything like an exposition or a critical analysis of Carman's genius. I cannot yet, if ever, stand sufficiently apart from him for such a task. Moreover, the doing of it would be superfluous, for the present. It has just been done by another hand, and done so brilliantly that one might well shrink from risking comparisons. Dr. Cappon's study of "Bliss Carman's Beginnings", in the autumn number of the *Queen's Quarterly*, covers more ground than its title would seem to imply. It is so adequate and so illuminating that any analysis I might attempt would resolve itself into a kind of running comment, with here and there some additions, perhaps, but no significant disagreement. When Dr. Cappon says "Carman's tendency is to transcendentalize experience rather than to explore it psychologically", he uncovers for us the very core of Carman's genius. I can not imagine any clearer guidance to the understanding of Carman's poetry as a whole than that one revealing sentence. This poetry is so considerable in bulk, and has appeared in so many small separate volumes, that it is seldom viewed as a whole even by its most convinced admirers. It is so varied, alike in form and mood and matter, so full of complexities masking behind simplicity of expression, that the essential unity underlying all its variety has hitherto, I think, eluded us. Dr. Cappon has dragged it into light.

My purpose then, in this article, is to catch and imprison in words, before they fade, some of those impressions of my great kinsman, friend and exemplar which yet linger in my memory, in the hope that they may help to build up such a portrait of the man himself as shall appear not unworthy of the imperishable works which he has left us. And I must beg forgiveness in advance if, in the course of these reminiscences, I may seem to obtrude too much of my own personality. It is worth while to risk the charge of egotism if thereby I may hope to make the picture of my friend in any degree more intimate or more vivid.

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Born in Fredericton, New Brunswick, on the 15th of April, 1861, Carman was only fifteen months younger than myself. But

as I grew up much faster than he did, in the matter of writing verse I got the start of him by many years. Before I was twelve I had begun to scribble verses,—or rather, I had begun striving laboriously to construct fragments of verse which never seemed to me worth finishing. After three or four years of such striving, however, stimulated by the wise and sympathetic criticism of my father, who had fed me from babyhood on the best of poetry—on Milton, Shelley, Byron, Tennyson in particular—I gained craftsmanhip enough to bring some of these youthful efforts to completion, and so was able to issue my first book of verse at the age of twenty. At this time Carman was just trying his hand on some metrical translations from Homer. The appearance of my little book, and the generous way it was welcomed by kindly critics, undoubtedly stimulated him to further efforts. But these efforts showed no sign whatever of having been influenced by anything that I had written. Bliss took so much longer to grow up, both intellectually and physically, than his more diminutive cousin, because it was decreed that he should have so much further to grow. It was much the same way in the field of sports. In the hundred yard sprint Bliss was no match for me at all; but in the long distance races his lanky six-foot-three of wiry sinew left me at last panting but undismayed far in the rear. Apropos of this lean length of his, which was fitly carried out in his extraordinarily long arms, his beautiful tapering hands, and his narrow number twelve feet—and also of the fact that his birthday was exactly in mid-April—he was wont to describe himself as a cross between an April Fool and a Maypole.

Not till I had passed my fourteenth year did I come to know Bliss intimately. Like him, to be sure, I am a child of the beautiful and storied River St. John, my birthplace being at the mouth of the Keswick stream, ten miles above Fredericton. But a few months after my birth my father was appointed rector of the parish of Westcock and Dorchester, at the head of the Bay of Fundy; and the following fourteen years of my life were spent at the quaint old colonial homestead known as Westcock Parsonage, on the wooded ridge of upland looking out across the green marshes and tumultuous tides of the Tantramar. During all these years, as far as memory serves me, I saw Bliss but once,—on a brief visit to Fredericton when I was about eight years old. In that home city of the clan, which seemed to me chiefly populated by grandfathers and grandmothers, uncles and aunts, and cousins innumerable, I was taken, of course, to see "Uncle Carman" and "Aunt Sophie" (my mother's sister)—and "Blissie". Blissie's little

sister, Murray, was then too young and in my eyes too unimportant to leave any impression on my memory. But "Blissie", as well as his father and mother, I remember very vividly. "Aunt Sophie" I loved at once. Tall and rather thin, she had features of a clean-cut austerity in marked resemblance to our great kinsman, Emerson, whose mother also was a Bliss. But her mouth and her eyes revealed the unfailing kindliness which made her the best loved of all the aunts. My "Uncle Carman" I admired tremendously. He was very tall—some inches over six feet—and very distinguished looking, with his luxuriant waving hair and well-groomed beard and peculiarly bright dark eyes. My admiration for this splendid figure would have been wholesomely mixed with awe, but for the indulgent twinkle which tempered that penetrating regard. Toward Blissie I was inclined to be just a little patronizing; for was I not a whole year and three months older than he, although he was already a couple of inches the taller? I remember thinking his hair (it was a golden bronze) ought to be cut at once. Mine was always kept short. He was a grave, shy little boy, and he looked to me awfully "good",—an appearance, by the way, which inexplicably clung to him throughout his after life, and now and again led to some misunderstanding. However, I presently learned that one must not always judge by appearances. Blissie and I were sent out into the garden, to play and get acquainted. I found that Blissie had a lively imagination, quick in response to large and constructive ideas. In the course of our well meant efforts to put these ideas into effect, some unavoidable damage was done to the hitherto perfect lawn. I was grieved to find myself more than suspected of having led my (then) examplary little cousin into mischief. But Blissie was staunchly insistent in claiming an equal share of whatever credit might be due for large, constructive ideas. It is possible that he was telling the truth. It is arguable that then, as was frequently to happen in later years, our intellects had struck fire from the contact with each other. However it may be, from that hour I fully appreciated my cousin.

When, in 1874, my father became rector of Fredericton, and from Westcock Parsonage we were transplanted to the massive old Georgian house of red brick known as The Rectory, I was brought into almost daily contact with Carman. We both attended the Collegiate School; and though he was in the Form junior to mine, we were both in the same coterie of schoolboy intimates bound together by like tastes and pursuits. From that day till my graduation from the University of New Brunswick in 1879, our paths lay never very far apart.

We were an enterprising and somewhat robustious lot of youngsters, half a dozen of them our own cousins, that coterie of intimates. Carman was much the quietest and least aggressive of the lot. He did not box or wrestle, and he lazily avoided quarrels when he could. But no one ever "picked on" him unduly, or tried to take advantage of his mildness. He was highly dangerous in a rough and tumble. The vice-like grip of his long, inexorable fingers was known and respected. His lank stature did not fit him for general sports and gymnasium work, and he was much too deliberate for the fierce struggle of football,—to all of which I was feverishly addicted—but he was a fine long distance runner, a powerful swimmer, an expert and tireless canoeist. In his school work he was no plodder, but just reasonably diligent,—enough so to give the general impression that he could make a brilliant showing if he tried. But he was not emulous. And he was not keenly interested in any of his subjects excepting the Greek and Latin. He was too much of a dreamer, and too absorbed in his outside reading, to strive for high marks in his examinations; but once in a while he would win a prize,—perhaps inadvertently, perhaps to please his devoted father and mother. His unfailing and courteous attention in the class-room, however, and his instinctively chivalrous dislike of making things difficult for those of his teachers who had not the gift of discipline, gained him at last a distinction which he was far from seeking. He was awarded the Good Conduct Prize. I can still see the wide, embarrassed grin with which he received it. I can still hear his whimsical apology to his schoolmates, his modest suggestion that he might live it down. But his father and mother didn't seem to mind at all.

During my first couple of terms at the Collegiate School, the Head Master, George R. Parkin, was away on leave, taking post-graduate work at Oxford, and making a deep impression in the debates at the Oxford Union by his fervent and convincing eloquence. In his absence, the post of acting Head Master was filled by Dr. H. S. Bridges, who afterwards became Professor of Greek and Latin at the university. He was an altogether admirable Head Master, commanding not only obedience but unqualified respect, and those of us who had the good luck to study our Latin and Greek under his guidance have reason to remember him with gratitude. But he was somewhat aloof and awe-inspiring, and none of us came very closely in contact with him. Parkin, on the other hand, was intensely personal, and essentially an inspirer. To him each pupil in his classes was an individual interest, and to be handled individually. It was a very phlegmatic pupil indeed

who could resist catching fire from his vivid and sympathetic enthusiasm.

To Carman and myself in particular, Parkin's return to the school was an event which stamped itself ineffaceably on our lives. The influence of that stimulating contact was never afterwards quite to fade away. Gladly we worked for him, and in his classes it was never dull. What seemed the dryest of passages from a Ciceronian oration might suddenly come alive and significant to us when our great teacher would interject a few flashing words to tell us how he first saw the honey-coloured moon rising over the roofs of Rome and flooding down its radiance upon the pale ruins of the Forum. By the look in his eyes we could see that he was far away from the classroom at that moment, and dreaming again among those ghostly columns. And it seemed to us that we shared the vision with him.

But it was outside school hours that Parkin did most for us two ardent boys,—that he gave us most inspiringly of himself, of his high enthusiasms, and of the atmosphere of that wonderful far world of art and letters from which he had just returned. Filling our pockets with apples, (he was addicted to apples, as Adam was, but more judiciously!) he would take us favoured two for long hikes over the wooded hills behind Fredericton. He would take us as comrades, not as pupils; and his talk would weave magic for us till the austere fir-clad slopes would transform themselves before us into the soft green Cumnor Hills, and the roofs and spires of Fredericton, far below, embowered in her rich elms, would seem to us the ivied towers of Oxford. England just then was thrilling to the new music, the new colour, the new raptures of Swinburne and Rossetti; Parkin was steeped in them; and in his rich voice he would recite to us ecstatically, over and over till we too were intoxicated with them, the great choruses from "Atalanta in Calydon", passages from "The Triumph of Time", and "Rococo", —but above all, "The Blessed Damozel", which he loved so passionately that Bliss suspected him of sometimes saying it instead of his prayers. But Parkin's love and understanding of poetry was not confined to the work of the Pre-Raphaelite group. He would quote Tennyson, Browning and Arnold to us; and he taught us to know Homer and Horace, not as subjects for laborious translation and scansion and parsing, but as supreme poets and masters of verbal music. In conversation with us, indeed, he was given to quoting from Horace as familiarly as from the English poets - and sometimes with a neatness that would surely have delighted the genial Q. H. F. himself. One day, when the three of us were

trout-fishing on the upper waters of the Nashwaak,—or rather, when Parkin and I were fishing, while Carman dreamily trailed his flies over a sunlit shallow where no trout would ever happen by, —I struck sharply to the rise of a fish so small that the rash fingerling was flung high into the air, where it caught and hung gleaming in the upper branches of an elm. On the instant, pointing upward, Parkin declaimed solemnly—

Piscium et summa genus haesit ulmo. Surely as pat a sally as one could ever hope to encounter!

When I passed on "up the Hill" from the school to the gray old university, I was foolish enough to let myself lose that intimate contact with Parkin which Carman was to enjoy, and richly profit by, for yet two years more. And of Carman himself, during those two years, I saw little enough. My time was taken up by all those absorbing interests which go to fill the life of a not-too-studious undergrad. But during the summer vacations we were together as before, on camping trips and long expeditions by canoe into the wilderness regions of Northern New Brunswick. These expeditions usually consisted of two or three canoes, and the *personnel* would often vary somewhat. Among the school and college mates who accompanied us at one time or another were several who were to win distinction in after life—Frank McInnes, who had once saved my life at the imminent risk of his own by plunging beneath a raft of logs and dragging me forth when I had been sucked under by the current,—Douglas Hazen (now Sir Douglas), my most frequent rival and usually my vanquisher in the competition for scholarships and medals,—Allan Randolph and Leigh Babbitt, later to become eminent in the banking world. But there was one without whom, for either Carman or myself, no such expedition could ever be complete—that most loved and relied-upon of all our cousins, Andrew Straton, to whom we have both paid tribute in our verse. Andrew, at that time Bliss's closest comrade, with me a feeble second, was a remarkable personality. Had he lived, he would surely have made a name for himself. He was two or three years older than I. Tall and powerful, an all-round athlete and expert woodsman, he was the unquestioned leader in all our expeditions. His courage and his resourcefulness were equalled only by his unfailing kindliness and cheerful humour,—and whatever he said went! Moreover, he had a finely equipped mind, loved good poetry wisely, and on occasion could turn a bit of finished verse which never lacked colour and music. I dwell upon Andrew Straton here, not only because I loved him myself, but because he exerted a shaping influence on Carman's character if not upon his art.

These long canoe trips, of course, took place in the vacation months, the closed season for all beasts and birds of interest to the hunter. And we respected the game laws. Yet we always carried two or three guns with us, in case of the unexpected. But the cold, clear amber waters of the northern interior of New Brunswick swarm with trout, and we were all keen sportsmen—except Carman. He would never touch a gun at all, lest he should inadvertently shoot something; and though we could sometimes persuade him to cast a fly, it was always in the hope that he would not catch anything. And he never did. None the less, when we had caught the trout, he had no objection to helping to clean them—no delectable task when the black flies and vicious little "bite-em-no-see-ems" were burrowing in eyes and hair. And when the trout, well peppered and salted within and rolled in yellow corn-meal without, were fried in pork fat to just the right rich shade of brown, Carman had no compunctions whatever about devouring them. All he was averse to was being their executioner. He would have been rather aggrieved if the rest of us had become infected with his gentle aversion.

I have never seen Carman so happy, so utterly at home, as on these wilderness expeditions. He was essentially native to the woods and the lonely inland waters. He paddled and handled his canoe like an Indian. He trod the forest trails like an Indian, noiseless, watchful, taciturn, moving with a long, loose-kneed slouch, flat-footed, and with toes almost turned in rather than out—an Indian's gait, not a white man's! That love of the sea which was later to show itself in so much of Carman's poetry was perhaps atavistic, an inheritance from some of our New England and approximately "Mayflower" ancestry.

After my graduation, in 1879, I rather lost personal touch with Carman for some years. Leaving Fredericton, I had flung myself headlong, with the audacity of my nineteen years, into the strenuous adventure of living. I had moved to the north shore of the province, to the old deep-sea-shipping and lumber town of Chatham, on the Miramichi, and become Principal of the Grammar School there. I had taken unto myself a wife, carrying off an undeniably comely bit of Fredericton in the act. I had brought out a book. I imagined myself important. Life to me was crowded, much to the detriment of my dreaming.

Carman, meanwhile, remained at Fredericton,—and it was good to be in Fredericton in those days. He finished his college course with distinction, graduating with honours in both classics and mathematics. For a little while he taught in the Collegiate

School, under Parkin, but found teaching by no means congenial to his temperament. He never could understand people not understanding things which to him seemed perfectly clear; and all through his life he hated to explain. He would even rather be misunderstood,—as his whimsical humour often led him to be. He gave up his post in the Collegiate, therefore, and settled down to read law. It was not that Blackstone's *Commentaries* had any particular charm for him, or that torts and kindred mysteries interested him in the least, or that he harboured any serious ambition to become a legal luminary. All he sought was a reasonable excuse for living at home, where he knew that he was needed. In his heart he was restless. His feet were itching to wander. He wanted Oxford, England, Italy. But he quietly clamped down the lid upon his restlessness, and stayed. His father, who had been by no means young when he married Bliss's mother (having already brought up a large family by a previous marriage) was now old and feeble, and his mother, though so much younger than her husband, had grown so frail as to cause anxiety. He knew they would be unhappy if he were to leave them. He knew also that, in their devotion, they would be still more unhappy if they thought they were thwarting any of his ambitions. So he pretended, and altogether successfully, that his chief ambition was to study law in Fredericton.

As I have already suggested, the Fredericton of those days was a good place for a poet to be. The lovely little city of the Loyalists, bosomed in her elms and half encircled by the sweep of her majestic river, was stirring with a strange aesthetic ferment. With not more than six thousand inhabitants, she was not only the capital, with Government House, the House of Assembly, the Law Courts, and all they stood for, but also she was the cathedral city, as well as the educational centre of the province. She had little of the commercial spirit, and I fear she was hardly as democratic as is now-a-days considered the proper thing to be. But she was not stagnant, and she was not smug. Instead of expecting all her people to be cut of one pattern, she seemed rather to prefer them to be just a little queer. She was indulgent to their eccentricities as long as these were not too offensive. Conformity, that tyrant god of small town life, got scant tribute from her. There was much good reading done,—up-to-date reading; and if people wrote verses, they had no need to be apologetic about it. To Fredericton it did not seem impossible that some of them might even turn out to be *good* verses. Good verses were, indeed, being written, not only in the Carman house, the big brick Rectory, and that high-

gabled old dwelling on Brunswick St. which our husky cousins, the Straton boys, vivaciously inhabited,—where all the clan foregathered,—and where that most erratic genius of the clan, Barry Straton, shy recluse and wilful roughneck, was composing a little volume of fine poetry called "The Building of the Bridge", now very precious to collectors of rare *Canadiana*. In other Fredericton homes also, where good literature was loved and studied, the newly awakened impulse to beauty was groping toward expression. A slim, dark-eyed and black-browed youth, by the name of Francis Sherman, when not toiling at his desk in the Bank, was dreaming with William Morris and Rossetti over old romances of Camelot and Lyonesse. The ultimate fruitage of this dreaming was a volume of poems called "Matins", which remains to this day almost unknown in Canada or elsewhere. But I cannot believe that it will always remain so. I feel that for sheer poetry, distilled and quintessential, we have produced little to equal it. This sudden outflowering of the poetic impulse which, for perhaps a score of years, made the name of Fredericton conspicuous in the world of letters, is a thing which some critics have been puzzled to account for. I am inclined to ascribe it, in no small part, to the vitalizing influence of George R. Parkin, falling upon soil that was peculiarly fitted to receive it.

(*To be continued.*)