

The Children of the Night'

By Theodore Roosevelt

President of the United States

THE "twilight of the poets" has been especially gray in America; for poetry is of course one of those arts in which the smallest amount of work of the very highest class is worth an infinity of good work that is not of the highest class. The touch of the purple makes a poem out of verse, and if it is not there, there is no substitute. It is hard to account for the failure to produce in America of recent years a poet who in the world of letters will rank as high as certain American sculptors and painters rank in the world of art.

But individual poems appear from time to time, by Mr. Madison Cawein, by Mr. Clinton Scollard, by Dr. Maurice Egan, and others; and more rarely a little volume of poetry appears, like Bliss Carman's "Ballads of Lost Haven." Such a book is Edward Arlington Robinson's "The Children of the Night."

It is rather curious that Mr. Robinson's volume should not have attracted more attention. There is an undoubted touch of genius in the poems collected in this volume, and a curious simplicity and good faith, all of which qualities differentiate them sharply from ordinary collections of the kind. There is in them just a little of the light that never was on land or sea, and in such light the objects described often have nebulous outlines; but it is not always necessary in order to enjoy a poem that one should be able to translate it into terms of mathematical accuracy. Indeed, those who admire the coloring of Turner, those who like to read how—and to wonder why—Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came, do not wish always to have the ideas presented to them with cold, hard, definite outlines; and to a man with the poetic temperament it is inevitable that life should often appear clothed with a certain sad mysticism. In the present volume I am not sure that I understand

"Luke Havergal;" but I am entirely sure that I like it.

Whoever has lived in country America knows the gray, empty houses from which life has gone. It is of one of these that "The House on the Hill" was written.

"They are all gone away,
The House is shut and still,
There is nothing more to say.

Through broken walls and gray
The winds blow bleak and shrill:
They are all gone away.

Nor is there one to-day
To speak them good or ill:
There is nothing more to say.

Why is it then we stray
Around that sunken sill?
They are all gone away,

And our poor fancy-play
For them is wasted skill:
There is nothing more to say.

There is ruin and decay
In the House on the Hill:
They are all gone away,
There is nothing more to say."

The next poem, "Richard Cory," illustrates a very ancient but very profound philosophy of life with a curiously local touch which points its keen insight. Those who feel poetry in their marrow and fiber are the spiritual heirs of the ages; and so it is natural that this man from Maine, many of whose poems could have been written only by one to whom the most real of lives is the life of the American small town, should write his "Ballade of Broken Flutes"—where "A lonely surge of ancient spray told of an unforgetful sea;"—should write the poem beginning:

"Since Persia fell at Marathon,
The yellow years have gathered fast:
Long centuries have come and gone;"

and the very original sonnet on Amaryllis, the last three lines of which are:

"But though the trumpets of the world were glad,

¹ *The Children of the Night*. By Edward Arlington Robinson. Richard G. Badger & Co., Boston.

It made me lonely and it made me sad
To think that Amaryllis had grown old."

Some of his images stay fixed in one's
mind, as in "The Pity of the Leaves,"
the lines running:

"The brown, thin leaves that on the stones
outside
Skipped with a freezing whisper."

Sometimes he writes, as in "The
Tavern," of what most of us feel we
have seen; and then again of what we
have seen only with the soul's eyes.

I shall close by quoting entire his
poem on "The Wilderness," which could
have been written only by a man into
whose heart there had entered deep the
very spirit of the vast and melancholy
northern forests:

"Come away! come away! there's a frost
along the marshes,
And a frozen wind that skims the shoal where
it shakes the dead black water;
There's a moan across the lowland and a
wailing through the woodland
Of a dirge that sings to send us back to the
arms of those that love us.
There is nothing left but ashes now where
the crimson chills of autumn
Put off the summer's languor with a touch
that made us glad
For the glory that is gone from us, with a
flight we cannot follow,
To the slopes of other valleys and the sounds
of other shores.

Come away! come away! you can hear them
calling, calling,
Calling us to come to them, and roam no
more.
Over there beyond the ridges and the land
that lies between us,
There's an old song calling us to come!

Come away! come away! for the scenes we
leave behind us
Are barren for the lights of home and a flame
that's young forever;

And the lonely trees around us creak the
warning of the night-wind,
That love and all the dreams of love are away
beyond the mountains.

The songs that call for us to-night, they have
called for men before us,
And the winds that blow the message, they
have blown ten thousand years;
But this will end our wander-time, for we
know the joy that waits us
In the strangeness of home-coming, and a
faithful woman's eyes.

Come away! come away! there is nothing
now to cheer us—
Nothing now to comfort us, but love's road
home:—
Over there beyond the darkness there's a
window gleams to greet us,
And a warm hearth waits for us within.

Come away! come away!—or the roving
fiend will hold us,
And make us all to dwell with him to the end
of human faring:
There are no men yet can leave him when his
hands are clutched upon them,
There are none will own his enmity, there are
none will call him brother.
So we'll be up and on the way, and the less
we brag the better
For the freedom that God gave us and the
dread we do not know:—
The frost that skips the willow-leaf will again
be back to blight it,
And the doom we cannot fly from is the
doom we do not see.

Come away! come away! there are dead
men all around us—
Frozen men that mock us with a wild, hard
laugh
That shrieks and sinks and whimpers in the
shrill November rushes,
And the long full wind on the lake."

Mr. Robinson has written in this little
volume not verse but poetry. Whether
he has the power of sustained flight
remains to be seen.