The Poets and Poetry of North Carolina

By HIGHT C. MOORE, Editor Biblical Recorder.

IV.—MARY BAYARD CLARKE.

Mary Bayard Clarke, daughter of Thomas P. Devereux, was born in Raleigh, N. C., May 12, 1829. She took at home under a governess the same course pursued by her brother at Princeton and was therefore highly educated. In 1848 she was married by her uncle Bishop Leonidas Polk, at his home near New Orleans to Capt. William J. Clarke, graduate of our State University, Confederate officer, later judge and literatus in North Carolina. She and her husband were close friends of General and Mrs. Robert E. Lee. Her culture was enriched by travel, particularly wintering in Cuba and six or seven years in Texas. Her later life was spent in New Bern where she died March 31, 1886, just two months after the death of her husband.

What "Tenella" Wrote.

At sixteen she wrote her first poem— "Nemo Semper Felix Est," which her son (who left a typewritten sketch of her life) considered rarely equaled by later and more studied composition. She herself considered "Under the Lava" her best poem; it is truly a fine piece of work, but certainly "The Triumph of Spring" is its equal, many would say superior. In 1845 Mrs. Clarke made the first compilation of State verse—"Wood Notes; or, Carolina Carols: A Collection of North Carolina Poetry." It appeared in two volumes and contained one hundred and eighty-two poems by sixty writers, "Tenella" herself in eight poems furnishing the best work in the volumes. Her second work appeared in 1866, contained sixty poems, and was entitled "Mosses From a Rolling Stone; or, Idle Moments of a Busy Woman." The last of her works was a long poem of sixty-five pages entitled "Clytie and Zenobia; or, The Lily and the Palm." It was published in 1871. Though other women have written, some of them well, no other has yet approached Mrs. Clarke in either quality or volume of work; "Tenella" still remains the queen among Carolina bards.

A Blossom Here and There.

Gleaning in the field of Mrs. Clarke's shorter poems we gather but a flower here and there fragrant with thought of motherhood, sadness, patriotism, love, and religion.

We note, first of all, the tender outpouring of the mother-soul. In "My Children" as a young mother she wrote:

> What dew is to the flowers,
> The rainbow to the sky,
> Are these darlings to my pathway
> Which they cheer and beautify.

In another poem the beautiful picture of the mother leading her child in evening devotion is charmingly presented:

> Clasp thy little hands my child
> For it is the close of day,
> And yon star with lustre mild
> Tells us it is time to pray.

In the domain of love we have this faithful little picture:

> And oft in love a friendship ends
> Though lovers rarely change to friends.

The complementary contrasts in the character of man and woman are finely drawn by Mrs. Clarke. In her splendid poem on "The Triumph of Spring" occurs this parenthetical reflection:

> 'Tis thus that woman gains her end—in weakness finds her strength,
> By yielding wins her way to power, and reigns a queen at length;
> Sweet is the music she can make, if with love's touch she play,
> And chords will vibrate in his heart, who scorned her open sway;
> The chilling frost that round it clings her tender love can melt,
> If like the breath of early spring, that love, unseen, is felt.
> Oft by a word, a smile, a look, she prompts to generous deeds
> While man benignly smiles, and led—still fancies that he leads.

Further and fuller illustration of this same theme appears in some of the extracts which we quote below from Clytie and Zenobia.

On the religious side Mrs. Clarke was not neglectful. "Oremus" embodies fine sentiment and "Religion" stresses the fundamental:

> Creeds, dogmas, fables, myths and all
> Shall crumble and decay,
> But Love—the kernel—lives when Faith
> The husk, has passed away.

Clytie and Zenobia.

This is the longest and the greatest of Mrs. Clarke's poems. It contains a thrilling story in the background and embodies a richer cluster of lofty poetic thoughts.

The scene is laid in ancient Palmyra—"an island in a sea of sand"—during the days of King Odenatus, who, with his wife Zenobia, won many victories and established the kingdom more and more firmly and widely.

The story opens with a recital of events occurring in the Temple of the Sun on New Year morning. The anxious priests are watching the sun's appearance as the forecast for the year. When, at last, he appears above the eastern horizon there are unfavorable portents which none can interpret; though shining clearly at first, he was soon obscured by a cloud freighted with thunder and lightning; but after a time, the sun shone forth again and a beautiful rainbow was set in the receding cloud. No one could interpret the meaning; yet all felt that the kingdom was to pass through a shadow before the year had worn away.

Upon the throne sat one of the best of kings and one of the loveliest of queens. In both there was a happy combination of Love and Ambition, and upon these traits in woman and in man the author dwells with fine discrimination:

> Ambition is a fearful dower
> When woman may not own its power,
> Though burning with intense desire
> To feed, not quench, its latent fire;
> Conscious of power to make a name,
> Yet lacking strength to conquer fame;
> Tied down by petty cares which bind
> The body fast, yet leave the mind
> To fret and struggle in despair
> With greater ills which it must bear;
> When love though pure and unalloyed,
> Still leaves an intellectual void,—
> A void its sweetness does not fill,
> A longing want it cannot still.
> Too often by the struggle torn,
> By many an inward conflict worn,
> A prey to doubt, the sport of fears,
> The pearl of health dissolved in tears,
> Too proud to yield, too weak to fight,
> She longs at noontide for the night.
>
> Love is but of man's life a part,
> It does not fill both head and heart;
> Its myrtles he would twine with bay,
> And 'mid its roses laurels lay.
> At intervals, fanned by its breeze,
> He lies at rest in Capuan ease,
> Then cheered and strengthened for the strife,
> Enters the battle-field of life.
> And there are women, who, like men,
> Need something more than love, and when
> It is not of their life the whole,
> And does not fill head, heart, and soul,
> Leaving no wish that is denied,
> No longing want ungratified,
> Laurels and bays they too would twine,—
> Not idly sit and hopeless pine.
> Though love is sweet, the danger's great
> When eagles stoop with doves to mate;
> They needs must soar to be content,
> And if within a dove-cote pent,
> E'en of their love they may grow weary,
> And sigh for freedom and an aerie.
> But she who's mated with her kind,
> Who in her highest flights will find
> Just o'er her head her king-bird rise,
> Glorying in every flight she tries,
> And urging her to fields still higher,
> May feed with love ambition's fire,
> Yet make of home a peaceful nest,
> With all love's soft emotions blest.

One day Zenobia accompanies her husband with his companions and attendants on a tiger hunt. As she dashes through the forest with her powerful steed, under complete control, she exhibits a queenly instinct which outshines all the luxurious ease of court-life:

> In woman's heart there ever lies
> A queenly instinct, which will rise
> At times, however trodden down,
> And claim its right to wear a crown;
> Then, for a moment, she will feel,
> Her springy muscles turn to steel,
> And boldly do, or bravely bear
> All, all, that man himself may dare.
> It will not stay, but while it lasts,
> New beauty o'er her face it casts;
> Her head is reared with conscious pride,
> Her bosom heaves beneath the tide
> Of wakened feeling in it pent,
> And longs to give its passion vent.
> And never does this instinct rise
> To flash more brightly from her eyes
> Than when she feels her slender hand
> Can in his might her steed command,
> That 'tis her will alone that guides
> The noble creature which she rides:
> Then, over every fear supreme,
> By Nature's hand she's crowned a queen.

At last the chase is concluded and the hunters close round the wearied tiger. In desperation he leaps at Zenobia, but she repels him with a wound. Just now the King appears and is on the point of flinging his lance into the beast, when the King's nephew, Maeonius, insolently took away the king's stroke by hurling his javelin first. It was a breach of the huntsman's etiquette and must be punished by banishing the offender from the chase, loss of weapons and steed, and confinement at court. Thus the edge of the shadow came on.

A week passes. We are given a glimpse of the royal court at the conclusion of the morning sport and before a great entertainment at Palmyra in the evening. A Grecian girl, Clytie, appears and sings before the King and Queen to their great delight. The King rewards her with a sapphire ring; the Queen says: "I'll let her have her woman's will. . . . . . Choose Zenobia's gift." At once she asks her to intercede with the King for the freedom and restoration to favor of her lover, Maeonius. After she sings another song, it is granted, the King observing that man can inflame love in woman as truly as she in him:

> For by one glance a woman can
> Inflame, we know, the heart of man,
> And 'tis but fair that in return
> Beneath his eye her own should burn.
> Prometheus stole from heaven its fire
> To animate a senseless form;
> Pygmalion prayed the powers divine
> His ivory beauty's breast to warm;
> But man, to melt a woman's heart,
> The aid of gods need not require,
> If in himself he feels the warmth
> Of passion's pure creative fire,—
> That spark divine which always glows
> When Heaven on him a soul bestows.

It seems to crop out that Clytie was really in love with the King, though for the first time the fact now was manifest. He was fond of her as he was of other maidens, but far above them all "Zenobia reigned, his heart's true queen." So our poetess reflects on misdirected love:

> 'Tis sweet to love and know it not,—
> Sweeter to give the heart away;
> But sharp the pang when woman finds
> Unsought her love has gone astray.
> And there are hearts—true, loyal hearts
> Which to be given will not wait,
> But give themselves most treach'rously
> Nor know the gift until too late:
> Too late the tendrils of their love
> With gentle touches to untwine,
> And they must wrench the branches from
> The living body of the vine;
> Break every tie, however strong,
> Sever each clinging link so frail,
> And tear the vine from its support,
> Though in the dust its branches trail.

From his prison overlooking the court Maeonius beheld "the speaking look" with which Clytie received the sapphire ring from the monarch. He saw its meaning and—

> It set his Arab blood on fire
> With deadly jealousy and ire.

This leads our writer to give a fine paragraph on jealousy:

> The deadliest passion of the heart
> At once may into being start,
> And jealousy be born of Love,
> As from the teeming brain of Jove
> Minerva sprang in all her might,
> Full grown and ready armed for fight.
> Anger with tenderest love is felt,
> Though into sorrow soon 'twill melt;
> But jealousy can know no trust,
> Is never generous, never just.
> Hatred man turns against his foes,
> But in his jealous rage he throws
> His keenest, swiftest, deadliest dart
> Against the idol of his heart;
> But if in woman's breast it burns
> Her wrath against her rival turns.

The prisoner determines upon revenge and invokes the aid of a traitorous priest. They determine that on to-morrow when the King is in the Temple he shall fall by the hand of Maeonius, who shall then ascend the throne of Palmyra and, said he, "Clytie, too, will be my own."

The evening comes and the court glitters with an unwonted splendor. Prior to the dance Maeonius appears before King Odenatus to receive his lance. The King said it was Clytie's right to again arm her love.

> To her, sir captive, you belong,
> She won your freedom with a song,
> And lips that ne'er can sue in vain
> Have broken with a word your chain.

Of course the suing lips were those of Queen Zenobia, not those of the songful Clytie. But the jealous Maeonius understood the latter and "again his blood flowed liquid fire." In the fury of the moment he could not wait for the execution of the plot to kill on the morrow. Like a tiger, he leaped upon the King, sheathed the murderous dagger in the royal heart, and just as Clytie sprang between them the dead King sank down from his throne. Then the murderer designed to slay the Queen, but was held back by two of her courtiers. With remarkable presence of mind she declared the King only wounded, summoned her subjects to her aid, and demanded the instant death of the traitor. But when Maeonius beheld Clytie grief-stricken on her knees by the side of the dead King, his heart was wrung with fiercest rage—

> To see her kneeling prostrate there
> Abandoned unto love's despair.

Then it was that "hope within his bosom died" and he welcome death, declaring: "No pang for me so sharp as life." Catching up the fatal dagger, he plunged it in his own side and fell dead at Clytie's feet. With Zenobia's overmastering grief and the death of the traitorous priest, the tragic scene closed that night. But with a strong heart and a steady hand she reigned for many years the "Queen of the East,"—

> Inscribed her name on history's page,
> And shone, the woman of her age.

Alas, for poor Clytie! Love was essential to her existence; so when her loved and lover were both gone at the point of the same dagger "she drooped from that fearful, fatal hour." They thought her dead at the time, but she survived the shock only to yield up her life ere a month had passed. And with this last scene Clytie's funeral our poem closes as the tearful maidens are round the bier—

> Singing, in voices sweet and low,
> A solemn dirge of wailing woe.