

FATHER TABB

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JOHN BANISTER TABB was born at Mattoax, Virginia on March 22, 1845. He was the third of four children and at his birth the Tabbs were among the wealthiest and oldest families of Virginia. From his childhood he had trouble with his eyes; however this did not prevent him from leading a normal boy's life. He was the most popular and the best liked of his group, due no doubt to his liveliness and a habit of drawing caricatures of everyone, from the teacher to himself. His sense of humor, so noticeable in his later life, carried him through what to others would have been a period of intense self-conscious shyness. There is nothing to lead us to believe that he ever regarded his affliction as a source for morbid self-pity. When the Civil War broke out Tabb was but sixteen. His oldest brother, William, was twenty-two and enlisted as a captain while Yelverton, two years younger than John joined the Confederates as a private. Seeing his two brothers and all his friends serving the South, Tabb tried to enlist but was rejected because of his eyes. Yet, he bided his time and waited. The opportunity came in the form of running the Northern blockade. After successfully eluding Union gun-boats for two years, his ship was taken and he was sent to the prison camp at Point Lookout, Maryland. It was here he met Sidney Lanier, the two becoming fast friends. After seven months Tabb was released and went to Baltimore to study music. The events of the next few years gradually worked up to his conversion. He entered St. Charles' College in 1872 and was ordained in 1884. The rest of his life was spent mainly in teaching. The same keen insight which made him a poet also made him a teacher. When we realize that the teacher of English grammar was also the author of "*Out of Bounds*," we can understand the hallowed regard of his students. The blindness which had been threatening him for many years finally fell on him in 1908. He died after a year of remarkable resignation.

To assign Fr. Tabb a place in English literature is yet impossible. "Criticism of our contemporaries," as Lemaitre puts it, "isn't criti-

cism; it is only conversation." It may be that he is not a great poet, but it is certain that he is not a bad one.

Out of the dusk a shadow,
Then a spark;

Out of the cloud a silence,
Then a lark.

Out of the heart a rapture,
Then a pain;

Out of the dead, cold ashes,
Life again.

No mere rimer could have written that. The thought is so concentrated and so exactly expressed, that only one whose talent is of the highest could have produced it. The most striking note of all Tabb's verse is this encompassing of a profound thought within the narrow limits of a single or double quatrain. Yet, so finished is his work that improvement is rarely possible. His was the gift of putting in miniature verse what others would have taken pages to put in prose. Whether he agreed with Poe, whom he admired greatly, in maintaining that a long poem does not exist, or whether he chose the short, epigrammatic form from necessity is of little moment. It is evident that he could not write a long poem. "*The Rhyme of the Rock*," one of his longest efforts, is lacking in clearness, precision, and that luminous intensity of his shorter works. It was given him to glimpse quickly and clearly and he did not attempt to force his gift. This brevity, however, occasionally forces the reader to ponder, as for instance in "*Day and Night*":

When Day goes down to meet the Night,
She welcomes him with many a light;
When Night comes up to meet the Day,
He drives her trooping stars away.

Few can read that and immediately grasp the author's idea. However, it must not be thought that he sacrificed clarity for brevity. It was his intention to capture an idea or emotion, strip it of all irrelevant details and record it in as few words as were consistent with clearness. This ability to say much in little is his chief claim to fame. It is also the difference between him and his contemporaries. His frugality of words stands in startling contrast to the almost excessive diction of his time. His simplicity becomes more noticeable when we recall that it was then the practice of authors to

launch their ideas in oceans of words. This was why he never admired Swinburne. Not because he "sang of the worst so well," but because he wrapped his thought in a "revel of rhymes" and spent his energy on a procession of sensuous sounds with the result that his thought (what there is of it) was diluted. At times the very fluency and ease of Tabb's verse may incline one to believe that he labored mightily, yet the manuscripts he left are extraordinarily clean. It seems that he rarely made a correction, his first draft usually being the completed poem.¹

A glance at the titles of Fr. Tabb's poems would lead one to suppose that he was a poet of Nature. He was, but he had a peculiar way of treating nature. Like Wordsworth, he saw in nature a living Presence, he saw a unity of things, and a moral that creation is always preaching. But his outlook was not one of pantheism as was the Lake Poet's. Fr. Tabb was a Catholic and a priest. His faith entered in and he saw this world from the only viewpoint which can make it at all orderly. The effect was such that in his poems religion plays a singular part. By religion there is to be understood not only the dogma of his Church, but all sacred places, things and events. when Tabb saw the sunset he also saw the Redemption.

Behold in every crimson glow
Of earth and sky and sea
The Hand that fashioned them doth show
Love crucified for me.

One might call it double vision. It runs through all his work and renders it unique. He would take an ordinary thing, idealize it, color it with a sacred event or place and leave us a poem. Only one other poet wrote in the same manner. In the *Orient Ode*, Francis Thompson uses the Benediction service to describe the passage of the sun. Yet, when we come to think of it, this method is not only a method, it is also a philosophy. It is the Christian view of life. It is seeing two sides of a fact. We come to know God through visible things, which is the same as saying that visible things lead us to God. It may be expressed in a more dignified way by stating that Reality does not consist only in the sensible universe. There is another sphere, to which man has been ordained, the knowledge of which is had through revelation. It is the normal thing for a Christian to look beyond what he sees to the things he believes uniting them, as they must be, in a unity through Faith, that he

¹Francis A. Litz, *Fr. Tabb*. The Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore; 1923. page 92.

may in a fuller manner understand just why he is alive. This is the reason for symbolism in religion. In the Middle Ages the idea was well understood but the Reformation threw in a wedge between the seen and the unseen world. The separation has continued to our own day, though gradually crumbling under the load of its own deformity. The extreme forms of philosophy and Romanticism are the consequence of this divorce. Man, one might say, instinctively realizes that he lives not by bread alone. Yet, there is but one way of satisfying the inner craving of human nature, it is belief in the Catholic Creed. Catholic teaching is not merely a mathematical enumeration of dogmas. It is a viewpoint, a way of living through which what we see reflects what we do not see. It is the balance wherein matter and spirit preserve their proper weight and render life sane. It may seem to be going too far to read all this in the brief quatrains of Tabb; but he was a Catholic, he had a Catholic's view of things and his distinction as a poet resides in his ability to unite the natural and the supernatural. He uses nature as the handmaid of Faith. The whole stress in his poetry is to be laid not on the natural image but on the supernatural idea behind it. For example:

Pause where apart the fallen sparrow lies,
And lightly tread;
For there the pity of a Father's eyes
Enshrines the dead.

If we consider these four lines merely as an imaginative reference to a gospel text, the poem would be nothing but a pretty conceit. But there is the vitalizing idea of divine Providence, an idea essentially Catholic and wrapt up in the Faith. Throughout Tabb's verse this method is used with telling effect. He succeeds so well in uniting the common, ordinary things with the things of Faith that he may well be called a Catholic poet.

Fr. Tabb wrote at a time when men were struggling to maintain their balance in the new Democracy and the new science. The West was being settled. Towns were springing up over night and the country was striving mightily to repair the effects of the Civil War. All in all, the time was one of transition and orientation. Tabb with his poems started an era of poetry which was of considerable brilliancy while it lasted, but the period which produced such writers as the Kilmers and Thomas Walsh is a thing of the past. Yet, the impetus of Tabb still continues and he is to be numbered among the chief contributors, on this side of the Atlantic, to that movement characterized as the Catholic spirit in modern English literature.