

# THE ALUMNÆ NEWS

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## HELEN GRAY CONE, POET

From 1885 to 1919, Helen Gray Cone published five volumes of verse which, though establishing her among minor poets of America and giving her a measure of international fame, are but the overflow of her vitality, mere marginalia on the closely written pages of her devotion to Hunter College. *Oberon and Puck*, *Verses Grave and Gay* (1885), *The Ride to the Lady* (1891), *Soldiers of the Light* (1911), *A Chant of Love for England* (1915), *The Coat without a Seam* (1919) were increased, 1930, by a volume of selections, *Harvest Home*, "Summer's green all girded up in sheaves." In this last are found, presumably, auctorial preferences, those poems on which in the estimation of Helen Gray Cone rested her modest claim to immortality, typified by the vanished meteor: "Brief memory of a moment touched with light."

Throughout these miscellaneous poems are the firm and fine fashioning noticed by the *New York Times*, and the delicacy of imagination praised by the *Outlook*, on the appearance of *A Chant of Love*. From the beginning they reveal not only tenderness, sympathy, love of nature,

"Peace of roses in a rain-sweet garden,

Peace of moonlit silver-heaving waters";

reflect not only the influence of music, mythology, and the masters, celebrated in proud humility; they embody noble themes, whether the romantic morning aspiration of the brave heart, the constant ideal of duty, "steadily facing today," or the recognition that

"Life is battle even to the sunset."

Here are poems of a fanciful mind which sees, for example, in evening primroses candles lighted by a fairy, or in the hepatica a shy beggar maid under a mantle of russet leaf; poems of humorous turn, well-exemplified by "Narcissus in Camden," a puckish satire on Walt Whitman; poems that respond for the artist's soul to a nocturne of Rubinstein, the medieval color of Chaucer and Dante, the beauty of Keats, the melody of Tennyson, the Greek perfection of Lander; poems that echo with deepening appreciation the voice of Shakespeare. In their highest flights these poems are inspired by patriotism, by hope of freedom for all men, emancipation from shackles of the spirit, by a vision of the brotherhood of man.

Standing before LePage's "Joan of Arc," in the Metropolitan Museum, Helen Gray Cone heard the message that let the girl of Domrémy know no peace, "Till that the king be crowned, and France be free!"

The same ideal ends her justly renowned

"Ode to Lincoln":

"Ah, never, till every spirit shall stand up free,

Comes the great Liberator's jubilee!"

Hers was never license or false freedom, but freedom hand in hand with duty. Her longest poem, "The Third Day at Gettysburg," reports rain of bullets, flash of sabre, and boom of cannon not less vividly than it proclaims "the larger Hope and the limitless future of Manhood," not less faithfully than it urges

"All a man hath will he give for his life  
—but his life for his Duty."

Common duty, the task of every day, she raised to the plane of poetry in her perhaps best-loved sonnet, "The Common Street," or modern Jacob's dream.

Her poems declare no hate but that of hate. Among those who read, on its first publication in the *Atlantic Monthly*, her magnificent reply to Lissauer, I throbbed to her ringing words. Next morning, early, I rushed to her office. At my knock she opened the door and, after I burst forth with what admiration I do not now recall, she flashed, "The top of my head would have flown off had I not written that out of my system!" Characteristically, she turned to routine duties, and I walked down the hall to my classroom, still vibrating to her scorn,

"Where is the giant shot that kills

Wordsworth walking the old green hills?"

She was a master of metrics, and though she loved well the sonnet form, expressing in its neat compactness many of her weightiest thoughts, she moved with unfettered skill through varied rhythm and length of line. In her tribute to Joyce Kilmer, for example, "The Way of the White Souls," she preferred a generously flowing measure, which evokes tramping columns of soldiers,

"And there the swinging soul of him goes  
on with the marching stars."

Beyond the sacrifice of these soldiers of the light—dear to her the word "light"—always she saw the flag of all souls triumphing in goodwill; always she dreamed of the day when men should wear the coat without a seam, the coat woven of the blue that is the sky of God, the red that is the blood of man.

Gone from us, our laureate poet yet lives for Hunter College and all the children of Hunter College in the heritage she has left, heritage of her gallant spirit, sense of honor, sense of duty, power of sympathy, and challenge to courage. And she will live for others so long as America remembers Lincoln, so long as England cherishes the glory that inspired "A Chant of Love."

BLANCHE COLTON WILLIAMS.