

# ERNEST HOWARD CROSBY AND HIS MESSAGE

By HAMLIN GARLAND

ERNEST CROSBY'S career as a writer began rather late in life and, so far as my reading goes, his last work is his best.

His place as a poet is overshadowed by his rank as a reformer. Profoundly influenced by Whitman, George and Tolstoi, his writings from first to last are the utterances of a man who took life seriously—that is to say, on the ethical side. He is always the reformer, the gentle satirist. It is not easy to characterize his work. In his prose you will find a manly scorn of meanness and sham and injustice, and in his verses, aspiration, toleration and love—tolerance of everything but bloodshed and cruelty.

Love is there, too, but not sex-love. He is no parlor poet. He offers no themes of the gallant, no word of the romantic lover.

He is conscience articulate. Born of a long line of cultured American ancestry, son of a clergyman, it was natural that he should concern himself with the suffering and wrongs of the world rather than with the mere craftsmanship of the versifier or the pursuit of beauty.

Beauty in itself did not particularly engage him. He sought rather the glory of truth; and yet he was by no means careless or slovenly in his literary method. His words are never banal, or empty, or indirect. They are always significant. A glance at a page of *Ploughshares* or *Broadcast* will show the profound influence which Whitman exercised over the matter as well as the method of his unrhymed lines. And yet he was much more than a copyist. He was too busy a man and too profoundly in earnest to imitate a master. The things he had to say

were too vital, too specific, and too revolutionary to find utterance in ordinary forms. He naturally and inevitably took up what may be called the rhythm of prose rather than the beat of the syllable. And what is more to the point, he managed to remain always himself in this form; whereas in prose he fell short of distinction.

There is a singular power in his lines. At their worst they are unrhymed arguments, lofty calls to duty, or deeply prophetic aspirations. At their best, they attain a sort of stern majesty, big of import and full of altruistic conceptions of man's duty to man. In the lines called "Moods" he reaches, in my judgment, his highest mark. He comes near to Henley and to Whitman in a certain originality of design and firmness of execution. On every page sentences flame with meaning, as where he says:

"I am no patriot—  
I love my country too well to be a patriot."

His hatred of injustice, of war, was a fierce passion. Over and over again, like Whitman, like Tolstoi, he cries out:

"Hate cannot conquer hate;  
Love alone can conquer hate."

And yet in another place he writes:

"It is well to rise above violence;  
It is well to rise superior to anger;  
But if peace means final acquiescence with  
wrong—  
If your aim is less than justice and peace  
forever one—  
Then your peace is a crime."

He was at first something of a Socialist, but toward the last he grew to be like Whitman, an individualist.

"Where are the cowards who bow down to environment?

Who think they are made of what they eat, and must conform to the bed they lie in?

I am not wax, I am energy.  
I refuse to be ruled."

His sympathies were always for the weak, the cheated, the poor barbarian, the oppressed of all lands. Taking Whitman's lesson to heart, he finds in every sin-sick soul a certain tragic innocence, acknowledging his kinship with each and all.

As you read his lines, you do not find a single one of the themes of the conventional literary man; but this does not mean that he is lacking in fervor. His lines fulfill their purpose. They express his love, his scorn and his hope, and they do this unerringly. Whether they are to be called poems or not depends on the point of view of the reader. For example, let me quote these lines:

"I am homesick.

Homesick for the home I never have seen,  
For the land where I shall look horizontally into the eyes of my fellows;

The land where men rise only to lift;

The land where equality leaves men free to differ as they will;

The land where freedom is breathed in the air and courses in the blood;

Where there is nothing over a man between him and the sky;

Where the obligations of love are sought for as prizes,

And where they vary as the moon—

That land is my true country.

I'm here by some sad cosmic mistake,  
And I am homesick."

He was critical of his time. To him, America was "drunk with rapid transit," New York "a city without a face." He was often bitter and harsh, but not for long. Mainly his utterances are those of an optimist, strong and sweet.

To him America was a "vast, vigorous, boastful, untidy mother." "I dwell on your faults, not as an unfilial son," he says,

"But as an anxious father, for you are my daughter, too—

You have made me what I am, and now it is my turn to make you what I would have you be.

What nobler task is there on earth than shaping the soul of a people?"

In another place he says:

"I am tired of being a creature,  
I will be a creator.

I am tired of adapting myself to environment,

I will make an environment to my own will.

The world no longer satisfies me,  
And forthwith I set to work in the workshop of my soul at a new heaven and a new earth."

Whether you agree with me concerning the poetic value of such words, you must admit largeness of view, vigor and a certain originality of thought in his later books, like *Broadcast*. He knew how "dangerous it was to sail on the ocean of truth." He had tasted of its essential loneliness, its "whispers of icebergs and maelstroms," but he was a man and set sail.

As I look back upon him now I can see that he had a certain shy reserve, and yet he said:

"You must listen to me, for I have something to say.

You will not like my form of speech, but I know no other.

You will resent my sharp words, but I have no blunt arrows in my quiver."

Like Shelley, he was an intellectual aristocrat, and like Shelley, too, he was born to ease and culture. His home was an ideally perfect union of refinement, comfort and democracy of rule; and yet from the home he did not hesitate to sally forth to do knightly warfare against greed and privilege—speaking, writing, careless of return, eager only to leave the world better than he found it.

He was often sadly disappointed, sometimes dispirited, if we may take these lines as a reflection of his true mood:

"I played my lute to the world,

But the world danced not and went on its way unheeding.

Only here and there I saw a solitary dancer,

Unnoticed of the rest, in an obscure corner.  
And I grieved at the world, for I loved my music.

But when I looked again to see who they were who danced to my music,

Forsooth, I sorrowed no more,

For they were the children of the new day."