

**NEPENTHE: A POEM
IN TWO CANTOS**

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Nepenthe: A Poem in Two Cantos by George Darley

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GEORGE DARLEY

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O BLEST UNFABLED INCENSE TREE
THAT BURNS IN GLORIOUS ARABY!

NEPENTHE

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A Poem in Two Cantos

BY

GEORGE DARLEY

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

R. A. STREATFEILD

LONDON

ELKIN MATHEWS, VIGO STREET

MDCCCXCVII

*The frontispiece designed and cut
on the wood by L. Binyon.*

INTRODUCTION

GEORGE DARLEY never was a popular poet, even during his lifetime, and perhaps, after half a century of neglect, it is now too late to rekindle the dying embers of his fame. His poetry is unquestionably not of the type which commands general appreciation, but he surely deserves to stand among the "poets' poets," by the side of his friend Beddoes, whose genius he was one of the first to recognise.

Darley published but little during his lifetime, and that little is now rarely to be met with, but within the last few years there have been two valuable reprints of some of his least accessible works. In 1890 Canon Livingstone, a kinsman of the poet, published a slender collection of Darley's lyrical poems for private circulation, and two years later his pastoral play, "Sylvia; or, The May Queen," was reprinted under the careful editorship of Mr. J. H. Ingram.

But Darley's lyrical poems, though their diction is often exquisitely felicitous, are little calculated to give a proper idea of his remarkable imaginative power, and "Sylvia," graceful as much of it is, is very far from being his most characteristic work. If he is ever to win the recognition to which such critics as Coleridge have thought him entitled, his passport to the glories of posthumous fame must be "Nepenthe," a poem which, though occasionally marred by wilful eccentricity, exhibits the scope of his poetical faculty in a more striking light than any of his other works.

Darley's history has been told before, but it may be well to recapitulate its leading incidents. He was born in Ireland in 1795, and was educated at Dublin. For what profession he was originally intended is not known, but a serious and apparently incurable habit of stammering with which he was afflicted, appeared to present an insurmountable barrier to success in any of the learned professions, and he therefore determined to devote himself to a literary career. He

migrated to London, and produced his first poem, "The Errors of Ecstasie," in 1822. Soon afterwards he joined the staff of the "London Magazine," to which he contributed both prose and verse. In 1826 came "The Labours of Idleness," a collection of prose tales and essays, which was reprinted a few years later, with some additional matter, as "The New Sketch-Book." In 1827 appeared his pastoral play, "Sylvia; or, The May Queen;" in 1839, "Nepenthe;" and in 1840 and 1841, two historical plays, "Thomas A'Becket," and "Ethelstan." Darley died in 1846. His career throughout was a disappointment. The unlucky impediment in his speech debarred him from intercourse with any but intimate friends, and as time went on, and his habits became more and more those of a recluse, he became estranged from many of these also. In Mr. Edmund Gosse's recently-published edition of the letters of Beddoes there is a striking vignette of Darley as he appeared in 1824. "Darley is a tallish, slender, pale, light-eyebrowed, gentle-looking bald-pate, in a

brown sourtout [*sic*], with a duodecimo under his arm—stammering to a most provoking degree, so much so as to be almost inconvertible." Beddoes and Darley were never intimate, though they seem to have met pretty often about this time, but Beddoes entertained a certain respect for Darley's poetry, and even speaks of him as the man upon whom the mantle of Shelley might conceivably have fallen. In Darley's "Labours of Idleness" there are not infrequent references to himself and his career, some of which seem to be worth quoting. I do not know that they have been noticed by any previous biographer. The book appeared under the pseudonym of Guy Penseval, prefaced by a rather elaborate piece of mystification, which purports to explain how the supposed editor came by the various tales included in the work. In it occurs this passage: "Of the four remaining articles, this is a straight-forward account. The last is written by an obscure young man, one G—— D——, who twinkled in the literary hemisphere a year or two ago, but