

HAIL MARY!

BY ALEISTER CROWLEY

The "Daily Mail" says—This is a garland of some fifty or sixty devotional hymns to the Virgin, in which the author, while not exceeding the bounds of Catholic orthodoxy, fills his verses with quaint and charming conceits, very much in the style of the 'metaphysical' poets of the seventeenth century. Indeed, in turning over the pages of 'Amphora,' as the little volume was entitled when published anonymously two years ago, by Burns & Oates, we feel them to be the work of a recipient of the tradition of Vaughan the Silurist, George Herbert, and Crashaw, although Mr. Crowley is smooth where they are rugged, plain where they are perplexing.

"These poems indicate a mind full of earnest aspiration towards his spiritual Queen, a mind of an engaging naïveté, untroubled by the religious and philosophical problems which weary more complex intelligences. This little work can be cordially recommended to Catholic readers."

Father Kent writes in "The Tablet"—"Among the many books which benevolent publishers are preparing as appropriate Christmas presents we notice many new editions of favourite poetic classics. But few, we fancy, can be more appropriate for the purpose than a little volume of original verses, entitled 'Amphora,' which Messrs. Burns & Oates are on the point of publishing. The following stanzas from a poem on the Nativity will surely be a better recommendation of the book than any words of critical appreciation:

"The Virgin lies at Bethlehem.
(Bring gold and frankincense and myrrh!)
The root of David shoots a stem.
(O Holy Spirit, shadow her!)"

"She lies alone amid the kine.
(Bring gold and frankincense and myrrh!)
The straw is fragrant as with wine.
(O Holy Spirit, shadow her!)"

Lieut.-Col. Gormley writes—"The hymns ordinarily used in churches for devotional purposes are no doubt excellent in their way, but it can scarcely be said, in the case of many of them, that they are of much literary merit, and some of them indeed are little above the familiar nursery rhymes of our childhood; it is therefore somewhat of a relief and a pleasure to read the volume of hymns to the Virgin Mary which has just been published by Messrs. Burns & Oates. These hymns to the Virgin Mary are in the best style, they are devotional in the highest degree, and to Roman Catholics, for whom devotion to the Virgin Mary forms so important a part of their religious belief, these poems should indeed be welcome; personally I have found them just what I desired, and I have no doubt other Catholics will be equally pleased with them."

"Vanity Fair" says—"To the ordinary mind passion has no relation to penitence, and carnal desire is the very antithesis of spiritual fervour. But close observers of human nature are accustomed to discover an intimate connection between the forces of the body and the soul; and the student of psychology is continually being reminded of the kinship between saint and sinner. Now and then we find the extremes of self and selflessness in the same soul. Dante tells us how the lover kissed the trembling mouth, and with the same thrill describes his own passionate abandonment before the mystic Rose. In our own day, the greatest of French lyric poets, Verlaine, has given us volumes of the most passionate love songs, and side by side with them a book of religious poetry more sublimely credulous and ecstatic than anything that has come down to us from the Ages of faith. We are all, as Sainte-Beuve said, 'children of a sensual literature,' and perhaps for that reason we should expect from our singers fervent religious hymns."

"There is one of London's favourites almost unrivalled to express by her art the delights of the body with a pagan simplicity and directness. Now she sends us a book, 'Amphora,' a volume of religious verse: it contains song after song in praise of Mary, etc. etc. etc."

The "Scotsman" says—"Outside the Latin Church conflicting views are held about the worship of the Virgin, but there can be no doubt that this motive of religion has given birth to many beautiful pieces of literature, and the poets have never tired of singing variations on the theme of 'Hail Mary.' This little book is best described here as a collection of such variations. They are written with an engaging simplicity and fervour of feeling, and with a graceful, refined literary art that cannot but interest and attract many readers beyond the circles of such as must feel it religiously impossible not to admire them."

The "Daily Telegraph" says—"In this slight volume we have the utterances of a devout anonymous Roman Catholic singer, in a number of songs or hymns addressed to the Virgin Mary. The author, who has evidently a decided gift for sacred verse and has mastered varied metres suitable to her high theme, divides her poems into four series of thirteen each—thus providing a song for each week of the year. The songs are all of praise or prayer addressed to the Virgin, and though many have a touch of mysticism, most have a simplicity of expression and earnestness of devotion that will commend them to the author's co-religionists."

The "Catholic Herald" says—"This anonymous volume of religious verse reaches a very high level of poetic imagery. It is a series of hymns in honour of Our Lady, invariably expressed in melodious verse. The pitfalls of religious verse are bathos and platitude, but these the sincerity of the writer and a certain mastery over poetic expression have enabled him—or her—to avoid. The writer of such verse as the following may be complimented on a very high standard of poetic expression:

"The shadows fall about the way;
Strange faces glimmer in the gloom;
The soul clings feebly to the clay,
For that, the void; for this, the tomb!"

"But Mary sheds a blessed light;
Her perfect face dispels the fears.
She charms Her melancholy knight
Up to the glad and gracious spheres."

"O Mary, like a pure perfume
Do thou receive this falling breath,
And with Thy starry lamp illumine
The darkling corridors of death!"

The "Catholic Times" says—"The 'Amphora' is a collection of poems in honour of our Blessed Lady. They are arranged in four books, each of which contains thirteen pieces. Thus with the prologue there are fifty-three poems in all. Needless to say they breathe a spirit of deep piety and filial love towards our Heavenly Mother. Many beautiful and touching thoughts are embodied in the various verses, which cannot but do good to the pious soul."

The "Staffordshire Chronicle" says—"Under this title there has appeared an anonymous volume of verses breathing the same exotic fragrance of Rossetti's poem on Our Lady that begins 'Mother of the fair delight.' There is the same intense pre-Raphaelite atmosphere, the same æsthetic revelling in Catholic mysticism, the same rich imagery and gorgeous word-colouring that pervade the poetic works of that nineteenth-century artist. A valuable addition to the poetic literature on the Mother of our Lord."

The "Guardian" says—"The devotional fervour of 'Amphora' will make them acceptable to those who address their worship to the Blessed Mother of the Christ. The meaning of the title of the book is not very obvious. It cannot surely have anything to do with the lines in Horace, 'Amphora coepit,' etc."

The "Catholic Times" says—"As far as we can gather from his other works, the author is not a Catholic, perhaps not even, strictly speaking, a Christian; but here we have page after page of most exquisite praise of Her, whom Wordsworth greeted as 'our tainted nature's solitary boast,' until one marvels at the fecundity of concept, imagery, and fit expression."