

James Lane Allen

A SKETCH OF
HIS LIFE
AND WORK



WITH PORTRAIT



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WHILE "*The Choir Invisible*" was primarily a love story, the setting in which its action moved was historical. Apart from the masterly handling of human passion and the harmony of thought and expression with which he has treated the larger and deeper movements of life, it is probably Mr. Allen's ability to picture forth the early settlement of Kentucky that has given his writings so solid a foundation in the literary affections of English speaking people.

The fascination that "*The Choir Invisible*" has had for so many thousands of readers is assuredly due as much to the author's faith-

ful historic treatment of the mighty stream of migration which had begun to spread through the jagged channels of the Alleghanies over the then unknown illimitable West as to his power to tell an absorbing story. When "*The Choir Invisible*" appeared, this perhaps most fascinating period of early American history had not been used as a background of his story by any great master of fiction, and it requires no very keen literary insight to discover the sources of the popularity which has been accorded to the four or five recent novels, each of which has for its setting a period in our history whose glamour has touched our hearts and stirred our imaginations.

Contemporary judgment is singularly unanimous in placing Mr. Allen in the front rank of American novelists, and it may not be out of place here to quote the opinions of two or three of the leading literary critical journals. WILLIAM MORTON PAYNE, in the *Dial* says that :

“Looking about among our younger men of letters for the promise of some new and vital impulse, it has for several years seemed to us that such an impulse might be expected to come from the work of Mr. James Lane Allen. He has published few books as yet, but the number is sufficient to reveal a steadily increasing mastery of his art, and the quality such as to warrant readers of discernment in predicting for him a brilliant career and an assured place in the front rank of American writers. *The Choir Invisible* does not disappoint these expectations. It is not only the most ambitious of Mr. Allen’s books, considered merely as to its sale, but it is also the one in which he has carried to the highest pitch that fineness of perception and that distinction of manner that have from the first set his work apart from the work of nearly all of his contemporaries. Hardly since Hawthorne have we had such pages as the best of these; hardly since *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Marble Faun* have we had fictive work so spiritual in essence and adorned with such delicate and lovely embroiderings of the imagination. There are descriptive passages so exquisitely wrought that the reader lingers over them to make them a possession forever; there are inner experiences so intensely realized that they become a part of the life of his own soul.” . . .

And again writing in the *Boston Transcript*, Bliss Carman, says:

“There are two chief reasons why Mr. Allen seems to me one of the first of our novelists to day. He is

most exquisitely alive to the fine spirit of comedy. He has a prose style of wonderful beauty, conscientiousness and simplicity. . . . He has the inexorable conscience of the artist, he always gives us his best; and that best is a style of great purity and felicity and sweetness, a style without strain and yet with an enviable aptness for the sudden inevitable word. . . . And yet that care, that deliberation is never tedious."

Hamilton W. Mabie is attracted more by the landscape beauty of Mr. Allen's work, and he too makes an original contribution to our subject. He says in *The Outlook*:

"No American novelist has so imbedded his stories in Nature as has James Lane Allen; and among English novels one recalls only Mr. Hardy's three classics of pastoral England, and among French novelists George Sand and Pierre Loti. Nature furnishes the background of many charming American stories, and finds delicate or effective remembrance in the hands of writers like Miss Jewett and Miss Murfree; but in Mr. Allen's romances Nature is not behind the action; she is involved in it. Her presence is everywhere; her influence streams through the story; the deep and prodigal beauty which she wears in rural Kentucky shines on every page; the tremendous forces which sweep through her disclose their potency in human passion and impulse. There was a fine note in Mr. Allen's earliest work; a prelude note with the quality of the flute. . . In *Summer in Arcady* a deeper note

in the treatment of Nature was struck, and Mr. Allen's style took on, not only greater freedom, but a richer beauty. The story is a kind of incarnation of the tremendous vitality of Nature, the unconscious, unmoral sweep of the force which makes for life. So completely enveloped is the reader in the atmosphere of the opulent world about him, so deeply does he realize the primeval forces rushing tumultuous through that world, that at times the human figures seem as subordinate as those in Corot's landscapes. And yet these human struggles are intensely real, the human drama intensely genuine. Whatever may be thought of the wisdom of presenting the sex problem so frankly, Mr. Allen's sharpest critic must confess that in no other American book is atmosphere so pervasive, so potential, so charged with passion and beauty.

In *The Choir Invisible* a still deeper note is struck; the moral insight, always clear, is more penetrating; the feeling for life is at once more restrained and more passionate; the constructive skill is more marked; the style surer and entirely moulded to its theme. This story is so steeped in beauty, both of the world and of the spirit, that it is not easy to write of it dispassionately. It has a richness of texture which American fiction, as a rule, has lacked; there are depths in it which American fiction has not, as rule, brought to the consciousness of readers; depths of life below the region of observation. There is in it the unconsciousness and abandon which are the very substance of art, and which are so constantly missed in the fiction of extreme sophistication."

Our final opinion, that of James McArthur when he was editor of the *Bookman* carries some weight both on account of the position of the writer and also by reason of his keen literary sense.

“ Poetry, ‘the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge,’ according to Wordsworth, the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science’—that poetry irrespective of rhyme and metrical arrangement which is as immortal as the heart of man, is distinctive in Mr. Allen’s work from the first written page. Like Minerva issuing full-formed from the head of Jove, Mr. Allen issues from his long years of silence and seclusion a perfect master of his art—unfailing in its inspiration, unfaltering in its classic accent. So that when we arrive at *The Choir Invisible* we find there a ripeness of matured thought, an insight into the moral depths of passion, and an entrance into the larger, deeper movements of life, a realizing power, a broader sense of humor, as well as humor itself, a concentrated and universal human interest; all of which is not so much the result of finer art as of a greater absorption of life, which comes not from more knowledge, but from more wisdom. *The Choir Invisible* is like an inward realization of the ‘Domain of Arnheim!’ More than in his other books there rests upon this work that unembarrassed calm, where truth sits Jove-like ‘on the quiet seat above the thunder,’

where the spirit is dignified, is priest-like, and inspired; where beauty dwells in a harmony of thought and expression that subdues and haunts us. In short, in *The Choir Invisible* Mr. Allen has come to that stage of quiet and eternal frenzy in which the beauty of holiness and the holiness of beauty burn as one fire, shine as one light, which, as Sidney Lanier has demonstrated, denotes the great artist. *The Choir Invisible* undeniably places its author among the foremost in American letters. Indeed, we venture to say that it would be difficult to recall any other novel since *The Scarlet Letter* that has touched the same note of greatness, or given to one section of our national life, as Hawthorne's classic did to another, a voice far beyond singing.

A word, however, about Mr. Allen's *Summer in Arcady* which precedes this, and was published * * * subsequent to *A Kentucky Cardinal* and *Aftermath*. In these two books Nature was interwoven benignantly with the human nature resting on her bosom, leading her lover, Adam Moss, with gentle influences to the human lover, and when bereft of human love, receiving him back into her healing arms. Not so in *Summer in Arcady*; the sunlight that brooded in calm over the forces of Nature that nursed Adam Moss's latent powers of loving into domestic serenity, rouses the fierce claw and tooth of Nature to drag Hilary and Daphne down to her level. As clearly as the poet saw that, 'all's Love, yet all's Law' so clearly is the same truth held in these stories with their divergent ends. The lawlessness of Nature is the lawlessness of man,

untempered and ungoverned by that principle of chastity which is the law of love; and again Nature, lawless in herself, becomes beneficent, law-abiding, when controlled by that higher law of instinct in man which is the seal and sign of the Divine upon his soul. Without moralizing, a moral principle is at work in *Summer in Arcady*; it is its vital distinction that over the whole action reigns a moral simplicity which, like sunlight, licks up the foetid, the exciting, sickening, uncertain torch-flames of passion. And in order to point the way to a full justification of the author's sincerity and moral purpose against the charge of pandering to a decadent taste for the 'downwardtending' fiction of the hour, it will be sufficient to show that the plea for the Divine supremacy of goodness, and for an unfallen purity in man and woman, has never been more strongly urged in modern fiction than in *The Choir Invisible*.

If in *Summer in Arcady* there were readers who were troubled by the heat lightning of passion that incessantly fluttered in its bosom and threatened to bolt from the blue, their fears will be laid to rest in the contemplation of Mr. Allen's new work which is pervaded by an intense summer calm—the brooding calm of the Country of the Spirit—but which does not preclude, rather is reached through, the fierce fightings of human spirit for victory over the evil passions of human nature—the fiercest struggle that can rend asunder the human breast, that of holding fast the integrity and purity of manhood and womanhood at any cost."

As a historical novelist then, Mr. Allen has taken his rank with the few men of whom Nathaniel Hawthorne is perhaps the most famous; and for the same reason. Both have given us pictures of the lives of our forefathers, whose faithfulness has assured them a position as classics in American literature. True to the instinct of his genius Mr. Allen has again chosen a stirring period in our history as a background for his new novel "*The Reign of Law*," which THE MACMILLAN COMPANY publish. Both the hero and heroine are products of a Revolution, and the scene of the plot is situated in the Kentucky hemp fields. The Revolution on the one hand was the social upheaval that our Civil War caused in the South. While on the other hand it was the moral and intellectual Revolution which followed the great discoveries in physical and social science in the middle of this Century.

The two chief characters of the story are a young man and a young woman. The young

man sprung from the lowest stratum of Southern society, and the young woman from the highest. The story of the intermingling of their lives must be left for the reader to discover.

As was so often the case during the political reconstruction of the South, the heroine passed from the sphere of the high social organization which existed at her birth to the humblest and most obscure hard manual work, while the hero rose from the lowest social condition to the highest intellectual plane, finding his development along the lines of religious and scientific thought. When they finally meet, the latter half of the story shows their influences on each other.

The involved social and political conditions, the play and interaction of phases of life, so utterly different as those which form the experiences of these two people, have allowed Mr. Allen a wide scope for the subtle analysis of character of which in his exquisitely delicate art he is such a master.

The trend of the book, and the religious crisis through which its hero passes, give the story its title; while an important part in the development of the hero's character is played by his passionate love story.

A well known critic affirms that the story contains by far the finest and noblest work Mr. Allen has yet done, both in respect of that human passion and interest which characterizes his former work, and also in the tender reverential feeling with which he dwells on the simple rural life of the Kentucky which he loves so well. In spite of the reserve which characterizes the author, a few of the leading facts of his life have found their way into print, and may be of interest to many who read his books.

He comes from Virginia ancestry and a pioneer Kentucky family. His mother's maiden name was Helen Foster, whose parents settled in Mississippi and were of Revolutionary Scotch-Irish stock of Pennsylvania. He was

born on a farm in Fayette County seven miles from Lexington, Kentucky, where he spent his early childhood. He was educated in Kentucky (Transylvania) University, and graduated in 1872. For several years afterward he taught in District schools, at first near his home and then in Missouri. He afterward became a private tutor, and finally accepted a Professorship at his Alma Mater which he exchanged for a similar position at Bethany College, West Virginia. He gave up this latter profession in 1884 and began his career as a writer in the city of New York.

The chief literary and critical Magazines and papers of those years contain many of his essays, while all his short stories saw the light in "Harper's Magazine" and the "Century." These short stories were collected and published under the title of "*Flute and Violin.*" His other books are "*The Blue Grass Region of Kentucky,*" "*A Kentucky Cardinal,*" and its sequel, "*Aftermath,*" "*A Summer in Arcady,*"

and lastly "*The Choir Invisible*," some two hundred and fifty thousand copies of which have found their way into the hands of readers on both sides of the Atlantic.

A new and complete edition of Mr. Allen's works is now being issued by THE MACMILLAN COMPANY. It will contain seven volumes; including *The Reign of Law, A Story of the Kentucky Hemp Fields*, an account of which has been given in the preceding pages.



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