

STEWED PRUNES AND PRISM:

THE TENNYSON CENTENARY

THE judicious may possibly wonder why one should dig so deep into the tumulus of oblivion to rescue (though but for execration) the bones of so very dead a dog as Alfred Tennyson.

But the truth is not so near the surface. He can hardly be called dead who never lived; and a trodden worm writhes longer than a felled ox. So therefore Tennyson succumbed to contempt, not to hatred; men twitched their robes away from the contamination of the unclean thing—there was no fight, no bloodshed.

Now therefore the smirking approval of the neuters of England continues unashamed, until the younger generation (some of them) may be inclined to class Tennyson with the poets, rather than with the Longfellows and Cloughs.

They can hardly imagine any creature, however vile, so crapulous as to prostitute the noble legend of England herself to dust-licking before that amiable Teutonic prig, the late Prince Consort. Yet this busy buttock-groom gives the best part of his flunky's life to the achievement. Even his own friendships—his—friendship are made but the pretext for a new servility.

And what an object for servility! The fashionable dilettante doubt, the fashionable dilettante faith, are neatly balanced in the scales of mid-Victorian pragmatism, whose coarse-fibred *affettuosì* bargain with God as with a huckster.

The British conception of the Noblest Man being that of a cheating tradesman, their God is fashioned in that image, and the ambition of them all is to cheat Him. So they avoid the sceptic's sneers by an affection of doubt, the fanatic's thunders by an affectation of faith: between which two stools they fall to the ground.

In the end they are more sceptic than the sceptic. Hear how they try to be pious!

"Leave thou thy sister, when she prays,
Her early Heaven, her happy views,"

implies that the whole question of religion is so trivial that it is really not worth while disturbing any one about it.

So too the play at scepticism results in an insane excess of maudlin piety.

As we look back on that whole dreadful period, we sicken at its loathsome cant, its *laissez-faire*, its sweating, its commercialism, its respectability, its humanitarianism, its inhumanity.

Of this age we have two perfect relics.

If art be defined as the true reflection of the inmost soul of the age, then the works of Alfred Tennyson and the Albert Memorial are among our chiefest treasures.

How harmonious, too, they are! There is nothing in Tennyson which the memorial does not figure in one or other of its gaudy features; no flatulence of the Memorial whose perfect parallel one cannot find in the shoddy sentimentalism of Tennyson.

Even where the vision is true and beautiful it is quite out of place.

The young gentleman waits in the park for his young lady; and sees, quite clearly and nicely:

"And like a ghost she glimmers on to me."

Apart from the villainous cacophony and bad taste of the wording, the vision is true enough; I was once young myself, in a park—and the rest of it; and that is exactly the vision. But what a point of view! The young gentleman must certainly have been a curate.

At such moments the heart should race, the veins swell, the breath quicken, the eyes strain, the foot—not a word of the struggle not to show impatience, the tenseness of the whole being of a man!

No! this is indeed a glimmering ghost, a bloodless, vacant phantom.

Note, too, the degradation of the symbols.

To compare a girl to a “ghost”; to disenchant the glow and glamour of her to a “glimmer.”

To compare a volcano in eruption to the puffing of a steam-engine; the sun in heaven at high noon to a farthing dip.

The vision is accurate enough; but the point of view is throughout that of a flunkey, of a tradesman, of a gelded toady, of a stewed prune!

So too the very perfection of form which marks Tennyson is a shocking fault, a guide to the governess' mind of the creature. He is so determined to keep all the rules that he utterly breaks the first (and last) rule: “Rules are the devil.” He writes like a schoolboy for whom a false quantity means a basting. He counts his syllables on his fingers; he never writes by ear, as one whose ears are open to the heavenly melody of the Muses.

So we have all the artifice—and perhaps the worst artifice ever invented—but no art, no humanity.

As a mountaineer (I have seen very many of the greatest mountains of the earth) I must admit that

. . . phantom fair
Was Monte Rosa, hanging there,
A thousand shadowy-pencilled valleys
And dewy dells in a golden air.”

is a very decent word-picture of the great mountain. But a Man would have felt his muscles tighten; and the lust to match his force against the stern splendour of those glittering ridges would have sent him hot-foot after rope and axe.

A great artist would rarely see so tremendous a vision as that of a mountain without emotion of terror and wonder and rejoicing. Tennyson sees it as a mere sight—he ticks it off in his Baedeker. He sees the dolly side of everything. Everything he touches becomes petty, false, weak, a mirage. He degrades the courteous Gawain to a vulgar lecher—but his lechery is as mild as an old maid's Patience; he ruins women as a child plucks a daisy. Lancelot commits adultery with kind gloves on; and Enoch Arden moralises like a Sunday-School Teacher at a village treat.

In the mouth of this soft-spoken counter-jumper the wildest words take on the smoothest sense. By sheer dint of cadence.

“Dragons of the prime
That tare each other in their slime”

sounds less terrible than a dog-fight.

“Nature, red in tooth and claw
With ravine, shriek'd ——”

is but a termagant.

“Ring out, wild bells” suggests no tocsin (as it might, for they symbolise the stupendous world-tragedy of the Atonement) but at most the pastoral summons to a simple worship, at least the dinner-gong—a dinner whose Turkey cooed, not gobbled; a Plum Pudding innocent of brandy.

Yet these lines are the most forcible one can remember; and if these things are done in the green tree——?

Lady Clara Vere de Vere feels (or is supposed to feel) a ladylike repugnance to the sight of a suicide's scarred throat! She never is conceived of as rising either in joy or horror to the height of tragedy. Her atonement? To preside at the Dorcas Society!

This ridiculous monster!

Let us cover up these bones neatly and tidily and bury them yet deeper in their tumulus of oblivion.
Bones? Jelly!

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