

## A WORD ABOUT TENNYSON

Beautiful as the song was, the original "Locksley Hall" of half a century ago was essentially morbid, heart-broken, finding fault with everything, especially the fact of money's being made (as it ever must be, and perhaps should be) the paramount matter in worldly affairs;

Every door is barr'd with gold, and opens but to golden keys.

First, a father, having fallen in battle, his child (the singer)

Was left a trampled orphan, and a selfish uncle's ward.

Of course love ensues. The woman in the chant or monologue proves a false one; and as far as appears the ideal of woman, in the poet's reflections, is a false one--at any rate for America. Woman is not "the lesser man." (The heart is not the brain.) The best of the piece of fifty years since is its concluding line:

For the mighty wind arises roaring seaward and I go.

Then for this current 1886-7, a just-out sequel, which (as an apparently authentic summary says) "reviews the life of mankind during the past sixty years, and comes to the conclusion that its boasted progress is of doubtful credit to the world in general and to England

in particular. A cynical vein of denunciation of democratic opinions and aspirations runs throughout the poem in marked contrast with the spirit of the poet's youth." Among the most striking lines of this sequel are the following:

Envy wears the mask of love, and, laughing sober fact to scorn,  
Cries to weakest as to strongest, 'Ye are equals, equal born,'  
Equal-born! Oh yes, if yonder hill be level with the flat.  
Charm us, orator, till the lion look no larger than the cat:  
Till the cat, through that mirage of overheated language, loom  
Larger than the lion Demo--end in working its own doom.  
Tumble Nature heel o'er head, and, yelling with the yelling street,  
Set the feet above the brain, and swear the brain is in the feet,  
Bring the old dark ages back, without the faith, without the hope.  
Beneath the State, the Church, the Throne, and roll their ruins down  
the slope.

I should say that all this is a legitimate consequence of the tone and convictions of the earlier standards and points of view. Then some reflections, down to the hard-pan of this sort of thing.

The course of progressive politics (democracy) is so certain and resistless, not only in America but in Europe, that we can well afford the warning calls, threats, checks, neutralizings, in imaginative literature, or any department, of such deep-sounding, and high-soaring voices as Carlyle's and Tennyson's. Nay, the blindness, excesses,

of the prevalent tendency--the dangers of the urgent trends of our times--in my opinion, need such voices almost more than any. I should, too, call it a signal instance of democratic humanity's luck that it has such enemies to contend with--so candid, so fervid, so heroic. But why do I say enemies? Upon the whole is not Tennyson--and was not Carlyle (like an honest and stern physician)--the true friend of our age?

Let me assume to pass verdict, or perhaps momentary judgment, for the United States on this poet--a remov'd and distant position giving some advantages over a nigh one. What is Tennyson's service to his race, times, and especially to America? First, I should say--or at least not forget--his personal character. He is not to be mention'd as a rugged, evolutionary, aboriginal force--but (and a great lesson is in it) he has been consistent throughout with the native, healthy, patriotic spinal element and promptings of himself. His moral line is local and conventional, but it is vital and genuine. He reflects the uppercrust of his time, its pale cast of thought--even its ennui. Then the simile of my friend John Burroughs is entirely true, "his glove is a glove of silk, but the hand is a hand of iron." He shows how one can be a royal laureate, quite elegant and "aristocratic," and a little queer and affected, and at the same time perfectly manly and natural. As to his non-democracy, it fits him well, and I like him the better for it. I guess we all like to have (I am sure I do) some one who presents those sides of a thought, or possibility, different from our own--different and yet with a sort of home-likeness--a tartness and

contradiction offsetting the theory as we view it, and construed from tastes and proclivities not at all his own.

To me, Tennyson shows more than any poet I know (perhaps has been a warning to me) how much there is in finest verbalism. There is such a latent charm in mere words, cunning collocations, and in the voice ringing them, which he has caught and brought out, beyond all others--as in the line,

And hollow, hollow, hollow, all delight,

in "The Passing of Arthur," and evidenced in "The Lady of Shalott," "The Deserted House," and many other pieces. Among the best (I often linger over them again and again) are "Lucretius," "The Lotos Eaters," and "The Northern Farmer." His mannerism is great, but it is a noble and welcome mannerism. His very best work, to me, is contain'd in the books of "The Idylls of the King," and all that has grown out of them. Though indeed we could spare nothing of Tennyson, however small or however peculiar--not "Break, Break," nor "Flower in the Crannied Wall," nor the old, eternally-told passion of "Edward Gray:"

Love may come and love may go,  
And fly like a bird from tree to tree.  
But I will love no more, no more  
Till Ellen Adair come back to me.

Yes, Alfred Tennyson's is a superb character, and will help give illustriousness, through the long roll of time, to our Nineteenth Century. In its bunch of orbic names, shining like a constellation of stars, his will be one of the brightest. His very faults, doubts, swervings, doublings upon himself, have been typical of our age. We are like the voyagers of a ship, casting off for new seas, distant shores. We would still dwell in the old suffocating and dead haunts, remembering and magnifying their pleasant experiences only, and more than once impell'd to jump ashore before it is too late, and stay where our fathers stay'd, and live as they lived.

May-be I am non-literary and non-decorous (let me at least be human, and pay part of my debt) in this word about Tennyson. I want him to realize that here is a great and ardent Nation that absorbs his songs, and has a respect and affection for him personally, as almost for no other foreigner. I want this word to go to the old man at Farringford as conveying no more than the simple truth; and that truth (a little Christmas gift) no slight one either. I have written impromptu, and shall let it all go at that. The readers of more than fifty millions of people in the New World not only owe to him some of their most agreeable and harmless and healthy hours, but he has enter'd into the formative influences of character here, not only in the Atlantic cities, but inland and far West, out in Missouri, in Kansas, and away in Oregon, in farmer's house and miner's cabin.

Best thanks, anyhow, to Alfred Tennyson--thanks and appreciation in

America's name.