

VICTOR HUGO.

BY T. C. SOMERVILLE, B. A.

IT is the common lot of humanity to be variously estimated. By some to be esteemed and honored, by others vilified and derided; by these to be considered a messenger of light, by those an emissary of darkness.

Victor Hugo has been no exception to the rule; and though time enough has elapsed to permit his life and works to prove the position he should occupy in the mind of the century, yet we still find much conflict of opinion, even in quarters where one would think a considerable unanimity should prevail.

In this hurried breathless nineteenth century, we have not time to read more than an infinitely small fraction of the books (even on one subject) that pour daily from the teeming presses, nor to consider in detail the lives of our prominent men.

It is matter for regret, therefore, that we have not as yet an adequate account of Hugo's life and works, written in a calm and judicious manner. Of biographies, there are several; of eulogies and denunciations galore. Some good classifications and criticisms of his works as a whole, but of intelligent individual analysis, almost none. I incline to the view that those who have denounced Hugo were actuated by his *political* acts and opinions, and by his visionary ideas of social reform, both of which, it must be confessed, were the least creditable of his performances, and those which have diminished rather than increased his fame and his fortune.

As one critic has said: "During the reign of Louis Philippe, he who had recently been an ardent Legitimist, became first a Constitutional Royalist (in which capacity he accepted from the king a peerage), then an extreme Liberal, and at last, when the revolution of 1848 broke out, a Republican Democrat."

We can afford, however, to overlook these apparently violent changes of base, since they have given us such an amazing model of scathing, satirical prose as "*Napoléon le Petit*"; such brilliant and vigorous verse as "*Les Châtiments*"; lyrics of such beauty as "*Les Contemplations*"; and such a "marvellous series of pictorial poems" as "*La Légende des Siècles*."

During the stormy times, through which his native land was passing, it would have been impossible for an ardent temperament like Hugo's not to take part in political affairs; and almost equally impossible to avoid committing blunders, or of running into excesses.

So, too, the social and literary revolutions going on about him enlisted his voice and pen. One of his admirers says: "It is our object to testify our admiration for a man whose every action commands our respect; for the writer who has infused new life into the antiquated diction of our language; for the poet whose verses purify while they fascinate the soul; for the dramatist whose plays exhibit his sympathy with the unendowed classes; for the

historian who has branded with ignominy the tyranny of oppressors; for the satirist who has avenged the outrages of conscience; for the orator who has defended every noble and righteous cause; for the exile who has stood up undauntedly to vindicate justice; and, finally, for the master-mind whose genius has shed a halo over France." But it is not, I think, as politician, nor as orator that posterity will esteem Victor Hugo great, but as poet, novelist and dramatist.

To arrive at a proper basis of criticism we must understand his position and relation to literature, his environment and his aims. The space at my disposal here will not admit of a thorough treatment of these, and I must limit myself to the merest outline.

Early in the reign of Charles X. the defect of the later classical literature of France began to be felt, and remedies to be sought. These defects were, briefly, "cut-and-dried rules of criticism, carefully selected and limited models, narrow range of subject, scanty vocabulary, paraphrases, stock metaphor and ornament, stiff, rigid metre and rhythm."

We can scarcely conceive the profound and slavish adherence to artificial models, nor the howls of derision and opprobrium that greeted those who dared to introduce innovations and to soil with polluting touch the sacred idol set up by Corneille and Racine. It was the time of extreme governmental censorship, and literary work had first to be submitted to the censors, and run the gauntlet of inferior, often ignorant creatures, whose only merit was to have obtained an undeserved position.

To abolish this degenerate classicism and to erect in its stead freedom of subject and method, in other words, complete emancipation from arbitrary rule, was the object of a new school called the "Romanticists."

Among the brilliant galaxy of names of this mighty literary revolution stands pre-eminent that of the subject of our sketch. In article, poem, novel and play Hugo never ceased—often against overwhelming odds—to fight the battle of freedom and originality, and lived to enjoy its complete triumph.

He claimed for the author "the right to submit to no other rule than that of his own imagination, and to survey everything from his own point of view."

The publication of "*Cromwell*" may be reckoned one of the greatest literary events of the time, for the preface was a startling manifesto containing the rules of the rising modern style of dramatic art, and Hugo thus offered himself as the "champion of the cause against that system which would retain every line of thought in one uniform mould." The preface of "*Cromwell*" became a sort of watchword to the young writers of the day, and its author the recognized leader of the "romantic" movement.

The final blows in verse and prose were struck in the drama of "*Hernani*," and the prose romance of "*Notre Dame de Paris*." These two may be considered the best representatives of Hugo's style, and the clearest types of the school of which he is the leader.