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TENNYSON AND GLADSTONE.

THE controversy between Tennyson and Mr. Gladstone is rather a battle between a dog and a fish; or to use language more decorous in the case of such august disputants, a discussion between two minds which are moving on different planes. Tennyson says that the soul of society is sick; that nobleness of character is departing; that power is lapsing into the hands of the unworthy. Mr. Gladstone replies by a copious, fervent, and impressive narrative of all the improvements—legislative, administrative, social, educational, and economical—which have been made in his time, including “the system founded by Mr. Cook, and now largely in use, under which numbers of persons, and indeed whole classes have for the first time found easy access to foreign countries.” This is almost as if somebody had answered the denunciations and warnings of John the Baptist by pointing out that there had been great improvements in the Roman law, that the system of Imperial roads had been successfully developed, that the harbour accommodation at Ravenna had been increased, and that there had been a gratifying activity during a recent period in the building trade at Caesarea Philippi.

There is no use in trying to put off Tennyson's denunciations as “dramatic.” His genius is not dramatic, and if he tries to be dramatic, he, like Byron, unconsciously projects himself. Nor will it do to say that he has grown desponding and pessimistic with advancing years. The passage in “Locksley Hall Fifty Years After” is the replica of a passage in “Maud,” and is entirely in consonance with the general view of society, character, and life which pervades the works of the great poet. There are two Voices, one entirely jubilant over Progress, the other not so jubilant. The first finds utterance in the orations and essays of Mr. Gladstone, the second in the poems of Tennyson, and, with a more pronounced accent, through the apocalyptic trumpet of Carlyle. To attempt to decide between the two Voices would be to write a book on the tendencies of the age. We may safely say that in Carlyle, and in Tennyson so far as he chimes in with Carlyle, there is a good deal of exaggeration. Certainly there was, on the part of Carlyle, very great exaggeration in the comparison which he drew between the Present and the Past to the disparagement of the Present. What was Abbot Samson's life but a continual struggle with roguery, injustice, extortion, disorder, and all the evils which Carlyle treats as peculiar to our age? Were there not in those days, as in ours, usurers despoiling the people? Was not the ruler of the land King John? It is true that in our days the work of the builder and the plumber is not always faithfully done. The gospel of a good day's wage for a bad day's work, assiduously preached by Labour demagogues, has not wholly failed of effect. It is true also that, as Carlyle complains, there is a mutiny in the kitchen, and that the household arrangements consequently are at present perplexed, and are probably in a state of transition. But one has only to look over any one great department of industry or service, such as the railway service, the postal service, the marine, to see that the qualities which Carlyle values most, and the decay of which he is always bewailing, such as integrity, punctual and intelligent performance of duty, submission to reasonable discipline, do in fact still abound. Carlyle and Mrs. Carlyle, if all was not well in their surroundings, were considerably better off than

they would have been at Bury St. Edmund in Abbot Samson's day. Nor can we doubt that there has been a great advance in humanity, and in moral refinement, and all the gentler and more affectionate parts of character. The diffusion of material well-being among the people in itself both diminishes crime and fosters at all events the homelier virtues. Sir James Stephen, whose authority is great on ethical questions, thinks that men have fallen off in fortitude. The occasions for displaying fortitude are happily not so numerous as they were in the days of religious persecution and judicial torture; but the army, the navy, and the life-boat service surely show that the quality is not extinct. Carlyle was, as Tennyson is, a literary man with the sensitive nerves of genius, and the second speaks in the full-bodied language of the bard as the first did in that of the seer. Tennyson has also something of the lotos-eater in him; his visions are of a rather languid happiness, such as that of a loving pair with a fine old mansion and no family cares, like the Miller's Daughter and her husband. While to purge the world of its baseness he is invoking “War with a hundred battles, and shaking a hundred thrones,” he, with his friend Morris, is quietly sitting over his wine at his villa in the Isle of Wight, and watching the men-of-war putting out to sea. Mr. Gladstone is a man of action, whose impressions are rectified by perpetual contact with his kind; and when he assures us that with some exceptions, such as the Ecclesiastical Titles Bill and the “devilish enginery” which he persists in saddling on the memory of poor Mr. Pitt, things have been growing better and not worse, we feel that we are hearing the verdict of a genuine experience, even though its expression may be somewhat rapturous, and not entirely free from what perhaps his illustrious friend and adversary would deem platitudes.

But there is a part of Tennyson's indictment with which Mr. Gladstone does not find it so easy to deal.

Nay, but these [the millions] would feel and follow truth if only you and your Rivals of realm-ruining Party when you speak were wholly true.

Ploughmen, shepherds, have I found, and more than once, and still could find, Sons of God and kings of men in utter nobleness of mind.

Truthful, trustful, looking upward to the practised hustings liar;
So the Higher wields the Lower, while the Lower is the Higher.

You that woo the voices tell them old Experience is a fool,
Teach your flattering kings that only those who cannot read can rule.

The last line might seem to have almost a personal application. Tennyson perhaps here again may be somewhat fastidious, and may do scant justice to the demagogic system of government, but his perceptions are likely, on the whole, to be more trustworthy than those of Mr. Gladstone, who is just now in a frame of mind like that of the American politician, who being wedged in a somewhat unsavoury crowd on a hot day, exclaimed: “I love the smell of the dear people!” We must admit that the “Hustings liar” has gained considerable ascendancy of late, and few would contend that the public men of England, at the present day, were the peers of the Puritan statesmen, or even of the much less heroic, but still strong and patriotic men of less remote times. From Peel and his group it is surely a rather steep descent to anything that is now on the public scene. England has no Government, and all patriotic hearts in her are filled with perplexity and fear. Nor does Mr. Gladstone take notice of the menacing signs on the horizon, such as Political Socialism and Communism, Nihilism, the Black Hand, Dynamite, and Labour Journalism, instinct with class envy and hatred. He will not find that everything is purified and sweetened in that direction. His enthusiasm reminds us a little of that of a Girondist exulting in the dawn of universal happiness amidst the gathering darkness of the Reign of Terror.

It seems really impossible to say how this generation will appear to men three or four generations hence. Hitherto man has believed that he knew from Revelation the end, and with it the law, of his being. Suppose that faith departs, as it has already departed from the minds of some who are very closely associated with Mr. Gladstone, what will follow? On what foundation will society rest? What will restrain men from wrong, and keep them in the path of duty? What will prevent them from behaving like subtler and more dangerous wild-beasts? We trust and believe in our hearts that all will come right, but we do not see how; and unless Mr. Gladstone does, while there may be reason for his jubilation, there may also be reason for Tennyson's boding wail.