

Lord Tennyson's Lady Godiva.



TENNYSON.

I waited for the train at Coventry;
I hung with grooms and porters on
the bridge,
To watch the three tall spires, and
there I shaped
The city's ancient legend into this:—
Not only we, the latest seed of Time,
New men, that in the flying of a wheel
Cry down the past, not only we, that
prate
Of rights and wrongs, have loved the
people well.
And loathed to see them overtax'd; but she
Did more, and underwrote, and overcame.
The women of a thousand summers back,
Godiva, wife to that grim Earl, who ruled
In Coventry; for when he laid a tax
Upon his town, and all the mothers
brought
Their children, clamoring. "If we pay we
starve!"
She sought her lord, and found him, where
he strode
About the hall, among his dogs, alone.
His beard a foot before him, and his hair
A yard behind. She told him of their tears.
And pry'd him. "If they pay their tax,
they starve."
Whereat he stared, replying half-amazed.
"You would not let your little finger ache
For such as these?"—"But I would
die," said she.
He laugh'd and swore by Peter and by
Paul:
Then fillip'd at the diamond in her ear;
"O, ay, ay, ay you talk!"—"Alas!" she
said,
"But prove me what it is I would not
do."
And from a heart as rough as Esau's hand,
He answer'd, "Ride you naked thro' the
town,
And I repent it; and wedding, as in scorn.
He perted, with great strides among his
dogs.
So left alone, the passions of her mind,
As winds from all the compass shift and
blow,
Made war upon each other for an hour.
Till pity won. She sent a herald forth.
And bade him cry with sound of trumpet,
all

The hard condition; but that she would
lose
The people: therefore, as they loved her
well,
From then till noon no foot should pace
the street,
No eye look down, she passing, but that
all
Should keep within, door shut, window
barr'd.
Then fled she to her inmost bower, and
there
Unclosp'd the wedded eagles of her belt,
The grim Earl's gift; but ever at a breath
She linger'd, looking like a summer moon
Half-dipt in cloud: anon she shook her
head.
And shower'd the rippled ringlets to her
face;
Unclo'd herself in haste; adown the stair
Stole on, and like a creeping sunbeam,
slid
From pillar unto pillar, until she reach'd
The gateway; there she found her pal-
frey trapt
In purple blazon'd with armorial gold.

Light horrors thro' her pulses: the blind
walls
Were full of chinks and holes; and over-
head
Fantastic gables, crowding, stared; but
she
Not less thro' all bore up, till, last, she
saw
The white-flower'd elder-thicket from the
field
Gleam thro' the Gothic archways in the
wall.
Then she rode back, clothed on with
chastity:
And one low churl, compact of thankless
earth.
The fatal byword of all years to come,
Boring a little augur-hole in fear,
Peep'd—but his eyes, before they had their
will,
Were shivell'd into darkness in his head.
And dropt before him. So the Powers who
wait
On noble deeds, cancell'd a sense misused;
And she, that knew not, pass'd: and all
at once.



Then she rode forth, clothed on with
chastity:
The deep air listen'd round her as she
rode
And all the low wind hardly breathed
for fear.
The little wide-mouth'd heads upon the
spout
Had cunning eyes to see, the barking cur
Made her cheeks flame: her palfrey's
footfall shot

With twelve great shocks of sound, the
shameless noon
Was clasp'd and hammer'd from a hundred
towers,
One after one: but even then she gain'd
Her bower: whence reissuing, robed and
crown'd,
To meet her lord, she took the tax away
And built herself an everlasting name.