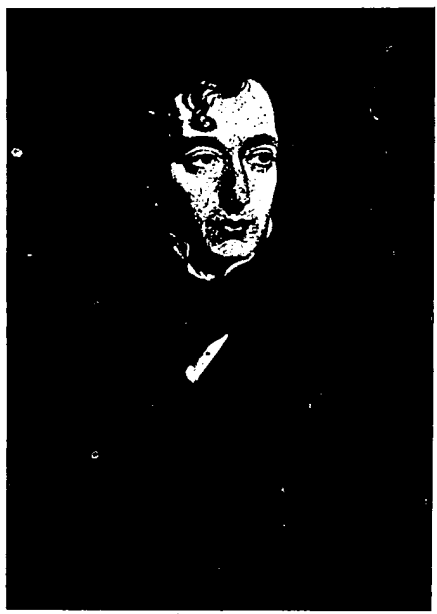
Benjamin Disraeli

THE popularity of Lord Beaconsfield since his death, a popularity that has gone on increasing in a sort of geometrical progression, is a somewhat puzzling phenomenon to outsiders; and, apparently, to a very large section of Englishmen themselves. It is not that any one is inclined to contest his title to be one of the foremost statesmen of the last century; it is because the present idolatry contrasts so curiously with the suspicion and dislike of which Disraeli was the object, among his political friends as well as among his political enemies, until a couple of years before his death. Nor

was this hostility confined to politicians. The leading churchmen, philanthropists, poets, philosophers have often given expression to language in his regard that, at the present day, seems absolutely ferocious. To Lord Shaftesbury, the devoted philanthropist and evangelical leader, he was "a leper, without principle, without feeling, without regard to anything human or divine." To Lord Selborne, the lay representative of the High Church party, he was "an actor in a mask he never tore off." Browning concentrated a world of contempt in a few phrases, such as "Beaconsfield the Jew." Carlyle, who, however, reconsidered his estimate when the Hebrew Prime Minister offered him a title and a pension, sneered at the "superlative Hebrew conjurer," who was also "a poor creature," and reviled John Bull for letting "this Jew jump upon his stomach." Mr. Chamberlain, destined to be the heir of his policy, entered on his parliamentary career with the solemn declaration: "I do not think that Mr. Disraeli, if he tried, could speak the truth." Yet, in spite of foes whose personal integrity added weight to their crushing invectives, and of aristocratic friends who obeyed resentfully and restively the authority an alien and a plebeian dared to exercise over them, Lord Beaconsfield won the battle in the end. The victory came late, came when he was past enjoying it, but it was a splendid outcome of the struggle between pure intellect and race and class prejudice combined. It would be ungenerous to withhold one's admiration, and even one's respect, from the indomitable will, the courage and tact that achieved such a result in the face of such opposition.



BENJAMIN DISRAELI

The critical circumstances of the last few years have made his figure loom larger than ever on the English horizon. The Conservatives, or at least the rank and file of the Conservative party, are becoming more and more convinced that "one blast upon his bugle horn" would have greater effect in rescuing the little island from the evils it suffers now and fears in the future than all the efforts of the small statesmen at present guiding its destinies in such blundering fashion.

Altho the number of books written about Disraeli—some impugning his character and motives, some lauding them, but all claiming to penetrate the Asian mystery, to read the riddle of the sphinx—would make up no inconsiderable library, the present work* is certainly about the most attractive and amusing that has yet appeared. Mr. Meynell writes in a very plain, unpretentious, rather free and easy style, a style as unlike the sparkling and gorgeous manner of his subject as can well be imagined, but it has grace, vividness and color, and the simplicity harmonizes admirably with the anecdotical character of the volume, which is a cross between a biography and an autobiography. Disraeli tells his own story, and the author comments on the incidents in a sort of unconventional way. He has no enigma to solve, no mask to raise, and for the very good reason—so thinks Mr. Meynell—that there was no enigma, that the seeming mask was an honest face. His theme is Disraeli as son, brother, friend, and if the political speeches and ro-

* BENJAMIN DISRAELI. *An Unconventional Biography. By Walter Meynell.* With 40 illustrations, including two photogravure plates. New York: Appleton & Co. $3.00 net.

mances are touched on, it is only when they help to elucidate the purely human story. What we have here are the statesman's letters, most of them published for the first time, the table talk of Downing Street, of his town and country residences, and of the smoking rooms of the Carlton Club and of the House of Commons. It is easy to imagine what a delightful book could be constructed out of such material skillfully used. Almost every page is lit up by an anecdote, a witticism, a sarcasm or a striking reflection on the men and events of the time.

Lord Beaconsfield is said by his present biographer to have been the most good natured and forgiving of men. It must be confessed that very little of these genial qualities appear in his jests and repartees. They are often very mordant, not to say venomous. When Lord John Russell, who concealed a great soul in a diminutive and withered body, became the leader of his party in the House, Disraeli called the attention of his friends to this leadership as "a modern illustration of the ancient worship of an insect." To an author from whom he accepted a book he had no intention of reading, he said: "Many thanks; I shall lose no time in reading it;" which is hardly as neat, however, as the formula which Oliver Wendell Holmes ascribes to "the master," who, after a few flattering adjectives about a similar presentation volume, added: "I am lying under a sense of obligation." Disraeli, when asked his opinion of Chamberlain's maiden speech, answered, in a tone of mild surprise: "He wears his eyeglass like a gentleman!" The aristocratic jibe did not come with a very good grace from one who, on the score of birth, had little superiority over the member for Birmingham. His answer to Lord Aberdare, who, after he had taken his peerage, asked him how he liked it: "Well, I feel that I am dead, but in the Elysian Fields," probably represents the feeling of most statesmen who have been "pitched into the Upper House." The Princess Mary of Cambridge, very patriotic, very impulsive, and always anxious for the Government to make a move against Russia, said to Disraeli (then Prime Minister) at a dinner party: "Why don't you oppose them; what are you waiting for?" "The potatoes, madame, at present," was the reply. His explanation of Queen Victoria's great liking for him is no doubt as true as it was witty. "Gladstone treats the Queen like a public department—I treat her like a woman."

By the way, Mr. Meynell does not adduce the slightest evidence for his statement that the primrose was the favorite flower of Disraeli, who has never even mentioned it except in "Lothair," where he states that the leaves are capital for a salad. If he had had a favorite, it would surely have been some flaring bloom, an orchid or a dragon lily, not the modest primrose. In the motto of the wreath laid by the Queen on his tomb, "*His* favorite flower," the pronoun stood for her deceased husband. It would seem as if after his death as well as during his life a certain amount of humbug must always be associated with the history of the great imperialist.

One of the most fascinating chapters in the volume is the long and exhaustive analysis of "Sybil," a novel that has exercised more influence upon English social life than all the rest of his stories together, a book as autobiographical as "Contarini Fleming," and in which we get closer to the heart of Disraeli as a politician. If the secret of the mysterious statesman be ever discovered, it will be revealed to some profound psychologist who has made a thorough psychological study of this book, and, perhaps, of "Lothair." As to "Endymion," we dissent from the opinion that it, like all the other romances, is a *roman à clef*. It is easy to recognize Cardinal Manning, or at least his outward features, in the Cardinal Grandison of "Lothair," "the Radical Cardinal, who wore the red and was red at heart." But the Nigel Penruddock of "Endymion," who becomes Archbishop of Westminster and Cardinal, has nothing distinctively of Manning about him except his titles. He has more of Newman or of Oakeley. The whole work is rather a gallery of composite photographs than of portraits, except, perhaps, the Sainte-Barbe, who has been identified as Thackeray, an unhappy incident in Disraeli's literary career, for a redeeming feature of his character was the temporary nature of his resentments, never, except in this instance, carried beyond the tomb.

As an *advocatus diaboli,* Mr. Meynell is far more amusing than convincing. But he is honest, and the reader can form his own judgment, for he has all the documents relating to certain shady phases of Disraeli's life before him. We do not believe that the author's special pleading will affect the opinion of any one, except a Dizzyite who is past redemption, on Disraeli's sudden *volte-face* from pure radicalism to extreme toryism, or on his mean and shabby treatment of Sir Robert Peel.