VICTORIAN MEMORIES

By Maurice Francis Egan

"DE SENECTUTE", which opens this book, is a dialogue in a college garden. It is the atmosphere of those conversations which have become so fashionable of late between a very old man and men who are much younger. What is called the Victorian time has been mellowed; it begins to have the glow of an old painting; we are just far enough from it to find it interesting or to misunderstand it. Frederic Harrison, who died on the thirteenth of January, at the age of ninety-two, had memories even of the pre-Victorian era of King William, which was really a survival of the manners and habits of George IV. In "De Senectute", he shows us that old age — very old age — has its consolations and enjoyments; and he simply emphasizes the truth known to every old man who has not wasted the whole of his life in merely making money, who has accumulated interests of the head and the heart, that old age is precious in its leisure. This it was hardly necessary for him to say; but nevertheless he said it with a new charm.

It will perhaps occur to the reader that none of the old men who celebrate the contentment of their time of life take into consideration the wretchedness of that old man who has not accumulated a competence. To climb another's stair, no matter how beloved the owner of the stair may be, is, as Dante puts it, sometimes full of bitterness. In the monastic days, the poor gentleman had his place, his garden, perhaps his cell, and the privilege of going into the world when he wanted to. There were burses for the old. Yet in our civilization there is no provision for the old who have been too altruistic, too devoted to their families or prevented by temperament or circumstances from providing for their own future. Who provides for Père Goriot? Mr. Harrison, belonging to a special class, was not the man to show how old age united to poverty endures life; and one who cannot do this adds very little to what Cicero has already said.

Those of us who have acquired a taste for Frederic Harrison — who was one of the most tolerant of free thinkers, who longed to construct rather than analyze or destroy — will find him at his best in "My Victorian Memoirs", and probably at his most irritating in "Greek and Elizabethan Tragedy". He gives his vote for the purity and proportion of the Greek tragedies, and he is one of the few Englishmen who take the view of Voltaire as to Shakespeare's mixture of the tragic and the comic. This essay is sure to strike sparks from the mind of the thoughtful reader. It calls attention to a fact now almost forgotten by the readers of English history, that the influence of Prince Albert — thoroughly German and autocratic in mental formation and entirely dominant with Queen Victoria

— might have produced a new revolution in England, if he had lived. But, after all, there were too many sturdy Englishmen like the Duke of Wellington, who publicly reminded this Teutonic Prince that he had been imported in order to perpetuate the dynasty and not to talk on English affairs!

Mr. Harrison pays a deserved compliment to Dr. Wilbur L. Cross's "History of Henry Fielding", which is a masterpiece of careful biography. Mr. Harrison admires "Tom Jones" greatly. He regrets that Fielding lived so much with libertines, although he was anything but a libertine himself. Fielding was affected in his point of view by the vicious tone of English society which existed until Queen Victoria — denounced as a prude by the remnant of the Prince Regent's set — gave society at least the air of being decent. The pre-Victorian tone, Mr. Harrison says, excludes Fielding's books from the young and innocent.

But, as Coleridge pointed out, the breezy coarseness of Fielding is less mischievous than the close sentimentalism of Richardson. Still there are things in Fielding which for my part I condemn on grounds of art quite as much as of morality. "The Modern Husband" is simply disgusting. So is Lady Bellaston. It is no use for Fielding and his defenders to say that such things existed in the smart world and were even tolerated in it. In the first place, they were not tolerated on the stage and in novels, even in that age and in that world. "The Modern Husband" play was denounced again and again; Lady Mary Montagu, Fielding's cousin, said he had made Tom Jones a "scoundrel". In the next place, there are things in fact which are so disgusting that they cannot be the subject of Art. Moralists, preachers and confessors must tackle them, but they are unfit for comedy and romance — the business of which is to charm, and not to disgust.

Mr. Harrison declares that "we ancients who seem so useless and so incapable of happiness really live with the mighty ones of old". He says that he is spared the trouble of even casting his eye over "the new stuff", above all over the new novels. Even the laudation of the publisher of each epoch making romance, each novel of the age, leaves him cold; he would as soon listen to the chatter in a crowded tram car or the smoking room of a country club as read the modern up to date novel of what "they" call "life". He rather thinks that not even Thackeray was quite true in his pictures of the upper classes in England. Dickens and Thackeray really knew very little about them, except from caricatures. As to Thackeray, this comes to us as a blow but it has been said before, and there is something to it. The voices of the old masters ring in Harrison's ears. Of Dante, for instance: "Onorate l'atissimo poeta."

When one knows how seriously the English regard precedence at dinner parties, one can understand the admiration of Mr. Harrison for the hostess who, passing by the guest of honor, a distinguished privy councilor, took the arm of Robert Browning, saying, "Onorate l'atissimo poeta."

The last essay in the book is an attempt on the part of Mr. Harrison to make a philosophic synthesis. As an Englishman has never been capable of making such a synthesis, one cannot be surprised at Mr. Harrison's failure, although he gets nearer to it than Bacon or Locke or Spencer. He calls Spencer's "Synthetic Philosopher" a vast "*mare ignotum*". He frankly admits that no great writer, except St. Thomas Aquinas, the disciple of Aristotle, has as yet succeeded in making a satisfactory *summa* of philosophy.

We all admit, with Mr. Harrison, that a *summa* "down to date" — to use a modern phrase — is badly needed.

There was no mind of the eighteenth or nineteenth century comprehensive or scientific enough to produce it; and so far the twentieth century has shown a deterioration in the process necessary for a great synthesis. Mr. Harrison has added very little to the methods of Comte. He repeats and rerepeats a truth too often forgotten — that philosophy itself cannot be separated from actual life or morality or religion. When it became a metaphysical toy with the later schoolmen, it perished.

To the reader who desires mental stimulus, who thrives on mental irritation, the charm of style and the originality of thought of this book will give continuous pleasure. It is a volume which lends itself to annotations, and the margins are sufficiently wide.

De Senectute: More Last Words. By Frederic Harrison. D. Appleton and Co.