TENNYSON: A MEMOIR.*

So at last it has come to this. A great man is forced to publish his memoirs in self-defence. Not at all by way of apologia, or protest; but simply to forestall and countermine unauthorised versions. Tennyson, who all his life shrank from advertisement, nay, resented bitterly every intrusion on his privacy, wished that no life of him should appear. And this not merely from temperament, but probably from matured judgment. With his singular strong sense he must have felt that a life so private, so domestic, so reclusive, so uneventful, appealed to no lawful curiosity, and promised no commentary upon

* Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir. By his son, Hallam Lord Tennyson. In 2 vols. New York: The Macmillan Co. $10.00.

his works beyond the bare fact that it was what it was, and what the world had long known it to have been. But he was powerless against the new Inquisition, and consented that his heir should publish his official *dossier*. "However, he wished," says his son, "that if I deemed it better, the incidents of his life should be given as shortly as might be without comment, but that my notes should be final and full enough to preclude the chance of further and unauthentic biographies." What was meant by "notes" is not quite clear, but the biographer, on whom rested the responsibility of a plenary discretion, has not followed strictly the poet's suggestion.

Now what should be the memoir of Tennyson which could satisfy him and his—for his we all are who love poetry and revere genius? This. Fifty pages—or at most a hundred—of prose fine as his verse, of prose simple, melodious, pure and purposeful—the prose of Goldsmith; and on this the "incidents of his life" should be strung with all the grace and charm of reverent sympathy, though "as shortly as might be, and without comment." So much for the Man, and no more; for the Poet an ampler portrayal. Without prying too much into the secrets of his craft, we would fain become conversant with every scene and incident which kindled and fed and tempered his poetic flame. All that may be known we would know of the purpose, the inspiration, and the working out of his greatest works; his bibliography and literary history should be handled finally and conclusively; the development of his own self-criticism traced side by side with that of his popularity. For criticism or interpretation of his poems no place remains; that is the province, not of the biographer, but of the critic.

Many of these elements will be found in Lord Tennyson's work, but embedded in a mass of trivial and, in our eyes, irrelevant gossip. We shall not presume to blame him. The public insists on knowing what the poet liked for breakfast, when he caught cold, and what casual remarks he and his callers made on weighty subjects about which their opinion is without special authority. And if Lord Tennyson did not supply these details, some one else would and with less veracity and good taste. A thousand pages—albeit the print is large—are overmuch; were they fewer, perchance some interloper would advertise a "full and complete Life." Perhaps, too, this wealth of domestic trivialities may render the publication of a "Real Lord Tennyson" impossible. The work has small pretensions to concinnity of structure or style. Though the author says, and no doubt truly, that he has tried to efface himself, he has not always succeeded. In the narrative chapters we are too often conscious of his inexperience or defective sense of proportion in the curtness and vagueness of the important sentence and the prolixity of the more trivial connecting matter. This vagueness—the preface is especially nebulous and empty—is partly due to his habit of weaving into his sentences scraps of his father's poems, which, apart from the context, are singularly confusing. Once upon a time our fathers who sat under the Kembles used to lard their style with scraps and orts of Shakespeare. The practice is happily extinct. Yet though it makes for obscurity, we do not upbraid the author with having learnt unconsciously to think in the words of his illustrious father, which to him are naturally more familiar and suggestive than to us. If the book as it goes on tends more and more to a *Tennyson and his Times* of the usual gossiping type, Professor Sidgwick and Professor Palgrave share the responsibility of "selection from upward of 40,000 letters." Many that appear from no point of view deserved printing in full with formal address and superscription. The copious extracts from the poet's and his wife's diaries and travel notes are often too trivial and domestic for publication. But the literary demerits of the work are, after all, its practical merits. Though the author and printer do not spare the paper, the varied and countless scraps of material succeed one another without joints or comments, in a stolid, business-like way that is really very convenient and comfortable. Lord Tennyson is always quite serious about it, and anxious to get as much as he can into his thousand pages. Some valuable papers on Tennyson contributed by various hands are printed in full as appendices. And finally the index is so excellent that we find it the pleasantest guide to the book. Infinite pains have been taken to render this labour of filial

love, what it undoubtedly is, the final, full, authoritative life of the great Laureate. In the future many more brilliant, or sympathetic, or profound studies of that life may appear, but they can be only abridgments of this, nor will they dare to palter with its magisterial testimonies. For five years we have trembled for the poet's honour lying at the mercy of the *valetaille ;* was it to be puffed up to shameful collapse, or vulgarised by sordid commonplace, or smirched by envious spleen? Lord Tennyson has devoted himself to spare us that pain, and we offer him the personal homage of our gratitude. Let him rest assured that he has let fall no word of enthusiastic veneration which has seemed too strong to one who, while upholding Tennyson's supremacy among modern poets, is perhaps more than most alive to his deficiencies, and for one phase of his work feels not only distaste, but positive repugnance. The book is no revelation. It only confirms and justifies the faith we had based upon the poet's writings. It is no plausible apology or artful panegyric. With nothing to conceal, nothing to explain away, the author is able without the least fail of seemly reverence to set just and reasoned limits to his enthusiasm. No judgment on Tennyson's life and character has ever been, or ever will be pronounced so judicious, so discriminating, so wise and moderate, and therefore so convincing as that suggested by the son, who of all living men knew the poet best, and whose whole life had moved under his controlling influence ; nor shall our narrowing space prevent us from quoting it in full. "If I may venture," he says, "to speak of his special influence over the world, my conviction is, that its main and enduring factors are his power of expression, the perfection of his workmanship, his strong common sense, the high purport of his life and work, his humility, and his openhearted and helpful sympathy."

The book is a mine of ore, some rich, some worthless. To throw up a few random spadefuls in this brief article were sorry work, when so many suggestive points are each tempting us to a lengthy essay. Tennyson's life we need touch at one point only, that which alone aroused criticism. The outcry against his peerage has died down ; these memoirs should prevent its revival. The offer was Mr. Gladstone's idea ; and his unrivalled experience and knowledge of what was fit and seemly should have been enough for the public. It was no question of a rubbishy "compliment to literature," like the baronetcies doled out to political journalists and pushing novelists. Nor was it a new-fangled "prize scheme" to encourage poetry. Mr. Gladstone never meant to fool the young recruit, slinking to the Row with his first epic, into the belief that he carried a coronet in his knapsack. Yet both these delusions were rife. Unchecked, to what would they tend? To a cry of injustice if a peerage were some day refused to an Otway, or Savage, or Goldsmith, or Burns of the future. We might easily have a poet of splendid genius and vast popularity who would be impossible as a peer ; say a man of low birth, of disreputable or even criminal connections, with a wife who had "no marriage lines to show," and a progeny of neglected brats—the heir to the barony perhaps already in Holloway Gaol ; a genial, tipsy visionary, unkempt, unwashed, innocent of politics and the great world, his great gains all squandered—in short, a splendid bankrupt in mind, body, and estate. Prime Ministers understand these matters better than the journalists. Lord Macaulay was not merely a popular writer, but a distinguished statesman and Indian official. Lord Tennyson was a man of good family and excellent connections, of the highest university breeding, of irreproachable and dignified life, an aristocrat of the best patriarchal type, yet a Liberal who had sympathised with and often voiced the progressive feeling of his day. He had ample means to support, and worthy descendants to transmit the title. The distinguishing favour of the Queen, and the confidence of some of her ablest statesmen were his ; scarce one of the great men of England, nay, almost of the world, but sought and valued his acquaintance or friendship. Though gifted with no power of original or profound thought, he had a good practical head, and with his conscientious thoroughness had acquired a sound knowledge of most political and scientific questions. There was nothing, at least in his later days, visionary or hysterical in his opinions, which would probably have carried weight in either House of Par-

liament. True, he was a poet also, and in the public eye only and above all, a poet. But as such he had long held and illustrated an ancient office in the royal court, and somehow always seemed a great officer of State—the Queen's Poet, the Nation's Poet—rather than the Poet of the publishers and their customers. But what Mr. Gladstone probably saw, and was the first to see, was that Tennyson was not only a born poet, but a born noble. As a boy, the spell of *noblesse oblige* was laid upon him. His modest simplicity of heart, his self-respecting pride, his scorn of little ends and base means, his ardent thirst for achievement, his worship of the far-off ideal of pure and high and noble life, and his inspired faith that courage must at last attain it —what was all this but the spirit of the young knights of old? In any other calling this man could never have been less than great—as a sailor, a Nelson, as a soldier, a Gordon. And when he was grown famous, how lordly and dignified was his modest life. It was a real court he held at Farringford, the life which great nobles may enjoy in their private apartments, when the gorgeous state rooms are shut up. Not, indeed, an atmosphere overcharged with high-pressure intellect; no shrine of courtly elegance or brilliant wit; nor yet the sumptuous, soul-satisfying palace of our modern painter-princes. No, its stately dignity lay in that proud seclusion, that wholesome domesticity, that household order and decency, that marked our English territorial families, who, resting on their acres and pedigrees, could afford to live sanely and nobly, and follow their natural instinct. It is fine to notice that not only did Tennyson never think of pushing himself, but what is more, never once dreamt that he needed pushing. And then the man himself! that commanding figure, that stately mien, that noble, impressive face that would have graced the court of Elizabeth or Philip II., and inspired the brush of Velasquez! Yes, Mr. Gladstone was quite right.

Thus far a single point has led us, and no space left for other incidents of his life, such as his interesting correspondence with the Queen—nor even for his beautiful euthanasy. Of Tennyson's poetical career, of the many literary criticisms which this book has suggested, we have said nothing; some of them we may possibly treat hereafter. But before leaving his life, perhaps it should be pointed out that, so far as we know, gossip has busied itself with only three frailties of the poet. First, the cloak. Well, it was not good—too Spanish, and yet not Spanish enough; and it did not go well with the collar and tie. But let the cloak and hat drop for the present, though they are really food for an essay—they are hardly sins. Secondly, a certain "gruffness," or testiness of manner. Well, was not Johnson a little gruff at times? Tennyson's "gruffness" was a jest in early days with Hallam and FitzGerald, so it was no later affectation. It is plain that those who knew him, saw in it only a strain of British sincerity, like Carlyle's growls, and probably an occasional reaction from his over-strung poetical imagination. The charge disappears before the universal testimony to his warmth and tenderness of heart. Lastly, it has been said that he was a keen hand at a bargain, and no poet in money matters. But so was Shelley. And what of that? It is very well for the rich, bachelor poet who is alone in the world, to take no thought for the morrow, and despise lucre. Any thought of meanness or over-reaching was repugnant to Tennyson's whole nature, and if at any time he may have been a little hard to deal with, it must have been due to his constitutional suspicion of the trading classes (as shown in his *Maud* and elsewhere), to his passion for justice, and to an English tenacity in claiming his lawful rights. Against what great memory have so few charges, and so trivial, been brought? Tennyson was not half eccentric enough: he would have been more perfect if he had had more imperfections.

Y. Y.