

The Message of "In Memoriam"

A CENTENARY APPRECIATION

ARTHUR HALLAM is best known as the subject of Tennyson's immortal poem, *In Memoriam*. Born at Bedford Place, in London, on February 1st, 1811, he was at Eton from 1822-27 and in 1828 he entered Trinity College, Cambridge, where Alfred Tennyson met him. From the first they took a liking to each other which deepened, as the acquaintance became close, into intimacy. Hallam fell in love with his friend's sister, Emily—a love which was reciprocated—but the engagement was a closely-guarded secret until 1832.

On leaving Cambridge, in 1832, Hallam settled with his father at 7 Wimpole Street, in London, where, to quote his own words, "he slaved at the outworks of his profession." Life as a lawyer was, however, very distasteful to him, and he was glad and grateful to leave the Courts and make many visits to the rectory of Somersby, in Lincolnshire, where his fiancée lived.

"The blind Fury with the abhorred shears," without warning, "slit the thin spun life" in Vienna, whither he had gone in quest of health, on September 15th, 1833. Arthur Hallam was found lying dead upon a sofa in his father's study. The cause of death was the sudden rushing of blood to the head, a weakness to which he was subject.

On St. George's Day, 1850, the death of William Wordsworth not only deprived the nation of a major poet, but left the much-coveted office of Poet Laureate vacant. There has seldom been such eager speculation as to the identity of a new Laureate, and seldom, if ever, have the claims of so many noteworthy candidates been advanced.

Tennyson had considerably enhanced his claims to the laureateship by the publication of *In Memoriam*, the poem which is the keystone in the elaborate arch of his fame, although even so he was offered—and accepted—the coveted prize only after Samuel Rogers had graciously refused it.

Generally allowed to be Tennyson's sovereign achievement in the sphere of poetic art, *In Memoriam* did not see the light until June 1850. By a piecemeal process it came into being, but it is certain that the poet's "shaping spirit of imagination" began its creative masterpiece not long after Hallam's death. He often visited the grave of the "young Marcellus" in Clevedon Church, which stands on a lonely hill south of the town and close to

where the sea breaks "on the cold gray stones." It was here that Tennyson started to write the small elegies "for Arthur's sake, just as he would have liked me to do them."

Professor A. C. Bradley, in his admirable labour of love, *A Modern Commentary to Tennyson's In Memoriam*, does not contend for any rigid division of the poem into parts. He admits that "the content of some of the later sections implies a greater distance of time from the opening of the series than is suggested by the chronological scheme." Also Tennyson himself late in life gave a scheme of the poem to Mr. Knowles which varies in one important point from that of Professor Bradley. It is, however, quite certain that the changes in the poet's mind are marked mainly by the Christmas sections, but also by other oft-recurring seasons and anniversaries.

Tennyson tells us himself that the divisions are made by the three Christmastide sections XXVIII., LXXVIII., CIV. If the reader will follow the divisions as made by Professor Bradley, he will see how the poet conceives the "Way of the Soul." In sections I. to XXVII.—up to the first Christmas—we have the first part, a span of grief, in which the poet looks back upon years of friendship and affirms that love should survive the loss of the loved one, but little reference is made to the continued existence of the lost friend.

In the second part—sections XXVIII. to LXXVII.—the conception of the continued life of the dead is very conspicuous, and the question of future reunion is raised. The remembrance of the early life in a world beyond the reach of death is stoutly and strongly affirmed. There is a passionate, even frantic, desire for the nearness of the dead companion.

Part three, to the third Christmas—LXXVIII. to CIII.—treats of the possible communion of the living with the dead, apparently realised in a trance:—

So word by word, and line by line,
The dead man touched me from the past;
And all at once it seem'd at last
His living soul was flash'd on mine;

And mine in his was wound, and whirl'd
About empyreal heights of thought,
And came on that which is, and caught
The deep pulsations of the world,

Aeonian music measuring out
The steps of Time—the shocks of Chance—
The blows of Death. At length my trance
Was cancelled, stricken through with doubt.

"Stricken through with doubt"; the ecstasy leaves no lasting assurance. If faith is to conquer in the end, as indeed it does,

it is not by the aid of such fanciful and fitful illuminations, but by the strength which it draws from a beautifully persistent love. The tone of the third section is, however, that of a quiet and not unhappy retrospection, and there are glimmerings on the poet's mental and spiritual horizon of new and joyful life starting to show itself.

In the fourth and last part, from the third Christmas—sections CIV. to CXXXI.—the poet wins his victory. The regret passes away, his love begins to grow and widen in the wonderful and welcome knowledge that

That friend of mine who lives in God,
That God, which ever lives and loves,
One God, one law, one element,
And one far-off divine event,
To which the whole creation moves.

Nevertheless, Arthur Christopher Benson, in his little book on Tennyson, argues that the immortal *In Memoriam* is not Christian because it has nothing to say about the Resurrection. "There is," says the one-time Master of Magdalen, "no allusion in the whole poem to the Resurrection, the cardinal belief of Christianity, the very foundation-stone of Christian belief; the very essence of consolation, of triumph over death, of final victory. It is impossible that one who was a Christian in the strictest sense should not have recurred again and again to this thought in a poem which deals from first to last with death and hope." But is it not true, as Canon Anthony Deane has pointed out, that the Resurrection Doctrine is implicit in the poem? Take, for example, the eleventh stanza of section LXXXIV., describing the meeting of two souls after death, when they would

Arrive at last the blessed goal,
And He that died in Holy Land
Would reach us out the shining hand,
And take us as a single soul.

This is, what Sir W. Robertson Nicoll has finely called, "the living act of the hand of Him Who not merely lived but '*died in Holy Land*'." Does it not involve the doctrine that He is risen? Then there is the great introductory poem beginning

Strong Son of God, immortal love,
Whom we, that have not seen Thy face,
By faith, and faith alone, embrace,
Believing where we cannot prove.

This poem, which introduces *In Memoriam*, was apparently written after the body of the work had been completed, and is dated 1849. The tone of quiet resignation and supreme faith that pervades it would strongly suggest its composition after the stage

of doubt and despondency had been thoroughly and triumphantly encountered. God is the supreme Author of created beings, rational and irrational. A school of thought, at the time of writing, had arisen which claimed that the scientific method was the adequate and only sure avenue to truth. To this Tennyson did not assent. He held that there were some things which were true which yet could not be *proved*; and these things are to be *believed*—"Believing where we cannot prove." And *believing* thus, Tennyson did not relinquish the foothold of faith. Belief in immortality to him was innate and intuitive. "Thou wilt not leave us in the dust" is almost the language of Psalm xvi, 10. The relation of God in Christ to us involves the necessity of a personal immortality and a personal resurrection.

That Christ died, and rose again, and sat down at the right hand of God, Alfred Tennyson never doubted. Moreover, his faith in our Lord's Resurrection is expressed in various ways, perhaps most clearly and convincingly at the conclusion of *The Holy Grail*:—

In moments when he feels he cannot die,
And knows himself no vision to himself,
Nor the high God a vision, nor that One
Who rose again.

Speaking of these last three lines Tennyson himself informs us that they are "the (spiritually) central lines in the *Idylls*." And it is in the thought of "that One Who rose again" that a struggling faith is rewarded.

"Till God's love set thee at his side again," Tennyson wrote to Queen Victoria. Her Majesty wrote in her private journal after meeting her Poet Laureate at Osborne in 1833:—"He talked of the many friends he had lost, and what it would be if he did not feel and know that there was another world, where there would be no partings; and then he spoke with horror of the unbelievers and philosophers who would make you believe there was no other world, no Immortality, who tried to explain all away in a miserable manner. We agreed that were such a thing possible, God, Who is Love, would be far more cruel than any human being." "Without the Resurrection," Tennyson said once to Herbert Warren, "I can't see how the apostles took heart again."

Hallam Tennyson writes in his biography of his illustrious father:—"That my father was a student of the Bible, those who have read *In Memoriam* know. He also eagerly read all notable works within his reach relating to the Bible, and traced with deep interest such fundamental truths as underlie the great religions of the world. He hoped that the Bible would be more and more studied by all ranks of people, and expounded simply by their

teachers; for he maintained that the religion of the people could never be founded on mere moral philosophy; and that it could only come home to them in the simple, noble thoughts and facts of a Scripture like ours." It would be a tremendous task to sift out all his borrowings from the Bible, for there are traces of them throughout the poem. "God's finger," "idle tales," "the dust of praise," "gods of gold," "the thews of Anakin,"—all these one feels, have sunk so deep into the writer's consciousness that they rise unbidden to his lips, faithful interpreters of his own thoughts, yet enriching and ennobling his verse with memories and associations that no other words in the language possess. The Bible certainly deepens the emotional colouring of his work, as much as it adds to the vividness of his sensuous imagery. Most skilful and convincing, too, is his use of the Scriptural stories of Noah's ark and the dove, of the raising of Lazarus from the dead and his homecoming, of Mary Magdalene anointing Jesus "with costly spikenard and tears," and of Paul fighting with wild beasts. Then besides many references to passages in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, the last stanza of the tenth poem may be compared with Jonah ii. 5—"The waters compassed me about, even to the soul; the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head." It would seem that Tennyson has wrenched the thought from its context and woven it into the context of Arthur Hallam's death:—

Than if with thee the roaring wells
Should gulf him fathom-deep in brine;
And hands so often clasp'd in mine,
Should toss with tangle and with shells.

Among the supreme accomplishments of elegaic English poetry, *In Memoriam*—in company with Milton's *Lycidas*, Dryden's *Ode In Memory of Mrs. Killigrew*, Shelley's *Adonais*, and Matthew Arnold's *Thrysis*, assumes an honourably high place. The gradual restorative power of the Christian faith has never been unfolded with more delicacy of feeling, subtlety of touch, and beauty of expression. *In Memoriam* has become sacred because of the inner message of spiritual hope and healing it has for all who will take the trouble to pore over it. It portrays the several phases or stages of development through which a stricken human soul, crushed with a crowning sorrow, may pass in a process of restoration and recovery, to the attainment of an assured hope.

The Incarnation of Christ is not only the central truth of the Christian system; it is Tennyson's conviction that it is the central fact of all history. When inquiries were addressed to Tennyson concerning his view of Jesus, the poet instructed his son, Hallam, to say: "I have given my belief in *In Memoriam*."

In the powerful prologue—already alluded to—Tennyson calls Christ "Strong Son of God"; and it is interesting to recall that he once said that "the Son of Man is the most tremendous title possible." Son of God, Son of Man—so Jesus was to Tennyson. He did not attempt to distinguish between the divinity and the humanity of our Lord, as so many theologians have unwittingly, and wittingly, done. To the poet the Prince of Peace was all human, all divine—

Thou seemest human and divine,
The highest, holiest manhood, Thou;

that is to say, one like ourselves, a man like us; and yet so high above us that we fall down before Him—

Our wills are ours, we know not how;
Our wills are ours, to make them Thine.

As long as the English landscape is loved such shining vignettes as, "The Danube to the Severn gave," "These dews that drench the furze," "The silvery gossamers that twinkle into green and gold," "Calm is the morn without a sound," "Dip down upon the northern shore," "The cattle huddled on the lea," "From his ashes may be made the violet," and "By night we lingered on the lawn," are lovely pictures that will never fade away. As long as the English language is spoken *In Memoriam* will live, be read, and loved. Such haunting lines as "Ring in the Christ that is to be," "'Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all," "God's finger touched him, and he slept," "The Christmas bells from hill to hill answer each other in the mist," "Behold a man raised up by Christ!" "We yield all blessing to the name of Him that made them current coin," "The full-grown energies of heaven," "The blows of Time—the shocks of Chance—," "The time draws near the birth of Christ; the moon is hid, the night is still," and "That friend of mine who lives with God," were penned to be a permanent legacy of hope and love to all.

The answer to Tennyson's cry for help—the help he wanted for himself and his fellows—came. It came, as the first line of the last stanza of *In Memoriam* informs us, carolling down the corridor of Time from—

That God, which ever lives and loves.

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