

TENNYSON; THE STORY OF HIS LIFE

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Tennyson; The Story of His Life by Evan J. Cuthbertson

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BY

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TENNYSON.

CHAPTER I.

EARLY SUMMERS.

THE year 1809 was destined to bequeath great riches to the coming Victorian age: riches to the State, to science, and to literature, and to the whole of mankind. For within its compass it held the birthday of William Ewart Gladstone, one of the century's greatest legislators; of Charles Robert Darwin, the leader of evolution; and of Alfred Tennyson, whose genius has enabled him above all his contemporaries to voice in song the spirit of his time. Three other children of that remarkable year who were born and grew to fame in the New World were Edgar Allan Poe, in Tennyson's eyes the 'most original American genius'; Oliver Wendell Holmes, the author of the *Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*; and Abraham Lincoln, the great American President. One hundred years earlier was born Samuel Johnson, and just half a century earlier Robert Burns;

but while it was 'a blast o' Januar' wind blew hansel in on Robin,' Tennyson came to earth a child of summer days, and first saw the light on the 6th of August.* It was indeed a summer's birth into a summer home; for the quiet village in which stood his father's rectory had long ago got from some descendants of the wandering Norse its name of Somersby (or Summer-town), because, it was said, birds and flowers seemed to tell how the sun lovingly lingered over it. By all accounts, a right sturdy babe was Alfred; at least if we are to accept as biographical the Doctor's wager in *The Grandmother* that not a babe had such a leg in twenty parishes round.

Somersby is, in Lincolnshire, commonly accounted 'a flat, malarian land of reed and rush.' But the county is not all flat; and though along the coast stretches a line of low-lying marshes—long tracts from which the sea is barely kept out by means of earth-embankments—and in the south what still remains of the fens, yet the western side—from the Humber in the north, through Lincoln to Grantham in the south—consists principally of light uplands; and away in the north lie the Wolds, gray downs of chalk, belted with wood and dotted with 'thick-fleeced sheep from wattled folds.' The little hamlet has been described by a Lincolnshire rector † as a quiet, wooded village at the foot of the South Wold; the country about it soft and pastoral, with small villages lying close together. Horncastle and Spilsby are the neighbouring towns, the nearer some seven miles away. Half-a-score of cottages

* Tennyson's birthday is frequently stated to be the 5th of August owing to the figure 6 in the Baptismal Register at Somersby having been mistaken for a 5 on account of the fading of the ink on the left side of the loop. He was born on the 6th, just after midnight, and it was on this day that his mother was wont to keep his birthday.

† The Rev. D. Rawnsley, a connection of the poet's by marriage.

around a tiny church and rectory, a cure of less than eighty souls, almost completely cut off from the outside world, so that the news of Waterloo did not reach it till long after the battle had been fought—such was Somersby in 1809. To-day the population has sunk to forty, and it is still a sequestered spot, six or seven miles from a railway station, itself only reached after a tedious journey chiefly remarkable for its ‘changes.’

Like many notable Englishmen before him, Tennyson was a son of the parsonage; and the white-walled rectory of Somersby, quaint and rambling, with its mediæval-looking dining-hall built by the poet’s father, its long, pointed, and stained-glass windows suggestive of a chapel rather than a modern dining-room, was an ideal home for the infant poet. The front of the house was separated from the road only by a narrow drive, but at the back the lawn sloped down to an old-fashioned garden. There were—

The seven elms, the poplars four,
That stand beside my father’s door.

‘The poplars four’ are long since gone; but the trim parterres and sweet-scented flower-beds still remain, giving to the place a delightful air of old-world-ness. It is a beautiful house, situate in a beautiful spot. ‘Fifty years hence people will make pilgrimages to this place,’ confidently asserted Arthur Hallam in 1832; and to-day the visitor to Somersby is shown—or can find out for himself—innumerable little ‘memorials’ of Tennyson.

Tennyson’s father, Dr George Clayton Tennyson, ‘the stern Doctor,’ as his parishioners were wont to call him, was a man of marked physical strength and stature; accomplished in the fine arts, music especially, and in language; imaginative in his temperament, and verging at times upon

gloom. Possessed of many diverse talents, he never gained the fame that is won only by concentration of purpose; but he was all the fitter to be the tutor of his children. The austerity of the man was perhaps not altogether natural, but to some extent acquired. From an ambitious caprice he had been disinherited by his own father, and the sense of injustice rankled in and embittered his nature. 'High-souled and high-tempered' was a friend's estimate of Dr Tennyson. Incumbent of Benniworth, vicar of Grimsby, and holder also of the livings of Wood Enderby and Somersby, a plurality of parishes given to him in lieu of an inheritance, Dr Tennyson had no real calling for the ministry of the Church, and the story is told of a venerable parishioner of the Doctor's, who, when asked how he used to preach, replied, 'Ec read um from a päaper, an' I didn't know what um meant.' Yet the poor were fond of their stern and melancholic pastor, and would do anything for him. How large a place he had in his son Alfred's affections is seen in the *Lives to J. S.*, published in 1832.

Alfred Tennyson used to tell a story of his father's stay in Russia when a young man, how at dinner one night at the English minister's at St Petersburg he said to his host across a Russian, 'It is perfectly well known in England who murdered the Emperor Paul [who was strangled in 1801]—it was Count Pahlen;' how, after dinner, the ambassador drew him aside and whispered, 'Ride for your life: the man across whom you were speaking was the Count whom you accused of murdering the Emperor;' and how Dr Tennyson took horse and rode for weeks, falling ill in the Crimea, and reaching England only after many adventures and much suffering.

The Tennysons came of an old and noble stock. In the Life of his father, the poet's son has given a pedigree which

goes back as far as 1672; and their lineage was traced to the Plantagenets through the old Norman family of D'Eyncourt. The ancient peerage of D'Eyncourt had become extinct towards the end of the fifteenth century, had been revived by Charles I., and had died out again somewhere about 1750. To revive it seems to have been the great ambition of the poet's grandfather, a wealthy retired lawyer and proprietor of Baynes Manor, Dalby, in Lincolnshire, who claimed descent on the female side from both the families who had formerly held it; and it was with that end in view that the old man deliberately disinherited Tennyson's father, his eldest son, who was but a country clergyman, passing him over in favour of the younger son Charles, a stirring Reform politician, and on the winning side. But the best-laid plans often fail. The peerage was not obtained; and when in the whirligig of time it did come, it was for greater services to the world than even the promoting of an English Reform Bill, and—would the old lawyer had lived to feel the irony of it!—it went to the disinherited branch. Tennyson loved to think himself of Danish origin; and there is reason to believe that the oldest line of the family had first settled north of the Humber, in Holderness. There is a notice of a John Tenison in 1343.

The poet's mother was Elizabeth, daughter of the Rev. Stephen Fytche, vicar of Louth. Mrs Thackeray-Ritchie tells us how sweet and gentle Mrs Tennyson was. Her kind-heartedness, indeed, became proverbial; and the more unscrupulous, inhabitants, of the next village used to ill-treat their dogs in front of the windows of Somersby Rectory, in order that the gentle lady might bribe them to desist, or be induced to purchase the worthless curs at

an exorbitant price. 'She was intensely, fervently religious,' adds Mrs Ritchie, 'as a poet's mother should be.' And we have Tennyson's own testimony as he turned away from her grave: 'She was the beautifullest thing that God Almighty ever made!' She had reached the great age of eighty-five when she died; and to this day, it is said, the aged and poor of the district still mention her name in tones of the most affectionate regret, and, half-mischievously, half-sorrowfully, hint at the tricks by which her kindness was imposed on.

In his poem of *Isabel*, Tennyson has more or less described his mother; and his son in his *Life of his father* records that she had been among the beauties of the county. When she was almost eighty, one of her daughters, believing the old lady to be too deaf to hear her remark, informed a small gathering of friends that twenty-four offers of marriage had been made to her mother. To the amusement of all present, Mrs Tennyson at once corrected her, saying emphatically, as if the true number was of great importance, 'No, my dear; twenty-five.'

Dr Tennyson had married in 1805, three years before his presentation to the living of Somersby; and Alfred was a fourth child, the eldest having died in infancy. As the years went by the rectory rang with the laughter of many young voices. Twelve times in all did Dr Tennyson stand at the baptismal font—seven times with a son, five times with a daughter. A long-lived race were the Tennysons, for all except two have exceeded the threescore years and ten of man's allotted span. 'We Tennysons do not die,' remarked Emilia Tennyson—Mrs Jesse—when she herself was over eighty.

Johnson's pretty phrase about his own college, 'a nest of singing birds,' has been applied to the Somersby par-