

CHAPTER I.

BOYHOOD.

1809–1827.

The Tennysons may probably in their origin have been Danes, and they appear to have first settled north of the Humber, in Holderness. The earliest notice of the family that can be found is that in 1343 one John Tenison charged certain persons with forcibly taking away his goods and chattels at Paulfleet to the amount of £40. In 1528 John Tennyson of Ryall directs that his body should be buried in the kirk-garthe of All Hallows at Skekelinge. To Margaret his wife he devises one ox-yard of land and half a close called Stockett Croft during her widowhood. Bequests are also made to his several children. One of them named William, who was possibly a Mayor, afterwards leaves to John, his son, his “best mace, and to Paul Church, twenty pence.” He desires to be buried in the same kirk-garthe of All Hallows. From these Tennysons, through a Lancelot Tennyson of Preston, and Ralph Tennyson, who raised a troop of horse to support William III., descends Michael of Lincoln, my father’s great-grandfather. Michael was remembered by my grandfather, the Rev. Dr George Clayton Tennyson, as taking him into his bed and talking to him about the stars. Half-way between Horncastle and Spilsby, in a land

of quiet villages, large fields, gray hillsides and noble tall-towered churches, on the lower slope of a Lincolnshire wold, the pastoral hamlet of Somersby nestles, embosomed in trees.

Here, on the 6th of August, 1809, was born, in his father's rectory, Alfred Tennyson. He was the fourth of twelve children, eight sons and four daughters, most of them more or less true poets, and of whom all except two have lived to 70 and upward. Dr Tennyson baptized the boy two days after he was born, following the Prayer-book instruction that people "defer not the Baptism of their children longer than the first or second Sunday next after their birth."

"Here's a leg for a babe of a week!" says doctor; and
 he would be bound,
 There was not his like that year in twenty parishes
 round¹,

was said of him; nevertheless during his infancy three times after convulsions he was thought to be dead.

In 1892 I visited the old home, and when I returned, told my father that the trees had grown up obscuring the view from the Rectory, and that the house itself looked very desolate. All he answered was, "Poor little place!" He always spoke of it with an affectionate remembrance; of the woodbine that climbed into the bay window of his nursery; of the Gothic vaulted dining-room with stained glass windows, making, as my uncle Charles Turner used to say, "butterfly souls" on the walls; of the beautiful stone chimney-piece carved by his father; of the pleasant little drawing-room lined with book-shelves, and furnished with yellow curtains, sofas and chairs, and looking out on the lawn. This lawn was overshadowed on one side by wych-elm, and on the other by larch and sycamore trees.

¹ See "The Grandmother."

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SOMERSBY.

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Here, my father said, he made his early song "A spirit haunts the year's last hours." Beyond the path, bounding the green sward to the south, ran in the old days a deep border of lilies and roses, backed by hollyhocks and sunflowers. Beyond that was

A garden bower'd close
 With plaited alleys of the trailing rose,
 Long alleys falling down to twilight grots,
 Or opening upon level plots
 Of crowned lilies, standing near
 Purple-spiked lavender—

sloping in a gradual descent to the parson's field, at the foot of which flows, by "lawn and lea," the swift, steep-banked brook, where are "bramble wildernesses," and "sweet forget-me-nots," and in which the "long mosses sway." The charm and beauty of this brook,

That loves
 To purl o'er matted cress and ribbed sand,
 Or dimple in the dark of rushy coves,
 And swerves to left and right thro' meadowy curves
 That feed the mothers of the flock¹,

haunted him through life.

Near Somersby the stream joins another from Holywell, and their confluence may be referred to in the lines:

By that old bridge, which, half in ruins then,
 Still makes a hoary eyebrow for the gleam
 Beyond it, where the waters marry.

"Flow down, cold rivulet, to the sea" was the poem more especially dedicated to the Somersby stream, and not, as some have supposed, "The Brook," which is designed to be a brook of the imagination.

The orchard on the right of the lawn forms a sunny

¹ "Ode to Memory," which he considered one of the best among his very early and peculiarly concentrated Nature-poems.

little spot that awoke in his mind pleasant memories. “How often,” he said, “have I risen in the early dawn to see the golden globes lying in the dewy grass among those apple trees.” He delighted too to recall the rare richness of the bowery lanes: the ancient Norman cross standing in the churchyard, close to the door of the quaint little church: the wooded hollow of Holywell: the cold springs flowing from under the sandstone rocks: the flowers, the mosses, and the ferns. When there I looked in vain for the words “Byron is dead,” which he had carved on a rock when he was fourteen, on hearing of Byron’s death (April 19th, 1824), “a day when the whole world seemed to be darkened for me.”

Like other children, the Tennysons had their imaginative games; they were knights and jousted in mock tournaments, or they were “champions and warriors, defending a field, or a stone-heap, or again they would set up opposing camps with a king in the midst of each. The king was a willow-wand stuck into the ground, with an outer circle of immortals, to defend him, of firmer, stiffer sticks. Then each party would come with stones, hurling at each other’s king and trying to overthrow him¹.” Stories are told too about their boyish pranks in the old red-bricked house with embattled parapet (Baumber’s Farm), said to have been built by Vanbrugh, which adjoins the Rectory garden, and is erroneously called by some “The Moated Grange.” “At all events, whatever may have happened,” my father writes, “The Moated Grange is an imaginary house in the fen; I never so much as dreamed of Baumber’s farm² as the abode of Mariana, and the character of Baumber was so ludicrously unlike the Northern Farmer, that

¹ Taken from the account which my father gave Mrs Thackeray Ritchie.

² The localities of my father’s subject-poems are wholly imaginary, although he has done for general Mid-Lincolnshire scenery what Virgil did for Mantua.

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EARLY DAYS AT HOME.

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it really makes me wonder how any one can have the face to invent such stories." I think that their childhood, despite the home circumstances which will be presently noticed, could not have been in the main unhappy. Their imaginative natures gave them many sources of amusement. One of these lasted a long time: the writing of tales in letter form, to be put under the vegetable dishes at dinner, and read aloud when it was over. I have heard from my uncles and aunts that my father's tales were very various in theme, some of them humorous and some savagely dramatic; and that they looked to him as their most thrilling story-teller. Among historical events the doings of Wellington and Napoleon were the themes of story and verse. Yet Somersby was so far out of the world that the elder children say they did not hear of the battle of Waterloo at the time. They had however an early memory that "the coach drove through Somersby, the horses decorated with flowers and ribbons, and this might have been in honour of Wellington's great victory."

My aunt Cecilia (Mrs Lushington) narrates how in the winter evenings by the firelight little Alfred would take her on his knee, with Arthur and Matilda leaning against him on either side, the baby Horatio between his legs; and how he would fascinate this group of young hero-worshippers, who listened open-eared and open-mouthed to legends of knights and heroes among untravelled forests rescuing distressed damsels, or on gigantic mountains fighting with dragons, or to his tales about Indians, or demons, or witches. The brothers and sisters would sometimes act one of the old English plays; and the elder members of the family thought that my father, from his dramatic rendering of his parts and his musical voice, would turn out an actor.

When he was seven years old he was asked, "Will

you go to sea or to school?" He said, "To school," thinking that school was a kind of paradise; so he was taken to the house of his grandmother at Louth. His mother had been born in that town, being daughter of the vicar, the Rev. Stephen Fytche¹; and he was sent to the Grammar School there, then under the Rev. J. Waite, a tempestuous, flogging master of the old stamp. He remembered to his dying day sitting on the stone steps of the school on a cold winter's morning, and crying bitterly after a big lad had brutally cuffed him on the head because he was a new boy. I still have the books which he used there, his *Ovid*, *Delectus*, *Analecta Græca Minora*, and the old *Eton Latin Grammar*, originally put together by Erasmus, Lilly and Colet.

Among the incidents in his school life he would recall that of walking in a procession of boys, decked with ribbons, at the proclamation of the Coronation of George IV., and how the old women said that "The boys made the prettiest part of the show." Later in school-life, he one day stood on a wall and made a political speech to his school-fellows, but was promptly ordered down by an usher, who asked him whether he wished to be the parish beadle.

Two facts that his grandmother told him at this time impressed him. One was that she had become blind from cataract, and then had a dream that she saw; and, that, although couching for cataract was not common in those days, owing to this dream she had gone to

¹ George Clayton Tennyson of Tealby, clerk, and Elizabeth Fytche of Louth, spinster, were married in Louth Church by license on the 6th August 1805 by Wolley Jolland, Vicar, in the presence of John Fytche and Charles Tennyson. The Fytches were a county family of old descent. The first name on the Fytche pedigree is John Fitch of Fitch Castle in the North, who died in the 25th year of Edward I. His descendant Thomas Fitch was knighted by Charles II. 1679, served the office of High Sheriff in Kent, and was created baronet Sept. 7th, 1688.

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LOUTH SCHOOL.

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London, and had been operated on successfully. The second was that she remembered having seen a young widow¹, dressed in white, on her way to be strangled (her body afterwards to be burnt) for poisoning her husband.

A few years ago the present master of Louth School gave a holiday in my father's honour. The compliment gratified him; yet he said, "How I did hate that school! The only good I ever got from it was the memory of the words, 'sonus desilientis aquae,' and of an old wall covered with wild weeds opposite the school windows. I wrote an English poem there, for one of the Jacksons; the only line I recollect is 'While bleeding heroes lie along the shore².'"

In 1820 he left Louth and came home to work under his father.

When twelve years old he wrote the following literary epistle (the earliest of those now remaining) to his aunt Marianne Fytche.

SOMERSBY.

MY DEAR AUNT MARIANNE,

When I was at Louth you used to tell me that you should be obliged to me if I would write to you and give you my remarks on works and authors. I shall now fulfil the promise which I made at that time. Going into the library this morning, I picked up "Sampson Agonistes," on which (as I think it is a play you like)

¹ "Women who were found guilty of murdering their husbands, or of the other offences comprised under the terms high or petit treason, were publicly burnt, by a law which was not abolished till 1790. A stake ten or eleven feet high was planted in the ground. An iron ring was fastened near the top, and from it the culprit was hung while the faggots were kindled under her feet. The law enjoined that she should be burnt alive, but in practice the sentence was usually mitigated, and she was strangled before the fire touched her body."

Lecky's *England in the Eighteenth Century*, Vol. i. p. 506.

² See Professor J. W. Hales' account of Louth School in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, Dec. 1892. See Appendix, p. 497.

I shall send you my remarks. The first scene is the lamentation of Sampson, which possesses much pathos and sublimity. This passage,

Restless thoughts, that like a deadly swarm
 Of hornets arm'd, no sooner found alone,
 But rush upon me thronging, and present
 Times past, what once I was, and what am now,

puts me in mind of that in Dante, which Lord Byron has prefixed to his "Corsair," "Nessun maggior dolore, Che ricordarsi del tempo felice, Nella miseria." His complaint of his blindness is particularly beautiful,

O loss of sight, of thee I most complain!
 Blind among enemies! O worse than chains,
 Dungeon or beggary, or decrepid age!
 Light, the prime work of God, to me is extinct,
 And all her various objects of delight
 Annulled, which might in part my grief have eased,
 Inferior to the vilest now become
 Of man or worm; the vilest here excel me:
 They creep, yet see; I, dark in light, exposed
 To daily fraud, contempt, abuse, and wrong,

* * * * *

Scarce half I seem to live, dead more than half.
 O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,
 Irrecoverably dark, total eclipse
 Without all hope of day!
 O first created beam, and thou great Word,
 "Let there be light!" and light was over all.—

I think this is beautiful, particularly

O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon.

After a long lamentation of Sampson, the Chorus enters, saying these words:

This, this is he. Softly awhile;
 Let us not break in upon him:
 O change beyond report, thought, or belief!
 See how he lies at random, carelessly *diffused*.

If you look into Bp. Newton's notes, you will find that he informs you that "This beautiful application of the

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EARLY LETTERS.

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word 'diffused' is borrowed from the Latin." It has the same meaning as "temere" in one of the Odes of Horace, Book the second,

Sic temere, et rosâ
 Canos odorati capillos.

of which this is a free translation, "Why lie we not at random, under the shade of the plantain (sub platano), having our hoary head perfumed with rose water?" To an English reader the metre of the Chorus may seem unusual, but the difficulty will vanish, when I inform him that it is taken from the Greek. In line 133 there is this expression, "Chalybean tempered steel." The Chalybes were a nation among the ancients very famous for the making of steel, hence the expression "Chalybean," or peculiar to the Chalybes: in line 147 "the Gates of Azzar"; this probably, as Bp. Newton observes, was to avoid too great an alliteration, which the "Gates of Gaza" would have caused, though (in my opinion) it would have rendered it more beautiful: and (though I do not affirm it as a fact) perhaps Milton gave it that name for the sake of novelty, as all the world knows he was a great pedant. I have not, at present, time to write any more: perhaps I may continue my remarks in another letter to you: but (as I am very volatile and fickle) you must not depend upon me, for I think you do not know any one who is so fickle as

Your affectionate nephew,

A. TENNYSON.

P.S. Frederick informed me that grandmamma was quite growing dissipated, going out to parties every night. The Russels and grandmamma are to be at Dalby on Tuesday the 23rd, and I also hope to be taken by papa and mamma who are invited. Frederick made mamma promise to write him an account of the visit, but if I go, I shall take the trouble from mamma.

His second earliest letter is a piece of nonsense with which he favoured his sisters' governess.

LA MANCHA.

MY DEAR DULCINEA,

Pursuant to your request and the honour of Knight-errantry, and in conformity to my bump of conscientiousness (which has grown so enormous since my visit to you that I can scarce put on my helmet), I now intend, as far as lies in my power, to fulfil that promise which the lustre of your charms extorted from me. Know then, most adorable mistress of my heart, that the manuscripts which your angelic goodness and perfection were pleased to commend are not with me. If however my memory, assisted by the peerless radiance of your divine favour, avail me aught, I will endeavour to illumine the darkness of my imagination with the recollection of your glorious excellence, till I produce a species of artificial memory unequalled by the *Memoria Technica* of Mr Gray. Who would not remember when thus requested? It would cause a dead idiot to start afresh to life and intellect. Accept then, soul of my soul, these effusions, in which no Ossianic, Miltonic, Byronic, Milmanic, Moorish, Crabbic, Coleridgic etc. fire is contained.

The first is a review of death :

Why should we weep for those who die? etc.

The second is a comparison :

Je fais naître la lumière
 Du sein de l'obscurité. (Rousseau.)

How gaily sinks the gorgeous sun, etc.

And now farewell, my incomparable Dulcinea. In the truest spirit of knight-errantry,

Yours ever, DON QUIXOTE.

As to his earliest attempts at poetry, he wrote the following note for me in 1890 :