

CHARLES KINGSLEY

AN APPRECIATION*

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*Still thou upraigest with zeal
The humble good from the ground,
Sternly represses the bad!
Still, like a trumpet, dost rouse
Those who with half-open eyes
Tread the border-land dim
'Twixt vice and virtue; reviv'st,
Succourest! this was thy work,
This was thy life upon earth.*

(Matthew Arnold)

CHARLES Kingsley was the nineteenth century Beowulf. He was a born fighter, with the common appeal of a man of action. For him there were no heroics, no strategy, hardly any tactics,—just courage, singleness of aim and a doggedness which admitted of no defeat, or even that defeat were possible. “Even if you prove me wrong, I will believe myself right” is the defiance he throws to his adversaries. It is the challenge of one impatient of argument, conscious of work to be done and of ability to do it.

Like Beowulf, he was a fighter of dragons,—not the mythical dragons of history's dawn, but the fiercely real ones of ignorance and “the pestilence which walketh in darkness,” product of unsanitary conditions as were Grendel and his hideous mother. Beowulf tore off the arm and shoulder of his foe when he met him face to face; Kingsley temporarily discomfited his by local measures of reform. Both warriors were forced to seek the abiding-place of their enemy, the one at the bottom of a loathsome mere, the other in the innermost recesses of entrenched privilege. Both emerged victorious, to be received with the plaudits of a faithful few.

The parallel holds for the third fight. The enemy took a new form, that of a monster guarding a treasure. The legendary hero was more successful than his modern counterpart; he lost his life, but his people gained the treasure. Kingsley had no such complete success. He made a brave fight, it can be said he died fighting; but complete success was impossible, for Ignorance, the new dragon, is hydra-headed, and many brave lives must be sacrificed before

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the treasures of knowledge are within the reach or desire of all who need them.

I

It is as a teacher that Kingsley is to be considered, his work judged and his influence estimated. True, he was a poet, and no mean one; a novelist with a sane romanticism, a preacher unafraid whether facing the smiling sneers of a fashionable gathering or the veiled hostility of an overworked, underfed crowd; a scientist whose knowledge, if limited, was so thorough that he was able to present his teaching in forms attractive in simplicity and unassailable in precision. Poet, novelist, preacher, scientist, these form the component parts of Kingsley's individuality, each reflecting the beauty around him rather than the ugliness; facets they are of scintillating brilliance, glowing with the hidden fire of his purpose "to vindicate democracy as the will and gift of God."

This democratic gospel, as delivered to an early Victorian society which taught the lower classes to "order themselves lowly and reverently to all their betters," was somewhat disturbing to both groups when preached with Kingsley's clear-sightedness, vigour, and even truculence. Society and populace alike defined "betters" to mean "better endowed with rank and wealth." This wild-eyed young parson, with a courage augmented and fired by the thoughts of his master Carlyle, poured scorn upon this worship of the show of things and called upon all to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God. The working man heard, perhaps for the first time, that the liberty he longed for and the power he coveted are the gifts of the God his new found atheism denied, and given only to those who by discipline and patience are fit to assume the responsibilities attached to the gifts. This new evangel was to take the place of "a sentimental philosophy for the enlightened few and a fetish worship for the masses," and it is no wonder that Kingsley's life was a continuous fight, that upon him fell the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune from both camps, only, however, to be caught on the shield of his strong vitality and unwavering belief that "every human being is a romance, a miracle to himself," therefore to be reasoned with, cajoled, even bullied, but never deserted. And, withal, how Kingsley enjoyed it! No knight of old ever joined forces with an opponent more joyfully than he, and none more successfully while he fought with familiar weapons—the mace of truth and the sword of the spirit: his touch was too heavy for the rapier of dialectic, and he suffered grievously when he attempted to use it.

The difficulty of the struggle to vindicate democracy can be appreciated only when the social conditions of the middle of the nineteenth century are known, and the arrogance of the upper class, the greed and ambition of the middle class, the ignorance of the working class are realized. The old aristocracy of England still lived upon their estates, impoverished to a greater or less extent by the advent of Free Trade, resisting as far as possible the coming of the new aristocracy of wealth from the manufacturing and trading centres. The tenant farmers, unable to pay their former rents through the low price of wheat, and unwilling through an innate conservatism to meet new conditions by new methods, could see only one remedy, and that was a reduction of rent. To their credit, most landowners met this demand and strengthened the bond of sympathy between themselves and their tenants. The young heir, with a natural inclination to enjoy all the pleasures open to birth and traditional wealth, found himself crippled, through his father's generosity, by the lack of the means he had always looked upon as the inevitable accompaniment of his rank.

Two ways were open to him,—both distasteful, and both were followed—marriage and the breaking of the entail. The Industrial Revolution had created a wealthy middle class quick to take advantage of the distress of the landowners. There was money for their daughters' dowries and ample funds to buy the estates which came upon the market; thus the wealthy manufacturer had the satisfaction of seeing his son heir to a landed estate or his daughter received in a society from which he was himself debarred. With characteristic shrewdness he accepted the situation, certain that his grandchildren would be received as equals in the most exclusive society, while he contented himself with the contemptuous patronage of his aristocratic neighbours, and endeavoured to make his estate self-supporting. The old order was indeed changing, yielding place to new, and well that it should do so, for doubtless there was a danger of one good custom corrupting the world, or at least England, as it had corrupted France.

The old landlord might pay low wages, but there was always an ungrudging and ample charity; he might treat his dependents as inferiors, but always as human beings; he was arrogant and dictatorial, but mellowed his attitude with sympathy and sweetened it with humour; he was tenacious of his rights, but acknowledged his obligations and fulfilled them; above all, perhaps as the result of these qualities, he had a prestige which made service under him a privilege and an honour.

By birth unable to feel, by training unwilling to acknowledge the feudal relationship between peer and peasant, squire and tenant, the new landowner—devotee of the Manchester School—made a model farmer, but an execrable landlord.

Caught between the upper and nether millstones of a decaying feudalism and a merciless competition, the young man left the village, lured by the high wages of a much vaunted industrialism to seek the means of rising to position of wealth and influence which it offered. The young women found openings in the factories where they tasted a freedom and earned wages beyond their utmost imaginings. The older people, forced to remain on the land because too old to learn new ways of living, deprived of the right to keep a cow or pig or cultivate a garden, compelled to account for the choppings of coppice and hedgerow, with no seasonable charities coming with their blessings to giver and receiver, passed a joyless life of hardship until, childless in their old age, worn and bent with dull toil, they passed through the hopeless portals of a workhouse to a welcome grave.

In the cities the condition of the working classes was not very much better than in the country. The rush of unskilled labour brought with it lower wages, longer hours, and bad housing conditions. The workers were refused any part in the government of either city or country; education was hardly obtainable except of the most elementary kind: books and newspapers were scarce and dear; no Factory Acts interfered with the sway of a bitter competition, and the crime of sedition was so comprehensive in its range that it was almost impossible and always dangerous for men to meet together for discussion on social conditions or the government of the country. With no amusements, no rational recreation, no pleasure in work well done, for industrialism had destroyed craftsmanship, the greater part of the workmen were ignorant, and sullen, and smarting under wrongs for which revolution appeared to be the only remedy. With eyes turned to America and France, they looked forward hopefully to the time when they should emulate the success abroad.

Into this seething chaos came Kingsley,

Chanting of order and right, and of foresight, warder of nations.
Chanting of labour and craft, and of wealth in the port and the
garner;

Chanting of valour and fame, and the man who can fall with the
foremost

Fighting for children and wife, and the field which his father
bequeathed him.

II

Is it to be wondered that his chanting fell upon deaf ears? What had the early Victorian Age to do with order, right, craftsmanship, honour and fame, and self-sacrifice? All except the last were the privileges and attributes of the governing classes. No wonder he was misunderstood at first by everyone—and always by the influential then as now—but the common people heard him gladly because he was the articulate expression of democracy. The people loved him because he had their humility and audacity, their earnestness and their confidence all in his own paradoxical character, but above all because he had their courage. "I will not be a liar," he writes when rejected at King's College for his sympathies with Chartism, "I will speak in season and out of season. I will not dare to declare the whole counsel of God," and he suffered the fate of all who make that declaration honestly—the jibe of the insincere, the scoffing laughter of the worldly wise, the wilful falsification of the partizan; but he had also the love of the poor who, after all, form the majority.

From the very nature of Kingsley's mission, the necessity he felt of plain speaking, of telling unpalatable truths, he was certain to live under a cloud of obloquy. A teacher who could say of newspaper editors, "Professing to speak the mind of the people, they live by pandering to its no-mind, i. e. its merest fancies and prejudices," was as certain then as he would be now of the hostility not only of a section of the Press, but of many who live by exploiting existing conditions. Or consider the effect of his speech in 1869 advocating free education, proclaiming the evils of the denominational system, and blaming the dearth of education upon the religious dissensions of Christians. Again, the writer of the following would hardly be popular to-day:

I do not deny, my friends, it is much cheaper and pleasanter to be reformed by the devil than by God; for God will only reform Society on condition of our reforming every man his own self—while the devil is quite ready to help us to mend the laws and the parliament without ever starting such an impertinent and personal request as that man should mend himself.

The unpopularity caused by such writings and speeches as these was carried over to his more literary work, partly because his first two novels, *Yeast* and *Alton Locke*, dealt with subjects—the struggle of the soul towards truth, and Chartism—which if handled with vigour and originality were sure to arouse strife and,

unfortunately, unjust criticism. With characteristic energy and enthusiasm he did not spare himself, neither did he give his opponents rest; he was continually preaching, lecturing, or writing, and always with a courage, certainty, and newness of presentation that invited hostility from these satisfied with things as they were and afraid of the effects of the French Revolution upon the national mind.

Much of the unjust criticism of Kingsley as an author is really the bitter rancour of the bigot, the intolerance of the cleric, the cowardice of the politician. This is to be seen in Mr. Chesterton's criticism in his *Victorian Age in Literature*: "There is a real though juvenile poetry in *Westward Ho*, and though that narrative, historically considered, is very much of a lie, it is a good, thundering, honest lie." Of *Hypatia* the same critic writes: "He said he wrote the book in his heart's blood. This is an exaggeration, but there is a truth in it; and one does feel that he may have relieved his feelings by writing in red ink." It is only necessary to know Mr. Chesterton's religious inclinations and final persuasion to perceive that this is a criticism of doctrine, not of literature, and has as little of literary criticism and honesty of intention as the Oxford graduate, a well-known member of the Anglican party, who in *The Guardian* of May 1851 reviewed *Yeast* and accused the author of heresy and of encouraging profligacy, supporting his charges by a misquotation and by palpably false conclusions.

Mr. Chesterton does once give Kingsley a place in the foremost rank of nineteenth century writers when, in referring to the reactions against a triumphant rationalism, he says: "The third reaction was a group that tried to create a sort of new romantic Protestantism, to pit against both Reason and Rome—Carlyle, Ruskin, Kingsley, Maurice—perhaps Tennyson." Here also is seen the subtle disparagement of a judgment distorted by sectarian prejudice.

It is this kind of faint praise which has delayed Kingsley's full recognition, has minimised his accomplishments, and magnified his defects. Many know that he was defeated in argument by Newman, few that his life was the argument that helped to save the working classes for Christianity. All share in the benefits of good sanitation, wide franchise, and free education; but few know how much they owe to Kingsley's gallant fight that these are to-day mere commonplaces of life. Factory Acts, Workmen's Compensation Acts, humane Poor Laws, the right to form Trade Unions, are the direct results of the trenchant eloquence of his tongue and pen, and the absolute sincerity of his convictions. To obtain all this for the people to whom he dedicated himself at

the time of his ordination, he paid the price in a life of incessant labour, and in a self-denial which robbed him of a legitimate pleasure and the world of an increase to its treasures of literature.

III

There is little doubt that his devotion to his work on behalf of democracy is responsible alike for the meagreness of his purely imaginative writings and for their occasional inaccuracies and lack of classical polish. Saintsbury has well said "Kingsley was one of those darlings—perhaps the rarest—of the Muses to whom they grant the gift not only of doing a little poetry exquisitely, but the gift of abstaining from doing anything ill;" and "Of all the men who have written so little verse during as long a life in our time Kingsley is probably the best poet," and again "Scores of songs, snatches, etc. . . are of extraordinary vigour, freshness, and charm." He subordinated his poetic faculty to the exigencies of daily life. He was a true poet—a seer—and writing poetry was for him a pleasure and a vocation. He sang as birds sing, without effort, often with the sweet reiteration of the feathered songster and with the thinnest chain of connected thought, but—as in "Lorraine, Lorraine, Lorrée"—producing a triumph of pure poetry. He thought his gift was in "that other harmony" of prose, and he was correct in so far as his work was concerned, but the man who could write "Lorraine," "The Three Fishers," and "The Sands of Dee" was one of the elect, and the realm of emotional thought is just so much poorer by his attention as that of material welfare is richer.

We must not regret the facts of Kingsley's life, but we may wish that he had had opportunity and leisure to add to his prose writing as well as his poetry. Even in his first novel, *Alton Locke*, he shows that amazing skill and versatility in prose rhythm which, reaching its full development in the *Prose Idylls* and *Westward Ho*, is unsurpassed in nineteenth century prose. In *Chalk Stream Studies* we read of "the first stars of the white saxifrage, golden-eyed, blood-red, as if a fairy had pricked her finger in the cup, which shine upon some green cushion of wet moss in a dripping crack of the soil," or again in the same essay, such felicitous phrasing in a description of a shallow stream as is seen only in the works of a master: "the long grassy shallow, paved with yellow fringed rock, between nut and oak and alder, to the low bar over which the water-wheels hiss piping before him, and the murmur of the ringdove comes out and sleepy through the woods." The skill with which conditions are depicted, the dramatic power of the characterization, the

depth of passion lightened by flashes of humour to be found in all his works, make it almost certain that with time we would have had, instead of books with passages of great beauty, works of uniform excellence fit to rank with the best productions of Ruskin, Meredith, Hardy, and Stevenson. We can agree with Müller when he writes "Kingsley seems to me the genius of our century, called to place by the side of that sublime dramatic series from *King John* to *Henry VIII* another series of equal rank from Edward VI to the landing of William of Orange. The tragedy of *St. Elizabeth* shows that Kingsley can grapple not only with the novel, but with the more severe rules of dramatic art. *Hypatia* proves, on the largest scale, that he can discover in the picture of historical past the truly human, the deep, the permanent, and that he knows how to represent it. How with all this he can hit the fresh tone of popular life, and draw humorous characters and complications with Shakespearean energy, is proved by all his works."

A study of Kingsley's writings leaves the impression of a dominant masculinity. There is no hesitancy, no compromise, no paltering with half truths, but there is a magnanimity and a tolerance in his controversial writings to be found only in those whose vision ranges to far horizons. His life was a continuous sermon. He bent every faculty of his mind and heart to the one great purpose of improving the lives of working men and effecting a reconciliation between them and the ruling classes; but, considered as a parson, he was distinguished from his contemporaries by his sympathy with the poor, by his knowledge of their strength and weaknesses, and by his ability to present high ideals so simply that they not only understood but admired and frequently followed them. This understanding of the working men's attitude appears all through his social works, as for example, in the first of the novels, *Alton Locke* says "He (the chaplain) would suddenly shift his ground and try to knock me down authoritatively with a single text of Scripture; when all the while I wanted proof that Scripture has any authority at all." Dean Stanley, preaching Kingsley's funeral sermon in Westminster Abbey, gave the key to his great power over the working men in the following words: "He was, we might almost say, a layman in the guise or disguise, and sometimes hardly in the guise, of a clergyman—fishing with the fisherman, hunting with the huntsman, able to hold his own in tent and camp, with courtier or with soldier; an example that a genial companion may be a Christian gentleman—that a Christian clergyman need not be a member of a separate caste, and a stranger to the common interests of his countrymen. Yet human, genial layman as he was, he still

was not the less—nay he was ten times more—a pastor than he would have been had he shut himself out from the haunts and walks of man.”

When writing or speaking of wrongs in the social, political, or moral world, he does not send out a cloud of generalities under which culprits may hide. He names the wrong, indicates the wrong-doer, and states the remedy; for national unrest—national repentance; for lawlessness—education and liberty; for agricultural distress—allotments and scientific farming; for disease—sanitation and cleanliness; for vice—pure air, pure water, and recreation. He sees the danger to freedom and independence of too much government, and shows the way of safety. “The office of all government, paternal or other, is as the Bible sets forth, self-sacrifice and not selfish advantage; and the perfect method of fulfilling that self-sacrifice is gradually to render its own office unnecessary; to teach its subjects not merely to obey it, but to do without it; to be, in short, only paternal by educating its children into sons, who may go forth and labour freely for themselves and on their own responsibility, according to the laws which have been taught them and with that sense of a common brotherhood, a common family interest, which they have acquired under their father’s teaching.” He has been accused of gross carelessness in his statements, of looseness in style, and there is some truth in the accusation; but even Shakespeare has anachronisms and defects which are condoned, his great genius raising him above ordinary standards. May not some measure of that charity be extended to Kingsley if, as has been said, “real primary creation calls forth not criticism, nor appreciation, but a kind of incoherent gratitude”? There is real primary creation in some of his poetry, and much originality of thought in his writings.

Inconsistent he was, but it was the inconsistency of continual growth, rather a joyous acknowledgment of a new aspect of truth than a change of opinion. The inconsistency of David’s *Psalms* is what brings them home to every heart, and certainly it has endeared Kingsley to those who read his life as it did to those who knew him.

To his learning he added modesty, to his genius humility, to his high purpose simplicity, and with these he had the saving gift of an infectious humour, and the joy of life of an everlasting youthfulness. There is the abandonment of the schoolboy at the end of the term, throwing away his books and caricaturing his masters, when “The Invitation” to Tom Hughes to join in a fishing holiday. When and talk are done, the parish is in the care of the curate,

so away they'll go to Snowdon, eat bread and bacon, smoke the pipe of peace, find sheets a superfluity, chat till midnight "o'er this babbling world" in happy relaxation. They will leave Browning to his beggars, fleas, and vines; mournful Ruskin to the dirty Stones of Venice and

Once a year, like schoolboys
Robin-Hooding go,
Leaving fops and fogies
A thousand feet below.

Kingsley has, curiously enough, been greatly misunderstood. He stands in the common conception as the champion of a "muscular Christianity," a kind of materialistic idealism of the Christian virtues; and though he himself says he does not know what the term means, "while such thy deeds, what matter thine opinions" from *Alton Locke* is used to support the idea. The fact is, he was a mystic, and none the less so because he was so plainly and notably a doer, which a true mystic must always be, just because he dwells in the secret places of the Most High, and knows something of "the abysmal unity of the Godhead." A mystic is no dreamer; he knows, and therefore he does. "When I walk the fields I am oppressed every now and then with an innate feeling that everything I see has a meaning if I could but understand it; and this feeling of being surrounded with truth which I cannot grasp amounts to indescribable awe sometimes." "Everything seems to be full of God's reflex, if we could but see it" he writes in 1843, and twenty years later—in one of his lectures to the students at Cambridge—he said the *Book of Revelation* had interpreted for him the times about which he was lecturing, and then drew a parallel between John's mystical allegory and the downfall of the Roman Empire. "All I saw of him left upon me the feeling that I was in contact with a profoundly earnest and reverent spirit. I was conscious in his presence of the bracing atmosphere of a noble nature. My copy of *Hypatia* is worn by frequent perusal, and the echoes of his rare and beautiful lyrics never die out of my memory." Such is the testimony of Whittier.

Charles Kingsley enriched English literature by the originality and imagination of his genius, quickened and enlivened public opinion by his life of ideal endeavour and resonant golden deeds, leaving the world better than he found it, going to his reward recognized, revered, and loved, a "gallant knight-errant of God."