

SUPPLEMENT TO THE GREEN SHEAF, No. 13.

FREDERICK YORK-POWELL

A REMINISCENCE

BY

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FREDERICK YORK-POWELL.

I HAVE given York-Powell's remarkable dream as nearly as possible in his own words, just as I took it down some years ago from his dictation.

By his death Oxford has lost one of its most distinguished scholars; and his host of friends a friend whose loss leaves the world a narrower pinfold than it seemed while he lived and laughed in it; for his laugh was like the laugh of a Viking—a courage-kindling laugh. It expanded your soul; and though like Hamlet you be might be “bounded in a nutshell,” it made you feel yourself for a moment “a king of infinite space.”

Never surely was there such an unconventional Don of Christchurch, such an unusual Regius Professor of History. He was not of the ordinary Oxford pattern; but a man of vigorous personality, who looked at everything from his own standpoint, cared little for traditional standards, and went his own way. He was no mere book-man, though he knew his books well; no mere specialist, though well skilled in his own special subject. He was interested in life all round, and was an encyclopædia of minute knowledge of the most varied kind—a man who might have passed with honours an examination on things in general.

He had a very large circle of friends in all ranks of life, and of all shades of religious and political opinion; and he was himself a most faithful and helpful friend, always ready to give and receive freely. He had his narrownesses and prejudices, no doubt; but he had something of that large sympathy which enabled Goethe to get at what was best in those whom he met. And from books, as from men, he could rapidly assimilate what was of most vital interest to himself. He would spend half an hour in your study, prowl round your shelves, and while talking skim through the pages of a book here and there, and know more about it when he put it back than a slower-brained man would by reading it from cover to cover. His memory was quick to seize and slow to forget, because his interest was always intense in what interested him, and most things did.

As men of all classes may expect to meet in heaven, so did they sometimes actually meet in York-Powell's rooms at Oxford. Once a friend, calling to see him, found him in animated conversation with an intellectual chimney-sweep, a socialist, and a great crony of his. On another occasion, as a distinguished art-critic told me, he came to dinner, found York-Powell had forgotten the appointment, and had to entertain a Dean and an Anarchist until their host arrived late and formally introduced them.

As a Professor of History, York-Powell looked upon his materials as Browning upon his "square old yellow book," as :

" pure crude fact,
Secreted from man's life when hearts beat hard,
And brains high-blooded ticked ; "

and went straight through the theories of the historic web-spinner to the contemporary documents, which he handled with sympathetic imagination when he wrote anything himself, which he too seldom did ; and his interest in literature, art, handicrafts, and sports—such as yachting, boxing, fencing—was no less intense than in that record of the lives of nations and the deeds of men of action which we call History.

He was a man vividly alive to the last ; and his influence on the younger men who came in contact with him at the University and elsewhere was, above all else, an inspiring one. He did not believe much in the intellectual activities of the modern woman ; but he was always ready to help the girls as well as the boys in their studies. He not merely gave all who asked for it information ; he kindled a thirst for knowledge in those capable of thirsting. It was good to have known him.

JOHN TODHUNTER.