

To the Darley Yew.

OLD yew, what thought can measure back thy years,
 Or guess whose hand within these hallowed bounds
 Planted and consecrated thee with tears
 Where slept his dead beneath their new-made mounds ?
 What generations of poor mortal man
 Since then have lain within thy eyeless gaze ;
 Who furthest had outstretched life's common span
 A very babe to thine unnumbered days !
 Thou king of yews ! yea, who disputes thy crown ?
 For though there be of more stupendous girth,
 Their walls are ruin : none of like renown
 With bole unmaimed survives in British earth :
 While dynasties have risen and decayed
 Here in God's acre thou hast silent stood
 Careless of time, by tempests undismayed.
 A tower impregnable of living wood.
 Majestic tree ! alas, to vulgar minds
 How unsuggestive of the ages flown !
 They come, and wonder, and pass by,—nor finds
 One thought a place but of thy bulk alone :
 Nor lingers in the annals of the Dale,
 Or in our people's legendary lore,
 Trustworthy hint whereon to build the tale,
 By safe conjecture of those days of yore.
 Yet may the imaginative soul create
 What various fortunes marked thine agelong growth—
 What meetings, partings, grief, and love, and hate,
 What secret crimes, what pangs of sundered troth.
 Beneath the welcome covert of thy boughs
 A thousand years of village life have passed ;
 Here childhood sported, youth made lovers' vows,
 Old age found rest, and all a grave at last.
 Sir John of Darley knew thee : in thy shade
 The Norman masons wrought their moulded stones :
 Here turned to dust gay foresters are laid :
 Thy roots have wandered among Saxon bones :
 Thy stubborn wood through many a Pagan shield
 Drove its resistless passage : thou perchance
 Didst arm the archers who on Crecy field
 Rained havoc on the chivalry of France.
 Fair Agnes Rollesley with thy leaves of gloom
 Wreathed her lord's bier. Thou heardest the last farewell
 Oft as they bore to his ancestral tomb
 Some Milward, Wendesley, or Collumbell.
 And through thy darkness moaned the heated air
 When death held carnival,* and one by one
 Who to the pit their hideous burden bare
 Themselves were borne ere sank another sun :—

* The Burial Register for the year 1551 records nine deaths in six days from "ye sweating sickness," or plague. And again in 1558, within a very short space, Alice Stafford, two Hayes, and three Mathers "dyed of the plague."—F.A.

Ah then, what sounds unwonted,—sudden vow,
 Mad laughter, blasphemous despairing cry,
 Vague prayer from lips that never prayed till now,—
 Went up discordant through the lurid sky !
 Full oft white-glistening choir and vested priest,
 With cross uplifted and low-chanted psalm
 Wending their Churchward way in fast or feast,
 Felt the dumb influence of thy changeless calm.
 Nor less, when beauty was divorced from awe,
 And factious zeal had humbled Church and Throne,
 In thy stern aspect the grim Roundhead saw
 The black and joyless image of his own.
 That sullen frenzy passed :—both Church and state
 Emerged triumphant from the civil strife ;
 And loyal minds once more could contemplate
 In thee our monarchy's perennial life :
 And anglers loitering late by Derwent's side
 Heard Darley bells ring in the happier times ;
 And up from Matlock, as the cadence died,
 And down from Winster came responsive chimes :
 Right gladly rang they ; for that day unmatched
 Restored our king, and healed our nation's sores :
 And dim with joy was many an eye that watched
 Its last light die behind the Stanton moors.
 And change on change has followed ; age on age,
 Each filled with circumstance, rolls slowly by :
 And ending here their shortlived pilgrimage
 The dalesfolk in their nameless myriads lie.
 Weak minds there are whose superstitious fear
 Peoples thy gloom with ghostly shapes of dread,
 Weird visitants from some malignant sphere,
 Or restless spirits of the untimely dead :
 Or morbid fancy sees at peep of morn
 Round thy huge trunk the fairies break their dance :—
 More solid truth be mine ! Thou hast outworn
 A hundred decades of the world's advance :
 To me thy patriarchal form brings thought
 Of ages linked in one historic bond ;
 Of men who lived and sorrowed, joyed and wrought,
 And still are living in some life beyond.
 How fit thy place hard by this ancient pile
 Where the one Faith through every chance and change
 Has held her lamp unquenched, though dimmed awhile,
 Far as the Christian thought can backward range ;—
 Has held, and shall hold ; for what powers of ill
 Can thwart the eternal ? Whatsoe'er betide,
 God's holy Ark, bearing her Pilot still,
 Shall the fell fury of all storms outride.
 Even so, old tree, thou standest sound and firm,
 Clothed in new green with each returning Spring ;
 Nor dare imagination fix the term
 When British yews shall own another king :
 Nay rather in her dreams she sees thee last
 A life unquenched, defiant of decay,
 Till o'er thy head rings out the final blast
 And every shattered grave gives up its prey.

F. ATKINSON.