CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary with the poets of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Patmore as occupies an important position as religious and philosophical poet in the later nineteenth century. The poet of The Angel in the House and The Unknown Eros, and the author of Religio Poetae and Principle in Art, has hardly received recognition at the hands of his critics. A modern critic has rightly asserted: "Patmore should stand with Tennyson, Browning and Arnold as one of the major poets of his age".

As a young man between the years sixteen and twenty Patmore felt in himself the passions of this world and the visions of the other. His visit to Paris with his parents and his meeting with the religious people was followed by a period of religious questionings.

Then in 1842 the publication of Tennyson's collected poems reawakened in him poetic ambition. The publication of his early poems created a good stir in the literary world of England. While the early poems The River. The Woodman's Daughter and Lellian were admired by many, the Blackwood's Magazine raised its towerhawk to slaughter the growing popularity of this new poet. The Magazine found The River as poor and pointless with the abortive ending. Speaking

of Lillean, the magazine accused the poet of imitating
Tennyson's Lockley Hall.

Yet on the whole the critics received these
poems with enthusiasm and respect. There are lines
and even whole stanzas in his early poems which
unmistakably declare the poet. The River is pure poetry.
The Falcon serves as the forerunner of the Pre-Raphaelite
manner the poems were praised by responsible critics
like Leigh Hunt.

The Year 1854 is an important landmark in
the life of Coventry Patmore. For, in this year the
first book of The Angel in the House (The Betrothal)
was published. The second part (The Espousal) was
published in 1856. The book narrates the love, courship,
and marriage of Felix, a young man, with Honoria. The
real topic is the progress of love and submission
of the actual passion. The Victories of Love is skilfully
written in the form of letters. The poem received
the admiration of his friends. Ruskin wrote to Patmore
in praise of the poem.

"I cannot tell you how much I admire your
book. I had no idea you had the power of this high
kind. I think it will at all events if ought to became

2. Ibid, Sept. 1844.
One of the most popular books in the language".

The press, however, was not so rapturous over *The Angel* as the poet's friends were the *Athenoeum* then, enjoying an enviable position in the world of criticism, even parodied the poem. In spite this, the poem rapidly became popular and millions of copies were sold during the poet's lifetime. Later of course, the press was forced to admit the greatness of the poem. As Frederick Page remarks:

"The *Angel in the House*, there is conscious love, unifying its subject and object, Man, Woman, God. The House is the Body, but also the literal house, the Englishman's Castle...".

The book reflects not only the contemporary period but also the idiosyncrasies of Patmore, the man who wrote it. A careful study of the poem would reveal the basis of Patmore's philosophy of love. It also helps to explain the later mystical odes in which the poet, leaving his earthly love behind, transcends to grasp the mysteries of divine love.

Patmore's association with the Pre-Raphaelites was quite intimate, but one wonders how in later years Patmore disclaimed all conscious relationship with

---

the aesthetic creed of the Brotherhood. Most of the biographers are silent over Patmore's friendship with Tennyson. This is probably due to the fact that all intimate correspondence between Patmore and Tennyson has been lost. Patmore wrote: "Tennyson I perceive a nature higher than my own; or the feel of which I can sit happily and with love." Tennyson exerted a great influence on Patmore's early work including *The Angel in the House*.

Between the years 1845 and 1852, the two friends remained most intimate. Patmore has one of the few friends of Tennyson who had first read portions of *In Memoriam*. It is perhaps unknown to many that but for Patmore's efforts one of the greatest elegies in the English language would have remained unknown to the world. The Poem was *In Memoriam*.

Yet this friendship was not destined to last and it broke off. Many reasons have been put forward to explain their estrangement. One of the reasons was that Patmore grew in maturity and developed a certain independence of mind. Tennyson, on the other hand, became envious of Patmore's popularity.

A slender volume of *nine odes* printed

---

5. Derek Patmore: *Life And Times*, P. 89.

6. These odes were: (1) Prophets who cannot sing, (2) Felicia, (3) Tired Memory, (4) Faint Yet Pursuing, (5) Pain, (6) The Two Deserts, (7) Delicacies, (8) Dead Language, (9) 1867.
for private circulation in 1868, marked Patmore's second and greatest poetic period. But these order were not warmly received by the poets. So with characteristic disdain, Patmore Consigned the remaining copies to the fire, only one copy of the odes was left with his daughter. Though shaken and sad at heart. He quietly went on writing further odes in the same metre which he used for his earlier odes. In 1877 the book containing these odes was published under the title The Unknown Eros. The following year a few more odes were added.

On its publication many readers complained that the odes lacked unity of idea or conception. Referring to the nine original odes Edmund Gosse remarked that "They had a certain note of unity in method but of unity in the subject there was very little." Perhaps the most bitter criticism of The Unknown Eros came from The Athenacum which, in one of its reviews of the book, complained of incongruity in the "Psche Odes".

The press in America, however received the book with enthusiasm. In a review of The Unknown Eros a leading periodical wrote.

"It has the strength and simplicity of the Gregorian chant, which in a few notes and exchanges expresses the heights of inspiration and exultation,

7. Edmund Gosse, Coventary Patmore (1905), P. 132.
the depths of dread the saddest sorrow of the human heart."8.

A few years after its publication AUBREY DE VERE wrote a letter to Father Neeker in America, enclosing a copy of The Unknown Eros.

"I am sending you a book which seems to me a very remarkable one The Unknown Eros, this by our Catholic poet, Coventry Patmore. Notwithstanding that many things in it are certainly obscure (The result in part of the abstruse theme discussed in the poem), many parts of the book seem to me both to ascend higher and descend deeper than almost anything we have had for a long time."9.

Later, it is gratifying to note that even the hostile Athanacum had changed its view for, while reviewing Gosse's Coventry Patmore, it wrote:

"It is though a Pre-Raphaelite would begin suddenly to paint like Rembrandt. The largeness and majesty of the 'odes' are at times Miltonic ......... Single lines, again, have more than Wordsworthian penetration of feeling."

8. The Catholic World Vol XXV No. 149, Aug. 1877.
Katherine Bregy in an article on Patmore writes:

"Throughout that supreme series of *The Unknown Eros*, Patmore leads his reader into realms of palpitating beauty, truth and love. The sensuous nature, by no means annihilated in this new life of the spirit, is glorified and inconceivably satisfied."

So much about the early reception of the volume by established critics.

In 1891 Patmore left Hastings for Lymington and the remaining five years were spent there. It was during this period that his friendship with Alice Meynell developed. He had been an admirer of her poems while she praised his *Unknown Eros*. This intellectual kinship brought them closer. He was intoxicated by the charming personality of Mrs. Maynell. He wrote an essay on Alice Meynell's Poetry and Letters in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1892. She wrote several essays on Patmore's work. When Tennyson died in 1892, Patmore strongly proposed the name of Mrs. Meynell for the poet laureateship. She understood and admired him and he developed a passionate attachment for her. But she was a very intelligent woman and found it impossible to support so passionate a friendship. She withdrew

---

and during the last two years of the poet's life, they never saw each other.

While out for stroll, he caught cold on Nov. 23, 1896. The next day after receiving the last Sacrament his agony commenced. A few minutes before the eternal silence he whispered to his wife "The Lord is my Life and Light." Into this larger life he passed happily in the afternoon of Nov. 26, 1896, at the ripe age of seventy-three when the news of his death reached Alice Meynell, she was shocked to dumliness. Many mourned his death.

Francis Thompson Wrote:

"Age alone will grasp in some dim measure what must have been the Unmanifested powers of a mind from which could go forth this starry manifestation and 'what silence full of wonders' interpaced his frugality of speech". 12

Alice Meynell:

Alice Meynell remains a challenging figure yet the amount of critical writing on her work is exceptionally small. The very superfluity of occasional articles is a hinderance to a full understanding of her achievement. Viola Meynell's study is mainly

12. As quoted in Derek Patmore's *Life and Times*, p. 242.
biographical and does not throw any light on the particular nature of her poetic vision. Many facets of her personality, of her thought and sensibility are yet to be charted. Despite Viola Meynell and Tuell the notion persists that she is an exceedingly small poet Tuell, however bolds, " here in the slim Volumes of Alice Meynell is prose of quality and poetry which needs no Commentary to be known for poetry. Criticism has seldom seriously denied to her a fine and private value."13.

Quiet early in like Alice showed signs of being literary genius. Her letters to her mother ample show her love of literature. She often sent her literary compositions along with her letters to her mother.14

Italy, where her formative years were spend, left a lasting impression on Alice's mind. The vivid word pictures of Italy in her essays ample prove this. Tuell the literary biographer of Alice Meynell has summed of places imbibed by her in beautiful words. she wrote.

"So Alice was made by native a citizen of the world touched by the home felt affection of a local quality." 15

One can safely conclude that Alice Meynell's life is characterised by pleasure and leisure but underneath. All this happiness lay a current of sadness. Her sister's brilliant career as Kensington inspired Alice and her melancholy flowed into verse like 'Autumn' with the low winds moaning for the dead sweet years of life'. The Preludes had the influence of Wordsworth whose poetry to her was the normal poetry par excellence. The poet was at the time passing through a severe crisis of the mind. The magic spell cast on her by the marks of Shelley and Keat did not last for long and she soon returned to the common path of submission and self discipline. The reason for her conversion to Catholicism could not be clearly known as she observed utmost Yelicence during that period.

The conversion of Alice Meynell to catholicism was an event of far reaching significance and she remained a loyal and sincere follower of the Catholic Church till the end of her life. As

15. Tuell A.K. *Alice Meynell and her literary Generation*, P. 12
a young girl she felt the passion of the word which was followed by a period of religious questionings. Gifted with a fine sensitivity and rare delicacy of feeling, she started writing poetry while she was only nine though these early poems did not show much promise. But it did not take much time for the flowering of her genius as a poet and her parents and admirers were surprised to find that over brooding daughter Thomas James Thompson created a stir with the publication, of her Preludes.

Preludes which appeared 1875 showed the makings of a great poet. These poems are characterised by a role of melancholy, sadness and unrequited love. Alice Meynell's Preludes is not an expression of her adolescent frustration. In fact, these poems contain in them the philosophy of life and love and are an important landmark in her literary career. The general view was that the poet had been able to accomplish much more in her Preludes than is generally achieved by the writers in their maiden work.

What is really surprising is that the poet herself did not fully realise her own power for in her later life she felt that there was enough in her poems which could be bettered. But the PALL MALL GAZETTE was rapturous in welcoming the birth
of a new poet of power. One of the poems reviewed in the Gazette was "My Heart shall be Thy Garden" which held a young journalist in thrall and he became impatient to meet the unknown writer of this sonnet. Later, Alice was also enthralled by the young journalist and decided to become his life-partner. When Father Lackhart learnt this he was filled with surprise and pleasure and wrote to Alice in his letter dated Jan 1, 1877 speaking highly of her choice.

Alice Meynell's marriage took place in the autumn of 1877. It was a pleasant union of the kindred spirits on the physical and intellectual plane and was followed by the life of active cooperation between the two opening new vistas of literary activity in the life of the brooding poet.

Alice Meynell and Welfred Meynell started their career as journalist with Pen, a weekly magazine which won Rossetti's admiration. A year later they published the Weekly Register, a Catholic paper. After some time they published Merry England, a Catholic paper. What was unique about the paper was that if published the articles by the non-Catholic writers also. The most event connected with the
Merry England is the discovery of a great genius in Francis Thompson. The publication of the paper was abandoned in 1895, but it ensured itself against oblivion, for it brought about the blossoming of the poet, Francis Thompson who found a master for himself. His opinion about the editors is worthy of mention here:

"I was virtually his pupil and his wife's long before I know him," Thompson wrote.\(^{17}\)

This letter laid the foundation of a luminous friendship between the Meynells and Thompson. And ever since the beginning of their friendship the poetry of Thompson made an undying appeal to the Meynells. Wilfred Meynell held that Thompson's poetry was a transforming thing but Alice found it exceedingly difficult to agree with him and felt that Thompson had not done much to raise the status of English Poetry.

Alice Meynell had also the singular distinction of being honoured by Thompson in a series of poems published under the Caption "Love in Dianas Lap" inspired by her the friendship between the vagrant opium eater and her was further cemented by a poem addressed to her, "On A Poet Breaking silence".

The first few years of the twentieth century were the years of great anxiety for her Francis Thompson became dangerously ill and it became her constant

\(^{17}\) Meynell Viola - Francis Thompson And Wilfrid Meynell, p. 69.
Concern to save his life. Alice her efforts proved fertile and he passed away leaving Alice Meynell desolate and forborne. In fact, this was the beginning of a long series of sorrows in her life. Three years later her mother died. There was yet another bereavement for her when her brother-in-law, Sir William Buller passed away in 1910.

Despite these disturbances in the family, Alice Meynell's literary ambition to accomplish something good and great things in literature was alive. She had observed silence for some time but the empty stretch of time pinched her. In 1909, she published *Cenes Runaway*, a book of essays which received much praise from Garvin. In 1911, she contributed an article to *Encyclopaedia Britannica* on Elizabeth Browning followed by an elaborate and painful toil for the collection of the parts of Everard's *Life of Francis Thompson*.

During the last few years of life, Alice Meynell did not go through life in a comfortable manner, though Wilfrid did everything to increase the felicity of one, who association with him was for him the fulfilment of the dream of heaven on earth. England was saken by war which she abhorred. Filled with a sense of inexpressible vacuum in life, she kept herself occupied with literary work, but
at tunes even this was beyond her capacity as her physical strength was on the wane what actually continued to haunt her at this time was the integrity of the country. She stood against any kind of alliance with France English honour was one thing which she held above everything else.

Though her health was failing and was a matter of constant concern to those for whom and by whom she lived, her devotion to and love of the muse was still at its zenith. It was the period when she produced poetry which seemed to her to be an accomplishment. The poem on Shakespeare and " A Father of Women" which are a perfect piece of writing were written during this period. A poem of 'The Early Dead in the Battle ' is another important poem written at this time. Later her ten poems were published under the title A Father of Women and Other Poems by her son. They were greatly acclaimed by the public.

Two of these poems have more of nature in them poetry of religion is usually concerned with. To her, all natural things seemed to be 'Yet remoter mystery' and the stars 'proclaiming a graver still divinity In " Sleep " gives a fundamental sense of religion in the episode of dream. The poet is shocked to know that there are no lighter powers and there is no heart in God, but the aching heart of the poet derives solace and comfort from the fact that the
creator of compassion and pity "saw himself as one looks in glass, in those impassioned eyes". Her work was deservedly appreciated by the public and a singular honour was done to her by her election to the Royal Society of Literature. Sir Henry Newbolt greatly praised her poetry, calling it the poetry of "Union of wit and religion as rare now as it was the characteristic of the seventeenth Century."

At the far end her career, she produced same poems which got a mixed reception. She was pained to know that "Reflection" was not liked. "Richman too, was not appreciated. It was, in fact, a study in ethics. Her husband always tried make her conscious of her achievement by his word of encouragement which made her forget any lack she may have felt in her life or work. So humble was she in her journey of life, that despite her being a critic of distinction she always undervalued her achievement.

The love of poetry, and nature and religion were the themes of her last poems. Garvin wrote about these poems: "The spirit of 'Farewell' cannot be repeated breathes very gently, solemnly, through these poems. They are poems of adieu — more implied than expressed and without a tremor of self-pathos'. Though very small in number, they formed an important part of her achievement and aroused much interest. The Times wrote about them:

18. Meynell, Poems: Alice Meynell, P. 338
"Her feelings spring from her mind, her thoughts from her heart. There is grief but no melancholy feeling that owes nothing to a mere 'fineness'; thought never merely curious, an imagination intent not an trying its wings but on reaching its goal".

In the evening of her life the poet was almost becoming conscious of the fast approaching end of the journey though her interest in life, in literature and those who had been her kindred spirits was not at all on the wave. Often she felt a sort of vacuum in her life. As life seemed to be at a low ebb she took elaborate pains to make a list of her unpublished poems and gave it to a friend. Later she made some additions to it. It was therefore, quite easy to guess that she had heared the 'footsteps of death. In 1922, she felt ill and remained confined to bed for about a week. And the changes of her recovery became slenderr. After some time her ill took a turn for the Worse. She kept herself completely detached from her children, though during her long period of devotion and service to literature her love and affection for them was never in doubt. Literature was in fact, her first love. On Nov. 27, 1922, a few minutes before her end. She could say nothing but "this is not tragic - I am happy".

When Garvin learnt of her death he was extremely shocked and wrote:
"Alice Meynell was in herself a person of her age, sure of perpetual remembrance ... Recognition only mad her humble".

Lamenting on her death, G.K. Chesterton predicted

"She was deservedly famous, but I will venture to prophesy that her fullest fame is yet to come. The whole modern world must immeasurably enlarge itself before it comes near the measure of her mind".

20. Mynell, Wilfrid - *Selected poems of Alice Meynell (Introduction)*, p. 15