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CHAMBERS'S EDINBURGH JOURNAL, NO. 418

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Chambers's Edinburgh Journal, No. 418

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Chambers's Edinburgh Journal, No. 418 / Volume 17, New Series, January 3, 1852

A CHILD'S TOY

The afternoon was drawing in towards evening; the air was crisp and cool, and the wind near the earth, steady but gentle; while above all was as calm as sleep, and the pale clouds—just beginning in the west to be softly gilded by the declining sun—hung light and motionless. The city, although not distant, was no longer visible, being hidden by one of the many hills which give such enchantment to the aspect of *our* city. There was altogether something singularly soothing in the scene—something that disposed not to gravity, but to elevated thought. As we looked upwards, there was some object that appeared to mingle with the clouds, to form a part of their company, to linger, mute and motionless like them, in that breathless blue, as if feeling the influence of the hour. It was not a white-winged bird that had stolen away to muse in the solitudes of air: it was nothing more than a paper kite.

On that paper kite we looked long and intently. It was the moral of the picture; it appeared to gather in to itself the sympathies of the whole beautiful world; and as it hung there, herding with the things of heaven, our spirit seemed to ascend and perch upon its pale bosom like a wearied dove. Presently we knew the nature of the influence it exercised upon our imagination; for a cord, not visible at first to the external organs, though doubtless felt by the inner sense, connected it with the earth of which we were a denizen. We knew not by what hand the cord was held so steadily. Perhaps by some silent boy, lying prone on the sward behind yonder plantation, gazing up along the delicate ladder, and seeing unconsciously angels ascending and descending. When we had looked our fill, we went slowly and thoughtfully home along the deserted road, and nestled as usual, like a moth, among our books. A dictionary was lying near; and with a languid curiosity to know what was said of the object that had interested us so much, we turned to the word, and read the following definition: Kite—*a child's toy*.

What wonderful children there are in this world, to be sure! Look at that American boy, with his kite on his shoulder, walking in a field near Philadelphia. He is going to have a fly; and it is famous weather for the sport, for it is in June—June 1752. The kite is but a rough one, for Ben has made it himself, out of a silk-handkerchief stretched over two cross-sticks. Up it goes, however, bound direct for a thunder-cloud passing overhead; and when it has arrived at the object of its visit, the flier ties a key to the end of his string, and then fastens it with some silk to a post. By and by he sees some loose threads of the hempen-string bristle out and stand up, as if they had been charged with electricity. He instantly applies his knuckle to the key, and as he draws from it the electrical spark, this strange little boy is struck through the very heart with an agony of joy. His labouring chest relieves itself with a deep sigh, and he feels that he could be contented to die that moment. And indeed he was nearer death than he supposed; for as the string was sprinkled with rain, it became a better conductor, and gave out its electricity more copiously; and if it had been wholly wet, the experimenter might have been killed upon the spot. So much for *this* child's toy. The splendid discovery it made—of the identity of lightning and electricity—was not allowed to rest by Ben Franklin. By means of an insulated iron rod the new Prometheus drew down fire from heaven, and experimented with it at leisure in his own house. He then turned the miracle to a practical account, constructing a pointed metallic rod to protect houses from thunder. One end of this true magic wand is higher than the building and the other end buried in the ground; and the submissive lightning, instead of destroying life and property in its gambols, darts direct along the conductor into the earth. We may add that Ben was a humorous boy, and played at various things as well as kite-flying. Hear this description of his pranks at an intended

pleasure-party on the banks of the Skuylkill: 'Spirits at the same time are to be fired by a spark sent from side to side through the river, without any other conductor than water—an experiment which we have some time since performed to the amazement of many. A turkey is to be killed for dinner by the electrical shock; and roasted by the electrical jack, before a fire kindled by the electric bottle; when the healths of all the famous electricians in England, Holland, France, and Germany, are to be drunk in electrified bumpers, under the discharge of guns from the electrical battery.'

We now turn to a group of capital little fellows who did something more than fly their kite. These were English skippers, promoted somehow to the command of vessels before they had arrived at years of discretion; and, chancing to meet at the port of Alexandria in Egypt, they took it into their heads—these naughty boys—that they would drink a bowl of punch on the top of Pompey's Pillar. This pillar had often served them for a signal at sea. It was composed of red granite, beautifully polished, and standing 114 feet high, overtopped the town. But how to get up? They sent for a kite, to be sure; and the men, women, and children of Alexandria, wondering what they were going to do with it, followed the toy in crowds. The kite was flown over the Pillar, and with such nicety, that when it fell on the other side the string lodged upon the beautiful Corinthian capital. By this means they were able to draw over the Pillar a two-inch rope, by which one of the youngsters 'swarmed' to the top. The rope was now in a very little while converted into a sort of rude shroud, and the rest of the party followed, and actually drank their punch on a spot which, seen from the surface of the earth, did not appear to be capable of holding more than one man.

By means of this exploit it was ascertained that a statue had once stood upon the column—and a statue of colossal dimensions it must have been to be properly seen at such a height. But for the rest—if we except the carving of sundry initials on the top—the result was only the knocking down of one of the volutes of the capital, for boys are always doing mischief; and this was carried to England by one of the skippers, in order to execute the commission of a lady, who, with the true iconoclasm of her country, had asked him to be so kind as to bring her a piece of Pompey's Pillar.

Little fellows, especially of the class of bricklayers, are no great readers, otherwise we might suspect that the feat of the skipper-boys had conveyed some inspiration to Steeple Jack. Who is Steeple Jack? asks some innocent reader at the Antipodes. He is a little spare creature who flies his kite over steeples when there is anything to do to them, and lodging a cord on the apex, contrives by its means to reach the top without the trouble of scaffolding. No fragility, no displacement of stones, no leaning from the perpendicular, frightens Steeple Jack. He is as bold as his namesake Jack-the-Giant-Killer, and does as wonderful things. At Dunfermline, not long ago, when the top of the spire was in so crazy a state that the people in the street gave it a wide berth as they passed, he swung himself up without hesitation, and set everything to rights. At the moment we write his cord is seen stretched from the tall, slim, and elegant spire of the Assembly Hall in Edinburgh, which is to receive through his agency a lightning-conductor; and Jack only waits the subsidence of a gale of wind to glide up that filmy rope like a spider. He is altogether a strange boy, Steeple Jack. Nobody knows where he roosts upon the earth, if he roosts anywhere at all. The last time there was occasion for his services, this advertisement appeared in the *Scotsman*: 'Steeple Jack is wanted at such a place immediately'—and immediately Steeple Jack became visible.

In 1827 the child's toy was put to a very remarkable use by one Master George Pocock. This clever little fellow observed that his kite sometimes gave him a very strong pull, and it occurred to him that if made large enough it might be able to pull something else. In fact, he at length yoked a pair of large kites to a carriage, and travelled in it from Bristol to London, distancing in grand style every other conveyance on the road. A twelve-foot kite, it appears, in a moderate breeze, has a one-man power of draught, and when the wind is brisker, a force equal to 200 lbs. The force in a rather high wind is as the squares of the lengths; and two kites of fifteen and twelve feet respectively, fastened one above the other, will draw a carriage and four or five passengers at the rate of twenty miles an hour. But George's invention went beyond the simple idea. He had an extra line which enabled him

to vary the angle of the surface of his kites with the horizon, so as to make his aërial horses go fast or slow as he chose; and side-lines to vary the direction of the force, till it came almost to right angles with the direction of the wind. His kites were made of varnished linen, and might be folded up into small compass. The same principle was successfully applied by a nautical lad of the name of Dansey to the purpose of saving vessels in a gale of wind on 'the dread lee-shore.' His kite was of light canvas.

In India, China, and the intermediate countries, the aggregate population of which includes one-half of mankind, kites are the favourite toy of both old and young boys, from three years to threescore and ten. Sometimes they really resemble the conventional dragon, from which, among Scotch children, they derive their name; sometimes they are of a diamond shape, and sometimes they are like a great spider with a narrow waist. Our Old Indian is eloquent on kites, and the glory of their colours, which, in the days of other years, made her girlish heart leap, and her girlish eyes dazzle. The kite-shop is like a tulip-bed, full of all sorts of gay and gorgeous hues. The kites are made of Chinese paper, thin and tough, and the ribs of finely-split bamboo. A wild species of silkworm is pressed into the service, and set to spin *nuck* for the strings—a kind of thread which, although fine, is surprisingly strong. Its strength, however, is wanted for aggression as well as endurance; and a mixture composed of pounded glass and rice gluten is rubbed over it. Having been dried in the sun, the prepared string is now wound upon a handsome reel of split bamboo inserted in a long handle. One of these reels, if of first-rate manufacture, costs a shilling, although coarser ones are very cheap; and of the nuck, about four annas, or sixpence worth, suffices for a kite.

In a Hindoo town the kite-flying usually takes place on some common ground in the vicinity, and there may be seen the young and old boys in eager groups, and all as much interested in the sport as if their lives depended upon their success. And sometimes, indeed, their fortunes do. Many a poor little fellow bets sweetmeats upon his kite to the extent of his only anna in the world; and many a rich baboo has more rupees at stake than he can conveniently spare. But the exhilarating sport makes everybody courageous; and the glowing colours of the kites enable each to identify his own when in the air, and give him in it, as it were, a more absolute property. Matches are soon made. Up go the aërial combatants, and with straining eyes and beating hearts their fate is watched from below. But their masters are far from passive, for this is no game of chance, depending upon the wind. Kite-flying is in these countries an art and mystery; and some there be who would not disclose their recipe for the nuck-ointment, if their own grandfathers should go upon their knees to ask it.

Sometimes an event occurs on the common. It is the ascent of a pair of kites of a *distingué* air, and whose grand and determined manner shews that the combat is to be *à l'outrance,* and that a large stake of money depends upon the result. The fliers are invisible. They are probably on the flat roof of some neighbouring house; but the kites are not the less interesting on account of their origin being unknown. What a host of anxious faces are turned up to the sky! Some take a liking to the red at first sight, while others feel attracted by a mysterious sympathy to the green. Bets are freely offered and accepted either in sweetmeats or money; and the crowd, condensing, move to and fro in a huge wave, from which their eager voices arise like the continuous roaring of the sea. Higher and higher go the kites. Well done, Red! he has shot above his antagonist, and seems meditating a swoop; but the Green, serenely scornful, continues to soar, and is soon uppermost. And thus they go—now up, now down, relatively to each other, but always ascending higher and higher, till the spectators almost fear that they will vanish out of sight. But at length the Green, taking advantage of a loftier position he has gained, makes a sudden circuit, and by an adroit manoeuvre gets his silken string over the silken string of the other, Here a shout of triumph and a yell of terror break simultaneously from the crowd; for this is the crisis of the fight. The victor gives a fierce cut upon his adversary's line. The backers of the latter fancy they hear it grate, and in an instant their forebodings are realised; far the unfortunate Red is seen to waver like a bird struck by a shot, and then, released from the severed string, he descends in forlorn gyrations to the earth.

Now rush in the smaller boys to play their part, Their object is that of the plunderers who traverse the field after a battle, to rob the dying and the slain. Off run the little Hindoos, like a company of imps from the nether regions, tearing and fighting as they fly; and on reaching the fallen kite, the object of their contention is torn to pieces in the scuffle. Presently the victorious Green is seen descending, and the gross excitement of the common pauses to watch his majestic flight. He is of the largest size of Indian kites called *ching*, and of the spider shape. Before being drawn in, he hangs for an instant high up over the crowd. It is not, however, to sing *Io Pæans* for his victory, but apparently rather to mourn over the ruin he has made; for a wailing music breathes from his wings as he passes. This is caused by the action of the wind upon some finely-split bamboo twigs arched over the kite without touching the paper, and which thus become a true Æolian harp. Sometimes a kite of this kind is sent up at night, bearing a small lighted lantern of talc; and the sleepers awakened, called to their balconies by the unearthly music, gaze after the familiar apparition not without a poetical thrill.

Upon the whole, it must be admitted, we think, that this is a somewhat interesting child's toy. But has the kite a future? Will its powers exhibit new developments, or has it already reached its pride of place? If a twelve-foot kite has the force of a man, would it take many more feet to lift a man into the air? And supposing the man to be in a strong cage of network, with bamboo ribs, and a seat of the same material, would he have greater difficulty in governing his aërial coursers by means of the Pocock cords, than if he were flashing along the road from Bristol to London? Mind, we do not say that this is possible: we merely ask for the sake of information; and if any little boy will favour us with his opinion, we shall take it very kind. Come and let us fancy that it *is* possible. The traveller feels much more comfortable than in the car of a balloon, for he knows he can go pretty nearly in what direction he chooses, and that he can hasten or check the pace of his horses, and bring them to a stand-still at pleasure. See him, therefore, boldly careering through the air at the rate of any number of miles the wind pleases. At a single bound he spans yonder broad river, and then goes bowling over the plantation beyond, just stirring the leaves as he passes; trees, water, houses, men, and animals gliding away beneath his feet like a dream. Now he stoops towards the earth, just to make the people send up their voices that there may be some sound in the desert air. Now he swings up again; now he leaps over that little green hill; now he—Hold! hold, little boy!—that will do: enough for a time of a Child's Toy.

JAMES FENIMORE COOPER

'. . . . Whose trained eye was keen,
As eagle of the wilderness, to scan
His path by mountain, lake, or deep ravine,
Or ken far friendly huts on good savannas green.'

– CAMPBELL: Gertrude of Wyoming.

On the 14th of last September, America lost the greatest of her novelists in the person of James Fenimore Cooper. He was born on the 15th of that month, 1789; so that, had he lived but a few hours longer, he would have completed his sixty-second year. At the time of his birth, his father, Judge Cooper, resided at Burlington, New Jersey, where the future *littérateur* commenced his education, and in so doing acquired a decided reputation for talent, which was not tarnished during subsequent years of tutelage at Newhaven and Yale College. At sixteen he exchanged the study of ancient literature and the repose of academic life for the bustling career of a 'middy' in the American navy; continuing for some half-dozen years his connection with those ocean scenes which he then learned to love so well and to describe so vividly. His retirement into private life took place in 1811, soon after which he married Miss de Lancey (whose brother is known to many as one of the New York bishops), and settled at Cooper's Town, his patrimonial estate. Ten years elapsed before his *début* as an author. In 1821 he presented the public with a novel bearing the perhaps apposite title of *Precaution*—apposite, if the two *lustra* thus elapsed were passed in preparation for that début, and as being after all anonymously published. The subject was one with which Cooper never shewed himself conversant—namely, the household life of England. Like his latest works, *Precaution* was a failure, and gave scanty indications of that genius which was to find its true sphere and full scope in the trackless prairies of his native land, and its path upon the mountain-wave he had ridden in buoyant youth. But the same year produced *The Spy*, still considered by many to be his masterpiece, and from that production his fame was secure; and not only America but British voices, exhorted Sir Walter to look to his laurels. Certainly there was a little more reason in calling Cooper the American Scott than in pronouncing Klopstock the German Milton.

The successful novelist visited Europe a few years after this 'sign and seal' of his literary renown, and spent a considerable period among the principalities and powers of Old-World Christendom. In Paris and London especially he was lionised to the top of his bent. Sir Walter met him in the French metropolis in 1826; and in his diary of November 3, after recording a morning visit to 'Cooper the American novelist,' adds: 'this man, who has shewn so much genius, has a good deal of the manners or want of manners peculiar to his countrymen.' Three days later we find the following entry: 'Cooper came to breakfast, but we were *obsédes partout*. Such a number of Frenchmen bounced in successively, and exploded—I mean discharged—their compliments, that I could hardly find an opportunity to speak a word or entertain Mr Cooper at all.'[1] The 'illustrious stranger' appears to have spent about ten years in Europe, for which he was, perhaps, in a literary point of view, none the better; as—to use the words of a periodical of the day—'he did not carry back the same fresh spirit that he brought, something of which must be attributed, no doubt, to the years which intervened; but something, too, to his abandonment of that mother-ground which to him, as to the fabled Antaeus, was the source of strength.' The autumn of his life glided quietly on amid the pleasures and pains of literature; its sombre close being pleasantly illuminated by the rays of spring-promise that radiated

[1] Lockhart's Life of Scott.

around the young brow of his daughter, which the dying veteran might well hope would be matured into 'glorious summer by the sun of' time. *Valeat signum*!

In calling Cooper the greatest of American novelists, we have not incurred much risk of contradiction. Others may rival—some surpass him—in this or that province of the art of fiction; but as a master of the art in its broad aspect, he is *facile princeps*. Brockden Brown treads a circle of mysterious power but mean circumference: Washington Irving is admirable at a sketch, one of the liveliest and most graceful of essayists, and quite equal to the higher demands of imaginative prose —witness his *Rip Van Winkle* and *Sleepy Hollow*—but his forte is in miniature, and the orthodox dimensions of three volumes post-octavo would suit him almost as ill as would the Athenian vesture of Nick Bottom the spruce proportions of royal Oberon: Haliburton is inimitable in his own line of things; his measure of wit and humour—qualities unknown, or nearly so, to Cooper—is 'pressed down, and shaken together, and running over;' but his 'mission' and Cooper's in the tale-telling art are wide as the poles asunder: John Neale had once, particularly by his own appraisement, a high repute as the eccentric author of *Logan* and *Seventy-six*, but the repute, like the *Seventy-six*, is quite in the preterite tense now; and to review him and his works at this time of day would be suspiciously like a *post-mortem* examination, resulting possibly in a verdict of temporary insanity—if not, indeed, of *felo de se*—so wilful and wrongheaded were the vagaries of this 'rough, egotistical Yankee,' as he has been called: Herman Melville is replete with graphic power, and riots in the exuberance of a fresh, racy style; but whether he can sustain the 'burden and heat' of a well-equipped and full-grown novel as deftly as the fragmentary autobiographies he loves to indite; remains to be seen: Longfellow's celebrity in fiction is limited to *Hyperion* and *Kavanagh*—clever, but slight foundations for enduring popularity—as irregular (the former at least) as Jean Paul's nondescript stories, without the great German's tumultuous genius: Hawthorne is probably the most noteworthy of the rising authors of America, and indeed manifests a degree of psychological knowledge and far-sighted, deep-searching observation of which there are few traces or none in Cooper; but the real prowess of the author of *The Scarlet Letter* is, we apprehend, still undeveloped, and the harvest of his honours a thing of the future. All these distinguished persons—not to dwell on the kindred names of Bird, Kennedy, Ware, Paulding, Myers, Willis, Poe, Sedgwick, &c.—must yield the palm to him who has attracted all the peoples and tongues of Europe[2] to follow out the destiny of a Spy on the neutral ground, of a Pilot on the perilous coasts of a hostile race, of a Last of the Mohicans disappearing before the onward tramp of the white man.

As Rob Roy felt the pulses of life quickened when his foot was on his native heath, so Cooper wrote with vigour and *aplomb* only when his themes were the aboriginal forest and the melancholy main. Pity that, having discovered the fount of his strength—the Samson-lock by which alone he towered above his fellows—he had not restrained himself, and concentrated his efforts within the appointed sphere. He repudiated the oracular counsel which his own consciousness must have approved—*Hoc signo vinces*; and seemed to assume that whatever province he invaded, the bulletin of the campaign would be another *Veni, vidi, vici*. Few things can be more unsatisfactory and insipid than his attempts in the 'silver-fork school' of novel-writing—his dreary commonplaces of fashionable life —his faded sermonisings on domestic, and political, and social economy. Few things can be more inspiriting, more energetic, more impressive, than his pictures of

'A wet sheet and a flowing sea,
A wind that follows fast,
And fills the white and rustling sail,
And bends the gallant mast;'

[2] And, in *one* instance at least, of Asia also; for *The Spy* was translated into Persian!

for we see in every stroke that the world of waters is his home, and that to *his* ear there is music in the wild piping of the wind, and that *his* eye beams afresh when it descries tempest in the horned moon, and lightning in the cloud. To him the ocean is indeed 'a glorious mirror,' where the form of the Highest 'glasses itself in tempests;' dear to him it is

> ——'in all time,
> Calm or convulsed—in breeze, or gale, or storm;
> . . . . Boundless, endless, and sublime—
> The image of Eternity—the throne
> Of the Invisible.'

Well might one who had lived six years on her swelling bosom, combine with his love 'of the old sea some reverential fear,' as Wordsworth has it. This compound feeling is highly effective in his marine fictions, so instinct is it with the reality of personal experience. Mr Griswold tells us that Cooper informed him as follows of the origin of *The Pilot*: 'Talking with the late Charles Wilkes of New York, a man of taste and judgment, our author [Cooper] heard extolled the universal knowledge of Scott, and the sea-portions of *The Pirate* cited as a proof. He laughed at the idea, as most seamen would, and the discussion ended by his promising to write a sea-story which could be read by landsmen, while seamen should feel its truth. *The Pilot* was the result of that conversation.'[3] Of this tale Scott says, in a letter to Miss Edgeworth: 'I have seen a new work, *The Pilot*, by the author of *The Spy* and *The Pioneers*. The hero is the celebrated Paul Jones, whom I well remember advancing above the island of Inchkeith, with three small vessels, to lay Leith under contribution.... The novel is a very clever one, and the sea-scenes and characters in particular are admirably drawn; and I advise you to read it as soon as possible.' Still higher panegyric would not have been misbestowed in this instance, which illustrates Mr Prescott's remark, that Cooper's descriptions of inanimate nature, no less than of savage man, are alive with the breath of poetry—'Witness his infinitely various pictures of the ocean; or, still more, of the beautiful spirit that rides upon its bosom, the gallant ship.' Though it is to *The Pilot*, pre-eminently, and *The Waterwitch*, in nearly an equal degree, that these remarks apply, there is many a passage in Cooper's later novels—for example, *The Two Admirals, Homeward Bound, Mark's Reef, Ashore and Afloat*, and *The Sea-Lions*—in which we recognise the same 'cunning' right hand which pencilled the *Ariel*, and its crew, the moody, mysterious pilot, and stalwart Long Tom Coffin.

Nor was he less at home in the backwoods and prairies of his fatherland, than upon the broad seas which divide it from the Old World. Tastes differ; and there are those—possibly the majority of his readers—who prefer the Indian associations of *The Last of the Mohicans, The Pioneers*, &c. to the salt-water scenery of the other class of works. For our part, we prefer his prairies to his savages, his forests to his aborigines, his inanimate to his living sketches of Indian story.[1] His wild men of the woods are often too sentimental, too dreamy, too ideal. In this respect Brockden Brown has the advantage of him; for, as Mr Prescott has pointed out, Brown shews the rude and uncouth lineaments of the Indian character, though he is chargeable with withholding intimations of a more generous nature. While Cooper discards all the coarser elements of savage life, and idealises the portrait. The first of this series of tales of

> 'Painted chiefs with pointed spears,'

was *The Pioneers*—the materials for which, it seems, were to a considerable extent derived from his father, who had an interest in large tracts of land near the 'sources of the Susquehanna,' where the scene is laid, and allied, therefore, to Campbell's *Gertrude of Wyoming*. It was speedily followed by

[3] 'The Prose-Writers of America.'

The Last of the Mohicans—not uncommonly pronounced his *chef d'oeuvre*—and *The Prairie*; which, among numerous descriptions of absorbing interest, pervaded throughout by a fine imaginative spirit, contains one of thrilling power—where the squatter discovers and avenges the murder of his son. *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish*—a strange story with a strange title, and which forms (chronologically at least) the climax of Cooper's fame—is justly admired by all who appreciate 'minute painting,' and that pensive monotony which begets a certain 'melancholy charm.' His skill in martial narrative was favorably attested in *Lionel Lincoln*; in which he describes with remarkable spirit and equal accuracy the battles of Lexington and of Bunker's Hill. But to go through in detail the *opera omnia*

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