

GEORGE MEREDITH

MISCELLANEOUS PROSE

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INTRODUCTION TO W. M. THACKERAY'S "THE FOUR GEORGES"

WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY was born at Calcutta, July 18, 1811, the only child of Richmond and Anne Thackeray. He received the main part of his education at the Charterhouse, as we know to our profit. Thence he passed to Cambridge, remaining there from February 1829 to sometime in 1830. To judge by quotations and allusions, his favourite of the classics was Horace, the chosen of the eighteenth century, and generally the voice of its philosophy in a prosperous country. His voyage from India gave him sight of Napoleon on the rocky island. In his young manhood he made his bow reverentially to Goethe of Weimar; which did not check his hand from setting its mark on the sickliness of Werther.

He was built of an extremely impressionable nature and a commanding good sense. He was in addition a calm observer, having 'the harvest of a quiet eye.' Of this combination with the flood of subjects brought up to judgement in his mind, came

the prevalent humour, the enforced disposition to satire, the singular critical drollery, notable in his works. His parodies, even those pushed to burlesque, are an expression of criticism and are more effective than the serious method, while they rarely overstep the line of justness. The Novels by Eminent Hands do not pervert the originals they exaggerate. 'Sieyes an abbe, now a ferocious lifeguardsman,' stretches the face of the rollicking Irish novelist without disfiguring him; and the mysterious visitor to the palatial mansion in Holywell Street indicates possibilities in the Oriental imagination of the eminent statesman who stooped to conquer fact through fiction. Thackeray's attitude in his great novels is that of the composedly urbane lecturer, on a level with a select audience, assured of interesting, above requirements to excite. The slow movement of the narrative has a grace of style to charm like the dance of the Minuet de la Cour: it is the limpidity of Addison flavoured with salt of a racy vernacular; and such is the veri-similitude and the dialogue that they might seem to be heard from the mouths of living speakers. When in this way the characters of Vanity Fair had come to growth, their author was rightly appreciated as one of the creators in our literature, he took at once the place he will retain. With this great book and with Esmond and The Newcomes, he gave a name eminent, singular, and beloved to English fiction.

Charges of cynicism are common against all satirists, Thackeray had to bear with them. The social world he looked at did not show him heroes, only here and there a plain good soul to

whom he was affectionate in the unhysterical way of an English father patting a son on the head. He described his world as an accurate observer saw it, he could not be dishonest. Not a page of his books reveals malevolence or a sneer at humanity. He was driven to the satirical task by the scenes about him. There must be the moralist in the satirist if satire is to strike. The stroke is weakened and art violated when he comes to the front. But he will always be pressing forward, and Thackeray restrained him as much as could be done, in the manner of a good-humoured constable. Thackeray may have appeared cynical to the devout by keeping him from a station in the pulpit among congregations of the many convicted sinners. That the moralist would have occupied it and thundered had he presented us with the Fourth of the Georges we see when we read of his rejecting the solicitations of so seductive a personage for the satiric rod.

Himself one of the manliest, the kindest of human creatures, it was the love of his art that exposed him to misinterpretation. He did stout service in his day. If the bad manners he scourged are now lessened to some degree we pay a debt in remembering that we owe much to him, and if what appears incurable remains with us, a continued reading of his works will at least help to combat it.

A PAUSE IN THE STRIFE—1886

Our 'Eriniad,' or ballad epic of the enfranchisement of the sister island is closing its first fytte for the singer, and with such result as those Englishmen who have some knowledge of their fellows foresaw. There are sufficient reasons why the Tories should always be able to keep together, but let them have the credit of cohesiveness and subordination to control. Though working for their own ends, they won the esteem of their allies, which will count for them in the struggles to follow. Their leaders appear to have seen what has not been distinctly perceptible to the opposite party—that the break up of the Liberals means the defection of the old Whigs in permanence, heralding the establishment of a powerful force against Radicalism, with a capital cry to the country. They have tactical astuteness. If they seem rather too proud of their victory, it is merely because, as becomes them, they do not look ahead. To rejoice in the gaining of a day, without having clear views of the morrow, is puerile enough. Any Tory victory, it may be said, is little more than a pause in the strife, unless when the Radical game is played 'to dish the Whigs,' and the Tories are now fast bound down by their incorporation of the latter to abstain from the violent springs and right-about-facings of the Derby-Disraeli period. They are so heavily weighted by the new combination that their Jack-in-the-box, Lord Randolph, will have to stand like an ordinary sentinel

on duty, and take the measurement of his natural size. They must, on the supposition of their entry into office, even to satisfy their own constituents, produce a scheme. Their majority in the House will command it.

To this extent, then, Mr. Gladstone has not been defeated. The question set on fire by him will never be extinguished until the combustible matter has gone to ashes. But personally he meets a sharp rebuff. The Tories may well raise hurrahs over that. Radicals have to admit it, and point to the grounds of it. Between a man's enemies and his friends there comes out a rough painting of his character, not without a resemblance to the final summary, albeit wanting in the justly delicate historical touch to particular features. On the one side he is abused as 'the one-man power'; lauded on the other for his marvellous intuition of the popular will. One can believe that he scarcely wishes to march dictatorially, and full surely his Egyptian policy was from step to step a misreading of the will of the English people. He went forth on this campaign, with the finger of Egypt not ineffectively levelled against him a second time. Nevertheless he does read his English; he has, too, the fatal tendency to the bringing forth of Bills in the manner of Jove big with Minerva. He perceived the necessity, and the issue of the necessity; clearly defined what must come, and, with a higher motive than the vanity with which his enemies charge him, though not with such high counsel as Wisdom at his ear, fell to work on it alone, produced the whole Bill alone, and then handed it to his Cabinet to digest, too much

in love with the thing he had laid and incubated to permit of any serious dismemberment of its frame. Hence the disruption. He worked for the future, produced a Bill for the future, and is wrecked in the present. Probably he can work in no other way than from the impulse of his enthusiasm, solitarily. It is a way of making men overweeningly in love with their creations. The consequence is likely to be that Ireland will get her full measure of justice to appease her cravings earlier than she would have had as much from the United Liberal Cabinet, but at a cost both to her and to England. Meanwhile we are to have a House of Commons incapable of conducting public business; the tradesmen to whom the Times addressed pathetic condolences on the loss of their season will lose more than one; and we shall be made sensible that we have an enemy in our midst, until a people, slow to think, have taken counsel of their native generosity to put trust in the most generous race on earth.

CONCESSION TO THE CELT—1886

Things are quiet outside an ant-hill until the stick has been thrust into it. Mr. Gladstone's Bill for helping to the wiser government of Ireland has brought forth our busy citizens on the top-rubble in traversing counterswarms, and whatever may be said against a Bill that deals roughly with many sensitive interests, one asks whether anything less violently impressive would have roused industrious England to take this question at last into the mind, as a matter for settlement. The Liberal leader has driven it home; and wantonly, in the way of a pedestrian demagogue, some think; certainly to the discomposure of the comfortable and the myopely busy, who prefer to live on with a disease in the frame rather than at all be stirred. They can, we see, pronounce a positive electoral negative; yet even they, after the eighty and odd years of our domestic perplexity, in the presence of the eighty and odd members pledged for Home Rule, have been moved to excited inquiries regarding measures—short of the obnoxious Bill. How much we suffer from sniffing the vain incense of that word practical, is contempt of prevision! Many of the measures now being proposed responsively to the fretful cry for them, as a better alternative to correction by force of arms, are sound and just. Ten years back, or at a more recent period before Mr. Parnell's triumph in the number of his followers, they would have formed a basis for the appeasement of the

troubled land. The institution of county boards, the abolition of the detested Castle, something like the establishment of a Royal residence in Dublin, would have begun the work well. Materially and sentimentally, they were the right steps to take. They are now proposed too late. They are regarded as petty concessions, insufficient and vexatious. The lower and the higher elements in the population are fused by the enthusiasm of men who find themselves marching in full body on a road, under a flag, at the heels of a trusted leader; and they will no longer be fed with sops. Petty concessions are signs of weakness to the unsatisfied; they prick an appetite, they do not close breaches. If our object is, as we hear it said, to appease the Irish, we shall have to give them the Parliament their leader demands. It might once have been much less; it may be worried into a raving, perhaps a desperate wrestling, for still more. Nations pay Sibylline prices for want of forethought. Mr. Parnell's terms are embodied in Mr. Gladstone's Bill, to which he and his band have subscribed. The one point for him is the statutory Parliament, so that Ireland may civilly govern herself; and standing before the world as representative of his country, he addresses an applausive audience when he cites the total failure of England to do that business of government, as at least a logical reason for the claim. England has confessedly failed; the world says it, the country admits it. We have failed, and not because the so-called Saxon is incapable of understanding the Celt, but owing to our system, suitable enough to us, of rule by Party, which puts perpetually

a shifting hand upon the reins, and invites the clamour it has to allay. The Irish—the English too in some degree—have been taught that roaring; in its various forms, is the trick to open the ears of Ministers. We have encouraged by irritating them to practise it, until it has become a habit, an hereditary profession with them. Ministers in turn have defensively adopted the arts of beguilement, varied by an exercise of the police. We grew accustomed to periods of Irish fever. The exhaustion ensuing we named tranquillity, and hoped that it would bear fruit. But we did not plant. The Party in office directed its attention to what was uppermost and urgent—to that which kicked them. Although we were living, by common consent; with a disease in the frame, eruptive at intervals, a national disfigurement always a danger, the Ministerial idea of arresting it for the purpose of healing was confined, before the passing of Mr. Gladstone's well-meant Land Bill, to the occasional despatch of commissions; and, in fine, we behold through History the Irish malady treated as a form of British constitutional gout. Parliament touched on the Irish only when the Irish were active as a virus. Our later alternations of cajolery and repression bear painful resemblance to the nervous fit of rickety riders compounding with their destinations that they may keep their seats. The cajolery was foolish, if an end was in view; the repression inefficient. To repress efficiently we have to stifle a conscience accusing us of old injustice, and forget that we are sworn to freedom. The cries that we have been hearing for Cromwell or for Bismarck prove the existence of an

impatient faction in our midst fitter to wear the collars of those masters whom they invoke than to drop a vote into the ballot-box. As for the prominent politicians who have displaced their rivals partly on the strength of an implied approbation of those cries, we shall see how they illumine the councils of a governing people. They are wiser than the barking dogs. Cromwell and Bismarck are great names; but the harrying of Ireland did not settle it, and to Germanize a Posen and call it peace will find echo only in the German tongue. Posen is the error of a master-mind too much given to hammer at obstacles. He has, however, the hammer. Can it be imagined in English hands? The braver exemplar for grappling with monstrous political tasks is Cavour, and he would not have hinted at the iron method or the bayonet for a pacification. Cavour challenged debate; he had faith in the active intellect, and that is the thing to be prayed for by statesmen who would register permanent successes. The Irish, it is true, do not conduct an argument coolly. Mr. Parnell and his eighty-five have not met the Conservative leader and his following in the Commons with the gravity of platonic disputants. But they have a logical position, equivalent to the best of arguments. They are representatives, they would say, of a country admittedly ill-governed by us; and they have accepted the Bill of the defeated Minister as final. Its provisions are their terms of peace. They offer in return for that boon to take the burden we have groaned under off our hands. If we answer that we think them insincere, we accuse these thrice accredited representatives of the Irish

people of being hypocrites and crafty conspirators; and numbers in England, affected by the weapons they have used to get to their present strength, do think it; forgetful that our obtuseness to their constant appeals forced them into the extremer shifts of agitation. Yet it will hardly be denied that these men love Ireland; and they have not shown themselves by their acts to be insane. To suppose them conspiring for separation indicates a suspicion that they have neither hearts nor heads. For Ireland, separation is immediate ruin. It would prove a very short sail for these conspirators before the ship went down. The vital necessity of the Union for both, countries, obviously for the weaker of the two, is known to them; and unless we resume our exasperation of the wild fellow the Celt can be made by such a process, we have not rational grounds for treating him, or treating with him, as a Bedlamite. He has besides his passions shrewd sense; and his passions may be rightly directed by benevolent attraction. This is language derided by the victorious enemy; it speaks nevertheless what the world, and even troubled America, thinks of the Irish Celt. More of it now on our side of the Channel would be serviceable. The notion that he hates the English comes of his fevered chafing against the harness of England, and when subject to his fevers, he is unrestrained in his cries and deeds. That pertains to the nature of him. Of course, if we have no belief in the virtues of friendliness and confidence—none in regard to the Irishman—we show him his footing, and we challenge the issue. For the sole alternative is distinct antagonism, a form of

war. Mr. Gladstone's Bill has brought us to that definite line. Ireland having given her adhesion to it, swearing that she does so in good faith, and will not accept a smaller quantity, peace is only to be had by our placing trust in the Irish; we trust them or we crush them. Intermediate ways are but the prosecution of our ugly flounderings in Bogland; and dubious as we see the choice on either side, a decisive step to right or left will not show us to the world so bemired, to ourselves so miserably inefficient, as we appear in this session of a new Parliament. With his eighty-five, apart from external operations lawful or not, Mr. Parnell can act as a sort of lumbricus in the House. Let journalists watch and chronicle events: if Mr. Gladstone has humour, they will yet note a peculiar smile on his closed mouth from time to time when the alien body within the House, from which, for the sake of its dignity and ability to conduct its affairs, he would have relieved it till the day of a warmer intelligence between Irish and English, paralyzes our machinery business. An ably- handled coherent body in the midst of the liquid groups will make it felt that Ireland is a nation, naturally dependent though she must be. We have to do with forces in politics, and the great majority of the Irish Nationalists in Ireland has made them a force.

No doubt Mr. Matthew Arnold is correct in his apprehensions of the dangers we may fear from a Dublin House of Commons. The declarations and novel or ultra theories might almost be written down beforehand. I should, for my part, anticipate a greater danger in the familiar attitude of the English metropolitan

Press and public toward an experiment they dislike and incline to dread:—the cynical comments, the quotations between inverted commas, the commiserating shrug, cold irony, raw banter, growl of menace, sharp snap, rounds of laughter. Frenchmen of the Young Republic, not presently appreciated as offensive, have had some of these careless trifles translated for them, and have been stung. We favoured Germany with them now and then, before Germany became the first power in Europe. Before America had displayed herself as greatest among the giants that do not go to pieces, she had, as Americans forgivingly remember, without mentioning, a series of flicks of the whip. It is well to learn manners without having them imposed on us. There are various ways for tripping the experiment. Nevertheless, when the experiment is tried, considering that our welfare is involved in its not failing, as we have failed, we should prepare to start it cordially, cordially assist it. Thoughtful political minds regard the measure as a backward step; yet conceiving but a prospect that a measure accepted by Home Rulers will possibly enable the Irish and English to step together, it seems better worth the venture than to pursue a course of prospectless discord! Whatever we do or abstain from doing has now its evident dangers, and this being imminent may appear the larger of them; but if a weighing of the conditions dictates it, and conscience approves, the wiser proceeding is to make trial of the untried. Our outlook was preternaturally black, with enormous increase of dangers when the originator of our species venturesomely arose from the

posture of the 'quatre pattes'. We consider that we have not lost by his temerity. In states of dubitation under impelling elements, the instinct pointing to courageous action is, besides the manlier, conjecturably the right one.

LESLIE STEPHEN—1904

When that noble body of scholarly and cheerful pedestrians, the Sunday Tramps, were on the march, with Leslie Stephen to lead them, there was conversation which would have made the presence of a shorthand writer a benefaction to the country. A pause to it came at the examination of the leader's watch and Ordnance map under the western sun, and void was given for the strike across country to catch the tail of a train offering dinner in London, at the cost of a run through hedges, over ditches and fellows, past proclamation against trespassers, under suspicion of being taken for more serious depredators in flight. The chief of the Tramps had a wonderful calculating eye in the observation of distances and the nature of the land, as he proved by his discovery of untried passes in the higher Alps, and he had no mercy for pursy followers. I have often said of this life-long student and philosophical head that he had in him the making of a great military captain. He would not have been opposed to the profession of arms if he had been captured early for the service, notwithstanding his abomination of bloodshed. He had a high, calm courage, was unperturbed in a dubious position, and would confidently take the way out of it which he conceived to be the better. We have not to deplore that he was diverted from the ways of a soldier, though England, as the country has been learning of late, cannot boast of many in uniform who have

capacity for leadership. His work in literature will be reviewed by his lieutenant of Tramps, one of the ablest of writers!— [Frederic W. Maitland.]—The memory of it remains with us, as being the profoundest and the most sober criticism we have had in our time. The only sting in it was an inoffensive humorous irony that now and then stole out for a roll over, like a furry cub, or the occasional ripple on a lake in grey weather. We have nothing left that is like it.

One might easily fall into the pit of panegyric by an enumeration of his qualities, personal and literary. It would not be out of harmony with the temper and characteristics of a mind so equable. He, the equable, whether in condemnation or eulogy. Our loss of such a man is great, for work was in his brain, and the hand was active till close upon the time when his breathing ceased. The loss to his friends can be replaced only by an imagination that conjures him up beside them. That will be no task to those who have known him well enough to see his view of things as they are, and revive his expression of it. With them he will live despite the word farewell.

CORRESPONDENCE FROM THE SEAT OF WAR IN ITALY

LETTERS WRITTEN TO THE MORNING POST FROM THE SEAT OF WAR IN ITALY FROM OUR OWN CORRESPONDENT

FERRARA, June 22, 1866.

Before this letter reaches London the guns will have awakened both the echo of the old river Po and the classical Mincio. The whole of the troops, about 110,000 men, with which Cialdini intends to force the passage of the first-named river are already massed along the right bank of the Po, anxiously waiting that the last hour of to-morrow should strike, and that the order for action should be given. The telegraph will have already informed your readers that, according to the intimation sent by General Lamarmora on Tuesday evening to the Austrian headquarters, the three days fixed by the general's message before beginning hostilities will expire at twelve p.m. of the 23rd of June.

Cialdini's headquarters have been established in this city since Wednesday morning, and the famous general, in whom the fourth corps he commands, and the whole of the nation, has so much confidence, has concentrated the whole of his forces within a

comparatively narrow compass, and is ready for action. I believe therefore that by to-morrow the right bank of the Po will be connected with the mainland of the Polesine by several pontoon bridges, which will enable Cialdini's corps d'armee to cross the river, and, as everybody here hopes, to cross it in spite of any defence the Austrians may make.

On my way to this ancient city last evening I met General Cadogan and two superior Prussian officers, who by this time must have joined Victor Emmanuel's headquarters at Cremona; if not, they have been by this time transferred elsewhere, more on the front, towards the line of the Mincio, on which, according to appearance, the first, second, and third Italian corps d'armee seem destined to operate. The English general and the two Prussian officers above mentioned are to follow the king's staff, the first as English commissioner, the superior in rank of the two others in the same capacity.

I have been told here that, before leaving Bologna, Cialdini held a general council of the commanders of the seven divisions of which his powerful corps d'armee is formed, and that he told them that, in spite of the forces the enemy has massed on the left bank of the Po, between the point which faces Stellata and Rovigo, the river must be crossed by his troops, whatever might be the sacrifice this important operation requires. Cialdini is a man who knows how to keep his word, and, for this reason, I have no doubt he will do what he has already made up his mind to accomplish. I am therefore confident that before two or three

days have elapsed, these 110,000 Italian troops, or a great part of them, will have trod, for the Italians, the sacred land of Venetia.

Once the river Po crossed by Cialdini's corps d'armee, he will boldly enter the Polesine and make himself master of the road which leads by Rovigo towards Este and Padua. A glance at the map will show your readers how, at about twenty or thirty miles from the first-mentioned town, a chain of hills, called the Colli Euganei, stretches itself from the last spur of the Julian Alps, in the vicinity of Vicenza, gently sloping down towards the sea. As this line affords good positions for contesting the advance of an army crossing the Po at Lago Scuro, or at any other point not far from it, it is to be supposed that the Austrians will make a stand there, and I should not be surprised at all that Cialdini's first battle, if accepted by the enemy, should take place within that comparatively narrow ground which is within Montagnana, Este, Terradura, Abano, and Padua. It is impossible to suppose that Cialdini's corps d'armee, being so large, is destined to cross the Po only at one point of the river below its course: it is extremely likely that part of it should cross it at some point above, between Revere and Stellata, where the river is in two or three instances only 450 metres wide. Were the Italian general to be successful—protected as he will be by the tremendous fire of the powerful artillery he disposes of—in these twofold operations, the Austrians defending the line of the Colli Euganei could be easily outflanked by the Italian troops, who would have crossed the river below Lago Scuro. Of course these

are mere suppositions, for nobody, as you may imagine, except the king, Cialdini himself, Lamarmora, Pettiti, and Menabrea, is acquainted with the plan of the forthcoming campaign. There was a rumour at Cialdini's headquarters to-day that the Austrians had gathered in great numbers in the Polesine, and especially at Rovigo, a small town which they have strongly fortified of late, with an apparent design to oppose the crossing of the Po, were Cialdini to attempt it at or near Lago Scuro. There are about Rovigo large tracts of marshes and fields cut by ditches and brooks, which, though owing to the dryness of the season [they] cannot be, as it was generally believed two weeks ago, easily inundated, yet might well aid the operations the Austrians may undertake in order to check the advance of the Italian fourth corps d'armee. The resistance to the undertaking of Cialdini may be, on the part of the Austrians, very stout, but I am almost certain that it will be overcome by the ardour of Italian troops, and by the skill of their illustrious leader.

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