THE BEST OF ALL GOOD COMPANY; A DAY WITH W. M. THAKERAY; PP. 315-392

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Extract from Letter of W. M. Thackeray.

Some critics have accused me of wishing to undervalue my profession, because I have spoken lightly of certain (imaginary) practitioners of it: but it is because I honour the calling, and hold it to be not better nor worse than that pursued by any other body of educated gentlemen, that I've written as I have done concerning it. To write for bread can't be wrong: but to write dishonestly & unjustly; & wilfully to impute bad motives to ~~[illegible]~~ opponents – it is that w^h lowers our profession. I am hurrying into a steamer, where I have had to answer a note – and tendering upon my thanks once more, remain, dear Sir Your very faithful Servt

W M Thackeray

THE

BEST OF ALL GOOD COMPANY.

BY

BLANCHARD JERROLD.

A DAY WITH W. M. THACKERAY.

"And there came up a lion out of Judah!"—
Charlotte Brontë's exclamation on first seeing Thackeray's Portrait.

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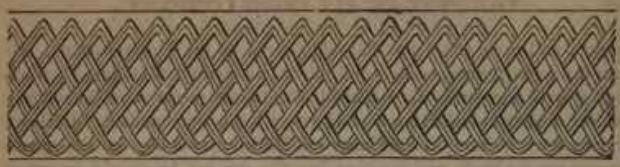

W. M. THACKERAY.

"AND SEE THE GREAT ACHILLES WHOM WE KNEW."

WHO that has seen will ever forget the commanding figure and the stately head? Sauntering—usually a solitary man—through the hall of the Reform Club, or in the quietudes of the Athenæum, making up his mind to find a corner to work for an hour or so on the small sheets of paper in his pocket, in a hand as neat as Peter Cunningham's or Leigh Hunt's;* gazing dreamily, and often with a sad and weary look, out of window; moving slowly westward home to dinner on a summer's evening; or making a strange presence, as obviously not belonging to the place, in Fleet Street on his way to Whitefriars or Cornhill; who that knew him does not remember dear Old Thackeray, as his familiars lovingly called him, in some or all of these moods and places? In Thackeray, as in Dickens, there was a strong and impressive individuality. No two men could be less alike, in person or mind, than these two writers who shared the world's favour together; and yet there was an equality and identity in their impressiveness. Dickens' strength was quick, alert, and with the glow of health in it; it seemed to proceed like that of a mighty engine from an inward fire. Thackeray's was calm, majestic by its ease and extent, as the force of a splendid stream. Hawthorne's figure and air has been described as "modestly grand"; and the observation, it occurs to me, applies exactly to Thackeray. Indeed, I have often been struck with the idea that the two men must have affected society much in the same way, and by the same mental and physical qualities. Like Hawthorne, Thackeray

"Wandered lonely as a cloud,"

—a cloud, it should be noted and remembered, with a silver lining. In their solitude, when suddenly observed, both had a sad, a grave

* Shortly before his death he spent a morning in the reading-room of the British Museum, and there by accident left upon a table a page of the MS. of the story he had in hand. The paper being found, the clearness and roundness of the writing at once suggested the owner to the attendant, and the precious missing leaf was forwarded to Kensington.

aspect; and each was "marvellously moved to fun" on occasions. In both the boy appeared easily; and this was a quality of Dickens' genius, as it was of my father's. I should like to see pictures of Thackeray holding a skein of silk for a child upon his broad hands; of Dickens playing at leap-frog or rounders; of Hawthorne lying in the grass listening to the birds, and ducking lest the passers by should interrupt him; and of Douglas Jerrold taking part in basting the bear in his Kentish orchard. Mr. Field's description of Hawthorne's fun at sea, and of his grand solitary figure under the stars at night, might stand for portraiture of Thackeray.

"That is his face, looking out upon us, next to Pope's," says Mr. Field, in his "Yesterdays with Authors." "What a contrast in bodily appearance those two English men of genius present! Thackeray's great, burly figure, broad-chested and ample as the day, seems to overshadow and quite blot out of existence the author of 'The Essay on Man.' But what friends they would have been had they lived as contemporaries under Queen Anne or Queen Victoria! One can imagine the author of 'Pendennis' gently lifting poor little Alexander out of his 'chariot' into the club, and revelling in talk with him all night long. Pope's high-bred and gentlemanly manner, combined with his extraordinary sensibility and dread of ridicule, would have modified Thackeray's usual gigantic form and sometimes boisterous sarcasm into a rich and strange adaptability to his little guest. We can imagine them talking together now, with even a nobler wisdom and ampler charity than were ever vouchsafed to them when they were busy amid the turmoils of their crowded literary lives."

What Thackeray would have been had he lived the contemporary of Pope, is a speculation much lower in interest than any description of Thackeray as he lived and breathed and had his being—one of the lights and glories of the Victorian epoch. Mr. Hannay's portrait is worth any number or kind of poetic speculations: "In private this great satirist, whose aspect in a crowd was often one of austere politeness and reserve, unbent into a familiar *naiveté*, which somehow one seldom finds in the demonstratively genial. And this was the more charming and precious that it rested on a basis of severe and profound reflection, before the glance of which all that was dark and serious in man's life and prospects lay open. The gravity of that white head, with its noble brow and thoughtful face full of feeling and meaning, enhanced the piquancy of his playfulness, and of the little personal revelations which came with such a grace from the depths of his kindly nature. When we congratulated him, many years ago, on the touch in *Vanity Fair*, in which Becky '*admires*' her husband, when he is giving Lord Steyne the chastisement which ruins *her* for life, 'Well,' he said, 'when I wrote the sentence, I slapped my fist on the table, and said '*that* is a touch of genius.' The incident is a trifle, but it will reveal, we suspect, an element of fervour, as well as a heartiness of frankness in recording the fervour, both equally at variance with the vulgar conception of him. This frankness and *bonhomie* made him delightful in a *tête-à-tête*, and