

PREFACE TO THE LIBRARY EDITION.

BEING THE HISTORY OF A STORY.

"THE HOOSIER SCHOOL-MASTER" was written and printed in the autumn of 1871. It is therefore now about twenty-one years old, and the publishers propose to mark its coming of age by issuing a library edition. I avail myself of the occasion to make some needed revisions, and to preface the new edition with an account of the origin and adventures of the book. If I should seem to betray unbecoming pride in speaking of a story that has passed into several languages and maintained an undiminished popularity for more than a score of years, I count on receiving the indulgence commonly granted to paternal vanity when celebrating the majority of a first-born. With all its faults on its head, this little tale has become a classic, in the bookseller's sense at least; and a public that has shown so constant a partiality for it has a right to feel some curiosity regarding its history.

I persuade myself that additional extenuation for

this biography of a book is to be found in the relation which "The Hoosier School-Master" happens to bear to the most significant movement in American literature in our generation. It is the file-leader of the procession of American dialect novels. Before the appearance of this story, the New England folk-speech had long been employed for various literary purposes, it is true; and after its use by Lowell, it had acquired a standing that made it the classic *lingua rustica* of the United States. Even Hoosiers and Southerners when put into print, as they sometimes were in rude burlesque stories, usually talked about "huskin' bees" and "apple-parin' bees" and used many other expressions foreign to their vernacular. American literature hardly touched the speech and life of the people outside of New England; in other words, it was provincial in the narrow sense.

I can hardly suppose that "The Hoosier School-Master" bore any causative relation to that broader provincial movement in our literature which now includes such remarkable productions as the writings of Mr. Cable, Mr. Harris, Mr. Page, Miss Murfree, Mr. Richard Malcom Johnson, Mr. Howe, Mr. Garland, some of Mrs. Burnett's stories and others quite worthy of inclusion in this list. The taking up of life in this regional way has made our

literature really national by the only process possible. The Federal nation has at length manifested a consciousness of the continental diversity of its forms of life. The "great American novel," for which prophetic critics yearned so fondly twenty years ago, is appearing in sections. I may claim for this book the distinction, such as it is, of being the first of the dialect stories that depict a life quite beyond New England influence. Some of Mr. Bret Harte's brief and powerful tales had already foreshadowed this movement toward a larger rendering of our life. But the romantic character of Mr. Harte's delightful stories and the absence of anything that can justly be called dialect in them mark them as rather forerunners than beginners of the prevailing school. For some years after the appearance of the present novel, my own stories had to themselves the field of provincial realism (if, indeed, there be any such thing as realism) before there came the succession of fine productions which have made the last fourteen years notable.

Though it had often occurred to me to write something in the dialect now known as Hoosier—the folk-speech of the southern part of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois of forty years ago—I had postponed the attempt indefinitely, probably because the only literary use that had been made of the

allied speech of the Southwest had been in the books of the primitive humorists of that region. I found it hard to dissociate in my own mind the dialect from the somewhat coarse boisterousness which seemed inseparable from it in the works of these rollicking writers. It chanced that in 1871 Taine's lectures on "Art in the Netherlands," or rather Mr. John Durand's translation of them, fell into my hands as a book for editorial review. These discourses are little else than an elucidation of the thesis that the artist of originality will work courageously with the materials he finds in his own environment. In Taine's view, all life has matter for the artist, if only he have eyes to see.

Many years previous to the time of which I am now speaking, while I was yet a young man, I had projected a lecture on the Hoosier folk-speech, and had even printed during the war a little political skit in that dialect in a St. Paul paper. So far as I know, nothing else had ever been printed in the Hoosier. Under the spur of Taine's argument, I now proceeded to write a short story wholly in the dialect spoken in my childhood by rustics on the north side of the Ohio River. This tale I called "The Hoosier School-Master." It consisted almost entirely of an autobiographical narration in dialect by Mirandy Means of the incidents that form the

groundwork of the present story. I was the newly installed editor of a weekly journal, *Hearth and Home*, and I sent this little story in a new dialect to my printer. It chanced that one of the proprietors of the paper saw a part of it in proof. He urged me to take it back and make a longer story out of the materials, and he expressed great confidence in the success of such a story. Yielding to his suggestion, I began to write this novel from week to week as it appeared in the paper, and thus found myself involved in the career of a novelist, which had up to that time formed no part of my plan of life. In my inexperience I worked at a white-heat, completing the book in ten weeks. Long before these weeks of eager toil were over, it was a question among my friends whether the novel might not write *finis* to me before I should see the end of it.

The sole purpose I had in view at first was the resuscitation of the dead-and-alive newspaper of which I had ventured to take charge. One of the firm of publishers thought much less favorably of my story than his partner did. I was called into the private office and informed with some severity that my characters were too rough to be presentable in a paper so refined as ours. I confess they did seem somewhat too robust for a sheet so anæmic

as *Hearth and Home* had been in the months just preceding. But when, the very next week after this protest was made, the circulation of the paper increased some thousands at a bound, my employer's critical estimate of the work underwent a rapid change—a change based on what seemed to him better than merely literary considerations. By the time the story closed, at the end of fourteen instalments, the subscription list had multiplied itself four or five fold. It is only fair to admit, however, that the original multiplicand had been rather small.

Papers in Canada and in some of the other English colonies transferred the novel bodily to their columns, and many of the American country papers helped themselves to it quite freely. It had run some weeks of its course before it occurred to any one that it might profitably be reprinted in book form. The publishers were loath to risk much in the venture. The newspaper type was rejustified to make a book page, and barely two thousand copies were printed for a first edition. I remember expressing the opinion that the number was too large.

"The Hoosier School-Master" was pirated with the utmost promptitude by the Messrs. Routledge, in England, for that was in the barbarous days before

international copyright, when English publishers complained of the unscrupulousness of American reprinters, while they themselves pounced upon every line of American production that promised some shillings of profit. "The Hoosier School-Master" was brought out in England in a cheap, sensational form. The edition of ten thousand has long been out of print. For this large edition and for the editions issued in the British colonies and in continental Europe I have never received a penny. A great many men have made money out of the book, but my own returns have been comparatively small. For its use in serial form I received nothing beyond my salary as editor. On the copyright edition I have received the moderate royalty allowed to young authors at the outset of their work. The sale of the American edition in the first twenty years amounted to seventy thousand copies. The peculiarity of this sale is its steadiness. After twenty years, "The Hoosier School-Master" is selling at the average rate of more than three thousand copies per annum. During the last half-dozen years the popularity of the book has apparently increased, and its twentieth year closed with a sale of twenty-one hundred in six months. Only those who are familiar with the book trade and who know how brief is the life of the average

novel will understand how exceptional is this long-continued popularity.

Some of the newspaper reviewers of twenty years ago were a little puzzled to know what to make of a book in so questionable a shape, for the American dialect novel was then a new-comer. But nothing could have given a beginner more genuine pleasure than the cordial commendation of the leading professional critic of the time, the late Mr. George Ripley, who wrote an extended review of this book for the *Tribune*. The monthly magazines all spoke of "The Hoosier School-Master" in terms as favorable as it deserved. I cannot pretend that I was content with these notices at the time, for I had the sensitiveness of a beginner. But on looking at the reviews in the magazines of that day, I am amused to find that the faults pointed out in the work of my prentice hand are just those that I should be disposed to complain of now, if it were any part of my business to tell the reader wherein I might have done better.

The Nation, then in its youth, honored "The Hoosier School-Master" by giving it two pages, mostly in discussion of its dialect, but dispensing paradoxical praise and censure in that condescending way with which we are all familiar enough. According to its critic, the author had understood and

described the old Western life, but he had done it "quite sketchily, to be sure." Yet it was done "with essential truth and some effectiveness." The critic, however, instantly stands on the other foot again and adds that the book "is not a captivating one." But he makes amends in the very next sentence by an allusion to "the faithfulness of its transcript of the life it depicts," and then instantly balances the account on the adverse side of the ledger by assuring the reader that "it has no interest of passion or mental power." But even this fatal conclusion is diluted by a dependent clause. "Possibly," says the reviewer, "the good feeling of the intertwined love story may conciliate the good-will of some of the malcontent." One could hardly carry further the fine art of oscillating between moderate commendation and parenthetical damnation—an art that lends a factitious air of judicial impartiality and mental equipoise. Beyond question, *The Nation* is one of the ablest weekly papers in the world; the admirable scholarship of its articles and reviews in departments of special knowledge might well be a subject of pride to any American. But its inadequate reviews of current fiction add nothing to its value, and its habitual tone of condescending depreciation in treating imaginative literature of indigenous origin is one

of the strongest discouragements to literary production.

The main value of good criticism lies in its readiness and penetration in discovering and applauding merit not before recognized, or imperfectly recognized. This is a conspicuous trait of Sainte-Beuve, the greatest of all newspaper critics. He knew how to be severe upon occasion, but he saw talent in advance of the public and dispensed encouragement heartily, so that he made himself almost a foster-father to the literature of his generation in France. But there is a class of anonymous reviewers in England and America who seem to hold a traditional theory that the function of a critic toward new-born talent is analogous to that of Pharaoh toward the infant Jewish population.¹

During the first year after its publication "The

¹ Since writing the passage in the text, I have met with the following in *The Speaker*, of London: "Everybody knows that when an important work is published in history, philosophy, or any branch of science, the editor of a respectable paper employs an expert to review it; . . . indeed, the more abstruse the subject of the book, the more careful and intelligent you will find the review. . . . It is equally well known that works of fiction and books of verse are not treated with anything like the same care. . . . A good poem, play, or novel is at least as fine an achievement as a good history; yet the history gets the benefit of an expert's judgment and two columns of thoughtful praise or censure, while the poem, play, or novel is treated to ten skittish lines by the hack who happens to be within nearest call when the book comes in."

Hoosier School-Master" was translated into French and published in a condensed form in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. The translator was the writer who signs the name M. Th. Bentzon, and who is well known to be Madame Blanc. This French version afterward appeared in book form in the same volume with one of Mr. Thomas Bailey Aldrich's stories and some other stories of mine. In this latter shape I have never seen it. The title given to the story by Madame Blanc was "Le Maître d'École de Flat Creek." It may be imagined that the translator found it no easy task to get equivalents in French for expressions in a dialect new and strange. "I'll be dog-on'd" appears in French as "devil take me" ("*diable m'emporte*"), which is not bad; the devil being rather a jolly sort of fellow, in French. "The Church of the Best Licks" seems rather unrenderable, and I do not see how the translator could have found a better phrase for it than "*L'Eglise des Raclées*," though "*raclées*" does not convey the double sense of "licks." "*Jim epelait vite comme l'eclair*" is not a good rendering of "Jim spelled like lightning," since it is not the celerity of the spelling that is the main consideration. "*Concours d'epellation*" is probably the best equivalent for "spelling-school," but it seems something more stately in its French dress. When Bud says, with