


## WILLIAM THACKERAY

 WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY, eminent English novelist, was born at Calcutta, the grandson of a member of the East India Council, July 18, 1811, and died at his home, close to Kensington Palace, London, on Christmas eve, 1863. In 1815 his father died, and, his mother having married again, the boy was sent to England and entered at the famous Charterhouse School,—the "Grey Friars" of "The Newcomes"—where he remained six years. In 1829, he passed to Trinity College, Cambridge, but at the end of two years he left college without taking his degree. He visited the Continent, intending on his return to adopt law for his profession; but having lost most of his small patrimony, he turned his attention for a while to art, but soon exchanged the brush for the pen. In 1833, he became editor of a weekly journal to which he had already contributed, but this venture proved a failure and he went to Paris to prosecute his studies in art. In 1835, he offered his services to illustrate the "Pickwick Papers," and the following year married. Six months later the newspaper publishing concern, of which his stepfather was chairman, failed, and Thackeray was left penniless. He moved to London and engaged actively in literary work. In 1840, after the birth of his third daughter, Mrs. Thackeray became hopelessly insane and his home was broken up. In 1840, appeared his first volume, the "Paris Sketch Book," but this and another publishing venture of the following year were failures. His work in "Fraser's Magazine" and elsewhere was beginning to attract attention, and in 1842 he joined the staff of "Punch," in which he published his "Snob" papers. "Vanity Fair," completed in monthly parts in July, 1848, made the author's fame secure and gave him a fair share of this world's goods. "Pendennis" was begun in November of the same year, and "Henry Esmond" followed in 1852. Meanwhile he had taken to lecturing in London and in various English cities on the "English Humorists of the 18th Century," with such success that he was invited to deliver them in the United States. On his return, in 1853, he began "The Newcomes," which was completed in 1855. In that year he gave in America his famous lectures on "The Four Georges." After his return to England he stood for Parliament as a Radical member for Oxford, but failed of election. In 1857 "The Virginians" began, and three years later he became editor of "Cornhill Magazine," to which he contributed "Lovell, the Widower," "Philip," and his "Roundabout Papers," and the first chapters of his unfinished "Dennis Duval," which was interrupted by the sudden summons of death. Of Thackeray as a writer it is pleasant as well as easy to speak—pleasant because there was so much that is delightful about the man; easy because there are few British authors, save perhaps Dickens and Scott, who are so largely read. His personality abounds in his books—a personality that was so genial and charming, so full of a large humanity, while alien to all that was vapid, warped, and mean in human nature. In these respects he was a thorough gentleman—high-minded, generous, sincere, and sympathetic. In all he wrote he was ever clean and wholesome, with a wonderful power of detecting and exposing the weaknesses, deceptions, subterfuges, and littlenesses of mankind, a scourger of impurity and viciousness,

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and the satirist of the follies, failings, and frailties of his time and people. His own personal purity and the innate nobleness of his nature made him the satirist—even the cynic—he was; though as a censor he was never unfeeling or unkindly. Besides his gift of seeing the vivid reality of things, the sense of humor in him prevented him from becoming the moralist prig or the canting preacher; while unlike either of the latter he had that tenderness of heart that could not conceal itself behind frowns and censorious lashings, but would break out occasionally into sentiment, and, in spite of himself, betray itself in deep pathos. He adds moreover to the pleasure of his reader by writing, after his Addisonian and Fielding models, in the purest and most felicitous English.

### LECTURE: CHARITY AND HUMOR

[This lecture was first delivered at New York on behalf of a charity at the time of Mr. Thackeray's visit to America in 1852, when he had been giving his series of lectures on the English Humorists. It was subsequently repeated, with slight variations, in London (once under the title of "Week-Day Preachers") for the benefit of the families of Angus B. Reach and Douglas Jerrold.]

SEVERAL charitable ladies of this city, to some of whom I am under great personal obligation, having thought that a lecture of mine would advance a benevolent end which they had in view, I have preferred, in place of delivering a discourse, which many of my hearers no doubt know already, upon a subject merely literary or biographical, to put together a few thoughts which may serve as a supplement to the former lectures, if you like, and which have this at least in common with the kind purpose which assembles you here, that they rise out of the same occasion and treat of charity.

Besides contributing to our stock of happiness, to our harmless laughter and amusement, to our scorn for falsehood and pretension, to our righteous hatred of hypocrisy, to our education in the perception of truth, our love of honesty, our knowledge of life, and shrewd guidance through the world, have not our humorous writers, our gay and kind week-day preachers, done much in support of that holy cause which has assembled you in this place; and which you are all abetting,—the cause of love and charity, the cause of the



poor, the weak, and the unhappy; the sweet mission of love and tenderness, and peace and good will towards men? That same theme which is urged upon you by the eloquence and example of good men to whom you are delighted listeners on Sabbath days is taught in his way and according to his power by the humorous writer, the commentator on everyday life and manners.

And as you are here assembled for a charitable purpose, giving your contributions at the door to benefit deserving people who need them, I like to hope and think that the men of our calling have done something in aid of the cause of charity, and have helped, with kind words and kind thoughts at least, to confer happiness and to do good. If the humorous writers claim to be week-day preachers, have they conferred any benefit by their sermons? Are people happier, better, better disposed to their neighbors, more inclined to do works of kindness, to love, forbear, forgive, pity, after reading in Addison, in Steele, in Fielding, in Goldsmith, in Hood, in Dickens? I hope and believe so, and fancy that in writing they are also acting charitably, contributing with the means which Heaven supplies them to forward the end which brings you, too, together.

A love of the human species is a very vague and indefinite kind of virtue, sitting very easily on a man, not confining his actions at all, shining in print, or exploding in paragraphs, after which efforts of benevolence the philanthropist is sometimes said to go home and be no better than his neighbors. Tartuffe and Joseph Surface, Stiggins and Chadband, who are always preaching fine sentiments and are no more virtuous than hundreds of those whom they denounce and whom they cheat, are fair objects of mistrust and satire; but their hypocrisy, the homage, according to the

old saying, which vice pays to virtue, has this of good in it, that its fruits are good: a man may preach good morals though he may be himself but a lax practitioner; a Pharisee may put pieces of gold into the charity-plate out of mere hypocrisy and ostentation, but the bad man's gold feeds the widow and the fatherless as well as the good man's. The butcher and baker must needs look, not to motives, but to money, in return for their wares.

I am not going to hint that we of the literary calling resemble Monsieur Tartuffe or Monsieur Stiggins, though there may be such men in our body, as there are in all.

A literary man of the humoristic turn is pretty sure to be of a philanthropic nature to have a great sensibility, to be easily moved to pain or pleasure, keenly to appreciate the varieties of temper of people round about him, and sympathize in their laughter, love, amusement, tears. Such a man is philanthropic, man-loving by nature, as another is irascible, or red-haired, or six feet high. And so I would arrogate no particular merit to literary men for the possession of this faculty of doing good which some of them enjoy. It costs a gentleman no sacrifice to be benevolent on paper; and the luxury of indulging in the most beautiful and brilliant sentiments never makes any man a penny the poorer. A literary man is no better than another, as far as my experience goes; and a man writing a book no better or no worse than one who keeps accounts in a ledger or follows any other occupation. Let us, however, give him credit for the good, at least, which he is the means of doing, as we give credit to a man with a million for the hundred which he puts into the plate at a charity-sermon. He never misses them. He has made them in a moment by a lucky speculation, and parts with them knowing that he has an almost endless balance



at his bank, whence he can call for more. But in esteeming the benefaction we are grateful to the benefactor, too, somewhat; and so of men of genius, richly endowed, and lavish in parting with their mind's wealth, we may view them at least kindly and favorably, and be thankful for the bounty of which Providence has made them the dispensers.

I have said myself somewhere, I do not know with what correctness (for definitions never are complete), that humor is wit and love; I am sure, at any rate, that the best humor is that which contains most humanity, that which is flavored throughout with tenderness and kindness. This love does not demand constant utterance or actual expression, as a good father, in conversation with his children or wife, is not perpetually embracing them or making protestations of his love; as a lover in the society of his mistress is not, at least as far as I am led to believe, forever squeezing her hand or sighing in her ear, "My soul's darling, I adore you!" He shows his love by his conduct, by his fidelity, by his watchful desire to make the beloved person happy; it lightens from his eyes when she appears, though he may not speak it; it fills his heart when she is present or absent; influences all his words and actions; suffuses his whole being; it sets the father cheerily to work through the long day, supports him through the tedious labor of the weary absence or journey, and sends him happy home again, yearning towards the wife and children. This kind of love is not a spasm, but a life. It fondles and caresses at due seasons, no doubt; but the fond heart is always beating fondly and truly, though the wife is not sitting hand-in-hand with him or the children hugging at his knee. And so with a loving humor: I think, it is a genial writer's habit of being; it is the kind, gentle spirit's way of looking out on the world — that sweet friendliness

which fills his heart and his style. You recognize it, even though there may not be a single point of wit, or a single pathetic touch in the page; though you may not be called upon to salute his genius by a laugh or a tear. That collision of ideas, which provokes the one or the other, must be occasional. They must be like papa's embraces, which I spoke of anon, who only delivers them now and again, and cannot be expected to go on kissing the children all night. And so the writer's jokes and sentiment, his ebullitions of feeling, his outbreaks of high spirits, must not be too frequent. One tires of a page of which every sentence sparkles with points, of a sentimentalist who is always pumping the tears from his eyes or your own. One suspects the genuineness of the tear, the naturalness of the humor; these ought to be true and manly in a man, as everything else in his life should be manly and true; and he loses his dignity by laughing or weeping out of place, or too often.

When the Reverend Laurence Sterne begins to sentimentalize over the carriage in Monsieur Dessein's courtyard, and pretends to squeeze a tear out of a rickety old shandrydan; when, presently, he encounters the dead donkey on his road to Paris, and snivels over that asinine corpse, I say: "Away you drivelling quack: do not palm off these grimaces of grief upon simple folks who know no better, and cry misled by your hypocrisy." Tears are sacred. The tributes of kind hearts to misfortune, the mites which gentle souls drop into the collections made for God's poor and unhappy, are not to be tricked out of them by a whimpering hypocrite, handing round a begging-box for your compassion, and asking your pity for a lie. When that same man tells me of Lefevre's illness and Uncle Toby's charity; of the noble at Rennes coming home and reclaiming his sword, I thank him for the



generous emotion which, springing genuinely from his own heart, has caused mine to admire benevolence and sympathize with honor; and to feel love, and kindness, and pity.

If I do not love Swift, as, thank God, I do not, however immensely I may admire him, it is because I revolt from the man who placards himself as a professional hater of his own kind; because he chisels his savage indignation on his tombstone, as if to perpetuate his protest against being born of our race — the suffering, the weak, the erring, the wicked, if you will, but still the friendly, the loving children of God our Father: it is because, as I read through Swift's dark volumes, I never find the aspect of nature seems to delight him; the smiles of children to please him; the sight of wedded love to soothe him. I do not remember in any line of his writing a passing allusion to a natural scene of beauty. When he speaks about the families of his comrades and brother clergymen, it is to assail them with gibes and scorn, and to laugh at them brutally for being fathers and for being poor. He does mention, in the *Journal to Stella*, a sick child, to be sure — a child of Lady Masham, that was ill of the smallpox — but then it is to confound the brat for being ill and the mother for attending to it when she should have been busy about a court intrigue, in which the Dean was deeply engaged. And he alludes to a suitor of Stella's, and a match she might have made, and would have made, very likely, with an honorable and faithful and attached man, Tisdall, who loved her, and of whom Swift speaks, in a letter to this lady, in language so foul that you would not bear to hear it. In treating of the good the humorists have done, of the love and kindness they have taught and left behind them, it is not of this one I dare speak. Heaven help the lonely misanthrope! be kind to that multitude of sins, with so little charity to cover them!

Of Mr. Congreve's contributions to the English stock of benevolence, I do not speak; for, of any moral legacy to posterity, I doubt whether that brilliant man ever thought at all. He had some money, as I have told; every shilling of which he left to his friend the Duchess of Marlborough, a lady of great fortune and the highest fashion. He gave the gold of his brains to persons of fortune and fashion, too. There is no more feeling in his comedies than in as many books of Euclid. He no more pretends to teach love for the poor, and good will for the unfortunate, than a dancing master does; he teaches pirouettes and *flic-flacs*; and how to bow to a lady, and to walk a minuet. In his private life Congreve was immensely liked — more so than any man of his age, almost; and, to have been so liked, must have been kind and good natured. His good nature bore him through extreme bodily ills and pain, with uncommon cheerfulness and courage. Being so gay, so bright, so popular, such a grand seigneur, be sure he was kind to those about him, generous to his dependents, serviceable to his friends. Society does not like a man so long as it liked Congreve, unless he is likable; it finds out a quack very soon; it scorns a poltroon or a curmudgeon; we may be certain that this man was brave, good tempered, and liberal; so, very likely, is Monsieur Pirouette, of whom we spoke; he cuts his capers, he grins, bows, and dances to his fiddle. In private he may have a hundred virtues; in public, he teaches dancing. His business is cotillions, not ethics.

As much may be said of those charming and lazy Epicureans, Gay and Prior, sweet lyric singers, comrades of Anacreon, and disciples of love and the bottle. "Is there any moral shut within the bosom of a rose?" sings our great Tennyson. Does a nightingale preach from a bough, or the



lark from his cloud? Not knowingly; yet we may be grateful, and love larks and roses, and the flower-crowned minstrels, too, who laugh and who sing.

Of Addison's contributions to the charity of the world I have spoken before, in trying to depict that noble figure; and say now, as then, that we should thank him as one of the greatest benefactors of that vast and immeasurably spreading family which speaks our common tongue. Wherever it is spoken, there is no man that does not feel, and understand, and use the noble English word "gentleman." And there is no man that teaches us to be gentlemen better than Joseph Addison. Gentle in our bearing through life; gentle and courteous to our neighbor; gentle in dealing with his follies and weaknesses; gentle in treating his opposition; deferential to the old; kindly to the poor, and those below us in degree; for people above us and below us we must find, in whatever hemisphere we dwell, whether kings or presidents govern us; and in no republic or monarchy that I know of, is a citizen exempt from the tax of befriending poverty and weakness, of respecting age, and of honoring his father and mother. It has just been whispered to me—I have not been three months in the country, and, of course, cannot venture to express an opinion of my own—that, in regard to paying this latter tax of respect and honor to age, some very few of the Republican youths are occasionally a little remiss. I have heard of young Sons of Freedom publishing their Declaration of Independence before they could well spell it; and cutting the connection with father and mother before they had learned to shave. My own time of life having been stated by various enlightened organs of public opinion, at almost any figure from forty-five to sixty, I cheerfully own that I belong to the fogy interest, and ask leave to rank in,

and plead for that respectable class. Now a gentleman can but be a gentleman, in Broadway or the backwoods, in Pall Mall or California; and where and whenever he lives, thousands of miles away in the wilderness, or hundreds of years hence, I am sure that reading the writings of this true gentleman, this true Christian, this noble Joseph Addison, must do him good. He may take Sir Roger de Coverley to the Diggings with him, and learn to be gentle and good-humored, and urbane, and friendly in the midst of that struggle in which his life is engaged. I take leave to say that the most brilliant youth of this city may read over this delightful memorial of a bygone age, of fashions long passed away; of manners long since changed and modified; of noble gentlemen, and a great, and a brilliant and polished society; and find in it much to charm and polish, to refine and instruct him, a courteousness, which can be out of place at no time, and under no flag, a politeness and simplicity, a truthful manhood, a gentle respect and deference, which may be kept as the unbought grace of life, and cheap defence of mankind, long after its old artificial distinctions, after periwigs, and small-swords, and ruffles, and red-heeled shoes, and titles, and stars and garters have passed away. I will tell you when I have been put in mind of two of the finest gentlemen books bring us any mention of. I mean our books (not books of history, but books of humor). I will tell you when I have been put in mind of the courteous gallantry of the noble knight, Sir Roger de Coverley of Coverley Manor, of the noble Hidalgo Don Quixote of La Mancha: here in your own omnibus carriages and railway cars, when I have seen a woman step in, handsome or not, well dressed or not, and a workman in hobnail shoes, or a dandy in the height of the fashion, rise up and give her his place. I think Mr. Spectator,