



CHAPTER VIII.

FROM THE DEATH OF SCOTT TO THE PRESENT TIME.

1832-1893.

THE literature of the past fifty years is too close to our eyes to enable the critic to pronounce a final judgment, or the literary historian to get a true perspective. Many of the principal writers of the time are still living, and many others have been dead but a few years. This concluding chapter, therefore, will be devoted to the consideration of the few who stand forth, incontestably, as the leaders of literary thought, and who seem likely, under all future changes of fashion and taste, to remain representatives of their generation. As regards *form*, the most striking fact in the history of the period under review is the immense preponderance in its imaginative literature of prose fiction, of the novel of real life. The novel has become to the solitary reader of to-day what the stage play was to the audiences of Elizabeth's reign, or the periodical essay, like the *Tatler* and *Spectator*, to the clubs and breakfast-tables of Queen Anne's. And if its criticism of life is less concentrated and brilliant than the drama gives, it is far more searching and minute. No period has ever left in its literary records so complete a picture of its whole society as the period which is just closing. At any other time than the present, the names of authors like Charlotte Brontë, Charles Kingsley, and Charles Reade—names which are here merely mentioned in passing—besides many others which want of space forbids us even to mention—would be of capital importance. As it is, we must limit our review to the three acknowledged masters of modern English fiction, Charles Dickens (1812-1870),

William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863), and "George Eliot" (Mary Ann Evans, 1819-1880).

It is sometimes helpful to reduce a great writer to his lowest term, in order to see what the prevailing bent of his genius is. This lowest term may often be found in his early work, before experience of the world has overlaid his original impulse with foreign accretions. Dickens was much more than a humorist, Thackeray than a satirist, and George Eliot than a moralist; but they had their starting-points respectively in humor, in burlesque, and in strong ethical and religious feeling. Dickens began with a broadly comic series of papers, contributed to the *Old Magazine* and the *Evening Chronicle*, and reprinted in book form, in 1836, as *Sketches by Boz*. The success of these suggested to a firm of publishers the preparation of a number of similar sketches of the misadventures of cockney sportsmen, to accompany plates by the comic draughtsman, Mr. R. Seymour. This suggestion resulted in the *Pickwick Papers*, published in monthly installments in 1836-1837. The series grew, under Dickens's hand, into a continuous though rather loosely strung narrative of the doings of a set of characters, conceived with such exuberant and novel humor that it took the public by storm and raised its author at once to fame. *Pickwick* is by no means Dickens's best, but it is his most characteristic and most popular book. At the time that he wrote these early sketches he was a reporter for the *Morning Chronicle*. His naturally acute powers of observation had been trained in this pursuit to the utmost efficiency, and there always continued to be about his descriptive writing a reportorial and newspaper air. He had the eye for effect, the sharp fidelity to detail, the instinct for rapidly seizing upon and exaggerating the salient point, which are developed by the requirements of modern journalism. Dickens knew London as no one else has ever known it, and, in particular, he knew its hideous and grotesque recesses, with the strange develop-

ments of human nature that abide there; slums like Tom-all-Alone's, in *Bleak House*; the river-side haunts of Rogue Riderhood, in *Our Mutual Friend*; as well as the old inns, like the "White Hart," and the "dusky purlieus of the law." As a man, his favorite occupation was walking the streets, where, as a child, he had picked up the most valuable part of his education. His tramps about London—often after nightfall—sometimes extended to fifteen miles in a day. He knew, too, the shifts of poverty. His father—some traits of whom are preserved in Mr. Micawber—was imprisoned for debt in the Marshalsea prison, where his wife took lodging with him, while Charles, then a boy of ten, was employed at six shillings a week to cover blacking-pots in Warner's blacking warehouse. The hardships and loneliness of this part of his life are told under a thin disguise in Dickens's masterpiece, *David Copperfield*, the most autobiographical of his novels. From these young experiences he gained that insight into the lives of the lower classes and that sympathy with children and with the poor which shine out in his pathetic sketches of Little Nell, in *The Old Curiosity Shop*; of Paul Dombey; of poor Jo, in *Bleak House*; of "the Marchioness," and a hundred other figures.

In *Oliver Twist*, contributed, during 1837-1838, to *Bentley's Miscellany*, a monthly magazine of which Dickens was editor, he produced his first regular novel. In this story of the criminal classes the author showed a tragic power which he had not hitherto exhibited. Thenceforward his career was a series of dazzling successes. It is impossible here to particularize his numerous novels, sketches, short tales, and "Christmas Stories"—the latter a fashion which he inaugurated, and which has produced a whole literature in itself. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, 1839; *Master Humphrey's Clock*, 1840; *Martin Chuzzlewit*, 1844; *Dombey and Son*, 1848; *David Copperfield*, 1850, and *Bleak House*, 1853, there is no falling off in strength. The last named was, in some

respects, and especially in the skillful construction of the plot, his best novel. In some of his latest books, as *Great Expectations*, 1861, and *Our Mutual Friend*, 1865, there are signs of a decline. This showed itself in an unnatural exaggeration of characters and motives, and a painful straining after humorous effects; faults, indeed, from which Dickens was never wholly free. There was a histrionic side to him, which came out in his fondness for private theatricals, in which he exhibited remarkable talent, and in the dramatic action which he introduced into the delightful public readings from his works that he gave before vast audiences all over the United Kingdom, and in his two visits to America. It is not surprising, either, to learn that upon the stage his preference was for melodrama and farce. His own serious writing was always dangerously close to the melodramatic, and his humor to the farcical. There is much false art, bad taste, and even vulgarity in Dickens. He was never quite a gentleman, and never succeeded well in drawing gentlemen or ladies. In the region of low comedy he is easily the most original, the most inexhaustible, the most wonderful, of modern humorists. Creations such as Mrs. Nickleby, Mr. Micawber, Sam Weller, Sairy Gamp, take rank with Falstaff and Dogberry; while many others, like Dick Swiveller, Stiggins, Chadband, Mrs. Jellyby, and Julia Mills, are almost equally good. In the innumerable swarm of minor characters with which he has enriched our comic literature there is no indistinctness. Indeed, the objection that has been made to him is that his characters are too distinct—that he puts labels on them; that they are often mere personifications of a single trick of speech or manner, which becomes tedious and unnatural by repetition. Thus, Grandfather Smallweed is always settling down into his cushion, and having to be shaken up; Mr. Jellyby is always sitting with his head against the wall; Peggotty is always bursting her buttons off, etc. As Dickens's humorous characters tend

perpetually to run into caricatures and grotesques, so his sentiment, from the same excess, slops over too frequently into "gush," and into a too deliberate and protracted attack upon the pity. A favorite humorous device in his style is a stately and roundabout way of telling a trivial incident, as where, for example, Mr. Roker "muttered certain unpleasant invocations concerning his own eyes, limbs, and circulating fluids;" or where the drunken man who is singing comic songs in the Fleet received from Mr. Smangle "a gentle intimation, through the medium of the water-jug, that his audience were not musically disposed." This manner was original with Dickens, though he may have taken a hint of it from the mock heroic language of *Jonathan Wild*; but as practiced by a thousand imitators, ever since, it has gradually become a burden.

It would not be the whole truth to say that the difference between the humor of Thackeray and Dickens is the same as between that of Shakspeare and Ben Jonson. Yet it is true that the "humors" of Ben Jonson have an analogy with the extremer instances of Dickens's character sketches in this respect, namely, that they are both studies of the eccentric, the abnormal, the whimsical, rather than of the typical and universal; studies of manners, rather than of whole characters. And it is easily conceivable that, at no distant day, the oddities of Captain Cuttle, Department Turveydrop, Mark Tapley, and Newman Noggs will seem as far-fetched and impossible as those of Captain Otter, Fastidious Brisk and Sir Amorous La-Foole.

When Dickens was looking about for some one to take Seymour's place as illustrator of *Pickwick*, Thackeray applied for the job, but without success. He was then a young man of twenty-five, and still hesitating between art and literature. He had begun to draw caricatures with his pencil when a school-boy at the Charter House, and to scribble them with his pen when a student at Cambridge,

editing *The Snob*, a weekly under-graduate paper, and parodying the prize poem *Timbuctoo* of his contemporary at the university, Alfred Tennyson. Then he went abroad to study art, passing a season at Weimar, where he met Goethe and filled the albums of the young Saxon ladies with caricatures; afterward living a bohemian existence in the Latin quarter at Paris, studying art in a desultory way, and seeing men and cities; accumulating portfolios full of sketches, but laying up stores of material to be used afterward to greater advantage when he should settle upon his true medium of expression. By 1837, having lost his fortune of five hundred pounds a year in speculation and gambling, he began to contribute to *Fraser's*, and thereafter to the *New Monthly*, Cruikshank's *Comic Almanac*, *Punch*, and other periodicals, clever burlesques, art criticisms by "Michael Angelo Titmarsh," *Yellowplush Papers*, and all manner of skits, satirical character sketches, and humorous tales, like the *Great Hoggarty Diamond* and the *Luck of Barry Lyndon*. Some of these were collected in the *Paris Sketch-Book*, 1840, and the *Irish Sketch-Book*, 1843; but Thackeray was slow in winning recognition, and it was not until the publication of his first great novel, *Vanity Fair*, in monthly parts, during 1846-1848, that he achieved any thing like the general reputation that Dickens had reached at a bound. *Vanity Fair* described itself, on its title-page, as "a novel without a hero." It was also a novel without a plot—in the sense in which *Bleak House* or *Nicholas Nickleby* had a plot—and in that respect it set the fashion for the latest school of realistic fiction, being a transcript of life, without necessary beginning or end. Indeed, one of the pleasantest things to a reader of Thackeray is the way which his characters have of re-appearing, as old acquaintances, in his different books; just as, in real life, people drop out of mind and then turn up again in other years and places. *Vanity Fair* is Thackeray's masterpiece, but it is not the

best introduction to his writings. There are no illusions in it, and, to a young reader fresh from Scott's romances or Dickens's sympathetic extravagances, it will seem hard and repellent. But men who, like Thackeray, have seen life and tasted its bitterness and felt its hollowness know how to prize it. Thackeray does not merely expose the cant, the emptiness, the self-seeking, the false pretenses, flunkeyism, and snobbery—the "mean admiration of mean things"—in the great world of London society; his keen, unsparing vision detects the base alloy in the purest natures. There are no "heroes" in his books, no perfect characters. Even his good women, such as Helen and Laura Pendennis, are capable of cruel injustice toward less fortunate sisters, like little Fanny; and Amelia Sedley is led, by blind feminine instinct, to snub and tyrannize over poor Dobbin. The shabby miseries of life, the numbing and belittling influences of failure and poverty on the most generous natures, are the tragic themes which Thackeray handles by preference. He has been called a cynic, but the boyish playfulness of his humor and his kindly spirit are incompatible with cynicism. Charlotte Brontë said that Fielding was the vulture and Thackeray the eagle. The comparison would have been truer if made between Swift and Thackeray. Swift was a cynic; his pen was driven by hate, but Thackeray's by love, and it was not in bitterness but in sadness that the latter laid bare the wickedness of the world. He was himself a thorough man of the world, and he had that dislike for a display of feeling which characterizes the modern Englishman. But behind his satiric mask he concealed the manliest tenderness, and a reverence for every thing in human nature that is good and true. Thackeray's other great novels are *Pendennis*, 1849; *Henry Esmond*, 1852, and *The Newcomes*, 1855—the last of which contains his most lovable character, the pathetic and immortal figure of Colonel Newcome, a creation worthy to stand, in its dignity and its sublime weakness, by the side

of Don Quixote. It was alleged against Thackeray that he made all his good characters, like Major Dobbin and Amelia Sedley and Colonel Newcome, intellectually feeble, and his brilliant characters, like Becky Sharp and Lord Steyne and Blanche Amory, morally bad. This is not entirely true, but the other complaint—that his women are inferior to his men—is true in a general way. Somewhat inferior to his other novels were *The Virginians*, 1858, and *The Adventures of Philip*, 1862. All of these were stories of contemporary life, except *Henry Esmond* and its sequel, *The Virginians*, which, though not precisely historical fictions, introduced historical figures, such as Washington and the Earl of Peterborough. Their period of action was the 18th century, and the dialogue was a cunning imitation of the language of that time. Thackeray was strongly attracted by the 18th century. His literary teachers were Addison, Swift, Steele, Gay, Johnson, Richardson, Goldsmith, Fielding, Smollett, and Sterne, and his special master and model was Fielding. He projected a history of the century, and his studies in this kind took shape in his two charming series of lectures on *The English Humorists* and *The Four Georges*. These he delivered in England and in America, to which country he, like Dickens, made two several visits.

Thackeray's genius was, perhaps, less astonishing than Dickens's; less fertile, spontaneous, and inventive; but his art is sounder, and his delineation of character more truthful. After one has formed a taste for his books, Dickens's sentiment will seem overdone, and much of his humor will have the air of buffoonery. Thackeray had the advantage in another particular: he described the life of the upper classes, and Dickens of the lower. It may be true that the latter offers richer material to the novelist, in the play of elementary passions and in strong native developments of character. It is true, also, that Thackeray approached "society" rather