

IRISH WIT AND HUMOUR.

THE Hon. S. S. Cox, of Richmond, Virginia, delivered a lecture in New York some short time since, selecting the above as his subject. The proceeds of the evening were devoted to the charities of the city, and realised a considerable sum, the hall being crowded in every part. After a brief disquisition of the difference between wit and humour, to which latter the Irish were more inclined from the geniality of their nature, the lecturer said:—

Wendell Phillips has said, with the usual exaggeration: "When we would map the Continent with 30,000 miles of railroad, we buried five millions of Irishmen under the sleepers." Aside from his statistics, it will be conceded that many millions of Irish people have been mingled, if not buried, in our midst. They are in every other family. They have been the nurses of our children, and the architects of our enterprises. They help to form, enliven, and elevate our society. Is it surprising that the indigenous humour, which is found in the very bogs of Ireland, should here flourish? What if the "head and harp" on the old Irish coin has been rubbed or disfigured by abrasion with the selfish surface of our society; enough remains to see that the "head" on the coin wags with its strange conceits, and the "harp" is redolent of its old music. Enough remains to distinguish the Irish idiosyncrasy. Even our patriotism has its odd admixture in the motto, "*Eoin go unum e pluribus bragh*." Every one can see in the American idea that "Every man is as good as another," the Irish gleam when there is added, "and a good deal better too." But it is not my purpose to compare American wit with Irish humour. You cannot compare Lever with Mark Twain, nor Sheridan with any one! I do not, however, purpose to limit my analysis of Irish humour by the fun we have from them in America. The Irish are best judged at home—in groups—even in their misery. An exotic Irishman may show his native flower and fruit, but it is not as consummate as his indigenous humour. Go we then to Ireland. Examine her genealogy. View the wondrous vicissitudes and the bewildering contrasts of her society, from her earliest infancy. Thus may we find the stock of that tree, whose foliage has shed its pleasant shadow over so many nations. Even England—sombre, savage, and sour—hacking away at the tree for centuries—finds that, like the sandal-wood, it gives even to the axe of the Saxon Vandal its fragrance and unction.

In the changeful vicissitudes of Ireland's history is found her rare humour and rare pathos. Ireland! how suggestive the name, with her darkly-chequered annals; her years of oppression drawing the lineaments of sorrow, yet not effacing the wrinkles of mirth; the wild recklessness of those who have little at stake bursting out fitfully in gleams of gaiety. In rage and poverty their cheerfulness dances like their sun upon Easter Day. And their rows and fairs, with potheen jig and shillelagh—in the hedge-school, in courting and wedding, in the dock or the witness-box, at the bar or in the senate; in the turbulence of popular agitation, or in the madness of famine, there is a constant flow of incandescent humour, which no condition can cool, and no oppression repress. It is said that in drowning or hanging rare colours flicker on the vision. Ireland seems to have had this satisfaction, at least, in her calamities. As from the black mud over which the river sleeps, the water-lily arises, arrayed beyond the glory of Solomon, and with a perfume sweeter than the roses of Cashmere—so from the bogs, huts, hedges, and miseries of Ireland arise the beauty and aroma of her mirth. How it softens the rugged inequalities of life, bridges over the space which separates the lord in his hall from the lowly peasant in his hut. How it wreathes around the seething waters of Hate, the Iris of Hope! How it hallows and glides into the heart; how fondly it feels for infirmity; how it insinuates its tickling fingers of fun, slowly, slyly, snugly, into the ribs of death, the skeleton, until laughter feels the flesh growing again under her magic manipulation.

Having thus shown the cause of Irish humour, let us trace the source from which, and the medium through which, it flows. First, her literature. From what we have seen of Irish life, we can readily infer the character of Irish literature. It would be strange if, in the ardour of Irish nature, her literature should be logical in form or in substance. Hence, with her, humour predominates over wit. Humour is of earlier growth than wit, and has more affinity with the poetic quality. Wit is more nearly allied to the ratiocinative intellect. Humour draws from situations and contrasts; wit seizes on unexpected and complex relations, and deals with the essential qualities of things. Well might Lord Bacon say, "that Ireland, *civilised*, would be far more dangerous than Ireland *savage*;" for when her Burke rises in invective, Hastings trembles; when Sheridan flashes his falchion, dunces wince; when Swift lets fly his arrow, let the antidote for its venom be ready; when Steele uses the rattan, let the victim procure a double epidermis; when Sir Philip Francis—the substance of the shadowy Junius—clicks his unerring rifle from his covert, let lords, commons, and kings take shelter; and even when her Goldsmith smiles or her Moore chirps—Irish humour becomes condensed into the curt energy and brilliant reason of wit. When Sheridan says, with studied antithesis, "the honorable gentleman depends on his memory for his jests, and on his imagination for his facts," the shining shaft sticks up to the feather, which tickles as the barb wounds. But it was in Sheridan's unstudied convivial, Irish mood—that he earned the couplet—

Good at a fight, but better at a play;
God-like in giving, but the devil to pay.

To him is accorded the honor of making the best speech and writing the best comedy in the English tongue. No one dares to rival his "School for Scandal," except one of his own countrymen—Goldsmith, with his comedy of "She Stoops to Conquer." Swift was an Irishman only in birth, as was Lord Wellington. He had for Ireland no sympathy; not even when he poured out the vitriol of his sardonic wit on his oppressors. His humour is uncongenial, because ironical. He wreathes his dagger in roses, and mocks his victim with fendi b atrocity. Mephistopheles might have written Swift's modest proposal for preventing the children of the Irish poor from becoming a burden, and for making them beneficial to the public.

In recommending the eating of children under six years as food, he gives the preference to the landlord's in their consumption. As they had already devoured the parents, they had the best right to the children. Oliver Cromwell did not butcher the Irish for the glory of God, with a more solemn sense of duty, than Swift seems to enter upon this economic question. How different from Goldsmith's evanescent glee.

There is another class of Irish authors, who do not display their their own humour, except as they paint that of their countrymen. Miss Edgeworth pioneered the way into their peasant homes. How full of graphic fidelity are her pictures, lifting the veil with a woman's smooth and ethereal grace, to show the rare contrasts of pathos and jollity, which Walter Scott confessed were the inspiration of his Scottish tales. With the same kindness and force have Mrs Hall, Lady Morgan, and Carleton opened to an all-embracing sunshine and warmth, the Irish views of Irish drollery, and, with it, mingled their genial sadness. To these, Lever and Lover have added their fundrunkn exaggerations. The novelists of Ireland have had for their work all the grotesqueness and oddity of a most unnatural state of politics and society.

But were there no literature in Ireland, the Attic salt of her orators, at the bar, on the hustings, and in the Senate, would preserve the fame of her fun. Phillips, Curran, Grattan, Plunkett, Burke, O'Connell, Shiel, and exiled "Young Ireland"—all stars differing in glory! Curran whose wit was lightning, and whose eloquence was intellectual thunder; and O'Connell, whose scorn was only equalled by his heatiness. How he lashed the enemies of Ireland! With what ridicule did he drive out of Ireland the "gutter Commissioner" of the "Times"—as he called him—while Conciliation Hall roared again. Three colonels representing Sligo, Armagh, and Lincoln in Parliament; they did not march to O'Connell's music of agitation. The first two were smooth faced and whiskerless, the other, Colonel Sibthorpe, was "bearded like a pard;" O'Connell demolished the trio in a pasquinade, amid a general roar:—

Three colonels in three distant countries born,
Sligo, Armagh, and Lincoln did adorn:
The first in matchless impudence surpassed,
The next in bigotry—in both the last.
The force of nature could no further go,
To board the third she shaved the other two.

But the fertile source of Irish humour is in the common people. This is the fountain to which the authors and orators of Erin repair with their golden urns, to draw light and lightomeness.

A quick sense of the ludicrous, and its apt and timely expression, is as indigenous to Ireland as its opposite is to England. It springs from their ultimate free-heartedness. The same liberality which sends, in gratuities, from America to Ireland, so many millions of dollars per year; and which thus speaks of a blessed and blessing sympathy beyond all praise, prompts the quick, odd reason, the insinuating flattery, the whimsical cunning, the nimble retort, the cool impudence, the tall hyperbole, the grotesque figure, the blunder of an expression though brilliant in idea, and claps in a zone of cheerful grace every mother's son and daughter of Erin, and turns them into something beautiful and joyful forever. All the thunders of England have been rolled over Ireland because she was not prosperous; because she did not speculate and rust in selfishness. Her poverty and potatoes, her brogue and bulls, are the gibe of "Punch," and the theme of many a poor blockhead (in England) who

Wisely rests content with sober sense,
Nor makes to dangerous wit a vain pretence.

Let Ireland forget her love of home—children, parents of Ireland—her care of widow and orphan; let her countenance freeze to all the approaches of fun; her heart close to all but the approaches of avarice; let her light laugh be echoed by the gripe of gain; let her soil be drained of its moisture, and her blood of its humor; let St. Patrick be stricken from the calendar, and St. Mammon be fairly installed; let the English Medusa rear her head where the crest of a reptile is never reared, and chill to stone all who turn to look on the fashionable curls of her snaky hair; then, oh! Ireland will become what England may praise, and her glory be measured by the length of her sob and the lankness of her feeling!

If in her impetuous warmth Ireland lacks the analytic criticism which obtains with other nations, she may, nevertheless, be proud of a genuine humor, which floods the inward soul with a rich sense of delight, peoples it with forms whose faces shine, and whose eyes twinkle, who tumble about in the delirium of drollery, and revel in a loud, ringing hilarity, until the soul runs over in a "sault stream of jubilant laughter." In blending this rarest of humor with our own, Ireland gives a cheer to our society, whose healthful and moral influences are needed in the meditation, turmoil, and toil of our busy life.

Ireland has lost the nationality of her home, but not of the spirit which ennobled it, when Carolan harped and Grattan spoke. She goes to a strange land, but she bears the ark of her covenant, in which is enshrined her songs, her traditions, her humor, and her faith. Her old harp is newly strung for the strains of freedom in a new hemisphere. The hope of her resurrection which arose in the Crimean war, out of the red storm on the Euxine, where the battling hosts of Europe were contending, may again dawn. What a vision was that which her exiled orator, Thomas Francis Meagher, painted then, so effulgent and inspiring! What a vision it was! It deserved a realization. Oh! that God, in his retributive Providence, should so order an uprising among the nations, that when the "Marseillaise" shall again thunder from the barricades, whilst in Italy the youth and gallant priesthood shall rear to victory a cross more radiant than that of Constantine; while Hungary shall again launch her stately chivalry on the tide of war; while along the Rhine the German youths shall buckle on their basket hilted broadswords, and, casting aside their dreamful pipes, shall go forth to the camp, and with the songs of Koerner and Freiligrath, awake the superb, though sombre, genius of their antique homes; then and there, in the grand chorus and gathering of the nations, shall Ireland appear at the feast of freedom, and sit down in the fulness of her pride, and in the joy of her radiant mirth.