

WRITERS WE LOVE TO READ

I—THACKERAY AND REAL MEN

BY HENRY VAN DYKE

IN that fragrant bunch of *Theodore Roosevelt's Letters to His Children* which has just brightened and sweetened these too sadly strenuous times there are some passages on novel-reading which are full of spirited good sense. He says that he can read *Pendennis*, and *The Newcomes*, and *Vanity Fair* over and over again; he agrees with his boy in preferring Thackeray to Dickens, and then he gives the reason—or at least a reason—for this preference:

Of course one fundamental difference . . . is that Thackeray was a gentleman and Dickens was not.

The damnatory clause in this sentence seems to me too absolute, though Roosevelt softens it by adding, "but a man might do some mighty good work without being in any sense a gentleman." That is certainly true, and beyond a doubt Dickens did it—a wonderful plenty of it. It is also true that in several perfectly good senses he was a brave and kind gentleman, despite his faults in manners and dress.

But it is the laudatory clause in Roosevelt's judgment that interests me. Thackeray's work is pervaded with his personality to an unusual degree. It is a saturated solution of the man. We can taste him in every page. And it is because we like the taste, because we find something strong and true, bracing and stimulant in it, that we love to read him. 'Tis like being with a gentleman in any enterprise or adventure; it gives us pleasure and does us unconscious good.

Well, then, what do we mean by "a gentleman"? Tennyson calls it

The grand old name of gentleman
Defamed by every charlatan,
And soil'd with all ignoble use.

In the big New Oxford Dictionary there is more than a pageful of definitions of the word, and almost every English essayist has tried a shot at it. One thing is sure, its old hereditary use as a title of rank or property is going out, or already gone. "John Jones, Gent.," is a vanishing form of address. More and more the word is coming to connote something in character and conduct. Inheritance may enter into it, and the sense of honor has a great part in it, and its outward and visible sign is an unassuming fitness of behavior in the various circumstances of life. But its indispensable essence is reality; its native speech, sincerity; and its controlling spirit, good will.

Let us content ourselves with a description instead of a definition. A gentleman is a real man who deals honestly, bravely, frankly, and considerately with all sorts and conditions of other real men.

This is Thackeray's very mark and quality. We can feel it all through his life and works. Everything real in the world he recognized and accepted, even though he might not always like it. But the unreal people and things—the pretenders, the hypocrites, the shams, and the frauds (whether pious or impious)—he detested and scoffed away. Reality was his quest and his passion. He followed it with unflinching interest, penetration, and good temper. He found it, at

least in humankind, always mixed and complicated, never altogether good nor altogether bad, no hero without a fault, and no villain without a germ of virtue. Life is really made that way. The true realist is not the materialist, the five-sense naturalist, but the man who takes into account the human soul and God as ultimate realities.

Thackeray's personal life had nothing that was remarkable and much that was admirable. It was simply the background of his genius. He was a child of the upper-middle class in England—if you know just what that means. He went to the Charterhouse School in London (which he afterward immortalized as Greyfriars in *The Newcomes*), and illustrated his passion for reality by getting his nose broken in a fight, which gave his face a permanent Socratic cast. At Cambridge University he seems to have written much and studied little, but that little to good purpose. He inherited a modest fortune, which he spent, not in riotous living, but in travel, art study in Paris, and in the most risky of all extravagances, the starting of new periodicals. When this failed and his money was gone, he lived in London as a hack writer.

His young wife was taken from him by that saddest of all bereavements—the loss of her mind. It became necessary to place her in a private sanitarium, where she outlived her husband by thirty years. To her and to the two little daughters whom she left him Thackeray was faithful and devoted. He never complained, never flinched into an easy way of escape from his burden. He bent his back to it, and, in spite of natural indolence, he worked hard and was cheerful.

He made a host of friends and kept them, as R. L. Stevenson puts it, "without capitulation." Of course this grim condition implies some frictions and some dislikes, and from these Thackeray was not exempt. The satire which was his first mode in writing was too direct and pungent to be relished by those who had any streak of self-humbug in their

make-up. But, so far as I know, he had only one serious literary quarrel—that unhappy dispute with Mr. Edmund Yates, in which Dickens, with the best intentions in the world, became, unfortunately somewhat involved. Thackeray might perhaps have been more generous and forgiving—he could have afforded that luxury. But he could not have been more honest and frank, more real, than he was. Being very angry, and for a just cause, he said so in plain words. Presently the tempest passed away. When Thackeray died in 1863, Dickens wrote:

No one can be surer than I of the greatness and goodness of his heart.

The first period of his life as a man of letters was given almost entirely to satirical and fragmentary writing, under various *noms de guerre*. Hence he remained for a long time in comparative poverty and obscurity, from which he stepped into fame and prosperity with the publication of his first large novel, *Vanity Fair*, in 1847–8. It was like turning the corner of Grub Street and coming into Glory Avenue.

Henceforth the way was open, though not easy. The succession of his big, welcome novels was slow, steady, unbroken. Each one brought him thousands of new readers, and the old ones were *semper fideles*, even when they professed a preference for the earlier over the later volumes. His lecture tours in Great Britain and the United States were eminently successful—more so, I think, than those of Charles Dickens. They may have brought in less money, but more of what old William Caxton, the prince of printers, called "good fame and renommee." The last of his completed books, and one of his most delightful, was *Roundabout Papers*—a volume of essays that has no superior in English for a light, firm, friendly touch upon the realities of life. His last story begun was *Denis Duval*, and on this he was working when he laid down his pen on Christmas Eve, 1863, and fell asleep for the last time.

It was Edmund Yates who wrote of him then:

Thackeray was dead; and the purest English prose writer of the nineteenth century and the novelist with a greater knowledge of the human heart, as it really is, than any other—with the exception perhaps of Shakespeare and Balzac—was suddenly struck down in the midst of us.

The human heart as it really is—there's the point! That is what Thackeray sought to know, to understand, to reveal, and—no! not to explain, nor to judge and sentence—for that, as he well knew, was far beyond him or any of us—but his desire was to *show* the real heart of man, in its various complexities and perplexities, working its way through the various realities and unrealities amid which we are all entangled.

The acute French critic, Edmond Scherer, distinguishes and divides between George Eliot, as “a novelist of character,” and Thackeray as “a novelist of manners.” The epithet will pass only if we take the word in the sense of William of Wykeham's motto, “Manners makeyth man.”

For, as surely as there is something in the outward demeanor which unveils and discloses the person within, even so surely is there something in behavior, the habitual mode of speech and conduct, which molds the man using it. A false behavior weaves a texture of lies into the warp of his nature. A true behavior weakens the hold of his own self-delusions, and so helps him to know what he really is—which is good for him and for others.

It was in this sense that Thackeray was interested in manners, and depicted them in his books. Go with him to a ball, and you arrive at the hour of unmasking; to a club, and you hear the thoughts under the conversation; to a play, and you pass behind the footlights and the paint; to a death-bed, and—well, do you remember the death of Helen in *Pendennis?* and of the Colonel in *The Newcomes?* Foolish critics speak

of these last two passages as “scenes.” Scenes! By Heaven! no, they are realities. We can feel those pure souls passing.

Let us follow this clue of the passion for reality through the three phases of Thackeray's work.

At first he is the indefatigable satirist, rejoicing in the assault. Youth is almost always inclined that way—far more swift and sweeping in judgment, more severe in condemnation, than maturity or age. Thackeray writes much that is merely amusing, full of high spirits and pure fun, in his first period. But his main business is to expose false pretensions, false methods, false principles in literature and life; to show up the fakers, to ridicule the humbugs, to convict the crooks of every rank and degree.

Here is, for example, a popular fashion of books with criminals and burglars for heroes and heroines, portrayed in the glamour of romance. Very well, our satirist, assuming the name of Ikey Solomons, Esq., will take a real criminal, a murderess, and show us the manner of life she leads with her associates. So we have *Catherine*. Here is another fashion of weaving a fiction about a *chevalier d'industrie*, a bold, adventurous, conscienceless fellow, who pursues his own pleasure with a swagger, and makes a brave show hide a mean and selfish heart. Very well, a fellow of this kidney shall tell his own story and show himself in his habit as he lives, and as he dies in prison. So we have *The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon, Esq.* Here are innumerable fashions of folly and falsehood current not only in high society, but also in the region of respectable mediocrity, and in the “world below-stairs.” Very well, our satirist, under the name of “Jeames Yellowplush,” or “M. Angelo Titmarsh,” or “Fitz-Boodle,” will show them up for us. So we have various bundles of short stories and skits and sketches of travel, some of them bubbling over with fun, some of them, like *Dennis Haggarty's Wife*, touched with quiet pathos.

The culmination of this satiric period is *The Book of Snobs*, which appeared serially in the *London Punch*, 1845-6. In order to understand the quality and meaning of Thackeray's satire—an element which stayed with him all through his writing, though it was later subdued to its proper place—we must take the necessary pains to know just what he meant by a “snob.”

A snob is an unreal person who tries to pass himself off for a real person, a pretender who meanly admires and imitates mean things, an ape of gentility. He is a specific variety of the great genus Sham. Carlyle, the other notable English satirist of the nineteenth century, attacked the whole genus with heavy artillery. Thackeray, with his light cavalry of ridicule, assailed the species.

All snobs are shams, but not all shams are snobs. The specific qualities of the snob are developed only in countries where there are social classes and distinctions, but no insuperable barriers between them. Thus in native India with its immutable caste, or in Central Africa with its general barbarism, I fancy it must be difficult to discover snobbism. (Yet I have seen traces of it even among dogs and cats.) But in a country like England or the United States of America, where society is arranged in different stories, with staircases between, snobbism is frequent and flourishing. The snob is the man who tries to sneak up-stairs. He is the surreptitious climber, the person who is ashamed to pass for what he is.

Has he been at an expensive college? He goes home and snubs his old friends with allusions to the distinguished society he has been keeping. Is he entertaining fashionable strangers? He gives them elaborate and costly fare at the most aurivorous hotel, but at home his wife and daughters may starve. He talks about books that he has never read, and pretends to like music that sends him to sleep. At his worst, he says his prayers on the street-corners and reviles

his neighbor for sins which he himself cherishes in secret.

That is the snob: the particular species of sham whom Thackeray pursues and satirizes through all his disguises and metamorphoses. He does it unsparingly, yet never—or at least hardly ever—savagely. There is always a strain of good humor in it, and often a touch of fellow-feeling for the man himself, camouflaged under his affectations. It may not be worth while—this kind of work. All satire is perishable. It has no more of the immortal in it than the unreality which it aims to destroy. But some shams die hard. And while they live and propagate, the arrows which hit them fairly are not out of date.

Stevenson makes a curious misjudgment of this part of Thackeray's work, when he says in his essay on “Some Gentlemen in Fiction”:

Personally [Thackeray] scarce appeals to us as the ideal gentleman; if there were nothing else, perpetual nosing after snobbery at least suggests the snob.

Most true, beloved R. L. S., but did you forget that this is precisely what Thackeray himself says? He tells us not to be too quick or absolute in our judgments; to acknowledge that we have some faults and failings of our own; to remember that other people have sometimes hinted at a vein, a trace, a vestige of snobbery in ourselves. Search for truth and speak it; but, above all, no arrogance—*faut pas monter sur ses grands chevaux*. Have you ever read the end of the lecture on “Charity and Humor”?

The author . . . has been described by *The London Times* newspaper as a writer of considerable parts, but a dreary misanthrope, who sees no good anywhere, who sees the sky above him green, I think, instead of blue, and only miserable sinners around him. So we are, as is every writer and reader I have heard of; so was every being who ever trod this earth, save One. I cannot help telling the truth as I view it, and describing what I see. To describe it otherwise than it seems

to me would be falsehood in that calling in which it has pleased Heaven to place me; treason to that conscience which says that men are weak; that truth must be told; that faults must be owned; that pardon must be prayed for; and that Love reigns supreme over all.

With *Vanity Fair* begins what some one has called the *quadrilateral* on which Thackeray's larger fame rests. The three other pillars are, *Henry Esmond*, *Pendennis*, and *The Newcomes*. Which is the greatest of these four novels? On this question there is dispute among critics, and difference of opinion, even among avowed Thackerayans who confess that they "like everything he wrote." Why try to settle the question? Why not let the interesting and illuminating *causerie* run on? In these furious days when the hysteria of world-problems vexes us, it is good to have some subjects on which we can chat without ranting or raving.

For my part, I find *Vanity Fair* the strongest, *Pendennis* the most intimate, *The Newcomes* the richest and in parts the most lovable, and *Henry Esmond* the most admirable and satisfying, among Thackeray's novels. But they all have this in common: they represent a reaction from certain false fashions in fiction which prevailed at that time. From the spurious romanticism of G. P. R. James and Harrison Ainsworth, from the philosophic affectation of Bulwer, from the gilding and rococo-work of the super-snob Disraeli—all of them popular writers of their day—Thackeray turned away, not now as in his earlier period to satirize and ridicule and parody them, but to create something in a different *genre*, closer to the facts of life, more true to the reality of human nature.

We may read in the preface to *Pendennis* just what he had in mind and purpose:

Many ladies have remonstrated and subscribers left me, because, in the course of the story, I described a young man resisting and affected by temptation. My object was to

say, that he had the passions to feel, and the manliness and generosity to overcome them. You will not hear—it is best to know it—what moves in the real world, what passes in society, in the clubs, colleges, mess-rooms—what is the life and talk of your sons. A little more frankness than is customary has been attempted in this story; with no bad desire on the author's part, it is hoped, and with no ill consequence to any reader. If truth is not always pleasant, at any rate truth is best, from whatever chair—from those whence graver writers or thinkers argue, as from that at which the story-teller sits as he concludes his labor, and bids his kind reader farewell.

It is amusing, in this age of art undressed, to read this modest defense of frankness in fiction. Its meaning is very different from the interpretation of it which is given by disciples of the "show-everything-without-a-fig-leaf" school.

Thackeray did not confuse reality with indecency. He did not think it needful to make his hero cut his toenails or take a bath in public in order to show him as a real man. The ordinary and common physical details of life may be taken for granted; to obtrude them is to exaggerate their importance. It is with the frailties and passions, the faults and virtues, the defeats and victories of his men and women that Thackeray deals. He describes *Pendennis* tempted without making the description a new temptation. He brings us acquainted with Becky Sharp, *enchanteresse*, without adding to her enchantment. We feel that she is capable of anything; but we do not know all that she actually did—indeed Thackeray himself frankly confessed that even he did not know, nor much care.

The excellence of his character-drawing is that his men and women are not mere pegs to hang a doctrine or a theory on. They have a life of their own, independent of, and yet closely touching his. This is what he says of them in his essay "*De Finibus*":

They have been boarding and lodging with

me for twenty months. . . . I know the people utterly—I know the sound of their voices.

Fault has been found with him (and that by such high authority as Mr. Howells) for coming into his own pages so often with personal comment or a word to the reader. It is said that this disturbs the narrative, breaks the illusion, makes the novel less convincing as a work of art. Frankly, it does not strike me that way. On the contrary, it adds to the *vraisemblance*. These men and women are so real to him that he cannot help talking to us about them as we go along together. Is it not just so in actual life, when you go with a friend to watch the passing show? Do you think that what Thackeray says to you about Colonel Newcome, or Captain Costigan, or Helen Pendennis, or Laura, or Ethel, or George Warrington, makes them fade away?

Yes, I know the paragraphs at the beginning and end of *Vanity Fair* about the showman and the puppets and the box. But don't you see what the parable means? It is only what Shakespeare said long ago:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.

Nor would Thackeray have let this metaphor pass without adding to it Pope's fine line:

Act well your part, there all the honor lies.

Of course there is another type of fiction in which running personal comment by the author would be out of place. It is illustrated in Dickens by *A Tale of Two Cities*, and in Thackeray by *Henry Esmond*. The latter seems to me the most perfect example of a historical novel in all literature. More than that—it is, so far as I know, the best portrayal of the character of a gentleman.

The book presents itself as a memoir of Henry Esmond, Esq., a colonel in the service of her Majesty, Queen Anne, written by himself. Here, then, we have

an autobiographical novel, the most difficult and perilous of all modes of fiction. If the supposed author puts himself in the foreground, he becomes egotistical and insufferable; if he puts himself in the background, he becomes insignificant, a mere Chinese "property-man" in the drama. This dilemma Thackeray avoids by letting Esmond tell his own story in the third person—that is to say, with a certain detachment of view, such as a sensible person would feel in looking back on his own life.

Rarely is this historic method of narration broken. I recall one instance, in the last chapter, where Beatrix, after that tremendous scene in the house of Castlewood with the Prince, reveals her true nature and quits the room in a rage. The supposed author writes:

Her keen words gave no wound to Mr. Esmond; his heart was too hard. As he looked at her, he wondered that he could ever have loved her. . . . The Prince blushed and bowed low, as she gazed at him and quitted the chamber. *I have never seen her from that day.*

Thackeray made this slip on purpose. He wanted us to feel the reality of the man who is trying to tell his own story in the third person.

This, after all, is the real value of the book. It is not only a wonderful picture of the Age of Queen Anne, its ways and customs, its manner of speech and life, its principal personages—the red-faced queen, and peremptory Marlborough, and smooth Atterbury, and rakish Mohun, and urbane Addison, and soldier-scholar Richard Steele—appearing in the background of the political plot. It is also, and far more significantly, a story of the honor of a gentleman—namely, Henry Esmond—carried through a life of difficulty, and crowned with the love of a true woman, after a false one had failed him.

Some readers profess themselves disappointed with the dénouement of the love-story. They find it unnatural and disconcerting that the hero should win

the mother and not the daughter as the guerdon of his devotion. Not I. Read the story more closely.

When it opens, in the house of Castlewood, Esmond is a grave, lonely boy of fourteen; Lady Castlewood, fair and golden-haired, is in the first bloom of gracious beauty, twenty years old; Beatrix is a dark little girl of four years. Naturally, Henry falls in love with the mother rather than with the daughter, grows up as her champion and knight, defends her against the rakishness of Lord Mohun, resolves for her sake to give up his claim to the title and the estate. Then comes the episode of his infatuation by the wonderful physical beauty of Beatrix, the vixen. That madness ends with the self-betrayal of her letter of assignation with the Prince, and her subsequent conduct. Esmond returns to his first love, his young love, his true love, Lady Castlewood. Of its fruition let us read his own estimate:

That happiness which hath subsequently crowned it, cannot be written in words; 'tis of its nature sacred and secret, and not to be spoken of, though the heart be ever so full of thankfulness, save to Heaven and the One Ear alone—to one fond being, the truest and tenderest and purest wife ever man was blessed with.

I have left myself scant space to speak of Thackeray's third phase in writing—his work as a moralist. But perhaps this is well, for, as he himself said, and as I have always tried to practise, the preacher must be brief if he wishes to be heard. Five words that go home are worth more than a thousand that wander about the subject.

Thackeray's direct moralizings are to be found chiefly in his lectures on "The Four Georges," "The English Humor-

ists," and in the "Roundabout Papers." He was like Lowell—as a scholastic critic he was far from infallible, but as a vital interpreter he seldom missed the mark.

After all, the essential thing in life for us as real men is to have a knowledge of facts to correct our follies, an ideal to guide our efforts, and a gospel to sustain our hopes.

That was Thackeray's message as moralist. It is expressed in the last paragraph of his essay "*Nil Nisi Bonum*," written just after the death of Macaulay and Washington Irving:

If any young man of letters reads this little sermon—and to him, indeed, it is addressed—I would say to him, "Bear Scott's words in your mind, and '*be good, my dear*.'" Here are two literary men gone to their account, and, *laus Deo*, as far as we know, it is fair, and open, and clean. Here is no need of apologies for shortcomings, or explanations of vices which would have been virtues but for unavoidable, etc. Here are two examples of men most differently gifted—each pursuing his calling; each speaking his truth as God bade him; each honest in his life; just and irreproachable in his dealings; dear to his friends; honored by his country; beloved at his fireside. It has been the fortunate lot of both to give incalculable happiness and delight to the world, which thanks them in return with an immense kindness, respect, affection. It may not be our chance, brother scribe, to be endowed with such merit, or rewarded with such fame. But the rewards of these men are rewards paid to *our service*. We may not win the bâton or epaulettes; but God give us strength to guard the honor of the flag!

With this supplication, for myself and for others, I leave this essay on Thackeray, the greatest of English novelists, to the consideration of real men.

BOTH JUDGE AND JURY

BY WILBUR DANIEL STEELE

THE moon was rising. Already it touched with silver the head of the dead volcano which held the island up out of the deep Caribbean waters; it flooded a high ravine here, or there on a far ridge a cornice of mahoganies thrashing in the trade-wind. As yet, on the lee shore, beyond the faint glow from the portico of Government House, the mystery of starlight held on. The two men were hardly more than two shirt-fronts and the tips of two cigars.

"You've not been in the tropics before?" murmured the governor.

"No," said Loomis.

"Ah? It's rather extraordinary just at first, I fancy."

"Very."

They were silent again. The straggling town was already dark, the black people asleep between their mud and iron walls, the dogs snatching a wink before the moon came; nothing was to be heard save the ripple of the tide or the rare cry of a sea-bird.

"You will be here for—for—ah—some time?"

"About a week, I should say, sir."

"Really? I wasn't aware we should look for a steamer so soon."

"The *Paramaribo* is to pick me up, I believe, direct for Halifax."

"Really?"

They had both stopped. Involuntarily they had drawn a little apart, and now they were facing each other, watching each other.

"Yes," Loomis went on, speaking slowly. "It's a bit out of the *Paramaribo's* way, but it's by government orders."

"The government of the Dominion of Canada?"

"Quite so." Loomis threw his cigar away with a kind of jerk and squared his shoulders. "I'll tell you, sir. Frankly, I've come here to take away a man. The man I've come to get, sir, is—"

"Is Jim White?"

Loomis paused for the fraction of a second before replying.

"The man *known* as Jim White. That is to say, Hyatt Carnes."

"I see! I see!" The governor turned a crab on its back with his boot-toe. "There was another of your kind, some time ago."

"There was. Inspector Alward. He came out here in August. He did not return, as you are also aware. He was murdered here, whether by governmental collusion or not remains (I will continue to be quite frank with you, sir) an open question."

"It need not. I tell you the truth when I say that neither White nor I knew the fellow's name or errand. Had he been frank with me there would have been a different outcome. He thought best, instead, to be frank with the blacks. A mulatto by the name of Kragie did him in. Kragie was tried for murder, convicted, sentenced, *and hanged*."

The moon had topped the mountain. Loomis's lids drooped slightly as he watched the other's face, bare in the white inundation.

"You believe, then, in the law?"

"I do—and I don't. I believe in the laws *I* make, simply because I know they are just laws."

He said it without bombast. Like Loomis, he was a self-made man, and, like Loomis, he did not presume upon the fact.

"By the way," he added, "you've a warrant, of course?"