

A LAUGHING PHILOSOPHER*

A REVIEW

BY ARCHIBALD HENDERSON

AS EVERY true American boy should be, I was "raised" on Uncle Remus and Mark Twain. At this remote date, I find it hazardous to conjecture which exerted the greater influence on my character. It can, however, be stated "without fear of successful contradiction," that each gave me unadulterated and measureless joy. A time came when I unmistakably outgrew Uncle Remus; he ceased to be a staple article of consumption in adult life. Not so Mark Twain; the habit grew on me to such an alarming extent that at last I became a hopeless victim. As a school-boy, I was startled one day to read in a current periodical the declaration by one of Mark Twain's English admirers, that "*Huckleberry Finn* was the best story written on either side of the Atlantic in the preceding twenty-five years." This dictum so strongly confirmed my own deliberate, if immature, conviction—which was much more downright, to the effect that this story was the best story *ever* written on either side of the Atlantic, or of the Pacific, for that matter!—that it awakened in me, for the first time, a sort of mild respect for literary criticism.

The reading of these letters brings back with poignant freshness a thousand memories associated with Mark Twain. How touched I was by his reluctant promise to his daughter, Clara, as he was about to depart for England in 1907, not to wear his white evening clothes in England, for fear of shocking the rigid conservatives of the British Isles. And how thunderstruck I was to discover, upon calling on him later at Brown's

Hotel in London, that the streets were blocked each day with spectators at the hour when, clad in gorgeous bath robe and loose slippers, he nonchalantly lounged down the crowded thoroughfare to the Turkish bath parlours! Mark Twain was an incorrigible jester; he had his joke at all hazards. He had no faith in Oliver Wendell Holmes's dictum that "all reputable authors are ashamed of being funny." On the contrary, he gloried in it; and somehow, by some strange exercise of genius, brought it about that others gloried in it. As I read over, with a mild amusement, the early letters of this callow youth of the Middle West, as he evolved through "the various planes of the phases," as O. Henry put it—printer, steamboat-pilot, miner, journalist, editor—I find it troublesome to swallow (even now) the solemn-faced panegyrics of Mr. Paine. For him, Mark Twain is rather oppressive and awe-inspiring as a world-figure—even when, in describing to his sister, Pamela, a visit to a World's Fair exhibition in 1853, he says: "It would take more than a week to examine everything; and as I was only in a little over two hours, I only glanced at about one-third of the articles; and having a poor memory, I have enumerated scarcely any even of the principal objects." In this same letter, responding to an inquiry as to where he spent his evenings, he refreshingly says: "Where would you suppose, with a fine printers' library containing more than four thousand volumes within a quarter of a mile of me, and nobody at home to talk to?"

One of the real contributions of such a collection of letters is the entirely natural picture it presents of an almost miraculous development. In a book I once

*Mark Twain's Letters. Arranged with comment by Albert Bigelow Paine. New York and London: Harper and Brothers. 1917.

wrote about Mark Twain, I expressed the opinion that American life affords no example of supreme success from humblest beginning so signal as the example of Mark Twain. The chastening and refining influence of his wife again appears in all its vividness—reminding me of something he once said to me: “I never wrote a serious word until after I married her. Her advice to me was: ‘Don’t give way to your invincible temptation to destroy the good effect of your story by some extravagantly comic absurdity. Don’t thwart your purpose with an ill-timed joke.’” Another important contribution of these volumes is the confirmation of the evidence, already afforded by Mr. Paine’s biography, of the tremendous debt Mark Twain owed to Mr. William Dean Howells for a kindly censorship and rigorous criticism that exerted an appreciably salutary effect upon much of his maturer writing. Mark Twain was a torrent of productivity—a cataract of literary energy. Invention never flagged. The crude product poured forth in an unending stream—awaiting the destructive influence of the rock-crusher, the winnowing of the sieve, the refining process of the pans. It would be interesting to know how much of Mark Twain’s writing was so vague, unco-ordinated, or crude, as to render it useless for preservation in printed form. I wonder what per cent. of it had to be “killed” because it did not measure up, strictly, to a standard of excellence in humour inexorably maintained. It was surely this ruthless self-criticism, to which he was driven, often with intense suffering, by his wife, Mr. Howells, and others, which transformed the “comic writer” into the great humourist. Mark Twain’s admiration for Mr. Howells’s art as a writer and critic was superlative. In speaking of a certain scene in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, he characteristically says: “That’s the best drunk scene—because the truest—that I ever read. There are touches in it that I never saw any writer take note of before. And they are set before the reader with amazing accuracy. How very drunk, and how

recently drunk, and how altogether admirably drunk you must have been to enable you to continue that masterpiece!” And again he writes to Howells: “If your literature has not struck perfection now we are not able to see what is lacking. . . . Only you see people and their ways, and their insides and outsides as they *are*, and make them talk as they *do* talk. I think you are the very greatest artist in these tremendous mysteries that ever lived.”

These letters fully confirm the impression, derived from Mark Twain’s published works, that he was a remarkable observer, a faithful reporter; and that his descriptions deserve study as extraordinary specimens of graphic narrative. His naïveté, his freshness in observation, his forthright sincerity are truly memorable. It was with him a cardinal virtue never to permit himself, to employ a phrase of Ibsen’s, to be “frightened by the venerableness of the institution”—however stable or well established the institution might be. His robustness of judgment, his buoyancy of spirit, and his faith in the contemporary stamps his work with the seal of perennial youth. Some words I wrote some years ago occur to me now as I read this important collection of letters, which constitute a revelation of many aspects of the American civilisation which Mark Twain so broadly and so many-sidedly represented: “There is a ‘sort of contemporaneous posterity’ which has registered its verdict that Mark Twain was the greatest humourist of the present era. But there is yet to come that wiser posterity of the future who will, I daresay, describe Mark Twain as America’s most expressive, most human sociologist in letters. He is the historian—the historian in *art*—of a varied and unique phase of civilisation on the American Continent that has passed forever. Future investigators into the sociological phases of that civilisation are predestined to discover priceless and veracious documents in the wild and rudimentary, yet sane and universally human, writings of Mark Twain.”

SOME CONDUCTORS AND THEIR BATONS

BY FREDERIC DEAN

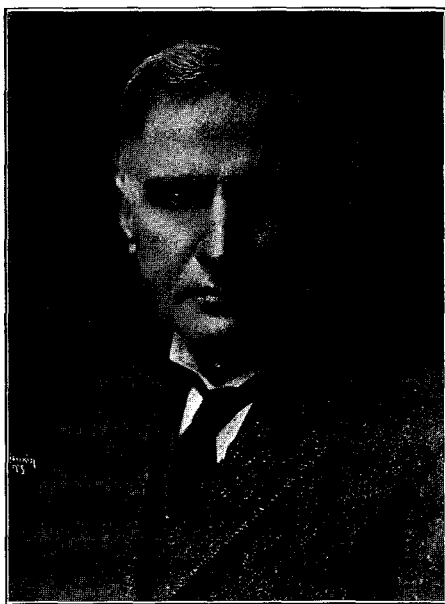
TSCHAIKOVSKY'S RUSSIA

ON THE evening of Saturday, December 1st, in Carnegie Hall, Walter Damrosch conducted a performance of Tschaikovsky's *Symphonie Pathétique*, using the men of the Symphony Society of New York as his instrument of expression. I choose this form of statement, as it was peculiarly and emphatically a Damrosch night—the director was peculiarly and emphatically inspired. It seemed as if the great Russian composer were standing at his side, charging his soul with the elemental poesy of this monumental hymn of national sorrow, electing to inject personally into the conductor and through him into the men with whom he was surrounded, the Russian spirit of unrest, compelling them to utter, as never before, this cry of anguish that so adequately and completely pictures the helplessness, the transcendent sadness of the heart of Russia in this her hour of darkest despair. There is boundless tragedy in a Vereshtchagin canvas, intense personal grief in a Tourgénief story, but no artist has exalted national sorrow as has Tschaikovsky in this lamentation. His *Pathétique* has been played superbly by Safonoff and only less well by dozens of others, dozens of other times. Mr. Damrosch himself has often presented it with a fine regard for the love he bore the composer—his guest upon this very platform not so many years ago—but on this occasion there was a special devotion to the memory of his friend, a new reverence in his interpretation of his well-beloved, yet ever superbly new, instrumentation of Russia's prayer. The wood-winds sang with special plaintiveness; the strings soared to exalted heights and sank to tragic depths; the brasses sobbed with fresh despair; the crescendoes beat upon our hearts with new stress; at the di-

minuendoes we held our breath; after the last expiring sigh we seemed to see Russia, bruised, beaten, broken—a final wreckage past repair.

A BUNDLE OF STICKS

In a drawer in my study I have a bundle of sticks—batons that have been used by various conductor-generals of



WALTER DAMROSCH, CONDUCTOR OF THE SYMPHONY SOCIETY OF NEW YORK

the music world in their orchestral campaigns in the name—and for the cause—of their art. Some of these sticks are long, some short; some thick and heavy, others—notably the one used by Dr. Karl Muck—but a trifle larger and longer than an average lemonade straw. Here is the one used by Anton Seidl when he conducted the first American performance of the *Nibelungen Ring*; this elegant-looking affair is the one with which the elegant Tschaikovsky opened