

Knickerbocker Era of American Letters

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FATHER KNICKERBOCKER was the first literary creation of our country. The little old man in the old black coat and cocked hat who strayed from his lodgings, and was near being advertised for by the police of that day, and who left behind him the curious history that was to be sold for his debts, was destined by the spirit of humor to be the eldest child of our originality, and he proved his title deeds of true birth so well that the estate of New York proudly received and owned him, and gave him the island and river realm, and took to itself and its belongings the name of its droll saint. He was a myth, like all our types; for American genius has never yet created a man or a woman so much of nature's stamp as to live in our memories and affections like one of ourselves, as Uncle Toby or Hamlet or Pickwick does; but, like all true myths, he had a root in the soil. It was characteristically American, premonitory of a land of many races, that this Dutch grotesque, so pure in his racial strain as to incorporate all the old traditional blood in his small figure, should have issued from a brain half Scotch and half English, the first-born of Irving's invention; but Dietrich Knickerbocker could hardly have seen himself in Dutch eyes, and so from the very first it was the blending of the stocks that gave literary consciousness and set up the reactions that breed imagination and humor.

The city, nevertheless, was pure-blooded in those early days, at least by comparison with its later conglomerations; and it was, in fact, the expression of local pride of race in Dr. Mitchell's *Picture of New York* that gave occasion to the graceless half-breed, this

young Irving, to amuse himself and the town with its author's vanity and heaviness. The Knickerbocker "History" was the sort of broad travesty that the victim calls coarse caricature, and it might not have survived so long and so acceptably if the victorious English race had not grown with the city and continued the local temper that most enjoyed the humor. Certainly the old Dutch town cannot be credited with producing Irving, except on the theory of opposites; it furnished the material, but the hand that wrought it was English by blood and breeding. It belonged to the situation that the observer should be of a different kind; the subject gained by his aloofness from it. If one to the manner born could never have seen the broad humor of it, neither could he have touched the Knickerbocker world with that luminous sentiment which by another smile of fortune made Rip Van Winkle immortal. Individuality has played an uncommonly large part in our literature, and its part is always greater than is usually allowed; and, after all, Irving created this past; he was the medium through whom it became visible; and it still lies there in the atmosphere of his genius, not in the crudity of its own bygone fact. He found the old Dutch life there in the little city, and up and down the waterways, in his cheerful, tender, and warm youth; he laughed at it and smiled on it; and what it was to his imagination it came to be as reality almost historic to his countrymen.

It is all a colonial dream, like Longfellow's *Acadie*; and the witchery of literature has changed it into a horizon of our past where it broods forever over the reaches of the Hudson northward. Hawthorne's Puritan past is

not more evasive; but a broad difference is marked by the contrast of *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*; the absence of the moral element is felt in the latter; and a grosser habit of life, creature comfort, a harmless but unspiritual superstition, a human warmth, a social comradery, are prominent in Irving's lucubrations, and these are traits of the community ripened and sweetened in him. Irving must have been a charming boy, and in his young days he laid the bases of his life in good cheer, happy cordiality, the amiableness of a sensitive and pleasurable temperament, which he developed in the kindly and hospitable homes of the city. He was all his days a social creature, and loved society, masculine and feminine; and going from New York to a long European experience of social life, he returned to be one of the finest types of a man so bred, fit to be one of the historic literary figures of a commercial and cosmopolitan city.

Irving, however, thorough American of his day though he was, bore but little relation to the life of the nation. He was indebted to his country for some impulses of his genius and much material which he reworked into books; but he gave more than he received. Our early literary poverty is illustrated by the gifts he brought. He was a pioneer of letters, but our literary pioneers, instead of penetrating further into the virgin wilderness, had to hark back to the old lands, and come again with piratical treasures; and in this he was only the first of a long line of Continental adventurers. Much of American literary experience, which comes to us in our few classics, was gained on foreign soil; and, in fact, it must be acknowledged that, like some young wines, American genius has been much improved by crossing the seas. Irving was the first example. Commerce naturally leads to travel, and he went out as a man in trade to stay a few months. He remained seventeen years. It was not merely that he received there an aristocratic social training and opportunity peculiarly adapted to ripen his graces—and the graces of his style and nature are essentially social graces—but subjects were given to him and his sym-

pathies drawn out and loosed by both his English and his Spanish residences.

Sentiment and romance were more to him than humor, and grew to be more with years; and in the old lands his mind found that to cling to and clamber over that otherwise might not have come to support his wandering and sympathetic mood. Genius he had, the nature and the faculty of an imaginative writer; what he needed was not power, but opportunity; and at every new chance of life he answered to the time and place, and succeeded. He alone of men not English-born has added fascination to English shrines and given them that new light that the poet brings; and he has linked his name indissolubly for all English-reading people with the Alhambra and Granada. It was because of his American birth that he wrote of Columbus, and perhaps some subtle imaginative sympathy always underlies the attraction of Spain, which is so marked, for American writers; but it was not unfitting that in his volumes of travel sketches the romantic after-glow of Spain should bloom in our western sky. By such works, more than by his English scenes, which will always seem an undivided part of English literature, he gave to our early literature a romantic horizon, though found in the history and legend of a far country, which it had hitherto lacked; and it is a striking phenomenon to find our writers, on whom the skies shut down round the shores of the New World, lifting up and opening out these prospects into the picturesque distance of earth's space and the romantic remoteness of history, as if our literary genius were gone on a voyage of discovery. It shows the expansion of the national mind, the cessation of the exiguous exile of the colonial days, the beginning of our reunion with the nations of the world, which still goes on; and in this reunion, necessary for our oneness with man, literature led the way in these romantic affections of our first travelled man of letters, Irving, in whose wake the others followed.

The third point of contact that Irving's genius found with the larger life of his native land was in the realm of exploration. It was long now since the human tide had swept from the shores

and inlets of the sea through the great forests and down the Appalachian slopes and broken in broad streams upon the open prairie; and the adventurers were already threading the thin trails of the desert and high mountain solitudes. Here was the new and unused material of national experience, and to this day its riches have gone to waste, so far as literature is concerned. Irving, however, on his late return home, was struck with admiration at the vast progress made into the western wilderness; and he perceived its literary utility. A journey he made in the southwest gave him the near view he always needed to stimulate his descriptive power and to wake his eye for incident, and in his *Tour of the Prairies* he wrote down our best literary impression of the actual scene. It was no more than a traveller's journal, but it remains unique and interesting. Unfortunately his temperament was not such as to respond with creative power over this new world.

The theme did not pass beyond the realistic stage of treatment, just as in the case of Poe, who also saw the subject in his *Julius Rodman*, though Irving's handling far surpasses Poe's by virtue of his personality and the charm that radiates from it. Even less in *Astoria* and *Captain Bonneville* did Irving win the heart from this western mystery. The matter remained crude, fine in its facts, but unimaginative, unawakened, unbreathed-on by the spirit that giveth life. The Americanization of the wilderness was going on, but its literature was like that of the settlement of the coast in the earlier time, a mass of contemporary, rudely recorded experience and memory; the routes of the fur-traders still led only to and from the Astor counting-room; Irving observed and noted, and made a book or two of the discovery, but his imagination was not of the sort to draw out the romance of it, for it had no element of the past, and the past was his mother muse.

It was the second writer who sprang up in the old city of New York, Cooper, who was to create in this broad field of national expansion, though in narrowly limited ways far from adequate to the vast sweep and variety of its immensely efficient life. Cooper subdued for litera-

ture the forest and the sea, and brought them into the mind's domain; but it was rather as parts of nature than as the theatre of men. The power of the scenery is most felt in his work, and prevails over the human element. It is a just perspective, nevertheless, and true to the emotion of the time and place.

He began very naturally. His first interest was in character, the personality that he immortalized as Harvey Birch, and in the events so near in memory to him and so close in locality, the Revolutionary scene as it was in Westchester; and out of these he made a historical tale that was the corner-stone of a great literary reputation. But it was not long before he went deeper into the sources of his own experience for theme and feeling, and his most characteristic work was a part of himself, and that self which had shared most widely in the novel and broad experience of American life. He had grown up under the shadow of the wild forest and in the sunlight of the lake and clearing, in close contact with nature all his boyish days; familiarity with the forest gave him at a later time of youth the open secret of the sea, so much the same are the ground-tones of nature; and ceasing to be midshipman and lieutenant, he had, so to speak, made the rounds of the great elements in whose primitive simplicities he set his story. There was something of the artist in him, but nothing of the poet, and he felt the impressiveness of nature, its opposition to society and law and man, as our common humanity feels them, not in Wordsworthian aloofness and spiritual interpretation, but as a real presence, an actuality, a thing of fact. His popular vogue in France was prepared for him by a pre-established harmony between the eloquent French dream of the life of nature and his narrative where nature still brooded as in a lake, so near was he to her presence; but what was to the foreigner a new Arcadia only, an illusion of the heart, was to him a living world.

Being a novelist, he concentrated this vague emotion of the free majesty of nature in a character of fiction, Leather Stocking, one of the great origi-

nal types of romanticism in the past century. Yet Leather Stocking, like Knickerbocker, is pure myth, though with a root in the soil too; an incarnation of the forest border, a blend of nature and man in a human form, thoroughly vitalized, impressive, emotional, an ideal figure. It is characteristic of our greater writers, even our humorists, to be nearer to the American idea than to anything concretely American. The infusion of grandeur—the word is not inappropriate—in Cooper's work is what gives it distinction, and most in its most imaginative portions. It is true that he invented the sea novel, as was not unnatural in view of his experience of our maritime life and of the great place of that life in our national activity and consciousness; and he used colonial, Revolutionary, and border history out of our stores to weave incident, plot, and scene; but it is not these things that make him national, but the American breath that fills his works; and where this is least, the scene grows mean, petty, awkward, inept, feeble; and where it is greatest, there the life is found, in *The Pathfinder*, *The Deerslayer*, *The Prairie*. He was abroad, like Irving, for many years, and gained thereby, perhaps through contrast and detachment merely, a truer conception and deeper admiration of democracy, its principles, aims, and energies; but he was national, when Irving was international; and if Irving, in his literary relation to his country, is rather thought of as an influence upon it, Cooper was its effluence, the American spirit in forest, sea, and man taking on form, feature, and emotion first in his world, sentimentalized, idealized, pictorial though it was. The best that literature achieves is a new dream; this was the first dream of American life, broad and various, in its great new solitudes of sea and land.

Irving and Cooper were the two writers of the first rank in our letters. Sharply contrasted in their careers as well as in character, and curiously overlapping in their experience and writings, neither of them was a true product of the city, or bound to it except in ephemeral ways. The one beloved, the other hated, their reputations were alike national. American literature, which was in no sense provincial, began with them. A

third great name, which is as large in tradition, at least, is linked with theirs in the city's literary fame. Bryant was a New-Englander by birth and remained one in nature all his life, but his name lingers where he had his career, in the metropolis. It belongs to a city in which, of all the cities of the earth, nativity is the least seal of citizenship to appropriate justly the works of its foster-children; and Bryant illustrates, as a New-Yorker, its assimilation of the sons of all the nation. In the Niagara of life that forever pours into its vast human basin there has been a constant current from New England, important in the city's life and control. What Beecher was in religion, Bryant was in poetry, an infusion of highly liberalized moral power. Irving said there was nothing Puritanical in him, nor had he any sympathy with Puritanism; and Cooper hated the New England type, though he was pietistic to an uncommon degree. Between them they represented the temper of the New York community on both its worldly and evangelical side. Bryant, however, offers a sharp contrast to them, for he had precisely that depth of moral power that was his heritage from Puritanism, and marked in the next generation the literature of New England, setting it off from the literature of New York. Depth, penetration, intensity, all that religious fervor fosters and spirituality develops, was what Irving and Cooper could lay no claim to. In Bryant something of this, in an early, primitive, and simple form of liberalism, came into the city, though it was not naturalized there. So lonely is it, indeed, that it is almost impossible for the mind to identify Bryant the poet with Bryant the editor. He himself kept the two lives distinct, and his distance and coldness was the aloofness of the poet in him from the world about him.

It is hard in any case to localize Bryant, not merely in the city, but in America, because he is so elemental in his natural piety. That something Druidical that there is in his aspect sets him apart; he was a seer, or what we fancy a seer to be, in his verse, a priest of the holy affections of the heart in communion with nature's God, one whose point of view and attitude suggest the early ministra-

tion of adoring Magians, the intuition of Indian sages, or the meditations of Greek philosophers. A sensitive mind can hardly rid itself of this old world or early world impression in respect to Bryant. The hills and skies of Berkshire had roofed a temple for him, and the forest aisled it, and wherever he moved he was within the divine precincts. Eternity was always in the same room with him. It was this sense of grandeur in nature and man, the perpetual presence of a cosmic relation, that dignified his verse and made its large impression; even his little blue gentian has the atmosphere of the whole sky. He was a master of true style, as refined in its plainness as was Irving's in its grace. If he was not national in a comprehensive sense, he was national in the sense that something that went to the making of the nation went to the making of him; the New England stock which had spread into the west and veined the continent with its spirit as ore veins the rock was of the same stuff as himself, and the rare manifestation of its fundamental religious feeling in his pure and uncovenanted poetry was the same as in Channing's universality. Present taste may forget his work for a time, but its old American spirit has the lasting power of a horizon peak; from those uplands he came, and some of the songs sung there the nation will long carry in its heart. He was the last of the early triad of our greater writers, and his presence is still a memory in the city streets; but the city that was greater for his presence, as for that of Irving and Cooper who had passed away before him, is also greater for their memory.

Between the greater and the lesser gods of the city there is a broad gulf fixed. Irving, Cooper, and Bryant were on the American scale; they were national figures. There were almost none who could be described as second to them. Every metropolis, however, breeds its own race of local writers, like mites in a cheese, numerous and active, the literary coteries of their moment. To name one of them, there was Willis; he was gigantic in his contemporaneity. He is shrunk now, as forgotten as a fashion-plate, though once the cynosure of the literary town. He was

the man that Irving by his richer nature escaped being, the talented, clever, frivolous, sentimental, graceful artifice of a man, the town-gentleman of literature; he was the male counterpart of Fanny Fern and Grace Greenwood; he outlasted his vogue, like an old beau, and was the superannuated literary journalist. Yet in no other city was he so much at home as here, and in the memoirs of the town he would fill a picturesque and rightful place. A court would have embalmed him, but in a democracy his oblivion is sealed.

One or two other early names had a sad fortune in other ways. Drake and Halleck stand for our boyish precocity; death nipped the one, trade sterilized the other; there is a mortuary suggestion in the memory of both. Halleck long survived, a fine outside of a man, with the ghost of a dead poet stalking about in him, a curious experience to those who met him, with his old-fashioned courtesy and the wonder of his un-literary survival. Of the elder generation these are the names that bring back the old times, Willis, Drake, and Halleck; and they all suggest the community in a more neighborly way than the national writers.

There was a culture in the old city, and a taste for letters such as grows up where there are educated men of the professions and a college to breed them. The slight influence of Columbia, however, and the main fact that it developed professional and technical schools instead of academic power, point to the controlling factor in the city's life, its preoccupation with practical and material interests. Literature was bound in such a modern community to be bottomed on commerce; whatever else it might be, it was first an article of trade to be used as news, circulated in magazines, sold in books. It has become, at present, largely an incident of advertising. New York was a great distributing centre, and editors, publishers, and writers multiplied exceedingly. The result was as inevitable here as in London or Paris, but the absence of a literary past and of a society of high-bred variety made a vast difference in the tone and in the product. Parnassus became a receding sentimental memory, fit for a child's wonder-

book like Hawthorne's; but Bohemia was thronged, and its denizens grew like mushrooms in a cellar. There was, too, from the beginning, something bibulous and carnivorous in the current literary life; the salon did not flourish, but there was always a Bread-and-Cheese Club in the city, and indeed its literary legend from the days of Irving's youthful suppers, not excluding its greater names, might be interestingly and continuously told by a series of memoirs of its convivial haunts. The men who frequented them and kept each other in countenance were as mortal, for the most part, as Pfaff's, for instance, once the Mermaid of the town wits. Such resorts, too, are hot-houses for the development of clever lads; and literature suffered by the overproduction of small minds. When in the history of letters gregariousness begins, one may look out for mediocrity. Great writers have found themselves in exile, in prison, in solitudes of all sorts; and great books are especially written in the country. Literature, too, is naturally exogamous; it marries with the remote, the foreign, the strange, and requires to be fertilized from without; but Bohemia, shut in its own petty frivolities, breeds the race of those manikins of Manhattan whose fame Holmes gibed at as having reached Harlem. Open Griswold and find their works; open Poe's *Literati* and find their epitaphs; of such is the kingdom of the Bohemians the world over. Such a race is incidental to a metropolitan literature. Nor were they altogether inferior men; many of them led useful lives and won local eminence; some even achieved the honors of diplomacy. They contributed much to their own gayety, and enlivened life with mutual admiration and contempt. Poe stirred up the swarm considerably. But no satire embalmed them in amber, and they are forgotten even by their own successors.

The city grew to be, through these middle years of the century, an ever-increasing mart of literary trade. The people, with their schools and Sunday-schools and habits of home reading, were to be supplied with information and entertainment; and New York, like Philadelphia, became a great manufactory of books. The law of demand and supply, however,

has a limited scope in literature; it can develop quantity, but not quality. Text-books, encyclopedias, popular knowledge, travel, and story all spawned in great numbers; but the literature of creation and culture continued to be sparse. It might have been thought that the literature of amusement, at least, would have flourished, and songs and plays have abounded; in fact, they did not exist except in the mediocre state. This infertility of the metropolis in the lasting forms of literature brings home to us the almost incredible famine of the time more sharply than even the tales that are told of the lack of expectation of any appreciation felt by the first great writers.

Irving's discovery that he could live by literature was a surprise to him; he had begun with an experiment rather than an ambition, and, having thus found his humor, he went on to make trial of sentiment, pathos, and romance. Cooper had no confidence, scarcely a hope, that an American novel would be accepted by his own countrymen. They had become so used to their lack of native productions as to mistake it for a permanent state. It was almost an accident that Cooper ever finished *The Spy*, and he did it much as the writer of a poem of classic rank to-day would complete it, in the scorn of circumstance and probably in ignorance of its reception.

The success of the greater writers was immediate and great; the city gave them dinners and has reared their statues, and was proud of them at the time in a truly civic way; but a cold obstruction of genius has set in ever since. The lesser writers approached them only on their feeblest side. Perhaps the bulk of emotional writing in every kind was of the sentimental sort. The men produced a good deal of it, but the women revelled and languished in it. "Ben Bolt," the popular concert-hall tune of its day, was a fair example of its masculine form; and such writers as Mrs. Osgood and the Cary sisters illustrate its feminine modes. Sentimentality is apt to seem very foolish to the next generation in its words, but in character it survives with a more realistic impression; and in Poe, in his relations to these literary women, one sees the contempo-

rary type. He was mated with Willis as the dark with the sunny, and as misery with mirth. He enchanted the poetesses, and was enchanted, finding in each one a new lost *Lenore*. All his female figures, in their slightly varied monotone, *Annabel* and *Annie*, are in the realm of this sentimentality gone maudlin in him, as it had gone silly in others. It was most wholesome when it stayed nearest to nature and domestic life; but here, too, it was feeble and lachrymose. The breath of the civil war put an end to it for the time; but even that great passion left few traces of itself in our letters. The writings of Dickens favored sentimentality, and much more the poems of Mrs. Browning and the early verse of Tennyson. We had our "little Dickens," but it is significant of the temperament of our literature that we had not even a "little" Thackeray. Just above this level there was here and there a cultivated author, reminiscent of sentiment in its purer forms—of Lamb and Irving, for example—of whose small number Curtis stands eminent for cheerfulness, intrinsic winningness, and unfailing grace. He was the last of the line that began with Irving, through which the literary history of the city can be traced as if in lineal descent. In him sentiment was what it should always be, a touch, not the element itself.

It is quite in the order of things that in a literature so purely romantic as our own has been in the greater writers, sentimentality should characterize those of lesser rank, for it naturally attends romanticism as an inferior satellite. It has all vanished now, and left *Lenore* and *Annie* and *Annabel* its lone survivors. We are a romantic and sentimental nation, as is well known, and we are also a nation of efficiency. The literary energies of the nation, apart from its genius, have been immense, in reality; they have gone almost wholly into popular education in its varied forms, and in no city upon such a scale as in New York. The magazines and the great dailies exhibit this activity in the most striking ways, both for variety

and distinction; and on the side of literature, in the usual sense, from the days of the old *Mirror*, *Knickerbocker*, and *Democratic*, the growth has been steady, and has carried periodical writing to its height of popular efficiency both for compass and power. The multitude of writers in the service have been substantially occupied with the production of news in the broadest sense. The poem and the essay have been rather a thing conceded than demanded, and make a small part in the whole; but the news of the artistic, literary, and scientific worlds—fact, event, personality, theory, and performance—all this has been provided in great bulk. The writers strive to engage attention, to interest, and the matter of prime interest in such a city is the news of the various world. Even in the imaginative field something of the same sort is to be observed in the usual themes and motives. The popularity of the detective story, for example, and of Japanese or other foreign backgrounds, and of the novel of adventure; and the travel and animal sketches, and the like, have an element of news; and the entire popularization of knowledge belongs in the same region of interest.

Thought, reflection, meditation, except on political and social subjects, does not flourish; that brooding on life and experience out of which the greatest literature emerges has not been found, whatever the reason may be, and in fact it is rather a matter of original endowment than of the environment. The literary craft, however, if it lacked genius, has been characterized by facile and versatile talent, and its product has been very great in mass and of vast utility. In no other city is the power of the printed word more impressive. The effective literature of the city is in reality, and has long been, its great dailies; they are for the later time what the sermons of the old clergy were in New England, the mental sphere of the community; and in them are to be found all the elements of literature except the qualities that secure permanence.

Into Action

BY BEULAH MARIE DIX

I

THE November twilight came early, with a trickle of slow rain. Long before the reading was over the darkness had gathered in the far corners of the room. Anne Telford moved from her place on the cushioned window-seat, and kneeling on the hearth-rug, finished the story.

When she had finished, there was a moment's silence, broken only by the snap of pine splinters and the sizzle of pitch in the fire. Margaret, the graduate student, spoke first. It was her room in which the three friends were gathered.

"That's an admirable story. The phrasing—how clever and clear-cut! And the characterization is so delicately done. Yes, I agree with you, Anne. It's an exquisite bit of work."

Anne heard this approval with tempered gratitude. She had esteemed Margaret's critical judgment since her early college days, when Margaret had shown her that Dickens's novels were full of the pathetic fallacy. But of late Anne had come to esteem her own judgments. That Margaret should like this story that she had discovered was a matter of course, and she waited with assurance for Katharine's verdict.

"No, I don't like the story," said Katharine, from the depth of the Morris chair.

Margaret uttered a murmured protest.

"It's well phrased," Katharine went on, "but phrasing is not quite everything. I don't like the main idea, Anne—the heroine's indifference to her brother. I don't think it is—well, quite human."

"Oh, it's not conventional," Margaret said, hastily.

"I'm glad to say that I don't think it is," answered Katharine. "I should number affection for one's family among our most reasonable conventions. It seems to me the kind of convention that is based in the needs of human nature."

Anne closed the magazine with a flutter of the pages. "You've always been an optimist, Katharine. Now the more I see of life—"

Anne paused. Even in the mid-career of argument she remembered that Katharine had seen far more of life than she.

"It's a question of temperament, perhaps," she amended. "But still I'll not admit that the convention of affection for one's family is based in reason." It was quite dark in the room, and the darkness invites reckless confidences. Anne plunged forward, almost without realizing what she did. "To have affection there must be sympathy in the higher things of life. Does that sympathy come from the accident of two people's being born of the same parents, living in the same household? Why, you two are far nearer to me than either of my sisters, than my father and mother."

Anne turned her face abruptly and sat gazing into the fire. She knew that she had said too much, and yet her heart protested that she meant it. What had she to do with home, with the little, forsaken Maine village where she had been born, where her family lived? For five years she had been away from them, at school and at college, spending her shorter vacations with her cousin in the city, returning home only in the long summer-time. That last summer time! She fairly hated the memory of it. Fresh from the semi-luxury of the college dormitory and the order and decorum of her cousin's house, fresh from hours-long discourse with Margaret and Katharine on all subjects in heaven and earth, she had gone back to the little, gossiping village and to her father's house—the shabby house of an old-fashioned country doctor. Sitting now in Margaret's room, where the fire-light played upon the dainty cushions of the couch, on the silver desk-set and the bowl of violets, on the Rembrandt heads and the Botticelli Ma-