

SOME FORGOTTEN VICTORIAN NOVELISTS

BY PERCY STEPHENS

From the *National Review*, January
(LONDON CONSERVATIVE MONTHLY)

IT is now more than half a century ago that the greatest of the Victorian novelists found himself 'in the little old town of Coire, or Chur, in the Grisons,' where the spectacle of a lazy, slouching boy, or hobbledehoy, immersed in the perusal of a novel, furnished him with the argument for the first, and perhaps the most perfect, of his *Roundabout Papers*. He adds a delightful vignette of this idle Swiss lad, dead to everything save the romance he holds in his 'large, lazy hands,' leaning over the bridge that spans the rushing Plissur.

The deduction that Thackeray draws from this melancholy spectacle is twofold: first, that all people with healthy literary tastes love novels — wherein I heartily agree with him; and secondly, that overindulgence in them in youth spoils the taste for them in after-life; even as a schoolboy outgrows his love for pudding and jelly.

Let us quote the Master's own words: —

As for that naughty, lazy boy at Chur, I doubt whether he will like novels when he is thirty years of age. He is taking too great a glut of them now. He is eating jelly until he will be sick. He will get weary of sweets as boys of private schools grow — or used to grow, for I have done growing some little time myself and the practice may have ended too — as private-school boys used to grow tired of their pudding before their mutton at dinner.

How true this is, few can deny. Every man — I am not so sure about women — who confines his reading exclusively to novels, becomes in time

cloyed, 'fed up' — in the slang of to-day — with them. Even as his body requires change of diet to keep it in health, so does his mind demand something more satisfying than constant fiction to interest it in literature; and unless he can find an antidote in biography or travel or science his lot as a reader is a miserable one.

Moreover, the enormous present output of fiction further tends to nauseate him, even as a too bountifully heaped plate discourages a delicate appetite. He becomes hypercritical, *raffiné*, to use an expressive French idiom; and I suppose it is due to this that so many modern novelists deem it necessary to season their work with the grossest of *gros sel*. I vow that within the last few years I have read a score of novels that in the days of my youth, could they have found a publisher, would have procured their authors a most wholesome term of imprisonment. Tennyson was farseeing when he predicted the 'abyss of Zolaism,' for decadence in the standard of the English novel dates for certain from the appearance of the agreeable works of the seer of Médan.

Yet, speaking as one who has fully proved the truth of Thackeray's assertion, — for I rarely find a modern work of fiction to hold my attention, — I must equally admit that the wind is so far tempered to my fellow sufferers that we can find a corrective in those romances which used to entrance us — ah! how many years ago. For even as I have seen a gourmet at the Club turn

from *pêches Melba* and ask for apple-dumpling, so does the jaded novel-reader revert with relief to the wholesome fare of his youth, and find therein a never-failing satisfaction. And here I do not allude to the great masters of fiction of the Victorian or pre-Victorian era, — the Scotts, Thackerays, Dickens, Brontës, and the like, — but to those minor novelists whose works, without attraction for a generation that can find amusement and instruction in Mr. H. G. Wells and Mr. Compton Mackenzie, now only lurk unsuspected on the dusty upper shelves of provincial circulating libraries, or, until Armageddon burst on us, were scrupulously cited in the catalogues of Tauchnitz.

It is now a very great many years since a little company of travelers found itself on a broiling August afternoon in a train of the Eastern Railway of France, which was jogging along to Switzerland after the leisurely fashion of Continental expresses of that day. The party consisted of three ladies of varying ages and a boy — a horrid, tiresome, restless British schoolboy; and I need say no more to enlist my readers' sympathy with his companions. Nor should a meed of pity be denied to the urchin himself; it was not by his wish that he had been torn from the cricket-fields of his summer holidays to improve his mind by foreign travel, which had already lost its first glamour for him, and hot, fidgety, and ill at ease, he could neither rest himself, nor allow his relatives to do so.

I suppose it was as a last resource that one of them finally offered him the 'yellow-backed' novel which she had destined for her own delectation on the journey, and which the boy accepted suspiciously, not to say ungraciously. The picture on its cover, a man resembling a dissenting minister standing between two angels, led him to suspect

a class of literature for which he had scant affection, but he grudgingly accepted the loan with an inward reservation not to read more of the book than he cared to. But he had scarce perused a dozen pages ere a delightful peace began to reign in that hot, stuffy railway-carriage; dead to his surroundings he forgot fatigue, discomfort, and heat; he could scarce be induced to look up from the book to catch his first glimpse of a 'snow-mountain'; and when he went to bed that night in the old Schweizerhof at Lucerne the volume was placed under his pillow in order that he might resume his reading as soon as he should wake next morning. That boy was myself, and the book Henry Kingsley's *Ravenshoe*. *Ay de mi!* — this happened nearly fifty years ago, yet my affection for this admirable novel is as fresh as ever.

Nor is this a matter for astonishment, for to my mind it contains every element that appeals to the reader. I admit the rather threadbare foundation — the changing of children at nurse — on which the story rests; but in all other respects it fulfils every requirement of fiction. Do you demand incident — it is there in profusion; knowledge of human nature treated with a master hand — every character in the book, save perhaps one, is life-like; pathos such as Dickens never excelled — you have it in the story of the little shoeblack; an admirable picture of society from highest to lowest — it is equally at your service; while, almost best of all, the book is replete with humor, healthy, natural, and yet never farcical.

The weak character in the book is, I think, Ellen, and the weak point of the story her reticence as to the secret of her brother's birthright; but the general combination of the plot is so well carried out that these minor defects escape any but the most critical analy-

sis. As to the other characters in the book there is not one we have not met in real life, except, of course, Lord Saltire, whose type passed away with him; but the rest of them are with us yet. Lords Welter and Hainault are still to be found in the ranks of the British aristocracy; John Marston still takes a double first at Oxford, and then goes to work in the London slums; Cuthbert Ravenshoe, and alas! Father Mackworth, are still turned out from Douai or similar institutions; and as for dear old Lady Ascot, I myself, as a shy, awkward lad, once found myself next to her at dinner and received during the progress of the meal some excellent advice against the pitfalls of Ritualism and a tip for the Chester Cup.

No writer has ever been able to maintain a uniform standard of excellence, and Henry Kingsley forms no exception to the rule. Indeed, I frankly admit that some of his novels are but indifferent stuff, in which he carries to excess the somewhat irritating didactic style of his brother Charles; yet I venture to think that few novelists have bequeathed to posterity a more delightful quartette of romances than *Ravenshoe*, *Geoffrey Hamlyn*, *The Hill-ys and the Burtons*, and *Austin Elliott*. Shame it is that the present generation should need to be reminded of their excellence. Next to *Ravenshoe* I would rank *Austin Elliott*. In fiction, I know few more lovable characters than the hero of the tale and his hapless friend, Lord Charles Barty, nor a more tragic episode than the latter's death when Austin sees the body of the man he loved with a love passing that of women, carried away in a baker's cart from the scene of the duel he should have fought himself. Equally terrible, too, is the picture of Austin sitting by his sleeping friend's bed on the morning of the duel, knowing he must rouse him to go forth and fight, and dreading to

do so; then remembering how he had once read in 'some blackguard book about prize-fighting' of how the men who train the prize-fighters wake them of a morning by opening the window; of how he himself resorts to the same method, and of how the look of affection in Lord Charles's eyes as he wakes fades into one of horror as he suddenly remembers what lies before him.

Perhaps the most perfect and delightful character in the book is the dog Robin, who followed his master to Millbank Prison, and sat outside the door 'panting and snapping at the flies.' He at all events is not overdrawn, as anyone who has ever owned a real Scots collie can testify.

It is sometimes urged that Henry Kingsley portrays his aristocrats with too lenient a pen; but it must be equally admitted that he is no less kind to his plebeians, in proof of which, I think, he is the only author I can call to mind who has a good word for Thackeray's special detestation, a footman, or, if you prefer it, a flunkey — a distinction of much delicacy. Indeed, to me the great charm of Henry Kingsley's writing lies in its loveliness, for he usually contrives, if not to enlist our sympathy with, at least to excite our pity for, his villains, and to show that human nature is not all bad. As for his aristocrats, he probably portrayed them as he found them: he mixed much in the inner life of great families and knew their secrets, for it was his vocation in life to hold in check the ghost that to some of them is the price they must pay for their greatness — I mean the particular one that used to haunt Lord Steyne.

If Henry Kingsley were too kind to his aristocrats, the same cannot be said of his equally forgotten contemporary, Anthony Trollope, who, though by no means insensible himself to the

attractions of rank and position, seemed to take a mischievous pleasure in stripping some of the fine feathers off his fine-birds, and giving glimpses of the dull underlying plumage. Indeed, next to Thackeray, who admittedly influenced him, I think he was one of the first novelists to divest lords and great folk of the glamour, as a class apart, that still surrounded them fifty years ago, and depict them as commonplace mortals.

Trollope has been styled the apostle of the middle classes; and, while I fail to see any great stigma in the title, I consider it undeserved, for his descriptions of all ranks of society are excellent. That they are sometimes unnecessarily prolix must be admitted, as might be expected of a writer who waited on no inspiring afflatus to put pen to paper, but deliberately set himself the task of producing a minimum number of pages every day, and by sheer grit and hard work achieved both fame and fortune. His reputation, of course, was made by his Barsetshire novels; and it would be indeed regrettable if they become entirely lost sight of, for more admirable pictures of English country life sixty years ago it would be hard to find. The most perfect of them is, I think, *The Small House at Allington*; yet I dare say it seems incredible to the youth of the present generation that there was once a time when young ladies wept over the sorrows of poor Lily Dale, and young gentlemen's fists clenched sympathetically when they read of Johnny Eames knocking the despicable Crosbie into the bookstall at Paddington Station.

Next to the Barsetshire chronicles I would place *Phineas Finn* and *Phineas Redux*, which describe excellently the political world to which Trollope himself aspired, but which he was never fated to enter; while, despite its unnecessary length, *Can You Forgive Her?*

is a capital novel, full of humor — of the pawky or dry variety — and incident. Trollope's dialogue, if too spun out at times, is admirable, and his occasional hunting scenes are the best I know in fiction, being true to life and not exaggerated.

Another almost equally prolific contemporary of Trollope's appears to be even more forgotten; and yet I refuse to believe that even the present generation has never heard of Wilkie Collins, and can find no pleasure in *The Moonstone* and *The Woman in White*, which are both literal masterpieces of sensational fiction. Indeed, the former is in my humble opinion the best story of its kind that was ever written. Its construction — if we except the inanities of Miss Clack, which are its only blot — is quite admirable; the reader's interest is kept at full tension throughout, without giving him that inkling of the dénouement of the tale, which so few writers fail to avoid; and the concluding chapter, where the disguised Oriental explorer sees in the forehead of the great idol of Somnauth 'the yellow diamond, whose splendor had last shone on him in England from the bosom of a woman's dress,' is unsurpassed in description or dramatic interest — the whole book is admirable. None the less, I believe *The Woman in White* was usually rated its superior; and reading his recently published *Letters* I see this was the opinion of so expert a critic as Algernon Charles Swinburne.

Yet, to me, great novel as it undoubtedly is, it lacks the artistic construction of *The Moonstone*; I venture to think that the experienced novel-reader will early begin to suspect the plot, and then, too, I can never forgive the rather commonplace hero for falling in love with the milk-and-water Laura instead of the magnificent Marian. But all the other characters in the book

pale before the incomparable Fosco, — I love to write his name in capitals as he would have written it himself, — surely the most perfect, as the most attractive, of all that large family of foreign villains in fiction, of which he was to be the progenitor. One feels his personality in every line, and, like Marian Halcombe herself, has to admit to a secret liking for him.

I can remember first reading the book as a little boy 'on the sly,' — for in my young days sensational literature was not considered wholesome for young people, — and feeling a sneaking affection for a man who, despite his crimes, could lunch 'entirely off fruit tart and cream.' No; Fosco was an undoubted scoundrel, but the author contrived to make him a very attractive one. It is curious, no less than regrettable, that the reputation of so prolific a writer as Wilkie Collins should rest almost entirely on these two books, though they in themselves are surely a sufficient monument; for I cannot recall any of his others that repay repusal.

This cannot, however, be said of the other great master of Victorian sensational — detestable word, but I can find no better — fiction, for there is scarcely one of Charles Reade's novels that does not attract. Of Reade it may be truly said that had he never produced but one book, and that his greatest, he would have ranked with the immortals. For *The Cloister and the Hearth* is no mere work of amusement; despite its unflinching humor it is a great book, great in its word-painting and construction, great in its evidence of scholarship and research, great in the truth it reveals. I suppose there are still people who read it, just as, although I never come across them, I suppose there are also people who read the Waverley Novels; but I believe Reade's minor works to be absolutely neglected.

And yet, what delightful books they are! I cannot name a more enthralling quartette of exciting novels than *Foul Play*, *Put Yourself in His Place*, *It Is Never Too Late to Mend*, and *Hard Cash*, and I would award the palm to the latter. Of its sort I know nothing finer in fiction, almost in literature, than the description of the fight between the Indiaman and the pirates in the Malacca Seas. But to appreciate thoroughly *Hard Cash* one should first read *Love Me Little*, *Love Me Long*, one of Reade's earliest works, not in the least sensational, but full of charm and humor, which tells how simple David Dodd won the beautiful Lucy Fountain against the heavy odds of position and wealth.

It must also be borne in mind that many of Reade's novels, notably three of those I have instanced, were written with the purpose of exposing evils: *Hard Cash*, that of the application of the Lunacy Laws; *Put Yourself in His Place*, as a protest against the tyranny of Trade Unionism; and *It Is Never Too Late to Mend*, to reveal the inhumanities of the prison life of the time; and I have always understood that in a great measure they achieved their purpose. Brave old Charles Reade! My heart goes out to the burly, blue-flannel-clad sage of Knightsbridge when I think of the pleasure his books still afford me.

And now let us leave the so-called sensational school of Victorian novelists, and turn to two, who, totally dissimilar in every other respect, had one striking point of resemblance — George John Whyte-Melville and William Black. Each wrote one novel far exceeding their others in merit — Whyte-Melville, *The Interpreter*, and Black, *Macleod of Dare*. But subsequently, having struck a vein that appealed to their public, they were wise, or foolish, enough to stick to it, until, as the for-

mer said of his own writing, 'the brew was getting very weak.' Whyte-Melville is usually described as a 'sporting' novelist, a title from which I dissent. True, sport figures largely in nearly all his books; but how important a part does it not play in the life of the class of which, and for which, he wrote?

To me, Whyte-Melville is the novelist of Society — with a capital S. With a few exceptions his books deal entirely with the small section of the human race comprised in that expression, to which he belonged by birth and training, and of which he was such a popular member. Eton and the Guards are not calculated to turn out a novelist dealing with the hard facts of life, and when Whyte-Melville wrote of London Society, of the Season, the Row, Ascot, and so forth, he wisely wrote of a world he knew well. Perhaps he knew it a little too well. Himself a man of intense personal charm, he loved to depict his characters as the same, and many a young gentleman not actually *purpureo genitus*, whose preconceived ideas of Society were derived, as was so often the case, from a perusal of Whyte-Melville's novels, was both astonished and pained when he came to knock at its portals to find they did not at once swing open on the well-oiled hinges he had anticipated.

Yet all through Whyte-Melville's novels there runs a strong undercurrent of sadness, which plainly shows his own appreciation of the hollowness of the life of the butterflies he usually depicted — *Vanitas vanitatum*, is the more or less openly expressed moral of all his books. This is perhaps best shown in *Good For Nothing*, which he was popularly supposed to have written in friendly competition with 'Guy Livingstone' Lawrence, whose counter-effort was, if I remember rightly, *Barren Honour*. Poor Whyte-Melville! His books had a tremendous vogue in

their day, yet I doubt if now even a fraction of the class to which they appeal ever troubles to read them. More's the pity.

The same can be said of William Black, a no less popular novelist of a rather later era. Had he maintained the standard of that really dramatic story, *Macleod of Dare*, his reputation might have been more lasting, but I do not think his popularity would have been so great. It was *The Strange Adventures of a Phaeton* which first appealed to his public, — though the impossible Prussian lieutenant would scarcely go down with it now, — but it was the delightful *Princess of Thule*, which struck a deeper note, and which earned the approval of good Queen Victoria herself, that showed him where his forte lay and influenced most of his subsequent writing. For, having invented a dish which appealed to the popular palate, Black was Scotchman enough to appreciate its value, and served it up again and again under a different name, and always with success.

The recipe was of the simplest, but it required a man of genius to mix it. Take the loves of two attractive young persons of the upper middle class, invest them with the atmosphere of the Western Highlands, — on no account forgetting mention of the 'great red-funneled steamer' Clansman, — garnish on every other page with scraps of ballads of the Jacobite or Annie Laurie kind; introduce a taste of the respectable Metropolitan *Haute Bohème* of artists and musicians, not forgetting — with an eye to the Transatlantic market — to throw in a little American flavoring; season with scraps of salmon-fishing, mix well together with a spice of what passes for humor in the Highlands, bring all to a happy ending; and hey presto! the *plat* is smoking ready for the table. And very good fare it usually is, though I must admit that a

good many of Black's novels do not bear reperusal.

Did space permit, I would fain touch on other novelists apparently as forgotten as those I have cited. If I have omitted Blackmore, it is because I believe that at all events *Lorna Doone* still commands a public; if Mrs. Oliphant, I have equally excluded Miss Mulock, yet *John Halifax, Gentleman* is one of the best of the early Victorian novels. Or to turn to an author still, I am glad to say, with us and productive, I doubt if many people are familiar with *Mademoiselle de Mersac* and *No New Thing*, yet of their class I do not know two novels better worth reading. Indeed, the former would rank very high indeed, if the author could have put a little restraint on his vein of persiflage, while Philip Marescalchi in the latter is almost the most perfect egotist of my acquaintance in fiction. It is a matter for regret that Mr. Norris has not maintained the same standard of excellence in his later books.

But perhaps of novels, as of tastes and colors, one should refrain from argument; what appeals to one man may not do so to his neighbor, and indeed I myself must plead guilty of irreverence toward some of the novelists usually accepted as immortal. I have, of course, read the Brontë novels, but have no desire to do so again; apart from *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss*, George Eliot is without attraction for me, and some other celebrated authors leave me cold. *Tot homines, quot sententiæ*; but it is certainly pitiable that the lesser lights of the Victorian novelists should have become swamped in the vortex of sex-problem and Socialism, which are the mainstays of the popular or 'best selling' — a horrible metaphor! — writers of modern fiction. I can only hope that they are not so forgotten as I fear is the case, or that there are cycles of revolution in literary

taste, and that they may come to their own again, as indeed appears to be the case with Jane Austen and Miss Ferrier.

It may be well that all fiction is ephemeral, and indeed I doubt whether any of my readers can truthfully claim to have perused *Don Quixote* from cover to cover, or whether anyone, save curious-minded schoolboys, ever reads Fielding or Smollett nowadays; yet I can name one minor Victorian novelist whose popularity, as far as it extends, appears imperishable. He wrote but few books and those only appealing to a small section of the community, and there are probably numbers of literary people who have never heard of, much less read, them. They exhibit no grace of style and are not free from a taint of vulgarity occasionally verging on coarseness; while the author, of whom it has been said with perhaps undue severity that he never depicted a gentleman, delighted in portraying the more sordid side of human nature. But though nearly seventy years have elapsed since the appearance of the most famous of his works, they are still as eagerly in demand as ever by the class to whom they appeal.

If proof of this assertion were demanded, I would in turn ask for the name of any other author, *reprints* of whose books, even granted the attraction of Leech's illustrations, still command their original price of issue of 15s. apiece; or if there be a country house in the United Kingdom where they are not to be found! How much this redounds to the culture of the class in question is a matter on which opinion may possibly be divided, but I defy anyone endowed with the slightest sense of humor to read them without appreciation. It is probably unnecessary for me to say that the author I have in mind is Robert Surtees, who, himself one of those smaller squires

whose foibles he delighted in portraying, has left us a picture of country life and country folk that is as true of today as of the period of which he wrote.

No doubt the march of fashion may have refined his fox-hunters, though not a few of them still survive, especially in his own North of England, but his minor characters, his farmers and farm-laborers, his country servants,

and publicans, and poachers are still true to type, and are to be found all over England. Even granted the semi-satirical vein of his style, no other author, not even Thomas Hardy nor Richard Jefferies, has ever depicted country people more faithfully; and on this account alone his books deserve a consideration that is not generally extended to them.

CASEY OF THE I. R. A.

BY AINDREIS BREATNAC

From the *Dublin Weekly Freeman*, January 6
(DUBLIN PRO-FREE STATE NEWSPAPER)

MILLORAN, County of X——, during the Irish War of Independence; or, to be more accurate, in the Year of Our Lord, 1920.

James Casey, the local schoolmaster, seated in the dining-room of his private residence adjoining the school, had just completed his dinner, and was about to light his pipe when his hand was stayed by an explosion, a terrific scream of agony, and, after an interval of a couple of seconds, volley upon volley of gunfire.

'My God! My God!' he exclaimed, jumping up. 'What on earth is the matter?'

Events developed with kaleidoscopic rapidity. He was dimly conscious of a squeal from his housekeeper, Mrs. Brannigan, who was hovering in the hall, when his door, which was on the latch, was burst violently open, and a former pupil of his, Tommy Muldoon, rushed in with a shotgun in his hand.

'Hide that!' he gasped, excitedly, thrusting the gun into the teacher's

hand, who immediately dropped it with a bang on the floor.

'What, what!' stammered the teacher, half in indignation, half in consternation.

Tommy Muldoon vouchsafed no reply, unless one could interpret the swift banging of a door in the rear as such.

'The impertinent little brat!' exclaimed the teacher angrily; 'the impudence of him leaving a gun in my house!'

He stared at the gun in stupefaction, until Mrs. Brannigan brought him to his senses by crying out hoarsely: 'What 'll we do wud it, sir? The sojers are comin', and they 'll murder us if they get it here.'

The teacher grabbed at the gun desperately, and looked wildly around for a hiding-place.

'My God, where 'll I put it, where 'll I put it?' he addressed excitedly to space. Rushing to the dining-room window, which was partly open, he noticed,