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Gossip About a Few Books: No. II

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GOSSIP ABOUT A FEW BOOKS.

NO. II.

A NEW SPIRIT OF THE AGE.

EDITED BY R. H. HORNE.

"A New Spirit of the Age" consists of 25 chapters, or articles, each containing critical and biographical sketches of one or more living British authors. Mr. Horne professes to be only "Editor;" but we give him credit for several of the most spirited articles. The diversities of style in the volume confirm his averment, (which we at first thought a quiz, like those employed to veil the authorship of Gulliver's Travels, Humphrey Clinker, Old Mortality, and many other novels,) that it is the production of several different hands. Its title and character were suggested, the preface says, by Hazlitt's Spirit of the Age, published 20 years ago.

Except in Macaulay's Reviews, we do not know where to find in the same compass, half so much sound, acute, and felicitous criticism, as this New Spirit of the Age embodies. If it errs, the error is always on the side of liberality. Indeed, so great is the predominance of praise, that most of the chapters are rather eulogies than judgments; yet they are eulogies so discriminating, so well sustained by skilful analysis of merits, and so often seasonably checked by a dash of judicious blame, that their justice stands abundantly vindicated. Occasionally, the blame is covered in terms of right caustic banter: as where, speaking of Bulwer's unsuccessful works, that have gone into forgetfulness, the critic says, "Then there have been patriotic songs and odes, in which there was a curious mixture of the roast-beef of Old England style, with an attempt at imaginative impulse and intensity of meaning, depending chiefly for high personifications and abstract qualities upon the use of capital letters;" or, as where, in relation to a saying attributed to Sir Lytton, that he became an Editor "to show that a gentleman might occupy such a position," our author says that if Sir Lytton said so, "it belongs to that 'dandiacal' portion of him, which disagreeably interferes with one's confidence in his sincerity."

About forty-three living writers are tabled for judgment, in the "New Spirit of the Age." And of these, only three are treated with a decided preponderance of censure—Thomas Ingoldsby, Theodore Hook, and Mrs. Trollope. The tremendous, yet gentlemanly severity, with which the author of the absurd and vicious "Ingoldsby Legends" and the coarse vulgarity of Mrs. Trollope are scourged, and the more tickling flagellation bestowed upon Hook's perpetual tuft-hunting and toad-eating, do our very hearts good.

Dickens, Talfourd, Macaulay, Carlyle, Miss Mar-

tineau, Mrs. Jameson, the Howitt's, and Sidney Smith, are among the writers criticised. The article on Dickens is the longest, and the analysis of him the most ample. Its praises are very high; and, we think, always just. But his faults are entirely overlooked. Perhaps the oblivion which is already closing over his "American Notes," and demonstrating their ephemeral nature, justifies the critic for sparing the lash upon their ill nature, injustice, and shallowness of observation. But through some of Mr. D.'s more admired works, there runs a fault which ought to be mentioned in every properly balanced estimate of his character as an author. It is the sneer, sometimes only chafing, but sometimes vicious, with which he treats natural frailties of humanity, and even institutions pregnant with good to mankind. In the first half of his *Pickwick Papers*, before he had made up his mind whether to heroize Mr. Pickwick, or to whelm him in ridicule,—

(Scamnumne faceret, an Priapum.)

that gentleman's whole history is but one perpetual sneer at his most amiable weaknesses. All that is most dear to men, and all that can most bless them,—Love, Religion, Temperance, Woman,—are the subjects of this cold and withering, though covert sneer. It pervades, too, the *Sketches of Boz*. We do not mean to say that Mr. Stiggins, "The Shepherd," is not really a despicable character—a drunken, long-faced pretender to sanctity. We do not mean to say that "The Brick-laying Branch of the Ebenezer Total Abstinence Society" is not a ridiculous mockery of the means of guarding against intemperance. But what we censure Mr. Dickens for, in those creations, is the way in which he passes off those mockeries for the real things they mock. By sneers, (proverbially irrefutable,) he convinces that numerous class of deep thinkers, both rich and poor, whose whole studies are of works like his, who always take caricatures for portraits, and a witticism for an argument, that all Methodism, nay, all Religion, is a humbug as Mr. Stiggins is; and that the absurd and oft fuddled "Brick-laying Branch" is a true type of that powerful and benign enginery, by which, in Ireland, Britain, and America, within twelve years, more money has been saved, more disease, vice and death have been prevented, more children been kept from beggary, and more female hearts from shame and anguish, than would balance the miseries caused by any war of Napoleon. It is a saying of Doctor Johnson, that to indulge, habitually, the emotion of contempt, either proves a mind to be weak, or makes it so. How greatly then, must Mr. Dickens have contributed to weaken the minds of his numerous readers! For where is the author who calls their feeling of contempt into such frequent exercise?—contempt for many of his best characters; Mr. Pickwick and his young fellow adventurer—even the Cheerful brothers, and their

faithful foreman, whose name we just now forget :—contempt for all charitable institutions—contempt for all persons—contempt for all lawyers, judges, and jurors—contempt for nine-tenths of womankind, and for ninety-nine-hundredths of mankind. One redeeming virtue of novels, among many hurtful effects, is their tendency to refine and elevate the character of their reader; to inspire generous sentiments, and nurture within him a steadfast integrity and inflexible moral courage. In this tendency, the fun-making fictions of Boz are extremely deficient. The reader seldom rises from the perusal of *his* novels, as from that of Miss Edgeworth's, or Miss Sedgewick's, or of Scott's, or Madame D'Arblay's, with the consciousness of being a braver and a better man than before. Another fault of Mr. Dickens, though a much smaller one, is the palpable mannerism of his style. The florid and alliterative eloquence of Counsellor Philips in his early days, or the everlasting "hope I don't intrude" of Paul Pry, is not a tithe so tiresome, because not a tithe so long drawn out, as a certain pet phraseology traceable from beginning to end of Boz' lucubrations. One of the most frequent specimens is his way of styling a very mean person "gentleman" or "lady." It is a favorite stroke of humor with him, to call a dirty-faced, ragged, and thievish boy, "that young gentleman." For once, or even twice, this would have been very well: but it is repeated so often, that we are reminded of a lively child, who having made somebody laugh by an odd noise, or a grotesque movement, does it over and over again till the beholder is tired. Again,—Mr. D. has injured the English language, by a quantity of slang which his use of it has canonized. But enough of this.

The article on "Lord Ashley and Dr. Southwood Smith" holds them up illustriously to view, as two of the greatest living benefactors of England. Lord Ashley's efforts in the House of Commons, and Dr. Smith's labors with his pen, in behalf of the oppressed operatives in English factories and coal mines, have earned for them a glory of which we were wholly unaware. This chapter is better worth studying than any other in the book we are reviewing. With singular felicity, it is placed immediately after the notice of Dickens; whose sensual, scornful, and anti-improvement spirit, are thus, to those minds which know him, placed in broad contrast with the active and enlightened benevolence of the young lord and the eminent physician. How we envy each of the two latter, his brilliant success in his particular walk, of talent and beneficence! The peer, his having repeatedly enchained for hours, the attention of the most fastidious assembly on earth, by his simple statements and well suggested remedies;—the doctor, his having won from the same assembly, and from a public equally fastidious, the most solid of all possible testimonials to his lucid, condensed, and powerful

Reports on the same subjects! And how far more desirable is the fame of either, than that of the upstart, who by throwing contempt on the benevolent institutions of his country,—on efforts to diffuse knowledge and suppress vice,—does all he can to prevent the rise of any, save himself, from the dregs whence he sprung!

M.

Shelbyville, Illinois, Oct. 21.