

Sympathy

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“Sympathy,” says Mr. Robert Louis Stevenson, “is a thing to be encouraged, apart from human considerations, because it supplies us with materials for wisdom. It is probably more instructive to entertain a sneaking kindness for any unpopular person than to give way to perfect raptures of moral indignation against his abstract vices.”

These are brave words, and spoken in one of those swift flashes of spiritual insight which at first bewilder and then console us. We have our share of sympathy; hearty, healthy, human sympathy for all that is strong and successful; but the force of moral indignation – either our own or our neighbors’ – has well-nigh cowed us into silence. The fashion of the day provides a procrustean standard for every form of distinction; and, if it does not fit, it is lopped down to the necessary insignificance. Those stern, efficient, one-sided men of action who made history at the expense of their finer natures; those fiery enthusiasts who bore down all just opposition to their designs; those loyal servants who saw no right nor wrong save in the will of their sovereigns; those keen-eyed statesmen who served their countries with craft, and guile, and dissimulation; those light-hearted prodigals who flung away their lives with a smile; – are none of these to yield us either edification or delight? “Do great deeds, and they will sing themselves,” says Emerson; but it must be confessed the songs are often of a very dismal and enervating character. Columbus did a great deed when he crossed the ocean and discovered the fair, unknown land of promise; yet many of the songs in which we sing his fame sound a good deal like pæans of reproach. The prevailing sentiment appears to be that a person so manifestly ignorant and improper should never have been permitted to discover America at all.

This sickly tone is mirrored in much of the depressing literature of our day. It finds amplest expression in such joyless books as “The Heavenly Twins,” the heroine of which remarks with commendable self-confidence that “The trade of governing is a coarse pursuit;” and also that “War is the dirty work of a nation; one of the indecencies of life.” She cannot even endure to hear it alluded to when she is near; but, like Athene, whose father, Zeus, “by chance spake of love matters in her presence,” she flies chastely from the very sound of such ill-doing. Now on first reading this sensitive criticism, one is tempted to a great

shout of laughter, quite as coarse, I fear, as the pursuit of governing, and almost as indecent as war. Ah! founders of empires, and masters of men, where are your laurels now? "If some people in public life were acquainted with Mrs. Witterly's real opinion of them," says Mr. Witterly to Kate Nickleby, "they would not hold their heads perhaps quite as high as they do." But in moments of soberness such distorted points of view seem rather more melancholy than diverting. Evadne is, after all, but the feeble reflex of an over-anxious age which has lost itself in a labyrinth of responsibilities. Shelley, whose rigidity of mind was at times almost inconceivable, did not hesitate to deny every attribute of greatness wherever he felt no sympathy. To him, Constantine was a "Christian reptile," a "stupid and wicked monster;" while of Napoleon he writes with the invincible gravity of youth. "Buonaparte's talents appear to me altogether contemptible and commonplace; incapable as he is of comparing connectedly the most obvious propositions, or relishing any pleasure truly enrapturing."

To the mundane and unpoetic mind it would seem that there were several propositions, obvious or otherwise, which Napoleon was capable of comparing quite connectedly, and that his ruthless, luminous fashion of dealing with such made him more terrible than fate. As for pleasures, he knew how to read and relish "Clarissa Harlowe," for which evidence of sound literary taste, one Englishman at least, Hazlitt, honored and loved him greatly. If we are seeking an embodiment of unrelieved excellence who will work up well into moral anecdotes and journalistic platitudes, the emperor is plainly not what we require. But when we have great men under consideration, let us at least think of their greatness. Let us permit our little hearts to expand, and our little eyes to sweep a broad horizon. There is nothing in the world I dislike so much as to be reminded of Napoleon's rudeness to Madame de Staël, or of Cæsar's vain attempt to hide his baldness. Cæsar was human; that is his charm; and Madame de Staël would have sorely strained the courtesy of good King Arthur. Had she attached herself unflinchingly to his court, it is probable he would have ended by requesting her to go elsewhere.

On the other hand, it is never worth while to assert that genius repeals the decalogue. We cannot believe with M. Waliszewski that because Catherine of Russia was a great ruler she was, even in the smallest degree, privileged to be an immoral woman, to give "free course to her senses imperially." The same commandment binds with equal rigor both empress and costermonger. But it is the greatness of Catherine, and not her immorality, which concerns us deeply. It is the greatness of Marlborough, of Richelieu, and of Sir Robert Walpole

which we do well to consider, and not their shortcomings, though from the tone assumed too often by critics and historians, one would imagine that duplicity, ambition and cynicism were the only attributes these men possessed; that they stood for their vices alone. One would imagine also that the same sins were quite unfamiliar in humble life, and had never been practised on a petty scale by lawyers and journalists and bank clerks. Yet vice, as Sir Thomas Browne reminds us, may be had at all prices. “Expensive and costly iniquities which make the noise cannot be every man’s sins; but the soul may be foully iniquated at a very low rate, and a man may be cheaply vicious to his own perdition.”

It is possible then to overdo moral criticism, and to cheat ourselves out of both pleasure and profit by narrowing our sympathies, and by applying modern or national standards to men of other ages and of another race. Instead of realizing, with Carlyle, that eminence of any kind is a most wholesome thing to contemplate and to revere, we are perpetually longing for some crucial test which will divide true heroism – as we now regard it – from those forceful qualities which the world has hitherto been content to call heroic. I have heard people gravely discuss the possibility of excluding from histories, from school histories especially, the adjective “great,” wherever it is used to imply success unaccompanied by moral excellence. Alfred the Great might be permitted to retain his title. Like the “blameless Ethiops,” he is safely sheltered from our too penetrating observation. But Alexander, Frederick, Catherine, and Louis should be handed down to future ages as the “well-known.” Alexander the Well-Known! We can all say that with clear consciences, and without implying any sympathy or regard for a person so manifestly irregular in his habits, and seemingly so devoid of all altruistic emotions. It is true that Mr. Addington Symonds has traced a resemblance between the Macedonian conqueror, and the ideal warrior of the Grecian camp, Achilles the strong-armed and terrible. Alexander, he maintains, is Achilles in the flesh; passionate, uncontrolled, with an innate sense of what is great and noble; but “dragged in the mire of the world and enthralled by the necessities of human life.” The difference between them is but the difference between the heroic conception of a poet and the stern limitations of reality.

Apart, however, from the fact that Mr. Symonds was not always what the undergraduate lightly calls “up in ethics,” it is to be feared that Achilles himself meets with scant favor in our benevolent age. “Homer mirrors the world’s young manhood;” but we have grown old and exemplary, and shake our heads over the lusty fierceness of the warrior, and the facile repentance of Helen, and the

wicked wiles of Circe, which do not appear to have met with the universal reprobation they deserve. On the contrary, there is a blithe good-temper in the poet's treatment of the enchantress, whose very name is so charming it disarms all wrath. Circe! The word is sweet upon our lips; and this light-hearted embodiment of beauty and malice is not to be judged from the bleak stand-point of Salem witch-hunters. If we are content to take men and women, in and out of books, with their edification disguised, we may pass a great many agreeable hours in their society, and find ourselves unexpectedly benefited even by those who appear least meritorious in our eyes. A frank and generous sympathy for any much maligned and sorely slandered character, – such, for instance, as Graham of Claverhouse; a candid recognition of his splendid virtues and of his single vice; a clear conception of his temperament, his ability, and his work, – these things are of more real service in broadening our appreciations, and interpreting our judgments, than are a score of unqualified opinions taken ready-made from the most admirable historians in Christendom. It is a liberal education to recognize, and to endeavor to understand any form of eminence which the records of mankind reveal.

As for the popular criticism which fastens on a feature and calls it a man, nothing can be easier or more delusive. Claverhouse was merciless and densely intolerant; but he was also loyal, brave, and reverent; temperate in his habits, cleanly in his life, and one of the first soldiers of his day. Surely this leaves some little balance in his favor. Marlborough may have been as false as Judas and as ambitious as Lucifer; but he was also the greatest of English-speaking generals, and England owes him something better than picturesque invectives. What can we say to people who talk to us anxiously about Byron's unkindness to Leigh Hunt, and Dr. Johnson's illiberal attitude towards Methodism, and Scott's incomprehensible friendship for John Ballantyne; who remind us with austere dissatisfaction that Goldsmith did not pay his debts, and that Lamb drank more than was good for him, and that Dickens dressed loudly and wore flashy jewelry? I don't care what Dickens wore. I would not care if he had decorated himself with bangles, and anklets, and earrings, and a nose-ring, provided he wrote "Pickwick" and "David Copperfield." If there be any living novelist who can give us such another as Sam Weller, or Dick Swiveller, or Mr. Micawber, or Mrs. Gamp, or Mrs. Nickleby, let him festoon himself with gauds from head to foot, and wedge his fingers "knuckle-deep with rings," like the lady in the old song, and then sit down and write. The world will readily forgive him his embellishments. It has forgiven Flaubert his dressing-gown,

and George Sand her eccentricities of attire, and Goldsmith his coat of Tyrian bloom, and the blue silk breeches for which he probably never paid his tailor. It has forgiven Dr. Johnson all his little sins; and Lamb the only sin for which he craves forgiveness; and Scott – but here we are not privileged even to offer pardon. “It ill becomes either you or me to compare ourselves with Scott,” said Thackeray to a young writer who excused himself for some literary laxity by saying that “Sir Walter did the same.” “We should take off our hats whenever that great and good man’s name is mentioned in our presence.”