CHARLES JAMES LEVER
(1806 - 1872)

A MEMORIAL DISCOURSE

DELIVERED

in the Chapel of Trinity College, Dublin,
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BY

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(1806–1872.)

"A merry heart doeth good like medicine."
—Proverbs, XVII, 22.

It is refreshing to turn from an age in which most young people seem to have been born old to an age in which even the old were perennially young; when, to the view of those at any rate who could afford to wear rose-coloured spectacles, the world was seen as a playground and life itself as a continual jest. To us who live in sterner, soberer times, that age in Ireland—only just over a century ago—has all the unreality of a stage performance.

Lever was the embodiment of the romantic extravagance of his age. His books reflected it in high relief, and he was himself the visible embodiment of what he wrote. He was himself in fact the perpetrator of many of the escapades and practical jokes which he recorded and was either a witness or an auditor of the rest. He was not, and made no pretence of being, a creative artist. The American poet Poë made the acute remark that his anecdotes "have the air of being remembered rather than invented." And Miss E. OE. Somerville has written: "Lever was a Dublin man, who lived most of his life on the Continent, and worked like a scene painter by artificial light, from memoranda. His brilliant and extravagant books, with their ever enchanting Mickey Frees and Corney Delanys, merely created and throned the stage Irishman." While of himself he wrote with characteristic candour: "I wrote as I felt—sometimes in good spirits, sometimes in bad, and always carelessly, for, God help me, I can do no better . . . The sense of a new venture was pretty

much as eventful to me as the turn of the right colour at *rouge et noir*. The world had for me all the interest of an admirable comedy, in which the part allotted to myself, if not high or a foreground one, was eminently suited to my taste, and brought me besides sufficiently often on to the stage to enable me to follow all the fortunes of the piece." In fact, the laughter of his guests who listened breathlessly to the sparkle of his talk, and the applause of his public who read his boisterous novels, were meat and drink to him. Even in boyhood he was the leader of theatricals at home and at school, and from youth when he led the revels in old Trinity—from then on through many vicissitudes to the end of his days—he must ever be in the limelight and the centre of attraction.

Lack of application drew out his residence in College (in no. 2, overlooking the Provost's garden) to five years, when at last he qualified for his degree in arts; and four years more for his degree in medicine. Then followed a year or more at Göttingen University to attend lectures in medicine and surgery. There he made friends with the notorious and exclusive set of student duellists, and nearly fought a duel himself; that the meeting was abandoned was due to no lack of courage on his part. He could fence and box, ride and row, sail and swim with the best of them, and did all of them with zest and vigour.

Then at the age of twenty-six he came suddenly for the first time into close contact with horror and affliction. During the cholera epidemic of 1832 he volunteered for service and was posted to a bleak and poverty-stricken area in Co. Clare, where this most hideous of diseases was at its height. The experience made a deep impression on his mind. Years later he wrote : " Even to recall some of the incidents of that time was an effort of great pain. Of one feature of the people I could not say enough, nor could any words of mine do justice to their splendid heroism, and the noble generosity they showed to each other in

misfortune. I never, in any condition or class, recognised more traits of thoughtful kindness and self-denial than I did among these poor, famished, and forgotten people." And it was observed by them that his mere presence among them was as much a tonic as any of his physic. His gaiety and confidence, kindness and jocularity, roused them from despondency and infected them with another and more wholesome contagion. It was here that he earned the soubriquet, 'Dr. Quicksilver.'

There followed some seven years of successful doctoring in Portstewart and Brussels and elsewhere ; for though not brilliant in his chosen profession, Lever was capable and conscientious. But at intervals he was throwing off in haphazard fashion, and without the least confidence of success, a series of antedotes for the *Dublin University Magazine*, entitled " The Confessions of Harry Lorrequer" —a character which, he later confessed, was virtually himself. Greatly to his astonishment the publisher wrote 'Go on.' " No thought of future authorship occurred to me, far less did I dream of abandoning my profession as a physician for the precarious livelihood of the pen . . . But if this sort of thing amuses them, thought I, I can go on forever; and so I launched forth with all that prodigal waste of material which, if it forms one of the reasons of success, is also one among the many demerits of the story."

Surprising as it may seem, his own exemplar in the literature of romance was not Fielding or Sterne or any such rombustious writer, but no less a person than Sir Walter Scott. He had nourished his imagination on the Waverley novels from boyhood, and their author was his *beau ideal* of all that a novelist should be to the end. The year before he died he could still write : " The finest part of Scott's nature to my thinking was the grand heroic spirit —that trumpet-stop on his organ—which elevated our commonplace people and stirred the heart of all that was high-spirited and generous amongst us .... The very

influence that a gentleman exerts in society on a knot of inferiors was the sort of influence Scott brought to bear upon the whole nation. All felt that there was at least one there before whom nothing mean or low or shabby should be exhibited." His very facility was his main source of difficulty ; he was continually begging his publisher to send him the proofs of a previous instalment so that he could start on the next, as he had not the slightest recollection where he had left his characters. And these proofs were by no means always supplied. But the fact that his books caught the public fancy at once, and began to sell like hot cakes, was a source of genuine amazement. " I never was fortunate yet without being the man most astonished at my own good luck." It is by these early, rollicking, devil-may-care novels that Lever's fame was won : *Harry Lorrequer, Charles O'Malley, Jack Hinton, Tom Burke, Arthur O'Leary,* and *The O'Donaghue;* but it is not by these that he would himself most wish to be remembered. His tale *St. Patrick's Eve,* published in 1845, marks a distinct turning point in his career as an author. Its tone was serious, its purpose political, and it is evident that he was for the first time taking pains with his style. His political principles had always been those of an old-fashioned Tory, and so they remained more or less all his life. He had no patience with the agitation for Repeal. But in this book—which is the first utterance of his literary maturity—he takes his old friends the landlords to task, and challenges his critics to hit as hard as they liked and he would give back as good as he got. He certainly, he says, will not spare the owners of property " who prefer factitious political influence to a position of credit and honour, and self-indulgence to the high duties of their station." In the dedication of the book to his children he struck the same unwonted note of earnestness : " Think that, when I wrote it, I desired to inculcate the truth that prosperity has as many duties as adversity has sorrows; that those to whom Providence has accorded many blessings

are but the stewards of His bounty to the poor, and that the neglect of an obligation so sacred is a grievous wrong, and may be the origin of evils for which all your efforts to do good through life will be but a poor atonement." This little book, slight as it is, is also a revelation of another kind—a personal one : it reveals Lever's first sense of disillusionment with the Ireland that he had idealized. He resigned his Editorship of the *Dublin University Magazine* and henceforth his Continental tours became more frequent and more prolonged. Not that any other country ever displaced Ireland in his affections; to the end of his life he professed himself to be Irish to the bone. But he loved sunshine and scenery on the grand scale—mountains and forests, glens, glaciers and cataracts, Germany, Austria, Italy—and his restless spirit demanded constant change of scene. He had even in his adventurous youth penetrated into the backwoods of Canada and had only escaped perpetual exile among Red Indian tribes by a ruse and the timely help of a native trader. No man of his times could be called more highly civilized than Lever, yet with his mercurial temperament he often longed to throw off the restraints of civilization. He was in every sense of the word always a traveller.

Among those who read his books with admiration were two lady novelists of established reputation, Miss Edgeworth and Miss Mitford; and, more surprisingly still, a great poetess, Mrs. Browning, who met him in Florence and thus wrote of him to Miss Mitford : " A most cordial vivacious manner, a glowing countenance, with the animal spirits predominant over the intellectual, yet the intellectual by no means in default. Natural too, and a *gentleman* past mistake." Her estimate is, however, cold in comparison with those of many others from well-known personalities of both sexes, as, for example, this :

" One of the most genial spirits I ever met; his conversation is like summer lightning—brilliant, sparkling,

but harmless. In his wildest sallies I never heard him give utterance to an unkind thought . . . He was the complete type and model of an Irishman—warm-hearted, witty, rollicking, but never unrefined; imprudent, and often blind to his own interests; adored by his friends, the playfellow of his children and of the gigantic boar-hound he had brought from the Austrian Tyrol." As he himself once wrote, in reference to another man, " the men who link genius with geniality are the true salt of the earth." He would have claimed for himself the geniality but not the genius, for of his own writings he was never other than modest and self-critical. This fact comes out very strongly in his letters to Miss Edgeworth, whom he regarded as the novelist *par excellence* of Irish life. To her he wrote of the " halting incoherency of my slovenly inartistic narratives which I have only to look back upon to see . . . But even when I strive after better things I invariably find that every step upwards is made at the cost of injury to my popularity." But Miss Edgeworth's constant encouragement to him to go on and fear not was backed by that of other contemporary writers of even more exalted rank, and by their personal friendship: Dickens, Thackeray, and Trollope, the first two especially. Dickens indeed proved to be the best and most patient friend of them all, inviting contributions to his periodical *All The Year Round*, and helping Lever out of many difficult straits, both literary and financial. Dickens wrote to him : " I put my hand in yours and say, out of my heart, that I never had to do with a more frank, more genial, more kind and considerate friend than I have found in you ; and that I heartily bless the evening that did at last bring us together. After this, will you begin to believe, my dear Lever, not only that I want you now, but that I have wanted such a generous spirit in a man, many a long day. And so, God bless you."

An attempt at comparison between the two is, I suppose,

inevitable. Lever did not possess a tithe of Dickens' exuberant genius, but there was a kinship of spirit between them—in humour and humanity, in love of good fellowship and goodwill, in compassion for the waifs and strays of mankind. Lever's characters are in the main no more than types; those of Dickens—multitudes of them—are each one of them individuals, even to the point of caricature. Mickey Free is but a pale reflection of Sam Weller.

Thackeray dedicated his *Irish Sketch Book* to Lever and in it wrote : " It was pleasant in travelling through the country to find that there was, at any rate, one subject in Ireland about which all parties were disposed to agree . . . You keep a nation in good humour." It is perhaps worth mentioning that some consider Lever's *Knight of Gwynne* a better character study than Thackeray's *Colonel Newcome.*

Trollope wrote : " Surely never did a sense of vitality come so constantly from a man's pen, nor from a man's voice, as from his. Of all the men I have ever encountered, he was the surest fund of drollery. Rouse him in the mid of night, and wit would come from him before he was half awake, and yet he never monopolized the talk. He would take no more than his share of the words spoken, and would yet seem to brighten all that was said."

His output of work in a life of under 66 years was enormous. He wrote 33 books in all—some of them very long ones. Now he was often driving his horses in a pair, that is, writing two books at a time; once it was actually a trio. He was also writing more carefully, with greater attention both to style and to psychology; so carefully indeed that towards the end he sometimes tore up three pages for one that he wrote. But it was too late. He had never troubled to learn the technique of his craft till his imaginative force was waning. These later books, which he considered his best, are not the books

which pleased his public most. All the gaiety and merriment of his earlier books is in them, but also that same unwonted tone of moral earnestness : he was growing more and more concerned with the political and social welfare of his country. He was convinced that the remedy for its ills lay less in legislative enactment than in mutual understanding, tolerance, charity, and good will. There were faults, he felt, to be acknowledged and amended on both sides.

Advancing years brought him an accumulation of misfortunes when, to better his failing fortunes, he accepted the uncongenial posts of Vice-Consul at Spezzia and Trieste. Increasing bodily infirmities which he well knew could have but one end; the reckless and unmanageable conduct of his only son upon whose upbringing he had lavished every care; the unhappy marriage of one of his daughters which ended in separation; the death of his elder brother—a clergyman—whom he loved; and, most heart-breaking of all, the permanent invalidism of his wife. His boy died young and the grief-stricken father wrote to a friend:

" I have for some years back had many misfortunes: this one fills the cup. My wife is dying, and this shock may be her last. My poor boy was 26, the finest, boldest, cleverest fellow you ever saw. The great struggle of my life was his advancement; to place him in a high and honourable position and to maintain him there was an effort for which I toiled till I left myself penniless and could scarce collect enough to pay the expenses for his burial. So much for human foresight ! All my love and all my toil to be under the small mound in the churchyard ! I wish from my heart the race was run and I could lie down beside my poor Charley."

Seven years later he was bereft of his wife, the kind companion of all his joys and sorrows. Nothing in Lever's character is more beautiful than his lifelong devotion to her and to his children. She had been from boyhood's days

his first and only love; no other woman he ever met could hold a place in his dearest affections. Now despite the long strain of her hopeless illness, frequent operations, many a sleepless night spent at her bedside, and the sad change that suffering had wrought in her, he was devastated by her loss. " All the happiness of my life has gone, and all the support. God's greatest mercy would be to take me from a life of daily looking back, which is all that remains to me now."

Two more years of life were left him; and yet, despite all his sorrows, he contrived to be still a fellow of infinite jest and of a most excellent fancy. His flashes of merriment could still set the table on a roar—and this was literally true up to the very day before his death. His pen was busy to the end. He was reading the proofs of his last book *Lord Kilgobbin*—in three volumes—only a few weeks before he died.

One searches in vain through Lever's books, voluminous letters which have all the brilliance of his books, and records of his conversations which are as witty and spontaneous as either—for any trace of religious feeling. In point of fact he had none, though he interested himself in the affairs of the churches he perfunctorily attended, and three or four of his most intimate friends were clergymen of repute. After bereavement he wrote that, whilst sensible of the truthfulness of what are called the consolations of religion, for a worldly-minded man like himself they did not apply. And when on his last visit to Trinity College, he attended the chapel for divine service, he wrote : " Though only a few hours here I was known and ushered into a grand stall, and attracted such attention that I dared not sleep during the sermon."

And yet if to be kind and generous in prosperity and courageous in adversity; if to be pure in heart and word and deed; if to think whatsoever things are just, honest,

honourable and of good report—if these are qualities that make for religious feelings, then in that sense, if in no other, Lever was an essentially religious man. He never in his life, as he said himself, wrote a line that a gentleman would feel ashamed of writing or that a lady would blush to read. He never told a story while the port circulated with the dessert, that he would be afraid to repeat in the drawing-room. He was a faithful and devoted husband, a thoughtful and affectionate father, a kind and steadfast friend.

Perhaps a fitting epitaph for him would be that of the poet Walter Savage Landor :

> " I strove with none, for none was worth my strife;
> Nature I loved and, next to Nature, Art ;
> I warmed both hands before the fire of life ;
> It sinks, and I am ready to depart."