Irving's Humor.

WAS it Thackeray who defined humor as wit and love? It was that same dreadful cynic who wrote at the end of his 'Book of Snobs' that 'fun is good, truth is better, but love is best of all.'

This is the touchstone of all humor that has lasted or will last a hundred years—sympathy with humanity. Humor that wants this is something ghastly, an empty and mocking laughter. It is the railing at weakness, the bitter contempt of shams, the Titanesque, grotesque, unsympathetic merriment heard out of Olympus where Carlyle sits and hoots at his insignificant fellow-mortals. We laugh, and shrink from it, and speedily get enough of it. Not so with the humor of Cervantes, whose people we laugh at, but love the more we laugh at them.

Perhaps THE CRITIC can prove in its centennial estimate of Washington Irving, that he was not a great man, and that he owed to primacy in our letters, rather than to genius, his conspicuous position. But a writer does not hold his place in literature for nearly a century by any accident of being first in a provincial field; nor does he hold it merely by style, which is more or less the fashion of a time. Whatever the quality of his genius or the measure of his capacity may be, Irving is personally beloved as few other writers of this century are. But the amiable and lovely traits of an author will not hand him down in affectionate remembrance much past his own generation unless there is something in his writings that the world loves as well. And I am inclined to think that the world, bad as it likes to describe itself, parts as reluctantly, when it is compelled to throw aside the accumulating literary baggage which the ages impose upon it, from the pages warm with human sympathy as from those glowing with intellectual brilliance. Irving held the attitude of a dispassionate observer, never exhibiting undue heat over the wrongs and sufferings of life, and never taking an active part in the conflicts of his time. It might seem probable therefore that the world would pay back indifference with indifference. But we must not misjudge this seeming indifference; for while Irving was neither a fighter nor a reformer, no writer of his time had a warmer sympathy with humanity than he. Without this his humor would have been comparatively barren, much of it mere whimsical and heartless exaggeration. He was born with the gift of seeing the humorous and even the ridiculous side of life, but he was born also with the greater gift, not only to make us see the ludicrous in human action, but to make us love the very actors who amuse us. This, it seems to me, is the characteristic of Irving's humor, as nearly as it can be analyzed in the few paragraphs to which I am limited. It has other characteristics to be sure. One is its purity; another the verbal felicity with which it is presented; and another is a certain irresponsible whimsicality, and the delicate American trick of restraint and understatement. But that which will carry it on through all literary fashions is its exquisite deference to humanity.

A sober and just eulogy of the early settlers of New York would never have conferred upon them the immortality which they enjoy in the 'Knickerbocker,' nor embalmed them in such affectionate remembrance as we all hold them in. People are not proud to claim kinship with ancestors who are merely ridiculous, nor would it now be considered an honor to descend from Irving's heroes, if his genius had not thrown about his amusing portraiture of them an atmosphere of fond regard—if we did not see in them certain qualities of human nature that touch our hearts. The humor that depicted them was poetic as well as playful, and they exist for us in that Indian-summer haze of content and comfortable innocence which fortunately hides the faults of all the dear departed out of this life.

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