III

Canon Sheehan's "The Intellectuals"*

The author calls the imaginary meetings and discussions of his little group of characters an "experiment in Irish club life" and hopes something like it may come true, "when under the influences of wider and more rational systems of education, the barriers of racial and sectarian prejudices may be broken down and the higher humanities accepted as an integral portion of social and domestic life." The members of the club, who take the name of Sunetoi on account of their "quick understanding and grasp of intellect," comprise the parish priest, the leading physician and the leading banker and their wives, a learned professor of Queen's College, a young woman who is a "B.A. of the Royal," a Scotch lady of severely accurate habits, and a young English civil engineer who writes verses. All but the last two are Irish Catholics, though with varying views on religion, politics and every other subject. The only member who has no ideas and cannot quote from the best writers in all languages is the banker, who of course is useful as a foil and as an excuse for explaining matters now and then to the reader. Later a genuine minor poet joins them. The club holds thirty-seven sessions, each of which is reported in detail and the number of subjects discussed and the amount of information interchanged are prodigious. It is an exceedingly elastic frame-work, admitting almost everything that the author happens to have read or thought about.

Thus a club meeting may begin with a discussion as to what constitutes a gentleman and end with Copernicus, as "the one man who has emancipated the human mind." Or a member may start gaily with the remark, "That brings up the eternal question, 'What is poetry?'" and they are soon saying what Wordsworth thought of Burns and how much Carlyle liked "Tam o' Shanter" and that poets are not always cleanly in their habits and that it is a mistake to suppose this earth is an oblate spheroid flattened at the poles, for it is really pear-shaped, and somebody quotes a line from Shakespeare and says it towers above men like the untrodden peaks of the Himalayas and somebody asks if it is greater than Halley's Comet. It gives a chance too for long lists of literary likes and dislikes. Somebody hates *Alice in Wonderland*. Somebody else adores it. The Professor deplores all French drama except Molière, thinks Calderon nearly as great as Shakespeare, prefers *Comus* to *Paradise Lost*, detests the *Faerie Queen*, and Montaigne and Goethe's *Faust*, and likes *Julius Cæsar* the best of Shakespeare's plays, and so on without reason or sign of intimacy or any contradiction from the others. And the others in their turn revel in equally bald assertions.

"I don't know, in the whole of my experience of authors, a more unreliable, unsafe and untrustworthy guide than the aforesaid Lord Macaulay."

There was a gasp of surprise, but the Professor went on:

"I always distrust preacher, teacher or critic who is absolutely sure of himself, and who dogmatises in such a manner that he leaves

*The Intellectuals. By Canon Sheehan. New York: Longmans, Green and Company. 1911. Pp. 386.

no room for a second opinion. I suppose such dogmatism offends my sense of pride, and I rise up in natural revolt against it. But I find invariably that modest men are right. I remember, and never without a sense of indignation, all the bitter and unjust things that were said against young poets at the commencement of the last century, poets that are now enshrined and immortal. And when I find Macaulay and Matthew Arnold adopting the same tone of infallibility, I at once reverse their verdict in my own mind. I conceived an aversion to the *Vicar of Wakefield* because Macaulay somewhere praises that book, and if anything could add to my adoring appreciation of Shelley it is the highly absurd censorship which Matthew Arnold assumes toward that poet and his works. Among our writers I have seen nowhere such just and impartial criticism of our English poets as that of Mr. Lowell; and, of course, in France, Sainte-Beuve remains supreme."

"You seem to think, Professor," said Mr. Hunt, "that poets are not the best or most impartial judges of poets."

"Certainly not. The very best proof of this is that poets are invariably the worst judges of their own work. You will hardly find a single case where the judgment of the poet and the judgment of the public is at one."

And there is a great deal about

> All the glory that was Greece,
> All the grandeur that was Rome,

and the value of a classical education and the claims of science and the modern languages, and the utilitarian members are easily downed by familiar quotations like the one above, and somebody quotes a Greek line and avers that the words have no equivalents in English, and nobody ever cites an English word that has no equivalent in Greek, for that would argue a very low taste indeed. Where would you find an English equivalent of *polyphloisbois thalasses* or *dakruoen gelasasa?* And nobody dares reply.

"Do you really mean, Professor," said the Doctor, interrupting rather brusquely, "that a man who is devoted to science cannot be a gentleman?"

"If you mean exclusively devoted to science," said the Professor blandly, "I say certainly, Yes! He cannot. The reason is plain. A gentleman is one of refined habits and feelings, sensitive to his own honour and others' comfort, physically unable to do anything coarse or rude. To raise the human mind to that level, ideas, as Miss Fraser so aptly said, are absolutely necessary; and these must be lofty and transcendent ideas—ideas that lift and raise and elevate above everything sordid and coarse and mean. Now, a scientist has to deal not with ideas, but with facts; and facts are vulgar things."

It is meant that religion shall get the better of science in these discussions and the classics prevail over the bread and butter studies.

We have quoted and summarised the text rather freely in a conscientious desire to offset our possibly biassed opinion that it is all rather pedantic and laboured. The style is exceedingly redundant, and as in the above passage, the reader often wonders why the "lofty" ideas should be made not only to "lift" but also to "raise" and "elevate." It has packed into one volume nearly as much as Dr. Holmes put into the whole "Breakfast Table" series, and its scope is more ambitious. Its Professor is more multifarious, its Poet is more persistent, than Holmes's ventured to be. At every point the worthy motive may be discerned. The writer is sure that he possesses "Culture" and he is trying to give some to us. He has read what he ought to read and he remembers a good deal of it. But he writes in a way that raises some delicate doubts as to his digestion. There must be a good many *Atlantic Monthly* contributions in such a man, but would that be a comfortable feeling? There are reckless consumers that had rather forget everything they have read than secrete only *Atlantic Monthly* contributions. This club for the domestication of the "higher humanities" is not a cheerful vision of the future, and the author's hope that it may some time come true is not an altogether kindly one. Its members seem dispirited by good traditions and overborne by worthy books. They are the "flat unraiséd spirits" of the higher plane. The chief result of their wide readings is the complacent sense of having done the gentlemanly thing.

But now and then when the Sunetoi forget that they are intellectual and talk of matters intimate or local their manner

is more spirited. Some good hard knocks are given to Parnell.

As for his aggregate work for Ireland, I tell you, it was the people behind Parnell and not Parnell himself, that won his battles. It was the poor devils that suffered themselves to be flung out on the road, that went to gaol, to the plank-bed and the skilly, not to the first-class hotel fare of Kilmainham; it was poor Davitt and O'Brien that won back the land from the stranger.

There is a very slight love story running through the book, terminating happily, and the attempt is made to develop each character sufficiently to give him an individual interest. The poet, who is described as the greatest of the minor poets in England, turns out to be a lord. "I fear," he says, after reading one of his poems, "I have been prolix," and the apprehension seems to us well founded, but it is only fair to quote in part

We glide from out the mists of Time,
Far, far away the fog-bell's chime
Seems through the sounds of seas to climb.

And farther, farther going,
Into the sunset faintly glowing,
From ocean into ocean flowing,

Over the seas as smooth as glass,
Mirrors unflecked, we swiftly pass,
The treasures of the deep amass,

Not in its ooze of pearl and gold,
The great, grey seas in their depths enfold,
Sought in the eld by mariners bold.

But in glorious day-dreams that ever come,
When sky, and sea, and lips are dumb,
And the albatross comes wheeling home.

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C. M. French.