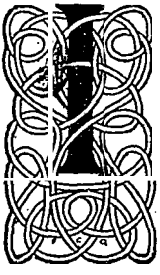
FOUR BIOGRAPHIES



N assigning biographers to the men whose lives are here to be considered, fate, though it has delivered them all into the hands of their friends, has not treated all with equal kindness. It will be convenient, in considering these four new books, to speak first of the three "theatrical" biographies, and of these first of the Irving, concerning which there is naturally a present curiosity.

The reader, as he makes his way through Mr. Stoker's two handsome and generously illustrated volumes, will now and again incline to the opinion that "Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving"[1] might with equal propriety have been entitled "Autobiographical Sketches of Bram Stoker." The author takes the stage-center in the Preface, and throughout is more in the limelight than the biographical proprieties permit. So much is this the case that at times Irving slips into the middle distance, fades into the far distance, or quite vanishes over the horizon. But if Mr. Stoker has sometimes found it impossible duly to suppress himself, the reader will forgive him, for, if not a prince of biographers, he is still a stanch friend, who put at the service of the man he worshiped a cultivated mind and a good heart, and has here recorded a friendship honorable both to Irving and himself.

These reminiscences make no pretense of being, and are not, a formal biography. Of Irving's parentage, of his early struggles, of his private life, or of the inner life of his mind, we hear little. What we do get here is a full chronicle of his career as an actor from 1878, when Mr. Stoker became his acting manager, until his death. There are sketches of his associates—the pages given to Ellen Terry are especially pleasant reading—and circumstantial accounts, detailed to the last degree, of his stage triumphs, and of his wrestling with the difficult problems that confronted him in striving to perfect the rich and elaborate realistic stage-settings for which he was famous—this last, in the opinion of many, largely a misplaced effort, since it tended to distract the audience from the business of the play, and to set it agape at the ingenuity of stage-carpenters, scene-painters, and upholsterers.

Another striking feature of this book is the picture it presents of the social side of Irving's career, a phase of his subject upon which Mr. Stoker never tires of enlarging. Indeed, the reader would be content with less talk of the titled and distinguished acquaintances who, whatever Irving may have been to them, were little or nothing to Irving. And when he has read all that Mr. Stoker has thought it worth while to set down on this head, he will be tempted to exclaim with Artemus Ward, "This is 2 mutch." Pages and pages that might have done better service are given to mere lists of men and women of name and fame, from Queen Victoria, King Edward, and Presidents of the United States down, who have either been entertained by Irving in the Beefsteak Room or on the stage of the Lyceum, or who have themselves entertained him. No

[1] *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving.* By Bram Stoker. The Macmillan Company, New York.

other actor, not even Garrick, has been so honored socially. Chiefs in every line of endeavor—poets, painters, sculptors, prime ministers, archbishops, and authors—graced his entertainments, and returned in kind his generous hospitality.

Besides chronicling Irving's histrionic achievements and recording his social triumphs, the "Reminiscences" aims to make us intimately acquainted with Irving the man. In this the author has but imperfectly succeeded. He lacks the gift of the creative biographer who can bare to us the heart of his hero and make him live in the pages of his book. From Mr. Stoker we do get, however, a very clear conception of the group of qualities which we are accustomed to associate with Irving's name, and which made him loved and respected beyond any other English actor of his generation. We see in him a masterly man, a man of fine grain, with a clear, strong mind and a kind heart; a man who strained every nerve for the honor of his art, and was steadfast in the pursuit of his ideals; one, too, who was affectionate to his friends, and considerate to even the humblest of his fellow-workers. Other shortcomings there are in these volumes besides the failure to make known to us the real Irving—Irving the man, as distinguished from Irving the actor. We get from them little idea of the development of his art, of his histrionic limitations, or of the relative excellence of his impersonations. But, after all is said, this is a book to be grateful for, a book that will be of deep interest to gentlemen of "the profession," and an important contribution to the history of the English stage.

In "Garrick and His Circle"[1] the actor who held in the eighteenth century a position not unlike that of Irving in the nineteenth is the protagonist. He is properly presented as an innovator, the triumphant champion of the new natural way of acting, that abjured the strutting, bellowing, and blustering of the old school. Mrs. Parsons's book is first of all a life of the greatest of English actors, a record of his triumphs and a study of his methods. It is also a broad picture of the social life of the day. Garrick is followed into all the circles he frequented, and we make the acquaintance of the great company of his friends and associates. First and foremost we meet Peg Woffington—Peg the irresistible, "sweet with the piquancy of wild honey, and mutable as quicksilver," who, from crying halfpenny tarts in the streets of Dublin, came to have all London at her feet. To her charms Garrick—he was then twenty-five, she twenty-four—succumbed, and, for once forgetting his aspirations toward high respectability, would have made her his wife, had not Peggy firmly declined "to be cast for the wife's part in any 'Constant Couple' of real life." The theatrical society of the day—its whimsicalities, its vanities, its vulgarities, its frailties, and its estimable qualities—is presented with the greatest possible fidelity and vivacity. There are, too, admirable pictures of the choicest literary circles of the day, which Garrick much frequented. He dined often with the great men of "The Club"—with Dr. Johnson, Goldsmith, Gibbon, Reynolds, and the rest. His fame as an actor, combined with a good mind, extraordinary social gifts, and a something of the *bel air* in his manner, also gave him an *entrée* to the highest circles of rank and fashion. The doors of many of the best houses in England opened to him, and he was a valued friend of many people in the great world, and of many of those who steered the ship of state. This book, besides being an admirable study of Garrick, is a gallery of admirably executed eighteenth-century portraits, a repertory of most delectable anecdotes that strike with perfect truth the keynote of the period, and a mine of curious and out-of-the-way information in regard to eighteenth-century theaters, the physical conditions of the stage, the tumultuous behavior of audiences, the costumes of actors and actresses, and no end of other matters of a kind that will be keenly relished.

Molière, first of all a dramatist, was also an actor, and one who, in certain aspects of his career, was to seventeenth-century France what Garrick and Irving were to the England respectively of the eighteenth and nineteenth cen-

[1] *Garrick and His Circle.* By Mrs. Clement Parsons. G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York.

turies. As there is in English no life of Molière worthy to stand beside the best French lives of the great actor-dramatist, a full and competent English critical biography is to be desired. To fill this gap is the difficult task which Mr. Chatfield-Taylor has undertaken in this handsome and bulky volume,[1] which, thanks to the aid of printer, binder, and illustrator, is on the physical side quite unexceptionable. And the book itself entitles the author to all the praise due to one who has spared no pains in getting up his subject and has presented it with scrupulous accuracy and care. To praise it on other grounds than these is impossible. It cannot be commended for grace, distinction, or charm of style, for the structural skill of the gifted and practiced literary workman, for critical acumen, nor for sympathy or insight. It sheds no new light upon the subject; nor is it an acceptable popularization of facts and judgments which the critical research of two centuries has established. But it is from a failure in sympathy and insight that the book suffers most grievously—from a seeming incapacity to sound the tragic depths in the nature of the great comic master. An instance of what is meant will be found in the chapter in which the biographer tells the story of Molière and Armande Béjart. One is shocked at the banality of the sentiment in the comments upon Molière's most unhappy marriage with that vain, frivolous, and unfeeling girl, whose bewitching graces, wit, audacity, and nonchalance had completely enslaved him. "The reader may think," writes Mr. Chatfield-Taylor, at the end of the chapter referred to, "that he [Molière] got his deserts. . . . Blame him if you like; yet when the young blood sings in a pretty woman's veins, even a stronger man than a genius will listen." To one acquainted, as the author of this volume must be, with Sainte-Beuve's masterly essay on Molière—that beautiful monument to the man and author—the flow of complete sympathy with which the critic dwells upon the poignant tragedy of the relations between the dramatist and his wife must, one would think, have made an indelible impression. So also must that touching conversation between Molière and Chapelle in the garden at Auteuil, in which the latter bared his heart and declared that all his reason and philosophy were helpless against the jealousy that dried up the springs of his happiness. How a biographer acquainted with these two documents could be guilty of the insensibility which his heavy-handed comments betray, it is difficult to understand.

Of the books of the hour few have had more attention than G. K. Chesterton's "Dickens."[1] Aiming to be a personal generalization upon the novelist's genius and his work, and leaving the facts of his life on the left hand, this is not greatly successful either as a psychological study or as a piece of interpretative criticism. It does not put into our hands the key to Dickens's inner life, nor does it appreciably help us to a fuller enjoyment of his work. Now and again, however, the author takes a fresh point of view, or, by incisive statement, brings home to us a good idea, as for instance when he repeatedly protests against the prevailing tendency to discount the value of Dickens's novels on the ground of their alleged unreality, or when he gives felicitous expression to the old complaint about the formlessness of these stories. His analysis, too, of the charm of "Pickwick" is good, and his enthusiasm over Dickens's comic invention, and his delight in Micawber, Pecksniff, and Swiveller, are contagious.

Readers on this side of the sea naturally look attentively at the part of this book—a disproportionately large part it is, too—in which Dickens's hostile criticisms of America are considered. By way of explaining the novelist's peevishness towards this country, Mr. Chesterton has some uncouth things to say about us on his own account. But these remarks, based upon encyclopædic ignorance of our feelings and temper, are ineffective and insignificant except as a measure of the author's mind and manners.

A year ago the present writer had occasion to read Mr. Chesterton's "Brown-

[1] *Molière: A Biography.* By H. C. Chatfield-Taylor. Duffield & Co., New York.

[1] *Charles Dickens.* A Critical Study. By G. K. Chesterton. Dodd, Mead & Co., New York.

ing," and still retains a lively sense of the disagreeable impression that book left. The same faults of taste and style that belonged to it are of the essence of the "Dickens." There are the same air of always hitting the nail on the head without really doing so, the same complacent smartness, the same brand of paradox, the same rhetorical contortions, the same explosive, bank-holiday volubility, and the same old juggling tricks of diction and phrasing. Why, then, it may be asked, are Mr. Chesterton's books so widely read, if his style is so unpleasant and the substance of his work so slight and innutritious? The answer seems easy: People read this writer as they go to see a juggler in motley, not to gather information, nor with any allusions as to the quality of the entertainment, but to find amusement and kill time. With so good a book as Dr. Ward's little critical biography in the field, the present volume seems a work of supererogation.