Mr. Meredith in Little

By G. S. Street

I

In addition to its possible concealment of irrelevant motives, anonymous criticism has this certain advantage, that it is not of necessity ridiculous. When the anonymous critic is confronted with such a question as that put, a trifle rudely but quite conclusively, by Charles Lamb to Dr. Nott—"You think : who are you ?" "I," he may answer proudly, "am *The North Boreshire Inquisitor*." Being that, he may go on to protect the interests of our hearths and homes, or to point out the approaching end of the century, without danger of seeming superfluous or impertinent. To do these things is felt to be part of the duty of *The North Boreshire Inquisitor*. But when Jones—I hope nobody is really called Jones—implies a supposition that the world will be glad to read what he, Jones, thinks of some great contemporary, he runs a risk of humorous eyebrows. Even when the critic is somebody whose name is a household word for eminence, one of those distinguished few before whom generations of intruders have trembled or basked, and the criticised only "a Mr. " So-and-so—there is a deal of national character in that use of the indefinite article—one suspects that the judgment, however instructive, has

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in it some possibility of the absurd. And it may be supposed that if a beginner in the dodge of scribbling should essay to estimate the greatest among living writers in his country, the proceeding would be something worse than ridiculous.

But it may be argued that such a critic would be in a less obnoxious position than any other. If he had a mind to patronise, somebody might be amused and nobody could be hurt; whereas the patronage of a superior rankles, and that of an inferior is not to be borne. Or if he set out to damn, it would be nothing; but your eminent critic, sitting heavily upon a writhing novice, has an air of cruel exclusiveness.

For such reasons as these, I have far less diffidence in making Mr. Meredith's last published book a little more than the starting-point of a few digressions, than I should have in criticising Mr. Max Beerbohm: I name, for example, an author whose works are of a later date and even less in bulk than my own. I should fear the satire of Mr. Beerbohm's eulogists or detractors: from Mr. Meredith's, I may hope for indulgent indifference. I was compelled in my youth to weigh the philosophers of ancient Greece in the balance of my critical intelligence, and I began to read Mr. Meredith at about the time I was deciding the comparative qualities of Plato and Aristotle. To me he was, and is, as much a classic as they: I approach him with as little personal feeling, and if I have to say that all of him is not, in my apprehension, equally good, I can say it with as little disrespect.

II

The Tale of Chloe and other Stories gives you Mr. Meredith in little. In *The House on the Beach* you have him, as it were, in

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his bones. In *The Case of General Ople and Lady Camper* you have him alive and imperfect. In *The Tale of Chloe* you have him consummate.

If Mr. Meredith were one of those sympathetic writers who can write only when they are drunk—and is not art life as expressed by a finely drunken intelligence?—I should think he wrote *The House on the Beach* after a surfeit of tea. The apprehension, the phrase and the mechanism of conveyance are there; the quickening fire, the "*that*," as Sir Joshua Reynolds said, is absent. "You *shall* live" Mr. Meredith seems to have said to his potential puppets, and so they live—under protest. As has happened before, when lack of customary inspiration has been felt, he seems to have tried, in over-vehement self-justification, to do what the fullest inspiration had hardly made possible. He has offered you a caprice of feminine emotion more incredible than is to be found in any other of his books. A middle-aged man, grotesquely vulgar and abnormally mean-minded, asks, as his price for not exposing an old friend, this old friend's daughter to wife. The daughter, having set herself to make the sacrifice, had to find in this treacherous cad, Tinman, some human merit for her comfort, and for a prop of her obstinacy towards a seemlier wooer. She found it in the fact that Tinman, being knocked down by her father, did not return the blow. "She had conceived an insane idea of nobility in Tinman that blinded her to his face, figure, and character—his manners, likewise. He had forgiven a blow! . . . Tinman's magnanimity was present in her imagination to sustain her." The play of emotional fancy which follows on this motive is delightful to read, and you are fain to be persuaded, for your enjoyment, of its truth; but when you have shut the book the perversity is plain. Perversity is, I think, the word. The caprice is gratuitous. When Mr. Meredith tried

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our powers of faith most severely before, in *Diana of the Cross-ways*, he was essaying, as in *The Tragic Comedians*, the almost superhuman task of fitting a creature of his imagination to historical fact. I cannot help fancying that Mrs. Norton, albeit a wonderful member of a wonderful family, was a thought less fine than the lady of the book—that when she sold her friend's secret to *The Times*, nature was doing a less elaborate trick than Mr. Meredith in the case of Diana. But there the attempt, though almost foolhardy, was successful. Mr. Meredith had set himself a most difficult but a possible task. He was a rider exulting in his skill, and he forced his horse up a flight of stone steps. In this *House on the Beach* he has attempted to fly, and in my opinion has had a tumble. The heroine of the story, then, is incredible to me as a whole ; but that point set apart, the workings of her mind are instructive to the student of her creator, because, while characteristic for certain, they are not very subtle, and are expressed with notable simplicity.

I cannot agree with some critics that Tinman is a glaring failure. The effects of the whole story are those of farce rather than comedy, and the most farcically funny of these, the rescue of Tinman from his falling house in his Court suit, is only possible because of the grotesque vanity and smallness of his character. For all that, I do not think Mr. Meredith can create people like Tinman and his sister, with such fulness and enjoyment to himself, as he can create people whose folly is finer and whose manners are more agreeable. He overdoes silliness of a vulgar type. I have lately, I confess by the way, reflected with much gratification on the fact, that of his greatest creations, the most—the exception readiest to mind is the immortal nurse in *Richard Feverel*—are people of breeding and even of affluent habits. Nobody admires more than I, certain writers among us who take for themes

"humble"

"humble"—the satire of that word is growing crude—"humble" and uneducated people. But I notice a growing tyranny which ordains that people who speak in dialect, people who live in slums, and the more aggressive and anachronistic order of Bohemians, and none but these, are fit subjects for books. I read a story the other day which began, somewhat in the manner of Mr. G. P. R. James, with two men leaving a club—a sufficiently democratic institution nowadays, one would have thought—and I happened to see a criticism thereon which objected, not that the story was bad, but that the author was a snob for having anything to do—any "truck," should one say?—with "clubmen." Surely there is more to be said for the blatant snobbery of an earlier time, than for this proletarian exclusiveness. The accident of Mr. Meredith's choice of material is a consolation.

III

The Case of General Ople and Lady Camper is a brilliant and delicious farce spoiled, and the uselessness of criticising it may be mitigated by suggesting the question: Why did Mr. Meredith spoil it? It is one I cannot answer. You are presented to a General, stupid, respectable, complacent. He has been a conqueror of women in his time; he is enormously pleased with himself. A keenly humorous and delightfully malicious woman has reason to punish him. The punishment she devises is a series of caricatures, the mere description of which is irresistibly comic, and the wretched General is driven by outraged vanity, to show them appealingly to his friends. The farce is furious as it proceeds, and you wonder what fitting climax to the ludicrousness is to end it. And lo! the climax, a simple intensifying of the torture, is passed, and

and you are faced by a terrible anti-climax, which is the marriage of the torturer to the tortured; nothing less, in fact, than a command to your common sympathies and canting kindliness of heart, which the farce had artistically excluded, to rush in pell-mell. It is a slap in the face to a worthy audience, and I cannot understand why it was done. Mr. Meredith is far above all suspicion of truckling to the average reviewer, who insists that everybody be happy and good. Can it have been—for the apparent revulsion in the lady's psychology, though not incredible, is carried with the high hand of mere assertion—that Mr. Meredith was sorry to have been cruel? Certainly he was cruel: pain was inflicted on the ass of a General. Most satire and most farce involve pain, actual or imaginary, to some victim—if you think of it. But you should not think of it, and if you are a unit of a worthy audience, you do not think of it. If it be the art of the inventor, to exclude so far as possible, a tendency to think of it, by his presentation of the victim, Mr. Meredith is here completely successful. The General is credible and human, but he is absurd, and the absurdity is duly emphasised to the point of your forgetting his humanity. And Mr. Meredith, as an artist here of farce, has prevented any feeling of rancour in you towards the General, rancour which would have made your appreciation of his punishment, a satisfaction of morality, and not a pure enjoyment of farce. There is a pair of lovers to whom the General's folly brings temporary disaster, but they are made—and surely the restraint was wonderfully artistic—so merely abstract, that you care nothing for their sorrow. *The Case of General Ople and Lady Camper* is, in fine, as artistic and as abundantly laughable a farce as was ever made, until you reach the end, which to me is inexplicable. But how many farces are there in English, for the stage or for the study, where

where you laugh with all your intelligence alert? I think they may be counted easily.

IV

It is to be noticed that both these stories are simple in diction. The charge of obscurity, that is brought by nine of ten reviewers against Mr. Meredith's books, is one that may be supported with facility. Indubitably he is, as Mr. Henley has said, "the victim of a monstrous cleverness that is neither to hold nor to bind." Over and over again, he is difficult when he might have been easy. He compresses impossibly, like Tacitus, or presents a commonplace in crack-jaw oddities of expression, like Browning. But more often still, the obscurity is in the reader's intelligence, not in the writer's art. We are accustomed to novelists of little individuality, or no individuality at all: Mr. Meredith's intellect is as individual as that of any poet in the English language. Necessarily, therefore, he is hard to understand. We are accustomed to presentations of the clothes of men and women, and of the baldest summary of their thoughts and feelings: Mr. Meredith has penetrated further into character, and has exposed minuter subtleties of thought and feeling than any writer of English poetry or prose. Necessarily, therefore, he is hard to understand.

I think this opinion is very well supported by these two stories. In them he is not concerned with any fine studies of feeling or thought, and he is quite simple. There are a few pomposities, a few idle gallantries of expression; but in the main he is here to be understood without a second thought.

V

Mr. Meredith's prose does not satisfy my ideal. The two qualities of prose that I value above all others are ease and rhythm. He can be easy, but in his case ease has the appearance of a lapse. He can be rhythmical, but he is rhythmical at long intervals. That quality of rhythm which seems to have come so commonly to our ancestors before the eighteenth century, seems hardly to be sought by the prose writers among ourselves. Were it sought and found, I am assured it would be hardly noticed.

Mr. Meredith is often neither musical nor easy. But as a manipulator of words to express complexity of thought he has no peer. It was by this complexity, this subtlety, and penetration of his, that he was valuable to me when first I read him. I imag'ne there must be many in my case, to whom he was, above all things, an educator. It was his very obscurity, another name, so often, for a higher intelligence, that was the stimulating force in him for such as myself. Youth can rarely appreciate an achievement of art as such. But youth is keen to grind its intellect on the stone of the uncomprehended. That was the service of Mr. Meredith to those in my case. We puzzled and strove, and were rewarded by the discovery of some complexity of thought, or some subtlety of emotion unimagined aforetime. Fortunately for us, advance of years and multiplying editions had not yet earned him the homage of the average reviewer ; for youth is conceited, and does not care to accept the verdict of the mass of its contemporaries. Mr. Meredith was sometimes an affectation in us, and sometimes the most powerful educator we had. In the passage of years, as we grew from conceit of intelligence into appreciation, in our degrees, of

of things artistic, we perceived that he was also a great artist, and sympathy was merged in admiration. The *Egoist* is perhaps the most stimulating, intellectually, of Mr. Meredith's books, the fullest interpreter, perhaps, of the world in which we live. In my declining years, so to speak, I value it less than *The Tale of Chloe*. For in a world that is become, in a superficial way, most deplorably intelligible, achievements of art are rare.

VI

When I first read *The Tale of Chloe* it was in an American edition, and I thank my gods I had not read any summary of its plot in a review. But from the third chapter I felt that tragedy was in the air, for I seemed to have the impression of an inevitable fate drawing nearer, until I reached the end, where the fate comes and the thing ends sombrely. In other words, I had the impression of a perfect tragedy. I fancy it is the most perfect in form of Mr. Meredith's works of fiction, except *Richard Feverel*. And from its length it is even more impressive of its order, for the air of tragedy is closer. When you had finished *Richard Feverel* you felt the tragedy had been inevitable, but you did not, unless you had a far keener sense than I, feel the tragedy all along. In *The Tale of Chloe* the tragedy is with you all the time. The elect and wise humours of Beau Beamish, the winsomeness of the dairymaid duchess, the artificial sunshine of the Wells, are perceived only as you glance away from the shadow, where stand Camwell, Chloe, and Count Caseldy. One may divide them in this way, because Duchess Susan, though a wholly realised creation in herself, stands, as it were, in the plot for an abstract contrast to Chloe ; another beautiful child of English nature would have served as well.

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That the tragedy is inevitable you feel altogether. And yet, when you think it out, you perceive that it is the wonderful art of the telling, which makes it so. That is more the case than even in *Richard Feverel;* suicide is, in itself, less credible and likely, than a catastrophe following on a very natural duel. It is the art of the telling, that brings the truth home to you.

And the force of the tragedy is more wonderful for another reason. Mr. Meredith has created for it a very artificial atmosphere, or has reproduced a society which was, on the surface, as artificial as can be imagined. Beau Beamish, the social king of the Wells, compelled the rude English to conduct themselves by ordinances of form. He ruled them with a rod of iron ; he must have inspired an enormous deal of hypocrisy. With a company of bowing impostors for background, and with some of them for actors, is played a drama of intense strength. The strongest emotions of our nature are presented in terms of bric-à-brac. Everybody is "strange and well-bred." Chloe, tying the secret knots in her skein of silk to mark the progress of an intrigue which must end, as she has willed, in her death, is gay the while, and talks with the most natural wit. She discusses the intrigue with Camwell in polite enigmas. Camwell, who sees the intrigue and foresees the unhappiness, though not until the end, the death of his mistress, carries himself as a polished gentleman. Caseldy is none of your dark conspirators. The guile of the duchess is simple hot blood.

This delicacy of the setting assists the exquisite pathos of the central figure, surely one of the noblest in tragic story. The strength of will, so admirable and so piteous, which enables her to impose blindness on herself for the enjoyment of a month, and finally to die that she may save her weaker sister and the man she loves, is relieved by curiously painful touches of femininity. When Camwell

Camwell is telling her of the purposed elopement, she knows well that Caseldy, the traitor to herself, is the man, yet she says, "I cannot think Colonel Poltermore so dishonourable." By many such touches is the darkness of the tragedy made visible.

Chloe's words to Camwell in this last interview, are for the grandeur of their simple resignation, in the finest spirit of tragedy. "Remember the scene, and that here we parted, and that Chloe wished you the happiness it was not of her power to bestow, because she was of another world, with her history written out to the last red streak before ever you knew her."

> *θάρσει· σὺ μὲν ζῇς, ἡ δ'ἐμὴ ψυχὴ πάλαι*
> *τέθνηκεν.*

Antigone went not more steadily to her grave.

I fear I have been something egotistical in this attempt of mine, and would permit myself some apology of quotation to conclude. Mr. Meredith has found room in *The Tale of Chloe* for some of the happiest expressions of his philosophy, and some of his most perfect images in description. Of the ballad, which relates the marriage of the duke and the dairymaid, he says: "That mischief may have been done by it to a nobility-loving people, even to the love of our nobility among the people, must be granted: and for the particular reason that the hero of the ballad behaved so handsomely." I cannot think what the guardians of optimism have been about, that they have not cried out on the "cynicism" of this remark. Here is a vivid summary of observation—Beau Beamish "was nevertheless well supported by a sex, that compensates for dislike of its friend before a certain age, by a cordial recognition of him when it has touched the period." There are many such pregnant generalisations, and never do they intrude on the narrative.

"She smiled for answer. That smile was not the common smile; it

it was one of an eager exultingness, producing as he gazed the twitch of an inquisitive reflection of it on his lips. . . . That is the very heart's language ; the years are in a look, as mount and vale of the dark land spring up in lightning." I question if that can be matched for beauty and force of imagery in Mr. Meredith's works.

And this of Chloe's musings : " Far away in a lighted hall of the west, her family raised hands of reproach. They were minute objects, dimly discerned as diminished figures cut in steel. Feeling could not be very warm for them, they were so small, and a sea that had drowned her ran between. . . ."

" Mr. Beamish indulges in verses above the grave of Chloe. They are of a character to cool emotion."

As I said in beginning, my eulogy in prose must be impotent for such disservice.