

Sydney Smith : His Life and Humour.

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“THERE is many a true word spoken in jest.” So runs the old saw. In some cases, the most effective way to speak the true word is in the form of a joke. Unhappily, the humorist is generally merely a funny man, and often an extremely stupid man, whose unusual intellectual poverty is relieved only by the capacity for making people laugh. A very little of such a person is sufficient for our needs, and when we receive an overdose we drink to the dregs the cup of boredom.

Sydney Smith, whose name is always associated with wit, was not a humorist of this order ; the man never lived who was bored by him. Late in his life, when he was in enormous demand in society, he felt the burden keenly of being funny “to order,” but it was he, and never his listeners, who was bored by this. His humour was seldom pointless, but it was a precious gift by means of which he could drive home a hard truth without causing offence, and often it was a mordant satire against the scandals of his day which stung the evils he was attacking to death or overwhelmed them with ridicule.

The French are never *triste*, and perhaps it was from his mother, Maria Olier, who was of French extraction, that Sydney Smith inherited his wonderful gaiety and light-heartedness. He was born at Woodford, in Essex, in 1771, and died in 1845, thus living through a period of extraordinary religious and political interest.

Those were the days when men “went into the Church” as a desirable profession, and Sydney Smith, in dutiful obedience to his father, and much against his own inclination, duly “entered the Church.” The result was, as his daughter, Lady Holland, remarks, that “he had often to exercise control over himself, and to make a struggle to do that which is comparatively

easy to those who have embraced their profession from taste and inclination alone."

But, though in this one respect he was typically a man of his time, in other respects he was far ahead of his age. Never did he truckle to those in exalted positions, never did he say what was merely expedient, but bravely he scourged the evils of his day, and lashed with his wit the bigotry of that narrow-minded period. The result was that he had a hard time of it. For a large proportion of his lifetime he lived in great poverty, and it was not only in his schooldays at Winchester, when he was unsuccessful in the daily fight for the coarse food provided, that he knew what hunger meant.

Whilst at school there were ways of obtaining supplies which could not be adopted in later years. On one occasion he made a catapult with which to shoot the headmaster's fattest turkey to satisfy the hunger of himself and a few friends. The headmaster discovered the catapult, and, ignorant of its use, warmly commended Smith for his cleverness!

His first charge as a clergyman was a parish on Salisbury Plain, which he served as curate—"one of God's poor working-men," as he expressed it, "the first and purest pauper in the hamlet"—and there he did good work establishing a day and Sunday school for the children, with the assistance of the Hicks-Beach family, who proved his first patrons. He was not here long, for Mr. Hicks-Beach appointed him tutor to his son Michael, whom Sydney Smith conducted on his tour through England and Scotland.

The gay tutor no doubt was an amusing companion to his pupil, but Michael, unconsciously, was vastly entertaining to his tutor. Smith would occasionally ask him to show him a few steps of his dancing, and this inelegant performance, he says, "never fails to throw me into a fit of laughing little short of suffocation."

Smith loved Scotland and the Scots. Their religious character much impressed him, and the contrast with England, where "(except amongst ladies in the middle class of life) there

is no religion at all," struck him forcibly. In this "knuckle-end of England" he declared that the people were so philosophical that they even loved metaphysically. "I overheard a young lady of my acquaintance, at a dance in Edinburgh, exclaim, in a sudden pause of the music, 'What you say, my lord, is very true of love in the *abstract*, but——' Here the fiddlers began fiddling furiously, and the rest was lost."

But the visit to Edinburgh was famous in the life of Sydney Smith, for during his stay there the *Edinburgh Review* was started, and of this outspoken periodical he was the prime mover. At this time the Corporation and Test Acts were unrepealed, the Roman Catholics unemancipated, Parliament unreformed, the Game Laws cruel and oppressive, prisoners tried on the capital charge were denied a counsel, slavery was encouraged, the laws of debt harsh and cruel, and the Church full of abuses. Smith was a Whig all his life, and with fearlessness and indifference to his own welfare he attacked these scandals in many ways, but chiefly through the *Edinburgh Review*. The Tories remembered this against him all his life. His opinion of Church life is worth mention :

"The thermometer of the Church of England sank to its lowest point in the first thirty years of George III. Unbelieving Bishops and a slothful clergy had succeeded in driving from the Church the faith and zeal of Methodism which Wesley had organized within her pale. The Spirit was expelled, and the dregs remained. That was the age when jobbing and corruption, long supreme in the State, had triumphed over the virtue of the Church ; when the money-changers not only entered the temple, but drove out the worshippers ; when ecclesiastical revenues were monopolized by wealthy pluralists ; when the name of curate lost its legal meaning, and instead of denoting the incumbent of a living, came to signify the deputy of an absentee."

Smith lived to see many of the abuses which he assailed modified or removed. He lived to revise his opinion of the Bishops. The ignorance and narrow-mindedness largely re-

mained, and he suggested as a cure that the Bishops, who were now, in his judgment, "incomparable," should "*touch* for bigotry and absurdity!"

He has some extraordinary valuable advice to offer on preaching, advice by no means obsolete. He objected to the trite use from the pulpit of Scripture phrases, such as: "Putting off the old man," "The one thing needful," "The Lord hath set up His candle," etc. Such a practice, he maintained, "wore and frittered their holy language into a perfect cant, which passes through the ear without leaving any impression." Like Mr. C. H. Spurgeon, who declared the impossibility of preaching the Gospel to people with cold feet, Sydney Smith was of opinion that "we should do no great injury to the cause of religion if we remembered the old combination of *aræ et foci*, and kept our churches a little warmer."

While at Edinburgh he was much amused by the complaint of two young men, that they found it difficult to find conversation for their partners at the balls. "Oh," said he, "I'll fit you up in five minutes. I'll write you some conversations, and you will be considered the two most agreeable young men in Edinburgh." There and then he sat down and, amidst fits of laughter, wrote out some sample conversations from which the young men made selections.

He attended the medical schools in the city, and acquired a knowledge of simple remedies which, on his return to parochial life, he made admirable, but characteristic, use of. He had them put up in bottles, and labelled in such a way that his housekeeper could diagnose and treat the case if he were out. This is part of his list: "Here is Gentleman-jog; a pleasure to take it. Bull-Dog for more serious cases. Heart's Delight, the comfort of all the old women in the village. Rub-a-dub, a capital embrocation. Dead-Stop settles the matter at once. Up-with-it-then needs no explanation." "Now, Annie Kay, give Mrs. Spratt a bottle of Rub-a-dub; and to Mr. Coles a dose of Dead-stop and twenty drops of laudanum."

He was called out once to baptize a dying child, and on his

return quietly remarked: "I gave the child a dose of castor-oil and then baptized it; so now it is ready for either world!"

Smith could not only make a joke, he could also laugh at one. The following was one of his special favourites:

One day a young and nervous lawyer was conducting a case before the sarcastic Lord Ellenborough, and began as follows: "My lord, my unfortunate client—my lord, my unfortunate client—my lord——" "Go on, sir—go on," said the Judge, "as far as you have proceeded, the Court is entirely with you."

Though Sydney Smith was overlooked, because of his views, and given no high preferment, except a prebend at Bristol, till his party came into power, he had many influential friends. One of these was the eccentric and absent-minded Lord Dudley.

One day this nobleman met Smith in the street and invited him to come to dinner to meet himself. "Dine with me—dine with me to-day, and I will get Sydney Smith to meet you." On another occasion he met Sydney Smith and nodded as he passed him; but, by-and-by, he turned round and joined him, muttering aloud, "I don't mind walking with him a little way. I'll walk with him as far as the end of the street!"

Sydney Smith was once preaching a charity sermon, in which two entertaining incidents occurred, in both of which Lord Dudley figured. He was sitting under the pulpit. Suddenly, at a moving passage, thinking he was in the House, he rapped loudly on the floor and murmured in an audible voice, "Hear, hear, hear." Lady C—— was sitting next to Lord Dudley, and she was so touched by the appeal of this sermon that she borrowed a sovereign from him to put in the collection. However, when the plate came round, she could not bring herself to part with it, and also consistently forgot afterwards to repay the debt!

Sydney Smith's table-talk was a delight. He would take up some thread of conversation and develop it in the most comical fashion.

One day conversation turned on Dante's "Inferno." Smith declared that the author was a mere bungler at inventing

tortures. "If I had taken it in hand, I would show you what torture really was. You, Macaulay," turning to the most brilliant talker of the day, "let me consider? Oh, you should be dumb. False dates and facts should be shouted in your ears; all liberal and honest opinions should be ridiculed in your presence; and you should not be able to say a single word during that period in their defence." Each member of the company had a punishment based upon his pet foible invented for him, and as Smith sentenced each one, the others shrieked with laughter.

He had no contempt for a "blue-stocking so long as she wore long skirts." This is a typical instance of real clever humour. On another occasion he remarked: "Yes; you find people ready enough to do the Samaritan without the oil and twopence."

One day, when dining at the Grenvilles', conversation turned on the new book published by Sir Charles Lyell, in which the great geologist reconstructed the skeleton of antediluvian monsters from fossil remains. "Let us imagine," said Sydney Smith, "an excavation on the site of St. Paul's. Fancy a lecture by the Owen of some future age, on the thigh-bone of a minor Canon, or the tooth of a Dean—the form, qualities, knowledge, tastes, propensities, he would discover from them," and off he went on this theme till his audience was convulsed with laughter.

He could tell a joke against himself with great relish. One of his favourites was to describe how one day he was preaching in a certain church where he had found it necessary to build a platform of hassocks to stand upon in the pulpit. He announced his text, "We are cast down but not forsaken," and immediately the substructure collapsed and the preacher was nearly pitched out of the pulpit upon his congregation.

From the snatches of conversation which have come down to us, we feel justified in saying that it is nothing short of a disaster that this wonderful conversationalist and rare humorist had no Boswell to act as biographer. Such a biography would

certainly be the most popular book of its kind ever written. Unhappily what has survived are only fragments of the sayings of a man who could keep a drawing-room full of cultured people roaring with laughter throughout a whole evening.

Thomas Moore knew a fellow-wit when he met one, and he and Sydney Smith were close friends. Moore wrote him a poem, one verse of which was a testimony to his high opinion of Smith's humour :

" Rare Sidney, thrice honour'd the stall where he sits,
And be his every honour he deigneth to climb at!
Had England a hierarchy formed of all wits,
Whom, but Sidney, would England proclaim as its primate?"

When the Whigs came into power in 1831, the days of comparative obscurity were over. As Lord Grey, the leader of the party, walked into Downing Street, the first words he said were : " Now I shall be able to do something for Sydney Smith." In a few months he offered him a canonry at St. Paul's. This was accepted, and was the highest point Smith ever reached. He always declared he did not want a bishopric, and would refuse it if offered him, but, all the same, he repeatedly expressed vexation that an offer was never made.

We have said but little of the more serious side of this remarkable man's life. His lectures on Moral Philosophy at the Royal Institution, his reforms at Bristol, his faithful parish work at Combe Florey and elsewhere, and his work at St. Paul's—all these deserve notice, if his life and character are to be properly estimated. But the greatest of all his works was his faithful and fearless preaching and writing in the cause of toleration and reform. But this, too, must be no more than mentioned.

Curiously enough his toleration failed in two directions. His hatred of " Methodistical cant " while a young man was only equalled by his detestation of " Puseyism " in his old age. For this system he had a mingled contempt and hatred. At a certain trial Lord Justice Knight Bruce asked if any of the learned counsel could define a " Puseyite." The *Morning Herald* stated that none attempted the task. Thereupon

Sydney Smith wrote an answer in characteristic fashion, which is worth setting down, at least in part :

- “ Pray tell me what's a Puseyite ? 'Tis puzzling to describe
This ecclesiastic genius of a pious hybrid tribe.
At Lambeth and the Vatican he's equally at home,
Altho' 'tis said, he rather gives the preference to Rome.
- “ Voracious as a book-worm is his antiquarian maw,
The ' Fathers ' are his textbook, ' the Canons ' are his law.
He's mighty in the Rubrics and well up in the Creeds,
But he only quotes ' the Articles ' just as they suit his needs.
- “ He talketh much of discipline, yet when the shoe doth pinch,
This most obedient, duteous son, will not give way an inch ;
Pliant and obstinate by turns, whate'er may be the whim,
He's only for the Bishop when the Bishop is for him.
- “ Others as weak, but more sincere, who rather feel than think,
Encouraging he leads to Popery's dizzy brink ;
And when they take the final plunge, he walks back quite content,
To his snug berth in Mother Church, and wonders why they went.
- “ Such, and much worse, aye worse ! had I time to write,
Is a faint sketch, your worship, of a thorough Puseyite,
Whom even Rome repudiates, as she laughs within her sleeve,
At the sacerdotal mimic, the solemn Would-Believe.
- “ Oh ! well were it for England if her Church were rid of those
Half-Protestant, half-Papist, who are less her friends than foes.
Give me the open enemy and not the hollow friend,
With God, and with our Bible, we will the Truth defend.”

But yet even his intolerance of Methodist and Puseyite could not earn for Sydney Smith any real enemies. He died leaving behind armies of friends, and not a single foe. This man's "foes" were not "they of his own household," for not only was there no one at all who wished him evil, but his only surviving brother Robert, or "Bobus," loved him so tenderly that he left Sydney's death-bed to lie down in his own, where he died a fortnight later.

