

THACKERAY

Amid all the eulogies and all the slanders that are lavished upon the English character, very few people would appear to take any real trouble to obtain a sincere view of it. Rhetorical phrases about its inarticulate strength and nobility do not commonly bring us very much further, for it may be questioned whether it is good for a people excitedly to articulate their own inarticulate disposition. But, when all is said and done, it may truly be said that among all the national temperaments the English is pre-eminently sim-

and childish ballads, that Germans smoked bad cigars. I see now that this is true, and yet unfathomably false; that is to say, there are, if you choose to put it in that way, more bad cigars smoked in Germany than in England, but that is only because, tobacco being cheaper, more cigars of every kind are smoked. It is as if a Hindoo peasant, who had never seen a jewel in his life, were to say that England was a land of false diamonds. In India only the rulers have such things at all; in the Strand any one may have



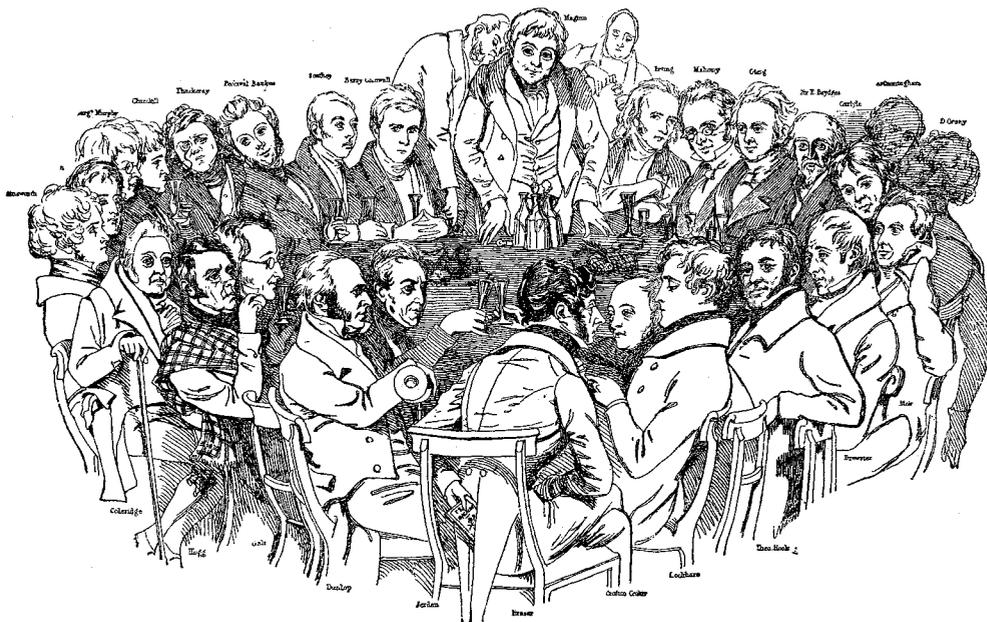
THACKERAY'S HOUSE IN PARIS IN THE FIRST YEAR OF HIS MARRIED LIFE.

ple and profoundly well-meaning. This well-meaningness combined with this simplicity is responsible for every one of its crimes, and it is the basis of its real and indestructible magnificence. But this union of moral soundness with mental innocence is responsible also for a certain tendency noticeable in all English life and character: the tendency to get hold of the truth, but to get hold of it falsely; to grasp the fact, but to grasp it somehow by the wrong end. A hundred instances might be given of this. To take a random example. I was taught at my mother's knee, in the intervals of hymns

them; and similarly the cigar is in England merely a badge of luxury, while abroad it is often a common possession, like a pipe. In this mere casual instance we have the constant English attitude: the strong and even humble curiosity which does really know something about foreign nations, but along with it that strange tendency to put the true thing the wrong way round, to seize on the unimportant side of the matter first. It is just as if a foreign critic of England—instead of knowing nothing at all about us, as is usually the case—were to grasp the fact that the most luxurious English people

went fox-hunting, and then explain it by saying that these Sybarites had one weird hatred, a venomous hatred of foxes. Such a man would have got the facts right and the truth wrong; and such is our constant national condition with regard to foreign ideas. But there is an even more curious example of it than this, and that is the fact that even in our own discussions, and in the matter of the great reputations of our own country, we exhibit this same singular tendency to catch hold of truth only by the tail or the hind leg. Our judgments—that is, our

Dick Swiveller. The supreme function of Dickens in the universe was to point out that robust and humorous common life is not vulgar, cannot in its nature be vulgar, and the only thing that his countrymen can see about him is that he could not describe a member of the upper classes. We might as well say that Michael Angelo never really painted a chartered accountant. Here again our sincere people have got to the wrong end of the telescope. But of all these examples there is none more perfect and more amusing than the fashion which called Thackeray



THE FRASERIANS.

current and conventional judgments—on our great men of genius have a singular disposition to begin in enormous letters with the unimportant defect, and miss in comparison the great merit out of which that defect arises. Thus, for instance, Englishmen have wearied themselves with asserting that Dickens was vulgar and could not describe a gentleman. Dickens could not describe a gentleman, but he was never vulgar except when he attempted that snobbish and unworthy enterprise. Most men do become vulgar when they describe those who are called vulgar people; and it is precisely here that Dickens was never vulgar—there is no trace of vulgarity about Silas Wegg or

a cynic. He was a cynic, if the critics will, in the same sense that Leonardo da Vinci was a chemist or Mr. Chamberlain a horticulturalist. But the cynic in him was not merely subordinate to his other characteristics; it was the mere product—nay, the by-product—of them. His cynicism was a minor result, a thing left over by his triumphant tendency to sentiment.

Thackeray, from the beginning of his life until the end, consistently and seriously preached a gospel. His gospel, like all deep and genuine ones, may be hard to sum up in a phrase, but if we wished so to sum it up we could hardly express it better than by saying that it was the philosophy of the beauty and the glory of

fools. He believed as profoundly as St. Paul that in the ultimate realm of essential values God made the foolish things of the earth to confound the wise. He looked out with lucent and terrible eyes upon the world with all its pageants and achievements; he saw men of action, he saw men of genius, he saw heroes; and amid men of action, men of genius and heroes he saw with absolute sincerity only one thing worth being—a gentleman. And when we understand what he meant by the phrase, the absolute sufficiency of a limpid kindliness, of an obvious and dignified humility, of a softness for noble memories and a readiness for any minute self-sacrifice, we may, without any affected paradox, but rather with serious respect, sum up Thackeray's view of life by saying that amid all the heroes and geniuses he saw only one thing worth being—a fool.

The real falsehood, if there be a falsehood, of Thackeray's view of the world was, in fact, the very opposite of that cynicism and worldliness once attributed to him. In so far as he did misrepresent life, it was rather in the direction of showing too much bold disdain of Vanity Fair and too much absolute faith in the saints, his unworldly women and his easily swindled gentlemen. He permitted this pietism of his to blind him to the vivid atrocities of the character of Helen Pendennis, supposing that her having lived all her life in a country homestead was some kind of preventive against cruelty and paganism and heathen pride. Thackeray is, if anything, too much on the side of the angels. He was a monk who rushed out of his monastery to cry out against a gaudy masquerade that was roaring around it, and ever since his monk's frock has been mistaken for one of the masquerade dresses and applauded as the best joke in the whole fancy-dress ball.

There are, of course, exceptions, or what may appear to be exceptions, to such a generalisation. So deep and genuine was Thackeray's insight into the normal human spirit that he detected this element of idealism where it might least be expected. The character of Major Pendennis, for instance, is simply a great lighthouse or beacon tower, not merely

of social satire, but of eternal ethical philosophy. In Major Pendennis, consciously or unconsciously, is traced the valuable truth that almost every man is, by the nature of things, an idealist. To go to great houses, to wear the latest and yet the most dignified attire, to know the right people, to do and say at every instant the thing which is most perfectly and exquisitely ordinary, this is a principle of life against which a sane man might have a great deal to say; but one thing he could not say, he could not say that it is materialistic. One moral merit it has: at least it is totally useless. A place in society is not something to drink; an invitation card from Lord Steyne is not something to eat. Poor old Pendennis did not sleep softer in his incomparable clothing; he was a poor man, lonely and constantly troubled. Nothing supported him but his own monstrous and insane religion. He was, as it were, a glorious heretic, a martyr to false gods; and nothing sadder or more honourable has ever been conceived in fiction than that scene in the end of *Pendennis* in which the old man, having, with a valour and energy that stirs us like a cavalry charge, defeated all machinations that would have robbed his nephew of name and fame, suddenly finds the nephew himself ready to fling down the whole laborious edifice in the name of an unintelligible scruple. "And Shakespeare was right, and Cardinal Wolsey, begad, if I had served my God as I've served you—" It has the pathos of the meeting of two faiths; the good Moslem staring at the good Crusader.

This was the greatness of Thackeray, the man whom sentimentalists without hearts or stomachs have conceived as a mere satirist, that he felt, perhaps, more fully and heavily than any other Englishman the immeasurable and almost unbearable emotion that is involved in the mere fact of human life. Dickens, with his indestructible vanity and boyishness, is always looking forward. Thackeray is always looking back in life. And no man will ever properly comprehend him until he has reached for a moment that state of the soul in which melancholy is the greatest of all the joys.

G. K. Chesterton.

OUIDA—AN ESTIMATE

On a recent rainy day, the usual noon-day crowd that loiters before a certain Ann Street book shop was missing. The bargain counters were shrouded in waterproof covers; the better class of books had been withdrawn indoors from the weather. Only the penny box remained exposed, a pile of tattered magazines idly fluttering their leaves in the wind and absorbing the water that dripped from an ineffectual awning. On the top of the pile lay a bedraggled copy of the Seaside Library, the front cover torn across, exposing the title *Syrlin*, by "Ouida," Author of *Under Two Flags*, *Signa*, etc. To one whom these words reminded of an early and forgotten enthusiasm, it seemed but a pious act to rescue an old acquaintance from its fallen state.

The incident would not be worth chronicling, if it were not in a measure typical of Ouida's own changed fortunes. Twenty years ago she enjoyed a vogue somewhat analogous to that of Marie Corelli to-day in this country, or of Georges Ohnet in France. It seems rather curious now to recall the avidity with which she was read, although not one reader out of twelve had the candour to acknowledge openly the fascination of her original, perverse and at times rather hysterical style. To-day she has literally declined to the garret and the second-hand dealer, along with the old coats and hats and other fashions of yesterday. In the early eighties, critics thought it worth while to inveigh against her false ethics and dangerous morals; anxious mothers were careful to shield their daughters from the corruption of *Moths* and *Puck* and *Friendship*. To-day such anxiety would be superfluous. The younger generation does not read Ouida. It finds her style as tediously verbose, as hopelessly out of date, as *Clarissa Harlowe* or *Sir Charles Grandison*. For every ten young women of to-day who can tell you that Blanche Bates made a capital Cigarette and rode a real horse, there is scarcely one who thinks it worth remembering that *Under Two Flags* was originally written by Ouida.

But to revert once more to that dilapidated old copy of *Syrlin*, the really inter-

esting thing about it is the critical discernment shown upon the title-page. Whoever formulated it, whether author or publisher, hit upon the two volumes which of all that Ouida wrote best deserve to be remembered and preserved. *Syrlin* itself was not, even relatively, a significant work. It practically brought to a close the long series of novels which began with *Granville de Vigne* and contain some of the best, as well as some of the worst, elements of sensational fiction that the latter half of the nineteenth century has produced. There is probably no other writer of her generation who so deliberately alienated his literary birthright, so openly prostituted a talent of uncommon worth to pander to a perverted taste for sensationalism. No one can read *Under Two Flags* without feeling that the woman who could write that story possessed at least some grains of that leaven with which the world's great stories of adventure have always been leavened—that she was one of those authors who not only create a little world of their own, but believe in its reality; who look into their brains as into a magic mirror, and record all the phantasmagoria that they see passing there, with a conviction that is contagious, especially if one brings youth and enthusiasm to the reading of it. Anatole France once confessed, with characteristic whimsicality, that the best novel he ever read was a half-forgotten old romance, read while a schoolboy surreptitiously "between the pages of a Greek Lexicon," but that he had been careful never to read it again. *Under Two Flags* is a rather exceptional book; in a large measure it is free from Ouida's besetting faults; and the story is carried to a finish with a verve and an audacity which somehow compel admiration. But aside from this story, it may be taken as an axiom that if any one remembers having read Ouida at twenty with a quickened pulse, he will be wise to follow the example of Anatole France and not re-read her at forty.

The reason for the decline of Ouida's popularity is not far to seek. It is not merely because she was outside of the literary movement of her time that she founded no school and leaves no suc-