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COMPASSIONATE HUMOUR IN HALIBURTON

Humour is a serious thing.—James Thurber

IN GENERAL TERMS “thoughtful laughter”, to use Meredith’s phrase, is about as good a description and definition of the results of true Comedy as can be found. “One excellent test of the civilization of a country, as I have said, I take to be the flourishing of the Comic idea and Comedy, and the test of true Comedy is that it shall waken thoughtful laughter.”¹ Thoughtful, Meredith asserts, because the highest level of Comedy appeals to the wits, to the intellect of Man, and its laughter should appeal to the heart, which knows humour. Most people would agree that Sam Slick’s humour generally “rolls in shouting” in the Meredithian phrase, but it is also easily shown that he can on occasion awaken thoughtful laughter. Humanity carefully and sympathetically observed always does this and we need go no further than Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Dickens for proof.

Now Meredith also asserts that only in societies where there is a free exchange of ideas between men and women, fairly independent and reasonably cultivated women—and here one is reminded of Shakespeare’s Kates and Rosalinds and Beatrices—only in such a society can the comic idea thrive. One sees the free interplay of character and thought in the raillery between Kate and Hotspur, Rosalind and Orlando, or Henry V and his Kate. There was plenty of free interplay of character and thought whenever the Wife of Bath started talking. These men and women are all conscious of the failings of their own and of the opposite sex and they are always delighted to sharpen wits on each other. Meredith mentions places—Bagdad, the Latin countries, Germany, for instance—where women did not mix on free and equal terms with men and where consequently Comedy was dead. Evidently this was not so in Nova Scotia. Sam Slick meets a great many women in his wanderings, and Haliburton was of course a close observer of the sex and, like Sam, both critical of them and partial to them.

Sam Slick’s society, and of course Haliburton’s, it is interesting to note, is mainly a farming one where, as everyone knows, the grey mare is often the

better horse. It was also a New World society where woman's position was certainly higher than that of her counterpart in the Old World, or at least there was a certain chivalry towards all women, which was reserved mainly for women of the aristocratic class in the Old World. Furthermore, Sam's creator had for a mother the daughter of an army officer; he was brought up by another cultivated woman; and he was married at nineteen to another officer's daughter, who had seen much of the world including London and Paris; none of these ladies was averse from free and easy discussion of their menfolk's dogmatisms and shortcomings when she thought it necessary, if we are to judge from the ladies we meet in Sam's wanderings. In short, the women Haliburton and Sam knew were far from being Meredith's veiled and silent women of Bagdad. They were "raal corn-fed gals" and many of them "as smart as a fox-trap".

Humour has also generally been considered to be corrective. The Comic Spirit, "the first-born of common-sense", as Meredith describes it, is the best cure for Folly of all kinds. This is the old idea, of course, of the corrective power of Comedy using its celebrated lash on Vice and Folly, and Haliburton was convinced that Sam was his lash. Sam, however, could always be the sympathetic observer provoking kindly laughter, as he is in the following picture of old Aunt Thankful.

Aunt Thankful, over seventy, and a transplanted Loyalist who still refers to the American Revolution as "The Rebellion", is like much-loved spinster aunts in a hundred families. She is an old dear and like many old dears she sometimes embarrasses the younger generation of her family.

Poor Aunt Thankful! It's others ought to be thankful to you, that's a fact, for your post ain't easy. We uncles and aunts have enough to do. Uncle pays for all, and aunt works for all. The children don't mind you like a mother, and the servants don't obey you like the real head of the house nother. Is there one of the party to stay at home? It's aunt. Is there one to get up early, and to be the last to lock doors, and to look to fires? It's aunty. Is there company to home, who takes charge of the house? Why aunty to be sure. If you haven't got money enough for what you want, there is some doubloons still left in the cend of Aunt Thankful's stockin'. You didn't return the last three you borrowed; but coax her, she is so good-natured and so kind. Get her to tell that story about Prince Edward, Duke of Kent, . . .²

Aunt was a fine-looking girl once, with beautiful eyes, upon which the thrilling Prince Edward congratulated her, on one memorable occasion, with the words: "Miss Collingwood, you are not in your usual spirits tonight. I

assure you there has been no execution done today, but what has been effected by your beautiful eyes"³ (p. 211). This gay but grim compliment, since the Prince was a martinet, was probably forgotten by the Prince as soon as uttered, but it was Aunt Thankful's biggest thrill, her most romantic moment, and has lived on in her memory for fifty years. Little girls and ladies have always had a *penchant* for princes, as the implications of the tales of Cinderella and the Sleeping Beauty and King Cophetua's discernment so amply attest. Royalty has always rocked the ladies and sometimes the reverse has happened, shaking even the throne of England. Aunt Thankful, however, treasures this moment of romance and tells the incident on any or even without any provocation, so that the younger generation, her embarrassed nieces, try to steer her away from any subject which may lead up to it.

Sam's description of Auntie and her treasured possessions shows the pathos of old ladies who have but a single high-light to live on for over half a century. When and if it is destroyed they are generally destroyed with it, but not Aunt Thankful, says Sam. She has too much sense for that. However she does day-dream nostalgically about it and perhaps, Sam speculates, dreams it at nights too, when her good sense is no longer in control: "'Sposin',' says the dreamer, 'papa had left me a little longer at Government House, and his Royal Highness had got his papa's consent for the American beauty as they called me. A Duchess is such a pretty title—the mother of a queen, perhaps a king—wouldn't I be *thankful* then? I wonder if the Duchess's eyes are as handsome as mine are. I don't believe it'" (p. 213). But somehow life has passed her by without bringing a man with it, much less a prince, and half a long century has gone by with Aunt Thankful looking after nephews and nieces and grandchildren—she has looked after scarlet-fever, whooping-cough, measles, chilblains, sore throats, and consumption, not to mention blisters, scalds, burns, cuts, and shot wounds. She is also a great hand at home-made quince preserves and her own special brew of bitters—to give a man an appetite.

Before Sam leaves the Collingwood house, well before day-break, Aunt Thankful asks him to wait upon her in her sitting-room, as she wishes to give him breakfast and also perhaps to tell him her favourite story of the prince's compliment. He drinks Aunt Thankful's home-made brew, though bitters are not his choice:

"Madam," said I, "my sarvice to you", and I made her a low bow and tossed it off. Lord, if it warnt bitter, then there are no snakes in Varginny. It was strong enough to pucker the mouth of an alligator so he couldn't open it without usin' cod-liver oil. "Oh that is grand!" said I.

"I am glad you like it," said she, "and I'll give you a receipt" (p. 209).

Aunt Thankful then rings her little silver bell and Rose, the servant, comes in with a tiny tea-pot, with a comparable sugar bowl and cream jug, a plate with buttered toast cut into small squares and two little dishes of preserves:

Thinks I, old lady, it was worth while to make a feller swaller bitters to get an appetite for all this, warnt it? "Will you try a little quince, Sir? It is some I preserved myself."

"Quince, is it?" said I, "the best flavour to my mind of any that is made. Dear me", sais I, "how tender, it's delicious, that's a fact. It's easy to see who prepared it."

"I am glad you like it, Sir. The great secret is to pulverise the leaf-sugar complete before it is put on the fruit, . . ." (p. 209).

Aunt Thankful is everybody's aunt. She then tells Sam how she learned long ago to make quince preserves helping a Mrs. Finley who was preparing some as a special treat for Prince Edward—and then she leads up to her favourite story of how the Prince complimented her fifty long years ago when she was a girl.

Previously Sam had observed her room closely, in which he sees her character and interests and background reflected as in a mirror. The Collingwood family had evidently brought all their possessions out of New York State after "the Rebellion" when they emigrated to Nova Scotia:

"O Jerusalem", sais I, "what in creation is all this? Here is a room, that looks as if it must have been cut out of the old family house in New York State, and fetched down, holus bolus, as it stood; for their ain't anything hardly in it as new as herself, and she is seventy years old, if she is a day. . . ." In the opposite one was a closet, made angular to fit the shape of the wall, with a glass front, to preserve and exhibit large silver tankards; Dutch wine-glasses, very high in the stem, made of blue glass, with mugs to match, richly gilt though showin' marks of wear, as well as age; a very old China bowl, and so on. In one of the deep recesses formed by the chimblly stood an old spinet, the voice of which probably was cracked before that of its mistress, and like her, had forgot its music. In the other was a mahogany bureau, with numerous drawers, growin' gradually less and less in depth and size, till it nearly reached the ceilin', and terminatin' in a cone, surmounted by a gilt parrot; not a bad emblem for a chatty old ladybird, who is apt to repeat over and over the same thing (p. 205).

One item in this room, a labour of childhood, which gives us an insight into

the character of old Aunt Thankful and the legion of aunts like her, is a yellow sampler which has worked on it, as they nearly all did, the letters of the alphabet and a lesson—"Remember thy Creator in the Days of thy Youth"—and at the bottom appears, painstakingly worked, the name of the artist: "*Thankful Collingwood, 1790, aged 10 years.*"

The artist was the same little girl who was to reach her apex of experience and of joy some ten years later when she flushed with happiness at some meaningless gallantry from a prince. She spent the next fifty years remembering it, presumably telling herself the while that she had a great deal to be thankful for, although she was never to be a princess or the mother of a Queen Victoria.

This portrait is in keeping with Thackeray's view of humour as a quality which must go hand in hand with charity and kindness.⁸ Aunt Thankful is chatty, she repeats herself, she has "forgot" her music, like her old spinet, but she is a lovable old dear with a lifetime of nameless, unremembered acts of love behind her, even if Sam finds her bitters are a caution to sinners and alligators. Her age perhaps saved her from Haliburton's usual feminine satire, though one feels that it is a portrait from life with love.

NOTES

1. George Meredith, *An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the English Comic Spirit* (London: Constable, 1910), p. 11.
2. T. C. Haliburton, *Wise Saws: or Sam Slick in Search of a Wife* (New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1853), p. 207. Later references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.
3. W. M. Thackeray, *The English Humorists* (London: Macmillan, 1924), p. 195.