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THE IMMORTAL MEMORY OF GEORGE ELIOT

An edited version by JONATHAN OUVRY of his toast to the Immortal Memory at the George Eliot Birthday Luncheon on November 25th 1984.

Having been aware, for some time, that I was about to undergo what I thought would be an ordeal, but which I realise may even turn out to be an enjoyable experience, I have been looking out for ways and means of getting through my allotted time without too much difficulty. I was delighted, therefore, to observe a distinguished visitor to the Huguenot Society at a recent meeting. Evidently an experienced academic, he knew just what to do. In the first place his lecture was written out on a great many small sheets of paper. At the end of each sheet he naturally had to turn to the next. If he required time for thought, it would turn out that the sheets were in the wrong order, and it would take some time to find the next. I was particularly taken with one unusually long pause after a sheet ending with the words 'Dr. Johnson' (it is clear that no talk with any pretensions to literary merit should fail to include at least one reference to the great Doctor). Finally, the lecturer found the next sheet and continued, as if without a pause 'Dr. Samuel Johnson' I wondered what other Dr. Johnson he might have thought to have come into the minds of his listeners!

I have to say that my talk may be rather wooden, but this should be attributed not so much to inexperience as to carpentry. Having recently moved house, and with all my books in some seventy cardboard boxes, I found it essential to build a substantial bookcase. The job was

finished last Sunday morning, the necessary books were shelved by the afternoon, and I could then get down to looking things up.

Kathleen Adams kindly told me that I could talk about anything, and that there was no need to be academic. This was a great relief, as Ruth Harris's inspiring talk on the similar occasion last year would be very difficult to follow. Furthermore, Kathleen reminded me that this was not to be a solemn occasion. Perhaps, then, a few thoughts on the subject of comedy, in the context of the careers of some of my Lewes forbears, might not come amiss.

In 1804, the year after the death of my great, great, great, great grandfather, Charles Lee Lewes, there was published (and I read it from the title of G.H. Lewes's own copy) 'Comic Sketches, or, The Comedian his own Manager. Written and selected for the benefit of performers in England, Ireland, Scotland and America. Inscribed to the performers in general by CHARLES LEE LEWES, COMEDIAN. The whole forming matter sufficient for Two Evenings' Entertainment; originally intended for the East Indies, and as delivered by him, without an apparatus, in many parts of the Three Kingdoms, with distinguished patronage'.

In terms of comic writing nearer our own time, no-one, in my view, comes within a mile of P.G. Wodehouse ('English Literature's performing flea') whom I have enjoyed since the age of ten - unlike George Eliot, who must be considered a maturer taste. To bring in Dr. Johnson again, he told Boswell that everything he ever knew he had learnt by the age of 18. It would be an exceptional 18 year-old nowadays who would know much of George Eliot.

P.G. Wodehouse knew all about my present situation, which reminds me of the occasion when Gussie Fink-Nottle addressed the young scholars of Market Snodbury on the occasion of their Speech Day, a prospect which he had looked forward to with something less than equanimity. His friend, Bertie Wooster, recommended alcohol as a useful specific, somewhat disastrous in the case of Gussie, a confirmed teetotaller, not used to looking on the wine when it was red. I have not found it necessary today, being among friends, to resort to alcohol in more than moderate amounts. John Cash of the Cash family, with whom George Eliot was friendly in her young days, was a lapsed Quaker whose strict teetotalism had disastrous consequences when he died in France owing to his insistence on drinking water not fit to drink in preference to wine which he would not drink!

For some reason, public speakers in the pages of P.G. Wodehouse were always faced with a row of toughs standing at the back, ready to throw tomatoes at the slightest provocation. I'm glad to say that the George Eliot Fellowship seems to be free from any such ominous presence!

Another expedient advised for the P.G. Wodehouse speaker worried about addressing those who probably knew a great deal more about the subject in hand than he, is the system of despising his audience. He should, for example, imagine them drinking soup in a particularly slovenly way, and all his awe of them will vanish, enabling him to play on them as on a stringed instrument, holding them in the hollow of his hand. I had a good look round during the soup course, but found no-one acting in a sufficiently despicable way!

I read out the title of Charles Lee Lewes's 'Comic Sketches'. In his day he was a well-known actor, and though perhaps not in the first rank, clearly made a good career for himself, and established an interest in the stage passed down through G.H. Lewes to the present generation. The 'Comic Sketches' were introduced by an anonymous biographical sketch which includes an interesting account of how Charles Lee Lewes came to 'create' the part of Young Marlow in 'She Stoops to Conquer'. It was said that some of the popular actors were unwilling to appear in the play as a number of supposedly competent judges predicted its failure. "Whether such was the case or not, Dr. Goldsmith entrusted the performance of this character to Lee Lewes; and to his success in it may be ascribed all his future eminence and celebrity". How success in the acting profession depends on being in the right place at the right time! This account certainly has the ring of truth about it, in particular in the lack of flattery in suggesting that Lewes was not the first person thought of for the part. However, I am bound to say that only one year later, in 1805, Lewes's son, John Lee Lewes, published in four volumes 'The Memoirs of Charles Lee Lewes', and in his introduction attacked the authenticity of the 'biographical sketch' with the superb high-flown rhetoric characteristic of literature of the time, for example, 'whatever clouds hung over my father's latter days, and however great was the contumacy and tyranny which he experienced from managerial Nebuchadnezzars, Mr. Lee Lewes was a man unrivalled in the comic line of his profession'.

The descriptions 'comic' and 'comedian' need some consideration. Having checked with the Shorter

Oxford English Dictionary of a few years ago, Webster of 100 years ago and Dr. Johnson (there he is again!) I find that the definitions do not alter perceptibly. Each century's, or even each generation's conception of the meaning of the words does, however, differ considerably. Shakespeare's comic interludes are almost incomprehensible these days. 'Marry, I am so plagued by insects I am in as sad a case as the cheesemonger of Blackfriars' no doubt caused the groundlings to fall off their stools with laughter, but leaves us unamused.

Similarly, in the 'Comic Sketches', I have looked almost in vain for something which would now be found tolerably amusing, though it is evident that it all went down well in the East Indies in the late 18th century. I must say, however, that I did find at least one excellent story which I cannot resist including, in which Charles Lee Lewes illustrates his idea of the good Story Teller, who has 'judgement to apply his subjects with propriety, spirit to pursue his narrative and humour to enliven the points most diverting'.

Mr. Hogarth used to tell a story of his being once in company with several artists, who were boasting of uncommon works each had executed. One, in particular, said, he had written a volume in folio with a single pen, which he had mended 199 times. Another declared he had finished an Equestrian Statue with only a broken knife for a chisel, and a rolling pin for a mallet. A third stated, he had engraved a copper-plate with no other tool than a rusty nail. "I told them," said Hogarth, "that I once painted a Sacred History Piece with one colour, which was neither heightened or lowered; making the background, shades, etc. with one unaltered colour." The company expressed their

astonishment, and begged he would relate the method of completing his performance. Hogarth thus informed them :

"I was sent for by a Sir Thomas Thornton, a man of singular disposition, to paint his stair-case with some sacred historical piece, applicable to a circumstance which happened to him once; which was his being at sea, where he was pursued and taken by some Algerine Pirates. I asked him what he thought of the Egyptians pursuing the children of Israel through the red sea?

"Egad," said Sir Thomas, " a lucky thought. Well, my dear friend, begin it as soon as possible. But stay, stay! stay! hold, hold! — What is your price? I always like to make a bargain with you gentlemen of the brush."

"Dear, Sir," Hogarth answered, "I can give no answer to that until I have finished. I shall not be unreasonable; you will pay me, I dare say, as an artist."

"Hey, egad, that you may depend on," said the Baronet; — "but stay, stay! — hold, hold! — I can't think of exceeding ten guineas."

Hogarth, picqued to have his talents so undervalued, accepted the terms on condition that five of the ten pieces should be advanced before he began. The five guineas were paid, and the painter desired to begin immediately.

Hogarth rose early the next morning and took with him some common red paint, with which single colour he covered the stair case from top to bottom. He

then went to Sir Thomas's chamber, and knocked at the door. The awakened knight asked — "Hey! Who's there?"

"Hogarth," answered the painter.

"Well! What do you want?" said Sir Thomas.

"The job is done, Sir Thomas," said Hogarth.

"Done?" asked the other. "Hey, the devil! no, sure! The stair case done already! Hold, hey — stay, stay! — Let me get on my morning gown — done — hey — What, a week's work done in a — Hey. Stay, stay!"

The knight hobbled out of his chamber as fast as his gouty legs would permit; and, rubbing his eyes, cried out —

"What the devil have we here?"

"The red sea, Sir," Hogarth answered.

"The red sea!" said the astonished knight.

"Hey! Stay, stay! Hold, hold! — But where the devil are the children of Israel?"

"They are all gone over," said the painter.

"They are all gone over, are they?" Sir Thomas repeated. — "Hey! Stay, stay! — Hold, hold! — But, zounds, where are the Egyptians?"

"They are all drowned, Sir Thomas," said Hogarth, who was considerably pleased to have thus so properly chastised the illiberal treatment he had received.

Turning to the third generation of Leweses from Charles Lee, we come to his grandson, George Henry Lewes, very much an actor manque, and indeed, for a period of his life, an actor in fact, though I doubt if he would every have described himself as a comedian (unless Shylock, for example, may have been considered a comic character). In The Leader in 1851 he referred to acting as 'an art I have always loved, and one in which I have a personal ambition'. The following advertisement appeared in The Manchester Guardian in March 1849:'

THEATRE ROYAL, MANCHESTER -
the last week of THE YELLOW DWARF,
This evening (Saturday) March 10th
MR. G.H. LEWES, the popular author,
will make his debut in THE MERCHANT
OF VENICE, one of the plays selected
by the command of Her Majesty at
Windsor Castle.

Shylock - MR. G.H. LEWES
After which the farce of BOX & COX.
To conclude with the burlesque of
THE YELLOW DWARF.

What a programme!

G.H. Lewes's stage ambitions seem to have come to an end at the time of his first going abroad with George Eliot, but up to that date he published in The Leader regular theatrical criticism which was later much admired by George Bernard Shaw among others. He also published essays on many non-theatrical topics, and some of his views would not meet with universal approval now. It is ironical, in view of his subsequent encouragement of George Eliot in her writing that, in 1851, (the year in which the two first met) he published in The Leader,

under the pseudonym of Vivian; an essay entitled 'A Gentle Hint to Writing Women' in which he professed panic 'not only at the number but the talent of "writing women" - Currer Bell, Mrs. Gaskell, Geraldine Jewsbury, Mrs. Marsh, Mrs. Crowe, Mrs. Rigby, Miss Martineau, "Eliza Lynn"' - and implores them not to crowd the other sex entirely out of the field. 'Burn your pens', he cries 'and purchase wool. Armchairs are to be made, waistcoats to be embroidered'.

If G.H. Lewes got in some digs at the women, George Eliot could do the same in the other direction, in terms of her own, perhaps, more gentle humour. From 'Adam Bede' comes the following delightful example: 'I'm not denying the women are foolish: God almighty made 'em to match the men'.

I must not, having arrived at George Eliot, forget the purpose of this address, which you may, with some reason, think has been rather wide of its intended subject matter.

George Eliot must have the last word. Her loving relationship with G.H. Lewes over a period of twenty-four years must show that they shared a sense of humour, and, as she wrote, in 'Daniel Deronda', 'a difference of taste in jokes is a great strain on the affections'. No such difference can have existed in this remarkable couple.