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THE QUALITY OF HUMOUR IN 'BROTHER JACOB'

By Graham Handley

'Brother Jacob' was written in 1860, but not published until 1864, some months after Romola had completed its run in the Cornhill Magazine. At first sight it appears to be an undistinguished piece of work, with the omniscient author well in evidence. The opening is heavy-handed, a deliberate and sententious humour being levelled at the reader:

Among the many fatalities attending
the bloom of young desire, that of
blindly taking to the confectionery
line has not, perhaps, been
sufficiently considered.

Fortunately, this is prelude to a fascinating story which has a comparable psychological insight to that shown in 'The Lifted Veil' (written in 1859) though of course different in emphasis. Whereas Latimer has the terrible disease of prophecy David Faux has merely those commonplace twin moral diseases of dishonesty and social ambition. But behind David is the shadow of Big Brother, whose love of sweets, bear-hugging and homicidal energy with a pitchfork make him a recognisable precursor of Lennie in Of Mice and Men. Steinbeck's story is grim, poignant with pathos, heavy with sexuality; George Eliot's story has a delightful lightness of touch for the most part and, in two sequences, a mastery of comic effects which is close to farce.

David Faux is from an early age 'gifted with a spirit of contrivance' but discontented with his 'average' lot. That lot is set in an earlier period, and this provides the author with the opportunity to

observe that 'If he had fallen on the present times ... he would certainly have taken to literature and have written reviews'. Handicapped though because 'his spelling and diction were too unconventional', he determines to steal his mother's hoard of guineas (glance across at Silas Marner for a moment, where another such theft is to be fraught with consequences to others as well as the thief). David has the moral self-deception practised by other characters in George Eliot's fiction, for we are told that he is able to assure himself that 'it is not robbery to take property belonging to your mother'. He is about to hide the guineas he has taken when 'the sound of a large body rustling towards him with something like a bellow' signals the claustrophobic presence of his idiot brother Jacob. The latter's "Hoich, Zavy!" and contiguous pitchfork require immediate compromise; David provides the lozenges which put Jacob into 'as great an ecstasy ... as Caliban at the taste of Trinculo's wine'. But like Caliban, Jacob can be awkward. He sees the 'zinnies' and, despite David's contrivances, sticks by him. The next day, David rises early, and the farce continues; Jacob is up before him uncovering the buried guineas by the ash-tree. David tries to send him for a spade, but his brother 'showed as much alacrity as a wasp shows in leaving a sugar-basin', meanwhile 'brandishing the higher bundle out of reach'. David waits in vain for a coach to take him away, then succeeds in getting into a carrier's cart but Jacob accompanies him with 'his arms tightly fastened round his dear brother's body'.

Eventually, David gets away by plying Jacob with beer and this time inducing a deep sleep without the bear-hug. The first chapter ends with the comforting 'Thank heaven, he should never see Jacob any more!' Fate, however, has other ideas; the lozenges remain

long in Jacob's mind after their taste has gone. David returns six years later, settling under an assumed name in a place some distance from his home called Grimworth. There he sets up his confectioner's business, wins over the women by the delicacy of his offerings, and covers his past (in the West Indies), even inventing false aristocratic associations in order to enhance his marital advances to one Penelope Palfrey, who is somewhat above him in station. Before he gains her consent, and that of her father, George Eliot indulges in ironic humour at the expense of the veterinary surgeon's wife who is the first to buy Freely's mince-pies and thus set in motion the prosperity of the 'commercial organ' which Mr. Edward Freely (in reality Mr. David Faux) has brought to Grimworth.

But just as David's greed for success and profit grows, and indeed as he is establishing himself with the Palfreys, he reads the news that 'he will hear of something to his advantage' if he gets in touch with an attorney. His suppositions are right - he has come into his father's legacy. He collects it, makes arrangements for his marriage, entertains his future wife's family, only to find that he has not been forgotten by brother Jacob. The latter, 'with a pitchfork in his hand', forcibly embraces 'Brother Zavy', pausing only 'to seize a large raised pie, which he lifted to his mouth'. This time there is no escape. Penny is near tears, while her older sister Letitia notes of the giant 'I think he's a good deal like Mr. Freely. He's got just the same sort of nose, and his eyes are the same colour'. The next day finds a crowd gathered round the shop, David still denying that Jacob is his brother, and then the arrival of his

elder brother Jonathan (an apt choice of name) to confirm the suspicions of all.

It is a simple story, nonetheless effective for the straight narrative line. The two farcical scenes involving Jacob provide an element of humour not common in George Eliot, since their effect depends on action rather than observation. Yet there is observation in plenty – of the Palfreys, with the jealousy of the sisters and the social complacency of their father, of Mr. Prettyman, of the veterinary surgeon's wife and of the 'corruption' of the town by the pastries of Mr. Edward Freely. The irony which we appreciate so much in the major novels, from the Rainbow Inn sequence in Silas Marner to Mr. Brooke's truncated election address in Middlemarch, is always there. But what is impressive is the structure of the tale, the clever duplication of situation after the passage of time, the pathos attendant upon Jacob, the family responsibility of the mother and brother for him, and the presence of the egoist – David Faux alias Edward Freely – in small but realistic compass. This story, like The Lifted Veil, was written while George Eliot's two great early successes, Adam Bede and The Mill on the Floss, were being published. And each story epitomises two separate aspects of their writer which are never fully realised afterwards; I refer to her probing, analytic, essentially scientific interests on the one hand, and her capacity to display in her writing a variety of humorous situation and action on the other. As she wrote on she took herself more seriously; it is perhaps a pity that she tended to play down the lighter side, or not to turn the light of that lighter side towards what is sombre. There is another thought too; the short story is the poor relation of literature, yet we sense that George Eliot might have

established for it an undeniable and lasting status.