

"CRUSTY CHRISTOPHER" (JOHN WILSON).



WHEN the great poet who has just been laid to rest in the Abbey put forth his youthful volume of "Poems, chiefly Lyrical," 1830, it had to run the gantlet of a kind of criticism now happily extinct. The practitioners of the ungentle craft are still too often adepts in the art of giving pain; and envy, hatred, and all uncharitableness wear the mask of a zeal for good literature. But the slashing article is no longer in vogue. The reviewer may be unfair, supercilious, offensive, malignant, mean, but he does not ordinarily nowadays call his victim an ass or an idiot, and intimate that he has an addle head and a rotten heart. Such little endearments were quite *en règle* in the days of the "Blackwood's wits" and the early years of "Fraser's." The glee, the abandon, with which Wilson and Lockhart and Maginn poured out ridicule on a cockney or a Whig, their uproarious contempt, the names that they called him, the blackguardly epithets that they applied to him, the personalities of their attack—these are luxuries that no reputable review can now afford. And yet "Christopher North" was not an unkindly man, though he loved, as Carlyle said of him, to "give kicks." The first age of the great modern reviews and magazines was an age of kicks and rough horse-play. Party spirit ran high under the Regency, and literary criticism, so far from being the "disinterested" affair which Matthew Arnold demands, was avowedly run upon political lines. Libel suits and challenges rained upon magazine editors. Jeffrey and Moore went through the forms of a duel. The Chaldee Manuscript had to be suppressed in the second edition, and cost Mr. Blackwood a thousand pounds, as it was. Aggrieved persons lay in wait for editors in the street. Thus one Mr. Douglas of Glasgow, who had been roughly handled in "Maga," came to Edinburgh and horsewhipped Blackwood, and was in turn beaten by Blackwood, who had reinforced himself meanwhile with a cudgel and with the Etrick Shepherd.

It would not be fair to hold Wilson responsible for all this, but he was largely contributory to it. It was a generation of fighters, and Christopher loved a fight almost as much as he loved trout-fishing, or deer-stalking, or a leaping-match, or a cocking-main, or a drink-

ing-bout. He used to pommel celebrated bruisers in his Oxford days, when they were disrespectful to him on the king's highway; and after he became professor of moral philosophy in Edinburgh University, it was his delight to take off his coat at a rural fair and to thrash a country bully who was getting the better of a weak antagonist. There was no malice in the "veiled editor" of Blackwood. His hatred of Whigs was official. The Chaldee Manuscript was conceived in a spirit of noisy fun. The same spirit inspired the roistering and convivial Toryism of the "Noctes Ambrosianæ," and the roaring choruses that accompanied the clink of glasses in Ambrose's snuggery. The criticism in "Blackwood's," the roasting of Hazlitt and Moore, the sneers at Hunt's "Rimini," were simply other expressions of Wilson's love of fighting, his wild fun and high animal spirits.

Tennyson fared very well, upon the whole, in the famous "Blackwood" review of his poems in May, 1832. "Perhaps in the first part of our article," said his critic, "we may have exaggerated Mr. Tennyson's not unfrequent silliness; . . . but we feel assured that in the second part we have not exaggerated his strength, and that we have done no more than justice to his fine faculties." However frequent or unfrequent the silliness in Tennyson's early verses may have been, there is no question as to the silliness of the retort which he allowed himself to make in his volume of 1833:

TO CHRISTOPHER NORTH.

YOU did late review my lays,
 Crusty Christopher;
 You did mingle blame with praise,
 Rusty Christopher:
 When I learned from whom it came,
 I forgave you all the blame,
 Musty Christopher;
 I could *not* forgive the praise,
 Fusty Christopher.

This is very weak, and the adjectives are ill chosen. In certain moods Christopher may have been crusty, but rusty or musty or fusty he could never have been. The abounding vitality, the eternal youthfulness of the man, was his most apparent trait. Like Charles Kingsley, of whom he constantly reminds one, he was always a good deal of a boy. Mr. Saintsbury has pointed out the resemblance between Wil-

son and Kingsley, and it is one that had occurred to me long since. They were alike in their ardor for sport and adventure; in their fondness for natural history (not science, but the observation of the habits of the living animal or plant in its habitat); in the eager, impulsive, uneven way in which they poured themselves out upon paper; in a certain illogical cast of mind—the want of "the tie-beam" which Carlyle detected in Wilson. Of course the points of contrast between the English Liberal and broad church priest and the high Tory Edinburgh professor are many and obvious. But Kingsley's Liberalism—Christian socialism, even—was curiously dashed with certain Toryish prepossessions. He believed in a landed aristocracy and wished well to the Southern Confederacy. Wilson's Toryism was an affair of instinct and temperament rather than of reasoned convictions. Indeed, he was a man of no opinions, in the strict sense of that word. Prejudices he had, tastes, whims, likes, and dislikes, but, properly speaking, no opinions.

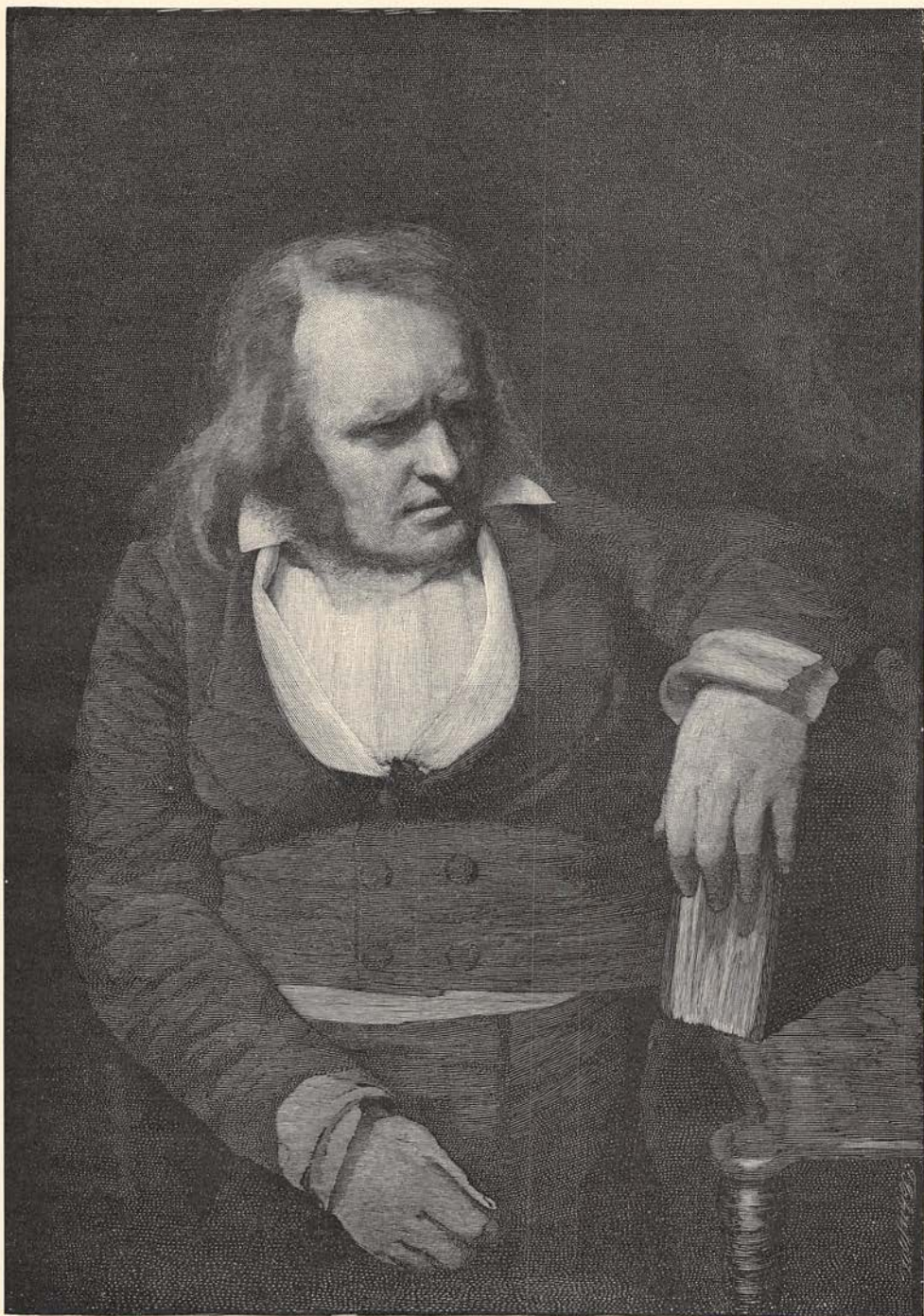
At any rate, one always thinks of Wilson, as of Kingsley, as a forerunner of muscular Christianity—leaping twenty-three feet on a level; walking over from London to Oxford—fifty-three miles—in a night, six miles an hour heel-and-toe walking (Wilson once made seventy miles in the Highlands in twenty-four hours); jumping tables at Ambrose's, or swallowing monstrous bowls of whisky and milk at Scotch shielings, where he paused for refreshment on his midnight rambles through the bents and glens; swimming Highland lochs, fishing-rod in hand, and arriving late at lonely bothies with basket, pockets, and hat-crown filled with trout; sailing on Windermere, and cock-breeding at Elleray; tramping over the Cumberland hills with the Opium Eater, or hunting bulls on horseback with prick of spear. At Oxford the tradition of his physical prowess lingered long, and even gave rise to legends—as of his joining a band of strolling actors, and abiding in gipsy tents for a season with a gipsy wife. All his contemporaries were impressed by his personal vigor, the size of his chest, his florid complexion, the brightness of his eye, the length of his limbs. His portraits show a certain aquiline cast of countenance, and a leonine air—given him not, as in Landor's case, by the cut of the features, but by the length of tawny mane. De Quincy, however, denies that Christopher was a handsome man: his mouth and chin, he says, were Ciceronian, but his hair was too light, and his blue eye lacked depth—its brightness was superficial.

The little passage at arms between Wilson and Tennyson is an interesting point of contact between Georgian and Victorian literature.

Wilson was a member of the generation of Scott and Byron and Moore. He belonged to an "era of expansion," and was himself expansive. The writings of the generation of Tennyson, Thackeray, and Matthew Arnold are in many ways a reaction and a protest against the emotional excesses of the Georgian time. Spontaneity, creative impulse, versatility belonged to the elders, but their art was less fine. The rich perfection of Tennyson's verse, the chastened perfection of Arnold's verse and prose, are rare among Wilson's contemporaries. His own work is profuse and diffuse, without selection and restraint. He was the most brilliant of magazinists, and Carlyle thought that he had the greatest gifts among the writers of his day, but that he had produced nothing that would endure. He compared his "Blackwood" papers to rugged rocks overgrown with luxuriant foliage, but bound together at bottom by "an ocean of whisky punch." Tennyson himself inherits of Keats, who was most purely the artist among the poets of his generation.

Who now reads "The Isle of Palms," or "The City of the Plague," or the miscellaneous verse of Wilson, which was thought to resemble Wordsworth's? Do young men nowadays read even the "Noctes," which their fathers and grandfathers read eagerly, and imitated in countless sanctum dialogues, "coffee clubs," and such like? I trow not. Nevertheless Christopher was a great creature, and there is imperishable stuff in the "Noctes." That famous series has not the even excellence—the close grain—of Holmes's "Breakfast-Table" papers. There is too much of it, and it should be read with judicious skipping. A large part of the dialogue is concerned with matters of temporary interest. The bacchanalian note in it becomes at times rather forced, and the reader wearies of the incessant consumption of powl-doodles, porter, and Welsh rabbits. But the Ettrick Shepherd is a dramatic creation of a high order, and the vehicle of wit, eloquence, and poetry always racy, if not always fine. The same exuberance, for good and for bad, characterizes the "Recreations" and the other miscellaneous papers, which place their author high, though not among the highest, in the line of British essayists. Christopher was, after all, most at home in his sporting-jacket, and his outdoor papers are the best—"The Moors," "The Stroll to Grasmere," and the rest. His literary criticism, though interesting as the utterance of a rich personality, is seldom wise or sure. But those who should know have said that none ever knew the scenery of the Western Highlands like "Christopher North," or wrote of it so well.

Henry A. Beers.



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FROM A PHOTOGRAPH OWNED BY HON. JOHN BIGELOW.

JOHN WILSON. ("CHRISTOPHER NORTH.")