

TRADITIONS OF STERNE AND BUNYAN.

Sterne and Bunyan ! Two names more widely apart—two men of genius more unlike in character and life—we can scarcely find in our whole world of reading. Even in Dialogues of the Dead, they would hardly tolerate each other. If we allowed such ghosts to meet, the clerical wit and worldling would certainly throw some wild jests at the Baptist fanatic; and we can imagine the grave Pilgrim looking thunder-clouds at the Reverend Mr. Levity, of Vanity Fair. I will quickly explain why I have, to the amazement of the reader, placed these two names together. I can show Sterne in the act of sketching character close to my village, and it so happens that traditional footsteps of John Bunyan may be found in the same locality, and the circumstance brings the two men—the two writers—before me with strange, intense reality.

Yorick is still, and evermore, "the keen observer, the arch humorist"; the master of pathos, the magician of the pen. More than a hundred years have rolled away since he breathed his last in the Bond Street lodging. Yet only the other day—on the 18th of June, 1870—the world welcomed some vague account of his wife and daughter, two ladies who have left but faint traces of their existence in a little French town. Think what we will of the man, the fascination of the artist is living now, a century after his death. No apology is needed when I offer new facts about Laurence Sterne and his Uncle Toby—facts which show us the very spot where the great humorist made his outlines from real life.

Twenty years ago, the possessor of a romantic imagination might have been greatly delighted by a *visit* to Preston Castle, near the village of Preston, in Hertfordshire. This old country-house was then unoccupied, and standing, forsaken and dilapidated, in the midst of its still beautiful gardens. A narrow lane, running south from Preston, led you to a simple lodge. You then passed through meadows, well fenced with hawthorn and holly, to the north front of the house. Over a low, strong hedge of sweetbrier, you saw a massive grey porch, a little overhung with virginia creeper; venerable casements looking out on the broad carriage-road which led to the hall-door, and a circle of flower-beds with a central sun-dial. Wide walks, fair lawns, huge evergreens, each one a kingdom of leaves, met the eye as you entered the gates. Well do I remember those grounds, and the wood of pines and chestnuts at the end of them! In the gardens, one saw everywhere a happy blending of modern art with the dear, old, stately formality of other days. But the house had suffered loss at the hands of some individual who had preferred convenience to the charms of antiquity ; and had been still more injured by another, who had given a castellated front to a pile half manorial, half Georgian. Preston Castle, when I remember it, stood silent and forsaken, a fit haunt for the ghosts of my childish imagination. The ancient hall and many chambers centuries old, were on the north side; on the south were the Georgian rooms. Even there, one's footsteps echoed strangely, and the mid-day sun, passing into them through an outer blind of sweet roses, stary jasmine, and climbing creepers, could not lighten the gloom within. The sight of the mildewed walls, the faded, falling papers, the blank, deserted hearth, would have saddened any heart but that of a child, full of "life, and whim, and *gaiete de coeur*." What story have I to tell of this ghostly place/ Not the story of many a pleasant summer afternoon spent there with those who have de-parted hence. It is the story of Uncle Toby—the Uncle Toby of real life; one which I heard from lips now silent, and which I know to be true.

In the days of Laurence Sterne, the owner of Preston Castle was a certain Captain Hinde, who was at once the old soldier and the country gentleman. My father, who lived near the village of Preston, was told by the late Lord Dacre, of The Hoo, in Hertfordshire, that this Captain Hinde "was Sterne's Uncle Toby." Much interested, my father asked many questions. and ascertained that the fact was well known to the Lord Dacre of the "Tristram Shandy" period, and had been

transmitted in the Dacre family from father to son. His lordship added, that a very old man named Pilgrim, who had spent his young days in the service of Captain Hinde, might be found some few miles from The Hoo, and that he would be able to give certainty and interest to the story from his early recollections. My father sought an interview with Pilgrim, the venerable patriarch of a lonely little village, and in the course of a long conversation gathered evidence which clearly traced my Uncle Toby to a real-life residence at Preston Castle. I will *give* the most striking part of this evidence as it was handed down to me. Some of its details have been hot in the lapse of years, but I have added nothing to the facts retained by my memory.

Pilgrim, in his youth, had an uncle who was butler at The Hoo, some five miles from Preston. This uncle well remembered the famous Mr. Sterne as one of Lord Deere's visitor; and once heard him conversing with his noble host about "Tristram Shandy."

"And how could you imagine such a character as my Uncle Toby!" asked Lord Dacre.

"It was drawn from life," said Mr. Sterne. "It is the portrait of your lordship's neighbour, Captain Hinde."

And the odd hook, which amazed, amused, and delighted the great world so long ago, and the name of which is still so familiar, was vividly called to remembrance by much that Pilgrim told of the sayings and doings of his old master. Eccentric—full of military habits and recollections—simple-hearted, benevolent, and tenderly kind to the dumb creatures of the earth and air, Captain Hinde was a veritable Uncle Toby. He gave the embattled front to his house—the labourers on his land were called from the harvest-field by notes of the bugle, and a battery was placed at the end of his garden. The animated old soldier, who delighted to talk of battles and sieges, was full of the most extraordinary love for all living things. Finding that a bullfinch had built her nest in the garden-hedge, close to his battery, he specially ordered his men not to fire the guns until the little birds had flown. To fire these guns was his frequent amusement, but he would not allow a sound to disturb the feathered family. This and other anecdotes greatly pleased my father. They reminded him of the generous heart which gave over the poor house-fly life from its boundless wealth of feeling. In short, Uncle Toby stood before him—clearly and forcibly drawn by a poor old villager. No reasonable mind could throw any doubt on the curious tale so strangely saved from oblivion.

Preston Castle is now numbered with the things that have been and are not. It was pulled down many years ago, and its picturesque gardens and luxuriant shrubberies were turned into common meadow ground. All the sons and daughters of Captain Hinde have passed away, and a rural memorial points out their last resting-place in the parish church of Hitchin. A few old cottagers still talk of their benevolence and eccentricity. An Irish trumper, who died in Hitchin workhouse, spoke of them with lively respect and gratitude. I have never forgotten that woman's look, as she mentioned their name. "Something of blessing and of prayer" might be seen in her dark violet eyes, as, glancing upwards, she said— "They was the rale, ould gintry, dear, was the Hindes! They was a Governmint family. . . . There's the world's differ between them and the new people about. . . . And don't I remimber poor Mrs. W—, almost the last of them—the blessed lady—the rale gintlewomant. Sure she's opened the gates of heaven for herself by all she did for us poor craythurs. . . . Rest her sowl in glory! "—This was the last honour paid to the Hindes. They certainly inherited the kind, generous virtues of Uncle Toby —good gifts which can make the most whimsical peculiarities dear to us. This was the last honour paid to the Hindes. They certainly inherited the kind, generous virtues of Uncle Toby —good gifts which can make the most whimsical peculiarities dear to us..

I will now venture to glance at the conjectures of those who have sought to find originals for the Tristram gallery. Let Thackeray speak first: "The most picturesque and delightful parts of Sterne's writings we owe to his recollections of the military life. Trim's monkey cap, and Le Fevre's sword, and dear Uncle Toby's roquelaure., are doubtless reminiscences of the boy who had lived with the followers of William and Marlborough, and had beat time with his little feet to the fifes of Ramillies in Dublin barrack-yard, or played with the torn flags and halberds of Malplaquet on the parade-ground at Clonmel." Twice Thackeray gave us his "Lectures on the English Humorists," from which this passage is taken. Mr. Percy Fitzgerald has published a biography of Sterne, containing much information never before collected. This biography has done good service to the memory of the Shandean hero who was at once the admiration and the scandal of his day. In vain does Thackeray pass sentence in immortal words of brilliant satire and severity. We read Mr. Fitzgerald's two volumes, and feel a kindness for the strange, wayward genius whose worst faults were encouraged by his age. We follow Yorick: through his years of provincial obscurity to his London carnival of flattery and feasting. We see the gay, wicked world doing its best to spoil the little good in that sentimental heart—to stimulate that erratic humour to wilder and wilder flights of folly and irreverence. And then we think with painful pity of the death-bed in the Bond Street lodging house. There the prince of jesters and sentimentalists died slowly, without the sympathy of wife, daughter, or friend—with only a hired nurse and a footman beside—personifications of indifference and curiosity. Perhaps in that last scene the poor player would willingly have exchanged lives and deaths with some faithful, simple, boorish Yorkshire Curate! In the fourth chapter of Mr. Fitzgerald's first volume, Ensign Roger Sterne, father of Laurence Sterne, is introduced to us as the prototype of Uncle Toby. The chapter opens with an abstract front the memorandum of family history given by the great humorist to his daughter Lydia :—" My father was a smart little man—active to the last degree in all exercises—most patient of fatigue and disappointments, of which it had pleased God to give him full measure. He was in his temper somewhat rapid and hasty, but of a kindly, sweet disposition; void of all designs, and so innocent in his own intentions that he suspected no one; so that you might have cheated him ten times a day if nine had not been sufficient for your purpose."

Mr. Fitzgerald asks: "Can anyone doubt but that this genial and spirited little sketch, which seems to overflow with a tender yearning and affection, is the original design for that larger canvas from which stands out the richly-coloured, firmly-painted, and exquisitely-finished figure of Uncle Toby! . . . It requires no great penetration to guess that the same gentle images must have been rising before him while he sat at his desk in his Sutton vicarage, suffusing his eyes and softening his heart, as lie thus filled in the portrait of the brave officer who had also served in the Flanders wars :—" My Uncle Toby was a man patient of injuries, not from want of courage. I know no man under whose arm I would sooner have taken shelter. Nor did this arise from my obtuseness or insensibility of his intellectual parts. But he was of a peaceful, placid nature, no jarring elements in it; all was mixed up so kindly within him; my Uncle Toby had scarce heart to retaliate on a fly.' Then follows the famous incident of the fly, and its subsequent happy discharge into that world which was wide enough both for itself and its captor. Contrasting the two brothers, he says that Mr. Shandy was quite the opposite of his brother 'in this patient *endurance* of wrongs.' . . . He was *ten years old*, Tristram writes, when the fly adventure happened, which might indeed have been a little incident in Ensign Sterne's life ; for it is very consistent with his ' kindly, sweet disposition, void of all design' But my Uncle Toby, with all this gentleness, could yet rouse himself when the occasion called for a necessary display of temper ; and thus he was always in the habit of calling the Corporal 'Trim,' excepting when he happened to be *very angry with him*."

"Putting this picture beside the original" continues the biographer, "we see that Ensign Roger Sterne, with that kindly, sweet disposition, void of all design ' (words which in themselves come sweetly and melodiously off the lips), could nevertheless be in his ' temper somewhat rapid and hasty.' It breaks out, does this likeness, in innumerable little touches—hints, rather, and delicate shadowings. . . . Like the famous Sir Roger, of Addison's make, this figure of my Uncle Toby, starting somewhat mistily, fills in as it goes, with a wonderful clearness and brilliancy. He scarcely knew at the outset how it would grow under his hands.

I feel sure that these conjectures convey a measure of truth. But they do not in the least set aside the Dacre tradition. "The scenery and costume of Queen Anne's wars"—"the Ramillie wig", "the blue and gold suit laid by in the great campaign trunk, and which was magnificently laced down the sides in the mode of *King William's* reign" —"the wonderful scarlet roquelaure in which Captain Shandy mounted guard in the trenches before the gates of St Nicholas"—all these things had most likely been long treasured in Sterne's memory before he sat down to write the first page of his "Tristram". A clever litterateur would know how to make good use of the recollections of his childhood, vague as they might be, and to blend them with studies of character made at a later time of life.

The reader will now stand with me at the old gates of Preston Castle. At the southern side of those broad meadows we can rebuild, in fancy, the quaint, embattled residence. And we may see a tall, thin, strange figure passing out into the narrow lane, hedged with hawthorn and holly. It is Yorick going back to The Hoo. Those sly, comic features which Lavater speaks of—the expressive features of "the arch, satirical Sterne"—wear a look of triumphant humour. He has just made a sketch of Captain Hinde, and feels that it will be his masterpiece. The work will be true to nature, but he will finish it with the thousand graceful touches of his unique pencil, and give it the rich costume and colour of the bygone days of Marlborough. The bright eyes of Yorick's pale face grow brighter with the inspiration of genius, and he rides away in his gayest mood, certain to be more brilliant than ever at Lord Darce's.

We who thus dreamily stared at the Preston gates, and call up the shadows of Laurence Sterne and Captain Hinde, may, in a moment, cast behind us another hundred years. We shall then see close to us a marvellous man, whose face and figure, homely though they be, are yet touched by the rays from the Celestial City. Within a few hundred yards of those gates, and in the midst of a thick wood which borders the Castle meadows, is a green space called "Bunyan's Dell". In this hollow in the wilderness a thousand people would once assemble to listen to their Baptist—the inspired Tinker of Bedford. A Protestant may admire Ignatius Loyola, or the gentle St. Francis, and the most severe Churchman must give due honour to the memory of John Bunyan—the saint-errant of Dissent. Anyone who reads his life may see that he lived through his own spiritual romance. Surrounded by the wild passions and blind bigotry of the seventeenth century, "his pure and powerful mind" fought a good fight with Apollyon, passed with trembling anguish through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and escaped serene and blameless from Vanity Fair. No doubt the "Meeters" who came to the Preston wood to hear Bunyan's rousing and searching sermons understood very well that he was the Christian hero of his "Pilgrim's Progress". Living in Hertfordshire, from sixteen to twenty miles from Bedford, they would probably know much of his history. A prisoner for Nonconformity and illegal preaching, Bunyan had spent twelve weary years in Bedford gaol. Though not shut up *in* the Venetian *pozzi*, he must have suffered severely in his dull, dark, damp chamber, built over the river. There, with only two books—the Bible and "Foxe's Book of Martyrs"—he gave himself up to studies more absorbing than those which endeared the "Martin Tower" to the "Wizard Earl of Northumberland." And there he resolved to remain "until the moss grew on his eyebrows" rather than promise not to preach. At length Dr. Barlow; afterwards Bishop of Lincoln, is said to have

obtained his unconditional release. All honour to the wise, kind Churchman! Wise and kind people, having read the "Pilgrim's Progress," felt that the writer had heart and intellect for a broad Catholic faith, and that nothing would narrow him into a mischievous sectarian. So he left the dismal old gaol on Bedford Bridge, and went out into the world as a preacher. It was probably sometime after this release in 1671 that Bishop Bunyan, as he was popularly called, made Hertfordshire part of his diocese. Justices and constables paid tribute to his character by allowing him to preach in several counties. But as the times were full of danger, he was often obliged to travel in disguise, and the people of his pastorate met during the night, and in places from which they might easily escape. One such place was found in Preston Wood, three miles from Hitchin. When we look at "Bunyan's Dell" we can see the midnight "Meeters," and their preacher.

The dense thicket of trees around—the starry sky—the multitude of enthusiasts half buried in shadow—this is a scene to inspire John Bunyan with the best of "his powerful and piercing words". Such words, though drawn from the common language of tinker and peasant, can work wonders. We feel that they would probably make a more lasting impression than any one of the Reverend Mr. brick's "dramatic -sermons," preached before judge, ambassador, or king. Like Dante, Bunyan is able to produce a sublime effect and a strong sense of reality by a few bold, abrupt touches. He has come, like the great Florentine, from la *valle d'abisso doloroso*, and he tells of its horrors with the vivid brevity of intense feeling. Let me read a passage from his "Sermons on the Greatness of the Soul: "Once I dreamed that I saw two persons whom I knew in bell ; and methought I saw a continual dropping, as of great drops of fire, lighting upon them in their sore distress. Oh, words are wanting—thoughts are wanting—imagination and fancy are poor things here! Hell is another place than any alive can think." This is truly Dantesque. But Bunyan devoted his Dantesque genius to the loving purpose of an Evangelist,

Shall we contrast the "glorious dreamer" with the historian of the Shandys?—the grave, devout pilgrim, with the gay trifler who made the Sentimental Journey! Let us not, contrast—nor judge—nor moralize Many of us have a library in which we receive a large company of illustrious men and women. If we have known them from childhood, as dear, familiar friends, we shall think of them in their best moments, and regard them with unfailing charity. If we possess the least trifle which belongs to the life or literary history of any one of thorn, we shall value it as a priceless treasure. In this spirit, I delight to find the tradition of Bunyan's Dell, and to rescue from the darkness and dust of years, the curious old portrait of Captain Hinde—Sterne's Uncle Toby.