

ON THE COCKNEY SCHOOL OF POETRY Vol. VI

John Gibson Lockhart

Freeditorial 

THIS is a posthumous publication, and has been given to the world, we understand, by the author's executors, Mr John Keats, Mr Vincent Novello, and Mr Benjamin Haydon. Such, at least, is the town-talk. We wish that these gentlemen had given us a short life of their deceased friend; but that, to be sure, would have been a delicate task. We have heard it whispered, that they found among his papers a quire of hot-pressed wire-wove, gilt Autobiography. Why not publish select portions of that? Neither have they given us a Face. This was unkind, for no man admired his face more than poor Hunt; and many and oft is the time that we have stood by him, at pond and stream, when he tried to catch a reflected glimpse of his "perked-up mouth" and "crisp curls" in the liquid element. The blame of this omission lies entirely at Mr Haydon's door, and we call upon him to justify himself before the public. A great historical painter like Haydon ought not to paint portraits of ordinary men—mere statesmen or warriors—your Cannings and your Wellingtons, and so forth; but poets belong to a higher order of beings, and the Raphael of the Cockneys need not to have blushed to paint the divine countenance of their Milton.

But we must put up the best way we can with the want of a Life and Face and rest satisfied with the image of the mind. It is not easy to explain why Leigh Hunt, the most fierce democrat and demagogue of his day, and whose habits and courses of life were altogether so very vulgar, should have been so fond of dedications to great people. "My dear Byron," was quite a bright thought; and

we have sometimes imagined what "confusion worse confounded" must have reigned in the box at Hampstead, when the maid-servant announced his lordship, more especially if it happened to be washing-day.

"Even in our ashes live their wonted fires,"

and accordingly we have now a posthumous dedication, beginning, "My dear Sir John." Oh! what a falling off is there! Why, had the Cockney lived a few years longer, he might have descended into a plain, paltry "My dear Sir;" and then there would have been an end of all his greatness. From "My dear Lord," the ascent would have been easy to "My dear Duke;" thence to "My dear Regent;" and when earthly potentate could not satisfy the bard's ambition, he might have dedicated a half-guinea volume to Pan or Apollo.

The main features of this posthumous volume are, we are told, "a love of sociality, of the country, and of the fine imagination of the Greeks;" and it is on that account dedicated to Sir John Swinburne, Bart, whom "a rational piety and a manly patriotism does not hinder from putting the Phidian Jupiter over his organ and flowers at the end of his room." This is a very mystical sentence. Rational piety and manly patriotism, as far as we can see, need no more hinder Sir John Swinburne from doing that, than from wearing buckskin-breeches and boots when he takes a morning ride, or from having a turkey-carpet in his drawing-room. But both rational piety and manly patriotism ought, in our opinion, to prevent Sir John Swinburne from admiring either the story of Rimini or the Examiner newspaper; for the first is an affected piece of immorality, and the second has for twelve years past been endeavouring to sap the foundations of all social institutions, and of the Christian religion. Sir John Swinburne is, we believe, a highly respectable person, and must hate and despise licentiousness, sedition, and impiety. A dedication to him, by a writer who so largely dealt in all of these as the late Leigh Hunt, is a gross public insult, not to himself alone, but to the country-gentlemen of England.

Let us see in what way the deceased Cockney exhibits his love of sociality — of the country—and of the fine imagination of the Greeks.

I. *His love of sociality.*

Few traits of this amiable disposition are discernible in the chief poem of this collection, the Nymphs. On the contrary, Mr Hunt seems desirous to have these fair ladies entirely to himself, and figures away in the character of the Grand Signer. The following is a sketch of part of his seraglio.

Most exquisite it was indeed to see

How those blithe damsels guided variously,

Before, behind, beside. Some forward stood

As in well-managed chariots, or pursued
Their trusting way as in self-moving ones;
And some sat up, or as in tilted chair
With silver back seemed slumbering through the air,
Or leaned their cheek against a pillowy place
As if upon their smiling, sleepy face
They felt the air, or heard aerial tunes.
Some were like maids who sit to wash their feet
On rounded banks beside a rivulet;
Some sat in shade beneath a curving jut
As at a small hill's foot;
And some behind upon a sunny mound
With twinkling eyes. Another only shewed
On the far side a foot and leg, that glowed
Under the cloud; a sweeping back another,
Turning her from us like a suckling mother;
She next, a side, lifting her arms to tie
Her locks into a flowing knot; and she
That followed her, a smooth down-arching thigh
Tapering with tremulous mass internally.
Others lay partly sunk, as if in bed,
Shewing a white raised bosom and dark head,
And dropping out an arm.

Several scores more of King Leigh the First's Beauties are described by the pencil of his enamoured majesty—and at the conclusion we are told by him that

Every lady bowed
A little from its side without a word,
And swept my lids with breathless lips serene,

As Alan's mouth was stooped to by a Queen.

But we, "who are ignorant of all noble theories," must not presume to guess at the meaning of these free nymphs, or at the construction which Mr Hunt may have put on their condescensions.

The love of sociality, however, breaks out, at page 40, in a poem entitled Fancy's Party. Mr Hunt and a few choice spirits are sipping tea in his parlour—and "cherishing their knees" at the fire, as he elsewhere snugly says—when it would appear that the Harlequin of Sadler's Wells, who we believe was an intimate friend of Leigh's, strikes the chimney-piece with his sword,

And hey, what's this? the walls, look,

Are wrinkling as a skin does;

And now they are bent

To a silken tent.

And there are chrystal windows;

And look! there's a balloon love!

Round and bright as the moon above.

Now we loosen—now—take care;

What a spring from earth was there!

Like an angel mounting fierce,

We have shot the night with a pierce;

And the moon, with slant-up beam,

Makes our starting faces gleam.

Lovers below will stare at the sight,

And talk of the double moon last night.

Mr Hunt's notions of sociality are very moderate ones indeed; and we know not what will be thought of them by those whom he calls "the once cheerful gentry of this war and money-injured land." Reader, if thou art an honest, stout county squire, what thinkst thou of the following debauch of two Cockney's, Hunt and Hazlitt.

Then tea made by one, who although my wife she be,

If Jove were to drink it, would soon be his Hebe,

Then silence a little, a creeping twilight,

Then an egg for your supper with lettuces white,
And a moon and friend's arm to go home with at night.

In this passage we have “the love of sociality, of the country and of the fine imagination of the Greeks,” all in one. What does Sir John Swinburne think of the Phidian Jove at his fourth cup of tea, putting his spoon across it, or fairly turning the cup upside down, in imitation of the custom of Cockaigne, to ensure himself against the fifth dilution? Then, think of the delicacy of the compliment paid to the lady who pours out the gun-powder! Jupiter drinking tea at Hampstead with Mr and Mrs Hunt, and Mr Hazlitt!

“Cedite Romani Scriptorum Cedite Graii.”

The affable arch-angel, supping with Adam and Eve in Paradise, is nothing to the Father of Gods and Men eating muffins with the Editor of a Sunday newspaper. There, Mr Benjamin Haydon, is a grand historical subject for your pencil. Shut yourself up again for seven years in sublime solitude, and Raphael and Michael Angelo are no more. One is at a loss to know if Jupiter staid supper. Short commons for a god who, in days of yore, went to sleep on Juno's bosom, full of nectar and ambrosia—

An egg for his supper with lettuces white!

Then think of letting Jove decamp, without so much as once offering him a bed—leaning on the arm of Mr William Hazlitt—and perhaps obliged, after all, to put up for the night at Old Mother Red-Cap's! Mr Hunt then exultingly exclaims, soon as he has got the Monarch of Olympus and the Lecturer at the Surrey Institution out of his house,

Now this I call passing a few devout hours.

Beseeming a world that has friendship and flowers,

That has lips also, made for still more than to chat to,

And if it has rain, has a rainbow for that too!

Who ever supposed that lips were made only to *chat to*? Their ordinary use is to *chat with*—and really all their other little agreeable offices are too universally acknowledged to allow Leigh Hunt to claim the honour of discovery.

Under the head of “Love of Sociality” we now make room for only one passage more—from an epistle to Charles Lamb, who has for many years past been in the very reprehensible habit of allowing Mr Hunt and Mr Hazlitt to suck his brains, at tea-drinkings and select suppers, to steal from him his ingenious fancies, and to send them out into the world wofully bedizened in

the Cockney uniform. Mr Coleridge, too, used to be plundered in this way—and one evening of his fine, rich, overflowing monologue would amply furnish out a lecture on poetry, or any thing else, at the Surrey Institution. Let that simple-minded man of genius, Charles Lamb, beware of such ungrateful plunderers—nor allow himself to be flattered by their magnificent compliments.

You'll guess why I can't see the snow-covered streets,
Without thinking of you and your visiting feats!
When you call to remembrance how you and one more,
When I wanted it most, used to knock at my door.
For when the sad winds told us rain would come down,
Or snow upon snow fairly clogged up the town,
And dun yellow fogs brooded over it's white.
So that scarcely a being was seen towards night,
Then, then said the lady yclept near and dear!
“Now mind what I tell you,—the L.'s will be here.”
So I poked up the flame, and she got out the tea!
And down we both sat, as prepared at could be!
And there, sure as fate, came the knock of you two,
Then the lanthorn, the laugh, and the “Well, how d'ye do?”
Then your palm tow'rds the fire, and your face turned to me,
And shawls and great-coats being—where they should be,—
And due “never saw's” being paid to the weather,
We cherished our knees, and sat sipping together,
And leaving the world to the fogs and the fighters,
Discussed the pretensions of all sorts of writers.

There is too much reason to believe, that this everlasting tea-drinking was the chief cause of Leigh Hunt's death. The truth is, that he had for many years been sipping *imitation-tea*, a pleasant but deleterious preparation—more pernicious by far than the very worst port; and there can be little doubt, that if he had drunk about a bottle of black-strap in the fortnight, and forsworn thin potations altogether, he might have been alive, and perhaps writing a sonnet at

this very moment.

II. *His love of the Country.*

Mr Hunt informs us, that of all the poets of the present day he was the fondest of rural scenes.

O Spirit, O muse of mine,
Frank, and quick-dimpled to all social glee,
And yet most sylvan of the earnest Nine,
Who on the fountain-shedding hill.
Leaning about among the clumpy bays
Look at the clear Apollo while he plays;—
Take me, now, now, and let me stand
On some such lovely land,
Where I may feel me, as I please,
In dells among the trees,
Or on some outward slope, with ruffling hair,
Be level with the air;
For a new smiling sense has shot down through me.

And from the clouds, like stars, bright eyes are beckoning to me.

Having got into this situation, Sir Hunt did not long for his wanted cup of tea,
but for “poetic women”

“To have their fill of pipes and leafy playing.”

What vast ideas of tobacco does “fill of pipes” awaken! and what a game at romps is signified by “leafy playing!” after this violent exertion the poet and his nymphs lie down to sleep.

There lie they, lulled by little whiffling tones
Of rills among the stones,
Or by the rounder murmur, glib and flush,
Of the escaping gush,
That laughs and tumbles, like a conscious thing.
For joy of all its future travelling.

The lizard circuits them; and his grave will
The frog, with reckoning leap, enjoys apart.
Till now and then the woodcock frights his heart
With brushing down to dip his dainty bill.
How beautifully he describes the Hampstead clouds of heaven.
And lo, there issued from beside the trees.
Through the blue air, a most delicious sight,
A troop of clouds, rich, separate, three parts white,
As beautiful as pigeons that one sees
Round a glad homestead reeling at their ease,
But large, and slowly; and what made the sight
Such as I say, was not that piled white,
Nor their more rosy backs, nor forward press
Like sails, nor yet their surfy massiveness
Light in it's plenitude, like racks of snow.
These are singing clouds, and ought to be introduced on the stage.
As they stooped them near,
Lo, I could hear
How the smooth silver clouds, lapping with care,
Make a bland music to the fawning air,
Filling with such a roundly-slipping tune
The hollow of the great attentive noon,
That the tall sky seemed touched; and all the trees
Thrilled with the coming harmonies;
And the fair waters looked as if they lay
Their cheek against the sound, and so went kissed away.

But it is needless to enter at greater length into Mr Hunt's "love of the country," for it all hangs on one great principle—*every grove has its nymph*, and that is enough for the author of the story of Rimini.

You finer people of the earth,
Nymphs of all names, and woodland Geniuses,
I see you, here and there, among the trees,
Shrouded in noon-day respite of your mirth:
This hum in air, which the still ear perceives,
Is your unquarrelling voice among the leaves;
And now I find, whose are the laughs and stirrings
That make the delicate birds dart so in whisks and whirlings.

It is much to be regretted, that the deceased bard's rural life was so limited and local. He had no other notion of that sublime expression, "sub Dio," than merely "out of doors." One always thinks of Leigh Hunt, on his rural excursions to and from Hampstead, in a great-coat or spencer, clogs over his shoes, and with an umbrella in his hand. He is always talking of lanes, and styles, and hedgerows and clumps of trees, and cows with large udders. He is the most suburban of poets. He died, as might have been prophesied, within a few hours saunter of the spot where he was born, and without having been once beyond the well-fenced meadows of his microcosm. Suppose for a moment, Leigh Hunt at sea—or on the summit of Mount Blanc! It is impossible. No. Hampstead was the only place for him.

"With farmy fields in front and sloping green."

Only hear how he revels in the morning before breakfast, when out on an adventurous constitutional stroll.

Then northward what a range,—with heath and pond,
Nature's own ground; woods that let mansions through,
And cottaged vales with pillowy fields beyond,
And clump of darkening pines, and prospects blue,
And that clear path through all, where daily meet
Cool cheeks, and brilliant eyes, and morn-elastic feet.

Mr Hunt is the only poet who has considered the external world simply as the "country," in contradiction to the town—fields in place of squares, lanes *vice* streets, and trees as lieutenants of houses. That fine line of Campbell's,

"And look on nature with a poet's eye,"

must, to be applicable to him, be changed into,

“Look on the country with a cockney’s eye.”

It is true, that on one occasion Mr Hunt (see a former quotation) talks of having gone up in a balloon—but there is something Cockneyish even in that object with all its beauty—and one thinks of the Aeronaut after his flight, returning to town in a post-chaise, with the shrivelled globe bundled on the roof.

III. *His love of the fine imagination of the Greeks.*

A man who could ask Jupiter if his tea was sweetened to his mind, must have a truly Greekish imagination of his own no doubt—and pray, where did Mr Hunt find that Hebe was a married lady with six children? What does that great orthographist, Lindley Murray, think of spelling Apollo with a final *r*, which Mr Hunt is in duty bound to do when he pronounces him Apollar? But Mr Hunt used to read Homer, and to translate choice passages from the Iliad, on which Pope and Cowper had wrought in vain.

Thrice did great Hector drag him by the feet
Backward, and loudly shouted to the Trojans;
And thrice did the Ajaces, springy-strength’d.
Thrust him away; yet still he kept the ground,
Sure of his strength; and now and then rushed on
Into the thick, and now and then stood still.
Shouting great shouts; and not an inch gave he.

When Iris invites Achilles to go to the rescue of the body of Patrocles, the son of Thetis replies to her, as if he were speaking to our old friend Mr Rees, in Paternoster-row, with a MS. for publication in his pocket.

“But how am I to go into the press?”

In another place, Hunt makes Homer call a fountain “clear and crisp,” which had he ever done, Apollo would have shot him instantly dead. There is something to us quite shocking in the idea of Hunt translating Homer—and his executors have much to answer for in having made the fact public.

The following description, though very conceited and passionless, seems to us the best thing the late Mr Hunt ever did “in the poetical line.” But instead of breathing “of the fine imagination of the Greeks,” it is nothing more than a copy in words of a picture in oil. Mr Hunt used to be a great loungee in picture-dealer’s shops, and was a sad bore among the artists,—who must feel

much relieved by his death. Whenever you meet with a vivid image in his verses, you are sure that it is taken from a picture. He is speaking of Polyphemus descending by night,

To walk in his anguish about the green places,
And see where his mistress lay dreaming of Acis.
I fancy him now, coming just where she sleeps;
He parts the close hawthorns, and hushes, and creeps;—
The moon slips from under the dark clouds, and throws
A light, through the leaves, on her smiling repose.
There, there she lies, bower'd;—a slope for her bed;
One branch, like a hand, readies over her head;
Half naked, half shrinking, with side-swelling grace,
A crook's 'twixt her bosom, and crosses her face,
The nook of her shepherd; and close to her lips
Lies the Pan-pipe he blows, which in sleeping she sips;—
The giant's knees totter, with passions diverse;
Ah, how can he bear it! Ah! what could be worse!
He's ready to cry out, for anguish of heart:
And tears himself off, lest she wake with a start.

So much for our deceased friend's "love of sociality, the country, and the fine imagination of the Greeks."—May we add a few specimens of

IV. *His love of himself.*

He gets Mrs L. H. to model a bust of him, and during the operation, he talks of becoming

"Worthier of Apollo's bough."

What is to be thought of a man writing a triumphal sonnet on his own bust, and publishing it—and what if that man be, at the best, but a small poetaster and news monger. Then follows a sonnet to John Keats,

"Tis well you think me truly one of those

Whose sense discerns the loveliness of things, &c.

And then again comes another sonnet on “receiving a crown of ivy from the same.”

A crown of ivy!—I submit my head
To the young hand that gives it—young, ’tis true.
But with a right, for ’tis a poet’s too.
How pleasant the leaves feel!! and how they spread
With their broad angles, like a nodding shed
Over both eyes!! and how complete and new,
As on my hand I lean, to feel them strew
My sense with freshness, Fancy’s rustling bed!

This sonnet presents to us a very laughable picture, which, spite of Mr Hunt’s decease, we hope there can be no great harm in enjoying. Mr John Keats was, we believe, at this time, a young apothecary, and if, instead of crowning poor Mr Hunt with ivy, he had clapped a blister upon his head, he would have acted in a way more suitable to his profession. Such an opportunity probably never occurred again. Well—behold the Cockney—strutting about the room, for we hope there was no “out of doors” exposure, with his ivy-crown, dressing gown, yellow breeches, and red slippers—followed, in all his movements by young Esculapius, and ever and anon coquetting with himself in the magic mirror. No doubt, he rung the bell for the ladies, and the children, and the servants, and probably sent out for his favourite “washerwoman.” When he dressed for dinner, did the ivy wreath still continue to deck his regal temples? Did he sip tea in it? Play a rubber at whist? And finally, did he go to bed in it—and, if so, did he shroud its glories in a night-cap, or did he lay his head on the pillow like Bacchus by the side of Ariadne? All these little interesting circumstantialities are, no doubt, mentioned in his autobiography.

But one sonnet—two sonnets to John Keats, do not suffice—and we have a third “on the same.”

It is a lofty feeling, yet a kind,
Thus to be topped with leaves; to have a sense
Of honour-shaded thought—an influence
As from great nature’s fingers, and be twined
With her old, sacred, verdurous ivy-bind.

To —— ——, M.D.

On his giving me a Lock of Milton's Hair.

I felt my spirit leap, and look at thee

Through my changed colour with glad grateful stare,

When after shewing us this glorious hair,

Thou didst turn short, and bending pleasantly

With gracious hand gav'st the great lock To Me!!

An honouring gift indeed! which I will wear

About me, while I breathe this strenuous air,

That nursed his Apollonian tresses free. As though she hallowed with that
sylvan fence,

A head that bows to her benevolence,

Midst pomp of fancied trumpets in the wind!!!!

'Tis what's within us crowned.

There is a pair of blockheads for you! John Keats had no more right to dress up Leigh Hunt in this absurd fashion, than he had to tar and feather him—and we do not doubt, that if Leigh Hunt had ever had the misfortune to have been tarred and feathered, he would have written a sonnet on his plumification, and described himself as a Bird of Paradise.

From John Keats the transition is not difficult to John Hamilton Reynolds—for he too had written lines on the story of Rimini—though by nature fit for far other occupation—and accordingly Mr Hunt returns him sonnet for sonnet. In it, Mr Reynolds, clever man as he is, is made to look very like a ninny.

TO JOHN HAMILTON REYNOLDS,

On his Lines upon the Story of Rimini.

Reynolds, whose Muse, from out thy gentle embraces,

Holding a little crisp and dewy flower,

Came to me in my close-entwined bower.

Where many fine-eyed Friendships and glad Graces,

Parting the boughs, have looked in with like faces.

And thanked the song which had sufficient power

With Phœbus to bring back a warmer hour,
And turn his southern eye to our green places.

But the most insane of all the Idolaters is at hand, in the shape of a certain Doctor, whose name, lest it should injure his practice, we shall not mention, and who (upon his knees, we presume,) makes an offering to the Idol of Cockaigne OF A LOCK OF MILTON'S HAIR!!!!

See what it is to be a favourite of Apollo! Apothecaries and physicians flock in upon you from every side.— And well might it be said of —— ——, M. D., in reference to Keats and Reynolds,

“The force of nature could no farther go—

To make one Fool, she joined the other two.”

Two more sonnets follow on the same subject, and Mr Hunt, we are told, a short time before his death, had the lock of Milton's hair put into a broach, in the figure of a naked Eve, and wore it, and the Mother of Mankind, on the frill of his shirt.

This fashion of firing off sonnets at each other was prevalent in the metropolis a short time since among the bardlings, and was even more annoying than the detonating balls. We have heard them cracking off in the lobbies of the Theatres, and several exploded close to our ear one morning in Sir John Leicester's gallery. Like other nuisances of the kind, they are now laughed down; and, indeed, after Leigh Hunt's death, who was at the top of the fashion, it dwindled quite away, though sometimes even yet a stray sonneteer is to be found cantering along on his velocipede.

In our next we hope to publish “Luctus” on the death of Mr Hunt, by Webb, Keats, and Co.—and also a funeral oration, by Mr Hazlitt. We ourselves intend to write his epitaph.

Z.

Freeditorial 

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