

**THE HUMOUR OF
THE UNDERMAN:
AND OTHER ESSAYS**

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The humour of the underman: and other essays by Francis Grierson

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FRANCIS GRIERSON

From the portrait by Gashin, St. Petersburg.

The Humour of the Underman

And Other Essays

By

Francis Grierson

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THE HUMOUR OF THE UNDERMAN

THERE is a humour of the *Uebermensch*, or Superman, which is direct, axiomatic, and self-assertive; it springs from knowledge and intuition, as in Shakespeare and Nietzsche, often reasoned, full of a certain moral significance, ironical, sarcastic, and even cynical. It stands for the consciousness of intellectual power; it is personal. But the humour of Uncle Remus is impersonal, for it represents the underworld of the Underman, without a conscious philosophy and without applied art. In the hands of the great poets and writers humour is allied to criticism. In the stories of Uncle Remus humour is untrammelled by learning and unfettered by ordinary rules of ethics. The unfathomable charm lies in simplicity and naturalness, in

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the relation established between the mind of the ignorant Underman and the primitive things of the natural world.

There are moods which become identical with Nature. A tree in leaf, a flower in bloom, is Nature in dreamland ; but the poet is one who gives a form to a mood, and interprets the dreams. In the stories of the negro, as told in Uncle Remus, instinct takes the place of reason. In his hands instinct grapples with mystery, and artlessness fills the place of art. It is here that the Underman rises to the plane of the Overman. The higher we go in the realm of words the simpler the words and expressions become. In the supremest moments in all poetry and prose art is drowned in instinct. Wonder and emotion rise to the surface with the impulsion of a cork to the top of a troubled sea. Simplicity of mind becomes identified with the mysteries of natural things, and the immanence of the instinctive mood renders ingenuity impossible and reason superfluous. At such moments the soul has neither the time nor the inclination to reason about conventions of art ; the instinct is swift and the words brief. Simple emotion makes

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Hamlet say: "Oh, that this too, too solid flesh would melt!" There would be no instinctive charm if he made use of the words: "Oh, that this materialistic flesh would dissolve and evaporate." Words of more than three syllables are fatal to direct and simple emotions, but in much of the greatest prose and poetry words of one syllable evoke the most potent charm and the most haunting images. The shortest words are closest to Nature, the longest pertain to philosophy and science. Pedantry makes naivety impossible, and philosophy makes reason a bore. The primitive words were created in obedience to a natural law in the world of sound. The first words were invented to imitate noises and musical tones; with them came expressions of want, fear, instinctive desires and feelings. The long words came with the first metaphysicians, and modern science added to the list by bringing into poetry a vocabulary of hard, unsympathetic, and often meaningless expressions. There is such a thing as poetic science, but no such thing as scientific poetry. Materialism, scepticism, philosophic doubt, scientific vapourings, have done their