THE ABSENT MAN

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649034451

The Absent Man by Cornelius Webbe

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

www.triestepublishing.com

CORNELIUS WEBBE

THE ABSENT MAN

Trieste

THE ABSENT MAN.

BY

CORNELIUS WEBBE,

AUTHOR OF

"THE MAN ABOUT TOWN," ETC.

LONDON:

JAMES BLACKWOOD, PATERNOSTER ROW.

MDCCCLVII.

CONTENTS.

MR. HIPPY'S VAGARIES;

OR,

THE ABSENT MAN.

"Not a sentence—not a syllable of *Trismegistus* shall be lost through my neglect. I am his word-banker—his storekeeper of puns and syllogisms."—*Charles Lamb.*

Mr. Hippy—(as he was familiarly called, otherwise Harty Hippisley, Gent.)—Mr. Hippy was not a man of wit, though he sometimes approached very near to it. A Scotch friend, indeed, once called him "A man of *wet*" (meaning wit). "Yes," said he, turning his eye with a merry twinkle upon his flattering friend, "very *wet*." (And he took the hint from his friend's pronunciation to suggest this as the true reading of a couplet by Dryden which has been much disputed—

"Great *wet*——"

or drinking largely—

"Great *wet* to madness nearly is allied,
And thin *potations* do their bounds divide.")

He was simply a man of whim, which sometimes had blended up with it much playful pleasantry, and sometimes a spice of true humour, to season it: for he was a humorist, or I know not what humour is; an English humorist—the only humorist: and notwithstanding all his real or imagined unhappiness (and he had many good proofs to give as reasons for any momentary indulgence in complaint), he was, after all, of that happy nature, that though there was at times a savour of salt in his humour, there was no bitterness; nothing

that offended the good taste, or hurt the feelings, of his friends or associates. He had, in an eminent degree, that rare quality in a man who loved jesting and raillery, and indulged in them, that he could forbear and spare. If he thought a severe thing of any one, he would not give it utterance. He was in that respect, perhaps, a little too tender of others; for he sometimes spared those who did not spare him. I have seen him put down by an impudent dog or conceited booby, and have not a word to say for himself. I heard him once, and never but once, regret that he sometimes felt such an embarrassment and diffidence in society, that "For the life of him he could not say *bo!* to a goose when he met one; and he regretted this the more, because he so often met a goose, and lost so many happy opportunities for saying *bo!*" But he was eminently a humanist; and felt, I should say, more pleasure in abstaining from severities of tongue than he could have taken in indulging that unruly member in an unbridled and unbitted licence. Yet no man, I believe, had a sharper sense of the ridiculous, a keener eye at detecting the faults, and follies, and weaknesses of his fellow-men; and no man was more prompt and prone to pity and be patient with them, let them pass and say nothing, though he thought much upon them. If he could persuade any one out of an error, he spoke; if he saw that that was a hopeless task, he was silent. "Let him that is without sin cast the first stone" was the religious rule that governed and restrained him. He was, I believe, a really benevolent man in the main, if not at all times and in all things, any departure of his from that "even tenour" of a wise man's way nevertheless and notwithstanding. If he ever diverged from that "primrose path," and had to accuse himself with any sins of commission—or sins of omission, which are worse—no man more bitterly regretted them. His humour, his jests and gibes, were therefore innocuous, and hurt not; and this was perhaps their best commendation.

Mr. Hippy could sometimes say severities, but he

was best at a quiet reproof. Some one, speaking in contempt of the mind of a mutual associate, said, "You may put all the ideas he has under this goblet." Hippy silently drew from his pocket a Pickering copy of Horace, laid it upon the table, drained his goblet, and turning it over the little volume, the whole works, the wit, the playful humour, and brilliant genius of the beloved friend of Virgil and Mecænas, and the favoured of Augustus, lay under that small crystal dome. The "moral" was obvious.

Among a knot of friends who were amusing themselves with cutting up a foolish acquaintance, he interposed by wishing that they would take a hint from Mrs. Rundell's advice to carvers—that "It is not necessary to cut up *the whole goose* unless the company is very large." He would often turn aside the shafts of ill-nature and ridicule by some such pleasant reproof.

Being in a drinking party where a dirty wit kept the table in a roar, Hippy sat in silence. His chair neighbour remarked it—"You do not laugh with our facetious friend." "No, sir," sternly replied Hippy, who loved wit much, but decency more;—"I saw a dirty pig this day who had just wallowed in the mire, but I did not feel compelled to hug him; I had too much respect for my white waistcoat." During the same evening he got into his old "merry cue," and kept his friends amused, and instructed too, without once calling in the aid of the low balderdash which some men mistake for humour. I could soon see that the company were very glad to exchange the cleanly tongue and the wholesome, healthy humour of my merry and wise friend for the cancerous comicalities of the dirty-minded gentleman upon whom he had so lately put an extinguisher. The club-room was full, everybody happy, the ale brisk as a bee—the waiters ditto; the Welsh rare-bits never so large and so good; the "natives," as fresh as a daisy, opened as if they were obliged to the knife that let them loose, and were uncommonly fat and fine. Puggleston was in the chair *pro formâ*; Hippy faced him,

No singing was allowed, which kept the company select and sensible. Any gentleman who forgot himself so far as to strike up a song, found himself, before verse the first was concluded, in the hands of four stout members of the club, who quietly took him out by the legs and wings, with as much gravity as four undertakers would carry out a departed gentleman, opened the yard-door, set the little or big warbler down upon the cold stones, and left him there to "*sing* his eyes out;" and when he was thoroughly song-exhausted, and come to a sense of his situation, then, and not till then, was he brought back to his chair with the same grave honours, perfectly sane, and silent, and songless.

In the club that night was a little cocking fellow, an attorney, of the name of Scrubbs, whom Hippy had christened "Wormwood Scrubbs,"—his temper reminding him, perhaps, of that once terrible Waterloo of our once terrible London Volunteers,—and by that sobriquet he was known. Poor Scrubbs had, in the course of the evening, been all at once violently seized with a song about as long as himself,—"Will Watch, the bold Smuggler,"—and having been taken out and set down on the cold stones (as nurses do when a child screams), was, upon exhibiting all proper signs of contrition, taken in again, and put under the care of Hippy for the remainder of the evening. He sat, therefore, by his side, looking like a marginal note to Hippy; but he could not keep the little fellow quiet—buzz he would. Just as he was getting unbearably troublesome to the whole room, Hippy came to the rescue, and got rid of him. "I don't know how it is, Scrubbs," said he, "but you always put me in mind of the long lawyer." "I do?" squeaked Scrubbs; and as he sat in his chair he swelled out like a barrister's bag in term, stretched himself out importantly, till his toes almost reached the ground, and thought himself something for the time being. "But why do I remind you of the long lawyer?" inquired Scrubbs; and his little soul seemed to hunger and thirst for a compliment from his variable friend Hippy, who,

I must say, on the average, treated little Six-and-eight-pence anything but tenderly. "Why?" shouted Hippy, "why? because you are such a short lawyer; extremes meet, you know." And he glanced his eye, glowing like a coal with the fire of fun, over the whole entirety of Wormwood Scrubbs; and then, taking a mighty suck at his pipe, deliberately delivered such an endless mouthful of smoke as made a "total eclipse" of the poor little attorney. When the corner was clear again, Scrubbs was looked for in his place, and was gone! He had silently slipped out of the room "behind the cloud" which had so long concealed him—everybody said, broken-hearted, because Hippy would not patronize him; but attorneys are not so sensitive as all that.

Hearing a young friend with good ideas, but an inaptness for uttering them, struggling hard to give expression to a happy thought he had somehow got hold of, he said, "You have hooked a fine fish there, W——; but you do not seem to me to know how to land it. Play with it, boy; give it line; and when you have let it spend its strength, then haul in slowly and steadily, whip your landing-net under it quietly, and lift it on shore."

No man sooner saw through masks and the usual dominoes in which men disguise themselves in the masquerade of life. He penetrated in a moment through the thin disguises of a professing friend of his, who preached benevolence, but stood selfishly still when the time came in which he should stir. "If," said he, "he was over his dessert, and had split a walnut in halves, and (his dining-room hanging over the river) he saw you drowning under his window, he would not be at the trouble to throw out one-half of the shell if it would save you. But as soon as you were sunk 'full fathoms five,' no man would compete with him in the pathos of his exclamations—no one shed more tears for your lamentable death—and no one return so soon to his cigar and whisky-toddy, and forget you altogether, as though you had never been."