

"THE SONG OF CONFLICT."

We are fighting a fight, my lads!
The leaden hailstones fly;
The sabres sweep, and the lances leap,
The death-reck blots the sky.
Would you carry the crowning height?
Be wreathed with the victor's bay?
Then trust no brand in your own weak hand,
But down on your knees and pray.

We are running a race, my lads!
O, stout must be the soul,
And sound the limb and the core of him
That hopes to reach the goal!
Does your tired head droop on your breast?
Do muscle and nerve give way?
Does your breath come thick, and your heart turn
sick?
Then down on your knees and pray.

We are reaping a field, my lads!
Already the night is nigh;
See, faint and afar, one pulsing star
Shines out in the kindled sky.
Would you level a goodly swath,
And trust that our Lord shall say,
For burden and heat comes guerdon sweet!
Then down on your knees and pray.

W. F. LANGERIDGE.

THEODORE HOOK AS AN IMPROVISATORE.

The gift of improvisation is rare in England, but when it is met with, it smacks of the soil, and has a distinctly national form, as different as possible from what one finds in Italy, which has from time immemorial been the recognized home of the improvisatore. The Italian creature is a rhapsodist of a serious cast, who pours forth romantic platitudes in "unpremeditated song," and strings together graceful, and sometimes impassioned, verses in the irregular metres to which the most musical of languages so readily lends itself. The English improvisatore has seldom much of the divine frenzy of the poet in his composition; he is a humorist, a wit, sometimes only a wag, who can reel off comic "patter" in verse with the sole object of creating a laugh. He needs conviviality to inspire him, and exclamation to encourage him. In neither case, probably, would it be advisable to have a shorthand writer present to take down the impromptu lucubrations for perusal on the morrow. For improvisation is only a species of intellectual legerdemain, meant to astonish and dazzle for the moment by the suddenness of its spontaneity, not to bear the test of deliberate criticism. Though we fancy the improvisations of Metastasio would bear the test better than those of Theodore Hook. Of all the artists the improvisatore is the one whose triumphs are most evanescent. His virtues, in England, at any rate, are writ in wine, and of his power it is possible to form only the vaguest idea from the impressions of those who, when they heard him, were themselves more or less elated by vinous enthusiasm. But beyond doubt, the talent is a most fascinating one, and secures its possessor a social popularity and fame which no other species of "lion," however brilliant his gifts, can hope to attain.

Now, unquestionably the greatest of English improvisatori was Theodore Hook; and, indeed, as far as our knowledge goes, England has never had any really successful performer in this way except the author of *Gilbert Gurney*. For men like Charles Sloman and other professional improvisatori, though undeniably clever, lacked the abandon and prolific ingenuity of Hook. He first gave evidence of the possession of this marvellous faculty in his twentieth year, and one of his earliest displays in improvisation was at the complimentary banquet given to Sheridan in Drury Lane Theatre. From that moment he became a "lion" of society. No dinner-party, among those who prided themselves on such entertainments, was considered complete without Theodore Hook. And he must have been extremely attractive and fascinating as a young man. His slim graceful figure, his fine head covered with clustering black curls, his wonderful play of feature, the compass and music of his voice, his large brilliant eyes, capable of every expression, from the gravest to the most grotesquely comical, the perfect grace and aptness of every attitude and gesture, combined to make him the idol of every circle which was fortunate enough to secure his presence. His fame spread like wildfire. The Prince Regent heard him with delight at the Marchioness of Hertford's, in Manchester-square, and declared emphatically afterwards that "something must be done for Hook," whence that unfortunate Mauritius appointment. People used to give him subjects the most unpromising. Campbell, who calls him "a wonderful creature, who sang extempore songs, not to my admiration, but to my astonishment," once gave him "Pepper and Salt" as a topic, and confessed that "he seasoned the impromptu with both—very Attic salt." His skill in introducing the names of the company present was remarkable. On one occasion there was a Danish gentleman in the room named Rosenhagen, and a bet was made that Hook would have to omit such an intractable patronymic from his song; but he amazed and amused them all by thus cleverly solving the problem:

"Yet more of my muse is required,
Alas, I fear she is done!
But no, like a fiddler that's tired,
I'll Rosen-hagen and go on."

Of course he failed occasionally; either early in the evening or very late, he did it but indifferently. When the call was well-timed, and the company such as excited his ambition, it is impossible to conceive anything more marvel-

lous than the felicity he displayed. He accompanied himself on the pianoforte, and the music was frequently, though not always, as new as the verse. He usually stuck to the common ballad measures; but one favorite sport was a mimic opera, and then he seemed to triumph without effort over every variety of metre and complication of stanza. About the complete extemporaneousness of the whole there could rarely be the slightest doubt; if he knew who were to be there, he might have come provided with a few palpable hits; but he did the thing for the best when stirred by the presence of strangers; and, as Mrs. Mathews observes in the life of her husband (Charles the elder), the staple was almost always what had occurred since he entered the room, or what happened to occur whilst he was singing. "The first time," says a friend of John Gibson Lockhart, from whose admirable sketch of Theodore Hook we quote,—"the first time I ever witnessed it (i. e., Hook's talent for improvisation) was at a gay young bachelor's villa near Highgate (the residence of the late Frederick Mansell Reynolds), when the other lion was one of a very different breed, Mr. Coleridge. Much claret had been shed before the *Ancient Mariner* proclaimed that he could swallow no more of anything, unless it were punch. The materials were forthwith produced; the bowl was planted before the poet, and as he proceeded in his concoction, Hook, unbidden, took his place at the piano. He burst into a bacchanal of egregious luxury, every line of which had reference to the author of the *Lay Sermons* and the *Aids to Reflection*. The room was becoming excessively hot. The first specimen of the new compound was handed to Hook, who paused to quaff it, and then, exclaiming that he was stifled, flung his glass through the window. Coleridge rose, with the aspect of a benignant patriarch, and demolished another pane. The example was followed generally. The window was a sieve in an instant; the kind host was farthest from the mark, and his goblet made havoc of the chandelier. The roar of laughter was drowned in Theodore's resumption of the song, and window and chandelier, and the peculiar shot of each individual destroyer, had apt, in many cases witty, commemoration. In walking home with Mr. Coleridge, he entertained me with a most excellent lecture on the distinction between talent and genius, and declared that Hook was as true a genius as Dante—that was his example." But was there ever a more ludicrous scene! The grave admiration of Coleridge must have been very funny to witness, almost as funny as his solemn smashing of the window-pane. Clearly the philosopher was vanquished by the improvisatore. But we question whether on appeal from Philip drunk to Philip sober that high eulogium on Hook's genius would have been sustained.

We have suggested that the most brilliant displays of improvisation could hardly bear the test of being taken down in shorthand, and read over soberly next morning. We will, however, give one or two examples of Hook's improvisations as stenographically reported, and the reader may judge for himself.

One evening, at Brighton, at a large party at which Hook was the lion of the occasion, the conversation turned upon a Miss Cox, at that time one of the reigning belles of London-super-Mare. Hook had sat down to the piano as usual, and asked for a subject, some one suggested King William IV. "That won't do," said he. "A king is no subject." Then Miss Cox's name was mentioned, whereupon Hook sang an elaborate song of one-and-twenty stanzas, of which the following will serve as an example:

"When straying along the shore,
A-picking of weeds from the rocks
I beheld (I ne'er saw her before)
The charming and pretty Miss Cox.

I followed this grace to a door.
When she gave to the rapper some knocks:
She entered: I dared do no more
But learn that her name was Miss Cox.

I'm wearing and wasting away,
And had I the strength of an ox,
To a shadow I soon should decay
If frown'd on by charming Miss Cox.

But she knows not my name nor my means,
If I'm poor, or have cash in the stocks:
She's haunted by lords and by deans,
And I shall be robb'd of my Cox.

I'm shy and I'm pale and I'm thin,
And I wear fleecy hosiery socks,
Fleecy hosiery next to my skin,
Which perhaps might not please sweet Miss Cox.

My hair is perhaps getting gray:
I'm pitted a bit with smallpox,
My limbs, too, are wasting away—
O, would I were pretty Cox!

If she's kind, I shall quickly get sound,
My hair will grow curly in locks,
No flannel about me be found,
If warm'd by the smile of Miss Cox.

When I walk on the beach and I see
Little children a-playing in frocks,
I think what a thing it would be
If I should get married to Cox.

To church let me lead her, and then,
With a service the most orthodox,
Put an end to this teasing affair
By changing the name of Miss Cox."

Perhaps Hook was seen at his best among the routs of the gaming-clubs, for there no restraint was laid upon his wit, and he could select his similes with Rabelaisian freedom. One or two

specimens of his improvisation in such company have been preserved, but they will not bear quoting here. As a proof, however, of his popularity among the men about town and the fast jeunesse dorée of his day, we may state that when Hook gave up dining at one particular club at which high play was carried on every night, the daily diners at once fell off to the extent of three hundred. At the supper-tables of the gaming-houses he was a frequent visitor, and he gathered round him a circle of clever men of rank and station, who attended with no other intention than passing an agreeable hour in his society, but who often dropped a cool hundred or two over a bottle or more of sparkling wine.

With what boisterous fun Hook often accompanied his improvisations may be gathered from the following amusing anecdote which the late Mr. J. R. Planche gives in his *Recollections and Reflections*. "I had often," he says, "met Hook in society without being introduced to him, but our acquaintances and intimacy dated simultaneously from the evening of a dinner at Horace Twiss's in Park-place, St. James's, the precise period of which has escaped me, but not the circumstances connected with it. It was a very merry party. Mr. John Murray (the great Murray of Albemarle street), James Smith, and two or three others remained till very late in the dining-room, some of us singing and giving imitations. Hook being pressed to sing another of his wonderful extempore songs, consented with a declaration that the subject should be John Murray. Murray objected vehemently, and a ludicrous contention took place, during which Hook dodged him round the table, placing chairs in his path, which was sufficiently devious without them, and singing all the while a sort of recitative, of which I remember only the commencement:

"My friend, John Murray, I see, has arrived at the head of the table,
And the wonder is, at this time of night, that John Murray should be able.
He's an excellent hand at a dinner, and not a bad one at a lunch,
But the devil of John Murray is, that he never will pass the punch."

The eminent publisher was inclined to grow angry over this humorous persecution at the time, but subsequently he used to laugh till the tears ran down his face at the recollection of that singularly undignified, but irresistibly comical, procession.

Theodore Hook did not always spare his friends, and indeed sometimes made some severe demands upon their good nature. Here is an instance in point which happened at a symposium in the house of the witty and agreeable barrister M. Dubois. Among those present were Hook, the elder Mathews, a clergyman, and Thomas Hill, the most innocent and ignorant of the bibliomaniacs—the *Hull of Gilbert Gurney*, the Tom Hill of all the realm of Cockayne—a good-natured and harmless little man, the most patient and long-suffering of Hook's victims. The clerical gentleman was led to give a very interesting account of a casual interview he once enjoyed in a stage-coach with a brother of Burns, and had repeated in a most touching manner some unpublished verses of the poet addressed to this relation.

"Sir," said Mathews at the conclusion of the recital, which elicited universal applause, "I would be willing and well-content to commence life again a beggar if I could but deliver those beautiful lines with half the pathos you have just thrown into them."

"O Matty, Matty!" interrupted Hook, "you have no idea how exquisitely ludicrous your enunciation would have made them; but you shall hear." Whereupon he commenced a display of mimicry, memory, and improvisation united; furnishing forth, verse by verse, a complete and perfect parody upon the poetry in question, and adopting the while an imitation of Mathews's expression, tone, and gesture that, even to those familiar from boyhood with his power and his genius, appeared little less than miraculous. Mathews alone kept clear of ecstasies; no man, perhaps, is qualified to appreciate a caricature of himself. His deep reverence for the sentimental and pathetic being outraged by the profane burlesque, he maintained a moody silence, adding the finishing touch to the comedy by the look of indignation and contempt which he threw upon the performer. It was not, however, long before his good-humour was thoroughly re-established, and he himself entertained the company with one or two of his admirable songs, calling at last upon Tom Hill, whose honest face was beaming with punch and pleasure, to contribute a specimen of his vocal abilities.

"Sing!" exclaimed Hill: "I sing! Come, come, Mat, that's too bad; you know I can't sing; never sang a song in my life; did I, Hook! Pooh, pooh!"

"No," replied Theodore, "I can't say I ever heard you as yet; but sing you shall to-night, by proxy."

And again he burst forth, giving an extemporaneous versification of what were supposed to be Hill's adventures; raking up the most grotesque medley of anachronous events, and weaving them into a sort of life of his tercentenary friend (Hill was popularly supposed to be as old as Methuselah, and there was a joke that his baptismal register has been burned at the Great Fire of London), each stanza winding up with a chorus:

"My name's Tommy Hill,
I'm jolly Tom Hill;
I'm fat Tommy Hill, I'm little Tom Hill;
I'm young Tommy Hill, I'm old Tommy Hill."

All were again convulsed with merriment with the exception of Hill himself, who nevertheless struggled manfully to conceal his chagrin, muttering to his forced attempts at laughter, "Excellent! admirable! clever dog! damn him! too bad—old friend. Pooh, pooh, Hook!"

The subject of this joke died at the age of eighty-three, though the general impression was that he was at least a hundred. No human being would, from his appearance, gait, or habits, have guessed him to be sixty. Till within three months of his death, he rose at five usually and brought the materials of his breakfast home with him to the Adelphi, after a walk to Billingsgate; whilst at dinner he would eat "like an adjutant of twenty-five"! Hook once said of him that he believed "he was one of the little Hills that are spoken of as skipping in the Psalms."

But if Hook was sometimes rather cruel upon his friends, he did not even spare himself. Just before he quitted the spooking house in Shire-lane, the sheriff's officer Hemp, who kept the place, gave him a farewell banquet, at which many ornaments of the literary and theatrical world were present, among them William Maginn; and Hook astonished the company with a ballad in which he made sport out of his own disgrace and calamity, every stanza ending with the chorus:

"Let him hang with a curse, this atrocious pernicious
Scoundrel that emptied the till at Mauritius!"

Reference has already been made to the attempts to pose Hook by suggesting subjects apparently the most hopelessly incapable of treatment in impromptu verse. There is no instance on record, however, of his ever being at a loss for rhyme or reason in his topical songs.

We here give an example of his ready wit and rapid power of rhyme. He had been idle for a fortnight, and had written nothing for the *John Bull*; the clerk, however, took him his salary as usual, and, on entering his room, said, "Have you heard the news? The King and Queen of the Sandwich Isles are dead" (they had just died in England, of the small-pox); "And," added the clerk, "we want something about them." "You shall have it," said Hook, "it is done!"

"Waiter, two sandwiches!" cried Death;
And their wild maisties resigned their breath."

There is an anecdote which has been often told in illustration of Hook's occasional depth of feeling, of which several versions are given, but the following seems to us the most probable and the most finished. It was at Prior's Bank, Fulham, then jointly occupied by Messrs. Baylis and Whitmore, the latter a son of General Sir George Whitmore, K.C.B. There had been a large party, and Theodore had been in one of his most brilliant moods, though his best friends were pained to see how constantly he sought inspiration in what one of them euphemistically termed "the mahogany mixture." One last song was solicited: such eyes and such lips were not to be refused; Hook, fresh as ever, at once responded to the call, taking as his subject, and pointing every stanza with the words "Good-night." Suddenly, in the midst of the mirth, some one threw open a shutter close by the end of the pianoforte: the sun was rising, and forced its early light into the apartment. On the instant the singer paused; a boy, with his wondering eyes fixed upon him (and there were few auditors he loved better), stood by his side. Like old Timotheus, he "changed his hand," and, turning from the fair dames—the boy's mother among them—clustered round, in a voice of deep pathos apostrophised the child, and thus concluded:

"But the sun, see, the heavens adorning,
Diffusing life, pleasure, and light!
To thee, 'tis a promise of morning,
To us 'tis the closing Good-night!"

"The effect of this momentary impulse," observes one who was present, "was indescribable; it was indeed a touching moral where-with to conclude one of those joyous days of which he was the centre and the soul."

There is more than ordinary interest attaching to this anecdote, because the occasion was one of the last on which Theodore Hook displayed his powers as an improvisatore. But those who remembered him in his youth could hardly recognise in the stout bald man with the pallid fleshy face, the hair elaborately brushed to conceal as far as possible his baldness, the laced, bandaged, padded figure elaborately made up to conceal its ungainly, unshapely corpulence, the "young Apollo," who had once borne, as one enthusiastic admirer had said, "the stamp and seal of genius upon every lineament of his face and every movement of his graceful form." The tailor and perruquier did their best for him, and he was presentable by candle-light. But he needed to be well primed with copious draughts of brandy before the old inspiration came to him as his fingers ran lightly over the keys of the piano. Then the lines of care and dissipation vanished for the moment from his haggard face, the mobile mouth caught something of the old humorous smile, the eye twinkled with something of the lustre of his bygone youth; and the eager listeners heard and saw enough to remind them still that they were in the presence of the prince of English improvisatori.

W. D.

THE Dominion Parliament has been summoned to meet for the despatch of business on February 8th.