

race which engendered and stimulated to the highest degree their *vis comica*—the faculty of saying witty and humorous things. Goethe, in his *Torquato Tasso*, exclaims with admirable truth and force :—

Wir Menschen werden wunderbar geprüft ;
Wir konnten's nicht ertragen, hatt' uns nicht
Den holden Leichtsinns die Natur verlieh'n.

Ay, the poor Jew has been, and still is to this very day, terribly tried. Crushed as he has been to the dust by the iron hand of bigotry, cowed by the soul-chilling venom of contempt and the oppression that "maketh a wise man mad," he could not have survived, had not benign nature mercifully endowed him with extraordinary elasticity, with a wonderful power of resilience which enabled him to elude effectually all the attempts made at every age, and in every clime, to lay him low.

But the genesis of his humor has also affected its nature, and imbued it with its peculiar characteristics. The mirth of the Hebrew does not come to him spontaneously. It is not the result of an overabundance of animal spirits. It is not an outcome of the mere exuberance of being. I would rather liken it to the weapon with which a beneficent Maker has provided His feeble creatures, whereby they have been enabled to survive in the fierce struggle for existence. He that is unjustly reviled and ignominiously trodden under foot, finds relief either in a flood of tears or in a burst of irony. Hence it is that there is an undercurrent of sadness even in the mirth of the Hebrew. Hence, if I may use a musical metaphor, even the *scherzo* of his song moves in the minor key.

We meet in Hebrew literature, and in the writings of those who were directly or indirectly nurtured in its spirit, with humor, the sympathetic representation of incongruous elements in human nature and life. We encounter wit which seizes on the unexpected, and places it before us in an attractive light. We meet with humor, diffuse, and flowing along, without any other law save its own fantastic will. We discover wit, brief and sudden, and sharply defined as a crystal. We detect wit and humor overlapping and blending with each other—pleasant fancies, quips and

cranks, *bons mots*, to which utterance was given perchance, amid the saddest and the most depressing environments.

I shall, of course, experience considerable and, in some instances, an insurmountable difficulty in conveying these sallies of wit to a general audience. Many of the witticisms, being couched in Hebrew, in German, or in that strange degeneration and uncouth blend of the two languages called *Yiddish*, altogether lose their pungency and flavor when translated into the vernacular. Some of these humorous utterances presuppose a very accurate knowledge of the Bible—ay, even of the labyrinthine intricacies of the *Talmud*—in order to be fully appreciated. And when once you attempt to explain and to interpret, all the sparkle and effervescence of the witticisms are irretrievably lost, and the savor thereof is like unto that of a bottle of champagne that was uncorked yesternight.

Some of the most devout and attentive readers of the Hebrew Scriptures may, perhaps, have failed to observe that even these pages contain illustrations of humor in its caustic form. And yet the scene on Mount Carmel, with all its sublime accessories, is not devoid of an element of grim jocularity.

The false prophets of Baal have leapt upon the altar, and cried to their idol from morning unto even, "O Baal, hear us !" Then Elijah steps forth, and mockingly exclaims, "Cry ye louder, for he is a god ; he is perhaps talking or walking, or he is on a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth and must be awaked." We have here the main elements of the ludicrous—the degradation of something usually associated with power and dignity. We may, perhaps, compare this episode to a humorous stroke of Moliere, who, in one of his plays, introduces the messenger of the gods sitting tired on a cloud, and complaining of the number of Jupiter's errands. The Goddess of Night expresses surprise that a God should be weary, whereupon Mercury indignantly replies, "Are then the Gods made of iron ?"

Again, what can be more instinct with genuine humor than Isaiah's description of the manufacture of an idol ?—