CHAPTER XXVIII

NOTE ON HOOD

ALTHOUGH we cannot devote very much space to the consideration of Hood's merits, we cannot pass him over lightly in a general study of English literature. No man was at one time more widely known and more sincerely loved by the English public than Thomas Hood. No man ever gave to that public so much amusement. He was for some twenty years the great English comic poet; in other words, for nearly a generation he represented in himself the joyous and merry aspect of English life. Comic poetry is never great poetry, for to the thinker there is nothing in this world which is absurd or ridiculous, nothing that is not worthy of serious consideration; and great poetry can be produced only by a great thinker. But this does not mean that in literature light poetry has no value. It has a value of a special kind, and one that a Japanese student should not absolutely ignore. When we meet a strange person for the first time, in whom we are interested, we study his face to decide whether we shall like or dislike him; and, quite unconsciously, we discover at once two facts regarding him —his liability to be pleased and to be displeased in certain ways. In order that we should determine how to conduct ourselves towards him, we want to know what will make him laugh as well as what will cause him pain or sorrow. With a strange literature, we must not content ourselves by looking at only the serious side. A literature is, after all, but the expression of a great national individuality, the reflection of the soul of a people. And in order to understand the spirit of a national literature, we must know what makes people laugh, as well as what makes them weep.

Now Hood tells us this better than any other Englishman of the century, even though he is becoming a little old-fashioned to-day, and his laurels have latterly been given to the very witty verse-maker Gilbert. But Gilbert, whose life has been chiefly connected with the drama, never really entered into the love of the people as did Hood. His humour has been of a much more limited kind—not a humour for households, but a humour for the theatre. Hood will be of use to you, I think, for another very special reason. The great mass of his comic work consists of clever punning, a punning most dependent upon the use of common English idioms. Now many a student, having an excellent knowledge of written English, literary English, is quite at a loss when he comes to deal with English conversational idioms. They have nothing to do with his personal experience outside of books; and they need a great deal of explanation. Well, I can think of no better and quicker way of learning familiar idioms than by reading the comic poems of Hood, — especially the comic ballads, which are in themselves a veritable museum of idioms. I make these remarks only by way of suggestion, for our time is too short to allow of analysing many examples of what I refer to. I shall, however, quote a few verses of one ballad* in illustration of what I mean.

Ben Battle was a soldier bold,
  And used to war's alarms;
But a cannon-ball took off his legs,
  So he laid down his arms!

Now as they bore him off the field
  Said he, "Let others shoot,
For here I leave my second leg,
  And the Forty-second Foot!"

The last line of the first stanza is of course a pun, but it is also an idiom; "to lay down one's arms" is to yield, to surrender. The last line of the second stanza gives us

* *Faithless Nelly Gray.*

an example of the peculiar English nomenclature of regiments. It is more common to speak of the Foot than of the Infantry: the Forty-second Foot means the Forty-second Regiment of Infantry. Another pun furnishes us with another curious military term, the suicide of the hero being thus recounted—

> So round his melancholy neck,
> A rope he did entwine,
> And, for the second time in life,
> *Enlisted in the Line!*

"Line" means a rope of any kind, as for instance a clothes-line, a rope on which clothes are hung to dry. But it also means infantry; regiments of the line are the regular regiments of infantry, as distinguished from volunteer regiments. Another stanza gives a still better illustration of the use of common idioms; but the whole poem is full of such examples:

> And there he hung, till he was dead
> As any nail in town,—
> For, though distress *had cut him up,*
> It could not *cut him down!*

The third line gives us the common expression about "being cut up," or "feeling cut up," meaning to be unhappy. To cut down in the fourth line is a familiar term referring to the removal of a criminal's body from the gallows by the cutting of the rope. When I tell you that Hood's comic poems alone comprise about four volumes of this kind of verse, you will understand what a treasury of idioms they contain. But at this point I shall leave the subject of his humour to speak about himself and about the few great serious things which he did. For this man had a double gift. One day he would make all England laugh, and the next day he would make them weep. The tears remain; the hearts are still touched by these verses of pathos and simple beauty. But the laughter has ceased; and the funny poems, as I tell you, are chiefly valuable for the study

of puns, household phrases, idioms, and mere tricks with words.

Thomas Hood was born at the close of the eighteenth century, in 1799. He was the son of a publisher who, being unfortunate in business, was not able to give his children a finished education. Hood had but very ordinary schooling, and at an early age attempted journalism. In these days he would perhaps have made a fortune as a journalist, but at that time the newspaper press was still young, and he found it very difficult to live. His whole after-life, until 1845 when he died, was a constant and bitter struggle with poverty and sickness — troubles increased by the fact that he had a large family to support. Yet in spite of all his struggles he exhibited no sign of melancholy or discouragement, and even within a short time of his death he was making every one laugh by the funny things that he sent to the press. He had begun by attempting serious verse, but though his poetry had considerable merit, he soon found that he could not live by it. Then he attempted comic verse. When the public discovered his gift, they could not get enough of it, and the poet presently found himself under the obligation of writing something funny every few days, whether sick or well, whether inspired or not inspired. This simply means that he was forced to become a hack-writer. It is not surprising that of the first five large volumes of his poems the greater part must be condemned as hack-work, imperfect verse. What is surprising is the existence of those few pieces which every English person knows by heart, and which have found their way into all the anthologies and the school text-books. These are especially "The Song of the Shirt," "The Bridge of Sighs," "I remember, I remember," and "The Dream of Eugene Aram." Certainly these will never die; and so many allusions are constantly made to them in literature that you cannot afford not to know them. Doubtless you have them in some form where you can refer to them at any time, so that we need not repeat them here. But I may make a few critical remarks about them. "The Song of the Shirt" is written in the

common dialect of a London working woman; there is nothing particularly literary about it, except its absolute naturalness and simple truth of pathos. Hood saw and knew all about the suffering of the poor women in London obliged to make shirts for a living. By working seventeen or eighteen hours without stopping, a girl could make just enough money to keep herself from dying of hunger, but not enough to buy her clothes or fire, or to give her comforts of any kind. The life was so terrible that only a brave person could attempt to bear it. Many committed suicide; many became prostitutes. All this was before the invention of the sewing machine, and even the invention of the sewing machine has not made the condition of the sewing woman much better. Hood made one of these women tell the story of her suffering in a song, the song of the shirt; and it touched all hearts. "The Bridge of Sighs" might be the story of one who had tried to live by shirt-making—though we are not assured of the fact. You have heard of the Bridge of Sighs in Venice — a roofed bridge which leads from a palace to a prison above a canal; but the title of Hood's poem has nothing to do with that bridge. He adopted the name only for its poetry, as signifying the bridge of sorrows. The bridge he means is either London Bridge or one of the numerous other bridges of the great city, from which unhappy women throw themselves in despair at the difficulties of life. For hundreds of years suicides have been committed in this way; and even now at regular intervals dead bodies are taken out of the river. Hood describes the finding of such a body—a beautiful girl, probably about to become a mother, who finding no way of hiding her shame or providing for the child to be born, had drowned herself. The poem is simply a series of tender reflections upon the event, full of kindness, tolerance, and a few piercing remarks about the so-called "Christianity" of the world. No one can even to-day pass over Westminster Bridge or London Bridge for the first time without thinking of that poem as he looks down into the water. Like the

other poem it is very simple; but it is not written in the language of a poor woman, but in the language of the great poet. "The Dream of Eugene Aram" I think you have all read. It will live long in literature because of qualities entirely different from those exhibited in "The Song of the Shirt" and "The Bridge of Sighs." Hood was not less gifted in touching the sensation of fear than in touching that of tenderness. The story of Eugene Aram had inspired others besides Hood; it inspired one of Bulwer-Lytton's novels. But the poem of Hood is a greater thing in English literature than even the novel of Bulwer-Lytton, though it is very short. It gives the sensation of horror and fear by the simplest possible methods, and without the aid of any supernatural machinery. I suppose you know that Eugene Aram was a schoolmaster, who murdered a man for money, secretly and in such a way that it was very difficult to detect the murderer. But he could not hide his remorse from his pupils; and one day he told a boy all the circumstances of the murder, pretending that he was only telling a dream. This led to his arrest, conviction, and execution. I mentioned one other poem by the title of the first line, "I remember, I remember," and I think that whoever reads this once is likely to remember. It is a little poem that describes nothing but the memories of a child, yet so that in all parts of the world the experiences will seem to be personal for whoever reads the verses, no matter what his language or country. The great merit which they have, I think, is what I have called elsewhere the merit of universal truth; and such truth must always be simple. Another special faculty which Hood possessed, but which he was not able even to develop as it might have been developed but for his struggle with poverty, was that of creating what we call the Grotesque. The grotesque is a combination of the terrible with the amusing; it is a difficult thing to do well, and there are very few modern poets capable of it. It must be an inborn gift. But Hood possessed it, and it appeared especially in such compositions as "The Forge," and the

long composition of "Miss Kilmansegg and her Precious Leg," the story of a very rich heiress, who having lost one of her legs through a riding accident, has an artificial leg made of gold, and is finally murdered by a man who married her for money. This poem especially is rich in the grotesque element; but I want to refer to it for another reason — namely, that it concludes with a few lines about the philosophy of money which have become famous, and which you ought to know, even if you should not have time to read so long a poem.

> Gold! Gold! Gold! Gold!
> Bright and yellow, hard and cold,
> Molten, graven, hammer'd and roll'd;
> Heavy to get, and light to hold;
> Hoarded, barter'd, bought, and sold,
> Stolen, borrow'd, squander'd, doled:
> Spurn'd by the young, but hugg'd by the old
> To the very verge of the churchyard mould;
> Price of many a crime untold;
> Gold! Gold! Gold! Gold!
> Good or bad a thousand-fold!
> How widely its agencies vary—
> To save—to ruin—to curse—to bless—
> As even its minted coins express,
> Now stamp'd with the image of Good Queen Bess,
> And now of a Bloody Mary!

It would be hard to say more about the subject in the same number of lines, and the simile of the coins with their images of good and bad rulers to the good and evil effects of money, is one of the most powerful in all English poetry. But here we must bid farewell to Hood. I have only desired to kindle your interest in him as a verse-maker, not belonging to the great ranks of the poets, but of extreme value for the student because of his richness of idiom, and his wonderful cleverness, as a great humorist, in the use of the colloquial.