The Humour Of Russia

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“ONE DAY I WAS OUT FOR A SPREE WITH MY MAN JACK.”

—p. 107.
The
Humour of Russia

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London and Seling-on-Tyne
THE WALTER SCOTT PUBLISHING CO., LTD.
NEW YORK: 3 EAST 14TH STREET
ALREADY ISSUED

FRENCH HUMOUR
GERMAN HUMOUR
ITALIAN HUMOUR
AMERICAN HUMOUR
DUTCH HUMOUR
IRISH HUMOUR
SPANISH HUMOUR
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INTRODUCTION.

Of all manifestations of literary genius humour is the rarest, and I am not sure that it is not the highest. Laughter is immortal. The sentimental novels over which our grandfathers and grandmothers shed floods of tears—the "Corinnas," the "Clarissas," and the "New Heloises"—have become for us soporifics of an almost irresistible strength. But the world still laughs, and will laugh for ever, over the masterpiece of Cervantes and the burlesques of Voltaire. Who nowadays can read from beginning to end Francesco Petrarca, and who can put down Giovanni Boccaccio when once begun?

Then again, whilst the demand for refreshing, invigorating laughter has been in all times the greatest, the number of authors who have come forward to dispense it is surprisingly small, even in the richest literatures. The Italians, for example, have had only one master of immortal laughter—the above-mentioned Boccaccio. The great Manzoni possessed the deep intrinsic qualities of a humorist but had not the pungency. In the long list of Italian authors of our century there is only one humorist of first magnitude—Carlo Porta, who
wrote not in literary Italian but in the Milanese dialect.

Of all races the stern, sad English are by far the richest in the beautiful gift of genuine humour. The melancholy Slavonians come, I think, next to the English. Melancholy does not exclude humour. On the contrary, the richest pearls of humour are gathered at the bottom of the sea of sadness. The greatest humorists have never been men of cheerful mood, and this seems to be as true of nations as of men.

From the time when Russia first possessed a literature worthy of the name, we have always had eminent humorists, some of them, like Gogol and Shchedrin, belonging to those makers of divine laughter who so rarely appear among the nations.

But although justly popular in their own country, the Russian humorists are hardly known abroad. This is certainly due not to want of opportunity of knowing them. Gogol's masterpieces, "Dead Souls" and "The Inspector," were translated years ago into English. But he is not half so well known in this country as any of the three great Russian novelists. Humour is so eminently national, it is so closely bound to the soil where it is born, that it can rarely be transplanted to other climes and skies. It certainly loses more in translation than ordinary fiction, and it requires a peculiar gift on the part of the translator that its distinctive characteristics should not be lost altogether. However, translators have had the courage to try their skill upon Gogol, who is not only the greatest but the most comprehensible of Russian humorists.
INTRODUCTION.

With him the comical effect results neither from the peculiar manner of description nor from the contrasts presented, but from his unique gift of bringing to the surface the comical traits of men's characters. His is the deepest and the most artistic form of humour, which on this account becomes sometimes international. Gogol's heroes—some of them at least—are as comprehensible to the English as Charles Dickens's Mr. Micawber and Mrs. Nickleby are comprehensible to the Russians.

The present volume contains two beautiful examples of Gogol's art, which has not been yet translated into English—"A Madman's Diary" and "Marriage."

The "Diary" is a fanciful sketch, presenting perhaps the most typical sample of "Humour," as distinguished from other forms of the comical, which can be found in any literature. It is an intensely pathetic, and at the same time irresistibly droll, bit of autobiography of a poor wretch of an official whose life has been one of insufferable humiliation, and whose mind, upset by a fatal passion for a fashionable girl, seeks refuge in the dream of greatness ending in total madness. "Laughter through tears," that was Gogol's own definition of the character of his muse, and in no other work has he shown so palpably what he meant by that expression as in "A Madman's Diary."

"Marriage," although bearing the author's heading, "an utterly incredible story," and viewed by him as a mere joke, is recognised by all Russia as one of Gogol's truest and finest works. It contains two of the best conceived and most delicately drawn characters of our great character-maker, that of the hero,
the old bachelor Podkolyôssin, an amusing type of irresolution and pusillanimity, and of his friend Kochkaryôv, the meddlesome busybody, who, just after he has abused the professional matchmaker Fèkla for having married him to a fool, becomes fired with an irresistible longing to confer upon his bosom friend Podkolyôssin the blessing of an alliance with another fool of exactly the same type. As a comedy of customs "Marriage" reproduces a patriarchal life so remote from the modern English that some explanations are necessary. Among the uneducated part of the Russian middle-class, as well as among the peasantry, marriages are arranged by the parents. The young people being considered too ignorant to be consulted upon a matter of such importance. In the villages, among the peasantry, where everybody is known by everybody else, no special intermediaries are needed to arrange these matches. But it is different with the middle-class living in large cities. Here a class of professional matchmakers and go-betweenes exists. Naturally enough, it lends itself very much to ridicule, and two samples of it appear in the present volume—one in Gogol, the other in Ostrôvsky’s comedy.

Gogol, who was born in 1810 and died in 1852, is the oldest of our great prose writers. To him we can trace the origin of the Russian realistic novel as well as drama. Ostrôvsky, who is his successor in the dramatic art, is our contemporary. He was born in 1824, and died four years ago. To him the Russians owe their theatre: he left us thirty-seven dramas and comedies, varying in merit and popularity, but all keeping their place upon the stage.