

A FORGOTTEN THACKERAYAN EPISODE

By W. J. LAWRENCE

ALTHOUGH Ireland has more than her quota of nonagenarians, there is probably nobody now living who recalls the remarkable ebullitions of enthusiasm witnessed in Dublin at the old Theatre Royal in Hawkins Street early in November, 1849, when the gifted dramatic soprano vocalist, Catherine Hayes, made her first appearance in Italian opera in her native country. Irish music-lovers were naturally proud of the fact that at long last the Green Isle had given to the lyric stage a prima donna of sterling ability. Sprung from the masses and born at Limerick in 1825, Catherine Hayes had early in life evinced the possession of high vocal powers, and, thanks to the generosity of certain noble patrons, had been enabled to study under Manuel Garcia, the mentor of Jenny Lind, that peerless singer to whose technique her own in some degree approximated. There had been no stumbling blocks in her path. From her début at Marseilles as Elvira in "I Puritani" in May, 1845, her progress on the continent had been a series of intoxicating triumphs. Prepossessed in her favor by ties of consanguinity and by the flattering reports that had reached the city, the Dublin audience flung wide the flood-gates of its enthusiasm once it found that the fair singer's Norma, although differing in conception, was little inferior to the superb characterisation of Grisi. There were abundant scenes of excitement, mingled with jubilant shouts of "Garryowen," (the old Limerick war-cry) during her short engagement, and exultation reached its height on her benefit night when the students of old Trinity paraded the streets carolling songs in her honour.

So whole-souled and flattering was the diva's reception that she paid a return visit to Dublin in February, 1850, when the charm and graces of her Amina in "La Sonnambula" urged comparisons with Jenny Lind, the result being by no means unflattering to the native songstress. She had stood the test of cooler judgment, of that familiarity which is prone to breed indifference, and had emerged pure metal from the assay. One can conceive the amazed indignation of the Dublin public a few weeks later on being informed that a distinguished English novelist had

written in opprobrious terms of the adored Limerick Nightingale. Sublimely unversed in the gruesome chronicles of *The Newgate Calendar*, the pleasure-loving citizens of the old capital were wholly ignorant of the fact that the admired Catherine Hayes had had an eighteenth-century namesake, a miscreant enjoying high rank in the ignoble army of the base. Small wonder that they bubbled over, and that the outcome was an amusing comedy of errors.

Scarcely had Miss Hayes terminated her Dublin engagement when Thackeray, in one of the serial numbers of "Pendennis," then being issued, made chance reference to the old-time murderess who had borne her name. Immediately there were wigs upon the green. The ball was set a-rolling by a fussy correspondent signing himself "Vindex," who was stupid enough to send a letter of remonstrance to the editor of "The Freeman's Journal," who duly published it in his issue of April 8, 1850. After quoting the apparently offensive passage, this wight asked indignantly,

Is it not enough that we are stricken down by famine, poverty and misrule—that we are about to lose the wretched pageant of loyalty, which has so long helped to screen our real degradation from us? Must we also submit to hear an accomplished woman, an ornament to her profession, depreciated because she is Irish?

Vindex's allusion to "the wretched pageant of loyalty" refers to an attempt then being made in Parliament to abolish the office of Lord Lieutenant, a salutary method of reform which Dublin sternly and effectually resented. Into the trap thus accidentally set the *Freeman* editor (as if by the way of exposing the fallacy of the popular belief in editorial omniscience), fell headlong. Stirred to the very depths by *Vindex's* impassioned outburst, he determined on giving the temerarious novelist a Roland for his Oliver and let loose his sentiments in the same issue in a trenchant editorial headed "The Age of Chivalry.—Mr. Thackeray." This is what he said:

A correspondent draws our attention to an extract from Mr. Thackeray's *Pendennis*, in which the name of our countrywoman, Miss Hayes, is introduced, to point one of those exquisite satirical hits for which the Big Blubberman is very remarkable.

The following is the passage which appears in the number for the current month: 'Let us admire the diversity of the tastes of mankind, and the oldest, the ugliest, the stupidest, and most vapid, the greatest criminal, tyrant, booby, Bluebeard, Catherine Hayes, George Barnwell among us, we need never despair.'

One is at a loss which to admire most—the delicate taste or manly magnanimity of the author in thus classing a virtuous and irreproachable Irish lady with the traditional poisoness and murderess of the Newgate

Calendar. It may be polished satire or piercing wit—very profound or very philosophical, but we confess our utter inability to discover anything beyond a coarse and scarcely veiled calumny—one of those rank exhalations which rise up betimes from the fetid lamp of Mr. Thackeray, and which with many passes for the light of genius.

A huger humbug than this same Mr. T., who has escaped from his swaddling clothes in *Fraser's Magazine*, to be clothed in purple and fine linen in the *Edinburgh Review*, has never been thrust upon public credulity and never has credulity devoured with so little, either of taste or discrimination. We have heard it said this gentleman is an Irishman. It is not so. We should be sorry to add another to the reproaches with which some of our countrymen in London are chargeable, or to believe the lowest of them capable of such an unmerited attack on a defenceless woman, who never gave an offence except to the morbid and the jealous—the class which would carefully exclude Irish genius from the field of any of its triumphs, and regard any success of our country, in any department of science, art or literature, as a derogation from the claims of England in the same path of cultivation.

It is some consolation to know that Mr. Thackeray is not an Irishman—not even one of those high-minded Englishmen who can appreciate and reward genius wherever it is found, and will not place Miss Catherine Hayes under ban because she happens not to be an Italian or a French, but an Irishwoman. It may be consonant to Mr. Thackeray's ideas of good breeding or good taste to make such attacks; but one fact is surprising, that he forgets that paragon, Mother Brownrigg, and instead of fairly mating Miss Hayes with that celebrated murderess, placed her so unequivocally between Blue Beard and George Barnwell.

Seriously, what could have been his object in thus singling out an unoffending lady as the mark of his unmanly grossness? The Irish character has its defects, and we do not conceal or disguise them; but none, at least, has ever charged an Irishman with a cowardly assault which should cause a blush on the cheek of a common carter. What adds to the virulence of this attack and proves that it had been written for a purpose lower than the philosophic moralising of Mr. Smoky Thackeray is this—that the number of *Pendennis* appeared a few days before Miss Hayes carried by storm the musical taste and intelligence of London. He wrote to ruin her, but did not succeed.

This, at least, we can promise Mr. Thackeray, that no Irish author, publicist, or critic shall ever follow his example or revenge his vulgar malice on any of his countrywomen who may appeal to Irish taste in confirmation of British genius.

The nature of this attack is so incredibly gross, that it has been suggested to us that possibly Mr. Thackeray's acquaintance with the list of 'the stupid, the silly, the vapid and the criminal' may have made him familiar with some one less known to fame or infamy than he supposes, and who may happen to have borne a name coincident with that of our accomplished countrywoman. We have sought in vain for any confirmation of this conjecture. If Mr. Thackeray has this very simple and very complete defence to make he will, of course, be in haste to offer it. But we have no expectation that any such defence exists.

It was unfortunate that the uneasy suspicion given expression to in the concluding paragraph did not cross the writer's mind before he began to indite this tasteless diatribe. Nobody in Dublin detected the blunder; on the contrary, the whole city seethed at once with indignation over "the insult" to the distinguished prima donna. The very day the editorial appeared a largely attended meeting was held at the Rotunda to protest against the proposed abolition of the Lord Lieutenancy. One of the speakers, Henry Grattan, son of the famous orator and member of Parliament for County Meath, after referring to the attitude of the Government, "with their insolent writers in *The Times* and other organs, who endeavour to vilify and turn into ridicule the conduct and fair fame of the natives of this country, male and female," illustrated his comment by drawing attention to "the language of this Mr. Thackeray in reference to Miss Hayes." This allusion evoked from his hearers an emphatic "Hear, Hear!"

Thackeray's attention having been drawn to the gross attack made on him in *The Freeman's Journal*, he lost no time in addressing a dignified letter of rebuke to its editor, who took his gruellings like a man and at once issued a graceful apology. Uncertain as to how his temperately-phrased protest would be received, he also took the precaution to send the following racy epistle to the editor of *The Morning Chronicle*, a London journal, in whose columns it duly appeared under the mystic heading of "Capers and Anchovies":

Sir,

I hope no Irish gentleman will be insulted at my recalling a story, venerable for its antiquity, of the Irish officer, who, having stated that he had seen anchovies growing in profusion upon the rocks of Malta, called out and shot an Englishman who doubted his statement. As the unhappy Saxon fell, writhing with his wound, the Irishman's second remarked 'Look, Sir Lucius, you have made him cut capers.' 'Begad, it's capers I mane!' the gallant and impetuous O'Trigger remarked; and instantly apologized in the handsomest terms to his English antagonist for his error. It was capers he had seen, and not anchovies, growing on the rocks; the blunder was his, but the bullet was in the Englishman's leg, who went away grumbling because the other had not thought of the truth before.

Sir, three Irish newspapers and an Irish member of Parliament, in his place in the Rotunda, have delivered their fire into me through a similar error. Every post brings me letters containing extracts from Irish papers, sent to me by friends, and one of them, who is most active in my behalf, informs me that there is a body of Irish gentlemen who are bent on cudgelling me, and who are very likely waiting at my door whilst I write from the club, where, of course, I have denied myself.

It is these, when it is yet time, whom I wish to prevent; and as many of them will probably read your journal tomorrow morning, you may possibly be the means of saving my bones, valuable to me and my family, and which I prefer before any apology for breaking them. The blunder of which I am the victim is at once absurd and painful, and I am sorry to be obliged to have recourse to the Press for explanation.

Ten years ago I wrote a satirical story in *Frazer's Magazine* called *Catherine*, and founded on the history of the murderess, Catherine Hayes. The tale was intended to ridicule a taste, then prevalent, for making novel heroes of Newgate malefactors. Every single personage in my story was a rascal and hanged, or put to a violent death; and the history became so atrocious that it created a general dissatisfaction, and was pronounced to be horridly immoral. While the public went on reading the works which I had intended to ridicule, *Catherine* was, in a word, a failure, and is dead, with all its heroes.

In the current number of the story of *Pendennis*, (which was written when I was absent from this country, and not in the least thinking about the opera here), I wrote a sentence to the purport that the greatest criminals and murderers—Blue Beard, George Barnwell, Catherine Hayes—had some spark of human feeling, and found some friends, meaning thereby to encourage minor criminals not to despair. And my only thought in producing the last of these instances was about Miss Hayes, who died at Tyburn, and subsequently perished in my novel—and not in the least about an amiable and beautiful young lady, now acting at Her Majesty's Theatre, and I quite forgot her existence. I was pointing my moral, such as it is, with quite a different person; and never for a single instant, I declare on my word of honour, remembering the young lady, nor knowing anything regarding her engagement at the Haymarket.

From this unlucky sentence in *Pendennis* my tribulations begin; and my capers are held up as the most wicked anchovies to indignant Ireland. 'Vindex' writes to *The Freeman's Journal*, saying that I have an intention to insult the Irish nation in the person of an accomplished and innocent young lady, whom I class with murderers and cut-throats—whereby I damn myself to everlasting infamy. *The Freeman's Journal*, in language intelligible always if not remarkable for grammatical or other propriety, says I am 'the Big Blubberman,' 'the hugest humbug ever thrust on the public,' that I am guilty of unmannerly grossness and cowardly assault, and that I wrote to ruin Miss Hayes, but I did not succeed. *The Freeman* adds in a concluding paragraph that there may have been some person happening to bear a name coincident with that of the *Freeman's* accomplished countrywoman; and that if I have 'this very simple and complete defence to make I shall hasten to offer it.' I don't take in *The Freeman's Journal*. I am not likely to be very anxious about reading it; but the *Freeman* never gives me any notice of the attack which I am to hasten to defend; and calling me coward and ruffian, leaves me. It is the anchovy-caper question settled in the approved manner.

The Mail, assuming that I intended insult and injury, remarks on the incriminating sentence thus, 'its brutality is so far neutralised by its absurdity, as to render it utterly harmless'—No. 2.

No. 3.—*The Packet*, speaking on the judgment of both its contemporaries, says admirably:—

'This prompt and chivalrous espousal of a lady's cause is just what we would have expected from our brethren of the Irish Press, and will, no doubt, be a source of much gratification to Miss Hayes. But we only think it fair to state that he has not been guilty of the 'incredibly gross act' of associating our pure and amiable Catherine with the murderess and tyrants about whom he has written so nonsensically,' and then follows the revelation of the mystery about the real Catherine, the writer remarking that I am neither a fool nor a madman, and that I would not outrage Miss Hayes, lest some Saxon should kick me.

Sir, if some pictures of the Irish, drawn by foreign hands, are caricatures, what are they compared to the pictures of the Irish drawn by themselves? Would any man—could any man out of Ireland—invent such an argument as the last? It stands thus—

1.—I have not intended to injure, nor have I in the least injured Miss Hayes.

2.—The people who have abused me for injuring her have acted with chivalrous promptitude, and, no doubt, have greatly gratified Miss Hayes. Poor young lady! She is to be gratified by seeing a man belaboured, who never thought of her or meant her wrong.

3.—But if I had injured Miss Hayes, many Saxon boot-toes would have taught me decency—that is, capers not being anchovies, gentlemen would have acted with much chivalry in shooting me—and, if capers had been anchovies, I should have richly merited a kicking. Comfortable dilemma!

I should not have noticed this charge, except in Ireland, believing that it must be painful to the young lady whose name has been innocently and unfortunately brought forward; but I see the case has already passed the Channel, and that there is no help for all parties but publicity. I declare upon my honour to Miss Hayes, that I am grieved to have been the means of annoying her, if I have done so; and I need not tell any gentleman—what gentleman could question me?—that I never for a moment could mean an insult to innocence, and genius, and beauty.

I am Sir, your very faithful servant,

WM. M. THACKERAY.

Garrick Club, April 11th, 1850.

Here the matter ended. So far from any rankling sores being left by this amusing passage-at-arms, the whole affair was soon forgotten: so soon that no biographer of Thackeray has ever referred to it.