

WILHELM BUSCH.

BY THE EDITOR.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES.

WILHELM BUSCH was born April 15, 1832, in Wiedensahl near Stadthagen in the kingdom of Hanover, as the son of a small merchant. Having passed through the preparatory schools, he attended the Polytechnic Institute of Hanover to study engineering, but he changed his mind and decided to become a painter, whereupon he visited the art academies of Düsseldorf, Antwerp and Munich. In the latter place he worked for some time in the studio of Professor Lenbach. But nature had not intended him for an artist, and he was not successful with his paintings.

Wilhelm Busch had views of his own which seemed to incapacitate him for a career on any of the traditionally prescribed lines; and it was not easy for him to find his proper place in the world. He was neither an engineer nor an artist. He disliked the exactness needed for a draftsman, and he lacked the love of beauty that would enable him to become a distinguished painter. He was easy going, and yet he was talented, full of original wit and thought, and he felt that he could accomplish something in the world, if he would only understand his own nature.

At last, in his twenty-eighth year, he began to become conscious of the possibilities that were slumbering in him.

In 1859 he was engaged for the *Fliegenden Blätter*, and here he found a field for his talent which consists of a peculiar combination of caricature and satire. His work found admirers, and so he was at once encouraged to write books of funny verses with illustrations of rough humorous drawings executed in his own ingenious style.

The best known works of his hand are *Max und Moritz*, *Schnurrdbur*, *Der heilige Antonius*. *Hans Huckelbein der Un-*

glücksrahe, Die fromme Helene, Pater Filucius, and Plisch und Plum. But he has also written unillustrated books such as *Die Kritik des Herzens* and *Zu guter Letzt*, both containing poems filled with humorous contemplations of various incidents in life.

The value of Busch does not so much consist in the details of his stories, nor their plots, not even in his drawings, but mainly in the contemplative comments which are incidentally thrown in by way of moralizing. They characterize Busch and are evidence of the good nature of his misanthropy.

We quote a few instances culled from his books at random.

Of bad people Busch says with reference to Fipps the monkey :

*"Auch hat er ein höchst verrucht Gelüst
Grad' so zu sein wie er eben ist."*

"The bad one maliciously listeth, you see,
Just such a one, as he is, to be."

But the evil doer who succeeds rises in the estimation of those whom he has worsted. So Busch says of Fipps after having exhibited a proof of his superiority over the dog and the cat :

*"Seitdem war Fipps bei diesen zween
Als Meister verehrt und angesehen."*

"Since then Fipps was by both these two
Respected as master and honored too."

When the pious Helen drowns her misery in drink, Busch suggests :

*"Es ist ein Brauch von Alters her,
Wer Sorgen hat, hat auch Likör."*

"An ancient rule 't is and still true,
Who worry has, takes liquor too."

How humorous is the following observation :

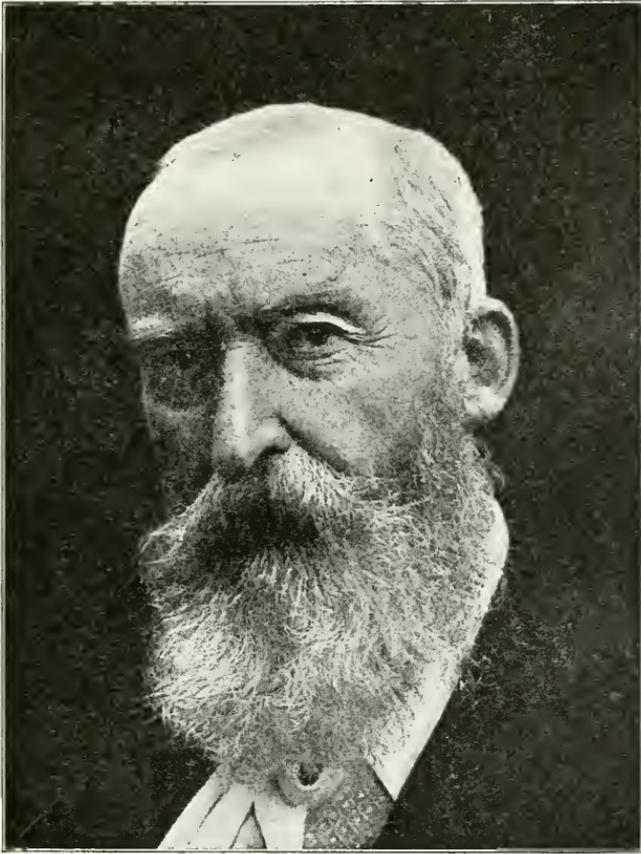
*"Ein guter Mensch giebt gerne acht,
Ob auch der Andre was Böses macht."*

"A good man loves indeed to guess
That others too sometimes transgress."

The only work of Busch that can be called philosophical is a fantastic exposition of his world-conception in the shape of a reverie called *Eduards Traum*, which proves that the great humorist was more of a thinker than might appear at first sight.

Wilhelm Busch's fame spread rapidly all over Germany, and it seems that he might have enjoyed the respect and honors which

were justly paid him by his innumerable admirers; but he hated publicity and preferred a life of retirement among the peasantry of a sequestered village in the Harz mountains. No wonder that in the opinion of many he was a misanthropic pessimist and a *Sonderling*, an odd fellow. He lived in solitude and succeeded well in keeping out of sight. In spite of his fame he was little molested by the curious and his private affairs remained unknown and unheeded.



WILHELM BUSCH.

From his latest photograph taken at Mechtshausen, July, 1906.

He died in his hermitage at Mechtshausen in the Harz on January 11 of the current year, 1908.

Rumors have gained currency that Wilhelm Busch had become pious in his old age, but it is not impossible that he was never impious as his satires made him seem to be. Many a jovial visitor who expected to find a jolly, perhaps even a frivolous, witticist was

shocked at meeting a man of unusual earnestness of life and their reports ought to be interpreted in the light of their disappointment, for we shall see that the humor of Busch had its serious background.

A PERSONAL REMARK.

I myself have never been an enthusiastic admirer of Wilhelm Busch. I read his humerous productions as they came out, but never paid any special attention to them. His wit is not of the style in which I would indulge if I were a humorist. Nevertheless I recognize in him a genius of uncommon originality and his fame is not due to accident.

A friend of mine, a university professor and a man of high scientific standing, finds more in Wilhelm Busch's works than idle jokes or droll pleasantries. As good Christians fall back on the Bible, he quotes pertinent lines from Busch in all the diverse situations of life, finding in them consolation, or advice, or helpful suggestions, as the case may be, and I was surprised to note how well my friend's method worked. Certainly he accomplished the same purpose in spite of the fact that the authority to which he resorted was different from the Psalms or the Gospels. How quickly did he recover from a mishap through a reference to a doggerel from *Hans Huckelbein*; how mild was his judgment of an all too human villainy after the recitation of a rhyme from *Plisch und Plum*, and when one of his dearest hopes remained unfulfilled, how much comfort he took in a line from *Max und Moritz*! Thus I had an opportunity to observe that any book may serve us as a Bible if we only learn to quote passages from it according to our needs.

Wilhelm Busch's satirical works have not been rendered into English so far as I know, nor should they be translated into any language. They can only lose thereby. The flavor of his wit and the finest shades of his sarcasm would be gone. Much that is quite unobjectionable in German would appear improper or even coarse in English, and so we believe that the best translation would be unfair to the author and could only in parts do justice to the original.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF HUMOR.

Humor is a rare treasure which we need not hesitate to prize most highly among the very best things of life. It is none of the ponderous gifts of heaven, such as the serious religious ideals; it

is not a virtue in the narrow sense of the word; it is not a sister of that noble trio, Faith, Hope and Charity; it is not sublime and lofty, nor is it grand and noble; it does not keep aloof from the common people in the humble walks of life; on the contrary it mingles freely with all and in its democratic judgment even seems to prefer the association of the lowly. And yet the roots of humor go down into the most secret recesses of the human heart and are nourished by thoughts of a broad and profound comprehension of life.

The more we investigate the nature of humor, the more shall we understand that this its substratum—we may call it the philosophy of humor, or if you prefer the religion of humor, or the serious background which unnoticeably gives humor its setting—is an indispensable part of it. Without it humor would be stale and unprofitable; it would fall flat, be like a joke that has no point, it would be trite like words without meaning, like a game without a purpose; it would merely be nonsense.

Humor as a rule appears frivolous and flippant to the narrow-minded bigot who glories in vinegar, and scowls at the silver ring of a laugh as an impious demonstration; but experience will teach us that humor is the child of grave, often of sad, experience, that it originates through the wholesome reaction of a strong heart against all the hosts of sorrows and cares of life, which vampire-like suck from out our souls all vitality and the very joy of life, and would leave us moral wrecks sicklied over with melancholia, pessimism and misanthropy.

Humor has a great task to perform, for to humor we owe the silver linings of the clouds of life. Humor offers us the invigorating tonic that restores our spirits and buoys us up when fatigue threatens to overcome us. But in order to be effective humor should be the expression of a conviction; it ought to reflect the world-conception of a thinker, it must be backed by moral purpose. This serious element of humor need not, nay it should not, be in ostentatious evidence, but it can not be missing, and I would even go so far as to insist that no humorist has ever been successful unless he was at the same time consciously or unconsciously a philosopher.

Humor comes to us as a liberator. When we meet with reverses, or are perplexed by untoward circumstances, we are annoyed and suffer bitterly. It is as if a poisonous infection had gained entrance into our psychical system, but we are cured as soon as we can laugh at our own faults and follies. Our laugh proves that humor has entered our soul, and humor comes only to the man who can rise above himself. Humor is the reward of a philosophical

attitude in life. Yea, we might say it is the triumph of a moral victory we have won.

In my childhood I once met a carpenter who did odd jobs around the house. He was humor incarnate for he seemed to be able to elicit smiles wherever he went. His eye beamed with mirth and he saw quickly the funny side of everything. People said of him: "How happy he is! He must never have seen misfortune." But when the question was put to him he grew very serious and answered: "I wish it were so, but I would better forbear to tell the tale of my sorrows." This incident made a deep impression on me for it proved that his gaiety merely reflected the ills of adversity.

It is not necessary that the background of humor should always be misfortune or sad experiences, but it seems to me that it will always be a recognition of the serious aspect of life, either in thought, sentiment or in action. And that this is so may be seen in the humor of Wilhelm Busch, the greatest humorist of modern Germany.

Wilhelm Busch's humorous writings are the expression of a world-conception which teaches us to smile at the ills of life, and the author has reached his point of view by rising above himself and by looking down upon the world from a standpoint of good-natured and sympathetic irony.