

IRVING

Sketch Book

COMPLETE EDITION

Edited by

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HE ROLLS ABOUT THE INN YARD WITH AN AIR OF THE
MOST ABSOLUTE LORDLINESS (PAGE 222)

INTRODUCTION

WASHINGTON IRVING was born in the city of New York, on the third of April, 1783; the same year that the British evacuated the city and that England acknowledged the independence of the thirteen colonies. "Washington's work is ended," said the mother, "and the child shall be named after him." One morning a few years later, as a Scotch maid who lived in the Irving family was walking out with her charge, she saw the great man enter a shop; for Washington was then living in New York as President of the United States. Following him in, she pointed to the boy, saying, "Please, your honor, here's a bairn was named for you." Whereupon the President placed his hand on the head of his future biographer and gave him his blessing.

Irving's father, a native of the Orkney Islands, was an upright, conscientious man and a believer in strict family discipline, while the mother, who came from the south of England, was sympathetic and vivacious. The strongest ties of affection united their large family of children, eight of whom lived to mature years.

As a boy Irving was given to roguish pranks. Sometimes after one of his escapades his mother would look at him mournfully and say, "Oh, Washington, if you were only good!" One of his teachers dubbed him "the general," because although constantly in mischief he never sought to shield himself by telling a lie. This

spirit of truthfulness existed in connection with a sensitiveness to suffering so keen that he was allowed to leave school with the girls whenever an unlucky schoolmate was to suffer punishment. At the age of eleven he was revelling in *Sindbad the Sailor*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *The World Displayed*, the last a collection of voyages that made him long to fly to the ends of the earth. A few years later his desire to become a sailor drove him to a diet of salt pork and a bed on the hard floor; but the preparatory discipline proving too severe, his imagination sought an outlet through other channels.

The New York of Irving's boyhood was a community of varied interests and marked social contrasts; a miniature metropolis where staid Dutch families lived side by side with comers from every quarter of the globe. In 1789, when Irving was six years old, the city had a population of twenty-nine thousand souls, of whom two thousand three hundred were negro slaves. Slave labor was employed in every household of importance.¹

Except in the business sections the houses were scattered and surrounded by gardens. There were a number of the old Dutch dwellings, with peaked roofs and gable ends toward the street, but frame buildings with brick fronts and tiled roofs predominated. The streets were lighted with oil lamps, for gas was not introduced until 1825. Perhaps the most primitive institution of all was the sewerage system, which consisted of negro slaves, "a long line of whom might be seen late at night wending their way to the river, each with a tub on his head." The gallows, which was much used in those days on account of the large number of crimes punished with death, was placed in a gaudily painted Chinese pagoda.

¹ For further details consult *The Work of Washington Irving* by Charles Dudley Warner (1893).

Near this were the stocks and the whipping post. An hour in the stocks was the penalty for profane swearing if the offender could not pay the fine of three shillings. In 1789 the city could boast of but one bank, one fire insurance company, and one theatre, while it had twenty-two churches representing thirteen denominations. At this time Columbia College had about thirty students.

The costumes of the early New Yorkers must have given to their city a touch of the picturesque. A man was considered simply dressed who wore a long blue riding-coat with steel buttons, a scarlet waistcoat, and yellow kerseymere knee-breeches. John Ramage, the miniature-painter, is described as wearing a scarlet coat with mother-of-pearl buttons, a white silk waistcoat embroidered with colored flowers, black satin breeches with paste knee buckles, white silk stockings, large silver shoe buckles, and, on the upper part of his powdered hair, a small cocked hat which left the curls at his ears displayed. He carried a gold snuff-box and a gold-headed cane. The costumes of the women were as varied and as gay in color as those of the men, and it is interesting to learn that the size and height of their hats called forth frequent remonstrances.

Although there were in the community many persons of intelligence and good breeding, the social customs were not over-refined. Drinking to excess was a common vice, and in their amusements the young men were free, even boisterous. The people were keenly interested in politics but cared little for art, literature, or music.

Travelling by land in Irving's youth was something of a hardship. The lumbering stage coach made slow progress over almost impassable roads and across dangerous streams. The trip from New York to Philadelphia occupied three days; Albany could be reached in three or

four, according to the season of the year ; but whoever was daring enough to attempt the journey to Boston was obliged to travel from three o'clock in the morning till ten at night, for six days, before reaching his destination.¹

When Irving was sixteen he left school and entered a lawyer's office — not following the example of his brothers, who went to Columbia College. His biographer asserts that he learned more literature than law while preparing for his profession. Ill health was no doubt one cause of his lack of close application ; for when he came of age, he was so far from robust that his brothers sent him abroad, hoping that he might benefit by change of air and scene.

He possessed in a high degree the qualities that make a good traveller. Hard beds and poor fare — the frequent portion of the wanderer in those days — could not disturb his equanimity. He wrote to one of his brothers : "For my part I endeavor to take things as they come, with cheerfulness ; when I cannot get a dinner to suit my taste, I endeavor to get a taste to suit my dinner. . . . There is nothing I dread more than to be one of the Smell-fungi of this world."

Some adventures not altogether pleasant fell to his lot. While he was on his way to Sicily, pirates boarded the vessel and opened all the trunks and portmanteaus ; and during the first part of his stay in France, he suffered much annoyance because the authorities suspected him of being an English spy. The social life which he enjoyed in the large centres compensated him for all

¹ The distance between New York and Philadelphia by rail is a little over ninety miles. At present the fastest trains make the distance in about two hours. Boston, which is two hundred and fourteen miles from New York by the shortest route, can be reached in five hours.

vexations. He saw many distinguished people. In Rome the charm of Allston's society almost induced him to turn painter; in London Siddons¹ "froze [his] heart and melted it by turns."

Several years before his trip to Europe he had contributed some juvenile essays to the *Morning Chronicle*, his brother William's paper, over the signature of "Jonathan Oldstyle"; but the first productions that gave promise of his future powers were articles written after his return, for a periodical known as the *Salmagundi*, edited by James K. Paulding and William Irving. Not long after the *Salmagundi* had run its short course, he was at work upon a book that will doubtless live when many of his more serious productions have been forgotten, the *History of New York*, by "Diedrich Knickerbocker." Before it came out humorous notices appeared in the newspapers concerning the disappearance from his lodgings of "a small elderly gentleman, dressed in an old black coat and cocked hat, by the name of Knickerbocker." Later it was stated that he had left behind him "a very curious kind of a written book" which would be sold to pay his bills. The *History* was published in Philadelphia and gravely dedicated to the New York Historical Society. Some of the old Dutch inhabitants of New York were indignant at the author's caricature of their ancestors, but in other quarters the book was warmly received. Mr. Charles Dudley Warner calls it "one of the few masterpieces of humor," and asserts that "it has entered the popular mind as no other American book ever has."

While Irving was at work upon his *History* an event occurred which cast a shadow over his future life — the death of Matilda Hoffman, the young lady whom he was

¹ Sarah Kemble Siddons, a celebrated English actress (1755-1831).

to have married. Writing of his early love long afterwards, he said: "For years I could not talk on the subject of this hopeless regret; I could not even mention her name; but her image was continually before me, and I dreamt of her incessantly." He never married, and in all his wanderings he carried with him her Bible and Prayer Book.

At the age of twenty-three Irving was admitted to the bar, but he never practised law. Four years later he went into partnership with his brothers, who carried on the hardware business in New York and Liverpool. The intention of his brothers in making this arrangement was to provide for his support and at the same time leave him free to devote himself to literary pursuits. In the autumn of 1812, after the United States had declared war against England, he made one of a committee of merchants who went to Washington seeking measures of relief. For several years business men had been suffering on account of the unfortunate relations existing between the two countries. The destruction of the public buildings in Washington by the British, in 1814, fired his soul with military ardor, and he immediately offered his services to Governor Tompkins of New York, who made him his aid and military secretary. Although he did not once "smell powder" in the four months during which he held this position, he did a good deal of rough riding and saw something of camp life on the frontier.

In May, 1815,—the year made memorable by the Battle of Waterloo,—he sailed for England, with the intention of returning in a few months. He remained abroad seventeen years. Not long after his arrival in Liverpool the illness of his brother Peter made it necessary for him to take charge of the affairs of the Irving brothers in that city. This was a trying experience for a

man of his temperament, and it was made the more trying from the fact that the firm was embarrassed and in 1818 was obliged to go into bankruptcy. Irving was now thrown upon his own resources ; indeed, besides supporting himself, he felt that he must do what he could for his brothers who had so generously provided for him in former years. Peter, because of his ill health, was his special care.

While literature had always been his chief interest, he had never devoted himself to it seriously. He now determined to make writing his profession ; and instead of returning to New York he decided to settle in London. This was a wise choice. In his native city, where he had scores of relatives and friends, it would have been difficult for him to lead the life of a hard-working author ; and, besides, he needed the stimulus that a writer finds in one of the great intellectual and literary centres. His first production after he had entered upon his new life was *The Sketch Book*, by "Geoffrey Crayon." The first number was published in America in 1819, and the series was completed during the following year. The popularity of the book in his own country led to its speedy publication in London, where it was equally successful.

As soon as he was known to be the author, he was warmly received in literary and fashionable circles. Leslie, the painter, wrote : "Geoffrey Crayon is the most fashionable fellow of the day." Lord Byron declared that he knew the *Crayon* by heart, or, at least, that there was not a passage in it to which he could not easily refer. In Scott, Irving had found a valuable friend while he was still an obscure author, and with Moore he became intimate later, in Paris. Campbell, Rogers, Hallam, Milman, Gifford, Isaac D'Israeli, — these were some of the men whom he met in society.

It is worthy of note that he won recognition, not in a period of literary sterility, but when these and many other able writers were in the field. Hazlitt, Charles Lamb, and De Quincey — his rivals on his own ground — were finding new possibilities in English prose; Landor was re-creating in his imagination the heroes of classical antiquity; Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey were still writing; Shelley and Keats, soon to be silenced by death, were uttering their swan songs; in America, Cooper and Bryant were becoming well known; France was soon to be startled by the daring note of Victor Hugo; and in Germany, Goethe, towering above all his fellow-writers through the breadth and power of his intellect, was giving to the world the last fruits of his rich experience. When we think of Irving as one of this distinguished company, we are a little surprised at his wide and long-continued popularity. "There seemed to be," as some one has said, "a kind of conspiracy to hoist him over the heads of his contemporaries."

The next few years, during which he spent some time in France and Germany, saw the production of *Bracebridge Hall* and *The Tales of a Traveller*, both similar to the *Sketch Book* in their general tone.

He had reached the point where he needed fresh inspiration, and the inspiration came from a sojourn in Spain. In 1826 he went to Madrid as member of the American Legation and remained in the country three years — the most productive years of his life. To this period we owe *The Life of Columbus*, *The Voyages of the Companions of Columbus*, *The Alhambra*, *The Conquest of Granada*, and *The Legends of the Conquest of Spain*. The romantic episodes of Spanish and Moorish history delighted his inmost soul; never had author food more fit for his imagination. From the palace of the Alhambra

he wrote: "Here, then, I am nestled in one of the most remarkable, romantic, and delicious spots in the world. . . . It absolutely appears to me like a dream, or as if I am spell-bound in some fairy palace."

In 1829 he left Spain and went to London as Secretary of Legation to the Court of St. James. His English friends gave him a warm welcome. In recognition of his valuable work as a writer, the Royal Society of Literature presented him with a medal, and the University of Oxford gave him the degree of D.C.L. In 1832 he left England for America.

His long sojourn abroad had not weakened his love for his native land. Soon after reaching New York he wrote to his brother Peter that he had been in a tumult of enjoyment ever since his arrival, was pleased with everything and everybody, and was as happy as mortal could be. During the year he made a tour in the West, in company with a party of commissioners who were to treat with the Indians. *Astoria*, written at the suggestion of John Jacob Astor,—in part the work of Mr. Pierre M. Irving,—the *Tour on the Prairies*, and the *Adventures of Captain Bonneville*, give many of his western experiences.

In 1842 he went again to Spain; this time as United States Minister. The appointment was made through the influence of Daniel Webster. Already the now distinguished author had refused to run for Congress, had objected to the use of his name in the election of mayor, in New York, and had declined the secretaryship of the Navy. Nothing but the sense of duty and the consciousness of his special fitness for the position could have induced him to leave again his native land, above all to tear himself from "Sunnyside," the home he had made for himself and his nieces at Tarrytown on the Hudson. His warm interest in Spanish affairs and his friendly

relations with Spaniards of high position caused him to be most successful in discharging his duties as minister through a somewhat troubled period.

He returned to New York in 1846, having reached the age of sixty-three. Increasing years failed to lessen his literary activity. The *Life of Washington*, begun before his mission to Spain, engaged his attention for the remainder of his life. The *Life of Goldsmith* and *Mahomet and His Successors* both appeared in 1849, and a collection of sketches, entitled *Wolfert's Roost*, in 1855. He died at "Sunnyside" on the 28th of November, 1859.

Irving's life of seventy-six years covers a period characterized by momentous changes — social, intellectual, and political. He was born in the early days of the Republic, when the stage coach and the sailing vessel furnished the most rapid means of conveyance and communication. When he died, the slow-going world of his boyhood was no more — done away by steam and electricity. The wilderness, which in his youth lay distant but a few hours from New York, had retreated to the far West. A great conflict was about to free his native land from the system of slavery, one of the familiar institutions of his boyhood. As a young man he had watched the early triumphs and the fall of the first Napoleon; and as an old man he had seen the rise to power of Napoleon III. and Eugénie, one of whom had been his guest at "Sunnyside," while the other, when a child in Granada, had sat upon his knee. When he began to write there was but one man in America who had made a reputation in the domain of pure literature — Charles Brockden Brown; in his later years the names of those now best known in American letters — Emerson, Hawthorne, Longfellow, and their contemporaries — were on the lips of all.

In reading the biography and the letters of this first distinguished American writer, one is struck by his aloofness from the strenuous life of the century. He, the spokesman of the youngest of the nations, looked ever toward the past. The great intellectual movement which owed its origin to the discoveries of modern science and to rapid changes in social conditions left him almost untouched. This seems the more strange from the fact that his public duties took him frequently to the centres of thought and action, while the positions which he held made it impossible for him to keep entirely out of contemporary politics. He followed of necessity the bent of his genius. By nature he was the contemplator of mankind, not the participator in man's struggles. He loved to withdraw from the present, with its bare and often ugly facts, to a past sufficiently remote to have about it the halo of romance. This is why he cared for Spain, with its tales of Moor and Christian, with its dream-haunted Alhambra ; why when a youth he wandered, gun in hand, on the shores of the Hudson or among the valleys of the Catskills, peopling the solitudes with the creatures of his imagination.

If Irving felt small interest in important movements, he cared greatly for human beings. He lived at "Sunnyside," surrounded by those whom he loved ; his brothers were as dear to him as his own life ; his friendships stood the test of time and change. He would often speak of some charming woman or of some noble man whom he had chanced to meet, recalling them through long stretches of years, as one recalls a delightful vision. His letters abound in references to children ; for in every land he found youthful comrades who listened with wide-eyed wonder to his tales of knights or fairies. Even the little Queen of Spain was first of all a "dear child," not

a royal personage, in the thought of the kindly American minister.

It is this human sympathy, this social quality, that gives to his productions their characteristic flavor. In reading him we enjoy the companionship of one who shows us with sincere delight the beauty in nature and in human life that has made his own existence a joy. He reminds one of Addison ; but he is more simple and more broadly human, — a friend rather than a teacher. His humor is less subtle than Addison's ; his intellect less keen.

In the lives of his own countrymen Irving has been an influence of much importance. Coming, as he did, at a time when Americans in general had little appreciation of beauty in any form, he opened their eyes to the loveliness that lay at their very doors — the loveliness of wild nature. He made them feel the glory of the Hudson and the charm of the Catskills. At his transmuting touch the legends that clung to the secluded valleys of Eastern New York became the folklore of the American people. His countrymen were provincial, and he broadened their horizon. Through his eyes they looked beyond the Atlantic, and across that wider and deeper sea which divides the present from the past. In his writings he gave them one of the best gifts that a man can bestow upon his fellows — a source of refined and ennobling pleasure.

While the *Knickerbocker History* is the most purely original of Irving's productions, while the biographies and histories have the value that results from conscientious work combined with literary skill, the *Sketch Book* is on the whole the most characteristic expression of the author's genius. Irving was at his best in short sketches. If not the originator of the modern short story, he was certainly the writer who gave to that species of literary composition its artistic form. There are greater histories

than the *Conquest of Granada*, and biographies that show a stronger grasp than the *Columbus* or the *Washington*; but it is not easy to find a short story that excels *Rip Van Winkle*.

Some of the articles in the *Sketch Book* have lost their freshness because the themes of which they treat have become hackneyed; others, like the *Little Britain* and the *Mutability of Literature*, possess an interest only for those who love to get away from the actual world and lose themselves in a dreamy past. *The Wife*, a sketch that in its day was fervently admired, rings false in the ear of the average modern reader — although he who knows Irving well cannot but feel that the sentiment which inspired it was genuine. Notwithstanding these drawbacks the *Sketch Book* as a whole possesses rare literary merit. The language in which it is written is a trifle antiquated because of its leisurely flow and its swelling periods; but the reader who delights in musical prose, in prose which expresses by its form the varying mood of the writer, may well go to this volume. The *Rip Van Winkle* is an artistic gem; the sketch of *Westminster* in its solemn harmony suggests the very spirit of the ancient abbey; the description of Baltus Van Tassel's farm, in the *Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, is the work of a master; and there is scarcely a piece in the book that does not contain passages of genuine beauty.

Like all true artists, Irving at his best has a style that defies analysis. It is the expression of the whole nature of the man. His goodness, his kindness, his love of beauty, his sense of humor, — all these and something more which cannot be defined go to produce what we know as Irving's style. It is these qualities embodied in literary form that make the *Sketch Book* one of the treasures of American literature.

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