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Terse and Terrible Texts

In these days of well fed poets, when editors really pay minted coin for hexameters, and triplets have a market value, when good verse distends the lithographed hides of every magazine one opens and fairly rational doggerel yells at one from every issue of every daily newspaper, when rhyming dictionaries cost less than a dollar and treatises upon the science of versification are within the reach of everyone—in these gay days of multitudinous verse-making, then, it is rather astonishing to the thoughtful critic that the average specimen of American obituary “poetry” is of a grade nine degrees lower than the lowest grad of soap advertisement doggerel.

In the golden treasure house of English poetry there lies Tennyson’s “In Memoriam”—the first example of its class of verse in any language. In the great Book of Books are the Psalms, and in the volumes of almost all of the English and American poets there are bits of rhymed sorrow which glitter like gems. Yet the average American of the “masses,” when he or she sets out to select a stanza “to make the notice look stylish,” hits upon one which, in nine cases out of ten, is bad enough to make the deceased poets of all the universe turn over in their numerous and widely separated graves.

Look at the “death column” of the average metropolitan paper. Take it slowly, item by item, lest it put a spell upon you. Run your eye down the announcements of deaths. By and by you will alight upon this:

SCROGGS—After a long and painful illness, William James Scroggs Jr., beloved son of Ferdinand and Sarah Scroggs, in his 10th year.

Little Willie was our darling,
Pride of all our hearts and home.
But an angel came and whispered
Little Willie do come home.
BY HIS BEREAVED PARENTS.

This is a timeworn chestnut, but its nickel plated pathos seems to appeal to mourners year after year. Another which calls forth perennial “weeps” is as follows:

A precious one from us has gone,
A voice we loved is still.
A place is vacant in our home
Which never can be filled.

Here is another:

Farewell, dear brother, you are at rest,
And shall forever be.
You would not stay with us on earth,
But we can come to thee.

This one, in a rude way, expresses that hope which is the greatest foe of grief. If, as some critics claim, the sentiment and not the form, makes true poetry, this is a good verse. But then, there is the humorous side to consider.

The following is open to the same objection:

Oh! George, thy gentle voice is hushed,
Thy warm true heart is still,
And on thy pale and peaceful face
Is resting death's cold chill,
Thy hands are clasped across thy breast,
We have kissed thy marble brow,
And in our hearts we know
We have no Georgia now.

This one, too, was written by either an unhumorous undertaker or an alabaster hearted cynic:

We miss thee from our home, dear brother,
We miss thee from thy place.
A shadow over our life is cast,
We miss the sunshine of thy face.
We miss thy kind and willing hand,
Thy fond and earnest care,
Our home is dark without thee,
We miss thee everywhere.
Oh! We shall meet, yes meet again,
Where free from sorrow, grief and pain,
Beyond the river on the shore
We will meet where parting is no more.

Here are other well defined types:

Bring back to me my father with blue and smiling eye.
With shining hair and noble brow, and all too sweet to die;
He was so kind and gentle, how can we give him up!
How can we live on and drink from such a bitter cup!

And,

For a portion of time, they were parents of a child,
With its pretty little life like an infinite smile.

Sweet little darling, lips sweet and tender as a rose.
Kissing, caressing, in this life, has come to a close.
Now a little angel, far above the sky, flashing praises
On its Savior; such a beauty will never, no, never, die.

And,

O! those beautiful, beautiful hands!
We shall clasp them again once more;
As our feet touch the bank of the Heavenly land
We shall meet on that shining shore.

As they say in Chicago, "O tempora! O mores!" Alas! Alackaday!

Mr. Robert J. McCuen, Superintendent of Lamps and Lighting, is a gentleman of some forty odd, with a huge reddish mustache which has overrun its bounds and degenerated into a beard. Besides being an official of extraordinary efficiency, Mr. McCuen is the soul of geniality and a sworn enemy of the gas octopus. Since his induction into office the officials of the Consolidated Gas Company, it is reported, have been unable to sleep at night without the use of sedatives. Incidentally, Mr. McCuen has saved \$75,000 of the city's hard earned money.

During the past month or two the editors of the Brown's Siding (Mich.) Beacon and the Sardanapalus (Mich.) Free Press have been overworking the thermometer in their native county of Aurora by indulging in a heated dispute regarding the recent costly expeditions to the North Pole. Editor McSchwartz, of the Beacon, started the controversy by referring to Nansen as a "blithering jassack." Editor Toole, of the Free Press, promptly challenged this statement, and in the course of a masterly editorial called upon all humanity to witness that the distinguished Swede, by risking his life in latitude 80, made a place for himself among the greatest men in the world's history.

"This," said Editor McSchwartz in reply, "is on a par with the usual grade of imbecile blubbing turned out by our contemporary. What good would Nansen accomplish by finding the pole? Could he sell it, or rent it out, or can it and give it away? The answer is, No! We think, and we will always think, that a man who risks freezing to death for the mere fun of the thing should be locked up in a cage. We have been frozen ourself. We have had chilblains—two of them—and they are painful. One of our ears was frozen in '84. It was not until last spring that we found a cure for it."

Editor Toole replied to this by charging that editor McSchwartz's reference to his chilblains was a covert "puff" for one of his advertisers. Thereupon the able editor fo the Beacon let fly the following broadside:

"When we were a boy it was impressed upon us, by moral suasion and manual exercise, that the most contemptible of all human snakes is the deliberate libeler. As we grew up we learned the truth of this maxim, and now, when we have a living example of it before our eyes, we cannot refrain from referring to it. Therefore, we rise to a question of personal privilege, and in the name of decency and honesty and civilization, with the fair fame of the American press wrapped round us and the star-eyed goddess of truth before us, in the name of Christianity and

virtue, and in the presence of all the peoples of the earth, we denounce James R. Toole as a deliberate falsifier, an abandoned rascal, an ex-convict and a would-be cutthroat.”

Thus the matter stands.