

THE SONNET.—I.

above named headings may be evolved the bows of acquaintanceship, of friendship, of love, of rivalry, of hidden enmity, of policy, business, speculative, professional bows, and so on. But in classifying these various greetings according to their ordinary appearances, it is necessary to exclude those particular instances where private and personal motives predominate wilfully over what we have decided to call the inane instincts, upon which we throw a large share of the responsibility of our own actions.

Taking ordinary society men and women in their attitude towards other people, as a mass, their modes of recognition are pretty sure to come under three distinct heads; first, there is the charming, smiling bow, bestowed upon the individuals of their own particular set, in whom they are obliged by that law which is the inevitable outgrowth of man's social relationship to recognize a power to which they must bend, even though it be in proud submission. Next comes the careful, guarded bow, cunningly speculative and non-committal (where the object does not call for a coldly decisive nod), the bow to one who is not generally known to belong to the exclusive rank of the *élite*, but who may any day be "taken up" by that fashionable caprice which is the arbiter of men's social destinies, and who, on account of this possibility, needs to be treated with an uncompromising discretion from the first. It is not hard for the speculative bow to become ardently decisive, when this fastidious power has raised one's doubtful acquaintances to one's own social level; by a slow and would-be imperceptible process it melts into the sweetness and charm of the first-mentioned faultless greeting.

Lastly comes that bow which is a consummation of the most artful hypocrisy, and which is bestowed with the nicest discrimination by the votaries of fashion upon such as are universally known to be their inferiors in every sense of the word, and who, moreover, have no ambition to outstep that point which is overshadowed by the pompous personality of such knowing patricians. It is not my intention here to penetrate into that active region of motive and thought presided over by the "darling sin" of the Father of Pride. Charity is a great virtue and generously veils the bluntness of impartial truth, but there are times when the kindest of us are tempted to brand such exhibitions of mock civility as nothing short of "the pride that apes humility." This tentative artfulness, if the truth be told, is, unlike the other pet subterfuges of that class of society with regard to their exercises of civility and courtesy, hardly an epicene weakness; I think to be frank we must own that the "bonnets" bring down the scale.

There are of course many exceptions to these rules, if rules they be. Any man or woman who, by reason of his or her personal merits, and for no other consideration, is placed upon that pedestal whither poor mortal eyes are ever and often vainly turning, is not reined in by the exactions of the social law, and it follows that the consequent freedom of his or her attitude towards other people, regardless of kind, class or condition, necessarily declares him or her, by reason of this noble and enviable self-emancipation, superior to the submissive advocates of these social tenets. It is strange that these two conditions, though so opposed, should be traceable to a common source, yet they both do spring from that forcible and salutary aphorism *Noblesse oblige*, which is open to a false construction and which, if violently misused, may justify supreme folly.

It may seem that so close an analysis of motive induces a miscarriage of justice in dealing with the proximate causes and effects of such a seemingly trifling subject, which is not so, however. The most uneducated mind seizes the drift of such efforts, and though not stimulated to probe into it with the avidity of a restless disquisition, it deduces the same practical truth therefrom by assuring itself, with an emphasis well understood by itself, that such advances are "too good to be wholesome."

Were we to speak of the language of bows our theme would threaten to become exhaustless. That is another comprehensive and interesting limb of the parent tree which, however, must not claim our attention for the present. From what has been said, it seems to me that if we have any real self-sustaining merit of our own we should feel that it is able to support us without the "feeble prop of human trust" or public opinion. Agreed that it is not only right but judicious that we use certain nice discriminations in the manner of greeting and saluting people whom we know in so many entirely different ways, there is still much to be condemned in the manner in which people freely interpret and apply this license of social decorum. Let us try to awaken a more active appreciation within us of the dignity, as fellow creatures at least, of those who are held to be the *nobodies* of the fashionable world, and bestow upon them when they cross our path something less intolerable and insulting than a mere flutter of the eye-lids or a scarcely perceptible motion of the lips. If there must be bows of necessity and bows of habit let us make them worth bestowing.

It is of course always the same underlying tenor of utter shallow-mindedness and sottish folly that stimulates men and women to make such asinine exhibitions of themselves before the world. Until the worm be taken from the root it can hardly be hoped that these tentative remedies can produce anything but a short-lived flickering of artificial life, which, while seeming to vivify, is but masking the progress of inward corruption.

Let us look to it in time, for when the disease has crept even into our "bows" it must be that it has gained great headway.

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SO much has been said of the Sonnet, and so many sonnets have been written by clever critics and eminent poets that it would seem an idle task to attempt addition in either direction; yet this exquisite form of verse appears to be more popular now than ever with both versifiers and litterateurs. Instead of being considered a task for the highest thought and a test of peculiar poetic genius, the sonnet is now the vehicle of verse first chosen by every little trifle with the muse.

Time was when the poetaster designed a tragedy after Shakespeare or an epic à la Milton as the proper outlet for his pent-up powers, much as (readers of Murger will remember) Marcel worked for five or six years at his great picture, "Le Passage de la Mer Rouge," which, though subsequently altered to "Passage du Rubicon," "Passage de la Bérésina," "Passage des Panoramas," failed to obtain the success desired by its author at the Salon (always being recognized and rejected by the jury in spite of its complete annual disguise); but which achieved a certain amount of popularity afterwards as an eating-house sign. Many an amateur epic has made a good wrapper for a pie.

It is said that the present is an age of small accomplishment by great men; but what is far more lamentable it is also a period of little attempts by ambitious nonentities. A pseudo-epic of some 20,000 lines on "The Purpose and Progress of the Universe" at any rate effected some indirect good, for it kept the author for some time out of sight and print and occasionally laid him in his grave; but now that three or four verses are able to satisfy the cravings of every rhyme-hungered soul—sonnets, ballades, rondeaux and quatrains flash off all round, like light from a fast revolving reflector. Perhaps on the principle recently advanced by a reputed poet of Canada; that "it is so much easier to write poetry" than prose, it is also thought by each new weaver of rhyming-straws that the finest forms of poetry are the easiest of all.

If the sonnet were only "a little sound," and nothing more than fourteen lines of it, then every quatorzain, labelled a sonnet, would have a fair claim to consideration; but unfortunately for the high genius of Heavysege and the aspirations of some others, much more is demanded before those fourteen lines can be truly termed a sonnet. So high are the standards laid down both as to musical form and completion of idea that many of the noblest poets of the English language are not to be found in any sonnet-collection; and many of the small poems that have been placed in them are not strictly entitled to the honour. For the natural outflow of a phase of thought or the evolution of a mood of passion the sonnet has been proven the finest form of verse. It has therefore been called the alphabet of the heart.

For a flight of whimsical fancy, or for a pretty conceit, the rondeau and ballade are the properly invented forms of verse; though in the hands of a Swinburne they may possibly convey more than in the fingers of a Peck.

The sonnet does not lend its flawless mould to be filled with mere freaks of poetical eccentricity. In spite of its prescribed length and strictly defined forms, there is little artificial about the sonnet. There are no long rhyme-repetitions to be insisted upon as in the ballade; no enforced returns to a central phrased thought, as in the rondeau; nothing to contract the poetic fire and extinguish it, as in the villanelle; but there are the fixed conditions of restraint and freedom of poetic forces that make it crystallized verse. Of all absurd impossibilities, the insuperable one is to attempt a thoroughly artificial sonnet. Instances of the sonnet form being used as an exponent of humour and philosophy abound; but the serio-comic muse must weep at the use of the sonnet to trifle with her affections.

Take the following, written at the beginning of this century on a celebrated character, Thomas Hogg, whose eccentric genius led him to live in a barrel, write verses and make knives, and caused a few small books to be written concerning him after his death.

OHEAP TOMMY.

If I forget thee, worthy old Tam Hogg,
May I forget that ever knives were cheap:
If I forget thy barrow huge and steep,
Slow as a snail, and croaking like a frog:
Peripatetic, stoic, cynic dog,
If from my memory perish thee, or thine,
May I be doomed to gnaw asunder twine,
Or shave with razor that has chipped a log.
For in thy uncouth tabernacle dwelt
Honest philosophy: and oh! far more
Religion thy unstopping heart could melt,
Nor scorned the muse to sojourn at thy door;
What pain, toil, poverty did'st thou endure,
Reckless of earth, so heaven might find thee pure.

There are instances of the sonnet form being employed for cryptic verse; but they merely prove how easy it is to destroy the soul of the sonnet while preserving the mere outer form. One of the most notable and certainly the most ingenious of this constructed verse is the well known enigma of Poe, to solve which the reader must take the first letter of the first line, the second letter of the second line, the third of the third, fourth of the fourth, and so on to the end. On putting these consecutively the name of the lady, for whom this masterpiece of patient toil was made, appears, viz.: Sarah Anna Lewis.

AN ENIGMA.

"Seldom we find," says Solomon Don Dunce,
"Half an idea in the profoundest sonnet.
Through all the flimsy things we see at once
As easily as through a Naples bonnet—
Trash of all trash!—how can a lady do it?"

Yet heavier far than your Petrarchan stuff—
Owl-downy nonsense, that the faintest puff
Twirls into trunk-paper the while you con it."
And, veritably, Sol is right enough.
The general tuckermanities are arrant
Bubbles—ephemeral and so transparent—
But *this* is, now—you may depend upon it—
Stable, opaque, immortal—all by dint
Of the dear names that lie concealed within't.

No sonnet anthology is free from the presence of verses in sonnet-form, that are not, either by violation of form or misapprehension of purpose, really sonnets. Mr. David M. Main in his valuable "Treasury of English Sonnets," includes Shelley's 'Ozymandias,' and Mr. William Sharp in his "Sonnets of This Century," gives John Clare's "First Sight of Spring" a place. But in the question of what shall constitute a sonnet proper, critics differ. Mr. Main was in favour of "a relaxation, so far as English practice is concerned of nearly every law in the Italian code, except the two cardinal ones, which demand that the sonnet shall consist of fourteen rimed decasyllabic verses and be a development of one idea, mood, feeling, or sentiment, and one only." On the other hand Mr. Sharp lays down his law of the sonnet in what he terms "ten absolutely essential rules."

If in compiling his anthology Mr. Sharpe has strictly insisted on his "ten absolutely essential rules" being obeyed, the book would have been much smaller and the reader robbed of many beautiful and true sonnets.

It is impossible, after studying the entire course of English sonnet-literature, not to favour Mr. Main's view of relaxation rather than insist on Mr. Sharp's rules. Critical rules are not infallible, and Mr. Sharp has had to change his opinion on certain matters relating to sonnet-form before to-day. Other critics have held other views as to the essential requirements of the sonnet, and later critics will put forth more modified theories; but notwithstanding all the critics and their laws, (which by the way, have all been deduced from the best specimens long after they were written) sonnets and reputed sonnets will continue to pour forth innumerable into the ever-increasing sea of verse, and the critical divers of the future will, let us hope, find the true pearls by-and-by.

The writer desires to go over some of the really fine sonnets from dead and living fingers, which should be favourites with all lovers of the diamond verse. For purposes of comparison certain subjects will be taken and examples of sonnets relating to them offered, and what can we treat of first better than the sonnet itself?

Of the actual composition of a sonnet, so far as the form is concerned, the untiring genius of the great Lope de Vega Carpio has left a whimsical record, which will be none the less interesting from the fact of its being written contemporaneously with those of our great Elizabethan writers. The translation here given is by James Y. Gibson, who has also translated many of Cervantes' sonnets.

ON THE SONNET.

To write a sonnet doth Juana press me,
I've never found me in such stress or pain;
A sonnet numbers fourteen lines, 'tis plain,
And three are gone, ere I can say God bless me!
I thought that spinning rhyme might sore oppress me,
Yet here I'm midway in the last quatrain;
And if the foremost tercet I can gain,
The quatrains need not any more distress me.
To the first tercet I have got at last,
And travel through it with such right good will
That with this line I've finished it, I ween,
I'm in the second now, and see how fast
The thirteenth line runs tripping from my quill,
Hurrah! 'tis done! Count if there be fourteen.

The above sonnet is the more humorous because the writer who took upon himself such airs of anxiety over the construction of a sonnet (asked for probably by his second wife), was one of the most facile and prolific writers of any time or clime.

Mr. Theodore Watts elaborated a very fanciful doctrine concerning the sonnet, which may be called the "wave theory." He believed the flow of the octave should have a justly balanced relation to the ebb of the sestet. This theory, we are told on the high authority of Mr. William Sharp, was accepted by sonnet specialists, and Mr. William Sharp himself not only accepted but added to the conception in 1886; but, alas! in a couple of years Mr. Sharp retracts all he previously eulogized so warmly, and says that "probably not the collective opinion of all the sonnet specialists could enforce the general acceptance of a theory which is really nothing more than a pleasant conceit." Mr. Theodore Watts took the bold and novel step of stating his theory and exemplifying the truth at the same time by writing the following sonnet:

THE SONNET'S VOICE.

A Metrical Lesson by the Sea Shore.

Yon silvery billows breaking on the beach
Fall back in foam beneath the star-shine clear,
The while my rhymes are murmuring in your ear
A restless lore like that the billows teach:
For on these sonnet-waves my soul would reach
From its own depths, and rest within you, dear,
As, through the billowy voices yearning here
Great nature strives to find a human speech.

A sonnet is a wave of melody;
From heaving waters of the impassioned soul
A billow of tidal music, one and whole
Flows in the octave; then returning free,
Its ebbing surges in the sestet roll
Back to the depths of Life's tumultuous sea.

It does not require much specialism to discover that the extraordinary theory of undulation will not hold water with a large majority of sonnets, though it may be supported by a few carefully culled examples. The theory is therefore valueless, except that it brought out a pretty sonnet on the sonnet from Mr. Wordsworth, who is