

On the Delights and Dangers of Versatility

[By Bernard McEvoy]

There is a popular saying, the tendency of which is to dissuade us from attempting to become proficient in too many departments. A "Jack of all trades, good at none," has been held up to us from childhood as a personage we should not try to imitate. The most respectable people have advised us against versatility, and have emphasized their warnings by cogent examples, pointing us to the history of clever fellows who, after passing desultory lives, died without leaving a sixpence behind them. From their point of view this argument is unanswerable. There was Tom Handicap, for instance. He did well at school in every subject. He was really brilliant, and such a charming boy that everyone was predisposed in his favour. He was articled to a solicitor, and it seemed certain he would rise in his profession. Then he began to write verses; and some of them were immediately accepted by editors of more or less obscure newspapers. His mother even gave it out that they had asked for more, which will show to the experienced that the youth's initial literary efforts were made on behalf of a comparatively circumscribed public. His first poem had been inspired by the funeral of his aunt, and was of such a melancholy and appropriate character, that as the old lady had left a considerable sum behind her, the surviving relatives felt that they could do no less than have it printed in the most artistic style and forwarded to the entire clan. The only people who did not praise the poem extravagantly were those who were so distantly connected with the deceased that it was the only legacy they received. It must not, however, be supposed that Tom Handicap's first printed verses were inspired by any pecuniary expectations. They were the natural expression of the feelings of a sensitive young person alive to the influences of Nature and of things around him. But there is no doubt that the commendations of his friends led him to think that he was rather out of the ordinary, so that dreams of fame visited even his waking hours. It was not till he had submitted poems to one or two of the more important magazines and got them promptly back, that the "genial current of his soul" received the check of a distinctly lower temperature than that to which he had lately been accustomed. It was soon after this, that a visit to the Royal Academy fired him with the notion that he could paint. He had been a hopeful pupil in the drawing class at school, and he was certain that he could do better than some of the worst pictures exhibited. He bought some paints, and his attic bedroom began to smell of turpentine and drying-oil. He did some really very fair pictures, and found he could give them away to his admirers with the greatest ease. As he had now, so to speak, two strings to his bow—poetry and art—he began to be esteemed as a clever fellow, although in the law office where