

Epigrams.

ANCIENT AND MODERN.

We live, it is said, in a prosaic and realistic age. With all our modern science and modern refinements, our life is not so imaginative, so gay, so insouciant, as that of our grandmothers and grandfathers. Even conversation, we are told, has lost its brilliancy. Women, who used to talk so charmingly, vibrate now between slang and science. Men are either too busy or too languid to exert themselves to talk at all, unless to constitutions or mechanics' institutes. The few who could talk well are suspected of keeping their talk to put into books. We all write and read instead of conversing. And even reading and writing have become occupations, rather than amusements. The warmest and most imaginative lover never now pens a sonnet to Delia's eyebrow, or an impromptu upon Sacharissa's girdle. The modern representatives of those charmers would only vote him a 'muff' for his pains. Vers de societe are gone out of fashion altogether. Such poetry as we want (and we do not want a great deal) is done for us by regular practitioners—laureates, and so forth; we no more think of making our own verses than our own pills. Any man or woman who was to produce and offer to read in polite company a poetical effusion of their own or a friend's, such as would have charmed a whole circle in the days of Pope or of Fanny Burney, would be stared at upon reasonable suspicion of having escaped from a private lunatic asylum. Even if the offered verses should be warranted to contain the severest remarks upon a mutual friend, we of a modern audience should have strength of mind enough to resist the temptation. Perhaps society has grown more charitable and less scandalous; perhaps it is only less easily amused.

It could hardly have been comfortable, after all, to live in the age of epigrams and impromptus. It was all very well for the Delias and Sacharissas, aforesaid, to have their charms celebrated by the wits and poets of the day; and though it is notoriously true that their admirers did not err on the side of reticence, female delicacy in those days was hardly startled by the warmth of the homage. A lady had no more objection to be compared to Venus than to the Graces. Few indeed, were they who needed the warning which Waller—most elegant of love's epigrammatists—puts into the mouth of his messenger, the Rose—

Tell her that's young,  
And shuns to have her graces spied,  
That had she sprung  
In deserts where no men abide,  
She must have uncommended died.  
Had her come forth,  
Suffer herself to be desired,  
And not blush so to be admired.

The days when such verses passed from hand to hand, and were read instead of 'Punch' and Mr. Darwin, were indeed a good time, as the American ladies call it, for the fair enchantresses who, strong in the charms of youth, had only to 'come forth' to insure admiration; but it was quite a different case with poor Chloe, who was repairing the damages of years with a little innocent paint; or with Gelia, who had just mounted a new wig of her very own hair, honestly bought and paid for. Human nature, we suppose, was human nature then; and it could never have been pleasant to have one's little personal peculiarities, or some outward accident, or slight social sin, done into verses forthwith by a clever friend, and handed round the breakfast or tea-table of your own particular circle for the amusement and gratification of other dear friends, clever or otherwise. It was a heavy penalty to pay for living in an Augustan age. In this present generation, if you find yourself the victim of a severe article in a popular review, you have yourself half-solicited the exposure by being guilty of print in the first place; even if, in the honest discharge of your ordinary duties, you awake some morning to a temporary notoriety in a column of the 'Times,' you can satisfy your feelings by stopping the paper; and in either case, you have the consolation of knowing that probably a majority of your personal friends will never read the abuse, and that most certainly nine-tenths of those who do read it will have forgotten it in a week. But the terse social epigram, of some four or eight lines, communicated first from friend to friend in a confidential whisper, and then handed about in manuscript long before it escaped into print, was remembered by the dullest dolt amongst a man's intimates, stuck to him all his life, and, in many instances, became his only memorial to posterity. Like Sintram's co-travellers, there was no escape from its dreadful companionship; if bad, it was the more readily remembered;

if neat and well-pointed, it was more generally admired and more widely circulated. True, the author of the satire did not always put in the actual name; the victim of his verse figured commonly under some classical alias; but everybody knew—and none better than the unfortunate object—that Grunio meant Sir Harry, that Chremes stood for old Brown, and that Lady Bab was intended by Phryne. Even if there was nothing more personal than a row of asterisks in the original, there were always plenty of copies in circulation with the hiatus carefully filled in. Let no one suppose for a moment that the polish and the humour of such productions made the attack more endurable. Few men, and perhaps fewer women, are of Falstaff's happy temperament, content to be the subject of wit in others. There is more sound than truth in the epigram which says—

As in smooth of the razor best is what,  
So wit is by politeness sharpest set;  
Their want of edge from their offence is seen,  
Both pain us least when exquisitely keen.

And both cut deepest too, and leave scars that are longest in healing. Johnson was quite right when he pronounced, on the other hand, that 'the vehicle of wit and delicacy, only made the satire more stinging; compared with ordinary abuse, he said, the difference was between being bruised with a club, or wounded with a poisoned arrow.'

One is surprised, however, on the whole, in looking over any collection of epigrams which were considered extremely good things in their day, to find how poor the majority of them are. They would read better, no doubt, to those who knew the parties. The spice of neighbourly ill-nature, which gave them their chief zest originally, and made up for the poverty of the wit, is lost—happily—to the cool judgment of the modern reader. They are like the glass of champagne kept till it has lost its sparkle.

A nicely printed little book, recently published, containing a selection (for a collection it certainly is not, though so called in the dedication), will impress this fact upon most of its readers. Of course, such jeux d'esprit do not show to advantage when gathered together at random, as these seem to have been. They find their best place as illustrations of biography or political history; often, an epigram of four lines would require a page of preface to make its point fully intelligible to an ordinary reader. But certainly, as one turns page after page of this 'Literature of Society,' one gets confirmed in the impression that society was very ill-natured in those days. The science of making one's self 'beautiful for ever,' by the aid of paint and other accessories, is still studied by some ladies, if we may trust law reports and advertisements, and, no doubt, sharp-sighted friends detect this false coinage of beauty; but they do not mercilessly nail it down on the social counter, as in the case of poor Doriuda (whose real name was doubtless perfectly well known to her contemporaries):—

Say, which enjoys the greatest blisses—  
John, who Dorinda's picture kisses,  
Or Tom his friend, the favored elf  
Who kisses fair Dorinda's self?—  
'Faith, tis not easy to divine,  
While both are thus with raptures fainting,  
To which the balance shall incline,  
Since Tom and John both kiss a painting.

There is a sequel, too, even less gallant, which calls itself 'the Point Decided':

Nay, surely John's the happier of the two,  
Because the picture cannot kiss again!

The rude wits of society delighted in attacking these adventitious charms—unconscious, probably, that in this as many other things, the Greek epigrammatists had been long before them. Here is one of the best amongst many—anonymous, so far as we know—which we miss in Mr. Booth's volume:—

Cosmetia's charms inspire my lays,  
Who, fair in nature's scorn,  
Blooms in the water of her days,  
Like Glastonbury thorn,  
If e'er to seize the tempting bliss,  
Upon her lips you fall,  
The plastered fair retains the kiss,  
Like Thisbe, through a wall.

Modern gallantry keeps its eyes open, and its lips to itself, under suspicious circumstances; and perhaps not being so readily taken in by false colors, is not so bitter against those who wear them.

There are blockheads amongst fashionable physicians in our own days, and jealousies, it is to be feared, are not unknown in the profession; but they do not put their professional antagonism into the form of epigrams, as Dr. Wynter, Dr. Cheney, Dr. Hill, Dr. Lettson, Dr. Radcliffe, and a host of others did (or their friends and enemies did for them) in the days of good Queen Anne and the German Georges. Dr. (afterwards Sir John) Hill one of those un-

iversal geniuses whom the public is apt to mistrust, is the hero of some of the best of these medical squibs. He wrote plays as well as prescriptions.

For physic and farces, his equal there scarce is;  
His farces are physic, his physic a farce is.

There is a little series of epigrams upon him which we cannot resist quoting here from Mr. Booth's book, though they must be already old acquaintances (as most of the best epigrams are) to all whose reading is not wholly of a modern kind. Some of the wits of the Literary Club, of which Garrick, Johnson, Burke, &c., were members, began upon the unlucky physician as follows:

'Thou essence of doek, and valerian, and sage,  
At once the disgrace and the pest of your age,  
The worst that we wish thee, for all thy sad crimes,  
Is to take thine own physic, and read thine own rhymes.'

To which is replied, by a sort of semi-chorus of the members,—

The wish should be in form reversed.  
To suit the Doctor's crimes;  
For if he takes his physic first,  
He'll never read his rhymes.'

Dr. Hill himself is supposed to rejoice in answer (and if it were really his, the doctor would have had the best of it.)—

'Whether gentlemen scribblers, or poets in jail,  
Your impertinent wishes shall certainly fail;  
I'll take neither essence, nor balsam of honey,—  
Do you take the physic, and I'll take the money.'

The anonymous quatrain on Dr. John Lettson, the Quaker, is one of the very best of punning epigrams; its brevity may excuse its re-appearance here:

'If any body comes to I,  
I physic, bleed, and sweats 'em;  
If after that, they like to die,  
Why, what care I?'

Sir Richard Blackmore, like Hill, was ambitious to combine poetry with physic; and was dealt with no less severely by the popular weapon. An anonymous octrain (of which the first six lines are weak) ends with this climax, which reads much better alone:

'Such shoals of readers thy dull drossian kills,  
'Thou'lt scarce leave one alive to take thy pills.'

This, again, has escaped Mr. Booth, though he has given his readers another, on the subject of Sir Richard's unfortunate poem of 'Job'—a kind of poetical paraphrase of the Scripture original:—

'Poor Job lost all the comforts of his life,  
And hardly saved a postbed and a wife;  
Yet Job blest Heaven; and Job again was blest;  
His virtue was assayed and bore the test,  
But, had heaven's wrath poured out its fiercest visit—  
Had he been thus bylesqued,—without denial,  
The patient man had yielded to the trial;  
His pious spouse, with Blackmore on her side,  
Must have prevailed—Job had blasphemed and died.'

We do not know where the compiler got this from, nor does he give any author's name; there were a whole volley of contemporary squibs flying about the head of this unlucky translator, who had got himself into bad odour with the licentious wits of his day by employing his pen against the immoralities of the stage. This drew upon him the wrath of Dryden, Sedley, Swift, and others; and his reputation has suffered rather unfairly in consequence; for the jests against his professional skill were unfounded, whatever may be thought of his poetry. A volume was actually published in 1700, in which the squibs upon him were all collected under the title of 'Commerciatory Poems, &c.' Here is another of them which we have met with, as good, perhaps, and also anonymous:—

'When Job contending with the devil I saw,  
I did my wonder, but not pity, draw;  
For I concluded that, without some trick,  
A saint at any time could match old Nick.

Next came a fiercer fiend upon his back—  
I mean his wife with her infernal back;  
But still I did not pity him, as knowing  
A crab-tree cudgel soon would send her going.

But when this quack engaged with Job I spied,  
Why, Heaven have mercy on poor Job, I cried,  
What wits and Satan did attempt in vain,  
The quack will compass with his murdering pen,  
And on a dunghill leave poor Job again;  
With impious doggerel he'll pollute his theme,  
And make the saint against his will blasphemous.'

Coleridge's epigram upon Job's wife is printed in the book before us, and is perhaps less generally known than some others:

'Sly Belzebub took all occasions  
To try Job's constancy and patience;  
He took his honors, took his health,  
He took his children, took his wealth,  
His camels, horses, asses, cows—  
Still the sly devil did not take his spouse—  
But Heaven, that brings out good from evil,  
And loves to disappoint the devil.

Had pre-determined to restore  
'Two-fold of all Job had before—  
His children, camels, asses, cows:—  
Short-sighted devil, not to take his spouse!'

The germ of this lies where very many good things lie unsuspected, and are occasionally dug out and made use of with very little acknowledgment—in the writings of St. Augustine; and has been used by Donne in one of his remarkable sermons, where Coleridge probably found it. The old divine's 'improvement' of the passage bears any epigram that ever was founded on it:—

'Miseri cordem putatis Diabolum,' says that father, 'qui ei reliquit uxorem?' Do you think that Job lighted upon a merciful and good-natured devil, or that Job was he holden to the Devil for this, that he left him his wife? 'Noverat per quam deceperat Adam,' says he; 'suam reliquit adjutricem, non marito consolationem;' he left Job a helper, but a helper for his own ends."

We must have done with the physicians, only quoting some more recent lines, neat but not over-complimentary, upon the trio who were in attendance on poor George III:

'The King employs three doctors daily,  
Willis, Heberden and Baillie;  
All exceedingly skillful men,  
Baillie, Willis and Heberden;  
But doubtful which most sure to kill is,  
Baillie, Heberden, or Willis.'

Law escapes these satiric rhymers better than physic. No doubt the lawyers were able to hold their own against the world in this as in other matters. Two or three clever things of Sir George Rose are given in Mr. Booth's book; but there are, we suspect, some still better in private circulation, perhaps rather too personal on contemporaries to be suitable for publication. The following, though it deals with names well known at the bar, is good-humored enough, as well as clever. It purports to be 'The History of a Case shortly reported by a Master in Chancery':

'Mr. Leach made a speech,  
Angry, neat, but wrong—  
Mr. Hart, on the other part,  
Was proxy, dull, and long.

Mr. Bell spoke very well,  
'Though nobody knew what about,  
Mr. Trower talked for an hour,  
Sat down fatigued and hot.

Mr. Parker made the case darker,  
Which was dark enough without,  
Mr. Cooke quoted his book,  
And the Chancellor said—"I doubt it."

Of course the Chancellor was Lord Eldon. But the Editor should have given the sequel. His Lordship soon after decided a case against Rose, and looking waggishly at him, said, 'In this case, Mr. Rose, the Chancellor does not doubt!' Mr. Booth has omitted one (or rather two) of the very best epigrams which touch upon the gentlemen of the long robe. We thought the lines were very well known, and they have certainly appeared more than once in print, as a proposed 'Inscription for the Gate of the Inner Temple':

'As by the Templars' holds you go  
The Horse and Lamb, displayed  
In emblematic figures, show  
The merits of their trade.

That clients may infer from thence  
How just is their profession—  
The Lamb sets forth their innocence,  
The Horse their expedition.

'Oh happy Britons! happy ide!  
Let foreign nations say,  
Where you get justice without guile,  
And law without delay.'

The reply is equally good:

'Deluded men, these holds forego,  
Nor trust such cunning elves;  
These artful emblems serve to show  
Their clients, not themselves.

'Tis all a trick; these are but shams;  
By which they mean to cheat you;  
But have a care—for you're the LAMBS  
And they the wolves that eat you.

Nor let the hope of no delay  
To these their courts misguide you;  
'Tis you're the slow Horses, and they  
The rogues that would ride you.'

The Universities have had their wits and their butts in at least as great abundance as the Courts of Law. Especially was this likely to be the case in a society like Oxford, which maintained upon its staff, for many years, a sort of licensed jester, under the name *Terra Pillus*, whose office was, at the 'Bachelor's Commencement,' to satirise, with the most unbounded license, all the recognized authorities. We feel sure that the Oxford social records might have supplied a collector of this literary smallware with some very tolerable specimens; and we hardly think that Mr. Booth can have availed him-