

Riley James Whitcomb

The Old Soldier's Story: Poems and Prose Sketches



James Riley

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Riley J.

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THE OLD SOLDIER'S STORY

AS TOLD BEFORE THE NEW ENGLAND SOCIETY IN NEW YORK CITY

Since we have had no stories to-night I will venture, Mr. President, to tell a story that I have heretofore heard at nearly all the banquets I have ever attended. It is a story simply, and you must bear with it kindly. It is a story as told by a friend of us all, who is found in all parts of all countries, who is immoderately fond of a funny story, and who, unfortunately, attempts to tell a funny story himself – one that he has been particularly delighted with. Well, he is not a story-teller, and especially he is not a funny story-teller. His funny stories, indeed, are oftentimes touchingly pathetic. But to such a story as he tells, being a good-natured man and kindly disposed, we have to listen, because we do not want to wound his feelings by telling him that we have heard that story a great number of times, and that we have heard it ably told by a great number of people from the time we were children. But, as I say, we can not hurt his feelings. We can not stop him. We can not kill him; and so the story generally proceeds. He selects a very old story always, and generally tells it in about this fashion: —

I heerd an awful funny thing the other day – ha! ha! I don't know whether I kin git it off er not, but, anyhow, I'll tell it to you. Well! – le's see now how the fool-thing goes. Oh, yes! – W'y, there was a feller one time – it was durin' the army, and this feller that I started in to tell you about was in the war, and – ha! ha! – there was a big fight a-goin' on, and this feller was in the fight, and it was a big battle and bullets a-flyin' ever' which way, and bombshells a-bu'stin', and cannon-balls a-flyin' 'round promiskus; and this feller right in the midst of it, you know, and all excited and het up, and chargin' away; and the fust thing you know along come a cannon-ball and shot his head off – ha! ha! ha! Hold on here a minute! – no sir; I'm a-gittin' ahead of my story; no, no; it didn't shoot his *head* off – I'm gittin' the cart before the horse there – shot his *leg* off; that was the way; shot his leg off; and down the poor feller drapped, and, of course, in that condition was perfectly he'pless, you know, but yit with presence o' mind enough to know that he was in a dangerous condition ef somepin' wasn't done fer him right away. So he seen a comrade a-chargin' by that he knowed, and he hollers to him and called him by name – I disremember now what the feller's name was...

Well, that's got nothin' to do with the story, anyway; he hollers to him, he did, and says, "Hello, there," he says to him; "here, I want you to come here and give me a lift; I got my leg shot off, and I want you to pack me back to the rear of the battle" – where the doctors always is, you know, during a fight – and he says, "I want you to pack me back there where I can get med-dy-cinal attention er I'm a dead man, fer I got my leg shot off," he says, "and I want you to pack me back there so's the surgeons kin take keer of me." Well – the feller, as luck would have it, ricko-nized him and run to him and throwed down his own musket, so's he could pick him up; and he stooped down and picked him up and kindo' half-way shouldered him and half-way helt him betwixt his arms like, and then he turned and started back with him – ha! ha! ha! Now, mind, the fight was still a-goin' on – and right at the hot of the fight, and the feller, all excited, you know, like he was, and the soldier that had his leg shot off gittin' kindo' fainty like, and his head kindo' stuck back over the feller's shoulder that was carryin' him. And he hadn't got more'n a couple o' rods with him when another cannon-ball come along and tuk his head off, shore enough! – and the curioust thing about it was – ha! ha! – that the

feller was a-packin' him didn't know that he had been hit ag'in at all, and back he went – still carryin' the deceased back – ha! ha! ha! – to where the doctors could take keer of him – as he thought. Well, his cap'n happened to see him, and he thought it was a ruther cur'ous p'ceedin's – a soldier carryin' a dead body out o' the fight – don't you see? And so he hollers at him, and he says to the soldier, the cap'n did, he says, "Hullo, there; where you goin' with that thing?" the cap'n said to the soldier who was a-carryin' away the feller that had his leg shot off. Well, his head, too, by that time. So he says, "Where you goin' with that thing?" the cap'n said to the soldier who was a-carryin' away the feller that had his leg shot off. Well, the soldier he stopped – kinder halted, you know, like a private soldier will when his presidin' officer speaks to him – and he says to him, "W'y," he says, "Cap, it's a comrade o' mine and the pore feller has got his leg shot off, and I'm a-packin' him back to where the doctors is; and there was nobody to he'p him, and the feller would 'a' died in his tracks – er track ruther – if it hadn't a-been fer me, and I'm a-packin' him back where the surgeons can take keer of him; where he can get medical attendance – er his wife's a widder!" he says, "'cause he's got his leg shot off!" Then *Cap'n* says, "You blame fool you, he's got his *head* shot off." So then the feller slacked his grip on the body and let it slide down to the ground, and looked at it a minute, all puzzled, you know, and says, "W'y, he told me it was his leg!" Ha! ha! ha!

SOME P'N COMMON-LIKE

Somep'n 'at's common-like, and good
And plain, and easy understood;
Somep'n 'at folks like me and you
Kin understand, and relish, too,
And find some sermint in 'at hits
The spot, and sticks and benefits.

We don't need nothin' extry fine;
'Cause, take the run o' minds like mine,
And we'll go more on good horse-sense
Than all your flowery eloquence;
And we'll jedge best of honest acts
By Nature's statement of the facts.

So when you're wantin' to express
Your misery, er happiness,
Er anything 'at's wuth the time
O' telling in plain talk er rhyme —
Jes' sort o' let your subject run
As ef the Lord wuz listenun.

MONSIEUR LE SECRETAIRE

[JOHN CLARK RIDPATH]

Mon cher Monsieur le Secretaire,
Your song flits with me everywhere;
It lights on Fancy's prow and sings
Me on divinest voyagings:
And when my ruler love would fain
Be laid upon it – high again
It mounts, and hugs itself from me
With rapturous wings – still dwindlingly —
On! – on! till but a *ghost* is there
Of song, Monsieur le Secretaire!

A PHANTOM

Little baby, you have wandered far away,
And your fairy face comes back to me to-day,
But I can not feel the strands
Of your tresses, nor the play
Of the dainty velvet-touches of your hands.

Little baby, you were mine to hug and hold;
Now your arms cling not about me as of old —
O my dream of rest come true,
And my richer wealth than gold,
And the surest hope of Heaven that I knew!

O for the lisp long silent, and the tone
Of merriment once mingled with my own —
For the laughter of your lips,
And the kisses plucked and thrown
In the lavish wastings of your finger-tips!

Little baby, O as then, come back to me,
And be again just as you used to be,
For this phantom of you stands
All too cold and silently,
And will not kiss nor touch me with its hands.

IN THE CORRIDOR

Ah! at last alone, love!
Now the band may play
Till its sweetest tone, love,
Swoons and dies away!
They who most will miss us
We're not caring for —
Who of them could kiss us
In the corridor?

Had we only known, dear,
Ere this long delay,
Just how all alone, dear,
We might waltz away,
Then for hours, like this, love,
We are longing for,
We'd have still to kiss, love,
In the corridor!

Nestle in my heart, love;
Hug and hold me close —
Time will come to part, love,
Ere a fellow knows;
There! the Strauss is ended —
Whirl across the floor:
Isn't waltzing splendid
In the corridor?

LOUELLA WAINIE

Louella Wainie! where are you?
Do you not hear me as I cry?
Dusk is falling; I feel the dew;
And the dark will be here by and by:
I hear no thing but the owl's hoo-hoo!
Louella Wainie! where are you?

Hand in hand to the pasture bars
We came loitering, Lou and I,
Long ere the fireflies coaxed the stars
Out of their hiding-place on high.
O how sadly the cattle moo!
Louella Wainie! where are you?

Laughingly we parted here —
"I will go this way," said she,
"And you will go that way, my dear" —
Kissing her dainty hand at me —
And the hazels hid her from my view.
Louella Wainie! where are you?

Is there ever a sadder thing
Than to stand on the farther brink
Of twilight, hearing the marsh-frogs sing?
Nothing could sadder be, I think!
And ah! how the night-fog chills one through.
Louella Wainie! where are you?

Water-lilies and oozy leaves —
Lazy bubbles that bulge and stare
Up at the moon through the gloom it weaves
Out of the willows waving there!
Is it despair I am wading through?
Louella Wainie! where are you?

Louella Wainie, listen to me,
Listen, and send me some reply,
For so will I call unceasingly
Till death shall answer me by and by —
Answer, and help me to find you too!
Louella Wainie! where are you?

THE TEXT

The text: Love thou thy fellow man!
He may have sinned; – One proof indeed,
He is thy fellow, reach thy hand
And help him in his need!

Love thou thy fellow man. He may
Have wronged thee – then, the less excuse
Thou hast for wronging him. Obey
What he has dared refuse!

Love thou thy fellow man – for, be
His life a light or heavy load,
No less he needs the love of thee
To help him on his road.

WILLIAM BROWN

"He bore the name of William Brown" —
His name, at least, did not go down
With him that day
He went the way
Of certain death where duty lay.

He looked his fate full in the face —
He saw his watery resting-place
Undaunted, and
With firmer hand
Held others' hopes in sure command. —

The hopes of full three hundred lives —
Aye, babes unborn, and promised wives!
"The odds are dread,"
He must have said,
"Here, God, is one poor life instead."

No time for praying overmuch —
No time for tears, or woman's touch
Of tenderness,
Or child's caress —
His last "God bless them!" stopped at "bless" —

Thus man and engine, nerved with steel,
Clasped iron hands for woe or weal,
And so went down
Where dark waves drown
All but the name of William Brown.

WHY

Why are they written – all these lovers' rhymes?
I catch faint perfumes of the blossoms white
That maidens drape their tresses with at night,
And, through dim smiles of beauty and the din
Of the musicians' harp and violin,
I hear, enwound and blended with the dance,
The voice whose echo is this utterance, —
Why are they written – all these lovers' rhymes?

Why are they written – all these lovers' rhymes?
I see but vacant windows, curtained o'er
With webs whose architects forevermore
Race up and down their slender threads to bind
The buzzing fly's wings whirless, and to wind
The living victim in his winding sheet. —
I shudder, and with whispering lips repeat,
Why are they written – all these lovers' rhymes?

Why are they written – all these lovers' rhymes?
What will you have for answer? – Shall I say
That he who sings the merriest roundelay
Hath neither joy nor hope? – and he who sings
The lightest, sweetest, tenderest of things
But utters moan on moan of keenest pain,
So aches his heart to ask and ask in vain,
Why are they written – all these lovers' rhymes?

THE TOUCH OF LOVING HANDS

IMITATED

Light falls the rain-drop on the fallen leaf,
And light o'er harvest-plain and garnered sheaf —
But lightlier falls the touch of loving hands.

Light falls the dusk of mild midsummer night,
And light the first star's faltering lance of light
On glimmering lawns, – but lightlier loving hands.

And light the feathery flake of early snows,
Or wisp of thistle-down that no wind blows,
And light the dew, – but lightlier loving hands.

Light-falling dusk, or dew, or summer rain,
Or down of snow or thistle – all are vain, —
Far lightlier falls the touch of loving hands.

A TEST

'Twas a test I designed, in a quiet conceit
Of myself, and the thoroughly fixed and complete
Satisfaction I felt in the utter control
Of the guileless young heart of the girl of my soul.

So – we parted. I said it were better we should —
That she could forget me – I knew that she could;
For I never was worthy so tender a heart,
And so for her sake it were better to part.

She averted her gaze, and she sighed and looked sad
As I held out my hand – for the ring that she had —
With the bitterer speech that I hoped she might be
Resigned to look up and be happy with me.

'Twas a test, as I said – but God pity your grief,
At a moment like this when a smile of relief
Shall leap to the lips of the woman you prize,
And no mist of distress in her glorious eyes.

A SONG FOR CHRISTMAS

Chant me a rhyme of Christmas —
Sing me a jovial song, —
And though it is filled with laughter,
Let it be pure and strong.

Let it be clear and ringing,
And though it mirthful be,
Let a low, sweet voice of pathos
Run through the melody.

Sing of the hearts brimmed over
With the story of the day —
Of the echo of childish voices
That will not die away. —

Of the blare of the tasselled bugle,
And the timeless clatter and beat
Of the drum that throbs to muster
Squadrons of scampering feet. —

Of the wide-eyed look of wonder,
And the gurgle of baby-glee,
As the infant hero wrestles
From the smiling father's knee.

Sing the delights unbounded
Of the home unknown of care,
Where wealth as a guest abideth,
And want is a stranger there.

But O let your voice fall fainter,
Till, blent with a minor tone,
You temper your song with the beauty
Of the pity Christ hath shown:

And sing one verse for the voiceless;
And yet, ere the song be done,
A verse for the ears that hear not,
And a verse for the sightless one:

And one for the outcast mother,
And one for the sin-defiled
And hopeless sick man dying,
And one for his starving child.

For though it be time for singing
A merry Christmas glee,
Let a low, sweet voice of pathos
Run through the melody.

SUN AND RAIN

All day the sun and rain have been as friends,
Each vying with the other which shall be
Most generous in dowering earth and sea
With their glad wealth, till each, as it descends,
Is mingled with the other, where it blends
In one warm, glimmering mist that falls on me
As once God's smile fell over Galilee.
The lily-cup, filled with it, droops and bends
Like some white saint beside a sylvan shrine
In silent prayer; the roses at my feet,
Baptized with it as with a crimson wine,
Gleam radiant in grasses grown so sweet,
The blossoms lift, with tenderness divine,
Their wet eyes heavenward with these of mine.

WITH HER FACE

With her face between his hands!
Was it any wonder she
Stood atiptoe tremblingly?
As his lips along the strands
Of her hair went lavishing
Tides of kisses, such as swing
Love's arms to like iron bands. —
With her face between his hands!

And the hands – the hands that pressed
The glad face – Ah! where are they?
Folded limp, and laid away
Idly over idle breast?
He whose kisses drenched her hair,
As he caught and held her there,
In Love's alien, lost lands,
With her face between his hands?

Was it long and long ago,
When her face was not as now,
Dim with tears? nor wan her brow
As a winter-night of snow?
Nay, anointing still the strands
Of her hair, his kisses flow
Flood-wise, as she dreaming stands,
With her face between his hands.

MY NIGHT

Hush! hush! list, heart of mine, and hearken low!
You do not guess how tender is the Night,
And in what faintest murmurs of delight
Her deep, dim-throated utterances flow
Across the memories of long-ago!
Hark! do your senses catch the exquisite
Staccatos of a bird that dreams he sings?
Nay, then, you hear not rightly, – 'tis a blur
Of misty love-notes, laughs and whisperings
The Night pours o'er the lips that fondle her,
And that faint breeze, filled with all fragrant sighs, —
That is her breath that quavers lover-wise —
O blessed sweetheart, with thy swart, sweet kiss,
Baptize me, drown me in black swirls of bliss!

THE HOUR BEFORE THE DAWN

The hour before the dawn!
O ye who grope therein, with fear and dread
And agony of soul, be comforted,
Knowing, ere long, the darkness will be gone,
And down its dusky aisles the light be shed;
Therefore, in utter trust, fare on – fare on,
This hour before the dawn!

GOOD-BY, OLD YEAR

Good-by, Old Year!
Good-by!
We have been happy – you and I;
We have been glad in many ways;
And now, that you have come to die,
Remembering our happy days,
'Tis hard to say, "Good-by —
Good-by, Old Year!
Good-by!"

Good-by, Old Year!
Good-by!
We have seen sorrow – you and I —
Such hopeless sorrow, grief and care,
That now, that you have come to die,
Remembering our old despair,
'Tis sweet to say, "Good-by —
Good-by, Old Year!
Good-by!"

FALSE AND TRUE

One said: "Here is my hand to lean upon
As long as you may need it." And one said:
"Believe me true to you till I am dead."
And one, whose dainty way it was to fawn
About my face, with mellow fingers drawn
Most soothingly o'er brow and drooping head,
Sighed tremulously: "Till my breath is fled
Know I am faithful!" ... Now, all these are gone
And many like to them – and yet I make
No bitter moan above their grassy graves —
Alas! they are not dead for me to take
Such sorry comfort! – but my heart behaves
Most graciously, since one who never spake
A vow is true to me for true love's sake.

A BALLAD FROM APRIL

I am dazed and bewildered with living
A life but an intricate skein
Of hopes and despairs and thanksgiving
Wound up and unravelled again —
Till it seems, whether waking or sleeping,
I am wondering ever the while
At a something that smiles when I'm weeping,
And a something that weeps when I smile.

And I walk through the world as one dreaming
Who knows not the night from the day,
For I look on the stars that are gleaming,
And lo, they have vanished away:
And I look on the sweet-summer daylight,
And e'en as I gaze it is fled,
And, veiled in a cold, misty, gray light,
The winter is there in its stead.

I feel in my palms the warm fingers
Of numberless friends – and I look,
And lo, not a one of them lingers
To give back the pleasure he took;
And I lift my sad eyes to the faces
All tenderly fixed on my own,
But they wither away in grimaces
That scorn me, and leave me alone.

And I turn to the woman that told me
Her love would live on until death —
But her arms they no longer enfold me,
Though barely the dew of her breath
Is dry on the forehead so pallid
That droops like the weariest thing
O'er this most inharmonious ballad
That ever a sorrow may sing.

So I'm dazed and bewildered with living
A life but an intricate skein
Of hopes and despairs and thanksgiving
Wound up and unravelled again —
Till it seems, whether waking or sleeping,
I am wondering ever the while
At a something that smiles when I'm weeping,
And a something that weeps when I smile.

BRUDDER SIMS

Dah's Brudder Sims! Dast slam yo' Bible shet
An' lef' dat man alone – kase he's de boss
Ob all de preachahs ev' I come across!
Day's no twis' in dat gospil book, I bet,
Ut Brudder Sims cain't splanify, an' set
You' min' at eaze! W'at's Moses an' de Laws?
W'at's fo'ty days an' nights ut Noey toss
Aroun' de Dil-ooge? – W'at dem Chillen et
De Lo'd rain down? W'at s'prise ole Joney so
In dat whale's inna'ds? – W'at dat laddah mean
Ut Jacop see? – an' wha' dat laddah go? —
Who clim dat laddah? – Wha' dat laddah lean? —
An' wha' dat laddah now? "Dast chalk yo' toe
Wid Faith," sez Brudder Sims, "an' den you know!"

DEFORMED

Crouched at the corner of the street
She sits all day, with face too white
And hands too wasted to be sweet
In anybody's sight.

Her form is shrunken, and a pair
Of crutches leaning at her side
Are crossed like homely hands in prayer
At quiet eventide.

Her eyes – two lustrous, weary things —
Have learned a look that ever aches,
Despite the ready jinglings
The passer's penny makes.

And, noting this, I pause and muse
If any precious promise touch
This heart that has so much to lose
If dreaming overmuch —

And, in a vision, mistily
Her future womanhood appears, —
A picture framed with agony
And drenched with ceaseless tears —

Where never lover comes to claim
The hand outheld so yearningly —
The laughing babe that lisps her name
Is but a fantasy!

And, brooding thus, all swift and wild
A daring fancy, strangely sweet,
Comes o'er me, that the crippled child
That crouches at my feet —

Has found her head a resting-place
Upon my shoulder, while my kiss
Across the pallor of her face
Leaves crimson trails of bliss.

FAITH

The sea was breaking at my feet,
And looking out across the tide,
Where placid waves and heaven meet,
I thought me of the Other Side.

For on the beach on which I stood
Were wastes of sands, and wash, and roar,
Low clouds, and gloom, and solitude,
And wrecks, and ruins – nothing more.

"O, tell me if beyond the sea
A heavenly port there is!" I cried,
And back the echoes laughingly
"There is! there is!" replied.

THE LOST THRILL

I grow so weary, someway, of all thing
That love and loving have vouchsafed to me,
Since now all dreamed-of sweets of ecstasy
Am I possessed of: The caress that clings —
The lips that mix with mine with murmurings
No language may interpret, and the free,
Unfettered brood of kisses, hungrily
Feasting in swarms on honeyed blossomings
Of passion's fullest flower – For yet I miss
The essence that alone makes love divine —
The subtle flavoring no tang of this
Weak wine of melody may here define: —
A something found and lost in the first kiss
A lover ever poured through lips of mine.

AT DUSK

A something quiet and subdued
In all the faces that we meet;
A sense of rest, a solitude
O'er all the crowded street;
The very noises seem to be
Crude utterings of harmony,
And all we hear, and all we see,
Has in it something sweet.

Thoughts come to us as from a dream
Of some long-vanished yesterday;
The voices of the children seem
Like ours, when young as they;
The hand of Charity extends
To meet Misfortune's, where it blends,
Veiled by the dusk – and oh, my friends,
Would it were dusk always!

ANOTHER RIDE FROM GHENT TO AIX

We sprang for the side-holts – my gripsack and I —
It dangled – I dangled – we both dangled by.
"Good speed!" cried mine host, as we landed at last —
"Speed?" chuckled the watch we went lumbering past;
Behind shut the switch, and out through the rear door
I glared while we waited a half hour more.

I had missed the express that went thundering down
Ten minutes before to my next lecture town,
And my only hope left was to catch this "wild freight,"
Which the landlord remarked was "most luckily late —
But the twenty miles distance was easily done,
If they run half as fast as they usually run!"

Not a word to each other – we struck a snail's pace —
Conductor and brakeman ne'er changing a place —
Save at the next watering-tank, where they all
Got out – strolled about – cut their names on the wall,
Or listlessly loitered on down to the pile
Of sawed wood just beyond us, to doze for a while.

'Twas high noon at starting, but while we drew near
"Arcady" I said, "We'll not make it, I fear!
I must strike Aix by eight, and it's three o'clock now;
Let me stoke up that engine, and I'll show you how!"
At which the conductor, with patience sublime,
Smiled up from his novel with, "Plenty of time!"

At "Trask," as we jolted stock-still as a stone,
I heard a cow bawl in a five o'clock tone;
And the steam from the saw-mill looked misty and thin,
And the snarl of the saw had been stifled within:
And a frowzy-haired boy, with a hat full of chips,
Came out and stared up with a smile on his lips.

At "Booneville," I groaned, "Can't I telegraph on?"
No! Why? "'Cause the telegraph-man had just gone
To visit his folks in Almo" – and one heard
The sharp snap of my teeth through the throat of a word,
That I dragged for a mile and a half up the track,
And strangled it there, and came skulkingly back.

Again we were off. It was twilight, and more,
As we rolled o'er a bridge where beneath us the roar
Of a river came up with so wooing an air

I mechanic'ly strapped myself fast in my chair
As a brakeman slid open the door for more light,
Saying: "Captain, brace up, for your town is in sight!"

"How they'll greet me!" – and all in a moment – "chewang!"
And the train stopped again, with a bump and a bang.
What was it? "The section-hands, just in advance."
And I spit on my hands, and I rolled up my pants,
And I clumb like an imp that the fiends had let loose
Up out of the depths of that deadly caboose.

I ran the train's length – I lept safe to the ground —
And the legend still lives that for five miles around
They heard my voice hailing the hand-car that yanked
Me aboard at my bidding, and gallantly cranked,
As I grovelled and clung, with my eyes in eclipse,
And a rim of red foam round my rapturous lips.

Then I cast loose my ulster – each ear-tab let fall —
Kicked off both my shoes – let go arctics and all —
Stood up with the boys – leaned – patted each head
As it bobbed up and down with the speed that we sped;
Clapped my hands – laughed and sang – any noise, bad or good,
Till at length into Aix we rotated and stood.

And all I remember is friends flocking round
As I unsheathed my head from a hole in the ground;
And no voice but was praising that hand-car divine,
As I rubbed down its spokes with that lecture of mine.
Which (the citizens voted by common consent)
Was no more than its due. 'Twas the lecture they meant.

IN THE HEART OF JUNE

In the heart of June, love,
You and I together,
On from dawn till noon, love,
Laughing with the weather;
Blending both our souls, love,
In the selfsame tune,
Drinking all life holds, love,
In the heart of June.

In the heart of June, love,
With its golden weather,
Underneath the moon, love,
You and I together.
Ah! how sweet to seem, love,
Drugged and half aswoon
With this luscious dream, love,
In the heart of June.

DREAMS

"Do I sleep, do I dream,
Do I wonder and doubt —
Are things what they seem
Or is visions about?"

There has always been an inclination, or desire, rather, on my part to believe in the mystic — even as far back as stretches the gum-elastic remembrance of my first "taffy-pullin'" given in honor of my fifth birthday; and the ghost-stories, served by way of ghastly dessert, by our hired girl. In fancy I again live over all the scenes of that eventful night: —

The dingy kitchen, with its haunting odors of a thousand feasts and wash-days; the old bench-legged stove, with its happy family of skillets, stewpans and round-bellied kettles crooning and blubbering about it. And how we children clustered round the genial hearth, with the warm smiles dying from our faces just as the embers dimmed and died out in the open grate, as with bated breath we listened to how some one's grandmother had said that her first man went through a graveyard once, one stormy night, "jest to show the neighbors that he wasn't afeard o' nothin'," and how when he was just passing the grave of his first wife "something kind o' big and white-like, with great big eyes like fire, raised up from behind the headboard, and kind o' re'ched out for him"; and how he turned and fled, "with that air white thing after him as tight as it could jump, and a hollerin' 'wough-yough-yough!' till you could hear it furdern you could a bullgine," and how, at last, just as the brave and daring intruder was clearing two graves and the fence at one despairing leap, the "white thing," had made a grab at him with its iron claws, and had nicked him so close his second wife was occasioned the onerous duty of affixing another patch in his pantaloons. And in conclusion, our hired girl went on to state that this blood-curdling incident had so wrought upon the feelings of "the man that wasn't afeard o' nothin'," and had given him such a distaste for that particular graveyard, that he never visited it again, and even entered a clause in his will to the effect that he would ever remain an unhappy corpse should his remains be interred in said graveyard.

I forgot my pop-corn that night; I forgot my taffy; I forgot all earthly things; and I tossed about so feverishly in my little bed, and withal so restlessly, that more than once my father's admonition above the footboard of the big bed, of "Drat you! go to sleep, there!" foreshadowed my impending doom. And once he leaned over and made a vicious snatch at me, and holding me out at arm's length by one leg, demanded in thunder-tones, "what in the name o' flames and flashes I meant, anyhow!"

I was afraid to stir a muscle from that on, in consequence of which I at length straggled off in fitful dreams — and heavens! what dreams! — A very long and lank, and slim and slender old woman in white knocked at the door of my vision, and I let her in. She patted me on the head — and oh! how cold her hands were! And they were very hard hands, too, and very heavy — and, horror of horrors! — they were not hands — they were claws! — they were iron! — they were like the things I had seen the hardware man yank nails out of a keg with. I quailed and shivered till the long and slim and slender old woman jerked my head up and snarled spitefully, "What's the matter with you, bub," and I said, "Nawthin'!" and she said, "Don't you dare to lie to me!" I moaned.

"Don't you like me?" she asked.

I hesitated.

"And lie if you dare!" she said — "Don't you like me?"

"Oomh-oomh!" said I.

"Why?" said she.

"Cos, you're too long — and slim — an'" —

"Go on!" said she.

" – And tall!" said I.

"Ah, ha!" said she, – "and that's it, hey?"

And then she began to grow shorter and thicker, and fatter and squattier.

"And how do I suit you now?" she wheezed at length, when she had wilted down to about the size of a large loaf of bread.

I shook more violently than ever at the fearful spectacle.

"How do you like me now?" she yelled again, – "And don't you lie to me neither, or I'll swallow you whole!"

I writhed and hid my face.

"Do you like me?"

"No-o-oh!" I moaned.

She made another snatch at my hair. I felt her jagged claws sink into my very brain. I struggled and she laughed hideously.

"You don't, hey?"

"Yes, yes, I do. I love you!" said I.

"You lie! You lie!" She shrieked derisively. "You know you lie!" and as I felt the iron talons sinking and gritting in my very brain, with one wild, despairing effort, I awoke.

I saw the fire gleaming in the grate, and by the light it made I dimly saw the outline of the old mantelpiece that straddled it, holding the old clock high upon its shoulders. I was awake then, and the little squatty woman with her iron talons was a dream! I felt an oily gladness stealing over me, and yet I shuddered to be all alone.

If only some one were awake, I thought, whose blessed company would drown all recollections of that fearful dream; but I dared not stir or make a noise. I could only hear the ticking of the clock, and my father's sullen snore. I tried to compose my thoughts to pleasant themes, but that telescopic old woman in white would rise up and mock my vain appeals, until in fancy I again saw her altitudinous proportions dwindling into that repulsive and revengeful figure with the iron claws, and I grew restless and attempted to sit up. Heavens! something yet held me by the hair. The chill sweat that betokens speedy dissolution gathered on my brow. I made another effort and arose, that deadly clutch yet fastened in my hair. Could it be possible! The short, white woman still held me in her vengeful grasp! I could see her white dress showing from behind either of my ears. She still clung to me, and with one wild, unearthly cry of "Pap!" I started round the room.

I remember nothing further, until as the glowing morn sifted through the maple at the window, powdering with gold the drear old room, and baptizing with its radiance the anxious group of old home-faces leaning over my bed, I heard my father's voice once more rasping on my senses – "Now get the booby up, and wash that infernal wax out of his hair!"

BECAUSE

Why did we meet long years of yore?
And why did we strike hands and say:
"We will be friends, and nothing more";
Why are we musing thus to-day?
Because because was just because,
And no one knew just why it was.

Why did I say good-by to you?
Why did I sail across the main?
Why did I love not heaven's own blue
Until I touched these shores again?
Because because was just because,
And you nor I knew why it was.

Why are my arms about you now,
And happy tears upon your cheek?
And why my kisses on your brow?
Look up in thankfulness and speak!
Because because was just because,
And only God knew why it was.

TO THE CRICKET

The chiming seas may clang; and Tubal Cain
May clink his tinkling metals as he may;
Or Pan may sit and pipe his breath away;
Or Orpheus wake his most entrancing strain
Till not a note of melody remain! —
But thou, O cricket, with thy roundelay,
Shalt laugh them all to scorn! So wilt thou, pray,
Trill me thy glad song o'er and o'er again:
I shall not weary; there is purest worth
In thy sweet prattle, since it sings the lone
Heart home again. Thy warbling hath no dearth
Of childish memories – no harsher tone
Than we might listen to in gentlest mirth,
Thou poor plebeian minstrel of the hearth.

THE OLD-FASHIONED BIBLE

How dear to my heart are the scenes of my childhood
That now but in mem'ry I sadly review;
The old meeting-house at the edge of the wildwood,
The rail fence and horses all tethered thereto;
The low, sloping roof, and the bell in the steeple,
The doves that came fluttering out overhead
As it solemnly gathered the God-fearing people
To hear the old Bible my grandfather read.
The old-fashioned Bible —
The dust-covered Bible —
The leathern-bound Bible my grandfather read.

The blessed old volume! The face bent above it —
As now I recall it – is gravely severe,
Though the reverent eye that droops downward to love it
Makes grander the text through the lens of a tear,
And, as down his features it trickles and glistens,
The cough of the deacon is stilled, and his head
Like a haloéd patriarch's leans as he listens
To hear the old Bible my grandfather read.
The old-fashioned Bible —
The dust-covered Bible —
The leathern-bound Bible my grandfather read.

Ah! who shall look backward with scorn and derision
And scoff the old book though it uselessly lies
In the dust of the past, while this newer revision
Lisps on of a hope and a home in the skies?
Shall the voice of the Master be stifled and riven?
Shall we hear but a tittle of the words He has said,
When so long He has, listening, leaned out of Heaven
To hear the old Bible my grandfather read?
The old-fashioned Bible —
The dust-covered Bible —
The leathern-bound Bible my grandfather read.

UNCOMFORTED

Lelloine! Lelloine! Don't you hear me calling?
Calling through the night for you, and calling through the day;
Calling when the dawn is here, and when the dusk is falling —
Calling for my Lelloine the angels lured away!

Lelloine! I call and listen, starting from my pillow —
In the hush of midnight, Lelloine! I cry,
And o'er the rainy window-pane I hear the weeping willow
Trail its dripping leaves like baby-fingers in reply.

Lelloine, I miss the glimmer of your glossy tresses,
I miss the dainty velvet palms that nestled in my own;
And all my mother-soul went out in answerless caresses,
And a storm of tears and kisses when you left me here alone.

I have prayed, O Lelloine, but Heaven will not hear me,
I can not gain one sign from Him who leads you by the hand;
And O it seems that ne'er again His mercy will come near me —
That He will never see my need, nor ever understand.

Won't you listen, Lelloine? – just a little leaning
O'er the walls of Paradise – lean and hear my prayer,
And interpret death to Him in all its awful meaning,
And tell Him you are lonely without your mother there.

WHAT THEY SAID

Whispering to themselves apart,
They who knew her said of her,
"Dying of a broken heart —
Death her only comforter —
For the man she loved is dead —
She will follow soon!" they said.

Beautiful? Ah! brush the dust
From Raphael's fairest face,
And restore it, as it must
First have smiled back from its place
On his easel as he leant
Wrapt in awe and wonderment!

Why, to kiss the very hem
Of the mourning-weeds she wore,
Like the winds that rustled them,
I had gone the round world o'er;
And to touch her hand I swear
All things dareless I would dare!

But unto themselves apart,
Whispering, they said of her,
"Dying of a broken heart —
Death her only comforter —
For the man she loved is dead —
She will follow soon!" they said.

So I mutely turned away,
Turned with sorrow and despair,
Yearning still from day to day
For that woman dying there,
Till at last, by longing led,
I returned to find her – dead?

"Dead?" – I know that word would tell
Rhyming there – but in this case
"Wed" rhymes equally as well
In the very selfsame place —
And, in fact, the latter word
Is the one she had preferred.

Yet unto themselves apart,
Whisp'ring they had said of her —
"Dying of a broken heart —

Death her only comforter —
For the man she loved is dead —
She will follow soon!" they said.

AFTER THE FROST

After the frost! O the rose is dead,
And the weeds lie pied in the garden-bed,
And the peach tree's shade in the wan sunshine,
Faint as the veins in these hands of mine,
Streaks the gray of the orchard wall
Where the vine rasps loose, and the last leaves fall,
And the bare boughs writhe, and the winds are lost —
After the frost – the frost!

After the frost! O the weary head
And the hands and the heart are quietéd;
And the lips we loved are locked at last,
And kiss not back, though the rain falls fast

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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