

The Poetical Works of O. W. Holmes, Volume 12.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.

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Verses from the Oldest Portfolio

This etext was produced by David Widger widger@cecomet.net

VERSES FROM THE OLDEST PORTFOLIO

FROM THE "COLLEGIAN," 1830, ILLUSTRATED ANNUALS, ETC.

Nescit vox missa reverti.—Horat. Ars Poetica.

Ab lis qua non adjuvant quam mollissime oportet pedem referre.—
Quintillian, L. VI. C. 4.

These verses have always been printed in my collected poems, and as the best of them may bear a single reading, I allow them to appear, but in a less conspicuous position than the other productions. A chick, before his shell is off his back, is hardly a fair subject for severe criticism. If one has written anything worth preserving, his first efforts may be objects of interest and curiosity. Other young authors may take encouragement from seeing how tame, how feeble, how commonplace were the rudimentary attempts of the half-fledged poet. If the boy or youth had anything in him, there will probably be some sign of it in the midst of his imitative mediocrities and ambitious failures. These "first verses" of mine, written before I was sixteen, have little beyond a common academy boy's ordinary performance. Yet a kindly critic said there was one line which showed a poetical quality:—

"The boiling ocean trembled into calm."

One of these poems—the reader may guess which—won fair words from Thackeray. The Spectre Pig was a wicked suggestion which came into my head after reading Dana's *Buccaneer*. Nobody seemed to find it out, and I never mentioned it to the venerable poet, who might not have been pleased with the parody. This is enough to say of these unvalued copies of verses.

The Poetical Works of O. W. Holmes, Volume 12.

FIRST VERSES

PHILLIPS ACADEMY, ANDOVER, MASS., 1824 OR 1825

TRANSLATION FROM THE ENEID, BOOK I.

THE god looked out upon the troubled deep
Waked into tumult from its placid sleep;
The flame of anger kindles in his eye
As the wild waves ascend the lowering sky;
He lifts his head above their awful height
And to the distant fleet directs his sight,
Now borne aloft upon the billow's crest,
Struck by the bolt or by the winds oppressed,
And well he knew that Juno's vengeful ire
Frowned from those clouds and sparkled in that fire.
On rapid pinions as they whistled by
He calls swift Zephyrus and Eurus nigh
Is this your glory in a noble line
To leave your confines and to ravage mine?
Whom I—but let these troubled waves subside—
Another tempest and I'll quell your pride!
Go—bear our message to your master's ear,
That wide as ocean I am despot here;
Let him sit monarch in his barren caves,
I wield the trident and control the waves
He said, and as the gathered vapors break
The swelling ocean seemed a peaceful lake;
To lift their ships the graceful nymphs essayed
And the strong trident lent its powerful aid;
The dangerous banks are sunk beneath the main,
And the light chariot skims the unruffled plain.
As when sedition fires the public mind,
And maddening fury leads the rabble blind,
The blazing torch lights up the dread alarm,
Rage points the steel and fury nerves the arm,
Then, if some reverend Sage appear in sight,
They stand—they gaze, and check their headlong flight,—
He turns the current of each wandering breast
And hushes every passion into rest,—
Thus by the power of his imperial arm
The boiling ocean trembled into calm;
With flowing reins the father sped his way
And smiled serene upon rekindled day.

THE MEETING OF THE DRYADS

Written after a general pruning of the trees around Harvard College.
A little poem, on a similar occasion, may be found in the works of Swift,
from which, perhaps, the idea was borrowed; although I was as much
surprised as amused to meet with it some time after writing the following
lines.

IT was not many centuries since,
When, gathered on the moonlit green,
Beneath the Tree of Liberty,
A ring of weeping sprites was seen.

The freshman's lamp had long been dim,
The voice of busy day was mute,
And tortured Melody had ceased
Her sufferings on the evening flute.

They met not as they once had met,
To laugh o'er many a jocund tale
But every pulse was beating low,
And every cheek was cold and pale.

There rose a fair but faded one,
Who oft had cheered them with her song;
She waved a mutilated arm,
And silence held the listening throng.

“Sweet friends,” the gentle nymph began,
“From opening bud to withering leaf,
One common lot has bound us all,
In every change of joy and grief.

“While all around has felt decay,
We rose in ever-living prime,

With broader shade and fresher green,
Beneath the crumbling step of Time.

“When often by our feet has past
Some biped, Nature's walking whim,
Say, have we trimmed one awkward shape,
Or lopped away one crooked limb?

“Go on, fair Science; soon to thee
Shall. Nature yield her idle boast;
Her vulgar fingers formed a tree,
But thou halt trained it to a post.

“Go, paint the birch's silver rind,
And quilt the peach with softer down;
Up with the willow's trailing threads,
Off with the sunflower's radiant crown!

“Go, plant the lily on the shore,
And set the rose among the waves,
And bid the tropic bud unbind
Its silken zone in arctic caves;

“Bring bellows for the panting winds,
Hang up a lantern by the moon,
And give the nightingale a fife,
And lend the eagle a balloon!

“I cannot smile,—the tide of scorn,
That rolled through every bleeding vein,
Comes kindling fiercer as it flows
Back to its burning source again.

“Again in every quivering leaf
That moment's agony I feel,
When limbs, that spurned the northern blast,
Shrunk from the sacrilegious steel.

“A curse upon the wretch who dared
To crop us with his felon saw!
May every fruit his lip shall taste
Lie like a bullet in his maw.

“In every julep that he drinks,
May gout, and bile, and headache be;
And when he strives to calm his pain,
May colic mingle with his tea.

“May nightshade cluster round his path,
And thistles shoot, and brambles cling;
May blistering ivy scorch his veins,
And dogwood burn, and nettles sting.

“On him may never shadow fall,
When fever racks his throbbing brow,
And his last shilling buy a rope
To hang him on my highest bough!”

She spoke;—the morning's herald beam
Sprang from the bosom of the sea,
And every mangled sprite returned
In sadness to her wounded tree.

THE MYSTERIOUS VISITOR

THERE was a sound of hurrying feet,
A tramp on echoing stairs,
There was a rush along the aisles,—
It was the hour of prayers.

And on, like Ocean's midnight wave,
The current rolled along,
When, suddenly, a stranger form
Was seen amidst the throng.

He was a dark and swarthy man,
That uninvited guest;
A faded coat of bottle-green
Was buttoned round his breast.

There was not one among them all
Could say from whence he came;
Nor beardless boy, nor ancient man,
Could tell that stranger's name.

All silent as the sheeted dead,
In spite of sneer and frown,
Fast by a gray-haired senior's side
He sat him boldly down.

There was a look of horror flashed
From out the tutor's eyes;
When all around him rose to pray,
The stranger did not rise!

A murmur broke along the crowd,
The prayer was at an end;
With ringing heels and measured tread,

A hundred forms descend.

Through sounding aisle, o'er grating stair,
The long procession poured,
Till all were gathered on the seats
Around the Commons board.

That fearful stranger! down he sat,
Unasked, yet undismayed;
And on his lip a rising smile
Of scorn or pleasure played.

He took his hat and hung it up,
With slow but earnest air;
He stripped his coat from off his back,
And placed it on a chair.

Then from his nearest neighbor's side
A knife and plate he drew;
And, reaching out his hand again,
He took his teacup too.

How fled the sugar from the bowl
How sunk the azure cream!
They vanished like the shapes that float
Upon a summer's dream.

A long, long draught,—an outstretched hand,—
And crackers, toast, and tea,
They faded from the stranger's touch,
Like dew upon the sea.

Then clouds were dark on many a brow,
Fear sat upon their souls,
And, in a bitter agony,
They clasped their buttered rolls.

A whisper trembled through the crowd,
Who could the stranger be?
And some were silent, for they thought
A cannibal was he.

What if the creature should arise,—
For he was stout and tall,—
And swallow down a sophomore,
Coat, crow's-foot, cap, and all!

All sullenly the stranger rose;
They sat in mute despair;
He took his hat from off the peg,
His coat from off the chair.

Four freshmen fainted on the seat,
Six swooned upon the floor;
Yet on the fearful being passed,
And shut the chapel door.

There is full many a starving man,
That walks in bottle green,
But never more that hungry one
In Commons hall was seen.

Yet often at the sunset hour,
When tolls the evening bell,
The freshman lingers on the steps,
That frightful tale to tell.

THE TOADSTOOL

THERE 's a thing that grows by the fainting flower,
And springs in the shade of the lady's bower;
The lily shrinks, and the rose turns pale,
When they feel its breath in the summer gale,
And the tulip curls its leaves in pride,
And the blue-eyed violet starts aside;
But the lily may flaunt, and the tulip stare,
For what does the honest toadstool care?
She does not glow in a painted vest,
And she never blooms on the maiden's breast;
But she comes, as the saintly sisters do,
In a modest suit of a Quaker hue.
And, when the stars in the evening skies
Are weeping dew from their gentle eyes,
The toad comes out from his hermit cell,
The tale of his faithful love to tell.

Oh, there is light in her lover's glance,
That flies to her heart like a silver lance;
His breeches are made of spotted skin,
His jacket 'is tight, and his pumps are thin;
In a cloudless night you may hear his song,
As its pensive melody floats along,
And, if you will look by the moonlight fair,
The trembling form of the toad is there.

And he twines his arms round her slender stem,
In the shade of her velvet diadem;
But she turns away in her maiden shame,
And will not breathe on the kindling flame;
He sings at her feet through the live-long night,
And creeps to his cave at the break of light;
And whenever he comes to the air above,
His throat is swelling with baffled love.

THE SPECTRE PIG

A BALLAD

IT was the stalwart butcher man,
That knit his swarthy brow,
And said the gentle Pig must die,
And sealed it with a vow.

And oh! it was the gentle Pig
Lay stretched upon the ground,
And ah! it was the cruel knife
His little heart that found.

They took him then, those wicked men,
They trailed him all along;
They put a stick between his lips,
And through his heels a thong;

And round and round an oaken beam
A hempen cord they flung,
And, like a mighty pendulum,
All solemnly he swung!

Now say thy prayers, thou sinful man,
And think what thou hast done,
And read thy catechism well,
Thou bloody-minded one;

For if his sprite should walk by night,
It better were for thee,
That thou wert mouldering in the ground,
Or bleaching in the sea.

It was the savage butcher then,
That made a mock of sin,
And swore a very wicked oath,
He did not care a pin.

It was the butcher's youngest son,—
His voice was broke with sighs,
And with his pocket-handkerchief
He wiped his little eyes;

All young and ignorant was he,
But innocent and mild,
And, in his soft simplicity,
Out spoke the tender child :—

“Oh, father, father, list to me;
The Pig is deadly sick,
And men have hung him by his heels,
And fed him with a stick.”

It was the bloody butcher then,
That laughed as he would die,
Yet did he soothe the sorrowing child,
And bid him not to cry;—

“Oh, Nathan, Nathan, what's a Pig,
That thou shouldst weep and wail?
Come, bear thee like a butcher's child,
And thou shalt have his tail!”

It was the butcher's daughter then,
So slender and so fair,
That sobbed as if her heart would break,
And tore her yellow hair;

And thus she spoke in thrilling tone,—

Fast fell the tear-drops big:—
“Ah! woe is me! Alas! Alas!
The Pig! The Pig! The Pig!

Then did her wicked father's lips
Make merry with her woe,
And call her many a naughty name,
Because she whimpered so.

Ye need not weep, ye gentle ones,
In vain your tears are shed,
Ye cannot wash his crimson hand,
Ye cannot soothe the dead.

The bright sun folded on his breast
His robes of rosy flame,
And softly over all the west
The shades of evening came.

He slept, and troops of murdered Pigs
Were busy with his dreams;
Loud rang their wild, unearthly shrieks,
Wide yawned their mortal seams.

The clock struck twelve; the Dead hath heard;
He opened both his eyes,
And sullenly he shook his tail
To lash the feeding flies.

One quiver of the hempen cord,—
One struggle and one bound,—
With stiffened limb and leaden eye,
The Pig was on the ground

And straight towards the sleeper's house
His fearful way he wended;
And hooting owl and hovering bat

On midnight wing attended.

Back flew the bolt, up rose the latch,
And open swung the door,
And little mincing feet were heard
Pat, pat along the floor.

Two hoofs upon the sanded floor,
And two upon the bed;
And they are breathing side by side,
The living and the dead!

“Now wake, now wake, thou butcher man!
What makes thy cheek so pale?
Take hold! take hold! thou dost not fear
To clasp a spectre's tail?”

Untwisted every winding coil;
The shuddering wretch took hold,
All like an icicle it seemed,
So tapering and so cold.

“Thou com'st with me, thou butcher man!”—
He strives to loose his grasp,
But, faster than the clinging vine,
Those twining spirals clasp;

And open, open swung the door,
And, fleeter than the wind,
The shadowy spectre swept before,
The butcher trailed behind.

Fast fled the darkness of the night,
And morn rose faint and dim;
They called full loud, they knocked full long,
They did not waken him.

Straight, straight towards that oaken beam,
A trampled pathway ran;
A ghastly shape was swinging there,—
It was the butcher man.

TO A CAGED LION

Poor conquered monarch! though that haughty glance
Still speaks thy courage unsubdued by time,
And in the grandeur of thy sullen tread
Lives the proud spirit of thy burning clime;—
Fettered by things that shudder at thy roar,
Torn from thy pathless wilds to pace this narrow floor!

Thou wast the victor, and all nature shrunk
Before the thunders of thine awful wrath;
The steel-armed hunter viewed thee from afar,
Fearless and trackless in thy lonely path!
The famished tiger closed his flaming eye,
And crouched and panted as thy step went by!

Thou art the vanquished, and insulting man
Bars thy broad bosom as a sparrow's wing;
His nerveless arms thine iron sinews bind,
And lead in chains the desert's fallen king;
Are these the beings that have dared to twine
Their feeble threads around those limbs of thine?

So must it be; the weaker, wiser race,
That wields the tempest and that rides the sea,
Even in the stillness of thy solitude
Must teach the lesson of its power to thee;
And thou, the terror of the trembling wild,
Must bow thy savage strength, the mockery of a child!

THE STAR AND THE WATER-LILY

THE sun stepped down from his golden throne.
And lay in the silent sea,
And the Lily had folded her satin leaves,
For a sleepy thing was she;
What is the Lily dreaming of?
Why crisp the waters blue?
See, see, she is lifting her varnished lid!
Her white leaves are glistening through!

The Rose is cooling his burning cheek
In the lap of the breathless tide;—
The Lily hath sisters fresh and fair,
That would lie by the Rose's side;
He would love her better than all the rest,
And he would be fond and true;—
But the Lily unfolded her weary lids,
And looked at the sky so blue.

Remember, remember, thou silly one,
How fast will thy summer glide,
And wilt thou wither a virgin pale,
Or flourish a blooming bride?
Oh, the Rose is old, and thorny, and cold,
And he lives on earth," said she;
"But the Star is fair and he lives in the air,
And he shall my bridegroom be."

But what if the stormy cloud should come,
And ruffle the silver sea?
Would he turn his eye from the distant sky,
To smile on a thing like thee?
Oh no, fair Lily, he will not send
One ray from his far-off throne;
The winds shall blow and the waves shall flow,
And thou wilt be left alone.

There is not a leaf on the mountain-top,

Nor a drop of evening dew,
Nor a golden sand on the sparkling shore,
Nor a pearl in the waters blue,
That he has not cheered with his fickle smile,
And warmed with his faithless beam,—
And will he be true to a pallid flower,
That floats on the quiet stream?

Alas for the Lily! she would not heed,
But turned to the skies afar,
And bared her breast to the trembling ray
That shot from the rising star;
The cloud came over the darkened sky,
And over the waters wide
She looked in vain through the beating rain,
And sank in the stormy tide.

ILLUSTRATION OF A PICTURE

“A SPANISH GIRL IN REVERIE,”

SHE twirled the string of golden beads,
That round her neck was hung,—
My grandsire's gift; the good old man
Loved girls when he was young;
And, bending lightly o'er the cord,
And turning half away,
With something like a youthful sigh,
Thus spoke the maiden gray:—

“Well, one may trail her silken robe,
And bind her locks with pearls,
And one may wreath the woodland rose
Among her floating curls;
And one may tread the dewy grass,
And one the marble floor,
Nor half-hid bosom heave the less,
Nor broidered corset more!

“Some years ago, a dark-eyed girl
Was sitting in the shade,—
There's something brings her to my mind
In that young dreaming maid,—
And in her hand she held a flower,
A flower, whose speaking hue
Said, in the language of the heart,
'Believe the giver true.'

“And, as she looked upon its leaves,
The maiden made a vow
To wear it when the bridal wreath
Was woven for her brow;
She watched the flower, as, day by day,
The leaflets curled and died;
But he who gave it never came
To claim her for his bride.

“Oh, many a summer's morning glow
Has lent the rose its ray,
And many a winter's drifting snow
Has swept its bloom away;
But she has kept that faithless pledge
To this, her winter hour,
And keeps it still, herself alone,
And wasted like the flower.”

Her pale lip quivered, and the light
Gleamed in her moistening eyes;—
I asked her how she liked the tints
In those Castilian skies?
“She thought them misty,—'t was perhaps
Because she stood too near;”
She turned away, and as she turned
I saw her wipe a tear.

A ROMAN AQUEDUCT

THE sun-browed girl, whose limbs recline
When noon her languid hand has laid
Hot on the green flakes of the pine,
Beneath its narrow disk of shade;

As, through the flickering noontide glare,
She gazes on the rainbow chain
Of arches, lifting once in air
The rivers of the Roman's plain;—

Say, does her wandering eye recall
The mountain-current's icy wave,—
Or for the dead one tear let fall,
Whose founts are broken by their grave?

From stone to stone the ivy weaves
Her braided tracery's winding veil,
And lacing stalks and tangled leaves
Nod heavy in the drowsy gale.

And lightly floats the pendent vine,
That swings beneath her slender bow,
Arch answering arch,—whose rounded line
Seems mirrored in the wreath below.

How patient Nature smiles at Fame!
The weeds, that strewed the victor's way,
Feed on his dust to shroud his name,
Green where his proudest towers decay.

See, through that channel, empty now,
The scanty rain its tribute pours,—
Which cooled the lip and laved the brow

Of conquerors from a hundred shores.

Thus bending o'er the nation's bier,
Whose wants the captive earth supplied,
The dew of Memory's passing tear
Falls on the arches of her pride!

FROM A BACHELOR'S PRIVATE JOURNAL

SWEET Mary, I have never breathed
The love it were in vain to name;
Though round my heart a serpent wreathed,
I smiled, or strove to smile, the same.

Once more the pulse of Nature glows
With faster throb and fresher fire,
While music round her pathway flows,
Like echoes from a hidden lyre.

And is there none with me to share
The glories of the earth and sky?
The eagle through the pathless air
Is followed by one burning eye.

Ah no! the cradled flowers may wake,
Again may flow the frozen sea,
From every cloud a star may break,—
There conies no second spring to me.

Go,—ere the painted toys of youth
Are crushed beneath the tread of years;
Ere visions have been chilled to truth,
And hopes are washed away in tears.

Go,—for I will not bid thee weep,—
Too soon my sorrows will be thine,
And evening's troubled air shall sweep
The incense from the broken shrine.

If Heaven can hear the dying tone
Of chords that soon will cease to thrill,
The prayer that Heaven has heard alone

May bless thee when those chords are still.

LA GRISETTE

As Clemence! when I saw thee last
Trip down the Rue de Seine,
And turning, when thy form had past,
I said, "We meet again,"—
I dreamed not in that idle glance
Thy latest image came,
And only left to memory's trance
A shadow and a name.

The few strange words my lips had taught
Thy timid voice to speak,
Their gentler signs, which often brought
Fresh roses to thy cheek,
The trailing of thy long loose hair
Bent o'er my couch of pain,
All, all returned, more sweet, more fair;
Oh, had we met again!

I walked where saint and virgin keep
The vigil lights of Heaven,
I knew that thou hadst woes to weep,
And sins to be forgiven;
I watched where Genevieve was laid,
I knelt by Mary's shrine,
Beside me low, soft voices prayed;
Alas! but where was thine?

And when the morning sun was bright,
When wind and wave were calm,
And flamed, in thousand-tinted light,
The rose of Notre Dame,
I wandered through the haunts of men,
From Boulevard to Quai,
Till, frowning o'er Saint Etienne,
The Pantheon's shadow lay.

In vain, in vain; we meet no more,

Nor dream what fates befall;
And long upon the stranger's shore
My voice on thee may call,
When years have clothed the line in moss
That tells thy name and days,
And withered, on thy simple cross,
The wreaths of Pere-la-Chaise!

OUR YANKEE GIRLS

LET greener lands and bluer skies,
If such the wide earth shows,
With fairer cheeks and brighter eyes,
Match us the star and rose;
The winds that lift the Georgian's veil,
Or wave Circassia's curls,
Waft to their shores the sultan's sail,—
Who buys our Yankee girls?

The gay grisette, whose fingers touch
Love's thousand chords so well;
The dark Italian, loving much,
But more than one can tell;
And England's fair-haired, blue-eyed dame,
Who binds her brow with pearls;—
Ye who have seen them, can they shame
Our own sweet Yankee girls?

And what if court or castle vaunt
Its children loftier born?—
Who heeds the silken tassel's flaunt
Beside the golden corn?
They ask not for the dainty toil
Of ribboned knights and earls,
The daughters of the virgin soil,
Our freeborn Yankee girls!

By every hill whose stately pines
Wave their dark arms above
The home where some fair being shines,
To warm the wilds with love,
From barest rock to bleakest shore
Where farthest sail unfurls,
That stars and stripes are streaming o'er,—
God bless our Yankee girls!

L'INCONNUE

Is thy name Mary, maiden fair?
Such should, methinks, its music be;
The sweetest name that mortals bear
Were best befitting thee;
And she to whom it once was given,
Was half of earth and half of heaven.

I hear thy voice, I see thy smile,
I look upon thy folded hair;
Ah! while we dream not they beguile,
Our hearts are in the snare;
And she who chains a wild bird's wing
Must start not if her captive sing.

So, lady, take the leaf that falls,
To all but thee unseen, unknown;
When evening shades thy silent walls,
Then read it all alone;
In stillness read, in darkness seal,
Forget, despise, but not reveal!

STANZAS

STRANGE! that one lightly whispered tone
Is far, far sweeter unto me,
Than all the sounds that kiss the earth,
Or breathe along the sea;
But, lady, when thy voice I greet,
Not heavenly music seems so sweet.

I look upon the fair blue skies,
And naught but empty air I see;
But when I turn me to thine eyes,
It seemeth unto me
Ten thousand angels spread their wings
Within those little azure rings.

The lily hath the softest leaf
That ever western breeze hath fanned,
But thou shalt have the tender flower,
So I may take thy hand;
That little hand to me doth yield
More joy than all the brodered field.

O lady! there be many things
That seem right fair, below, above;
But sure not one among them all
Is half so sweet as love;—
Let us not pay our vows alone,
But join two altars both in one.

LINES BY A CLERK

OH! I did love her dearly,
And gave her toys and rings,
And I thought she meant sincerely,
When she took my pretty things.
But her heart has grown as icy
As a fountain in the fall,
And her love, that was so spicy,
It did not last at all.

I gave her once a locket,
It was filled with my own hair,
And she put it in her pocket
With very special care.
But a jeweller has got it,—
He offered it to me,—
And another that is not it
Around her neck I see.

For my cooings and my billings
I do not now complain,
But my dollars and my shillings
Will never come again;
They were earned with toil and sorrow,
But I never told her that,
And now I have to borrow,
And want another hat.

Think, think, thou cruel Emma,
When thou shalt hear my woe,
And know my sad dilemma,
That thou hast made it so.
See, see my beaver rusty,
Look, look upon this hole,
This coat is dim and dusty;
Oh let it rend thy soul!

Before the gates of fashion

I daily bent my knee,
But I sought the shrine of passion,
And found my idol,—thee.
Though never love intenser
Had bowed a soul before it,
Thine eye was on the censer,
And not the hand that bore it.

THE PHILOSOPHER TO HIS LOVE

DEAREST, a look is but a ray
Reflected in a certain way;
A word, whatever tone it wear,
Is but a trembling wave of air;
A touch, obedience to a clause
In nature's pure material laws.

The very flowers that bend and meet,
In sweetening others, grow more sweet;
The clouds by day, the stars by night,
Inweave their floating locks of light;
The rainbow, Heaven's own forehead's braid,
Is but the embrace of sun and shade.

Oh! in the hour when I shall feel
Those shadows round my senses steal,
When gentle eyes are weeping o'er
The clay that feels their tears no more,
Then let thy spirit with me be,
Or some sweet angel, likest thee!

How few that love us have we found!
How wide the world that girds them round
Like mountain streams we meet and part,
Each living in the other's heart,
Our course unknown, our hope to be
Yet mingled in the distant sea.

But Ocean coils and heaves in vain,
Bound in the subtle moonbeam's chain;
And love and hope do but obey
Some cold, capricious planet's ray,
Which lights and leads the tide it charms
To Death's dark caves and icy arms.

Alas! one narrow line is drawn,
That links our sunset with our dawn;
In mist and shade life's morning rose,
And clouds are round it at its close;
But ah! no twilight beam ascends
To whisper where that evening ends.

THE POET'S LOT

WHAT is a poet's love?—
To write a girl a sonnet,
To get a ring, or some such thing,
And fustianize upon it.

What is a poet's fame?—
Sad hints about his reason,
And sadder praise from garreteers,
To be returned in season.

Where go the poet's lines?—
Answer, ye evening tapers!
Ye auburn locks, ye golden curls,
Speak from your folded papers!

Child of the ploughshare, smile;
Boy of the counter, grieve not,
Though muses round thy trundle-bed
Their broidered tissue weave not.

The poet's future holds
No civic wreath above him;
Nor slated roof, nor varnished chaise,
Nor wife nor child to love him.

Maid of the village inn,
Who workest woe on satin,
(The grass in black, the graves in green,
The epitaph in Latin,)

Trust not to them who say,
In stanzas, they adore thee;
Oh rather sleep in churchyard clay,

With urn and cherub o'er thee!

TO A BLANK SHEET OF PAPER

WAN-VISAGED thing! thy virgin leaf
To me looks more than deadly pale,
Unknowing what may stain thee yet,—
A poem or a tale.

Who can thy unborn meaning scan?
Can Seer or Sibyl read thee now?
No,—seek to trace the fate of man
Writ on his infant brow.

Love may light on thy snowy cheek,
And shake his Eden-breathing plumes;
Then shalt thou tell how Lelia smiles,
Or Angelina blooms.

Satire may lift his bearded lance,
Forestalling Time's slow-moving scythe,
And, scattered on thy little field,
Disjointed bards may writhe.

Perchance a vision of the night,
Some grizzled spectre, gaunt and thin,
Or sheeted corpse, may stalk along,
Or skeleton may grin

If it should be in pensive hour
Some sorrow-moving theme I try,
Ah, maiden, how thy tears will fall,
For all I doom to die!

But if in merry mood I touch
Thy leaves, then shall the sight of thee
Sow smiles as thick on rosy lips

As ripples on the sea.

The Weekly press shall gladly stoop
To bind thee up among its sheaves;
The Daily steal thy shining ore,
To gild its leaden leaves.

Thou hast no tongue, yet thou canst speak,
Till distant shores shall hear the sound;
Thou hast no life, yet thou canst breathe
Fresh life on all around.

Thou art the arena of the wise,
The noiseless battle-ground of fame;
The sky where halos may be wreathed
Around the humblest name.

Take, then, this treasure to thy trust,
To win some idle reader's smile,
Then fade and moulder in the dust,
Or swell some bonfire's pile.

TO THE PORTRAIT OF "A GENTLEMAN"

IN THE ATHENIEUM GALLERY

IT may be so,—perhaps thou hast
A warm and loving heart;
I will not blame thee for thy face,
Poor devil as thou art.

That thing thou fondly deem'st a nose,
Unsightly though it be,—
In spite of all the cold world's scorn,
It may be much to thee.

Those eyes,—among thine elder friends
Perhaps they pass for blue,—
No matter,—if a man can see,
What more have eyes to do?

Thy mouth,—that fissure in thy face,
By something like a chin,—
May be a very useful place
To put thy victual in.

I know thou hast a wife at home,
I know thou hast a child,
By that subdued, domestic smile
Upon thy features mild.

That wife sits fearless by thy side,
That cherub on thy knee;
They do not shudder at thy looks,
They do not shrink from thee.

Above thy mantel is a hook,—
A portrait once was there;
It was thine only ornament,—
Alas! that hook is bare.

She begged thee not to let it go,
She begged thee all in vain;
She wept,—and breathed a trembling prayer
To meet it safe again.

It was a bitter sight to see
That picture torn away;
It was a solemn thought to think
What all her friends would say!

And often in her calmer hours,
And in her happy dreams,
Upon its long—deserted hook
The absent portrait seems.

Thy wretched infant turns his head
In melancholy wise,
And looks to meet the placid stare
Of those unbending eyes.

I never saw thee, lovely one,—
Perchance I never may;
It is not often that we cross
Such people in our way;

But if we meet in distant years,
Or on some foreign shore,
Sure I can take my Bible oath,
I've seen that face before.

THE BALLAD OF THE OYSTERMAN

IT was a tall young oysterman lived by the river-side,
His shop was just upon the bank, his boat was on the tide;
The daughter of a fisherman, that was so straight and slim,
Lived over on the other bank, right opposite to him.

It was the pensive oysterman that saw a lovely maid,
Upon a moonlight evening, a sitting in the shade;
He saw her wave her handkerchief, as much as if to say,
“I 'm wide awake, young oysterman, and all the folks away.”

Then up arose the oysterman, and to himself said he,
“I guess I 'll leave the skiff at home, for fear that folks should see
I read it in the story-book, that, for to kiss his dear,
Leander swam the Hellespont,—and I will swim this here.”

And he has leaped into the waves, and crossed the shining stream,
And he has clambered up the bank, all in the moonlight gleam;
Oh there were kisses sweet as dew, and words as soft as rain,—
But they have heard her father's step, and in he leaps again!

Out spoke the ancient fisherman,—“Oh, what was that, my daughter?”
“T was nothing but a pebble, sir, I threw into the water.”
“And what is that, pray tell me, love, that paddles off so fast?”
“It's nothing but a porpoise, sir, that 's been a swimming past.”

Out spoke the ancient fisherman,—“Now bring me my harpoon!
I'll get into my fishing-boat, and fix the fellow soon.”
Down fell that pretty innocent, as falls a snow-white lamb,
Her hair drooped round her pallid cheeks, like sea-weed on a clam.

Alas for those two loving ones! she waked not from her swoond,
And he was taken with the cramp, and in the waves was drowned;
But Fate has metamorphosed them, in pity of their woe,

And now they keep an oyster-shop for mermaids down below.

A NOONTIDE LYRIC

THE dinner-bell, the dinner-bell
Is ringing loud and clear;
Through hill and plain, through street and lane,
It echoes far and near;
From curtained hall and whitewashed stall,
Wherever men can hide,
Like bursting waves from ocean caves,
They float upon the tide.

I smell the smell of roasted meat!
I hear the hissing fry
The beggars know where they can go,
But where, oh where shall I?
At twelve o'clock men took my hand,
At two they only stare,
And eye me with a fearful look,
As if I were a bear!

The poet lays his laurels down,
And hastens to his greens;
The happy tailor quits his goose,
To riot on his beans;
The weary cobbler snaps his thread,
The printer leaves his pi;
His very devil hath a home,
But what, oh what have I?

Methinks I hear an angel voice,
That softly seems to say
"Pale stranger, all may yet be well,
Then wipe thy tears away;
Erect thy head, and cock thy hat,
And follow me afar,
And thou shalt have a jolly meal,
And charge it at the bar."

I hear the voice! I go! I go!

Prepare your meat and wine!
They little heed their future need
Who pay not when they dine.
Give me to-day the rosy bowl,
Give me one golden dream,—
To-morrow kick away the stool,
And dangle from the beam!

THE HOT SEASON

THE folks, that on the first of May
Wore winter coats and hose,
Began to say, the first of June,
“Good Lord! how hot it grows!”
At last two Fahrenheits blew up,
And killed two children small,
And one barometer shot dead
A tutor with its ball!

Now all day long the locusts sang
Among the leafless trees;
Three new hotels warped inside out,
The pumps could only wheeze;
And ripe old wine, that twenty years
Had cobwebbed o'er in vain,
Came spouting through the rotten corks
Like Joly's best champagne

The Worcester locomotives did
Their trip in half an hour;
The Lowell cars ran forty miles
Before they checked the power;
Roll brimstone soon became a drug,
And loco-focos fell;
All asked for ice, but everywhere
Saltpetre was to sell.

Plump men of mornings ordered tights,
But, ere the scorching noons,
Their candle-moulds had grown as loose
As Cossack pantaloons!
The dogs ran mad,—men could not try
If water they would choose;
A horse fell dead,—he only left
Four red-hot, rusty shoes!

But soon the people could not bear

The slightest hint of fire;
Allusions to caloric drew
A flood of savage ire;

The leaves on heat were all torn out
From every book at school,
And many blackguards kicked and caned,
Because they said, "Keep cool!"

The gas-light companies were mobbed,
The bakers all were shot,
The penny press began to talk
Of lynching Doctor Nott;
And all about the warehouse steps
Were angry men in droves,
Crashing and splintering through the doors
To smash the patent stoves!

The abolition men and maids
Were tanned to such a hue,
You scarce could tell them from their friends,
Unless their eyes were blue;
And, when I left, society
Had burst its ancient guards,
And Brattle Street and Temple Place
Were interchanging cards

A PORTRAIT

A STILL, sweet, placid, moonlight face,
And slightly nonchalant,
Which seems to claim a middle place
Between one's love and aunt,
Where childhood's star has left a ray
In woman's sunniest sky,
As morning dew and blushing day
On fruit and blossom lie.

And yet,—and yet I cannot love
Those lovely lines on steel;
They beam too much of heaven above,
Earth's darker shades to feel;
Perchance some early weeds of care
Around my heart have grown,
And brows unfurrowed seem not fair,
Because they mock my own.

Alas! when Eden's gates were sealed,
How oft some sheltered flower
Breathed o'er the wanderers of the field,
Like their own bridal bower;
Yet, saddened by its loveliness,
And humbled by its pride,
Earth's fairest child they could not bless,
It mocked them when they sighed.

AN EVENING THOUGHT

WRITTEN AT SEA

IF sometimes in the dark blue eye,
Or in the deep red wine,
Or soothed by gentlest melody,
Still warms this heart of mine,
Yet something colder in the blood,
And calmer in the brain,
Have whispered that my youth's bright flood
Ebbs, not to flow again.

If by Helvetia's azure lake,
Or Arno's yellow stream,
Each star of memory could awake,
As in my first young dream,
I know that when mine eye shall greet
The hillsides bleak and bare,
That gird my home, it will not meet
My childhood's sunsets there.

Oh, when love's first, sweet, stolen kiss
Burned on my boyish brow,
Was that young forehead worn as this?
Was that flushed cheek as now?
Were that wild pulse and throbbing heart
Like these, which vainly strive,
In thankless strains of soulless art,
To dream themselves alive?

Alas! the morning dew is gone,
Gone ere the full of day;
Life's iron fetter still is on,
Its wreaths all torn away;
Happy if still some casual hour
Can warm the fading shrine,
Too soon to chill beyond the power

Of love, or song, or wine!

THE WASP AND THE HORNET

THE two proud sisters of the sea,
In glory and in doom!—
Well may the eternal waters be
Their broad, unsculptured tomb!
The wind that rings along the wave,
The clear, unshadowed sun,
Are torch and trumpet o'er the brave,
Whose last green wreath is won!

No stranger—hand their banners furled,
No victor's shout they heard;
Unseen, above them ocean curled,
Safe by his own pale bird;
The gnashing billows heaved and fell;
Wild shrieked the midnight gale;
Far, far beneath the morning swell
Were pennon, spar, and sail.

The land of Freedom! Sea and shore
Are guarded now, as when
Her ebbing waves to victory bore
Fair barks and gallant men;
Oh, many a ship of prouder name
May wave her starry fold,
Nor trail, with deeper light of fame,
The paths they swept of old!

“QUI VIVE?”

“Qui vive?” The sentry's musket rings,
The channelled bayonet gleams;
High o'er him, like a raven's wings
The broad tricolored banner flings
Its shadow, rustling as it swings
Pale in the moonlight beams;
Pass on! while steel-clad sentries keep
Their vigil o'er the monarch's sleep,
Thy bare, unguarded breast
Asks not the unbroken, bristling zone
That girds yon sceptred trembler's throne;—
Pass on, and take thy rest!

“Qui vive?” How oft the midnight air
That startling cry has borne!
How oft the evening breeze has fanned
The banner of this haughty land,
O'er mountain snow and desert sand,
Ere yet its folds were torn!
Through Jena's carnage flying red,
Or tossing o'er Marengo's dead,
Or curling on the towers
Where Austria's eagle quivers yet,
And suns the ruffled plumage, wet
With battle's crimson showers!

“Qui vive?” And is the sentry's cry,—
The sleepless soldier's hand,—
Are these—the painted folds that fly
And lift their emblems, printed high
On morning mist and sunset sky—
The guardians of a land?
No! If the patriot's pulses sleep,
How vain the watch that hirelings keep,
The idle flag that waves,
When Conquest, with his iron heel,
Treads down the standards and the steel
That belt the soil of slaves!

NOTES.

Page 6. "They're as safe as Dan'l Malcolm."

The following epitaph is still to be read on a tall grave-stone standing as yet undisturbed among the transplanted monuments of the dead in Copp's Hill Burial-Ground, one of the three city cemeteries which have been desecrated and ruined within my own remembrance :—

“Here lies buried in a
Stone Grave 10 feet deep,
Cap' DANIEL MALCOLM Merch'
Who departed this Life
October 23d, 1769,
Aged 44 years,
a true son of Liberty,
a Friend to the Publick,
an Enemy to oppression,
and one of the foremost
in opposing the Revenue Acts
on America.”

Page 62. This broad-browed youth.
Benjamin Robbins Curtis.

Page 62. The stripling smooth of face and slight.
George Tyler Bigelow.