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A MIRROR FOR MAGISTRATES

THE URCHIN and I were coming home from Baltimore with a suitcase full of old books, good old juvenile treasures such as The Plant Hunters (by Captain Mayne Reid, I hope I don't have to tell you) and Voyage au Centre de la Terre and At the Back of the North Wind; and even the tattered family copy of Tom Holt's Log: A Tale of the Deep Sea. I don't know who wrote it, for the binding and title-page are both gone; and I don't know whether I dare re-read it, for it's sure to be a disappointment. But it contains Polly, the first girl in fiction I ever fell in love with.

Of course quite a nice piece could be written about the sentimental pleasures of going along the shelves of vanished boyhood and bringing back, with an eight-year-old Urchin, some of the things that will now be his excitement. But while he was deep in The Boy's Own Indoor Book (Lippincott, 1890), seduced by the same fascinating chapter on How to Make a Toy Locomotive that used to delight me, I was getting out some old schoolbooks from the suitcase. Here was the edition of Milton's "Minor" Poems that I had used—no, not so awfully long ago; in 1905, to be exact. I fell to reading the Notes, which fill 71 pages of small type. (The poems, only 56 pages of much larger.) Then, in the sweet retired solitude of the B. & O. smoker, Contemplation began to plume her feathers and let grow her wings.

I don't know how to admit you to the traffic of my somewhat painful meditations except by quoting a few of the notes my startled eyes encountered. I had forgotten that schoolbooks are like that. It is astounding that anyone ever grows up with a love for poetry. Was anything ever written more wholesomely to be enjoyed than "L'Allegro"? You remember the lines:

To hear the lark begin his flight,
And, singing, startle the dull night,
From his watch-tower in the skies,
Till the dappled dawn doth rise;
Then to come, in spite of sorrow,
And at my window bid good-morrow . . .

Fairly translucent, aren't they? Mark you then what the fifteen-year-old finds in the Notes:

Then to come, etc. This passage is obscure. (1) It may mean that the lark is to come to L'Allegro's window and bid him "good-morrow." In this case we must make to come and bid depend on to hear (41), and suppose that the unusual to before come is made necessary by the distance between it and the governing verb. But such a construction is awkward. The interpretation, moreover, forces us to make the phrase in spite of sorrow almost meaningless by applying it to the lark; it makes it difficult to account for L'Allegro seeing the performance of the cock described below (51-52); and, finally, obliges us to suppose Milton ignorant of the lark's habits, since the bird never approaches human habitations—an ignorance we are not justified in assuming if the passage can be explained in some other way. (2) Another interpretation makes to come and bid depend on admit (38). "Awakened by the lark, the poet, after listening to that early song, arises to give a blithe good-morrow at his window. Other matin sounds are heard, and he goes forth," etc. (Brown). Those who adopt this view explain that he bids "good-morrow" to "the rising morn," "the new day," or "the world in general".

(3) Masson, however, thinks that L'Allegro is already out of doors. "Milton, or whoever the imaginary speaker is, asks Mirth to admit him to her company and that of the nymph Liberty, and to let him enjoy the pleasures natural to such companionship (38-40). He then goes on to specify such pleasures, or to give examples of them. The first (41-44) is that of the sensations

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of early morning, when, walking round a country cottage, one hears the song of the mounting skylark, welcoming the signs of sunrise. The second is that of coming to the cottage window, looking in, and bidding a cheerful good-morrow, through the sweet-brier, vine, or eglantine, to those of the family who are also astir." This last interpretation is perhaps more in keeping with the good-hearted sociability of L’Allegro’s character. But see Pattison, Milton, p. 23.

A little farther on we read in the poem that “every shepherd tells his tale Under the hawthorn in the dale.”

Tells his tale. Counts the number of his sheep (Warton, on the suggestion of Headley). For tell meaning “count” and tale meaning “number,” see Psalm xlviii. 12, Exodus v. 8, though it must be confessed that when tell and tale are combined, as in the present passage, “the almost invariable meaning is to narrate something” (Keightley). In view of this last fact, tells his tale is also interpreted as “relates his story”—tale being taken either in the general sense of “any story” or in the particular sense of “a love-tale.” “But (1) this [particular sense] would be a somewhat abrupt use of the word tale. (2) The every shows that some piece of business is meant. (3) The context too shows that. (4) The early dawn is scarcely the time for love-making.

Signor Allegro mentions mountains. The Notes retort smartly “There are no mountains in the vicinity of Horton, where Milton probably wrote these poems.” The poem refers to “towers and battlements”; Notes give us: “These,” says Masson, “are almost evidently Windsor Castle.” “With wanton heed and giddy cunning,” writes Milton, having a gorgeous time (his pen spinning merrily for the instant) but Notes pluck us back with “The figure is an oxymoron; consult a dictionary and explain.”

Truly, like the drudging goblin, the editor’s shadowy flail hath threshed the corn That ten day-laborers could not end.

Fortunately our friend Morning Face, at fifteen, pays little attention to the insinuating questions and cross-references of the editor. Nor do I wish to seem unkind. This sort of smallbeer parsing has, I dare say, its usefulness. In the voice of genuine magistrates it may even be thrilling. But heavens! Do you intend children to read poetry as though it were a railway timetable?

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I turned over to the Notes on “Comus.” And—

I’m sorry: I can’t go on quoting these nonsenses. If the pupil paid any genuine attention to them, which probably he doesn’t, he’d get a queer kind of notion of how Milton wrote. He’d imagine that “Comus” was put together with the author’s eyes on Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Horace, Shakespeare, and what not, picking out the plums. Of course, a thing like “Comus” is likely to pass like a swoon over the head of Fifteen anyhow; it is too full of the things that no gross ear can hear. Yet it would seem that an annotator might say less about the Earl of Bridgewater and more of the fact that the masque was written by a boy of twenty-five, which accounts for so much that is gloriously Bachelor-of-Artish in it. Instead of memoranda about “pleonasms” and “quadrisyllables” it would perhaps make the thing more human to the luckless pupil if he realized that the Lady was so obviously a phantom of a high-minded young celibate’s imagination. How delightfully young-Miltonian she is: how differently he would have done her after his marriage to Miss Powell. And the simpering and gooseberry-headed Brothers. . . .

But I’m not a teacher of literature; I have no right, probably, to expose my own ideas about such matters. After reading through the Notes on “Comus” in this very reputable edition (still used by thousands of children) I seemed to have been present at a murder. I could see the corpse of Milton in the ditch, and the bloody Piedmontese—or was it the Modern Language Association—marching in lock-step down the highway.

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The disturbing part of it all is that it renews the unpleasant suspicion that the professional teachers of “English” do not always have any very clear idea of what literature is all about, or how it is created.
Such pitiable haggling over absurd irrelevancies is, in Don Marquis's fine phrase, to play veterinary to the horse with wings. Poetry, God help us, is men's own hearts and lives; it is both a confession and a concealment. It rarely means exactly what it seems to. If we knew why Milton reached his most magnificent vibrations of eloquence when speaking for Comus and for Satan we might know why—in the good old Lexicographer's phrase—he suffered at Cambridge "the publick indignity of corporal correction."

Poetry happens when a mind bursts into a sudden blaze; and the annotators gather round, warming their hands at a discreet distance as they remark that such and such a glowing ember is an echo from Horace or Virgil, or a description of Windsor Castle. As though a poet like Milton, in his godlike fit, gives a damn where the mysterious suggestion arose. To margent lovelessness with such trivial scribble is (let's adapt one of Comus's own lines) to live like Poetry's bastards, not her sons. How shall we justify the ways—not of God to man, but of teachers to literature? And you will hunt in vain in the textbooks for the most human tribute ever paid to Milton. It is this: the only time Wordsworth ever got drunk was when he visited Milton's old rooms at Cambridge.

CHRISTOPHER MORLEY

PAINTINGS AT PEABODY

Alumni and students of George Peabody College for Teachers are attempting to beautify the interior of the college buildings by hanging reproductions of America's best paintings on the walls. As a beginning, eighteen reproductions of mural paintings have been hung in the reading room of the library at a cost of $800. Each class is now undertaking to raise funds for similar pictures for one or more rooms. It is hoped that Peabody may thus become a center for ideas on school decoration.

A SURVEY OF THE ENGLISH TEACHING IN BRUNSWICK COUNTY, VIRGINIA

LAST spring the English teachers in District "D" organized. The purpose of this organization was the formation of a group of teachers who would work for the establishment of definite standards of English in the grades and high schools of the district. These teachers realized that before any definite scheme for the improvement of the status of English could be advocated, a study of the existing conditions in the schools of the district must be made. The first survey, the results of which furnish the material for this article, was made in Brunswick county.

The first section of the survey was the standardized test given the high school children of the district. The Briggs English Form Test (Beta), published by Teachers College, Columbia University, was used. This test, according to the bulletin which accompanies it, concerns itself with the seven simplest of the minimum essentials in written composition. They are (1) the initial capital, (2) the terminal period, (3) the terminal interrogation point, (4) the capital for a proper noun or adjective, (5) the detection and correction of the run-on sentence, (6) the apostrophe of possession, and (7) the comma before but, co-ordinating the members of a compound sentence. The test is so arranged that the children are graded on only thirty-five errors.

One hundred and twenty-nine freshmen took the test. They made 1659 errors, or an average of 14.61 errors.

Ninety-one sophomores took the test. They made 1104, or an average of 12.13 errors.

Seventy-two juniors took the test. They made 824, or an average of 11.44 errors.

Fifty-nine seniors made 623, or an average of 10.59 errors.