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HOOD'S HUMOROUS POEMS

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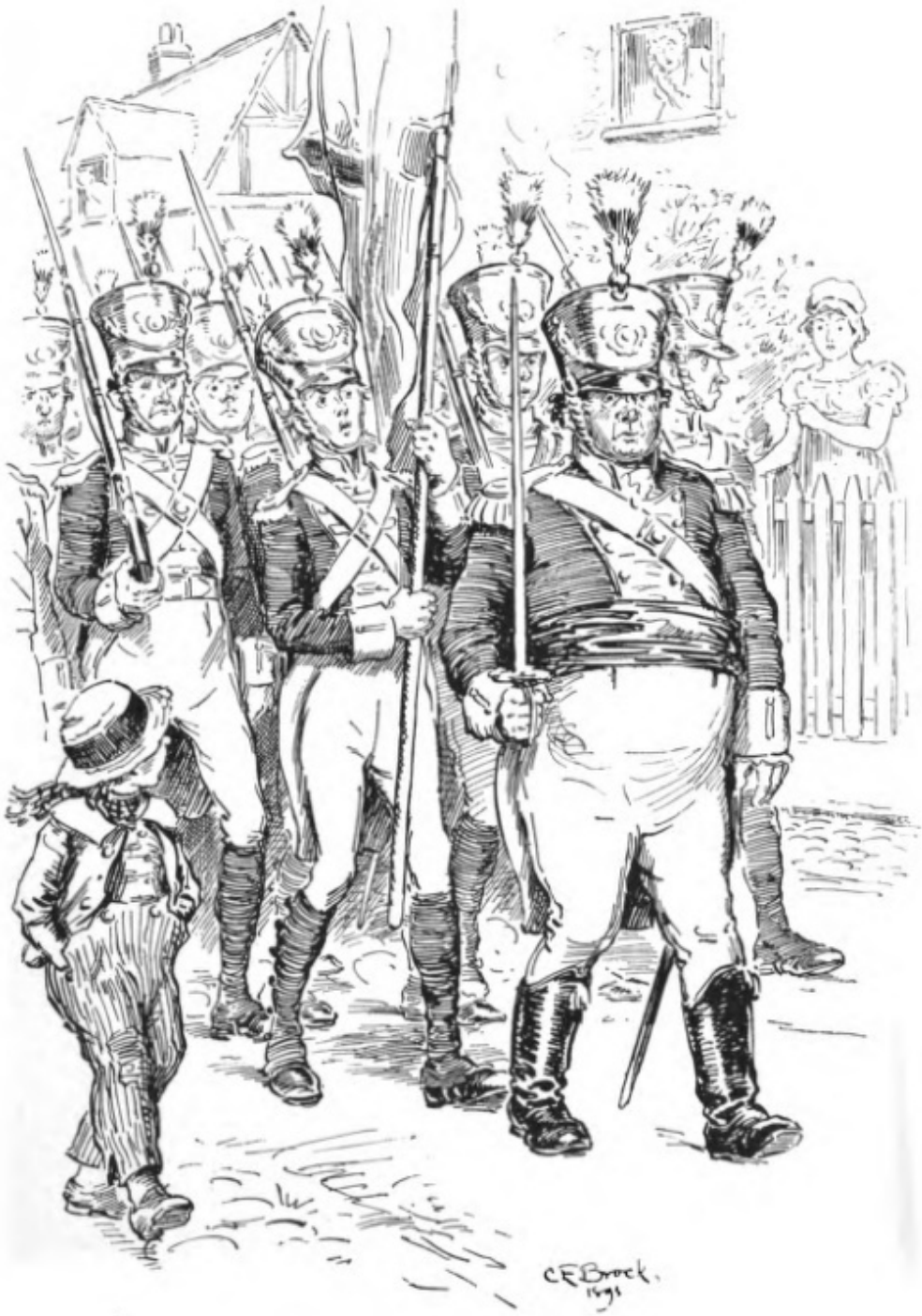

'Marched as mourners march.'

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HUMOROUS POEMS

BY

THOMAS HOOD

WITH A PREFACE BY

ALFRED AINGER

AND ONE HUNDRED AND THIRTY ILLUSTRATIONS

BY

CHARLES E. BROCK

London
MACMILLAN AND CO.
AND NEW YORK
1893

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"Marched as straw men would."

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Some time in the year 1825 there was published in London a thin duodecimo volume having for title Odes and Addresses to Great People. *It bore no author's name on the title-page,—only a quotation from the* Citizen of the World, "*Catching all the oddities, the whimsies, the absurdities and the littlenesses of conscious greatness by the way.*" *The little book proved, on examination, to contain some fifteen humorous poems addressed to various public characters of greater or less claim to distinction at that day. There was one to Mr. Graham, the aeronaut; another to M'Adam, the maker of roads; another to Mrs. Fry, the Quaker philanthropist; another to Grimaldi, the clown, and so forth. An acute critic might, even then, I think, have detected not only that these fresh and amusing productions were of unequal*

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merit, but that they were not all by the same hand. But he would, most assuredly, have allowed that wit and ingenuity of a rare kind were to be found among them.

The little volume quickly attracted attention, and was soon in a second edition. Among those into whose hands it fell was Samuel Taylor Coleridge, then residing under Mr. Gillman's roof at Highgate. His delight was great; and in the absence of any information as to the authorship, he at once assumed that such mingled fun and poetry could have emanated from but one living man—and that, the author of Elia. *Accordingly Coleridge wrote off at once to Charles Lamb:—*

My dear Charles—This afternoon a little thin mean-looking sort of a foolscap sub-octavo of poems, printed on very dingy outsides, lay on the table, which the cover informed me was circulating in our book-club, so very Grub Streetish in all its appearance, internal as well as external, that I cannot explain by what accident of impulse (assuredly there was no motive *in play) I came to look into it. Least of all the title,* Odes and Addresses to Great Men, *which connected itself in my head with* Rejected Addresses, *and all the Smith and Theodore Hook squad. But, my dear Charles, it was certainly written by you, or under you, or* unâ cum *you. I know none of your frequent visitors, capacious and assimilative enough of your converse, to have reproduced you so honestly, supposing*

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you had left yourself in pledge in his lock-up house. Gillman, to whom I read the spirited parody on the Introduction to Peter Bell, the Ode to the Great Unknown, and to Mrs. Fry—he *speaks doubtfully of Reynolds and Hood. . . .*

Thursday night, 10 o'clock—*No! Charles, it is* you! *I have read them over again, and I understand why you have* anoned *the book. The puns are nine in ten good—many excellent,—the* Newgatory, *transcendent! And then the* exemplum sine exemplo *of a volume of personalities and contemporaneities without a single line that could inflict the infinitesimal of an unpleasance on any man in his senses—saving and except, perhaps, in the envy-addled brain of the despiser of your* Lays. *If not a triumph over him, it is, at least, an* Ovation. *Then moreover and besides (to speak with becoming modesty), excepting my own self, who is there but you who could write the musical lines and stanzas that are intermixed?*

Lamb writes back on the second of July from Colebrooke Row, Islington, and after telling Coleridge of his own recent illness and the weariness of being without occupation—he had just retired from the India House—he proceeds :—

The Odes are, four-fifths, done by Hood—a silentish young man you met at Islington one day, an invalid. The rest are Reynolds's, whose sister Hood has lately married. I have not had a broken finger in them. . . . Hood will be gratified, as much as I am, by your mistake.

And Lamb is able to add at the close of his

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letter: "Hood has just come in; his sick eyes sparkled with health when he read your approbation."

The "silentish young man—an invalid" was then just six-and-twenty years of age. He had been forced to abandon, for health's sake, the engraver's desk to which he had been bound; had become in 1821 sub-editor of the London Magazine, *and in that service, and at the hospitable table of the publishers, Taylor and Hessey, had both practised his poetic gift and made the most valuable and inspiring friendships of his life,—with Hazlitt, De Quincey, Hartley Coleridge, and, above all, in Hood's affection and admiration, Charles Lamb, then just beginning to contribute his essays to the magazine. One greater genius than any in the list it was not given to Hood to know in the flesh. John Keats had closed his brief life of suffering at Rome in the February of the year in which Hood joined the staff. But it was under the spell of that poetic genius that Hood began his career as poet. Among the friends he owed to the magazine was John Hamilton Reynolds, his future brother-in-law. Reynolds had been one of Keats's closest friends, and himself wrote verse of considerable merit, bearing strong marks of the Keatsian influence. Hood*

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remained sub-editor for two or three years, and contributed many of his longer serious poems, clearly due in subject as well as style to the same influence—his "Lycus the Centaur," "The Two Peacocks of Bedfont," the "Ode to Autumn," and others. But very early in his editorial career he had also printed in the magazine, modestly, among certain imaginary and whimsical "Notices to Correspondents," a short and facetious "Ode to Dr. Kitchener," prelude and model of those which afterwards so captivated Coleridge. But this, with all other of Hood's contributions at this time, was anonymous, and together with the serious poetry, seems to have attracted scant notice. Unsigned poetry, even seventy years ago, was sufficiently abundant, and, for the most part, sufficiently commonplace, for the general reader to pass it by as so much padding. And when the Odes and Addresses, *the joint-production of Hood and Reynolds, appeared anonymously in 1825, even those who lived in the world of literature were in some doubt as to the authorship.*

In 1824 Hood married Jane Reynolds, contrary, it would seem, to the wishes of her family; and indeed, with his health and uncertain prospects, the match

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may well have been deemed imprudent. In any case the "bread and cheese" question had become urgent. The Odes and Addresses *came out in the year following, to be soon followed by the two series of* Whims and Oddities; *and in 1827 Hood reprinted his Serious Poems from the* London Magazine *with some new matter, including the graceful poem which gave its name to the volume, "The Plea of the Midsummer Fairies." This poem was dedicated to Charles Lamb,—the volume, as a whole, to Coleridge, in grateful recognition of the praise he had bestowed on Hood's earlier efforts,—but neither poems nor dedications availed to awaken any interest in the reading public. The volume fell all but dead from the press; and the author, his son and daughter tell us, bought up a large number of the remainder copies, "to save them from the butter-shop."*

It now became evident that if Hood was to live by writing, it must be by his humorous, not his serious verse; and though happily his poetic genius was not discouraged, the remaining eighteen years of his life were spent mainly in working that rich and unique vein of which he had given earliest proof in his Odes and Addresses. *He was to show that in the hands*

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of a poet and humorist, the pun—that so-called "verbal wit"—was to take higher rank and subserve quite other purposes than anything of the kind in our literature before. Samuel Johnson once remarked that "little things are not valued, but when they are done by those who can do greater things." But he might have gone further, and said that the little things only become *great when they proceed from those who can do greater, —who come to them, that is to say, from a higher ground.*

And, with Hood, this higher ground was the poetic heart, and a vividness and rapidity of imagination such as never before had found such an outlet. The same instantaneous perception of the analogies and relations between, apparently, incongruous things that was possessed by Dickens, Hood possessed with regard to words and ideas. The pun, as ordinarily understood, is a play upon the double meanings of words, or on the resemblance of one word to another; and in the hands of one destitute of humour or fancy the pun begins and ends there. It may be purely mechanical, and if so, speedily becomes wearisome and disgusting. To hear of any ordinary man that he makes puns is properly a warning to avoid his society. For with the

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funny man the verbal coïncidence is everything; there is nothing underlying it, or beyond it. In the hands of a Hood the pun becomes an element in his fancy, his humour, his ethical teaching, even his pathos. As ordinarily experienced, the pun is the irreconcilable enemy of these things. It could not dwell with them "in one house." Hood saw, and was the first to show, that the pun might become even their handmaid, and in this confidence dared to use it often in his serious poems, when he was conveying some moral truth, or expressing some profound human emotion. Coleridge, as we have seen, remarking on the excellence of the puns in the Odes and Addresses, *added, "The* Newgatory *is transcendent!" Hood was addressing the admirable Mrs. Fry, who, as every one knows, set up a school in Newgate to teach the poor neglected outcasts what they had never heard from Christian lips before. One of the chief points made by Hood is this,—how much better, kinder, wiser, more politic even, it would be to multiply these schools* outside, *not* inside *the Prison walls, so that prevention might take the place of cure. "Keep your school out of Newgate" is the burden of Hood's remonstrance:—*

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Ah! who can tell how hard it is to teach
Miss Nancy Dawson on her bed of straw—
To make Long Sal sew up the endless breach
She made in manners—to write heaven's own law
On hearts of granite; nay, how hard to preach,
In cells, that are not memory's—to draw
The moral thread thro' the immoral eye
Of blunt Whitechapel natures, Mrs. Fry!

And then, after a stanza or two, comes the one ending with the play on words that so fascinated Coleridge:—

I like your chocolate, good Mistress Fry!
I like your cookery in every way;
I like your Shrove-tide service and supply;
I like to hear your sweet Pandeans *play;*
I like the pity in your full-brimmed eye;
I like your carriage, and your silken grey,
Your dove-like habits, and your silent preaching;
But I don't like your Newgatory *teaching!*

The distinctive quality of Hood's puns is exemplified here, but not more notably than in a hundred other instances that crowd upon the memory. The ordinary pun is, for the most part, profoundly depressing, being generally an impertinence; while Hood's at their best exhilarate and fill the reader with a glow of admiration and surprise. The "sudden glory" which Hobbes pronounced to be the secret of the pleasure derived from wit is true of Hood's. There was a pretty drawing-

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room ballad by his brother-in-law Reynolds, which our grandmothers used to sing to an equally pretty tune, beginning—

Go where the water glideth gently ever,
Glideth by meadows that the greenest be;
Go, listen to our own belovèd river
And think of me!

Hood had a young lady friend who was going to India, and he writes her a playful copy of verses, imitating Reynolds's poem in metre and refrain. Hood noticed that the matrimonial market, already in his day, was somewhat overstocked, and that watchful parents had the comfort of hoping that daughters who lingered in England might yet find husbands in the smaller society of Bombay or Madras, and he adds—

Go where the maiden on a mariage plan goes,
Consigned for wedlock to Calcutta's quay,
Where woman goes for mart, the same as mangos,
And think of me!

The same as man goes! *How utter the surprise, and yet how inevitable the simile appears! It is just as if the writer had not foreseen it—as if it had been mere accident—as if he had discovered the coincidence rather than arranged it. This is a special note of Hood's best puns. They fall*

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