

## THOMAS HOOD,

PUNSTER, POET, PREACHER.

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IN Kensal Green Cemetery, near London, there stands a monument on which is graven, "In memory of Thomas Hood, who sang the 'Song of the Shirt.'" The frequent visitor, uncovered, reverently regards the grass-grown grave, and the effort which sculpture has made to portray the word-pictures fashioned long ago by him who sleeps beneath.

But each year grows smaller the company of pilgrims to this grave. The dead poet is but little known or appreciated by the literary world of our day.

The father of Thomas Hood was a native of Scotland, who came to London seeking his fortune, and became a bookseller. The poet's mother was a Miss Sands. From Hood's own account of his ancestry we learn "that as his grandmother was a Miss Armstrong, he was descended from two notorious thieves, *i. e.*, Robin Hood and Johnnie Armstrong."

We quote from the exquisite memorial of Hood by his daughter, who, continuing the very brief account of her father's parents, says: "The father was a man of cultivated taste and literary inclinations, and was the author of two novels, which attained some popularity in their day, although now their very names are forgotten. For those days they must have been a fairly intellectual family."

When the poet was still but a boy, his father was taken away by sudden death, and the widow and children left with but slender support. The nobility which afterward characterized the man was straightway manifested in the lad. He chose the drudgery of the engraver's desk rather than encroach upon the meagre family store.

In the year 1821, when Hood was about twenty-one years of age, an opening which offered more congenial employment at last presented itself, and he became the sub-editor of the *London Magazine*. In 1824, with the proverbial imprudence of a poet, he married, and the daughter writes: "In spite of all the sickness and sorrow that formed the greatest portion of the after-part of their lives, the union was a happy one." Children were born, poverty, the wolf growled at the door, disease entered the home, and

never left it until the victim had been slain, the husband taken away. There is hardly an incident worthy of record. Poverty and weakness will not surrender the fight, will not cease the effort to pay the debt incurred by the failure of friends. The dying poet will not consent to be absolved from his obligations by one or another of the sharp remedies which the legislature has provided for such evils. He says he is "determined to try whether he cannot score off his debts as effectually and more creditably with his pen than with the legal whitewash or a wet sponge." So, "leaving every shilling behind him derived from the sale of his effects, the means he carried with him being an advance upon his future labors, he voluntarily expatriated himself, and bade his native land good-night."

For two years he and his little family are domiciled at Coblenz, where the blue Moselle pours its waters into the "arrowy Rhine," and thence come the budgets of fun over which England shakes its sides, all ignorant that by subtlest alchemy sighs and pains and sorrows have been transmuted into these bonbons. Then three years of suffering, and yet of unflagging toil, at Ostend, whose marshy miasma was aggravation of his disease. And then England again; and in the five years which remain of his allotted span, though the vital flame burns with ever-diminishing intensity, it yet sheds a more glorious effulgence on all around; though the "silver chord" is so soon to be loosed, it yet sounds forth ever sweeter and sweeter melodies; and from the "golden bowl" so soon to be broken, he pours the perfume of his pleading for right which has anointed and cheered the soiled face of myriad down-trodden ones. And then, at last, in the month of the flowers, in the month of his birth and of his marriage, the singer's voice is hushed forever, the punster's quirks are ended, the preacher's sermon is done.

Such must be the answer to the question, Who was Thomas Hood? A man of lowly birth, of meagre education, of diseased body, but of brave heart; who lived a life of toil, without incidents of heroism or crises of trial, and died young.

But in reply to the further question, "What was Thomas Hood?" we answer, Punster, poet, preacher, all combined; a teacher both in life and word of highest Christian principle. Hood's reputation with the general public is undoubtedly only as a joker, and, beyond controversy, he was in act and word, constitutionally, spontaneously, necessarily, always and everywhere, the perpetrator of jests, verbal and practical.

The design of this paper is to correct, if possible, this false estimate of a brave knight who went laughingly to battle, but still *went to battle*, against giant falsehoods and follies and giant wrongs and giant misbeliefs, and with his smooth round stones of song did smite them. Its aim is to portray him as poet; in highest, truest sense a poet in life and verse; a maker, creator, who of materials old and familiar doth fashion results startling in their beauty, and in themselves a revelation.

And its further aim is to claim for the punster-poet the honor due to the preacher, though unordained and unrecognized, and to show from his sermons how effective was his preaching of that charity "which suffereth long and is kind, which envieth not, vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, thinketh no evil"; of toleration, that hardest lesson for humanity to learn.

An incident shall first be narrated, illustrative of his inevitable tendency to word-twisting, which I have never seen in print. The two Hoods—father and son—are one day driving in a buggy in the neighborhood of London. Most probably it was during the last years of his life, after the days of exile were ended, and the poet had come home to England to die. They come to a gate on the road-side through which they design to pass, and are given pause by the warning in big, bold letters, "Beware the dog!" The poet alights from his carriage to make a reconnaissance of the enemy. But no dog is in sight; the most diligent search reveals none, and straightway, with a piece of chalk, Hood writes beneath the warning "Beware the dog!" the expostulatory question, "Where be the dog?"

Hood's poetry is certainly not Shakespeare's nor Milton's, and yet is poetry, genuine, real, true. For what is poetry? We answer with Hazlitt that it is the language of the imagination and of the emo-

tions, and he is a poet who can speak that language so that it shall be understood of the people; so that the soul of man may hear its native tongue, and hearing, awake and rejoice.

How many a man has stood in a darkened chamber that seemed to grow ever darker, for the light of the house was going out! He has listened with breathless eagerness to hear the dipping of the oar that should announce the pale boatman come to carry the traveller across the river, and the thoughts of his heart could find no clothing in the poor wardrobe of his mind. But a poet has stood there before him, and he makes the experience of agony a very joy forever by the words in which he tells it:

"We watched her breathing through the night—  
Her breathing soft and low—  
As in her breast the wave of life  
Kept heaving to and fro.

"So silently we seemed to speak,  
So slowly moved about,  
As we had lent her half our powers  
To eke her living out.

"Our very hopes belied our fears,  
Our fears our hopes belied;  
We thought her dying when she slept,  
And sleeping when she died.

"For when the morn came dim and sad,  
And chill with early showers,  
Her quiet eyelids closed—she had  
Another morn than ours."

Then we can but recall the marvellous picture of tragic death, which, with perhaps one single exception, has added more to our poet's fame than all else he has written. We mean, of course, the "Bridge of Sighs," and, in our judgment, for intensity of human sympathy, for penetrating vision of the hidden significance beneath the commonplace event, for pictured portrayal of the weakness and the agony, the cruelty and the treachery, which have gone before, for agonizing lamentation that there was no Christ in Christian men to succor the betrayed, and for fiery denunciation and stinging remorseful lashing of the betrayer—these verses are not surpassed, perhaps not equalled, in the literature of our language.

Our space permits us to do no more than mention a poem by which we would further illustrate Hood's claims to be a poet. It is but little known now, even as, strange to say, it was but little read in his own day. His daughter records in her *Memorial* that her father himself bought the unbound sheets of a large part

of the edition to save them from the disgraceful fate of the "trunk-makers." The title of the poem is "The Plea of the Midsummer Fairies." In the dedication to his friend Charles Lamb, Hood says:

"It is my design in the following poem to celebrate by an allegory the immortality which Shakespeare has conferred on the fairy mythology by his *Midsummer Night's Dream*. But for him those pretty children of our childhood would leave barely their names to our maturer years. They belong, as the mites upon the plum, to the bloom of fancy, a thing generally too frail and beautiful to withstand the rude handling of time; but the poet has made the most perishable part of the mind's creation equal to the most enduring. . . . (so) that they are as real to the mind's eye as their green magical circles to the outer sense."

Such the design; fairies live only in the faith of men; that faith had grown old and ready to perish when the great magician touched it with his wand, and, behold! it is new and vigorous again. Time's scythe passes harmless through the giant Shade; Shakespeare is immortal, and has made the fairies so. The excellence of the poem consists in the intensity and the clearness of the poet's vision of the fairy world. He projects himself, if we may so say, into that airy world of unreality; there he beholds, there he speaks, and his words are all redolent of the perfumed air of the elfin kingdom.

We will quote but a single line from the poem, but that line is, in our opinion, as perfect adaptation of words to thought as can be found in English poetry. When Time stands with uplifted scythe ready to strike and destroy the whole fairy race, then Shakespeare, the "timely apparition," comes, and

"Doffs to the lily queen his courteous cap."

But the effort to characterize the peculiar excellences of our poet were wholly incomplete did it fail to note that in the fruits of his genius, more perhaps than in those of any other writer, is made manifest that laughter and tears, mirth and sorrow, dwell ever as closest neighbors, are but joint-tenants of one house, and together greet the poet visitor. In his own beautiful "Ode to Melancholy" Hood says,

"There is no music in the life  
That sounds with idiot laughter solely;  
There's not a string attuned to mirth  
But has its chord in melancholy."

And it is just as true that on the crest of the highest surging wave of feeling there will ever be a snowy, frothy cap of gladness; that the rainbow of beauty and content will be made by the sunlight of merriment shining through the tears of deepest feeling. The quaint conceit with which the poet's lips are smiling is just as full of tenderest concern as his bitterness was of lamentation; perhaps tells his story more fully, more powerfully, and makes it to be longer remembered. For instance, he mourns over the inequalities in this human life of ours, those mysterious dispensations which men have found it so hard to reconcile with the government of an all-wise, all-powerful, all-loving Father. See how he does it:

"What different dooms our birthdays bring!  
For instance, one little mannikin thing  
Survives to wear many a wrinkle,  
While death forbids another to wake,  
And a son that it took nine moons to make  
Expires without a twinkle!"

"Into this world we come like ships  
Launch'd from the docks and stocks and slips,  
For fortune fair or fatal;  
And one little craft is cast away  
In its very first trip to Babbicome Bay,  
While another rides safe at Port Natal.

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"And the other sex, the tender, the fair,  
What wide reverses of fate are there!  
While Margaret, charmed by the Bulbul rare,  
In a garden of Gul reposes,  
Poor Peggy hawks nose-gays from street to street  
Till—think of that! who find life so sweet—  
She hates the smell of roses!"

Does the funny setting detract from the brilliancy of the jewel, that questioning wonder at the inexplicable, that tender commiseration for the unfortunate?

Fully equal to the foregoing is his dissertation upon the text that a clear conscience alone maketh the head to rest easy on its pillow; and the fun does not dull the point of the moral or obscure the beauty of the conception.

"The careful Betty the pillow beats,  
And airs the blankets, and smooths the sheets,  
And gives the mattress a shaking;  
But vainly Betty performs her part  
If a ruffled head and a rumpled heart  
As well as the couch want making.

"There's Morbid, all bile and verjuice and nerves;  
Where other people would make preserves,  
He turns his fruit into pickles.  
Jealous, envious, and fretful by day,  
At night to his own sharp fancies a prey,  
He has, like a hedgehog, rolled up the wrong way,  
Tormenting himself with his prickles.

"But a child that bids the world good-night  
 In downright earnest, and cuts it quite—  
 A cherub no art can copy—  
 'Tis a perfect picture to see him lie  
 As if he had supp'd on dormouse pie  
 (An ancient classical dish, by-the-bye!)  
 With a sauce of syrup of poppy."

We have space for but the opening verses of the playful tender lines suggested by the distant view of Clapham Academy, where he had been at school. Are not the tears in the eyes that look on these "happy autumn fields" while thought runs back to "the days that are no more," though the poet's lips are wreathed with smiles? We can hear the mournful cadence of the old man's melancholy while yet he talks so gleefully of the boys and the joys of the old time; and our own sympathetic enjoyment is heightened that thus in retrospect we are taught to smile while we weep.

"Ah me! those old familiar bounds!  
 That classic house, those classic grounds,  
 My pensive thought recalls!  
 What tender urchins now confine,  
 What little captives now repine,  
 Within yon irksome walls!

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"There was I birch'd; there was I bred;  
 There like a little Adam fed  
 From learning's woful tree!  
 The weary tasks I used to con;  
 The hopeless leaves I wept upon—  
 Most fruitless leaves to me!"

We suspect that some little astonishment has been excited by the title we have given to this paper, and that perhaps the unworthy suggestion has found place that it is but a "dodge" to attract attention. It does seem a bit timorous to designate as preacher a man of whom the lady mentioned in his *Literary Reminiscences* asked, with such innocent effrontery, "Mr. Hood, are you not an infidel?" But perhaps it is without warrant that the expounders of the Christian creed have arrogated to themselves the exclusive right to be so called, and perhaps many of them and of their hearers have need to be reminded that the Master forbade His apostles to silence a preacher who "followed not with them," because he yet "cast out devils in His name," saying unto them, "For he that is not against us is on our part."

Certainly Hood followed not in full conformity with any one of the companies which traversed the land proclaiming the gospel; but just as certainly he did cast

out devils in the name of the Christ—devils wild and fierce, who centuries long had torn the poor and helpless. He displayed the spirit of the God-Man, so long overlaid and disguised with incrusting orthodoxy and formalism and fanaticism, and men saw and knew there was reality and power in the revelation He had made.

And further: "Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report," on these things he thought, of these things he wrote, to these things he urged his fellow-men with the persuasive call of musical entreaty, and with the stinging whips of scornful satire.

When the end came, the dying man was heard crying to his Saviour, "O Lord, say, 'Arise, take up thy cross, and follow Me!'" And but a little while before he had said to his faithful wife, "Remember, Jane, I forgive all, *all*, as I hope to be forgiven."

So we dare to call him preacher, not of dogma, not of creed, nor yet of mere morality, but preacher genuine and true of the living Christ. He pleaded not for this or that form of Christian belief, but pleaded with men to live the Christ life here that they may live with Him there.

The question of the gentle-mannered lady we mentioned just now offers good text for our consideration of this part of our subject—"Mr. Hood, are you not an infidel?"

A gentleman (?) named Rae Wilson, of whom we know only his name, had charged the poet with "profaneness and ribaldry," because of his own stupid inability to understand a figure in one of the poems. Hood had not seen the book containing the strictures, but he outlines what he supposes Wilson has said of his character, and then adds:

"Well, be the graceless lineaments confest.  
 I do enjoy the bounteous, beauteous earth,  
 And dote upon a jest  
 Within the limits of becoming mirth.

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"I pray for grace, repent each sinful act;  
 Peruse, but underneath the rose, my Bible;  
 And love my neighbor far too well, in fact,  
 To call and twit him with a godly tract.  
 That's turned by application to a libel.  
 My heart ferments not with the bigot's leaven,  
 All creeds I view with toleration thorough,  
 And have a horror of regarding heaven  
 As anybody's rotten borough."

He prayed for "grace," the special, peculiar gift of the Christ; repentance recalled and deplored each sinful act; and he strove to love his neighbor.

But his Christianity was not that of any one of the sects; and here we read the first of the doctrines that he preached—toleration. Shall not every earnest man who loves mankind and their Redeemer thank God for the preacher and his sermon? To do so is not to do dishonor to the historic creed; it is not unmingled with regret that the gentle poet never knew the joy and freedom of the Christian home, the church of the living God; but still is not the evangel needed to-day to be sounded with ever-increasing clearness of tone, even that which the church was sent to declare, that not orthodoxy, not conformity, but the living Christ is in men the "hope of glory"? Toleration! toleration! and intolerance of nothing save intolerance, this Hood preached.

"Intolerant to none,

Whatever shape the pious rite may bear;  
Even the poor pagan's homage to the sun  
I would not harshly scorn, lest even there  
I spurned some element of Christian prayer,  
An aim, though erring, at a 'world ayont,'  
Acknowledgment of good, of man's futility—  
That very thing so many Christians want—  
Humility."

Just here the writer would enter a "caveat" that he be not misunderstood in his eager defence of the poet to even seem to counsel the abandonment of the historic church and creed. By no means; Hood has given no such counsel. But he teaches us to love the jewel better than any casket, and that we recognize and rejoice in its glorious beauty in whatsoever setting, no matter that to us it may seem by its weakness to endanger the jewel's safety, or by its awkward holding to distort its rays. He teaches that Christ may be and is in many a heart that gives no outward token we can recognize, and that we must rejoice to believe so. More plainly, let a man hold his peculiar principles as tightly as he may, the grasp must be looser than that which clasps the Christ Himself. The tighter he holds the truth, the better—we mean what seems to his best instructed intelligence the truth—if only he hold and speak it in love.

Then how refreshing, how like an echo from the far past, is Hood's scornful denunciation of canting hypocrisy!

"A man may cry church, church, at every word,  
With no more piety than other people:  
A daw's not reckoned a religious bird  
Because it keeps a-cawing from the steeple.  
The temple is a good, a holy place,  
But quacking only gives it an ill savor,  
While saintly mountebanks the porch disgrace,  
And bring religion's self into disfavor."

And again, he preached the brotherhood of man, and the love of that brotherhood, in words that sound like those of that New Testament which we heard described once by a great preacher as the "most radical book on earth."

"One place there is—beneath the burial sod—  
Where all mankind are equalized by death.  
Another place there is—the fane of God—  
Where all are equal who draw living breath.  
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I do confess that I abhor and shrink  
From schemes with a religious willy-nilly,  
That frown upon St. Giles's sins, but blink  
The peccadilloes of all Piccadilly.  
My soul revolts at all such base hypocrisy,  
And will not, dare not, fancy in accord  
The Lord of Hosts with an exclusive Lord  
Of this world's aristocracy."

Hood pleaded for the rights of man as man, and for the liberty wherewith Christ has made man free—a liberty not to be circumscribed by the decrees of church, nor by the statutes of the state, nor by the intolerant persecution of society.

Specially for those who were downtrodden and without helper, for the weary toiling masses of our kind, for them he pleaded that their taskmasters should not add to their burdens, nor yet take away the few delights that made its bearing a possibility. Hence came his poem on the Sunday question, that almost burning question of to-day. His position is that Sunday should not be made by legislative enactment a Sabbath either Jewish or Puritan; but because it is the day of the Son of Man, it belongs to the sons of men, and government should protect it for them; that it is the God-given holiday to the toiling artisan, on which one day in the seven he may dandle his children on his knees and see their eyes open and awake. Therefore he must not be denied entrance to the Zoological Garden, the sight of the creatures of the great Creator. Therefore shut him not up to the offensive foulness of the tenement-house and the clamorous confusion of its noisy occupants. Nay, rather give him all inducement on the rest-day to walk, like the patriarchs, in the fields with his children round about him. Surely, he argues, this

privilege should not be withheld by those to whom fortune has made every day a holiday, whose luxurious homes are amid wide lawns and embowering trees, whose libraries offer plentiful recreation to the mind jaded or listless, and to whom the oft-visited garden would bring no gratification. We must quote two or three verses to show the manner of his plea.

"What! shut the gardens! lock the lattice gate!  
Refuse the shilling and the fellow's ticket!  
And hang a wooden notice up to state,  
'On Sundays no admittance at this wicket!'  
The birds, the beasts, and all the reptile race  
Denied to friends and visitors till Monday!  
Now really this appears the common case  
Of putting too much Sabbath into Sunday—  
But what is your opinion, Mrs. Grundy?"

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"What harm if men who burn the midnight oil,  
Weary of frame, and worn and wan in feature,  
Seek once a week their spirits to assail,  
And snatch a glimpse of 'animated nature'?  
Better it were if in his best of suits  
The artisan who goes to work on Monday  
Should spend a leisure hour among the brutes  
Than make a brute of his own self on Sunday—  
But what is your opinion, Mrs. Grundy?"

But does not our poet forget that the Lord's day should be consecrated to remembrance of Him who on that first day of the week spoiled the strong man Death, and came forth from the grave? It would seem so. And yet the Christ ever gave healing and rest to the diseased and wearied body ere He offered the spiritual blessing. The masses, men say, come never within the church's doors. Is it because at the hour of morning service their wearied bodies and minds can find no pleasure in the thought of worship? Is it, at least in some cases, because they are too tired to go? If this be in any degree an explanation of the mournful fact that the laboring classes are not church-goers, then let us not, Hood pleads, by legal prohibition or by public opinion take away the only opportunity for healthful rest and recreation, but rather let us seek to lead them by love of natural beauty up to love of the supernatural—through nature up to nature's God.

"Oh, simply open wide the temple door,  
And let the swelling organ greet  
With *voluntaries* meet  
The *willing* advent of the rich and poor.  
And while to God the loud hosannas soar  
With rich vibrations from the vocal throng,  
From quiet shades that to the woods belong,  
And brooks with music of their own,  
Voices may come to swell the choral song  
With notes of praise they learned in musings lone."

On the monument in Kensal Green Cemetery, as we have already mentioned, is the epitaph which the poet himself prepared, "Thomas Hood, who sang the 'Song of the Shirt.'" He wished all his claim to remembrance by posterity to rest upon this one poem, in which he stood forth as the defender of the defenceless; in which he sought to destroy the giant oppressor of the poor needle-women of England. The world has accepted his judgment, and his reputation rests largely on the foundation he chose for it. The poem appeared in *Punch* for Christmas, 1843. It ran through the land like wild-fire; paper after paper quoted it, and it became the talk of the day. Hood was astonished at its wonderful popularity, though the truer instinct of his wife had prophesied it.

"Now mind, Hood," she said, as she was folding up the packet to send to the press, "mark my words, this will tell wonderfully. It is one of the best things you ever did."

"The poem was translated into French and German, and even, I believe," says his daughter, "into Italian.... It was printed on cotton handkerchiefs for sale; .... but what delighted and yet touched my father most deeply was that the poor creatures to whose sorrows and sufferings he had given such eloquent voice seemed to adopt its words as their own by singing them about the streets to a rude air of their own adaptation." But a little while before the singer's voice was hushed forever, among other touching proofs of admiration and esteem, came an envelope containing a bank-note for £20, and these words, "A shirt, and a sincere wish for health." Doubtless it was sweet to the dying man to think that the words were written by one of that army of work-women whom his poems had helped to deliver from a worse than Egyptian bondage, as, when his eyes were closed in death and his monument was building, it was sweet to his children to receive subscriptions of the very poor, who would fain testify their reverence for him who had been their friend.

Indeed, our own Lowell has written a true epitaph for the punster, poet, and preacher:

"Here lies a poet. Stranger, if to thee  
His claim to memory be obscure,  
If thou wouldst know how truly great was he,  
Go, ask it of the poor."