

## CHAPTER XL

### A FEW EXAMPLES OF LIGHT VERSE

IN the course of these lectures I have often used the expression "Light Verse." But I am not sure whether you quite understand the general term which, I must acknowledge, although technical, is also quite vague. For this reason, I want to conclude this course of lectures with a few examples that will serve to illustrate the expression.

Light verse means, of course, verse which is not of the serious kind; but it does not necessarily mean comic verse. As a general term it only means any kind of verse that is not essentially serious: it may touch us deeply; it may also make us laugh. However, no matter how serious a subject be suggested by light verse, the tone should always be cheerful and pleasant,—should make you think of a smiling face. There is the general outline for you;—now let us go into particulars.

There are many kinds of light verse,—ranging from almost purely comic up to, or down to, something bordering upon the tragic. All light verse ought to be artistic—otherwise it has scarcely an excuse for existence. A great deal of it is artistic; and a great deal of it deals with art-subjects. Here is an example:—

#### OF A TOYOKUNI COLOUR-PRINT

Was I a Samurai renowned,  
Two-sworded, fierce, immense of bow?  
A historian angular and profound?  
A priest? a porter?—Child, although  
I have forgotten clean, I know  
That in the shape of Fujisan,

What time the cherry-orchards blow,  
I loved you once in old Japan.

As here you loiter, flowing-gowned  
And hugely sashed, with pins a-row  
Your quaint head as with flamelets crowned,  
Demure, inviting—even so,  
When merry maids in Miyako  
To feel the sweet o' the year began,  
And green gardens to overflow,  
I loved you once in old Japan.

Clear shine the hills; the rice-fields round  
Two cranes are circling; sleepy and slow,  
A blue canal the lake's blue bound  
Breaks at the bamboo bridge; and lo!  
Touched with the sundown's spirit and glow,  
I see you turn, with flirted fan,  
Against the plum-tree's bloomy snow. . . .  
I loved you once in old Japan!

*Envoy*

Dear, 'twas a dozen lives ago;  
But that I was a lucky man  
The Toyokuni here will show:  
I loved you—once—in old Japan.

This little address to a Japanese picture is by Mr. W. E. Henley who has published several volumes of poetry, and who now has a considerable influence in the circle of English letters. He is not a first-class poet; but he has written some pretty things (of which this is one) and some curious things of which his series of poems describing the life of a patient in a London Hospital deserves mention. You will see that this is very light verse in the full meaning of the word—though it makes us think of some pretty things, which is very close to the border line of the serious;—of course there are some lines in it, which seem a little strange to a Japanese; nor can it be said the artist fully understood the picture which he so much admired. But in the third stanza,

he really gives us the colour of the print, and the charming effect of the slight figure standing against a background white with plum blossoms. This is called the ballade form (which you must not confuse with ballad) which is a French form of verse. There should be three stanzas of eight lines each with a burden at the end of each stanza and the whole should end with a quatrain of four lines. Most of the later English poets have written in this form; it was made first popular by Austin Dobson, and since then almost everybody attempts it.

But all light verse is by no means so light as this: I took a strong example merely to introduce the subject. Here is a poem which, although essentially light verse, touches us. The author is Thackeray, and the subject is the thoughts of a lover watching at a church door for the chance of seeing the girl that he loves pass by. There is prettiness here too, if you like; but it is not of the trifling kind. The title of the poem is "At the Church Gate."

Although I enter not,  
 Yet round about the spot  
     Ofttimes I hover;  
 And near the sacred gate,  
 With longing eyes I wait,  
     Expectant of her.

The minster bell tolls out  
 Above the city's rout,  
     And noise and humming;  
 They 've hush'd the minster bell:  
 The organ 'gins to swell;  
     She 's coming, she 's coming!

My lady comes at last,  
 Timid and stepping fast  
     And hastening thither,  
 With modest eyes downcast;  
 She comes—she 's here, she 's past!  
     May heaven go with her!

Kneel undisturb'd, fair saint!  
 Pour out your praise or plaint  
     Meekly and duly;  
 I will not enter there,  
 To sully your pure prayer  
     With thoughts unruly.

But suffer me to pace  
 Round the forbidden place,  
     Lingering a minute,  
 Like outcast spirits, who wait,  
 And see, through heaven's gate,  
     Angels within it.

The charm of this poem is in the real emotion suggested but not expressed. The poet feels, by contrast with the pure innocence of the young girl—innocence as of a child,—his own unworthiness; and while mocking himself in a gentle way, he lets us understand his real sentiment. This is the art of what is called “Society Verse.”

But light verse may be altogether comic,—purely funny. Here is a famous example,—one of the most famous in English literature. The authorship was never acknowledged; but it is supposed to have been the work of George Canning, who wrote a great many other funny things in a paper called “The Anti-Jacobin:”

Whene'er with haggard eyes I view  
     This dungeon, that I'm rotting in,  
 I think of those companions true  
 Who studied with me in the U-  
     -niversity of Göttingen—  
     -niversity of Göttingen.

Sweet 'kerchief check'd with heavenly blue,  
     Which once my love sat knotting in,  
 Alas, Matilda then was true,  
 At least I thought so at the U-  
     -niversity of Göttingen—  
     -niversity of Göttingen.

Barbs! barbs! alas! how swift ye flew,  
 Her neat post-waggon trotting in!  
 Ye bore Matilda from my view;  
 Forlorn I languish'd at the U-  
     -niversity of Göttingen—  
     -niversity of Göttingen.

This faded form! this pallid hue!  
 This blood my veins is clotting in,  
 My years are many—they were few  
 When first I enter'd at the U-  
     -niversity of Göttingen—  
     -niversity of Göttingen.

There first for thee my passion grew,  
 Sweet! sweet Matilda Pottingen!  
 Thou wast the daughter of my tu-  
 -tor, Law Professor at the U-  
     -niversity of Göttingen—  
     -niversity of Göttingen.

Sun, moon, and thou vain world, adieu,  
 That kings and priests are plotting in;  
 Here doom'd to starve on water-gru-  
 -el, never shall I see the U-  
     -niversity of Göttingen!—  
     -niversity of Göttingen!

This is called, or was called, when it first appeared, "The Song of Rogero," because it figured in a kind of ironical drama. But, since it became famous, the original name has been quite forgotten; and the composition is more generally known as Canning's song about the University of Gottingen. Remember, it is not quite certain that Canning wrote it; it might have been work of his friend Frere. Of course, beside the fun of the thing, the ingenuity of the rhymes has helped to give it celebrity.

Let me now offer an example of light verse upon a serious subject, "The Unrealized Ideal." It is by Frederick Locker,—perhaps the greatest of all English writers of this

kind of verse. You will find it pretty; but it will also give you something to think about:—

My only Love is always near,—  
In country or in town  
I see her twinkling feet, I hear  
The whisper of her gown.

She fooms it ever fair and young,  
Her locks are tied in haste,  
And one is o'er her shoulder flung,  
And hangs below her waist.

She ran before me in the meads;  
And down this world-worn track  
She leads me on; but while she leads  
She never gazes back.

And yet her voice is in my dreams,  
To witch me more and more,  
That wooing voice! Ah me, it seems  
Less near me than of yore.

Lightly I sped when hope was high,  
And youth beguiled the chase;  
I follow—follow still; but I  
Shall never see her Face.

Of course I need not tell you that no woman is referred to,—the emblematic people may mean any beautiful idea, any beautiful conception of right or truth that a young man wishes to realize. No man ever quite realizes his ideal; and the older he grows the further away that ideal seems. It is as if he were following a guide, a figure that never suffers her face to be seen. This light verse comes very close to purely serious verse; and yet it does not cross the line.

The most serious poets have occasionally indulged in light verse. There is no more serious poet than Cowper; but Cowper has written many pleasing examples of light verse. Here is an examples of light verse, entitled “The

Jackdaw." The jackdaw is only a kind of crow; and this is a poem which might as well refer to a Japanese crow as to any other kind of crow.

There is a bird, who by his coat,  
And by the hoarseness of his note,  
Might be supposed a crow;  
A great frequenter of the church,  
Where bishop-like he finds a perch,  
And dormitory too.

Above the steeple shines a plate,  
That turns and turns, to indicate  
From what point blows the weather:  
Look up—your brains begin to swim,  
'Tis in the clouds—that pleases him,  
He chooses it the rather.

Fond of the speculative height,  
Thither he wings his airy flight,  
And thence securely sees  
The bustle and the rareeshow  
That occupy mankind below,  
Secure and at his ease.

You think, no doubt, he sits and muses  
On future broken bones and bruises,  
If he should chance to fall.  
No; not a single thought like that  
Employs his philosophic pate,  
Or troubles it at all.

He sees that this great roundabout,  
The world, with all its motley rout,  
Church, army, physic, law,  
Its customs, and its businesses,  
Is no concern at all of his,  
And says—what says he?—Caw.

Thrice happy bird! I too have seen  
Much of the vanities of men;  
And, sick of having seen 'em,

Would cheerfully these limbs resign  
 For such a pair of wings as thine,  
 And such a head between 'em.

The word "roundabout" in the fifth stanza may be new to you: it means a kind of structure, made to turn upon a pivot, like the revolving stage in a Japanese theatre. On this there are either seats or wooden horses, for little children to sit upon; and when they have taken their places, and the structure turns about, they enjoy the pleasure of motion. This comparison of the world to a "roundabout" at a fair is quite in the spirit of Bunyan. On the part of the poet, the desire is to be able to consider the world and all its vexations with the indifference of a crow watching things from the top of the steeple, is morally well enough. The man of letters must try to think and act independently of fashion. But, for the man who has to fight the battle of life in a different way, the philosophy might not be so commendable.

I shall now give one more short example of light verse, —to show you an example of this verse reflecting what is called "the society tone." It is a poem by Locker upon his grandmother's picture, in which she appeared as when a beautiful young girl:—

This Relative of mine  
 Was she seventy-and-nine  
     When she died?  
 By the canvas may be seen  
 How she look'd at seventeen,  
     As a Bride.

Beneath a summer tree  
 Her maiden reverie  
     Has a charm;  
 Her ringlets are in taste;  
 What an arm! and what a waist  
     For an arm!

With her bridal-wreath, bouquet,  
 Lace farthingale, and gay,  
*Falbala,—*  
 If Romney's touch be true,  
 What a lucky dog were you,  
 Grandpapa!

Her lips are sweet as love;  
 They are parting! Do they move?  
 Are they dumb?  
 Her eyes are blue, and beam  
 Beseechingly, and seem  
 To say, "Come!"

What funny fancy slips  
 From atween these cherry lips?  
 Whisper me,  
 Fair Sorceress in paint,  
 What canon says I mayn't  
 Marry thee?

That good-for-nothing Time  
 Has a confidence sublime!  
 When I first  
 Saw this Lady, in my youth,  
 Her winters had, forsooth,  
 Done their worst.

Her locks, as white as snow,  
 Once shamed the swartly crow;  
 By-and-by  
 That fowl's avenging sprite  
 Set his cruel foot for spite  
 Near her eye.

Her rounded form was lean,  
 And her silk was bombazine:  
 Well I wot  
 With her needles would she sit,  
 And for hours would she knit,—  
 Would she not?

Ah perishable clay!  
Her charms had dropt away  
    One by one  
But if she heaved a sigh  
With a burthen, it was, "Thy  
    Will be done."

In travail, as in tears,  
With the fardel of her years  
    Overprest,  
In mercy she was borne  
Where the weary and the worn  
    Are at rest.

O if you now are there,  
*And sweet as once you were,*  
    Grandmamma,  
This nether world agrees  
You'll all the better please  
    Grandpapa.

Here you have a very interesting mixture of emotion, mockery of emotion, of admiration, and melancholy reflection. The poet obliges you to share his liking for the picture, and to think his thoughts, although he is laughing all the time, and wants you to laugh too,—not to laugh very loud, of course, but just to smile in his company. That is elegant light verse: perhaps the best example that I can offer you.

These examples should enable you to see how wide the range of light verse can be. You have had one philosophical poem of this class, a comic poem, a poet's reflection upon the value of equanimity, and a composition embodying the emotion and the fancies suggested by a family portrait. Also you have had a small example of the use to which such poetry can be put in relation to art-matters. A great deal of English light verse—certainly the majority of it—can scarcely interest you, because it deals so very much with particular aspects of English social life. But there are

numerous exceptions; and I think that you would do well to study some of these, because the Japanese language is particularly well adapted for certain kinds of light verse, and because a great deal of new literary work might be attempted in this direction. No kind of poetry is more essentially aristocratic—no kind of poetry is more sure to find a welcome in cultivated circles. Perhaps you will say that it is not very durable. That is true. You must try to think of it as evanescent,—like the charm of the cherry blossom or plum flower. It is only the delight of a season. Of course we are sorry that the blossoming of flowers lasts only for so short a time,—but who would forego the pleasure of the spectacle merely because it happens to be brief? The poet, too, need not fear to put forth an occasional frail bloom: the beauty of the bloom more than excuses the frailty. (May 22nd, 1902)

THE END