THE POETS OF PRINTING HOUSE SQUARE
La Touche Hancock
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THE POETS OF PRINTING HOUSE SQUARE

About five years ago, when the daily papers held out monetary inducements to poets, both born and made, a group of half a dozen *habitués* of Park Row supplied the demand. This little coterie is now dispersed in various directions. Some are editors, some editorial writers: some still free lances, but, with one or two exceptions, all have turned their attention to the more lucrative task of writing prose. Now and then, when an election is being contested, a holiday celebrated, or a fashionable function of national import held, some verses may be seen with one of the old names attached in the only high-class newspaper that admits such effusions; but what used to be the rule is honored now only in the breach. The days when "A Song of the Day" had to be handed in before nine o'clock to ensure its appearance in the evening papers is long since past. The editorial page is now made up the day before, and poetry is almost universally avoided. Some, perhaps all, of this sextet, remember that sad morning in February, 1897, when the fiat went forth that no more verse was to be accepted. It was the beginning of the end, and the editor of that particular periodical has a long account to settle with the ephemeral versifiers. Not that, honestly speaking, there was an abundance of merit in any of the productions. They were merely hack work, but hack work, which none the less filled for the time being the needy coffers. In those days the poets were in affluence. Remuneration was very generous, especially when the small amount of energy expended is taken into consideration. One of the poets at least confesses that he used to write his daily effort while going downtown on the cars. Another says that less than an hour a day was quite sufficient to turn out his verses, while all will admit that they looked on this portion of their daily labour as a mere side line. At the present moment the market for such commodities has practically disappeared in New York, and, as the years have rolled by, each one of the little band has chosen another sphere for his ability.

The dean of this little band of bards, and, it might be added, humorists (for their whole object was to hold up to kindly ridicule the events of the day), was R. K. Munkittrick, who is now the editor of *Judge*. Munkittrick's writings are known from Oregon to Maine. He has a style distinctly his own, and, though his peculiarities have often been copied, there is no gainsaying the fact that he is a past master in his particular line. Ruralities seem to appeal to him more than politics, and he is never so much at home as when polishing off at Mud Knob, as he calls his house, verses like these:

> The turkey neck so scrawny
> Within our vision veers
> To test the jaw that's brawny
> Before it disappears!
> It's far behind the giblets,
> Though beautiful to see,
> And so we smite our riblets
> In gustatory glee!

Munkittrick has a way of fitting a rhyme, when it would seem an absolute impossibility to ally one word with the other. To join "vermiform appendix" in a suitable rhyming association would, doubtless, be mere child's play to him, while it is not impossible that some day he will cope with "month" and "silver," and wed them to rhymes of which none has hitherto dreamed.

Albert Bigelow Paine follows closely in the footsteps of Munkittrick, with whom he was intimately connected, the two having an "office" together, where they turned out "poems," individually and in collaboration. It was Paine who referred to Park Row as "fame's eternal dumping ground," and conferred upon himself and associates the title of "The Poets of Printing House Square." The latter occurred as the caption, and refrain of a poem inscribed to Munkittrick, who replied to it the following week, and later almost every one of the "gang" had a "go" at it in one form or another. They had been Park Row scribblers up to that time, or "Park Roasters," as Munkittrick had dubbed them. Afterward they were poets—The Poets of Printing House Square. Far from having given up the idea that the path of poesy is not strewn with flowers, Paine's name may still be seen in the various magazines attached to verses that ought to do much to obliterate the memory of the rhymes contributed to

ALBERT BIGELOW PAINE AT HIS DESK IN THE OFFICE OF "ST. NICHOLAS."

the evening papers of half a dozen years ago. His apprenticeship stood him in good stead. Now on the staff of *St. Nicholas,* he can well afford to laugh at his former efforts, though no one looks back with kinder memories to the days when he was struggling for a recognised and more stable position.

Every journalist knows that the initials "A. G.," which were often subscribed to clever little apropos rhymes, stood for Arthur Grissom, who at the time of his death, a few months ago, was the editor of the *Smart Set.*

Grissom is missed. A little poem that he wrote, called "A Poet's Farewell," will serve as a fitting epilogue:

They say my muse has flown for aye,
And that my poet's day is done,
That I am but a "sinking sun,"
Who sang so sweetly yesterday.

My masters know. . . . Yea, it is o'er,
With broken heart I close the book,
Put by my pen with one last look,
And turn away to dream no more.

What now, beloved, remains unsaid?
One wish, perhaps, before the end—
That you will think of me as *friend,*
And call me fair, when I am dead!

Charles Battell Loomis, who is now known as a humorist, confesses to having deserted the fields of Helicon. "It is easier," he says, "to read poetry than write it." This is a pity, for Loomis had a knack of turning rhymes that struck the popular taste at once. In the way of nonsense verse, which was eagerly welcomed in the Sunday papers, he was prolific.

Almost the best known of the poets was N. A. Jennings. Whether rightly or wrongly, he was popularly supposed by his contemporaries to dash off verse with the aid of a rhyming dictionary faster than any one else, with the possible exception of Munkittrick. Although he, too, has presumably deserted the Muse for higher class work, N. A. Jennings will be remembered by the readers of a popular evening paper. There seemed to be an absolute lack of effort to his ditties. With him it was, "Give me a subject, and I will write you a quatrain or two while you wait!" His humorous work, which appears from time to time in *Harper's Magazine,* affords an example of how he has turned his attention to "fresh fields and pastures new."

R. K. MUNKITTRICK, THE DEAN OF THE POETS OF PRINTING HOUSE SQUARE. MR. MUNKITTRICK IS NOW THE EDITOR OF "JUDGE."

Post Wheeler, and be it said this name is not a *nom de guerre,* must, of course, be recognized as a member of the poetical cabal. Though his work was confined at the time specified to a morning newspaper, of whose staff he was a member, it was equally well known. His work differed from that of the other poets, for, as a rule, and the fact will be recognised in his book, which is made up almost entirely of his newspaper verses, sentiment took the place of humour. Not that he

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was, or is, by any means devoid of pleasantry, but a strain of sadness is evident in most of his poems. His writings have a delicacy of sentiment and thought that one would scarcely have expected from a Poet of Printing House Square half a dozen years ago. The achievement of which Wheeler is, perhaps, most proud, is the invention of the term "Yellow Journalism."

The list of the little band proper closes with the names of Paul West and John W. Low. The former is still connected with the Sunday comic page of the paper on which he served his apprenticeship, and at intervals his drawings, for West is an artist as well as a versifier, will be recognised in a comic weekly. His verse, if not polished, at all events suited the subject always, and what he lacked in pure versification he certainly made up in a ceaseless flow of ideas.

John W. Low is also at the moment connected with the staff of the paper which formerly recognised his talent in its peculiar poetical market. Like Loomis and N. A. Jennings, he has for the time being, at any rate, forsaken his old love; but the files of five years ago show that he was by no means the least prolific of the poets.

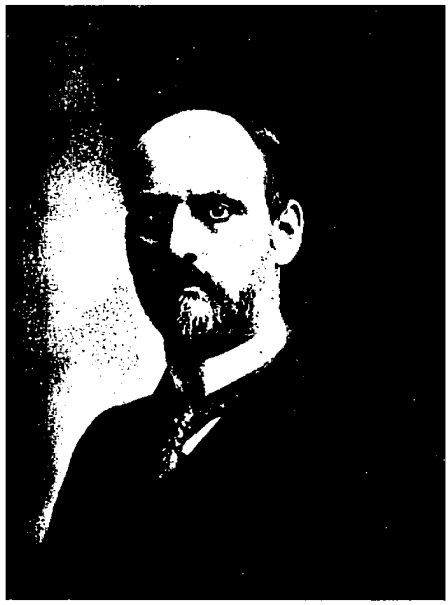
Bertram A. Marburgh, who seems to have dropped out entirely in these days, was likewise not unknown to fame in that halcyon time, and it would scarcely be fair not to add to the roll of the Poets of Printing House Square the name of W. J. Lampton. About the time the era of strictly ephemeral verse came to an end there suddenly appeared in a morning paper some productions, which, though scarcely poetical, certainly gave the author a claim to be enrolled with the little band. The "yawp," as the author calls it, is supposed to have originated with Walt Whitman; but there is a very wide distinction between the "yawp" of Whitman's days and the wiry elongation that Lampton produces. At first sight it looks as if the "yawp" was merely a few sentences of prose divided into short lines. This, however, is far from being the case. It has an art, which consists presumably in being able to break in on an emphatic word, and an ability not to get away from that word. In any case, no matter how the "yawp" is manufactured, it immediately attracted the attention of the public, and has held it ever since. One can imagine this tall, breezy Kentuckian being suddenly struck with an idea, and, sitting down at his typewriter, dashing off one of his pet effusions with a "Gee Whizz" or a "See," which naturally closes so many of these efforts. Being at an age when the intellect is at its best, Lampton can well afford to laugh at his detractors, for, though he has many imitators, he is *par excellence* the Yawper of the country. A "yawp" cannot be explained, nor can it be taught. It is in a class by itself. It recalls the indefiniteness of Lewis Carroll's famous line:

For the Snark was a Boojum, you see!

Ella Wheeler Wilcox, though she disclaims any connection with the Poets of Printing House Square, must by her poetical essays in the daily press be included. Furthermore, she admits that her work is done on the shortest notice, a prerogative enjoyed by all her compeers. Her well-known poem on the "Death of McKinley," for instance, was wired for at nine A.M. on the Saturday following the tragedy, and sent in by the same means on the evening of the same day. She does her work best, she confesses, in a large hotel with the noise of people about her, with every convenience at hand, but no responsibilities. "I write," she says, "anywhere, and under any circumstances, when I find it expedient to do so."

POST WHEELER.

The fact that the several poets enjoyed the privilege of having their names printed in small capitals underneath their verses led to all sorts and kinds of experiences, for such publicity invited correspondence from all over the States. The chief offenders in this way were, sad to relate, of the gentler sex. Poetry seems to appeal more to their feelings than to the sense of the male. As a general rule, these letters were ignored. In the one or two cases that they were acknowledged an experience was gained, which common



W. J. LAMPTON.

sense dictated should not be repeated. Even lunatics, or rather those harmlessly

THE LATE ARTHUR GRISSOM.

insane, were included amongst the devotees of these public versifiers. One poet confesses to having yielded to a flowery request from a lady, who had wrestled with the Muse much and often for the

ELLA WHEELER WILCOX.

benefit of her friends. Would this master of verse, she begged, look over her odes, and give her some much needed advice? He did, and to his astonishment was met by a vision of beauty in a pseudo-Grecian dress with unmistakable insanity in her eyes.

Another answered a similar request in person, and was confronted the next morning at the office of the paper for which he was writing by a letter from the lady's husband, in which the latter said, "that though he was extremely obliged for the trouble Mr. —— had taken, and quite appreciated the courtesy the Poet had shown in acceding to his wife's request, he was extremely sorry to say that Mrs. —— had of late developed traits of insanity, and presumably a fit was coming on now, so he would be obliged if Mr. —— would not call again!" Offers of marriage were numerous.

It will not be far from the truth to say that every one of the Poets of Printing House Square has had a chequered career. Above all others, poets have to learn the lesson of starvation. The recollection of such a time is gruesome; but now and then a line, a thought, will unconsciously creep in, which cannot fail to be reminiscent to the author of the hard times he had, when, without a penny in his pocket, he was struggling to attain an ambition that he had determined to reach.

Although new versifiers are springing up, it is pleasant to look back at the period when poets were prosperous, and the public, through the agency of editors, demanded ephemeral verse. Where the practice is now desultory it was then continuous. Such a course of sprouts probably did not do much harm to either writer or reader. They both felt that the epoch was merely transitory, just as the lovers of good music are not surprised at the disappearance of "rag-time." The following song, written by Albert Bigelow Paine, describes the *camaraderie*, the good fellowship, and last, but not least, that Bohemianism, which is inborn, and cannot be taught, of

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As jolly a lot of good fellows, I know,
As you'll meet in this journey of life,
For their hearts are in tune and they sing as they go,
In the midst of humanity's strife.
And the day may be sunny or sodden and grey,
And the world may be blooming or bare.
The weary will always be cheered by a lay
From the poets of Printing House Square.

When the summer time comes with its mantle of green,
And the fountain is merry with song,
Their rhymes flow as gayly and gently, I ween,
As the day of the summer is long.

Forgetful of winter's privation and cold,
They bathe in the balm of the air,
And the heart gathers hope from the song that is sold
By the poet of Printing House Square.

In the bleak winter days when the fountain is still,
And the skies are forbidding and grey,
He will sing of the summer to settle a bill,
And pay for his coal with a lay.
And the warmth and the music return;—and the glow
And the sheen of the summer are there.

No winter can conquer the spirit, I know,
Of the poet of Printing House Square.

Some day when the rhyme of the seasons is done,
And the rush of the riot is past—
When that marvellous era of rest is begun,
And life's problem is finished at last,
When our songs are all sung, and our debts are all paid,
And the heart slips its anchor of care,
I only ask then that my name be arrayed
With the poets of Printing House Square.

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