

A LITERATOORALORAL TREASURE-TROVE

THE happiest of literary discoveries would presumably be the complete works of Sappho. In the meantime we have got along wonderfully well with the masterpiece of "G. Ragsdale M'Clintock" which Mark Twain unearthed in his matchless "Cure for the Blues." (He does not specify Oxford or Cambridge.) The phrase that chiefly sticks in my memory is one of which Mark Twain makes especial fun: "the topmast topaz of an ancient tower." But this is not funny, it is superb; it is pure early Maeterlinck, and better than the Belgian imitation at that. I admit, however, that the rest of the book is quite as absurd as Mark Twain makes out.

But after all this is no funnier than the "St. Irvine; or, The Rosicrucian," and the "Zastrozzi" of Percy Bysshe Shelley; and I may modestly claim recognition as the finder of a rarer and more exquisite treasure. Modestly, for my treasure-trove was not the result of research; I followed up no clues; I deciphered no cryptogram. I claim only this degree of insight and moral courage: the minute I found it, I stole it.

I feel sure it was the author's own copy; for I cannot believe that any one else would have had one. My atonement be to give him belated recognition!

On the approved principles, let me describe my booty. It is a small 4to about 6½" x 4½. quietly bound in black cloth. It is printed on very bad paper, and the edges have been cut and marbled.

Unassuming, indeed, is this slim booklet of 207 pages. But the author knew his business; for on the front cover appear these words—it is like an obscure grey battleship suddenly belching her broadside—

SONNETICAL NOTES ON PHILOSOPHY By WM. HOWELL WILLIAMS.

The first shot struck me between wind and water. Sonnetical! There's glory for you! A beautiful new adjective; a perfect adjective; so simple, and yet nobody ever thought of it before. Get smoked glasses and look at it! No good; one cannot comment or criticize or weave a word picture (as the D— M— might say) about it. One can only bow down in reverent silence and adore.

But that is not all. That is only external barbaric splendour. There is more behind. Think of all the things that *might* be sonnetical—why, there isn't one. Nothing is sonnetical but a sonnet. Aha! that is where your great mind droops; where you stop, Wm. Howell Williams begins.

Notes on Philosophy are to be sonnetical. Now one can think of many things about which sonnets have been written; there is just one which you would never think of—Philosophy. That is where Wm. Howell Williams has you every time.

In a stunned manner one opens the book. The author pours in his second broadside, and leaves you but a laughter-logged derelict. What might these Sonnetical Notes on Philosophy be? It suggests Rousseau and Shelley, in a kind of way. One might think of Bertram Dobell—a mildly atheistic set of sonnets. Oh dear no!

There is one thing that could not be there—and there it is. It is a reproduction of Holman Hunt's picture of the Saviour with a stable lantern trying to look like Nana Sahib in his more cynically cruel moments.

(I understand that the original of this picture has been acquired by Manchester; and from what I am told of Manchester, the penalty fits the crime.)

And opposite that is the text, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock," etc.

You now begin to wonder if two books have not got mixed up; but no.

The title-page then appears.

SONNETICAL
NOTES
ON
PHILOSOPHY
BY
WM. HOWELL WILLIAMS.

No date; no publisher; no price. But on the reverse we find, very small—

Copyrighted by
Wm. Howell Williams
April 1901.

(It was in May 1906 that I stole this copy.)

Now one would like a preface, something to explain the astounding choice of form, and so on. Or to give some idea of the scope and purpose of the treatise. No; nothing of the sort. He butts right in with

INTRODUCTION

And no sooner does this begin that you see what the author is driving at. He is out to prove that no matter how simple language may seem, in his master hands it can be made absolutely unintelligible. He begins:

"Philosophy must knowledge be,
Hence knowledge is philosophy."

Ponder that "hence." At least it must lead to something else. No. He continues:

"It matters not what savant say
If somehow knowledge comes man's way."

You now see the beginning of his first great rule of grammar: "Never inflect a verb!"

But wait! he is going to lay a trap for the unwary. He is going to give us three couplets which seem consecutive, and possess a meaning—

"Supposing can be only fun,
And knowledge never so begun.
With supposition's wand laid by
Hume, Berkley (sic), Kant and Hegel fly.
Nay! single, several, or all,
Together taken they appall."

The spelling of "appall" is perhaps intended to spur the relaxed attention; for the next couplet wants it.

"Philosophers need not agree,
Still is philosophy to be."

The comma is a very subtle weapon! And when you discover (by and by) that his Seventh great Rule is "Never use relative pronouns!" a return to this sublime Sphinx-verse leaves you worse off than you are at the first reading.

"All knowledge is on being cast:

The being first and knowledge last."

Quite so: you must *be* before you can know. Wait.

"But note—'The first shall be the last
And last shall be the first' ere cast."

How's that, umpire?

Perhaps the next couplet will clear things up. No: it only serves to introduce a point—of etiquette rather than of law—which deprecates sentences containing a principal verb.

"Such knowledge only consciousness
In case of being under stress."

White resigned.

Wm. Howell Williams, however, has now got on to his mashie. Every couplet within a foot of the hole.

"All other were mere vanity,
Save, sadly, 'tis profanity."

And, a little later, for I cannot quote the whole twenty-three pages of this lucid introduction:

"In consciousness experience
Is manifesting prescience.
In prescience experience
Establishes thought permanence.
Nor need eventuation solve
All prescience assume to prove.
Beginning nor the end of time
Eventuation need not chime.
Time being but persistency
Of some conditionality."

These, as Sherlock Holmes would say, are indeed deep waters, Watson. However, Wm. gets irritated, I think, on page 13, when he says:

"Each perfectly see it is so
And yet the fool to logic go."

But in the next verse he explains:

"He only taking in as sent
Away will reason increment."

Still on the bullying tack! Still using words of three syllables to hide his meaning in! But the master will rise to the heights yet.

"Not faith but knowledge would lead man,
Did he himself but see as can."

There's the true gold. Until the very last word you think it's going to mean something: and then—smash!

Very rarely, however, he tries a simpler method yet. He writes you a couplet which does mean some-

thing, though of course out of all connection with the context, and that something is the maddest nonsense.

"To give mankind a consciousness
Lived Jesus Christ of Nazareth."

This sentence is not written merely to show off his ability as a rimester; no, the master wants you to think, "Well, Wm. means something else when he writes 'consciousness.' " Then he has you. Because never will he give you a glimmer of his meaning. He will unsettle you about simple terms in this way, and then leave you to perish miserably.

Again:

"Ere was condition manifest,
The unconditioned was at rest."

Yes, certainly. That I did know before.

"Relations of rest with unrest
Hence did conditions manifest."

Um. Seems to skate over the difficulty a little. But go on.

"To such relation specify
We use the word velocity."

Do we?

"Velocity sole history
Of uncondition's mystery."
! .. ! .. !

We may leave the introduction with the surmise:

"Specific trouble history
Of introduction's mystery."

I think I have fairly caught the style!

But this is only introduction; this is all mere mashie chips on the green: come and see what he can do with a wooden club, this plus four Wm. Howell Williams.

On page 24 he just gives you one more flick of the mashie, and reprints four couplets of the Introduction—not consecutive, and of course not coherent. Then comes the half-title "Sonnetical Notes on Philosophy" and the Magnum Opus starts. There are One Hundred and Eighty-two "Sonnets," and the master rapidly introduces some important and novel rules.

The Octet *must* end with a colon.

A sonnet should if possible contain one sentence only.

That sentence should have no subject, predicate or object. But the reader should be led to think that they are there, and gently undeceived as the sonnet unfolds.

Sonnet I exhibits these qualities in maddening perfection. I must quote it in full. Another writer might have led one up to this, might have feared a falling-off. But not so Wm. Howell Williams. Just as the Introduction went calmly on, never hesitating, never turning aside, rolling over the difficulties as if they were not there, so he begins and so he ends, never one seed of doubt in his mind.

"While man trains up the child in way men go,
It goes without the saying that man's way
In life convention only will display,
As each one by himself can surely know;
Hence may these notes that light of rush-light throw
Where glares so-called, civilization's day,
Without night's darkness chasing once away,
Perchance as simple truth for some one glow."

Now I have studied Wm. as reverently as Mr. Frank Harris has studied the other Wm. and I would almost swear I know what these lines mean. The secret is that line 8 belongs to line 5. The "Hence" is my real difficulty. Education leads to conventionality (lines 1-4), therefore these notes may glow as simple truth for some one.

I'm afraid

"Each perfectly see it is so
And yet the fool to logic go"

is one on me. But all speculations are futile, for the sonnet continues as follows:

"If seen the curse, if be a curse, on man
Is taxing self to understand, amid
Environment that ever keeps its place,
What shape may take his life, if any can,
That haunting foolishness alone not bid
Him to endure, with pain, but for disgrace."

Where's your subject now? Where's your principal sentence? Where's any vestige of connection with anything? You can find a meaning of sorts if you pick out any line or two, and are allowed to supply all sorts of those cheap and nasty little words that the master has discarded: *e.g.*—

If (it be) seen (that) the curse, if (it) be a curse, on man is (that he is obliged to be) taxing (him) self to understand (the universe) amid (his) environment that ever keeps its place—

There's enough conjecture there to endear me more than ever to my dear old tutor, Dr. A. W. Verrall (since I wrote this article, alas! he has joined Agamemnon)—but anyhow, there it stops. I cannot imagine in my wildest moments any nexus with the last three lines of the sestet. I cannot see the merest germ of an apodosis for that majestic protasis.

The second sonnet is not quite equal to this, in my opinion. The method is not the same—perhaps, though, this is the master's plan, to give us the same effect in a totally different fashion. But I call it sheerly meretricious to *spoil* the sonnet by a full stop after four lines.

"Man's place is truth that makes no sign, but is,
Which man, who seek a sign where is no sign
Will ever overlook till forced repine
In dumb despair since nothingness is his."

Put "seeks" for "seek," and "to" before "repine," and it makes sense. Ah! but there's a "for" coming!

"For other than what is may not say 'tis
But to impose on blind a fool's design
As thorns about the brow of Christ define
Not him, but those who mock, with emphasis:
Less puncto see and pundit silent pass
Mankind from truth will ever wander on—"

and so on, almost intelligibly. With a single word he knocks down our castle of cards. Who or what is "puncto"?

I'm not sure about "less," it may be Wm.ese for lest. It occurs again in line 13.

"Less absolute, as absolute, be gone——"

There is a fine passage in Sonnet III:

"Whence knowledge once a sensibility
Of a present conditionality,
Must helpless self-persistence enterprise."

These lines are rather important, as they bunch the Dramatis Personae of these sonnets. He rings the changes on Sensibility Sahib and Count Conditionality and Sir Self-Persistence all through the book. But the Principal Boy is called "propositional"; he is introduced to us in the wonderful 29th sonnet.

"A proposition: propositional
To imagery of presence in sense felt
Of actuality: is ever spelt,
By consciousness as abstract actual,
Persisting unperceived as well, withal,
As when perceived: an image nothing pelt
Against without itself is backward dealt
As if by something quite perpetual:
Whence seen non-actual relation come
As mystery unveiled to simulate
In imagery that actual won't deal:
And budding thence has blossomed forth till dome
Of all creation cannot estimate
Imaginary being that existence steal."

I regard this as one of the very finest sonnets in the book. I like "pelt"; it baffles conjecture entirely. And the final "steal," which suddenly checkmates the aspiring intellect that thought the last three lines were going to mean something, is a supreme touch of Wm.'s art.

But one cannot select; the whole is so stupendous a piece of perfection. The absolute balance of phrases which mean something (if taken in watertight compartments) with those which mean nothing, and can mean nothing; the miraculous skill shown in avoiding even a suggestion of a subject, the expectation of which is so compelled by the beginning "A proposition": the admirable steam-roller obfuscation of grammar and syntax—all these things and many more make this sonnet unique in the language. I am afraid the rest of our investigations (said I) will be anti-climax. Dear, no! Wm. Howell Williams is not so poor in pride. Whenever you stop, whenever you think he must stop, just there he begins. In Sonnet XXXV, for example:

"A propositional abstractional
Remain, that proposition may include
An indisputable, as well exclude
Disputable, in sphere provisional
To stand immovable conditional,
Whence comprehension never to conclude
But ever know what thereto did intrude
Lest venturing become habitual:
As in imaginary personage
Usurp the functionality bestowed

On creature by a providential hand,
And rashly venturing themselves engage
To journey through their lives without a road
That they can see or guide they can command."

This is sublime art. To the last five lines one could put a beginning to make sense; and it seems to refer to the fear (of Providence) lest venturing should become habitual. With one single line "as in imaginary personage" the whole idea is reduced to ruin. That line is a mammoth.

Note; it is the first line of the sestet. And the first line of the octet is that dinosaur

"A propositional abstractional"

with the lovely verb "remain" following it, lest any "habitual venturer" should conjecture that one or both of the adjectives was a noun.

He is evidently pleased with it himself; for XXXVI begins:

"Abstractional, as propositional."

Here is another very charming method. It consists of repeating words with different verbs and things, a sort of weaving. The only limitation of course is that of meaning. Try Sonnet LXX:

"Philosophy, as quantity, be less
When knowledge as a quantity be more
Than quantity, philosophy can score;
Hence quantity less quality possess,
Sensation never can put under stress;
Since semblance of condition cannot store
Shades protean as quality before
Proportionate of quantity duress:
Since semblance of condition unity
Possess by holding unit under stress,
As quantity, however, change will stay;
While quality as mere diversity,
Stress more or less of quality, more or less
Enforced, with dying force will melt away."

One can only say Look! Ecce Wm.!

Another very pretty plan is to use constantly words which may be either nouns or verbs, and "that" where it may be either relative or demonstrative.

In Sonnet X, for example, he begins:

"Though aggregation form, as semblance place,
Where mere sensation will substantial find
Unseen relation force conditioned mind
Form aggregation ever set to face
Perception shall be as fixed for the case."

Remember that Wm. has suppressed prepositions. Then "form," "place," "find," "Unseen," "force," "mind," "Form," may any of them be either nouns or verbs; and of course in no case can sense be made of the sentence.

Take also the passage in Sonnet CIX:

"Example: Huxley nihil bonum screen;
How:"

Parse screen!

And what can it mean, this Fragment of Ozymandias? It stands there, absolutely isolated from any reference to Huxley; as an "example," but of what who can say? on all sides, boundless and bare, the lone and level sonnets stretch far away.

Did Huxley put a screen on the market called the nihil bonum?
Did he give shelter to "nothing good"? or did "nothing good" save him from exposure?
Or was Huxley's screen no good? Or it is no good to screen Huxley?
It makes me feel what he feels in No. CXIII:

"Creation absolute by absolute
Of absolute for absolute imply
What self-pride primes mere mortals to deny;
Nor other fluting for its fluting flute,
But idle tooting idle fancy toot
That never any being satisfy
But leaves all hungering,—"

And in his last sonnet, CLXXXII, he most surely utters the supreme wish of every would-be reader:

"O Lord, arise, help and deliver us
For Thy name's sake."

But it was time to stop: his eagle pinions droop; the last quatrain of the octet becomes sense, grammar, almost poetry.

"O Lord, arise, help and deliver us
From pride and foolish faith and idle fears
That baseless phantom Hope in man uprears
Since Eos woke his eons dolorous."

It is his first slip; but he accepts Nature's warning, and retires into private life. This

"henchman stout
To blow imagination's windy flute
That aggregations wantoning en route
To thin Attenuation whistles out:

returns to his propositional abstractional unconditioned absolute consciousness quality less quantity require like a mere Newton temple Rimmon "To be or not to be" "Fools, liars, hypocrites" brigade flut, and leaves us who have certainly "stood at the door, and knocked" long enough to our dormant deride aggregated imagination eradicate; until "attenuation properly, withal, Semblantic manifestation repossess," "all sensation notes is vacancy."

LEMUEL S. INNOCENT.