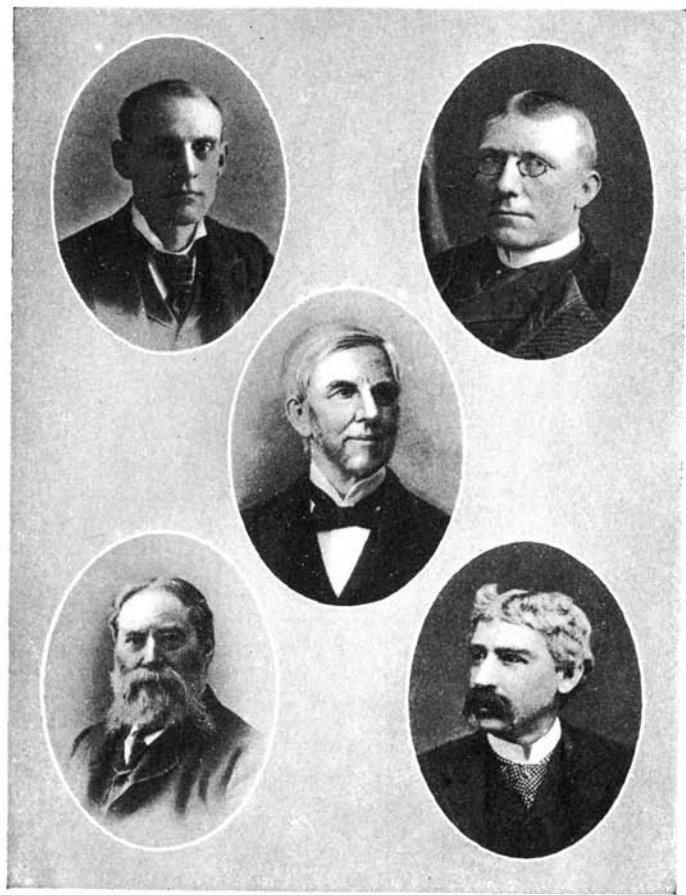


A Treasury of Humorous
Poetry

Frederic Lawrence Knowles



Field

Riley

Holmes

Lowell

Harte

A Treasury of Humorous Poetry

*Being a Compilation of Witty, Facetious, and
Satirical Verse Selected from the Writings of
British and American Poets*

Edited by

FREDERIC LAWRENCE KNOWLES

Illustrated

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PREFACE

"The great end of comedy," said Doctor Johnson, in speaking of the drama, is "making an audience merry." Whatever else may or may not be true of a humorous compilation, it is certain that unless such a book is amusing, it is a failure.

The aim of this "Treasury" is not that of presenting extracts illustrating the development of humorous poetry in the English language. If that were its purpose, the anthology might have greater value for historical students of literature, but for the average reader it would prove of necessity uninteresting. A sense of relative proportion would have to be observed, which would mean that Chaucer must be liberally represented; that one or more scenes from Shakespeare would have to be transplanted bodily; that the "Rape of the Lock" must needs be included, as well as much of Dryden, Prior, Gay, Samuel Butler, Swift, Southey, and other wits of a former day, and that the jesters who can really amuse a modern audience would have to be represented meagrely or not at all.

The editor's first intention, he confesses, was to produce a book a little after this fashion, but upon examining a number of compilations which aim to preserve a sense of historical perspective, and discovering how uncompromisingly dull they are, viewed in the light of contemporary taste, he abandoned the scheme for one more unpretentious. The selections are almost wholly from nineteenth century writers, but in any anthology which succeeds in interesting a wide audience of readers, this is unavoidable.

And yet the present book has a higher aim than that of collecting ephemeral newspaper rhymes. Although it has been the editor's purpose to include only extracts that are strictly amusing to modern readers, he has given preference to such selections as seem most likely to have

something approaching permanent interest. This standard, however, is difficult to preserve, for who shall say that what entertains this generation will succeed in entertaining the next,—or, indeed, that what amuses one reader to-day will be certain to amuse another! At best, any editor's choice must be personal, and all his efforts to determine the tastes of his readers experimental.

The term "humorous" has been interpreted in this compilation very broadly. It has been made to include poems as widely apart as the rollicking ballads of Flood, and the refined, delicately phrased verses of Locker-Lampson, or as the grotesque comicality of Gilbert and the serious irony of Canning, Clough, and Sill. In a word, there has been no attempt to discriminate between humorous poetry in any exact or narrow sense, and society verse, epigram, or satire. The selections vary from broadly comic to merely facetious and lively.

It is interesting to observe how the public taste has changed. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the dominant influence of Pope led to the substitution of pithy, satirical epigrams for the broader, comic manner which preceded, and which happily has followed. The fondness for epigram persisted well up toward the present time. In Parton's "Humorous Poetry," published fifty years ago, nearly two hundred epigrams are included. The reader of to-day cannot but wonder that many of the supposedly witty couplets and quatrains by Prior, Pope, Swift, Waller, Sheridan, Hook, and others, failed to seem merely flat and vulgar. It would appear that any clever schoolboy could versify the current jests of *Life* or *Puck* with more effective results. Some of these miniature satires were, of course, exceedingly brilliant, but of the majority of the selections in Adams's "English Epigrams," for example, what can one say except that they are either pretty bad, or that our taste has so outgrown the mood which produced them that we are incapable of judging their merits impartially.

But not all the wits, even in the eighteenth century, were busy in making pigmy arrows with poisoned tips. Burns, of course, was a master of humor, and Cowper and Goldsmith also carried on the great tradition begun with Chaucer and continued through Shakespeare and his successors. The early nineteenth century saw a group of real humorists

in Barham, the authors of "The Rejected Addresses," and Winthrop Mackworth Praed. In Hood, who lived nearly till the mid-century mark, England produced a man of very high talent almost approaching genius, who could play at will on the keyboard of tears or laughter. For wholesome, exuberant fun, often very extravagant, but never gross, he has had no rival since his too-early death. A new kind of humor, however, has sprung up later, quite different from his own, and in the opinion of many of a superior order. It depends for its effectiveness, not on puns or outrageously comic situations, but on more subtle and pervasive elements. Among English writers, Thackeray, Calverley, Dobson, and Seaman, though each in a different way, represent this deeper mood, and, among Americans, such men as Lowell, Harte, Riley, Leland, and Bunner. Saxe, a very clever poet in his way, belonged to the school of Hood. Doctor Holmes, though from the very first more original than Saxe, showed evidence of the same moulding influence in his earliest humor, but later worked out for himself a much broader style.

It is strange that so few of the most eminent English and American poets have distinguished themselves in the field of humorous composition. Spenser, Milton, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, Arnold, Bryant, Longfellow, Emerson, Whittier, Poe, and Whitman—here is surely a formidable list! But it is, perhaps, still more remarkable that among the foremost humorists of the English language so few can be adequately represented in a collection like this. Chaucer and Shakespeare, greatest of English humorous poets, do not lend themselves to quotation, except in very long or else in the briefest and most fragmentary selections. This is also true in a less degree of Pope and of Byron.

The editor has had very free range in the choice of copyrighted material, but it is only fair to add that he would willingly have given larger representation to several American writers, if the number of poems available had not been restricted by their publishers. In the case of one or two American humorists, indeed, he was prevented by copyright difficulties from including them at all. It is a matter of especial regret that the publishers saw fit to forbid the use of Halpine's "Irish Astronomy," and E. S. Martin's "Little Brother of the Rich,"—certainly two of the most clever among American humorous poems.

It is possible that among such a large number of selections one or more copyrighted poems may have been included on the supposition that they were common property. For any such unwitting transgression, if such there prove to be, the editor offers sincere apologies, and promises proper acknowledgment in future editions of the book.

The aim of the compiler has been, so far as practicable, to draw directly from original sources. No one can have a greater aversion to the indolent and worse than useless practice of making anthologies from other anthologies. On the other hand, in editing any book like this, it is impossible to disregard the patient labors of one's forerunners. The editor has consulted many humorous collections, of which the following list may serve as examples: Adams's "Comic Poets of the Nineteenth Century," Leigh Hunt's "Wit and Humour," Rossiter Johnson's "Play-day Poems," W. M. Rossetti's "Humorous Poems," Cook's "Anthology of Humorous Verse," Miles's "Poets and Poetry of the Century" (Vol. ix.), Caine's "Humorous Poems of the Century," Parton's "Humorous Poetry of the English Language," Langbridge's "Poets at Play," Locker-Lampson's "Lyra Elegantiarum," Shirley Brooks's "Amusing Poetry," and many others. The editor is also indebted to such compilations as Smeaton's "English Satires," Adams's "English Epigrams," and Hamilton's "Parodies of the Works of English and American Authors." A collection of humorous poems by Irish writers is Graves's "Songs of Irish Wit and Humor," and compilations of American humorous verse are included in "The Canterbury Poets" series of Walter Scott, London, and the "Cap and Gown" series of L. C. Page & Company, Boston. Collections of both prose and verse are Morris's "Half-hours with the Best Humorous Authors," Mason's "Humorous Masterpieces from American Literature," Mark Twain's "Library of Humor," and "The International Humor Series," published by the London house of Walter Scott.

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F. L. K.

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