

A photograph of a hand reaching out to touch a pink cosmos flower in a field. The hand is positioned in the center, with fingers slightly spread, touching the petals of a vibrant pink flower with a yellow center. The background is a soft-focus field of many similar pink and white cosmos flowers. The lighting is bright and natural, suggesting a sunny day. The overall mood is gentle and serene.

***EUGENE
FIELD***

***A LITTLE BOOK
OF WESTERN
VERSE***

Eugene Field

A Little Book of Western Verse

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SOME TIME

TO MARY FIELD FRENCH

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A dying mother gave to you
Her child a many years ago;
How in your gracious love he grew,
You know, dear, patient heart, you know.

The mother's child you fostered then
Salutes you now and bids you take
These little children of his pen
And love them for the author's sake.

To you I dedicate this book,
And, as you read it line by line,
Upon its faults as kindly look
As you have always looked on mine.

Tardy the offering is and weak;—
Yet were I happy if I knew
These children had the power to speak
My love and gratitude to you.

E. F.

Go, little book, and if an one would speak thee ill, let him bethink him that thou art the child of one who loves thee well.

EUGENE FIELD

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A MEMORY

When those we love have passed away; when from our lives something has gone out; when with each successive day we miss the presence that has become a part of ourselves, and struggle against the realization that it is with us no more, we begin to live in the past and thank God for the gracious boon of memory. Few of us there are who, having advanced to middle life, have not come to look back on the travelled road of human existence in thought of those who journeyed awhile with us, a part of all our hopes and joyousness, the sharers of all our ambitions and our pleasures, whose mission has been fulfilled and who have

left us with the mile-stones of years still seeming to stretch out on the path ahead. It is then that memory comes with its soothing influence, telling us of the happiness that was ours and comforting us with the ever recurring thought of the pleasures of that travelled road. For it is happiness to walk and talk with a brother for forty years, and it is happiness to know that the surety of that brother's affection, the knowledge of the greatness of his heart and the nobility of his mind, are not for one memory alone but may be publicly attested for admiration and emulation. That it has fallen to me to speak to the world of my brother as I knew him I rejoice. I do not fear that, speaking as a brother, I shall crowd the laurel wreaths upon him, for to this extent he lies in peace already honored; but if I can show him to the world, not as a poet but as a man,—if I may lead men to see more of that goodness, sweetness, and gentleness that were in him, I shall the more bless the memory that has survived.

My brother was born in St. Louis in 1850. Whether the exact day was September 2 or September 3 was a question over which he was given to speculation, more particularly in later years, when he was accustomed to discuss it frequently and with much earnestness. In his youth the anniversary was generally held to be September 2, perhaps the result of a half-humorous remark by my father that Oliver Cromwell had died September 3, and he could not reconcile this date to the thought that it was an important anniversary to one of his children. Many years after, when my uncle, Charles Kellogg Field, of Vermont, published the genealogy of the Field family, the original date, September

3, was restored, and from that time my brother accepted it, although with each recurring anniversary the controversy was gravely renewed, much to the amusement of the family and always to his own perplexity. In November, 1856, my mother died, and, at the breaking up of the family in St. Louis, my brother and myself, the last of six children, were taken to Amherst, Massachusetts, by our cousin, Miss Mary F. French, who took upon herself the care and responsibility of our bringing up. How nobly and self-sacrificingly she entered upon and discharged those duties my brother gladly testified in the beautiful dedication of his first published poems, "A Little Book of Western Verse," wherein he honored the "gracious love" in which he grew, and bade her look as kindly on the faults of his pen as she had always looked on his own. For a few years my brother attended a private school for boys in Amherst; then, at the age of fourteen, he was intrusted to the care of Rev. James Tufts, of Monson, one of those noble instructors of the blessed old school who are passing away from the arena of education in America. By Mr. Tufts he was fitted for college, and from the enthusiasm of this old scholar he caught perhaps the inspiration for the love of the classics which he carried through life. In the fall of 1868 he entered Williams College—the choice was largely accidental—and remained there one year. My father died in the summer of 1869, and my brother chose as his guardian Professor John William Burgess, now of Columbia University, New York City. When Professor Burgess, later in the summer, accepted a call to Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois, my brother accompanied him and entered that institution, but the restlessness which

was so characteristic of him in youth asserted itself after another year and he joined me, then in my junior year at the University of Missouri, at Columbia. It was at this institution that he finished his education so far as it related to prescribed study.

Shortly after attaining his majority he went to Europe, remaining six months in France and Italy. From this European trip have sprung the absurd stories which have represented him as squandering thousands of dollars in the pursuit of pleasure. Unquestionably he had the not unnatural extravagance which accompanies youth and a most generous disposition, for he was lavish and open-handed all through life to an unusual degree, but at no time was he particularly given to wild excesses, and the fact that my father's estate, which was largely realty, had shrunk perceptibly during the panic days of 1873 was enough to make him soon reach the limit of even moderate extravagance. At the same time many good stories have been told illustrative of his contempt for money, and it is eminently characteristic of his lack of the Puritan regard for small things that one day he approached my father's executor, Hon. M. L. Gray, of St. Louis, with a request for seventy-five dollars.

"But," objected this cautious and excellent man, "I gave you seventy-five dollars only yesterday, Eugene. What did you do with that?"

"Oh," replied my brother, with an impatient and scornful toss of the head, "I believe I bought some postage stamps."

Before going to Europe he had met Miss Julia Sutherland Comstock, of St. Joseph, Missouri, the sister of a college

friend, and the attachment which was formed led to their marriage in October, 1873. Much of his tenderest and sweetest verse was inspired by love for the woman who became his wife, and the dedication to the "Second Book of Verse" is hardly surpassed for depth of affection and daintiness of sentiment, while "Lover's Lane, St. Jo.," is the very essence of loyalty, love, and reminiscential ardor. At the time of his marriage my brother realized the importance of going to work in earnest, and shortly before the appointment of the wedding-day he entered upon the active duties of journalism, which he never relinquished during life. These duties, with the exception of the year he passed in Europe with his family in 1889-90, were confined to the West. He began as a paragrapher in St. Louis, quickly achieving somewhat more than a merely local reputation. For a time he was in St. Joseph, and for eighteen months following January 1880 he lived in Kansas City, removing thence to Denver. In 1883 he came to Chicago at the solicitation of Melville E. Stone, then editor of the Chicago Daily News, retaining his connection with the News and its offspring, the Record, until his death. Thus hastily have been skimmed over the bare outlines of his life.

The formative period of my brother's youth was passed in New England, and to the influences which still prevail in and around her peaceful hills and gentle streams, the influences of a sturdy stock which has sent so many good and brave men to the West for the upbuilding of the country and the upholding of what is best in Puritan tradition, he gladly acknowledged he owed much that was strong and enduring. While he gloried in the West and remained loyal to the

section which gave him birth, and in which he chose to cast his lot, he was not the less proud of his New England blood and not the less conscious of the benefits of a New England training. His boyhood was similar to that of other boys brought up with the best surroundings in a Massachusetts village, where the college atmosphere prevailed. He had his boyish pleasures and his trials, his share of that queer mixture of nineteenth-century worldliness and almost austere Puritanism which is yet characteristic of many New England families. The Sabbath was a veritable day of judgment, and in later years he spoke humorously of the terrors of those all-day sessions in church and Sunday-school, though he never failed to acknowledge the benefits he had derived from an enforced study of the Bible. "If I could be grateful to New England for nothing else," he would say, "I should bless her forevermore for pounding me with the Bible and the spelling-book." And in proof of the earnestness of this declaration he spent many hours in Boston a year or two ago, trying to find "one of those spellers that temporarily made me lose my faith in the system of the universe."

It is easy at this day to look back three decades and note the characteristics which appeared trivial enough then, but which, clinging to him and developing, had a marked effect on his manhood and on the direction of his talents. As a boy his fondness for pets amounted to a passion, but unlike other boys he seemed to carry his pets into a higher sphere and to give them personality. For each pet, whether dog, cat, bird, goat, or squirrel—he had the family distrust of a horse—he not only had a name, but it was his delight to

fancy that each possessed a peculiar dialect of human speech, and each he addressed in the humorous manner conceived. He ignored the names in common use for domestic animals and chose or invented those more pleasing to his exuberant fancy. This conceit was always with him, and years afterward, when his children took the place of his boyish pets, he gratified his whim for strange names by ignoring those designated at the baptismal font and substituting freakish titles of his own riotous fancy. Indeed it must have been a tax on his imaginative powers. When in childhood he was conducting a poultry annex to the homestead, each chicken was properly instructed to respond to a peculiar call, and Finnikin, Minnikin, Winnikin, Dump, Poog, Boog, seemed to recognize immediately the queer intonations of their master with an intelligence that is not usually accorded to chickens. With this love for animal life was developed also that tenderness of heart which was so manifest in my brother's daily actions. One day—he was then a good-sized boy—he came into the house, and throwing himself on the sofa, sobbed for half an hour. One of the chickens hatched the day before had been crushed under his foot as he was walking in the chicken-house, and no murderer could have felt more keenly the pangs of remorse. The other boys looked on curiously at this exhibition of feeling, and it was indeed an unusual outburst. But it was strongly characteristic of him through life, and nothing would so excite his anger as cruelty to an animal, while every neglected, friendless dog or persecuted cat always found in him a champion and a friend.

In illustration of this humane instinct it is recalled that a few weeks before he died a lady visiting the house found his room swarming with flies. In response to her exclamation of astonishment he explained that a day or two before he had seen a poor, half-frozen fly on the window-pane outside, and he had been moved by a kindly impulse to open the window and admit her. "And this," he added, "is what I get for it. That ungrateful creature is, as you perceive, the grandmother of eight thousand nine hundred and seventy-six flies!"

That the birds that flew about his house in Buena Park knew his voice has been demonstrated more than once. He would keep bread crumbs scattered along the window-sill for the benefit, as he explained, of the blue jays and the robins who were not in their usual robust health or were too overcome by the heat to make customary exertion. If the jays were particularly noisy he would go into the yard and expostulate with them in a tone of friendly reproach, whereupon, the family affirms, they would apparently apologize and fly away. Once he maintained at considerable expense a thoroughly hopeless and useless donkey, and it was his custom, when returning from the office at any hour of the night, to go into the back yard and say "Poor old Don" in a bass voice that carried a block away, whereupon old Don would lift up his own voice with a melancholy bray of welcome that would shake the windows and start the neighbors from their slumbers. Old Don is passing his declining years in an "Old Kentucky home," and the robins and the blue jays as they return with the spring will look in vain for the friend who fed them at the window.