

A close-up photograph of a violin lying on a thick layer of dry, brown, and orange autumn leaves. The violin's body is a warm, light brown color, and its neck and scroll are visible. The leaves are scattered around the instrument, creating a textured, natural background.

***EUGENE
FIELD***

***SONGS
AND
OTHER
VERSE***

Eugene Field

Songs and Other Verse

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INTRODUCTION

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"It is about impossible for a man to get rid of his Puritan grandfathers, and nobody who has ever had one has ever escaped his Puritan grandmother;" so said Eugene Field to me one sweet April day, when we talked together of the things of the spirit. It is one of his own confessions that he was fond of clergymen. Most preachers are supposed to be helplessly tied up with such a set of limitations that there are but a few jokes which they may tolerate, and a small number of delights into which they may enter. Doubtless many a cheerful soul likes to meet such of the clergy, in order that the worldling may feel the contrast of liberty with bondage, and demonstrate by bombardment of wit and humor, how intellectually thin are the walls against which certain forms of skepticism and fun offend. Eugene Field did not belong to these. He called them "a tribe which do unseemly beset the saints." Nobody has ever had a more numerous or loving clientage of friendship among the ministers of this city than the author of "The Holy Cross" and "The Little Yaller Baby." Those of this number who were closest to the full-hearted singer know that beneath and within all his exquisite wit and ludicrous raillery—so often directed against the shallow formalist, or the unctuous hypocrite—there were an aspiration toward the divine, and a desire for what is often slightly called "religious conversation," as sincere as it was resistless within him. My

own first remembrance of him brings back a conversation which ended in a prayer, and the last sight I had of him was when he said, only four days before his death, "Well, then, we will set the day soon and you will come out and baptize the children."

Some of the most humorous of his letters which have come under the observation of his clerical friends, were addressed to the secretary of one of them. Some little business matters with regard to his readings and the like had acquainted him with a better kind of handwriting than he had been accustomed to receive from his pastor, and, noting the finely appended signature, "per — —," Field wrote a most effusively complimentary letter to his ministerial friend, congratulating him upon the fact that emanations from his office, or parochial study, were "now readable as far West as Buena Park." At length, nothing having appeared in writing by which he might discover that — — was a lady of his own acquaintance, she whose valuable services he desired to recognize was made the recipient of a series of beautifully illuminated and daintily written letters, all of them quaintly begun, continued, and ended in ecclesiastical terminology, most of them having to do with affairs in which the two gentlemen only were primarily interested, the larger number of them addressed in English to "Brother — —," in care of the minister, and yet others directed in Latin:

Ad Fratrem — — —

In curam, Sanctissimi patris — —, doctoris divinitatis,
Apud Institutionem Armouriensem,

CHICAGO,
ILLINOIS.

{Ab Eugenic Agro, peccatore misere}

Even the mail-carrier appeared to know what fragrant humor escaped from the envelope.

Here is a specimen inclosure:

BROTHER —: I am to read some of my things before the senior class of the Chicago University next Monday evening. As there is undoubtedly more or less jealousy between the presidents of the two south side institutions of learning, I take it upon myself to invite the lord bishop of Armourville, our holy père, to be present on that occasion in his pontifical robes and followed by all the dignitaries of his see, including yourself. The processional will occur at 8 o'clock sharp, and the recessional circa 9:30. Pax vobiscum. Salute the holy Father with a kiss, and believe me, dear brother,

Your fellow lamb in the old Adam,
EUGENIO AGRO.

(A. Lamb) SEAL.

The First Wednesday after Pay day,
September 11, 1895.

On an occasion of this lady's visit to the South-west, where Field's fancied association of cowboys and miners was formed, she was fortunate enough to obtain for the decoration of his library the rather extraordinary Indian blanket which often appears in the sketches of his loved workshop, and for the decoration of himself a very fine necktie made of the skin of a diamond-back rattlesnake. Some other friend had given his boys a "vociferant burro."

After the presentation was made, though for two years he had met her socially and at the pastor's office, he wrote to the secretary, in acknowledgment, as follows:

DEAR BROTHER —: I thank you most heartily for the handsome specimens of heathen manufacture which you brought with you for me out of the land of Nod. Mrs. Field is quite charmed—with the blanket, but I think I prefer the necktie; the Old Adam predominates in me, and this pelt of the serpent appeals with peculiar force to my appreciation of the vicious and the sinful. Nearly every morning I don that necktie and go out and twist the supersensitive tail of our intelligent imported burro until the profane beast burthens the air with his ribald protests. I shall ask the holy father—Pere — to bring you with him when he comes again to pay a parochial visit to my house. I have a fair and gracious daughter into whose companionship I would fain bring so circumspect and diligent a young man as the holy father represents you to be. Therefore, without fear or trembling accompany that saintly man whensoever he says the word. Thereby you shall further make me your debtor. I send you every assurance of cordial regard, and I beg you to salute the holy father for me with a kiss, and may peace be unto his house and unto all that dwell therein.

Always faithfully yours,

EUGENE FIELD.

CHICAGO, MAY 26, 1892.

He became acquainted with the leading ladies of the Aid Society of the Plymouth Church, and was thoroughly interested in their work. Partly in order to say "Goodbye" before his leaving for California in 1893, and partly, no doubt, that he might continue this humorous correspondence, as he did, he hunted up an old number of Peterson's Magazine, containing a very highly colored and elaborate pattern for knit slippers, such as clergymen received at Christmas thirty years ago, and, inclosing it with utmost care, he forwarded it to the aforesaid "Brother ——" with this note:

DEAR BROTHER ——: It has occurred to me that maybe the sisters of our congregation will want to make our dear pastor a handsome present this Christmas; so I inclose a lovely pattern for slippers, and I shall be glad to ante up my share of the expense, if the sisters decide to give our dear pastor this beautiful gift. I should like the pattern better if it had more red in it, but it will do very nicely. As I intend to go to California very soon, you'll have to let me know at once what the assessment *per cap.* is, or the rest of the sisters will be compelled to bear the full burthen of the expense. Brother, I salute you with an holy kiss, and I rejoice with you, humbly and meekly and without insolent vaunting, that some of us are not as other men are.

Your fellow-lamb,

EUGENE FIELD,

**BUENA PARK, ILL., DECEMBER 4,
1893.**

This was only one phase of the life of this great-hearted man, as it came close to his friends in the ministry. Other clergymen who knew him well will not forget his overflowing kindness in times of sickness and weariness. At least one will not forget the last day of their meeting and the ardor of the poet's prayer. Religion, as the Christian life, was not less sacred to him because he knew how poorly men achieve the task of living always at the best level, nor did the reality of the soul's approach to God grow less noble or commanding to him because he knew that too seldom do we lift our voices heavenward. I am permitted to copy this one letter addressed to a clerical friend, at a time when Eugene Field responded to the call of that undying puritanism in his blood:

DEAR, DEAR FRIEND: I was greatly shocked to read in the Post last night of your dangerous illness. It is so seldom that I pray that when I do God knows I am in earnest. I do not pester Him with small matters. It is only when I am in real want that I get down on my wicked knees and pray. And I prayed for you last night, dear friend, for your friendship—the help that it is to me—is what I need, and I cannot be bereft of it. God has always been good to me, and He has said yes to my prayer, I am sure. Others, too—thousands of them—are praying for you, and for your restoration to health; none other has had in it more love and loyalty than my prayer had, and none other, dear friend, among the thousands whom you have blessed with your sweet friendship, loves you better than I do.

EUGENE FIELD. BUENA PARK, NOVEMBER 15, 1893.

I am still sick abed and I find it hard to think out and write a letter. Read between the lines and the love there will comfort you more than my faulty words can.

I have often thought, as I saw him through his later years espousing the noblest causes with true-hearted zeal, of what he once said in the old "Saints' and Sinners' Corner" when a conversation sprang up on the death of Professor David Swing. His words go far to explain to me that somewhat reckless humor which oftentimes made it seem that he loved to imitate and hold in the pillory of his own inimitable powers of mimicry some of the least attractive forms of the genus *parson* he had seen and known. He said: "A good many things I do and say are things I have to employ to keep down the intention of those who wanted me to be a parson. I guess their desire got into my blood, too, for I have always to preach some little verses or I cannot get through Christmastide."

He had to get on with blood which was exquisitely harmonious with the heart of the Christ. He was not only a born member of the Society for the Prevention of Sorrow to Mankind, but he was by nature a champion of a working Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. This society was composed of himself. He wished to enlarge the membership of this latter association, but nobody was as orthodox in the faith as to the nobility of a balky horse, and he found none as intolerant of ill-treatment toward any and every brute, as was he. Professor Swing had written and read at the Parliament of Religions an essay on the Humane

Treatment of the Brutes, which became a classic before the ink was dry, and one day Field proposed to him and another clergyman that they begin a practical crusade. On those cold days, drivers were demanding impossible things of smooth-shod horses on icy streets, and he saw many a noble beast on his knees, "begging me," as he said, "to get him a priest." Field's scheme was that the delicate and intelligent seer, David Swing, and his less refined and less gentle contemporary should go with him to the City Hall and be sworn in as special policemen and "do up these fellows." His clear blue eye was like a palpitating morning sky, and his whole thin and tall frame shook with passionate missionary zeal. "Ah," said he, as the beloved knight of the unorthodox explained that if he undertook the proposed task he would surely have to abandon all other work, "I never was satisfied that you were orthodox." His other friend had already fallen in his estimate as to fitness for such work. For, had not Eugene Field once started out to pay a bill of fifteen dollars, and had he not met a semblance of a man on the street who was beating a lengthily under-jawed and bad-eyed bull-dog of his own, for some misdemeanor? "Yea, verily," confessed the poet-humorist, who was then a reformer. "Why didn't you have him arrested, Eugene?" "Why, well, I was going jingling along with some new verses in my heart, and I knew I'd lose the *tempo* if I became militant. I said, 'What'll you take for him?' The pup was so homely that his face ached, but, as I was in a hurry to get to work, I gave him the fifteen dollars, and took the beast to the office." For a solitary remark uttered at the conclusion of this relation and fully confirmed as to its justness by an

observation of the dog, his only other human prop for this enterprise was discarded. "Oh, you won't do," he said.

Christianity was increasingly dear to him as the discovery of childhood and the unfolding of its revelations. Into what long disquisitions he delighted to go, estimating the probable value of the idea that all returning to righteousness must be a child's returning. He saw what an influence such a conception has upon the hard and fast lines of habit and destiny to melt them down. He had a still greater estimate of the importance of the fact that Jesus of Nazareth came and lived as a child; and the dream of the last year of his life was to write, in the mood of the Holy-Cross tale, a sketch of the early years of the Little Galilean Peasant-Boy. This vision drifted its light into all his pictures of children at the last. He knew the "Old Adam" in us all, especially as he reappeared in the little folk. "But I don't believe the depravity is total, do you?" he said, "else a child would not care to hear about Mary's Little One;"—and then he would go on, following the Carpenter's Son about the cottage and over the hill, and rejoicing that, in following Him thus, he came back to his own open-eyed childhood, "But, you know," said he, "my childhood was full of the absurdities and strenuositities" (this last was his word) "of my puritan surroundings. Why, I never knew how naturally and easily I can get back into the veins of an old puritan grandfather that one of my grandmothers must have had—and how hard it is for me to behave there, until I read Alice Morse Earle's 'The Sabbath in New England.' I read that book nearly all night, if haply I might subdue the confusion and sorrows that were wrought in me by eating a Christmas