

Classic Poetry Series

Ellis Parker Butler

- poems -

Publication Date:

2004

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

Djolan

Soft was the night, the eve how airy,
When through the big, fat dictionary
I wandered on in careless ease,
And read the a's, b's, c's and d's!

But stop! What is this form I see,
Beginning with a hump-backed d?
I pause! I gasp! I falter there!
It is the djolan, I declare!

It is the djolan, wond'rous word!
The Buceros plicatus bird!
Ne'er, ne'er before had I the bliss
To meet a djolly word like this!

'Twas djust before my dinner hour --
Well, let the djuicy djoint go sour!
Djoyful I read. I djust must see
What this strange djolan word may be!

Ah! ha! It is a noun! A noun!
(A "name word" as we say in town)
"E. Ind. The native name of the
Year bird." These are the words I see.

"A hornbill with a white tail and --"
The big book trembles in my hand --
"-- plicated membrane at the base --"
Ah, well-a-day! If that's the case!

"-- base of the beak, inhabiting --"
Oh! dictionary, wond'rous thing!
"-- the Sunda Islands ----" Where would we
Without our dictionary be?

"-- Malacca, e-t-c." That's all!
I let the dictionary fall.
I am replete. All is explained.
Knowledge (it's power) is what I've gained!

Soft was the night, the eve how airy,
I read no more the dictionary,
But Oh! and Oh! my heart was stirred
To learn the djolan was a bird!

Submitted by John Martin

Ellis Parker Butler

Good - Better - Best

When young, in tones quite positive
I said, "The world shall see
That I can keep myself from sin;
A good man I will be."

But when I loved Miss Kate St. Clair
'Twas thus my musing ran:
"I cannot be compared with her;
I'll be a better man."

'Twas at the wedding of a friend
(He married Kate St. Clair)
That I became superlative,
For I was "best man" there.

Ellis Parker Butler

Night In the City

The sluggish clouds hang low upon the town,
And from yon lamp in chilled and sodden rays
The feeble light gropes through the heavy mist
And dies, extinguished in the stagnant maze.

From moisty eaves the drops fall slowly down
To strike with leaden sound the walk below,
And in dark, murky pools upon the street
The water stands, as lacking life to flow.

With hopeless brain, oppressed and sad at heart,
Toil's careworn slave turns out his flickering light
And treads in dreams his dulling round again,
Where weary day succeeds to dismal night.

Ellis Parker Butler

October

The forest holds high carnival to-day,
And every hill-side glows with gold and fire;
Ivy and sumac dress in colors gay,
And oak and maple mask in bright attire.

The hoarded wealth of sober autumn days
In lavish mood for motley garb is spent,
And nature for the while at folly plays,
Knowing the morrow brings a snowy Lent.

Ellis Parker Butler

The Ballad Of A Bachelor

Listen, ladies, while I sing
The ballad of John Henry King.

John Henry was a bachelor,
His age was thirty-three or four.

Two maids for his affection vied,
And each desired to be his bride,

And bravely did they strive to bring
Unto their feet John Henry King.

John Henry liked them both so well,
To save his life he could not tell

Which he most wished to be his bride,
Nor was he able to decide.

Fair Kate was jolly, bright, and gay,
And sunny as a summer day;

Marie was kind, sedate, and sweet,
With gentle ways and manners neat.

Each was so dear that John confessed
He could not tell which he liked best.

He studied them for quite a year,
And still found no solution near,

And might have studied two years more
Had he not, walking on the shore,

Conceived a very simple way
Of ending his prolonged delay--

A way in which he might decide
Which of the maids should be his bride.

He said, "I'll toss into the air
A dollar, and I'll toss it fair;

If heads come up, I'll wed Marie;
If tails, fair Kate my bride shall be."

Then from his leather pocket-book
A dollar bright and new he took;

He kissed one side for fair Marie,
The other side for Kate kissed he.

Then in a manner free and fair

He tossed the dollar in the air.

"Ye fates," he cried, "pray let this be
A lucky throw indeed for me!"

The dollar rose, the dollar fell;
He watched its whirling transit well,

And off some twenty yards or more
The dollar fell upon the shore.

John Henry ran to where it struck
To see which maiden was in luck.

But, oh, the irony of fate!
Upon its edge the coin stood straight!

And there, embedded in the sand,
John Henry let the dollar stand!

And he will tempt his fate no more,
But live and die a bachelor.

Thus, ladies, you have heard me sing
The ballad of John Henry King.

Submitted by John Martin

Ellis Parker Butler

The Ballade Of The Automobile

When our yacht sails seaward on steady keel
And the wind is moist with breath of brine
And our laughter tells of our perfect weal,
We may carol the praises of ruby wine;
But if, automobiling, my woes combine
And fuel gives out in my road-machine
And it's sixteen miles to that home of mine--
Then ho! For a gallon of gasoline!

When our coach rides smoothly on iron-shod wheel
With a deft touch guiding each taut drawn line
And the inn ahead holds a royal meal,
We may carol the praises of ruby wine;
But when, on some long and steep incline,
In a manner entirely unforeseen
The motor stops with a last sad whine--
Then ho! For a gallon of gasoline!

When the air is crisp and the brooks congeal
And our sleigh glides on with a speed divine
While the gay bells echo with peal on peal,
We may carol the praises of ruby wine;
But when, with perverseness most condign,
In the same harsh snowstorm, cold and keen,
My auto stops at the six-mile sign--
Then ho! For a gallon of gasoline!

ENVOY

When yacht or Coach Club fellows dine
We may carol the praises of ruby wine;
But when Automobile Clubmen convene
Then ho! For a gallon of gasoline!

Submitted by John Martin

Ellis Parker Butler

The Twenty Hoss-Power Shay

You have heard of the wonderful one-hoss shay
That was built in such a logical way
It ran a hundred years to a day.
And then, of a sudden, it up and bust,
And all that was left was a mound of dust?
Holmes -- O. W. -- told it well
In a rhyme of his -- what there was to tell --
But the one-hoss shay wasn't "one, two, three"
With a vehicle once belonged to me.

One hoss? No, sir! Not six nor nine --
Twenty there were in this rig of mine!
Twenty hosses as tough as rocks,
All caged up in a sort of box
That stood jist back of the forward wheels!
Right! She was one of those automobiles
With twenty hosses bottled inside -
Hosses that not only pull but ride!
Wonder what Holmes would have had to say
If the mare had rode in his one-hoss shay!
I reckon the shay would have logicked out
Before the century rolled about.

Well, this big touring car, I say,
Was built just like the one-hoss shay --
Some dependable, logical way --
Flipflaps, dujabs, wheels and things,
Levers, thing-gum-bobs and springs,
Hub, and felloe, and hoss-power chest --
One part just as strong as the rest;
So "logic is logic," as Holmes would say,
And no one part could first give way.

Wonderful vehicle, you'll admit,
With not one flaw in the whole of it;
As long as I had it, I declare
I hadn't one cent to pay for repair,
It couldn't break down because, you see,
It was such a logical symphony.

Now for my tale. We're not so slow
These days as a hundred years ago,
And it's like enough that the one-hoss shay,
Ambling along in its sleepy way,
Should creep a century 'thout a break,
But nowadays we aim to make
A pace that is something like a pace,
And if that old shay got in our race
It would stand the pressure twenty days
And go to the home of played-out shays.

"Logic is logic." Just figure this out --

For I know just what I'm talking about: --
If a one-hoss vehicle, genus shays,
Will stand our pressure twenty days,
Then, vice versa, a twenty-hoss shay
Should stand the pressure just one day; --
Well, mine is a logical automobile,
From rubber tire to steering wheel.
I bought it one morning at just 10.42,
And the very next morning what did it do,
Right on the second, but up and bust!
Talk of the old shay's pile of dust --
That's not logical; my mobile
Vanished completely! Brass and steel,
Iron and wood and rubber tire
Went right up in a gush of fire,
And in half a minute a gassy smell
Was all I had left by which to tell
I ever owned a touring car, --
And then that vanished, and there you are!

End of my twenty hoss-power shay.
Logic is logic. That's all I say.

Submitted by John Martin

Ellis Parker Butler

To Lovers

Ho, ye lovers, list to me;
Warning words have I for thee:
Give ye heed, before ye wed,
To this thing Sir Chaucer said:

"Love wol not be constrained by maistrie,
When maistrie cometh, the god of love anon
Beteth his winges, and farewell, he is gon."

Other poets knew as well,
And the same sad story tell,
Hark ye, heed ye, while ye may,
What the worldly Pope doth say:

"Love, free as air, at sight of human ties
Spreads his light wings and in a moment flies."

This, Sir Hudibras, brave knight,
Faithful lover, constant wight,
From his lady's lips did hear;
Mark ye, eke, the warning clear:

"Love is too generous t'abide
To be against its nature ty'd,
For where 'tis of itself inclin'd,
It breaks loose when it is confin'd."

Ho, ye lovers, shall I tell
How through life with Love to dwell,
Spite of all the poets say?
Harken to the easy way:--

Strive to bind him not, but see
That the little god binds thee.

Ellis Parker Butler

Trespassers

When Love and I drew softly nigh
And gazed in modest Chloe's eye
We saw reflected there in part
The lovely mansion of her heart,
A sight so fair that, quite bereft
Of sense and shame, we had but left
One wish, that we by foul or fair
Might enter in and tarry there.

But when, with vagabondish art,
We nearer crept to Chloe's heart
That we might steal therein, we found
Her heart with barbed wires enwound;
And crawling through those cruel rings
My garments caught, Love caught his wings.
And though we now would fain depart
We twain are snared, outside her heart.

Ellis Parker Butler

Why Washington Retreated

1775

Said Congress to George Washington:
"To set this country free,
You'll have to whip the Britishers
And chase them o'er the sea."
"Oh, very well," said Washington,
"I'll do the best I can.
I'll slam and bang those Britishers
And whip them to a man."

1777

Said Congress to George Washington:
"The people all complain;
Why don't you fight? You but retreat
And then retreat again."
"That can't be helped," said Washington,
"As you will quite agree
When you see how the novelists
Have mixed up things for me."

Said Congress to George Washington:
"Pray make your meaning clear."
Said Washington: "Why, certainly --
But pray excuse this tear.
Of course we know," said Washington,
"The object of this war --
It is to furnish novelists
With patriotic lore."

Said Congress to George Washington:
"Yes! yes! but pray proceed."
Said Washington: "My part in it
Is difficult indeed,
For every hero in the books
Must sometime meet with me,
And every sweet-faced heroine
I must kiss gallantly."

Said Congress to George Washington:
"But why must you retreat?"
Said Washington: "One moment, please,
My story to complete.
These hero-folk are scattered through
The whole United States;
At every little country town
A man or maiden waits."

To Congress said George Washington:
"At Harlem I must be
On such a day to chat with one,

And then I'll have to flee
With haste to Jersey, there to meet
Another. Here's a list
Of sixty-seven heroes, and
There may be some I've missed."

To Congress said George Washington:
"Since I must meet them all
(And if I don't you know how flat
The novels all will fall),
I cannot take much time to fight,
I must be on the run,
Or some historic novelist
Will surely be undone."

Said Congress to George Washington:
"You are a noble man.
Your thoughtfulness is notable,
And we approve your plan;
A battle won pads very well
A novel that is thin,
But it is better to retreat
Than miss one man and win."

Said Congress to George Washington:
"Kiss every pretty maid,
But do it in a courtly way
And in a manner staid --
And some day when your sword is sheathed
And all our banners furled,
A crop of novels will spring up
That shall appal the world."

Submitted by John Martin

Ellis Parker Butler