

**Classic Poetry Series**

# **James Thomas Fields**

## **- poems -**

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# James Thomas Fields(1817-1881)

James Thomas Fields (December 31, 1817 – April 24, 1881) was an American publisher and author.

Fields was born in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. His father was a sea captain and died before Fields was three. At the age of 14, Fields took a job at the Old Corner Bookstore in Boston. His first published poetry was included in the Portsmouth Journal in 1837 but he drew more attention when, on September 13, 1838, he delivered his "Anniversary Poem" to the Boston Mercantile Library Association.

In 1839, he joined William Ticknor and became junior partner in the publishing and bookselling firm known after 1846 as Ticknor and Fields, and after 1868 as Fields, Osgood & Company. With this company, Fields was the publisher of leading contemporary American writers, with whom he was on terms of close personal friendship. He was also the American publisher of some of the best-known British writers of his time, some of whom he also knew intimately. The first collected edition of Thomas De Quincey's works (20 vols., 1850-1855) was published by his firm. As a publisher, he was characterized by a somewhat rare combination of keen business acumen and sound, discriminating literary taste, and as a man he was known for his geniality and charm of manner. Ticknor and Fields built their company to have a substantial influence in the literary scene which writer and editor Nathaniel Parker Willis acknowledged in a letter to Fields: "Your press is the announcing-room of the country's Court of Poetry."

In 1854, Fields married his second wife, Annie Adams, who was an author herself.

Ticknor and Fields purchased The Atlantic Monthly for \$10,000 and, about two years later in May 1861, Fields took over the editorship when James Russell Lowell left. In 1871, he retired from business and from his editorial duties and devoted himself to lecturing and writing. He also edited, with Edwin P. Whipple, A Family Library of British Poetry (1878).

Fields died in Boston on April 24, 1881. He is buried at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

# Ballad Of The Tempest

WE were crowded in the cabin,  
Not a soul would dare to sleep,--  
It was midnight on the waters,  
And a storm was on the deep.

'Tis a fearful thing in winter  
To be shattered by the blast,  
And to hear the rattling trumpet  
Thunder, 'Cut away the mast!'

So we shuddered there in silence,--  
For the stoutest held his breath,  
While the hungry sea was roaring  
And the breakers talked with death.

As thus we sat in darkness  
Each one busy with his prayers,  
'We are lost!' the captain shouted,  
As he staggered down the stairs.

But his little daughter whispered,  
As she took his icy hand,  
'Isn't God upon the ocean,  
Just the same as on the land?'

Then we kissed the little maiden,  
And we spake in better cheer,  
And we anchored safe in harbor  
When the morn was shining clear.

James Thomas Fields

# Common Sense

She came among the gathering crowd,  
A maiden fair, without pretence,  
And when they asked her humble name,  
She whispered mildly, "Common Sense."

Her modest garb drew every eye,  
Her ample cloak, her shoes of leather;  
And, when they sneered, she simply said,  
"I dress according to the weather."

They argued long, and reasoned loud,  
In dubious Hindoo phrase mysterious,  
While she, poor child, could not divine  
Why girls so young should be so serious.

They knew the length of Plato's beard,  
And how the scholars wrote in Saturn;  
She studied authors not so deep,  
And took the Bible for her pattern.

And so she said, "Excuse me, friends,  
I find all have their proper places,  
And Common Sense should stay at home  
With cheerful hearts and smiling faces."

James Thomas Fields

# Patient Mercy Jones

Let us venerate the bones  
Of patient Mercy Jones,  
Who lies underneath these stones.

This is her story as once told to me  
By him who still loved her, as all men might see—  
Darius, her husband, his age seventy years.  
A man of few words, but, for her, many tears.

Darius and Mercy were born in Vermont,  
Both children were christened at baptismal font  
In the very same place, on the very same day  
(Not much acquainted just then, I dare say).  
The minister sprinkled the babies, and said,  
Who knows but this couple some time may be wed,  
And I be the parson to join them together,  
For weal or for woe, through all sorts of weather.

Well, they were married, and happier folk  
Never put both their heads in the same loving yoke.  
They were poor, they worked hard, but nothing could try  
The patience of Mercy, or cloud her bright eye.  
She was clothed with Content as a beautiful robe;  
She had griefs - who has not in this changeable globe? -  
But at such times she seemed like the sister of Job.

She was patient with dogmas, where light never dawns,  
She was patient with people who trod on her lawns;  
She was patient with folks who said blue skies were gray,  
And dentists and oxen that pulled the wrong way;  
She was patient with phrases no husband should utter,  
She was patient with cream that declined to be butter;  
She was patient with buyers with nothing to pay,  
She was patient with talkers with nothing to say;  
She was patient with millers whose trade was to cozen,  
And grocers who counted out ten to the dozen;  
She was patient with bunglers and fault-finding churls,  
And tall, awkward lads who came courting her girls;

She was patient with crockery no art could mend,  
And chimneys that smoked every day the wrong end;  
She was patient with reapers who never would sow,  
And long-winded callers who never would go;  
She was patient with relatives when, uninvited,  
They came, and devoured, then complained they were slighted;  
She was patient with crows that got into the corn,  
And other dark deeds out of wantonness born;  
She was patient with lightning that burned up the hay,  
She was patient with poultry unwilling to lay;  
She was patient with rogues who drank cider too strong,  
She was patient with sermons that lasted too long;  
She was patient with boots that tracked up her clean floors,  
She was patient with peddlers and other smooth bores;  
She was patient with children who disobeyed rules,  
And, to crown all the rest, she was patient with fools.

The neighboring husbands all envied the lot  
Of Darius, and wickedly got up a plot  
To bring o'er his sunshine an unpleasant spot.  
"You think your wife's temper is proof against fate,  
But we know of something her smiles will abate.  
When she gets out of wood, and for more is inclined,  
Just send home the crookedest lot you can find;  
Let us pick it out, let us go and choose it,  
And we'll bet you a farm, when she comes for to use it,  
Her temper will crack like Nathan Dow's cornet,  
And she'll be as mad as an elderly hornet."

Darius was piqued, and he said, with a  
vum,

"I'll pay for the wood, if you'll send it hum;  
But depend on it, neighbors, no danger will come."

Home came the gnarled roots, and a crookeder load  
Never entered the gate of a Christian abode.  
A ram's horn was straighter than any stick in it;  
It seemed to be wriggling about every minute;  
It would not stand up, and it would not lie down;  
It twisted the vision of one-half the town.  
To look at such fuel was really a sin,

For the chance was Strabismus would surely set in.

Darius said nothing to Mercy about it:

It was crooked wood—even she could not doubt it:

But never a harsh word escaped her sweet lips,

Any more than if the old snags were smooth chips.

She boiled with them, baked with them, washed with them through

The long winter months, and none ever knew

But the wood was as straight as Mehitable Drew,

Who was straight as a die, or a gun, or an arrow

And who made it her business all male hearts to harrow.

When the pile was burned up, and they needed more wood,

"Sure, now," mused Darius, "I shall catch it good;

She has kept her remarks all condensed for the Spring,

And my ears, for the trick, now deserve well to sing.

She never did scold me, but now she will pout,

And say with such wood she is nearly worn out."

But Mercy, unruffled, was calm, like the stream

That reflects back at evening the sun's perfect beam;

And she looked at Darius, and lovingly smiled,

As she made this request with a temper unriled:

"We are wanting more fuel, I'm sorry to say;

I burn a great deal too much every day,

And I mean to use less than I have in the past;

But get, if you can, dear, a load like the last;

I never had wood that I liked half so well—

Do see who has nice crooked fuel to sell:

There's nothing that's better than wood full of knots,

It fays so complete round the kettles and pots,

And washing and cooking are really like play

When the sticks nestle close in so charming a way.'

James Thomas Fields

# The Captain's Daughter

WE were crowded in the cabin,  
Not a soul would dare to sleep,  
It was midnight on the waters,  
And a storm was on the deep.

'Tis a fearful thing in winter  
To be shattered by the blast,  
And to hear the rattling trumpet  
Thunder, 'Cut away the mast!'

So we shuddered there in silence,  
For the stoutest held his breath,  
While the hungry sea was roaring  
And the breakers talked with death.

As thus we sat in darkness,  
Each one busy with his prayers,  
'We are lost !' the captain shouted,  
As he staggered down the stairs.

But his little daughter whispered,  
As she took his icy hand,  
'Isn't God upon the ocean,  
Just the same as on the land?'

Then we kissed the little maiden,  
And we spake in better cheer,  
And we anchored safe in harbor  
When the morn was shining clear.

James Thomas Fields



# The Lover's Peril

Have I been ever wrecked at sea,  
And nigh to being drowned  
More threat'ning storms have compassed me  
Than on the deep are found!

What coral reefs her dangerous lips!  
My bark was nearly gone;  
Hope plunged away in dire eclipse,  
And black the night rolled on.

What seas are like her whelming hair,  
That swept me o'er and o'er?  
I heard the waters of despair  
Crash round the distant shore!

"Come, Death!" I murmured in my cries—  
For signals none were waved—  
When both light-houses in her eyes  
Shone forth, and I was saved!

James Thomas Fields

# The Lucky Horseshoe

A farmer travelling with his load  
Picked up a horseshoe in the road,  
And nailed it fast to his barn door,  
That Luck might down upon him pour,  
That every blessing known in life  
Might crown his homestead and his wife,  
And never any kind of harm  
Descend upon his growing farm.

But dire ill-fortune soon began  
To visit the astounded man.  
His hens declined to lay their eggs;  
His bacon tumbled from the pegs,  
And rats devoured the fallen legs;  
His corn, that never failed before,  
Mildewed and rotted on the floor;  
His grass refused to end in hay;  
His cattle died, or went astray:  
In short, all moved the crooked way.

Next spring a great drought baked the sod,  
And roasted every pea in pod;  
The beans declared they could not grow  
So long as nature acted so;  
Redundant insects reared their brood  
To starve for lack of juicy food;  
The staves from barrel sides went off  
As if they had the hooping-cough,  
And nothing of the useful kind  
To hold together felt inclined:  
In short, it was no use to try  
While all the land was in a fry.

One morn, demoralized with grief,  
The farmer clamored for relief;  
And prayed right hard to understand  
What witchcraft now possessed his land;  
Why house and farm in misery grew  
Since he nailed up that "lucky" shoe.

While thus dismayed o'er matters wrong  
An old man chanced to trudge along,  
To whom he told, with wormwood tears,  
How his affairs were in arrears,  
And what a desperate state of things  
A picked-up horseshoe sometimes brings.

The stranger asked to see the shoe,  
The farmer brought it into view;  
But when the old man raised his head,  
He laughed outright, and quickly said,  
"No wonder skies upon you frown—  
You've nailed the horseshoe upside down!  
Just turn it round, and soon you'll see  
How you and Fortune will agree."

The farmer turned the horseshoe round,  
And showers began to swell the ground;  
The sunshine laughed among his grain,  
And heaps on heaps piled up the wain;  
The loft his hay could barely hold,  
His cattle did as they were told;  
His fruit trees needed sturdy props  
To hold the gathering apple crops;  
His turnip and potato fields  
Astonished all men by their yields;  
Folks never saw such ears of corn  
As in his smiling hills were born;  
His barn was full of bursting bins—  
His wife presented him with twins;  
His neighbors marvelled more and more  
To see the increase in his store.  
And now the merry farmer sings  
"There are two ways of doing things;  
And when for good luck you would pray,  
Nail up your horseshoe the  
right  
way."

James Thomas Fields

# The Owl-Critic

'Who stuffed that white owl?' No one spoke in the shop,  
The barber was busy, and he couldn't stop;  
The customers, waiting their turns, were all reading  
The 'Daily,' the 'Herald,' the 'Post,' little heeding  
The young man who blurted out such a blunt question;  
Not one raised a head, or even made a suggestion;  
And the barber kept on shaving.

'Don't you see, Mr. Brown,'  
Cried the youth, with a frown,  
'How wrong the whole thing is,  
How preposterous each wing is,  
How flattened the head is, how jammed down the neck is --  
In short, the whole owl, what an ignorant wreck 't is!  
I make no apology;  
I've learned owl-eology.

I've passed days and nights in a hundred collections,  
And cannot be blinded to any deflections  
Arising from unskilful fingers that fail  
To stuff a bird right, from his beak to his tail.  
Mister Brown! Mr. Brown!  
Do take that bird down,  
Or you'll soon be the laughingstock all over town!  
And the barber kept on shaving.

'I've  
studied  
owls,  
And other night-fowls,  
And I tell you  
What I know to be true;  
An owl cannot roost  
With his limbs so unloosed;  
No owl in this world  
Ever had his claws curled,  
Ever had his legs slanted,  
Ever had his bill canted,  
Ever had his neck screwed

Into that attitude.  
He cant  
do  
it, because  
'Tis against all bird-laws.

Anatomy teaches,  
Ornithology preaches,  
An owl has a toe  
That  
can't  
turn out so!  
I've made the white owl my study for years,  
And to see such a job almost moves me to tears!  
Mr. Brown, I'm amazed  
You should be so gone crazed  
As to put up a bird  
In that posture absurd!  
To  
look  
at that owl really brings on a dizziness;  
The man who  
stuffed  
him don't half know his business!'  
And the barber kept shaving.

'Examine those eyes  
I'm filled with surprise  
Taxidermists should pass  
Off on you such poor glass;  
So unnatural they seem  
They'd make Audubon scream,  
And John Burroughs laugh  
To encounter such chaff.  
Do take that bird down;  
Have him stuffed again, Brown!'  
And the barber kept on shaving!

'With some sawdust and bark  
I could stuff in the dark  
An owl better than that.  
I could make an old hat

Look more like an owl  
Than that horrid fowl,  
Stuck up there so stiff like a side of coarse leather.  
In fact, about  
him  
there's not one natural feather.'

Just then, with a wink and a sly normal lurch,  
The owl, very gravely, got down from his perch,  
Walked around, and regarded his fault-finding critic  
(Who thought he was stuffed) with a glance analytic,  
And then fairly hooted, as if he should say:  
'Your learning's at fault  
this  
time, anyway:  
Don't waste it again on a live bird, I pray.  
I'm an owl; you're another. Sir Critic, good day!'  
And the barber kept on shaving.

James Thomas Fields

# With Wordsworth At Rydal

THE GRASS hung wet on Rydal banks,  
The golden day with pearls adorning,  
When side by side with him we walked  
To meet midway the summer morning.

The west wind took a softer breath,  
The sun himself seemed brighter shining,  
As through the porch the minstrel stepped,  
His eye sweet Nature's look enshrining.

He passed along the dewy sward,  
The linnet sang aloft, "Good morrow!"  
He plucked a bud, the flower awoke  
And smiled without one pang of sorrow.

He spoke of all that graced the scene  
In tones that fell like music round us;  
We felt the charm descend, nor strove  
To break the rapturous spell that bound us.

We listened with mysterious awe,  
Strange feeling mingling with our pleasure;  
We heard that day prophetic words,—  
High thoughts the heart must always treasure.

Great Nature's Priest! thy calm career,  
Since that sweet morn, on earth has ended;  
But who shall say thy mission died  
When, winged for heaven, thy soul ascended?

James Thomas Fields