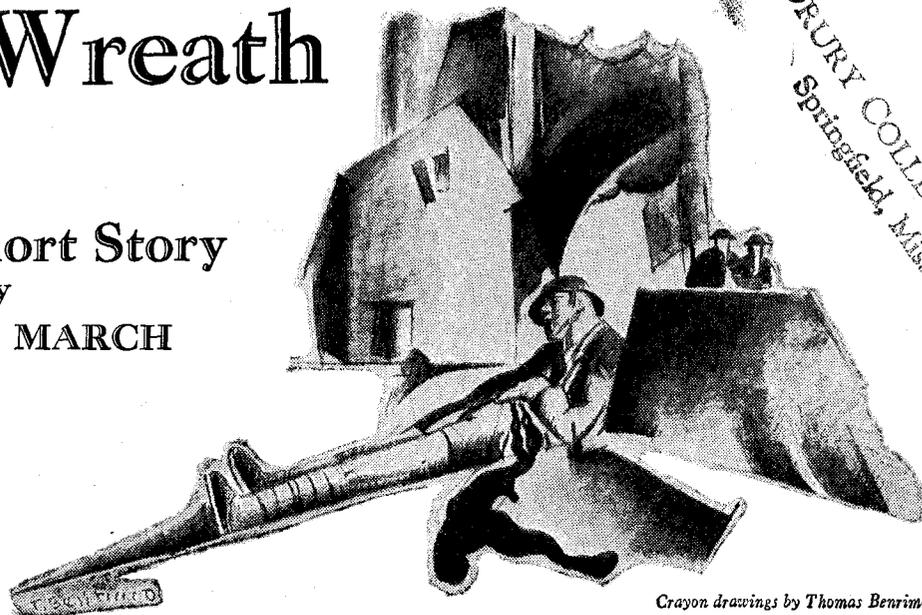


Holly Wreath

A First Short Story
by
WILLIAM MARCH



Crayon drawings by Thomas Benrimo

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TO THE LEFT of the village square, a dead mule lay on a manure heap. Its stiff legs were stretched to the June sky and its glazed eyes, wide open and rolled backward, were like two pieces of dirty mica. Its yellow teeth were bared in a fixed snarl. From between its teeth there hung a swollen purple tongue, and over it flies crawled and disputed and lived amorously.

Corporal Reagan and his water detail surveyed the wrecked village with interest. After a moment they saw the well at which they were to fill their canteens: it was in the center of the ruined square.

"The Germans sure gave this place hell!" said Reagan.

"You said it!" agreed Private Bouton.

Leaning against the well, his chin held high and his helmet set rakishly on one side of his head, lay a dead man. His left hand was pressed against a wound in his side, but the blood had flowed through his fingers and onto his uniform. His right hand, which still clutched the well rope, had been flung wide in his pain and rested now on the stone lip of the trough that carried away the waste water.

"He looks like he might make a speech any minute," said Corporal Reagan. Keeney said nothing, but Bouton rubbed his chin and stated very sensibly that the man would have to be moved, or he would be in their way when they were filling the canteens.

As the men stood there, a soft humming sound came to their ears, followed by the sharp explosion of a shell. There was the faint neigh-

ing of flying steel and a series of soft, kissing sounds as the shrapnel found its mark. Corporal Reagan and his two men ran quickly across the street and down a long flight of stairs into a deep cellar. Bouton had a sack of tobacco and a package of brown cigarette papers which he passed to his companions. After they had lighted their cigarettes they felt better.

Bouton grew slightly boastful. "If it's me the Heinies are after, they're wasting their ammunition," he said. "They haven't made the shell that can get this baby."

"I don't mind shrapnel so much," said Charlie Keeney; "it's machine gun bullets that get on my nerves. I don't like the way they whine about your ears. They remind me of a sick woman quarreling in the dark." He paused a moment, ashamed of his imagination. "You've got a chance to duck a shell, but machine gun bullets get you before you know it," he finished lamely.

Reagan understood his embarrassment. "Well, I suppose you're right at that, Keeney," he said, "but I think they're all pretty damned bad."

"The thing I hate most is not having your meals regular or a decent place to sleep," said Bouton. "I never think about getting hit: I'm too lucky for any squarehead to get me. Before I left home an old nigger woman told my fortune. She said I was going through the war without a scratch and that I was going to get a lot of fame and all that."

Before the men had finished their cigarettes,

the shelling stopped as suddenly as it had begun, but Reagan thought it safer to wait for a few minutes, as he didn't want to be caught by any artilleryman's trick. When he heard the shells passing far overhead, he knew that everything was all right. The batteries were now shelling the Lucy road — serious business which should keep them busy for an hour or two.

After a brief survey Corporal Reagan turned to his men and said, "Now let's get these canteens filled and get to hell out of here while we got a chance. Keeney, you get that dead man away from the well. Drag him over behind that wall where he won't get hit again."

II

KEENEY FOUND it difficult to loosen the dead man's grip on the rope, but with the assistance of Reagan he finally succeeded. He grasped the rigid corpse firmly under the arms and walked slowly backward. The stiff heels of the dead man dragging over the square made two furrows in the white dust and collected half-moons of straw and refuse. Before he was at the well again Bouton had drawn a bucket of water. Reagan passed the first canteen to Keeney, who held it in his hand and tilted the side of the bucket, but his arm shook so that the water spilled over his hand and ran down into the stone trough.

Reagan looked up in surprise: "For the love of Christ! Don't you know how to fill a canteen? That's no way to do it, lad. Put the canteen in the bucket and let it sink. There, you can fill three at one time, that way."

"They didn't have wells in Brooklyn where I lived," said Keeney sullenly.

"Well, they didn't have them in Topeka either, but I got sense enough to know how to fill a canteen."

"If you don't like the way I'm doing this, you know what you can do!" said Keeney.

Bouton hastened to avoid the impending clash. "Say, Reagan, are you from Topeka?" he asked.

"That's the place: Topeka, Kansas. Why?"

"Oh, nothing, except a girl out there used to send us candy and knit socks for us when I was in training camp," lied Bouton.

"What's her name? I might know her; I know almost everybody in Topeka."

"Well, I can't think of her name just this

minute, but she sure wrote a good letter."

"What part of the world do you come from, Bouton?" asked Reagan, after a pause.

"Oh, I come from Memphis, Tennessee."

"That's a good town, I've heard."

"You said it! I wish to Christ I was back there."

"I suppose we all do; I know I wish this lousy war was over and I was back in Topeka. My mother and I are going to move out in the country to her father's old place when I get back. We're going to start a chicken farm. Later we're going to put in greenhouses and grow for the Kansas City florists. That's the only life. I wouldn't give two cents to live in a town for the rest of my days. — Say, what's the matter with Keeney? What's the matter, kid?"

Keeney had slipped down and lay with his back against the well. His face was white and his teeth chattered slightly. "I never had my hands on a dead man before," he said.

"Oh, that's all right; take it easy. Lots of fellows are like that at first. You'll get over it," said Reagan.

"It was the way he looked at me when I was trying to open his hand, and when I left him by the wall, he —"

"Forget it, lad. You'll see a hell of a lot worse before you get through with this outfit. Just sit there until you feel all right. Bouton and I will finish up the canteens."

Keeney rose to his feet. "No, thanks, Reagan; I'll finish them up. I'm all right. I'm not a baby, you know." After a silence he said awkwardly, "You were right about the best way to fill canteens."

III

WHEN THE LAST canteen had been filled and placed on the notched sticks, shells were flying thickly overhead and exploding with great rocking blasts on the Lucy road.

"Say, we can't get back through that barrage," said Bouton.

"Well, we'll have to stay here until it lifts, unless one of you boys knows another way back to the outfit," Reagan answered. Bouton laughed suddenly. "I don't give a damn how much they shell the road, if they leave this place alone," he said.

As they stood smoking their cigarettes and watching the ever-increasing barrage on the road, they were suddenly jarred almost off

their feet by a heavy explosion, followed by a series of blasts which seemingly increased in intensity.

"What the hell do you suppose that was?" asked Bouton.

"It sounded like they got an ammunition train," Reagan replied.

They waited a short time, long enough for a few more cigarettes. The pounding had once more settled into a dull rumbling. Then Reagan said, "That's what it was all right. They're shelling that road out to beat hell." Keeney and Bouton were silent. Reagan spoke again: "Come on, let's get going. If we go across country, we'll be able to come out on the road above the barrage."

The three men picked their way across the square and through the littered main street of the wrecked village. Presently they came to a long lane, which finally led into a field of yellow flowers that resembled mustard in bloom. A sudden breeze ran over the flowers and across the faces of the men. They removed their helmets and walked in silence. When they came to the end of the first field, they saw another in front of them, wider than the first one; poppies were growing in it and it was studded with large stone boulders. Corporal Reagan was frankly worried. "Seems as if we've gone far enough," he said irritably, "but that shelling is still pretty loud. If it doesn't get any quieter after we're through these flowers, I think we'd better go back to Lucy and wait until the barrage lifts."

"All right, Reagan; you're in charge of the outfit," said Bouton.

When the party was halfway across the field, there suddenly came the staccato tapping of a machine gun and a hundred bullets sang through the poppies and struck the ground at their feet. Before the gunner could get their range, they were safe behind a wide boulder about four feet high and deeply rooted in the green field. They lay there huddled and silent, their green uniforms scarcely distinguishable from the wheat. The bullets chipped the solid rock over their heads in sudden rushes that sounded like the faint, irregular breathing of a man suffering with asthma.

After a time Keeney said, "How long will we have to stay here?"

"Until it gets too dark for the gunners to spot us."



"But it won't be dark before ten o'clock. Do you mean we've got to stay here listening to those machine gun bullets for six hours?"

"That's the way it looks to me," said Reagan.

"Oh, well," said Bouton, "I'd rather be lying here resting than digging silly, God-damned trenches for them lazy Frogs!"

IV

THE MEN LAY in silence, each occupied with his thoughts. It was Reagan who spoke first: "Say, this is Wednesday, isn't it!" he said suddenly.

"Yeah, I think so; but what the hell difference does it make?" Bouton slid down lazily and rested his head against his helmet.

"Nothing, except my mother always writes to me on Wednesday night. She writes me on Sunday nights, too, but the Wednesday letters are always the best." He carefully unloosened his ammunition belt and unhooked his blouse at the throat.

Closing his eyes, Reagan thought of home. He saw his mother seated at her desk, writing to him. He saw her finish the letter and gather the neatly written pages together. She folded them into an envelope and placed it, carefully addressed, on the hall tree beside her hat, her school papers, and the black handbag with the broken catch. Then she set her metal alarm clock to ring for half-past seven and pattered about the house for a time, locking doors and

seeing that everything was safe for the night. He saw her comb out her thin hair and plait it into a scant gray braid. A sudden wave of tenderness came over him. He hadn't felt that way for a long time. He opened his eyes and smiled dreamily. "It will be pretty nice when we get home again, won't it?" he said.

"It sure will," said Bouton; "I hate like hell losing all this time. It don't get you anywhere. The best you can hope for is a commission, and that's no good in peace times."

Keeney faced them suddenly, his lips twisted more than ever. "You fellows give me a pain, mooning like sentimental shopgirls!" he said furiously.

Bouton looked up in surprise and rubbed his stubble of a beard with his forefinger. People like Keeney were beyond him. Reagan was inclined to be angry at first, but when he saw Keeney's face he changed his mind. "Oh, all right, Keeney," he said.

Again the men lay in silence and stared at the sky. After a while Keeney said, "Do you think we could make it if we ran for those trees?"

"Better wait," said Reagan. "Better wait until dark."

"Let's see how good those gunners are," said Bouton. He broke a small stick and with it slowly raised his helmet above the rock. Instantly a flock of bullets came flying in their direction, striking the rock and ringing off his helmet. Bouton lowered it quickly and regarded the dents in it. "If you boys want to run for the woods, go to it — but don't count me in. I think I'll take a little nap; God knows I need sleep. You better do the same. You won't get a chance like this every day."

The men stretched themselves out as comfortably as possible. After an hour Bouton was asleep and snoring softly, his lips alternately pursed and relaxed. But Reagan, feeling his responsibility as corporal (particularly since the other two men belonged to replacement troops which had only recently joined the company), fought down his drowsiness. Keeney lay flat on his belly, his face cupped in his hands. Each time the gunners raked the rock with their fire and he heard the bullets striking the rock and ricocheting into the air with a high querulous note, he trembled slightly and pressed his face against his bent arm. Reagan noticed this with alarm.

"Say, Keeney, don't let it worry you that way; they can't get you here."

"It's those damned machine gun bullets — they get on my nerves!"

"Then don't pay any attention to them. Get your mind on something else. Look at Bouton there: that's the way to take it."

"Yes, you're right. Bouton's got the right idea. — Oh, I don't know what's the matter with me. — Let me alone, can't you?"

"You haven't any business in this outfit," said Reagan kindly.

"Do you think I don't know that?"

After a long silence Keeney said, "Reagan, do you think I'm yellow?"

"I don't know. Are you?"

Keeney waited for a long time, turning the matter over in his mind. Finally he said, "I don't know." A little later he asked, "How long have we been here, Reagan?"

Reagan's answer was lost in a rain of bullets striking the rock and whizzing overhead. Bouton turned over suddenly and sat up. He glanced at Keeney. Keeney was trembling violently and sucking in his breath with a hissing noise through his chattering teeth. "Say, listen kid," said Bouton, "you want to cut that out. Get yourself in hand, or you'll wind up in a shellshock ward."

Keeney didn't answer. He lay there trembling and making sobbing noises for a long time. Finally he sat up against the rock and reached for his rack of canteens. "I can't stand this any longer," he said.

"Get down, Keeney. Don't be a God-damned fool!"

"Say, what are you trying to do, kid?"

"I'm going to run. I can't stand this quarreling in the dark, I tell you!" He stood upright and swung his canteens across his shoulder; then he started running awkwardly, his head lowered and the canteens swaying to his stride.

"Keeney, for Christ's sake!"

"Keeney, come back, you fool!"

There came a sharp splutter of machine guns and a quick rush of bullets. Jets of water gushed from the filled canteens and shone for an instant crystal clear in the afternoon light. Suddenly Keeney stopped and threw the canteens from him with a wide, convulsive gesture. He began zigzagging crazily from side to side and running in sudden broken circles. Then he turned squarely and faced the gunners. A cur-

tain of blood ran down his face. The sound of the bullets whipping his body was the sound of an old rug being beaten with a muffled stick. He lifted his arms to the gunners: "Don't! — Don't!" he screamed. Finally he toppled over into the field, thrashing about like an animal, and uprooting with his dying hands great bunches of poppies and wheat. At length he stiffened, contorted with pain, his head almost touching his feet and his green uniform stained with his blood.

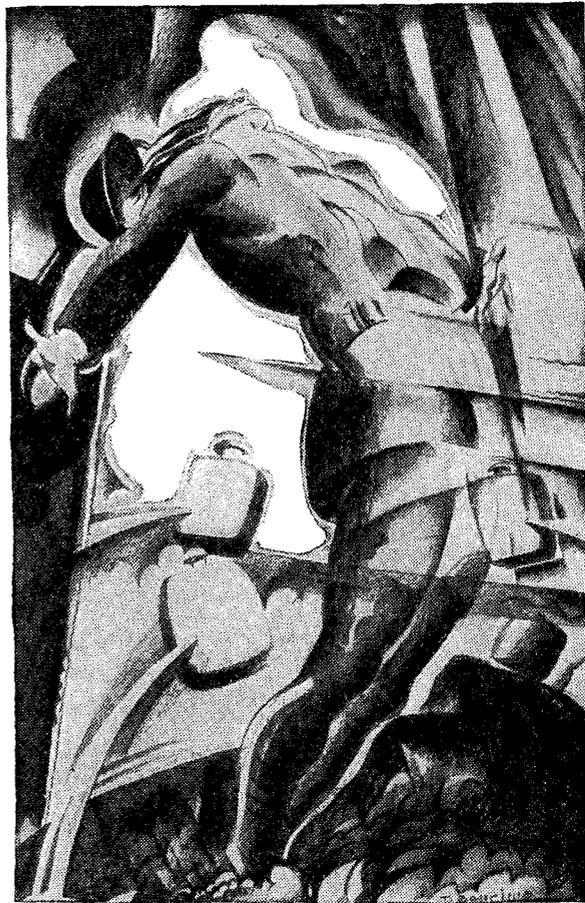
REAGAN LAY staring at the twisted body for a long time. It reminded him of something he had seen, but the impression was faint and illusive and would not come into consciousness. He shut his eyes tightly and turned his head away, but he couldn't shut out the sight of Keeney lying dead in the wheat, the red blood on the green uniform. . . . Finally it occurred to him: Keeney in death resembled a huge, distorted holly wreath. He knew that Bouton would not understand, but he felt the necessity of talking to someone. "Bouton, what does Keeney remind you of?" he asked.

Bouton gave the matter careful thought. "He looks like a dead Frenchman; they always die tied in knots that way." He closed his eyes sleepily.

"Does he remind you at all of a holly wreath?"

Bouton looked up in surprise at the question. "Well, no, I can't say that he does. A holly wreath, as I remember it, is rounder and not so big."

After that Reagan lay in silence staring at the dead body. . . . A holly wreath. . . . It started him thinking of his home and Christmas time and his mother. Bouton had gone back to sleep. Reagan unbuttoned his shirt and let the cool afternoon breeze blow against his throat. A far-away look came into his eyes. He looked at the sun and judged that it was about half-past six. A holly wreath. . . . It would be half-past twelve in Kansas. He wondered what his mother was doing at that moment. In his mind's eye he pictured her room, every piece of old furniture with its lifetime of associations: the armchair where she read or sewed or corrected her school papers at night; his father's picture in crayon, enlarged and hanging in a gilt frame on the wall. . . . He would write his mother more often; it



must be lonely living by herself that way. . . . A holly wreath. . . . He turned on his back and stared lazily at the blue sky, watching a bank of clouds drift past. He thought of the farm that he and his mother were going to have as soon as he got home. Gradually his thought became more broken and formless and he drifted into a dreamy borderline state between sleep and waking.

There came to him then a clear picture of his mother asleep, one arm resting on her breast and the other under her pillow. He smiled at the well-remembered posture. Then he saw her clench her fists and sit up in bed, her eyes wide with fear. She turned on her night light and looked at the clock. Reagan noticed that her hands were trembling. Finally she got out of bed and found her house slippers and the faded bathrobe with the yellow tassels. She sat down quickly in her armchair, as if overcome by emotion, and pressed her palms against her temples. It was a familiar gesture and unconsciously Reagan copied it: he raised his own hands and pressed them against his temples, exactly the way his mother had done it. He noticed then that she was crying. "Don't cry

like that, Mother," he murmured. Then he saw her rise and walk to the open window and the room blurred and melted away and there appeared only his mother's face, magnified like a close-up in the movies. He could see terror in her eyes and in the way the loose skin under her throat trembled. She held on to the window sill for support and her lips moved silently. . . .

VI

REAGAN ROLLED over on his side. He opened his eyes and said dreamily, "What did you say, Bouton?" But Bouton's soft snoring sounded rhythmically. Again Reagan lay on his back and looked at the sky. "I must have been dreaming," he thought, "but I was sure I heard somebody calling me." His eyes closed drowsily. . . . Again that overpowering wish to sleep. He fought against it, but he was powerless. He wondered, vaguely, what had frightened his mother so badly and where he had seen that peculiar look on her face before. Suddenly he remembered. It was the Christmas after his father had died and his mother had taken him to her father's farm to spend the holidays. His mother had been sad and depressed, but grandfather and Aunt Martha and Uncle Henry had been very kind and understanding and had done what they could to cheer her up.

Aunt Martha was a big woman with soft brown eyes and reddened hands. She wore a black silk shirtwaist sewed over with glistening jet that caught the lamplight and threw it back. It gave her the appearance of being made of metal from the waist up. He remembered Aunt Martha's steaming kitchen and the odor of a great turkey turning golden brown in the oven. It had snowed the week before and the rolling Kansas countryside was white and still. That morning Uncle Henry had got out the sleigh and had taken him and his mother to gather evergreens and red berries. The two big horses had neighed and pawed the snow with their hoofs, restive in the cold and anxious to be away. He remembered that Uncle Henry had placed his arm around his mother's shoulder without saying a word, and that she had suddenly started crying against his coat. When they had reached his grandfather's house, his mother and Aunt Martha had taken the evergreens and red berries and woven them into wreaths which they tied with huge red bows and hung in all the windows. Aunt Martha told

him that people put holly wreaths in their windows at Christmas time so that folks passing in the road would know that they were happy.

Aunt Martha and his mother talked about old times and wove the wreaths rapidly. They laughed and pretended that Jimmy was really helping them. Uncle Henry sat by the stove smoking his pipe and reading a newspaper; and grandfather was by the window in his chair (the one that nobody else was allowed to sit in), tinkering with a mousetrap. At intervals Uncle Henry would take his pipe from between his teeth and read them an item of local news or a funny story. His mother had succeeded in throwing off her early depression: there was color in her cheeks again and she even laughed once or twice at Uncle Henry's jokes. Every few minutes Aunt Martha would put down her thread and scissors and run to the kitchen to look at her dinner. How good it smelled!

And now the wreaths and all are finished and mother is cleaning her hands and winding up her ball of twine.

"Let me hang the wreaths, mother!"

"No, no, son; you're too small. You'll fall and hurt yourself."

"Mother — please!"

Uncle Henry is putting down his paper and stretching himself widely: "Oh, let the boy hang 'em if he wants to; you can't baby him all his life, Cora!"

"But Henry, he's only five. I'm afraid he'll hurt himself!"

"Oh nonsense!" says Uncle Henry.

And now Uncle Henry is drawing up a chair from the kitchen and placing a soap box on the seat to make it higher. He lifts Jimmy high in his arms and swings him to the top of the pile. Jimmy is excited. He wonders if he will ever be as big and strong as Uncle Henry.

Jimmy knows that they are watching him, so he is hanging the wreath with care, balancing it evenly on the nail. Now he has turned and faced his audience: "See, mother, I didn't hurt myself at all!"

Jimmy throws out his chest and swaggers slightly. "I guess I can hang any holly wreath there is!" he says. At that moment he loses his balance; the chair is swaying backward and the box has slipped from under him. The next thing is his mother's frightened face bending over him: her eyes are wide with fear and the muscles in her throat are throbbing. Aunt Mar-

tha is bathing his temple, which is still bleeding a little.

"Jimmy!— Jimmy!" his mother is crying over and over. . . .

With a start Reagan sat bolt upright against the rock. High overhead a shell passed with a faint, boring sound, but he did not hear. He was still at his grandfather's farm with his mother and Aunt Martha bending over him and Uncle Henry, contrite and shamefaced, holding a basin of water and a bottle of arnica.

"Don't worry, mother, it was fun," he said.

"Oh, my poor baby!"

"It didn't hurt a bit, I tell you, mother!"

Suddenly he stood upright above the rock. "See, I'm all right, Mother; I'm not hurt at all. I'll hang the other wreaths too!" He laughed

suddenly, the late sunlight gleaming against his teeth.

There came a quick tapping from the German gun and a sudden rush of bullets. A moment later Reagan crashed forward onto the rock that rose to meet his smile.

When Bouton awoke, he found him lying grotesquely across the rock. He was still smiling, but the stone had broken his teeth and bruised his mouth.

"What the hell!" said Bouton in surprise.

When it was quite dark, Bouton shouldered the three sticks and retraced his steps through the field and down the long lane until he came again to the wrecked square of the ruined town. It was very late when he reached his company.

QUOTATION

by

C. E. MONTAGUE

I

DO YOU KNOW how it feels to enter a first-class hotel with no luggage but a rucksack? I do. The noblemen disguised as hall porters look through or past you. The princess in control of the bureau listens with a vinegar aspect to your petition for shelter, and assigns you the least covetable of rooms. The infant Bacchus in plum-colored Eton jacket who shows you the way to your sorry chamber, handles your jejune baggage with an air at once disdainful and apprehensive, as though it might either fall to pieces or bite him. You come down to dinner cowering under a sense that your infamous reputation has preceded you. The ex-ambassador who has accepted the portfolio of head waiter shows a true diplomatist's sense of relative values by giving you that penal seat which is islanded in the very estuary of the passage issuing from the kitchen,

so that your elbows, and nobody else's, may be polished by frequent friction against the hips of his lieutenants as they hasten back and forth between the destinations of the evening's victuals and their place of origin.

That is how some of us feel all our days. For we are going up and down this well-read world with literary luggage so meager that it is hardly worth putting up in the rack, not to speak of the van. Scarcely a day passes over our heads when no eye of scorn has fallen on some detail or other of our destitution. The talk turns to Southey or Landor, De Quincey or Peacock, Goethe or Schiller, Ariosto or Dante, Rabelais or Corneille, *The Faerie Queene* or *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Then it all comes out. Not one of them have we read. And then the lips of the tactful are almost imperceptibly closed, and those of the less tactful may be balefully

