

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers* 2, 1886 – 1887 June 5, '86 to May 21, '87)

## The Web-Footed Princess of Groningen – A Tale

Wherein is truly, fully, and honestly set forth the trials, and ultimate discomfiture of a virtuous woman at odds with the world; to conclude with the consoling moral that as in this world vice invariably mastereth virtue, we should solemnly look to a higher or – – – other world, where the rubber shall be fairly played off.

### Preface.

Before we enter upon the heart-rending trials of the most praiseworthy virgin whose name adorns our frontispiece, it were well for the author to establish a level between himself and his audience. Note, gentle reader, how carefully I have guarded thy self-love and my own; I shall undoubtedly come down to thee, but I would not have thee suspect it for a world; hence the euphemism, neat in its way, and not costly.

We write, those of us who can, for many reasons. Some have an inborn fire which impelleth them to pour their thoughts upon their fellow-men a demon possesseth them, a fatal demon which will out, but lacketh help of the accoucheur. Ink-volcanoes which the vernacularly-minded flippantly abbreviate to Crank. Some again write because they labor under the delusion that they own a pipe – that a pipe is sweet to listen to; and that some men may live so lost to their own true interest that peradventure it might please them to listen to the soulful tunings of the same. There is, also, descriptive of those off-shoots of the genus scribe, a word of the vernacular which painteth them; and I am given to understand that it is pronounced Chump! Alas! that our best words should be slang! Alas! and well-a-day! None mourn so truly as I do that we should have no Dictionary of that great flat and naked footed English which goes its own ways in open contempt of Doctor Noah Webster, and his marshaled host of the seventeen Connecticut dialects. There be others again on whom literary labors thrust – or to drop, as Mr. Micawber did tropes for business, who write for a living. Peace to their rubbish, it is paid for!

Shall I go on ruminating why some of us who can, and many of us who can not, go on writing? I have given three separate, distinct, and totally divergent reasons; can I not look to this intelligent audience for imagination enough to cap my three reasons with x reasons more? This all by the way, what can the author intend to convey to his audience was that those of us who write at all are sore concerned as to what we may write, how we shall write that “what”? and wherefore can that “what” and “how” be justified. The “what” branch of the problem admits of little difficulty. Audiences, in the church, in the Senate, in the lecture room are entertained every day without the consumption of brains, imagination, or reasoning. Wind is the staple. Let any tune to wind, it will please, if the tune-setter but know his audience. Oh! There's the rub. What shall be the subject depends on the more complicated psychological conundrum who might be the hearers? Take for example two or three here assembled together. You have gathered together for no ostensible reason unless to be considered a valid reason to inflict trepidation and responsibility upon one among you already sorely tried. You do not want knowledge: that sleeps in your libraries. Nor amusement, for the baggage runs the streets. Nor that

pleasant stupor which pens alone can give: nor again the acrid titillation akin by contraries to physical enjoyment which discussion with our fellows invariably brings. All these have been the aims of men since Adam delve and Noah swam. I leave out of the question mutual protection. The very essence of your being is Mutual Punishment.

What will you hear? Oh, you have come here to listen. Words, words, words! If you came not for this, what means your high-sounding ensign "Literary Club." Letters make words: words, Creeds: creeds Gods: gods Fools, and so on ad infinitum. Which brings us back to the author.

Ab uno disce omnes. We come then to our second proposition. How shall words be so crooked, dished, and served as to make them most acceptable to the dainty palate of the modern reader? For, mind you, the modern reader is a far different customer from the old-fashioned glutton of a hundred years ago: the Dr. Johnsonesque intellectual stomach which could assimilate and wax fat on Paralsus and the Fathers of the Church. Time has worn out the linings, the gastric juices have grown lazy. Our brain has been taxed overmuch with the lumpy fat of German metaphysics, and stimulated out of all reason by the cayenne and ginger of French fiction. What are we but valetudinarians intellectually? For a while we have been kept alive on the weak phosphates of Howells, and the subdued beef-broth of Henry James; but even these have grown to be course food and feverish these latter days. See! women have come in: Mrs. Burnett, Miss Woolson, Miss Phelps, Miss Warden; when the doctors retired, and the nurses crowd around the patient, the death-rattle is near at hand. Yes I am loath to administer the last sacrament to this nineteenth-century literature of ours, so many years before its full and ripe term. Surely we ought to keep it going, an old man perhaps, but a hale old man, rich with treasured memories and sunny parables. One of those ancients we occasionally see, and oftener read of who cast upon their surroundings all the splendor of the sunset of a time that is gone. So should we write but wise indeed the cook, or conjuror, rather, who will give the recipe. And yet, methinks such an octogenarian's diet might be neatly hit off. A dainty bouillon, perhaps, dainty in finish, virgin of all crudités, and yet reticently suggestive of the massive Bull, that early symbol of procreation; or else some shrewd punch where in strange herbs banked up the fires of the alcohol, and left aglow but the sun-born memory of the grape. It will go hard with me but you will agree that it can be done, should you ever live to finish the tale to which this is but a careless prelude: – wherein the author as a virtuoso trips a light-fingered scale over his patient violin, before making his foot scrape to the audience.

It remains but to explain wherefore you have been so belabored with explanatory and exculpatory remarks. Wherefore have bees the sting in front of the honey? Who can explain the freaks of nature or of man, her abject copyist? Darwin has tried, but the preachers have run him to Earth, and live on in the hope of his warmer resurrection. I shall not try to explain, but leave it to your trained and versatile imagination.

Budget

Dexter Editor

Jany 22 1887

Editor's note: This paper is unattributed, but the minutes show DHJ Holmes (possibly John R. Holmes).

<rev 02/12 jnm>