“Enigmatical and Conundrum-ical”

Alexander's Weekly Messenger
December 18, 1839, p. 4

Weekly Messenger Images Courtesy

American Antiquarian Society

www.howtoreadpoe.com
original website materials

ENIGMATICAL AND CONUNDRUM-ICAL.

A correspondent writes to us as follows, from Halifax county, Va.

Editors of Alexander's Messenger:

Gentlemen—Examining a parcel of your old papers (which were on file at my father's) some short time since, I found in one an enigma, which runs thus:

I'm a noise never heard, yet I'm nothing but sound;
I move not, yet travel the world all round;
I cannot be seen, yet no mortal can say
Without seeing me he can go through the day;
I cannot be touched, yet no lady fair
Can close her sweet hand without finding me there:
I'm enormously large, though as small as a digit;
And I often at cards put old frumps in a fidget;
I'm rough, smooth, soft, hard; I'm both oval and square,
Yet nothing but angels which make tories swear;
I'm the prop of the throne, and abhor revolution,
And yet for my treason deserve execution:
I'm blacker than jet, than a lily more white;
I never am seen, yet am never out of sight;
I'm colder than ice, yet hotter than fire;
I die every minute, yet never expire.
Come guess me at once; make no fuss about me,
For ladies never sit down to piquet without me.

From the many contradictions and novelty of the piece, my curiosity is raised to such a degree, that I must request you to send me the answer. I have read it over carefully a great many times, and can form no idea what it can be.

Respectfully, your friend, &c.

We sympathise with our correspondent's perplexity, and hasten to remove it—especially as we have a *penchant* for riddles ourselves. In spite of the anathemas of the over-wise, we regard a good enigma as a good thing. Their solution affords one of the best possible exercises of the analytical faculties, besides calling into play many other powers. We know of no truer test of general capacity than is to be found in the guessing of such puzzles. In explanation of this idea a most capital Magazine article might be written. It would be by no means a labor lost to show how great a degree of rigid *method* enters into enigma-guessing. So much is this the case, that a set of rules might absolutely be given by which almost any (good) enigma in the world could be solved instantaneously. This may sound oddly; but is not more strange than the well known fact that rules really exist, by means of which it is easy to decipher any species of hieroglyphical writing—that is to say writing where, in place of alphabetical letters, any kind of marks are made use of at random.*

The *method* of which we speak enables us to say at once, in regard to our correspondent's enigma, that he has puzzled himself, and would have puzzled himself to all eternity, in vain. *It has no answer.* That is, it has no word of solution which will reply to *all* the categories. The enigma is *imperfect*, and no doubt, composed by some ignorant person; one who, at all events, knew nothing of the *laws* of such compositions; for, like every thing else, they have their laws. The *style* would indicate this ignorance sufficiently, without looking farther; but a little scrutiny fully exposes it. Still it is not difficult to perceive what the author *intended* as the answer—and this is *light*. The vulgar notions about light are embodied in the opening lines, and indeed throughout; while the "putting old frumps in a fidget at cards" &c. &c. plainly show the design.

Modern taste, however, at least modern newspaper taste, affects rather the conundrum than the enigma proper. The former has more spice in its composition, and its brevity gives it force. A good enigma, we have said, is a good thing, but a good conundrum *may be* a better. Consequently, we see our brethren of the press tying their hands at once in all directions, and as soon as they perpetrate a decent one (after a severe effort) they set up a cackle forthwith, and the bantling goes the round of the papers in a kind of ovation. This inordinate estimation of conundrums arises from the chance hap-hazard manner in which they are conceived, making their conception a difficult thing. With a little of that *method* upon which we just now commented, they may be manufactured by the yard—yes, and of good quality, too. We will just look over the pages of a Johnson's Dictionary for five minutes, and then shall have no trouble in concocting a string of them as long as your arm. No sooner said than done.

"Why is a bad wife better than a good one?—Because bad is the best." This somewhat ungallant old query, with its horrible answer, is an embodiment of the true genius of the whole race to which it belongs—the race of the conundrums. Bad is the best. There is nothing better settled in the minds of people who know any thing at all, than the plain truth that if a conundrum is decent it wo'nt do—that if it is fit for anything it is not worth twopence—in a word that its real value is in exact proportion to the extent of its demerit, and that it is only positively good when it is outrageously and scandalously absurd. In this clear view of the case we offer the annexed. They have at least the merit of originality—a merit apart from that of which we have just spoken. At all events if they are not ours, we have just made them, and they ought to be. If any one has imagined such things before, he, evidently, had no business to do so. We say, with Donatus, apud Hieronymus, "*Pereant qui ante nos nostra*"

1. Why are the Thugs like the crack omnibuses?
   Because they are Phansigars.—*fancy cars.*
2. Why is a man a bad reasoner who bruises his knuckles?
   Because he's a sophist.—*he's a sore fist.*
3. Poor Mary's dead! why is she a many-sided figure?
   Because she's a Polly gone.—*polygon.*
4. Why is my fat friend Tom's scarlet face like a small pungent esculent? Because it's a little reddish.—*a little radish.*
5. Why is his olfactory organ like a bunch of flowers?
   Because it's a nose gay.—*a nosegay.*
6. Why is his last new novel sleep itself?
   Because it's so poor.—*sopor.*
7. Why is Dr. Williams' cash, the oculist, like a divorced wife's pension? Because it's all eye-money.—*alimony.*
8. Why are Bennett's ocular organs interrogative?
   Because they are queer eyes.—*queries?*
9. Why is a feline cat a very common fish?
   Because it's a poor puss.—*porpus.*
10. Why is a tin cup like a crab?
    Because it is a can, sir.—*a cancer.*
11. What kind of a vessel was Don Quixotte's squire?
    A pun, sir.—*a Panza.*
12. Why is a pismire a good reply to that last question?
    Because it is an ant, sir.—*an answer.*
13. What is the difference between a small tub and a runaway shoat. The one is a piggin, *pig in*, the other a pig out.
14. I have a table needing repairs; why must the cabinet-maker who comes for it be in good circumstances?
    Because he is comfortable.—*come for table.*
15. Why is the fifteenth letter of the alphabet, when mutilated, like a Parisian cockney.
    Because it is a bad O.—*badaud.*
16. Why is the Pacific like an inhabitant of Languedoc?
    Because it's a languid ocean.—*a Languedocian.*
17. Why is a chain like the feline race?
    Because it's a catenation.—*a catty nation.*
18. Why should my friend Miss Sarah Amanda be able to stand fire? Because she's a Sal Amanda.—*a salamander.*
19. Why is there little difference between herb soup and turtle?
    Because one is herb soup, the other soup herb.—*superb.*
20. Why might a regular rowdy be eaten?
    Because he's a loafer bred.—*a loafead.*
21. What must you do to a tea-table to make it fit to eat?
    Take tea from it, *t*, it then becomes eatable.
22. What important difference is there between a sot and the purple Convolvulus?
    The one is always drunk, the other blue every other day.
23. Why does a lady in tight corsets never need comfort?
    Because she's already so laced.—*solaced.*
24. When you called the dock a wharf, why was it a deed of writing? Because it was a dock you meant.—*a document.*
25. Why ought the author of the "Grotesque and Arabesque" to be a good writer of verses?
    Because he's a poet to a *t*. Add *t* to Poe makes it Poet.

* For example—in place of *A* put † or any other arbitrary character—in place of B, a * &c. &c. Let an entire alphabet be made in this manner, and then let this alphabet be used in any piece of writing. This writing can be read, by means of a proper method. Let this be put to the test. Let any one address us a letter in this way, and we pledge ourselves to read it forthwith—however unusual or arbitrary may be the characters employed.