

**THE WRITINGS IN
PROSE AND VERSE.
SHARPS AND FLATS I**

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The Writings in Prose and Verse. Sharps and Flats I by Eugene Field

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EUGENE FIELD

**THE WRITINGS IN
PROSE AND VERSE.
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THE WORKS OF
EUGENE FIELD

Vol. XI



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OF EUGENE FIELD

S HARPS AND
FLATS  

I

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S
SONS, NEW YORK, 1901

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Introduction

IT is something over eleven years since I assisted Eugene Field in the publication of "A Little Book of Profitable Tales" and "A Little Book of Western Verse." They consisted of what he deemed the best of his verse and prose that had appeared prior to 1888, selected with a jealous personal care not bestowed on his other collections. They remained the favorite children of his pen to the last, possibly because they were his first love, but more probably because they represented the culling from the work of ten of his most fruitful years.

It is easily within the fact to say that Eugene Field contributed one hundred times as many words as compose these volumes to the column in the *Chicago Daily News* (now the *Chicago Record*) which, under the title of

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"Sharps and Flats," won him recognition as the most popular newspaper paragrapher in the United States. It is a simple calculation, which the reader may make for himself. Six days of the week for twelve years he wrote what made the even column, to a line, of "leaded agate" which appeared almost invariably in the last column of the editorial page of that paper. This column averaged two thousand words. Multiply this by three hundred and thirteen days each year for twelve years, and the product is a grand total of 7,512,000 words. The odd 512,000 may be deducted for the interruptions, which occurred with increasing frequency during the later years of Mr. Field's life, so leaving 7,000,000 words of literature, ranging all the way from the most ephemeral paragraph on a passing event to as exquisite bits of prose and verse as ever illumined the pages of a newspaper.

Before coming to Chicago, Eugene Field had attracted some attention in the newspaper offices of the country by his *Denver Tribune* primer stories. But his real career as a newspaper writer and author dates

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from August, 1883, when his connection with the *News* first began to show in paragraphs under the commonplace heading of "Current Gossip." In such a paragraph as this (August 16, 1883):

It is said, though not authoritatively, that, purely upon grounds of self-protection, the buffaloes are fleeing to the Yellowstone Park in great numbers,

there was the flavor of Field's peculiar humor, which was still present in the last paragraph he ever wrote. To appreciate this humor at this late date it needs to be recalled that President Arthur, with a hunting-party of distinguished friends, was in the Yellowstone Park at that time.

On August 31, 1883, the title "Current Gossip" gave place to that of "Sharps and Flats," which was retained to the end. This heading was taken from the title of a play by Clay M. Greene and the writer, then being performed by Messrs. Robson and Crane.

Mr. Field's early work had the character of the breeziest sort of table-talk. It consisted of daily gossip about persons and things. From the President and affairs of

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state down to the doorkeeper of a local theatre and the most trivial happening of the day, everything was grist to his whimsical mind. Sometimes his whole column would be filled with a "Profitable Tale," but more often it was broken up into forty or more paragraphs, upon as many different subjects. I have counted twenty-nine political paragraphs out of a total of thirty-three; and again, I have known more than half of a larger total devoted to the national game of base-ball, of which Mr. Field was an ardent and critical follower.

The greatest number of paragraphs I remember to have seen in the "Sharps and Flats" column was sixty-four, and this was in October, 1894—long after Mr. Field had abandoned the theory that the wit of a paragraph consisted in its brevity.

In his earlier days Mr. Field was addicted to the use of such phrases as "we opine," "we are free to admit," "we violate no confidence," "we are pained to learn," etc., in opening his paragraphs. He employed them ironically until they became a habit, from which he was rudely shocked when,