

A LOT OF HOT AIR

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A lot of hot air has been generated in an attempt to solve the riddle first proposed in Word Ways in 1981. I believe that Ronnie Kon has unwittingly given us the clue that will reveal the riddle's answer. He notes that it first appeared in Dickson's Balloon Almanac in 1801, and we need to discover what kind of publication that was.

The first attempts at hot air ballooning took place in France in 1783 and it soon became a craze. Before long it moved on to England, and in 1793 Jean Pierre Blachard became the first to fly a hot air balloon in North America. It is said that George Washington witnessed the launch.

Dickson's Balloon Almanac was published from at least 1787 until 1807, according to the National Library of Australia's on-line catalogue of their holdings and was clearly aimed at balloonists and those interested in the sport. Articles included a biography of Vincent Lunardi, an early balloonist, stories of balloon ascents and articles on balloons in art. It was published first in Philadelphia and later in Lancaster, PA. It may have originated elsewhere (perhaps even in England) for the weather information was "adapted to Pennsylvania and neighboring states." Why did the riddle appear in this publication?

I think the answer to the riddle is A HOT AIR BALLOON and that each stanza in the riddle contains one or two words which are designed to be hints. The rest is simply window dressing. In the first stanza "rise" is an obvious clue; in the second, "frail and fantastic" describe the nature of the balloon. Ballooning was a dangerous sport; the first fatality occurred in 1785 when Pilatre de Rozier died in the attempt to cross the English Channel, and we find "danger" in the third stanza. Another clue in this stanza is "abroad." "Burn" in the fourth stanza refers to the fire underneath the balloon which generated the hot air, and "short time" in the fifth refers to the typical duration of early flights – no more than 15 minutes. The author of the riddle saw no need to give the answer because his balloon-loving readers would "easily guess" it.

Riddles are often subject to many possible interpretations as witnessed by the four suggested previously for this one. Such interpretations usually involve some tortured twisting of all the words to make a cohesive story. Below is a more modern solution which, though not the intended one, does make a plausible narrative.

THE PLAINT OF A LOVE-SICK YOUNG MAN

In the morn, when I rise, I open my eyes,
Though I sleep not a wink in the night:
(I've spent the whole night thinking about my beloved and planning my campaign to woo her.)

If I wake e'er so soon, I still lie till noon,
And I pay no regard to the light.

(No point in getting up earlier; no self-respecting young lady will receive suitors before afternoon.)

I am chaste, I am young, I am lusty and strong,
And my habit oft change in a day.

(I have a lot of good character traits to offer my love, including cleanliness. I change my clothes (habit) as soon as they're soiled.)

To court I ne'er go, am not Lady or Beau;

(I don't have a criminal record. I'm certainly not a lady, nor am I anyone else's beau)

Yet as frail and fantastic as they.

(But still I'm weak and full of fantasies.)

I travel abroad, and ne'er miss the road

(I go out on the town, and stick to the straight and narrow in my behavior)

Unless I am met by a stranger:

(Unless I meet a new girl)

If you come in my way, and you very well may,

You will always be subject to danger.

(Be careful; I may fall in love with you and pursue you)

I have loss, I have gain, I have pleasure and pain,

(You win a few; you lose a few...)

And am punished with many a stripe:

(and I've been subjected to many a verbal lashing.)

To diminish my woe, I burn friend and foe

(I'm tired of rejection, so I'll metaphorically get rid of all my friends and foes... ..)

And the ev'ning I close with a pipe.

(and spend my evenings home alone with my pipe.)

I live but short time, and die in my prime,

Neglected by all who possess me:

(My love affairs don't last very long, I'm rejected by those with whom I'm infatuated – those who “possess me” in the sense of demonic possession, even though my love for them is still strong.)

If I say any more, to what's gone before,

(A double entendre. Love is gone.)

I fear you will easily guess me.