

**THE LOVE SONNETS
OF A HOODLUM**

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The Love Sonnets of a Hoodlum by Wallace Irwin

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LOVE SONNETS
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By WALLACE IRWIN

WITH AN INTRODUCTION

By GELETT BURGESS

UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

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*"A Leaden
Heart I wear since she
forsook me."*

Class of
1900

Copyright, 1901
by WALLACE IRWIN

TO .V.V.V.V.
AMERICAN

The Tomoye Press

UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

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INTRODUCTION

"Tell me, ye muses, what hath former ages
Now left succeeding times to play upon,
And what remains unthought on by those sages
Where a new muse may try her pinion?"

SO COMPLAINED Phineas Fletcher in his PURPLE ISLAND as long ago as 1633. Three centuries have brought to the development of lyric passion no higher form than that of the sonnet cycle. The sonnet has been likened to an exquisite crystal goblet that holds one sublimely inspired thought so perfectly that not another drop can be added without overflow. Cast in the early Italian Renaissance by Dante, Petrarch and Camoens, it was chased and ornamented during the Elizabethan period by Shakespere, and filled with its most stimulating draughts of song and love during the Victorian era by Rossetti, Browning and Meredith. And now, in this first year of the new century, the historic cup is refilled and tossed off in a radiant toast to Erato by Wallace Irwin.

The attribute of modernity is not given to every new age. The cogs in the wheels of time slip back, at times. The classic revival may be permeated with enthusiasm, but it is a second edition of an old work—not a virile essay at expression of living thought. The later Renaissance was but half modern in its spirit; the classic period of the eighteenth century in England was half ancient in its mood. But the twentieth century breaks with a new promise of emancipation to English Literature, for a new influence has freshened the blood of conventional style that in the decadence of the End of the Century had grown dilute. This adjuvant strain is found in the enthusiasm of Slang. Slowly its rhetorical power has won

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foothold in the language. It has won many a verb and substantive, it has conquered idiom and diction, and now it is strong enough to assault the very syntax of our Anglo-Saxon tongue.*

Slang, the illegitimate sister of Poetry, makes with her a common cause against the utilitarian economy of Prose. They both stand for lavish luxuriance in trope and involution, for floriation and adornment of thought. It is their boast to make two words bloom where one grew before. Both garb themselves in Metaphor, and the only complaint of the captious can be that whereas Poetry follows the accepted style, Slang dresses her thought to suit herself in fantastic and bizarre caprices, that her whims are unstable and too often in bad taste.

But this odium given to Slang by superficial minds is undeserved. In other days, before the language was crystallized into the idiom and verbiage of the doctrinaire, prose, too, was untrammled. Indeed, a cursory glance at the Elizabethan poets discloses a kinship with the rebellious fancies of our modern colloquial talk. Mr. Irwin's sonnets may be taken as an indication of this revolt, and how nearly they approach the incisive phrases of the seventeenth century may easily be shown in a few exemplars. For instance, in Sonnet XX, "You're the real tan bark!" we have a close parallel in Johnson's *VOLPONE, OR THE FOX*:

"Fellows of outside and mere bark!"

And this instance is an equally good illustration also of that curious process which, in the English language, has in time created for a single word ("cleave," for instance) two exactly opposite meanings. A line from John Webster's *APPRIUS AND VIRGINIA* might be cited as showing how near his diction approached modern slang:

*Note, for instance, the potential mood used indicatively in the current colloquial, "Wouldn't that jar you!"

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"My most neat and cunning orator, whose tongue is quicksilver ;"

and, for an analogy similar, though elaborate, compare lines 5-8 in Sonnet XI. In Beaumont and Fletcher's *PHILASTER*,

"A pernicious petticoat prince"

is as close to "Mame's dress-suit belle" of No. VII as modern costume allows, and

"No, you scarab!"

from Ben Jonson's *ALCHEMIST* gives a curious clue to the derivation of the popular term "scab" found in No. VI. Webster's forcible picture in *THE WHITE DEVIL*—

"Fate is a spaniel; we cannot beat it from us!"

finds a rival in Mr. Irwin's strong simile—"O Fate, thou art a lobster!" in No. IV. And, to conclude, since such similarities might be quoted without end, note this exclamation from Beaumont and Fletcher's *WOMAN'S PRIZE*, written before the name of the insect had achieved the infamy now fastened upon it by the British Matron:

"These are bug's words!"

Not only does this evidently point out the origin of "Jim-jam bugs" in No. IX, and the better known modern synonym for brain, "bug-house," but it indicates the arbitrary tendency of all language to create gradations of caste in parts of speech. It is to this mysterious influence by which some words become "elegant" or "poetic," and others "coarse" or "unrefined," that we owe the contempt in which slang is held by the superficial Philistine.

In Mr. Irwin's sonnet cycle, however, we have slang idealized,

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or as perhaps one might better say, sublimated. Evolution in the *argot* of the streets works by a process of substitution. A phrase of two terms goes through a system of permutation before it is discarded or adopted into authorized metaphor. "To take the cake," for instance, a figure from the cake-walk of the negroes, becomes to "capture" or "corral" the "bun" or "biscuit." Nor is this all, for in the higher forms of slang the idea is paraphrased in the most elaborate verbiage, an involution so intricate that, without a knowledge of the intervening steps, the meaning is often almost wholly lost. Specimens of this cryptology are found in many of Mr. Irwin's sonnets, notably in No. V:

"My syncopated con-talk no avail."

We trace these synonyms through "rag-time," etc., to an almost subliminal thought — an adjective resembling "verisimilitudinarius," perhaps, qualifying the "con" or confidential talk that proved useless to bring Mame back to his devotion.

In the masterly couplet closing the sestet of No. XVIII, Mr. Irwin's verbal enthusiasm reaches its highest mark in an ultra-Meredithian rendition of "I am an easy mark," an expression, by the way, which would itself have to be elaborately translated in any English edition.

Enough of the glamors of Mr. Irwin's dulcet vagaries. He will stand, perhaps as the chief apostle of the hyperconcrete. With Mr. Ade as the head of the school, and insistent upon the didactic value of slang, Mr. Irwin presents in this cycle no mean claims to eminence in the truly lyric vein. Let us turn to a contemplation of his more modest hero.

I have attempted in vain to identify him, the "Willie" of these sonnets. The police court records of San Francisco abound in characters from which Mr. Irwin's conception of this pyrotechnically garrulous Hoodlum might have been drawn,

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and even his death from cigarette-smoking, prognosticated in No. XXII, does not sufficiently identify him. Whoever he was, he was a type of the latter-day lover, instinct with that self-analysis and consciousness of the dramatic value of his emotion that has reached even the lower classes. The sequence of the sonnets clearly indicates the progress of his love affair with Mary, a heroine who has, in common with the heroines of previous sonnet cycles, Laura, Stella and Beatrice, only this, that she inspired her lover to an eloquence that might have been better spent orally upon the object of his affections. Even the author's scorn does not prevent the reader from indulging in a surreptitious sympathy with the flamboyant coquetry of his "peacherino," his "Paris Pansy." For she, too, was of the caste of the articulate; did she not

"Cough up loops of kindergarten chin?"

and could we hear Mame's side of the quarrel, no doubt our Hoodlum would be convicted by every reader. But Kid Murphy, the pusillanimous rival, was even less worthy of the superb Amazon who bore him to the altar. "See how that Murphy cake-walks in his pride!" is the *cri-du-cœur* the gentlest reader must inevitably render.

But "the Peach Crops come and go," as Mr. George Ade so eloquently observes. We must not take our hero's gloomy threats too seriously. There are other babies on the bunch, and no doubt he is, long ere this, consoled with a "neater, sweeter maiden" to whom his Muse will sing again a happier refrain. In this hope we close his dainty introspections and await his next burst of song!

GELETT BURGESS.

San Francisco, Nov. 1, 1901.