

**THE LOVE SONNETS
OF A CAR
CONDUCTOR**

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The love sonnets of a car conductor by Wallace Irwin

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WALLACE IRWIN

**THE LOVE SONNETS
OF A CAR
CONDUCTOR**

RAYMOND
CARTER

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“But when your arms are full of girl and fluff
You hide your nerve behind a yard of grin.”

THE LOVE SONNETS OF A
CAR CONDUCTOR

By
WALLACE IRWIN

Author of
THE LOVE SONNETS OF A HOODLUM
THE RUBÁIYÁT OF OMAR KHAYYÁM, JUNIOR
ETC.

*With a harmless
and instructive Introduction
by*

WOLFGANG COPERNICUS ADDLEBURGER

*Professor of Literary Bi-Products
University of Monte Carlo*

*Muse of my native land,
am I inspir'd?*

— Keats.

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1918

*Mark what I say! Attend
me where I wheel!*
— *Troilus and Cressida.*

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INTRODUCTION

SCIENCE may conquer the stars, but it does nothing by jumps. As a Scientist, as well as a philosopher, I am accustomed to reaching the Transcendental by winding paths. It is characteristic of me that I should have consented to preface this remarkable Sonnet Cycle only after supreme deliberation, and that I should at last have determined to speak in behalf of the Car Conductor for the following reasons:

1. As a Botanist I am fascinated by the phenomenon of Genius flourishing from bud to flower, from flower to seed.
2. As a Psychologist I am anxious to establish once and for all, both by plano-inductive and pre-coordinate systems of logic, the Status of Slang.

What position does Slang occupy in the thought of the world? Let us turn to Zoology for an answer.

No traces of Slang may be found among mollusks, crustaceans or the lower invertebrates. Slang is not common to vertebrate fishes or to whales, seals, reptiles or anthropoid apes—in a word, slang-speaking is nowhere prevalent among lower animals. It may, then, be definitely and clearly asserted that Slang is the natural, logical expression of the Human Race. If Man, then, is the highest of created mammals, is not his natural speech (Slang) the highest of created languages? It is generally conceded that Literature is the most exalted expression of Language. Would not the Literature, then, which employs the highest of created languages (Slang) be the supreme Literature of the world?

By such logical, irrefutable, inductive steps have I proven not only the Status of Slang, but the literary importance of these Sonnets which it is at once my scientific duty and my esthetic pleasure to introduce.

The twenty-six exquisite Sonnets which form this Cycle were written, probably, during the years 1906 and 1907. Their author was William Henry Smith, a car conductor, who penned his passion, from time to time, on the back of transfer-slips which he treasured carefully in his hat. We have it from no less an authority than Professor Sznuyso that the Car Conductor usually performed these literary feats in public, writing between fares on the rear platform of a Sixth Avenue car. Smith's devotion to his Musa Sanctissima was often so hypnotic, I am told, that he neglected to let passengers on and off—nay, it is even held by some critics that he occasionally forgot to collect a fare. But be it said to his undying honor that his Employers never suffered from such carelessness, for it was the custom of our Poet to demand double fares from the old, the feeble and the mentally deficient.*

Even as the illimitable ichor of star-dust, the mysterious Demiurge of the Universe, keeps the suns and planets to their orbitary revolutions, so must environment mark the Fas and Nefas of Genius. Plato's Idea of the Archetypal Man was due, perhaps, as much to the serene weather conditions of Academe as to the marvelous mentality of Plato. What had Job eaten for breakfast that he should have given utterance to his magnificent Lamentation? Was he the discoverer of Human Sorrow or the pioneer of Human Dyspepsia?

It is not altogether radical on my part, then, for me to assert that many of the stylistic peculiarities found in these Sonnets are attributable to the locale of their inspiration—the rear platform of a Sixth Avenue car. One can plainly hear the jar and jounce of the elliptical wheels, the cry,

*Since the salary-books of the Metropolitan Street Railways show, during the year 1906, 182 conductors named Smith in their employ, 38 of whom were named William Smith and 12 William Henry Smith, it is easy for the reader to conceive my task in establishing the identity of our Poet.

"Step lively!" the six o'clock stampede, the lament of the strap-hanging multitude in such lines as these:

"Three days with sad skidoo have come and went,
Yet Pansy cometh nix to ride with me.
I rubber vainly at the throng to see
Her golden locks—gee! such a discontent!
Perhaps she's beat it with some soapy gent—"

Where are lines like these to be found in the Italian of Petrarch? Where has Tasso uttered an impassioned confession to resemble this:

"But when I ogle Pansy in the throng
My heart turns over twice and rings a gong"?

Of the human or personal record of William Henry Smith very little has been discovered. Looking over the books of the Metropolitan Street Railway I unearthed the following entry:

"Nov. 1, 1907:

"W. H. Smith, conductor, discharged.

"Remarks:—Car No. 21144, William Smith, conductor, ran into large brewery truck at So. E. cor. Sixth Ave. It is reported that Smith, to the neglect of his duty, was reading poetry from a book called 'Sonnets of de Heredia' at the time of the accident. Three Italians were slightly injured by the accident, and Ethelbert Pangwyn, an actor starring in 'The Girl and the Idiot,' a musical comedy, was killed.

"Smith was held for manslaughter, but Judge O'Rafferty, who had seen 'The Girl and the Idiot,' discharged the defendant, averring that the killing of Pangwyn did not constitute a crime."

What, then, has become of this minstrel who sang the Minnelieder of the Car-barns? Like Homer, like Omar, like Sappho, like Shakespeare, he is a Voice singing out of the mists. He was but a Name to his employers; and his friends, if he has friends, remember him not. These Sonnets, written neatly on twenty-six violet transfer-slips, were discovered, together with a rejection blank from a leading magazine, in

the Dead Letter office. According to the current folk-lore in Harlem and the Bronx, Smith is now living in California employed as a brakeman on the Southern Pacific Railroad. Some aver that Pansy fell heiress to a sausage establishment and moved to Italy with her Poet. Still others maintain that Pansy, Gill the Grip and Maxy the Firebug never existed in real life—were merely the mind-children of a Symbolist and a dreamer of dreams.

To the latter theory I incline at a scholarly angle. This Cycle may be taken, perhaps, not so much as a living record of human experience as a lofty parable sounding the key-note of all human life. Gill the Grip is the Iago, the Mefistofele, the symbolism of a malevolent destiny. Maxy the Firebug may be the Poet's interpretation of the Social Unrest, of Doubt, of progressive irresponsibility. Would it be going too far, then, to say that Pansy stands to us as the symbol of Pan-girlism—as an almost Anacreontic yearning for the type? Or may not these Sonnets be taken, in a way, as a modern Vita Nuova wherein a Sixth Avenue Alighieri calls to his Beatrice and mourns within when,

“Pansy-girl refuses to occur?”

So much for the Poet and his Purpose. Should any one of the readers of this Cycle doubt the enduring greatness of the lines, let him consider that I, Wolfgang Copernicus Addeburger, have seen fit to introduce them to immortality.

Wolfgang Copernicus Addeburger

Monte Carlo

September 14th MCMVII
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