

The Tale of a Tightwad

William Slavens McNutt

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The Tale of a Tightwad

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The Tale of a Tightwad

I

I like dollars same as I like race-horses," the saleslady behind the hotel cigar-counter explained. "I like 'em when they're movin', an' furnishin' some excitement to the onlookers. A race-horse packed in a can don't make anybody's heart beat faster, does it? No! Well, a dollar buried for life in a bank is my idea of nothing useful.

"It's all right to put a race-horse in his stall now an' then, to let him get his growth, or recover his wind for the next heat. But they only bed a racehorse down in a nice pile of well-combed straw so that he can show more speed when they take him out again. It's perfectly all right to bed a dollar down in the bank once in a while, to let it grow a few cents an' get its breath back; but, man, don't forget where you put the poor thing.

"A dollar is one of the best little friends I know of, if you just give it a chance; but you can't hide it away in the dark forever, like as if you was ashamed to be seen with it, an' then expect it to sit up on its hind legs an' make you laugh when you feel blue, can you? What? No! Take it out an' pal around with it now an' then. Give it the air. Let it run for you before it's too late. A horse won't go for you after it's dead, an' a dollar won't go for you after you're dead.

"Buh-lieve me, no! You may be able to come back an' haunt your wife if she marries somebody you never did like; but after they pull off the parade that you only go one way with, you can't startle a dollar! You can mail it a low moan of anguish in your astral envelope, but you can't make it hop over the counter and come back disguised as six bits and a good cigar. Not after the undertaker's cashed in his percentage on you, you can't! A dollar ain't superstitious. It don't believe in spooks.

"If a dollar's your best friend, don't give it life imprisonment without a fair trial. Money talks; listen to what it says, an' do it justice. Don't ever get the habit.

"What habit? Why, the economy habit. It's deadly. It's worse than drugs, or whisky, or even purple socks. A cocain fiend may be cured till he's so sick of the drug that he has to take to his bed when the snow falls, but a habitual tightwad will never come loose.

"It's an awful habit. It sneaks up on a man so! Some good guy with a flap to his pocket that opens both ways starts in economizin' to buy somethin' he wants. Before he knows it, he gets the habit, an' by the time he's got enough laid by to pay for what he wants—he don't want it. He couldn't buy it, if he did. The habit's sapped his will-power till his hands won't behave any better'n a drunken man's legs. He can put them in his pockets for safety's sake when company's present, but he can't get 'em out. He can pick up a dollar, but he can't lay it down. The habit's got him, an' he can't break it.

"Oh, it's awful to watch one o' these economical knots tryin' to untie itself! It can't be done. They'll get a few dollars' worth of snarl untangled after a terrible struggle, an' then, all of a sudden, they'll wind up again in a fancy design so close-knit that if two-bit pieces were the size of a flea's eye, the Indian penny couldn't get his nose through the cracks to breathe. Economy's an acquired habit with most of us—like olives an' grand opera; but once you get it—curtain! You'll never be able to spend any money for fun, 'cause it's no fun for an economy victim to spend money. An' it's a habit you'll never break away from. You may stray, but you'll always go back to it.

"Did you know Henry Wiggins, that used to live here in the hotel? No? He was a long, lean, solemn squizzle from somewhere in New England. He always looked as if he'd just read a telegram that was as bad as he thought it was before he opened it.

"He had a lot of money, but he didn't feel good about it. He never thought about how much he had; all he could think about was how much there was in the world that he didn't have. If he'd ever managed to get it all, he'd have felt still worse because there wasn't any more to get. He invested out here in real estate and timber. He was the same to a dollar as a curly-haired leadin' man to a matinee girl. He couldn't get away from it if he tried—an' he never tried!

"He had a good character, 'cause a bad one was expensive. His lips never touched liquor, 'cause liquor costs money, an' the dollar that touched him never touched nobody else! Buh-lieve me, no! The only thing money ever said to him was 'Hello!' After he got done greeting it, it never spoke again.

"How he did hate a nickel! He hated it for not bein' a dime. Why, the man had chronic indigestion just from worryin' over what his food cost him, while he ate. He couldn't get any peace in his sleep, because he had to pay

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rent for the room he snored in, an' before he went anywheres he'd sit down an' do a sum to decide whether to walk or to ride. If he found out that the wear an' tear on shoe-leather an' the loss of his time totaled up less than the fare, he'd walk.

"It was kind o' pitiful about Henry, at that. He honestly thought that each time he black-jacked a dollar an' laid it away on the ice, he'd had a real good time; but he hadn't. He didn't get any real fun out of it. He thought he did, but he had a nagging suspicion all the time that in some way he was short- changing himself; an' it preyed on his mind. He thought he'd found a way to beat the grand average of human happiness without contributin' to it; an' yet away down deep inside of himself he knew he hadn't.

"He knew he was wrong, so he spent most of his spare time tellin' people how right he was. Ain't that always the way? If a guy's right, he don't bother spreadin' the news; but if he's wrong, he'll pay space rates for a chance to say that he ain't. A guilty conscience is a regular phonograph with a perpetual- motion attachment, an' a good title for the one tone it plays would be: `I Ain't What I Know I Am.' Ain't it so?

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II

"It was that way with Henry Wiggins. He couldn't talk to you for five minutes without startin' in to tell you what a good time he had bein' unhappy. He used to lean on the counter there an' tell me over an' over again that his vice was virtue. Why, if you drove him to it, he'd argue that the orphans an' widows of the country would all go to the poorhouse if he were to loosen up an' spend anything. He wasn't savin' up to give to anybody that needed it, but he'd swear that poor people were better off because he was what he called 'frugal,' and that they would be poorer if they got any part of what he had more of than he needed. He knew lots of words, but he couldn't fit 'em together in any kind of an argument that sounded reasonable.

"I agreed with him just as long as his stuff sounded funny to me, but after a while it got stale, an' I told him something.

"Do you know what?" I says to him one day. "You ain't deep; you're just tight. You're just a plain, ordinary, every-day tightwad. There's only one reason you hang on to money the way you do," I says to him. "You'd rather hang on than let go. Don't kid yourself into thinkin' that you shine your own shoes just to give the poor little dago bootblack time to study English an' learn to be President or something. You black 'em yourself because you'd rather bend over an' work than set still an' pay a nickel for the privilege. You ain't denyin' yourself nothin'," I says, "just to set some widows or orphans a good example. You're not stingy," I says, "because you think you ought to be stingy. You're stingy," I says to him, "just because you're stingy. You'd have a lot more fun if you were generous, an' you know it; but you're so stingy you won't even give yourself a good time. You think you're pretty wise for holding out on everybody," I says to him. "Wise!" I says. "Why, you're the champion book of the universe! A hick that lets a con man oil him for a piece o' change may be a foolish fish," I says; "but if he's a sucker, you're a whole school of whales. You double-cross yourself. You sell yourself a gold brick, an' when you find out it's brass you won't believe it. No! You go an' buy more o' the same. You've been stingy an' miserable all your life," I says to him. "The answer's easy. Two an' two make four. Loosen up an' be happy!"

"Do you think he got sore? Not a chance! Just confidential.

"In a way you're right," he admits. "But at the same time you're absolutely wrong. I am miserable," he says. "I never have had any fun, and sometimes I do feel as if I was cheating myself; but I'm not," he says. "I only feel that way in my moments of weakness. I have a system," he says; "a system that may take time to work out to my advantage, but it will work," he says. "We're all out for the most we can get out of life, aren't we? Sure. Now some people spend money as they get it, for this, that, and the other thing. They spend it to go to theaters and dances. They spend it for nice clothes. They spend it for fine apartments and expensive food. They spend it in tips in return for good service and a smile from the people that serve them. They spend it for many little things each day—many things which I know they don't particularly want.

"That's where I'm different," Henry goes on to tell me. "I'm not stingy; I'm just playing my system. I'm not going to spend a nickel that I don't absolutely have to until I see something that I like better than I like money—something that I want more than I want anything else in the world. When I find that thing, I'll have the money to get it, and I will get it. No matter what it costs, I'll get it! When I find the one thing that will bring me happiness, you'll see whether I'm stingy or not! You'll see whether I can spend money or not. Most people haven't the stren(yth of character to wait for big happiness. They must have it every day in retail lots. I'm different. I'm going to wait until I find what I've absolutely got to have to make me happy, and when I find it I'll be able to get it. You bet I will! That's my system," he says. "I'm no fool!"

"Then you're a fine imitation," I says. "Accordin' to all I've been able to dope out, the Lord figured out this game of life pretty well. He made happiness the reward for winnin' at it, an' laid out a system of play that don't jibe with the one you follow. Accordin' to His system, a tip an' a kind word to the bootblack in the mornin' entitles you to a chip o' happiness out of the main pot. The more you feed the kitty that goes to them that ain't got the price to buy in on the big game, the more luck you have with the hands you hold. You've got into the habit of cheatin' yourself, Mr. Wiggins," I says. "An' when you want to hand yourself a square deal, you won't be able to break the habit," I says.

"Ah, won't I?" he says. "You'll see!"

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"An' I saw!

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III

"Wiggins was standin' right here by the counter, talkin' to me, when he first laid eyes on Lily Martin. As he watched her walk across the lobby to the elevator his eyes bulged out till they looked like a couple of blue glass marbles that was just about to fall an' break.

"What a lovely girl!" he says. "I wish I could meet her."

"I laugh.

"Lay off!" I says to him. "Lily Martin an' her mother haven't got any too much money of their own," I says; "but there's a whole flock of money goats blatting with sorrow because Lily won't take all they've got—an' them, too! Men," I says to him, "fight for the chance to spend regular money on her, an' only the lucky ones get it. You," I says, "don't spend enough on clothes in a year to buy her flowers for a week. She ain't accustomed to tightwads," I says to him.

"But I want to meet her," he says. "I want to!"

"I seen he meant it, an' it struck me funny. I could see him spendin' the evenin' with Lily Martin, an' askin' her to take a walk around the block or have a stick of gum; so I told him I'd fix it for him, an' then I got in touch with Bert Edgeley.

"Bert was a fine scout. Money was the only desirable thing he didn't have. He was a young mining-engineer, an' he was doin' fine, both with his profession and with Lily Martin. He was all there with her that spring. Her mother was a little sour on him because he didn't have a check-book like some, but what he lacked with the mother he made up with Lily, buh-lieve me! So I got hold of Bert an' gave him the straight dope about Wiggins.

"He's got a crush on Miss Martin," I tell him. "If he gets a chance to meet her, he'll probably buy a new fifty-cent tie to make an impression. After he's kicked in with the price of an ice-cream soda, he'll think he's got some kind of a claim on her, an' say things fit to laugh at," I says. "Put Miss Martin wise first," I says, "an' then make this human astringent known to her. There's some comedy in it," I says to Bert.

"An' he fell for it. I introduce him to Wiggins, an' Bert promises to take him to call on Miss Martin that night. It was a laugh from the start. Wiggins was as excited as if somebody was goin' to pay him a dollar he hadn't expected to get. While he was still talkin' to me about how glad he was to get the chance to meet her, she come out of the elevator an' crossed the lobby to the desk. Wiggins squared off an' took a good, keen, Yankee squint. When she'd gone out, he turned to me, an' he says:

"That's the prettiest girl I ever saw in my life," he says. "I want her!" he says. "I want her more than I ever yet wanted anything, and I know," he says, "I that once I get acquainted with her, I'll want her a darn sight more than I do now. You think I'm a tightwad," he says. "Now I'll show you that I'm not. I've seen what I want," he says, "and I've got the money to help me get it. You'll see!"

"I'll say one thing for the simp—he didn't waste no time. I'd never seen him with a suit of clothes on that cost him more than ten dollars. That night he showed up to meet Bert all togged out in evening clothes and a top-hat; an' he had a bunch of violets an' a box of candy for Miss Martin. It was a real box of candy, mind you, not a scoopful out of a bucket. Honest! For the first time in his life, he'd gone an' spent good money on himself just to get ready to meet her.

"An' you know what? He wasn't bad-lookin' when he was dressed decent. No, he wasn't. I'd come to think of him as a kind of a slob, seein' him togged out cheap, as I always had; but with regular clothes on he was kind of handsome in a lean, hungry, serious sort of way. He looked real striking.

"Well, he met Lily Martin according, to schedule, but what come after the meeting come different than anything I'd planned. Say, man! The dead one come to life—honest he did. An' such a life! Dinners an' dances an' parties an' theaters an' flowers! All for Miss Martin, all paid for by Tightwad Wiggins that had never so much as paid for havin' his shoes shined up to then.

"An' he made people think he liked to part with his dough. That was the weird part of it. He ponied up with a smile; an' if the smile was forced, it didn't show to the naked eye. He put up a campaign of entertainment that made Lily Martin an' her mother dizzy with the speed of it. He paid for it, an' made 'em think it come natural to him. Oh, he was an actor! I got to give him credit.

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"Bert Edgeley had gone an' primed Miss Martin for a funny hick that would give them all a good laugh if she would agree to take a few minutes off an' meet him; an' instead o' that, Wiggins give her the time of her young life. How was she to know that Henry had switched the cut on Bert? It seemed to her that Edgeley had gone an' slandered a lovely gentleman. He only made it all the worse by tryin' to explain to her that Wiggins was really funny; that the money he was spendin' on her was the biggest joke of all, an' all that. No chance! She was off Bert, who was no gentleman to speak ill of such a splendid fellow as Henry Wiggins, an' Henry had the inside track.

"`You're a fine tipster!' Bert says to me. `I thought you told me this Wiggins was a kind of something that ought to be in vaudeville! Didn't you say he spent his time alone because he was too stingy to share with a friend? What? He's in and I'm out. I've tried to laugh, but there's nothing funny about it. It's getting serious!"

"`It won't last,' I tell him.

"`No,' he says. `Life won't last—not forever. That's no helpful hint. You touted me into this; can't you tout me out?"

"`Don't worry,' I says. `The man's a habitual tightwad. He's playin' a part, an' playin' it fine,' I says, `but he'll make a mistake. He smiles while he's spendin' all this dough,' I says; `but the smile hurts, buh-lieve me! He'll forget an' groan some o' these days, an' she'll get a chance to see him as be is. Don't worry!"

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IV

"But Bert did worry, an' so did I. I liked Miss Martin, an' I was gettin' scared for fear this Wiggins was goin' to play the part outright up to the altar an' spend like a prince till the weddin'-bells rung for him. I knew what would happen to Lily Martin if he ever got her that far. She'd never lay eyes on a thin dime from the time she once said 'I do.' Can you imagine what Henry Wiggins would turn into after spendin' what he had spent to get a woman, an' gettin' her? Well, I can!

"Wiggins was on my nerves, too. He was so blamed triumphant! Every time he come over to the stand here to buy a paper he'd tip me a quarter. Him that had never bought papers before! Him that had always sneaked into the lobby an' picked up the news of the day second-hand from some crumpled sheet that a human being had read and thrown away. He'd buy his own an' tip me a quarter!

"'You're doin' pretty well,' I says to him one day, real snappy.' But don't bother to hand me any more quarters,' I says. 'I don't want blood-money,' I says. 'You act as if you liked it, an' you act pretty well; but I know you bleed internally from the rupture every time you jar yourself loose from one of these two-bit pieces.'

"'You remember what I told you?' he says, still smilin'. 'I was never stingy. I was simply saving my money to buy happiness with when I saw what I knew would make me happy. I've seen it, and I don't think any one can accuse me now of being a tightwad.'

"'No,' I says, 'not now; but I know that the punishment you're undergoin' is somethin' frightful. You're doin' well, but you can't stand the pain forever.'

"'I'm having the time of my life,' he says, with a smile still workin'. 'This is what I've had the strength to wait for.'

"Oh, Wiggins was game! He had the money, an' he sure spent it like a drunken sailor. Miss Martin said something about liking to take a little trip among the islands in the Sound, and Wiggins just carelessly steps out and buys the White Wave, a forty-five-foot yacht, to take her where she wanted to go. Can you beat it? He could have rented something, but he buys it! That little boat was second-hand, but it stood him in a good five hundred dollars in real money—an' just because she said she would like the trip! It had me beat.

"They made up a party for the voyage, an' got the boss here to let me off to go along as a kind of general ladies' maid an' stewardess. Bert Edgeley was along, an' five others besides Wiggins an' the Martins, Bert was just as happy as a Mexican hairless dog at the north pole. He was playin' Wiggins's cards for him right along, the poor simp! Bert knew what Wiggins really was. Miss Martin had never seen him in his natural state, so poor Bert's grouch goes with her for unmanly jealousy of a generous and gentlemanly rival—an' he acts accordingly.

"'I tried to give her the low-down on this fellow Wiggins,' he says to me. 'I suppose it doesn't seem right to knock him when I'm his guest, but great Scott, you an' I know that he's not human! I just can't sit by and see Lily fooled by a thing like him; but when I try to tell her what he is, she thinks I'm jealous of him. An' I am,' he says. 'He's carried his bluff so far, I'm worried white!'

"'He'll crack,' I says, an' tried to think I meant it; but I couldn't. Henry Wiggins had my goat.

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V

"It was fine sailin' down the Sound the first day out, but about noon of the second we run into a bank of fog you couldn't see ten feet through. They shut her down to half speed, an' went nosin' through it, blowin' the fog-whistle an' tryin' to keep a general guess on where we were headin' for. There'd been quite a breeze in the mornin', an' there was a nasty little chop left. We went wallowing through it for about half an hour, an' then, all of a sudden, whang, crash, lickety-bang! We hit a rock hard enough to knock out a prize-fighter that's as good as he says he is. The bow of that boat scooted up on a nice little accommodatin' wave that couldn't stay long, an' when the wave moved on, the poor bow fell on that rock. Some fall! It knocked a hole in the boat big enough for a good-sized river to run through without gettin' dammed up. The men got the life-boat busy, an' found we were only a few yards from shore. They got us all off all right, but speed was necessary. That five-hundred-dollar beauty of Wiggins's was spoilin' herself on that rock mighty fast.

"Scared as I was, I took pains to watch an' see if he'd squeal. He didn't. When we got ashore, I took pains to mention what a shame it was that the boat should be a total loss to him, so soon after he'd bought it, an' he just laughed.

"There are other boats,' he says, in an offhand way. 'I'm only troubled about this unavoidable inconvenience to the ladies.'

"We'd landed on a little beach at the foot of some high rocks, an' we sat there for a half-hour or so, wonderin' where we was. Then the fog lifted, an' we got a little peek around. We was on one o' them steep little rocky islands that a mountain goat couldn't make a mile an hour across. It was a cinch that wherever we was goin' from where we were, we wouldn't travel afoot. The only way away from there was by water.

"The captain squinted around a little an' located himself. He said we were only about two miles from Uniondale.

"Well, of all good fortune!' Wiggins chirps up, as happy as a canary sounds. 'Uniondale, eh? Well, we won't have to forego our trip after all. Just before I bought the White Wave a chap from Uniondale approached me and tried to sell me his boat. She was in the harbor at Uniondale, and I didn't want to take the time to run across here and look her over, so I bought the White Wave. I'll just row the two miles up to Uniondale with the captain, buy the boat that's there, and return for you people in a jiffy. I understand it's a better boat than the White Wave was, anyway.'

"Just like that! Five hundred dollars gone on the rocks, an' he was happy 'cause he had the chance to spend another wad right away quick. Of course, every one tried to argue him out of doing any such thing, but he wouldn't be dissuaded. Not him! An' he was the Henry Wiggins that up to two months before that time wouldn't tip his hat, if he could help it, on account of the wear an' tear on the brim!

"If it should happen that I'm not able to buy the vessel I have in mind, I'll hire some craft and come back for you at once,' he says. 'I'm sorry on account of the inconvenience you have been put to.'

"So he got into the life-boat with the captain, an' they rowed away for Uniondale. All the rest of us, except Bert an' me, sat there an' said what a fine an' wonderful man Henry Wiggins was.

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VI

Well, we kept right on sitting. Two hours went by, an' still we sat. Another hour passed, an' it began to rain, an' still we sat. Wiggins an' the captain had had time to row to Uniondale an' get a boat built, it seemed to us, an' still we sat. We got soaking wet and shivering cold. Some of the women begun to cry, an' all the men begun to swear. We wondered if Wiggins an' the captain had been drowned, or if they'd only been wrecked again an' were yet alive. We wondered for a while, an' by an' by we got so cold an' wet we didn't care.

"It was pretty near dark when at last a fishin'-boat came along an' we hailed it. The fishermen put off a rowboat an' took us aboard, an' we started for Uniondale. There wasn't any cabin on that fishing-boat, an' we were gettin' colder an' wetter all the time. We'd gone about a mile when we see a couple of men in a boat in near shore.

"'It's Wiggins an' the captain,' Edgeley says, an' the fishermen steered in toward them.

"It was Wiggins an' the captain, all right. They was havin' high words. We could hear the captain speakin' his mind in a way no hired man should speak to the guy that pays him. We run alongside of them an' stopped.

I never see such anguish as there was on Wiggins's face. He seen us, but he hardly took notice. The captain was different.

"'Don't none of you people blame me,' he says in a loud voice. 'This man Wiggins is crazy. I been tryin' to get him to go on for hours, an' he wouldn't budge. The idea of him lettin' you people set back there in the rain, an' likely get your death of cold! It ain't my fault. He's crazy, I tell you!'

"'But it's right down there between those two little rocks,' Wiggins says. 'It's easy to get at. I could get it, if I wasn't so short-winded. I can't stay under long enough to feel around for it. Won't you please try, captain? It's right there between those two little rocks, and the water's hardly up to your neck now the tide's gone out so.'

"'No, I won't try!' the captain yells at him. 'You're crazy!'

"'What's the matter?' Bert Edgeley says.

"'I was sitting here counting my change while the captain rowed, and I dropped a five-dollar gold piece overboard,' Wiggins wails, wringin' his hands. 'It's right down there between those two little rocks. I know right where it is. I could get it easy, if I could hold my breath long enough to hunt around for it. Couldn't you just try for it once? I'll show you right where it is!'

"Lily Martin stepped to the rail of the boat an' looked down at Wiggins. Her teeth had been chatterin' with the cold for two or three hours, but she seemed to be warm enough all of a sudden.

"'Have you been hunting for that five-dollar gold piece all afternoon?' she asks in a tone of voice that would have made Jesse James throw up his hands on suspicion.

"Wiggins looks at her, an' I'll swear he hardly saw her. His mind was where it belonged—on money.

"'It's right down there between those two little rocks,' he says, like a kid recitin' a piece. 'It's only about five feet under water, now that the tide's gone out so far.'

"Lily turned her back on him an' held out her hand to Bert Edgeley.

"'I beg your pardon, Bert,' she says. 'I didn't understand!'

"One of the boys give the fisherman the high sign, an' he started the engine. Wiggins scarcely paid any attention to our leavin'. He was too busy pleadin' with the captain to dive down an' make a try for the five-dollar gold piece that was just between the two little rocks. The last we seen of the two of 'em, the captain was rowin' after us an' swearin' a blue streak. Wiggins was standin' up, wringin' his hands an' beggin' for the captain to wait an' let him make just one more try for it. The habit had him!

"Wiggins moved from the hotel here to cheaper quarters, as soon as he got back to town, an' I didn't see him for near six months. Then one afternoon I was leanin' over the counter, readin' the account of Lily Martin's marriage to Bert Edgeley, when Henry come shufflin' in. He looked seedier an' sadder than ever.

"'I see they're married,' he says to me. 'I'm glad I escaped! I must have been mad, for a time,' he says. 'It was a terrible expense! You wouldn't believe how much I spent!'

"'You can't get away from it, I tell you. It ain't done. Economy's a nice pastime, but it's a terrible habit!'

SHADOWS

A LITTLE trellis stood beside my head,
And all the tiny fruitage of its vine
Fashioned a shadowy cover to my bed,
And I was madly drunk on shadow wine!

A lily bell hung sidewise, leaning down,
And gowned me in a robe so light and long;
And so I dreamed, and drank, and slept, and heard
The lily's song.

Lo, for a house, the shadow of the moon;
For golden money, all the daisy rings;
And for my love, the meadow at my side—
Thus tramps are kings!

Djuna Barnes