

The Love Sonnets of a Hoodlum

Wallace Irwin

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The Love Sonnets of a Hoodlum

Wallace Irwin

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With an Introduction by
Gelett Burgess

Showing how Vanity is still on Deck,
humble Virtue gets it in the Neck!

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

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 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 untrammelled. 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 *Appius and Virginia* might be cited as showing how near his diction approached modern slang:

"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!"

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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, 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 "verisimilitudinarious," 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, 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 Beatricia, 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-coeur 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

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

An Inside Con to Refined Guys

Let me down easy, reader, say!
Don't run the bluff that you are on,
Or proudly scoff at every toff
Who rattles off a rag-time con.

Get next to how the French Villon,
Before Jack Hangman yanked him high,
Quilled slangy guff and Frenchy stuff
And kicked up rough the same as I.

And Byron, Herrick, Burns, forby,
Got gay with Erato, much the same
As I now do to show to you
The way into the Hall of Fame.

Prologue

Wouldn't it jar you, wouldn't it make you sore
To see the poet, when the goods play out,
Crawl off of poor old Pegasus and tout
His skate to two-step sonnets off galore?
Then, when the plug, a dead one, can no more
Shake rag-time than a biscuit, right about
The poem-butcher turns with gleeful shout
And sends a batch of sonnets to the store.

The sonnet is a very easy mark,
A James P. Dandy as a carry-all
For brain-fag wrecks who want to keep it dark
Just why their crop of thinks is running small.
On the low down, dear Maine, my looty loo,
That's why I've cooked this batch of rhymes for you.

The Love Sonnets of a Hoodlum

I

Say, will she treat me white, or throw me down,
Give me the glassy glare, or welcome hand,
Shovel me dirt, or treat me on the grand,
Knife me, or make me think I own the town?
Will she be on the level, do me brown,
Or will she jolt me lightly on the sand,
Leaving poor Willie froze to beat the band,
Limp as your grandma's Mother Hubbard gown?

I do not know, nor do I give a whoop,
But this I know: if she is so inclined
She can come play with me on our back stoop,
Even in office hours, I do not mind –
In fact I know I'm nice and good and ready
To get an option on her as my steady.

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II

On the dead level I am sore of heart,
For nifty Mame has frosted me complete,
Since ten o'clock, G. M., when on the street
I saw my lightning finish from the start.
O goo-goo eye, how glassy gazed thou art
To freeze my spinach solid when we meet,
And keep thy Willie on the anxious seat
Like a bum Dago on an apple cart!

Is it because my pants fit much too soon,
Or that my hand-me-down is out of style,
That thou dost turn me under when I spoon,
Nor hand me hothouse beauties with a smile?
If that's the case, next week I'll scorch the line
Clad in a shell I'll buy of Cohenstein.

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As follows is the make-up I shall buy,
Next week, when from the boss I pull my pay: –
A white and yellow zig-zag cutaway,
A sunset-colored vest and purple tie,
A shirt for vaudeville and something fly
In gunboat shoes and half-hose on the gay.
I'll get some green shoe-laces, by the way,
And a straw lid to set 'em stepping high.

Then shall I shine and be the great main squeeze,
The warm gazook, the only on the bunch,
The Oklahoma wonder, the whole cheese,
The baby with the Honolulu hunch –
That will bring Mame to time—I should say yes!
Ain't my dough good as Murphy's? Well, I guess!

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IV

O fate, thou art a lobster, but not dead!
Silently dost thou grab, e'en as the cop
Nabs the poor hobo, sneaking from a shop
With some rich geezer's tile upon his head.
By thy fake propositions are we led
To get quite chesty, when it's buff! kerflop!!
We take a tumble and the cog-wheels stop,
Leaving the patient seeing stars in bed.

So was I swatted, for I could not draw
My last week's pay. I got the dinky dink.
No more I see the husk in dreams I saw,
And Mame is mine some more, I do not think.
I know my rival, and it makes me sore –
'Tis Murphy, night clerk in McCann's drug store.

The Love Sonnets of a Hoodlum

V

Last night—ah, yesternight—I flagged my queen
Steering for Grunsky's ice-cream joint full sail!
I up and braced her, breezy as a gale,
And she was the all-rightest ever seen.
Just then Brick Murphy butted in between,
Rushing my funny song-and-dance to jail,
My syncopated con-talk no avail,
For Murphy was the only nectarine.

This is a sample of the hand I get
When I am playing more than solitaire,
Showing how I become the slowest yet
When it's a case of razors in the air,
And competition knocks me off creation
Like a gin-fountain smashed by Carrie Nation.

VI

See how that Murphy cake-walks in his pride,
That brick-topped Murphy, fourteen-dollar jay;
You'd think he'd leased the sidewalk by the way
He takes up half a yard on either side!
I'm wise his diamond ring's a cut-glass snide,
His overcoat is rented by the day,
But still no kick is coming yet from Mae
When Murphy cuts the cake so very wide.

Rubber, thou scab! Don't throw on so much spaniel!
Say, are there any more at home like you?
You're not the only lion after Daniel,
You're not the only oyster in the stew.
Get next, you pawn-shop sport! Come oft the fence
Before I make you look like thirty cents!

VII

Mayhap you think I cinched my little job
When I made meat of Mamie's dress-suit belle.
If that's your hunch you don't know how the swell
Can put it on the plain, unfinished slob
Who lacks the kiss-me war paint of the snob
And can't make good inside a giddy shell;
Wherefore the reason I am fain to tell
The slump that caused me this melodious sob.

For when I pushed Brick Murphy to the rope
Mame manned the ambulance and dragged him in,
Massaged his lamps with fragrant drug store dope
And coughed up loops of kindergarten chin;
She sprang a come back, piped for the patrol,
Then threw a glance that tommyhawked my soul.

VIII

I sometimes think that I am not so good,
That there are foxier, warmer babes than I,
That Fate has given me the calm go-by
And my long suit is sawing mother's wood.
Then would I duck from under if I could,
Catch the hog special on the jump, and fly
To some Goat Island planned by destiny
For dubs and has-beens and that solemn brood.

But spite of bug-wheels in my cocoa tree,
The trade in lager beer is still a-humming,
A schooner can be purchased for a V
Or even grafted if you're fierce at bumming.
My finish then less clearly do I see,
For lo! I have another think a-coming.

IX

Last night I tumbled off the water cart –
It was a peacherino of a drunk;
I put the cocktail market on the punk
And tore up all the sidewalks from the start.
The package that I carried was a tart
That beat Vesuvius out for sizz and spunk,
And when they put me in my little bunk
You couldn't tell my jag and me apart.

Oh! would I were the ice man for a space,
Then might I cool this red-hot cocoanut,
Corral the jim-jam bugs that madly race
Around the eaves that from my forehead jut –
Or will a carpenter please come instead
And build a picket fence around my head?

The Love Sonnets of a Hoodlum

X

As one who with his landlord stands deuce high
And blocks his board bill off with I O U's,
Touching the barkeep lightly for his booze,
Sidestepping when a creditor goes by,
Soaking his mother's watch-chain on the sly,
Haply his ticker, too, haply his shoes,
Till Mr. Johnson comes to turn him loose
And lift the mortgage from that poor cheap guy;

So am I now small change in Mamie's scorn,
A microbe's egg, or two-bits in a fog,
A first cornet that cannot toot a horn,
A Waterbury watch that's slipped a cog;
For when her make-up's twisted to a frown,
What can I but go 'way back and sit down?

XI

O scaly Mame to give me such a deal,
To hand me such a bunch when I was true!
You played me double and you knew it, too,
Nor cared a wad of gum how I would feel.
Can you not see that Murphy's handy spiel
Is cheap balloon juice of a Blarney brew,
A phonograph where all he has to do
Is give the crank a twist and let 'er reel?

Nay, love has put your optics on the bum,
To you are Murphy's gold bricks all O. K.;
His talks go down however rank they come,
For he has got you going, fairy fay.
Ah, well! In that I'm in the box with you,
For love has got poor Willie groggy, too.

XII

Life is a combination hard to buck,
A proposition difficult to beat,
E'en though you get there Zaza with both feet,
In forty flickers, it's the same hard luck,
And you are up against it nip and tuck,
Shanghaied without a steady place to eat,
Guyed by the very copper on your beat
Who lays to jug you when you run amuck.

O Life! you give Yours Truly quite a pain.
On the T square I do not like your style;
For you are playing favorites again
And you have got me handicapped a mile.
Avaunt, false Life, with all your pride and pelf:
Go take a running jump and chase yourself!

XIII

If I were smooth as eels and slick as soap,
A baked-wind expert, jolly with my clack,
Gally enough to ask my money back
Before the steerer feeds me knock-out dope,
Still might I throw a duck-fit in my hope
That I possessed a headpiece like a tack
To get my Mamie in my private sack
Ere she could flag some Handsome Hank and slope.

What ho! she bumps! My wish avails me not,
My work is coarse and Mame is onto me;
So am I never Johnny-on-the-spot
When any wooden Siwash ought to be.
Thus I get busy working up a grouch
Whenever heartless Mame harpoons me—ouch!

XIV

O mommer! wasn't Mame a looty toot
Last night when at the Rainbow Social Club
She did the bunny hug with every scrub
From Hogan's Alley to the Dutchman's Boot,
While little Willie, like a plug-eared mute,
Papered the wall and helped absorb the grub,
Played nest-egg with the benches like a dub
When hot society was easy fruit!

Am I a turnip? On the strict Q. T.,
When do my Trilbys get so ossified?
Why am I minus when it's up to me
To brace my Paris Pansy for a glide?
Once more my hoodoo's thrown the game and scored
A flock of zeros on my tally-board.

XV

Nixie! I'm not canned chicken till I'm cooked,
And hope still rooms in this pneumatic chest,
While something's doing underneath my vest
That makes me think I'm squiffier than I looked.
Mayhap Love knew my class when I was booked
As one shade speedier than second best
To knock the previous records galley west,
While short-end suckers on my bait were hooked.

Mayhap—I give it up—but this I know:
When I saw Mamie on the line today
She turned her happy searchlights on me so,
And grinned so like a living picture—say,
If a real lady threw you such a chunk,
Could n't she pack her Raglan in your trunk?

XVI

Oh, for a fist to push a fancy quill!
A Lover's Handy Letter Writer, too,
To help me polish off this billy doo
So it can jolly Mame and make a kill,
Coax her to think that I'm no gilded pill,
But rather the unadulterated goo.
Below I give a sample of the brew
I've manufactured in my thinking mill:

"Gum Drop:—Your tanglefoot has got my game,
I'm stuck so tight you cannot shake your catch;
It's cruelty to insects—honest, Mame, —
So won't you join me in a tie-up match?
If you'll talk business I'm your lemon pie.
Please answer and relieve

An Anxious Guy."

XVII

Woman, you are indeed a false alarm;
You offer trips to heaven at tourist's rates
And publish fairy tales about the dates
You're going to keep (not meaning any harm),
Then get some poor old Rube fresh from the farm,
As graceful as a kangaroo on skates,
Trying to transfer at the Pearly Gates –
For instance, note this jolt that smashed the charm: –

"P.S.—You are all right, but you won't do.
You may be up a hundred in the shade,
But there are cripples livelier than you,
And my man Murphy's strictly union-made.
You are a bargain, but it seems a shame
That you should drink so much.
Yours truly,
Mame."

XVIII

Last night I dreamed a passing dotty dream –
I thought the cards were coming all my way,
That I could shut and open things all day
While Mame and I were getting thick as cream,
And starred as an amalgamated team
In a cigar–box flat across the bay –
Just then the alarm clock blew to pieces. Say,
Wouldn't that jam you? I should rather scream.

Sleep, like a bunco artist, rubbed it in,
Sold me his ten–cent oil stocks, though he knew
It was a Kosher trick to take the tin
When I was such an easy thing to do;
For any centenarian can see
To ring a bull's–eye when he shoots at me.

XIX

A pardon if too much I chew the rag,
But say, it's getting rubbed in good and deep,
And I have reached the limit where I weep
As easy as a sentimental jag.
My soul is quite a worn and frazzled rag,
My life is damaged goods, my price is cheap,
And I am such a snap I dare not peep
Lest some should read the price-mark on my tag.

The more my sourballed murmur, since I've seen
A Sunday picnic car on Market Street,
Full of assorted sports, each with his queen –
And chewing pepsin on the forninst seat
Were Mame and Murphy, diked to suit the part,
And clinching fins in public, heart-to-heart.

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XX

Forget it? Well, just watch me try to shake
The memory of that four-bit Scheutzen Park,
Where Sunday picnics boil from dawn till dark
And you tie down the Flossie you can take,
If you don't mind man-handling and can make
A prize rough house to jolly up the lark,
To show the ladies you're the whole tan-bark,
And leave a blaze of fireworks in your wake.

'Twas there before the Rainbow Club that Mame
Bawled herself out as Murphy's finansay
And all the chronic glad hand-claspers came
To copper invites for the wedding day;
And when the jocund day threw up the sponge
Murphy was billed to take the fatal plunge.

XXI

At noon today Murphy and Mame were tied.
A gospel huckster did the referee,
And all the Drug Clerks Union loped to see
The queen of Minnie Street become a bride,
And that bad actor, Murphy, by her side,
Standing where Yours Despondent ought to be.
I went to hang a smile in front of me,
But weeps were in my glimmers when I tried.

The pastor murmured, "Two and two make one,"
And slipped a sixteen K on Mamie's grab;
And when the game was tied and all was done
The guests shied footwear at the bridal cab,
And Murphy's little gilt-roofed brother Jim
Snickered, "She's left her happy home for him."

XXII

Still joy is rubbernecking on the street,
Still hikes the Mags' parade at five o'clock,
Still does the masher march around the block
Pining in vain some hothouse plant to meet;
Still does the rounder pull your leg to treat,
Where flows the whisky sour or russet bock,
And the store clothing dummies in a flock
Keep good and busy following their feet.

Rats! cut this out; for I'm a last year's champ;
Into the old bone orchard am I blowing,
So with the late lamented let me camp,
My walkers to the graveyard daisies toeing,
And shaking this too upish generation,
Pass checks through cigarette asphyxiation.

Epilogue

To just one girl I've tuned my sad bazoo,
Stringing my pipe-dream off as it occurred,
And as I've tipped the straight talk every word,
If you don't like it you know what to do.
Perhaps you think I've handed out to you
An idle jest, a touch-me-not, absurd
As any sky-blue-pink canary bird,
Billed for a record season at the Zoo.

If that's your guess you'll have to guess again,
For thus I fizzled in a burst of glory,
And this rhythmic side-show doth contain
The sum and substance of my hard-luck story,
Showing how Vanity is still on deck
And Humble Virtue gets it in the neck.