

Cooke Edmund Vance

Impertinent Poems



Edmund Cooke
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A PRE-IMPERTINENCE

Anticipating the intelligent critic of "Impertinent Poems," it may well be remarked that the chief impertinence is in calling them poems. Be that as it may, the editors and publishers of "The Saturday Evening Post," "Success" and "Ainslee's," and, in a lesser degree, "Metropolitan," "Independent," "Booklovers'" and "New York Herald" share with the author the reproach of first promoting their publicity. That they are now willing to further reduce their share of the burden by dividing it with the present publishers entitles them to the thanks of the author and the gratitude of the book-buying public.

E. V. C.

DEAD MEN'S DUST

You don't buy poetry. (Neither do I.)

Why?

You cannot afford it? Bosh! you spend

Editions de luxe on a thirsty friend.

You can buy any one of the poetry bunch

For the price you pay for a business lunch.

Don't you suppose that a hungry head,

Like an empty stomach, ought to be fed?

Looking into myself, I find this true,

So I hardly can figure it false in you.

And you don't *read* poetry very much.

(Such

Is my own case also.) "But," you cry,

"I haven't the time." Beloved, you lie.

When a scandal happens in Buffalo,

You ponder the details, con and pro;

If poets were pugilists, couldn't you tell

Which of the poets licked John L.?

If poets were counts, could your wife be fooled

As to which of the poets married a Gould?

And even *my* books might have some hope

If poetry books were books of dope.

"You're a little bit swift," you say to me,
"See!"

You open your library. There you show
Your "favorite poets," row on row,
Chaucer, Shakespeare, Tennyson, Poe,
A Homer unread, an uncut Horace,
A wholly forgotten William Morris.
My friend, my friend, can it be you thought
That these were poets whom you had bought?
These are dead men's bones. You bought their mummies
To display your style, like clothing dummies.
But when do they talk to you? Some one said
That these were poets which should be read,
So here they stand. But tell me, pray,
How many poets who live to-day
Have you, of your own volition, sought,
Discovered and tested, proved and *bought*,
With a grateful glow that the dollar you spent
Netted the poet his ten per cent.?

"But hold on," you say, "I am reading *you*."
True,
And pitying, too, the sorry end
Of the dog I tried this on. My friend,
I *can* write poetry – good enough
So you wouldn't look at the worthy stuff.
But knowing what you prefer to read
I'm setting the pace at about your speed,
Being rather convinced these truths will hold you

A little bit better than if I'd told you
A genuine poem and forgotten to scold you.
Besides, when I open my little room
And see *my* poets, each in his tomb,
With his mouth dust-stopped, I turn from the shelf
And I must scold you, or scold myself.

IN NINETEEN HUNDRED AND NOW

Thomas Moore, at the present date,
Is chiefly known as "a ten-cent straight."
Walter, the Scot, is forgiven his rimes
Because of his tales of stirring times.
William Morris's fame will wear
As a practical man who made a chair.
And even Shakespere's memory's green
Less because he's read than because he's seen.
Then why should a poet make his bow
In the year of nineteen hundred and now?

Homer himself, if he could but speak,
Would admit that most of his stuff is Greek.
Chaucer would no doubt own his tongue
Was the broken speech of the land when young.
Shelley's a sealed-up book, and Byron
Is chiefly recalled as a masculine siren.
Poe has a perch on the chamber door,
But the populace read him "Nevermore."
Spenser fitted his day, as all allow,
But this is nineteen hundred and now.

Tennyson's chiefly given away

To callow girls on commencement day.
Alfred Austin, entirely solemn,
Is quoted most in the funny column.
Riley's Hoosiers have made their pile
And moved to the city to live in style.
Kipling's compared to "The Man Who Was,"
And the rest of us write with little cause,
Till publishers shy at talk of per cents.,
But offer to print "at author's expense."

O, once the "celestial fire" burned bright,
But the world now calls for electric light!
And Pegasus, too, is run by meter,
Being trolleyized to make him fleeter.
So I throw the stylus away and set
Myself at the typewriter alphabet
To spell some message I find within
Which shall also scratch your rawhide skin,
For you must read it, if I learn how
To write for nineteen hundred and now.

DON'T YOU?

When the plan which I have, to grow suddenly rich
Grows weary of leg and drops into the ditch,
And scheme follows scheme
Like the web of a dream
To glamor and glimmer and shimmer and seem...
Only seem;
And then, when the world looks unfadably blue,
If my rival sails by
With his head in the sky,
And sings "How is business?" why, what do I do?
Well, I claim that I aim to be honest and true,
But I sometimes lie. Don't you?

When something at home is decidedly wrong,
When somebody sings a false note in the song,
Too low or too high,
And, you hardly know why,
But it wrangles and jangles and runs all awry...
Aye, awry!
And then, at the moment when things are askew,
Some cousin sails in
With a face all a-grin,
And a "Do I intrude? Oh, I see that I do!"
Well, then, though I aim to be honest and true,

Still I sometimes lie. Don't you?

When a man whom I need has some foible or fad,
Not very commendable, not very bad;
Perhaps it's his daughter,
And some one has taught her
To daub up an "oil" or to streak up a "water";
What a "water"!
And her grass is green green and her sky is blue blue,
But her father, with pride,
In a stagey aside
Asks my "candid opinion." Then what do I do?
Well, I claim that I aim to be honest and true,
But I sometimes lie. Don't you?

YOU TOO

Did you ever make some small success
And brag your little brag,
As if your breathing would impress
The world and fix your tag
Upon it, so that all might see
The label loudly reading, "ME!"
And when you thought you'd gained the height
And, sunning in your own delight,
You preened your plumes and crowed "All right!"
Did something wipe you out of sight?
Unless you did this many a time
You needn't stop to read this rime.

When I was mamma's little joy
And not the least bit tough,
I'd sometimes whop some other boy
(If he were small enough),
And for a week I'd wear a chip,
And at the uplift of a lip
I'd lord it like a pigmy pope,
Until, when I had run my rope,
Some bullet-headed little Swope
Would clean me out as slick as soap.
No doubt you were as bad, or worse,

Or else you had not read this verse.

All women were like pica print
When I was young and wise;
I'd read their very souls by dint
Of looking in their eyes.
And in those limpid souls I'd see
A very fierce regard for me.
And then – my, my, it makes me faint! —
Peroxide and a pinkish paint
Gave me the hard, hard heart complaint,
I saw the sham, I felt the taint,
Yet if she'd pat me once or twice,
I'd follow like a little fyce.

I never played a little game
And won a five or ten,
But, presto! I was not the same
As common makes of men.
Not Solomon and all his kind
Held half the wisdom of my mind.
And so I'd swell to twice my size,
And throw my hat across my eyes,
And chew a quill, and wear red ties,
And tip you off the stock to rise —
Until, at last, I'd have to steal
The baby's bank to buy a meal.

I speak as if these things remained

All in the perfect tense,
And yet I don't suppose I've gained
A single ounce of sense.
I scoff these tales of yesterday
In quite a supercilious way,
But by to-morrow I may bump
Into some newer game and jump!
You'll think I am the only trump
In all the deck until – kerslump!
Unless you'll do the same some time,
Of course you haven't read this rime.

THE ETERNAL EVERYDAY

O, one might be like Socrates
And lift the hemlock up,
Pledge death with philosophic ease,
And drain the untrembling cup; —
But to be barefoot and be great,
Most in desert and least in state,
Servant of truth and lord of fate!
I own I falter at the peak
Trode daily by the steadfast Greek.

O, one might nerve himself to climb
His cross and cruelly die,
Forgiving his betrayer's crime,
With pity in his eye; —
But day by day and week by week
To feel his power and yet be meek,
Endure the curse and turn the cheek,
I scarce dare trust even you to be
As was the Jew of Galilee.

O, one might reach heroic heights
By one strong burst of power.
He might endure the whitest lights
Of heaven for an hour; —

But harder is the daily drag,
To smile at trials which fret and fag,
And not to murmur – nor to lag.
The test of greatness is the way
One meets the eternal Everyday.

DON'T TAKE YOUR TROUBLES TO BED

You may labor your fill, friend of mine, if you will;
You may worry a bit, if you must;
You may treat your affairs as a series of cares,
You may live on a scrap and a crust;
But when the day's done, put it out of your head;
Don't take your troubles to bed.

You may batter your way through the thick of the fray,
You may sweat, you may swear, you may grunt;
You may be a jack-fool if you must, but this rule
Should ever be kept at the front: —
Don't fight with your pillow, but lay down your head
And kick every worriment out of the bed.

That friend or that foe (which he is, I don't know),
Whose name we have spoken as Death,
Hovers close to your side, while you run or you ride,
And he envies the warmth of your breath;
But he turns him away, with a shake of his head,
When he finds that you don't take your troubles to bed.

FAILURE

What is a failure? It's only a spur
To a man who receives it right,
And it makes the spirit within him stir
To go in once more and fight.
If you never have failed, it's an even guess
You never have won a high success.

What is a miss? It's a practice shot
Which a man must make to enter
The list of those who can hit the spot
Of the bull's-eye in the centre.
If you never have sent your bullet wide,
You never have put a mark inside.

What is a knock-down? A count of ten
Which a man may take for a rest.
It will give him a chance to come up again
And do his particular best.
If you never have more than met your match,
I guess you never have toed the scratch.

GOOD

You look at yourself in the glass and say:

"Really, I'm rather *distingué*.

To be sure my eyes

Are assorted in size,

And my mouth is a crack

Running too far back,

And I hardly suppose

An unclassified nose

Is a mark of beauty, as beauty goes;

But still there's something about the whole

Suggesting a beauty of – well, say soul."

And this is the reason that photograph-galleries

Are able to pay employees' salaries.

Now, this little mark of our brotherhood,

By which each thinks that his looks are good,

Is laudable quite in you and me,

Provided we not only look, but be.

I look at my poem and you hear me say:

"Really, it's clever in its way.

The theme is old

And the style is cold.

These words run rude;

That line is crude;

And here is a rhyme
Which fails to chime,
And the metre dances out of time.
Oh, it isn't so bright it'll blind the sun,
But it's better than that by Such-a-one."
And this is the reason I and my creditors
Curse the "unreasoning whims" of editors,
And yet, if one writes for a livelihood,
He ought to believe that his work is good,
Provided the form that his vanity takes
Not only believes, but also makes.

And there is our neighbor. We've heard him say:
"Really, I'm not the commonest clay.
Brown got his dust
By betraying a trust;
And Jones's wife
Leads a terrible life;
While I *have* heard
That Robinson's word
Isn't quite so good as Gas preferred.
And Smith has a soul with seamy cracks,
For he talks of people behind their backs!"
And these are the reasons the penitentiary
Holds open house for another century.
True, we want no man in our neighborhood
Who doesn't consider his character good,
But then it ought to be also true
He not only knows to consider, but do.

LET'S BE GLAD WE'RE LIVING

I

Oh, let's be glad that we're living yet; you bet!
The sun runs round and the rain is wet
And the bird flip-flops its wing;
Tennis and toil bring an equal sweat;
It's so much trouble to frown and fret,
So easy to laugh and sing,
Ting ling!
So easy to laugh and sing!
(And yet, sometimes, when I sing my song,
I'm almost afraid my method is wrong.)

II

Many have money which I have not, God wot!
But victual and keep are all they've got,
And the stars still dot the sky.
Heaven be praised that they shine so bright,
Heaven be praised for an appetite,

So who is richer than I?

Hi yi!

Say, who is richer than I?

(And yet I'm hoping to sell this screed
For several dollars I hardly need.)

III

Ducats and dividends, stocks and shares, who cares?

Worry and property travel in pairs,

While the green grows on the tree.

A banquet's nothing more than a meal;

A trolley's much like an automobile,

With a transfer sometimes free,

Tra lee!

With a transfer sometimes free!

(And yet you're unwilling, I plainly see,
To leave the automobile to me.)

IV

A note you give and a note you get; don't fret,

For they both may go to protest yet,

And the roses blow perfume.

Fortune is only a Dun report;
The Homestead Law and the Bankrupt Court
Have fostered many a boom,
Boom, boom!
Have fostered many a boom.
(But I see you smile in a rapturous way
On the man who is rated double A.)

V

Life is a show for you and me; it's free!
And what you look for is what you see;
A hill is a humped-up hollow.
Riches are yours with a dollar bill;
A million's the same little digit still,
With nothing but naughts to follow,
So hollo!
There's nothing but naughts to follow.
(But you and I, as I've said before,
Could get along with a trifle more.)

SUCCESS

It's little the difference where you arrive;
The serious question is how you strive.
Are you up to your eyes in a wild romance?
Does your lady lead you a dallying dance?
Do you question if love be fate, or chance?
Oh, the world will ask: "Did he get the girl?"
Though gentleman, coxcomb, clown or churl,
Master or menial of passion's whirl.
But it *isn't* that. The world will run
Though you never bequeath it daughter or son,
But what, O lover, will come to you
If you be not chivalrous, honest, true?
As far ahead as a man may think,
You can see your little soul shrivel and shrink.
It's not, "Do you win?"
It is, "What have you been?"

Are you stripped for the world-old, world-wide race
For the metal which shines like the sun's own face
Till it dazzles us blind to the mean and base?
Do you say to yourself, "When I have my hoard,
I will give of the plenty which I have stored,
If the Lord bless me, I will bless the Lord"?
And do you forget, as you pile your pelf,

What is the gift you are giving yourself?
Though your mountain of gold may dazzle the day,
Can you climb its height with your feet of clay?
Oh, it isn't the stamp on the metal you win;
It's the stamp on the metal you coin within.
It's not what you give;
It is "What do you live?"

Are you going to sail the polar seas
To the point of ninety-and-north degrees,
Where the very words in your larynx freeze?
Well, the mob may ask "Did he reach the pole?
Though fair, or foul, did he touch the goal?"
But if that be the spirit which stirs your soul,
Off, off from the land below the zeroes;
For you are not of the stuff of heroes.
Ho! many a man can lead men forth
To the fearsome end of the Farthest North,
But can you be faithful for woe or weal
In a land where nothing but self is leal?
Oh, it isn't "How far?"
It is what you are.
And it isn't your lookout where you arrive,
But it's up to you as to how you strive.

THE GRILL

Why do you?

What's it to you?

I know you do, for I've seen the gruesome feeling simmer through you.

I've seen it rise behind your eyes

And take your features by surprise.

I've seen it in your half-hid grin

And the tilting-upness of your chin.

Good-natured though you are and fair, as you have often boasted,

Still you like to hear the other man artistically roasted.

Whenever the star secures the stage with the spotlight in the centre,

Why should the anvil chorus think it has the cue to enter?

Whenever the prima donna trills the E above the clef,

Why should the brasses orchestrate the bass in double f?

It's funny,

But it's even money,

You like to spy the buzzing fly in the other fellow's honey.

Though you have said that honest bread

Demands no honey on it spread,

And if we eat the crusty wheat

With appetite, it needs no sweet,
Still I have noticed you were not at all inclined to cry
Because the man the bees had blest was bothered with the fly.

Whenever the chef concocts a dish which sets the world to
tasting,

Why does the cooking-school get out its recipes for basting?

Whenever a sprinter beats the bunch from the pistol-shot,
why is it

The heavy hammer throwers get together for a visit?

Excuse me!

Did you accuse me

Of turning the spit a little bit myself? Why, you amuse me!

Didn't I scratch the sulphurous match

And blow the flame to make it catch?

Didn't you trot to get the pot

To heat the water good and hot?

Then, seizing on our victim, if we found no greater sin,

Didn't we call him "a lobster," and cheerfully chuck him in?

THE VISION

At the door of Success, I've been tempted to knock
Both the door and the man who went through it,
But I find that the fellow was greasing the lock
All the time that he strove to undo it,
So I either stay out, or must look for the key
Which slipped back the bolt which impeded,
And I'm certain to find it, as soon as I see
The reason my rival succeeded.

Yes, I own when the man is a rank also-ran

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