

CLASSICS TO GO
A HANDY GUIDE
FOR BEGGARS
ESPECIALLY THOSE OF THE POETIC FRATERNITY



VACHEL LINDSAY

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Vachel Lindsay

DEDICATION AND PREFACE OF A HANDY GUIDE FOR BEGGARS

THERE are one hundred new poets in the villages of the land. This Handy Guide is dedicated first of all *to them*.

It is also dedicated to the younger sons of the wide earth, to the runaway boys and girls getting further from home every hour, to the prodigals who are still wasting their substance in riotous living, be they gamblers or blasphemers or plain drunks; to those heretics of whatever school to whom life is a rebellion with banners; to those who are willing to accept counsel if it be mad counsel.

This book is also dedicated to those budding philosophers who realize that every creature is a beggar in the presence of the beneficent sun, to those righteous ones who know that all righteousness is as filthy rags.

Moreover, as an act of contrition, reënlistment and fellowship this book is dedicated to all the children of Don Quixote who see giants where most folks see windmills: those Galahads dear to Christ and those virgin sisters of Joan of Arc who serve the lepers on their knees and march in shabby armor against the proud, who look into the lightning with the eyes of the mountain cat. They do more soldierly things every day than this book records, yet they are mine own people, my nobler kin to whom I have been recreant, and so I finally dedicate this book *to them*.

These are the rules of the road:—

- (1) Keep away from the Cities;
- (2) Keep away from the railroads;
- (3) Have nothing to do with money and carry no baggage;

- (4) Ask for dinner about quarter after eleven;
- (5) Ask for supper, lodging and breakfast about quarter of five;
- (6) Travel alone;
- (7) Be neat, deliberate, chaste and civil;
- (8) Preach the Gospel of Beauty.

And without further parley, let us proceed to inculcate these, by illustration, precept and dogma.

VACHEL LINDSAY.

SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS,
November, 1916.

FOLLOW THE THISTLEDOWN

I asked her "Is Aladdin's Lamp
Hidden anywhere?"
"Look into your heart," she said,
"Aladdin's Lamp is there."

She took my heart with glowing hands.
It burned to dust and air
And smoke and rolling thistledown,
Blowing everywhere.

"Follow the thistledown," she said,
"Till doomsday if you dare,
Over the hills and far away.
Aladdin's Lamp is there."

I
VAGRANT ADVENTURES IN THE
SOUTH

COLUMBUS

WOULD that we had the fortunes of Columbus.
Sailing his caravels a trackless way,
He found a Universe—he sought Cathay.
God give such dawns as when, his venture o'er,
The Sailor looked upon San Salvador.
God lead us past the setting of the sun
To wizard islands, of august surprise;
God make our blunders wise.

THE MAN UNDER THE YOKE

It was Sunday morning in the middle of March. I was stranded in Jacksonville, Florida. After breakfast I had five cents left. Joyously I purchased a sack of peanuts, then started northwest on the railway ties straight toward that part of Georgia marked "Swamp" on the map.

Sunset found me in a pine forest. I decided to ask for a meal and lodging at the white house looming half a mile ahead just by the track. I prepared a speech to this effect:—

"I am the peddler of dreams. I am the sole active member of the ancient brotherhood of the troubadours. It is against the rules of our order to receive money. We have the habit of asking a night's lodging in exchange for repeating verses and fairy-tales."

As I approached the house I forgot the speech. All the turkeys gobbled at me fiercely. The two dogs almost tore down the fence trying to get a taste of me. I went to the side gate to appeal to the proud old lady crowned with a lace cap and enthroned in the porch rocker. Her son, the proprietor, appeared. He shall ever be named the dog-man. His tone of voice was such, that, to speak in metaphor, he bit me in the throat. He refused me a place in his white kennel. He would not share his dog-biscuit. The being on the porch assured me in a whanging yelp that they did not take "nobody in under no circumstances." Then the dog-man, mollified by my serene grin, pointed with his thumb into the woods, saying: "There is a man in there who will take you in sure." He said it as though it were a reflection on his neighbor's dignity. That I might not seem to be hurrying, I asked if his friend kept watch-dogs. He assured me the neighbor could not afford them.

The night with the man around the corner was like a chapter from that curious document, "The Gospel according to St. John." He "could not afford to turn a man away" because once he slept three nights in the rain when he walked here from west Georgia. No one would give him shelter. After that he decided that when he had a roof he would go shares with whoever asked. Some strangers were good, some bad, but he would risk them all. Imagine this amplified in the drawling wheeze of the cracker sucking his corn-cob pipe for emphasis.

His real name and address are of no consequence. I found later that there were thousands like him. But let us call him "The Man Under the Yoke." He was lean as an old opium-smoker. He was sooty as a pair of tongs. His Egyptian-mummy jaws had a two-weeks' beard. His shirt had not been washed since the flood. His ankles were innocent of socks. His hat had no band. I verily believe his pipe was hereditary, smoked first by a bond-slave in Jamestown, Virginia.

He could not read. I presume his wife could not. They were much embarrassed when I wanted them to show me Lakeland on the map. They had warned me against that village as a place where itinerant strangers were shot full of holes. Well, I found that town pretty soon on the map, and made the brief, snappy memorandum in my note-book: "Avoid Lakeland."

There were three uncertain chairs on the porch, one a broken rocker. Therefore the company sat on the railing, loafing against the pillars. The plump wife was frozen with diffidence. The genial, stubby neighbor, a man from away back in the woods, after telling me how to hop freight-cars, departed through an aperture in the wandering fence.

The two babies on the floor, squealing like shoats, succeeded in being good without being clean. They wrestled

with the puppies who emerged from somewhere to the number of four. I wondered if the Man Under the Yoke would turn to a dog-man when the puppies grew up and learned to bark.

Supper was announced with the admonition, "Bring the chairs." The rocking chair would not fit the kitchen table. Therefore the two babies occupied one, and the lord of the house another, and the kitchen chair was allotted to your servant. The mother hastened to explain that she was "not hungry." After snuffing the smoking lamp that had no chimney, she paced at regular intervals between the stove and her lord, piling hot biscuits before him.

I could not offer my chair, and make it plain that some one must stand. I expressed my regrets at her lack of appetite and fell to. Their hospitality did not fade in my eyes when I considered that they ate such provisions every day. There was a dish of salt pork that tasted like a salt mine. We had one deep plate in common containing a soup of luke-warm water, tallow, half-raw fat pork and wilted greens. This dish was innocent of any enhancing condiment. I turned to the biscuit pile.

They were raw in the middle. I kept up courage by watching the children consume the tallow soup with zest. After taking one biscuit for meat, and one for vegetables, I ate a third for good-fellowship. The mother was anxious that her children should be a credit, and shook them too sternly and energetically I thought, when they buried their hands in the main dish.

Meanwhile the Man Under the Yoke told me how his bosses in the lumber-camp kept his wages down to the point where the grocery bill took all his pay; how he was forced to trade at the "company" store, there in the heart of the pine woods. He had cut himself in the saw-pit, had been laid up for a month, and "like a fool" had gone back to the same

business. Last year he had saved a little money, expecting to get things “fixed up nice,” but the whole family was sick from June till October. He liked his fellow-workmen. They had to stand all he did. They loved the woods, and because of this love would not move to happier fortunes. Few had gone farther than Jacksonville. They did not understand travelling. They did not understand the traveller and were “likely to be mean to him.” Then he asked me whether I thought “niggers” had souls. I answered “Yes.” He agreed reluctantly. “They have a soul, of course, but it’s a mighty small one.” We adjourned to the front room, carrying our chairs down a corridor, where the open doorways we passed displayed uncarpeted floors and no furniture. The echo of the slow steps of the Man Under the Yoke reverberated through the wide house like muffled drums at a giant’s funeral. Yet the largeness of the empty house was wealth. I have been entertained since in many a poorer castle; for instance, in Tennessee, where a deaf old man, a crone, and her sister, a lame man, a slug of a girl, and a little unexplained boy ate, cooked, and slept by an open fire. They had neither stove, lamp, nor candle. I was made sacredly welcome for the night, though it was a one-room cabin with a low roof and a narrow door.

Thanks to the Giver of every good and perfect gift, pine-knots cost nothing in a pine forest. New York has no such fireplaces as that in the front room of the Man Under the Yoke. I thought of an essay by a New England sage on compensation. There were many old scriptures rising in my heart as I looked into that blaze. The one I remembered most was “I was a stranger, and ye took me in.” But though it was Sunday night, I did not quote Scripture to my host.

It was seven o’clock. The wife had put her babies to bed. She sat on the opposite side of the fire from us. Eight o’clock was bedtime, the host had to go to work so early.

But our three hearts were bright as the burning pine for an hour.

You have enjoyed the golden embossed brocades of Hokusai. You have felt the charm of Maeterlinck's "The Blind." Think of these, then think of the shoulders of the Man Under the Yoke, embossed by the flame. Think of his voice as an occult instrument, while he burned a bit of crackling brush, and spoke of the love he bore that fireplace, the memory of evenings his neighbors had spent there with him, the stories told, the pipes smoked, the good silent times with wife and children. It was said by hints, and repetitions, and broken syllables, but it was said. We ate and drank in the land of heart's desire. This man and his wife sighed at the fitting times, and smiled, when to smile was to understand, while I recited a few of the rhymes of the dear singers of yesterday and to-day: Yeats and Lanier, Burns and even Milton. This fire was the treasure at the end of the rainbow. I had not been rainbow-chasing in vain.

As my host rose and knocked out his pipe, he told how interesting lumbering with oxen could be made, if a man once understood how they were driven. He assured me that the most striking thing in all these woods was a team of ten oxen. He directed me to a road whereby I would be sure to see half a dozen to-morrow. He said if ever I met a literary man, to have him write them into verses. Therefore the next day I took the route and observed: and be sure, if ever I meet the proper minstrel, I shall exhort him with all my strength to write the poem of the yoke.

As to that night, I slept in that room in the corner away from the fireplace. One comfort was over me, one comfort and pillow between me and the dark floor. The pillow was laundered at the same time as the shirt of my host. There was every reason to infer that the pillow and comfort came from his bed.

They slept far away, in some mysterious part of the empty house. I hoped they were not cold. I looked into the rejoicing fire. I said: "This is what I came out into the wilderness to see. This man had nothing, and gave me half of it, and we both had abundance."