

"Terence, This is Stupid Stuff."

by A. E. Houseman (1859–1936)

A Shropshire Lad. London: K. Paul, Trench, Treubner, 1896

‘Terence, this¹ is stupid stuff:
You eat your victuals² fast enough;
There can’t be much amiss, ’tis clear,
To see the rate you drink your beer.
But oh, good Lord, the verse you make, 5
It gives a chap the belly-ache.
The cow, the old cow, she is dead;
It sleeps well, the hornéd head:
We poor lads, ’tis our turn now
To hear such tunes as killed the cow. 10
Pretty friendship ’tis to rhyme
Your friends to death before their time
Moping melancholy mad:
Come, pipe a tune to dance to, lad.’

Why, if ’tis dancing you would be, 15
There’s brisker pipes than poetry.
Say, for what were hop-yards meant,³
Or why was Burton built on Trent?⁴
Oh many a peer of England brews
Livelier liquor than the Muse, 20
And malt does more than Milton can
To justify God’s ways to man.⁵
Ale, man, ale’s the stuff to drink
For fellows whom it hurts to think:
Look into the pewter pot 25
To see the world as the world’s not.
And faith, ’tis pleasant till ’tis past:
The mischief is that ’twill not last.
Oh I have been to Ludlow fair⁶
And left my necktie God knows where, 30
And carried halfway home, or near,
Pints and quarts of Ludlow beer:
Then the world seemed none so bad,

¹ This poetry Terence writes

² Snacks, "vittles"

³ Fermentation vats for making beer

⁴ Burton on the River Trent, an English city renowned for its breweries

⁵ An allusion to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, in which the poet claims his poetry will let readers understand God's mysterious ways.

⁶ A town in Shropshire with a beer-tasting festival each spring.

And I myself a sterling lad;
And down in lovely muck I've lain, 35
Happy till I woke again.
Then I saw the morning sky:
Heigho, the tale was all a lie;
The world, it was the old world yet,

I was I, my things were wet, 40
And nothing now remained to do
But begin the game anew.

Therefore, since the world has still
Much good, but much less good than ill,
And while the sun and moon endure 45
Luck's a chance, but trouble's sure,
I'd face it as a wise man would,
And train for ill and not for good.
'Tis true, the stuff I bring for sale
Is not so brisk a brew as ale: 50
Out of a stem that scored⁷ the hand
I wrung it in a weary land.
But take it: if the smack⁸ is sour,
The better for the embittered hour;
It should do good to heart and head 55
When your soul is in my soul's stead;
And I will friend you, if I may,
In the dark and cloudy day.

There was a king reigned in the East:
There, when kings will sit to feast, 60
They get their fill before they think
With poisoned meat and poisoned drink.
He gathered all the springs to birth
From the many-venomed earth;
First a little, thence to more, 65
He sampled all her killing store;
And easy, smiling, seasoned sound,
Sate the king when healths went round.
They put arsenic in his meat
And stared aghast to watch him eat; 70
They poured strychnine in his cup
And shook to see him drink it up:
They shook, they stared as white's their shirt:
Them it was their poison hurt.
--I tell the tale that I heard told. 75
Mithridates,⁹ he died old.

⁷ sliced

⁸ taste

⁹ Mithridates VI, King of Pontus (133 BCE-63 BCE). The story of Mithridates and his immunity to poison comes from the Roman historian Pliny (23-27 CE).