

Medicine for the Soul

Over the entrance to the library in ancient Thebes was inscribed the legend used as the title for this story. Thus are we reminded that then, as now and forever, for men tossed amidst "the ups and downs of this unstable sphere", there is no haven that better ministers to the vexed spirit than the supreme art and accumulated wisdom held in solution in the best books of the world — the tale in verse and prose of humanity's reaction to the impact of Life.

The blood inheritance of James Depew Edmundson, flowing down on the father's side through many honored generations in Britain and on the mother's side for centuries through a distinguished line of the French nobility, was of no common quality. The privations and meager facilities of pioneer days seemed but to whet to an even keener edge the hunger of the boy for books and the acquisition of knowledge. His schooling was never more than that of the frontier country school of 1845-50. But to make up for scant facilities were certain contacts, notably Uncle David and his love of literature, and on the boy's part the kind of intellectual hunger that marked

Lincoln's boyhood. The boy was very shy, a quality that all the years have not diminished. Very poor and physically delicate, the necessity of training to meet life bore in upon his consciousness. A strong, fine spirit rallied to the task. His life and remarkable intellectual interests are a perfect illustration of how the tough, strong fiber of the spirit may find mastery in the battle of life and flower in superb culture.

From the first he was passionately devoted to the best literature and, as a specialty, the correct use of English. He tells yet with vivid zest how at school he revelled in the analysis of sentences by means of the old scheme of diagrams on the blackboard — like so many diminutive zeppelins. He still maintains there is no better plan to mark the relation of words. He came as youth and in early manhood to avoid incorrect English as a deep humiliation. Slovenly use of one's mother tongue was a real offense. Thus, that letterhead, not of his designing — "Bloomer & Edmundson, Attorneys at Law Real Estate and Insurance Agents" — jarred upon his sensibility. To make certain of his contention that the word "and" should have been inserted before the words "Real Estate", he wrote to Cyrus Northrup, then Professor of English at Yale, and later president of the University of Minnesota. Northrup agreed.

It is with a positive pang that he refers to the Iowa motto on the Washington Monument which reads: "Her affections, like the rivers of her borders flow to an inseparable union", whereas Enoch Eastman's utterance was: "The affections of her people, like the rivers of her borders, flow to an inseparable union". He is hurt to see sacrificed the perfect balance that marked the real utterance, and the mutilation of the author's lovely phrase.

In the fifties he acquired his first Webster's Dictionary, for which he paid \$4.50. Only an insatiable hunger could explain so prodigious an expenditure in his circumstances. He has owned every edition that has since been issued. Through the years he has used and accumulated perhaps the most remarkable private library in the State of authorities on correct English and of anthologies of famous quotations.

Mr. Edmundson has long taken a great host of magazines. During a recent call I noted these on his study table: the *National Geographic*, *Atlantic*, *Popular Mechanics*, *Pathfinder*, *Forum*, *North American Review*, *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, *Literary Digest*, *American*, and the *Times Book Review*. He has *Scribners*, *Harpers*, and the *Century* bound from the beginning until a few years ago. He has from the first the Chicago

Daily News Almanac, the *World Almanac*, except the first six or seven volumes, the *Tribune Almanac* from 1838 to its suspension of publication in recent years, the *Iowa Official Register* from the issue prepared by Frank D. Jackson in 1886, the *Annals of Iowa* (all three series), bound, from the first in 1863, the *Biographical Directory of the American Congress* including every member from 1774 to 1927. For years he has subscribed to the *New York Times Book Review*. Each week he turns eagerly to "Queries and Answers", where are set out the questions of those eager mortals asking where can be found the poem containing the lines ". . .", and the answers that come from all about the rim of the globe. He has furnished many a clew and launched many a question.

A year or two ago, before he arose from his bed, there came marching into his consciousness at ninety-two years the words, "While Greece arose divinely free and dauntless as her own dark sea." Where did they come from? Who said it? For more than a year there was no rest for Edmundson — searching, searching everywhere. Everybody else searched too — librarians, *Times Book Review* editors, "sharks" who make such quests a specialty. No use. No clew. Could I have made them up? Absurd, no such luck! Thrilling

words, spurring the imagination! But at last, and here at home came the answer. Forrest B. Spaulding, Des Moines librarian, found the lines in Robert Montgomery's "Starlight on Marathon". So peace settled again at 3333 Grand.

The "Lexicographer's Column" in the *Literary Digest* is a perennial delight. With its famous editor, Frank H. Vizetelly, a lexicographer of world renown and editor of the *Standard Dictionary*, Mr. Edmundson has enjoyed a friendship of nearly forty years. They engaged in much interesting correspondence from time to time on the use and origin of words. The following extract from a letter to Mr. Vizetelly in 1919 gives Edmundson's attitude on the subject of the accurate use of the mother tongue.

"I have for a long time thought that a practical and accurate knowledge of the Mother Tongue of a people, should stand at the head not only of its essential branches, but also of the so-called accomplishments. I cannot help thinking that such a knowledge would be the greatest accomplishment that could be acquired by a student. It also seems to me that teachers in both our common schools and our colleges give too little attention to the study of their Mother Tongue. I have before me as I write, an advertisement of a prominent Western College, in which it speaks of the Rocke-

fellers, the Morgans, the Ames, the Goulds and others, the 'Ames' meaning the Ameses who were instrumental in the building of the Union Pacific Railroad. I really think such an error is inexcusable in the literature of such an institution."

Mr. Edmundson has two books, highly prized, given to him by Vizetelly, namely: *A Desk-Book of Twenty-five Thousand Words Frequently Mispronounced* and *Essentials of English Speech and Literature*, the latter inscribed by the author, "To my good friend and kindly critic." This friendship with a kindred spirit has been an un-failing joy. From New York on November 21, 1923, Mr. Vizetelly sent birthday greetings to his friend in Des Moines. "My dear Mr. Edmundson", he wrote. "On this, the Eighty-fifth Anniversary of your birth, I come as one who 'also serves' to offer you my warmest congratulations.

"We have corresponded with each other for many years — almost thirty, I think, — and, notwithstanding the fact that sometimes our views were at variance, not one line, nay, not even one word has passed between us that could mar that perfect amity born of mutual appreciation and friendly understanding that continues between us to this day.

"You who can look back to the times when railroads were unknown, when steam navigation was

in its infancy, when the telegraph and telephone were yet undreamed, when mankind had not conquered the air or mastered the sea, have been blessed by an All-Wise Providence with a fullness of years that commands the good will of mankind and the love of all people.

“As you look back, well may you remind us that our years are spent as a tale that is told, and that the tale varies between man and man, in youth and age, in grief and joy, in laughter and tears, from day to day until the days roll into years — and the years, how quickly they pass!

“May the future hold for you a promise for greater blessings than the past, and looking backward as you march toward the golden sunrise of a new dawn, may you find that Peace which passeth all understanding that brings comfort and contentment to all who have trod in the steps of the Master.

God bless you!

Very heartily yours,

Frank H. Vizetelly”

Mr. Edmundson has for years been in frequent correspondence with authorities on English all about the country on correct phrasing and the origin of various quotations and poems. In one case, relating to John Luckey McCreery, once a resident of Iowa and the author of the well-known

poem "There Is No Death", attributed by Burton S. Stevenson, in the first edition of his *Home Book of Verse*, to Bulwer-Lytton, Edmundson collected the proofs and secured credit in later editions for McCreery, the true author. It was a common error, against which McCreery had protested for many years with slight success. Stevenson has since told the story of the controversy in his book of *Famous Single Poems*.

In many cases Edmundson has taken the pains to furnish information on authenticity of verse or quotation eagerly sought in some far corner of the nation. His collection of data relating to such matters is voluminous. Inquiries come to him constantly and always arouse his keen interest and active coöperation. As recently as November, 1932, came a request from Alfred H. Holt, Instructor in English at Williams College, asking the pronunciation of the words "Iowa" and "Des Moines". As to the former, Edmundson referred him to Frank Luther Mott's fine article on the subject in the *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*. Such services give him the utmost delight, as does the perusal of Mr. Holt's *Wild Names I Have Met*, just obtained.

Mr. Edmundson commissioned the well-known American sculptor, Sherry Edmundson Fry, to fashion a statue of the famous Iowa Indian, Chief

Mahaska, for presentation to the city of his youth. Of the working model the great sculptor Frederick MacMonnies wrote to Mr. Edmundson on September 7, 1906, that it was "faithfully modelled and well designed, and in the subsequent elaboration of the final large model will not fail to bring fame to its author and add beauty to your city." The small model received honorable mention in the Paris Salon in 1906 and in the following year the completed statue was awarded the gold medal. Mainly on the strength of this work came to Mr. Fry the coveted National Prize to Rome in 1908. The statue was presented in 1909. It stands in the public square in Oskaloosa and is regarded as one of the finest Indian statues extant.

JAMES B. WEAVER