

Classic Poetry Series

Herbert Asquith
- poems -

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Herbert Asquith(11 March 1881 - 5 August 1947)

Herbert Asquith was an English poet, novelist and lawyer.

Biography

He was the second son of H. H. Asquith, British Prime Minister — with whom he is frequently confused — and younger brother of Raymond Asquith. His wife Lady Cynthia Asquith, whom he married in 1910, the daughter of Hugo Richard Charteris, 11th Earl of Wemyss (1857–1937), was also a writer.

Asquith was greatly affected by his service with the Royal Artillery in World War I. His poems include "The Volunteer" and "The Fallen Subaltern", the latter being a tribute to fallen soldiers. His books include "Roon" and "Young Orland".

A Dedication

FRIEND if all these verses die:
Soon will you, and soon will I
But, if any word should live,
Then that word to you I give.

Herbert Asquith

A Ship Sails Up To Bideford

A ship sails up to Bideford;
Upon a western breeze,
Mast by mast, sail over sail,
She rises from the seas,
And sights the hills of Devon
And the misty English trees.

She comes from Eastern islands;
The sun is in her hold;
She bears the fruit of Jaffa,
Dates, oranges and gold;

She brings the silk of China,
And bales of Persian dyes,
And birds with sparkling feathers
And snakes with diamond eyes.

She's gliding in the starlight
As white as any gull;
The east is gliding with her
In the shadows of her hull.

A ship sails up to Bideford;
Upon a western breeze,
With fruits of Eastern summers
She rises from the seas,
And sights the hills of Devon
And the misty English trees.

Herbert Asquith

After The Salvo

UP and down, up and down
They go, the gray rat, and the brown.
The telegraph lines are tangled hair,
Motionless on the sullen air
An engine has fallen on its back,
With crazy wheels, on a twisted track
All ground to dust is the little town.
Up and down, up and down
They go, the gray rat, and the brown
A skull, torn out of the graves near by,
Gapes in the grass. A butterfly,
In azure iridescence new,
Floats into the world, across the dew
Between the flow'rs. Have we lost our way,
Or are we toys of a god at play,
Who do these things on a young Spring day?

Where the salvo fell, on a splintered ledge
Of ruin, at the crater's edge,
A poppy lives: and young, and fair,
The dewdrops hang on the spider's stair,
With every rainbow still unhurt
From leaflet unto leaflet girt.
Man's house is crushed ; the spider's lives
Inscrutably He takes, and gives,
Who guards not any temple here,
Save the temple of the gossamer.

Up and down, up and down
They go, the gray rat and the brown:
A pistol cracks: they too are dead.
The nightwind rustles overhead.

Herbert Asquith

Ares God Of War

UNDER the stars the armies lie asleep:
Between the lines a quiet river flows
Through brakes of honeysuckle, and of rose,
And fields where poppies droop in languor deep:
The night as with a mantle now enfolds
The muffled forms upon the pasture low;
The scent of thyme comes down across the wolds,
And on the roses of the dark hedgerow
The summer starlight falls in flakes of silver snow.

Here, from the wooded haunt of nymph and fawn,
The hidden guns peer forth across the hills,
Their wheels are on the trampled daffodils,
And so they wait the coming of the dawn.
In dappled shadows, where the fairy weaves
On grasses tall his web of sparkling lace,
The gunners lie, their heads upon the sheaves:
White falls the moon on many a sunburnt face,
That ere the day shall feel another God's embrace.

Among the barrows of the sunken plain,
Where sleep the soldiers of another day,
On misty meadow and on upland gray,
On many eyes, that close but once again,
The peaceful earth her benediction throws,
The waves of healing music from the streams,
That though the willows softly comes, and goes ;
And now the face of all the country seems
A mirror consecrated to an army's dreams.

From far away is borne a woman's pray'r
To Ares, restless in his iron crown :
'Sleep, Ares, Sleep ! For, once the dice are thrown,
Empires to thee are leaves upon the air !
Ere all the homes go smoking to the skies,
And men are swept upon the battle-blast,
Ere all the tears are wept from women's eyes,
O Queen of Love, hold now the Lover fast,
And let him taste eternal anodyne at last !'

But with the dawn there comes a soldier's song:
'When all the guns have fired their last salute,
And the tongues of all the world are mute,
And life is dearer than to right a wrong,
Then may he weary of his burning wine,
And rest forever in the arms divine
Of Aphrodite passionate and pale-
But Hark ! He comes ! Hail, Ares ! Lord of Thunder, Hail !

'He rides above the ocean and the snow,
His trail is on the curtain of the skies :
Brighter than dawn, his young eternal eyes
Shine in the eyes of Valour far below :
Now Mammon hides beneath his trembling halls,
While Honour marches singing into war ;
On strange forgotten hearts a radiance falls,
As ever nearer, burning from afar,
The sword of Ares gleams above the morning star.'

'The other gods are weaker ; thou alone
Dost break the king and bend the emperor's knee:
Lower than unto Christ they bow to thee,
Lord of the slave, and guardian of the free,
Steel-hearted Ares, shaker of the throne ;
Young god of battle, restless lover, hail !
For, once a man has seen thine eyes aflame,
And mounted on the horses of the gale,
Death is a nothing, life an empty name:
Arise and lead us ere our blood be tame,
O lord of thunder, Arcs of the crimson mail !'

Herbert Asquith

Fortune Of War

THE far guns boom: shell-struck the church is rolled
Skyward athunder, dust of rose and gold:
The staring villa stands. So goes the War:
The limelight lives: extinguished is the star.

Herbert Asquith

Jewels: A Young Man To A Merchant

OLD Man, your pearls are not for us,
Your rubies die too soon:
Have you the pearls of Sirius,
Or opals of the moon?

I do not ask for other gems;
Flashing with frost and fire
The sky's undying diadems
Shall be my love's attire.

Emeralds, that into rubies melt
Upon the brow of night,
I've taken from Orion's belt
To make her girdle bright.

On high ways of the albatross
I scale the purple air
For sapphires of the Southern Cross
And wreath them in her hair

Her robe it is the morning sky,
Her veil it is the West;
So robed, so veiled my love will fly.
When I am gone to rest.

Yet all the rays of all the moons,
The lights of all the skies
Are pale beside the dim lagoons
Of those mysterious eyes.

Old Man, your pearls are not for us,
Your rubies die too soon:
Have you the pearls of Sirius,
Or opals of the moon

Herbert Asquith

Love And Humour

WHEN first I saw you, in eclipse,
A veil about your head,
And wondered at those unseen lips
With wit bediamonded:
Then laughing down the street I went,
And sang upon my way, content.

Next time we met in dim surmise,
Upon an autumn morn,
And in those understanding eyes
Shone humour, rainbow-born:
So travelling through this earthly maze,
A greater light fell on my ways.

But, when I saw your head unveiled,
Feature, and form, and hue:
A woodland fairy, silver-mailed,
Lightwinged upon the dew:
Then did I pay a heavy cost,
For love, a world of laughter lost.

Herbert Asquith

Nightfall

Hooded in angry mist, the sun goes down:
Steel-gray the clouds roll out across the sea:
Is this a Kingdom? Then give Death the crown,
For here no emperor hath won, save He.

Herbert Asquith

On A Troopship - 1915

FAREWELL, the village leaning to the hill,
And all the cawing rooks that homeward fly ;
The bees; the drowsy anthem of the mill
The willows winding under April sky !
We watch the breakers crashing on the bow,
And those far flashes in the Eastern haze :
The fields and friends, that were, are fainter now
Than whispering of ancient waterways.
Now England stirs, as stirs a dreamer wound
In immemorial slumber ; lids apart,
Soon will she rouse her giant limbs, attuned
To that old music hidden at her heart.
The small occasions and the menial cries
Fade fast away : the little men beware :
She rises in her circuit of the skies,
An eagle drinking of the mountain air.
We come to harbour in the breath of wars;
Welcome again, the land of our farewells
In this strange ruin, open to the stars,
We find the haven, where her spirit dwells.

Herbert Asquith

Riding

FILL up, fill up the stirrup-cup!
The wine is running free:
The blue veils of the Spring are out;
She dances on the sea.
In fields of love, in lanes of laughter,
Slacken not the pace:
Care not for Him, who follows after,
And wins at last the race.
Past pear and apple-orchards,
The bramble and the rose,
And out across the swinging turf
To where the sea-wind goes:
To horse! To horse! the time is short;
Soon will the day be done:
We'll gallop on the morning grass,
And drink the rising sun:
And onward through the upland,
To see the plains unfurled,
And armies of the stars go down
Over the brink of the world.

Herbert Asquith

Soldiers At Peace

Mourn not for these, the children of the spring :
On Flemish plains and far Aegean sand,
Mourn not for these, who had no perishing !
Hang high their swords in churches greatly spanned !
Whose deeds have spoken so, beyond our tears,
Their spirits live, needing no other voice
Above the dimming valley of the years
They live anew, immortal by their choice.

The soldiers' peace of their imagining
has fallen here. The whirling leaves are still:
Deep in the shadow of the rainwashed hill,
A lustre and a quietude art shed,
When all the valley streams are glimmering,
And the moon swims from the storm-wrack overhead.

Herbert Asquith

Sunset

HOODED in angry mist, the sun goes down:
Steel-gray the clouds roll out across the Sea:
Is this a Kingdom? Then give Death the crown,
For here no emperor hath won, save He.

Though from the blackened grasses of the spring
The dead look up to where the swallow flies:
And in this woodland never a bird will sing-
The laughter lives within the sentry's eyes.

Herbert Asquith

The Bather

THE sea-breeze beating on her brow,
The foam asurge her shining feet,
She stood,-a silver Victory,
Poised high on some Athenian prow,
Leading against a tyrant fleet
The winged vanguard of the free.

Herbert Asquith

The Charioteer

(TO A CHILD)

LOVE be thy charioteer:
In all thy brightening and thy darkening hours
May he be at thine ear;
So shalt thou sail at ease above the tow'rs,
Where pale Ambition, in his clouded hood,
Climbs, step by step, the stair;
And Beauty, dancing in the roadside flow'rs,
Or resting in her mountain quietude,
Tresses a-wander on the sunlit air,
Shall meet thee everywhere.
Then the fast-withered leaves of poor Caprice
Shall live again; and she be happy yet.
Freed from the tangle of her glittering net:
And Poverty no longer want for alms,
And everything be blessed,
Save fevered Avarice,
With his discoloured palms,
And talons prisoned in his own gray breast.
Above the path of death,
Through field and wood,
Mountain and flood,
Upon the whirlwind's breath,
My way be sped!
If die thou must,
With wine and crust,
Through flow'rs to dust,
Be thou so charioted!

Herbert Asquith

The Fairy Lover

SHE lay beneath an apple tree,
A marble maiden, free from care;
And round her was a canopy
Of moonlit air.

He made his bed among the leaf,
And on a petal softly blown,
He touched a vein upon her brow
With grief unknown.

Then lightly, where the lashes fall,
Entered the chamber of her soul;
And, finding there a silver bell,
He made it toll.

Herbert Asquith

The Fallen Poet

NOW that the soul has left its throne
 Behind your mortal eyes,
And light, and colour and sound are gone
 From the body's palaces :
Still in his wood the blackbird calls,
 But there is one too few to hear :
And one too few to watch the trout
 Swim through the music of the weir.

And once I dreamt that you were gone,
 As dust upon the wave ;
Or, as a dropp in some deep well,
 That none could sort or save.
But falling low between the stars,
 So soon as I had such a fear,
At dusk and dawn a whisper came :
 'The dead are near: the dead are near.

Herbert Asquith

The Fallen Spire [a Flemish Village]

THE spire is gone, that slept for centuries,
Mirrored among the lilies, calm and low:
And now the water holds but empty skies,
Through which the rivers of the thunder flow.

The church lies broken near the fallen spire:
For here, among these old and human things,
Death sweeps along the street with feet of fire,
And goes upon his way with moaning wings.

On pavements by the kneeling herdsmen worn
The drifting fleeces of the shells are rolled
Above the Saints a village Christ forlorn,
Wounded again, looks down upon his fold.

And silence follows fast: no evening peace,
But leaden stillness, when the thunder wanes,
Haunting the slender branches of the trees,
And settling low upon the listless plains.

Herbert Asquith

The Fallen Subaltern

The starshells float above, the bayonets glisten;
We bear our fallen friend without a sound;
Below the waiting legions lie and listen
To us, who march upon their burial-ground.

Wound in the flag of England, here we lay him;
The guns will flash and thunder o'er the grave;
What other winding sheet should now array him,
What other music should salute the brave?

As goes the Sun-god in his chariot glorious,
When all his golden banners are unfurled,
So goes the soldier, fallen but victorious,
And leaves behind a twilight in the world.

And those who come this way, in days hereafter,
Will know that here a boy for England fell,
Who looked at danger with the eyes of laughter,
And on the charge his days were ended well.

One last salute; the bayonets clash and glisten;
With arms reversed we go without a sound:
One more has joined the men who lie and listen
To us, who march upon their burial-ground.

Herbert Asquith

The Frowning Cliff

The sea has a laugh
And the cliff a frown;
For the laugh of the sea is wearing him down.

Lipping and lapping
Frown as he may,
The laughing sea
Will eat him away;

Knees and body,
And tawny head,
He'll smile at last
On a golden bed.

Herbert Asquith

The Ship Of Oak

When the bow-waves race through the foam
and aft are the boiling trails,
What ship is that in the fading light
with the press and the wind in her sails?
When the salvo flashes through the smoke
and the stricken cruisers reel,
Behold a pennoned ship of oak
That leads the ships of steel!

Through storms of lashing hail
When the green swells life and gleam,
What sailor now commands the Fleet?
The Captain of a dream:
When battle thunders to the shock
Or while the gulls go swerving by,
He leads the Fleet in a ship of oak,
One arm and blinded eye.

Herbert Asquith

The Silver Birch

O SILVER one, O silver one,
Above the valley of the Bane:
O stem with snow-water agleam,
And glistening limbs, and trails of pearl.

The sun has sent a slanting kiss:
Red fire and gold, his arrows burn:
Now that he aims a shaft at thee,
Red fire and gold to silver turn!

When I am spent with the ways of men.
I'll wash my hands in melting snow:
And live with thee among the oaks,
And watch the river swirl below.

But I must ever be travelling
From sea to sea, from shoal to shoal:
Farewell ! O still and beautiful,
I would thy valley were my goal!

Herbert Asquith

The Volunteer

Here lies a clerk who half his life had spent
Toiling at ledgers in a city grey,
Thinking that so his days would drift away
With no lance broken in life's tournament:
Yet ever 'twixt the books and his bright eyes
The gleaming eagles of the legions came,
And horsemen, charging under phantom skies,
Went thundering past beneath the oriflamme.

And now those waiting dreams are satisfied;
From twilight to the halls of dawn he went;
His lance is broken; but he lies content
With that high hour, in which he lived and died.
And falling thus he wants no recompense,
Who found his battle in the last resort;
Nor needs he any hearse to bear him hence,
Who goes to join the men of Agincourt.

Herbert Asquith

The Western

THOR draws a chord invisible
 Across the shaking sky:
I hear the tearing of the shell,
 The bullets sing and cry,
As, charging through the flames of hell,
 The batteries go by.

The gunners laugh about the task,
 That man to man has given:
Like Titans, now the guns unmask,
 And fire the veils of heaven.
Above the cloud what lights are gleaming?
 God's batteries are those,
Or souls of soldiers, homeward streaming
 To banquet with their foes?
The floods of battle ebb and flow,
The soldiers to Valhalla go!

They say that, when the day awoke,
 And the dying night was wan,
Harry of England rode the smoke,
 And led the English van:
And bowmen in the battle-glare
 Rose from the ghostly dew:
The clothyard sang upon the air,
 And the grey goose-feather flew!
Harry of England is awake,
His archers mind not trench or stake !

And men have seen the Emperor,
 The Eagle of the South:
God grant the bonds be loosed by Thor
 That bind that marble mouth!
The silver roads of conquest lie
 Fast frozen in his brow:
Would those imperious lips were free
 To give their orders now!
The floods of battle ebb and flow,
The soldiers to Valhalla go!

Beyond the thunder of the guns,
 Beyond the flaming line,
Far from this sky of echoing bronze,
 The English valleys shine;
The gardens, moated in the wolds,
 By wind and water kissed;
And dainty girls, that England folds
 In sunshine and in mist.
The floods of battle ebb and flow,
The soldiers to Valhalla go!

The fighting men go charging past,
 With the battle in their eyes,
The fighting men go reeling past,
 Like gods in poor disguise:
And stumbling men, whom none will see,
 No wife or mother more,
Winged with the wings of Victory,
 And helmeted by Thor!

Above the cloud what lights are gleaming?
 God's batteries are those,
Or souls of soldiers, homeward streaming
 To banquet with their foes?

Herbert Asquith

To A Baby Found Paddling Near The Thames

Hail! O Baby of the May
In the bubbling river-bed,
Playing where the cannon play,
With the shrapnel overhead!
Sparkling in and flashing out
Through the eddies and the shallows,
With your feet among the trout,
And your head among the swallows;
While your wag-tails on the daisies
Lead you in the minuet,
Twinkling through the flow'ry mazes,
Baby, do you quite forget
That, with shrapnel overhead,
Other babes are put to bed?
Baby, may the buttercup,
When you tumble, pick you up;
If you fall beside the willow,
Lilies rise to be your pillow!
In the winter should you go
Straying far without a rest,
Down beneath the drifting snow
May you be the mouse's guest;
May the bull-frog be your Knight,
And the tit your Templar true!
May the fairy guide you right
Wandering through a misty land,
At the crossings of the dew,
With the rainbow in her hand!
Should you fall from branches high
And go tumbling down the sky,
May the heron in the air
Take you floating on his wings,
And the cloudlets be your stair,
Over palaces of kings:
Riding high above the wold,
Larks your sentinels shall be,
Challenging with tongues of gold
Those who try to cage the free!
So, philosopher of May,

With my blessing go your way!
If you win such friends as these
You need never have a care,
Cannon you may safely tease,
And may juggle, at your ease,
With the whizzbangs in the air:
Though the world be full of sadness,
You may still have fun and gladness,
And be happy for a day,
Playing where the cannon play.

Herbert Asquith

Venice

IN domes of dim and ancient gold,
 In cloisters, where the lightning plays,
Where gleam the gorgeous saints of old
 In aisles of jade and chrysoprase,
In halls that wave like waving water,
Still moves the voice of Ocean's daughter.

Venice ! What siren music then
 Stirred on the shoals and shallow sea,
When that small band of wandering men
 First in their dreams imagined thee,
And hung thy lyric splendour high
Between the water and the sky!

What Triton strains in other days
 Were heard, when, on a sea of flame,
Thy battlefleet swung through the haze,
 And homeward in her glory came,
Bearing the beauty of the East
To make Thy happy saint a feast.

Now, though that sceptre-hand be cold,
 Those argent argosies no more
Their Tyrian-tinted wings unfold
 From Cyprus unto Elsinore;
With broken sword, and banner furled,
How dies the Siren of the world?

The cloud has lifted from the stars,
 And now again the starlight falls;
Now Venus calls again to Mars,
 And Bacchus reels about his halls
And, lovely in a thousand forms,
Our Lady drifts above the storms.

Among the moonlit marble lace,
 That wreathes this avenue forlorn,
Some God has made his dwelling place
 And takes his manna from the morn;

And every young and wandering soul,
That passes here, must pay its toll.

Far off the city fades away,
Save where one tow'r of rosy light,
Like some dissolving shaft of day,
Pierces the bosom of the night:
The distant lightning breaks its shroud:
Valhalla gleams beyond the cloud.

Alone we float through gulfs remote,
The black canal no longer seen;
My boat it is a fairy boat,
Above the ripple silver-green,
Upon the wavelet violet-crowned,
My boat and I are outward bound!
What

Herbert Asquith

War's Cataract

In this red havoc of the patient earth,
Though higher yet the tide of battle rise,
Now has the hero cast away disguise,
And out of ruin splendour comes to birth.
This is the field where Death and Honour meet,
And all the lesser company are low:
Pale Loveliness has left her mirror now
And walks the Court of Pain with silent feet.

From cliff to cliff war's cataract goes down,
Hurling its booming waters to the shock;
And, tossing high their manes of gleaming spray,
The crested chargers leap from rock to rock,
While over all, dark though the thunder frown,
The rainbows climb above to meet the day.

Herbert Asquith

Youth In The Skies

These who were children yesterday
Now move in lovely flight,
Swift-glancing as the shooting stars
That cleave the summer night;

A moment flashed, they came and went,
Horizons rise and fall,
The speed of valour lifts them up
And strength obeys their call.

The downs below are breathing peace
With thyme and butterflies,
And sheep at pasture in the shade-
And now from English skies

These who were children yesterday
Look down with other eyes;
Man's desperate folly was not theirs
But theirs the sacrifice.

Old men may wage a war of words,
Another race are these,
Who flash to glory dawn and night
Above the starry seas.

Herbert Asquith