

Classic Poetry Series

Ada Cambridge

- poems -

Publication Date:

2004

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

At Sea

When the investing darkness growls,
And deep reverberates to deep;
When keyhole whines and chimney howls,
And all the roofs and windows weep;
Then, through the doorless walls of sleep,
The still-sealed ear and shuttered sight,
Phantoms of memory steal and creep,
The very ghosts of sound and light--
Dream-visions and dream-voices of a bygone night.

I see again, I hear again,
Where lightnings flash and house-eaves drip,
A flying swirl of waves and rain--
That storm-path between Sound and Rip.
I feel the swaying of the ship
In every gust that rocks the trees,
And taste that brine upon my lip
And smell the freshness of the breeze
That sped us through the welter of those racing seas.

I hear the menace of the call
To rope and rivet, wheel and mast,
In the swift onrush of the squall,
The challenge of the thundering blast
To daring men as it sweeps past;
And in my dream I have no dread.
Rivet and rope are firm and fast,
The clear lights shining, green and red,
The quiet eyes of sentry watching overhead.

What epic battles pass unsung!
It was a war of gods befell
On that wild night when we were young.
They rode, like cavalry of hell,
The mighty winds, the monstrous swell,
On their white horses, fierce and fleet;
They stood at bay, invincible,
Where pulsed beneath our sliding feet
The faithful iron heart that never lost a beat.

How the sharp sea-spume lashed and stung!
How the salt sea-wind tugged and tare
And clawed and mauled us where we clung,
With panting breasts and streaming hair,
To our frail eyrie in mid-air!
How we exulted in the fight--
With neither haste nor halt to dare
Those Titans furies in their might,
Undaunted and unswerving in our insect flight!

No lap of exquisite repose!
A mortar wherein souls are brayed;
An anvil ringing to the blows
Whereby true men are shaped, and made
Divinely strong and unafraid.
Such gallant sailor-men there be--
Never unready or dismayed,
Though 't's the face of death they see
In cyclone, fire and fog, and white surf on the lee.

Not only in the sylvan bower,
On dreaming hill, by sleeping mere,

The holy place--the sacred hour.
Beset by every form of fear,
Darkness ahead and danger near,
Sorely hard-driven and hard-prest,
But still unspent and of good cheer--
He finds them who can pass the test,
Who never winks an eye and never stays to rest

Ada Cambridge

Despair

Alone! Alone! No beacon, far or near!
No chart, no compass, and no anchor stay!
Like melting fog the mirage melts away
In all-surrounding darkness, void and clear.
Drifting, I spread vain hands, and vainly peer
And vainly call for pilot, -- weep and pray;
Beyond these limits not the faintest ray
Shows distant coast whereto the lost may steer.

O what is life, if we must hold it thus
As wind-blown sparks hold momentary fire?
What are these gifts without the larger boon?
O what is art, or wealth, or fame to us
Who scarce have time to know what we desire?
O what is love, if we must part so soon?

Ada Cambridge

Faith

And is the great cause lost beyond recall?
Have all the hopes of ages come to naught?
Is life no more with noble meaning fraught?
Is life but death, and love its funeral pall?
Maybe. And still on bended knees I fall,
Filled with a faith no preacher ever taught.
O God -- MY God -- by no false prophet wrought --
I believe still, in despite of it all!

Let go the myths and creeds of groping men.
This clay knows naught -- the Potter understands.
I own that Power divine beyond my ken,
And still can leave me in His shaping hands.
But, O my God, that madest me to feel,
Forgive the anguish of the turning wheel!

Ada Cambridge

Good-bye

Good-bye! -- 'tis like a churchyard bell -- good-bye!
Poor weeping eyes! Poor head, bowed down with woe!
Kiss me again, dear love, before you go.
Ah, me, how fast the precious moments fly!
Good-bye! Good-bye!

We are like mourners when they stand and cry
At open grave in wintry wind and rain.
Yes, it is death. But you shall rise again --
Your sun return to this benighted sky.
Good-bye! Good-bye!

The great physician, Time, shall pacify
This parting anguish with another friend.
Your heart is broken now, but it will mend.
Though it is death, yet still you will not die.
Good-bye! Good-bye!

Dear heart! dear eyes! dear tongue, that cannot lie!
Your love is true, your grief is deep and sore;
But love will pass -- then you will grieve no more.
New love will come. Your tears will soon be dry.
Good-bye! Good-bye!

Ada Cambridge

Honour

Me let the world disparage and despise --
As one unfettered with its gilded chains,
As one untempted by its sordid gains,
Its pleasant vice, its profitable lies;
Let Justice, blind and halt and maimed, chastise
The rebel spirit surging in my veins,
Let the Law deal me penalties and pains
And make me hideous in my neighbours' eyes.

But let me fall not in mine own esteem,
By poor deceit or selfish greed debased.
Let me be clean from secret stain and shame,
Know myself true, though false as hell I seem --
Know myself worthy, howsoe'er disgraced --
Know myself right, though every tongue should blame.

Ada Cambridge

On Australian Hills

Earth, outward tuning on her path in space
This pensive southern face,
Swathing its smile and shine
In that soft veil that day and darkness twine,
The silver-threaded twilight thin and fine,
With April dews impearled,
Looms like another and diviner world.

Here April brings her garnered harvest-sheaf,
Her withered autumn leaf,
Tintings of bronze and brass;
Her full-plumed reeds, her mushroom in the grass,
Her furrowed fields, where plough and sower pass,
Her laden apple bough.
All are transfigured and transmuted now.

The eastward ranges, so unearthly blue,
Bloom with their richest hue;
Slowly each rose-flushed crest
Deepens to violet where the shadows rest,
Darkens and darkens to the paling west;
The waning sun-fires die;
The first star swims in the pellucid sky.

Soundless to listening ear, on grass and flowers,
The footfall of the hours;
Formless and void to sight
The evolutions of invading night,
The creeping onslaught and the gradual flight,
Until the field is won,
And we look forth to see that day is done.

Then, from their grave of darkness, wood and lawn
Wake to a second dawn.
From unseen wells below
The pearly moon-tides rise and overflow,
Till vale and peak and wide air-spaces glow
In the transfiguring stream,
And earth and life are but a heavenly dream.

And now we hear the fairy-echoes fall
Where distant curlews call,
And how the silence thrills
With the night-voices of the glens and hills,
Rustling in reeds and tinkling in the rills,
Bubbling in creek and pool
Where frogs are wooing in the shallows cool.

And more than these, in this delicious time,
The melody sublime
That inward spirit hears--
The faint and far-off music of the spheres,
Immortal harmonies, too fine for ears
Dulled in the dusty ways,
Deaf with the din of the laborious days.

Whereto, responsive as the vibrant wire
Of some aeolian lyre
Fanned by celestial wings,
The summoned soul in mystic concord brings
The deep notes latent in its trembling strings,
Joining the choir divine
Of all the worlds that in the ether shine.

O sacred hour! O sweet night, calm and fair!
Thou dost rebuke despair;
Thou dost assuage the pain
Of passionate spirit and distempered brain,
And with thy balms, distilled like gentle rain,
Dost heal the fret and smart
And nerve the courage of this coward's heart.

And lift me up, a Moses on the Mount
To the pure source and fount
Of law transcending law,
Of life that hallows life. I know no more
Of life's great Giver than I knew before,
But these His creatures tell
That He is living, and that all is well.

Oh, to be there to-night!
To see that rose of sunset flame and fade
On ghostly mountain height,
The soft dusk gathering each leaf and blade
From the departing light,
Each tree-fern feather of the wildwood glade.

From arid streets to pass
Down those green aisles where golden wattles bloom,
Over the fragrant grass,
And smell the eucalyptus in a gloom
That is as clear as glass,

The dew-fresh scents of bracken and of broom . . .

These city clamours mute,
To hear the woodland necromancers play
Each his enchanted lute;
That dear bird-laugh, so exquisitely gay,
The magpie's silver flute
In vesper carol to the dying day.

To hear the live wind blow,
The delicate stir and whisper of the trees
As light breaths come and go,
The brooklet murmuring to the vagrant breeze,
The bull-frog twanging low
His deep-toned mandolin to chime with these.

And then the whispering rills,
The hushed lone wheel, or hoof, or axeman's tool;
The brooding dark that stills
The sweet Pan-piping of the grove and pool;
The dimly glimmering hills;
The sleeping night, so heavenly clean and cool.

Oh, for that mother-breast
That takes the broken spirit for repair,
The worn-out brain for rest--
That healing silence, that untainted air,
That Peace of God Blest, blest
The very memory that I once was there.

The thought that someday yet,
In flesh, not dreams, I may return again,
And at those altars, set

In the pure skies, above the smoky plain,
Remember and forget
The joy of living and its price of pain

That sullied earth reserves
Such spacious refuge virgin and apart,
That wasting life preserves
Such sweet retreat for the distracted heart,
Such fount of strength for nerves
Torn in the ruthless struggle of the mart

That Government divine
O'er all this reek of blunders and of woes
Keeps an unravaged shrine
Not here, not there, but in the souls of those
Who neither weep nor whine,
But trust the guidance of the One Who Knows.

Ada Cambridge

The Dawn of God's Sabbath

The dawn of God's dear Sabbath
Breaks o'er the earth again,
As some sweet summer morning
After a night of pain;
It comes as cooling showers
To some exhausted land,
As shade of clustered palm trees
'Mid weary wastes of sand.

Lord, we would bring for offering
Though marred with earthly soil,
Our week of earnest labor,
Of useful daily toil;
Fair fruits of self denial,
Of strong, deep love to Thee,
Fostered by Thine own Spirit
In our humility.

And, we would bring our burden
Of sinful thought and deed,
In Thy pure presence kneeling,
From bondage to be freed;
Our heart's most bitter sorrow
For all Thy work undone;
So many talents wasted!
So few bright laurels won!

And with that sorrow mingling,
A steadfast faith, and sure,
And love so deep and fervent,
That tries to make it pure;
In His dear presence finding
The pardon that we need;
And then the peace so lasting,
Celestial peace indeed!

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The Virgin Martyr

Every wild she-bird has nest and mate in the warm April weather,
But a captive woman, made for love -- no mate, no nest has she.
In the spring of young desire, young men and maids are wed together,
And the happy mothers flaunt their bliss for all the world to see:
Nature's sacramental feast for these -- an empty board for me.

I, a young maid once, an old maid now, deposed, despised, forgotten --
I, like them have thrilled with passion and have dreamed of nuptial rest,
Of the trembling life within me of my children unbegotten,
Of a breathing new-born body to my yearning bosom prest,
Of the rapture of a little soft mouth drinking at my breast.

Time, that heals so many sorrows, keeps mine ever freshly aching;
Though my face is growing furrowed and my brown hair turning white,
Still I mourn my irremediable loss, asleep or waking --
Still I hear my son's voice calling "mother" in the dead of night,
And am haunted by my girl's eyes that will never see the light.

O my children that I might have had! my children, lost for ever!
O the goodly years that might have been -- now desolate and bare!
O malignant God or Fate, what have I done that I should never
Take my birthright like the others, take the crown that women wear,
And possess the common heritage to which all flesh is heir?

Ada Cambridge

What of the Night?

To you, who look below,
 Where little candles glow --
Who listen in a narrow street,
Confused with noise of passing feet --

To you 'tis wild and dark;
 No light, no guide, no ark,
For travellers lost on moor and lea,
And ship-wrecked mariners at sea.

But they who stand apart,
 With hushed but wakeful heart --
They hear the lulling of the gale,
And see the dawn-rise faint and pale.

A dawn whereto they grope
 In trembling faith and hope,
If haply, brightening, it may cast
A gleam on path and goal at last.

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