

Classic Poetry Series

Charles Stuart Calverley

- poems -

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Beer

1 In those old days which poets say were golden --
2 (Perhaps they laid the gilding on themselves:
3 And, if they did, I'm all the more beholden
4 To those brown dwellers in my dusty shelves,
5 Who talk to me 'in language quaint and olden'
6 Of gods and demigods and fauns and elves,
7 Pan with his pipes, and Bacchus with his leopards,
8 And staid young goddesses who flirt with shepherds:)

9 In those old days, the Nymph called Etiquette
10 (Appalling thought to dwell on) was not born.
11 They had their May, but no Mayfair as yet,
12 No fashions varying as the hues of morn.
13 Just as they pleased they dressed and drank and ate,
14 Sang hymns to Ceres (their John Barleycorn)
15 And danced unchaperoned, and laughed unchecked,
16 And were no doubt extremely incorrect.

17 Yet do I think their theory was pleasant:
18 And oft, I own, my 'wayward fancy roams'
19 Back to those times, so different from the present;
20 When no one smoked cigars, nor gave At-homes,
21 Nor smote a billiard-ball, nor winged a pheasant,
22 Nor 'did' her hair by means of long-tailed combs,
23 Nor migrated to Brighton once a year,
24 Nor -- most astonishing of all -- drank Beer.

25 No, they did not drink Beer, 'which brings me to'
26 (As Gilpin said) 'the middle of my song.'
27 Not that 'the middle' is precisely true,
28 Or else I should not tax your patience long:
29 If I had said 'beginning,' it might do;
30 But I have a dislike to quoting wrong:
31 I was unlucky -- sinned against, not sinning --
32 When Cowper wrote down 'middle' for 'beginning.'

33 So to proceed. That abstinence from Malt
34 Has always struck me as extremely curious.
35 The Greek mind must have had some vital fault,
36 That they should stick to liquors so injurious --
37 (Wine, water, tempered p'raps with Attic salt) --
38 And not at once invent that mild, luxurious,
39 And artful beverage, Beer. How the digestion
40 Got on without it, is a startling question.

41 Had they digestions? and an actual body
42 Such as dyspepsia might make attacks on?
43 Were they abstract ideas -- (like Tom Noddy
44 And Mr. Briggs) -- or men, like Jones and Jackson?
45 Then nectar -- was that beer, or whisky-toddy?
46 Some say the Gaelic mixture, I the Saxon:
47 I think a strict adherence to the latter

48 Might make some Scots less pigheaded, and fatter.

49 Besides, Bon Gaultier definitely shows
50 That the real beverage for feasting gods on
51 Is a soft compound, grateful to the nose
52 And also to the palate, known as 'Hidgson.'
53 I know a man -- a tailor's son -- who rose
54 To be a peer: and this I would lay odds on,
55 (Though in his Memoirs it may not appear,)
56 That that man owed his rise to copious Beer.

57 O Beer! O Hodgson, Guinness, Allsopp, Bass!
58 Names that should be on every infant's tongue!
59 Shall days and months and years and centuries pass,
60 And still your merits be unrecked, unsung?
61 Oh! I have gazed into my foaming glass,
62 And wished that lyre could yet again be strung
63 Which once rang prophet-like through Greece, and taught her
64 Misguided sons that the best drink was water.

65 How would he now recant that wild opinion,
66 And sing -- as would that I could sing -- of you!
67 I was not born (alas!) the 'Muses' minion,
68 I'm not poetical, not even blue:
69 And he, we know, but strives with waxen pinion,
70 Whoe'er he is that entertains the view
71 Of emulating Pindar, and will be
72 Sponsor at last to some now nameless sea.

73 Oh! when the green slopes of Arcadia burned
74 With all the lustre of the dying day,
75 And on Cithæron's brow the reaper turned,
76 (Humming, of course, in his delightful way,
77 How Lycidas was dead, and how concerned
78 The Nymphs were when they saw his lifeless clay;
79 And how rock told to rock the dreadful story
80 That poor young Lycidas was gone to glory:)

81 What would that lone and labouring soul have given,
82 At that soft moment for a pewter pot!
83 How had the mists that dimmed his eye been riven,
84 And Lycidas and sorrow all forgot!
85 If his own grandmother had died unshriven,
86 In two short seconds he'd have recked it not;
87 Such power hath Beer. The heart which Grief hath cankered
88 Hath one unfailing remedy -- the Tankard.

89 Coffee is good, and so no doubt is cocoa;
90 Tea did for Johnson and the Chinamen:
91 When 'Dulce est desipere in loco'
92 Was written, real Falernian winged the pen.
93 When a rapt audience has encored 'Fra Poco'

94 Or 'Casta Diva,' I have heard that then
95 The Prima Donna, smiling herself out,
96 Recruits her flagging powers with bottled stout.

97 But what is coffee, but a noxious berry,
98 Born to keep used-up Londoners awake?
99 What is Falernian, what is Port or Sherry,
100 But vile concoctions to make dull heads ache?
101 Nay stout itself -- (though good with oysters, very) --
102 Is not a thing your reading man should take.
103 He that would shine, and petrify his tutor,
104 Should drink draught Allsopp in its 'native pewter.'

105 But hark! a sound is stealing on my ear --
106 A soft and silvery sound -- I know it well.
107 Its tinkling tells me that a time is near
108 Precious to me -- it is the Dinner Bell.
109 O blessed Bell! Thou bringest beef and beer,
110 Thou bringest good things more than tongue may tell:
111 Seared is, of course, my heart -- but unsubdued
112 Is, and shall be, my appetite for food.

113 I go. Untaught and feeble is my pen:
114 But on one statement I may safely venture:
115 That few of our most highly gifted men
116 Have more appreciation of their trencher.
117 I go. One pound of British beef, and then
118 What Mr. Swiveller called a 'modest quencher';
119 That home-returning, I may 'soothly say,'
120 'Fate cannot touch me: I have dined to-day.'

Charles Stuart Calverley

Changed

1 I know not why my soul is rack'd:
2 Why I ne'er smile as was my wont:
3 I only know that, as a fact,
4 I don't.
5 I used to roam o'er glen and glade
6 Buoyant and blithe as other folk:
7 And not unfrequently I made
8 A joke.

9 A minstrel's fire within me burn'd.
10 I'd sing, as one whose heart must break,
11 Lay upon lay: I nearly learn'd
12 To shake.
13 All day I sang; of love, of fame,
14 Of fights our fathers fought of yore,
15 Until the thing almost became
16 A bore.

17 I cannot sing the old songs now!
18 It is not that I deem them low;
19 'Tis that I can't remember how
20 They go.
21 I could not range the hills till high
22 Above me stood the summer moon:
23 And as to dancing, I could fly
24 As soon.

25 The sports, to which with boyish glee
26 I sprang erewhile, attract no more;
27 Although I am but sixty-three
28 Or four.
29 Nay, worse than that, I've seem'd of late
30 To shrink from happy boyhood -- boys
31 Have grown so noisy, and I hate
32 A noise.

33 They fright me, when the beech is green,
34 By swarming up its stem for eggs:
35 They drive their horrid hoops between
36 My legs: --
37 It's idle to repine, I know;
38 I'll tell you what I'll do instead:
39 I'll drink my arrowroot, and go
40 To bed.

Charles Stuart Calverley

Companions - A Tale Of A Grandfather

I KNOW not of what we ponder'd
Or made pretty pretence to talk,
As, her hand within mine, we wander'd
Tow'rd the pool by the lime-tree walk,
While the dew fell in showers from the passion flowers
And the blush-rose bent on her stalk.

I cannot recall her figure:
Was it regal as Juno's own?
Or only a trifle bigger
Than the elves who surround the throne
Of the Faëry Queen, and are seen, I ween,
By mortals in dreams alone?

What her eyes were like I know not:
Perhaps they were blurr'd with tears;
And perhaps in you skies there glow not
(On the contrary) clearer spheres.
No! as to her eyes I am just as wise
As you or the cat, my dears.

Her teeth, I presume, were "pearly:"
But which was she, brunette or blonde?
Her hair, was it quaintly curly,
Or as straight as a beadle's wand?
That I fail'd to remark: it was rather dark
And shadowy round the pond.

Then the hand that repos'd so snugly
In mine,—was it plump or spare?
Was the countenance fair or ugly?
Nay, children, you have me there!
My eyes were p'haps blurr'd; and besides I 'd heard
That it 's horribly rude to stare.

And I,—was I brusque and surly?
Or oppressively bland and fond?
Was I partial to rising early?
Or why did we twain abscond,
When nobody knew, from the public view
To prowl by a misty pond?

What pass'd, what was felt or spoken,—
Whether anything pass'd at all,—
And whether the heart was broken
That beat under that shelt'ring shawl,—
(If shawl she had on, which I doubt),—has gone,
Yes, gone from me past recall.

Was I haply the lady's suitor?
Or her uncle? I can't make out;
Ask your governess, dears, or tutor.

For myself, I 'm in hopeless doubt
As to why we were there, who on earth we were,
And what this is all about.

Charles Stuart Calverley

Forever

"Forever": 'tis a single word!
Our rude forefathers deemed it two:
Can you imagine so absurd
A view?

"Forever"! What abysses of woe
The word reveals, what frenzy, what
Despair! "For ever" (printed so)
Did not.

It looks, ah me! how trite and tame!
It fails to sadden or appal
Or solace--it is not the same
At all.

O thou to whom it first occurred
To solder the disjoined, and dower
The native language with a word
Of power:

We bless thee! Whether far or near
Thy dwelling, whether dark or fair
Thy kingly brow, is neither here
Nor there.

But in men's hearts shall be thy throne,
While the great pulse of England beats.
Thou coiner of a word unknown
To Keats!

And nevermore must printer do
As men did long ago; but run
"For" into "ever," bidding two
Be one.

"Forever"! passion-fraught, it throws
O'er the dim page a gloom, a glamour:
It's sweet, it's strange; and I suppose
It's grammar.

"Forever"! 'Tis a single word!
And yet our fathers deemed it two:
Nor am I confident they erred;
Are you?

Charles Stuart Calverley

Love

1 Canst thou love me, lady?
2 I've not learn'd to woo:
3 Thou art on the shady
4 Side of sixty too.
5 Still I love thee dearly!
6 Thou hast lands and pelf:
7 But I love thee merely
8 Merely for thyself.

9 Wilt thou love me, fairest?
10 Though thou art not fair;
11 And I think thou wearest
12 Someone-else's hair.
13 Thou could'st love, though, dearly:
14 And, as I am told,
15 Thou art very nearly
16 Worth thy weight, in gold.

17 Dost thou love me, sweet love?
18 Tell me that thou dost!
19 Women fairly beat one,
20 But I think thou must.
21 Thou art loved so dearly:
22 I am plain, but then
23 Thou (to speak sincerely)
24 Art as plain again.

25 Love me, bashful fairy!
26 I've an empty purse:
27 And I've 'moods,' which vary;
28 Mostly for the worse.
29 Still, I love thee dearly:
30 Though I make (I feel)
31 Love a little queerly,
32 I'm as true as steel.

33 Love me, swear to love me
34 (As, you know, they do)
35 By yon heaven above me
36 And its changeless blue.
37 Love me, lady, dearly,
38 If you'll be so good;
39 Though I don't see clearly
40 On what ground you should.

41 Love me -- ah or love me
42 Not, but be my bride!
43 Do not simply shove me
44 (So to speak) aside!
45 P'raps it would be dearly
46 Purchased at the price;
47 But a hundred yearly

48 Would be very nice.

Charles Stuart Calverley

On The Brink

I WATCH'D her as she stoop'd to pluck
A wild flower in her hair to twine;
And wish'd that it had been my luck
To call her mine;

Anon I heard her rate with mad,
Mad words her babe within its cot,
And felt particularly glad
That it had not.

I knew (such subtle brains have men!)
That she was uttering what she shouldn't;
And thought that I would chide, and then
I thought I would n't.

Few could have gaz'd upon that face,
Those pouting coral lips, and chided:
A Rhadamanthus, in my place,
Had done as I did.

For wrath with which our bosoms glow
Is chain'd there oft by Beauty's spell;
And, more than that, I did not know
The widow well.

So the harsh phrase pass'd unprov'd:
Still mute—(O brothers, was it sin?)—
I drank, unutterably mov'd,
Her beauty in.

And to myself I murmur'd low,
As on her upturn'd face and dress
The moonlight fell, "Would she say No,—
By chance, or Yes?"

She stood so calm, so like a ghost,
Betwixt me and that magic moon,
That I already was almost
A finish'd coon.

But when she caught adroitly up
And sooth'd with smiles her little daughter;
And gave it, if I 'm right, a sup
Of barley-water;

And, crooning still the strange, sweet lore
Which only mothers' tongues can utter,
Snow'd with deft hand the sugar o'er
Its bread-and-butter;

And kiss'd it clingingly (ah, why
Don't women do these things in private?)—

I felt that if I lost her, I
Should not survive it.

And from my mouth the words nigh flew,—
The past, the future, I forgot 'em,—
"Oh, if you 'd kiss me as you do
That thankless atom!"

But this thought came ere yet I spake,
And froze the sentence on my lips:
"They err who marry wives that make
Those little slips."

It came like some familiar rhyme,
Some copy to my boyhood set;
And that 's perhaps the reason I'm
Unmarried yet.

Would she have own'd how pleas'd she was,
And told her love with widow's pride?
I never found out that, because
I never tried.

Be kind to babes and beasts and birds,
Hearts may be hard though lips are coral;
And angry words are angry words:
And that 's the moral.

Charles Stuart Calverley

Peace. A Study

1 He stood, a worn-out City clerk --
2 Who'd toil'd, and seen no holiday,
3 For forty years from dawn to dark --
4 Alone beside Caermarthen Bay.

5 He felt the salt spray on his lips;
6 Heard children's voices on the sands;
7 Up the sun's path he saw the ships
8 Sail on and on to other lands;

9 And laugh'd aloud. Each sight and sound
10 To him was joy too deep for tears;
11 He sat him on the beach, and bound
12 A blue bandana round his ears

13 And thought how, posted near his door,
14 His own green door on Camden Hill,
15 Two bands at least, most likely more,
16 Were mingling at their own sweet will

17 Verdi with Vance. And at the thought
18 He laugh'd again, and softly drew
19 That Morning Herald that he'd bought
20 Forth from his breast, and read it through.

Charles Stuart Calverley

The Auld Wife

PART I

The auld wife sat at her ivied door,
(Butter and eggs and a pound of cheese)
A thing she had frequently done before;
And her spectacles lay on her apron'd knees.

The piper he pip'd on the hill-top high,
(Butter and eggs and a pound of cheese)
Till the cow said, "I die," and the goose asked "Why?"
And the dog said nothing, but search'd for fleas.

The farmer he strode through the square farmyard;
(Butter and eggs and a pound of cheese)
His last brew of ale was a trifle hard,
The connection of which with the plot one sees.

The farmer's daughter hath frank blue eyes;
(Butter and eggs and a pound of cheese)
She hears the rooks caw in the windy skies,
As she sits at her lattice and shells her peas.

The farmer's daughter hath ripe red lips;
(Butter and eggs and a pound of cheese)
If you try to approach her away she skips
Over tables and chairs with apparent ease.

The farmer's daughter hath soft brown hair;
(Butter and eggs and a pound of cheese)
And I met with a ballad, I can't say where,
Which wholly consisted of lines like these.

PART II

She sat with her hands 'neath her dimpled cheeks,
(Butter and eggs and a pound of cheese)
And spake not a word. While a lady speaks
There is hope, but she did n't even sneeze.

She sat with her hands 'neath her crimson cheeks;
(Butter and eggs and a pound of cheese)
She gave up mending her father's breeks,
And let the cat roll in her best chemise.

She sat with her hands 'neath her burning cheeks,
(Butter and eggs and a pound of cheese)
And gaz'd at the piper for thirteen weeks;
Then she follow'd him out o'er the misty leas.

Her sheep follow'd her, as their tails did them,
(Butter and eggs and a pound of cheese)
And this song is consider'd a perfect gem;

And as to the meaning, it 's what you please.

Charles Stuart Calverley