

Classic Poetry Series

Eleanor Agnes Lee

- poems -

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Eleanor Agnes Lee (1841-1873)

Eleanor Agnes Lee or "Wig"(as she liked to be known) was one of seven children. She was born in 1841 as the daughter of the Robert E. Lee who would go on to become a major Confederate General in the American Civil War.

Agnes spent much of her time in reading, studying, playing piano and in working in her garden. Agnes kept a fascinating journal during her childhood years, later published and entitled Growing Up in the 1850s.

Before leaving for boarding school in 1855, she and her sister Annie had a tutor, Miss Sue Poor, from whom they learned their love of music, English, French, and probably arithmetic. For a time Eleanor helped to instruct the Arlington slaves by conducting a Sunday evening school for them and by instructing individual children before and after breakfast.

She was religious and was confirmed in the Episcopal Church in 1857. She was a charming and attractive young lady, and there is some evidence that she felt a romantic attachment to Orton A. Williams, her mother's young cousin and a frequent visitor at Arlington, just before the Civil War. Her father is said to have frowned upon the romance because he regarded young Williams as too unsettled to marry.

Thought to be somewhat reserved and aloof after the war by her family, this may have been caused by the tragic death of Orton Williams in 1862, and to her own serious illness in 1865, Considered her mother's favorite daughter, Agnes never married and died from typhoid fever in October 1873 at the age of 32.

A Roman Doll

(In a Museum)

How an image of paint and wood
Leaped to her life with a love's control,
Struck the chords of her motherhood,
Passionate little mother-soul!
Fair to her sight were the stolid eyes,
Dear to her toil the robes empearled.
She crooned it the ancient lullabies,
She gathered it close from the outer world.
They watched together, as Nero's pyres
Fed the haze of a hundred fires.

Me in her fresh young arms she bore.
See, I am small,
Only a doll.
But I keep her kiss forevermore.

Long and lonely the toy has lain.
One by one into time's abyss
Years have dropped as the drops of rain.
Yet the cycles have left us this!
O red-lipped mother, O mother sweet,
Today a sister has heard you call,
I saw her weep o'er the crumbling doll.
She knew, she knew! You had lived and smiled!
You had loved your dream, little Roman child!

Me in her fresh young arms she bore.
See, I am small,
Only a doll.
But I keep her kiss forevermore.

Eleanor Agnes Lee

A Statue In The Garden

I was a goddess ere the marble found me.
Wind, wind, delay not!
Waft my spirit where the laurel crowned me!
Will the wind stay not?

Then tarry, tarry, listen, little swallow!
An old glory feeds me
I lay upon the bosom of Apollo!
Not a bird heeds me.

For here the days are alien. Oh, to waken
Mine, mine, with calling!
But on my shoulders bare, like hopes forsaken,
The dead leaves are falling.

The sky is gray and full of unshed weeping
As dim down the garden
I wait and watch the early autumn sweeping.
The stalks fade and harden.

The souls of all the flowers afar have rallied.
The trees, gaunt, appalling,
Attest the gloom, and on my shoulders pallid
The dead leaves are falling.

Eleanor Agnes Lee

Convention

The snow is lying very deep.
My house is sheltered from the blast.
I hear each muffled step outside,
I hear each voice go past.

But I'll not venture in the drift
Out of this bright security,
Till enough footsteps come and go
To make a path for me.

Eleanor Agnes Lee

Her Going

The Wife

Child, why do you linger beside her portal?
None shall hear you now if you knock or clamor*
All is dark, hidden in heaviest leafage.
None shall behold you.

Truth

Gone, gone, the dear, the beautiful lady!
I, her comrade, tarry but to lament her.
Ah, the day of her vanishing all things lovely
Shared in her fleetness!
Tell me her going.

The Wife

You are a child. How tell you?

Truth

I am a child, yet old as the earliest sorrow.
Talk to me as you would to an old, old woman.
I own the ages.

The Wife

Voices, they say, gossipped around her dwelling.
She awoke, departing, they say, in silence.
I am glad she is gone. The old hurt fastens.
Hate is upon me.

It was hard to live down the day, and wonder,
Wonder why the tears were forever welling,
Wonder if on his lips her kiss I tasted
Turning to claim him.

Truth

Jealousy, mad, brooding blind and unfettered,
Takes its terrible leap over lie and malice.
Who shall question her now in the land of shadow?
Who shall uphold her?

The Wife

It was hard to know that peace had forsaken
All my house, to greet with a dull endeavor
Babe or book, so to forget a moment
I was forgotten.

Truth

Who shall question her now in the land of shadow,
Question the mute pale lips, and the marble fingers,
Eyelids fallen on eyes grown dim as the autumn?
Ah, the beloved!

The Wife

Go, go, bringer of ache and discord!

Truth

Go I may not. Some, they think to inter me.
Out of the mold and clay my visible raiment
Rises forever.

The Wife

Hers the sin that lured the light from our threshold,
Hers the sin that I lost his love and grew bitter.

Truth

Lost his love? You never possessed it, woman.

The Wife

Sharp tongue, have pity! . . .

Yes, I knew. But I loved him, hoping for all.
I said in my heart: 'Time shall bring buds to blossom.'
I almost saw the flower of the flame descending.
Then she came toying.

He is mine, mine, by the laws of the ages!
Mine, mine, mine yes, body and spirit!
I am glad she has gone her way to the shadow.
Hate is upon me.

Oh, the bar over which my soul would see
All that eludes my soul, while he remembers!
You, dispel if you can my avenging passion
Clouds are before me!

Eleanor Agnes Lee

Motherhood

Mary, the Christ long slain, passed silently,
Following the children joyous astir
Under the cedrus and the olive tree,
Pausing to let their laughter float to her--
Each voice an echo of a voice more dear,
She saw a little Christ in every face.

Then came another woman gliding near
To watch the tender life which filled the place.
And Mary sought the woman's hand and spoke:
' I know thee not, yet know thy memory tossed
With all a thousand dreams their eyes evoke
Who bring to thee a child beloved and lost.

' I ,too, have rocked my Little One.
And He was fair !
Oh, fairer than the fairest sun
And , like its rays through amber spun,
His sun-bright hair.
Still I can see it shine and shine.'
Even so, the woman said, 'was mine.'

' His ways were ever darling ways'-
And Mary smiled -
So soft, so clinging ! Glad relays
Of love were all His precious days.
My Little Child !
My vanished star ! My music fled ! '
' Even so was mine,' the woman said.

And Mary whispered : Tell me, thou
Of thine.' And she :
' Oh, mine was rosy as a bough
Blooming with roses, sent, somehow,
To bloom for me !
His balmy fingers left a thrill
Deep in my breast that warms me still. '

Then she gazed down some wilder, darker hour,
And said -when Mary questioned, not knowing :
Who art thou, mother of so sweet a flower? '--
' I am the mother of Iscariot.'

Eleanor Agnes Lee

On The Jail Steps

I've won the race.
Young man, I'm new!
Old Sallow-face
Good luck to you!

I've turned about,
And paid for sin.
And you come out,
As I go in.

Ten years! but mark,
I am free, free!
Ten years of dark
Shall gather me.

My wife long-while
She wept her pain.
She cannot smile;
She weeps again.

My little one
Shall know my call.
Child is there none
For sin grows tall.

Now who are you,
Spar of hell's flood?
And who, and who,
But your own blood?

Eleanor Agnes Lee

Peace

Suddenly bells and flags!
Suddenly -- door to door --
Tidings! Can we believe,
We, who were used to war?

Yet we have dreamed her face,
Knowing her light must be,
Knowing that she must come.
Look -- she comes, it is she!

Tattered her raiment floats,
Blood is upon her wings.
Ah, but her eyes are clear!
Ah, but her voice outrings!

Soon where the shrapnel fell
Petals shall wake and stir.
Look -- she is here, she lives!
Beauty has died for her.

Eleanor Agnes Lee