

Classic Poetry Series

Frank Dalby Davison

- poems -

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The Earth-Mother

COMETH a voice:—'My children, hear;
From the crowded street and the close-packed mart
I call you back with my message clear,
Back to my lap and my loving heart.
Long have ye left me, journeying on
By range and river and grassy plain,
To the teeming towns where the rest have gone—
Come back, come back to my arms again.

'So shall ye lose the foolish needs
That gnaw your souls; and my touch shall serve
To heal the ills that the city breeds,
The pallid cheek and the fretted nerve.
Treading the turf that ye once loved well,
Instead of the stones of the city's street,
Ye shall hear nor din nor drunken yell,
But the wind that croons in the ripening wheat.

'Yonder, beneath the smoke-smeared sky,
A city of half a million souls
That struggle and chaffer and strive and cry
By a sullied river that seaward rolls.
But here, blue range and full-filled creek,
And the soil made glad by the welcome rain
Waiting the plough. If peace ye seek,
Come back, come back to my arms again.

'I that am old have seen long since
Ruin of palaces made with hands
For the soldier-king and the priest and prince
Whose cities crumble in desert sands.
But still the furrow in many a clime
Yields softly under the ploughman's feet;
Still there is seeding and harvest time,
And the wind still croons in the ripening wheat.

'Where is Persepolis? Ask the Wind
That once the tresses of Thais kissed.
A stone or two you may haply find
Where Night and the Desert keep their tryst.
But the broken goblet is cast away,
And to seek for the lights that are lost is vain.
The city passes; the green fields stay—
Come back, come back to my arms again.

'The works of man are but little worth;
For a time they stand, for a space endure;
But turn once more to your mother—Earth,
My gifts are gracious, my works are sure.
Green shoot of herbage for growing herd,
And blossoming promise of fruitage sweet,
These shall not fail, if ye heed my word,

Nor the wind that croons in the ripening wheat.

`Would ye fashion a nation, whole and true,
Goodly-proportioned, sound at core?
Then this, my sons, ye must surely do—
Give city less, and country more.
Would ye rear a race to hold this land
From foemen steering across the main?
Then, children, listen and understand—
Come back, come back to my arms again.

`Your coastwise cities are passing fair—
Jetty and warehouse and banking-hall,
Tower and dome and statued square—
But who is to guard when the blow shall fall?
The men who can shoot and ride are found
Not where the clerks and the shopmen meet,
But out, where the reaper hears the sound
Of the wind that croons in the ripening wheat.

`Ye know, who have long since left the loam
For a city job in some crowded works,
That sorrow abides in the straitened home,
And Death in the stifling factory lurks.
And some, who are out of a job, must sleep
On a city bench in the driving rain.
Of happier days are ye dreaming deep?
Come back, come back to my arms again.

`There in the city, by jungle law,
Each fights for his meat till set of sun.
By the deadliest fang and the sharpest claw
The right to the largest share is won.
But here there is neither strife nor guile,
The brazen robber nor smooth-tongued cheat.
Your gold is safe—where the harvests smile,
And the wind still croons in the ripening wheat.

`I mind me once, in a sunlit land,
Lancer, Hussar, and fierce Uhlan
Came galloping in on every hand,
And poppied cornfields over-ran.
And many a sabre was stoutly plied,
And many a hero kissed the plain,
And many a hero's mother cried,
"Come back, come back to my arms again!"

`But when no longer the trumpets pealed,
And the stricken land was at rest once more,
They found a peasant who sowed his field
Nor knew that France had been at war.
E'en so, instead of the strife and pain

I give you peace, with its blessing sweet.
Come back, come back to my arms again,
For the wind still croons in the ripening wheat.'

Frank Dalby Davison

With Deaths' Prophetic Ear

Lay my rifle here beside me, set my Bible on my breast,
For a moment let the warning bugles cease;
As the century is closing I am going to my rest,
Lord, lettest Thou Thy servant go in peace.
But loud through all the bugles rings a cadence in mine ear,
And on the winds my hopes of peace are strowed.
Those winds that waft the voices that already I can hear
Of the rooi-baatjes singing on the road.

Yes, the red-coats are returning, I can hear the steady tramp,
After twenty years of waiting, lulled to sleep,
Since rank and file at Potchefstroom we hemmed them in their camp,
And cut them up at Bronkerspruit like sheep.
They shelled us at Ingogo, but we galloped into range,
And we shot the British gunners where they showed.
I guessed they would return to us, I knew the chance must change --
Hark! the rooi-baatjes singing on the road!

But now from snow-swept Canada, from India's torrid plains,
From lone Australian outposts, hither led,
Obeying their commando, as they heard the bugle's strains,
The men in brown have joined the men in red.
They come to find the colours at Majuba left and lost,
They come to pay us back the debt they owed;
And I hear new voices lifted, and I see strange colours tossed,
'Mid the rooi-baatjes singing on the road.

The old, old faiths must falter, and the old, old creeds must fail --
I hear it in that distant murmur low --
The old, old order changes, and 'tis vain for us to rail,
The great world does not want us -- we must go.
And veldt, and spruit, and kopje to the stranger will belong,
No more to trek before him we shall load;
Too well, too well, I know it, for I hear it in the song
Of the rooi-baatjes singing on the road.

Frank Dalby Davison