

Classic Poetry Series

George Gordon McCrae

- poems -

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Forby Sutherland

A LANE of elms in June;—the air
Of eve is cool and calm and sweet.
See! straying here a youthful pair,
With sad and slowly moving feet,

On hand in hand to yon gray gate,
O'er which the rosy apples swing;
And there they vow a mingled fate,
One day when George the Third is king.

The ring scarce clasped her finger fair,
When, tossing in their ivied tower,
The distant bells made all the air
Melodious with that golden hour.

Then sank the sun out o'er the sea,
Sweet day of courtship fond,... the last!
The holy hours of twilight flee
And speed to join the sacred Past.

The house-dove on the moss-grown thatch
Is murmuring love-songs to his mate,
As lovely Nell now lifts the latch
Beneath the apples at the gate.

A plighted maid she nears her home,
Those gentle eyes with weeping red;
Too soon her swain must breast the foam,
Alas! with that last hour he fled.

And, ah! that dust-cloud on the road,
Yon heartless coach-guard's blaring horn;
But naught beside, that spoke or showed
Her sailor to poor Nell forlorn.

She dreams; and lo! a ship that ploughs
A foamy furrow through the seas,
As, plunging gaily, from her bows
She scatters diamonds on the breeze.

Swift, homeward bound, with flags displayed
In pennoned pomp, with drum and fife,
And all the proud old-world parade
That marks the man-o'-war man's life.

She dreams and dreams; her heart's at sea;
Dreams while she wears the golden ring;
Her spirit follows lovingly
One humble servant of the king.

And thus for years, since Hope survives
To cheer the maid and nerve the youth.

"Forget-me-not!"—how fair it thrives
Where planted in the soil of Truth!

The skies are changed; and o'er the sea,
Within a calm, sequestered nook,
Rests at her anchor thankfully
The tall-sterned ship of gallant Cook.

The emerald shores ablaze with flowers,
The sea reflects the smiling sky,
Soft breathes the air of perfumed bowers—
How sad to leave it all, and die!

To die, when all around is fair
And steeped in beauty;—ah! 't is hard
When ease and joy succeed to care,
And rest, to "watch" and "mounted guard."

But harder still, when one dear plan,
The end of all his life and cares,
Hangs by a thread; the dying man
Most needs our sympathy and prayers!

'T was thus with Forby as he lay
Wan in his narrow canvas cot;
Sole tenant of the lone "sick bay,"
Though "mates" came round, he heard them not.

For days his spirit strove and fought,
But, ah! the frame was all too weak.
Some phantom strange it seemed he sought,
And vainly tried to rise and speak.

At last he smiled and brightened up,
The noonday bugle went; and he
Drained ('t was his last) the cooling cup
A messmate offered helpfully.

His tongue was loosed—"I hear the horn!
Ah, Nell! my number 's flying. See!—
The horses too;—they 've had their corn.
Alas, dear love!... I part from thee!"

He waved his wasted hand, and cried,
"Sweet Nell! Dear maid! My own true Nell!
The coach won't wait for me!"... and died—
And this was Forby's strange farewell.

Next morn the barge, with muffled oars,
Pulls slowly forth, and leaves the slip
With flags half-mast, and gains the shores,
While silence seals each comrade's lip.

They bury him beneath a tree,
His treasure in his bosom hid.
What was that treasure? Go and see!
Long since it burst his coffin-lid!

Nell gave to Forby, once in play,
Some hips of roses, with the seeds
Of hedgerow plants, and flowerets gay
(In England such might count for weeds).

"Take these," cries smiling Nell, "to sow
In foreign lands; and when folk see
The English roses bloom and grow,
Some one may bless an unknown me."

The turf lies green on Forby's bed,
A hundred years have passed, and more,
But twining over Forby's head
Are Nell's sweet roses on that shore.

The violet and the eglantine,
With sweet-breathed cowslips, deck the spot,
And nestling 'mid them in the shine,
The meek, blue-eyed "Forget-me-not!"

George Gordon McCrae

L'envoi from Balladeadro

See where the allied armies camped,
Where plumed and painted dancers tramped--
'Tis still the same, the same wild scene,
As though the ploughshare ne'er had been.
Grey Tomboritha still the skies
With bold and massy front defies;
And gorge, and chasm, and long-ledged rocks
Echo the ever-thundering shocks
Of waters dashed with headlong force,
Wild cataracts leaping on their course.
In dark Maroka's vale the stream
Reflects the slanting solar beam;
There the proud lyre-bird* spreads his tail,
And mocks the notes of hill and dale--
Whether the wild dog's plaintive howl
Or cry of piping waterfowl,
Or the shrill parrot's answering scream,
As, gem-like, dangling o'er the stream
He hears, re-echoed from the rock
The whirlwind whistle of the flock.
Alas! and what a change is there!
And yet the landscape still is fair.
There smiled the woodland by the rill:
'Tis gone--the waters turn a mill.
There the Mirbango village lay:
Mirbango maidens, where? O say,
Where the tall braves, whose warrior songs
Once wooed the dark-eyed Darakongs.
Yon sheltered hollow, 'neath the steep,
Now dotted o'er with browsing sheep,
Holds the last graves the dark man owns--
The treasure of his father's bones.
All else, alas! has passed, is o'er;
Time's wing has swept hill, vale, and shore;
All, hence to farthest northern strand,
Obeys the white, "the blood-stained hand;"
And grey-beards by the fire at night,
Warm, basking in its ruddy light,
The young, in solemn tones, advise
To shun all stranger-women's eyes.
"Our fathers," quoth they, "as we trace,
Thus lost a country--doomed a race."

George Gordon McCrae

Mamba: (The Bright Eyed) An Aboriginal Reminiscence

Canto I.

XXVIII.

The day had fled, the moon arose,
Night straight began with evening's close--
A night whose calm and silvery sheen
Befitted well the wild yapeen.¹
Within the circle of the camp
Blazed the clear fire, while measured tramp
Of dancing warriors shook the ground,
To song and time-sticks' throbbing sound.
There twice two hundred feet advanced,
There twice a hundred malkas² glanced
Bright in the moon, that silvered o'er
The arms that all those malkas bore.
Wild the device, and strange the sign
That stared in many a snowy line
From beaming face and heaving breast,
And limbs that seldom paused to rest;
Whilst all the rib-like lines laid on,
Made each man seem a skeleton.
Nodded the feathers from the red
And netted band that bound each head,
And hoarsely rustling leaves of trees
Shook round dark ankles in the breeze.
The singers with their time-sticks rang
The cadence of the song they sang;
And every face and limb below,
And tree above them, caught the glow
That spread from camp-fire's rising blaze,
Lighting the yapeen's wond'rous maze
Of feet and ankles in the dance
With fitful gleam or twinkling glance.

XXIX

Conspicuous 'mid the dancing crowd,
Whose ranks alternate swayed and bowed,
Shone Mamba, tricked with wild design,
And symbol traced in waving line.
No limbs more active wore the green
At yon great Ghim-boboke³ yapeen;
And no two arms more graceful there
In circling motion cleft the air
Than his--and his the eagle-eye
Inspiring all the minstrelsy.
The young and old in groups around
Drank in the sight, the joy, the sound;
And Mamba's form throughout the dance
Attraced every wondering glance.

George Gordon McCrae

Morning at Sea in the Tropics

NIGHT waned and wasted, and the fading stars
Died out like lamps that long survived a feast,
And the moon, pale with watching, sank to rest
Behind the cloud-piled ramparts of the main.
Young, blooming Morn, crowned with her bridal wreath,
Bent o'er her mirror clear, the faithful sea;
And gazing on her loveliness therein,
Blushed to the brows, till every imaged charm
Flung roses on the bosom of the wave,
Then, glancing heavenward, both, they blushed again,
As sprang the Sun to claim his radiant bride;
And sea and sky seemed but one rose of morn,
Which thenceforth grew in glory, and the world
Shot back her lesser light upon the day,
While night sped on to seek the sombre shades
That sleep in silent caves beyond the sea.
The day grew calmer, hotter, and our barque
Lay like a sleeping swan upon a lake,
And such soft airs as blew from off the land
Brought with them fragrant odours, and we felt
That orange groves lay blooming 'neath the sun
Which blazed so fiercely overhead at sea.
We heard (with Fancy's ear) a distant bell;
And thro' the haze that simmered on the Main
Pictured a purple shore—a convent tow'r
And snowy cots, that from the dark hill-side
Peeped forth 'tween plantain-patches at the sky,
Or smiled through groves of cocos on the sea.
Meanwhile our ship slid on, with breathing sails
Fraught with the melody of murmured song
Such as the zephyr chanted to the morn,
And showers of diamonds flashed before the prow
While sternwards whirled unstrung—pale beads of foam,
Pearls from the loosen'd chaplet of the sea.
'Mid these the flame-bright Nautilus, that seemed
Itself a flow'ret cast upon the stream,
Spread out its crimson sail and drifted on.
Beyond arose a cloud (as 'twere) of birds,
That leapt from out the wave to meet the sun,
Flew a short circuit, till their wings grew dry,
And seaward fell in showers of silver rain.
'Mid these careered the dolphin-squadrons swift,
With mail of changeful hue, and Iris tints;
And floating slowly on, a sea-flow'r passed,
A living creature (none the less a flow'r)
That lives its life in love, and dies for joy,
Unmissed 'mid myriads in the sapphire sea.

George Gordon McCrae