

Classic Poetry Series

James Beattie

- poems -

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An Epitaph

LIKE thee I once have stemm'd the sea of life,
Like thee have languish'd after empty joys,
Like thee have labour'd in the stormy strife,
Been grieved for trifles, and amused with toys.

Forget my frailties; thou art also frail:
Forgive my lapses; for thyself may'st fall:
Nor read unmoved my artless tender tale--

James Beattie

Elegy (Tir'd with the busy crouds)

Tir'd with the busy crouds, that all the day
Impatient throng where Folly's altars flame,
My languid powers dissolve with quick decay,
Till genial Sleep repair the sinking frame.

Hail kind Reviver! that canst lull the cares,
And every weary sense compose to rest,
Lighten th' oppressive load which Anguish bears,
And warm with hope the cold desponding breast.

Touch'd by thy rod, from Power's majestic brow
Drops the gay plume; he pines a lowly clown;
And on the cold earth stretch'd the son of Woe
Quaffs Pleasure's draught, and wears a fancy'd crown.

When rous'd by thee, on boundless pinions born
Fancy to fairy scenes exults to rove,
Now scales the cliff gay-gleaming on the morn,
Now sad and silent treads the deepening grove;

Or skims the main, and listens to the storms,
Marks the long waves roll far remote away;
Or mingling with ten thousand glittering forms
Floats on the gale, and basks in purest day.

Haply, ere long, pierc'd by the howling blast
Through dark and pathless deserts I shall roam,
Plunge down th' unfathom'd deep, or shrink aghast
Where bursts the shrieking spectre from the tomb:

Perhaps loose Luxury's enchanting smile
Shall lure my steps to some romantic dale,
Where Mirth's light freaks th' unheeded hours beguile,
And airs of rapture warble in the gale.

Instructive emblem of this mortal state!
Where scenes as various every hour arise
In swift succession, which the hand of Fate
Presents, then snatches from our wondering eyes.

Be taught, vain man, how fleeting all thy joys,
Thy boasted grandeur, and thy glittering store;
Death comes, and all thy fancy'd bliss destroys,
Quick as a dream it fades, and is no more.

And, sons of Sorrow! though the threatening storm
Of angry Fortune overhang a while,
Let not her frowns your inward peace deform;
Soon happier days in happier climes shall smile.

Through earth's throng'd visions while we toss forlorn,
'Tis tumult all, and rage, and restless strife;

But these shall vanish like the dreams of morn,
When Death awakes us to immortal life.

James Beattie

Law

Laws, as we read in ancient sages,
Have been like cobwebs in all ages.
Cobwebs for little flies are spread,
And laws for little folks are made;
But if an insect of renown,
Hornet or beetle, wasp or drone,
Be caught in quest of sport or plunder,
The flimsy fether flies in sunder.

James Beattie

The Minstrel; or, The Progress of Genius (excerpts)

THE FIRST BOOK (excerpts)

Ah! who can tell how hard it is to climb
The steep where Fame's proud temple shines afar!
Ah! who can tell how many a soul sublime
Hath felt the influence of malignant star,
And wag'd with Fortune an eternal war!
Check'd by the scoff of Pride, by Envy's frown,
And Poverty's unconquerable bar,
In life's low vale remote hath pin'd alone
Then dropt into the grave, unpitied and unknown!

And yet, the languor of inglorious days
Not equally oppressive is to all.
Him, who ne'er listen'd to the voice of praise,
The silence of neglect can ne'er appal.
There are, who, deaf to mad Ambition's call,
Would shrink to hear th' obstreperous trump of Fame;
Supremely blest, if to their portion fall
Health, competence, and peace. Nor higher aim
Had he, whose simple tale these artless lines proclaim.

This sapient age disclaims all classic lore;
Else I should here in cunning phrase display,
How forth The Minstrel far'd in days of yore,
Right glad of heart, though homely in array;
His waving locks and beard all hoary grey:
And, from his bending shoulder, decent hung
His harp, the sole companion of his way,
Which to the whistling wind responsive rung:
And ever as he went some merry lay he sung.

Fret not yourselves, ye silken sons of pride,
That a poor Wanderer should inspire my strain.
The Muses Fortune's fickle smile deride,
Nor ever bow the knee in Mammon's fane;
For their delights are with the village-train,
Whom Nature's laws engage, and Nature's charms:
They hate the sensual, and scorn the vain;
The parasite their influence never warms,
Nor him whose sordid soul the love of wealth alarms.

Though richest hues the peacock's plumes adorn,
Yet horror screams from his discordant throat.
Rise, sons of harmony, and hail the morn,
While warbling larks on russet pinions float;
Or seek at noon the woodland scene remote,
Where the grey linnets carol from the hill.
O let them ne'er with artificial note,
To please a tyrant, strain the little bill,
But sing what Heaven inspires, and wander where they will.

Liberal, not lavish, is kind Nature's hand;
Nor was perfection made for man below.
Yet all her schemes with nicest art are plann'd,
Good counteracting ill, and gladness woe.
With gold and gems if Chilian mountains glow,
If bleak and barren Scotia's hills arise;
There plague and poison, lust and rapine grow;
Here peaceful are the vales, and pure the skies,
And freedom fires the soul, and sparkles in the eyes.

Then grieve not, thou to whom th' indulgent Muse
Vouchsafes a portion of celestial fire;
Nor blame the partial Fates, if they refuse
Th' imperial banquet, and the rich attire.
Know thine own worth, and reverence the lyre.
Wilt thou debase the heart which God refin'd?
No; let thy heaven-taught soul to heaven aspire,
To fancy, freedom, harmony, resign'd;
Ambition's groveling crew for ever left behind.

...
But who the melodies of morn can tell?
The wild brook babbling down the mountain-side;
The lowing herd; the sheepfold's simple bell;
The pipe of early shepherd dim descried
In the lone valley; echoing far and wide
The clamorous horn along the cliffs above;
The hollow murmur of the ocean-tide;
The hum of bees, and linnet's lay of love,
And the full choir that wakes the universal grove.

The cottage-curs at early pilgrim bark;
Crown'd with her pail the tripping milkmaid sings;
The whistling plowman stalks afield; and, hark!
Down the rough slope the ponderous waggon rings;
Through rustling corn the hare astonish'd springs;
Slow tolls the village-clock the drowsy hour;
The partridge bursts away on whirring wings;
Deep mourns the turtle in sequester'd bower,
And shrill lark carols clear from her aerial tower.

O Nature, how in every charm supreme!
Whose votaries feast on raptures ever new!
O for the voice and fire of seraphim,
To sing thy glories with devotion due!
Blest be the day I scap'd the wrangling crew,
From Pyrrho's maze, and Epicurus' sty;
And held high converse with the godlike few,
Who to th' enraptur'd heart, and ear, and eye,
Teach beauty, virtue, truth, and love, and melody.

Hence! ye, who snare and stupefy the mind,

Sophists, of beauty, virtue, joy, the bane!
Greedy and fell, though impotent and blind,
Who spread your filthy nets in Truth's fair fane,
And ever ply your venom'd fangs amain!
Hence to dark Error's den, whose rankling slime
First gave you form! hence! lest the Muse should deign,
(Though loth on theme so mean to waste a rhyme),
With vengeance to pursue your sacrilegious crime.

But hail, ye mighty masters of the lay,
Nature's true sons, the friends of man and truth!
Whose song, sublimely sweet, serenely gay,
Amus'd my childhood, and inform'd my youth.
O let your spirit still my bosom soothe,
Inspire my dreams, and my wild wanderings guide.
Your voice each rugged path of life can smooth;
For well I know, wherever ye reside,
There harmony, and peace, and innocence, abide.

James Beattie