

Classic Poetry Series

John McCrae

- poems -

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A Song Of Comfort

"Sleep, weary ones, while ye may --
Sleep, oh, sleep!"
Eugene Field.

Thro' May time blossoms, with whisper low,
The soft wind sang to the dead below:
"Think not with regret on the Springtime's song
And the task ye left while your hands were strong.
The song would have ceased when the Spring was past,
And the task that was joyous be weary at last."

To the winter sky when the nights were long
The tree-tops tossed with a ceaseless song:
"Do ye think with regret on the sunny days
And the path ye left, with its untrod ways?
The sun might sink in a storm cloud's frown
And the path grow rough when the night came down."

In the grey twilight of the autumn eves,
It sighed as it sang through the dying leaves:
"Ye think with regret that the world was bright,
That your path was short and your task was light;
The path, though short, was perhaps the best
And the toil was sweet, that it led to rest."

John McCrae

Anarchy

I saw a city filled with lust and shame,
Where men, like wolves, slunk through the grim half-light;
And sudden, in the midst of it, there came
One who spoke boldly for the cause of Right.

And speaking, fell before that brutish race
Like some poor wren that shrieking eagles tear,
While brute Dishonour, with her bloodless face
Stood by and smote his lips that moved in prayer.

"Speak not of God! In centuries that word
Hath not been uttered! Our own king are we."
And God stretched forth his finger as He heard
And o'er it cast a thousand leagues of sea.

John McCrae

Disarmament

One spake amid the nations, "Let us cease
From darkening with strife the fair World's light,
We who are great in war be great in peace.
No longer let us plead the cause by might."

But from a million British graves took birth
A silent voice -- the million spake as one --
"If ye have righted all the wrongs of earth
Lay by the sword! Its work and ours is done."

John McCrae

Equality

I saw a King, who spent his life to weave
Into a nation all his great heart thought,
Unsatisfied until he should achieve
The grand ideal that his manhood sought;
Yet as he saw the end within his reach,
Death took the sceptre from his failing hand,
And all men said, "He gave his life to teach
The task of honour to a sordid land!"
Within his gates I saw, through all those years,
One at his humble toil with cheery face,
Whom (being dead) the children, half in tears,
Remembered oft, and missed him from his place.
If he be greater than his people blessed
Than he the children loved, God knoweth best.

John McCrae

Eventide

The day is past and the toilers cease;
The land grows dim 'mid the shadows grey,
And hearts are glad, for the dark brings peace
At the close of day.

Each weary toiler, with lingering pace,
As he homeward turns, with the long day done,
Looks out to the west, with the light on his face
Of the setting sun.

Yet some see not (with their sin-dimmed eyes)
The promise of rest in the fading light;
But the clouds loom dark in the angry skies
At the fall of night.

And some see only a golden sky
Where the elms their welcoming arms stretch wide
To the calling rooks, as they homeward fly
At the eventide.

It speaks of peace that comes after strife,
Of the rest He sends to the hearts He tried,
Of the calm that follows the stormiest life --
God's eventide.

John McCrae

In Due Season

If night should come and find me at my toil,
When all Life's day I had, tho' faintly, wrought,
And shallow furrows, cleft in stony soil
Were all my labour: Shall I count it naught

If only one poor gleaner, weak of hand,
Shall pick a scanty sheaf where I have sown?
"Nay, for of thee the Master doth demand
Thy work: the harvest rests with Him alone."

John McCrae

In Flanders Field

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

John McCrae

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John McCrae

Isandlwana

Scarlet coats, and crash o' the band,
The grey of a pauper's gown,
A soldier's grave in Zululand,
And a woman in Brecon Town.

My little lad for a soldier boy,
(Mothers o' Brecon Town!)
My eyes for tears and his for joy
When he went from Brecon Town,
His for the flags and the gallant sights
His for the medals and his for the fights,
And mine for the dreary, rainy nights
At home in Brecon Town.

They say he's laid beneath a tree,
(Come back to Brecon Town!)
Shouldn't I know? -- I was there to see:
(It's far to Brecon Town!)
It's me that keeps it trim and drest
With a briar there and a rose by his breast --
The English flowers he likes the best
That I bring from Brecon Town.

And I sit beside him -- him and me,
(We're back to Brecon Town.)
To talk of the things that used to be
(Grey ghosts of Brecon Town);
I know the look o' the land and sky,
And the bird that builds in the tree near by,
And times I hear the jackals cry,
And me in Brecon Town.

Golden grey on miles of sand
The dawn comes creeping down;
It's day in far off Zululand
And night in Brecon Town.

John McCrae

Mine Host

There stands a hostel by a travelled way;
Life is the road and Death the worthy host;
Each guest he greets, nor ever lacks to say,
"How have ye fared?" They answer him, the most,
"This lodging place is other than we sought;
We had intended farther, but the gloom
Came on apace, and found us ere we thought:
Yet will we lodge. Thou hast abundant room."

Within sit haggard men that speak no word,
No fire gleams their cheerful welcome shed;
No voice of fellowship or strife is heard
But silence of a multitude of dead.
"Naught can I offer ye," quoth Death, "but rest!"
And to his chamber leads each tired guest.

John McCrae

Penance

My lover died a century ago,
Her dear heart stricken by my sland'rous breath,
Wherefore the Gods forbade that I should know
 The peace of death.

Men pass my grave, and say, "'Twere well to sleep,
Like such an one, amid the uncaring dead!"
How should they know the vigils that I keep,
 The tears I shed?

Upon the grave, I count with lifeless breath,
Each night, each year, the flowers that bloom and die,
Deeming the leaves, that fall to dreamless death,
 More blest than I.

'Twas just last year -- I heard two lovers pass
So near, I caught the tender words he said:
To-night the rain-drenched breezes sway the grass
 Above his head.

That night full envious of his life was I,
That youth and love should stand at his behest;
To-night, I envy him, that he should lie
 At utter rest.

John McCrae

Quebec

-1908

Of old, like Helen, guerdon of the strong --
Like Helen fair, like Helen light of word, --
"The spoils unto the conquerors belong.
Who winneth me must win me by the sword."

Grown old, like Helen, once the jealous prize
That strong men battled for in savage hate,
Can she look forth with unregretful eyes,
Where sleep Montcalm and Wolfe beside her gate?

John McCrae

Recompense

I saw two sowers in Life's field at morn,
To whom came one in angel guise and said,
"Is it for labour that a man is born?
Lo: I am Ease. Come ye and eat my bread!"
Then gladly one forsook his task undone
And with the Tempter went his slothful way,
The other toiled until the setting sun
With stealing shadows blurred the dusty day.

Ere harvest time, upon earth's peaceful breast
Each laid him down among the unreaping dead.
"Labour hath other recompense than rest,
Else were the toiler like the fool," I said;
"God meteth him not less, but rather more
Because he sowed and others reaped his store."

John McCrae

Slumber Songs

I

Sleep, little eyes
That brim with childish tears amid thy play,
Be comforted! No grief of night can weigh
Against the joys that throng thy coming day.

Sleep, little heart!
There is no place in Slumberland for tears:
Life soon enough will bring its chilling fears
And sorrows that will dim the after years.
Sleep, little heart!

II

Ah, little eyes
Dead blossoms of a springtime long ago,
That life's storm crushed and left to lie below
The benediction of the falling snow!

Sleep, little heart
That ceased so long ago its frantic beat!
The years that come and go with silent feet
Have naught to tell save this -- that rest is sweet.
Dear little heart.

John McCrae

The Anxious Dead

O guns, fall silent till the dead men hear
Above their heads the legions pressing on:
(These fought their fight in time of bitter fear,
And died not knowing how the day had gone.)

O flashing muzzles, pause, and let them see
The coming dawn that streaks the sky afar;
Then let your mighty chorus witness be
To them, and Caesar, that we still make war.

Tell them, O guns, that we have heard their call,
That we have sworn, and will not turn aside,
That we will onward till we win or fall,
That we will keep the faith for which they died.

Bid them be patient, and some day, anon,
They shall feel earth enwrapt in silence deep;
Shall greet, in wonderment, the quiet dawn,
And in content may turn them to their sleep.

John McCrae

The Captain

Here all the day she swings from tide to tide,
Here all night long she tugs a rusted chain,
A masterless hulk that was a ship of pride,
Yet unashamed: her memories remain.

It was Nelson in the `Captain', Cape St. Vincent far alee,
With the `Vanguard' leading s'uth'ard in the haze --
Little Jervis and the Spaniards and the fight that was to be,
Twenty-seven Spanish battleships, great bullies of the sea,
And the `Captain' there to find her day of days.

Right into them the `Vanguard' leads, but with a sudden tack
The Spaniards double swiftly on their trail;
Now Jervis overshoots his mark, like some too eager pack,
He will not overtake them, haste he e'er so greatly back,
But Nelson and the `Captain' will not fail.

Like a tigress on her quarry leaps the `Captain' from her place,
To lie across the fleeing squadron's way:
Heavy odds and heavy onslaught, gun to gun and face to face,
Win the ship a name of glory, win the men a death of grace,
For a little hold the Spanish fleet in play.

Ended now the "Captain"'s battle, stricken sore she falls aside
Holding still her foemen, beaten to the knee:
As the `Vanguard' drifted past her, "Well done, `Captain'," Jervis cried,
Rang the cheers of men that conquered, ran the blood of men that died,
And the ship had won her immortality.

Lo! here her progeny of steel and steam,
A funnelled monster at her mooring swings:
Still, in our hearts, we see her pennant stream,
And "Well done, `Captain'," like a trumpet rings.

John McCrae

The Dead Master

Amid earth's vagrant noises, he caught the note sublime:
To-day around him surges from the silences of Time
A flood of nobler music, like a river deep and broad,
Fit song for heroes gathered in the banquet-hall of God.

John McCrae

The Dying Of Pere Pierre

". . . with two other priests; the same night he died,
and was buried by the shores of the lake that bears his name."
Chronicle.

"Nay, grieve not that ye can no honour give
To these poor bones that presently must be
But carrion; since I have sought to live
Upon God's earth, as He hath guided me,
I shall not lack! Where would ye have me lie?
High heaven is higher than cathedral nave:
Do men paint chancels fairer than the sky?"
Beside the darkened lake they made his grave,
Below the altar of the hills; and night
Swung incense clouds of mist in creeping lines
That twisted through the tree-trunks, where the light
Groped through the arches of the silent pines:
And he, beside the lonely path he trod,
Lay, tombed in splendour, in the House of God.

John McCrae

The Harvest Of The Sea

The earth grows white with harvest; all day long
The sickles gleam, until the darkness weaves
Her web of silence o'er the thankful song
Of reapers bringing home the golden sheaves.

The wave tops whiten on the sea fields drear,
And men go forth at haggard dawn to reap;
But ever 'mid the gleaners' song we hear
The half-hushed sobbing of the hearts that weep.

John McCrae

The Hope Of My Heart

"Delicta juventutis et ignorantius ejus, quoesumus ne memineris, Domine."

I left, to earth, a little maiden fair,
With locks of gold, and eyes that shamed the light;
I prayed that God might have her in His care
And sight.

Earth's love was false; her voice, a siren's song;
(Sweet mother-earth was but a lying name)
The path she showed was but the path of wrong
And shame.

"Cast her not out!" I cry. God's kind words come --
"Her future is with Me, as was her past;
It shall be My good will to bring her home
At last."

John McCrae

The Night Cometh

Cometh the night. The wind falls low,
The trees swing slowly to and fro:
Around the church the headstones grey
Cluster, like children strayed away
But found again, and folded so.

No chiding look doth she bestow:
If she is glad, they cannot know;
If ill or well they spend their day,
Cometh the night.

Singing or sad, intent they go;
They do not see the shadows grow;
"There yet is time," they lightly say,
"Before our work aside we lay";
Their task is but half-done, and lo!
Cometh the night.

John McCrae

The Oldest Drama

"It fell on a day, that he went out to his father to the reapers.
And he said unto his father, My head, my head. And he said to a lad,
Carry him to his mother. And . . . he sat on her knees till noon,
and then died. And she went up, and laid him on the bed. . . .
And shut the door upon him and went out."

Immortal story that no mother's heart
Ev'n yet can read, nor feel the biting pain
That rent her soul! Immortal not by art
Which makes a long past sorrow sting again

Like grief of yesterday: but since it said
In simplest word the truth which all may see,
Where any mother sobs above her dead
And plays anew the silent tragedy.

John McCrae

The Pilgrims

An uphill path, sun-gleams between the showers,
Where every beam that broke the leaden sky
Lit other hills with fairer ways than ours;
Some clustered graves where half our memories lie;
And one grim Shadow creeping ever nigh:
And this was Life.

Wherein we did another's burden seek,
The tired feet we helped upon the road,
The hand we gave the weary and the weak,
The miles we lightened one another's load,
When, faint to falling, onward yet we strode:
This too was Life.

Till, at the upland, as we turned to go
Amid fair meadows, dusky in the night,
The mists fell back upon the road below;
Broke on our tired eyes the western light;
The very graves were for a moment bright:
And this was Death.

John McCrae

The Shadow Of The Cross

At the drowsy dusk when the shadows creep
From the golden west, where the sunbeams sleep,

An angel mused: "Is there good or ill
In the mad world's heart, since on Calvary's hill

'Round the cross a mid-day twilight fell
That darkened earth and o'ershadowed hell?"

Through the streets of a city the angel sped;
Like an open scroll men's hearts he read.

In a monarch's ear his courtiers lied
And humble faces hid hearts of pride.

Men's hate waxed hot, and their hearts grew cold,
As they haggled and fought for the lust of gold.

Despairing, he cried, "After all these years
Is there naught but hatred and strife and tears?"

He found two waifs in an attic bare;
-- A single crust was their meagre fare --

One strove to quiet the other's cries,
And the love-light dawned in her famished eyes

As she kissed the child with a motherly air:
"I don't need mine, you can have my share."

Then the angel knew that the earthly cross
And the sorrow and shame were not wholly loss.

At dawn, when hushed was earth's busy hum
And men looked not for their Christ to come,

From the attic poor to the palace grand,
The King and the beggar went hand in hand.

John McCrae

The Song Of The Derelict

Ye have sung me your songs, ye have chanted your rimes
(I scorn your beguiling, O sea!)
Ye fondle me now, but to strike me betimes.
(A treacherous lover, the sea!)
Once I saw as I lay, half-awash in the night
A hull in the gloom -- a quick hail -- and a light
And I lurched o'er to leeward and saved her for spite
From the doom that ye meted to me.

I was sister to `Terrible', seventy-four,
(Yo ho! for the swing of the sea!)
And ye sank her in fathoms a thousand or more
(Alas! for the might of the sea!)
Ye taunt me and sing me her fate for a sign!
What harm can ye wreak more on me or on mine?
Ho braggart! I care not for boasting of thine --
A fig for the wrath of the sea!

Some night to the lee of the land I shall steal,
(Heigh-ho to be home from the sea!)
No pilot but Death at the rudderless wheel,
(None knoweth the harbor as he!)
To lie where the slow tide creeps hither and fro
And the shifting sand laps me around, for I know
That my gallant old crew are in Port long ago --
For ever at peace with the sea!

John McCrae

The Unconquered Dead

". . . defeated, with great loss."

Not we the conquered! Not to us the blame
Of them that flee, of them that basely yield;
Nor ours the shout of victory, the fame
Of them that vanquish in a stricken field.

That day of battle in the dusty heat
We lay and heard the bullets swish and sing
Like scythes amid the over-ripened wheat,
And we the harvest of their garnering.

Some yielded, No, not we! Not we, we swear
By these our wounds; this trench upon the hill
Where all the shell-strewn earth is seamed and bare,
Was ours to keep; and lo! we have it still.

We might have yielded, even we, but death
Came for our helper; like a sudden flood
The crashing darkness fell; our painful breath
We drew with gasps amid the choking blood.

The roar fell faint and farther off, and soon
Sank to a foolish humming in our ears,
Like crickets in the long, hot afternoon
Among the wheat fields of the olden years.

Before our eyes a boundless wall of red
Shot through by sudden streaks of jagged pain!
Then a slow-gathering darkness overhead
And rest came on us like a quiet rain.

Not we the conquered! Not to us the shame,
Who hold our earthen ramparts, nor shall cease
To hold them ever; victors we, who came
In that fierce moment to our honoured peace.

John McCrae

The Warrior

He wrought in poverty, the dull grey days,
But with the night his little lamp-lit room
Was bright with battle flame, or through a haze
Of smoke that stung his eyes he heard the boom
Of Bluecher's guns; he shared Almeida's scars,
And from the close-packed deck, about to die,
Looked up and saw the "Birkenhead"'s tall spars
Weave wavering lines across the Southern sky:

Or in the stifling 'tween decks, row on row,
At Aboukir, saw how the dead men lay;
Charged with the fiercest in Busaco's strife,
Brave dreams are his -- the flick'ring lamp burns low --
Yet couraged for the battles of the day
He goes to stand full face to face with life.

John McCrae

Then And Now

Beneath her window in the fragrant night
I half forget how truant years have flown
Since I looked up to see her chamber-light,
Or catch, perchance, her slender shadow thrown
Upon the casement; but the nodding leaves
Sweep lazily across the unlit pane,
And to and fro beneath the shadowy eaves,
Like restless birds, the breath of coming rain
Creeps, lilac-laden, up the village street
When all is still, as if the very trees
Were listening for the coming of her feet
That come no more; yet, lest I weep, the breeze
Sings some forgotten song of those old years
Until my heart grows far too glad for tears.

John McCrae

Unsolved

Amid my books I lived the hurrying years,
Disdaining kinship with my fellow man;
Alike to me were human smiles and tears,
I cared not whither Earth's great life-stream ran,
Till as I knelt before my mouldered shrine,
God made me look into a woman's eyes;
And I, who thought all earthly wisdom mine,
Knew in a moment that the eternal skies
Were measured but in inches, to the quest
That lay before me in that mystic gaze.
"Surely I have been errant: it is best
That I should tread, with men their human ways."
God took the teacher, ere the task was learned,
And to my lonely books again I turned.

John McCrae

Upon Watts' Picture "Sic Transit"

"What I spent I had; what I saved, I lost; what I gave, I have."

But yesterday the tourney, all the eager joy of life,
The waving of the banners, and the rattle of the spears,
The clash of sword and harness, and the madness of the strife;
To-night begin the silence and the peace of endless years.

(One sings within.)

But yesterday the glory and the prize,
And best of all, to lay it at her feet,
To find my guerdon in her speaking eyes:
I grudge them not, -- they pass, albeit sweet.

The ring of spears, the winning of the fight,
The careless song, the cup, the love of friends,
The earth in spring -- to live, to feel the light --
'Twas good the while it lasted: here it ends.

Remain the well-wrought deed in honour done,
The dole for Christ's dear sake, the words that fall
In kindness upon some outcast one, --
They seemed so little: now they are my All.

John McCrae

Upon Watts' Picture Sic Transit

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