

Classic Poetry Series

Katharine Lee Bates

- poems -

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Above the Battle

Honor and pity for the smitten field,
The valorous ranks mown down like precious corn,
Whose want must famish love morn after morn,
Till Death, the good physician, shall have healed
The craving and the tearspent eyelids sealed.
Proud be the homes that for each cannon-torn,
Encrimsoned rampart have been left forlorn;
Holy the knells o'er fallen patriots pealed.

But they, above the battle, throng a space
Of starry silences and silver rest.
Commingled ghosts, they press like brothers through
White, dove-winged portals, where one Father's face
Atones their passion, as the ethereal blue
Serenes the fiery glows of east and west.

Katharine Lee Bates

America the Beautiful

O beautiful for spacious skies,
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the fruited plain!
America! America!
God shed His grace on thee
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea!

O beautiful for pilgrim feet,
Whose stern, impassioned stress
A thoroughfare for freedom beat
Across the wilderness!
America! America!
God mend thine every flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control,
Thy liberty in law!

O beautiful for heroes proved
In liberating strife,
Who more than self their country loved,
And mercy more than life!
America! America!
May God thy gold refine,
Till all success be nobleness,
And every gain divine!

O beautiful for patriot dream
That sees beyond the years
Thine alabaster cities gleam
Undimmed by human tears!
America! America!
God shed His grace on thee
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea!

Katharine Lee Bates

America to England

1899

Who would trust England, let him lift his eyes
To Nelson, columned o'er Trafalgar Square,
Her hieroglyph of duty, written where
The roar of traffic hushes to the skies;
Or mark, while Paul's vast shadow softly lies
On Gordon's statued sleep, how praise and prayer
Flush through the frank young faces clustering there
To con that kindred rune of sacrifice.
O England, no bland cloud-ship in the blue,
But rough oak plunging on o'er perilous jars
Of reef and ice, our faith will follow you
The more for tempest roar that strains your spars
And splits your canvas, be your helm but true,
Your courses shapen by the eternal stars.

1900

The nightmare melts at last, and London wakes
To her old habit of victorious ease.
More men, and more, and more for over-seas,
More guns until the giant hammer breaks
That patriot folk whom even God forsakes.
Shall not Great England work her will on these,
The foolish little nations, and appease
An angry shame that in her memory aches?
But far beyond the fierce-contested flood,
The cannon-planted pass, the shell-torn town,
The last wild carnival of fire and blood,
Beware, beware that dim and awful Shade,
Armored with Milton's sword and Cromwell's frown,
Affronted Freedom, of her own betrayed!

Katharine Lee Bates

Anniversary hymn

[sung to tune: "All Saints New"]

Our fathers, in the years grown dim, reared slowly, wall by wall
A holy dwelling-place for Him, that filleth all in all.
They wrought His house of faith and prayer, the rainbow round the Throne,
A precious temple builded fair on Christ the Cornerstone.

The Angel of the Golden Reed hath found the measure strait'
He hears the Great Foundation plead for ampler wall and gate.
The living pillars of the Truth grown on from morn to morn,
And still the heresy of youth is age's creed outworn.

But steadfast is their inner shrine wrought of the heart's fine gold,
Its hunger and its thirst divine, with jewels manifold,
Red sard of pain, hope's emerald gleam, white peace, no glory missed
Of righteous life and saintly dream, Jasper to amethyst.

Spirit of Truth, forbid that we who now God's temple are
And keep the faith with minds more free, our father's fabric mar.
Better than thoughts the stars that search is self still sacrificed,
For only Love can build the church whose corner-stone is Christ.

Katharine Lee Bates

Blood Road

The Old Year groaned as he trudged away,
His guilty shadow black on the snow,
And the heart of the glad New Year turned grey
At the road Time bade him go.

"O Gaffer Time, is it blood-road still?
Is the noontide dark as the stormy morn?
Is man's will yet as a wild beast's will?
When shall the Christ be born?"

He laughed as he answered, grim Gaffer Time,
Whose laugh is sadder than all men's moan.
"That name rides high on our wrath and crime,
For the Light in darkness shone.

"And thou, fair youngling, wilt mend the tale?"
The New Year stared on the misty word,
Where at foot of a cross all lustrous pale
Men raged for their gods of gold.

"Come back, Old Year, with thy burden bent.
Come back and settle thine own dark debt."
"Nay, let me haste where the years repent,
For I've seen what I would forget."

"And I, the first of a stately train,
The tramp of a century heard behind,
Must I be fouled with thy murder-stain?
Is there no pure path to find?"

The Old Year sneered as he limped away
To the place of his penance dim and far.
The New Year stood in the gates of day,
Crowned with the morning star.

Katharine Lee Bates

England to America

And what of thee, O Lincoln's Land? What gloom
Is darkening above the Sunset Sea?
Vowed Champion of Liberty, deplume
Thy war-crest, bow thy knee,
Before God answer thee.

What talk is thine of rebels? Didst thou turn,
My very child, thy vaunted sword on me,
To scoff to-day at patriot fires that burn
In hearts unbound to thee,
Flames of the Sunset Sea?

Katharine Lee Bates

Fodder for Cannon

Bodies glad, erect,
Beautiful with youth,
Life's elect,
Nature's truth,
Marching host on host,
Those bright, unblemished ones,
Manhood's boast,
Feed them to the guns.

Hearts and brains that teem
With blessing for the race,
Thought and dream,
Vision, grace,
Oh, love's best and most,
Bridegrooms, brothers, sons,
Host on host
Feed them to the guns.

Katharine Lee Bates

Glory

At the crowded gangway they kissed good-bye.
He had half a mind to scold her.
An officer's mother and not keep dry
The epaulet on his shoulder.

He had forgotten mother and fame,
His mind in a blood-mist floated,
But when reeling back from carnage they came,
One told him: "You are promoted!"

His friend smiled up from the wet red sand,
The look was afar, eternal,
But he tried to salute with his shattered hand:
"Room now for another colonel!"

Again he raged in that lurid hell
Where the country he loved had thrown him.
"You are promoted!" shrieked a shell.
His mother would not have known him.

Katharine Lee Bates

Great Twin Brethren, The

The battle will not cease
Till once again on those white steeds ye ride,
O heaven-descended Twins,
Before humanity's bewildered host.
Our javelins
Fly wide,
And idle is our cannon's boast.
Lead us, triumphant Brethren, Love and Peace.
A fairer Golden Fleece
Our more adventurous Argo fain would seek,
But save, O Sons of Jove,
Your blended light go with us, vain employ
It were to rove
This bleak,
Blind waste. To unimagined joy
Guide us, immortal Brethren, Love and Peace.

Katharine Lee Bates

If You Could Come

My love, my love, if you could come once more
From your high place,
I would not question you for heavenly lore,
But, silent, take the comfort of your face.

I would not ask you if those golden spheres
In love rejoice,
If only our stained star hath sin and tears,
But fill my famished hearing with your voice.

One touch of you were worth a thousand creeds.
My wound is numb
Through toil-pressed, but all night long it bleeds
In aching dreams, and still you cannot come.

Katharine Lee Bates

Matthew Arnold On hearing him read his Poems in Boston

A stranger, schooled to gentle arts,
He stept before the curious throng;
His path into our waiting hearts
Already paved by song.

Full well we knew his choristers,
Whose plaintive voices haunt our rest,
Those sable-vested harbingers
Of melancholy guest.

We smiled on him for love of these,
With eyes that swift grew dim to scan
Beneath the veil of courteous ease
The faith-forsaken man.

To his wan gaze the weary shows
And fashions of our vain estate,
Our shallow pain and false repose,
Our barren love and hate,

Are shadows in a land of graves,
Where creeds, the bubbles of a dream,
Flash each and fade, like melting waves
Upon a moonlight stream.

Yet loyal to his own despair,
Erect beneath a darkened sky,
He deems the austerest truth more fair
Than any gracious lie;

And stands, heroic, patient, sage,
With hopeless hands that bind the sheaf,
Claiming God's work with His wage,
The bard of unbelief.

Katharine Lee Bates

Pigeon Post

White wing, white wing,
Lily of the air,
What word dost bring,
On whose errand fare?

Red word, red word,
Snowy plumes abhor.
I, Christ's own bird,
Do the work of war.

Katharine Lee Bates

Pity of It, The

I. In South Africa

Over the lonesome African plain
The stars look down, like eyes of the slain.

A bumping ride across gullies and ruts,
Now a grumble and now a jest,
A bit of profanity jolted out,
--Whist!
Into a hornet's nest!
Curse on the scout!
Long-bearded Boers rising out of the rocks,
Rocks that already are crimson-splashed,
Ping-ping of bullets, stabbings and cuts,
As if hell hurtled and hissed,
--Then, muffling the shocks,
A sting in the breast,
A mist,
A woman's face down the darkness flashed,
Rest.

All as before, save for still forms spread
Under the boulders dripping red.

Over the lonesome African plain
The stars look down, like eyes of the slain.

II. In the Philippines

Silvery rice-fields whisper wide
How for home and freedom their owners died.

We've set the torch to their bamboo town,
And out they come in a scampering rush,
Little brown men with spears.
Shoot!
Down they go in a crush,
Sickening smears,
Hideous writhing huddles and heaps
Under the palms and the mango-trees.
More, still more! Shoot 'em down
Like brown jack-rabbits that scoot
With comical leaps
Out of the brush.
No loot?
No prisoners, then. As for these --
Hush!

The flag that dreamed of delivering

Shudders and droops like a broken wing.

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Katharine Lee Bates

The Falmouth Bell

Never was there lovelier town
Than our Falmouth by the sea.
Tender curves of sky look down
On her grace of knoll and lea.
Sweet her nestled Mayflower blows
Ere from prouder haunts the spring
Yet has brushed the lingering snows
With a violet-colored wing.
Bright the autumn gleams pervade
Cranberry marsh and bushy wold,
Till the children's mirth has made
Millionaires in leaves of gold;
And upon her pleasant ways,
Set with many a gardened home,
Flash through fret of drooping sprar
Visions far of ocean foam.
Happy bell of Paul Revere,
Sounding o'er such blest demesne
While a hundred times a year
Weaves the round from green to green.

Never were there friendlier folk
Than in Falmouth by the sea,
Neighbor-households that invoke
Pride of sailor-pedigree.
Here is princely interchange
Of the gifts of shore and field,
Starred with treasures rare and strange
That the liberal sea-chests yield.
Culture here burns breezy torch
Where gray captains, bronzed of neck
Tread their little length of porch
With a memory of the deck.
Ah, and here the tenderest hearts,
Here where sorrows sorest wring
And the widows shift their parts
Comforted and comforting.
Holy bell of Paul Revere
Calling such to prayer and praise.
While a hundred times the year
Herds her flock of faithful days!

Greetings to thee, ancient bell
Of our Falmouth by the sea!
Answered by the ocean swell,
Ring thy centuried Jubilee!

Like the white sails of the Sound,
Hast thou seen the years drift by,
From the dreamful, dim profound
To a goal beyond the eye.
Long thy maker lieth mute,
Hero of a faded strife;
Thou hast tolled from seed to fruit
Generations three of life.
Still thy mellow voice and clear
Floats o'er land and listening deep,
And we deem our fathers hear
From their shadowy hill of sleep.
Ring thy peals for centuries yet,
Living voice of Paul Revere!
Let the future not forget
That the past accounted dear!

Katharine Lee Bates

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Katharine Lee Bates

To My Country

O dear my Country, beautiful and dear,
Love cloth not darken sight.
God looketh through Love's eyes, whose vision clear
Beholds more flaws than keenest Hate hath known.
Nor is Love's judgment gentle, but austere;
The heart of Love must break ere it condone
One stain upon the white.

There comes an hour when on the parent turns
The challenge of the child;
The bridal passion for perfection burns;
Life gives her last allegiance to the best;
Each sweet idolatry the spirit spurns,
Once more enfranchised for its starry quest
Of beauty undefiled.

Love must be one with honor; yet to-day
Love liveth by a sign;
Allows no lasting compromise with clay,
But tends the mounting miracle of gold,
Content with service till the bud make way
To the rejoicing sunbeams that unfold
Its culminant divine.

There is a rumoring among the stars,
A trouble in the sun.
Freedom, most holy word, hath fallen at jars
With her own deeds; 'tis Mammon's jubilee;
Again the cross contends with scimitars;
The seraphim look down with dread to see
Earth's noblest hope undone.

O dear my Country, beautiful and dear,
Ultimate dream of Time,
By all thy millions longing to revere
A pure, august, authentic commonweal,
Climb to the light. Imperiled Pioneer
Of Brotherhood among the nations, seal
Our faith with thy sublime.

Katharine Lee Bates

Two centuries

Two centuries' winter storms have lashed the changing sands of Falmouth's shore,
Deep-voiced, the winds, swift winged, wild, have echoed there the ocean's roar.
But though the north-east gale unleashed, rage-blind with power, relentless beat,
The sturdy light-house sheds its beam on waves churned white beneath the sleet.
And still when cold and fear are past, and fields are sweet with spring-time showers,
Mystic, the gray age-silent hills breathe out their souls in fair mayflowers.
And where the tawny saltmarsh lies beyond the sand dunes' farthest reach,
The undulous grass grown russet green, skirts the white crescent of the beach.

Above the tall elms' green-plumed tops, etched against low-hung, gray-hued skies,
Straight as the heaven-kissing pine, the home-bound mariner descries
The goodly spire of the old first church, reverend, serene, with old-time grace,
Symbol and sign of an inner life deep-sealed by time's slow carven trace.

Out of that church in days long gone went a stalwart, true-eyed sturdy band,
Sons of the mist and the flying foam, the blood and brawn of the Pilgrim land;
Down to the sea where the tall masts rose, where the green-mossed black hulls rose
and fell,
And the cables strained at the call of the tide, for they knew and heeded its summons
well.

Katharine Lee Bates

When lincoln died

A five-year old in a Cape Cod village, twenty miles from the rail,
Falmouth, Falmouth, loveliest Falmouth,
Wearing her silvery, pearl-embroidered ocean mist for a veil;
Her sweet God's Acre a windsome garden whither often would weepers bear
Their gifts of flowers, dear dooryard flowers,
To pale stones carved with a ship or anchor, though no mound was molded there;

For many a Falmouth man lay dreaming under seas of dazzling blue
Mid the rosewhite coral, the rosepink coral,
And some in the Arctice ice were shrouded, and the tomb of some known knew.

A five-year old on the side porch holding a fold of her mother's dress,
Mother, Mother, our fair young Mother,
Shaking the breakfast cloth with a flourish of her own gay gallantness.

And across the yard, in her narrow doorway, the neighbor I held in dread,
Venomous neighbor, witch of a neighbor,
Lean and gray, with a furtive pussy that the boys called Copperhead.

Yet I loved her grandson, a pygmy urchin with black eyes glittering sly,
Impish playmate, my earliest playmate,
Whose quick red mouth would snap at and swallow the bewildered buzz of a fly.

She shrilled across: "They've shot Abe Lincoln, He's dead and I'm glad he's dead."
Lincoln! Lincoln! Abraham Lincoln!
She stood and laughed, that terrible woman, and never a word God said.

Back into the kitchen my mother staggered, her face all strange and blanched,
Her deep eyes filling, filling and brimming
With tears that the tablecloth kept so sacred from childish weeping stanchd.

"I will not believe it. I'll not believe it," she sobbed till with drooping head
An old sea-captain, a whaler captain
Off the stage-coach swung with a Boston paper that from house to house he read.

I heard it and hid me under the lilacs this mystery to prod.
Lincoln! Lincoln! Abraham Lincoln!
And not one angel to catch the bullet! What had become of God?

A robin byond me hopped and chirruped where the April grasses blew,
As if Lincoln, Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln
Were no more than the worm he tugged at and swallowed. I lamented that long worm,
too.

Then our lonely village among the sand dunes with only its one scant store,
Yet part of a nation, a stricken nation,
Took thought how to honor our saint, our martyr, our hero forevermore.

Wonted to grief, the women of Falmouth hung the old church, pulpit and walls,
With a simple mourning, a sacred mourning,
Already steeped in uttermost anguish, hung it with widow's shawls.

The flag on the village green half-masted, bell tolling upon the air,
Lincoln, Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln,
The nation's sorrow I felt my sorrow, for my mother's shawl was there.

Katharine Lee Bates

Yellow Clover

Must I, who walk alone,
Come on it still,
This Puck of plants
The wise would do away with,
The sunshine slants
To play with,
Our wee, gold-dusty flower, the yellow clover,
Which once in Parting for a time
That then seemed long,
Ere time for you was over,
We sealed our own?
Do you remember yet,
O Soul beyond the stars,
Beyond the uttermost dim bars
Of space,
Dear Soul, who found earth sweet,
Remember by love's grace,
In dreamy hushes of the heavenly song,
How suddenly we halted in our climb,
Lingering, reluctant, up that farthest hill,
Stooped for the blossoms closest to our feet,
And gave them as a token
Each to Each,
In lieu of speech,
In lieu of words too grievous to be spoken,
Those little, gypsy, wondering blossoms wet
With a strange dew of tears?

So it began,
This vagabond, unvalued yellow clover,
To be our tenderest language. All the years
It lent a new zest to the summer hours,
As each of us went scheming to surprise
The other with our homely, laureate flowers.
Sonnets and odes
Fringing our daily roads.
Can amaranth and asphodel
Bring merrier laughter to your eyes?
Oh, if the Blest, in their serene abodes,
Keep any wistful consciousness of earth,
Not grandeurs, but the childish ways of love,
Simplicities of mirth,
Must follow them above
With touches of vague homesickness that pass
Like shadows of swift birds across the grass.
Beneath some foreign arch of sky,
How many a time the rover
You or I,
For life oft sundered look from look,
And voice from voice, the transient dearth
Schooling my soul to brook

This distance that no messages may span,
Would chance
Upon our wilding by a lonely well,
Or drowsy watermill,
Or swaying to the chime of convent bell,
Or where the nightingales of old romance
With tragical contraltos fill
Dim solitudes of infinite desire;
And once I joyed to meet
Our peasant gadabout
A trespasser on trim, seigniorial seat,
Twinkling a saucy eye
As potentates paced by.

Our golden cord! our soft, pursuing flame
From friendship's altar fire!
How proudly we would pluck and tame
The dimpling clusters, mutinously gay!
How swiftly they were sent
Far, far away
On journeys wide,
By sea and continent,
Green miles and blue leagues over,
From each of us to each,
That so our hearts might reach,
And touch within the yellow clover,
Love's letter to be glad about
Like sunshine when it came!

My sorrow asks no healing; it is love;
Let love then make me brave
To bear the keen hurts of
This careless summertide,
Ay, of our own poor flower,
Changed with our fatal hour,
For all its sunshine vanished when you died;
Only white clover blossoms on your grave.

Katharine Lee Bates

Yellow Warblers

The first faint dawn was flushing up the skies
When, dreamland still bewildering mine eyes,
I looked out to the oak that, winter-long,
-- a winter wild with war and woe and wrong --
Beyond my casement had been void of song.

And lo! with golden buds the twigs were set,
Live buds that warbled like a rivulet
Beneath a veil of willows. Then I knew
Those tiny voices, clear as drops of dew,
Those flying daffodils that fleck the blue,

Those sparkling visitants from myrtle isles,
Wee pilgrims of the sun, that measure miles
Innumerable over land and sea
With wings of shining inches. Flakes of glee,
They filled that dark old oak with jubilee,

Foretelling in delicious roundelays
Their dainty courtships on the dipping sprays,
How they should fashion nests, mate helping mate,
Of milkweed flax and fern-down delicate
To keep sky-tinted eggs inviolate.

Listening to those blithe notes, I slipped once more
From lyric dawn through dreamland's open door,
And there was God, Eternal Life that sings,
Eternal joy, brooding all mortal things,
A nest of stars, beneath untroubled wings.

Katharine Lee Bates