Classic Poetry Series

Richard Savage

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The Bastard

In gayer hours, when high my fancy ran,
The Muse exulting, thus her lay began:
'Blest be the Bastard's birth! through wondrous ways,
He shines eccentric like a comet's blaze!
No sickly fruit of faint compliance he!
He! stamped in nature's mint of ecstasy!
He lives to build, not boast a generous race:
No tenth transmitter of a foolish face:
His daring hope no sire's example bounds;
His first-born lights no prejudice confounds.
He, kindling from within, requires no flame;
He glories in a Bastard's glowing name.

'Born to himself, by no possession led,
In freedom fostered, and by fortune fed;
Nor guides, nor rules his sovereign choice control,
His body independent as his soul;
Loosed to the world's wide range, enjoined no aim,
Prescribed no duty, and assigned no name:
Nature's unbounded son, he stands alone,
His heart unbiased, and his mind his own.

'O mother, yet no mother! 'tis to you
My thanks for such distinguished claims are due;
You, unenslaved to Nature's narrow laws,
Warm championess for freedom's sacred cause,
From all the dry devoirs of blood and line,
From ties maternal, moral, and divine,
Discharged my grasping soul; pushed me from shore,
And launched me into life without an oar.

'What had I lost, if, conjugally kind,
By nature hating, yet by vows confined,
Untaught the matrimonial bonds to slight,
And coldly conscious of a husband's right,
You had faint-drawn me with a form alone,
A lawful lump of life by force your own!
Then, while your backward will retrenched desire,
And unconcurring spirits lent no fire,
I had been born your dull, domestic heir,
Load of your life, and motive of your care;
Perhaps been poorly rich, and meanly great,
The slave of pomp, a cipher in the state;
Lordly neglectful of a worth unknown,
And slumbering in a seat by chance my own.

'Far nobler blessings wait the bastard's lot;
Conceived in rapture, and with fire begot!
Strong as necessity, he starts away,
Climbs against wrongs, and brightens into day.'
Thus unprophetic, lately misinspired,
I sung: gay fluttering hope my fancy fired:

Inly secure, through conscious scorn of ill,
Nor taught by wisdom how to balance will,
Rashly deceived, I saw no pits to shun,
But thought to purpose and to act were one;
Heedless what pointed cares pervert his way,
Whom caution arms not, and whom woes betray;
But now exposed, and shrinking from distress,
I fly to shelter while the tempests press;
My Muse to grief resigns the varying tone,
The raptures languish, and the numbers groan.

O Memory! thou soul of joy and pain!
Thou actor of our passions o'er again!
Why didst thou aggravate the wretch's woe?
Why add continuous smart to every blow?
Few are my joys; alas! how soon forgot!
On that kind quarter thou invad'st me not;
While sharp and numberless my sorrows fall,
Yet thou repeat'st and multipli'st them all.

Is chance a guilt? that my disastrous heart,
For mischief never meant; must ever smart?
Can self-defence be sin?--Ah, plead no more!
What though no purposed malice stained thee o'er?
Had Heaven befriended thy unhappy side,
Thou hadst not been provoked--or thou hadst died.

Far be the guilt of homeshed blood from all
On whom, unsought, embroiling dangers fall!
Still the pale dead revives, and lives to me,
To me! through Pity's eye condemned to see.
Remembrance veils his rage, but swells his fate;
Grieved I forgive, and am grown cool too late.
Young, and unthoughtful then; who knows, one day,
What ripening virtues might have made their way?
He might have lived till folly died in shame,
Till kindling wisdom felt a thirst for fame.
He might perhaps his country's friend have proved;
Both happy, generous, candid, and beloved,
He might have saved some worth, now doomed to fall;
And I, perchance, in him, have murdered all.

O fate of late repentance! always vain:
Thy remedies but lull undying pain.
Where shall my hope find rest?--No mother's care
Shielded my infant innocence with prayer:
No father's guardian hand my youth maintained,
Called forth my virtues, or from vice restrained.
Is it not thine to snatch some powerful arm,
First to advance, then screen from future harm?
Am I returned from death to live in pain?
Or would imperial Pity save in vain?

Distrust it not--What blame can mercy find,
Which gives at once a life, and rears a mind?

Mother, miscalled, farewell--of soul severe,
This sad reflection yet may force one tear:
All I was wretched by to you I owed,
Alone from strangers every comfort flowed!

Lost to the life you gave, your son no more,
And now adopted, who was doomed before;
New-born, I may a nobler mother claim,
But dare not whisper her immortal name;
Supremely lovely, and serenely great!
Majestic mother of a kneeling state!
Queen of a people's heart, who ne'er before
Agreed--yet now with one consent adore!
One contest yet remains in this desire,
Who most shall give applause, where all admire.

Richard Savage