

Classic Poetry Series

Robert Blair

- poems -

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Grave, The (excerpt)

While some affect the sun, and some the shade.
Some flee the city, some the hermitage;
Their aims as various, as the roads they take
In journeying thro' life;--the task be mine,
To paint the gloomy horrors of the tomb;
Th' appointed place of rendezvous, where all
These travellers meet.--Thy succours I implore,
Eternal King! whose potent arm sustains
The keys of Hell and Death.--The Grave, dread thing!
Men shiver when thou'rt named: Nature appall'd
Shakes off her wonted firmness.--Ah ! how dark
The long-extended realms, and rueful wastes!
Where nought but silence reigns, and night, dark night,
Dark as was chaos, ere the infant Sun
Was roll'd together, or had tried his beams
Athwart the gloom profound.--The sickly taper,
By glimm'ring thro' thy low-brow'd misty vaults,
(Furr'd round with mouldy damp, and ropy slime)
Lets fall a supernumerary horror,
And only serves to make thy night more irksome.
Well do I know thee by thy trusty yew,
Cheerless, unsocial plant! that loves to dwell
'Midst skulls and coffins, epitaphs and worms:
Where light-heel'd ghosts, and visionary shades,
Beneath the wan, cold moon (as fame reports)
Embodied thick, perform their mystic rounds,
No other merriment, dull tree! is thine.

See yonder hallow'd fane;--the pious work
Of names once fam'd, now dubious or forgot,
And buried midst the wreck of things which were;
There lie interr'd the more illustrious dead.
The wind is up:--hark! how it howls!--Methinks,
'Till now, I never heard a sound so dreary:
Doors creak, and windows clap, and night's fowl bird,
Rook'd in the spire, screams loud; the gloomy aisles
Black plaster'd, and hung round with shreds of 'scutcheons,
And tatter'd coats of arms, send back the sound,
Laden with heavier airs, from the low vaults,
The mansions of the dead.--Rous'd from their slumbers,
In grim array the grisly spectres rise,
Grin horrible, and, obstinately sullen,
Pass and repass, hush'd as the foot of night.
Again the screech-owl shrieks--ungracious sound!
I'll hear no more; it makes one's blood run chill.

Quite round the pile, a row of reverend elms,
(Coeval near with that) all ragged show,
Long lash'd by the rude winds. Some rift half down
Their branchless trunks; others so thin at top,
That scarce two crows can lodge in the same tree.
Strange things, the neighbours say, have happen'd here;

Wild shrieks have issued from the hollow tombs;
Dead men have come again, and walk'd about;
And the great bell has toll'd, unring, untouch'd.
(Such tales their cheer at wake or gossiping,
When it draws near to witching time of night.)

Oft in the lone church yard at night I've seen,
By glimpse of moonshine chequering thro' the trees,
The school boy, with his satchel in his hand,
Whistling aloud to bear his courage up,
And lightly tripping o'er the long flat stones,
(With nettles skirted, and with moss o'ergrown,)
That tell in homely phrase who lie below.
Sudden he starts, and hears, or thinks he hears,
The sound of something purring at his heels;
Full fast he flies, and dare not look behind him,
'Till, out of breath, he overtakes his fellows,
Who gather round and wonder at the tale
Of horrid apparition tall and ghastly,
That walks at dead of night, or takes his stand
O'er some new-open'd grave; and (strange to tell!)
Evanishes at crowing of the cock.

The new-made widow, too, I've sometimes 'spy'd,
Sad sight! slow moving o'er the prostrate dead:
Listless, she crawls along in doleful black,
While bursts of sorrow gush from either eye,
Fast falling down her now untasted cheek,
Prone on the lowly grave of the dear man
She drops; while busy meddling memory,
In barbarous succession, musters up
The past endearments of their softer hours,
Tenacious of its theme. Still, still she thinks
She sees him, and indulging the fond thought,
Clings yet more closely to the senseless turf,
Nor heeds the passenger who looks that way.

Invidious Grave!--how dost thou rend in sunder
Whom love has knit, and sympathy made one?
A tie more stubborn far than Nature's band.
Friendship! mysterious cement of the soul,
Sweet'ner of life, and solder of society,
I owe thee much. Thou hast deserv'd from me,
Far, far beyond what I can ever pay.
Oft have I prov'd the labours of thy love,
And the warm efforts of the gentle heart,
Anxious to please.--Oh! when my friend and I
In some thick wood have wander'd heedless on,
Hid from the vulgar eye, and sat us down
Upon the sloping cowslip-cover'd bank,
Where the pure limpid stream has slid along
In grateful errors thro' the underwood,

Sweet murmuring; methought the shrill-tongued thrush
Mended his song of love; the sooty blackbird
Mellow'd his pipe, and soften'd every note:
The eglantine smell'd sweeter, and the rose
Assum'd a dye more deep; whilst ev'ry flower
Vied with its fellow-plant in luxury
Of dress--Oh! then the longest summer's day
Seem'd too too much in haste; still the full heart
Had not imparted half: 'twas happiness
Too exquisite to last. Of joys departed,
Not to return, how painful the remembrance!

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