

Classic Poetry Series

Thomas William Heney

- poems -

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A Riverina Road

Now while so many turn with love and longing
To wan lands lying in the grey North Sea,
To thee we turn, hearts, mem'ries, all belonging,
Dear land of ours, to thee.

West, ever west, with the strong sunshine marching
Beyond the mountains, far from this soft coast,
Until we almost see the great plains arching,
In endless mirage lost.

A land of camps where seldom is sojourning,
Where men like the dim fathers of our race,
Halt for a time, and next day, unreturning,
Fare ever on apace.

Last night how many a leaping blaze affrighted
The wailing birds of passage in their file;
And dawn sees ashes dead and embers whited
Where men had dwelt awhile.

The sun may burn, the mirage shift and vanish
And fade and glare by turns along the sky;
The haze of heat may all the distance banish
To the uncaring eye.

By speech, or tongue of bird or brute, unbroken
Silence may brood upon the lifeless plain,
Nor any sign, far off or near, betoken
Man in this vast domain.

Though tender grace the landscape lacks, too spacious,
Impassive, silent, lonely, to be fair,
Their kindness swiftly comes more soft and gracious,
Who live or tarry there.

All that he has, in camp or homestead, proffers
To stranger guest at once a stranger host,
Proudest to see accepted what he offers,
Given without a boast.

Pass, if you can, the drover's cattle stringing
Along the miles of the wide travelled road,
Without a challenge through the hot dust ringing,
Kind though abrupt the mode.

A cloud of dust where polish'd wheels are flashing
Passes along, and in it rolls the mail.
Comes from the box as on the coach goes dashing
The lonely driver's hail.

Or in the track a station youngster mounted
Sits in his saddle smoking for a "spell",

Rides a while onward; then, his news recounted,
Parts with a brief farewell.

To-day these plains may seem a face defiant,
Turn'd to a mortal foe, yet scorning fear;
As when, with heaven at war, an Earth-born giant
Saw the Olympian near.

Come yet again! No child's fair face is sweeter
With young delight than this cool blooming land,
Silent no more, for songs than wings are fleeter,
No blaze, but sunshine bland.

Thus in her likeness that strange nature moulding
Makes man as moody, sad and savage too;
Yet in his heart, like her, a passion holding,
Unselfish, kind and true.

Therefore, while many turn with love and longing
To wan lands lying on the grey North Sea,
To-day possessed by other mem'ries thronging
We turn, wild West, to thee!

23rd December, 1891.

Thomas William Heney

Absence

Ah, happy air that, rough or soft,
 May kiss that face and stay;
And happy beams that from above
 May choose to her their way;
And happy flowers that now and then
 Touch lips more sweet than they!

But it were not so blest to be
 Or light or air or rose;
Those dainty fingers tear and toss
 The bloom that in them glows;
And come or go, both wind and ray
 She heeds not, if she knows.

But if I come thy choice should be
 Either to love or not --
For if I might I would not kiss
 And then be all forgot;
And it were best thy love to lose
 If love self-scorn begot.

Thomas William Heney

The Boundary Rider

THE BRIDLE reins hang loose in the hold of his lean left hand;
As the tether gives, the horse bends browsing down to the sand,
On the pommel the right hand rests with a smoking briar black,
Whose thin rings rise and break as he gazes from the track.

Already the sun is aslope, high still in a pale hot sky,
And the afternoon is fierce, in its glare the wide plains lie
Empty as heaven and silent, smit with a vast despair,
The face of a Titan bound, for whom is no hope nor care.

Hoar are its leagues of bush, and tawny brown is its soil,
In that immensity lost are human effort and toil,
A few scattered sheep in the scrub hardly themselves to be seen;
One man in the wilderness lone; beside, a primaeval scene.

Firm and upright in his saddle as a soldier upon parade,
Yet graceful too is his seat, for Nature this horseman made;
From childhood a fearless rider, now like a centaur he,
And half of his strength is gone when he jumps from the saddle-tree.

Back from his sweat-wet hair his felt is carelessly placed,
Handkerchief at his throat, sagging shirt round a lank firm waist;
True to the set of strong loins the belted moleskins are tight,
Plain from forehead to stirrup a virile vigour in sight.

Yet scarce more than a boy, but the long blaze not more sure
Has left on the countenance spare a hue that shall ever endure,
Than the life of the plains has set reliance and courage there,
Constancy, manliness frank in a young face debonair.

He should be no less who rides for ever each spacious bound,
Better than human speech he knows the desert around.
He journeys from dawn to dusk, and always he rides alone,
The hue of the wilderness takes, as his mind its monotone.

He hears the infrequent cries, shrieking or hoarse and slow,
Sheep bleating, the minah's scream, the monologue of the crow;
He rides in a manless land, and in leagues of the salt-bush plain,
Seeks day after day for change, and seeks it ever in vain.

In his hands his life each morn as he swings to his leathern seat,
Woe to him if he falls where as water the plain sucks heat,
Alone in a vast still tomb, cruel and loth to spare,
Death waits for each sense and slays whilst the doomed wretch feels despair.

Thomas William Heney

To The Poet

WHAT cares the rose if the buds which are its pride
Be plucked for the breast of the dead or the hands of a bride?

The mother-drift if its pebbles be dull inglorious things,
Or diamonds fit to shine from the diadems of kings?

Sing, O poet, the moods of thy moments each
Perfect to thee whatever the meaning it reach.

Let the years find if it be as a soulless stone,
Or under the words which hide there be a glory alone.

Thomas William Heney