

Classic Poetry Series

William Edmondstoune Aytoun

- poems -

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Blind Old Milton

Place me once more, my daughter, where the sun
May shine upon my old and time-worn head,
For the last time, perchance. My race is run;
And soon amidst the ever-silent dead
I must repose, it may be, half forgot.
Yes! I have broke the hard and bitter bread
For many a year, and with those who trembled not
To buckle on their armor for the fight,
And set themselves against the tyrant's lot;
And I have never bowed me to his might,
Nor knelt before him -- for I bear within
My heart the sternest consciousness of right,
And that perpetual hate of gilded sin
Which made me what I am; and though the stain
Of poverty be on me, yet I win
More honor by it, than the blinded train
Who hug their willing servitude, and bow
Unto the weakest and the most profane.
Therefore, with unencumbered soul I go
Before the footstool of my Maker, where
I hope to stand as undebased as now!

Child! is the sun abroad? I feel my hair
Borne up and wafted by the gentle wind,
I feel the odors that perfume the air,
And hear the rustling of the leaves behind.
Within my heart I picture them, and then
I almost can forget that I am blind,
And old, and hated by my fellow-men.
Yet would I fain once more behold the grace
Of nature ere I die, and gaze again
Upon her living and rejoicing face --
Fain would I see thy countenance, my child,
My comforter! I feel thy dear embrace --
I hear thy voice, so musical and mild,
The patient sole interpreter, by whom
So many years of sadness are beguiled;
For it hath made my small and scanty room
Peopled with glowing visions of the past.
But I will calmly bend me to my doom,
And wait the hour which is approaching fast,
When triple light shall stream upon mine eyes,
And heaven itself be opened up at last
To him who dared foretell its mysteries.
I have had visions in this drear eclipse
Of outward consciousness, and clomb the skies,
Striving to utter with my earthly lips
What the diviner soul had half divined,
Even as the Saint in his Apocalypse
Who saw the inmost glory, where enshrined
Sat He who fashioned glory. This hath driven
All outward strife and tumult from my mind,

And humbled me, until I have forgiven
My bitter enemies, and only seek
To find the straight and narrow path to heaven.

Yet I am weak -- oh! how entirely weak,
For one who may not love nor suffer more!
Sometimes unbidden tears will wet my cheek,
And my heart bound as keenly as of yore.
Responsive to a voice, now hushed to rest,
Which made the beautiful Italian shore,
In all its pomp of summer vineyards drest,
And Eden and a Paradise to me.
Do the sweet breezes from the balmy west
Still murmur through thy groves, Parthenope,
In search of odors from the orange bowers?
Still, on thy slopes of verdure, does the bee
Cull her rare honey from the virgin flowers?
And Philomel her plaintive chaunt prolong
'Neath skies more calm and more serene than ours,
Making the summer one perpetual song?
Art thou the same as when in manhood's pride
I walked in joy thy grassy meads among,
With that fair youthful vision by my side,
In whose bright eyes I looked -- and not in vain?
O my adorèd angel! O my bride!
Despite of years, and woe, and want, and pain,
My soul yearns back towards thee, and I seem
To wander with thee, hand in hand, again,
By the bright margins of that flowing stream.
I hear again thy voice, more silver-sweet
Than fancied music floating in a dream,
Possess my being; from afar I greet
The waving of thy garments in the glade,
And the light rustling of thy fairy feet --
What time as one half eager, half afraid,
Love's burning secret faltered on my tongue,
And tremulous looks and broken words betrayed
The secret of the heart from whence they sprung.
Ah me! the earth that rendered thee to heaven
Gave up an angel beautiful and young,
Spotless and pure as snow when freshly driven;
A bright Aurora for the starry sphere
Where all is love, and even life forgiven.
Bride of immortal beauty -- ever dear!
Dost thou await me in thy blest abode!
While I, Tithonus-like, must linger here,
And count each step along the rugged road;
A phantom, tottering to a long-made grave.
And eager to lay down my weary load.

I who was fancy's lord, am fancy's slave.
Like the low murmurs of the Indian shell

Ta'en from its coral bed beneath the wave,
Which, unforgetful of the ocean's swell,
Retains within its mystic urn the hum
Heard in the sea-grots where Nereids dwell --
Old thoughts still haunt me -- unawares they come
Between me and my rest, nor can I make
Those aged visitors of sorrow dumb.
Oh, yet awhile, my feeble soul, awake!
Nor wander back with sullen steps again;
For neither pleasant pastime canst thou take
In such a journey, nor endure the pain.
The phantoms of the past are dead for thee;
So let them ever uninvoked remain,
And be thou calm, till death shall set thee free.
Thy flowers of hope expanded long ago,
Long since their blossoms withered on the tree:
No second spring can come to make them blow,
But in the silent winter of the grave
They lie with blighted love and buried woe.

I did not waste the gifts which nature gave,
Nor slothful lay in the Circean bower;
Nor did I yield myself the willing slave
Of lust for pride, for riches, or for power.
No! in my heart a nobler spirit dwelt;
For constant was my faith in manhood's dower;
Man -- made in God's own image -- and I felt
How of our own accord we courted shame,
Until to idols like ourselves we knelt,
And so renounced the great and glorious claim
Of freedom, our immortal heritage.
I saw how bigotry, with spiteful aim,
Smote at the searching eyesight of the sage;
How Error stole behind the steps of Truth,
And cast delusion on the sacred page.
So, as a champion, even in early youth
I waged by battle with a purpose keen:
Nor feared the hand of terror, nor the tooth
Of serpent jealousy. And I have been
With starry Galileo in his cell --
That wise magician with the brow serene,
Who fathomed space; and I have seen him tell
The wonders of the planetary sphere,
And trace the ramparts of heaven's citadel
On the cold flag-stones of his dungeon drear.
And I have walked with Hampden and with Vane --
Names once so gracious to an English ear --
In days that never may return again.
My voice, though not the loudest, hath been heard
Whenever freedom raised her cry of pain,
And the faint effort of the humble bard
Hath roused up thousands from their lethargy,

To speak in words of thunder. What reward
Was mine, or theirs? It matters not; for I
am but a leaf cast on the whirling tide,
Without a hope or wish, except to die.
But truth, asserted once, must still abide,
Unquenchable, as are those fiery springs
Which day and night gush from the mountain-side,
Perpetual meteors girt with lambent wings,
Which the wild tempest tosses to and fro,
But cannot conquer with the force it brings.

Yet I, who ever felt another's woe
More keenly than my own untold distress;
I, who have battled with the common foe,
And broke for years the bread of bitterness;
Who never yet abandoned or betrayed
The trust vouchsafed me, nor have ceased to bless,
Am left alone to wither in the shade,
A weak old man, deserted by his kind --
Whom none will comfort in his age, nor aid!

Oh, let me not repine! A quiet mind
Conscious and upright, needs no other stay;
Nor can I grieve for what I leave behind,
In the rich promise of eternal day.
Henceforth to me the world is dead and gone,
Its thorns unfelt, its roses cast away:
And the old pilgrim, weary and alone,
Bowed down with travel, at his Master's gate
Now sits, his task of life-long labor done,
Thankful for rest, although it comes so late,
After sore journey through the world of sin,
In hope, and prayer, and wistfulness to wait,
Until the door shall ope, and let him in.

William Edmondstone Aytoun

The Execution Of Montrose

COME hither, Evan Cameron!
Come, stand beside my knee:
I hear the river roaring down
Towards the wintry sea.
There 's shouting on the mountain-side,
There 's war within the blast;
Old faces look upon me,
Old forms go trooping past:
I hear the pibroch wailing
Amidst the din of fight,
And my dim spirit wakes again
Upon the verge of night.

'T was I that led the Highland host
Through wild Lochaber's snows,
What time the plaided clans came down
To battle with Montrose.
I 've told thee how the Southrons fell
Beneath the broad claymore,
And how we smote the Campbell clan
By Inverlochy's shore.
I 've told thee how we swept Dundee,
And tam'd the Lindsays' pride;
But never have I told thee yet
How the great Marquis died.

A traitor sold him to his foes;
O deed of deathless shame!
I charge thee, boy, if e'er thou meet
With one of Assynt's name—
Be it upon the mountain's side,
Or yet within the glen,
Stand he in martial gear alone,
Or back'd by armed men—
Face him, as thou wouldst face the man
Who wrong'd thy sire's renown;
Remember of what blood thou art,
And strike the caitiff down!

They brought him to the Watergate,
Hard bound with hempen span,
As though they held a lion there,
And not a fenceless man.
They set him high upon a cart,
The hangman rode below,
They drew his hands behind his back
And bar'd his noble brow.
Then, as a hound is slipp'd from leash,
They cheer'd the common throng,
And blew the note with yell and shout
And bade him pass along.

It would have made a brave man's heart
Grow sad and sick that day,
To watch the keen malignant eyes
Bent down on that array.
There stood the Whig west-country lords,
In balcony and bow;
There sat their gaunt and wither'd dames,
And their daughters all a-row.
And every open window
Was full as full might be
With black-rob'd Covenanting carles,
That goodly sport to see!

But when he came, though pale and wan,
He look'd so great and high,
So noble was his manly front,
So calm his steadfast eye,
The rabble rout forbore to shout,
And each man held his breath,
For well they knew the hero's soul
Was face to face with death.
And then a mournful shudder
Through all the people crept,
And some that came to scoff at him
Now turn'd aside and wept.

But onwards—always onwards,
In silence and in gloom,
The dreary pageant labor'd,
Till it reach'd the house of doom.
Then first a woman's voice was heard
In jeer and laughter loud,
And an angry cry and a hiss arose
From the heart of the tossing crowd:
Then as the Graeme look'd upwards,
He saw the ugly smile
Of him who sold his king for gold,
The master-fiend Argyle!

The Marquis gaz'd a moment,
And nothing did he say,
But the cheek of Argyle grew ghastly pale
And he turn'd his eyes away.
The painted harlot by his side,
She shook through every limb,
For a roar like thunder swept the street,
And hands were clench'd at him;
And a Saxon soldier cried aloud,
"Back, coward, from thy place!
For seven long years thou hast not dar'd
To look him in the face."

Had I been there with sword in hand,
And fifty Camerons by,
That day through high Dunedin's streets
Had peal'd the slogan-cry.
Not all their troops of trampling horse,
Nor might of mailed men,
Not all the rebels in the south
Had borne us backwards then!
Once more his foot on Highland heath
Had trod as free as air,
Or I, and all who bore my name,
Been laid around him there!

It might not be. They placed him next
Within the solemn hall,
Where once the Scottish kings were thron'd
Amidst their nobles all.
But there was dust of vulgar feet
On that polluted floor,
And perju'd traitors fill'd the place
Where good men sate before.
With savage glee came Warristoun
To read the murderous doom;
And then uprose the great Montrose
In the middle of the room.

"Now, by my faith as belted knight,
And by the name I bear,
And by the bright Saint Andrew's cross
That waves above us there,
Yea, by a greater, mightier oath—
And oh, that such should be!
By that dark stream of royal blood
That lies 'twixt you and me,
I have not sought in battle-field
A wreath of such renown,
Nor dar'd I hope on my dying day
To win the martyr's crown!

"There is a chamber far away
Where sleep the good and brave,
But a better place ye have nam'd for me
Than by my father's grave.
For truth and right, 'gainst treason's might,
This hand hath always striven,
And ye raise it up for a witness still
In the eye of earth and heaven.
Then nail my head on yonder tower,
Give every town a limb,
And God who made shall gather them:
I go from you to Him!"

The morning dawn'd full darkly,
The rain came flashing down,
And the jagged streak of the levin-bolt
Lit up the gloomy town:
The thunder crash'd across the heaven,
The fatal hour was come;
Yet aye broke in with muffled beat
The 'larum of the drum.
There was madness on the earth below
And anger in the sky,
And young and old, and rich and poor,
Came forth to see him die.

Ah, God! that ghastly gibbet!
How dismal 't is to see
The great tall spectral skeleton,
The ladder and the tree!
Hark! hark! it is the clash of arms—
The bells begin to toll—
"He is coming! he is coming!
God's mercy on his soul!"
One last long peal of thunder:
The clouds are clear'd away,
And the glorious sun once more looks down
Amidst the dazzling day.

"He is coming! he is coming!"
Like a bridegroom from his room,
Came the hero from his prison
To the scaffold and the doom.
There was glory on his forehead,
There was lustre in his eye,
And he never walk'd to battle
More proudly than to die:
There was color in his visage,
Though the cheeks of all were wan,
And they marvell'd as they saw him pass,
That great and goodly man!

He mounted up the scaffold,
And he turn'd him to the crowd;
But they dar'd not trust the people,
So he might not speak aloud.
But he look'd upon the heavens,
And they were clear and blue,
And in the liquid ether
The eye of God shone through;
Yet a black and murky battlement
Lay resting on the hill,
As though the thunder slept within—
All else was clam and still.

The grim Geneva ministers
With anxious scowl drew near,
As you have seen the ravens flock
Around the dying deer.
He would not deign them word nor sign,
But alone he bent the knee,
And veil'd his face for Christ's dear grace
Beneath the gallows-tree.
Then radiant and serene he rose,
And cast his cloak away:
For he had ta'en his latest look
Of earth and sun and day.

A beam of light fell o'er him,
Like a glory round the shriven,
And he climb'd the lofty ladder
As it were the path to heaven.
Then came a flash from out the cloud,
And a stunning thunder-roll;
And no man dar'd to look aloft,
For fear was on every soul.
There was another heavy sound,
A hush and then a groan;
And darkness swept across the sky—
The work of death was done!

William Edmondstoune Aytoun

The Massacre of MacPherson

Fhairshon had a son,
Who married Noah's daughter,
And nearly spoiled ta Flood
By trinking up ta water:

Which he would have done,
I at least pelieve it,
Had the mixture peen
Only half Glenlivet.

William Edmondstoune Aytoun

The Refusal of Charon

Why look the distant mountains
So gloomy and so drear?
Are rain clouds passing o'er them,
Or is the tempest near?
No shadow of the tempest
Is there, nor wind nor rain—
'Tis Charon that is passing by,
With all his gloomy train.

The young men march before him,
In all their strength and pride;
The tender little infants,
They totter by his side;
The old men walk behind him,
And earnestly they pray—
Both old and young imploring him
To grant some brief delay.

'O Charon! halt, we pray thee,
Beside some little town,
Or near some sparkling fountain,
Where the waters wimple down!
The old will drink and be refreshed,
The young the disc will fling,
And the tender little children
Pluck flowers beside the spring.'

'I will not stay my journey,
Nor halt by any town,
Near any sparkling fountain,
Where the waters wimple down:
The mothers coming to the well
Would know the babes they bore,
The wives would clasp their husbands,
Nor could I part them more.'

William Edmondstone Aytoun