

Classic Poetry Series

Alfred Gordon
- poems -

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Alfred Gordon()

To meet unexpectedly a new poet of originality and power, and to feel for a few minutes the charm of his frank, sincere and warm-blooded personality, was my privilege in a Yonge Street bookstore, one fortunate day in January, 1916. The poet was Mr. Alfred Gordon of Montreal, and my attention had just been drawn by Mr. Albert Britnell to Father Dollard's appreciative critique, when I walked Mr. Gordon with a volume of his Poems under his arm.

Mr. Gordon was born in London, England, in 1888. He was educated in a private school, and at Finsbury Technical College, where he studied for three years and graduated with a certificate in Mechanical Engineering. Shortly after graduation he was employed by the Underfeed Stoker Company, and in connection with this company, first saw Canada in 1908, when he came out on the Allan Line steamer, Corinthian, assisting in boiler tests to determine the relative efficiency of mechanical stoking as against hand-firing.

This was the voyage on which the Corinthian came into collision with the Malin Head, and Mr. Gordon was stranded with the rest for a fortnight at Levis. Through a misunderstanding the steamer continued homeward without him, and he was left alone and penniless.

Eventually he got back to England, but not finding congenial employment of a permanent nature, he decided, in June, 1910, to cross the ocean again, this time to settle in Canada. He came first to Toronto where he says,

I was engaged in almost unbelievably humble work, before I went to Lachine and entered the employ of The Dominion Bridge Company as a structural draughtsman.

Mr. Gordon stuck to draughting, 'eventually making good,' and was with The St. Lawrence Bridge Company when the Great War broke out, unsettling industrial conditions and causing loss of employment to himself and others.

The drudgery—to him—of a clerkship in an insurance office provided a livelihood for a time, when he resigned to become Managing Editor of The Canadian Spectator and Bookman, a new journalistic venture with headquarters in Montreal. In this city Mr. Gordon resides with his mother, to whose devotion and guidance he ascribes whatever attainment and success he has achieved.

Dedication

There was a time in boyhood, ere life ceased
To hold a miracle in every hour,
We saw a City shining in the East
That drew us towards it with a magic power.

I saw its spires in glittering array,
And called you to me, while, with shaded sight,
We looked and wondered how far off it lay.
And looked again along the roadway white.

I told you how right fair it was, and you,
Half-willing only, placed your hand in mine—
'T was but a mirage-aye, that all men knew,
But yet none mortal ever might divine.

And now the whole width of the Atlantic main
Divides the fortune of our temporal ways;
Perhaps we shall not meet on earth again
Except in memories of those bygone days.

With strengthened vision you, maybe, have wrought
The consummation of that early dream,
Whilst I, too certain in Youth's pride, am brought
To cry the passing of its transient gleam.

Indeed, I think now that I did not see
The Eternal City of man's endless quest—
'T was Art, not Life, that first awakened me,
Though, once awakened, I might never rest.

I saw the beauty, first, of Form alone;
To Knowledge, not to Wisdom, I aspired:
But hardly even God to Youth makes known
The things 'more excellent' of Him required.

Who were the captains of my early song?
Swinburne and Dowson, Symons, Oscar Wilde:
Sensuous or violent, but seldom strong;
By them unconsciously I was beguiled.

Yet it was natural I should mistake
Their loves and lutes and towers of ivory
For that Adventure which the soul must make
Or else for ever ignominious be.

And, at the root, the difference is not great;
'T is but a strangeness more profound I seek:
The Boy's romance, to him, is filled with Fate,
Although his elders of it lightly speak.

So here, inversely, and from time to time,
Is told, dear friend, my pilgrimage since then—
From decoration and embroidered rhyme
To some poor reading of the minds of men.

I sometimes ponder if each soul that wins
An entrance to the far-off gates thereof,
May make atonement for a spirit's sins,
If once it dwelt with it, on earth, in love.

I wonder if those hours, though so long past,
When we in word and deed went hand in hand,
Will be a sacrament, and, at the last,
Together in that City we shall stand?

Alfred Gordon

Easter Ode 1915

O Spring! To whom the Poets of all time
Have made sweet rhyme;
And unto Lovers, above all, most dear!
How shall they hymn thee in this latter year,
When Death, not Life, doth ripen to his prime?
What pulse shall quicken, or what eye grow bright,
With Love's delight,
Now sleepeth not the bridegroom with the bride?
What flowers shall cover, or what grasses hide
The miles of mounds that thrust upon our sight?

April's light showers, that made the sun more sweet,
Seem now to beat
In constant boding of the nations' tears:
Across the pastures, to each mother's ears,
The lambs and ewes more piteously bleat.
The fledglings fallen from the nest awake,
In hearts that break,
A new compassion for their fluttering:
The brown soft eyes of every furry thing
Seem doubly tender for our sorrow's sake.

Pity, through Terror, hath touched every heart;
None stand apart,
In blunted sense or in the spirit's pride:
The base and gross are cleansed and purified;
Life to the lettered grows more great than Art.
Terror, of Tragedy the nether pole,
Hath purged the soul;
The priest and prophet cry not now alone:
Blood and burnt-offerings, that we thought outgrown,
Now seem the centre of a cosmic whole.

On every hill, blood stains the melting snow,–
The rivers flow
Crimson and swollen with the unburied dead;
Through vale and meadow like a silver thread
The streams wind not as but a year ago.
The stolid ploughman as a rite or prayer

Doth drive his share,
But Plague and Famine in the furrows stalk;
While, in the cities, our distracted talk
Betrays the fever of a constant care.

Nay! It is Autumn, surely, and not Spring,
That we should sing?
Autumn whose breath makes every leaf forlorn!
'Put in thy sickle on the standing corn!
The sheaves are ready for the garnering!'
But, like a trumpet, even as we doubt,
A Voice rings out
Above the shrill of the increasing strife:
Lo, it is Easter! And there dawns such life,
The very stars, in exultation, shout!

Before the glory of the seraphim
Earth's hosts grow dim;
The Rights of Nations and man's empires fade:
No more from God each seeks peculiar aid;
In equal penitence all turn to Him.
And though the quickening of the countless slain
We plead in vain,
Life, and not Death, shall reap this harvest-tide:

Love in the Pit shall seal the Prince of Pride;
The Peace we mocked, in triumph shall obtain.

Caught up in vision, lo, I dare to pen
Patmos again:
'Behold! The kingdoms of this world shall be
Those of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He
Shall reign for ever and for evermore.' Amen.

Alfred Gordon

England To France

O France! On this dire anniversary
After what fashion should we sing to thee?
Or should we sing?
Or if one sang in such an hour, should we?
For, in times past, how often have we said
But vanity and folly crowned thy head,
And that in thee there was no stable thing?

Yet thou didst judge us with like jaundiced eyes—
A people gloomy as their own grey skies,
Whom neither love
Nor hate nor fear nor death might agonise:
That never new a lifetime in one kiss;
Deaf to all rhapsody of woe or bliss,
Of Hell beneath them, or of Heaven above.

For perfidy we were to thee a name,
As thou to us for all licentious shame,
Until that day
All such loose folly was consumed with flame:
But now, howe'er the tide of battle run,
This year for us an era has begun
Which shall not soon or lightly pass away.

As lovers' quarrels now stand forth revealed
The petty wrangles that we kept unhealed
In jealous pride,
But now for ever and for ever sealed;
Only the wasted past shall we now rue,
The love unowned which yet at heart we knew,
And which from now shall never be denied.

As Sidney hailed thee in thy fame gone by,
'France, that sweet enemy!' So now we cry,
'France, that sweet friend!'
Yet, as of old, a Queen; with fame more high.
Sweet friend for ever, yet on this high day
A Queen in meet and glorious array
To whom in homage all the nations bend.

O France! Fair land of sunlight and the vine,
To whom illusion and romance were wine,
By what new light,
High o'er the conflict, doth thy spirit shine?
We have grown old and outlived dangerous dreams,
While through thy veins the fire of youth yet streams—
How shall we praise thy calm restraint aright?

Girt by the sea, howe'er so greatly pressed,
Always secure we had one place of rest,
And well we doubt
If we or any had endured thy test:
Wherefore we praise thee as none else before,
And in our hearts a memory of thee store
That shall not fade till all the stars die out.

For thou not merely hast survived thine hour,
Not, in thy trial, but preserved thy power;
But hast come forth
From thine affliction with yet richer dower:
A strange, new strength thy spirit doth endue,
A strength unknown of nations hitherto—
Far from the fury of this day of wrath.

As of fair women purged by bitter ruth,
Who have outlived the passions of their youth
And find at length
Peace in the quiet sanctuaries of truth;
Who smile where once they laughed, and yet are seen
More beautiful than they have ever been
In any triumph of their former strength,

Who walk in ways so gracious and so still,
Whose mien so calm a majesty doth fill,
Their purpose seems

Not theirs, but part of the eternal will:
So thou, O France, before the world dost fight
Not for thyself alone, but that great light
In which the very flood of freedom streams.

That light indeed which always lighted thee,
Howe'er disguised or fitful it might be—
Aye, even when
The holiest things thou mad'st but mockery:
Falsehood for truth, in error, thou hast deemed,
But never the idea of truth blasphemed—
So that great light thou guardest once again.

There is no God, thou saidst, but never said
Thyself wast God, and power unlimited
Thy right divine,
That all the earth should tremble at thy tread:
Aye, with what laughter, sweetly terrible,
Voltaire had hurled this Anti-Christ to Hell,
Cleaving him shrewdly to the very chine.

How thine immortal soul in him had flamed
To see thy temples ruined and defamed;
What thing more crude
The lightning laughter of his scorn had claimed?
For though destruction overtake thy fanes,
Yet indestructible the faith remains,
Purged of its dross, and strengthened and renewed.

Barbarian hordes that have but one recourse,
How shall thy foes, O France, assail the source
Of that hid life,
Who think to slay the spirit by brute force?
Upon the glory of the past they war,
But, 't is the future that thou fightest for,
And that great glory which shall crown thy strife,

For lo! Whatever wounds are this day thine,
More clear through suffering doth thy spirit shine,
Made once again
For all mankind a standard and a sign:
Aye, as of old, o'er Terror and o'er Wrath,
The clarion cry of Liberty goes forth,
And, as of old, it doth not cry in vain!

Alfred Gordon