

Classic Poetry Series

Susan Frances Harrison
- poems -

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Susan Frances Harrison(24 February 1859 – 5 May 1935)

Susan Frances Harrison née Riley (a.k.a. Seranus) was a Canadian poet, novelist, music critic and music composer who lived and worked in Ottawa and Toronto.

Life

Susie Frances Riley was born in Toronto of Irish-Canadian ancestry, the daughter of John Byron Riley. She studied music with Frederic Boscovitz, at a private school for girls in Toronto, and later in Montreal. She reportedly began publishing poetry, in the Canadian Illustrated News, at 16 under the pseudonym "Medusa." After completing her education, she worked as a pianist and singer. In 1880 she married organist John W. F. Harrison, of Bristol, England, who was the organist of St. George's Church in Montreal. The couple had a son and a daughter. The Harrisons lived in Ottawa in 1883, when Susie Harrison composed the song "Address of Welcome to Lord Lansdowne" to celebrate the first public appearance of the new Governor General, the Marquess of Lansdowne. In 1887 the Harrisons moved to Toronto, where John Harrison became organist and choirmaster of St. Simon the Apostle, and Susan Harrison began a literary career under the pseudonym "Serasus" (a misreading of her signature, "S. Frances"), soon publishing articles in "many of the leading journals and periodicals." She wrote a number of songs published in the United States and England under the name Seranus, and published other songs in England under the name, Gilbert King. She was the music critic of *The Week* from December 1886 to June 1887 under her pen-name of Seranus. She wrote the "Historical sketch on Canadian music" for the 1898 *Canada: An Encyclopedia of the Country*. Susan Harrison was considered an authority on folk music, and often lectured on the subject. She used traditional Irish melodies in her *String Quartet on Ancient Irish Airs*, and French-Canadian music in her 1887 *Trois Esquisses canadiennes* (Three Canadian Sketches), 'Dialogue,' 'Nocturne,' and 'Chant du voyageur'. She also incorporated French-Canadian melodies in her three-act opera, *Pipandor* (with libretto by F.A. Dixon of Ottawa). Her *String Quartet on Ancient Irish Airs*, is likely the first string quartet composed in Canada by a woman. In 1896 and 1897 she presented a series of well-received lectures in Toronto on "The Music of French Canada. For 20 years Harrison was the principal of the Rosedale branch of the Toronto Conservatory of Music. During the 1900s she contributed to and edited the Conservatory's publication *Conservatory Monthly*, and contributed to its successor *Conservatory Quarterly Review*. She wrote the article on "Canada" for the 1909 *Imperial History and Encyclopedia of Music*. In addition, she wrote at least six books of poetry, and three novels.

Writing

Poetry

Harrison's musical training is reflected in her poetry: "she was adept in her handling of the rhythmic complexities of poetic forms such as the sonnet and the villanelle. Like other Canadian poets of the late nineteenth century, her prevailing themes include nature, love, and patriotism. Her landscape poetry, richly influenced by the works of Charles G.D. Roberts and Archibald Lampman, paints the Canadian wilderness as beguilingly beautiful yet at the same time mysterious and distant." Harrison was a master of the villanelle. The villanelle was a French verse form that had been introduced to English readers by Edmund Gosse in his 1877 essay, "A Plea for Certain Exotic Forms of Verse".

Novels

Her two novels "articulate a fascination with a heavily mythologized Quebec culture that Harrison shared with many English-speaking Canadians of her time ... characterized by a gothic emphasis on horror, madness, aristocratic seigneurial manor houses, and a decadent Catholicism." "Harrison writes elegiacally of a regime whose romantic qualities are largely the creation of an Upper Canadian quest for a distinctive historical identity."

Recognition

Harrison experienced a decline in reputation in her lifetime. In 1916 anthologist John Garvin called her "one of our greater poets whose work has not yet had the recognition in Canada it merits.". "By 1926, Garvin describes her merely as 'one of our distinctive poets'." The Dictionary of Literary Biography wrote of Susan Frances Harrison, in 1990, that "Harrison's unpublished work has not been preserved, her published work is out of print and difficult to obtain, and her once-substantial position in the literary life of her country is now all but forgotten."

Benedict Brosse

HALE, and though sixty, without a stoop,
What does old Benedict want with a wife?
Can he not make his own pea soup?

Better than most men—never droop
In the August noons when storms are rife?
Hale, and though sixty, without a stoop,

Supreme in the barn, the kitchen, the coop,
Can he not use both broom and knife?
Can he not make his own pea soup?

Yet Widow Gouin in command of the troop
Of gossips, can tell of the spinsters' strife.
Hale, and though sixty, without a stoop,

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There's a dozen would jump through the golden hoop,
For he's rich, and hardy for his time of life,—
Can he not make his own pea soup?

But Benedict's wise and the village group
He ignores, while he smokes and plays on his fife.
Hale, and though sixty, without a stoop,
Can he not make his own pea soup?

II

As for Catharine—now, she's a woman of sense,
Though hard to win, so Benedict thinks,
Though hard to please and near with the pence.
Down to the Widow Rose Archambault's fence
Her property runs and Benedict winks—
As for Catharine—now, she's a woman of sense.

At times he has wished to dropp all pretense
And ask her—she's fond of a bunch of pinks,
Though hard to please and near with the pence,

But he never progresses—the best evidence
That from medias res our Benedict shrinks.
As for Catharine—now, she's a woman of sense,

A woman of rarest intelligence;
She manages well, is as close as the Sphinx,
Though hard to please and near with the pence.

Still, that is a virtue at St. Clements.

Look at Rose Archambault, the improvident minx!
As for Catharine—now, she's a woman of sense,
Though hard to please and near with the pence.

Susan Frances Harrison

Catharine Plouffe

THIS grey-haired spinster, Catharine Plouffe—
Observe her, a contrast to convent chits,
At her spinning wheel, in the room in the roof.

Yet there are those who believe that the hoof
Of a horse is nightly heard as she knits—
This grey-haired spinster, Catharine Plouffe—

Stockings of fabulous warp and woof,
And that old Benedict's black pipe she permits
At her spinning wheel, in the room in the roof,

For thirty years. So the gossip. A proof
Of her constant heart? Nay. No one twits
This grey-haired spinster, Catharine Plouffe;

The neighbours respect her, but hold aloof,
Admiring her back as she steadily sits
At her spinning wheel, in her room in the roof.

Will they ever marry? Just ask her. Pouf!
She would like you to know she's not lost her wits—
This grey-haired spinster, Catharine Plouffe,
At her spinning wheel, in her room in the roof.

Susan Frances Harrison

Danger

WELL! Let him sleep! Time enough to awake
When sunset ushers a kind release,
When cooling shadows the raft overtake.

For Madelon's heart will never break
For Alphonse, but for Verrier, fils,
So-let him sleep! Time enough to awake

When Verrier, dressed for Madelon's sake
In his best, is up the river a piece,
When cooling shadows the raft overtake.

A Carmen-she-whose eyelashes make
Havoc with all-old Boucher's niece-
So-let him sleep! Time enough to awake,

For a desperate thing is a bad heart-ache,
And one that may not entirely cease
When cooling shadows the raft overtake.

If they met, who knows-a spring, a shake,
A jack-knife, deadly as Malay crease-
Hush! Let him sleep! Time enough to awake
When cooling shadows the raft overtake.

Susan Frances Harrison

From Down The River

A HALF-BREED, slim, and sallow of face,
Alphonse lies full length on his raft,
The hardy son of a hybrid race.

Lithe and long, with the Indian grace,
Versed in the varied Indian craft,
A half-breed, slim, and sallow of face,

He nurses within mad currents that chase-
The swift, the sluggish-a foreign graft,
This hardy son of a hybrid race.

What southern airs, what snows embrace
Within his breast-soft airs that waft
The half-breed-slim, and sallow of face,

Far from the Gattineau's foaming base!
And what strong potion hath he quaffed,
This hardy son of a hybrid race,

That upon this sun-baked blistered place
He sleeps, with his hand on the burning haft,
A Metis-slim and sallow of face,
The hardy son of a hybrid race!

Susan Frances Harrison

In March

HERE on the wide waste lands,
Take- child-these trembling hands,
Though my life be as blank and waste,
My days as surely ungraced
By glimmer of green on the rim
Of a sunless wilderness dim,
As the wet fields barren and brown,
As the fork of each sterile limb
Shorn of its lustrous crown.

See-how vacant and flat
The landscape empty and dull,
Scared by an ominous lull
Into a trance-we have sat
This hour on the edge of a broken, a grey snake-fence,
And nothing that lives has flown,
Or crept, or leapt, or been blown
To our feet or past our faces-
So desolate, child-the place is!
It strikes, does it not, a chill,
Like that other upon the hill,
We felt one bleak October?
See-the grey woods still sober
Ere it be wild with glee,
With growth, with an ecstasy,
A fruition born of desire.
The marigold's yellow fire
Doth not yet in the sun burn to leap, to aspire;
Its myriad spotted spears
No erythronium rears;
We cannot see
Anemone,
Or heart-lobed brown hepatica;
There doth not fly,
Low under sky,
One kingfisher-dipping and darting
From reedy shallows where reds are starting,

Pale pink tips that shall burst into bloom,
Not in one night's mid-April gloom,
But inch by inch, till ripening tint,
And feathery plume and emerald glint
Proclaim the waters are open.

All this will come,
The panting hum
Of the life that will stir,
Glance and glide, and whistle and whir,
Chatter and crow, and perch and pry,
Crawl and leap and dart and fly,
Things of feather and things of fur,

Under the blue of an April sky.
Shall speak, the dumb,
Shall leap, the numb,
All this will come,
It never misses,
Failure, yet—
Never was set
In the sure spring's calendar,
Wherefore—Pet—
Give me one of your springtime kisses!
While you plant some hope in my cold man's breast—
Ah! How welcome the strange flower-guest—
Water it softly with maiden tears,
Go to it early—and late—with fears;
Guard it, and watch it, and give it time
For the holy dews to moisten the rime—
Make of it some green gracious thing,
Such as the heavens shall make of the spring!

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The trees and the houses are darkling,
No lamps yet are sparkling
Along the ravine;
A wild wind rises, the waters are fretting,
No moon nor star in the sky can be seen!

But if I can bring her with thinking
The thoughts that are linking
Her life unto mine:
Then blow wild wind! And chafe, proud river!
At least a Star in my heart shall shine.

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Had I not met her, great had been my loss,
Had I not loved her, pain I had been spared.
So this life goes, and lovers bear the cross,
Burden borne willingly, if only it be shared.
Had I not met her, Song had passed me by,
Had I not loved her, Fame had been more sure.
So this life goes, we laugh, and then we sigh,
While we believe 'tis blessed to endure.

Susan Frances Harrison

Les Chantiers

FOR know, my girl, there is always the axe
Ready at hand in this latitude,
And how it stings and bites and hacks

When Alphonse the sturdy trees attacks!
So fear, child, to cross him, or play the prude,
For know, my girl, there is always the axe.

See! It shines even now as his hands relax
Their grip with a dread desire imbued
And how it stings and bites and hacks,

And how it rips and cuts and cracks—
Perhaps—in his brain as the foe is pursued!
For know, my girl, there is always the axe.

The giant boles in the forest tracks
Stagger, soul-smitten, when afar it is viewed,
And how it stings and bites and hacks!

Then how, Madelon, should its fearful thwacks
A slender lad like your own elude?
For know, my girl, there is always the axe,
And how it stings! and bites! and hacks!

Susan Frances Harrison

Petite Ste. Rosalie

FATHER Couture loves a fricassee,
Served with a sip of home-made wine,
He is the Curé, so jolly and free,

And lives in Petite Ste. Rosalie.
On Easter Sunday when one must dine,
Father Couture loves a fricassee.

No stern ascetic, no stoic is he,
Preaching a rigid right divine.
He is the Curé, so jolly and free,

That while he maintains his dignity,
When Lent is past and the weather is fine,
Father Couture loves a fricassee.

He kills his chicken himself—on dit,
And who is there dare the deed malign?
He is the Curé, so jolly and free.

Open and courteous, fond of a fee,
The village deity, bland and benign,
Father Couture loves a fricassee,
He's a sensible Curé, so jolly and free!

Susan Frances Harrison

St. Jean B'Ptiste

'TIS the day of the blessed St. Jean B'ptiste,
And the streets are full of the folk awaiting
The favourite French-Canadian feast.

One knows by the bells which have never ceased,
Since early morn reverberating,
'Tis the day of the blessed St. Jean B'ptiste.

Welcome it! Joyeux, the portly priest!
Welcome it! Nun at your iron grating!
The favourite French-Canadian feast.

Welcome it! Antoine, one of the least
Of the earth's meek little ones, meditating
On the day of the blessed St. Jean B'ptiste,

And the jostling crowd that has swift increased
Behind him, before him, celebrating
The favourite French-Canadian feast.

He is clothed in the skin of some savage beast.
Who cares if he be near suffocating?
'Tis the day of the blessed St. Jean B'ptiste,
The favourite French-Canadian feast.

II

Poor little Antoine! He does not mind.
It is all for the Church, for a grand good cause,
The nuns are so sweet and the priests so kind.
The martyr spirit is fast enshrined
In the tiny form that the ox-cart draws,
Poor little Antoine, he does not mind.

Poor little soul, for the cords that bind
Are stronger than ardour for fame or applause—
The nuns are so sweet and the priests so kind.

And after the fête a feast is designed—

Locusts and honey are both in the clause—
Brave little Antoine! He does not mind

The heat, nor the hungry demon twined
Around his vitals that tears and gnaws,
The nuns are so sweet and the priests so kind.

The dust is flying. The streets are lined
With the panting crowd that prays for a pause.
Poor little Antoine! He does not mind!
The nuns are so sweet and the priests so kind.

Susan Frances Harrison

The Voyageur

LIKE the swarthy son of some tropic shore
He sleeps, with his olive bosom bared,
He sleeps—in his earrings of brassy ore.

Like a tawny tiger whom hot hours bore,
When all night long he has growled and glared
At the swarthy son of some tropic shore,

Like a fierce-eyed blossom with heart of gore
That too long in the sun-flushed fields has flared,
He sleeps—in his earrings of brassy ore,

And his scarlet sash that he gaily wore
To tempt Madelon—who his heart has snared,
Like the swarthy son of some tropic shore.

That dusky form might a queen adore—
Prenez garde, Madelon, for a season spared,
He sleeps—in his earrings of brassy ore.

For a season only. What may be in store
For Madelon? She who has never cared! . . .
Like the swarthy son of some tropic shore
He sleeps—in his earrings of brassy ore.

Susan Frances Harrison