

Classic Poetry Series

William Johnson Cory
- poems -

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William Johnson Cory(1823 - 1892)

English schoolmaster and author, son of Charles Johnson of Torrington, Devonshire, was born on the 9th of January 1823. He was educated at Eton and King's College, Cambridge. At Cambridge he gained the chancellor's medal for an English poem on Plato in 1843, and the Craven Scholarship in 1844. In 1845, after graduating at the university, he was made an assistant master at Eton, where he remained for some twenty-six years. He has been called "the most brilliant Eton tutor of his day." He had a great influence on his pupils, and he defended the Etonian system against the criticism of Matthew James Higgins. In 1872, having inherited an estate at Halsdon and assumed the name of Cory, he left Eton. He married late in life, and after four years spent in Madeira he settled in 1882 at Hampstead. He died on the 11th of June 1892. He proved his genuine lyrical power in *Ionica* (1858), which was republished with some additional poems in 1891. He also produced *Lucretilis* (1871), a work on the writing of Latin verses; *Iophon* (1873), on Greek Iambics; and *Guide to Modern History from 1815 to 1835* (1882). Extracts from the *Letters and Journals of William Cory*, which contains much paradoxical and suggestive criticism, were edited by F.W. Cornish and published by private subscription in 1897.

A Poor French Sailor's Scottish Sweetheart

I CANNOT forget my Joe,
I bid him be mine in sleep;
But battle and woe have changed him so
There 's nothing to do but weep.

My mother rebukes me yet,
And I never was meek before;
His jacket is wet, his lip cold set,
He 'll trouble our home no more.

Oh, breaker of reeds that bend!
Oh, quencher of tow that smokes!
I 'd rather descend to my sailor friend
Than prosper with lofty folks.

I 'm lying beside the gowan,
My Joe in the English bay;
I 'm Annie Rowan, his Annie Rowan,
He called me his Bien-Aimée.

I 'll hearken to all you quote,
Though I 'd rather be deaf and free;
The little he wrote in the sinking boat
Is Bible and charm for me.

William Johnson Cory

Amaturus

Somewhere beneath the sun,
These quivering heart-strings prove it,
Somewhere there must be one
Made for this soul, to move it;
Some one that hides her sweetness
From neighbours whom she slights,
Nor can attain completeness,
Nor give her heart its rights;
Some one whom I could court
With no great change of manner,
Still holding reason's fort,
Though waving fancy's banner;
A lady, not so queenly
As to disdain my hand,
Yet born to smile serenely
Like those that rule the land;
Noble, but not too proud;
With soft hair simply folded,
And bright face crescent-browed,
And throat by Muses moulded;
And eyelids lightly falling
On little glistening seas,
Deep-calm, when gales are brawling,
Though stirred by every breeze:
Swift voice, like flight of dove
Through minister arches floating,
With sudden turns, when love
Gets overnear to doting;
Keen lips, that shape soft sayings
Like crystals of the snow,
With pretty half-betrayings
Of things one may not know;
Fair hand, whose touches thrill,
Like golden rod of wonder,
Which Hermes wields at will
Spirit and flesh to sunder;
Light foot, to press the stirrup
In fearlessness and glee,
Or dance, till finches chirrup,

And stars sink to the sea.

Forth, Love, and find this maid,
Wherever she be hidden:
Speak, Love, be not afraid,
But plead as thou art bidden;
And say, that he who taught thee
His yearning want and pain,
Too dearly, dearly bought thee
To part with thee in vain.

William Johnson Cory

Heraclitus

They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead,
They brought me bitter news to hear and bitter tears to shed.
I wept, as I remembered, how often you and I
Had tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky.

And now that thou art lying, my dear old Carian guest,
A handful of grey ashes, long long ago at rest,
Still are thy pleasant voices, thy nightingales, awake;
For Death, he taketh all away, but them he cannot take.

William Johnson Cory

Mimnermus In Church

You promise heavens free from strife,
Pure truth, and perfect change of will;
But sweet, sweet is this human life,
So sweet, I fain would breathe it still;
Your chilly stars I can forgo,
This warm kind world is all I know.

You say there is no substance here,
One great reality above:
Back from that void I shrink in fear,
And child-like hide myself in love:
Show me what angels feel. Till then
I cling, a mere weak man, to men.

You bid me lift my mean desires
From faltering lips and fitful veins
To sexless souls, ideal quires,
Unwearied voices, wordless strains:
My mind with fonder welcome owns
One dear dead friend's remember'd tones.

Forsooth the present we must give
To that which cannot pass away;
All beauteous things for which we live
By laws of time and space decay.
But O, the very reason why
I clasp them, is because they die.

William Johnson Cory