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Title: A Father of Women, and Other Poems

Author: Alice Meynell

Release Date: December 13, 2009 [EBook #30669]

Language: English

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A FATHER OF WOMEN, AND OTHER POEMS ***

Transcribed from the 1917 Burns & Oates Ltd edition by David Price, email ccx074@pglaf.org

A FATHER OF WOMEN AND OTHER POEMS

by
Alice Meynell

BURNS & OATES Ltd
28 Orchard Street
London W
1917

*To
V. L.*

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AD SOROREM E. B.

"Thy father was transfused into thy blood."

Dryden: Ode to Mrs. Anne Killigrew.

Our father works in us,
The daughters of his manhood. Not undone
Is he, not wasted, though transmuted thus,
And though he left no son.

Therefore on him I cry
To arm me: "For my delicate mind a casque,
A breastplate for my heart, courage to die,
Of thee, captain, I ask.

"Nor strengthen only; press
A finger on this violent blood and pale,
Over this rash will let thy tenderness
A while pause, and prevail.

"And shepherd-father, thou
Whose staff folded my thoughts before my birth,
Control them now I am of earth, and now
Thou art no more of earth.

"O liberal, constant, dear!
Crush in my nature the ungenerous art
Of the inferior; set me high, and here,
Here garner up thy heart."

p. 8

Like to him now are they,
The million living fathers of the War—
Mourning the crippled world, the bitter day—
Whose striplings are no more.

The crippled world! Come then,
Fathers of women with your honour in trust;
Approve, accept, know them daughters of men,
Now that your sons are dust.

LENGTH OF DAYS

p. 9

TO THE EARLY DEAD IN BATTLE

There is no length of days
But yours, boys who were children once. Of old
The past beset you in your childish ways,
With sense of Time untold!

What have you then forgone?
A history? This you had. Or memories?
These, too, you had of your far-distant dawn.
No further dawn seems his,

The old man who shares with you,
But has no more, no more. Time's mystery
Did once for him the most that it can do:
He has had infancy.

And all his dreams, and all
His loves for mighty Nature, sweet and few,
Are but the dwindling past he can recall
Of what his childhood knew.

He counts not any more
His brief, his present years. But O he knows
How far apart the summers were of yore,
How far apart the snows.

Therefore be satisfied;
Long life is in your treasury ere you fall;

p. 10

Yes, and first love, like Dante's. O a bride
For ever mystical!

Irrevocable good,—
You dead, and now about, so young, to die,—
Your childhood was; there Space, there Multitude,
There dwelt Antiquity.

NURSE EDITH CAVELL

p. 11

Two o'clock, the morning of October 12th, 1915.

To her accustomed eyes
The midnight-morning brought not such a dread
As thrills the chance-awakened head that lies
In trivial sleep on the habitual bed.

'Twas yet some hours ere light;
And many, many, many a break of day
Had she outwatched the dying; but this night
Shortened her vigil was, briefer the way.

By dial of the clock
'Twas day in the dark above her lonely head.
"This day thou shalt be with Me." Ere the cock
Announced that day she met the Immortal Dead.

SUMMER IN ENGLAND, 1914

p. 12

On London fell a clearer light;
Caressing pencils of the sun
Defined the distances, the white
Houses transfigured one by one,
The "long, unlovely street" impearled.
O what a sky has walked the world!

Most happy year! And out of town
The hay was prosperous, and the wheat;
The silken harvest climbed the down;
Moon after moon was heavenly-sweet
Stroking the bread within the sheaves,
Looking twixt apples and their leaves.

And while this rose made round her cup,
The armies died convulsed. And when
This chaste young silver sun went up
Softly, a thousand shattered men,
One wet corruption, heaped the plain,
After a league-long throb of pain.

Flower following tender flower; and birds,
And berries; and benignant skies
Made thrive the serried flocks and herds.—
Yonder are men shot through the eyes.
Love, hide thy face
From man's unpardonable race.

* * * * *

p. 13

Who said "No man hath greater love than this,
To die to serve his friend?"
So these have loved us all unto the end.
Chide thou no more, O thou unsacrificed!
The soldier dying dies upon a kiss,
The very kiss of Christ.

TO TINTORETTO IN VENICE

p. 14

The Art of Painting had in the Primitive years looked with the light, not towards it. Before Tintoretto's date, however, many painters practised shadows and lights, and turned more or less sunwards; but he set the figure between himself and a full sun. His work is to be known in Venice by the splendid trick of an occluded sun and a shadow thrown straight at the spectator.

Tintoretto's thronged "Procession to Calvary" and his "Crucifixion," incidentally named, are two of the greatest of his multitude of works in Venice.

Master, thy enterprise,
Magnificent, magnanimous, was well done,
Which seized, the head of Art, and turned her eyes—
The simpleton—and made her front the sun.

Long had she sat content,
Her young unlessoned back to a morning gay,
To a solemn noon, to a cloudy firmament,
And looked upon a world in gentle day.

But thy imperial call
Bade her to stand with thee and breast the light,
And therefore face the shadows, mystical,
Sombre, translucent, vestiges of night,

Yet glories of the day.
Eagle! we know thee by thy undaunted eyes
Sky-ward, and by thy glooms; we blow thy way
Ambiguous, and those halo-misted dyes.

Thou Cloud, the bridegroom's friend
(The bridegroom sun)! Master, we know thy sign:
A mystery of hues world-without-end;
And hide-and-seeK of gamesome and divine;

Shade of the noble head
Cast hitherward upon the noble breast;
Human solemnities thrice hallowèd;
The haste to Calvary, the Cross at rest.

Look sunward, Angel, then!
Carry the fortress-heavens by that hand;
Still be the interpreter of suns to men;
And shadow us, O thou Tower! for thou shalt stand.

p. 15

A THRUSH BEFORE DAWN

p. 16

A voice peals in this end of night
A phrase of notes resembling stars,
Single and spiritual notes of light.
What call they at my window-bars?
The South, the past, the day to be,
An ancient infelicity.

Darkling, deliberate, what sings
This wonderful one, alone, at peace?
What wilder things than song, what things
Sweeter than youth, clearer than Greece,
Dearer than Italy, untold
Delight, and freshness centuries old?

And first first-loves, a multitude,
The exaltation of their pain;
Ancestral childhood long renewed;
And midnights of invisible rain;
And gardens, gardens, night and day,
Gardens and childhood all the way.

What Middle Ages passionate,
O passionless voice! What distant bells
Lodged in the hills, what palace state
Illyrian! For it speaks, it tells,
Without desire, without dismay,
Some morrow and some yesterday.

All-natural things! But more—Whence came
This yet remoter mystery?

p. 17

How do these starry notes proclaim
A graver still divinity?
This hope, this sanctity of fear?
O innocent throat! O human ear!

THE TWO SHAKESPEARE TERCENTENARIES: OF BIRTH, 1864: OF DEATH, 1916.

p. 18

TO SHAKESPEARE

Longer than thine, than thine,
Is now my time of life; and thus thy years
Seem to be clasped and harboured within mine.
O how ignoble this my clasp appears!

Thy unprophetic birth,
Thy darkling death: living I might have seen
That cradle, marked those labours, closed that earth.
O first, O last, O infinite between!

Now that my life has shared
Thy dedicated date, O mortal, twice,
To what all-vain embrace shall be compared
My lean enclosure of thy paradise?

To ignorant arms that fold
A poet to a foolish breast? The Line,
That is not, with the world within its hold?
So, days with days, my days encompass thine.

Child, Stripling, Man—the sod.
Might I talk little language to thee, pore
On thy last silence? O thou city of God,
My waste lies after thee, and lies before.

TO O—, OF HER DARK EYES

p. 19

Across what calm of tropic seas,
'Neath alien clusters of the nights,
Looked, in the past, such eyes as these?
Long-quenched, relumed, ancestral lights!

The generations fostered them;
And steadfast Nature, secretwise—
Thou seedling child of that old stem—
Kindled anew thy dark-bright eyes.

Was it a century or two
This lovely darkness rose and set,
Occluded by grey eyes and blue,
And Nature feigning to forget?

Some grandam gave a hint of it—
So cherished was it in thy race,
So fine a treasure to transmit
In its perfection to thy face.

Some father to some mother's breast
Entrusted it, unknowing. Time
Implied, or made it manifest,
Bequest of a forgotten clime.

Hereditary eyes! But this
Is single, singular, apart:—
New-made thy love, new-made thy kiss,
New-made thy errand to my heart.

Three times have I beheld
Fear leap in a babe's face, and take his breath,
Fear, like the fear of eld
That knows the price of life, the name of death.

What is it justifies
This thing, this dread, this fright that has no tongue,
The terror in those eyes
When only eyes can speak—they are so young?

Not yet those eyes had wept.
What does fear cherish that it locks so well?
What fortress is thus kept?
Of what is ignorant terror sentinel?

And pain in the poor child,
Monstrously disproportionate, and dumb
In the poor beast, and wild
In the old decorous man, caught, overcome?

Of what the outposts these?
Of what the fighting guardians? What demands
That sense of menaces,
And then such flying feet, imploring hands?

Life: There's nought else to seek;
Life only, little prized; but by design
Of Nature prized. How weak,
How sad, how brief! O how divine, divine!

p. 21

A WIND OF CLEAR WEATHER IN ENGLAND

p. 22

O what a miracle wind is this
Has crossed the English land to-day
With an unprecedented kiss,
And wonderfully found a way!

Unsmirched incredibly and clean,
Between the towns and factories,
Avoiding, has his long flight been,
Bringing a sky like Sicily's.

O fine escape, horizon pure
As Rome's! Black chimneys left and right,
But not for him, the straight, the sure,
His luminous day, his spacious night.

How keen his choice, how swift his feet!
Narrow the way and hard to find!
This delicate stepper and discreet
Walked not like any worldly wind.

Most like a man in man's own day,
One of the few, a perfect one:
His open earth—the single way;
His narrow road—the open sun.

IN SLEEP

p. 23

I dreamt (no "dream" awake—a dream indeed)
A wrathful man was talking in the park:
"Where are the Higher Powers, who know our need
And leave us in the dark?"

"There are no Higher Powers; there is no heart
In God, no love"—his oratory here,
Taking the paupers' and the cripples' part,
Was broken by a tear.

And then it seemed that One who did create
Compassion, who alone invented pity,

Walked, as though called, in at that north-east gate,
Out from the muttering city;

Threaded the little crowd, trod the brown grass,
Bent o'er the speaker close, saw the tear rise,
And saw Himself, as one looks in a glass,
In those impassioned eyes.

THE DIVINE PRIVILEGE

p. 24

Lord, where are Thy prerogatives?
Why, men have more than Thou hast kept;
The king rewards, remits, forgives,
The poet to a throne has stept.

And Thou, despoiled, hast given away
Worship to men, success to strife,
Thy glory to the heavenly day,
And made Thy sun the lord of life.

Is one too precious to impart,
One property reserved to Christ?
One, cherished, grappled to that heart?
—To be alone the Sacrificed?

O Thou who lovest to redeem,
One whom I know lies sore oppressed.
Thou wilt not suffer me to dream
That I can bargain for her rest.

Seven hours I swiftly sleep, while she
Measures the leagues of dark, awake.
O that my dewy eyes might be
Parched by a vigil for her sake!

But O rejected! O in vain!
I cannot give who would not keep.
I cannot buy, I cannot gain,
I cannot give her half my sleep.

p. 25

FREE WILL

p. 26

Dear are some hidden things
My soul has sealed in silence; past delights,
Hope unconfessed; desires with hampered wings,
Remembered in the nights.

But my best treasures are
Ignoble, undelightful, abject, cold;
Yet O! profounder hoards oracular
No reliquaries hold.

There lie my trespasses,
Abjured but not disowned. I'll not accuse
Determinism, nor, as the Master ^[26] says,
Charge even "the poor Deuce."

Under my hand they lie,
My very own, my proved iniquities,
And though the glory of my life go by
I hold and garner these.

How else, how elsewhere.
How otherwise, shall I discern and grope
For lowliness? How hate, how love, how dare,
How weep, how hope?

THE TWO QUESTIONS

p. 27

"A riddling world!" one cried.
"If pangs must be, would God that they were sent
To the impure, the cruel, and passed aside
The holy innocent!"

But I, "Ah no, no, no!
Not the clean heart transpierced; not tears that fall
For a child's agony; not a martyr's woe;
Not these, not these appal.

"Not docile motherhood,
Dutiful, frequent, closed in all distress;
Not shedding of the unoffending blood;
Not little joy grown less;

"Not all-benign old age
With dotage mocked; not gallantry that faints
And still pursues; not the vile heritage
Of sin's disease in saints;

"Not these defeat the mind.
For great is that abjection, and august
That irony. Submissive we shall find
A splendour in that dust.

"Not these puzzle the will;
Not these the yet unanswered question urge.
But the unjust stricken; but the hands that kill
Lopped; but the merited scourge;

"The sensualist at fast;
The merciless felled; the liar in his snares.
The cowardice of my judgment sees, aghast,
The flail, the chaff, the tares."

p. 28

THE LORD'S PRAYER

p. 29

"Audemus dicere 'Pater Noster.'"—CANON OF THE MASS.

There is a bolder way,
There is a wilder enterprise than this
All-human iteration day by day.
Courage, mankind! Restore Him what is His.

Out of His mouth were given
These phrases. O replace them whence they came.
He, only, knows our inconceivable "Heaven,"
Our hidden "Father," and the unspoken "Name";

Our "trespasses," our "bread,"
The "will" inexorable yet implored;
The miracle-words that are and are not said,
Charged with the unknown purpose of their Lord.

"Forgive," "give," "lead us not"—
Speak them by Him, O man the unaware,
Speak by that dear tongue, though thou know not what,
Shuddering through the paradox of prayer.

EASTER NIGHT

p. 30

All night had shout of men and cry
Of woeful women filled His way;
Until that noon of sombre sky
On Friday, clamour and display
Smote Him; no solitude had He,
No silence, since Gethsemane.

Public was Death; but Power, but Might,
But Life again, but Victory,
Were hushed within the dead of night,

The shutter'd dark, the secrecy.
And all alone, alone, alone
He rose again behind the stone.

PRINTED IN ENGLAND
BY W. H. SMITH & SON
THE ARDEN PRESS
STAMFORD STREET S.E.

Footnotes:

[26] George Meredith.

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