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1919

COLLECTED POEMS

JOHN BLACK





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John Black

COLLECTED POEMS

BY
JOHN BLACK



The Knickerbocker Press
NEW YORK
1919

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MS B 14 Jan 1920

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COLLECTED POEMS

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

This little book represents the poetical achievement of a brave and faultless life; and, confident that such would have been my father's wish had he lived himself to superintend the publication of the volume, I dedicate it to the one who, more than any other, contributed happiness to his life—my mother.

My father was born in Bona, Invernessshire, Scotland, on December 25, 1852. He early manifested a taste for literature and was, in youth, a fervent admirer of George Eliot. He was the son of Archibald Black, a sea captain, and Janet Fraser Black. Captain Black, who was well known in marine circles along the Scottish coast, was a brilliant Gaelic scholar and a keen judge of literature. It was from his father, apparently, that the poet inherited his love of books, while his mother was a great and good influence on his life.

The poet attended various schools in Scotland. In 1880 he decided to go in for medicine. He went to Edinburgh and studied medicine at the University for four years. The strain, however, reacted on his sight, and he abandoned all hope of becoming a physician when, in

1884, he was compelled to put himself under the care of specialists in London. His vision was seriously endangered for a year.

Upon his recovery, in 1885, he returned to Scotland. He then followed his father's example and became connected with a steamship company. He gave this up later, and, after several successful ventures in the hotel business in Inverness, he built the Palace Hotel there. This hostelry still stands, a noble structure, on the banks of the Ness. It is, even in these days of rapid structural development, a fine building. At the time of its completion, it was one of the important hotels in that part of Scotland.

Inverness was then, as now, a Mecca for tourists, and the Palace Hotel was the scene of many a brilliant assemblage.

In 1887, just a few years prior to the opening of the Palace Hotel, the poet married Miss Marjorie Robb, daughter of Mrs. Donald Robb, of Conon Bridge, Ross-shire. It was about 1889 that he wrote his best poem, "The Story of a Mother's Love." As his first child, Archibald, was then only a few months old, it might be easy to trace the origin of the poet's inspiration. In the Palace Hotel, my father passed several very happy years.

A business transaction in 1893 or '94 was the beginning of a series of misfortunes that continued, almost without interruption, until but a few years before the poet's death.

As suddenly as his troubles came on, my father's

writing ceased. His verses up to that time he had been sending to various newspapers and magazines in Scotland. Many of these were published without any signature. Others appeared over my mother's initials, "M. R." The poet was very modest about his work and reluctant to take credit for any of his achievements. That he placed his own initials to the poem, "The Story of a Mother's Love" may, in some measure, indicate how he felt toward this work.

In 1901 my father sailed from Glasgow for New York. His heart had been wrung by his failures in business in his native land and he resolved to make a home for his family in the United States. The first four years of his life in this country was a period of intense suffering and additional misfortune. Forced to accept work cruelly unworthy of his talents, he aged in those years as though they had been many times their number.

He was rejoined by his family in June, 1906, and the happiness of the reunion did much to prolong his life. Surrounded by his wife and children in these after years, he enjoyed a real serenity. He did not, however, do any more writing; suffering had too permanently affected him to permit of any such relaxation even in these gentler days.

His physical decline grew more serious in the summer of 1910 and he spent a few weeks in the hospital. He was brought home in September of that year. A series of rallies and relapses followed, until on the evening of

Friday, October 7, 1910, in an apartment in New York City, the end came. His passing was kindly and peaceful, death being to him the conclusion of a struggle that had tired him out. He was buried in Woodlawn Cemetery, New York.

JOHN BLACK, 2d.

Brooklyn, N. Y.

THE STORY OF A MOTHER'S LOVE.

THE STORY OF A MOTHER'S LOVE

"CAN A MOTHER E'ER FORGET HER SUCKING CHILD?"

O, great and blessed gift!—maternal love!
There's nought else here so full of sacrifice
And sacred trust. A mother's love begins
With childhood's earliest dawn, and gathers strength
Through all the changes of succeeding years.
A joy, subdued, possesses her, when first
Her boy goes out to school; but then she fears
Contamination to the pure young mind.
These fears increase when, later, he must go
Far from the ties and influence of home,
Manhood's stern duties bravely to fulfill.
The mother's heart goes out to this first-born
With many a secret prayer that he may prove
Worthy, throughout life's thorny pilgrimage.
And when vice first has left its slimy trace
On the young brow, what agony compels
Her yearning heart to sorrow, yet to hope
Her heart-wrung prayers may save him. And she seeks
Continually the mercy-seat to implore
Pardon and guidance. So her love remains

Sacred amid the pestilential fumes
Of deepest degradation and despair.

There was a tender mother, once, who dwelt
By sweet Lochaline's softly wooded shore
In classic Morven. With her infant son
She clomb the hills on sunny afternoons
To gaze, from grassy top, with wistful eye,
Westward, to where a sail might, then, perchance
Be passing Rhu-na-gael, or, farther off,
Gleam 'round Ardnamurchan. For he sailed,
The husband of her choice, in his small craft
On short sea voyages to neighboring isles,
His manly form and honest, kindly face
Meeting with warmest welcome, everywhere,
From tiniest bays of Mull to distant coasts
Of the outer Hebrides—dark, misty lands,
Where shores exposed to the aggressive sweep
Of the Atlantic; and no husband thought
With fonder recollection of his home,
Forever picturing his wife and son
On Morven's sunny slope, at eventide,
Or clasped, in close embrace, through the long night,
To waken early, whispering his name.

Sometimes he came to spend a week at home,
And, for the time, forget his nights at sea,
With heart oblivious of all else but love.

One cold Spring day, when he had just returned
From one of these short visits, his young wife
Resolved to bring her child with her and cross
The hill toward Loch Sunart, where her friends
Had always dwelt, and now expected her.

Already had the softly falling snow
Made the path dubious; but with courage high,
And certain long-taught knowledge of the way,
She nerved her for the task, and so pursued
Her solitary course. The wind had risen
And fiercely blew across her dreary path;
So she clung closer to her babe and pressed
The small face to her bosom and she prayed
For help and guidance. But no step approached,
Nor sound, save of the tempest, smote her ear
As she pursued her journey up the hill.

O, awful silence! 'mid the swathing snow!
O, crushing agony of solitude!
Where art thou, now, husband and father both?
Doth nothing pierce thy soul at this dire hour
Of dread, lest those who always fill thine heart
Might be in peril?

As before there moved
Her son, with Hagar, in the wilderness;
So this fond mother ran with eager gaze,
As if to ward off all bewilderment.
Courage must not forsake her at this hour.
She sought again the footpath; on she went

Stumbling continually. At last she sat,
The blinding snow rendering impossible
All further progress; and a sheltering rock
Inviting her to temporary rest,
She fed her babe with the last drop of milk
She had provided. Soon the weary child
And still more wearied mother, fell asleep.

It was but transient on the mother's part.
Shivering, she woke, and shuddered as her eyes
Opened on that vast wilderness of snow.
Night was approaching, and with maddened brain
She rose, rebellious, crying upon God
To save her child. Then as her mind awoke
To fuller understanding, there she knelt
And from the depths of her lone soul, she prayed.

The night had passed, and friends began to fear
She might have lost her way, and so resolved
To search and bring some nourishment. Perchance
The snow had caused the wanderers to remain
In shelter for the night. They searched the path
Across the snow-clad hill, with anxious hearts
And minds alternating 'twixt hope and fear.
At last they found the mother, lifeless, robed
In one thin outer garment, all else gone,
With face that peaceful looked, as if kind death
Had first assured her that her child would live.

A little farther, in the shelter, lay
Smiling in sleep, and missing nought, the child
Clad warmly in the loving mother's dress,
All save the covering she had made her shroud.

.

From Morven came the great race of MacLeods,
Great in physique, in heart, in intellect;
These gifts all culminated in the man,
Norman (the chosen chaplain of our queen),
Reckoned the foremost preacher of his time,
He left an honored name that will go down
To latest generations.

Once he meant
To preach from some well-pondered text, but still
Another came between him and his choice,
With pressing importunity. He thought
And hesitated, as the time approached
When he must meet his hearers, for this text
Would still persist to thrust itself before
Aught else, and "Can a mother e'er forget
Her sucking child?" came with o'ermastering force.
From this he preached, and thrilled the multitude
With heart-subduing pathos, as he told
This simple story of a mother's love
In far-off Morven.

In the crowded church
An old man who had entered late (to escape
The coming shower) seemed moved with the tale,

And wept in silence. Those around him looked
With pitying eyes, wondering what chord was touched
To this heart-melting issue. While he strove
To still his anguished soul, the tempest raged
With fiercer violence, as 'twere to aid
Concealment of his suffering. He rose
And hurried from the church, as if pursued
By his tormentors.

Later on that night
An urgent message to the preacher came,
To see a dying man. When he arrived
The man was overcome, and as he gazed
He sobbed aloud. The preacher quietly knelt
With quick compassion, saying "Let us pray."
At length the patient raised his eyes and said:
"The child of whom you spoke today was I.
That was my mother who so bravely died
That I might live. My father also died
(The neighbors told me) of a broken heart
Soon after her; and I was left to friends,
Who certainly were kind. I swear to this
Before you and my God. But as I grew
A spirit of unrest took hold of me,
And urged me to take flight.

"I wandered far,
As did 'the younger son.' You see I know
Something of Scripture. I have with me here
The Bible where my father wrote my name.

In all my miserable wanderings
I still preserved this Bible, and would look
Into its pages sometimes. Yet I felt
Alone at times, as in a wilderness.
All the affection of the world seemed lost
And ended in my mother's sacrifice.
The wreck I am has been the work of years
Of fearful living, without hope or God,
Or dread of a hereafter. Now the end
So near approaches. Is it not too late
To ask for pardon?"

Here the preacher stopped
Albeit with gentleness, the sufferer's speech,
Touching with gentle lovingness, the chord
That had already thrilled in quick response,
He whispered softly of that mightier love
Waiting to shield the suppliant. He spoke
With tenderest pathos, of the sacrifice
For sinners on that "green hill far away,"
Until the weary patient's eye began
To glow, as if the faintest ray of hope
Now lightened the dark soul.

Day after day,
The worn man languished in his suffering,
And, as in his first childhood's helplessness,
He was surrounded by a mother's love,
So now, "God's children" came to comfort him,
And kind hands tended to his wants. But yet,

He looked with cheerful gratitude on none
As on the pastor who had touched his heart
To penitence and hope. Last day he came,
The poor man could not speak (but there were signs
Of peaceful resignation). Ere he left
The weary wanderer returned to God.

SONNETS

DISAPPOINTMENT

I did not see thee, and my soul was sad;
I looked for thee as flowers look for the sun,
Awaiting patiently till night hath run
Its dreary course, and in the sunshine glad
They ope their tender bosoms. I have had
A blissful period of expectancy,
Believing that in answer to the cry
For the Divine within me had been made
Thy friendship: now a dark and harrowing fear
Hath seized me, since so far removed from thee
And all thy joys, my sphere, henceforth shall be
No hopeful tone my drooping heart to cheer;
Denied the bright soul glances of thine eye;
Thy soft voice never whispering sympathy.

TO I. L. AT PARTING

(OCT. 1st, 1876)

Heaven's light illumine thy path, thou gentle friend,
And fortune bless thee with a constant smile;
May summer's friendships never thee beguile,
Nor disappointment, care, nor sorrow lend
One shadow to thy path. All joy attend
Thee through this pilgrimage, and though we part,
Enshrined within this solitary heart,
Sacred shalt thou remain unto the end
Of my existence. I may not again
Behold thee as I now do, and may feel
The chill of disappointment o'er me steal,
When, lonely, I shall look for thee in vain.
Unchanged by time or absence, I shall be
The same in spirit constantly with thee.

ABSENCE

Thy spirit fills the silence, tho' thou'rt gone,
I feel as if thine eyes beheld me now
Deep gazing into mine, although no tone
Betray thee smiling near me, and allow
Glad converse with thee. My kind friend, I bow
With reverence to the gentle influence stealing
O'er my worn senses, pleasantly revealing
Thy taste in everything around, and vow,
That as these speak of thee in absence, I
Will thus remember thee, though I depart
Far from thee: for a voice within my heart
Shall whisper thy loved name as tenderly
As erewhile, and around it fondly strew
All the green laurel wreaths that ever grew.

PARTING

Look once again, oh, turn not yet away
Thine eyes, although their gaze be dimmed with tears
That through the sad and solitary years
Of thy long absence in my soul I may
Still see that look, and passionately pray
To Heaven, while deepest yearnings inly burn
Imploring Him to hasten thy return,
Who this poor, bleeding heart alone can stay.
Thus with thine arms around me I could die,
Breathing thy loved name with my parting breath,
Gathering a death-strength from thy tender eye—
Oh, it were better than a living death
Apart from thee, through weary years that roll
Still deeper floods of anguish o'er my soul!

Parting

Love once again, Oh, turn not yet away
Thine eyes although their gaze be dimmed with tears
That through the sad and ~~grieving~~ ^{grieving} years
Of thy long absence in my soul I may
Still see that look and passionately pray
To Heaven while deepest yearnings inly burn
Imploving Him to hasten thy return
Who this poor bleeding heart alone can stay
Thus with true arms around me I could die
Breathing thy loved name with my lasting breath
Smelling a death. ~~Shout~~ from thy tender eye
Oh it were better ~~than~~ a living death
Apart from thee through weary years that roll
Still deeper floods of anguish o'er my soul.

GREECE

(Of this poem the poet wrote: "I didn't know Eric McKay had written sonnets on the Greco-Russian war, but I fancy I must be in sympathy with him. I know little of politics but I felt keenly for poor Greece. You will see how I fell back on others to keep my own poor lines afloat. The first line is Wordsworth's while the other quotations in the last four lines are from 'The Spanish Gipsy.'")

"Milton! Thou should'st be living at this hour!"
With Grecian fire to set the world aflame,
Or hapless Byron, to surround the name
Of Greece anew with glamour; or the power
Of Wordsworth, with "fine frenzy" to endower
The time with pity, patriotism, and will
To conquer tyranny, and instill
Into all hearts one great resolve to lower
This savage despotism. Liberty!
Where are the "powers," now, that claimed to seek
Thy sacredness? "For strong souls to be weak"
There was a "choice"; but everything that makes
All nature great has sunk, and now we see
Those boastful "powers" "crawl like hissing snakes!"

MISCELLANEOUS

MEDITATION

Mayhap the moonlight's mellow ray
Falls sweet upon the lovely track,
Gilding with radiant beam the way,
And naught can lure thy footsteps back.
Abanas' silvery water glide
Meandering thro' the verdant plains,
Kissing the flowerlets at thy side
And waking soft, melodious strains.

QUEEN ALEXANDRA'S WISH

In maidenhood when questioned as
To where my fancy's wishes roved,
What my heart's chief ambition was,
I answered simply: "To be loved."

As Princess of the Peerless Realm
When surging throngs around me moved
With shouts my fears to overwhelm
I deemed it glorious "to be loved."

And thro' the years of wedded bliss,
Among my children as behooved,
I felt no joy could equal this:
By my own offspring "to be loved."

A husband's life in peril, past,
A mother's grief, my people proved
These touched the nation's heart, so vast,
And I felt grateful "to be loved."

When the good mother Queen resigned
Her earthly scepter, and it moved
The world to sorrow, I divined
How great a thing 'tis "to be loved."

THE JUBILEE SINGERS

Weird, wailing voices from the prairie plains,
Plaintive and mournful as the wandering wind,
Ye seem to whisper of sad memories,
Of tyranny that, erstwhile, long had ruled
The toilers of the earth.

TO MY MOTHER

Your eyes remain with me, and your soft voice.
No other eyes nor voice have been the same
To me, nor can be. I remember them
In one first sorrow. What a look of grief
Your face had, when, with eyes adim with tears,
“Wet as Cordelia’s” and in faltering tones
You told us that our father’s friend was dead!
That sad, impressive scene arises now
In painful vividness before my mind,
The nimble fingers folding the black crêpe,
The anxious gaze, as of a mother bird
Towards her fledglings in their little nest.
O! eyes so full of love’s divinest light
Grief-stricken, then, O! tremulous, soft voice
Prophetic of the harder years to come
With sadder partings!

TO A PICTURE, ROYAL HOTEL, DUNDEE, WHILE
WAITING FOR MR. FISHER

Young heart, that, tempest-tossed, 'twixt hope and fear,
Outspeaking, thro' the hesitating eye,
Do pangs of parting first begin in thee?
Thy mother erstwhile smiling; as I gaze
The artist's meaning thrills and masters me.
Hope springs exultant in thy brave young soul,
But, broken-winged, descends again to earth
In filial piety. 'Tis sad to part!
Thy mother's arms encircle thy young form,
While thoughts unutterable rend her heart,
Anticipating that it shall be years
Ere thy return.

UPON A SCRAP OF HOTEL NOTE-PAPER

For men and women (both) with wearied souls
There is at least one requiem in the stores
Garnered from hearts and minds that long ago
Have sunk in triumph (or oblivion)
And yet revive again as genius must.

THOUGHTS

I know not what it is that urges me
To write, unless that terrible despair,
The depths from which our heart-wrung tears are stirred
To utterance. And lay my suffering bare
To alien sympathy. O! that I were
Endowed with gift of poet to express
What burns within me!

JOHN

John, mine own namesake, with the golden hair,
O, be thy path less perilous than mine,
Heaven fill the coming years with grace divine,
Nor burden thy young life with grief or care!

**SUGGESTED BY THE PICTURE OF SAMUEL'S
FLIGHT FROM DAMASCUS**

Lone voyager, the rage of foes
Hath trespassed on thy quiet home,
And direst persecution's throes
Have urged thee thus afar to roam.

What sorrows fill thine anguished heart!
How painful, now, life's changeful scene!
From home and friendships thou must part,
A follower of the Nazarene!

THE CRITERION

Whenever I detect vanity or jealousy in a great writer I feel truly sorry; for, in my estimate of gifts, the possession of a ready divination of greatness in another seems an additional claim to greatness in the possessor himself.

GREATNESS

There is a greater man than the great man—the man who is too great to be great.

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