

Stowe Harriet Beecher

Religious Poems



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Religious Poems

ST. CATHERINE BORNE BY ANGELS.¹

SLOW through the solemn air, in silence sailing,
Borne by mysterious angels, strong and fair,
She sleeps at last, blest dreams her eyelids veiling,
Above this weary world of strife and care.

Lo how she passeth! – dreamy, slow, and calm:
Scarce wave those broad, white wings, so silvery bright;
Those cloudy robes, in star-emblazoned folding,
Sweep mistily athwart the evening light.

Far, far below, the dim, forsaken earth,
The foes that threaten, or the friends that weep;
Past, like a dream, the torture and the pain:
For so He giveth his beloved sleep.

The restless bosom of the surging ocean
Gives back the image as the cloud floats o'er,
Hushing in glassy awe his troubled motion;
For one blest moment he complains no more.

Like the transparent golden floor of heaven,
His charmed waters lie as in a dream,
And glistening wings, and starry robes unfolding,
And serious angel eyes far downward gleam.

O restless sea! thou seemest all enchanted
By that sweet vision of celestial rest;
Where are the winds and tides thy peace that haunted, —
So still thou seemest, so glorified and blest!

Ah, sea! to-morrow, that sweet scene forgotten,
Dark tides and tempests shall thy bosom rear;
And thy complaining waves, with restless motion,
Shall toss their hands in their old wild despair.

¹ According to this legend, Catherine was a noble maiden of Alexandria, distinguished alike by birth, riches, beauty, and the rarest gifts of genius and learning. In the flower of her life she consecrated herself to the service of her Redeemer, and cheerfully suffered for his sake the loss of wealth, friends, and the esteem of the world. Banishment, imprisonment, and torture were in vain tried to shake the constancy of her faith; and at last she was bound upon the torturing-wheel for a cruel death. But the angels descended, so says the story, rent the wheel, and bore her away, through the air, far over the sea, to Mount Sinai, where her body was left to repose, and her soul ascended with them to heaven.

So o'er our hearts sometimes the sweet, sad story
Of suffering saints, borne homeward crowned and blest,
Shines down in stillness with a tender glory,
And makes a mirror there of breathless rest.

For not alone in those old Eastern regions
Are Christ's beloved ones tried by cross and chain;
In many a house are his elect ones hidden,
His martyrs suffering in their patient pain.

The rack, the cross, life's weary wrench of woe,
The world sees not, as slow, from day to day,
In calm, unspoken patience, sadly still,
The loving spirit bleeds itself away.

But there are hours when, from the heavens unfolding,
Come down the angels with the glad release;
And we look upward, to behold in glory
Our suffering loved ones borne away to peace.

Ah, brief the calm! the restless wave of feeling
Rises again when the bright cloud sweeps by,
And our unrestful souls reflect no longer
That tender vision of the upper sky.

Espoused Lord of the pure saints in glory,
To whom all faithful souls affianced are,
Breathe down thy peace into our restless spirits,
And make a lasting, heavenly vision there.

So the bright gates no more on us shall close;
No more the cloud of angels fade away;
And we shall walk, amid life's weary strife,
In the calm light of thine eternal day.

THE CHARMER

"*Socrates*. However, you and *Simmias* appear to me as if you wished to sift this subject more thoroughly, and to be afraid, like children, lest, on the soul's departure from the body, winds should blow it away.

"Upon this *Cebes* said, 'Endeavor to teach us better, *Socrates*. Perhaps there is a childish spirit in our breast that has such a dread. Let us endeavor to persuade him not to be afraid of death, as of hobgoblins.'

"'But you must charm him every day,' said *Socrates*, 'until you have quieted his fears.'

"'But whence, O *Socrates*,' he said, 'can we procure a skilful charmer for such a case, now you are about to leave us.'

"'Greece is wide, *Cebes*,' he said, 'and in it surely there are skilful men; and there are many barbarous nations, all of which you should search, seeking such a charmer, sparing neither money nor toil.'" – Last words of *Socrates*, as narrated by *Plato* in the *Phædo*.

WE need that charmer, for our hearts are sore
With longings for the things that may not be,
Faint for the friends that shall return no more,
Dark with distrust, or wrung with agony.

"What is this life? and what to us is death?
Whence came we? whither go? and where are those
Who, in a moment stricken from our side,
Passed to that land of shadow and repose?

"And are they all dust? and dust must we become?
Or are they living in some unknown clime?
Shall we regain them in that far-off home,
And live anew beyond the waves of time?

"O man divine! on thee our souls have hung;
Thou wert our teacher in these questions high;
But ah! this day divides thee from our side,
And veils in dust thy kindly-guiding eye.

"Where is that Charmer whom thou bidst us seek?
On what far shores may his sweet voice be heard?
When shall these questions of our yearning souls
Be answered by the bright Eternal Word?"

So spake the youth of Athens, weeping round,
When *Socrates* lay calmly down to die;
So spake the sage, prophetic of the hour
When earth's fair morning star should rise on high.

They found Him not, those youths of soul divine,
Long seeking, wandering, watching on life's shore;
Reasoning, aspiring, yearning for the light,
Death came and found them – doubting as before.

But years passed on; and lo! the Charmer came,
Pure, simple, sweet, as comes the silver dew,
And the world knew him not, – he walked alone,
Encircled only by his trusting few.

Like the Athenian sage, rejected, scorned,
Betrayed, condemned, his day of doom drew nigh;
He drew his faithful few more closely round,
And told them that his hour was come – to die.

"Let not your heart be troubled," then He said,
"My Father's house hath mansions large and fair;
I go before you to prepare your place,
I will return to take you with me there."

And since that hour the awful foe is charmed,
And life and death are glorified and fair;
Whither He went we know, the way we know,
And with firm step press on to meet him there.

KNOCKING

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock."

KNOCKING, knocking, ever knocking?
Who is there?
'Tis a pilgrim, strange and kingly,
Never such was seen before; —
Ah, sweet soul, for such a wonder
Undo the door.

No, — that door is hard to open;
Hinges rusty, latch is broken;
Bid Him go.
Wherefore, with that knocking dreary
Scare the sleep from one so weary?
Say Him, — no.

Knocking, knocking, ever knocking?
What! Still there?
O, sweet soul, but once behold Him,
With the glory-crownéd hair;
And those eyes, so strange and tender,
Waiting there;

Open! Open! Once behold Him, —
Him, so fair.
Ah, that door! Why wilt Thou vex me,
Coming ever to perplex me?
For the key is stiffly rusty,
And the bolt is clogged and dusty;

Many-fingered ivy-vine
Seals it fast with twist and twine;
Weeds of years and years before
Choke the passage of that door.
Knocking! knocking! What! still knocking?
He still there?

What's the hour? The night is waning, —
In my heart a drear complaining,
And a chilly, sad unrest!
Ah, this knocking! It disturbs me,
Scares my sleep with dreams unblest!
Give me rest,

Rest, — ah, rest!

Rest, dear soul, He longs to give thee;
Thou hast only dreamed of pleasure,
Dreamed of gifts and golden treasure,
Dreamed of jewels in thy keeping,
Waked to weariness of weeping; —

Open to thy soul's one Lover,
And thy night of dreams is over, —
The true gifts He brings have seeming
More than all thy faded dreaming!
Did she open? Doth she? Will she?
So, as wondering we behold,

Grows the picture to a sign,
Pressed upon your soul and mine;
For in every breast that liveth
Is that strange mysterious door; —
Though forsaken and betangled,
Ivy-gnarled and weed-bejangled,

Dusty, rusty, and forgotten; —
There the piercé hand still knocketh,
And with ever-patient watching,
With the sad eyes true and tender,
With the glory-crownéd hair, —
Still a God is waiting there.

THE OLD PSALM TUNE

YOU asked, dear friend, the other day,
Why still my charmed ear
Rejoiceth in uncultured tone
That old psalm tune to hear?

I've heard full oft, in foreign lands,
The grand orchestral strain,
Where music's ancient masters live,
Revealed on earth again, —

Where breathing, solemn instruments,
In swaying clouds of sound,
Bore up the yearning, tranced soul,
Like silver wings around; —

I've heard in old St. Peter's dome,
Where clouds of incense rise,
Most ravishing the choral swell
Mount upwards to the skies.

And well I feel the magic power,
When skilled and cultured art
Its cunning webs of sweetness weaves
Around the captured heart.

But yet, dear friend, though rudely sung,
That old psalm tune hath still
A pulse of power beyond them all
My inmost soul to thrill.

Those halting tones that sound to you,
Are not the tones I hear;
But voices of the loved and lost
There meet my longing ear.

I hear my angel mother's voice, —
Those were the words she sung;
I hear my brother's ringing tones,
As once on earth they rung;

And friends that walk in white above
Come round me like a cloud,
And far above those earthly notes
Their singing sounds aloud.

There may be discord, as you say;
Those voices poorly ring;
But there's no discord in the strain
Those upper spirits sing.

For they who sing are of the blest,
The calm and glorified,
Whose hours are one eternal rest
On heaven's sweet floating tide.

Their life is music and accord;
Their souls and hearts keep time
In one sweet concert with the Lord, —
One concert vast, sublime.

And through the hymns they sang on earth
Sometimes a sweetness falls
On those they loved and left below,
And softly homeward calls, —

Bells from our own dear fatherland,
Borne trembling o'er the sea, —
The narrow sea that they have crossed,
The shores where we shall be.

O sing, sing on, beloved souls!
Sing cares and griefs to rest;
Sing, till entranced we arise
To join you 'mong the blest.

THE OTHER WORLD

IT lies around us like a cloud,
A world we do not see;
Yet the sweet closing of an eye
May bring us there to be.

Its gentle breezes fan our cheek;
Amid our worldly cares,
Its gentle voices whisper love,
And mingle with our prayers.

Sweet hearts around us throb and beat,
Sweet helping hands are stirred,
And palpitates the veil between
With breathings almost heard.

The silence, awful, sweet, and calm,
They have no power to break;
For mortal words are not for them
To utter or partake.

So thin, so soft, so sweet, they glide,
So near to press they seem,
They lull us gently to our rest,
They melt into our dream.

And in the hush of rest they bring
'Tis easy now to see
How lovely and how sweet a pass
The hour of death may be; —

To close the eye, and close the ear,
Wrapped in a trance of bliss,
And, gently drawn in loving arms,
To swoon to that – from this, —

Scarce knowing if we wake or sleep,
Scarce asking where we are,
To feel all evil sink away,
All sorrow and all care.

Sweet souls around us! watch us still;
Press nearer to our side;
Into our thoughts, into our prayers,
With gentle helpings glide.

Let death between us be as naught,
A dried and vanished stream;
Your joy be the reality,
Our suffering life the dream.

MARY AT THE CROSS

"Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother."

O WONDROUS mother! since the dawn of time
Was ever love, was ever grief, like thine?
O highly favored in thy joy's deep flow,
And favored, even in this, thy bitterest woe!

Poor was that home in simple Nazareth
Where, fairly growing, like some silent flower,
Last of a kingly race, unknown and lowly,
O desert lily, passed thy childhood's hour.

The world knew not the tender, serious maiden,
Who through deep loving years so silent grew,
Full of high thought and holy aspiration,
Which the o'ershadowing God alone might view.

And then it came, that message from the highest,
Such as to woman ne'er before descended,
The almighty wings thy prayerful soul o'erspread,
And with thy life the Life of worlds was blended.

What visions then of future glory filled thee,
The chosen mother of that King unknown,
Mother fulfiller of all prophecy
Which, through dim ages, wondering seers had shown!

Well did thy dark eye kindle, thy deep soul
Rise into billows, and thy heart rejoice;
Then woke the poet's fire, the prophet's song,
Tuned with strange burning words thy timid voice.

Then, in dark contrast, came the lowly manger,
The outcast shed, the tramp of brutal feet;
Again behold earth's learned and her lowly,
Sages and shepherds, prostrate at thy feet.

Then to the temple bearing – hark again
What strange conflicting tones of prophecy
Breathe o'er the child foreshadowing words of joy,
High triumph blent with bitter agony!

O, highly favored thou in many an hour
Spent in lone musings with thy wondrous Son,
When thou didst gaze into that glorious eye,

And hold that mighty hand within thine own.

Blest through those thirty years, when in thy dwelling
He lived a God disguised with unknown power;
And thou his sole adorer, his best love,
Trusting, revering, waited for his hour.

Blest in that hour, when called by opening heaven
With cloud and voice, and the baptizing flame,
Up from the Jordan walked th' acknowledged stranger,
And awe-struck crowds grew silent as he came.

Blessed, when full of grace, with glory crowned,
He from both hands almighty favors poured,
And, though He had not where to lay his head,
Brought to his feet alike the slave and lord.

Crowds followed; thousands shouted, "Lo, our King!"
Fast beat thy heart. Now, now the hour draws nigh:
Behold the crown, the throne, the nations bend!
Ah, no! fond mother, no! behold him die!

Now by that cross thou tak'st thy final station,
And shar'st the last dark trial of thy Son;

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