

Classic Poetry Series

Alexander Smith
- poems -

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Alexander Smith(31 December 1830 - 5 January 1867)

a Scottish poet, and labelled as one of the Spasmodic School.

Life and Works

He was born in a thatched house in Kilmarnock, in the Scottish Lowlands south-west of Glasgow, the first of several children. His father, John Smith, was a Lowlander who worked as a designer of lace, calico prints, paisley patterns, and muslins. His mother Christina Murray Smith was of Highland extraction and, together with a Highland servant girl, first introduced him to Gaelic songs and Scottish legends.

Being too poor to send him to college, his parents placed him in a linen factory in Glasgow to follow his father's trade of a pattern designer.

His early poems appeared in the Glasgow Citizen, in whose editor, James Hedderwick, he found a friend. A Life Drama and other Poems (1853) was a work of promise, ran through several editions, and gained Smith the appointment of secretary to Edinburgh University in 1854.

As a poet he was one of the leading representatives of what was called the "Spasmodic" School, now fallen into oblivion. Smith, <a href="

In the same year Sydney Dobell came to Edinburgh, and an acquaintanceship at once sprang up between the two, which resulted in their collaboration in a book of War Sonnets (1855), inspired by the Crimean War. He also published City Poems (1857) and Edwin of Northumbria Edwin of Deira (1861), a Northumbrian epic poem.

Although his early work A Life Drama was highly praised, his poetry was later less well thought of and he was ridiculed as being a Spasmodic. Smith turned his attention to prose, and published Dreamthorp: Essays written in the Country (1863) and A Summer in Skye (1865). He wrote two novels, Miss Dona M'Quarrie (18??), and his last work Alfred Hagart's Household (1866) which ran first through Good Words.

He died in Wardie, near Edinburgh. A memoir of Smith by P. P. Alexander was prefixed to a volume entitled Last Leaves. See also Brisbane's Early Years Of

Alexander Smith (1869) (but be aware that Brisbane's is not a scholarly work and contains errors of fact).

Barbara

ON the Sabbath-day,
 Through the churchyard old and gray,
Over the crisp and yellow leaves I held my rustling way;
And amid the words of mercy, falling on my soul like balms,
'Mid the gorgeous storms of music--in the mellow organ-calms,
'Mid the upward-streaming prayers, and the rich and solemn psalms,
 I stood careless, Barbara.

 My heart was elsewhere,
 While the organ shook the air,
And the priest, with outspread hands, bless'd the people with a
 prayer;
But when rising to go homeward, with a mild and saintlike shine
Gleam'd a face of airy beauty with its heavenly eyes on mine--
Gleam'd and vanish'd in a moment--O that face was surely thine
 Out of heaven, Barbara!

 O pallid, pallid face!
 O earnest eyes of grace!
When last I saw thee, dearest, it was in another place.
You came running forth to meet me with my love-gift on your wrist:
The flutter of a long white dress, then all was lost in mist--
A purple stain of agony was on the mouth I kiss'd,
 That wild morning, Barbara.

 I search'd, in my despair,
 Sunny noon and midnight air;
I could not drive away the thought that you were lingering there.
O many and many a winter night I sat when you were gone,
My worn face buried in my hands, beside the fire alone--
Within the dripping churchyard, the rain plashing on your stone,
 You were sleeping, Barbara.

 'Mong angels, do you think
 Of the precious golden link
I clasp'd around your happy arm while sitting by yon brink?
Or when that night of gliding dance, of laughter and guitars,
Was emptied of its music, and we watch'd, through lattice-bars,
The silent midnight heaven creeping o'er us with its stars,

Beauty

BEAUTY still walketh on the earth and air,
Our present sunsets are as rich in gold
As ere the Iliad's music was out-roll'd;
The roses of the Spring are ever fair,
'Mong branches green still ring-doves coo and pair,
And the deep sea still foams its music old.
So, if we are at all divinely soul'd,
This beauty will unloose our bonds of care.
'T is pleasant, when blue skies are o'er us bending
Within old starry-gated Poesy,
To meet a soul set to no worldly tune,
Like thine, sweet Friend! Oh, dearer this to me
Than are the dewy trees, the sun, the moon,
Or noble music with a golden ending.

Alexander Smith

From: A Life-Drama

FORERUNNERS

Walter. I HAVE a strain of a departed bard;
One who was born too late into this world.
A mighty day was past, and he saw nought
But ebbing sunset and the rising stars,—
Still o'er him rose those melancholy stars!
Unknown his childhood, save that he was born
'Mong woodland waters full of silver breaks;

I was to him but Labrador to Ind;
His pearls were plentier than my pebblestones.
He was the sun, I was that squab—the earth,
And bask'd me in his light until he drew
Flowers from my barren sides. Oh! he was rich,
And I rejoiced upon his shore of pearls,
A weak enamor'd sea. Once he did say,
"My Friend! a Poet must ere long arise,
And with a regal song sun-crown this age,
As a saint's head is with a halo crown'd;—
One, who shall hallow Poetry to God
And to its own high use, for Poetry is
The grandest chariot wherein king-thoughts ride;—
One, who shall fervent grasp the sword of song,
As a stern swordsman grasps his keenest blade,
To find the quickest passage to the heart.
A mighty Poet, whom this age shall choose
To be its spokesman to all coming times.
In the ripe full-blown season of his soul,
He shall go forward in his spirit's strength,
And grapple with the questions of all time,
And wring from them their meanings. As King Saul
Call'd up the buried prophet from his grave
To speak his doom, so shall this Poet-king
Call up the dead Past from its awful grave
To tell him of our future. As the air
Doth sphere the world, so shall his heart of love—
Loving mankind, not peoples. As the lake
Reflects the flower, tree, rock, and bending heaven,

Shall he reflect our great humanity;
And as the young Spring breathes with living breath
On a dead branch, till it sprouts fragrantly
Green leaves and sunny flowers, shall he breathe life
Through every theme he touch, making all Beauty
And Poetry for ever like the stars.”
His words set me on fire; I cried aloud,
“God! what a portion to forerun this Soul!”
He grasp’d my hand,—I look’d upon his face,—
A thought struck all the blood into his cheeks,
Like a strong buffet. His great flashing eyes
Burn’d on mine own. He said, “A grim old king,
Whose blood leap’d madly when the trumpets bray’d
To joyous battle ’mid a storm of steeds,
Won a rich kingdom on a battle-day;
But in the sunset he was ebbing fast,
Ring’d by his weeping lords. His left hand held
His white steed, to the belly splash’d with blood,
That seem’d to mourn him with its drooping head;
His right, his broken brand; and in his ear
His old victorious banners flap the winds.
He called his faithful herald to his side,—
‘Go! tell the dead I come!’ With a proud smile,
The warrior with a stab let out his soul,
Which fled and shriek’d through all the other world,
‘Ye dead! My master comes!’ And there was pause
Till the great shade should enter. Like that herald,
Walter, I ’d rush across this waiting world
And cry, ‘He comes!’” Lady, wilt hear the song? [Sings.

A MINOR POET

He sat one winter ’neath a linden tree
In my bare orchard; “See, my friend,” he said,
“The stars among the branches hang like fruit,
So, hopes were thick within me. When I ’m gone
The world will like a valuator sit
Upon my soul, and say, ‘I was a cloud
That caught its glory from a sunken sun,
And gradual burn’d into its native gray.’”
On an October eve, ’t was his last wish
To see again the mists and golden woods;

Upon his death-bed he was lifted up,
The slumb'rous sun within the lazy west
With their last gladness fill'd his dying eyes.
No sooner was he hence than critic-worms
Were swarming on the body of his fame,
And thus they judged the dead: "This Poet was
An April tree whose vermeil-loaded boughs
Promis'd to Autumn apples juiced and red,
But never came to fruit." "He is to us
But a rich odor,—a faint music-swell."
"Poet he was not in the larger sense;
He could write pearls, but he could never write
A Poem round and perfect as a star."
"Politic, i' faith. His most judicious act
Was dying when he did; the next five years
Had finger'd all the fine dust from his wings,
And left him poor as we. He died—'t was shrewd!
And came with all his youth and unblown hopes
On the world's heart, and touch'd it into tears."

SEA-MARGE

The lark is singing in the blinding sky,
Hedges are white with May. The bridegroom sea
Is toying with the shore, his wedded bride,
And, in the fulness of his marriage joy,
He decorates her tawny brow with shells,
Retires a space, to see how fair she looks,
Then proud, runs up to kiss her. All is fair—
All glad, from grass to sun! Yet more I love
Than this, the shrinking day that sometimes comes
In Winter's front, so fair 'mong its dark peers,
It seems a straggler from the files of June,
Which in its wanderings had lost its wits,
And half its beauty; and, when it return'd,
Finding its old companions gone away,
It join'd November's troop, then marching past;
And so the frail thing comes, and greets the world
With a thin crazy smile, then bursts in tears,
And all the while it holds within its hand
A few half-wither'd flowers. I love and pity it!

Alexander Smith

Glasgow

SING, poet, 'tis a merry world;
That cottage smoke is rolled and curled
In sport, that every moss
Is happy, every inch of soil: -
Before me runs a road of toil
With my grave cut across.
Sing, trailing showers and breezy downs -
I know the tragic hearts of towns.

City! I am true son of thine;
Ne'er dwelt I where great mornings shine
Around the bleating pens;
Ne'er by the rivulets I strayed,
And ne'er upon my childhood weighed
The silence of the glens.
Instead of shores where ocean beats
I hear the ebb and flow of streets.

Black Labor draws his weary waves
Into their secret moaning caves;
But, with the morning light,
That sea again will overflow
With a long, weary sound of woe,
Again to faint in night.
Wave am I in that sea of woes,
Which, night and morning, ebbs and flows.

I dwelt within a gloomy court,
Wherein did never sunbeam sport;
Yet there my heart was stirred -
My very blood did dance and thrill,
When on my narrow window-sill
Spring lighted like a bird.
Poor flowers! I watched them pine for weeks,
With leaves as pale as human cheeks.

Afar, one summer, I was borne;
Through golden vapors of the morn
I heard the hills of sheep:

I trod with a wild ecstasy
The bright fringe of the living sea:
And on a ruined keep
I sat, and watched an endless plain
Blacken beneath the gloom of rain.

Oh, fair the lightly-sprinkled waste,
O'er which a laughing shower has raced!
Oh, fair the April shoots!
Oh, fair the woods on summer days,
While a blue hyacinthine haze
Is dreaming round the roots!
In thee, O city! I discern
Another beauty, sad and stern.

Draw thy fierce streams of blinding ore,
Smite on a thousand anvils, roar
Down the harbor-bars;
Smoulder in smoky sunsets, flare
On rainy nights; with street and square
Lie empty to the stars.
From terrace proud to alley base
I know thee as my mother's face.

When sunset bathes thee in his gold,
In wreaths of bronze thy sides are rolled,
They smoke is dusky fire;
And, from the glory round thee poured,
A sunbeam like an angel's sword
Shivers upon a spire.
Thus have I watched thee, Terror! Dream!
While the blue night crept up the stream.

The wild train plunges in the hills,
He shrieks across the midnight rills;
Streams through the shifting glare,
The roar and flap of foundry fires,
That shake with light the sleeping shires;
And on the moorlands bare
He sees afar a crown of light
Hang o'er thee in the hollow night.

And through thy heart as through a dream,
Flows on that black disdainful stream;
All scornfully it flows,
Between the huddled gloom of masts,
Silent as pines unvexed by blasts -
'Tween lamps in streaming rows,
O wondrous sight! O stream of dread!
O long, dark river of the dead!

Afar, the banner of the year
Unfurls: but dimly prisoned here,
Tis only when I greet
A dropt rose lying in my way,
A butterfly that flutters gay
Athwart the noisy street,
I know the happy Summer smiles
Around thy suburbs, miles on miles.

'Twere neither pæan now, nor dirge,
The flash and thunder of the surge
On flat sands wide and bare;
No haunting joy or anguish dwells
In the green light of sunny dells,
Or in the starry air.
Alike to me the desert flower,
The rainbow laughing o'er the shower

While o'er thy walls the darkness sails,
I lean against the churchyard rails;
Up in the midnight towers
The belfried spire, the street is dead,
I hear in silence overhead
The clang of iron hours:
It moves me not - I know her tomb
Is yonder in the shapeless gloom.

All raptures of this mortal breath,
Solemnities of life and death,
Dwell in thy noise alone:
Of me thou hast become a part -
Some kindred with my human heart
Lives in thy streets of stone;

For we have been familiar more
Than galley-slave and weary oar.

The beech is dipped in wine; the shower
Is burnished; on the swinging flower
The latest bee doth sit.

The low sun stares through dust of gold.
And o'er the darkened heath and wold
The large ghost-moth doth flit.
In every orchard Autumn stands,
With apples in his golden hands.

But all these sights and sounds are strange;
Then wherefore from thee shoud I range?
Thou hast my kith and kin;
My childhood, youth, and manhood brave;
Thou hast that unforgotten grave
Within thy central din.
A sacredness of love and death
Dwells in thy noise and smoky breath.

Alexander Smith

To -----

THE BROKEN moon lay in the autumn sky,
And I lay at thy feet;
You bent above me; in the silence I
Could hear my wild heart beat.

I spoke; my soul was full of trembling fears
At what my words would bring:
You rais'd your face, your eyes were full of tears,
As the sweet eyes of Spring.

You kiss'd me then, I worshipp'd at thy feet
Upon the shadowy sod.
Oh, fool, I lov'd thee! lov'd thee, lovely cheat!
Better than Fame or God.

My soul leap'd up beneath thy timid kiss;
What then to me were groans,
Or pain, or death? Earth was a round of bliss,
I seem'd to walk on thrones.

And you were with me 'mong the rushing wheels,
'Mid Trade's tumultuous jars;
And where to awe-struck wilds the Night reveals
Her hollow gulfs of stars.

Before your window, as before a shrine,
I 've knelt 'mong dew-soak'd flowers,
While distant music-bells, with voices fine,
Measur'd the midnight hours.

There came a fearful moment: I was pale,
You wept, and never spoke,
But clung around me as the woodbine frail
Clings, pleading, round an oak.

Upon my wrong I steadied up my soul,
And flung thee from myself;
I spurn'd thy love as 't were a rich man's dole,—
It was my only wealth.

I spurn'd thee! I, who lov'd thee, could have died,
That hop'd to call thee "wife,"
And bear thee, gently-smiling at my side,
Through all the shocks of life!

Too late, thy fatal beauty and thy tears,
Thy vows, thy passionate breath;
I 'll meet thee not in Life, nor in the spheres
Made visible by Death.

Alexander Smith