

Songs, Sonnets & Miscellaneous Poems eBook

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Thomas Runciman was born in Northumberland in 1841, and died in London in 1909. He was the second son of Walter Runciman of Dunbar and Jean Finlay, his wife. In his youth he left the beautiful coast where his father was stationed to go to school and work in Newcastle. Artists of his name had been men of mark in Scotland, and as he had their strong feeling for colour he was allowed for a time to become a pupil of William Bell Scott, who was on the fringe of the Pre-Raphaelite Movement. Throughout his life he painted portraits and landscapes, but the latter were what he loved. His work was not widely known, for he had a nervous contempt for Exhibitions, and the first collection of his landscapes in water-colour and oil was opened to the public at a posthumous exhibition in Newcastle in 1911. He travelled from time to time, and enjoyed living on the banks of the Seine, and in other beautiful regions abroad.

His poems were never offered for publication, although critical essays of his appeared from time to time, as for instance in the "London" of Henley and Stevenson. The Songs and Sonnets were written for his own satisfaction, and were sent to a few faithful friends and to members of his own family, who have allowed me to collect and print them. The miscellaneous verses were in many instances found in letters, and others written in high spirits were rescued after his death from sketch books and scraps of paper by his daughter, Kate Runciman Sellers, and by his friend, Edward Nisbet.

W.R.

SONGS

I.

Though here fair blooms the rose and the woodbine waves on high,
And oak and elm and bracken frond enrich the rolling lea,
And winds as if from Arcady breathe joy as they go by,
Yet I yearn and I pine for my North Countrie.

I leave the drowsing south and in dreams I northward fly,
And walk the stretching moors that fringe the ever-calling sea;
And am gladdened as the gales that are so bitter-sweet go by,
While grey clouds sweetly darken o'er my North Countrie.

For there's music in the storms, and there's colour in the shades,
And there's joy e'en in the sorrow widely brooding o'er the sea;
And larger thoughts have birth among the moors and lowly glades
And reedy mounds and sands of my North Countrie.

II.

You who know what easeful arms
Silence winds about the dead,
Or what far-swept music charms
Hearts that were earth-wearied;

You who know—if aught be known
In that everlasting Hush
Where the life-born years are strewn,
Where the eyeless ages rush,—

Tell me, is it conscious rest
Heals the whilom hurt of life?
Or is Nirvana undistressed
E'en by memory of strife?



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III.

Metempsychosis.

When Grief comes this way by
With her wan lip and drooping eye,
Bid her welcome, woo her boldly;
Soon she'll look on thee less coldly.

Her tears soon cease to flow.
'Tis now not Grief but Joy we know;
From her smiling face the roses
Tell the glad metempsychosis.

IV.

Life with the sun in it—
Shaded by gloom!
Life with the fun in it—
Shadowed by Doom!

Life with its Love ever haunted by Hate!
Life's laughing morrows frowned over by Fate!
Young Life's wild gladness still waylaid by Age!
All its sweet badness still mocking the sage!
What can e'er measure the joy of its strife? What boundless leisure
Count the heaped treasure
Of woe, that's the pleasure
And beauty of Life?

V.

Once as the aureole
Day left the earth,
Faded, a twilight soul,
Memory, had birth:
Young were her sister souls, Sorrow and Mirth.

Dark mirrors are her eyes:
Wherein who gaze
See wan effulgencies



Flicker and blaze—
Lorn fleeting shadows of beautiful days.

Scan those deep mirrors well
After long years:
Lo! what aforesight fell
In rain of tears,
In radiant glamour-mist now reappears.

See old wild gladness
Tamed now and coy;
Grief that was madness
Turned into joy.
Fate cannot harry them now, nor annoy.

Down from yon throbbing blue,
Passionless, fair,
Still faces look on you,
Sunlit their hair,
With a slow smile at your pleasure and care.

Life and death murmurings
From their lips go
In vaster music-rings;
Outward they flow,
Tenderer, wilder, than songs that we know.

VI.

My love's unchanged—though time, alas!
Turns silver-gilt the golden mass
Of flowing hair, and pales, I wis,
The rose that deepened with that kiss—
The first—before our marriage was. And though the fields of corn and grass,
So radiant then, as summers pass
Lose something of their look of bliss,

My love's unchanged. Our tiny girl's a sturdy lass;
Our boy's shrill pipe descends to bass;
New friends appear, the old we miss;
My Love grows old ... in spite of this

My love's unchanged.

VII.

A Gurly Breeze in Scotland.



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A gurly breeze swept from the pool
The Autumn peace so blue and cool,
Which all day long had dreamed thereon
Of men and things aforetime gone,
Their vanished joy, their ended dule:
So glooms the sea, so sounds her brool,
As from the East at eve comes on
A gurly breeze.

Sense yields to Fancy 'neath whose rule
This inland scene is quickly full
Of ocean moods wherein I con
As in a picture; quickly gone.
To what sweet use the mind may school
A gurly breeze!

SONNETS

I.

A Hamadryad Dies.

Low mourned the Oread round the Arcadian hills;
The Naiad murmured and the Dryad moaned;
The meadow-maiden left her daffodils
To join the Hamadryades who groaned
Over a sister newly fallen dead.
That Life might perish out of Arcady
From immemorial times was never said;
Yet here one lay dead by her dead oak-tree.
"Who made our Hamadryad cold and mute?"
The others cried in sorrow and in wonder.
"I," answered Death, close by in ashen suit;
"Yet fear not me for this, nor start asunder;
Arcadian life shall keep its ancient zest
Though I be here. My name?—is it not Rest?"

II.

"Et in Arcadia ego ..."



“What traveller soever wander here
In quest of peace and what is best of pleasure,
Let not his hope be overcast and drear
Because I, Death, am here to fix the measure
Of life, even in blameless Arcady.
Bay, laurel, myrtle, ivy never sere,
And fields flower-decorated all the year,
And streams that carry secrets to the sea,
And hills that hold back something evermore
Though wild their speech with clouds in thunder-roar,—
Yea, every sylvan sight and peaceful tone
Are thine to give thy days their purer zest.
Let not the legend grieve thee on this stone.
I Death am here. What then? My name is Rest.”

III.

Despairless! Hopeless! Quietly I wait
On these unpeopled tracks the happy close
Of Day, whose advent rang with noise elate,
Whose later stage was quick with mirthful shows
And clasping loves, with hate and hearty blows,
And dreams of coming gifts withheld by Fate
From morrow unto morrow, till her great
Dread eyes 'gan tell of other gifts than those,
And her advancing wings gloomed like a pall;
Her speech foretelling joy became a dirge
As piteous as pitiless; and all
My company had passed beyond the verge
And lost me ere Fate raised her blinding wings....
Hark! through the dusk a bird “at heaven’s gate sings.”

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IV.

“Despairless? Hopeless? Join the cheerful hunt
Whose hounds are Science, high Desires the steeds,
And Misery the quarry. Use and Wont
No help to human anguish bring, that bleeds
For all two thousand years of Christian deeds.
Let Use and Wont in styes still feed and grunt,
Or, bovine, graze knee-deep in flowering meads.
Mount! follow! Onward urge Life’s dragon-hunt!”
—So cries the sportsman brisk at break of day.
“The sound of hound and horn is well for thee,”
Thus I reply, “but I have other prey;
And friendly is my quest as you may see.
Though slow my pace, full surely in the dark
I’ll chance on it at last, though none may mark.”

V.

Hopeless! Despairless! like that Indian wise
Free of desire, save no desire to know.
To gain that sweet Nirvana each one tries,
Thinks to assuage soul-wearing passion so.
From the white rest, the ante-natal bliss,
Not loth, the wondrous wondering soul awakes;
Now drawn to that illusion, now to this,
With gathering strength each devious pathway takes;
Till at the noon of life his aims decline;
Evermore earthward bend the tiring eyes,
Evermore earthward, till with no surprise
They see Nirvana from Earth’s bosom shine.
The still kind mother holds her child again
In blank desirelessness without a stain.

VI.

He comes to me like air on parching grass;
His eyes are wells where truth lives, found at last;
Summer is fragrant should he this way pass;
His calm love is a chain that binds me fast....
Yet often melancholy will forecast



That time when I shall have grown old—when he—
Still rapturous in his struggle with life's blast—
Shall give a pitying side glance to me,
Who skirt the fog-fringe of eternity,
Straining mine eyes to catch what shadowy sign
Of good or evil omen there may be,
Yet no sure good nor evil can divine:
Only some hints of doubtful sound and light,
That lonelier leave the unaccompanied night.

VII.

She scanned the record of Beethoven's thought,
And made the dumb chords speak both clear and low,
And spread the dead man's voice till I was caught
Away, and now seemed long and long ago.
Methought in Tellus' bosom still I lay,
While centuries like steeds tramped overhead,
To the wild rhythms that, by night and day,
From nature and man's passions still are made.
The music of their motion as they pranced
Lulled me to flawless ease as of a God;
Never upon me pain or pleasure chanced;
Unknown the dew of bliss, or fate's hard rod.
Thus dreamed I ... But I know our mother Earth
Waits to give back the peace she reft at birth.

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VIII.

By mead and marsh and sandhill clad with bent,
Soothed by the wistful musings of the wind
That in scarce listening ears are mildly dinned,
On plods the traveller till the day be spent,
And day-dreams end in dreamless night at last.
He hears, beyond the grey bent's silken waves,
The foam-embroidered waters ever cast
On sighing sands and into echoing caves.
And from the west, where the last sunset glow
Still lingers on the border hills afar,
Come pastoral sounds, attenuate and low,
Thence where the night shall bring, 'neath cloud and star,
Silence to yearn o'er folk worn with day's strife,
Lost in blank sleep to hope, regret, death, life.

[An alternative ending:]

While from the West comes murmuring earthly noise,
Sweet, slumberous, attenuate and afar;
Sad sunglows in the border mountains poise,
There where he knows to-night, mid cloud and star,
Silence shall yearn o'er folk worn out with strife,
Lost in blank sleep to hope, regret, death, life.]

MISCELLANEOUS POEMS

I.

What though my voice cease like a moan o' the wind?
Not the less shall I
Cast on this life a kindly eye,
Glad if through its mystery
Faint gleams of love and truth glance o'er my mind.

What though I end like a spring leaf shed on the wind?
Restrained by pure-eyed Sorrow's hand,
Lithe Joy through this wondrous land
Leads me; nothing have I scanned
Unmixed with good. Fate's sharpest stroke is kind.



To me, thoughts lived of old anew are born
From glances at the unsullied sea,
Or breath of morning purity,
From cloud or blown grass tossing free,
Or frail dew quivering on leaf, rose or thorn.

What though behind me all is mist and shade,
Yet warmth of afterglow bathes all.
Hallowed spirits move and call
Each to me, a willing thrall,
With kindly speech of mountain, plain or glade.

Before me, through the veil that covers all,
Rays of a vasty Dawn strike high
To the zenith of the sky.
Intense, yet low as true love's sigh,
Prophetic voices to my spirit call.

So, though my voice cease like a moan o' the wind,
Not the less shall I
Cast on life a kindly eye,
Glad if through its mystery
Stray gleams of love and truth illumine my mind.

II.

An Afternoon Soliloquy.

How good some years of life may be!
Ah, once it was not guessed by me,
Past years would shine, like some bright sea,
In golden dusks of memory.

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Ere then the music of the dawn
From me had long since surged away;
And in the disillusioned day
Of chill mid-life I plodded on.

Anon a fuller music thrilled
My world with meaning undertones,
That elegized our vanished ones,
And told how Lethe's banks are filled

With wordless calm, and wistful rest,
And sweet large silence, solemn sleep,
And brooding shadows cool and deep,
And grand oblivions, undistressed.

No more 'twas "Lethe rolling doom,"
But Lethe calling, "Come to me,
And wash away all memory
And taint of what precedes the tomb;

And know the changeless afterthought,
Half guessed, half named from age to age,
Wherein I quench the flame and rage
And sorrow with which life is fraught."

III.

The Love that speaks in word and kiss,
That dyes the cheek and fires the eye,
Through surface signs of shallow bliss
That, quickly born, may quickly die;
Sweet, sweet are these to man and woman;
Who thinks them poor is less than human.

But I do know a quavering tone,
And I do know lack-lustre eyes,
Behind the which, dumb and alone,
A stronger Love his labour plies:
He cannot sing or dance or toy—
He works and sighs for other's joy.

In gloom he tends the growth of food,
While others joy in sun and flowers:



None knows the passion of his mood
Save they who know what bitter hours
Are his whose heart, alive to beauty,
Yet dies to it and lives for duty.

IV.

Revoke Not.

Long is it since they ceased to look on light,
To thrill with hope in our fond human way.
Why grudge them rest in their sweet ancient night,
 Ungrieved, if never gay,
 Eased from Life's sorry day?

Is it because at times when storms subside
Through which thou oarest Life's ill-fitted bark,
Dreams rise, from sounds of lapping of the tide,
 To veil the daylight stark,
 Its anguish and its cark?

What was their joy here? Absence of great pain?
Some music in lamentings of the wind?
The mystic whispers of the dripping rain?
 Sad yearnings toward their kind?
 Ruth for old loves that pined?

For these would'st thou revoke their flawless rest?
Restore hope unfulfilled which they knew here?
Oh! well they fare, safe sheltered in that nest
 Of silence, far from fear,
 Their memory not yet sere.

Take thou no joy in any passing dream
Of revocation from their stainless state!
Love them: haste on, till thou to others seem
 As these to thee—their mate,
 A waning name, a date!

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Till then, the low keen sound of Life's "Alas!"
Change as thou canst to themes in every key,
That so for thee and others time may pass
Full of presagings of content to be
 Age-long in that far bourne,
 Till thought end, quite outworn.

V.

*"And there shall be no night there and they
need no candle, and neither light of the sun;
for the Lord God giveth them Light."*

Your place is Heaven, a stormless nightless home?
Then we twain never more shall live together
Such days of gladdest thought as here, whilom,
We spent amid the change of earthly weather.

No white young day like hope smiles in yon east,
Or, westering, cleaves wild-omened scarlet glooms;
No frosty breezes wreath your woods in mist;
No breaker o'er Heaven's glassy ocean booms.

No scents of delved dewy soil arise;
No storm-blue pall in state hangs hill or lea;
No nightly seas swirl in grey agonies;
Nor old Earth's sweet decays dye herb or tree.

Do wan gold tints shot on the midnight air
Herald the moon that loiters far away?
Or moony sea-gleams peep and beckon there
From sapphire dark or mystic silver grey?

No, not the olden pleasure shall be there
We knew, before the grass sprang o'er your breast;
Yet that is yours which here hearts cannot share—
Heaven's summer peace eterne and noonday rest.

VI.

Northumbria.—A Dirge.



Dirge the sorrows by time made dim:

Seas are sullen in rain and mist.

Regret the woes that behind us swim:

Sullen's the north and grey the east.

Black boats speck the horizon's rim:

The north is heavy and grey the east.

They plash to shore in unison grim:

The breakers roar through rain and mist.

Ah! the ravening Dane of old!

Joys are born of time and sorrow.

He was beautiful, cruel and bold:

Death yesterday is life to-morrow.

The slain lie stark on bented mounds:

Winds are calling in rain and mist.

There's blood and smoke and wide red wounds,

And black boats make to north and east.

Through murky weltering seas they row:

Dirge the eyes their deeds made dim.

Wives at their conning smile and glow,

And hail them on the horizon's rim.

There's peace on low mounds and shallow dells,

Yellow rag-wort and sea-reed grey,

And thrumming and booming of village bells:

Dirge the lives of that faded day.

VII.

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Merely Suburban.

Dry light reverberates, colour withdrawing
Into a sky so white, sight cannot follow it.
While in the shadows cast, rich hues, intenser
Far than in light spaces, offer me gladness.
Sun reigns triumphantly, thinning all vapour
Into translucency, through which the foliage
Bears out in sparkles of full golden greenery.
O'er this, short dashes of keen grey-green masses lie;
Even the cooler tints, pitched in this higher key—
Purpling and greening greys—are fierce as fires.
All the vast universe lives in one beautiful
Summer—made lambent light, offering gladness.
Who can accept of it? Hearts where no echo rings
Wildly recalling deeds done by old Destiny—
Deeds of finality, darkening the spirit—
Rousing the echoes of thought to reverberate
Ever and ever “Alas!” evermore.

Once in a burning day's brightness like this,
Sad I awaited the quenching forever of
Light that had mantled and flickered and ebbed out
Unto some twilight of hope and of reason.
Out of his own unto future time's darkness
Wistfully gazed he, as one who unhelped floats,

Swept by a current past land out to sea.
He started alertly with laughter and mockery,
Loud at its height with the rapture of contest.
For him the light focusses now to one vision,
Shot through its beautiful heart with black terror,
Terror from weakness, remorse and leave-taking.
To his scared eye the day's bitter brightness
Circles about the dark doorway set open
Awaiting his entrance ere shut to for ever.
Ever he harkens to voices behind him
Dolefully hinting defect and omission;
Cruelly shouting: “This, this was the true path;
Here greatness lay, by humility guarded,
She whom thou soughtest through mountains of pride!
What avails tenderness now so belated?
What gaining love with no deed as its child?”
Whitening intenselier ever to setting



Down sank the last sun save one he should gaze on.
In the next dawning, with dull apprehensiveness,
Groped he mid recent and older remembrance,
Mingled with mad vain desires for a helping hand;
Then off reeled his soul from my speechless adieus.
Once more the whole blaze triumphed through the welkin,
Bitter in brightness in memory for ever.

VIII.

Whistler versus Ruskin Trial.

Critic John cam here to view
Ha, ha, the viewin' o't!
Lindsay's picture shop bran new,
Ha, ha, the viewin' o't!
John, he cast his head fu' high,
Looked asklent and unco' skeigh,
Vowed he'd gar James stand abeigh:
Ha, ha, the viewin' o't!

John he nayther ramps nor roars,
Ha, ha, the viewin' o't!
Soft gans hame and writes in "Fors"—
Ha, ha, the viewin' o't!
Writes, and wi' ae critic-puff
Blaws James oot, like can'le snuff:
Sweers in Art he's just a muff!
Ha, ha, the viewin' o't!



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Englan' heurs and rubs her ee,
Ha, ha, the viewin' o't!
"Just as I had guessed," quo' she:
Ha, ha, the viewin' o't!
No so James. He to the Judge
Cries, "John he ca's my noketurns 'fudge':
That's a lee—spoke in a grudge."
Ha, ha, the viewin' o't!

Ca' up Michael! Ca' up Moore!
Ha, ha, the viewin' o't!
Bring up Wills—he's kenned before!
Ha, ha, the viewin' o't!
Midmay Michael's ta'en his stan',
Moore and Wills say Whistler' gran',
Nae better work done in this lan':
Ha, ha, the viewin' o't!

Now bring Jones—let's hear his min':
Ha, ha, the viewin' o't!
Out spake he: "Jim's work's rale fine,"
Ha, ha, the viewin' o't!
"An' were't like Titian's here or mine,
A' this or that, I'd no decline
To say they're rather like muneshine."
Ha, ha, the viewin' o't!

Run in Frith. Says he: "Dear me!"
Ha, ha, the viewin' o't!
"For my pairt here's nowt like me:"
Ha, ha, the viewin' o't!
"Nothing is like nature here.
Where's the detail roun' an' clear,
Such as in my work appear?"
Ha, ha, the viewin' o't!

How it cam let lawyers tell:
Ha, ha, the provin' o't!
Jury bodies luik fu' swell:
Ha, ha, the provin' o't!
"John's no right, yet Jim's no wrang!
Art's made of nocht but peut an' slang!
Half a bawbee! Hame let's gang!"
Ha, ha, the provin' o't!



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