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OUT OF THE DUST



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By R. Kate

(M.A. Filson)

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Certain of the following poems have appeared in "The Sydney Morning Herald" and "Whose," to whom grateful acknowledgement is made for permission to reprint.

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Cover design by Etheleen Palmer.

Dedication
To Eileen — My Friend
But for whom these could never have
been written

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WARATAH

How many dawns and sunsets came
 Across the valleys of the years
 Before your heart of sculptured flame
 Blazed through its galaxy of spears?
 Green spears that lift with one desire
 To shield your heart of chiselled fire!

TIMBER

Through the sighing bush they bore him—
 Many men and many oxen—
 Chains of iron all about him:
 He, the helmeted of sunsets!
 He, the challenger of tempests!
 North and south the Wind Gods knew him,
 East and west they called him brother;
 Suns had smouldered in his branches;
 Through his dark boughs moons had flowered;
 Whiter than a drift of lilies
 Clouds had pitched their tents about him;
 Dew had swung her crystal lanterns
 From his leaves in flickering legions.
 He had watched dawns through the ages
 Sweep like silver avalanches
 Down the forest of the stars.
 Up and down his mighty barrel
 Once had drifted pools of amber,
 Pools of orange, jade and purple,
 Scattered where the shining lances
 Of the daylight struck and splintered.
 He had turned the spears of lightning
 On a wave of silken laughter;

Sleet had sped her pointed arrows;
 Fire had seared with swirling rapier;
 Storm unfurled her floods about him.
 But the valiant heart and dauntless
 Of the Warrior Eucalyptus
 Made all fibre of his being,
 Wrought the scars of age-long battle
 Into strength and into beauty
 With the white flame of the spirit:
 That intangible, unconquered
 Challenger of tragic seeming
 Which defeats the clay horizon;
 Which defies the clay defining.

But the little men with axes,
 Full of little tawdry valours,
 Stood before his giant splendour
 And they hewed with little axes
 And they knew not what they did—
 Yet, their little souls saluted:
 "Gawd!" they said, "he was a tough 'un!"
 And they straightened sweating bodies
 As he fell among the bracken.

INSATIABLE

And, when He had appliqued
Upon the blue dark pavilions of the night
Opal and pearl in deep fringed pools of light,
Oh, then He might have stayed
The Splendid Tireless Hands,
Had He not dreamed of threads of golden fire
Braiding the shadowy lands
And a great design upon the first dark mire!

CICADA

Did some old craftsman long ago
Once pluck a stem of reedy grass,
To make a pipe, and softly blow
Your wings like flakes of fairy glass?
And, with his finest etching tool
Engrave a web to snare the light,
Delicate and beautiful,
Before he harnessed them for flight?
But what dark woe or ancient wrong
Did he theme for your sonorous, shattering song?

IN THE DESERT

Who knows, who knows
If, dreaming beneath this shimmering sand, there glows
A city older than Byzantium,
With streets of amber; sea-green hills; and rose
Drenched towers; and streams whence silver water flows
Through gardens where the flower of flowers throws
To the wind her petals soft as painted snows?

Who knows, who knows
If images the mirror-skies disclose
To those, who to the golden deserts come,
Are beauty, time and dust could not depose;
And this sand is mirage, and not the rose
Drenched towers and spires the mirror shows?
Oh loveliness beyond the dust, who knows!

MOON-TRACK

Thou art a silver bow to-night,
Oh Moon! Thine argent arrow sped
Beyond the swinging worlds of light
To point a way where men may tread.
And here between the slender trees
Thine arrow lies
A silver shaft between the trees,
Loosed from the skies.

CHRISTMAS BUSH

And did the great Apollo once
Choke in his chiffon skies,
And, weary of the pallid stars
With closed averted eyes,
Gold-sandalled, leap across the wind
Down to the rugged lands,
And touch the dreaming grey-green bush
With shining god-like hands;
And race the shadow of the wind
Along a russet track;
And rest within a gully dim
Before he hied him back;
And there, beside a tawny rock,
Perchance to prove he came,
Toss gloriously upon his staff
His cloak of tattered flame;
Then in a rapt creative hush
Tether you, fiery burning bush?

HIGH COMEDY

Suddenly came the dawning,
Rose-flushed, in a lovely hurry,
So that the pale amazed stars,
Startled, leapt in a silver flurry
Over the laquered, crimson bars
Of the swinging gates of the morning.
And all the birds in the world awoke
With a burst of song at the exquisite joke.

WIND

Through the unseen gates of the unseen kingdom
 He came singing.
 In the gully he danced with the reeds and the bracken
 And where a wandering sarsaparilla
 Splashed royal purple, wantonly,
 Over a brown rock.
 The young trees swayed as he passed,
 And the old trees made obeisance,
 And there was salutation
 From the grasses and the flowers.
 And he was a challenge
 To the complacent sovereignty of earth,
 And the solitudes of the high places.
 Indomitable!
 A god!
 An echo
 Of the sorrow and laughter of all the world!
 A jester
 Who plays with a cloud, an ocean or a man's hat,
 Who dances through the hovels of the poor,
 And laughs down the chimneys of the great!
 Enigma!
 The intangible
 Who will gather from this dust unto himself
 My breath, our common essence,
 And pass on singing!

THE FORERUNNER

(An incident of the Russian conquest of the North Pole)

And so we came
 Into the great white kingdom, hearts aflame!
 And proudly scanned the dazzling ice-wrought scene,
 The crystal hills, the crystal seas between,
 Exulting: "Here no other life has been!"
 And so we scorned the little deeds of kings
 As baubles fashioned by the underlings;
 For we had done high and impossible things.
 Into this strange, white world that none called home,
 We were the first to come, the first to come.
 And then to mock our vain imagining
 Somewhere, somewhere, a bird began to sing
 And we were dumb!

THE LOSER

And, when deft winds had loosed each gilded thread
 That tied to boughs the drifts of fiery leaves,
 And tossed them down till earth was garlanded
 With smouldering trails, he sighed, for he believes
 That Beauty dies,
 And falling leaves enshrine finalities;
 Nor sees the pattern splendid in a scheme
 That still defies
 The end with crimson banners on the skies.
 Like unleashed flames that limn some valiant theme,
 Not desolate, but in a dauntless mood,
 Drift these to earth, the crucible of clay,
 To share a challenge in an interlude,
 Before they light a world from brave decay.

ELIXIR

When all my songs are written and all the tales are
 told,
 Let me remember this of you, and I shall not be old,
 Oh Day! How all the fountains of the morning
 played
 In streams of rose and saffron and amethyst and
 jade,
 And how the tents of night went down beneath a
 gold cascade;
 And how across the phantom plain that was the
 skies
 Came riven clouds as foam-white flocks of butter-
 flies,
 To prove that there were gardens in some nearby
 paradise—
 Oh, lovely Day! and how the shining proof of you
 Was in the dusky shadows which the lilies threw
 Earthwards—for dark ethereal lilies only the
 grasses knew.

THE KEEPER OF THE HOUSE

Lift high the vessel of clay;
Shatter the dusty bowl;
I have been here for a golden day—
Spill out my soul!

HERITAGE

Were ever blue Aegean seas
Mosaic of lovelier hues than these,
Wrought in the golden halls of days
Which loitered in these ancient bays
Before the centuries had spun
Troy's web of hills to snare the sun?
Here shadows inlaid in the sea
With old and occult artistry,
Like phantom traffic queerly pass,
Over blue deeps of ruffled glass;
And small waves dream in ragged ponds.
Like small bewitched sea vagabonds
When by dim sea-ways, shadow-strewn,
Floats the pale barge of the lily moon—
Dream not of love and blood and flame
Nor sigh the sound of Helen's name,
Yet chant of braver loveliness
In sagas wild and fetterless
Which still defy the mortal tongue
Though this was old when Troy was young.

Were ever hills of Ilion
 Fairer than these to look upon ?
 Here, like a great wave lifting high,
 The grey gums smudge an immaculate sky,
 Or dare with cloud and star to trace
 Their sign upon the cliffs of space.
 Below, from ridges, rusty-brown,
 Dark chasm tracks go winding down
 Through flowers like flocks of butterflies
 That star the earth to mock the skies.
 For here the pink boronias go
 As brilliant ribbons to and fro,
 Enlacing little russet stones ;
 And, here, a waxen lily owns
 A window in an old brown rock,
 And lifts her creamy arms to mock
 With petal bright magnificence
 Its dull and rugged diffidence.
 Here, wattle blooms are aureoled
 With dust of purest faery gold,
 And carven crimson waratahs
 Lift minarets toward the stars,
 While in a place no mortal knows
 Dwells an elusive native rose.

And flannel-flowers beside a pool,
 White-robed and chastely beautiful,
 See sunlight squandered recklessly,
 And ponder what strange alchemy
 Transmutes this gay extravagance
 Into a sombre radiance,
 So vaguely luminous it seems
 To mist the air with molten dreams.
 And all the flower-drenched wilderness
 Is charged with mystic silences,
 As though the questing wild had thrust
 Beyond the aching mesh of dust,
 And, lit with poignant ecstasies,
 Was listening to the centuries
 Before the dream of clay was brought
 Forth from the fecund womb of thought.
 Then little reverend honey bees
 Go down upon their amber knees,
 And every swaying grey green tree
 Becomes a shrine of mystery ;
 And even wild excited birds
 Forget their silver singing words,
 As though they saw some splendid thing
 Beyond our frail remembering.

Were ever braver shores than these ?
When Troy dreamed still beneath wide seas,
These hills had met the bluntless spears
Of Time down twice ten thousand years ;
And there was valour in this earth
And ceaseless tyrannies of Birth
Who, by tremendous strategies,
Smashed chaos with huge centuries,
And hammered from these ancient hills
This host of lovely miracles.

.
Could some great golden bell-voiced tongue
Echo the tales these heights have flung
Across the valleys fringed with stars,
A torrent of hexameters
Would thunder down an Iliad
Greater than Godlike Homer made !

THE PASSION

Once there were thorns upon my brow—
And there are thorns upon it now—
And there are thorns upon my heart—
For of men's wounds I am a part,
While still upon a thousand trees
They slay with larger cruelties.
And when they slay my brother Man,
I am slain since time began. . . .
Once I dreamed love's valiant flame
Would light the world and so I came. . . .
Two thousand years I've kept the light ;
But, still, Oh God, it's night ! It's night !

SEPTEMBER, 1939

The great guns sob once more,
Though, o'er the places where our slain
Lie still, the grasses grow again.
Oh tragic grass, does that dark stain
From which ye sprang cry out: "In vain,
In vain, Oh Christ, that this was spilled;
For our high dream is unfulfilled—
The great guns sob once more?"

CHALLENGE

What shall we light our way of culture with ?
Flares to power and narrow national pride,
That blind and foolish creed, that tragic myth
By which a thousand cultures marched and died ?
Or shall we build with young and splendid hands
Beacons upon high hills, world views commanding,
Forging as Wisdom pleads and Truth demands,
The brave unquenchable flame of Understanding
Wherein the race of men walks glorified ?

SYDNEY HARBOUR BRIDGE

"Of what do you dream, oh, Giant Grey,
With your head in the stars and your feet in the clay,
When the great winds come to laugh and sigh:
'Trespasser in our fields of the sky'?"

"There comes a dream of stoic Earth
In travail through a million years,
In whom these granite and iron piers
Were slowly wrought and came to birth
When she delivered me to Man
To fashion to this mighty span.

Around your little lovely bays
I see the folk of other days,
The lean, dark men, and red camp flame,
Ere the white-winged ships and the white men came,
I see them all go sailing by—
Philip, Macquarie, Flinders, Bligh.
And there are tracks up from the seas
Through drifts of flowers and grey-green trees,
And where your concrete roads come down
I see these tracks of Sydney town,
Hewn out of shame and tragedy,
And wisdom and stupidity,
And out of low and high desire
And courage like a holy fire
Which still would forge the miracle—
A city of the people's will.
And then there comes from days gone by
This cavalcade across the sky:
Pioneers of noble fame,
Soldier, settler, and fearless dame,
In coach or carriage or bullock-dray.
("We helped to build you," they seem to say),
Gazing on me with wistful pride,
As back into the past they ride.

I dream of men who fashioned me
And moulded with majestic skill
This steel to serve the constructive will:
A highway for humanity.
Yet more than a bridge of steel could I be—
A symbol and a philosophy.

THESIS

Because,
in that dark pool, my mind, there flamed a star
reflected from immaculate reality
which had in me no part,
I know
somewhere, NOW, truth and beauty are
substance of my shadow star, omnipotently
enshrined in some great heart.

.
So shall I press
on to Inevitable Loveliness.

INESCAPABLE

Though from the brazen peak of Noon
We watched white trails of cloud festoon
High borders of the blue lagoon,
We did not sigh: "Dusk comes so soon. . . .
Grey Dusk who'll fold each hill and flower
In tissue from her violet bower,
And lock the sun within her tower—
And lose the key for one great hour."
Nor did we cry: "These might have stayed,"
When, like a gleaming cavalcade
Of jewels in a grand parade,
The Night swept on in light arrayed;
For we knew Dawn, serene, bizarre,
In scarlet and gold would speed each star
Onward to light some new afar—
And only Beauty and Beauty are.

THE DIVINE SPARK

Did Lucifer, that fierce iconoclast,
Snatch, from the brow of God as down he fell,
One white immaculate star and hold it fast
To light one secret shrine in darkest Hell?

MAN

I.

Lord, I have felt seas and stars
Stir in my blood,
And all the rivers in the world
In flood !
And I have been myself a part
Of muted snows,
Thunder and rain and every wind
That blows.
And I have known within my flesh
The beat of wings,
And the tumultuous, noiseless rhythms
Of growing things.
And I am all yet none of these—
Chief of Thine inconsistencies.

II.

Why was I thrust forth from thy thews,
Touched with thine unimaginable fire,
Because fulfilment of some old desire
Or some swift unpremeditated lust,
Had carved for me a cavern out of dust ?
Oh Life of Life ! Let me not lose
This vague indomitable memory
Of old dominion smouldering deep in me,
While breaks upon these walls of clay, the thunder
Of huge questionings and high dark wonder
As to what brave next of me
Thou wilt require
Ere I may walk again, flame of thy fire.

III.

I am not of dust's ecstasy !
I came not forth by body's pain !
When dust has passed, I shall remain !
Before dust was, there was this me,
Brooding above the unforged hills,
Brooding above the unbuilt sea,
Pregnant with endless miracles ;
Scion of immortality ;
Moulded in that mighty hand,
Ere the mud and stars were planned !

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