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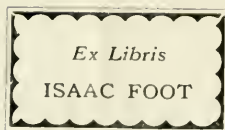


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A BOY'S ABSENCE

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A BOY'S ABSENCE

Poems

by a Schoolmaster



London

George Allen & Unwin Ltd.

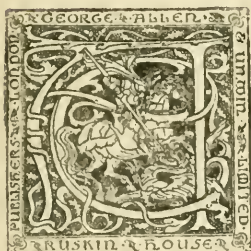
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A BOY'S ABSENCE

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BY

A SCHOOLMASTER



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To J.



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A BOY'S ABSENCE

I

Upon the margin of the sand the sea
Is murmuring soft and low, the eve is still,
The crescent moon shines wanly o'er the hill,
With one bright star to keep her company ;
The beach is solitary, save for me,
From the South-East the breeze is faint but chill,
A sea-gull's cry comes, querulous and shrill,
And, as I pace the shore, I think of thee.

All I could say thou knowest ; how I long
To clasp thy hand, to feel thy cheek on mine,
To see thee smile, to watch thee at thy play ;
So, in thy absence, will I make a song :
A friendship's garland let the hours entwine
That miss thee, since we parted yesterday.

II

As at our sports, in the Relay, a boy
Runs with the scarf to where his comrades stand,
So I the lore that I have won would hand
To thee that thou may'st hold it and enjoy ;
And though thy task with tedium annoy,
Be patient, sweet, if thou would'st understand :
Thus wilt thou forge a key to fairyland,
And treasuries of gold without alloy.

This morning came thy letter ; if I sigh,
'Tis but because I cannot watch thee play,
And see thee get that 'twisty' one away
To leg for four, or smite that to the sky,
Far o'er the long-field :—and my world is grey
Without thee, on this last day of July.

III

When I reflect on the ill-omened dower
Of passionate will in my inheritance,
And feel within my heart the evidence
Of dark ancestral folly's fatal power,
I tremble, love, lest some disastrous hour
Should find me overcome—without defence—
A sick thing, piteous in its impotence,
That once was glorious in its manhood's flower.

And wilt thou cherish me when I am low,
Who worship thee while my estate is high,
And would so gladly give my all to know
Thee happy, see thee honoured, ere I die?
—Thus do I muse at sunset, as I lie,
Turning my face towards the after-glow.

IV

I think that in yourself you adumbrate
Some long-ago perfection of our race,
That centuries of beauty in thy face
Were wrought by Time to one rich sublimate ;
That Nature in thy form did re-create
A loveliness she lost through deep disgrace
For some foul sin, forgotten, which we trace
Nevertheless in man's undying hate
Towards his kind, and fratricidal strife.
Now, when I look into thy eyes, I see
Reflected some half-conscious memory
Of the lost goodness of our ancient life ;
And, though with misery the world is rife,
I draw my comfort from thy purity.

V

You know I think that we were friends before
We lived our present lives, and, side by side,
I deem we looked on Anderida's pride
When Rome was mistress of the world. I bore
The eagle of the legion, and you wore
A sweet, short tunic when I saw you ride
By Cæsar's envoy, while the townsmen cried:
Hail to the boy whom men and gods adore!

And then my heart rose skywards like the lark
In ecstasy; I loved; and in your eyes
I saw an answering look of glad surprise.
You sent for me; and soon we did embark
Together on some mighty enterprise
Over the ocean. But the rest is dark.

VI

When I reflect that in my youthful days,
Inspired with an ideal once, I threw
My glove to fortune, dared what might ensue,
And strove to scholarship by arduous ways ;
Knowing the struggle's worth, I long to raise
A similar desire to excel in you,
Bidding thee strive, hold fast the end in view,
Nor falter, though achievement long delays.
Ah ! little comrade, that I might inflame
Thy heart with zeal for some exalted aim,
That thus thou mightest drink the joy in store
For those adventurous souls that live above
The wonted level, till at last they soar,
Rising to immortality through love.

VII

Fearing, alack, that something is amiss
Because thou hast not written, all day long
I fancy all imaginable wrong
That Fate might do to mar our happiness ;
Dost thou not feel my spirit like a kiss
Caress thee ? Is there aught than love more
strong,
That thou art thus forgetful of my song
And so unheedful of my loneliness ?

And yet, if thou art happy, let it pass ;
I would not have my darling sad for me ;
The winter of my age is come, alas !
The flowers of spring are blossoming for thee,
And Time, to chide me for my vanity,
Shows me my wrinkled features in his glass.

VIII

Even as a swimmer who, his strength out-worn,
Looks upon death in the approaching wave,
Nor cares to struggle more his life to save,
When, suddenly, to safety he is borne ;
Thus, when, of hope bereft, I seemed forlorn,
Undreamed-of riches Fortune to me gave,—
To me who did in desperation crave
Deliverance from a world by hatred torn !

Here there is no abidance, Fortune's wheel
So variable is, that now I fear
Lest what I care for most mischance may steal,
And take away from me my friend so dear ;
A cruel disillusion should I thole,
Counting myself thus rich in worldly gear,
If I should lose the jewel of my soul.

IX

To-day, as though by an enchanter's spell,
A languorous silence lay on earth and sea,
The winds that rarely cease to scurry free
Across our meadows to a whisper fell ;
The Marsh its ancient secrets strove to tell,
A strange, expectant hush appeared to be
The prelude to some pagan mystery,
Within whose rites primeval passions dwell.

On such an eve the elemental things
That live below are perilously near.
They surge about us like a restless fear,
Craving observance with their mutterings ;
But in my heart of hearts an angel sings,
And in his song thy own sweet voice I hear.

X

Upon the strip of green that fronts the strand
The children play at cricket ; happy cries
From laughing boys and lovely girls arise ;
The grey-haired father takes the bat in hand,
Unbending to their frolic ; o'er the sand
The ball goes merrily, a maiden tries
With a sweet clumsiness to stop it, sighs
At missing—how, she cannot understand.
And, as I shyly watch, the shadows steal
Across my mind, for never shall I call
A child my own ; I never look to feel
The homely pleasures that to most men fall ;
Yet, having thee, I deem that I have all ;
Upon my heart I set thee as a seal.

XI

Upon the moon's full circle now I gaze,
I see the ripples sparkle in her beam,
Beneath her wavering glance the waters dream,
And murmur in their sleep. The silence lays
Its balm upon me, and my fancy plays
With the fond thought that on thy northern stream
Thou watchest too, this hour, the moonlight gleam,
And thinkest of thy friend. Ah! if those rays
Possessed a potency my wish to bear,
Then would'st thou know with what desire I yearn
To hear once more thy footstep on the stair,
To read to thee, from thy dear lips to learn
Thy doings since we parted, and my care
To banish in the joy of thy return.

XII

Wandering o'er the marsh I thought to-night
Of days we spent together in the spring,
In deep enjoyment of each lovely sight
That the sweet season of the year doth bring ;
How often have we watched the heron's flight
On pinions slow, the kestrel hovering,
The kingfisher with radiant plumage bright,
The startled red-shank, screaming on the wing.
How often have we sauntered, hand in hand,
Hearing the throstle descant in the grove,
Or tramped along the dyke-bewildering land,
Where'er our errant fancies bade us rove :
But thou art hence, and with that thought a sting
Pierces the memory of past delight.

XIII

In bygone days a poet oft would feign
The causes of his passion to unfold,
Praising his lady's hair, more rich than gold,
Her gracious smile, her glance of high disdain,
And then in amorous woe would oft complain
That she was hard as flint,—as Dian, cold ;
And how he languished, longing to behold
Some mark of favour, to requite his pain.

But why he loves, what man can ever tell ?
You know what deed you did, how soon your
tears
At my rebuke in swift contrition fell,
And when, at length, I kissed away your fears,
In that sweet hour that Memory endears,
You smiled, and on my heart you cast your spell.

XIV

I deem no man for what he once hath sown
 Shall in some fabulous Inferno weep,
But those he knew and those he ne'er hath known
 Alike the harvest of his wrong must reap
 When all oblivious he lies asleep.

If from the grave his slumbering sense could peep,
 Seeing the wrong he wrought, how would he moan,
And wish that for his sin with anguish deep
 The uttermost penalty he might alone
 Endure, and everlastingly atone !

So may I stand before Love's awful throne
 With reverence, and may from me no ill,
 When the fond heart that beats for thee is still,
Be on thy life's fair page unseemly shown !

XV

To-day, out-worn—by sleeplessness distressed—
My work I left and lay upon the shore ;
By many a night of tribulation sore
This weary life of mine hath been oppressed,
Denied the natural boon of wholesome rest ;
Too heavy a burdēn in my youth I bore,
And ever since my sixteenth winter wore,
A sleepless care hath been my dreaded guest.

And, as I lay, I watched a little maid
Of haply some nine summers : chestnut hair,
Short, like a boy's—most daintily arrayed—
Brown limbs of perfect shape—a smile most fair ;
Her sweet unconscious beauty, as she played,
Soothed my sick brain and half dispelled my care.

XVI

When the last song is sung, the last word spoken,
And life, no more by trembling hope beguiled,
Dies like a spent flame, shall these lines betoken
How, in a bygone day I loved thee, child.

For, beyond all the subjects that old singers
Have wrought to harmony—all songs above,—
In the attentive ear of Time there lingers
No music like the minstrelsy of love.

In four more days my dear will be returning,
In four more days an end to my suspense !
With every beat my heart is fondly yearning
To greet again my darling, four days hence.

XVII

Beneath this ruined castle's vanished pride
Hath many a generation toiled in vain ;
A port whereof no vestiges remain
Once did o'erlook a haven, fair and wide,
Mouth of a mighty river, on whose tide
Briton and Roman, Saxon, Norman, Dane
Unfurled their sail. Once did these walls sustain
Full many a bootless siege by warriors tried.
Now is that glory gone ; we only see
A shallow stream, meandering o'er the marsh,
A slumbering village, and these ruined towers,
Reminding us that all man's vaunted powers,
His days and dreams, are subject to the harsh
Hand of inexorable destiny.

XVIII

Thou art the mortal shape in which I see
For one brief hour eternal beauty's face,
And, having seen, must love. Outside all space,
Beyond all time, the sole reality—
The perfect Form—endures, whereof in thee
The lineaments divine I fondly trace.
And, though my heart could break to think thy grace
And loveliness shall one day cease to be,
Yet do I deem these but the symbols are
Of that Idea that exists secure
And changeless, which in heaven we did behold
Among the gods, when round the stars we rolled
In chariots through the empyrean pure,—
Since when with aching souls we yearn afar.

XIX

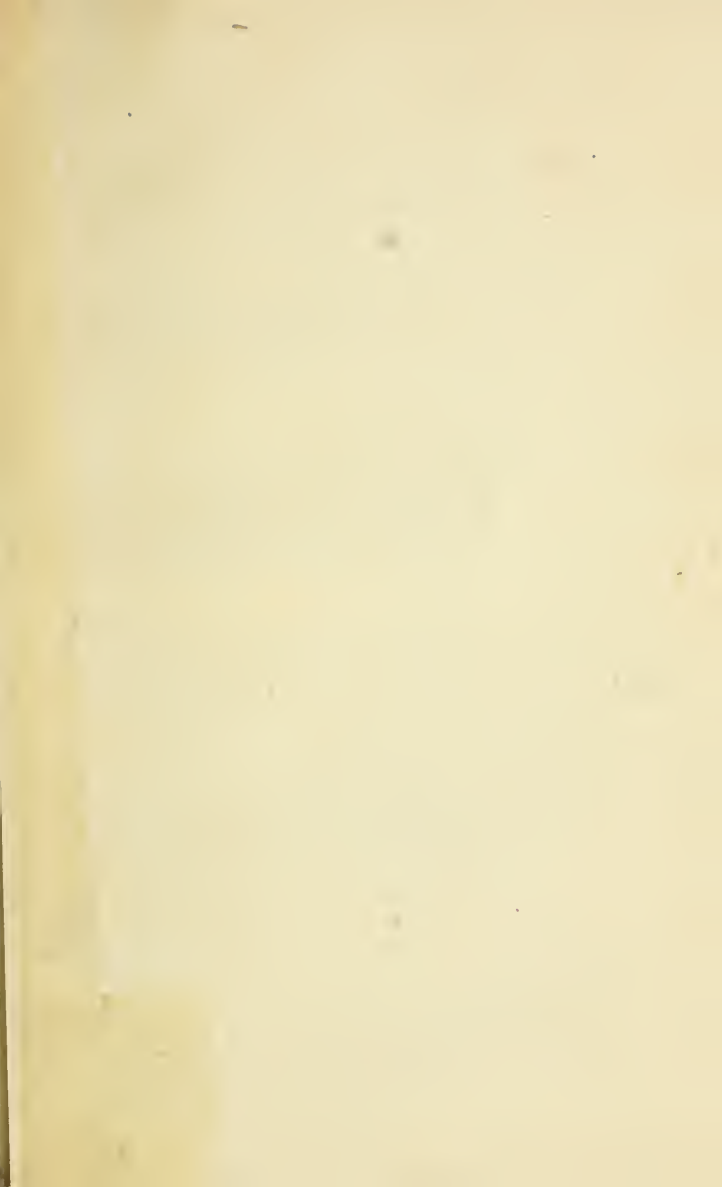
When I consider this most monstrous thing
That men have miscalled 'Peace', and see in store
For those that now are young incessant war,
The evil seed of hate's red blossoming,
How do I wish I had the strength to fling
The furious folly that men do before
Their eyes ; and to their ears, that with the roar
Of clamorous tongues are deafened, truth to bring !

Better that no more children should be born
Than that the world should wear these heavy chains,
While National Interest—that lie out-worn—
The rulers in their lust for power sustains,
Turning all pity and lovely things to scorn,
Till neither ruth nor charity remains.

XX

Here is my friendship's garland : flowers that hold
 Within their petals many an hour of thought,
 Whose loving dedication I have sought,
In duteous words, each evening to unfold ;
Nor would I cease, leaving the truth untold
 Of that most precious treasure thou hast brought
 To me, thy innocent affection, fraught
With meek observance, kindness manifold.

May all that I have loved in thee abide,
 And may my hope—that all thy days will be
 Blessed with the gifts that make men honoured, free ;
 That in thy life duty and love will blend,
 And happiness upon thy steps attend—
Be in this friendship's offering sanctified.



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