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THE BACKSLIDER

AND

OTHER POEMS

BY

ANTAEUS



LONDON

PRINTED FOR THE AUTHOR

1890



William Ebbett,

11th March, 1890.

Out of 100 copies

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MY DEAR WILLIE,

When you said the other day, "Does —
Jesus — make — it — rain — Washing — Days?"
you made us laugh heartily.

You are now only a little boy three years old;
but perhaps at some time your father's book will
make you laugh too.

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THE BACKSLIDER.

AN OLD STORY.

THE pride of Epsom's Baptist Chapel
Was Charlie Cook. Of Adam's apple
Well could he preach, and loudly taught
That fleshly joy is less than naught.
Six days the world him glazier styled ;
The seventh saw him meek and mild
Devoutly walk to Bethel's bliss,
The cold despair of every miss
Who sailed the other way to church
Where gaudy rites the pure heart search.
No less from grace the lad had slipped
And lived a sinner ; but was dipped
Before he reached his fifteenth year ;
Yet fell again, as you shall hear.

* * * * *

THE BACKSLIDER.

The Sabbath ere that fatal day
When Satan dances blithe and gay,
And opens Hell's dark portal wide
For many a bet-wrecked suicide,
Is Show-out Sunday. Then a crowd
Of Sabbath-breakers rough and loud
Throng past the chapel with their girls
All decked in finery and curls,
And scandalize with loud guffaw
The saved who have fulfilled the law.
These with sad thoughts repress a frown
While those career to Epsom Down,
Where clowns and coker-nuts invite
The giddy crew to vain delight,
And show to Britons once a year
A continental Sunday clear.
For many a year the pastor's flock
Had borne with pain this dreadful shock ;
And once again it seemed their doom
To pass the day in patient gloom ;
But ere their pastor's final prayer
Dismissed to cold and righteous fare
Up rose Charles Cook, and spirit-taught

Expressed this new and happy thought :
“What these poor sinners want is Facts ;
“I’ll combat their vain joys with Tracts ;
“If Heaven will, I’ll to this show
“And deal the Evil One a blow
“This very afternoon.” A hush
Of joy fell on the flock. A blush
O’erspread the face of Charlie Cook,
Who first saw Fame and liked her look.
Some had, indeed, the gravest doubts
About attendance on such routs,
And told their fears when Charlie’s fall
Came to the knowledge of them all,
And shook their wiser heads and sighed
At overweening spirit-pride.

* * * * *

Cold Mutton filled young Charlie Cook
As to the Down his way he took ;
But though his creature-comforts cold,
His face was flushed, his heart was bold.
Along the sin-bedizened way
He scattered tracts, and none so gay
As he among that careless throng,

THE BACKSLIDER.

For he was right and they were wrong,
At length the fair met Charlie's view,
And sure the sight was very new
To his chaste eyes, that scarce had seen
Such bravery of varied sheen.
Bright flags and pennons struggle free ;
Bright women dance in finery ;
The shows present their wonders rare ;
Relentless music fills the air ;
The switchback rolls its golden round ;
The scarlet balls in armies bound ;
Blue swings strain to the duller sky,
And ceaseless laughter babbles by.
But Charlie smiled, for well he knew
With what devices Satan drew
The thoughtless crowd to sin and hell.
And then he gazed ; but what befell
Needs a more potent Muse than mine
Who's scarcely numbered with the Nine.
I said he gazed--a mournful gaze
Deploring all those wicked ways,
A sheaf of Tracts in one hand tight,
The other stretched to every wight

Who hurried by his slim, young form,
So meekly taking Hell by storm.
Among these wights was Mary Clarke.
What shall I say? Her hair was dark ;
Her eyes were black and laughing too ;
Her form was fair ; her beads were blue.
She glanced at him : he waved his hand
With winning smile ; appeal so bland
No lonely maiden could resist.
Then low he spoke, "Will you assist ?
"Assist me in this holy task !
"Is it indeed too much to ask ?
"I know the worldlings scoff and jeer,
"But what is that to heaven here?"
He pointed to his simple heart
Fair target for a hellish dart.
Then quick she looked at him and smiled ;
He looked at her and she beguiled
From him a poor, submissive blush
Begot of carnal heart-blood's rush.
A very devil was her eye—
O Charles, O Baptist ! fly ! fly ! fly !
But Charlie never moved a bit,

Forgot his tracts and lost his wit ;
He sat upon the sinful ground
And thought of her, and looked around
Till his poor eyes met hers again,
But fell abashed in struggle vain.
“ Well, shall I go ? ” at length the maid.
“ Oh no, don't, don't ! ” young Charlie said.
“ What shall we do then ? ” quoth she clear.
“ It seems so stupid sitting here.”
“ Do ! What indeed you like with me.”
“ Then let's get up and walk and see
“ The people and the shows and swings,
“ The whirligigs and all the things ;
“ It seems to be too wicked, but
“ I should so like a coker-nut ! ”
“ Would you ? ” cried Charles, and straight forgot
His soul and his eternal lot,
And lost his hope of heaven high
Most freely in a woman's eye.
But she was bounteous to her swain,
For well she read his loving pain,
And gave him all the sweet delight
That maids may give. That very night

THE BACKSLIDER.

7

They plighted troth, they learnt to kiss,
And Satan roared for very bliss.

* * * * *

What of the tracts? It came to pass
Charles used the tracts to wipe his glass.

AD FUTURUM.

O FRIEND that art to be, I'll tell thee all,
And thou shalt fold me in thy greater heart,
Regarding with a smile the funeral
Of my lone past displayed with simple art.
All questions answered after weary toil,
The fruitless loves each feebler dying down,
The nothings I have worshipped, and the coil
Of snaky formal wisdom hatched in town ;
The poor impertinence of all I hear,
The maze of words in which my mates are lost,
My solitude of love, the nameless fear
That stung me dead-like as I hopeful tost
In long night-watches for the coming friend
Who marches on slow days that never end.

THE HEART OF DORSET.

I.

DORSET is so fair and free
And its people are so kind,
It shall be my own country,
All its beauties to my mind.
Dorset ends the golden age ;
Dorset is the poet's cage.

II.

Devon 'bounds with steamy cloud,
Somerset with shadowed glade,
Hampshire with its cities' crowd ;
Only Wilts is sister-maid ;
Yet poor Wilts a maid must be,
Dorset's wedded to the sea.

III.

Men of old lie in its breast,
Wander not in ghostly fear ;
Gentle footsteps o'er their rest
Bear no dread to fathers' bier.
Shepherd's whistle wakes them half
Just to turn with well-pleased laugh.

IV.

In the midst of Dorset lies
Fair and trim its chief city,
Shunned of cockneys' restless eyes,
Brief the land's epitome
With the image of its poet
And rejoicing men to show it.

V.

In the middle of the town
Stands the quiet *Antelope*,
Cleanly inn of fair renown
And potent ale. I pray and hope
Soon to taste its pleasant cheer,
Soon to see its jewel clear.

VI.

For above the rustic tales
Of the ruddy farmers there,
And the men of honest scales
Purified by honest air,
Shines a woman bright and bland
With the beauty of the land.

VII.

Dorset born, sweet Jenny reigns
O'er the chat of her snug room,
Babble of the downs and lanes,
Shepherd's joy and shepherd's gloom.
Lightens she the dullest day
With a happy face's ray.

VIII.

She's not old, but she is kind ;
She's not young, but she is wise ;
All the Dorset people find
Kindly will in Jenny's eyes ;
Ever round her gladsome bowers
Wreathéd with her lover's flowers.

IX.

Thus to Jenny do I bring
Little verses for a part
Of the scanty offering
I can pay to Dorset's heart ;
What are years and what are miles
To the sight of Jenny Biles ?

TRANSLATION.

LIGHTLY flit within my breast,
Pretty echoes of the spring ;
Little song that whisperest,
Grow to lusty carolling !

Travel to the leafy home
Where the lowly violet grows.
If the red rose spy you come,
Say the poet greets his rose.

TO DR. HUXLEY,

ON THE CREDIBILITY OF MIRACLES.

O PICTURED grasper of the skull,
You snatch at all our mythic bones
And grind them 'tween your wordy stones.
Is not your lonely labour dull?

“Incredible!” you loudly shout
“The miracle is rampant folly,
“And yet—’tis very melancholy—
“So many millions do not doubt.

“For faith is still in woman’s breast,
“And foolish men still love their church,
“Nor even care to make a search
“For flaws in what they hug for best.”

O Sage, you beat the passing wind,
For faith is not that grass is green,
That ginger's hot or razor's keen,
Or that the seed's within the rind.

Regard, I pray, with quiet eye
The decent crew in fair array
Slow passing down the leafy way
That meets the church you bid them fly.

They tread the road their fathers trod ;
They walk the way their neighbours walk.
What care they for polemic talk ?
Their mates and sires they call them God.

They sit within the pillared frame :
The myths are toned with antique drawl ;
They love the well-known words that call
Affectioned past with constant name.

This then is faith ;—the sacred deed
That links them with their fathers dear,
That brings their neighbour fellows near.
Why mock their way of love ? What need,

But need of manners, deals a blow
At ancient phrase for social act?
Be wise ! The miracle 's a fact,
Translated into passing show.

THE BALLAD OF WILLIAM AND MARY.

It was the fair Mary, I ween,
A-lying in her bower,
And she was wan for many a day
And sad for many an hour.

Young William long had left her love
For far-off lands to sail,
And whether he was dead or gone
She waxed large and pale.

The child it thumpéd in her womb
The child it grew so strong,
“O William dear, O William dear,
“The days are drear and long.”

“What ails you, Mary? tell me true,
“O tell me ne'er a lie,

“Some man hath broke your maidenhead.”

“O mother, let me die.”

“What makes you pale, my daughter dear?

“And who hath done you hurt?”

“I’ll smite him with my heavy sword

“And make him kiss the dirt.

“I’ll hew him into pieces small

“And cut his heart in twain!”

“O father dear, I’m strong and hale,

“I’d run along the lane.”

Along the lane fair Mary ran,

And when she reached the shore,

The child it thumpéd in her womb

Till she was passing sore.

The child it thumpéd in her womb,

The child it waxéd strong,

“O William dear, O William dear,

“The days are drear and long.”

The rain it washed the salt sea-shore
And Mary she must lie.

The rain it washed a bonny boy
And Mary she must die.

Young William came along the shore
To see his leman dear,
And when he stumbled on her corse
He dropped a bitter tear.

He bore her to her father's house
And bore the child withal,
"Rise up, rise up, and let us in
"To sit within the hall."

The father held his heavy sword,
The mother held her woe,
Young William set his burden down,
And stood before the two.

The father smote him to the ground,
The mother took the boy,
The father clave a heart in twain
And laughed with bitter joy.

“ O take away my daughter dear
“ And take away the man,
“ And bury 'em on the salt sea-shore
“ Within each other's span.”

TO A DEAD MISTRESS.

"Our deathlessness is in what we do, not in what we are."

Rhoda Fleming.

I.

YOU laughed with me and then you died,
Dead darling, in your beauty's prime,
But your sweet laugh has glorified
The dim arcade of after-time,
As day-slain cactus, starry-white,
And rich with unimagined scent,
Makes all the darkness purely bright
And gaudy dawn a dreariment :
And yet not like ; for He and She
Droop sadly in their ghostly cup,
But you, you laughed so joyously
That I, who helped you laugh, look up
Through long dull years with happy eyes
To your gay face that never dies.

II.

THE nightingale, unlike the twite
That squats and chews the coarser grain,
Leaps restless while his large-eyed sight
Records the motion in the lane ;
At night he higher mounts the thorn
And tells his varied tale in song
So clear and full that through the morn
Praise runs from house to house along :
Thus your sweet love of all quick things,
That fed itself the livelong day,
Gave tune to all your utterings
And harmonied your roundelay ;
The years of Philomel's great name
Shall hardly weary out your fame.

III.

THE little lizard all the day
 Basks sun-filled on the baked road,
Or nimbly skips along the way,
 His airy prey a scanty load ;
The loutish wain that threatens near
 He flees, a flashing vanishment,
And yet his tiny, transient fear
 Quick changes to his old content :
So glanced your light and cheerful wit
 Aside from dull and drear result
Of neutral fact and statement, fit
 To be a dying blind man's cult,
To little mounds of phantasy
 To dainty dells of Arcady.

IV.

THE goldfinch 'neath the fir-tree top,
With crimson face and twit and sneer
And dandy sways,— the naughty fop!—
Braggs forth his little greypates dear
P'acked tight within their spangled cup,—
Then preens his gold-emblazoned wings
And sharps his pale-pink needle up
To touch the good in little things :
So all your morning words expressed
A pretty pride in deeds of home,
A pretty taste, a pretty zest,
Distilling perfume in the room ;
And then you'd concentrate the bliss
And quick record it in a kiss.

V.

THE moon that silvers silence brings
Such golden memory of you
Who warmed my poor dumb shiverings,
Before you smiled your last adieu,
With frankest joy in sunny rays,
In throstle's song and little flowers,
With dainty love in idle days,
And happy words in duller hours,
That I have not the will to mourn
Your absence from my present day,
Nor e'en to hold myself forlorn,
Nor chant alone a dismal lay,
Unless, dear memory, the chief
Of all my bliss be very grief.

VI.

THE sun that golds the leafy glade
And mountain-top with equal touch
Behind your form casts no dark shade
In envy of your beauty's flush ;
But purifies the lily's white,
Brings butterflies to joyous birth,
Sets man's responsive face alight,
With burning joy in varied earth.
Unchanged it keeps those lively parts
That gave your living mirth its food
To be the mould of your deserts
And kind expressers of your good.
The sun by day, the moon by night,
Make deathless you their whole delight.

TO A FRIEND

AFTER PREMATURELY DISCLOSING TO HIS DAUGHTER
SOME VERSES DEDICATING A BOOK TO HER.

URBAN kept a little treasure
Closely hidden from his girl,
Who must glow with sudden pleasure
When she tripped across the pearl.

Whispered he his pretty kindness
To an ox he fondled by.
Straight the brute in clumsy blindness
Roared the secret to the sky ;

Trampled down the dear intention
To surprise with thrilling good
His sweet darling's bright ascension
On the way of maidenhood.

How did Urban treat the creature?
Only smiled and scratched its skull;
Even praised its blank-eyed feature.
How should not an ox be dull?

EXIT.

Go, little book !
I may not look
At blushing ruth
That meets your truth,
Nor may I see,
Unhappy me !
The smiles that find
Your meaning kind.
You'll be a friend
Beyond my end,
So shall I die
Right royally.

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