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The Singing Man A Book of Songs and Shadows

Josephine Preston Peabody

Imprint

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NOTE

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FOREWORD

We make our songs as we must, from fragments of the joy and sorrow of living. What Life itself may be, we cannot know till all men share the chance to know.

Until the day of some more equal portion, there is no human brightness unhaunted by this black shadow: the thought of those unnumbered who pay all the heavier cost of life, to live and die without knowledge that there is any Joy of Living.

No song could face such blackness, but for the will to share, and for hope of the day of sharing.

Upon that hope and that mindfulness, the poems in this book are linked together.

J.P.M.

4 October, 1911.

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THE SINGING MAN

AN ODE OF THE PORTION OF LABOR

'The profit of the Earth is for all.' – ECCLESIASTES.

THE SINGING MAN

I

He sang above the vineyards of the world.
And after him the vines with woven hands
Clambered and clung, and everywhere unfurled
Triumphing green above the barren lands;
Till high as gardens grow, he climbed, he stood,
Sun-crowned with life and strength, and singing toil,
And looked upon his work; and it was good:
The corn, the wine, the oil.

He sang above the noon. The topmost cleft
That grudged him footing on the mountain scars
He planted and despaired not; till he left
His vines soft breathing to the host of stars.
He wrought, he tilled; and even as he sang,
The creatures of his planting laughed to scorn
The ancient threat of deserts where there sprang
The wine, the oil, the corn!

He sang not for abundance. — Over-lords
Took of his tilth. Yet was there still to reap,
The portion of his labor; dear rewards
Of sunlit day, and bread, and human sleep.
He sang for strength; for glory of the light.
He dreamed above the furrows, 'They are mine!'
When all he wrought stood fair before his sight
With corn, and oil, and wine.

*Truly, the light is sweet
Yea, and a pleasant thing
It is to see the Sun.*

*And that a man should eat
His bread that he hath won; –
(So is it sung and said),
That he should take and keep,
After his laboring,
The portion of his labor in his bread,
His bread that he hath won;
Yea, and in quiet sleep,
When all is done.*

He sang; above the burden and the heat,
Above all seasons with their fitful grace;
Above the chance and change that led his feet
To this last ambush of the Market-place.
'Enough for him,' they said – and still they say –
'A crust, with air to breathe, and sun to shine;
He asks no more!' – Before they took away
The corn, the oil, the wine.

He sang. No more he sings now, anywhere.
Light was enough, before he was undone.
They knew it well, who took away the air,
– Who took away the sun;
Who took, to serve their soul-devouring greed,
Himself, his breath, his bread – the goad of toil; –
Who have and hold, before the eyes of Need,
The corn, the wine, – the oil!

*Truly, one thing is sweet
Of things beneath the Sun;
This, that a man should earn his bread and eat,
Rejoicing in his work which he hath done.
What shall be sung or said
Of desolate deceit.
When others take his bread;
His and his children's bread? –
And the laborer hath none.
This, for his portion now, of all that he hath done.*

*He earns; and others eat.
He starves; – they sit at meat
Who have taken away the Sun.*

II

Seek him now, that singing Man.
Look for him,
Look for him
In the mills,
In the mines;
Where the very daylight pines, –
He, who once did walk the hills!
You shall find him, if you scan
Shapes all unbecoming Man,
Bodies warped, and faces dim.
In the mines; in the mills
Where the ceaseless thunder fills
Spaces of the human brain
Till all thought is turned to pain.
Where the skirl of wheel on wheel,
Grinding him who is their tool,
Makes the shattered senses reel
To the numbness of the fool.
Perisht thought, and halting tongue
(Once it spoke; – once it sung!)
Live to hunger, dead to song.
Only heart-beats loud with wrong
Hammer on, – *How long?*
... *How long? – How long?*

Search for him;
Search for him;
Where the crazy atoms swim
Up the fiery furnace-blast.
You shall find him, at the last, –
He whose forehead braved the sun, –

Wreckt and tortured and undone.
Where no breath across the heat
Whispers him that life was sweet;
But the sparkles mock and flare,
Scattering up the crooked air.
(Blackened with that bitter mirk, –
Would God know His handiwork?)

Thought is not for such as he;
Naught but strength, and misery;
Since, for just the bite and sup,
Life must needs be swallowed up.
Only, reeling up the sky,
Hurling flames that hurry by,
Gasp and flare, with *Why – Why*,
... *Why?...*

Why the human mind of him
Shrinks, and falters and is dim
When he tries to make it out:
What the torture is about. –
Why he breathes, a fugitive
Whom the World forbids to live.
Why he earned for his abode,
Habitation of the toad!
Why his fevered day by day
Will not serve to drive away
Horror that must always haunt: –
... *Want ... Want!*
Nightmare shot with waking pangs; –
Tightening coil, and certain fangs,
Close and closer, always nigh ...
... *Why?... Why?*

Why he labors under ban
That denies him for a man.
Why his utmost drop of blood

Buys for him no human good;
Why his utmost urge of strength
Only lets Them starve at length;—
Will not let him starve alone;
He must watch, and see his own
Fade and fail, and starve, and die.

* * * * *

... *Why?*... *Why?*

* * * * *

Heart-beats, in a hammering song, Heavy as an ox may plod,
Goaded—goaded—faint with wrong, Cry unto some ghost of God
... *How long?*... *How long?* *How long?*

III

Seek him yet. Search for him!
You shall find him, spent and grim;
In the prisons, where we pen
These unsightly shards of men.
Sheltered fast;
Housed at length;
Clothed and fed, no matter how!—
Where the householders, aghast,
Measure in his broken strength
Nought but power for evil, now.
Beast-of-burden drudgeries
Could not earn him what was his:
He who heard the world applaud
Glories seized by force and fraud,
He must break,—he must take!—
Both for hate and hunger's sake.
He must seize by fraud and force;
He must strike, without remorse!
Seize he might; but never keep.
Strike, his once!—Behold him here.
(Human life we buy so cheap,

Who should know we held it dear?)

No denial, — no defence
From a brain bereft of sense,
Any more than penitence.
But the heart-beats now, that plod
Goaded — goaded — dumb with wrong,
Ask not even a ghost of God
.....*How long?*

*When the Sea gives up its dead,
Prison caverns, yield instead
This, rejected and despised;
This, the Soiled and Sacrificed!
Without form or comeliness;
Shamed for us that did transgress;
Bruised, for our iniquities,
With the stripes that are all his!
Face that wreckage, you who can.
It was once the Singing Man.*

IV

Must it be? — Must we then
Render back to God again
This His broken work, this thing,
For His man that once did sing?
Will not all our wonders do?
Gifts we stored the ages through,
(Trusting that He had forgot) —
Gifts the Lord requirèd not?

Would the all-but-human serve!
Monsters made of stone and nerve;
Towers to threaten and defy
Curse or blessing of the sky;

Shafts that blot the stars with smoke;
Lightnings harnessed under yoke;
Sea-things, air-things, wrought with steel,
That may smite, and fly, and feel!
Oceans calling each to each;
Hostile hearts, with kindred speech.
Every work that Titans can;
Every marvel: save a man,
Who might rule without a sword. —
 Is a man more precious, Lord?

Can it be? — Must we then
Render back to Thee again
Million, million wasted men?
Men, of flickering human breath,
Only made for life and death?

Ah, but see the sovereign Few,
Highly favored, that remain!
These, the glorious residue,
Of the cherished race of Cain.
These, the magnates of the age,
High above the human wage,
Who have numbered and possess
All the portion of the rest!

What are all despairs and shames,
What the mean, forgotten names
Of the thousand more or less,
For one surfeit of success?

For those dullest lives we spent,
Take these Few magnificent!
For that host of blotted ones,
Take these glittering central suns.
Few; — but how their lustre thrives
On the million broken lives!

Splendid, over dark and doubt,
For a million souls gone out!
These, the holders of our hoard, —
 Wilt thou not accept them, Lord?

V

Oh, in the wakening thunders of the heart,
— The small lost Eden, troubled through the night,
Sounds there not now, — forboded and apart,
 Some voice and sword of light?
Some voice and portent of a dawn to break? —
 Searching like God, the ruinous human shard
Of that lost Brother-man Himself did make,
 And Man himself hath marred?

It sounds! — And may the anguish of that birth
 Seize on the world; and may all shelters fail,
Till we behold new Heaven and new Earth
 Through the rent Temple-vail!
When the high-tides that threaten near and far
 To sweep away our guilt before the sky, —
Flooding the waste of this dishonored Star,
 Cleanse, and o'erwhelm, and cry! —

Cry, from the deep of world-accusing waves,
 With longing more than all since Light began,
Above the nations, — underneath the graves, —
 'Give back the Singing Man!'