Classic Poetry Series

Richard Francis Burton
- poems -

Publication Date:
2004

Publisher:
Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Richard Francis Burton(1821 - 1890)

Richard Francis Burton was born near Elstree, Hertfordshire, on March 19, 1821, the son of an army colonel. As a boy he accompanied his parents on their frequent travels about the European continent.
Burton later attended Oxford University, where he was known as "Ruffian Dick" for his long moustaches and penchant for challenging students to duels; he was eventually expelled for attending horse races. He was overjoyed at leaving Oxford; he found the dons and fellow students notably dull, and exited with a flair: he drove his horses and carriage over the flower beds while blowing a trumpet.
At 21 Burton joined the army of the East India Company and was posted to the Sindh, where he lived with the Muslims and learned several Eastern languages and dialects, including Iranian, Hindustani, and Arabic. (He mastered Arabic and Hindi and, during his eight-year stay, became proficient also in Marathi, Sindhi, Punjabi, Telugu, Pashto, and Multani. In his travels in Asia, Africa, and South America, he learned 25 languages, with dialects that brought the number to 40.

As an intelligence officer assigned to go undercover in the souks and bazaars of the Sindh, Burton perfected his language ability and disguises and brought information back to his commanding officer, the renowned Sir Charles Napier. One assignment required him to investigate male brothels, where he reported that many of the customers were British officers. His report was hushed up and he came under close scrutiny after Napier was dispatched from India. Ill with cholera and under the cloud of his report, he returned home, at the age of 29.

After those seven years in India he returned to recuperate with his mother and sister in France, where he wrote four books on India in the next three years and planned his next adventure: entering Mecca disguised as a Muslim hajj. This feat, which if he were discovered would have resulted in his summary execution by beheading or crucifixion, was not the first time that a non-Muslim had breached the holy city. But Burton wrote about his trip, where he posed as an Afghaniphysician , Pilgrimage to El Medinah and Mecca.

Before returning in triumph to England, Burton set out to to enter the forbidden Muslim city of Harar, ostensibly to establish horse trading routes. All non-believers who had entered this Somalian city before Burton had been executed, and in this Burton became the first white man to enter and leave alive. He wrote about this as First Footsteps in East Africa.

On leave again in 1854, Burton went again to Somaliland in eastern Africa with

John Speke to find the source of the Nile. Their party was attacked by Somali tribesmen; Speke was seriously injured and Burton's jaw was pierced by a spear. He returned to England to recuperate, when the Crimean War broke out. After his recovery, in July 1855, he went to the Crimea to volunteer in the war against Russia. Burton trained Turkish irregulars at the front in the Dardanelles, but saw no action himself.

The war over, on a second expedition in Africa with Speke (1857-58), Burton discovered Lake Tanganyika in 1858. Speke -- correctly-- believed Victoria to be the source of the Nile. He returned to England to become famous as the discoverer of the Nile, but the dispute over the source led to a bitter feud between them that ended only when Speke accidentally shot himself on a hunting trip.

In 1860 Burton made an overland trip to Utah to visit the Mormons and their leader. This meeting with Brigham Young and extensive reporting on polygamy was reported in The City of the Saints (1861). Shortly after his return from the United States, in January 1861, he secretly married the aristocrat Isabel Arundell , the daughter of an aristocratic (and Catholic) family.

Burton joined the British Foreign Office as a consul to Fernando Po, a Spnaish island off the coast of West Africa. From there he travelled to the African continent often, resulting in five books that were popular for his description of tribal rituals, cannibalism, and what were to the British reading public, bizarre sexual customs. His preoccupation with all facets of African cultures led the British home office to be wary of him.

He was posted next as consul to Santos, Brazil. As usual, he wrote books about the area The Highlands of Brazil and began his extensive translation of Camoens, the Portuguese poet, and of Hindu folk-tales. But Burton loathed Brazil and began drinking heavily, whereupon his wife petitioned the home office to transfer him to the Middle East, to Damascus.

In Damascus Burton was successful and happy for a time, but as usual, discontent set in, which Burton always found difficult to suppress. His wife created additional troubles by her religious proselytizing that, coupled with Arab intrigue, led to his dismissal.

In 1872 Burton was assigned to Trieste as consul. He wrote extensively there: travel Iceland, India, and Africa, archaeology Italy, his own poetry The Kasidah, and translations of Italian, Roman, Persian poetry, and six volumes of Camoens. He brought the erotica of the East in an unexpurgated form The Perfumed

Garden,The Ananga Ranga, and The Kama Sutra of Vatsayana to the staid Victorian world, shocking and outraging them. Burton received some measure of acclaim in his later years. Queen Victoria awarded him the honor of Knight Commander of St. Michael and St. George for his service to England.

Burton died in Trieste on October 20, 1890. Immediately following his death, his wife burned his diaries and current manuscripts, and followed that up with her own whitewashed version of his life, depicting him as a good Catholic, faithful husband, and wronged and misunderstood adventurer. Rebuffed as unfit to be buried in Westminster Abbey with Livingstone, Burton was later buried at Mortlake in London

An Unpraised Picture

I SAW a picture once by Angelo.
“Unfinished,” said the critic; “done in youth;”
And that was all, no thought of praise, forsooth!
He was informed, and doubtless it was so.
And yet, I let an hour of dreaming go
The way of all time, touched to tears and ruth,
Passion and joy, the prick of conscience’ tooth,
Before that careworn Christ’s divine, soft glow.
The painter’s yearning with an unsure hand
Had moved me more than might his master days;
He seemed to speak like one whose Meccaland
Is first beheld, though faint and far the ways;
Who may not then his shaken voice command,
Yet trembles forth a word of prayer and praise.

Richard Francis Burton

Black Sheep

FROM their folded mates they wander far,
Their ways seem harsh and wild:
They follow the beck of a baleful star,
Their paths are dream-beguiled.

Yet haply they sought but a wider range,
Some loftier mountain slope,
And little recked of the country strange
Beyond the gates of hope.

And haply a bell with a luring call
Summoned their feet to tread
Midst the cruel rocks, where the deep pitfall
And the lurking snare are spread.

Maybe, in spite of their tameless days
Of outcast liberty,
They ’re sick at heart for the homely ways
Where their gathered brothers be.

And oft at night, when the plains fall dark
And the hills loom large and dim,
For the shepherd’s voice they mutely hark,
And their souls go out to him.

Meanwhile, “Black sheep! black sheep!” we cry,
Safe in the inner fold;
And maybe they hear, and wonder why,
And marvel, out in the cold.

Richard Francis Burton

Extras

THE CROCUSES in the Square
Lend a winsome touch to the May;
The clouds are vanished away,
The weather is bland and fair;
Now peace seems everywhere.
Hark to the raucous, sullen cries:
“Extra! extra!”—tersely flies
The news, and a great hope mounts, or dies.

About the bulletin-boards
Dark knots of people surge;
Strained faces show, then merge
In the inconspicuous hordes
That yet are the Nation’s lords.
“Extra! extra! Big fight at sea!”
Was the luck with us? Is it victory?
Dear God, they died for you and me!

Meanwhile the crocuses down the street
With heaven’s own patience are calm and sweet.

Richard Francis Burton

In Sleep

NOT drowsihood and dreams and mere idless,
Nor yet the blessedness of strength regained,
Alone are in what men call sleep. The past,
My unsuspected soul, my parents' voice,
The generations of my forbears, yea,
The very will of God himself are there
And potent-working: so that many a doubt
Is wiped away at daylight, many a soil
Washed cleanlier, many a puzzle riddled plain.
Strong, silent forces push my puny self
Towards unguessed issues, and the waking man
Rises a Greatheart where a Slave lay down.

Richard Francis Burton

Love Is Strong

A VIEWLESS thing is the wind,
But its strength is mightier far
Than a phalanxed host in battle line,
Than the limbs of a Samson are.

And a viewless thing is Love,
And a name that vanisheth;
But her strength is the wind’s wild strength above,
For she conquers shame and Death.

Richard Francis Burton

On A Ferry Boat

THE RIVER widens to a pathless sea
Beneath the rain and mist and sullen skies.
Look out the window; ’t is a gray emprise,
This piloting of massed humanity
On such a day, from shore to busy shore,
And breeds the thought that beauty is no more.

But see yon woman in the cabin seat,
The Southland in her face and foreign dress;
She bends above a babe, with tenderness
That mothers use; her mouth grows soft and sweet.
Then, lifting eyes, ye saints in heaven, what pain
In that strange look of hers into the rain!

There lies a vivid band of scarlet red
With careless grace across her raven hair;
Her cheek burns brown; and ’t is her way to wear
A gown where colors stand in satin’s stead.
Her eye gleams dark as any you may see
Along the winding roads of Italy.

What dreamings must be hers of sunny climes,
This beggar woman midst the draggled throng!
How must she pine for solaces of song,
For warmth and love to furnish laughing-times!
Her every glance upon the waters gray
Is piteous with some lost yesterday.

I ’ve seen a dove, storm-beaten, far at sea;
And once a flower growing stark alone
From out a rock; I ’ve heard a hound make moan,
Left masterless: but never came to me
Ere this such sense of creatures torn apart
From all that fondles life and feeds the heart.

Richard Francis Burton

The First Song

A POET writ a song of May
That checked his breath awhile;
He kept it for a summer day,
Then spake with half a smile:

"Oh, little song of purity,
Of mystic to-and-fro,
You are so much a part of me
I dare not let you go."

And so he made a sister-song
With more of cunning art;
But held the first his whole life long
Deep hidden in his heart.

Richard Francis Burton

The Forefather

HERE at the country inn,
I lie in my quiet bed,
And the ardent onrush of armies
Throbs and throbs in my head.

Why, in this calm, sweet place,
Where only silence is heard,
Am I ware of the crash of conflict,—
Is my blood to battle stirred?

Without, the night is blessed
With the smell of pines, with stars;
Within, is the mood of slumber,
The healing of daytime scars.

'T is strange,—yet I am thrall
To epic agonies;
The tumult of myriads dying
Is borne to me on the breeze.

Mayhap in the long ago
My forefather grim and stark
Stood in some hell of carnage,
Faced forward, fell in the dark;

And I, who have always known
Peace with her dove-like ways,
Am gripped by his martial spirit
Here in the after days.

I cannot rightly tell:
I lie, from all stress apart,
And the ardent onrush of armies
Surges hot through my heart.

Richard Francis Burton

The Polar Quest

UNCONQUERABLY, men venture on the quest
And seek an ocean amplitude unsailed,
Cold, virgin, awful. Scorning ease and rest,
And heedless of the heroes who have failed,
They face the ice floes with a dauntless zest.

The polar quest! Life’s offer to the strong!
To pass beyond the pale, to do and dare,
Leaving a name that stirs us like a song.
And making captive some strange Otherwhere,
Though grim the conquest, and the labor long.

Forever courage kindles, faith moves forth
To find the mystic floodway of the North.

Richard Francis Burton