

Poems of

Trial and Triumph

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by Bremer Hofmeyr

Grosvenor Books
P.O. Box 10144
Johannesburg

First published 1983
by Grosvenor Books
P.O. Box 10144, Johannesburg

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ISBN 0 620 06654 7

Printed by Sigma Press
Pretoria

Set by Typesetting Services
Randburg

Cover design by Marjorie Hennessy

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Dedication

This volume is dedicated to the memory of my wife's brother, Nigel Leakey, V.C., from Kenya, killed in Ethiopia during World War II. His body was never recovered.

My wife and he shared a spiritual quest. In one of his last letters to her he wrote, "If the sacrifices we are called on to make will give you a chance to build a better world, then I am ready to give everything." His words live with us still.

He was a great lover of Africa and after the war we laid flowers in the little church in Addis Ababa, where the war dead are remembered, with these lines.

*I know not where he found his rest.
His heart, I know, was full possessed
By Africa.
No cross above his clay may rise
Sufficient that a loved one lies
Beneath the sun and soil and skies
Of Africa.*

Not Alone

To the widow of a war time pilot

Cleaving the sky on flaming, fiery wings
He held his life not dear, but other things
Of greater worth — that man should tread this earth
Free as a child of God — his right of birth.
Your life brings honour to his blood and bone
Firm in the faith that you are not alone.

Who Follow His Star

Far from His home saw the sun's first ray
Fled for His life by the desert way
Lived His first years as a refugee —
This was the shape of the years to be.
Foxes had holes and the birds a nest
No place His own for His head to rest
Hanged for subversion at thirty three
Naked, exposed for the world to see,
Laid in a tomb on the mountain slopes —
Buried with Him were a million hopes.

Centuries pass — now a tortured earth
Summons fresh hope from the Infant's birth
Buffeted mortals take strength since He
Suffered past reckoning more than we
Yet He arose from the earth's cold sod
Entered His realms at the hand of God
Proffering succour to all of them
Who follow His star to Bethlehem.

Evolution

Written for a symposium on evolution where the argument raged between those who believed it was a mechanical process, and those who believed that it was master-minded.

We agree that we rose from the slime
Some believe by the chances of time
 But it may be the action
 Of some unseen attraction
And to God and to Heaven we climb.

On The Death of a Child

I'll count the years that have been granted
 And not what might have been
I'll reckon not the joys I've wanted
 But what mine eyes have seen.

Too soon, too soon by mortal reck'ning
 Are fled the infant charms
But Faith beholds the Master beck'ning
 And lays her in His arms.

Fly Hand in Hand

You were my life, my richest, rarest gift
My heart to rest, my troubled soul to lift.
There is no other that can take your place
In dreams I still behold your radiant face
Past time and space our living spirits blend —
Fly hand in hand unto our journey's end.

Meru

Camping beneath Mount Meru In Tanzania

The great trees form cathedral glades
In magic hours as daylight fades,
The Colobus with motion free
Sails effortless from tree to tree,
The bushbuck sounds his nervous bark
From forest hideout deep and dark
Protesting that man heedlessly
Invades his calm tranquillity.

The cooling streams with chattering flow
Lure out the cautious buffalo
While elephants on padded feet
Come silent from their deep retreat.
The camp fire with its fingers bright
Touches each friendly face with light,
Transforms the branches set on high
To lace-like patterns in the sky.

Here peace and deep contentment rest
The heart by worldly cares oppressed
And grant the transient eye to see
A moment of eternity
In nature's ever changing flow
While man made empires come and go —
And Meru's massive mountain wall
Stands silent, watchful over all.

Not for Dreading

To a husband whose wife triumphed over years of suffering.

No suffering could veer her step from treading,
 With head held high, the Master's chosen course
The closing of life's span was not for dreading
 But lent her will a yet unmeasured force
To bear the load, to see beyond tomorrow
 The deathless Kingdom, past the realms of pain —
And so the morn of triumph crowns our sorrow
 And lights our path to follow in her train.

Grace

Not by perfection but by grace
Shall I behold my Master's face
Not by the reach of mind alone
But by a heart that is His throne
Nor in the robes of sinlessness
But clothéd in His righteousness.

New Year

The year has sped. I close the book
With one more fleeting backward look
To witness how the ledger stood,
The balance of the bad and good.
For what is good, I thank Thee, Lord,
For all the rest, Thy grace afford.

Stretching before my feet today
Beck'ning my step there lies the way
Of trial, triumph, crown and thorn,
Of Friday night and Easter morn,
All that my burning heart would seek
Yet faith so frail, my hand so weak.
Strident the call of human will
The inner voice so small, so still.
To satisfy the flesh I long
I've looked for things I knew were wrong,
I've spurned the hand held out to me,
I've cursed the daily Calvary,
I've lashed the back, the blood I've shed,
I've spat upon the thorn-crowned head
Yet never could I wholly flee
The beck'ning call, the "Follow Me."

With trembling hand, with throbbing head,
I bow my will, I steel my tread
To share the burden and the bliss
The mud, the myrrh, the Judas-kiss.

I set my foot upon the road
I take the cross to be my load
The claims of hungry flesh deny
And take Thy grace to satisfy
Till all my devious deceit
Shall lie exposed before Thy feet
And o'er the ashes of my pride
The gates of heaven open wide.

Wedding

May God's own grace this wedding bless
With boundless stores of happiness
And every passing day present
A brand new fund of merriment
And open new effective doors
To this gay pair of troubadours.

A Merry Couple

Now some may choose the glitter
And some may choose the gold
But it leaves them sad and bitter
Though they keep a face that's bold
But you elect to travel
On the highway of your God
And His secrets you unravel
On the road His Son has trod.

Christmas

An Empire rose in all its man-made might,
A helpless babe was born on Christmas night.
The Empire fell and crumbled into dust.
The Babe lived on in all who put their trust
In Him, and ever in man's darkest hour
His star has led men from their pomp and power
Back to the crib, where humble hearts are given
More than the wealth for which their hands have striven —
Where empty hands the whole wide world possess
With strength made perfect in their helplessness.
And so, as missiles soar to undreamed height,
Be still my soul, remember Christmas night.
As vast space-stations whirl around the earth,
Be still my soul. Remember Jesus's birth.

The Trumpets Welcome

“For now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face”

Death's dark streams past, God's heaven opens wide
The trumpets welcome on the farther side.
From bonds of worn and wearied flesh set free
He roams the fields of immortality.
No more, like us, through darkened glass he sees
And knows in part, now every shadow flees
As he beholds his Master face to face
Borne on the tide of His abounding grace.
So farewell, Greatheart. But one thing we pray —
God keep us faithful till our meeting day.

Engagement Party

May your marriage, made in heaven,
Still in heaven anchored be
And that knowledge be the leaven
Of your hearts' tranquillity.

God who gave you to each other
As His richest, rarest gift
Make you sister and a brother
To each man whose load you lift.

As you tread the earth together
With your feet upon the sod
May your eyes in every weather
Scan the highway of your God.

So with merriment resounding
As your future course you plot
May long life and joy abounding
Be your portion and your lot.

Twenty First Birthday

It's a day for celebrations

It's a day of mounting joy

For you build on firm foundations

What the years will not destroy,

It's a day you've long prepared for

What's been sown you start to reap,

And now you who've long been cared for

Are the shepherd of the sheep.

Confirmation

I take Thee, Christ, through storm and strife
As Pilot-compass of my life.
I take the bread, I take the wine,
Thy blood and body bound with mine.
I pledge my troth, I take my stand
With Christ's uncounted warrior-band.
Be strong my arm, be true my blade
My trembling heart be unafraid
My banner to the wind unfurled
A promise to the waiting world
We will not rest till Christ's decree
Reshapes our human destiny,
Till every hungry mouth is fed,
Each hungry heart finds living bread
And history writes that round the earth
New men, new nations came to birth.

Past Human Comprehending

To one who suffered a great tragedy

Past human comprehending
 Beyond a breaking heart
The unseen hand is mending
 What fate has torn apart.
After the night's disaster
 The dawn makes shadows flee
For God still stands as master
 Of human destiny.
Still stands the Rock of Ages
 And faith avails alone
For God writes history's pages
 With wisdom past our own

Silver Wedding

As the mind recounts the stories
 Of the five and twenty years
With its riches and its glories,
 With its triumphs and its tears,
As we view the woven pattern
 Mid time's formless, shifting sand,
Then we grasp the hand that guided
 And we bless the heart that planned.

We, with eye of faith beholding
 Greater glories yet to be,
Steel our wills to tasks unfolding
 And the battles we shall see,
For the crown is to the faithful
 And the victory to the bold —
Where the past was cast in silver
 There the future will be gold.

You Called No Man Your Master

Dr. William Nkomo fought all his life for the African people. As a young man he saw violence as the only road to freedom. Later he decided that peaceful freedom fighters were more effective. His change challenged and changed many white South Africans.

You called no man your master as you trod
The lonely road — the footsteps of your God.
Restless, you longed to see all wrong put right
Yet cast out hate and violence from your fight.
Ever opposing evil in our land
To alien foes you never gave your hand
But fought that those who seek to criticise
Equip their hearts with truth, and not with lies.
Your whole heart longed to see all people freed
Yet cared for those with whom you disagreed,
The fabric of our land you sought to mend,
In every enemy you sought a friend.
Deeply you loved those of your blood and bone
Yet made the human family your own
Living in faith that men, with mercy shod,
Would one day walk as children of their God.

Holy Babe

O Holy Babe in manger still
Who came to do another's will
O holy Wisdom, glad to rest
Unknowing, on a mother's breast,
My man-made schemes I count but loss
Before the cradle and the cross.

Pope John XXIII

First printed in "The Star."

Short was his reign. And yet his shadow stretches
Far down the labyrinth of history.
Humble his ways, and yet his labour etches
The bold clear lines of tableaux still to be.
He called his Council from earth's farthest corners
The broken bridges of the world to mend —
Christ's Vicar to a myriad of mourners
To all mankind a father and a friend.

Christmas Star

Christmas star, O Christmas star
Bearing radiance from afar
Shine on the weary race of men
Bring light and life and hope again.

When murder stalks across the land
When hate binds hearts with iron bands
And blood upon the nations' hands

Christmas star, O Christmas star
Bearing healing from afar
Shine on the troubled race of men
Bring love and joy and peace again.

When wills are weak and hearts are hard
By gates of steely self-will barred
And fear stands ruthlessly on guard

Christmas star, O Christmas star
Bearing mercy from afar
Shine on the frozen hearts of men
Bring warmth and pity back again.

In cabinet room, in prison cell
On lonely veld with magic spell
To black and white the story tell

Christmas star, O Christmas star
Bearing wisdom from afar
Shine on the foolish hearts of men
Bring sense and sanity again.

Night

The moon in the hemlock
 First star in the sky
The lisp of the leaves
 As the winds wing by
The twilight peace
 O'er my spirit stealing
And the balm of night
 With its gentle healing.

Communication

The falling rays of setting sun
Through my window casement stole
The magic of the evening hour
Lightened my searching soul.

Sweet beyond measure these moments rare
When silence lives unbroken,
Heart speaks to heart, their voices one —
But no word spoken

To Make the Other Great

With quiet goodness through each passing day
He walked the earth with unassuming way
Sought not for self a vain or high estate
But lived with care to make the other great.
His journey with contentment was replete
When he found ways to wash another's feet.
Mid changing times, mid sharp and violent shock
His life stood firm, sure founded on a rock,
His vision clear, like sun at height of day
His yea was yea, and so his nay was nay.
His right and wrong to pressures would not bend —
And so he walked up to the journey's end.

Bereavement

God has His perfect time, His perfect way,
His winter weather and His summer day.
No less the sorrow for the sense that He
Plans every passing hour with certainty
And peace eternal mid the transient stands
Firm on the rock "My times are in Thy hands."

The Altar

Written for an occasion when we constructed an altar for the wedding of two friends while life was slipping away from another in a room above. The following day the altar graced his burial.

What is the thing God seeks to say
Framing events this strange, strange way
That here we seal the bonds of love
While life ebbs in a room above?
One day a family is born
The next a father passes on,
An altar raised for two to wed
Sheds, too, its grace upon the dead.
Is it perchance God wants to say
He values things another way —
That laughter's lilt and sorrow's pall
Are things not separate at all
For both an equal chance afford
To bring our hearts before the Lord —
That ways we measure things are wrong,
To finite spheres alone belong
While God may have another measure
Where joy and pain hold equal treasure
And both the perfect plan unfold,
The purple weaving with the gold,
And every joy and sorrow stored
In hearts defenceless to the Lord
Together weave through peace or strife
The fabric of eternal life.

Waiting

To a friend awaiting the verdict whether she was stricken with cancer.

When our human lot is weighted
 With all uncertainty
We wait with breathing bated
 The verdict that's to be,
Still stands the Rock of Ages
 By centuries unmoved
And sinners, saints and sages
 Its timeless trust have proved

Who Turneth Dark to Light

O Christ who turneth dark to light,
O Christ who maketh midnight bright,
Whose birth lit up the firmament,
Bring light to every continent.

O Christ who turneth death to life,
O Christ who bringeth peace from strife
Turn the dark deeds of sinful man
To consummate Thy master plan.

O Christ whose birth glad tidings sent,
O Christ whose death the temple rent,
Grant us to enter, unafraid,
The glory of a world remade.

Golden Wedding

Two hearts for fifty golden years

Have beat as one

Alike in triumph and in tears

And now the sun

Sheds its bright ray on paths we yet shall see —

The mellow, golden autumn days to be.

Who Go Down to the Sea in Ships

The gulls wheel on high
In the blue of the sky
 And my heart flies far away
Through the zephyrs above
To the one that I love
 With all that I long to say
Of the radiant grace
Of your dear loved face
 And the laughter so close to your lips,
And my heart tells me then
I'm the happiest of men
 Who go down to the sea in ships.

British Diplomat

To one who serves his queen but serves his Master first

With tides of history daily on you pressing
 You labour in the service of your queen
The good and bad in every wave assessing
 Turning the barb of ills that might have been
And still beyond the form of earthly things
Shaping the kingdom of the King of Kings.

Autumn Glory

God's lavish brush paints every autumn glory
Ere the leaves settle to their winter rest
And sunset crowns the day's majestic story
With royal splendour flaming in the West.
So, valiant heart, your latest years have been
Rich beyond all our eyes as yet had seen.

An Eye So Bright

Where in a frame so frail such shining spirit?
Where 'neath a head so white
An eye so bright?
Where in a doubting age so clear a vision?
Where amid skies so gray
A heart so gay?
Where in a world of self so pure a passion?
Where at a life's decease
Such perfect peace?

Admiral Sir Edward Cochrane

The good ship “High Adventure” was his barque.
He sailed undaunted when the clouds were dark
And stormy, or when skies were fair
And gentle zephyrs fanned the summer air.
God’s great new world was his unceasing quest,
Onward he sailed, forever scorning rest,
As pilot chose the wounded Son of God,
Unswerving in His bleeding footsteps trod,
Sailed safe through perils of the hidden shoal
His compass set on his appointed goal.

He sailed to Westward to the setting sun,
Death’s dark night settled, but his task was done,
The new day broke over the promised land,
The harbour of his searching was at hand,
He rode the flood tide of abounding grace —
And then he met his Pilot face to face.

Remembrance

Through strife and struggle she was ever by you
Through passing years your hearts as one have grown
Though hard the road, her heart would not deny you
The love that made your chosen task her own.
Her spirit flees — but still with us abiding
Lightens our dark, touches with smiles our pain
And tells how thin the veil our worlds dividing —
How soon the day when we shall meet again.

Nor Pain Nor Scars

On the death of Frederik Ramm, a leader in Norway's resistance movement

The latest of the martyrs, he
 Besides his Master takes his stand,
His life poured out the seed will be
 Of life made new across the land.
 Nor pain nor scars
 Nor prison bars
Could break the will that gaily strode
With Christ along the martyr's road.

Your life and limb you held not dear,
 Your faith through torment brighter burned,
The call of comfort, voice of fear,
 The lure of hate alike you spurned.
 Up to the last
 Your faith stood fast.
Valiant, rejoice, your battle's won.
Louder in death your voice rings on.

He Lives

He lives. He lives. Bid sorrow's shadows flee
His life transformed the eye of faith can see
The mortal puts on immortality
And death is swallowed up in victory.

The Blade Springs from the Sod

For a friend on the anniversary of his wife's death.

A year the thread has broken
Our lives have flown apart
And all the things unspoken
Still burn within my heart,
The things I'd fain be saying
If you could only hear
The prayers I would be praying
If you were only near.

Not now through glasses darkly
You view the mortal scene
But black and white stand starkly
Where only grey has been
And all my heart's deep longings
More clear you know than I
My thoughts in tumult thronging
Straight to your heart will fly.

The trees set forth their brightness
The blade springs from the sod
The spirits of the righteous
Flower in the fields of God.
You beautify God's acre
And this at last I see
That, closer to my Maker,
Closer am I to thee.

Hope

Tears dimmed my eyes and shadowed all the world —
 It's gain, it's loss,
But through the swirling mist a light appeared —
 It was a cross

Magic Mystery

We have drunk life's cup together
We have shared its joy and pain
We have laughed in sunny weather
Yet thanked God for the rain
For the long sought key to history
In deathless trust we hold
That the cross with magic mystery
Turns everything to gold.

We Will Meet Again

Written during the war for my father's last birthday. I had not seen him for twelve years, and in fact I was not to see him again – not in this life

Though endless miles of tumbling ocean waste
 Between us lie
And passing years in memory have encased
 Our last goodbye,
Unbroken still the bonds of love and laughter
 And some of pain,
Our hearts are one through triumph or disaster
 And we'll meet again.

Truth

An error confessed
May yet be blessed,
An error denied
Is multiplied.

Fate

This truth is written down the years
And traced in mankind's bitter tears —
Who flee the cross that leads to life
Must bear the cross of mortal strife.

Pioneers

Once they braved the rugged mountains
 Crossed the blistered, burning plains
Daily prayed for cooling fountains
 And the grace of summer rains
Often left their dead behind them
 Set their faces toward the sun
As the continent entwined them
 And the wheels kept rolling on.

There a paradise they founded
 When the long, hard haul was done,
But man's selfishness compounded
 To betray the goal they'd won,
For the fathers' faith is yielding
 To the glitter and the gold,
And the gods of war are wielding
 Threats of horror yet untold.

But their sons and daughters, marching,
 Yet give substance to their dreams
With a vision overarching
 All man's sad dividing schemes,
And they plough today God's furrow
 Through each stony human heart
As they claim the great tomorrow
 For the Lord of Hosts to chart.

Blood Propitiate

My wife's father, Gray Leakey, was a pioneer settler in Kenya. He found a deep change in his life and apologised to his farm workers for occasions when he had been arrogant and hurtful to them. It ushered in a new day of reconciliation.

When the Mau Mau revolution began he never carried a gun as the Kikuyu considered him their friend. But when the fortunes of Mau Mau were on the wane a "prophetess" said that the gods were angry and must be placated by the sacrifice of a good man, as only the best was acceptable to the gods.

They chose him. Sixty Mau Mau broke into the Leakey farmhouse, killed his wife (my wife's stepmother) and carried him up Mount Kenya where he was buried alive as a ritual sacrifice.

In a strange way his death has been used for the reconciliation of the races for which he had steadily lived.

These lines were written at the time of his death. In fact his body was later moved to Nyeri cemetery which looks over a valley to Kenya, the mountain he loved.

In bamboo forest shaded deep
 My final sleep,
Beyond the reach of human will,
 Peaceful and still
I rest upon the peaks above
The woodland and the fields I love
The acres that my hand has tilled
 That now is stilled.

Of all the madness man has known
 This stands alone,
The spirit world exacts as price
 My sacrifice,

Unfathomed human reason deems
My offered life to aid their schemes —
That blood propitiate restores
 A failing cause.

When men have done their worst I'm still
 Within His will,
The life they took was in His store
 Long years before,
The foolish ways of foolish man
He'll bend to serve His master plan
And life cut down like fallen grain
 Not be in vain.

For through the darkness of the night
 I see a light,
A shaft of truth, a ray divine
 I see to shine —
Perchance alike to friend and foe
From this my grave a stream will flow
To lave with healing from above
 The land I love.

Sleep Peacefully

For a friend on the death of his mother

Sleep peacefully, my mother,
 You who once gave me birth,
One age succeeds another
 And earth returns to earth
But man goes onward thronging
 Past dreams the future make —
So may your fondest longing
 In us its substance take.