

St Ambrose.

Written by Cecil Day-Lewis.

Winner of the English Verse Prize at Sherborne School in 1922.

'I was singing all alone in a corner, and the melody caught your ear... One plaintive little strain mingled with the great music of the world, and with a flower for a prize you came down and stopped at my cottage door.' Rabindranath Tagore.

"Ambrose for bishop!" ... a voice clear and sweet
Rings out above the din of shifting feet
In the great square; above the humming mutters
Of a vast multitude a child's voice utters
Dominant, powerful words; a child with hair
Gold-sprinkled from the light that angels bare
On the fourth day to stud the sky with stars.
"Ambrose for bishop!" .. the pearl-jewelled bars
Of heaven's gate are oped; the air is stirred
With fluttering of myriad wings; a bird
Carols loud praise to the descending host,
As ripples sing to great waves on the coast.
The childish voice is borne aloft and whirled,
Tossed eddying, feather-wise, re-echoed, hurled
Up to the blazing threshold of the heaven,
Sentinelled by slow feet of angels seven.
E'en as the raving sea's wind-frenzied roar
Thunders in foam-torn tumult to the shore.
So through the colonnades, "Ambrose! Ambrose"!
Sounds ceaselessly, till evening's crimson rose
With fading blossom droops behind the hill,
And, hushed, the clamour dies, and all is still...

When night draws her dark curtain o'er the earth,
And hurtling meteors chase the moon in mirth,
One comes and stands beside the saint's proud bed,
A pale unearthly radiance round him shed:
One with rough raiment smirched by toil, and dust
Of wanderings, eyes saddened for the lust
And pain and sorrow of all time. In tones
More sweet than song of dew-drenched dawn, that roams
Vestured in fleece of pink-flushed clouds, more sad
Than sigh of pines with wind-swayed branches clad
"I had not where to lay my head." Upstarting,
The saint would kiss that pierced hand, but parting
Th' embroidered purple canopy of night,
The vision vanishes ... again the light
Of gold-sandalled morning wakes the world,
And days' bright flaunting banners are unfurled,
From marble halls a stream of treasure flows –
Rare stones and gold goblets, myrrh, aloes,
Rich spices, ivory, peacocks, and bales
Of gauzes shimmering like twilight's veils;
Sweet sandalwood, silver, and strange perfumes
From sunlit lands. But where no sun illumines
The greyness of mean streets and hovels dim,
Ambrose pours out his gold, and a glad hymn
Of thanksgiving bursts forth from toil-worn hearts.
And slinking vice, with poverty, departs...

Years pass. Down by a stream soft ripples break
On the black roots of trees, and branches make
A misty web to deck the milk-white arms
Of the sad moon. There seeks the saint for balms
And potent herbs and flowers, in whose carved cups
The fairies mingle starlight and syrups
Distilled from clover dew and yeasty foam.
Thousand-eyed night full oft has seen him roam
Gathering such simples. But all-seeing day,
When vapour-dabbled clouds are drawn away,
Gazes in wonder, for the sun's strong beams
Splash golden wedges on a court that teems
With sick and fevered figures: to their kneeling
The saint compassionate delivers healing
Of mystic herbs, as healed with gentle hand
The Galilaean in a lake-washed land.
Flees pestilence before the cure he brings –
A bat whirring away on damp-sealed wings.

Minutes and hour, like driftwood on the tide
Of centuries, to time's vast ocean glide
Untroubled, save when ever and anon
Gusts ruffle the calm stream, and hurry on
The rocking drift in puny strife embroiled.
Against the faith I see a snake uncoiled,
Venomous discord. God's own house is filled
With tramp of armed men who men have killed.
And pillared angels gaze from niches high
In stony-eyed amaze, for that the cry
Of blood has summoned down no direful Levin-
Flash, and th' unhallowed bands go yet unriven
By the swift sword of God's earth-shattering wrath.
But one, the Church's champion straight comes forth,
And smites with fiery tongue, and eyes enflamed
With lightning from the viles of heaven. Ashamed
The soldiers slink away: the trappings cease,
And pillared angels fold their wings in peace...

The scene is changed. The white-hot furnace door
Of the fierce sun is opened, and the floor
Of a slave market blisters in the heat.
Poor caged souls! Your weary, chain-bruised feet
Have felt the touch of dew on springing grass;
And ye have seen the woods when white birds pass
Down silver-shafted moonbeams; that torn hair
Gleamed once with fragrant rose-wreaths ruby flare;
Those sunken cheeks were fanned on flower-strewn hills
By the soft wind that buds the daffodils...
But hark! The sunset throbs with joyous singing;
Across a rocky land the saint rides, bringing
A ransom to the captives. For gold, wrought
From molten sacred vessels, they are bought,
Men, the thrice sacred vessels of God's light,
Made in his image... One questions his right:
Him Ambrose answers. "On the holy rood
Their souls did Christ redeem with His own blood;

Shall not their bodies be redeemed, then,
By the vessels that held His blood?" .. And when
The last star pales, a ship is sailing free
To a dim land beyond the foam-flecked sea...

The lives of holy men are beacon-flares
On heights above the vale of mortal cares.
Their far-flung flames burnish man's dark abode
With glint of gold, and from the shadowy road
A distant pilgrim with dusty-weary eyes
Beholds a torch low-poised beneath the skies,
And heav'n above stained with a purple glow.
Beacon to beacon, flame on flame, they grow,
Links in a star-hung chain o'er land and sea,
First kindled from the gloom of Calvary...
So cometh one to Milan, full of tears
For youths' bedraggled bloom, heart-dumb with fears,
And the old better crying of mankind.
Augustine yet no deeps of truth can find,
Till, on a russet day of chanting leaves,
A crowd, and one with grey hair he perceives
Whose passionate spirit trembles on his lips,
Whose fiery words the mist-webbed sun eclipse.
By him the seed of faith is sown, to spring
Into fair fruit of golden blossoming...

So life's proud pageant passes like a dream,
And, passing, leaves a fragrance, and a gleam
Of glory 'mid the sombre trees. Old age
And winter come, and the last tear-dimmed page
Of life is turned. Tear-dimmed. And yet.. and yet
There is some peace, for memory dulls the fret
Of keen-edged sorrow.. Old age is a haven
Where curl no waves uprooted by the raven-
Black-wings of storm. But the spray-salted sails
Hang restful; the strained shroud no longer wails.
The ship nods slow to a full-breasted swell
Till morning comes, and the loud clang of a bell..
The end draws near. It is the dreadful day
When the tombs walked, and shuddering darkness lay
Over the land where stood a lonely Tree.
The saint's life ebbs away, his dim eyes see
Visions of light: from out the imminent gloom
There gleams a silver cross, and in the room
A sounds of wings, and voices not of earth.
Sudden the wing-swept harps of heav'n give birth
To ecstasies of joy: the golden lyres
Of star-hosts scatter songful flowers; dawn's quires
Deck the pale sky with rainbow-woven fleece.
A mighty soul has reached the shores of peace.