

William E. Aytoun (1813-65)

2 *The Execution of Montrose*

I.

Come hither, Evan Cameron!  
Come, stand beside my knee —  
I hear the river roaring down  
Towards the wintry sea.  
There's shouting on the mountain-side 5  
There's war within the blast —  
Old faces look upon me,  
Old forms go trooping past:  
I hear the pibroch wailing  
Amidst the din of fight, 10  
And my dim spirit wakes again  
Upon the verge of night.

II.

'Twas I that led the Highland host  
Through wild Lochaber's snows,  
What time the plaided clans came down 15  
To battle with Montrose.  
I've told thee how the Southrons fell  
Beneath the broad claymore,  
And how we smote the Campbell clan  
By Inverlochy's shore. 20  
I've told thee how we swept Dundee,  
And tamed the Lindsays' pride;  
But never have I told thee yet  
How the great Marquis died.

III.

A traitor sold him to his foes; 25  
O deed of deathless shame!  
I charge thee, boy, if e'er thou meet  
With one of Assynt's name —  
Be it upon the mountain's side,  
Or yet within the glen, 30

Stand he in martial gear alone,  
Or backed by armèd men —  
Face him, as thou wouldst face the man  
Who wronged thy sire's renown;  
Remember of what blood thou art, 35  
And strike the caitiff down!

IV.

They brought him to the Watergate,  
Hard bound with hempen span,  
As though they held a lion there,  
And not a fenceless man. 40  
They set him high upon a cart —  
The hangman rode below —  
They drew his hands behind his back,  
And bared his noble brow.  
Then, as a hound is slipped from leash, 45  
They cheered the common throng,  
And blew the note with yell and shout,  
And bade him pass along.

V.

It would have made a brave man's heart  
Grow sad and sick that day, 50  
To watch the keen malignant eyes  
Bent down on that array.  
There stood the Whig west-country lords,  
In balcony and bow;  
There sat their gaunt and withered dames, 55  
And their daughters all a-row.  
And every open window  
Was full as full might be  
With black-robed Covenanting carles,  
That goodly sport to see! 60

VI.

But when he came, though pale and wan,  
He looked so great and high,  
So noble was his manly front,  
So calm his steadfast eye; —  
The rabble rout forbore to shout, 65

And each man held his breath,  
For well they knew the hero's soul  
Was face to face with death.  
And then a mournful shudder  
Through all the people crept, 70  
And some that came to scoff at him  
Now turned aside and wept.

VII.

But onwards — always onwards,  
In silence and in gloom,  
The dreary pageant laboured, 75  
Till it reached the house of doom.  
Then first a woman's voice was heard  
In jeer and laughter loud,  
And an angry cry and a hiss arose  
From the heart of the tossing crowd: 80  
Then as the Græme looked upwards,  
He saw the ugly smile  
Of him who sold his king for gold —  
The master-fiend Argyle!

VIII.

The Marquis gazed a moment, 85  
And nothing did he say,  
But the cheek of Argyle grew ghastly pale,  
And he turned his eyes away.  
The painted harlot by his side,  
She shook through every limb, 90  
For a roar like thunder swept the street,  
And hands were clenched at him;  
And a Saxon soldier cried aloud,  
“Back, coward, from thy place!  
For seven long years thou hast not dared 95  
To look him in the face.”

IX.

Had I been there with sword in hand,  
And fifty Camerons by,  
That day through high Dunedin's streets  
Had pealed the slogan-cry. 100

Not all their troops of trampling horse,  
Nor might of mailèd men —  
Not all the rebels in the south  
Had borne us backwards then!  
Once more his foot on Highland heath 105  
Had trod as free as air,  
Or I, and all who bore my name,  
Been laid around him there!

X.

It might not be. They placed him next  
Within the solemn hall, 110  
Where once the Scottish kings were throned  
Amidst their nobles all.  
But there was dust of vulgar feet  
On that polluted floor,  
And perjured traitors filled the place 115  
Where good men sate before.  
With savage glee came Warristoun  
To read the murderous doom;  
And then uprose the great Montrose  
In the middle of the room. 120

XI.

“Now, by my faith as belted knight,  
And by the name I bear,  
And by the bright Saint Andrew’s cross  
That waves above us there —  
Yea, by a greater, mightier oath — 125  
And oh, that such should be! —  
By that dark stream of royal blood  
That lies ’twixt you and me —  
I have not sought in battle-field  
A wreath of such renown, 130  
Nor dared I hope on my dying day  
To win the martyr’s crown!

XII.

“There is a chamber far away  
Where sleep the good and brave,  
But a better place ye have named for me 135

Than by my father's grave.  
For truth and right, 'gainst treason's might,  
    This hand hath always striven,  
And ye raise it up for a witness still  
    In the eye of earth and heaven. 140  
Then nail my head on yonder tower —  
    Give every town a limb —  
And God who made shall gather them:  
    I go from you to Him!"

XIII.

The morning dawned full darkly, 145  
    The rain came flashing down,  
And the jagged streak of the levin-bolt  
    Lit up the gloomy town:  
The thunder crashed across the heaven,  
    The fatal hour was come; 150  
Yet eye broke in with muffled beat,  
    The 'larm of the drum.  
There was madness on the earth below  
    And anger in the sky,  
And young and old, and rich and poor, 155  
    Came forth to see him die.

XIV.

Ah, God! that ghastly gibbet!  
    How dismal 'tis to see  
The great tall spectral skeleton,  
    The ladder and the tree! 160  
Hark! hark! it is the clash of arms —  
    The bells begin to toll —  
"He is coming! he is coming!  
    God's mercy on his soul!"  
One last long peal of thunder — 165  
    The clouds are cleared away,  
And the glorious sun once more looks down  
    Amidst the dazzling day.

XV.

"He is coming! he is coming!"  
    Like a bridegroom from his room, 170

Came the hero from his prison  
    To the scaffold and the doom.  
There was glory on his forehead,  
    There was lustre in his eye,  
And he never walked to battle                     175  
    More proudly than to die:  
There was colour in his visage,  
    Though the cheeks of all were wan,  
And they marvelled as they saw him pass,  
    That great and goodly man!                     180

XVI.

He mounted up the scaffold,  
    And he turned him to the crowd;  
But they dared not trust the people,  
    So he might not speak aloud.  
But he looked upon the heavens,                     185  
    And they were clear and blue,  
And in the liquid ether  
    The eye of God shone through!  
Yet a black and murky battlement  
    Lay resting on the hill,                     190  
As though the thunder slept within —  
    All else was calm and still.

XVII.

The grim Geneva ministers  
    With anxious scowl drew near,  
As you have seen the ravens flock                     195  
    Around the dying deer.  
He would not deign them word nor sign,  
    But alone he bent the knee;  
And veiled his face for Christ's dear grace  
    Beneath the gallows-tree.                     200  
Then radiant and serene he rose,  
    And cast his cloak away:  
For he had ta'en his latest look  
    Of earth and sun and day.

XVIII.

A beam of light fell o'er him,                     205

Like a glory round the shriven,  
And he climbed the lofty ladder  
As it were the path to heaven.  
Then came a flash from out the cloud,  
And a stunning thunder-roll; 210  
And no man dared to look aloft,  
For fear was on every soul.  
There was another heavy sound,  
A hush and then a groan;  
And darkness swept across the sky — 215  
The work of death was done!

1844

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