

SWAN SONGS

Arthur L. Salmon

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SWAN SONGS

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

VERSE

Songs of a Heart's Surrender

Life of Life

A Book of Verses

West Country Verses

A New Book of Verses

Songs of Wind and Wave

City, Sea and Countryside

New Verses

In Later Days

Selection (in the Sixpenny "Augustan Poets" series)

Westward

PROSE

The Heart of the West

The Ferry of Souls

Waysides and Byways

A Book of English Places

A Book of Memories

Literary Rambles in the West of England (*Revised*, 1937)

SWAN SONGS

A Collection of Later Verses

by

ARTHUR L. SALMON



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PREFACE

I HAVE entitled these verses *Swan Songs*, because in all likelihood this will be the last of the small volumes in which I have proffered such things to a reluctant public.

Perhaps a short profession of literary faith may be permitted. I have never valued or slighted a product or a theory because it was new or because it was old; yet I have felt that in all work that is normally human there must be continuity even if there be transition. Any violent attempt to break such continuity must be justified by its results, or condemned by them. I distrust profoundly the would-be originality that dispenses with punctuation, that discards capitals, that ignores prosody and outrages syntax. A thing is not of value because it is traditional, but it may have become traditional because it was of value.

Poetry has not the mutability of scientific research or of intellectual doctrine; its essence is human emotion, which changes not at all. Extreme modernism is not an evolution but a deliberate reaction, a voluntary reversion to the infancy of articulation, to the disconnected exclamations of a child indicating what he sees or what he fancies. Much is being written to-day for which there is no suitable name; it is not prose, it is certainly not poetry. Flashes of light may come to it but are quickly smothered in fog. If readers love these things, by all means let them have them. They will pass to something else to-morrow. But in the face of all changeful fashions there will always be those who care for lucidity as well as beauty of utterance. They will believe that at least one reason for speech is the desire to be understood; and they will be convinced that the great things of literature have never been the enigmatic, the metaphysical, or the violent, but rather the clear expressing of matters that were as vital a thousand years since as they are to-day, and that will retain their vitality as long as man continues to be human.

Some of these verses have appeared in the *Observer* or elsewhere; others have not hitherto been published.

A.L.S.

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SWAN SONGS

NEW YEAR

I saw the year pass in a blaze of light
Beyond the hilltops, where the mist illumed
And burgeoned swiftly, like a smouldering fire
Blown to its ashes. And the night was quick
With trooping ghosts—
Passion and fear and hot desire and strivings—
Pallid and death-chill now, poor derelict outcasts.
And some I cried to for a brief renewal
Of converse, but they turned aside,
Dumb phantoms of the underworld, and escaped me.
Here bleak despair and there delusion cowered;
And here regret with stifled sobbings lurked,
Comfortless still.

And then the new year came
With eyes like stars, her voice a magic singing;
Glad as a child to lead me by the hand
Among the grasses, beside the running waters.
But I remembered all those other years
That came like this with outstretched hands of promise,
That came with beautiful feet across the mountains—
Snatches of their dead song, glimpse of their smiling:
They all had passed to this same shrinking nakedness.
Shall this one be as they?
Defeat and disillusion may be mine
Once more.—Yet come,
New visitant from the dark, and lead me forth
Not haply where I would, but where all great
And profiting things are possible.
Let me go forth believing once again,
And take the outstretched hand and hear the singing.

THE LURE

These are the things I long for when my days are slow:
A mighty water washing in the morning's glow;
A lonely weeded lakeside or a lipping stream
Where all the rosy radiance of the sundown lies agleam,
Or glimmering when the twilight becomes a pallid flush—
The coolness and the fragrance, the whispering and the hush;
A quiet road that passes where cottages half-seen
Are bowers of bloomy leafage with mossy paths between;
A moor whose stones protruding appear like grazing sheep
Or fade like lurking phantoms when mists of autumn creep;
Great hillsides sloping steeply towards a lapping tide,
Where gorses cluster golden, where heather scatters wide;
A tangled buried byway where Ragged Robins bright
Are thick above the bracken, and starry disks of white;
A meadowland where elders and blossomed thorn are blent
In one delicious mating of beauty and of scent,
Where honeysuckles linger and the hedge's wilding rose
That cometh with the summer, that with the summer goes;
A bank of flaming poppies, a field of earing corn,
An autumn hedgerow filmy with gossamers of morn;
The harebell, and the primrose that never comes too soon,
The cowslip and the daisy, the buttercups of June;
The violet in the grasses, the early cuckoo's cry:
These are the things I long for, and must long for till I die.

IN WINTER

What of this winter gloom,
To imprison and depress?—
Lo, to my quiet room
Come visitants of the tenderest loveliness.
The joys I once have had
Are mine for ever, though the days are sad.
I hear the old places calling and I go.
Soft summer winds breathe low
Through mazy paths of fragrances and bloom;
The creamy waters wash on Devon sands
Or toss in Cornish caverns; sea-birds cry
From dawn to dusk in harbours of the west.
Wide undulating lands
Where heaven descends with consecrating rest—
Blue bracken'd downs that mate the brooding sky—
The smoke of field-fires through a lovely haze
Of wistful autumn days:
I see them all
And answer to their call,
Here in my quiet room—these wizard ways.

HOMELAND

Wherever I go she woos me,
Her voice for ever calls.

I want no golden city,
No heaven of jewelled walls,
But just my English homeland
When misty twilight falls:

The hush of English woodlands,
The scent of English lanes;
The leaping moorland rivers,
The downland and the plains—
The harebell and the bracken,
The lispings summer rains:

The blooming bowery hamlets
And secret haunts of sleep;
The great and gracious valleys
Where quiet waters creep;
The spacious seas of sundown,
The lonely fields of sheep.

Give to the South her vineyards,
Her skies of cloudless blue;
But England, land of magic,
God gave the mists to you,
To clothe your hills with beauty
And let the sun shine through.

I go athirst for ever,
With dreaming love I go,
From Springtide smiling wistful
To autumn's deepening glow;
My land of dear remembrance,
The Eden that I know.

RAIN IN THE WOODS

There comes a stealthy rustle, scarcely heard,
As though a leaf had stirred
In sleep—
Softer than wash of twilight waves that creep
From a reluctant sea;
A thrill of tremulous whisperings that pass
Through bush and grass,
With sliding drops that touch them furtively.
The hush around
Falters as with the phantom of a sound;
And where the path is free
From leafage, pattering footfalls print the ground,
Leaving their tiny dusted pearls to say
That they have passed this way.
Then comes the fuller downpour, and the shower
Reaches to deepest moss and hidden flower;
The raindrops sink
Where thirsting lips can drink
And drink again;
And all the breaths of tree and soil are blent
In one pervading fragrance of content.
O, joy of summer rain.

TO A CHILD

For thee
Beauty shall be more beautiful, and truth
More true, and love more lovely.
There shall be
A wizard alchemy that perpetuates youth;
And thou shalt find
Joy in the very dust, joy in the wind,
Joy in the trampling sea.

And what thou seest of wonder thou shalt press
To instant service of thy consciousness,
Using it for thine utterance, shaping still
Its purport to thy will.
Moments shall come when seekings shall be crowned
By something partly captured, partly found,
Seen by the flashing bright
As of a secret mirror's light,
Rifting the sullen veils that darken sight.

THE SWAN

O Swan, O swimmer,
Gliding serenely,
Quietly, queenly,
In shade and shimmer;
Through sunlit spaces
And shadowed places;
Wraith of the stream
And the moonlight's dream—
Stainless as a maiden's face is,
Pure as the light that lies
Within her eyes;
White as a cloud in April skies.

O snow-white swimmer,
Hiding and dreaming,
Gleaming and gliding
Through shade and glimmer—
O swimmer!

A PILLOW SONG

Were ye plucked from white swans of the marshland,
From wild white geese of the plains?
O feathers of weird and bewitchment,
Were ye plucked in the wind and the rains?

Were ye gathered in magical moonshine
To a music of wonderful runes—
To a telling of mystical legends
And strange unforgettable tunes?

Were ye floated in dusk of the owl-light,
Or shed by the carolling lark?
A scatter of flickering starshine,
A tangle of gleamings and dark.

O feathers that pillow me nightly,
Your secret I never can tell;
For I wake in the dawn to forget it,
And the day makes a mock of your spell.

But the hauntings and lurings for ever
Are there, like the flow of a stream
That merges the doings of daylight
In a wizard elusion of dream.

IN THE DAWN

In the drowsing of the dawn,
Ere its leaping
Through the curtains that were drawn
For our sleeping—
In the stealthy furtive light
Creeping to the heart of night,
Comes a quiet opening of the gates
Where our bygone waits.

Meet we then companions old,
With no seeking;
Sealed remembrances unfold
In their speaking.
Death becomes a thought unknown;
All are living and our own—
All our own the dear remembered things—
Till the first bird sings.

ALONE

Ah, dismal sobbing weather
And weary winds that moan—
Where two set forth together,
And one goes on alone!
Where two have been together
And one goes on alone.

Ah, sad returning thither
Where happier days were known—
Where two have gone together
And one returns alone—
Where two have walked together,
And one returns alone.

Long eves of summer weather,
And songs of haunting tone—
Where two have been together
And one is left alone:
Where two have dreamed together—
And one must dream alone.

NIGHTFALL

I saw the golden aureole of the day
Flame on the forehead of advancing night,
As though the dusk would bear the crown away—
Dark covetous of light.
But with to-morrow's morn,
On eastward hills shall flame the light reborn.
Night hath her different glories—stars that gleam
Like diamonds on a coronal of dream,
And tides of blue that wash around the deep
Dim palaces of sleep.
O night, illumined shrine
Whose gates unfold,
Thou hast no need to covet sunset-gold,
Who art a chancel of the veiled divine.

F O G

Grimly the fog, unbroken by the daybreak,
Sucks the pale light and holds it and absorbs it;
Roadway and path are but a maze of phantoms
 Vanishing ghost-like.

Sometimes there comes an eddy and a thinning;
The clammy woof is stirred and streaked and filmy;
Then with a massing of intenser blackness
 Gather the vapours.

Dense as the reek of smouldering conflagration,
Blind with a blindness darker than the midnight's;
Never a star to pierce, a breath to lift its
 Pitiless swathings.

So might we find it on the ocean's floor-way,
Sunk from the glimmering of a faintest sun-gleam;
Fain would we raise our arms and strive and wrestle
 Free from the horror.

It dogs and chokes us in our inmost chambers;
Passage and court are black with its intrusion;
Lights are a mock that dimly show the dripping
 Vaults of entombment.

THE WORD

Time was when man
Groped in his forests, huddled in his caves,
Speechless as beast or bird.
Hunger and primal lustings, terror, pain,
Frenzies of fight, forced inarticulate cries;
Or gentler passion moved, as when a mother
Crooned to her child or with a rapt surrender
Clave to her man.

No deep spake yet to deep, nor thought with thought
Held converse. Yet at times a wondering eye
Would light with hope or brood with gathering dreams,
Glimpses of things that flashed to consciousness
And flashing died; at times a voice would sing
As sings a twilight bird, and in its song
A soul would plead for birth.

And the burden grew

Too great for song alone.
The lips of man framed sounds that were distinct
From old indefinite cries.
The past became a memory and the present
A purpose and the future a desire.
Song took to herself a message, and the seer
Began to speak as others could apprehend him.
Far sundered peoples learned communication;
Untutored lispings grew to reasoned speech,
Vain babble passed to converse, and the deeds
Of heroes won their record; myths were wrought,
Tales told, before the night brought hush and slumber.
And as the soul strained upward, with its urging
Came richer moulds for its inheritance,
Giving to spirit body and to thought
More ample voice for its complexities.

So from the cry came song, and after song
The word.

And God was with the word—the Word was God.

THE LAW-BRINGER

Descending from the lonely sacred place,
He did not know the gleam was on his face;
He had no heed or thought
Save for the mandate that he brought.
So from the height—
Bearing the reflex of the thing he saw—
Thinking he brought the Law
He brought the Light.

F E A L T Y

If in the paths of night
Thou meet with one
Whose eyes are wells of light,
Whose face a sun,

Knowing him for thy lord,
Be it thine to yield;
Giving to him thy sword,
To him thy shield.

Lay thou thy hand in his
Though pride be loth,
Speaking the word that is
Thine utmost troth.

Emptied the soul must be,
That it may fill
From the great treasury
That is his will.

Kneel then, surrendering
Thy baffled soul,
That the poor shrunken thing
May be made whole.

FIDELITY

If I deserted where I should have stayed,
If when I should have hastened I delayed,
No parleyings can evade
The slow dispiritment of my disgrace;
From my own soul I turn away my face.

Then let me stand without revolt or cry,
Grim with a fear that is too proud to fly
And therefore must defy;
Ready to face an issue that shall meet
Disaster or survival—not defeat.

SEA QUEST

They went from me like vessels winged with sunshine;
On a far quest they steered into the light;
With gilded sails they stood away and vanished
Beyond the night.

But now like derelicts they crawl to harbour,
Battered and warped, with spars and timbers old.
Yet may I find in some deserted cabin
Ingots of gold.

HOW SHALL WE SING?

How shall we sing?—By waters that are strange,
In days of harrowing change
From that sweet witchery of the season's prime
To this distempered time?—
Shadowed and sad the paths by which we range
Towards the westering sun;
Painful the climb
To heights from which no heartening views are won.
In these dull ways forgetful of their Spring,
How shall we sing?
By the stream whose fount is tears,
Through this unstayed privation of the years—
How shall we sing?

Yet there are those who find the river of God
Wherever they may be,
Whatever paths of exile they have trod.
They heap memorial mounds with patient hands
Desirously,
Their hope and their remembrance to prolong;
And by whatever waters, in all lands,
Sing the Lord's song.

SANCTUARY

Not to the cry of panic will the gate
Of sanctuary be opened. Only they
Who by their own frequenting know the way
Can find it, soon or late,
Winning its refuge from a world's dismay.
But they who never sought
Its peace in prospering hours
Find it not easily when the storm-cloud lowers.
Not in a moment are the great things won,
Nor to be cheaply bought.
The race must still be run.

O spirit, stricken with a sudden stress,
Driven to the wilderness
With no equipment for the desolate way.
It may be thou shalt find
No shelter from the ruthless buffeting wind,
No comfort in the grim calamitous day.
Yet humble thee to patience; learn to pray.
Haply, there is a chance,
The blessed haven of deliverance
May yet reveal its path, and thou shalt win
The peace that bides therein,
And hear the birds, and see the sunlight's glow
On pastures where the living waters flow.

IN THE CROWD

Not in the upper room,
The quiet place
Where softened lights illumine
Love's face,
Can all familiarly recline,
Taking the bread, the wine.
There are who fear
To come so near,
Too stricken by their own unworthiness.
But in the crowded way
At times, with its distractions and dismay,
They are aware of One who passes by,
Hid in the press;
And timidly they try
To reach unseen the presence that shall bless,
Soothing the sorrow, hallowing the stress.
They cannot dare
To climb that upper stair.
It is enough for them
To touch the garment's hem.

LEAVING THE HOME

We pass; the door is closed. And yet there stays
Something that does not go with us,
Some effluence of old days
That gives to them a life continuous.
More than we know
Remains when we have closed the door—
Ah, so much more
That will not go.
Strivings of spirit, toil and human pain,
Vision and dream
Remain
In the bare chambers where the moonlight's beam
Glides, or the sunset stain.
And they who come shall feel, they know not why,
This lingering of a time gone by,
This secret flowing on
From us though we have gone;
And they will guess
What manner of life we knew,
Passioned or peaceful, counterfeit or true,
Or what high seas of storm we battled through.
We leave things great and less
For others to find;
And yet—we leave not all behind.

ALONE IN THE HOUSE

There is no-one in the house—but I myself;
No creaking of the stair—but that will come
If I wait long enough and do not listen:
No empty house but has its creaking stair.
There is no wind to stir the listless curtain
With a similitude of life;
Each vacant room sends something to the stillness.
My door is closed; no visitor will come,
No friend whom I await;—and yet I know not.
Guests there may be that seek us uninvited,
Or come again after we have dismissed them.
Silence and loneliness steal through the passage
From each deserted chamber,
And they may summon other visitants.

How do I know
That there is no-one in the house?

VENTURE

Forth to the dark—
Forth from the dull inglorious rest,
The tyranny of a thing possess'd;
Follow the shadow—let the substance stay
For some complacent day.
'Tis time to seek for other gods and hark
To other voices—free
For some imperilling quest,
Steer by strange stars across a chartless sea.

THE PASSING

Year after year we tread our destined way,
And see and love and learn;
Led by a law that sanctions no delay
And no return.

And then because the burden would be such
As no tired heart could keep,
Time with his tenderly benumbing touch
Beckons to sleep;

Sleep with the lips that hush, the hand that laves
In cool oblivious stream—
Sleep with the murmur of retreating waves
From shores of dream.

THE UNCHANGING

O years, ye have taken so much,
Pillaged and ravaged and reft—
Nothing remains but to seek
The unchangeable things that are left:

The thrilling of life that is near,
The stillness of life that is far,
The measureless will of the winds,
The passionless peace of the star.

And my spirit shall be reborn
With a miracle of increase,
When I take from the winds their passion
And learn of the stars their peace.

TO THE HILLS

I have stayed too long in the lowlands,
Lapped in their murmurous dreams;
I have drunk my fill of their beauty,
Their lovely lingering streams;

With ever the lull of contentment
And never the sting of fears,
With ever the languor of slumbers
And never the hallow of tears.

Let me go to the uplands straightway
With the winds of heaven on my cheek,
And the strength of the hills shall absolve me,
The voice of the hills shall speak.

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Swan Songs* by Arthur L. Salmon]