

THE IRON DOOR

(An Ode)

E. J. Pratt

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(An Ode)

by E. J. Pratt

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Mr. Pratt has also written:

*Newfoundland Verse
The Witches' Brew
Titans*

To some very dear memories.

THE IRON DOOR

(An Ode)

Its features half-revealed in passing gleams
Which had no origin in earthly light,
Half-buried in a shifting mass of gloom
Which had no kinship with the face of night,
It had its station in the cliffs to stand
Against the clamour of eternal storm.
A giant hand
Had wrought it cruciform,

And placed deep shadows on the sunken panels.
Then in ironic jest,
Had carved out the crest
Of death upon the lintel.
Out of some Plutonian cave
It had been brought, and hung
Within its granite architrave.
I saw no latch or knocker on the door;
It seemed the smith designed it to be swung
But once, then closed forevermore.

The noise as of stubborn waters
Came in from a distant tide
To the beat of Time with slow,
Immeasurable stride.
From an uncharted quarter,
A wind began to blow,
And clouds to rise,
And underneath I saw the forms of mortals
Come and go,
And heard their cries,—
Fragments of speech, bewildered pleas,
That rose upon the pauses of the wind,
To hush upon the thunder of great seas.
And I thought what vain credulities
Should lure those human souls before
This vast inexorable door.

A music which the earth has only known
In the drab hours of its emptiness,
Or in the crisis of a fiery stress
Fell on my ear

In broken chord and troubled undertone.
For in this scale were tragic dreams
Awaiting unfulfilled decrees,
Some brighter than the purest gleams
Of seraphic ecstasies;
And some with hopes and fears
Which ran their paling way
Beyond the boundaries of availing prayer,
To dim-illumined reaches where the frore,
Dumb faces of despair
Gazed at their natural mirror in the door.
Then with the intermittent lull
Of wind and the dull
Break of transitory light,
Where rents in the shawl of the darkness
Revealed star-bursts and clouds in flight,
The cries were winged into language,
And forms which were featureless grew
Into the shapes of persons I knew
Who had tasted of life and had died.

Standing, anxious-eyed,
So small against the drift of space,
Enveloped by the gloom,
A boy searched for his father's face,
With that unvoiced appeal,
Which I remember, when he brought
A water-spaniel home one day,
Crushed beneath an engine-wheel;
And could not, by a rational way,
Be fully made to understand
That the mending of a lifeless body lay

Beyond the surgery of his father's hand.

A master mariner
Stood looking at the dull
Outline of a basalt spur,
Which in the fall and lift of fog,
Took on the shape of a gigantic hull.
He was old and travel-stained,
And his face grained
With rebel questionings
Urged with unsundered dignity;
For he had lost three sons at sea,
In a work of rescue known
To the high Atlantic records of that year.
Then as the crag took on the heaving motion
Of the fog, and the roar beat in his ear
Of surge afar off, he hallooed
The unknown admiral of the unknown ocean:—

*Ahoy! The latitude and longitude?
Within these parts do the stars fail?
Is the sextant in default?
What signals and what codes prevail?
And is the taste of the water salt
About your reefs? Do you bury your dead
In the national folds?
Is the blood of your sailors red
When songs are sung
At the capstan bars? Are davits swung
At a call from the bridge when the night is dark,
And life like wine is spilled at a word to retrieve
The ravage of gales? Do courage and honour receive*

*On the wastes of your realm, their fair name and title?
As they do at our sea gray altars,—by your leave.*

The fog closed in upon the spur,
The moving hull became a rock
Beneath the undulations, and the shock
Of winds from an unknown compass point cut short
The seaman's challenge till that sound again
From the hinter-sea broke through, and the swart
Impress on his face was stirred
By that insurgent flash,
It once had known when after the report
Of his sons' loss on the High Seas, he had heard,
With a throb of pride,
The authentic word
From the Captain's lips,
Of the way the lads had died.

Another form appeared,
One whom I knew so well,—endeared
To me by all the natural ties which birth
And life and much-enduring love impose.
There was no trace
Of doubt or consternation on her face,
Only a calm reliance that the door
Would open and disclose
Those who by swifter strides had gone ahead.
It was the same expression that she wore,
One evening, when with life-work done,
She went to bed,
In the serene belief that she could borrow
Sufficient strength out of the deep

Resources of a final sleep,
To overtake the others by the morrow.

A young man struck against the door
Demanding with his sanguine prime,
If the eternal steward registered
The unrecorded acts of time;
Not for himself insisting, but for one,—
A stranger at his side,
For whom he had staked his life,
And on the daring odds had died.
No one had seen this young man go,
Or watched his plunge,
To save another whom he did not know.
Men only guessed the grimness of the struggle,
The body-tug, the valour of the deed,
For both were wrapped in the same green winding-sheet,
And blood-red was the colour of the weed,
That lay around their feet.
Life for a life! The grim equivalent
Was vouched for by a sacred precedent;
But why the one who should have been redeemed
Should also pay the price
In the mutual sacrifice,
Was what he wished to know,
And urged upon the iron, blow by blow.

One who had sought for beauty all his days,
In form and colour, symphony and phrase,
Who had looked on gods made perfect by man's hand,
And Nature's glories on the sea and land,—
Now paused and wondered if the Creator's power,

Finding itself without a plan, was spent,
Leaving no relic at this vacant hour,
But a grave-stone and iron monument.

One who had sought for truth, but found the world
Outside the soul betray the one within,
Knew beacon signals but as casual fires,
And systems dead but for their power to spin,
Laid deeply to his heart his discipline,
Looked at the door where all the roadways closed,
And took it as the clench of evidence,
That the whole cosmic lie was predisposed,
Yet faced it with a fine indifference.

From somewhere near the threshold of the door,
A sharp insistent cry,
Above all other notes, arose,—
A miserere flung out to the sky,
Accompanied by a knocking
So importunate,
It might have been the great
Crescendo from the world of human souls,
Gathering strength to assail
The unhearing ears of God, or else to hail
His drowsy warders at the stellar poles.
Then through a rift
In a storm-cloud's eddying,
A grayness as of drift
Of winter snow in a belated spring,
Appeared upon a woman's face,
Eroded with much perishing.
The same dark burden under which the race

Reaches old age lay strapped upon her soul:—
That which collects in silence all the shame,
Through hidden passages of time and blood,
Then puts the open stigma of the blame
Upon a spotless name.

Why all the purchase of her pain,
And all her love could not atone
For that incalculable stain:
Why from that tortuous stream,—
Flesh of her flesh, bone of her bone,—
Should issue forth a Cain;
Were queries rained upon the iron plates.
'Twas not enough, it seemed, that her one gift
To life should be returned
To death, but that the Fates
Should so conspire
To have this one devoted offering burned
At such an altar, and by such a fire!
But what availed
A woman's cry against the arrest
Of hope when every rubric paled
Before the Theban mockery of the crest?

And at this darkest moment, as I dreamed,
The world with its dead weight of burdens seemed
To pause before the door, in drifts of sand,
And catacombs of rock and burial turf:
For every wind that raged upon the land
Had fled the nescient hollow of God's hand.
And all the music left upon its waters
Lay in the gray rotation of the surf,

With calls of seamen in great weariness
At their unanswered signals of distress;
And all the light remaining was bereft
Of colour and design in full eclipse;
No fragrance in the fields; no flowers left
But poppies with their charred autumnal lips.

Then with a suddenness beyond surprise,
When life was winged at its Icarian trial,
And time was running down before my eyes,
New lights and shadows leaped upon the dial.

I have often heard it said that by some token,
As fragile as a shell,
Or a wish thrice-spoken,
The direst spell,
Though old and ringed of iron, might be broken;
That a fool's belief in the incredible,
Joined to the sounding magic of a name,
Makes up the stuff of miracle.
From such a source, it well might be,
Came this supreme authority.
It may have been the young man's claim
On life; or the old captain calling stormily
From sea to sea;
Or that root faith within a woman's heart;
Perhaps it was the white face of the child;
Or that last argument so wild
Of wing, of such tumultuous breath,
Its strange unreason might be made to prove
The case for life before the throne of death,
I do not know;

But in the dream the door began to move.

A light shot through the narrow cleft,
And shattered into hurrying gleams that rode
Upon the backs of clouds, and through deep hollows,
Like couriers with weird, prophetic code.
And as the door swung forward slowly,
A sound was heard, now like the beat
Of tides under the drive of winds,
Now like the swift deck-tread of feet,
Steadying to a drum
Which marshalled them to quarters, or the hum
Of multitudinous voices that would tell
Of the move of life invincible.

Then as the opening widened,
And the sound became more clear, I tried
With an insatiate hunger, to discover
The fountain of that light and life inside;
And with an exultation which outrode
The vaunt of raw untutored strength, I cried;—

*Now shall be read
The faded symbols of the page which keeps
This hoary riddle of the dead.*

But something heavy and as old as clay,
Which mires a human soul,
Laid hold upon the quest so that it fell,
Just baffled of its goal.
Beyond the threshold of the door,
I could not see; I only knew

That those who had been standing, waiting there,
Were passing through;
And while it was not given me to know
Whither their journey led, I had caught the sense
Of life with high auroras and the flow
Of wide majestic spaces;
Of light abundant; and of keen impassioned faces,
Transfigured underneath its vivid glow.

Then the door moved to its close with a loud,
Relentless swing, as backed by ocean power;
But neither gird of hinges, nor the feel of air
Returning with its drizzled weight of cloud,
Could cancel half the meaning of that hour.—
Not though the vision passed away,
And I was left alone, aware
Of blindness falling with terrestrial day
On sight enfeebled by the solar glare.

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[The end of *The Iron Door (An Ode)* by E. J. (Edwin John Dove) Pratt]