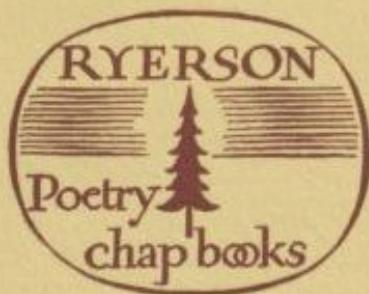


THE FLUTE
AND OTHER POEMS

by Katherine Hale



TORONTO · *The* RYERSON PRESS

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THE FLUTE

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RYERSON
Poetry chap books

TORONTO * *The* RYERSON PRESS

This is Chap-Book 142

OF THIS EDITION OF *THE FLUTE AND
OTHER POEMS*, BY KATHERINE HALE,
FIVE HUNDRED COPIES ONLY HAVE
BEEN PRINTED.

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Katharine Hale (Mrs. John Garvin) is a well-known poet. Her first book publications were in this medium and attracted wide attention. Poems began to appear in many anthologies, Canadian, American and British. With *Canadian Cities* and *Canadian Houses of Romance* she turned to prose, and these works were followed by *Legends of the St. Lawrence*, which won for her a place among the Honorary Members of *L'Institut Historique et Heraldique* of France; a *Life of Isabella V. Crawford* and *This is Ontario*.

The Island, a poem in seven movements, was published in a small edition, quickly exhausted. It is to release this remarkable sequence, and to add new poems which we feel will undoubtedly strengthen her position as a unique and original talent that this chap-book of the work of Katherine Hale is offered. We agree with the opinion of the

distinguished author and critic, Dr. Pelham Edgar, who wrote in 1937, "Katherine Hale has written much good prose, but her verse is more than that. Here she is an artist of the first flight, with perfect control of her wings."

Two of the poems in this collection appeared previously in *Saturday Night*.

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THE FLUTE

AND OTHER POEMS

THE FLUTE

Lonely, the curious voice
With its shy quiver
That beats like a gold bird
On a dark river.

From the banks come voices
Crying all day long:
Homage waits your flute note
Salvoes greet your song.

Come to meet your triumph
Far from lands forlorn,
Leave your secret piping
Leave your chilly thorn.

I'm no band, sighs gold bird,
I'm no brazen band,
All my songs are memory
Of a distant land.

I'm no band, sings gold bird,
Hand it to the horn!
Noise is not my country
Let me live forlorn.

I am plagued with music
Roaring down the street—
Let me back to silence,
Stay not my retreat.

And he might be famous!
They say of slender flute,
Whose lonely voice through fading worlds
Will call when they are mute.

THE ISLAND

DISCOVERY

This is where it shimmered
In the morning air,
Looking like a legend
Wrought in colour there:
Fortressed by a rock wall

And its airy street,
Poised as light as pine trees
Wind-bent towards retreat.

We had turned a corner
Caught a sudden sheen,
Found a glowing island
We had never seen:
Heard a sound like music
Perfume all the lake—
Singing as a woman sings
Lovely, half-awake.

And we paddled nearer,
Struck the rocky shore,
Called in strange excitement:
"We are at your door!"
"Are you fact or fancy?"
"Have you been here long?"
And the island answered:
"I am an old song,
An old, old song
Old song."

AIR

The air was warm with an exotic charm,
Not Canada at all
And a small northern lake;
A land of soft desire,

A depth of turquoise fire,
A height of foreign stars.
Only the water glittered
In a cool northern way
Sparkling against the rocks,
Then the full moon arose.
"We shall awake, my dear,
We shall awake,
And find all this some fabulous mistake!
I hear a song from far away
A song that never rests,
I feel the island trembling,
Or is it your small breasts?"
"Let us be still and go to sleep,
For the song will vanish in the morning."

WATER

But the song surged up in the morning,
Turned into crystal cadence as we swam
Beating against blue fire;
The far sea in our blood
Raced through the cold, fresh bath
Singing eternal life.

Electrons in the sun,
Or stars in space,
Or little shining fish were we—
Anything fully alive
Anything coldly free.

Then the hot rock
Was hard and firm;
The island gathered shape again
Beneath our pulsing limbs.
We lay upon the centuries,
Regaining warmth.

NOON

An Indian guide
From up at Lake Traverse
(Strawberry shirt and grey canoe and all)
Came circling in and out,
Expecting us to beckon him or call.
Then—near enough to shout—
"Where was you all last week?
Thought maybe you was lost!
Don't you two want no trout?
This is damn island!
Very much too low—too near the water.
Today I take you down to Hurdman's Creek
Good fish there, if you like!"

We shouted back:
"Ah, no! ... We've leased this island now—
Forever—do you hear?
And absolutely there's no poaching here,
But we may go with you to Hurdman's Creek
One day next year—next year."

He paddled slowly off,
Then very clear the island echoed gaily:
"You may go with him, perhaps,
This day next year—next year."

EVENING

An August evening,
Pale blue and silver and the moon ahead,
And the canoe, if you should turn it westward,
Glazed to a lacquer red.

We had set up our house:
A fireplace of the island stone,
And a mat of moss,
A tent, and a balsam bed,
And a table made of a pine.

And through the twilight's fading line
We paddled far down the bay
To look at the place so far away
Where the inns and the tourists belong,
The place we had left so hurriedly
When we heard the sound of a song.

Being established in magic,
Householders you might say,
It was safe enough to glance at the past
From our supernatural bay.

And then we went fishing instead!
And something reached out of the twilight,
Something so old and magnetic
Something so sure and prevailing
It seemed we might better obey—
For a song has a certain conviction
Heard at the end of the day.

NIGHT

We finally built a fire
To warm our shivering tent.
It looked like a ghost, as the flame rose higher
And showed the open rent of the flap
Knocking about in the wind.

"Where was you all last week?" Pierre had asked,
"Thought maybe you was lost!"

We wondered a moment later
If that was the sound of frost,
Or a bent twig snapped in the forest.
We wondered when winter, with bitter cost,
Would stop the song of the island.

Lighting my cigarette from yours,
Close in the lovely blaze,
We talked of miraculous nights
And endless drowsy days.

"But is it a night, or a hundred nights
Since we stopped at the rocky door?"
"Is it too long for you, my dear?
Is your bed warm no more?" ...
"Yes, witchingly, yes—
But time runs on:
Sometimes I know, as in a dream,
That we have often been here before.
The song that is part of everything
Beats like a bell in my brain.
Is the tent, in fact, but a ghost?
And we—are we lost in this magical pain,
In the cold blue depths,
In the heat of the rocks,
In passionate sorcery,
In death that is endless sweet?
And shall I save you, while there is time,
From unreal cold and heat!"

But we died again that night,
Sank deep and far away,
Seeing the star through the canvas roof,
Hearing the pine trees sway,
And the island's murmurous song,
And the deep sea in our blood
Beating for long and long.

(But that pistol frost in the woods!)

"We've a lease of this island forever,
Forever, do you hear?
And absolutely no poaching:

But we may go with you to Hurdman's Creek
This time next year—next year."

DETENTION

Well, we thought it over and over
For another night or two,
Then creeping about like trespassers,
When the sun had almost risen
In the moment before day,
We took our fate in both our hands
And packed the tent,
And were well on our way
When suddenly the paddles slipped,
The boat went all astray
Caught in the sedge,
And a wind arose, drifting us back to land.

Then we made ourselves a sail,
And took a last adieu.
But we said to our smiling island
"We shall return to you
After the cold is over
We shall return" ...
Her smile was as new as waking earth
On a morning after rain.
And the waves, as in October,
Were choppy and swift and clear,
We had almost turned the corner
When the whole thing happened again—

For the lake was suddenly still
As a lonely and forgotten pool
At the foot of a broken mill,
And our sail was a rag of canvas
That sorcery could not fill.
We were merged again in a mystery
That defied our fluttering will,
So we came like abject children
Back to our cold doorsill—
Suddenly cold and gray,
Ashy and cold and gray,
And we heard the song of the island
From far and far away
In a chant that was slow and still:
*If you would ask me I should say:
Not if you fell on your knees to pray,
Not for a year and not for a day,
And my days are long and long...
For you have found what you came to see
And I am you and you are me
And you are part of a song—
An old, old song
Old song.*

FOURTH DIMENSIONAL

This flimsy tent
On the dark forest's edge

Faces such cold blue water,
And length of russet sedge.

Open to night
A tree holds out the rain,
Or melts in wavering shadow
Upon our roof again.

Within the tent,
All heaven for you and me:
From violent root to blossoming flower
The whole ecstatic tree.

Oh, as we lay
Deep in the stillness there
Knowing that we should sink
Out of all mortal air
Down into that sweet death
I quite believed, you know,
That a fourth door might open
Or a torn fold would show
Trace of the long-lost passage—
And yet, it was not so!

NEARING QUEBEC

Grey line of ocean that our sharp bow severs,
Do you remember those tiny dipping sails

Venturing the unknown!
Then the free wind was an uncertain guide,
Criss-crossing the grey line,
Breaking the problematic course,

Enlarging, moving, changing,
Opening the vast abyss.
Remember the huddled women
In question of this mystery,
The climbing, peering men,
The strain of tense expectancy,
And the doubt of arrival.

But the trembling line is controlled,
And the wayward guide dismissed.
What is the wind to us,
A beaten and frustrate force!
Did it once intimidate men,
Who used to measure and peer
At navies of storm in the sky?
First-rate machinery casts out fear,
And now we know what we know!
London, New York, it is all the same,
The ocean track is clear and tame,
We shall without doubt arrive.

Yet I return to you,
As though to a new land,
A woman on a sailing ship
Still huddled in a mystery.
Shall I touch your shores,
Past all these shimmering capes,

Prefacing cliffs and legends,
Witch-music, song of sirens,
Hymns of safety and the rest?
I mean your actual shores;
Earth of your very being,
The innermost of you,
The straight cliffs of your mind,
The mountains of your will,
The secret passes,
The deep and lovely fountains of your joy.
Are you to be my country,
My fathomless resource,
And my enduring song?
I, too, sail trembling
Into the unknown.

BEFORE BIRTH

Sombre, relaxed, supine
I saw the prairie lie,
Heavy with unborn April
Under the wintry sky;
Her tent, her mirror, her husband,
Her lord and master, the sky.

He is a barbarous lord,
Who kills her overnight,
But draws her back to him again

With magic old and bright,
Stirring her heart with new desire
Piercing it with delight.

I saw him bending down
In the curve of an arching bow,
And her shimmering response,
beautiful, grave, and slow,
A thousand raptures in her breast
So lately cold as snow.

The two, alone in space,
Like death must pause and wait,
Canopied by a myriad stars,
And matted with fate,
In the long Olympian love of man
And his eternal mate.

It is immortal love,
Passion of air and earth,
Melting of sky and land,
Blossoming, giant birth;
Silently bearing the seed of spring
Back to the waiting north.

SOUTHERN LIVE OAK

Circles of green, ringed in a plushy darkness,
Thatching of leaves and raftered branching of boughs,
A fabulous tent,
A dewy, dark bouquet,
Thick with a hundred years,
And silent in the echoing youth
Of this bright clamorous May.

Leaves that have watched
White-pillared houses rise
And glow and blossom and fade,
Eaves that have overheard
Chatter of Spain and France
And music of English words—
See, I return to you
As to one long beloved.

For in this southern town
That is so strange to me
My vanished ancestors walked up and down.
My grandmother, they say,
Was used to driving out Magnolia Way,
And you have called to her, how many a time,
All your bells ringing in a fairy chime,
Just as you do with poignancy today
This younger blood of mine.

What of the whispering past
Caught in the aged circle of a tree?
If I should stay
Under these branches patiently,
Under these old leaves silently,

For one deep night, one day,
Oh, long-loved petals of this vast bouquet,
What would you say to me—
What would you say!

ARIZONA DESERT ROAD

To the sound of wave-like years
The desert palms march on,
Trudging the grey-green wilderness
Under the glittering sun;
Like pigmy footmen pressing
Through the sombre dusty trails,
Where a cactus shadow is like a cross,
With spikes for the cross's nails;
And around their feet the sand,
Sparkling and pale and old,
Waits for the laggard sea
That was fierce and young and cold.

Something happens at night:
The sand becomes a wave,
And every form is marching
Back to a secret cave.
Rocks that were red in the sun
Have a voice in the night, and cry,
And the whole thing turns back sea-ward:
The land leans to the sky,

The crooked palms grow crazy,
They whisper and fret and sigh,
And when the moon arises
They taste the tide of the sky,
And it sends them out of their senses,
So they gather in whimpering clusters
With their peaked horns rising high,
A dwarf and his circling friends,
And they argue in whispering voices
Till the moon has passed them by.

For the mist at the foot of the rocks
Is sea-mist old and sad,
And the sand is a glittering wave,
That drives half-creatures mad.
In that terrible sigh for the sea
I feel all earth complain,
I find old forces rising,
I hear a strange refrain,
And I see footmen thronging
Down to an old sea-lane ...

God knows this ancient desert road
Is more than sun-baked plain!

MEXICAN ROAD MENDERS

These Mexicans are like the land,
Like images of sand;
Dry as the sage brush, infinitely old,
Brown as the landscape fading into gold,
Coloured with foothills,
Smudged with dusty red.
As the car passed them
One held up his weathered head,
Stared at us gently,
Looked across the land
Where his wild mountains darkly cut the sky,
Swore softly at these strangers passing by
And went on shovelling sand.

QUARTET

Four men with a velvet curtain behind them;
Green stage-light turning its folds into trees;
Sound beginning from somewhere invisible,
As though it came from caverns underground;
As thin as crystal air comes that far sound.
A slender forest wakes before the mind.

Some frail notes blow through the forest,
Deep into silence move the strings,
The leaves are listening, and the hunt is on;
Faint, icy bugles penetrate the air,

Mysterious calls from every here and there
Summon far, muted notes to make reply.

These paths are deep and narrow through the ferns,
The old-scale music hurries to and fro—
Lost footsteps come again to feel the earth,
Primitive steps, that slide between the leaves,
Small sound, that like some ancient shuttle weaves
A silver theme to lead us through the wood.

Slowly this magic fades into the velvet curtain
And four men have returned us to the world.
In the silence Ravel and his secret remain—
Dim fairyland, warm earth, or unguessed heaven.
"Enter these enchanted woods who dare!"
Immortal challenge given to mortal air.

LIKE FIGURES BY DU MAURIER

Like figures by Du Maurier
They sat in the Chelsea drawing-room
Over whose red garden walls
One can barely see the heads of passers by;
John, who played so beautifully,
Making the piano sing whole operas,
Recalling Nordica and Calvé
And news of Jean de Reské.

Theodore, who remembers every tone of Duse's voice
And adores Edith Evans.
Cynthia, who used to act—but only gardens now.
Julien, so elegant and so composed.

They were content to sit on summer evenings
Through the long English gloaming,
Perfumed by bowls of spicy pink carnations,
Sipping black coffee, smoking cigarettes,
Watching the river-breeze blow through the curtains,
Listening to John, and listening to the past
So musical with memories;
Straightening sometimes a crooked silhouette,
Interpolating news of the last play,
The Court Gazette, or little family jokes.
All so content. As if dear Chelsea
Lay like a moat between the world and them.

Now they will close the Beckstein,
And go away, and return, hoping,
And yet it will not come—their feeling of security.
The room has been entered by change,
The thing they dreaded. Even the breeze
Knocks on the window, colder now and strange,
Air without music.

Why must he come, this forager,
Displacing with determined fingers
The notes of an old harmony—
A sequence to such lovely music wed!
Nor you nor I can ever answer that,

I only know that Julien has written me to say
That John is dead.

THIS OBLIVION

One dear to him is moving towards the river;
Her broad-brimmed hat and dress of faded blue,
Her sketch book under a protecting arm.
Slowly she disappears, hid by the grasses,
Fading in light of the dim, blue-grey day.
Ah, so he faded as his tie with earth
Was loosed, and he slipped down
Hidden, as she is now. But the dim green
That floats and weaves above his secret place
Will not return him, not for any grace
Of wildest supplication. Yet she comes,
Risen from the grasses, back along the road,
Her little disappearance traced in form,
Her morning told in colour and in line.
Self-tranced she walks into the world again
Renewed by this oblivion.
But, oh, for him, bound in a blinding sleep,
What recompense?
I see no recompense that such negation brings
Or—is there song that endless silence sings
Faintly, below these grasses strong and deep?

'CELLIST

Against curved cello
Almost breast to breast,
Curve linked to curve
Her ardent body pressed

In a strange marriage,
Through whose deep embrace
Moments of rapture
Seemed to interlace.

As in joy's arrowed swiftness
So creation there
Final, immaculate,
In tragic brevity arose in air.

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