The Black Riders, and Other Lines

by Stephen Crane

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BLACK RIDERS, AND OTHER LINES ***

THE BLACK RIDERS AND OTHER LINES

Cover

THE BLACK RIDERS AND OTHER LINES

BY STEPHEN CRANE

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I

Black Riders came from the sea.

There was clang and clang of spear and shield,

And clash and clash of hoof and heel,

Wild shouts and the wave of hair

In the rush upon the wind:

Thus the ride of Sin.

II

Three little birds in a row

Sat musing.

A man passed near that place.

Then did the little birds nudge each other.

They said, "He thinks he can sing."

They threw back their heads to laugh,

With quaint countenances

They regarded him.

They were very curious,

Those three little birds in a row.

III

In the desert

I saw a creature, naked, bestial,

Who, squatting upon the ground,

Held his heart in his hands,

And ate of it.

I said, "Is it good, friend?"

"It is bitter--bitter," he answered;

"But I like it

Because it is bitter,

And because it is my heart."

IV

Yes, I have a thousand tongues,

And nine and ninety-nine lie.

Though I strive to use the one,

It will make no melody at my will,

But is dead in my mouth.

V

Once there came a man

Who said,

"Range me all men of the world in rows."

And instantly

There was terrific clamor among the people

Against being ranged in rows.

There was a loud quarrel, world-wide.

It endured for ages;

And blood was shed
By those who would not stand in rows,
And by those who pined to stand in rows,
Eventually, the man went to death, weeping.
And those who staid in bloody scuffle
Knew not the great simplicity.

VI

God fashioned the ship of the world carefully
With the infinite skill of an All-Master
Made He the hull and the sails,
Held He the rudder
Ready for adjustment.
Erect stood He, scanning his work proudly.
Then--at fateful time--a Wrong called,
And God turned, heeding.
Lo, the ship, at this opportunity, slipped slyly,
Making cunning noiseless travel down the ways.
So that, forever rudderless, it went upon the seas
Going ridiculous voyages,
Making quaint progress,
Turning as with serious purpose
Before stupid winds.
And there were many in the sky
Who laughed at this thing.

VII

Mystic Shadow, bending near me,

Who art thou?

Whence come ye?

And--tell me--is it fair

Or is the truth bitter as eaten fire?

Tell me!

Fear not that I should quaver,

For I dare--I dare.

Then, tell me!

VIII

I looked here;

I looked there;

Nowhere could I see my love.

And--this time--

She was in my heart.

Truly, then, I have no complaint,

For though she be fair and fairer,

She is none so fair as she

In my heart.

IX

I stood upon a high place,

And saw, below, many devils

Running, leaping,

And carousing in sin.

One looked up, grinning,

And said, "Comrade! Brother!"

X

Should the wide world roll away,

Leaving black terror,

Limitless night,

Nor God, nor man, nor place to stand

Would be to me essential,

If thou and thy white arms were there,

And the fall to doom a long way.

XI

In a lonely place,

I encountered a sage

Who sat, all still,

Regarding a newspaper.

He accosted me:

"Sir, what is this?"

Then I saw that I was greater,

Aye, greater than this sage.

I answered him at once,

"Old, old man, it is the wisdom of the age."

The sage looked upon me with admiration.

XII

"and the sins of the fathers shall be
visited upon the heads of the children,
even unto the third and fourth
generation of them that hate me."
Well, then, I hate thee, Unrighteous Picture;
Wicked Image, I hate thee;
So, strike with thy vengeance
The heads of those little men
Who come blindly.
It will be a brave thing.

XIII

If there is a witness to my little life,
To my tiny throes and struggles,
He sees a fool;
And it is not fine for gods to menace fools.

XIV

There was crimson clash of war.
Lands turned black and bare;
Women wept;
Babes ran, wondering.
There came one who understood not these things.
He said, "Why is this?"
Whereupon a million strove to answer him.
There was such intricate clamor of tongues,

That still the reason was not.

XV

"Tell brave deeds of war."

Then they recounted tales,--

"There were stern stands

"And bitter runs for glory."

Ah, I think there were braver deeds.

XVI

Charity, thou art a lie,

A toy of women,

A pleasure of certain men.

In the presence of justice,

Lo, the walls of the temple

Are visible

Through thy form of sudden shadows.

XVII

There were many who went in huddled procession,

They knew not whither;

But, at any rate, success or calamity

Would attend all in equality.

There was one who sought a new road.

He went into direful thickets,

And ultimately he died thus, alone;

But they said he had courage.

XVIII

In Heaven,

Some little blades of grass

Stood before God.

"What did you do?"

Then all save one of the little blades

Began eagerly to relate

The merits of their lives.

This one stayed a small way behind,

Ashamed.

Presently, God said,

"And what did you do?"

The little blade answered, "Oh, my Lord,

"Memory is bitter to me,

"For, if I did good deeds,

"I know not of them."

Then God, in all His splendor,

Arose from His throne.

"Oh, best little blade of grass!" He said.

XIX

A god in wrath

Was beating a man;

He cuffed him loudly

With thunderous blows

That rang and rolled over the earth.

All people came running.

The man screamed and struggled,

And bit madly at the feet of the god.

The people cried,

"Ah, what a wicked man!"

And--

"Ah, what a redoubtable god!"

XX

A learned man came to me once.

He said, "I know the way,--come."

And I was overjoyed at this.

Together we hastened.

Soon, too soon, were we

Where my eyes were useless,

And I knew not the ways of my feet

I clung to the hand of my friend;

But at last he cried, "I am lost."

XXI

There was, before me,

Mile upon mile

Of snow, ice, burning sand.

And yet I could look beyond all this,

To a place of infinite beauty;

And I could see the loveliness of her
Who walked in the shade of the trees.
When I gazed,
All was lost
But this place of beauty and her.
When I gazed,
And in my gazing, desired,
Then came again
Mile upon mile,
Of snow, ice, burning sand.

XXII

Once I saw Mountains angry,
And ranged in battle-front.
Against them stood a little man;
Aye, he was no bigger than my finger.
I laughed, and spoke to one near me,
"Will he prevail?"
"Surely," replied this other;
"His grandfathers beat them many times."
Then did I see much virtue in grandfathers,--
At least, for the little man
Who stood against the Mountains.

XXIII

Places among the stars,

Soft gardens near the sun,

Keep your distant beauty;

Shed no beams upon my weak heart.

Since she is here

In a place of blackness,

Not your golden days

Nor your silver nights

Can call me to you.

Since she is here

In a place of blackness,

Here I stay and wait.

XXIV

I saw a man pursuing the horizon;

Round and round they sped.

I was disturbed at this;

I accosted the man.

"It is futile," I said,

"You can never"--

"You lie," he cried,

And ran on.

XXV

Behold, the grave of a wicked man,

And near it, a stern spirit.

There came a drooping maid with violets,

But the spirit grasped her arm.

"No flowers for him," he said.

The maid wept:

"Ah, I loved him."

But the spirit, grim and frowning:

"No flowers for him."

Now, this is it--

If the spirit was just,

Why did the maid weep?

XXVI

There was set before me a mighty hill,

And long days I climbed

Through regions of snow.

When I had before me the summit-view,

It seemed that my labor

Had been to see gardens

Lying at impossible distances.

XXVII

A youth in apparel that glittered

Went to walk in a grim forest.

There he met an assassin

Attired all in garb of old days;

He, scowling through the thickets,

And dagger poised quivering,

Rushed upon the youth.

"Sir," said this latter,

"I am enchanted, believe me,

"To die, thus,

"In this medieval fashion,

"According to the best legends;

"Ah, what joy!"

Then took he the wound, smiling,

And died, content.

XXVIII

"Truth," said a traveller,

"Is a rock, a mighty fortress;

"Often have I been to it,

"Even to its highest tower,

"From whence the world looks black."

"Truth," said a traveller,

"Is a breath, a wind,

"A shadow, a phantom;

"Long have I pursued it,

"But never have I touched

"The hem of its garment."

And I believed the second traveller;

For truth was to me

A breath, a wind,

A shadow, a phantom,

And never had I touched

The hem of its garment.

XXIX

Behold, from the land of the farther suns

I returned.

And I was in a reptile-swarming place,

Peopled, otherwise, with grimaces,

Shrouded above in black impenetrableness.

I shrank, loathing,

Sick with it.

And I said to him,

"What is this?"

He made answer slowly,

"Spirit, this is a world;

"This was your home."

XXX

Supposing that I should have the courage

To let a red sword of virtue

Plunge into my heart,

Letting to the weeds of the ground

My sinful blood,

What can you offer me?

A gardened castle?

A flowery kingdom?

What? A hope?

Then hence with your red sword of virtue.

XXXI

Many workmen

Built a huge ball of masonry

Upon a mountain-top.

Then they went to the valley below,

And turned to behold their work.

"It is grand," they said;

They loved the thing.

Of a sudden, it moved:

It came upon them swiftly;

It crushed them all to blood.

But some had opportunity to squeal.

XXXII

Two or three angels

Came near to the earth.

They saw a fat church.

Little black streams of people

Came and went in continually.

And the angels were puzzled

To know why the people went thus,

And why they stayed so long within.

XXXIII

There was one I met upon the road
Who looked at me with kind eyes.
He said, "Show me of your wares."
And this I did,
Holding forth one.
He said, "It is a sin."
Then held I forth another;
He said, "It is a sin."
Then held I forth another;
He said, "It is a sin."
And so to the end;
Always he said, "It is a sin."
And, finally, I cried out,
"But I have none other."
Then did he look at me
With kinder eyes.
"Poor soul!" he said.

XXXIV

I stood upon a highway,
And, behold, there came
Many strange pedlers.
To me each one made gestures.
Holding forth little images, saying,

"This is my pattern of God.

"Now this is the God I prefer."

But I said, "Hence!

"Leave me with mine own,

"And take you yours away;

"I can't buy of your patterns of God,

"The little Gods you may rightly prefer."

XXXV

A man saw a ball of gold in the sky;

He climbed for it,

And eventually he achieved it--

It was clay.

Now this is the strange part:

When the man went to the earth

And looked again,

Lo, there was the ball of gold.

Now this is the strange part:

It was a ball of gold.

Aye, by the Heavens, it was a ball of gold.

XXXVI

I met a seer.

He held in his hands

The book of wisdom.

"Sir," I addressed him,

"Let me read."

"Child--" he began.

"Sir," I said,

"Think not that I am a child,

"For already I know much

"Of that which you hold.

"Aye, much."

He smiled.

Then he opened the book

And held it before me.--

Strange that I should have grown so suddenly blind.

XXXVII

On the horizon the peaks assembled;

And as I looked,

The march of the mountains began.

As they marched, they sang,

"Aye! We come! We come!"

XXXVIII

The ocean said to me once,

"Look!

"Yonder on the shore

"Is a woman, weeping.

"I have watched her.

"Go you and tell her this,--

"Her lover I have laid

"In cool green hall.

"There is wealth of golden sand

"And pillars, coral-red;

"Two white fish stand guard at his bier.

"Tell her this

"And more,--

"That the king of the seas

"Weeps too, old, helpless man.

"The bustling fates

"Heap his hands with corpses

"Until he stands like a child,

"With surplus of toys."

XXXIX

The livid lightnings flashed in the clouds;

The leaden thunders crashed.

A worshipper raised his arm.

"Hearken! Hearken! The voice of God!"

"Not so," said a man.

"The voice of God whispers in the heart

"So softly

"That the soul pauses,

"Making no noise,

"And strives for these melodies,

"Distant, sighing, like faintest breath,

"And all the being is still to hear."

XL

And you love me?

I love you.

You are, then, cold coward.

Aye; but, beloved,

When I strive to come to you,

Man's opinions, a thousand thickets,

My interwoven existence,

My life,

Caught in the stubble of the world

Like a tender veil,--

This stays me.

No strange move can I make

Without noise of tearing.

I dare not.

If love loves,

There is no world

Nor word.

All is lost

Save thought of love

And place to dream.

You love me?

I love you.

You are, then, cold coward.

Aye; but beloved--

XLI

Love walked alone.

The rocks cut her tender feet,

And the brambles tore her fair limbs.

There came a companion to her,

But, alas, he was no help,

For his name was Heart's Pain.

XLII

I walked in a desert.

And I cried,

"Ah, God, take me from this place!"

A voice said, "It is no desert."

I cried, "Well, but--

"The sand, the heat, the vacant horizon."

A voice said, "It is no desert."

XLIII

There came whisperings in the winds

"Good bye! Good bye!"

Little voices called in the darkness:

"Good bye! Good bye!"

Then I stretched forth my arms.

"No--no--"

There came whisperings in the wind:

"Good bye! Good bye!"

Little voices called in the darkness:

"Good bye! Good bye!"

XLIV

I was in the darkness;

I could not see my words

Nor the wishes of my heart.

Then suddenly there was a great light--

"Let me into the darkness again."

XLV

Tradition, thou art for suckling children,

Thou art the enlivening milk for babes;

But no meat for men is in thee.

Then--

But, alas, we all are babes.

XLVI

Many red devils ran from my heart

And out upon the page,

They were so tiny

The pen could mash them.

And many struggled in the ink.

It was strange

To write in this red muck

Of things from my heart.

XLVII

"Think as I think," said a man,

"Or you are abominably wicked;

"You are a toad."

And after I had thought of it,

I said, "I will, then, be a toad."

XLVIII

Once there was a man,--

Oh, so wise!

In all drink

He detected the bitter,

And in all touch

He found the sting.

At last he cried thus:

"There is nothing,--

"No life,

"No joy,

"No pain,--

"There is nothing save opinion,

"And opinion be damned."

XLIX

I stood musing in a black world,

Not knowing where to direct my feet.

And I saw the quick stream of men

Pouring ceaselessly,

Filled with eager faces,

A torrent of desire.

I called to them,

"Where do you go? What do you see?"

A thousand voices called to me.

A thousand fingers pointed.

"Look! Look! There!"

I know not of it.

But, lo! in the far sky shone a radiance

Ineffable, divine,--

A vision painted upon a pall;

And sometimes it was,

And sometimes it was not.

I hesitated.

Then from the stream

Came roaring voices,

Impatient:

"Look! Look! There!"

So again I saw,

And leaped, unhesitant,

And struggled and fumed

With outspread clutching fingers.

The hard hills tore my flesh;

The ways bit my feet.

At last I looked again.

No radiance in the far sky,

Ineffable, divine;

No vision painted upon a pall;

And always my eyes ached for the light.

Then I cried in despair,

"I see nothing! Oh, where do I go?"

The torrent turned again its faces:

"Look! Look! There!"

And at the blindness of my spirit

They screamed,

"Fool! Fool! Fool!"

L

You say you are holy,

And that

Because I have not seen you sin.

Aye, but there are those

Who see you sin, my friend.

LI

A man went before a strange god,--

The god of many men, sadly wise.

And the deity thundered loudly,

Fat with rage, and puffing,

"Kneel, mortal, and cringe

"And grovel and do homage

"To my particularly sublime majesty."

The man fled.

Then the man went to another god,--

The god of his inner thoughts.

And this one looked at him

With soft eyes

Lit with infinite comprehension,

And said, "My poor child!"

LII

Why do you strive for greatness, fool?

Go pluck a bough and wear it.

It is as sufficing.

My lord, there are certain barbarians

Who tilt their noses

As if the stars were flowers,

And thy servant is lost among their shoe-buckles.

Fain would I have mine eyes even with their eyes.

Fool, go pluck a bough and wear it.

LIII

I

Blustering god,

Stamping across the sky

With loud swagger,

I fear you not.

No, though from your highest heaven

You plunge your spear at my heart,

I fear you not.

No, not if the blow

Is as the lightning blasting a tree,

I fear you not, puffing braggart.

II

If thou can see into my heart

That I fear thee not,

Thou wilt see why I fear thee not,

And why it is right.

So threaten not, thou, with thy bloody spears,

Else thy sublime ears shall hear curses.

III

Withal, there is one whom I fear;

I fear to see grief upon that face.

Perchance, Friend, he is not your god;

If so, spit upon him.

By it you will do no profanity.

But I--

Ah, sooner would I die

Than see tears in those eyes of my soul.

LIV

"It was wrong to do this," said the angel.

"You should live like a flower,

"Holding malice like a puppy,

"Waging war like a lambkin."

"Not so," quoth the man

Who had no fear of spirits;

"It is only wrong for angels

"Who can live like the flowers,

"Holding malice like the puppies,

"Waging war like the lambkins."

LV

A man toiled on a burning road,

Never resting.

Once he saw a fat, stupid ass

Grinning at him from a green place.

The man cried out in rage,

"Ah! Do not deride me, fool!

"I know you--

"All day stuffing your belly,

"Burying your heart

"In grass and tender sprouts:

"It will not suffice you."

But the ass only grinned at him from the green place.

LVI

A man feared that he might find an assassin;

Another that he might find a victim.

One was more wise than the other.

LVII

With eye and with gesture

You say you are holy.

I say you lie;

For I did see you

Draw away your coats

From the sin upon the hands

Of a little child.

Liar!

LVIII

The sage lectured brilliantly.

Before him, two images:

"Now this one is a devil,

"And this one is me."

He turned away.

Then a cunning pupil

Changed the positions.

Turned the sage again:

"Now this one is a devil,

"And this one is me."

The pupils sat, all grinning,

And rejoiced in the game.

But the sage was a sage.

LIX

Walking in the sky,

A man in strange black garb

Encountered a radiant form.

Then his steps were eager;

Bowed he devoutly.

"My Lord," said he.

But the spirit knew him not.

LX

Upon the road of my life,

Passed me many fair creatures,

Clothed all in white, and radiant.

To one, finally, I made speech:

"Who art thou?"

But she, like the others,

Kept cowled her face,

And answered in haste, anxiously,

"I am Good Deed, forsooth;

"You have often seen me."

"Not uncowled," I made reply.

And with rash and strong hand,

Though she resisted,

I drew away the veil

And gazed at the features of Vanity

She, shamefaced, went on;

And after I had mused a time,

I said of myself,

"Fool!"

LXI

I

There was a man and a woman

Who sinned.

Then did the man heap the punishment

All upon the head of her,

And went away gayly.

II

There was a man and a woman

Who sinned.

And the man stood with her.

As upon her head, so upon his,

Fell blow and blow,

And all people screaming, "Fool!"

He was a brave heart.

III

He was a brave heart.

Would you speak with him, friend?

Well, he is dead,

And there went your opportunity.

Let it be your grief

That he is dead

And your opportunity gone;

For, in that, you were a coward.

LXII

There was a man who lived a life of fire.

Even upon the fabric of time,

Where purple becomes orange

And orange purple,

This life glowed,

A dire red stain, indelible;

Yet when he was dead,

He saw that he had not lived.

LXIII

There was a great cathedral.

To solemn songs,

A white procession

Moved toward the altar.

The chief man there

Was erect, and bore himself proudly.

Yet some could see him cringe,

As in a place of danger,

Throwing frightened glances into the air,

A-start at threatening faces of the past.

LXIV

Friend, your white beard sweeps the ground,

Why do you stand, expectant?

Do you hope to see it

In one of your withered days?

With your old eyes

Do you hope to see

The triumphal march of Justice?

Do not wait, friend

Take your white beard

And your old eyes

To more tender lands.

LXV

Once, I knew a fine song,

--It is true, believe me,--

It was all of birds,

And I held them in a basket;

When I opened the wicket,

Heavens! They all flew away.

I cried, "Come back, little thoughts!"

But they only laughed.

They flew on

Until they were as sand

Thrown between me and the sky.

LXVI

If I should cast off this tattered coat,

And go free into the mighty sky;

If I should find nothing there

But a vast blue,

Echoless, ignorant,--

What then?

LXVII

God lay dead in Heaven;

Angels sang the hymn of the end;

Purple winds went moaning,

Their wings drip-dripping

With blood

That fell upon the earth.

It, groaning thing,

Turned black and sank.

Then from the far caverns

Of dead sins

Came monsters, livid with desire.

They fought,

Wrangled over the world,

A morsel.

But of all sadness this was sad,--

A woman's arms tried to shield

The head of a sleeping man

From the jaws of the final beast.

LXVIII

A spirit sped

Through spaces of night;

And as he sped, he called,

"God! God!"

He went through valleys

Of black death-slime,

Ever calling,

"God! God!"

Their echoes

From crevice and cavern

Mocked him:

"God! God! God!"

Fleetly into the plains of space

He went, ever calling,

"God! God!"

Eventually, then, he screamed,

Mad in denial,

"Ah, there is no God!"

A swift hand,

A sword from the sky,

Smote him,

And he was dead.

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