POEMS

BY

Maria (Siska) Hunt

Mrs. HELEN JACKSON

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POEMS.

Comes out to meet and honor me;
The glittering ranks spread royally
Far as I walk. When hasty greed
Tramples it down for food and seed,
I, with a certain veiled delight,
Hear half the crop is lost by blight.
Letter of law these may fulfil,
Plant where they like, slay what they will,
Count up their gains and make them great;
Nevertheless, the whole estate
Always belongs to me and mine.
We are the only royal line.
And though I have no title-deed
My tenants pay me loyal heed
When our sweet fields I wander by
To see what strangers occupy.

THE STORY OF BOON.¹

It haunts my thoughts morn, night, and noon,
The story of the woman, Boon, —
Haunts me like restless ghost, until
I give myself to do its will;
Cries voiceless, yet as voices cry,—
"O singer, can this tale pass by
Untold by thee? Thy heart is wrung
In vain, if dies the song unsung."

I am unworthy: master hands
Should strike the chords, and fill the lands
From sea to sea with melody
All reverent, yet with harmony
Majestic, jubilant, to tell
How love must love, if love loves well;
How once incarnate love was found
On earth, dishonored, martyr-crowned,
Crowned by a heathen woman's name,—
O blessed Boon, of peerless fame!
In Siam's court the Buddhist King
Held festival. Fair girls to sing;
And dance, and play, were led between
Close ranks of Amazons in green
And gold. In chariot milk-white
Of ivory, and glittering bright
With flowers garlanded, rode Choy,
The young, the beautiful; with joy
And subtle pride no words could tell,
Her virgin bosom rose and fell.
No dream the Siamese maiden knew
More high or blest than that which grew
In Choy's poor blinded heart,—to be
The favorite of the King, and see
The other wives beneath her feet.
From babyhood, that this was sweet
The child was taught. How should she know
They told her false, and worked her woe!

The song, the dance, the play, were done,
Choy's fatal triumph had been won.
The old king's bleeared and lustful eyes
Had marked her for his next new prize.
Asking her name, as low she bowed
Before the throne, he called aloud,—
"Which of my nobles springs to lead
Her chariot ponies? Do I need
Speak farther?"

On the instant, two
Young nobles robed in white sprang through
The crowd, and kneeling as to queen,
With low-bent head and reverent mien,
They walked the chariot beside.
The bands burst forth in swelling tide
Of music, and the curtain fell.
One noble, smitten by the spell
Of Choy's great beauty, whispered, "God,
How beautiful thou art!"

"My Lord,
Have care," the scornful Choy exclaimed:
"I were ill for thee, if thou wert blamed
By me."

The other noble silent gazed,
With eyes whose glance strange tumult raised
Within Choy's breast. He did not speak:
All spoken words had fallen weak,
After his look. Yet Choy's heart burned
To hear his voice. Sudden she turned,
And leaning forward said, "How now,
What seest thou in air that thou
Art dumb?"

With trembling lips he spoke,—
"O Lady, till thy sweet voice broke
Upon the air, I thought I saw

The story of Boon.

An angel; now, with no less awe,
But greater joy, I see thou art
A woman."

Ah, they know not heart
Of man or woman, who declare
That love needs time to love and dare.
His altars wait,—not day nor name,
Only the touch of sacred flame.

The song, the dance, the play were done.
Oh, fatal triumph Choy had won!
Oh, hateful life she thought was sweet!
She knelt before the old king's feet,
A slave, a toy, a purchased thing,
Which to his worn-out sense might bring
Pleasure again of touch, of sight.
Doting, he named her "Chorn," "Delight,"
Decked her with jewels, gave her power,
And day and night, and hour by hour,
With hideous caresses sought
Joy in the thing which he had bought.
And hour by hour, and night and day,
Wasted poor Choy's young life away.
One thrilling voice, one glowing face,
One thought of such a love's embrace,
Haunted her thoughts, and racked her breast,
Robbed her of peace, robbed her of rest,
Made of her life such living lie,
Such torture, she but prayed to die.

Months passed, and she knew not the name
Of him she loved. At last there came
The fated day. A woman slave,
New in the palace, quickly gave,
Answering Choy's artful questioning,
The noble's name.

"Ah, go and bring
Me news of him," said Choy. "He bore
Himself so loftily, I more
Recall him than all else that day.
Seek out minutely in what way
He lives; what may his harem hold.
He seemed to me so silent, cold,
No doubt some Houri keeps him chained,"
With scornful laugh, but poorly feigned,
Cried Choy.

At dusk of night returned
The slave, with wondrous tale, which burned
Itself on Choy's glad heart.

The Duke,

Phaya Phi Chitt his name, forsook
His harem on the day he led
The Favorite's chariot ponies. Dead
He seemed to all he once had loved:
No fear, no joy, his spirit moved.
His friends believed that he was mad,
Or else some mortal illness had.
A feverish joy filled all Choy's thought,
She knew by what this change was wrought.
Love's keenest pain, if shared like this,
No longer seemed a pain, but bliss.
Again the faithful slave she sent,
With message of one word, which meant
But "I remember."

"I love much,"
The Duke sent back. Ah, madness such
As this was never seen. The halls
Of tyrants' palaces have walls
Higher than Love's and Hope's last breath,
Wider than Life, deeper than Death!

Embroidered with a thread of gold
On silk, and hidden fold on fold,
As if an amulet she wore,
Her lover's name the poor Choy bore
By night, by day, upon her heart.
The new slave woman, with an art
As tender as a sister's, sought
To comfort her. Each day she brought
New message from the Duke, each night
Lay at her mistress' feet till light.
O Buddha! pitiful, divine,
All-seeing, gav'st thou no sign
To warn these faithful, loving three,
Who were as faithful unto thee
As to each other! Didst thou teach
The cruel tyrant how to reach
Their life blood, that thy arm might save
Them by the surety of the grave?
Might give to their expiring breath
The gift of life, in shape of death?
Ah, Buddha! pitiful, divine,
Thy gifts of death record no sign
Of life beyond. Our weak hearts crave
Some voice of surety for the grave.
The hours grew ripe: the hour was set,
The night had come. Choy slumbered yet,
While faithful Boon, with footsteps light,
Made all things ready for their flight.
Sudden a clash of arms,—a gleam
Of fire of torches! From her dream
Choy waked, and on her threshold saw,
Dread sight which chilled her blood with awe,
Standing with panting voice and breath,
Mai Tale, Mother of Death,
Cruelest of all the Amazons,
 Slayer of all convicted ones
Who braved the tyrant's wrath and hate.
Choy called on Boon. Too late! too late!
Boon fettered lay with gag and chain;
Most piteous eyes, faithful in pain,
Unto her mistress lifting still.
With blows and jeers wreaking their will,
The soldier women, fierce and strong,
Dragged weeping Choy and Boon along
The by-ways of the silent town,
And flung them, chained and helpless, down
Into a dark and loathsome cell.
Soon as their footsteps' echoes fell
Faintly afar, Choy whispered low,—
"O Boon, dear Boon! tell me hast thou
Confessed?"

"Dear Lady, no!" she cried.

"No tortures tyrants ever tried
Shall wring from me one word of blame
Against Phaya Phi Chitt's dear name."
That instant, flashing through Choy's heart

Strange instinct swept.

"Tell me who art
Thou, Boon," she said: "why dost thou cling
To me through all this suffering?
All other women I have known
Had left me now to die alone.
O Boon, conceal from me no more!
Tell me the truth in this dread hour!"
Then, looking newly at her face,
She saw it beauty had, and grace;
Saw that the feet were lithe and fine,
The hands were small and smooth: each sign
Of tender nurture and high blood
This loving woman bore, who stood
To her as slave. Unearthly sweet
Grew Boon's pale face, as to the feet
Of Choy, all crippled, chained, she crept,
And, as she strove to speak, but wept
And sobbed,—

"O Lady dear, forgive
That I deceived thee! I but live
For thy dear Duke. I am his wife!"
Dumb wonder sealed Choy's lips. A strife
Of fierce mistrust warred in her breast.
At last, stern-faced, "Tell me the rest,"
She said.

Closer, more humbly still
Boon crept, and said,—

"Lady, I will;
And, by the heart of Buddha, thou
Canst but forgive when thou dost know
The whole.
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"The day my husband came
Home from the fête, he spoke thy name
And told thy beauty unto me,
And said that from that moment he,
His thought, his heart, his blood, were thine,—
Thine utterly, and no more mine
Again. What could I do but weep?
I saw him pine. No food, no sleep,
He took. I thought that he must die.
What could I do? O Lady, I
So loved him that I longed as he
That fate might give him joy and thee.
I vowed to him that I would win
Thee for his wife. How to begin
I knew not, when I found thou wert
The King's last favorite. It hurt
My pride to be a slave. The gold
Lies in the sea for which I sold
Myself to thee, rather than break
My vow. But easy for his sake,
I loved him so, thy service came,
Soon as I found that his dear name
Was dear to thee as thine to him;
That, when I spoke it, it could dim
Thine eyes with passion's tears, like those
Which he had shed in passion's throes,
For want of thee. O Lady, none
Of all thy sighs and tears, not one,
But I have flown and faithful told,
That he might know thou wert not cold.
Each word of beauty, nobleness,
Which thou didst speak, I bore to bless

THE STORY OF BOON.

His heart with knowledge more complete
Of thee. O Lady, the deceit
Was only for his precious sake
And thine: no other way to take
I knew. My husband is so great,
So good, I was but humble mate
For him. As shadow follows shape,
My heart in life cannot escape
From following his; nor yet in death
Shall it be changed: with dying breath,
From Buddha I one joy will wrest,
That he find rapture in thy breast."

Boon ceased, and in her slender hands,
Which scarce could lift her fetter bands,
Buried her face. Choy did not speak.
Her reverence knew not where to seek
For fitting words which she might dare
To use to Boon. The midnight air
Heard only sobs, as close between
Her arms she drew Boon's head to lean
Upon her breast. The long night waned,
And still in silence sat the chained
And helpless women. Strange thoughts filled
The heart of Choy. Her love seemed chilled,
Poor, and untrue, beside this one
Great deed she never could have done.
"Ah, me! his wife has loved him best,"
In bitterness her heart confessed,
Yet jealousy for shame was dead.
Her tears fell loving on Boon's head:
"Dear Boon," she whispered soft and low,
"To Buddha pitiful we go."
Next morning when the judges dread
Cross-questioned Boon, she simply said,
"My Lords, what can a poor slave know?"
Weary at last, the fearful blow
Of lashes on her naked feet
They ordered. Blood ran down the sweet
Soft flesh: still came the answer low,
"My Lords, what can a poor slave know?"
Be pitiful!" The swift blows fell
Again: no cry, no sound, to tell
That it was pain, Boon gave; no sign
Of faltering. They poured down wine
To stay her strength, and then again, —
Oh, surely fiends they were, not men! —
Again, from slender neck to waist,
The cutting blows in angry haste
With tenfold violence they laid.
Each blow a line of red blood made;
Yet, when they paused, the answer came
Steadfast, heroic, in the same
Pathetic words, more feeble, slow,
"My Lords, what can a poor slave know?"
Then in the torture of the screw,
Whose pain has led strong men to do
Dishonor to their souls and God,
They bound this woman's hands. Sweat stood
In bloody drops along her brow,
Yet from her lips not even now
Was heard one syllable.

In rage,
The baffled tyrants to assuage
Her sufferings tried every art
Which could be tried by kindest heart,
And snatched her back from death again,
Again to tortures fresh; in vain!
Night came, and from her lips no word
Had fallen. All night they faintly stirred,
As if in sleep she dreamed and spoke.
Choy watching, weeping by her, took
Her hand, and said, —
"Oh, tell thy Choy,
Art thou in mortal pain?"
"My joy
Is greater than my pain," she said,
"That this poor flesh hath not betrayed
My love. Thanking great Buddha now,
I pray unceasing, till we go
Again to torture." Then no more
Boon spoke. To Choy, but little lower
Than angel she appeared. Ah! true
It was the wife loved best! Love knew
His own. His angels comforted
Her soul with joy through hours which bred
But anguish in Choy's breast. Too soon
Came cruel day, and brought to Boon
Again the lash, the screw; again
Unto the door of death in vain
They tortured her: no word escaped
Her bloodless lips. Her face seemed shaped
Of iron, so calm, so resolute;
A superhuman light her mute
And upward gaze transfigured, till
In awe the torturers stood still.
Then, binding up her wounds, they laid
Her on a couch to rest. New shade
Of anguish now her face revealed,
Waiting Choy's words. All unconfessed,
No doubt, the weaker love lay bare
Before her instinct. It could dare
For self: now that for self remained
No hope, no future to be gained,
Could it for him be true, be great?
Ah, this true torture was,—to wait
Another woman's courage! Eyes
Of fire Boon fixed on Choy. To rise
She helpless strove, in impulse vain,
As if by touch she could sustain
Choy's strength. Her gaze was like a cry.
"Oh, what is death, is suffering, by
The side of truth? If thou dost love
Another, thought of self can move
Thee not. If thou dost love, to bear
The worst is nothing. Dost thou dare
Betray, thou art a coward, liar!"
Entreated, warned Boon's eyes of fire.
They held Choy's eyes as by a spell.
Feeble the judges' stern tones fell,
Idle the threats of torture seemed,
Beside the scorching look which gleamed
Upon that woman's face.

Thus stayed
And stung, Choy bore the blows which laid
Her quivering flesh in furrows. Feet
And neck and shoulders, all the sweet
Fair skin was torn: her blood ran down

As Boon's had run,—not of her own
Resolve, but born of Boon's the strength
Which silent sealed her lips. At length
The one sure pain which torturers know
They tried. No rack, no fire, no blow,
Is dreadful as the screw. At first
Sharp turn it gave, a loud cry burst
From Choy,—
"O Boon, forgive, forgive!
I cannot bear this pain, and live!"
And, shrieking out her lover's name,
She cowered before Boon's eyes of flame.
One cry of uttermost despair
From Boon rang out upon the air,
Her fettered arms above her head
She lifted, and fell back as dead.
Ah! true it was, the wife loved best!
How true, that cry of Choy's confessed.
To love which she had so betrayed,
No prayer she for forgiveness made:
On him whom she had thought her life
She called not, but upon his wife.

Swift sped the feet of them who sought
The lover. Ere the noon, they brought
Him also. Boon, with anguished eyes,
Beheld him there. She could not rise,
But, creeping on her hands and feet,
She cried, in tones unearthly sweet,—
"O Lords! O Judges! look at me,
And listen. It was I, not he.
I am his wife. I laid the plot.
Except for me, the thought had not
Been his. 'T was only I deceived
The Lady Choy. He but believed
What I desired. The guilt is mine,
All mine. Tell them it was not thine,
My husband,—I can bear the whole.'
And, as she turned to him, the soul
Of love ineffable set smile
Upon her face. Her piteous guile,
Transparent, thrilled each heart and ear
That heard her pleading voice. A tear
Fell from the sternest Amazon,
Fierce Khoon Thow App, as in a tone
No mortal from her lips had heard
Before, she said, "O Boon, what stirred
Thy heart to this? Thy motive tell!"
The question all unanswered fell.
Boon lay again as if in death,
With closed eyes and gasping breath.

All night, low on the dark cell's floor,
Lay Boon and Choy; for Boon no more
Remained in life. When Choy crept near,
And humbly spoke, she answered, "Dear,
Farewell!"—no other word. Choy strove, —
Poor Choy! her feeble, lesser love
Avenging on herself its sin,—
Strove from the greater love to win
Some healing stay. Too sweet to pain,
Too loyal and too true to feign,
Boon made but one reply, which fell
Fainter and fainter, "Dear, farewell!"

That night, at midnight, sat the King
And Lords in council. For the thing
Phaya Phi Chitt and Choy had planned,
Scarce in all that cruel land
Was known a punishment which seemed
Sufficient. Fierce his red wrath gleamed,
As cried the King,—

"At dawn shall fly
The vultures with their hungry cry.
Rare feast for them ready by noon
Shall be: three traitors' bodies hewn
In pieces, and with offal cast
Abroad, that to the very last
Low grade of life they may return,
And grovel with the beasts to learn,
Through countless ages, in what way
Kings punish when their slaves betray.
Long generations shall forget
Their base-born names, ere souls are set
Again within their foul, false flesh,
To murder love and trust afresh!"¹

Ah! true it was, the wife loved best!
Love knew his own, gave her his rest;
And, to the other woman, doom
Of life-long woe and life-long gloom.
O cruel friends who prayed the King,
Who dreamed Choy to this world could cling!
Reprieved from death, to life condemned,
Sad prisoner forever hemmed

¹ The Siamese believe that, whenever a dead body is not burned,
its soul is condemned to begin life again in the lowest animal form.
Within the hated palace-wall;
By all despised, and shunned by all,
Lonely and broken-hearted, she
Weeps day and night in misery.
And day and night one picture haunts
Her weary brain, her sorrow taunts,—
Picture of Buddha's fairest fields,
Where every hour new transport yields,
And where the lover whom she slew,
Loyal at last, and glad and true,
In full Elysium's perfect rest,
Walks with the one who loved him best!
It haunts me morn, and night, and noon:
This story of the woman, Boon,—
Haunts me like restless ghost, that says,—
"Oh, where is love in these sad days!
Rise up, and in my might and name
Plead for the altar and the flame."
I am unworthy: master hands
Should strike the chords, and fill the lands
From sea to sea with melody
Of such transcendent harmony
That it all jubilant might tell
How love must love, if love loves well.
Yet, telling all, and flooding lands
With melody, the master hands
Could strike no deeper chord than I,
When from a woman's heart I cry,—
"O martyred Boon, of peerless fame,
Incarnate in thy life, Love came!"