

A SONG TO DIE WITH

A bard, whose songs in early youth
Were marked by tender themes and truth,
In time to wantonness succumbed,
Until his noble heart was numbed.
When grog and lust erased his past,
He fell to thievery at last.

Upon a gallows, without hope,
Before a dangling noose of rope,
Before a crowd that knew him not,
Or knowing once, long since forgot,
Again he raised within that square
A voice that stilled the chatter there.

“Give ear, ye wayward hearts! What ho!
Let’s have a song before we go!
A moment . . . let a sinner sing!
Your leave!” And cheers affirmed the thing.
The guard stepped back and gave him space
To let his verses fill the place . . .

“Good friends and fiends and angels here,
Come round a rogue who sings with fear.
Come listen hard! I’ll sing what’s true.
I’ll sing, the way I used to do,
A song that once I sang so well,
Before I burned with songs from hell.

The restless multitude addressed
Became a voiceless sea at rest,
Became a field of flesh that swayed
Before the melody he made,
Became one silent listening ear
The sentenced troubadour to hear.

“Praise God for life!” the bard began.
“A merry jaunt bequeathed to Man
From mother’s tender arms and breast
Until in mother earth we rest.”
He stepped up closer to the rail.
“But some fare well, and others fail.

“Praise God for daily bread and drink!
We thank Him not enough, I think.
Though hunger follows hard on thirst,
What knaves to swear our lot as cursed!
No mouth or belly with their head
Would stand here now if not well-fed!

“Praise God for light upon the path
To hold us back from holy wrath!
I knew but strayed from God’s command
And die, a scoundrel in the land.
I warn you, heed what you have heard,
Or stand condemned beneath His Word!

“Praise God for grace!” the sinner sang.
“I’ve sought His face before I hang.
I’ve pled forgiveness from His Son
Who fought the fight with death and won
My pardon from the hellish rod.
So, send me now to meet my God!”

Into the noose he leaned himself,
Then boldly neared the narrow shelf.
Among the crowd, instead of cheers,
Were faces full of grief and tears.
And just before the guard’s push came,
He sang, “Amen, in Jesus’ name.”

— *David L. Hatton*, 7/2/2003