



The RYERSON
POETRY
CHAP-BOOKS



The Dying
General

and Other Poems

By Goodridge MacDonald

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OF THIS EDITION OF *THE DYING GENERAL AND OTHER
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To
MY CHILDREN

GOODRIDGE MacDONALD was born in Fredericton, N.B., May 10, 1897, the son of Archibald Roberts MacDonald and Elizabeth Roberts MacDonald. His education was largely informal. After a brief period in the Civil Service he served with the Army Medical Corps in Canada. He spent some time in free lance writing and has been twenty-two years with *The Montreal Herald*, recently as Associate Editor. His *Armageddon and Other Poems* appeared in 1917.

The Ryerson Poetry
Chapbooks

The Dying General

and Other Poems

By Goodridge MacDonald

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THE DYING GENERAL

(November 25, 1933)

Wind and sleet and ice
And beneath the ice,
The frost-gripped earth and the rock,
The waters moving on perpetually;
And beneath the soil and the rock,
The moving waters and still,
The molten core of the world—
Gases and flame.

To the one law they move,
Mingle and change their form,
Flowing forever on.

Even so, woman and man,
The beast and the bird:
To the one law they move,
Mingle and change their form;
And all are one; and the law
Is all.

It was his fate from afar
To supervise the red routine of war:
Not ever his to stand
In mudded trench, rifle clasped in hand:
—The wounds of calumny were reserved for him.

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Now that his eyes are dim
And he awaits decay—
Now can he say
That he moved this or that battalion forth?—
Shifted this gun, or by his thought,
Captured a trench, or sent a man to death?

His stifled breath
Comes slow, his crippled brain
Stumbles and fails again,
Uncomprehending that which folds him round,
Is of him;—hurrying him now
Toward disintegration and the ground.

Spirit and body hurry, hurry on
Toward their delayed re-union, and the worm.

In a few days the priest will say—
"It is sown in corruption,
It is raised in incorruption"—
"I am the resurrection and the life—" he will say.
And this he will not say—
That corruption and incorruption are one, and the law is one.

That he is one with the winter wind that moves
His surplice as the soil
Rattles upon the casket—
"Dust unto dust"—:
That the thing within the casket is one
With fire and frost; with love and death;
With the rifle reversed, and the private's numbing hand.

And the bugler will blow Last Post,
And men will stand—
Representatives of the greatest in the land—
Bare-headed beside the grave, until Reveille
Rings in the air;
Then go away half believing
The legend they have heard of life and death,—
Even their half-belief governed by the law
Which is the wind and worm and waiting corpse,
The flesh that waits decay.

In his bed the general lies;
Slow or fast the general dies;
Long-planned are the obsequies,
But he is not concerned with these.

WHEN THE DREAM IS ENDED

When the dream is ended and the dreamer wakes,
All about his window the cold sunlight breaks.
He beholds the dresser and the broken chair:
In his eyes the colour of her gleaming hair
Lingers still and changes;—half he thinks he sees
Her pale hands and her white face among the moving trees.

Feet upon the bare boards move. They are astir
In the hall and kitchen.—Memories of her
Voice and song and laughter drift and will not stay,
Though his heart would hold them through the windy day.
—So he washes, dresses, eats and drinks, and goes
Seeking down the empty day, dream-haunted to its close.

I SHALL RETURN

I do not know the varied forms
Through which my life may burn:—
In sensient clay or ecstasy
Or dawn I shall return:

Return in a chord of music thrown
To the dancers' careless feet,
Or in a drift of rain-drops blown
Down some remembered street.

But when she comes whom I have loved
Light-footed down the stair,
Then may I be a crimson rose
Thrust in her scented hair.

THE SAILOR

A greasy sky-line where the grey
Unending billows roam,—
A lifting bow-wash, breaking spray,—
These bound the sailor's home

A month or two. Then port is made
And in some Sailor Town
At 'Frisco, Rio, Adelaide,
His shillings rattle down

For wine and women—double rums,
Vermuth, or British beer;
A gold-haired wench to steal his purse
And call him "Jackie, dear—".

Then comes the squat-nosed harbour-tug
To hail him out to sea;
The bell-buoys clang, the shore-lights flash
In sullen ecstasy,

And standing watch upon the peak,
He dreams of lips and hands,
Drugged liquor and a painted cheek,
And sighs, nor understands

That he's a dreamer—and the call
That made a fool of him
In Hamburg or in Montreal,
Still to the wide sea's rim

Must lure him on, with hint of wine
More fragrant, and of lips
Unpainted, luscious, half-divine
To men who sail in ships.

ELEGY, MONTREAL MORGUE

She served love well,
Now she lies here
In a white trough,
In a white room
Upon whose wall
A cross hangs high.

Little Picard
Unbars the door
And seven men
Slow shuffle in,
Their heavy hands
Turning their hats,
Nervously turning.

They look upon
Her quiet breasts
And folded hands,
Then shuffle out
To give a verdict.

But love, ah love, the crimson rose, flames on
With no less loveliness now she is gone;
So pluck the rose—the petals strew, my friend;
There is white quiet at the end.

ORCHESTRAL INTERLUDE

The lights were bright, and my eyes were tired,
And my soul was weary of laughter and song,
When out of the South there came a breath—
The note of a wild bird stricken with death;
—The red seas closed about me, and the long,
Long hills in the drifting moonlight lay.
The wind sobbed on . . . and the crimson waves
Beat my soul with their spray.

By my side were Life and Death—
One form divinely fair—
And with my every breath
I stirred her hair,
Her dark hair that lay so lightly
On cheek and brow—though my heart guessed rightly
Her eyes were the eyes of Death. . . .

And I rode on, rode on.
The grass about my feet
Grasped and clasped with its fingers to stay my flight.
The path was gone
And fear at my heart was sweet
And I knew that the wind and the sea together
Cried after me through the night. . . .

“For she has died, has died so long ago”—
(The violins sang softly and I wept.)—
Into silence with a measure slow
The music crept.

HALL OF MIRRORS

I look in mirrors, everyway
About me seeing still
Only myself—contracted or expanded—
Familiar fault or quality in caricature
Dominating face or figure;
Speaking in glance or gesture;
Drawing, repelling, as the case may be.

A Hall of Mirrors—And I've paid my dime
For a poor show;
At best, no laughing matter.—

Beyond the mirrors, I have heard,
Another face with lineaments divine
Awaits the eyes of him who dares
To smash the mirrors,
Sweeping them aside;
Shatter the empty images of self—
The loved and loathed.

BELOW DECKS

"Talk to me, bones!"—The shifting candle-light
A moment touched the speaker's face with gold—
Deep-crevised, as the lightning's flash to sight
Might bring some mountain-side, rain worn and old;
Showed the deep lines from lip to chin, the bold,
Dark, deep-set eye, hooked-nose, and streaked the black
And tumbled hair with yellow—then leapt back

To catch and linger on the fluttering dice,
The dull piled silver and the greasy board.—
"Little Joe dies!"—The trimmer saw the price
Of many beers take flight, counted his hoard
And threw his last ten shillings to be scored
Out with the rest. Long fingers, cold and grey,
Like wind-stirred paper, garnered Fortune's pay.

The watch was changed and from the fire-hole,
Loud with the beat of steel, the growl of flame,
Where for four hours they had shovelled coal,
Three blacks, still sweating, leaden-footed came,
Lit cigarettes, and sighed, and joined the game
In weary silence.—Overhead the deck
Was washed with silver from the torn moon's wreck.

And still the sea in pleading monotone
Cried to the stumbling ship; and still below,
Where the bent candle's flickering flame was blown
Swiftly across dark faces, at each throw—
"Talk to me, bones!"—"Fade him, Little Joe!"—
The gambler told his eager litany,
Still hungry, still importunate as the sea.

HARBOUR GULL

Riding wind currents
Above the murky waters,
The gull executes a pattern
Of line and curve against the chilling blue;
A design by master
Of brush or pencil unattainable,
In pure simplicity touching that fringe
Of truth toward which art strives.

With bank and turn and curving wing he weaves
The rhythm dreamed of in vanity by every poet—
Sought in futility with singing bow
And painted ivory keys;
Nor any wielder
Of baton ever
Drew from the slavish reeds and viols and brasses,
The drums and cymbals and triangles at his command,
That harmony beyond sound's reach
Recorded by the briefly voyaging gull.

Keats in the darkness mumbled—
"Beauty is truth—"
Here then is beauty
Above the turgid water wheeling—
A mystery as simple, as insoluble,
As two plus two—
The sum of flight and feathers.

And beauty dips, its goal attained, to feed on garbage—
The galley scrapings from a Glasgow freighter,
High-standing at the quay, her empty holds
Agape for wheat, eggs, fish blood sausage,
Having but now vomited
Upon the dock her westbound cargo
Of biscuits, glass, topcoats and chinaware.

Is this truth then?—Tell me,
Bird or poet, does Beauty
At the last, ever dip to feed on garbage?

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