

Classic Poetry Series

John Howard Payne
- poems -

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John Howard Payne(9 June 1791 – 10 April 1852)

John Howard Payne was an American actor, poet, playwright, and author who had most of his theatrical career and success in London. He is today most remembered as the creator of "Home! Sweet Home!", a song he wrote in 1822 that became widely popular in the United States, Great Britain, and the English-speaking world. After his return to the United States, Payne spent time with the Cherokee Indians. He published accounts that suggested their origin as one of the Ten Lost Tribes of ancient Israel.

In 1842, Payne was appointed American Consul to Tunis, where he served for nearly 10 years until his death. Payne was a distant cousin of the American parlor song composer Carrie Jacobs-Bond, born 10 years after Payne's death.

Early Life and Education

John Howard Payne was born in New York City on June 9, 1791, one of the eldest of nine children and seven sons. Soon after his birth, his father moved the family to Boston, where he headed a school. The family also spent time at his grandfather's colonial-era house in East Hampton, New York, which was later preserved in honor of Payne. As a youth, Payne showed precocious dramatic talent, but his father tried to discourage that path. After the death of an older brother, his father installed young Payne, age 13, in the brother's position at the same accountants' firm in New York, but the boy did not have a mind for commerce.

His interest in theater was irrepressible. He published the first issue of *The Thespian Mirror*, a journal of theater criticism, at age 14. Soon after that, he wrote his first play, *Julia: or the Wanderer*, a comedy in five acts. Its language was racy, and it closed quickly. Payne then caught the attention of John E. Seaman, a wealthy New Yorker who recognized his talent and paid for his education at Union College.

Payne started a college paper called the *Pastime*, which he kept up for several issues. When he was 16, his mother died and his father's business failed. Payne thought he could best assist his family by leaving college and going on stage, and made his debut on February 24, 1809 as Young Norval in the play by the same name, at the old Park Theatre in New York. He was a brilliant success, and played in other major cities to acclaim. In a brief interval away from the theatre, he founded the Athenaeum, a circulating library and reading room.

Payne was friends with Sam Colt and his brother John C. Colt, who were accused of murdering . Payne was a character witness at John Colt's murder trial and acted as a witness in Colt's wedding ceremony to Caroline Henshaw on the morning of Colt's scheduled execution.

Career

After the death of Payne's father, the young actor was taken up by the English tragedian George Frederick Cooke who came to America and became interested in him. Cooke appeared with Payne in King Lear at New York's Park Theatre. He encouraged Payne to go to London for its theatre world, which the young man did in February 1813.

Payne's first engagements as an actor in London were very successful, and he played at Drury Lane and Covent Garden theatres. Payne also went to Paris, where he attended much theater and met people in the circles. He decided to try writing, which he did easily and quickly, both in English, and translating from French to English. He was paid to translate several French plays for production in London. In 1818 he wrote his own play Brutus, which he sold. Wanting to branch out, he produced some of his own pieces at Sadler's Wells Theatre but, as a theater manager, struggled to make ends meet.

In 1823 Payne worked on a play proposal with Charles Kemble, the manager of Covent Garden Theatre, out of a number he sold to him as a group for £230. Because the one Kemble chose was being produced elsewhere, Payne easily changed the plot, added lyrics for songs and duets to it, and transformed it into an opera he called Clari; or the Maid of Milan. This included his poem and ballad "Home, Sweet Home", which helped make the opera an instantaneous success and Payne a famous man. Sir Henry Bishop wrote the music, based on an Italian folk song.

When the song was published separately, it quickly sold 100,000 copies. The publishers made a considerable profit from it, net £2100 in the first year, and the producer of the opera did well. Only Payne did not really profit by its success. "While his money lasted, he was a prince of bohemians", but had little business sense.

While in Europe, Payne was reportedly romantically infatuated with Mary Shelley, the author of Frankenstein. She had nothing but a literary interest in him. Payne never married.

After spending nearly twenty years in Europe, Payne returned to New York and the United States in 1832. Friends arranged a benefit concert in New York to try

to help him give him a stake. He also toured the country with artist John James Audubon. Payne developed a strong interest in the Cherokee Indians, whose fate had become a public issue. Acknowledged as one of the Five Civilized Tribes, they had developed self-government, a constitution, and written language, but they were under extreme pressure from the US government for removal to the trans-Mississippi West from the southeastern United States. Payne was taken by their story, and lobbied Congress against their removal.

In 1836 Payne went to Georgia as the guest of the Cherokee Chief John Ross, who opposed removal. There were great tensions within the tribe and state at the time. Major Ridge supported removal. Payne visited with Ross to collect and record the myths, religious traditions, foodways and other aspects of the Cherokees. While staying with Ross, Payne was arrested and briefly imprisoned by Georgia authorities as his arrival was considered suspicious. Intercession by General Edward Harden of Athens, to whom Payne had a letter of introduction, accomplished his release.

Payne reported his findings in popular newspaper articles, and also had considerable work that was never published. Payne's collected, unpublished papers from the 1830s have served as important source material for scholars. The writer had visited with the nation as it was on the verge of dramatic change. In 1838 most of the Cherokee did go west on the Trail of Tears. Removal meant the Cherokee Nation was split and transformed, with eastern and western groups developing independently after that time.

Payne believed his research demonstrated that the Cherokee were one of the Ten Lost Tribes of ancient Israel. Payne was reflecting historians and other researchers who still proposed this theory in the nineteenth century. It was at a time when historians tried to correlate their ideas with the Bible and classical texts, and were trying to fit the Native Americans into a biblical scheme of origin. Some scholars criticized Payne for his refusal to accept that the Cherokee had their origins in North America. Others considered his work biased by his attempt to show the "Hebrew" origins of Cherokee religion. When coming upon elements he seemed to recognize from Judaism, rather than seeing these as organic forms that could have arisen independently in numerous religions (Eliade), Payne claimed they were derived from Judaism.

The work of archaeologists, linguists and anthropologists has confirmed that the Cherokee were descended from prehistoric indigenous peoples of North America. Scholars have concluded that these prehistoric peoples originated from eastern Asia and migrated across the Bering Straits to North America more than 15,000 years ago. Although Payne's theory of Cherokee origins related to Biblical tribes has been replaced by the facts of Asian origin, his unpublished papers are useful

to researchers as a rich source of information on the culture of the Cherokee in the early decades of the 19th century.

Last Years in North Africa

In 1842 President John Tyler appointed Payne as the American Consul in Tunis, due in part from support from statesman William Marcy and Secretary of State Daniel Webster, who were moved by his famous song and wanted to help him. Payne served twice in North Africa (the area of present-day Tunisia). He died in Tunis in 1852 and was buried there in St. George's Protestant Cemetery.

Late Celebration

"[N]ever was a dead poet so famous for a single song, or so honored."

Payne's song was widely sung during the American Civil War, when it was treasured by troops of both the North and the South. It was also a particular favorite of President Abraham Lincoln. He asked Italian opera star Adelina Patti to perform it for him and his wife when she appeared at the White House in 1862. The Lincolns were still mourning the death of their son Willie.

In February 1883, Payne's remains were disinterred and brought to the U.S. by steamer, at the suggestion and expense of the philanthropist W.W. Corcoran of Washington, DC, who arranged reinterment in his home city. (He was the founder of the Corcoran Gallery.) In New York, the coffin with Payne's remains was received with honors and transported by black funeral hearse to City Hall, where it was held in state while several thousand people visited the hall to pay respects. For a day all the papers were filled again with the story of his life, for "his song is that one touch of nature which makes the world kin. It is the frailest thread of which fame was ever spun."

The remains were transported to Washington, DC, and held for services on the anniversary of Payne's birth in June.

Arrangements were made for a memorial service to mark the reinterment of Payne's remains at Oak Hill Cemetery in the Georgetown neighborhood. (Corcoran had created this cemetery, where many Civil War veterans were buried.) The memorial service was held on the 91st anniversary of Payne's birth and was attended by President Chester A. Arthur, members of his cabinet, the State Department and the Supreme Court; the Marine Band, and a crowd of 2,000-3,000, filled with literary and other prominent people. Organizers arranged for a full choir to sing "Home, Sweet Home."

Legacy and honors

1873: A bronze bust of Payne was installed with a public ceremony in Prospect Park, Brooklyn.

1883: Payne's ashes were brought back to the United States, received with honors, held in state at New York's City Hall, and reinterred in a ceremony in Washington, DC on the 91st anniversary of his birth.

Circa 1890s: Payne's grandfather's home on James Lane in East Hampton was preserved by Mr. Buck, a wealthy admirer of the poet, and identified as "Home Sweet Home" in Payne's honor. Payne spent time there as a child. Across the street is Mulford Farmhouse, a significant English colonial farmstead, listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

1970: John Howard Payne was inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame.

Cadences

I

(MINOR)

THE ANCIENT memories buried lie,
And the olden fancies pass;
The old sweet flower-thoughts wither and fly,
And die as the April cowslips die,
That scatter the bloomy grass.

All dead, my dear! And the flowers are dead,
And the happy blossoming spring;
The winter comes with its iron tread,
The fields with the dying sun are red,
And the birds have ceas'd to sing.

I trace the steps on the wasted strand
Of the vanish'd springtime's feet:
Wither'd and dead is our Fairyland,
For Love and Death go hand in hand
Go hand in hand, my sweet!

II

(MAJOR)

OH, what shall be the burden of our rhyme,
And what shall be our ditty when the blossom's on the lime?
Our lips have fed on winter and on weariness too long:
We will hail the royal summer with a golden-footed song!

O lady of my summer and my spring,
We shall hear the blackbird whistle and the brown sweet throstle sing,
And the low clear noise of waters running softly by our feet,
When the sights and sounds of summer in the green clear fields are sweet.

We shall see the roses blowing in the green,
The pink-lipp'd roses kissing in the golden summer sheen;
We shall see the fields flower thick with stars and bells of summer gold,
And the poppies burn out red and sweet across the corn-crown'd wold.

The time shall be for pleasure, not for pain;
There shall come no ghost of grieving for the past betwixt us twain;
But in the time of roses our lives shall grow together,
And our love be as the love of gods in the blue Olympic weather.

John Howard Payne

Home, Sweet Home

Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam,
Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home;
A charm from the sky seems to hallow us there,
Which, seek through the world, is ne'er met with elsewhere.
Home, home, sweet, sweet home!
There's no place like home, oh, there's no place like home!

An exile from home, splendor dazzles in vain;
Oh, give me my lowly thatched cottage again!
The birds singing gayly, that come at my call --
Give me them -- and the peace of mind, dearer than all!
Home, home, sweet, sweet home!
There's no place like home, oh, there's no place like home!

I gaze on the moon as I tread the drear wild,
And feel that my mother now thinks of her child,
As she looks on that moon from our own cottage door
Thro' the woodbine, whose fragrance shall cheer me no more.
Home, home, sweet, sweet home!
There's no place like home, oh, there's no place like home!

How sweet 'tis to sit 'neath a fond father's smile,
And the caress of a mother to soothe and beguile!
Let others delight mid new pleasures to roam,
But give me, oh, give me, the pleasures of home.
Home, home, sweet, sweet home!
There's no place like home, oh, there's no place like home!

To thee I'll return, overburdened with care;
The heart's dearest solace will smile on me there;
No more from that cottage again will I roam;
Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home.
Home, home, sweet, sweet, home!
There's no place like home, oh, there's no place like home!

John Howard Payne

Love's Autumn

YES, love, the Spring shall come again,
But not as once it came:
Once more in meadow and in lane
The daffodils shall flame,
The cowslips blow, but all in vain;
Alike, yet not the same.

The roses that we pluck'd of old
Were dew'd with heart's delight;
Our gladness steep'd the primrose-gold
In half its lovely light:
The hopes are long since dead and cold
That flush'd the wind-flowers' white.

Oh, who shall give us back our Spring?
What spell can fill the air
With all the birds of painted wing
That sang for us whilere?
What charm re clothe with blossoming
Our lives, grown blank and bare?

What sun can draw the ruddy bloom
Back to hope's faded rose?
What stir of summer re-illumine
Our hearts' wreck'd garden-close?
What flowers can fill the empty room
Where now the nightshade grows?

'T is but the Autumn's chilly sun
That mocks the glow of May;
'T is but the pallid bindweeds run
Across our garden way,
Pale orchids, scentless every one,
Ghosts of the summer day.

Yet, if it must be so, 't is well:
What part have we in June?
Our hearts have all forgot the spell
That held the summer noon;

We echo back the cuckoo's knell,
And not the linnet's tune.

What shall we do with roses now,
Whose cheeks no more are red?
What violets should deck our brow,
Whose hopes long since are fled?
Recalling many a wasted vow
And many a faith struck dead.

Bring heath and pimpernel and rue,
The Autumn's sober flowers:
At least their scent will not renew
The thought of happy hours,
Nor drag sad memory back unto
That lost sweet time of ours.

Faith is no sun of summertime,
Only the pale, calm light
That, when the Autumn clouds divide,
Hangs in the watchet height,—
A lamp, wherewith we may abide
The coming of the night.

And yet, beneath its languid ray,
The moorlands bare and dry
Bethink them of the summer day
And flower, far and nigh,
With fragile memories of the May,
Blue as the August sky.

These are our flowers: they have no scent
To mock our waste desire,
No hint of bygone ravishment
To stir the faded fire:
The very soul of sad content
Dwells in each azure spire.

I have no violets: you laid
Your blight upon them all:
It was your hand, alas! that made
My roses fade and fall,

Your breath my lilies that forbade
To come at Summer's call.

Yet take these scentless flowers and pale,
The last of all my year:
Be tender to them; they are frail:
But if thou hold them dear,
I 'll not their brighter kin bewail,
That now lie cold and sere.

John Howard Payne

Sibyl

THIS is the glamour of the world antique:
The thyme-scents of Hymettus fill the air,
And in the grass narcissus-cups are fair.
The full brook wanders through the ferns to seek
The amber haunts of bees; and on the peak
Of the soft hill, against the gold-marged sky,
She stands, a dream from out the days gone by.
Entreat her not. Indeed, she will not speak!
Her eyes are full of dreams; and in her ears
There is the rustle of immortal wings;
And ever and anon the slow breeze bears
The mystic murmur of the songs she sings.
Entreat her not: she sees thee not, nor hears
Aught but the sights and sounds of bygone springs.

John Howard Payne

Song's End

THE CHIME of a bell of gold
That flutters across the air,
The sound of a singing of old,
The end of a tale that is told,
Of a melody strange and fair,
of a joy that has grown despair:

For the things that have been for me
I shall never have them again;
The skies and the purple sea,
And day like a melody,
And night like a silver rain
Of stars on forest and plain.

They are shut, the gates of the day;
The night has fallen on me:
My life is a lightless way;
I sing yet, while as I may!
Some day I shall cease, maybe:
I shall live on yet, you will see.

John Howard Payne

Thorgerda

LO, what a golden day it is!
The glad sun rives the sapphire deeps
Down to the dim pearl-floor'd abyss
Where, cold in death, my lover sleeps;

Crowns with soft fire his sea-drench'd hair,
Kisses with gold his lips death-pale,
Lets down from heaven a golden stair,
Whose steps methinks his soul doth scale.

This is my treasure. White and sweet,
He lies beneath my ardent eyne,
With heart that nevermore shall beat,
Nor lips press softly against mine.

How like a dream it seems to me,
The time when hand in hand we went
By hill and valley, I and he,
Lost in a trance of ravishment!

I and my lover here that lies
And sleeps the everlasting sleep,
We walk'd whilere in Paradise;
(Can it be true?) Our souls drank deep

Together of Love's wonder-wine:
We saw the golden days go by,
Unheeding, for we were divine;
Love had advanced us to the sky.

And of that time no traces bin,
Save the still shape that once did hold
My lover's soul, that shone therein,
As wine laughs in a vase of gold.

Cold, cold he lies, and answers not
Unto my speech; his mouth is cold
Whose kiss to mine was sweet and hot
As sunshine to a marigold.

And yet his pallid lips I press;
I fold his neck in my embrace;
I rain down kisses none the less
Upon his unresponsive face:

I call on him with all the fair
Flower-names that blossom out of love;
I knit sea-jewels in his hair;
I weave fair coronals above

The cold, sweet silver of his brow:
For this is all of him I have;
Nor any Future more than now
Shall give me back what Love once gave.

For from Death's gate our lives divide;
His was the Galilean's faith:
With those that serve the Crucified,
He shar'd the chance of Life and Death.

And so my eyes shall never light
Upon his star-soft eyes again;
Nor ever in the day or night,
By hill or valley, wood or plain,

Our hands shall meet afresh. His voice
Shall never with its silver tone
The sadness of my soul rejoice,
Nor his breast throb against my own.

His sight shall never unto me
Return whilst heaven and earth remain:
Though Time blend with Eternity,
Our lives shall never meet again,—

Never by gray or purple sea,
Never again in heavens of blue,
Never in this old earth—ah me!
Never, ah never! in the new.

For me, he treads the windless ways

Among the thick star-diamonds,
Where in the middle æther blaze
The Golden City's pearl gate-fronds;

Sitteth, palm-crown'd and silver-shod,
Where in strange dwellings of the skies
The Christians to their Woman-God
Cease nevermore from psalmodes.

And I, I wait, with haggard eyes
And face grown awful for desire,
The coming of that fierce day's rise
When from the cities of the fire

The Wolf shall come with blazing crest,
And many a giant arm'd for war;
When from the sanguine-streaming West,
Hell-flaming, speedeth Naglfar.

John Howard Payne