

O MAY I JOIN THE
CHOIR
INVISIBLE!

BY
GEORGE ELIOT

O MAY I JOIN THE CHOIR INVISIBLE!

O may I join the choir invisible
Of those immortal dead who live again
In minds made better by their presence; live
In pulses stirred to generosity,
In deeds of daring rectitude, in scorn
Of miserable aims that end with self,
In thoughts sublime that pierce the night like stars,
And with their mild persistence urge men's minds
To vaster issues.

So to live is heaven:
To make undying music in the world,
Breathing a beauteous order that controls
With growing sway the growing life of man.
So we inherit that sweet purity
For which we struggled, failed and agonized
With widening retrospect that bred despair.
Rebellious flesh that would not be subdued,
A vicious parent shaming still its child,
Poor, anxious penitence is quick dissolved;
Its discords, quenched by meeting harmonies,
Die in the large and charitable air;
And all our rarer, better, truer self,
That sobbed religiously in yearning song,
That watched to ease the burden of the world,
Laboriously tracing what must be,
And what may yet be better saw rather
A worthier image for the sanctuary
And shaped it forth before the multitude,
Divinely human, raising worship so
To higher reverence more mixed with love
That better self shall live till human Time
Shall fold its eyelids, and the human sky
Be gathered like a scroll within the tomb
Unread forever.

This is life to come,
Which martyred men have made more glorious
For us who strive to follow.

May I reach
That purest heaven be to other souls
The cup of strength in some great agony,
Enkindle generous ardor, feed pure love,
Beget the smiles that have no cruelty,

Be the sweet presence of a good diffused,
And in diffusion ever more intense!
So shall I join the choir invisible
Whose music is the gladness of the world.

HOW THEY BROUGHT THE GOOD NEWS FROM GHENT TO AIX.

At Aerschot up leaped of a sudden the Sun

I sprang to the stirrup, and Joris and he:
I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped all three;
“Good speed!” cried the watch as the gatebolts undrew,
“Speed!” echoed the wall to us galloping through.
Behind shut the postern, the lights sank to rest,
And into the midnight we galloped abreast.

Not a word to each other; we kept the great pace
Neck by neck, stride by stride, never changing our place;
I turned in my saddle and made its girths tight,
Then shortened each stirrup and set the pique right,
Rebuckled the checkstrap, chained slacker the bit,
Nor galloped less steadily Roland a whit.

’Twas moonset at starting; but while we drew near
Lokeren, the cocks crew and twilight dawned clear;
At Boom a great yellow star came out to see;
At Düffeld ’twas morning as plain as could be;
And from Mecheln churchsteeple we heard the halfchime
So Joris broke silence with “Yet there is time!”

At Aerschot up leaped of a sudden the sun,
And against him the cattle stood black every one,
To stare through the mist at us galloping past;
And I saw my stout galloper Roland at last
With resolute shoulders, each butting away
The haze, as some bluff river headland its spray;

And his low head and crest, just one sharp ear bent back
For my voice, and the other pricked out on his track,
And one eye’s black intelligence ever that glance
O’er its white edge at me, his own master, askance;
And the thick heavy spume flakes, which aye and anon
His fierce lips shook upwards in galloping on.

By Hasselt, Dirck groaned; and cried Joris, “Stay spur!
Your Roos galloped bravely, the fault’s not in her;
“We’ll remember at Aix” for one heard the quick wheeze

Of her chest, saw the stretched neck and staggering knees,
And sunk tail, and horrible heave of the flank,
As down on her haunches she shuddered and sank.

So we were left galloping, Joris and I,
Past Looz and past Tongres, no cloud in the sky;
The broad sun above laughed a pitiless laugh;
'Neath our feet broke the brittle bright stubble like chaff;
Till over by Delhem a dome spire sprung white,
And "Gallop," gasped Joris, "for Aix is in sight!

"How they'll greet us!" and all in a moment his roan
Rolled neck and croup over, lay dead as a stone;
And there was my Roland to bear the whole weight
Of the news which alone could save Aix from her fate,
With his nostrils like pits full of blood to the brim,
And with circles of red for his eyesockets' rim.

Then I cast loose my buffcoat, each holster let fall,
Shook off both my jackboots, let go belt and all,
Stood up in the stirrup, leaned, patted his ear,
Called my Roland his pet name, my horse without peer
Clapped my hands, laughed and sung, any noise, bad or good,
Till at length into Aix Roland galloped and stood.

And all I remember is friends flocking around,
As I sate with his head twixt my knees on the ground;
And no voice but was praising this Roland of mine
As I poured down his throat our last measure of wine,
Which (the burgesses voted by common consent)
Was no more than his due who brought good news from Ghent.

MOTHER AND POET.

Dead! one of them shot by the sea in the east,
And one of them shot in the west by the sea.
Dead! both my boys! When you sit at the feast
And are wanting a great song for Italy free,
Let none look at me!

Yet I was a poetess only last year,
And good at my art for a woman, men said,
But this woman, this, who is agonized here,
The east sea and west sea rhyme on in her head
Forever instead.

What art can woman be good at? Oh, vain!

What art is she good at, but hurting her breast
With the milkteeth of babes, and a smile at the pain?
Ah, boys, how you hurt! you were strong as you pressed,
And I proud by that test.

What's art for a woman? To hold on her knees
Both darlings! to feel all their arms round her throat
Cling, strangle a little! To sew by degrees,
And 'broider the long clothes and neat little coat!
To dream and to dote.

To teach them . . . It stings there. I made them indeed
Speak plain the word 'country.' I taught them, no doubt,
That a country's a thing men should die for at need.
I prated of liberty, rights, and about
The tyrant turned out.

And when their eyes flashed, oh, my beautiful eyes!
I exulted! nay, let them go forth at the wheels
Of the guns, and denied not. But then the surprise,
When one sits quite alone! Then one weeps, then one kneels!
God! how the house feels.

At first happy news came, in gay letters moiled
With my kisses, of camp life and glory, and how
They both loved me, and soon, coming home to be spoiled,
In return would fan off every fly from my brow
With their green laurel bough.

Then was triumph at Turin. 'Ancona was free!
And some one came out of the cheers in the street,
With a face pale as stone to say something to me.
My Guido was dead! I fell down at his feet
While they cheered in the street.

I bore it friends soothed me: my grief looked sublime
As the ransom of Italy. One boy remained
To be leant on and walked with, recalling the time
When the first grew immortal, while both of us strained
To the height he had gained.

And letters still came shorter, sadder, more strong,
Writ now but in one hand. I was not to faint,
One loved me for two . . . would be with me ere long,
And 'Viva Italia' he died for, our saint,
Who forbids our complaint.

Dead! One of them shot by the sea in the east,
And one
of them shot in the West by the sea

My Nanni would add, 'he was safe and aware
Of a presence that turned off the balls . . . was imprest
It was Guido himself, who knew what I could bear,
And how 'twas impossible, quite dispossessed,
To live on for the rest.'

On which, without pause, up the telegraph line,
Swept smoothly the next news from GaetaShot.
Tell his mother. Ah, ah! 'his,' 'their' mother: not 'mine.'
No voice says 'my mother' again to me. What!
You think Guido forgot?

Are souls straight so happy that, dizzy with Heaven,
They drop earth's affection, conceive not of woe?
I think not. Themselves were too lately forgiven
Through that Love and Sorrow which reconciled so
The Above and Below.

O Christ of the seven wounds, who look'dst through the dark
To the face of thy mother! consider, I pray,
How we common mothers stand desolate, mark,
Whose sons, not being Christs, die with eyes turned away,
And no last word to say!

Both boys dead! but that's out of nature. We all
Have been patriots, yet each house must always keep one.
'Twere imbecile hewing out roads to a wall,
And when Italy's made, for what end is it done
If we have not a son?

Ah! ah! ah! when Gaeta's taken, what then?
When the fair, wicked queen sits no more at her sport
Of the fireballs of death crashing souls out of men?
When your guns of Cavalli, with final retort,
Have cut the game short

When Venice and Rome keep their new jubilee,
When your flag takes all Heaven for its white, green, and red,
When you have your country from mountain to sea,
When King Victor has Italy's crown on his head,
(And I have my dead)

What then? Do not mock me! Ah, ring your bells low!

And burn your lights faintly. My country is there,
Above the star pricked by the last peak of snow.
My Italy's therewith my brave civic Pair,
To disfranchise despair.

Forgive me. Some women bear children in strength,
And bite back the cry of their pain in selfscorn,
But the birthpangs of nations will wring us at length
Into wail such as this! and we sit on forlorn
When the manchild is born.

Dead! one of them shot by the sea in the west!
And one of them shot in the east by the sea!
Both! both my boys! If, in keeping the feast,
You want a great song for your Italy free,
Let none look at me!

NATURE'S LADY.

Three years she grew in sun and shower,
Then Nature said, "A lovelier flower
On earth was never sown;
This child I to myself will take,
She shall be mine, and I will make
A lady of my own.

"Myself will to my darling be
Both law and impulse: and with me
The Girl, in rock and plain,
In earth and heaven, in glade and bower,
Shall feel an overseeing power
To kindle or restrain.

"She shall be sportive as the fawn
That wild with glee across the lawn
Or up the mountain springs;
And hers shall be the breathing balm,
And hers the silence and the calm,
Of mute insensate things.

She shall be sportive as the fawn

"The floating clouds their state shall lend
To her; for her the willows bend;
Nor shall she fail to see
Even in the motions of the storm
Grace that shall mould the maiden's form

By silent sympathy.

“The stars of midnight shall be dear
To her; and she shall lean her ear
In many a secret place
Where rivulets dance their wayward round,
And beauty born of murmuring sound
Shall pass into her face.”

TO A SKYLARK.

Hail to thee, blithe spirit
Bird thou never wert
That from heaven or near it
Pourest thy full heart
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.

Higher still and higher
From the earth thou springest,
Like a cloud of fire;
The blue deep thou wingest,
And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest.

In the golden lightning
Of the sunken sun,
O'er which clouds art bright'ning,
Thou dost float and run,
Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun.

The pale purple even
Melts around thy flight;
Like a star of heaven,
In the broad daylight
Thou art unseen, but yet I hear thy shrill delight

Keen as are the arrows
Of that silver sphere
Whose intense lamp narrows
In the white dawn clear
Until we hardly see, we feel, that it is there.

All the earth and air
With thy voice is loud,
As, when night is bare,
From one lonely cloud
The moon rains out her beams, and heaven is overflowed.

What thou art we know not;
What is most like thee?
From rainbowclouds there flow not
Drops so bright to see
As from thy presence showers a rain of melody:

Like a poet hidden
In the light of thought,
Singing hymns unbidden,
Till the world is wrought
To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not;

Like a highborn maiden
In a palace tower,
Soothing her loveladen
Soul in secret hour
With music sweet as love which overflows her bower;

Like a glowworm golden
In a dell of dew,
Scattering un beholden
Its aerial hue
Among the flowers and grass which screen it from the view;

Like a rose embowered
In its own green leaves,
By warm winds deflowered,
Till the scent it gives
Makes faint with too much heat these heavywinged thieves;

Thou art unseen, but yet I hear they shrill delight

Sound of vernal showers
On the twinkling grass,
Rainawakened flowers
All that ever was
Joyous and clear and freshthy music doth surpass.

Teach us, sprite or bird,
What sweet thoughts are thine:
I have never heard
Praise of love or wine
That panted forth a flood of rapture so divine.

Chorus hymeneal,
Or triumphal chaunt,
Matched with thine, would be all

But an empty vaunt
A thing wherein we feel there is some hidden want.

What objects are the fountains
Of the happy strain?
What fields, or waves or mountains?
What shapes of sky or plain?
What love of thine own kind? what ignorance of pain?

With thy clear keen joyance
Languor cannot be:
Shadow of annoyance
Never came near thee:
Thou lovest, but ne'er knew love's sad satiety.

Waking or asleep,
Thou of death must deem
Things more true and deep
Than we mortals dream,
Or how could thy notes flow in such a crystal stream?

We look before and after,
And pine for what is not;
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught;
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.

Yet, if we could scorn
Hate and pride and fear,
If we were things born
Not to shed a tear,
I know not how thy joy we ever should come near.

Better than all measures
Of delightful sound,
Better than all treasures
That in books are found,
Thy skill to poet were, thou scorner of the ground!

Teach me half the gladness
That thy brain must know,
Such harmonious madness
From my lips would flow
The world should listen then as I am listening now.

Freeditorial 