

**Frances E. W. Harper**

**Poems**

ETHIOPIA

Yes! Ethiopia yet shall stretch  
Her bleeding hands abroad;  
Her cry of agony shall reach  
The burning throne of God.

The tyrant's yoke from off her neck,  
His fetters from her soul,  
The mighty hand of God shall break  
And spurn the base control.

Redeemed from dust, and freed from chains,  
Her sons shall lift their eyes;  
From cloud-capt hills and verdant plains  
Shall shouts of triumph rise.

Upon her dark, despairing brow  
Shall play a smile of peace;  
For God shall bend unto her wo,  
And bid her sorrows cease.

'Neath sheltering vines and stately palms  
Shall laughing children play;  
And aged sires, with joyous psalms,  
Shall gladden every day.

Secure by night, and blest by day,  
Shall pass her happy hours;  
Nor human tigers hunt for prey  
Within her peaceful bowers.

Then, Ethiopia! Stretch, oh stretch  
Thy bleeding hands abroad;  
Thy cry of agony shall reach  
And find redress from God.

(1853?)

ELIZA HARRIS

Like a fawn from the arrow, startled and wild,  
A woman swept by us, bearing a child;  
In her eye was the night of a settled despair,  
And her brow was o'ershaded with anguish and care.

She was nearing the river – in reaching the brink,  
She heeded no danger, she paused not to think!  
For she is a mother – her child is a slave –  
And she'll give him his freedom, or find him a grave!

'Twas a vision to haunt us, that innocent face –  
So pale in its aspect, so fair in its grace;  
As the tramp of the horse and the bay of the hound,  
With the fetters that gall, were trailing the ground!

She was nerved by despair, and strengthen'd by woe,  
As she leap'd o'er the chasms that yawn'd from below;  
Death howl'd in the tempest, and rav'd in the blast,  
But she heard not the sound till the danger was past.

Oh! how shall I speak of my proud country's shame?  
Of the stains on her glory, how give them their name?  
How say that her banner in mockery waves –  
Her "star-spangled banner" – o'er millions of slaves?

How say that the lawless may torture and chase  
A woman whose crime is the hue of her face?  
How the depths of forest may echo around  
With the shrieks of despair, and the bay of the hound?

With her step on the ice, and her arm on her child,  
The danger was fearful, the pathway was wild;  
But, aided by Heaven, she gained a free shore,  
Where the friends of humanity open'd their door.

So fragile and lovely, so fearfully pale,  
Like a lily that bends to the breath of the gale,  
Save the heave of her breast, and the sway of her hair,  
You'd have thought her a statue of fear and despair.

In agony close to her bosom she press'd

The life of her heart, the child of her breast: —  
Oh! love from its tenderness gathering might,  
Had strengthen'd her soul for the dangers of flight.

But she's free! — yes, free from the land where the slave  
From the hand of oppression must rest in the grave;  
Where bondage and torture, where scourges and chains  
Have plac'd on our banner indelible stains.

The bloodhounds have miss'd the scent of her way;  
The hunter is rifled and foil'd of his prey;  
Fierce jargon and cursing, with clanking of chains,  
Make sounds of strange discord on Liberty's plains.

With the rapture of love and fullness of bliss,  
She plac'd on his brow a mother's fond kiss: —  
Oh! poverty, danger and death she can brave,  
For the child of her love is no longer a slave!

(1853)

#### THE SLAVE MOTHER

Heard you that shriek? It rose  
So wildly on the air,  
It seem'd as if a burden'd heart  
Was breaking in despair.

Saw you those hands so sadly clasped —  
The bowed and feeble head —  
The shuddering of that fragile form —  
That look of grief and dread?

Saw you the sad, imploring eye?  
Its every glance was pain,  
As if a storm of agony  
Were sweeping through the brain.

She is a mother pale with fear,  
Her boy clings to her side,  
And in her kirtle vainly tries  
His trembling form to hide.

He is not hers, although she bore  
For him a mother's pains;  
He is not hers, although her blood  
Is coursing through his veins!

He is not hers, for cruel hands  
May rudely tear apart  
The only wreath of household love  
That binds her breaking heart.

His love has been a joyous light  
That o'er her pathway smiled,  
A fountain gushing ever new,  
Amid life's desert wild.

His lightest word has been a tone  
Of music round her heart,  
Their lives a streamlet blent in one —  
Oh, Father! must they part?

They tear him from her circling arms,  
Her last and fond embrace.  
Oh! never more may her sad eyes  
Gaze on his mournful face.

No marvel, then, these bitter shrieks  
Disturb the listening air:  
She is a mother, and her heart  
Is breaking in despair.

(1854)

VASHTI.

She leaned her head upon her hand  
And heard the King's decree —  
"My lords are feasting in my halls;  
Bid Vashti come to me.

"I've shown the treasures of my house,  
My costly jewels rare,  
But with the glory of her eyes  
No rubies can compare.

"Adorn'd and crown'd I'd have her come,  
With all her queenly grace,  
And, 'mid my lords and mighty men,  
Unveil her lovely face.

"Each gem that sparkles in my crown,  
Or glitters on my throne,  
Grows poor and pale when she appears,  
My beautiful, my own!"

All waiting stood the chamberlains  
To hear the Queen's reply.  
They saw her cheek grow deathly pale,  
But light flash'd to her eye:

"Go, tell the King," she proudly said,  
"That I am Persia's Queen,  
And by his crowds of merry men  
I never will be seen.

"I'll take the crown from off my head  
And tread it 'neath my feet,  
Before their rude and careless gaze  
My shrinking eyes shall meet.

"A queen unveil'd before the crowd! —  
Upon each lip my name! —  
Why, Persia's women all, would blush  
And weep for Vashti's shame!

"Go back!" she cried, and waved her hand,  
And grief was in her eye:  
"Go, tell the King," she sadly said,  
"That I would rather die."

They brought her message to the King;  
Dark flash'd his angry eye;  
'Twas as the lightning ere the storm  
Hath swept in fury by.

Then bitterly outspoke the King,  
Through purple lips of wrath —  
"What shall be done to her who dares  
To cross your monarch's path?"

Then spake his wily counsellors —  
"O King of this fair land!  
From distant Ind to Ethiop,  
All bow to thy command.

"But if, before thy servants' eyes,  
This thing they plainly see,  
That Vashti doth not heed thy will  
Nor yield herself to thee,

"The women, restive 'neath our rule,  
Would learn to scorn our name,  
And from her deed to us would come  
Reproach and burning shame.

"Then, gracious King, sign with thy hand  
This stern but just decree,  
That Vashti lay aside her crown,  
Thy Queen no more to be."

She heard again the King's command,  
And left her high estate;  
Strong in her earnest womanhood,  
She calmly met her fate,

And left the palace of the King,  
Proud of her spotless name —  
A woman who could bend to grief,  
But would not bow to shame.

(1857)

#### A DOUBLE STANDARD

Do you blame me that I loved him?  
If when standing all alone  
I cried for bread a careless world  
Pressed to my lips a stone.

Do you blame me that I loved him,  
That my heart beat glad and free,

When he told me in the sweetest tones  
He loved but only me?

Can you blame me that I did not see  
Beneath his burning kiss  
The serpent's wiles, nor even hear  
The deadly adder hiss?

Can you blame me that my heart grew cold  
That the tempted, tempter turned;  
When he was feted and caressed  
And I was coldly spurned?

Would you blame him, when you draw from me  
Your dainty robes aside,  
If he with gilded baits should claim  
Your fairest as his bride?

Would you blame the world if it should press  
On him a civic crown;  
And see me struggling in the depth  
Then harshly press me down?

Crime has no sex and yet to-day  
I wear the brand of shame;  
Whilst he amid the gay and proud  
Still bears an honored name.

Can you blame me if I've learned to think  
Your hate of vice a sham,  
When you so coldly crushed me down  
And then excused the man?

Would you blame me if to-morrow  
The coroner should say,  
A wretched girl, outcast, forlorn,  
Has thrown her life away?

Yes, blame me for my downward course,  
But oh! remember well,  
Within your homes you press the hand  
That led me down to hell.

I'm glad God's ways are not our ways,  
He does not see as man,

Within His love I know there's room  
For those whom others ban.

I think before His great white throne,  
His throne of spotless light,  
That whited sepulchres shall wear  
The hue of endless night.

That I who fell, and he who sinned,  
Shall reap as we have sown;  
That each the burden of his loss  
Must bear and bear alone.

No golden weights can turn the scale  
Of justice in His sight;  
And what is wrong in woman's life  
In man's cannot be right.

(1895)