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THE BLACK RIDERS AND OTHER LINES

Stephen Crane

Crane, Stephen (1871-1900) - An American novelist, short-story writer, and poet who is often called the first modern American writer. The Black Riders and Other Lines (1895) - A book of free verse. The title poem was inspired by Crane's boyhood dream of black riders on black horses rising out of the sea.

THE BLACK RIDERS AND OTHER LINES

I Black riders came from the sea.

There was clang and clang of spear and shield, And clash and clash of hoof and heel, Wild shouts and the wave of hair In the rush upon the wind: Thus the ride of sin.

II Three little birds in a row Sat musing.

A man passed near that place.

Then did the little birds nudge each other.

They said, "He thinks he can sing." They threw back their heads to laugh. With quaint countenances They regarded him.

They were very curious, Those three little birds in a row.

III In the desert I saw a creature, naked, bestial, who, squatting upon the ground, Held his heart in his hands, And ate of it.

I said, "Is it good, friend?" "It is bitter — bitter," he answered; "But I like it Because it is bitter, And because it is my heart."

IV Yes, I have a thousand tongues, And nine and ninety-nine lie.

Though I strive to use the one, It will make no melody at my will, But is dead in my mouth.

V Once there came a man Who said, "Range me all men of the world in rows." And instantly There was terrific clamour among

the people Against being ranged in rows. There was a loud quarrel,
world-wide. It endured for ages; And blood was shed By those who
would not stand in rows, And by those who pined to stand in
rows. Eventually, the man went to death, weeping. And those who
staid in bloody scuffle Knew not the great simplicity.

VI God fashioned the ship of the world carefully. With the infinite
skill of an All-Master Made He the hull and the sails, Held He the
rudder Ready for adjustment. Erect stood He, scanning His work
proudly. Then — at fateful time — a wrong called, And God
turned, heeding. Lo, the ship, at this opportunity, slipped slyly,
Making cunning noiseless travel down the ways. So that, forever
rudderless, it went upon the seas Going ridiculous voyages,
Making quaint progress, Turning as with serious purpose Before
stupid winds. And there were many in the sky Who laughed at this
thing.

VII Mystic shadow, bending near me, Who art thou? Whence come
ye? And — tell me — is it fair Or is the truth bitter as eaten fire?
Tell me! Fear not that I should quaver .For I dare — I dare. Then,
tell me!

VIII I looked here; I looked there; Nowhere could I see my love.
And — this time — She was in my heart. Truly, then, I have no
complaint, For though she be fair and fairer, She is none so fair as
she In my heart.

IX I stood upon a high place, And saw, below, many devils
Running, leaping, and carousing in sin.

One looked up, grinning, And said, "Comrade! Brother!"

X Should the wide world roll away, Leaving black terror, Limitless
night, Nor God, nor man, nor place to stand Would be to me
essential, If thou and thy white arms were there, And the fall to
doom a long way.

XI In a lonely place, I encountered a sage Who sat, all still,
Regarding a newspaper. He accosted me: "Sir, what is this?" Then I
saw that I was greater, Aye, greater than this sage. I answered him
at once, "Old, old man, it is the wisdom of the age." The sage
looked upon me with admiration.

XII "And the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the heads of
the children, even unto the third and fourth generation of them
that hate me." Well, then I hate thee, unrighteous picture; Wicked

image, I hate thee; So, strike with thy vengeance The heads of those little men Who come blindly. It will be a brave thing.

XIII If there is a witness to my little life, To my tiny throes and struggles, He sees a fool; And it is not fine for gods to menace fools.

XIV There was crimson clash of war. Lands turned black and bare; Women wept; Babes ran, wondering. There came one who understood not these things. He said, "Why is this?" Whereupon a million strove to answer him. There was such intricate clamour of tongues, That still the reason was not.

XV "Tell brave deeds of war." Then they recounted tales, — "There were stern stands And bitter runs for glory." Ah, I think there were braver deeds.

VI Charity thou art a lie, A toy of women, A pleasure of certain men. In the presence of justice, Lo, the walls of the temple Are visible Through thy form of sudden shadows.

XVII There were many who went in huddled procession, They knew not whither; But, at any rate, success or calamity Would attend all in equality. There was one who sought a new road. He went into direful thickets, And ultimately he died thus, alone; But they said he had courage.

XVIII In heaven, Some little blades of grass Stood before God.

"What did you do?" Then all save one of the little blades Began eagerly to relate The merits of their lives. This one stayed a small way behind, Ashamed. Presently, God said, "And what did you do?" The little blade answered, "Oh my Lord, Memory is bitter to me, For, if I did good deeds, I know not of them." Then God, in all His splendor, Arose from His throne. "Oh, best little blade of grass!" He said.

XIX A god in wrath Was beating a man; He cuffed him loudly With thunderous blows That rang and rolled over the earth. All people came running. The man screamed and struggled, And bit madly at the feet of the god.

The people cried, "Ah, what a wicked man!" And — "Ah, what a redoubtable god!"

XX A learned man came to me once. He said, "I know the way, — come." And I was overjoyed at this. Together we hastened. Soon, too soon, were we Where my eyes were useless, And I knew not

the ways of my feet. I clung to the hand of my friend; But at last he cried, "I am lost."

XXI There was, before me, Mile upon mile Of snow, ice, burning sand. And yet I could look beyond all this, To a place of infinite beauty; And I could see the loveliness of her Who walked in the shade of the trees. When I gazed, All was lost But this place of beauty and her. When I gazed, And in my gazing, desired, Then came again Mile upon mile, Of snow, ice, burning sand.

XXII Once I saw mountains angry, And ranged in battle-front.

Against them stood a little man; Aye, he was no bigger than my finger. I laughed, and spoke to one near me, "Will he prevail?" "Surely," replied this other; "His grandfathers beat them many times." Then did I see much virtue in grandfathers — At least, for the little man Who stood against the mountains.

XXIII Places among the stars, Soft gardens near the sun, Keep your distant beauty; Shed no beams upon my weak heart.

Since she is here In a place of blackness, Not your golden days Nor your silver nights

Can call me to you. Since she is here In a place of blackness, Here I stay and wait

XXIV I saw a man pursuing the horizon; Round and round they sped. I was disturbed at this; I accosted the man. "It is futile," I said, "You can never — " "You lie," he cried, And ran on.

XXV Behold, the grave of a wicked man, And near it, a stern spirit. There came a drooping maid with violets, But the spirit grasped her arm. "No flowers for him," he said. The maid wept:

"Ah, I loved him." But the spirit, grim and frowning: "No flowers for him."

Now, this is it — If the spirit was just, Why did the maid weep?

XXVI There was set before me a mighty hill, And long days I climbed Through regions of snow. When I had before me the summit-view, It seemed that my labour Had been to see gardens Lying at impossible distances.

XXVII A youth in apparel that glittered Went to walk in a grim forest. There he met an assassin Attired all in garb of old days;

He, scowling through the thickets, And dagger poised quivering,
Rushed upon the youth. "Sir," said this latter, "I am enchanted,
believe me, To die, thus, In this medieval fashion, According to the
best legends; Ah, what joy!" Then took he the wound, smiling, And
died, content.

XXVIII "Truth," said a traveller, "Is a rock, a mighty fortress; Often
have I been to it, Even to its highest tower, From whence the world
looks black." "Truth," said a traveller, "Is a breath, a wind, A
shadow, a phantom; Long have I pursued it, But never have I
touched The hem of its garment." And I believed the second
traveller; For truth was to me A breath, a wind, A shadow, a
phantom, And never had I touched The hem of its garment.

XXIX Behold, from the land of the farther suns I returned.

And I was in a reptile-swarmling place, Peopled, otherwise, with
grimaces, Shrouded above in black impenetrableness. I shrank,
loathing, Sick with it. And I said to him, "What is this?" He made
answer slowly, "Spirit, this is a world; This was your home."

XXX Supposing that I should have the courage To let a red sword
of virtue Plunge into my heart, Letting to the weeds of the ground
My sinful blood, What can you offer me? A gardened castle? A
flowery kingdom? What? A hope? Then hence with your red
sword of virtue.

XXXI Many workmen Built a huge ball of masonry Upon a
mountain-top. Then they went to the valley below, And turned to
behold their work. "It is grand," they said; They loved the thing.
Of a sudden, it moved: It came upon them swiftly; It crushed them
all to blood. But some had opportunity to squeal.

XXXII Two or three angels Came near to the earth. They saw a fat
church. Little black streams of people Came and went in
continually. And the angels were puzzled To know why the people
went thus, And why they stayed so long within.

XXXIII There was one I met upon the road Who looked at me with
kind eyes. Her said, "Show me of your wares." And this I did,
Holding forth one. He said, "It is a sin." Then held I forth another;
He said, "It is a sin." Then held I forth another; He said, "It is a
sin." And so to the end; Always he said, "It is a sin." And, finally, I
cried out, "But I have none other." Then did he look at me With
kinder eyes. "Poor soul!" he said.

XXXIV I stood upon a highway, And, behold, there came Many
strange peddlers. To me each one made gestures, Holding forth
little images, saying, "This is my pattern of God.
Now this is the God I prefer." But I said, "Hence!
Leave me with mine own, And take you yours away; I can't buy of
your patterns of God, The little gods you may rightly prefer."

XXXV A man saw a ball of gold in the sky; He climbed for it, And
eventually he achieved it — It was clay. Now this is the strange
part: When the man went to the earth And looked again, Lo, there
was the ball of gold. Now this is the strange part:

It was a ball of gold. Aye, by the heavens, it was a ball of gold.

XXXVI I met a seer. He held in his hands The book of wisdom.
"Sir," I addressed him, "Let me read." "Child — " he began.
"Sir," I said, "Think not that I am a child, For already I know much
Of that which you hold. Aye, much." He smiled.
Then he opened the book And held it before me. — Strange that I
should have grown so suddenly blind.

XXXVII On the horizon the peaks assembled; And as I looked, The
march of the mountains began.
As they marched, they sang, "Aye! We come! We come!"

XXXVIII The ocean said to me once, "Look!
Yonder on the shore Is a woman, weeping. I have watched her.
Go you and tell her this — Her lover I have laid In cool green hall.
There is wealth of golden sand And pillars, coral-red; Two white
fish stand guard at his bier.

"Tell her this And more — That the king of the seas Weeps too,
old, helpless man. The bustling fates Heap his hands with corpses
Until he stands like a child With a surplus of toys."

XXXIX The livid lightnings flashed in the clouds; The leaden
thunders crashed. A worshipper raised his arm.

"Hearken! Hearken! The voice of God!" "Not so," said a man.
"The voice of God whispers in the heart So softly That the soul
pauses, Making no noise, And strives for these melodies, Distant,
sighing, like faintest breath, And all the being is still to hear."

XL And you love me I love you.

You are, then, cold coward. Aye; but, beloved, When I strive to
come to you, Man's opinions, a thousand thickets, My interwoven
existence, My life, Caught in the stubble of the world Like a tender
veil — This stays me. No strange move can I make Without noise of
tearing I dare not. If love loves, There is no world Nor word.

All is lost Save thought of love And place to dream.
 You love me? I love you.
 You are, then, cold coward. Aye; but, beloved —

XLI Love walked alone. The rocks cut her tender feet, And the
 brambles tore her fair limbs. There came a companion to her, But,
 alas, he was no help, For his name was heart's pain.

XLII I walked in a desert. And I cried, "Ah, God, take me from this
 place!" A voice said, "It is no desert." I cried, "Well, But — The
 sand, the heat, the vacant horizon." A voice said, "It is no desert."

XLIII There came whisperings in the winds:

"Good-bye! Good-bye!" Little voices called in the darkness:

"Good-bye! Good-bye!" Then I stretched forth my arms.

"No — no — " There came whisperings in the wind "Good-bye!
 Good-bye!" Little voices called in the darkness:

"Good-bye! Good-bye!"

XLIV I was in the darkness; I could not see my words Nor the
 wishes of my heart. Then suddenly there was a great light —

"Let me into the darkness again."

XLV Tradition, thou art for suckling children, Thou art the
 enlivening milk for babes; But no meat for men is in thee.

Then — But, alas, we all are babes.

XLVI Many red devils ran from my heart And out upon the page,
 They were so tiny The pen could mash them. And many struggled
 in the ink. It was strange To write in this red muck Of things from
 my heart.

XLVII "Think as I think," said a man, "Or you are abominably
 wicked; You are a toad." And after I had thought of it, I said, "I
 will, then, be a toad."

XLVIII Once there was a man — Oh, so wise!

In all drink He detected the bitter, And in all touch He found the
 sting. At last he cried thus: "There is nothing — No life, No joy, No
 pain — There is nothing save opinion, And opinion be damned."

XLIX I stood musing in a black world, Not knowing where to
 direct my feet. And I saw the quick stream of men Pouring
 ceaselessly, Filled with eager faces, A torrent of desire.

I called to them, "Where do you go? What do you see?" A
 thousand voices called to me. A thousand fingers pointed.

"Look! look! There!" I know not of it.

But, lo! In the far sky shone a radiance Ineffable, divine — A vision
 painted upon a pall; And sometimes it was, And sometimes it was

not. I hesitated. Then from the stream
Came roaring voices,
Impatient:

“Look! look! There!”

So again I saw, And leaped, unhesitant, And struggled and fumed
With outspread clutching fingers.

The hard hills tore my flesh; The ways bit my feet.

At last I looked again.

No radiance in the far sky, Ineffable, divine; No vision painted
upon a pall; And always my eyes ached for the light.

Then I cried in despair, “I see nothing! Oh, where do I go?” The
torrent turned again its faces:

“Look! look! There!”

And at the blindness of my spirit They screamed, “Fool! fool! fool!”

L You say you are holy, And that Because I have not seen you sin.

Aye, but there are those Who see you sin, my friend.

LI A man went before a strange God — The God of many men,
sadly wise. And the deity thundered loudly, Fat with rage, and
puffing. “Kneel, mortal, and cringe And grovel and do homage To
My Particularly Sublime Majesty.” The man fled.

Then the man went to another God — The God of his inner
thoughts. And this one looked at him With soft eyes Lit with
infinite comprehension, And said, “My poor child!”

LII Why do you strive for greatness, fool? Go pluck a bough and
wear it. It is as sufficing.

My Lord, there are certain barbarians Who tilt their noses As if the
stars were flowers, And Thy servant is lost among their shoe-
buckles. Fain would I have mine eyes even with their eyes.

Fool, go pluck a bough and wear it.

LIII

i Blustering God, Stamping across the sky With loud swagger, I
fear You not. No, though from Your highest heaven You plunge
Your spear at my heart, I fear You not. No, not if the blow Is as the
lightning blasting a tree, I fear You not, puffing braggart.

ii If Thou canst see into my heart That I fear Thee not, Thou wilt
see why I fear Thee not, And why it is right. So threaten not, Thou,
with Thy bloody spears, Else Thy sublime ears shall hear curses.

iii Withal, there is One whom I fear: I fear to see grief upon that face. Perchance, friend, He is not your God; If so, spit upon Him. By it you will do no profanity. But I — Ah, sooner would I die Than see tears in those eyes of my soul.

LIV “It was wrong to do this,” said the angel.
 “You should live like a flower, Holding malice like a puppy, Waging war like a lambkin.”
 “Not so,” quoth the man Who had no fear of spirits; “It is only wrong for angels Who can live like the flowers, Holding malice like the puppies, Waging war like the lambkins.”

LV A man toiled on a burning road, Never resting.
 Once he saw a fat, stupid ass Grinning at him from a green place.

The man cried out in rage, “Ah! Do not deride me, fool!

I know you — All day stuffing your belly, Burying your heart In grass and tender sprouts:

It will not suffice you.” But the ass only grinned at him from the green place.

LVI A man feared that he might find an assassin; Another that he might find a victim. One was more wise than the other.

LVII With eye and with gesture You say you are holy.
 I say you lie; For I did see you Draw away your coats From the sin upon the hands Of a little child. Liar!

LVIII The sage lectured brilliantly.
 Before him, two images: “Now this one is a devil, And this one is me.” He turned away. Then a cunning pupil Changed the positions. Turned the sage again: “Now this one is a devil, And this one is me.” The pupils sat, all grinning, And rejoiced in the game. But the sage was a sage.

LIX Walking in the sky, A man in strange black garb Encountered a radiant form. Then his steps were eager; Bowed he devoutly.
 “My Lord,” said he.

But the spirit knew him not.

LX Upon the road of my life, Passed me many fair creatures, Clothed all in white, and radiant.
 To one, finally, I made speech:

“Who art thou?”

But she, like the others, Kept cowed her face, And answered in haste, anxiously, “I am good deed, forsooth; You have often seen me.” “Not uncowed,” I made reply. And with rash and strong hand, Though she resisted, I drew away the veil And gazed at the features of vanity. She, shamefaced, went on; And after I had mused a time, I said of myself, “Fool!”

LXI

i There was a man and a woman Who sinned.
Then did the man heap the punishment All upon the head of her,
And went away gaily.
ii There was a man and a woman Who sinned.
And the man stood with her.
As upon her head, so upon his, Fell blow and blow, And all people
screaming, “Fool!” He was a brave heart.
iii He was a brave heart.

Would you speak with him, friend? Well, he is dead, And there went your opportunity. Let it be your grief That he is dead And your opportunity gone; For, in that, you were a coward.

LXII There was a man who lived a life of fire.

Even upon the fabric of time, Where purple becomes orange And orange purple, This life glowed, A dire red stain, indelible; Yet when he was dead, He saw that he had not lived.

LXIII There was a great cathedral.

To solemn songs, A white procession Moved toward the altar.
The chief man there Was erect, and bore himself proudly.
Yet some could see him cringe, As in a place of danger, Throwing frightened glances into the air, A-start at threatening faces of the past.

LXIV Friend, your white beard sweeps the ground.

Why do you stand, expectant? Do you hope to see it In one of your withered days? With your old eyes Do you hope to see The triumphal march of justice? Do not wait, friend! Take your white beard And your old eyes To more tender lands.

LXV Once, I knew a fine song, — It is true, believe me — It was all of birds, And I held them in a basket; When I opened the wicket, Heavens! They all flew away. I cried, “Come back, little thoughts!” But they only laughed. They flew on Until they were as sand Thrown between me and the sky.

LXVI If I should cast off this tattered coat, And go free into the
mighty sky; If I should find nothing there But a vast blue, Echoless,
ignorant — What then?

LXVII God lay dead in heaven; Angels sang the hymn of the end;
Purple winds went moaning, Their wings drip-dripping With
blood That fell upon the earth. It, groaning thing, Turned black and
sank. Then from the far caverns Of dead sins

Came monsters, livid with desire.

They fought, Wrangled over the world, A morsel.

But of all sadness this was sad — A woman's arms tried to shield
The head of a sleeping man From the jaws of the final beast.

LXVIII A spirit sped Through spaces of night; And as he sped, he
called, "God! God!" He went through valleys Of black death-slime,
Ever calling, "God! God!" Their echoes From crevice and cavern
Mocked him:

"God! God! God!"

Fleetly into the plains of space He went, ever calling, "God! God!"
Eventually, then, he screamed, Mad in denial, "Ah, there is no
God!" A swift hand, A sword from the sky, Smote him, And he
was dead.

THE END