

# The Poet's Allegory

By Richard Middleton

## I

The boy came into the town at six o'clock in the morning, but the baker at the corner of the first street was up, as is the way of bakers, and when he saw the boy passing, he hailed him with a jolly shout.

"Hullo, boy! What are you after?"

"I'm going about my business," the boy said pertly.

"And what might that be, young fellow?"

"I might be a good tinker, and worship god Pan, or I might grind scissors as sharp as the noses of bakers. But, as a matter of fact, I'm a piper, not a rat-catcher, you understand, but just a simple singer of sad songs, and a mad singer of merry ones."

"Oh," said the baker dully, for he had hoped the boy was in search of work. "Then I suppose you have a message."

"I sing songs," the boy said emphatically. "I don't run errands for any one save it be for the fairies."

"Well, then, you have come to tell us that we are bad, that our lives are corrupt and our homes sordid. Nowadays there's money in that if you can do it well."

"Your wit gets up too early in the morning for me, baker," said the boy. "I tell you I sing songs."

"Aye, I know, but there's something in them, I hope. Perhaps you bring news. They're not so popular as the other sort, but still, as long as it's bad news——"

"Is it the flour that has changed his brains to dough, or the heat of the oven that has made them like dead grass?"

"But you must have some news——?"

"News! It's a fine morning of summer, and I saw a kingfisher across the water-meadows coming along. Oh, and there's a cuckoo back in the fir plantation, singing with a May voice. It must have been asleep all these months."

"But, my dear boy, these things happen every day. Are there no battles or earthquakes or famines in the world? Has no man murdered his wife or robbed his neighbour? Is no one oppressed by tyrants or lied to by their officers?"

The boy shrugged his shoulders.

"I hope not," he said. "But if it were so, and I knew, I should not tell you. I don't want to make you unhappy."

"But of what use are you then, if it be not to rouse in us the discontent that is alone divine? Would you have me go fat and happy, listening to your babble of kingfishers and cuckoos, while my brothers and sisters in the world are starving?"

The boy was silent for a moment.

"I give my songs to the poor for nothing," he said slowly. "Certainly they are not much use to empty bellies, but they are all I have to give. And I take it, since you speak so feelingly, that you, too, do your best. And these others, these people who must be reminded hourly to throw their crusts out of window for the poor——would you have me sing to them? They must be told that life

is evil, and I find it good; that men and women are wretched, and I find them happy; that food and cleanliness, order and knowledge are the essence of content while I only ask for love. Would you have me lie to cheat mean folk out of their scraps?"

The baker scratched his head in astonishment.

"Certainly you are very mad," he said. "But you won't get much money in this town with that sort of talk. You had better come in and have breakfast with me."

"But why do you ask me?" said the boy, in surprise.

"Well, you have a decent, honest sort of face, although your tongue is disordered."

"I had rather it had been because you liked my songs," said the boy, and he went in to breakfast with the baker.

## II

Over his breakfast the boy talked wisely on art, as is the wont of young singers, and afterwards he went on his way down the street.

"It's a great pity," said the baker; "he seems a decent young chap."

"He has nice eyes," said the baker's wife.

As the boy passed down the street he frowned a little.

"What is the matter with them?" he wondered. "They're pleasant people enough, and yet they did not want to hear my songs."

Presently he came to the tailor's shop, and as the tailor had sharper eyes than the baker, he saw the pipe in the boy's pocket.

"Hullo, piper!" he called. "My legs are stiff. Come and sing us a song!"

The boy looked up and saw the tailor sitting cross-legged in the open window of his shop.

"What sort of song would you like?" he asked.

"Oh! the latest," replied the tailor. "We don't want any old songs here." So the boy sung his new song of the kingfisher in the water-meadow and the cuckoo who had overslept itself.

"And what do you call that?" asked the tailor angrily, when the boy had finished.

"It's my new song, but I don't think it's one of my best." But in his heart the boy believed it was, because he had only just made it.

"I should hope it's your worst," the tailor said rudely. "What sort of stuff is that to make a man happy?"

"To make a man happy?" echoed the boy, his heart sinking within him.

"If you have no news to give me, why should I pay for your songs? I want to hear about my neighbours, about their lives, and their wives and their sins. There's the fat baker up the street—they say he cheats the poor with light bread. Make me a song of that, and I'll give you some breakfast. Or there's the magistrate at the top of the hill who made the girl drown herself last week. That's a poetic subject."

"What's all this?" said the boy disdainfully. "Can't you make dirt enough for yourself?"

"You with your stuff about birds," shouted the tailor; "you're a rank impostor! That's what you are!"

"They say that you are the ninth part of a man, but I find that they have grossly exaggerated," cried the boy, in retort; but he had a heavy heart as he made off along the street.

By noon he had interviewed the butcher, the cobbler, the milkman, and the maker of candlesticks, but they treated him no better than the tailor had done, and as he was feeling tired he went and sat down under a tree.

“I begin to think that the baker is the best of the lot of them,” he said to himself ruefully, as he rolled his empty wallet between his fingers.

Then, as the folly of singers provides them in some measure with a philosophy, he fell asleep.

### III

When he woke it was late in the afternoon, and the children, fresh from school, had come out to play in the dusk. Far and near, across the town-square, the boy could hear their merry voices, but he felt sad, for his stomach had forgotten the baker’s breakfast, and he did not see where he was likely to get any supper. So he pulled out his pipe, and made a mournful song to himself of the dancing gnats and the bitter odour of the bonfires in the townsfolk’s gardens. And the children drew near to hear him sing, for they thought his song was pretty, until their fathers drove them home, saying, “That stuff has no educational value.”

“Why haven’t you a message?” they asked the boy.

“I come to tell you that the grass is green beneath your feet and that the sky is blue over your heads.”

“Oh! but we know all that,” they answered.

“Do you! Do you!” screamed the boy. “Do you think you could stop over your absurd labours if you knew how blue the sky is? You would be out singing on the hills with me!”

“Then who would do our work?” they said, mocking him.

“Then who would want it done?” he retorted; but it’s ill arguing on an empty stomach.

But when they had tired of telling him what a fool he was, and gone away, the tailor’s little daughter crept out of the shadows and patted him on the shoulder.

“I say, boy!” she whispered. “I’ve brought you some supper. Father doesn’t know.” The boy blessed her and ate his supper while she watched him like his mother and when he had done she kissed him on the lips.

“There, boy!” she said.

“You have nice golden hair,” the boy said. “See! it shines in the dusk. It strikes me it’s the only gold I shall get in this town.”

“Still it’s nice, don’t you think?” the girl whispered in his ear. She had her arms round his neck.

“I love it,” the boy said joyfully; “and you like my songs, don’t you?”

“Oh, yes, I like them very much, but I like you better.”

The boy put her off roughly.

“You’re as bad as the rest of them,” he said indignantly. “I tell you my songs are everything, I am nothing.”

“But it was you who ate my supper, boy,” said the girl.

The boy kissed her remorsefully. “But I wish you had liked me for my songs,” he sighed.

“You are better than any silly old songs!”

“As bad as the rest of them,” the boy said lazily, “but somehow pleasant.”

The shadows flocked to their evening meeting in the square, and overhead the stars shone out in a sky that was certainly exceedingly blue.

### IV

Next morning they arrested the boy as a rogue and a vagabond, and in the afternoon they brought him before the magistrate.

“And what have you to say for yourself?” said the magistrate to the boy, after the second policeman, like a faithful echo, had finished reading his notes.

“Well,” said the boy, “I may be a rogue and a vagabond. Indeed, I think that I probably am; but I would claim the license that has always been allowed to singers.”

“Oh!” said the magistrate. “So you are one of those, are you? And what is your message?”

“I think if I could sing you a song or two I could explain myself better,” said the boy.

“Well,” replied the magistrate doubtfully, “you can try if you like, but I warn you that I wrote songs myself when I was a boy, so that I know something about it.”

“Oh, I’m glad of that,” said the boy, and he sang his famous song of the grass that is so green, and when he had finished the magistrate frowned.

“I knew that before,” he said.

So then the boy sang his wonderful song of the sky that is so blue. And when he had finished the magistrate scowled. “And what are we to learn from that?” he said.

So then the boy lost his temper and sang some naughty doggerel he had made up in his cell that morning. He abused the town and townsmen, but especially the townsmen. He damned their morals, their customs, and their institutions. He said that they had ugly faces, raucous voices, and that their bodies were unclean. He said they were thieves and liars and murderers, that they had no ear for music and no sense of humour. Oh, he was bitter!

“Good God!” said the magistrate, “that’s what I call real improving poetry. Why didn’t you sing that first? There might have been a miscarriage of justice.”

Then the baker, the tailor, the butcher, the cobbler, the milkman, and the maker of candlesticks rose in court and said—

“Ah, but we all knew there was something in him.”

So the magistrate gave the boy a certificate that showed that he was a real singer, and the tradesmen gave him a purse of gold, but the tailor’s little daughter gave him one of her golden ringlets. “You won’t forget, boy, will you?” she said.

“Oh, no,” said the boy; “but I wish you had liked my songs.”

Presently, when he had come a little way out of the town, he put his hand in his wallet and drew out the magistrate’s certificate and tore it in two; and then he took out the gold pieces and threw them into the ditch, and they were not half as bright as the buttercups. But when he came to the ringlet he smiled at it and put it back.

“Yet she was as bad as the rest of them,” he thought with a sigh.

And he went across the world with his songs.