Opening Extract from...

FRIENDS: A POEM FOR EVERY DAY OF THE YEAR

Written by **Jane McMorland Hunter**

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EDITED BY *Jane McMorland Hunter*

BATSFORD

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To Louy and Matilda, with all my love.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

Jane McMorland Hunter has compiled six anthologies: *Favourite Poems of London*, *Favourite Poems of England*, *Classic Readings and Poems* and *A Nature Poem for Every Day of the Year* for Batsford and *Poems of the First World War* and *Favourite Poems* for The National Trust. She also writes gardening books and works as a gardener and as the Shop Scribe at Hatchards Bookshop in Piccadilly, compiling their annual catalogues.

Introduction

There are many different types of friends: old and new, those you see every day, others you might never see but whose contact is still important, and, ideally, lovers and married couples. This collection of poems is aimed at all of these people and more: children, students, families and people nearing the end of their lives who may have more ghostly friends than living ones. There are poems about friendship, poems you would give to a friend and one or two pieces of particularly poetic prose.

Throughout our lives we make, keep and, regrettably, lose friends. Old friends, as praised by Austin Dobson, may be the best, but there was a moment when they were new friends; first meetings, first friends and first loves are all important. At any stage of life, what is clear is that friends make most things better: William Wordsworth's description of skating, G. K. Chesterton's drunken outing and Robert Louis Stevenson's piratical adventures are all better because they are enjoyed in company. Even food tastes better with friends, as Ben Jonson's planning and Robert Herrick's lonely meal attest.

Our first friends are often our siblings, followed by school playmates and fellow scholars. It is at this point that love and friendship start to intertwine. Emily Brontë is clear on the difference between the two, describing one as an ephemeral wild briar rose and the other as an everlasting holly tree. Laura, in Thomas Moore's 'Temple

to Friendship', confuses friendship and love when choosing a statue for her garden; how much more confusing are matters which involve real people. Sonnets by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, William Shakespeare and others describe feelings of love, but many of these could equally apply to our friends – do most of us not love our closest friends?

Marriage is, again ideally, a union of two friends. From Thomas Campion and Anne Bradstreet to William Barnes and Charles Jefferys, poets have extolled the virtues of friendship in marriage. Laurence Alma-Tadema points out that even if you fail to marry, a squirrel, a rabbit, a pony and a lamb will provide the companionship you need.

Animals are often our best friends, although some are more reliable than others; Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Flush is well known for his faithfulness but Tiger, Binkie and an unnamed watchdog also prove their worth at the hands of Jonathan Swift, Rudyard Kipling and Lord Byron. Cats have a more varied reputation, with Christopher Smart and others recognising that a cat's friendship is never quite as unquestioning as that of a dog. For other poets a falcon, a lamb, a tree and a hare are less likely soulmates (Thomas Wyatt, Sarah Josepha Hale, Christina Rossetti and William Cowper respectively).

Friendship between animals also exists, with the surprising pairing of a duck and a kangaroo courtesy of Edward Lear, and the charming faithfulness of a goldfinch who, in the mind of William Cowper, chooses to forsake freedom rather than desert his friend in their cage.

Memories of friends can be as important as friendship itself. Fleeting glimpses of happiness appear in Louis MacNeice's 'Sunlight on the Garden', and in Leigh Hunt's 'Rondeau' the memory of a single kiss outweighs all the trials and tribulations of old age. In some cases the memories can make the dead seem more alive than the living. Many poets write of lost friends and loves, either

through death or misfortune. Whatever the cause, as Lord Tennyson writes, ''Tis better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all'.

As well as descriptions of friendships, this anthology also contains poems which one could give to a friend: Edward Thomas' 'Thaw', which sees the passing of winter, and John Drinkwater's 'Miracle', which welcomes spring. The pleasure of a walk in the countryside and the time to 'stand and stare' are things any friends would wish to share. W. B. Yeats gives us the perfect Christmas gesture of friendship, to spread one's dreams at another's feet.

Although this is an anthology of poetry, in each month there is a little prose. Essays by Francis Bacon, William Emerson and others were too moving to ignore. There are diaries, plays, passages from the Bible, and an extract from Charles Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers* which describe friendship in a poetical way even if they are not strictly poetry.

In many anthologies the order of the poems is governed by external factors: nature by the passing seasons, life by the passage of time itself. Here, apart from Valentine's, the famously exuberant spring and a few dates with personal connections, there was no such guide. It was impossible to place the poems so that they could be all things to all readers; my hope is that all will find some poems that pertain particularly to them whilst still being able to enjoy the others.

One of the most perceptive poems in this collection is by Edward Verrall Lucas, who rightly points out that often we cannot explain our choice of friends:

'We two are friends' tells everything.
Yet if you must know, this is why:
Because he is he and I am I.
Edward Verrall Lucas

JANUARY

It is a Sweet Thing, Friendship

1 JANUARY

Passages of the Poem, or Connected Therewith

LINES 62–77

It is a sweet thing, friendship, a dear balm,
A happy and auspicious bird of calm,
Which rides o'er life's ever tumultuous Ocean;
A God that broods o'er chaos in commotion;
A flower which fresh as Lapland roses are,
Lifts its bold head into the world's frore air,
And blooms most radiantly when others die,
Health, hope, and youth, and brief prosperity;
And with the light and odour of its bloom,
Shining within the dungeon and the tomb;
Whose coming is as light and music are
'Mid dissonance and gloom – a star
Which moves not 'mid the moving heavens alone –
A smile among dark frowns – a gentle tone
Among rude voices, a belovèd light,
A solitude, a refuge, a delight.

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822)

2 JANUARY

Since We Parted

Since we parted yester eve,
I do love thee, love, believe,
Twelve times dearer, twelve hours longer, –
One dream deeper, one night stronger,
One sun surer, – thus much more
Than I loved thee, love before.

Edward Bulwer-Lytton / Owen Meredith (1831–1891)

DECEMBER

Winter is Deck'd with a Smile

Natural History

(A LETTER TO KATHERINE, FROM THE
KING EDWARD HOTEL, TORONTO)

The spider, dropping down from twig,
Unfolds a plan of her devising,
A thin premeditated rig
To use in rising.

And all that journey down through space,
In cool descent, and loyal hearted,
She spins a ladder to the place
From where she started.

Thus I, gone forth, as spiders do,
In spider's web a truth discerning,
Attach one silken thread to you
For my returning.

E. B. White (1899–1985)

'How Pleasant to Know Mr. Lear!'

'How pleasant to know Mr. Lear!'
  Who has written such volumes of stuff!
Some think him ill-tempered and queer,
  But a few find him pleasant enough.

His mind is concrete and fastidious; –
  His nose is remarkably big; –
His visage is more or less hideous; –
  His beard it resembles a wig.

He has ears, and two eyes, and ten fingers, –
  (Leastways if you reckon two thumbs;)
Long ago he was one of the singers,
  But now he is one of the dumms.

He sits in a beautiful parlour,
  With hundreds of books on the wall;
He drinks a great deal of Marsala,
  But never gets tipsy at all.

He has many friends, laymen and clerical;
  Old Foss is the name of his cat;
His body is perfectly spherical; –
  He weareth a runcible hat.

When he walks in waterproof white
  The children run after him so!
Calling out, – 'He's gone out in his night-
  gown, that crazy old Englishman, – O'

He weeps by the side of the ocean,
  He weeps on the top of the hill;
He purchases pancakes and lotion,
  And chocolate shrimps from the mill.

He reads, but he cannot speak, Spanish;
  He cannot abide ginger beer. –
Ere the days of his pilgrimage vanish, –
  'How pleasant to know Mr. Lear!'

Edward Lear (1812–1888)

3 DECEMBER

Love and Friendship

Love is like the wild rose briar,
Friendship, like the holly tree
The holly is dark when the rose briar blooms
But which will bloom most constantly?

The wild rose briar is sweet in spring,
Its summer blossoms scent the air;
Yet wait till winter comes again
And who will call the wild-briar fair?

Then scorn the silly rose-wreath now
And deck thee with the holly's sheen,
That when December blights thy brow
He still may leave thy garland green.

Emily Brontë (1818–1848)

To a Cat

I
Stately, kindly, lordly friend,
Condescend
Here to sit by me, and turn
Glorious eyes that smile and burn,
Golden eyes, love's lustrous meed,
On the golden page I read.

All your wondrous wealth of hair,
Dark and fair,
Silken-shaggy, soft and bright
As the clouds and beams of night,
Pays my reverent hand's caress
Back with friendlier gentleness.

Dogs may fawn on all and some
As they come;
You, a friend of loftier mind,
Answer friends alone in kind.
Just your foot upon my hand
Softly bids it understand.

Morning round this silent sweet
Garden-seat
Sheds its wealth of gathering light,
Thrills the gradual clouds with might,
Changes woodland, orchard, heath,
Lawn, and garden there beneath.

Fair and dim they gleamed below:
Now they glow
Deep as even your sunbright eyes,
Fair as even the wakening skies.
Can it not or can it be
Now that you give thanks to see?

May not you rejoice as I,
Seeing the sky
Change to heaven revealed, and bid
Earth reveal the heaven it hid
All night long from stars and moon,
Now the sun sets all in tune?

What within you wakes with day
Who can say?
All too little may we tell,
Friends who like each other well,
What might haply, if we might,
Bid us read our lives aright.

II
Wild on woodland ways your sires
Flashed like fires:
Fair as flame and fierce and fleet
As with wings on wingless feet
Shone and sprang your mother, free,
Bright and brave as wind or sea.

Free and proud and glad as they,
  Here to-day
Rests or roams their radiant child,
Vanquished not, but reconciled,
Free from curb of aught above
Save the lovely curb of love.

Love through dreams of souls divine
    Fain would shine
Round a dawn whose light and song
Then should right our mutual wrong –
Speak, and seal the love-lit law
Sweet Assisi's seer foresaw.

Dreams were theirs; yet haply may
    Dawn a day
When such friends and fellows born,
Seeing our earth as fair at morn,
May for wiser love's sake see
More of heaven's deep heart than we.

Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837–1909)

5 DECEMBER

Cyril and Florian

FROM *THE PRINCESS*, PART I

That morning in the presence room I stood
With Cyril and with Florian, my two friends:
The first, a gentleman of broken means
(His father's fault) but given to starts and bursts
Of revel; and the last, my other heart,
And almost my half-self, for still we moved
Together, twinn'd as horse's ear and eye.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–1892)