Early Affection

By George Moses Horton

I lov’d thee from the earliest dawn,
    When first I saw thy beauty’s ray,
And will, until life’s eve comes on,
    And beauty’s blossom fades away;
And when all things go well with thee,
    With smiles and tears remember me.

I’ll love thee when thy morn is past,
    And wheedling gallantry is o’er,
When youth is lost in age’s blast,
    And beauty can ascend no more,
And when life’s journey ends with thee,
    O, then look back and think of me.

I’ll love thee with a smile or frown,
    ’Mid sorrow’s gloom or pleasure’s light,
And when the chain of life runs down,
    Pursue thy last eternal flight,
When thou hast spread thy wing to flee,
    Still, still, a moment wait for me.

I’ll love thee for those sparkling eyes,
    To which my fondness was betray’d,
Bearing the tincture of the skies,
    To glow when other beauties fade,
And when they sink too low to see,
    Reflect an azure beam on me.

Born a slave on William Horton’s tobacco plantation, George Moses Horton taught himself to read. Around 1815 he began composing poems in his head, saying them aloud and “selling” them to buyers at the weekly Chapel Hill farmers market. As his fame spread, he gained the attention of Caroline Lee Whiting Hentz, a novelist and professor’s wife who transcribed his poetry and helped publish it in the newspaper. With her assistance, Horton published his first collection of poetry, The Hope of Liberty (1829), becoming the first African American to publish a book in the South—and the
only one to publish it while still in slavery. After 68 years as a slave, he settled in Philadelphia for 17 years of freedom before his death. His poetry explores faith, love, and slavery while celebrating the rural beauty of Chatham County, home of the plantation on which Horton spent much of his life.

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