Verse

by

Edith Wharton

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BOTTICELLI'S MADONNA IN THE LOUVRE

What strange presentiment, O Mother, lies
On thy waste brow and sadly-folded lips,
Forefeeling the Light's terrible eclipse
On Calvary, as if love made thee wise,
And thou couldst read in those dear infant eyes
The sorrow that beneath their smiling sleeps,
And guess what bitter tears a mother weeps
When the cross darkens her unclouded skies?

Sad Lady, if some mother, passing thee,
Should feel a throb of thy foreboding pain,
And think—"My child at home clings so to me,
With the same smile . . . and yet in vain, in vain,
Since even this Jesus died on Calvary"—
Say to her then: "He also rose again."

THE TOMB OF ILARIA GIUNIGI

Ilaria, thou that wert so fair and dear
That death would fain disown thee, grief made wise
With prophecy thy husband's widowed eyes
And bade him call the master's art to rear
Thy perfect image on the sculptured bier,
With dreaming lids, hands laid in peaceful guise
Beneath the breast that seems to fall and rise,
And lips that at love's call should answer, "Here!"

First-born of the Renascence, when thy soul
Cast the sweet robing of the flesh aside,
Into these lovelier marble limbs it stole,
Regenerate in art's sunrise clear and wide
As saints who, having kept faith's raiment whole,
Change it above for garments glorified.

THE SONNET

Pure form, that like some chalice of old time
  Contain'st the liquid of the poet's thought
  Within thy curving hollow, gem-enwrought
  With interwoven traceries of rhyme,
While o'er thy brim the bubbling fancies climb,
  What thing am I, that undismayed have sought
  To pour my verse with trembling hand untaught
  Into a shape so small yet so sublime?
Because perfection haunts the hearts of men,
  Because thy sacred chalice gathered up
  The wine of Petrarch, Shakspere, Shelley—then
Receive these tears of failure as they drop
  (Sole vintage of my life), since I am fain
  To pour them in a consecrated cup.

TWO BACKGROUNDS

I

LA VIERGE AU DONATEUR.

Here by the ample river's argent sweep,
Bosomed in tilth and vintage to her walls,
A tower-crowned Cybele in armored sleep
The city lies, fat plenty in her halls,
With calm, parochial spires that hold in fee
The friendly gables clustered at their base,
And, equipoised o'er tower and market-place,
The Gothic minster's winged immensity;
And in that narrow burgh, with equal mood,
Two placid hearts, to all life's good resigned,
Might, from the altar to the lych-gate, find
Long years of peace and dreamless plenitude.

II

MONA LISA

Yon strange blue city crowns a scarped steep
No mortal foot hath bloodlessly essayed;
Dreams and illusions beacon from its keep,
But at the gate an Angel bares his blade;
And tales are told of those who thought to gain
At dawn its ramparts; but when evening fell
Far off they saw each fading pinnacle
Lit with wild lightnings from the heaven of pain;
Yet there two souls, whom life's perversities
Had mocked with want in plenty, tears in mirth,
Might meet in dreams, ungarmented of earth,
And drain Joy's awful chalice to the lees.

EXPERIENCE

I

Like Crusoe with the bootless gold we stand
Upon the desert verge of death, and say:
"What shall avail the woes of yesterday
To buy to-morrow's wisdom, in the land
Whose currency is strange unto our hand?
In life's small market they have served to pay
Some late-found rapture, could we but delay
Till Time hath matched our means to our demand."

But otherwise Fate wills it, for, behold,
Our gathered strength of individual pain,
When Time's long alchemy hath made it gold,
Dies with us—hoarded all these years in vain,
Since those that might be heir to it the mould
Renew, and coin themselves new griefs again.

II

O, Death, we come full-handed to thy gate,
Rich with strange burden of the mingled years,
Gains and renunciations, mirth and tears,
And love's oblivion, and remembering hate,
Nor know we what compulsion laid such freight
Upon our souls—and shall our hopes and fears
Buy nothing of thee, Death? Behold our wares,
And sell us the one joy for which we wait.
Had we lived longer, life had such for sale,
With the last coin of sorrow purchased cheap,
But now we stand before thy shadowy pale,
And all our longings lie within thy keep—
Death, can it be the years shall naught avail?

"Not so," Death answered, "they shall purchase sleep."

CHARTRES

I

Immense, august, like some Titanic bloom,
  The mighty choir unfolds its lithic core,
Petalled with panes of azure, gules and or,
  Splendidly lambent in the Gothic gloom,
And stamened with keen flamelets that illume
  The pale high-altar. On the prayer-worn floor,
By surging worshippers thick-thronged of yore,
  A few brown crones, familiars of the tomb,
The stranded driftwood of Faith's ebbing sea—
  For these alone the finials fret the skies,
The topmost bosses shake their blossoms free,
  While from the triple portals, with grave eyes,
Tranquil, and fixed upon eternity,
  The cloud of witnesses still testifies.

II

The crimson panes like blood-drops stigmatize
  The western floor. The aisles are mute and cold.
A rigid fetich in her robe of gold
  The Virgin of the Pillar, with blank eyes,
Enthroned beneath her votive canopies,
  Gathers a meagre remnant to her fold.
The rest is solitude; the church, grown old,
  Stands stark and gray beneath the burning skies.
Wellnigh again its mighty frame-work grows
  To be a part of nature's self, withdrawn
From hot humanity's impatient woes;
  The floor is ridged like some rude mountain lawn,
And in the east one giant window shows
  The roseate coldness of an Alp at dawn.

LIFE

Life, like a marble block, is given to all,
A blank, inchoate mass of years and days,
Whence one with ardent chisel swift essays
Some shape of strength or symmetry to call;
One shatters it in bits to mend a wall;
One in a craftier hand the chisel lays,
And one, to wake the mirth in Lesbia's gaze,
Carves it apace in toys fantastical.

But least is he who, with enchanted eyes
Filled with high visions of fair shapes to be,
Muses which god he shall immortalize
In the proud Parian's perpetuity,
Till twilight warns him from the punctual skies
That the night cometh wherein none shall see.

AN AUTUMN SUNSET

I

Leaguered in fire
The wild black promontories of the coast extend
Their savage silhouettes;
The sun in universal carnage sets,
And, halting higher,
The motionless storm-clouds mass their sullen threats,
Like an advancing mob in sword-points penned,
That, balked, yet stands at bay.
Mid-zenith hangs the fascinated day
In wind-lustrated hollows crystalline,
A wan valkyrie whose wide pinions shine
Across the ensanguined ruins of the fray,
And in her lifted hand swings high o'erhead,
Above the waste of war,
The silver torch-light of the evening star
Wherewith to search the faces of the dead.

II

Lagooned in gold,
Seem not those jetty promontories rather
The outposts of some ancient land forlorn,
Uncomforted of morn,
Where old oblivions gather,
The melancholy, unconsoling fold
Of all things that go utterly to death
And mix no more, no more
With life's perpetually awakening breath?
Shall Time not ferry me to such a shore,
Over such sailless seas,
To walk with hope's slain importunities
In miserable marriage? Nay, shall not
All things be there forgot,
Save the sea's golden barrier and the black
Closecrouching promontories?
Dead to all shames, forgotten of all glories,
Shall I not wander there, a shadow's shade,
A spectre self-destroyed,
So purged of all remembrance and sucked back
Into the primal void,
That should we on that shore phantasmal meet
I should not know the coming of your feet?

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