



*THE AUGUSTAN BOOKS OF
MODERN POETRY*

LORD ALFRED
DOUGLAS

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The Sphinx

IGAZE across the Nile; flamelike and red
The sun goes down, and all the western sky
Is drowned in sombre crimson; wearily
A great bird flaps along with wings of lead,
Black on the rose-red river. Over my head
The sky is hard green bronze, beneath me lie
The sleeping ships; there is no sound, or sigh
Of the wind's breath,—a stillness of the dead.

Over a palm tree's top I see the peaks
Of the tall pyramids; and though my eyes
Are barred from it, I know that on the sand
Crouches a thing of stone that in some wise
Broods on my heart; and from the darkening land
Creeps Fear and to my soul in whisper speaks.

British Agency, Cairo, 1893.

Impression de Nuit

London

SEE what a mass of gems the city wears
Upon her broad live bosom! row on row
Rubies and emeralds and amethysts glow.
See! that huge circle like a necklace, stares
With thousands of bold eyes to heaven, and dares
The golden stars to dim the lamps below,
And in the mirror of the mire I know
The moon has left her image unawares.

That's the great town at night: I see her breasts,
Pricked out with lamps they stand like huge black towers.
I think they move! I hear her panting breath.
And that's her head where the tiara rests.
And in her brain, through lanes as dark as death,
Men creep like thoughts The lamps are like pale
flowers.

London, 1894.

Night Coming Out of a Garden

THROUGH the still air of night
Suddenly comes, alone and shrill,
Like the far-off voice of the distant light,
The single piping trill
Of a bird that has caught the scent of the dawn,
And knows that the night is over;
(She has poured her dew on the velvet lawn
And drenched the long grass and the clover),
And now with her naked white feet
She is silently passing away,
Out of the garden and into the street,
Over the long yellow fields of the wheat,
Till she melts in the arms of the day.
And from the great gates of the East,
With a clang and a brazen blare,
Forth from the rosy wine and the feast
Comes the god with the flame-flaked hair;
The hoofs of his horses ring
On the golden stones, and the wheels
Of his chariot burn and sing,
And the earth beneath him reels;
And forth with a rush and a rout
His myriad angels run,
And the world is awake with a shout,
"He is coming! The sun! The sun!"

Perkin Warbeck

AT Turney in Flanders I was born
Fore-doomed to splendour and sorrow,
For I was a king when they cut the corn,
And they strangle me to-morrow.

Oh! why was I made so red and white,
So fair and straight and tall?
And why were my eyes so blue and bright,
And my hands so white and small?

And why was my hair like the yellow silk,
And curled like the hair of a king?
And my body like the soft new milk
That the maids bring from milking?

I was nothing but a weaver's son,
I was born in a weaver's bed;
My brothers toiled and my sisters spun,
And my mother wove for our bread.

I was the latest child she had,
And my mother loved me the best.
She would laugh for joy and anon be sad
That I was not as the rest.

For my brothers and sisters were black as the gate
Whereby I shall pass to-morrow,
But I was white and delicate,
And born to splendour and sorrow.

And my father the weaver died full soon,
But my mother lived for me;
And I had silk doublets and satin shoon
And was nurtured tenderly.

And the good priests had much joy of me,
For I had wisdom and wit;
And there was no tongue or subtlety
But I could master it.

And when I was fourteen summers old
There came an English knight,
With purple cloak and spurs of gold,
And sword of chrysolite.

He rode through the town both sad and slow,
And his hands lay in his lap;
He wore a scarf as white as the snow,
And a snow-white rose in his cap.

And he passed me by in the market-place,
And he reined his horse and stared,
And I looked him fair and full in the face,
And he stayed with his head all bared.

And he leaped down quick and bowed his knee,
And took hold on my hand,
And he said, "Is it ghost or wraith that I see,
Or the White Rose of England?"

And I answered him in the Flemish tongue,
"My name is Peter Warbeckke,
From Katherine de Faro I am sprung,
And my father was John Osbeckke.

"My father toiled and weaved with his hand
And bare neither sword nor shield;
And the White Rose of fair England
Turned red on Bosworth field."

And he answered, "What matter for anything?
For God hath given to thee
The voice of the king and the face of the king,
And the king thou shalt surely be."

And he wrought on me till the vesper bell,
And I rode forth out of the town:
And I might not bid my mother farewell,
Lest her love should seem more than a crown.

And the sun went down, and the night waxed black,
And the wind sang wearily;
And I thought on my mother, and would have gone back,
But he would not suffer me.

And we rode, and we rode, was it nine days or three?
Till we heard the bells that ring
For "my cousin Margaret of Burgundy,"
And I was indeed a king.

For I had a hundred fighting men
To come at my beck and call,
And I had silk and fine linen
To line my bed withal.

They dressed me all in silken dresses,
And little I wot did they reckon
Of the precious scents for my golden tresses,
And the golden chains for my neck.

And all the path for "the rose" to walk
Was strewn with flowers and posies,
I was the milk-white rose of York,
The rose of all the roses.

And the Lady Margaret taught me well,
Till I spake without lisp
Of Warwick and Clarence and Isabel,
And "my father" Edward the King.

And I sailed to Ireland and to France,
And I sailed to fair Scotland,
And had much honour and pleasaunce,
And Katherine Gordon's hand.

And after that what brooks it to say
Whither I went or why?
I was as loath to leave my play
And fight, as now to die.

For I was not made for wars and strife
And blood and slaughtering,
I was but a boy that loved his life,
And I had not the heart of a king.

Oh! why hath God dealt so hardly with me,
That such a thing should be done,
That a boy should be born with a king's body
And the heart of a weaver's son?

I was well pleased to be at the court,
Lord of the thing that seems;
It was merry to be a prince for sport,
A king in a kingdom of dreams.

But ever they said I must strive and fight
To wrest away the crown,
So I came to England in the night
And I warred on Exeter town.

And the King came up with a mighty host
And what could I do but fly?
I had three thousand men at the most,
And I was most loath to die.

And they took me and brought me to London town,
And I stood where all men might see;
I, that had well-nigh worn a crown,
In a shameful pillory!

And I cried these words in the English tongue,
“I am Peter Warbeckke,
From Katherine de Faro I am sprung
And my father was John Osbeckke.

“My father toiled and weaved with his hand,
And bare neither sword nor shield;
And the White Rose of fair England
Turned red on Bosworth field.”

And they gave me my life, but they held me fast
Within this weary place;
But I wrought on my guards ere a month was past,
With my wit and my comely face.

And they were ready to set me free,
But when it was almost done,
And I thought I should gain the narrow sea
And look on the face of the sun,

The lord of the tower had word of it,
And, alas! for my poor hope,
For this is the end of my face and my wit—
That to-morrow I die by the rope.

And the time draws nigh and the darkness closes,
And the night is almost done.
What had I to do with their roses,
I, the poor weaver's son?

They promised me a bed so rich
And a queen to be my bride,
And I have gotten a narrow ditch
And a stake to pierce my side.

They promised me a kingly part
And a crown my head to deck,
And I have gotten the hangman's cart
And a hempen cord for my neck.

Oh! I would that I had never been born,
To splendour and shame and sorrow,
For it's ill riding to grim Tiborne,
Where I must ride to-morrow.

I shall dress me all in silk and scarlet,
And the hangman shall have my ring,
For though I be hanged like a low-born varlet
They shall know I was once a king.

And may I not fall faint or sick
Till I reach at last to the goal,
And I pray that the rope may choke me quick
And Christ receive my soul.

Hatch House, 1893.

A Prayer

OFTEN the western wind has sung to me,
There have been voices in the streams and meres,
And pitiful trees have told me, God, of Thee:
And I heard not. Oh! open Thou mine ears.

The reeds have whispered low as I passed by,
"Be strong, O friend, be strong, put off vain fears,
Vex not thy soul with doubts, God cannot lie":
And I heard not. Oh! open Thou mine ears.

There have been many stars to guide my feet,
Often the delicate moon, hearing my sighs,
Has rent the clouds and shown a silver street;
And I saw not. Oh! open Thou mine eyes.

Angels have beckoned me unceasingly,
And walked with me; and from the sombre skies
Dear Christ Himself has stretched out hands to me;
And I saw not. Oh! open Thou mine eyes.

Clouds, 1894.

The Image of Death

I CARVED an image coloured like the night,
Winged with huge wings, stern-browed and menacing,
With hair caught back, and diademed like a king.
The left hand held a sceptre, and the right
Grasped a sharp sword, the bitter marble lips
Were curled and proud; the yellow topaz eyes
(Each eye a jewel) stared in fearful wise;
The hard fierce limbs were bare, and from the hips
A scourge hung down. And on the pedestal
I wrote these words, "O all things that have breath
This is the image of the great god Death,
Pour ye the wine and bind the coronal!
Pipe unto him with pipes and flute with flutes,
Woo him with flowers and spices odorous,
Let singing boys with lips mellifluous
Make madrigals and lull his ear with lutes.
Anon bring sighs and tears of harsh distress,
And weeping wounds! so haply ye may move
A heart of stone, from breasts of hate suck love,
Or garner pity from the pitiless."

Wine of Summer

THE sun holds all the earth and all the sky
From the gold throne of this midsummer day.
In the soft air the shadow of a sigh
Breathes on the leaves and scarcely makes them sway.
The wood lies silent in the shimmering heat,
Save where the insects make a lazy drone,
And ever and anon from some tree near,
 A dove's enamoured moan,
Or distant rook's faint cawing harsh and sweet,
Comes dimly floating to my listening ear.

Right in the wood's deep heart I lay me down,
And look up at the sky between the leaves,
Through delicate lace I see her deep blue gown.
Across a fern a scarlet spider weaves
From branch to branch a slender silver thread,
And hangs there shining in the white sunbeams,
A ruby tremulous on a streak of light.
 And high above my head
One spray of honeysuckle sways and dreams,
With one wild honey-bee for acolyte.

My nest is all untrod and virginal,
And virginal the path that led me here,
For all along the grass grew straight and tall,
And live things rustled in the thicket near:
And briar rose stretched out to sweet briar rose
Wild slender arms, and barred the way to me
With many a flowering arch, rose-pink or white,
 As bending carefully,
Leaving unbroken all their blossoming bows,
I passed along, a reverent neophyte.

The air is full of soft imaginings,
They float unseen beneath the hot sunbeams,
Like tired moths on heavy velvet wings.
They droop above my drowsy head like dreams.
The hum of bees, the murmuring of doves,
The soft faint whispering of unnumbered trees,
Mingle with unreal things, and low and deep
 From visionary groves,
Imagined lutes make voiceless harmonies,
And false flutes sigh before the gates of sleep.

O rare sweet hour! O cup of golden wine!
The night of these my days is dull and dense,
And stars are few, be this the anodyne!
Of many woes the perfect recompense.
I thought that I had lost for evermore
The sense of this ethereal drunkenness,
This fierce desire to live, to breathe, to be;
 But even now, no less
Than in the merry moon that danced before
My tedious night, I taste its ecstasy.

Taste, and remember all the summer days
That lie, like gold reflections in the lake
Of vanished years, unreal but sweet always;
Soft luminous shadows that I may not take
Into my hands again, but still discern
Drifting like gilded ghosts before my eyes,
Beneath the waters of forgotten things,
 Sweet with faint memories,
And mellow with old loves that used to burn
Dead summer days ago, like fierce red kings.

And this hour too must die, even now the sun
Droops to the sea, and with untroubled feet
The quiet evening comes: the day is done.
The air that throbbled beneath the passionate heat

Grows calm and cool and virginal again.
The colour fades and sinks to sombre tones,
As when in youthful cheeks a blush grows dim.

Hushed are the monotones
Of doves and bees, and the long flowery lane
Rustles beneath the wind in playful whim.

Gone are the passion and the pulse that beat
With fevered strokes, and gone the unseen things
That clothed the hour with shining raiment meet
To deck enchantments and imaginings.
No joy is here but only neutral peace
And loveless languor and indifference,
And faint remembrance of lost ecstasy.

The darkening shades increase,
My dreams go out like tapers—I must hence.
Far off I hear Night calling to the sea.

The City of the Soul

I

IN the salt terror of a stormy sea
There are high altitudes the mind forgets;
And undesired days are hunting nets
To snare the souls that fly Eternity.
But we being gods will never bend the knee,
Though sad moons shadow every sun that sets,
And tears of sorrow be like rivulets
To feed the shallows of Humility.

Within my soul are some mean gardens found
Where drooped flowers are, and unsung melodies,
And all companioning of piteous things.
But in the midst is one high terraced ground,
Where level lawns sweep through the stately trees
And the great peacocks walk like painted kings.

II

What shall we do, my soul, to please the King?
Seeing he hath no pleasure in the dance,
And hath condemned the honeyed utterance
Of silver flutes and mouths made round to sing.
Along the wall red roses climb and cling,
And oh! my prince, lift up thy countenance,
For there be thoughts like roses that entrance
More than the languors of soft lute-playing.

Think how the hidden things that poets see
In amber eyes or mornings crystalline,
Hide in the soul their constant quenchless light,
Till, called by some celestial alchemy,
Out of forgotten depths, they rise and shine
Like buried treasure on Midsummer night.

III

The fields of Phantasy are all too wide,
My soul runs through them like an untamed thing.
It leaps the brooks like threads, and skirts the ring
Where fairies danced, and tenderer flowers hide.
The voice of music has become the bride
Of an imprisoned bird with broken wing.
What shall we do, my soul, to please the King,
We that are free, with ample wings untied?

We cannot wander through the empty fields
Till beauty like a hunter hurl the lance.
There are no silver snares and springes set,
Nor any meadow where the plain ground yields.
O let us then with ordered utterance
Forge the gold chain and twine the silken net.

IV

Each new hour's passage is the acolyte
Of inarticulate song and syllable,
And every passing moment is a bell,
To mourn the death of undiscerned delight.
Where is the sun that made the noon-day bright,
And where the midnight moon? O let us tell,
In long carved line and painted parable,
How the white road curves down into the night.

Only to build one crystal barrier
Against this sea which beats upon our days;
To ransom one lost moment with a rhyme
Or if fate cries and grudging gods demur,
To clutch Life's hair, and thrust one naked phrase
Like a lean knife between the ribs of Time.

Naples, 1897.

Sonnet on the Sonnet

TO see the moment holds a madrigal,
To find some cloistered place, some hermitage
For free devices, some deliberate cage
Wherein to keep wild thoughts like birds in thrall;

To eat sweet honey and to taste black gall,
To fight with form, to wrestle and to rage,
Till at the last upon the conquered page
The shadows of created Beauty fall.

This is the sonnet, this is all delight
Of every flower that blows in every Spring,
And all desire of every desert place;
This is the joy that fills a cloudy night
When, bursting from her misty following,
A perfect moon wins to an empty space.

A Triad of the Moon

I

LAST night my window played with one moonbeam,
And I lay watching till sleep came, and stole
Over my eyelids, and she brought a shoal
Of hurrying thoughts that were her troubled team,
And in the weary ending of a dream
I found this word upon a candid scroll:
"The nightingale is like a poet's soul,
She finds fierce pain in miseries that seem."

Ah me, methought, that she should so devise!
To seek for pain and sing such doleful bars,
That the wood aches and simple flowers cry,
And sea-green tears drench mortal lovers' eyes,
She that is made the lure of those young stars
That hang like golden spiders in the sky.

II

That she should so devise, to find such lore
 Of sighful song and piteous psalmody,
 While Joy runs on through summer greenery,
 And all Delight is like an open door.
 Must then her liquid notes for evermore
 Repeat the colour of sad things, and be
 Distilled like cassia drops of agony,
 From the slow anguish of a heart's bruised core?

Nay, she weeps not because she knows sad songs,
 But sings because she weeps; for wilful food
 Of her sad singing, she will still decoy
 The sweetness that to happy things belongs.
 All night with artful woe she holds the wood,
 And all the summer day with natural joy.

III

My soul is like a silent nightingale
 Devising sorrow in a summer night.
 Closed eyes in blazing noon put out the light,
 And Hell lies in the thickness of a veil.
 In every voiceless moment sleeps a wail,
 And all the lonely darkneses are bright,
 And every dawning of the day is white
 With shapes of sorrow fugitive and frail.

My soul is like a flower whose honey-bees
 Are pains that sting and suck the sweets untold,
 My soul is like an instrument of strings;
 I must stretch these to capture harmonies,
 And to find songs like buried dust of gold,
 Delve with the nightingale for sorrowful things.

Proem

For the Third Edition of "The City of the Soul"

HOW have we fared my soul across the days,
Through what green valleys, confident and fleet,
Along what paths of flint with how tired feet?
Anon we knew the terror that dismays
At noon-day; and when night made dark the ways
We bought delight and found remembrance sweet.
Though in our ears we heard the wide wings beat
Ever we kept dumb mouths to prayer and praise.

Yet never lost or spurned or cast aside,
And never sundered from the love of God,
Through how-so wayward intricate deceits,
Lured by what shining toys, our charmed feet trod,
On the swift winds we saw bright angels ride,
And strayed into the moon-made silver streets.

1910.

Dedication to "Sonnets" (1909)

WHAT shall I say, what word, what cry recall,
What god invoke, what star, what amulet,
To make a sonnet pay a hopeless debt,
Or bind a winged heart with a madrigal?
Weak words are vainer than no words at all,
The barrier of flesh divides us yet;
Your spirit, like a bird caught in a net,
Beats ever an impenetrable wall.

This is my book, and there as in a glass,
Darkly beheld, the shadow of my mind
Wavers and flickers like a flame of fire.
So through your eyes, it may be, it will pass,
And I shall hold my wild shy bird confined
In the gold cage of shadowless desire.

The Dead Poet

I DREAMED of him last night, I saw his face
All radiant and unshadowed of distress,
And as of old, in music measureless,
I heard his golden voice and marked him trace
Under the common thing the hidden grace,
And conjure wonder out of emptiness,
Till mean things put on beauty like a dress
And all the world was an enchanted place.

And then methought outside a fast locked gate
I mourned the loss of unrecorded words,
Forgotten tales and mysteries half said,
Wonders that might have been articulate,
And voiceless thoughts like murdered singing birds.
And so I woke and knew that he was dead.

Paris, 1901.

The Traitor

CAST out my soul the broken covenant,
Forget the pitiable masquerade,
And that ignoble part ignobly played.
Let us take shame that such a mummer's rant
Of noble things could pierce the adamant
Of Pride wherewith we ever were arrayed,
And being with a kiss once more betrayed,
Let not our tears honour that sycophant.

Let him, on graves of buried loyalty,
Rise as he may to his desired goal;
Ay and God speed him here, I grudge him not.
And when all men shall sing his praise to me
I'll not gainsay. But I shall know his soul
Lies in the bosom of Iscariot.

To Olive

I

WHEN in dim dreams I trace the tangled maze
Of the old years that held and fashioned me,
And to the sad assize of Memory
From the wan roads and misty time-trod ways,
The timid ghosts of dead forgotten days
Gather to hold their piteous colloquy,
Chiefly my soul bemoans the lack of thee
And those lost seasons empty of thy praise.

Yet surely thou wast there when life was sweet,
(We walked knee-deep in flowers) and thou wast there,
When in dismay and sorrow and unrest,
With weak bruised hands and wounded bleeding feet,
I fought with beasts and wrestled with despair
And slept (how else?) upon thine unseen breast.

II

I have been profligate of happiness
And reckless of the world's hostility,
The blessed part has not been given to me
Gladly to suffer fools, I do confess
I have enticed and merited distress,
By this, that I have never bowed the knee
Before the shrine of wise Hypocrisy,
Nor worn self-righteous anger like a dress.

Yet write you this, sweet one, when I am dead:
"Love like a lamp swayed over all his days
And all his life was like a lamp-lit chamber,
Where is no nook, no chink unvisited
By the soft affluence of golden rays,
And all the room is bathed in liquid amber."

III

Long, long ago you lived in Italy,
You were a little princess in a state
Where all things sweet and strange did congregate,
And in your eyes was hope or memory
Or wistful prophecy of things to be;
You gave a child's blank "no" to proffered fate,
Then became grave, and died immaculate,
Leaving torn hearts and broken minstrelsy.

But Love that weaves the years on Time's slow loom
Found you again, reborn, fashioned and grown
To your old likeness in these harsher lands;
And when life's day was shadowed in deep gloom
You found me wandering, heart-sick and alone,
And ran to me and gave me both your hands.

IV

My thoughts like bees explore all sweetest things
To fill for you the honeycomb of praise,
Linger in roses and white jasmine sprays,
And marigolds that stand in yellow rings.
In the blue air they moan on muted strings,
And the blue sky of my soul's summer days,
Shines with your light, and through pale violet ways,
Birds bear your name in beatings of their wings.

I see you all bedecked in bows of rain,
New showers of rain against new-risen suns,
New tears against new light of shining joy.
My youth, equipped to go, turns back again,
Throws down its heavy pack of years and runs
Back to the golden house a golden boy.

V

When we were Pleasure's minions, you and I,
When we mocked grief and held disaster cheap,
And shepherded all joys like willing sheep
That love their shepherd; when a passing sigh
Was all the cloud that flecked our April sky,
I floated on an unimagined deep,
I loved you as a tired child loves sleep,
I lived and laughed and loved, and knew not why.

Now I have known the uttermost rose of love;
The years are very long, but love is longer;
I love you so, I have no time to hate
Even those wolves without. The great winds move
All their dark batteries to our fragile gate:
The world is very strong, but love is stronger.

VI

When I am dead you shall not doubt or fear,
Or wander nightly in the halls of gloom.
The moon will shine into my empty room,
And in the narrow garden flowers will peer,
While you look through your window. Scarce a tear
Will drench your child's blue eyes, while on my tomb,
Where the red roses wake and break and bloom,
The stars gaze down eternal and austere.

And I, in the dark ante-room of Death,
Will wait for you with ever-outstretched hands
And ears strained for your little timid feet;
And in the listening darkness, when your breath
Pants in distress, my arms will be like bands
And all my weakness like your winding-sheet.

1907.

Forgetfulness

ALAS! that Time should war against Distress,
And numb the sweet ache of remembered loss,
And give for sorrow's gold the indifferent dross
Of calm regret or stark forgetfulness.
I should have worn eternal mourning dress
And nailed my soul to some perennial cross,
And made my thoughts like restless waves that toss
On the wild sea's intemperate wilderness.

But lo! came Life, and with its painted toys
Lured me to play again like any child.
O pardon me this weak inconstancy.
May my soul die if in all present joys,
Lapped in forgetfulness or sense-beguiled,
Yea, in my mirth if I prefer not thee.

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