

The Burden Of Itys

Oscar Wilde

This English Thames is holier far than Rome,
Those harebells like a sudden flush of sea
Breaking across the woodland, with the foam
Of meadow-sweet and white anemone
To fleck their blue waves,—God is likelier there
Than hidden in that crystal-hearted star the pale monks bear!

Those violet-gleaming butterflies that take
Yon creamy lily for their pavilion
Are monsignores, and where the rushes shake
A lazy pike lies basking in the sun,
His eyes half shut,—he is some mitred old
Bishop *in partibus!* look at those gaudy scales all green and gold.

The wind the restless prisoner of the trees
Does well for Palæstrina, one would say
The mighty master's hands were on the keys
Of the Maria organ, which they play
When early on some sapphire Easter morn

In a high litter red as blood or sin the Pope is borne

From his dark House out to the Balcony

Above the bronze gates and the crowded square,

Whose very fountains seem for ecstasy

To toss their silver lances in the air,

And stretching out weak hands to East and West

In vain sends peace to peaceless lands, to restless nations rest.

Is not yon lingering orange after-glow

That stays to vex the moon more fair than all

Rome's lordliest pageants! strange, a year ago

I knelt before some crimson Cardinal

Who bare the Host across the Esquiline,

And now—those common poppies in the wheat seem twice as fine.

The blue-green beanfields yonder, tremulous

With the last shower, sweeter perfume bring

Through this cool evening than the odorous

Flame-jewelled censers the young deacons swing,

When the grey priest unlocks the curtained shrine,

And makes God's body from the common fruit of corn and vine.

Poor Fra Giovanni bawling at the mass

Were out of tune now, for a small brown bird

Sings overhead, and through the long cool grass

I see that throbbing throat which once I heard

On starlit hills of flower-starred Arcady,

Once where the white and crescent sand of Salamis meets sea.

Sweet is the swallow twittering on the eaves

At daybreak, when the mower whets his scythe,

And stock-doves murmur, and the milkmaid leaves

Her little lonely bed, and carols blithe

To see the heavy-lowing cattle wait

Stretching their huge and dripping mouths across the farmyard gate.

And sweet the hops upon the Kentish leas,

And sweet the wind that lifts the new-mown hay,

And sweet the fretful swarms of grumbling bees

That round and round the linden blossoms play;

And sweet the heifer breathing in the stall,

And the green bursting figs that hang upon the red-brick wall,

And sweet to hear the cuckoo mock the spring

While the last violet loiters by the well,

And sweet to hear the shepherd Daphnis sing

The song of Linus through a sunny dell

Of warm Arcadia where the corn is gold

And the slight lithe-limbed reapers dance about the wattled fold.

And sweet with young Lycoris to recline

In some Illyrian valley far away,

Where canopied on herbs amaracine

We too might waste the summer-tranced day

Matching our reeds in sportive rivalry,

While far beneath us frets the troubled purple of the sea.

But sweeter far if silver-sandalled foot

Of some long-hidden God should ever tread

The Nuneham meadows, if with reeded flute

Pressed to his lips some Faun might raise his head

By the green water-flags, ah! sweet indeed

To see the heavenly herdsman call his white-fleeced flock to feed.

Then sing to me thou tuneful chorister,

Though what thou sing'st be thine own requiem!

Tell me thy tale thou hapless chronicler

Of thine own tragedies! do not condemn

These unfamiliar haunts, this English field,

For many a lovely coronal our northern isle can yield

Which Grecian meadows know not, many a rose

Which all day long in vales Æolian

A lad might seek in vain for over-grows

Our hedges like a wanton courtesan

Unthrifty of its beauty; lilies too

Ilissos never mirrored star our streams, and cockles blue

Dot the green wheat which, though they are the signs

For swallows going south, would never spread

Their azure tents between the Attic vines;

Even that little weed of ragged red,

Which bids the robin pipe, in Arcady

Would be a trespasser, and many an unsung elegy

Sleeps in the reeds that fringe our winding Thames

Which to awake were sweeter ravishment

Than ever Syrinx wept for; diadems

Of brown bee-studded orchids which were meant

For Cytheræa's brows are hidden here

Unknown to Cytheræa, and by yonder pasturing steer

There is a tiny yellow daffodil,

The butterfly can see it from afar,

Although one summer evening's dew could fill

Its little cup twice over ere the star

Had called the lazy shepherd to his fold

And be no prodigal; each leaf is flecked with spotted gold

As if Jove's gorgeous leman Danae

Hot from his gilded arms had stooped to kiss

The trembling petals, or young Mercury

Low-flying to the dusky ford of Dis

Had with one feather of his pinions

Just brushed them! the slight stem which bears the burden of its suns

Is hardly thicker than the gossamer,

Or poor Arachne's silver tapestry,—

Men say it bloomed upon the sepulchre

Of One I sometime worshipped, but to me

It seems to bring diviner memories

Of faun-loved Heliconian glades and blue nymph-haunted seas,

Of an untrodden vale at Tempe where

On the clear river's marge Narcissus lies,

The tangle of the forest in his hair,

The silence of the woodland in his eyes,

Wooing that drifting imagery which is

No sooner kissed than broken; memories of Salmacis

Who is not boy nor girl and yet is both,

Fed by two fires and unsatisfied

Through their excess, each passion being loth

For love's own sake to leave the other's side

Yet killing love by staying; memories

Of Oreads peeping through the leaves of silent moonlit trees,

Of lonely Ariadne on the wharf

At Naxos, when she saw the treacherous crew

Far out at sea, and waved her crimson scarf

And called false Theseus back again nor knew

That Dionysos on an amber pard

Was close behind her; memories of what Mæonia's bard

With sightless eyes beheld, the wall of Troy,

Queen Helen lying in the ivory room,

And at her side an amorous red-lipped boy

Trimming with dainty hand his helmet's plume,

And far away the moil, the shout, the groan,

As Hector shielded off the spear and Ajax hurled the stone;

Of wingèd Perseus with his flawless sword

Cleaving the snaky tresses of the witch,

And all those tales imperishably stored

In little Grecian urns, freightage more rich

Than any gaudy galleon of Spain

Bare from the Indies ever! these at least bring back again,

For well I know they are not dead at all,

The ancient Gods of Grecian poesy:

They are asleep, and when they hear thee call

Will wake and think 't is very Thessaly,

This Thames the Daulian waters, this cool glade

The yellow-irised mead where once young Itys laughed and played.

If it was thou dear jasmine-cradled bird

Who from the leafy stillness of thy throne

Sang to the wondrous boy, until he heard

The horn of Atalanta faintly blown

Across the Cumnor hills, and wandering

Through Bagley wood at evening found the Attic poets' spring,—

Ah! tiny sober-suited advocate

That pleadest for the moon against the day!

If thou didst make the shepherd seek his mate

On that sweet questing, when Proserpina

Forgot it was not Sicily and leant

Across the mossy Sandford stile in ravished wonderment,—

Light-winged and bright-eyed miracle of the wood!

If ever thou didst soothe with melody

One of that little clan, that brotherhood

Which loved the morning-star of Tuscany

More than the perfect sun of Raphael

And is immortal, sing to me! for I too love thee well.

Sing on! sing on! let the dull world grow young,

Let elemental things take form again,

And the old shapes of Beauty walk among

The simple garths and open crofts, as when

The son of Leto bare the willow rod,

And the soft sheep and shaggy goats followed the boyish God.

Sing on! sing on! and Bacchus will be here

Astride upon his gorgeous Indian throne,

And over whimpering tigers shake the spear

With yellow ivy crowned and gummy cone,

While at his side the wanton Bassarid

Will throw the lion by the mane and catch the mountain kid!

Sing on! and I will wear the leopard skin,

And steal the moonèd wings of Ashtaroth,

Upon whose icy chariot we could win

Cithæron in an hour ere the froth

Has over-brimmed the wine-vat or the Faun

Ceased from the treading! ay, before the flickering lamp of dawn

Has scared the hooting owlet to its nest,

And warned the bat to close its filmy vans,

Some Mænad girl with vine-leaves on her breast

Will filch their beech-nuts from the sleeping Pans

So softly that the little nested thrush

Will never wake, and then with shrilly laugh and leap will rush

Down the green valley where the fallen dew

Lies thick beneath the elm and count her store,

Till the brown Satyrs in a jolly crew

Trample the loosestrife down along the shore,

And where their hornèd master sits in state

Bring strawberries and bloomy plums upon a wicker crate!

Sing on! and soon with passion-wearied face

Through the cool leaves Apollo's lad will come,

The Tyrian prince his bristled boar will chase

Adown the chestnut-copses all a-bloom,

And ivory-limbed, grey-eyed, with look of pride,

After yon velvet-coated deer the virgin maid will ride.

Sing on! and I the dying boy will see

Stain with his purple blood the waxen bell

That overweighs the jacinth, and to me

The wretched Cyprian her woe will tell,

And I will kiss her mouth and streaming eyes,

And lead her to the myrtle-hidden grove where Adon lies!

Cry out aloud on Itys! memory

That foster-brother of remorse and pain

Drops poison in mine ear,—O to be free,

To burn one's old ships! and to launch again

Into the white-plumed battle of the waves

And fight old Proteus for the spoil of coral-flowered caves!

O for Medea with her poppied spell!

O for the secret of the Colchian shrine!

O for one leaf of that pale asphodel

Which binds the tired brows of Proserpine,

And sheds such wondrous dew at eve that she

Dreams of the fields of Enna, by the far Sicilian sea,

Where oft the golden-girdled bee she chased

From lily to lily on the level mead,

Ere yet her sombre Lord had bid her taste

The deadly fruit of that pomegranate seed,

Ere the black steeds had harried her away

Down to the faint and flowerless land, the sick and sunless day.

O for one midnight and as paramour

The Venus of the little Melian farm!

O that some antique statue for one hour

Might wake to passion, and that I could charm

The Dawn at Florence from its dumb despair,

Mix with those mighty limbs and make that giant breast my lair!

Sing on! sing on! I would be drunk with life,
Drunk with the trampled vintage of my youth,
I would forget the wearying wasted strife,
The riven veil, the Gorgon eyes of Truth,
The prayerless vigil and the cry for prayer,
The barren gifts, the lifted arms, the dull insensate air!

Sing on! sing on! O feathered Niobe,
Thou canst make sorrow beautiful, and steal
From joy its sweetest music, not as we
Who by dead voiceless silence strive to heal
Our too untented wounds, and do but keep
Pain barricaded in our hearts, and murder pillowed sleep.

Sing louder yet, why must I still behold
The wan white face of that deserted Christ,
Whose bleeding hands my hands did once enfold,
Whose smitten lips my lips so oft have kissed,
And now in mute and marble misery

Sits in his lone dishonoured House and weeps, perchance for me?

O Memory cast down thy wreathèd shell!

Break thy hoarse lute O sad Melpomene!

O Sorrow, Sorrow keep thy cloistered cell

Nor dim with tears this limpid Castaly!

Cease, Philomel, thou dost the forest wrong

To vex its sylvan quiet with such wild impassioned song!

Cease, cease, or if 't is anguish to be dumb

Take from the pastoral thrush her simpler air,

Whose jocund carelessness doth more become

This English woodland than thy keen despair,

Ah! cease and let the north wind bear thy lay

Back to the rocky hills of Thrace, the stormy Daulian bay.

A moment more, the startled leaves had stirred,

Endymion would have passed across the mead

Moonstruck with love, and this still Thames had heard

Pan plash and paddle groping for some reed

To lure from her blue cave that Naiad maid

Who for such piping listens half in joy and half afraid.

A moment more, the waking dove had cooed,
The silver daughter of the silver sea
With the fond gyves of clinging hands had wooed
Her wanton from the chase, and Dryope
Had thrust aside the branches of her oak
To see the lusty gold-haired lad rein in his snorting yoke.

A moment more, the trees had stooped to kiss
Pale Daphne just awakening from the swoon
Of tremulous laurels, lonely Salmacis
Had bared his barren beauty to the moon,
And through the vale with sad voluptuous smile
Antinous had wandered, the red lotus of the Nile

Down leaning from his black and clustering hair,
To shade those slumberous eyelids' caverned bliss,
Or else on yonder grassy slope with bare
High-tuniced limbs unravished Artemis
Had bade her hounds give tongue, and roused the deer

From his green ambuscade with shrill halloo and pricking spear.

Lie still, lie still, O passionate heart, lie still!

O Melancholy, fold thy raven wing!

O sobbing Dryad, from thy hollow hill

Come not with such despondent answering!

No more thou wingèd Marsyas complain,

Apollo loveth not to hear such troubled songs of pain!

It was a dream, the glade is tenantless,

No soft Ionian laughter moves the air,

The Thames creeps on in sluggish leadenness,

And from the copse left desolate and bare

Fled is young Bacchus with his revelry,

Yet still from Nuneham wood there comes that thrilling melody

So sad, that one might think a human heart

Brake in each separate note, a quality

Which music sometimes has, being the Art

Which is most nigh to tears and memory;

Poor mourning Philomel, what dost thou fear?

Thy sister doth not haunt these fields, Pandion is not here,

Here is no cruel Lord with murderous blade,

No woven web of bloody heraldries,

But mossy dells for roving comrades made,

Warm valleys where the tired student lies

With half-shut book, and many a winding walk

Where rustic lovers stray at eve in happy simple talk.

The harmless rabbit gambols with its young

Across the trampled towing-path, where late

A troop of laughing boys in jostling throng

Cheered with their noisy cries the racing eight;

The gossamer, with ravelled silver threads,

Works at its little loom, and from the dusky red-eaved sheds

Of the lone Farm a flickering light shines out

Where the swinked shepherd drives his bleating flock

Back to their wattled sheep-cotes, a faint shout

Comes from some Oxford boat at Sandford lock,

And starts the moor-hen from the sedgy rill,

And the dim lengthening shadows flit like swallows up the hill.

The heron passes homeward to the mere,
The blue mist creeps among the shivering trees,
Gold world by world the silent stars appear,
And like a blossom blown before the breeze
A white moon drifts across the shimmering sky,
Mute arbitress of all thy sad, thy rapturous threnody.

She does not heed thee, wherefore should she heed,
She knows Endymion is not far away;
'Tis I, 'tis I, whose soul is as the reed
Which has no message of its own to play,
So pipes another's bidding, it is I,
Drifting with every wind on the wide sea of misery.

Ah! the brown bird has ceased: one exquisite trill
About the sombre woodland seems to cling
Dying in music, else the air is still,
So still that one might hear the bat's small wing
Wander and wheel above the pines, or tell

Each tiny dew-drop dripping from the bluebell's brimming cell.

And far away across the lengthening wold,

Across the willowy flats and thickets brown,

Magdalen's tall tower tipped with tremulous gold

Marks the long High Street of the little town,

And warns me to return; I must not wait,

Hark! 't is the curfew booming from the bell at Christ Church gate.

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