

HEPHAESTUS

PERSEPHONE AT ENNA AND
SAPPHO IN LEUCADIA

BY
ARTHUR STRINGER



METHODIST BOOK & PUBLISHING HOUSE
TORONTO
GRANT RICHARDS, LONDON

1903

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DEDICATION

What bird that climbs the cool dim Dawn
But loves the air its wild wings roam?
And yet when all the day is gone
But turns its weary pinions home,
And when the yellow twilight fills
The lonely stretches of the West,
Comes down across the darkened hills,
Once more to its remembered nest?

And I who strayed, O Fond and True,
To seek that glory fugitive
And fleeting music that is You,
But echoes of yourself can give
As through the waning gold I come
To where the Dream and Dreamer meet:
Yet should my faltering lips be dumb,
I lay these gleanings at your feet!

HEPHAESTUS

(HEPHAESTUS, *finding that his wife APHRODITE is loved by his brother ARES, voluntarily surrenders the goddess to this younger brother, whom, it is said, APHRODITE herself preferred.*)

Take her, O Ares! As Demeter mourned
Through many-fountained Enna, I shall grieve
Forlorn a time, and then, it may be, learn,
Some still autumnal twilight by the sea
Golden with sunlight, to remember not!
As the dark pine forgoes the pilgrim thrush
I, sad of heart, yet unimpassioned, yield
To you this surging bosom soft with dreams,
This body fashioned of Aegean foam
And languorous moonlight. But I give you not
The eluding soul that in her broods and sleeps,
And ne'er was mine of old, nor can be yours.
It was not born of sea and moon with her,
And though it nests within her, no weak hand
Of hers shall cage it as it comes and goes,
Sorrows and wakens, sleeps, and sings again.
And so I give you but the hollow lute,
The lute alone, and not the voices low
That sang of old to some forgotten touch.
The lamp I give, but not the glimmering flame
Some alien fire must light, some alien dusk
Enisle, ere it illumine your land and sea.
The shell I give you, Ares, not the song
Of murmuring winds and waves once haunting it;
The cage, but not love's wings that come and go.
I give you them, light brother, as the earth
Gives up the dew, the mountain-side the mist!

Farewell sad face, that gleamed so like a flower
Through Paphian groves to me of old—farewell!
Some Fate beyond our dark-robed Three ordained
This love should wear the mortal rose and not
Our timeless amaranth. 'Twas writ of old, and lay
Not once with us. As we ourselves have known,
And well your sad Dodonian mother found,
From deep to deep the sails of destined love
Are blown and tossed by tides no god controls;
And at the bud of our too golden life
Eats this small canker of mortality!

I loved her once, O Ares—
I loved her once as waters love the wind;
I sought her once as rivers seek the sea;
And her deep eyes, so dream-besieged, made dawn
And midnight one. Flesh of my flesh she was,
And we together knew dark days and glad.
Then fell the change;—some hand unknown to us
Shook one white petal from the perfect flower,
And all the world grew old. Ah, who shall say
When Summer dies, or when is blown the rose?
Who, who shall know just when the quiet star
Out of the golden West is born again?
Or when the gloaming saddens into night?
'Twas writ, in truth, of old; the tide of love
Has met its turn, the long horizon lures
The homing bird, the harbour calls the sail.
Home, home to your glad heart she goes, while I
Fare on alone, and only broken dreams
Abide with me! And yet, when you shall tread
Lightly your sunlit hills with her and breathe
Life's keener air, all but too exquisite,
Or look through purpling twilight on the world,
Think not my heart has followed nevermore
Those glimmering feet that walked once thus with me,
Nor dream my passion by your passion paled.
But lower than the god the temple stands;
As deeper is the sea than any wave,
Sweeter the summer than its asphodel,
So love far stronger than this woman is.
She from the untiring ocean took her birth,
And from torn wave and foam her first faint breath;
Child of unrest and change, still through her sweeps
Her natal sea's tumultuous waywardness!
And losing her, lo, one thin drifting cloud
Curls idly from the altar in that grove
Where burn the fires that know not change or death!

Yet she shall move the strange desires of men;
For in her lie dim glories that she dreams
Not of, and on her ever broods a light
Her Cyprian eyes ne'er saw; and evermore
Round her pale face shall pleading faces press;
Round her shall mortal passion beat and ebb.
Years hence, as waves on islands burst in foam,
Madly shall lives on her strange beauty break.

When she is yours and in ambrosial glooms

You secretly would chain her kiss by kiss,
Though close you hold her in your hungering arms,
And with voluptuous pantings you and she
Mingle, and seem the insentient moment one,
Yet will your groping soul but lean to her
Across the dusk, as hill to lonely hill,
And in your warmest raptures you shall learn
There is a citadel surrenders not
To any captor of the outer walls;
In sorrow you shall learn there is a light
Illumines not, a chamber it were best
To leave untrod.

O Ares, dread the word

That silences this timorous nightingale,
The touch that wakens strings too frail for hands;
For, giving her, I gain what you shall lose;
Forsaking her, I hold her closer still.
The sea shall take a deeper sound; the stars
Stranger and more mysterious henceforth
Shall seem, the darkening sky-line of the West
For me, the solitary dreamer, now shall hold
Voices and faces that I knew not of.
More, henceforth, shall all music mean to me,
And she, through lonely musings, ever seem
As beautiful as are the dead. But you—
You in your hand shall guard the gathered rose,
Shall hold the riven veil, the loosened chord!

So love your hour, bright god, ere it is lost,
A swan that sings its broken life away.
In that brief hour, 'tis writ, you shall hear breathe
Songs blown from some enchanted island home,
Then mourn for evermore life's silent throats,—
Aye, seek and find the altar when its fires
Are ashes, and the worship vain regret!
A mystic law more strong than all delight
Or pain shall each delicious rapture chill,
Exactingly sternly for each ecstasy;
And when her voice enwraps you and in arms
Luxurious your softest languor comes,
Faintly torn wings shall flutter for the sun,
Madly old dreams shall struggle toward the light,
And, drugged with opiate passion, you shall know
Dark days and shadowy moods when she may seem
To some dusk underworld enchaining you.
Yet I shall know her as she was of old,

Fashioned of moonlight and Aegean foam,
Some visionary gleam, some glory strange
Shall day by day engolden her lost face.
The slow attrition of the years shall wear
No tenderest charm away, and she shall live
A lonely star, a gust of music sweet,
A voice upon the Deep, a mystery!
But in the night, I know, the lonely wind
Shall sigh of her, the restless ocean moan
Her name with immemorial murmurings,
And the sad golden summer moon shall mourn
With me, and through the gloom of rustling leaves
The shaken throats of nightingales shall bring
Her low voice back, the incense of the fields
Recall too well the odour of her hair.
But lo, the heart doth bury all its dead,
As mother Earth her unremembered leaves;
So the sad hour shall pass, and with the dawn
Serene I shall look down where hills and seas
Throb through their dome of brooding hyaline
And see from Athens gold to Indus gray
New worlds awaiting me, and gladly go,—
Go down among the toilers of the earth
And seek the rest, the deeper peace that comes
Of vast endeavour and the dust of strife.
There my calm soul shall know itself, and watch
The golden-sandalled Seasons come and go,
Still god-like in its tasks of little things;
And, woven not with grandeurs and red wars,
Wanting somewhat in gold and vermeil, shall
The Fates work out my life's thin tapestry,
As sorrow brings me wisdom, and the pang
Of solitude, O Ares, keeps me strong!

PERSEPHONE

Goddess and Mother, let me smooth thy brow
And cling about thee for a little time
With these pale hands,—for see, still at the glow
Of all this white-houred noon and alien sun
I tremble like a new-born nightingale
Blown from its nest into bewildering rain.

How shall I tell thee, Mother, of those days
My aching eyes saw not this azure sea
Of air, unknown in Death's gray Underworld
And only whispered of by restless Shades
Rememb'ring shadowy things across their dusk?—
Or how I often asked: "Canst thou, dark heart,
Remember home? So far and long forlorn
Canst thou, my heart, remember Sicily?"
Then didst thou, weeping, call Persephone
The Many-Songed, and where thy lonely voice
Once fell all greenness faded and the song
Of birds all died, and down from brazen heights
A blood-red sun long noon by sullen noon
On ashen days and desolation shone;
And cattle lowed about the withered springs,
And Earth gaped wide, each arid Evening moaned
Amid the dusk for rain, or dew at most.
But thou in anger didst withhold the green,
And grim of breast forbade the bursting sap,
And dared the darkest sky-line of lone Deeps
For thy lost daughter, and could find her not.

Then came the Arethusan whisper, and release;
The refreshing rains washed down and gushed
And sluiced the juicy grasses once again,
And bird by bird, the Summer was re-born,
And drooping in thine arms I wakened here.
Yet all those twilight days I was content
Though silent as a frozen river crept
The hours entombed, though far I was from thee
And from the Nysian fields of open sun,
The sound of waters, and the throats of song.

But when with happier lips I tell thee all
Thou must, worn Mother, leave me here alone
Where soft as early snow the white hours fall
About my musing eyes, and life seems strange,

And strange the muffled piping of the birds,
And strange the drowsy music of the streams,
The whispering pavilions of the pines;
And more than strange the immersing wash of air
That breathes and sways and breaks through all my being
And lulls away, like seas intangible,
Regrets, and tears, and days of heavy gloom.
O Mother, all these things are told not of
Where I have been, and on these eyes estranged
Earth's vernal sweetness falls so mystical
Its beauty turns a thing of bitter tears;
And even in my gladness I must grieve
For this dark change, where Death has died to me,—
For my lost Gloom, where life was life to me!

Long years from now shall ages yet unborn
Watch the returning Spring and strangely yearn;
Others shall thrill with joy like unto mine;
Vague things shall move them and strange voices steal
Through sad, bud-scented April eves to them.
Round them shall fall a glory not of earth,
As now o'er these Sicilian meadows fall
Dim memories that come I know not whence.
In lands I know not of some sorrowing girl
Shall faintly breathe: "I am Persephone
On such a day!" and through the world shall run
The immemorial rapture and the pangs,
And pale-eyed ghosts shall creep out to the light
And drink the sun, like wine, and live once more.
The dower of my delight shall make them glad;
The tears of my regret shall weigh them down,
And men with wondering eyes shall watch the Spring
Return, and weep, indeed, these selfsame tears,
And laugh with my good laughter, knowing not
Whence came their passing bliss so torn with pain.

For good is Enna, and the wide, glad Earth,
And good the comfortable green of grass
And Nysian meadows still so milky pale;
Good seems the dark steer in the noonday sun,
The ploughman's keel that turns black waves of loam,
The laughing girls, the fluting shepherd boys,
And beautiful the song of many birds;
Good seem these golden bees whose busy wings
With wavering music drone and die away,—
The orchard odours and the seas of bloom;
And good the valleys where the green leaves breathe,

The hills where all the patient pines look down;
Good seem the lowland poplars bathed in light,
That pillar from the plain this tent of blue,—
The quiet homes amid the cooling fields,
The flashing rivers and the woods remote,
The little high white town among the hills!

All, all are good to look on, and most dear
To my remembering eyes. Each crocus, too,
And gold narcissus, gleams memorial,—
Untouched of sorrow for that troubled day
Impetuous hoof and wheel threshed through the wheat,
And 'mid these opiate blooms the Four-Horsed One
Swept down on me, half lost in pensive dreams,
And like a poppy in some panting noon,
All drooping, bore me to the gates of Hell,—
When on my fragile girlhood closed his arms
As on some seed forlorn Earth's darkest loam.
Yet think not, Mother, this fierce Son of Night
Brought only sorrow with him, for behold,
In learning to forbear I learned to love;
And battling pale on his impassioned breast
I felt run through my veins some golden pang
Of dear defeat, some subjugation dim,
Presaging all this bosom once was made
To be thus crushed, ere once it could be glad.
Thus are we fashioned, Mother, though we live
Immortal or the sons of men; and so
Each day on my disdain some tendril new
Bound me the closer to him; loving not,
Some wayward bar of pity caged me down,
And day by languid day amid Death's gloom,
I grew to lean upon him, and in time
I watched his coming and his absence wept.
I walked companion to his pallid shades,
And pale as yon thin crescent noonday moon
I dwelt with him, a ghost amid his ghosts.
If this was love, I loved him more than life.
And now he means to me what flame and ruin
And tumultuous conflagration of great towers
And citadels must mean to martial eyes,
Bewildering the blood like dizzy wine
And sweeping on to any maddened end:
I came to glory in him,—felt small hands
Clutch at my breast when he was standing near,
And knew his cruel might, yet thrilled to it

And in his strength even took my weak delight.
Stern were his days, yet leaned he patient o'er
This wayward heart, till I in wonder saw
From those dark weeds of wanton lust creep forth
Belated violets of calmer love,—
And, link by link, found all my life enchained!

Only at times the music of the Sea
Sang in my ears its old insistent note;
Only at times I heard the wash and rush
Of waves on open shores and windy cliffs;
Only at times I seemed to see great wings
Scaling some crystal stairway to the Sun,
And languid eagles shouldering languid clouds.
Singing on summer mornings too I heard,—
I caught the sound that sweet green waters make,
The music—O so delicate!—of leaves
And rustling grasses, and the stir of wings
About dim gardens. Where shy nightingales
Shook their old sorrow over Ida's gloom
I into immortality was touched
Once more by song and moonlight, far away.
I mused beside dim fires with Memory
And through my tears rebuilt some better life
Untouched of time and change, and dreaming thus
Forgot my woe, and, first of all the gods,
I, wistful-eyed, with Aspiration walked!

For, Mother, see, this dubious death in life
Makes beautiful my immortality:
Once all my world was only phantom stream
And shadowy flower, and song that was not song,
And wrapt in white eternities I walked
A daughter of the gods, who knew not Death:
I was a thing of coldness and disdain,
Half-losing all that was so dear in life:
Enthroned in astral taciturnity,
I, looking tranquil-eyed on beauties old,
E'er faced some dull Forever, strange to Hope
And strange to Sorrow, strange to Tears,—Regrets;
Joy was not joy, and living was not life.
So unreluctantly the long years went,
Though I had all that we, the gods, have asked,
Drunk with life's wine, I could not sing the grape,
And knew not once, till Hades touched my hand
And made me wise, how good the world could be.

Now, now I know the solace and the thrill
Of passing Autumns and awakening Springs;
I know and love the Darkness, many-voiced,
Since Night it was that taught me to be strong;
The meaning of all music now I know,—
The song autumnal sky and twilight seas
Would sing so well, if once they found the words,—
The sorrow of dear shores grown low and dim
To darkling eyes, that may not look again,—
The beauty of the rose made rich by death,—
The throbbing lark that hymns amid the yew,
And mortal love grown glorious by the grave.

For worlds and faces now I see beyond
The sad-aisled avenues of evening stars;
The Future, like an opal dawn, unfurls
To me, and all the dreaming Long Ago
Lies wide and luring as the open Deep.
And so, still half in gloom and half in sun
Shall men and women dwell as I have dwelt.
Half happy and half sad their days shall fall,
And grief shall only learn beside the grave
How beautiful life can be, how deep is love.
As snow makes soft Earth's vernal green, so tears
Shall make its laughter sweet, and lovers strange
To thee and me, gray Mother, many years
From now shall feel this thing and dimly know
The bitter-sweetness of this hour to me,
Whom Life has given unto Death and Death
Back unto Life—both ghost and goddess, lo,
Who faced these mortal tears to fathom love!

SAPPHO IN LEUCADIA

SCENE.—*The white-rocked promontory of Leucate, on the Island of Leucadia, overlooking the Ionian Sea. High on the cliff, in the background, towers the Leucadian Temple to Apollo, white and gold in the waning sunlight. SAPPHO, of Lesbos, stands on the brink of the cliff, and at her feet kneels PHAON, of Mitylene. As they gaze seaward a group of young shepherds pass from the Temple, and a voice in the distance is heard singing.*

SAPPHO

Where rests your sail that faced so many winds?—
(O Aphrodite, help me in this hour!)

PHAON

There white against the blue of yonder bay.

SAPPHO

It seems a little thing to creep so far
From home and Asian shores—a little thing!

PHAON

Bird-throated child of Lesbos—

SAPPHO (*musingly*)

Yet I too
Am frail, and I have fared on troubled seas!

PHAON

Bird-throated child of Lesbos, let us turn
To those dark hills of home and Long Ago
That one great love relumes, and one lost voice
Still like a fading lute with sorrow haunts.

SAPPHO

Dear hills of sun and gloom and green—soft hills
Ambrosial I shall see no more!

PHAON

Nay, come,
O Violet-Crowned, come back where still the girls
Laugh ruddy-ankled round the Lesbian vats
And swart throats from the laden galleys sing
At eve of love and women as of old—

SAPPHO

How far away those twilight voices are!

PHAON

And down the solemn Dorian scale the pipes
Wander and plead, then note by note awake
Shrill with Aeolian gladness once again.
Come back where opiate lyres shall drowse away
This wordless hunger that has paled your face,
Where island hills reach out their arms for you;
Come back, and be at rest!

SAPPHO (*turning to him*)

O island home

Where we were happy once!

PHAON

And shall again

Be happy as of old, remembering not
The little shower that gathered at the break
Of dawns so blue and golden. For to you,
Sad-hearted Alien, have I come afar
By many lands and seas to lure you back,—
Back where the olive groves and laughing hills
Still glow so purple from Aeolia's coast
And all the harbour-lights have watched so long,
Like weary eyes, for you to come again.

SAPPHO

Yes, well I know them where their paths of gold
Once lay like wavering music on the sea.

PHAON

And slowly there, like wine with honey made
Too sweet, our languid days shall flow.

SAPPHO

O home

Where we so long ago were happy once!

PHAON

'Twas but a little time I went from you,
And I have sorrowed for it, and am wise;
And with my wisdom, lo, the tremulous wings
Of twilight love have now flown home again.

SAPPHO

It is too late, my Phaon.

Your light hand

Has crushed the silver goblet of my heart,
And all the wine is spilt; the page is read,
And from the tale the olden glory gone;
The lamp has failed amid the glimmering dusk
Of midnight; and now even music sounds
Mournful as evening bells on seas unknown.

PHAON

O, Lesbos waits, and still you will not come—
Our home is calling, and you will not hear?

SAPPHO

Out of my time I am, and like a bird
On nor'land wings too early flown, I dream
Amid the wintry cold of all the world
Of dawns and summer rains I ne'er shall see! . . .
Lightly you loved me, Phaon, long ago,
And there were other arms unknown to me
That folded over you, though none more fond
Than mine that fell so wing-like round your head.
And there were other eyes that drooped as mine
Despairingly before your pleading mouth;
And many were the nights I wept, and learned
How sorrowful is all divided love,
Since one voice must be lost, and being lost,
Is then remembered most.

PHAON

But you alone

It was, pale-throated woman, that I loved:
Through outland countries have I seen your eyes,
And like a tender flow'r through perilous ways
Your face has gone before me, and your voice
Across dim meadows and mysterious seas
Has drawn me to you, calling from the dunes
Where Summer once hung low above our hands
And we, as children, dreamed to dreaming waves,
And all the world seemed made for you and me.

SAPPHO

It is too late; for now the wine of life
Is spilt, the shore-lark of first love has flown,
And all the Summer waned.

Yet, long ago,

How lightly I had passed through any pain,—
How gladly I had gone to any home,
A wanderer with you o'er many seas;
And slept beside your little fire content,
And fared still on again between green hills
And echoing valleys where the eagled pines
Were full of gloom, and many waters sang,—
Still on to some low plain and highland coign
Remembered not of men, where we had made
Our home amid the music of the hills,
Letting life's twilight sands glide thro' the glass
So golden-slow, so glad, no plaintive chime
Could e'er be blown across autumnal eves
From Life's gray towers of many-tongued Regret:
Then I had been most happy at your side,
Easing this aching heart with homely thoughts
And turning these sad hands to simple things.
In the low oven that should gleam by night
Baking my wheaten loaves, and with my wheel
Spinning the milky wool, and light of heart
Dipping my brazen pitcher in the spring
That bubbled by our door.

And then, perchance

(O anodyne for all dark-remembered days!),
To feel the touch of little clinging hands
And hold your child and mine close on this breast,
And croon it songs and tunes quite meaningless
Unto the bosom where no milk has been,
And fonder than the poolside flutings low
Of dreaming frogs to their Arcadian Pan.
There had I borne to you a sailor-folk,
A tawny-haired swart brood of boys, as brave
As mine old Phaon was, cubbed by the sea
And buffeted by wind and brume; and I,
On winter nights when all the waves were black,
In musing-wise had told them tales and dreams
Of Lesbian days, e'en though the words should sound
To my remembering heart, so far from home,
As mournful as the wind to imprisoned men;
—Old tales they should re-tell long ages hence
Unto their children's children by the fire
When loud the dark South-West that brings the rain
Moaned round their eaves. And in more happy days
By some pale silver summer moon, when dim
The waters were—mysterious eves of dusk,

And music, stars, and silence, when the sea
Sighs languorously as a god in sleep—
Singing into my saddened heart should come
White thoughts, to bloom in words as roses break
And blow and wither and are gone; and we,
Reckless of time, should waken not and find
Our hearts grown old, but evermore live on
As do the stars and Earth's untroubled trees,
While seasons came, like birds, and went again,—
Though Greece and her green islands were no more,
And all her marbled glory should go down
Like flowers that die and fall, and one by one
Like lamps her lofty cities should go out.

PHAON

Your voice, like dew, falls deep in my dry heart,
And like a bell your name swings through my dreams;
Now all my being throbs and cries for you;
Come back with me; but come, and I will speak
A thousand gentle words for each poor tear
That dimmed your eyes! Come back, and I will crown
Your days with love so enduring it shall light
The eternal stars to bed!

SAPPHO

Ask me no more,—
My Phaon, you must ask me nevermore:
Though Music pipe from Memory's darkest pine
Her tenderest note, all time her wings are torn;
The assuaging founts of tears themselves have failed.
Life to the lees I drained, and I have grown
Too lightly wayward with its wine of love,
Too sadly troubled with its wind of change,
And some keen madness burns through all my blood.
The whimpering velvet whelps of Passion once
I warmed in my white breast, and now full-grown
And gaunt they stalk me naked through the world;
Too fondly now I bend unto the fierce
Necessity of bliss, yet in each glow
Of golden angour yearn forever toward
Some quiet gloom where plead the nightingales
Of lustral hope. I am a garden old
Where drift dead blossoms now and broken dreams
And only ghosts of old pale Sorrows walk.

Earth, April after April, beauteous is,

But from this body worn, yet once so fair,
My tired eyes gaze, as from a ruined tower
Some nesting bird looks out upon the sun.
These vagrant feet too many homes have known
To claim one door; all my waste heart is now
An impregnant thing of weeds and wilful moods,
Where even Love's most lowly groundling ne'er
Could creep with wearied plumes, and be at rest:
Not now like our sad plains of Sicily,
Pensive with happier harvests year by year
This bosom is,—but hot as Aetna's, torn
And seared with all the fires of vast despairs,—
A menace and a mockery where still brood
On its dark heights the eagles of Unrest.

Yet had you only loved me, who can tell
How humble I had been, how I had tried
From this poor broken twilight to re-build
The Dawn, and from Love's ashes to re-dream
The flower.

PHAON

I loved you then, and love you now.
The torn plumes of the wayward wings I take,
The ruined rose, and all the empty cruse;
Here I accept the bitter with the sweet,
The autumnal sorrow with the autumnal gold;
Tears shall go unregretted, and much pain
Gladly I take, if grief, in truth, and you
Go hand in hand.

SAPPHO

Ask me no more! For good
Were life, indeed, if every lonely bough
Could lure again the migrant nightingale!
—If all that luting music of first love
Could be recalled down years grown desolate!
Lightly they sing who love and are beloved;
And men shall lightly listen; but the heart
Forlorn of hope, that hides its wound in song,
Remembered is through many years and lands.
And I have wept and sung, and I have known
So many hours of sorrow—all for you!

PHAON

What Love remembers little things?—what wave
Withholds itself for sighs of broken reeds?

SAPPHO

The wave remembers not, till reed by reed
The lyric shores of youth lie ruinous;
It was not much I asked in those old days;—
As waters come whence reeds may never see,
So men have wider missions than we know.
'Tis not thro' all their moods they hunger for
Our poor pale faces; as a flame at sea
They seek us in the gloom, and then forget.
'Tis when by dusk the battle-sweat has dried;
'Tis when the port is won, and wind and storm
Are past; 'tis when the heart for solace aches;
'Tis when the road is lost in darkling woods,
Or under alien stars the fire is lit
And when strange dreams make deep the idle hour;
Then would I have my name sing throbbingly
Thro' some beloved heart, soft as a bird,—
And swing with it—swing sweet as silver bells!
Not all your hours I hoped to see you turn
To my poor face; but when the wayside flower
Shone through the dust and won the softer mood,
And when the soul aspired for better things,
Disturbed by voices calling past the Dawn,
I hoped your troubled eyes would seek my eyes.
And in those days that I have cried for you
And went uncomforted, had you returned,
I could have washed your guilty feet with tears,
And unto you still grown, and gone thro' sun
And gloom beside you, holding in my arms
Hope's hostage children, while I gladly felt
The keen captivity of love re-wake
At each light touch, and in the sweet dread bliss
Of motherhood and most mysterious birth
Forgot old wrongs, and starred the hills of grief
With primrose faith and opiate asphodel.

PHAON

Why brood on things turned ashes long ago
When softly dawn by golden dawn, and eve
By opal eve, Earth whispers: Life is good?

Once I had listened to you e'er I go;—
For like a god you seemed in those glad days
Of droning wings and languorous afternoons,
When close beside the murmuring sea we walked.
Then did the odorous summer ocean seem
A meadow green where foam one moment flowered
And then was gone, and ever came again,
A thousand blossom-burdened Springs in one!
—How like a god you seemed to me; and I
Was then most happy, and at little things
We lightly laughed, and oftentimes we plunged
Waist-deep and careless in the cool green waves,
As Tethys once and Oceanus played
Upon the golden ramparts of the world:
Then would we rest, and muse upon the sands,
Heavy with dreams and touched with some sad peace
Born of our very weariness of joy,
While drooped the wind and all the sea grew still
And unremembered trailed the idle oar
And no leaf moved and hushed were all the birds
And on the dunes the thin green ripples lisped
Themselves to sleep and sails swung dreamily,
Where azure islands floated on the air.
Then did your body seem a temple white
And I a worshipper who found therein
No god beyond the gracious marble, yet
Most meekly kneeled, and learned that I must love.
The bloom of youth was on your sunburnt cheek,
The streams of life sang thro' your violet veins,
The midnight velvet of your tangled hair
Lured, as a twilight rill, my passionate hands;
The muscles ran and rippled on your back
Like wind on evening waters, and your arm
Seemed one to cherish, or as sweetly crush.
The odour of your body sinuous
And saturate with sun and sea-air was
As Lesbian wine to me, and all your voice
A pain that took me back to times unknown;
And all the ephemeral glory of the flesh,—
The mystic sad bewilderment of warmth
And life amid the coldness of the world
Did seem to me so feeble on the Deep,
Poised like a sea-bird on some tumbling crest
As you called faintly back across the waves,
That one must love it as a little flower—

So strange, that one must guard it as a child.
Some spirit of the Sea crept in our veins
And through long immemorial afternoons
We mused and dreamed, and wave by pensive wave
Strange moods stole over us, and lo, we loved!

Oh, had you gone while still that glory fell
Like sunlight round you—had you sweetly died,
I should have loved you now as women love
The wonder and the silence of the West
When with sad eyes they breathe a last farewell
To where the black ships go so proudly out,—
Watching with twilit faces by the Sea,
Till down some golden rift the fading sails
Darken and glow and pale amid the dusk,
And gleam again, and pass into the gloom.

PHAON

Nay, Violet-Crowned, once in our time we loved,
The hand of that love's ghost shall lead you back.
Life, without you—life is an empty nest!
A grove with god and altar lost! A lute
Whereon no lonely fingers ever stray.
When in the moonlight Philomela mourned
Sad-throated for poor murdered Itylus,
And when the day-birds woke the dewy lawn
And white the sunlight fell across my bed
And all the dim world turned to gold again,—
Oft then, it seemed, the truant would come home,
Back as a bird to its forgotten nest,
And O the lute should find its song, and life
Be glad again!

SAPPHO

Your words but live and die
Like desert blooms, flow'rs blown and gone again
Where no foot ever fell.

I shall go Home,—
Home, Home afar, where unknown seas forlorn
On gloomy towers and darkling bastions foam,
And lonely eyes look out for one dim sail
That never comes, and men have said there is
No sun.—And though I go forth soon no fear
Shall cling to me, since I a thousand times
Ere this have died, or seemed in truth to die.
For sun by sun the grave insatiable

Has taken to its gloom some fleeting grace,
And day by day some glory old engulfed,
And left me as a house untenanted.
The unfathomed Ocean of wide Death, at most,
And that familiar stream called sleep are one!

PHAON

Enough of this! I need you; nay, turn back
With me, and let one riotous flame of bliss
Forever burn away these withered griefs
As fire eats clean autumnal mountain-sides;
For all this sweet sad-eyed dissuasiveness
Endears like dew the flow'r of final love!

SAPPHO

Yes, I have died ere this a thousand times;
For on the dusky borderlands of dream
Thro' the dim twilight of dear summer dawns
So darkly gold, before the hurrying hooves
Of Apollonian pearl throbbed down the wind,
Hearing the Lesbian birds amid green boughs
Where tree and hill and town were touched with fire,
—Hearing, yet hearing not, thro' all the thin
Near multitudinous lament of Dawn's
Low-rustling leaves, stirred by some opal wing,—
Oft have I felt my pilgrim soul come home,
For all its caging flesh a wanderer
That in the night goes out by those stern gates
Where five grim warders guard the body well.
It was not I, but one long dead that woke,
When, half in dreams, I felt this errant soul
Once more to its tellurian cage return:
An angel exile, looking for its lost,—
A draggled glory, brooding for its own!
Then faint and strange on my half-hearing ears
There fell the flute and pipe of early birds;
And strange the odour of the opening flowers;
And strange the great world lay; and stranger still
The quiet rain along the glimmering grass:
And Earth, sad with so many memories
Of bliss, and beautiful with vague regrets,
Took on a poignant glory, strange as death;
And light and water, grass, and dark-leaved trees
Were good to look on, and most dear was life!

PHAON

What is this dim-eyed madness and dark talk
Of Death?

SAPPHO

Hush! I have seen Death pass a hand
Along old wounds, and they have ached no more;
And with one little word lull pain away,
And heal long-wasting tears.

PHAON

But these soft lips
Were made not for the touch of mold.

SAPPHO

Time was
I thought Death stern, and scattered at his door
My dearest roses, that his feet might come
And softly go.

PHAON

This body white was made
Not for the grave,—this flashing wonder of
The hand for hungry worms!

SAPPHO

Oh, quiet as
Soft rain on water shall it seem, and sad
Only as life's most dulcet music is,
And dark as but a bride's first dreaded night
Is dark; mild, mild as mirrored stars!

But you,—

You will forget me, Phaon; there, the sting,
The sorrow of the grave is not its green
And the salt tear upon its violet;
But the long years that bring the gray neglect,
When the glad grasses smooth the little mound,—
When leaf by leaf the tree of sorrow wanes
And on the urn unseen the tamish comes,
And tears are not so bitter as they were.
Time sings so low to our bereavèd ears,—
So softly breathes, that, bud by falling bud,
The garden of fond Grief all empty lies
And unregretted dip the languid oars
Of Charon thro' the gloom, and then are gone.

PHAON

Red-lipped and breathing woman, made for love,
How can this clamouring heart of mine forget?

SAPPHO

You will forget, e'en though you would or no,
And the long years shall leave you free again;
And in some other Spring when other lips
Let fall my name, you will remember not.

PHAON

Enough,—but let me kiss the heavy rose
Of your red mouth.

SAPPHO

Not until Death has kissed
It white as these white garments, and has robed
This body for its groom.

PHAON

O woman honey-pale
And passion-worn, here to my hungering lips
These arms shall hold you close!

SAPPHO

You come too late;
Forth to a sterner lover must I fare!

PHAON

Mine flamed your first love, and shall glow your last!

SAPPHO

Then meet this One, and know!

PHAON

The hounds of Hell
And Aidoneus himself—

SAPPHO

Hush!

PHAON

You I seek!
The sorrow of your voice enraptures me,
And though you would elude me, still this arm
Is strong, and this great heart as daring as

That dusky night in Lesbos long ago!

SAPPHO

Stop, son of passion,—hear!

PHAON

Not till these arms,
O Oriole-throated woman, hold and fold
About your beauty as in Lesbos once!

SAPPHO

By all the hours you darkened, by the love
You crushed and left forsaken, hear me now!

PHAON

Thus women change! thus in their time forget!

SAPPHO

There lies the sorrow—if we could forget!
For one brief hour you gave me all the love
That women ask, and then with cruel hands
Set free the singing voices from the cage,
And shook the glory from the waiting rose;
And in life's empty garden still I clung
To this, and called it love, and seemed content!
Love! Love! 'Tis we who lose it know it best!
Love! Love! It gleams all gold and marble white
High on the headlands of our troubled lives
Pure as this golden temple of the Sun
To twilight eyes; by day a luring star
That leads our sea-worn hearts from strait to strait,
By night a fire and solace thro' the cold;
Yet standing as this temple stands, a door
To worlds mysterious, to alien things,
And all the glory of the waiting gods!
Love! Love! It is the blue of bluest skies;
The farthest green of waters touched with sun!
It is the calm of Evening's earliest star
And yet the tumult of most troubled tides!
It is the frail original of things,
A timorous flame that once half-feared the light,
Yet, loosened, sweeps the world, consuming Time
And tinsel empires grim with blood and war!
It is a hostage lent of Death, that Life
Once more in times afar may find its lost!
It is the ache and utter loneliness

Of wintry lands made wonderful with Spring!
Music it is, and song, regret and tears;
The rose upon the tomb of fleeting youth;
The one red wine of life, that on the lip
Of Thirst turns not to ashes!

Change and time

And sorrow kneel to it, for at its touch
The world is paved with gold, and wing by wing
Drear autumn fields and valleys dark with rain
Re-waken with the birds of Memory!

PHAON

All time your words were tuned to madden men;
And I am drunk with these sweet pleadings, soft
As voices over many waters blown.

SAPPHO

Hear me, for by those gods you fear the most
There is a fire within me burns away
All pity, and some Hate, half-caged, may eat
Thro' all its bars!

PHAON

Not till your mouth's
Sad warmth droops unto mine!

SAPPHO

Yours once I was,
And once, indeed, I watched you tread me down
And trample on my whitest flower of youth;
And long amid my poor dead roses lay,
Stifling with sorrow, and still held my peace,
Hoping thro' all that pain for better things.
Down to this day I raised no voice in wrath
But bowed my head beneath your heel, and smiled
With quiet mouth and most unhappy eyes,
And saw my woman's soul go thin and starved.
But now I warn you that the tide has turned;
Touch nevermore these hands, for my torn heart
Is desperate, and given not to words.
Quite humble have I been, and duly spake
My lips as you once tutored them to speak.
But now this empty husk from which you drained
Life's darkest wine shall die in its own way,
And whither now it will this thing you hurt
Shall steal away, for all its broken wings.

And now, as waters sigh and whisper through
Some hollow-throated urn, so peace this day
Shall steal thro' all my veins, as I have said.
So back! Stand back,—or if it must be, then
Locked desperately arm in arm with me
You shall go down, down to this crawling Deep!

(She approaches him with open arms, but he draws back from her in fear.)

PHAON

Madness throbs thro' her, and I fear this mood.

SAPPHO

The waves are softer with their dead, and winds
More kindly are with leaves in winter than
Men's cruel love, that kills and buries not!
Naked and torn we lie beneath their feet,
Who, had they known, in sorrow would have crept
Thro' griefs entombing night with what once held
Such joys and tears for them!

(As she turns to the sea a voice in the distance is heard singing through the twilight:)

O that sound, not wind or sea,
From no bird nor dreamland blown,
Bearing you away from me,
Crying: "One must go alone!"
O that Voice, so like my own
Calling through the gloom for thee!—
For the love that life has known,
For the parting yet to be!

SAPPHO

Now I shall go

Quite gladly, with this more than anguish at
My over-aching heart, that cries for rest:
Yes, shade-like even now I seem,—this face
Sea-worn as Leucothea's lonely face,
So wistful white at eve amid the waves
Where with sad eyes, men say, she gazes on
Earth's failing hills and fields!

(She turns once more to the sea.)

'Tis good to sleep,

And alone, sad mother Ocean, let me lie;
Alone, gray mother, take me in your arms
Whose earthly sorrow once was deep as yours,

Whose passion was as vain, whose heart could sound
Thro' all the sweetest meadows of this world
Only for evermore the morning lutes
Of loneliness and most unhappy love.
For once, in times I know not of, you too
Have loved and sorrowed, as your heart would say,
Mourning at dusk among your golden Isles.
I cannot call on mine old gods, for they
Have lived so far from Earth, they scarce would know
The odour of my incense, nor how white
My piteous altars stand; for as the Moon
Smiles sadly disempassioned over men
And their tumultuous cities crowned with song,
Where live by night so many heavy hearts,
So smile the gods on my pale-lipped despairs.
On to the end these feet must walk alone,—
Alone, once more, and unilluminated, fare;
For I am far from home to die, and far
From any voice to comfort me beyond
The cypress twilight and the hemlock gloom!
Not evermore, O blue Ionian Sea,
And vine-clad valleys, shall these eyes behold
My Lesbos, still my first and last of loves!
But take me, mother Ocean, while I feel
Burn thro' my blood this magic ecstasy!
Take me, O take me in your cooling arms,
And let the ablution of soft waters lave
Old sorrows from these eyes, and wash the pain
From this poor heart, that sinned, but suffered more!

(With arms upraised she walks through the gathering dusk to the edge of the cliff, and leaps into the sea beneath her.)



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Transcriber's Notes:

Hyphenation and archaic spellings have been retained as in the original. Punctuation errors have been corrected without note.

[The end of *Hephaestus, Persephone at Enna and Sappho in Leucadia* by Arthur Stringer]