

WHAT OF THE DIM OLD LEGENDS?

WHAT of the dim old legends,
What of the story and song
That put this planet to slumber
Ere it grew to be mighty and strong?

Far back in the misty ages
It heard them in its sleep,
And it smiled, as smiles an infant
When its hand has something to keep.

It played with the toys of childhood,
And found such playing sweet,
And then when it grew to be older
It flung them down at its feet.

It grew into youth and manhood
When higher needs had to be,
And fashioned for prayer and worship
The gods and the creeds we see.

And slowly growing upward
It flung those creeds away,
And hurled from column and temple
The gods of marble and clay.

Then it saw with clearer vision
The forces of things that move,
And built high fanes to a worship
Of a wider and deeper love.

It moves with the roll of the ages,
It has faith in what is unseen,
It gathers the long procession
Of the years and what they mean.

But does it ever look backward
In this march of the mighty mind,
To see the wreck of its playthings
It has left so far behind?

OMAR KHAYYAM.

WAS it of wine and all its purple glow,
Or roses when the seasons bade them blow,
That Omar Khayyam, he of Nashapur,
Sang in the centuries of long ago?

Or was the wine and blossom but a veil
To hide the doubts that fight and still prevail;
That life is but a rose that fades and dies,
And all the leaves are scattered to the gale;

That we but live a moment ere we die,
Let not the fleeting days go idly by;
But seize the cup and blossom ere they shrink,
And all the odours and the incense fly.

Or did the Preacher from another land
Reach forth, and touch him with a brother's hand,
Saying, "I touch thee with my spirit, and lo!
Come thou, and be with us, and all our band."

Or he who, in despair, once thought to fight
The Voice that answered from the whirlwind's might;
Did he too touch him from the mystic east,
And set his spirit yearning for the light?

We know not; rather unto human things,
He looked himself and, touching all the strings,
Sang till his fingers struck the lower chords—
The hope that wavers, and the doubt that stings.

Perchance he saw with eager, open eyes,
This web of human life with all its dyes,
Woven with hand unseen within the dark,
And no one sees the shuttle as it flies.

This web of human life, so interwrought,
With warp and woof and colours rarely sought;

We see it being woven and in our heart
There lives the hunger of all eager thought.

Did Omar fail to catch the world-wide light,
And failing, could not read the problem right,

But left us, groping for the single path
That leads us from the shadows of the night?

Not sure himself, and hearing no reply
To questions put with eager lip and eye,

He turned to watch the roses bud and blow,
And all the idle moments saunter by.

AT THE GRAVE OF KEATS.

HE sleeps beneath the violets,
That grow above him like regrets,
That he, so sick at heart should come
Here in the splendid past of Rome,
And lay him down to rest, nor crave
The glory of an English grave,
Where Fame might whisper soft and clear—
“An English poet’s dust is here.”

But the gods loved him, and they drew
His spirit to theirs as winds the dew,
Until his music took the tone
And changing sorrow of their own.
Such sorrow as the waves will make,
When winds from slumber half awake,
And overhead is spread on high
The lonely distance of the sky.

They beat above him with the wreath
Of early song and early death;

AT THE GRAVE OF KEATS

They wove it round pale brows that felt
The glory of the doom they dealt.
That he should find an early home
Within their past and that of Rome,
Whose fading splendour should receive
The melody for which they grieve.

“ Sleep then,” they said, “ with flowers above,
And feel the doom of those we love—
Immortal youth apart from fears,
No dread of slowly waning years,
No time to touch the pulse or shake
The dews from off the heart, nor wake
The shadows into life, but be
Immortal as our love for thee.”

He sleeps with violets above
Whom Shelley's heart and England love.
He sleeps. O let him slumber on,
The past of Rome around him thrown.
So let him rest, nor for him crave
The glory of an English grave;
For Fame will whisper soft and clear—
“ An English poet's dust is here.”

THE POET'S CHOICE.

LIFE said to the soul of the poet—
“ Of the gifts I can offer to thee,
Thou hast turned from them all, and taken
A touch of sweet melody.

“ Thine is the choice and thine only,
The joy and shadow it brings,

THE POET'S CHOICE

For by singing comes the sorrow
That is heard through human things.

“ But I cannot give thee the laurel,
I can only inspire thy song;
And stand by thy side in battles
On the fields of right and wrong.

“ Another than I must crown thee,
He must by thee be unseen,
Thou shalt only hear his whispers,
And thy heart shall know what they mean.

“ Thou shalt see a brighter sunshine
Resting on wood and field;
And also a deeper shadow
With the fears that it may yield.

“ In thy breast shall be the longing
For that which can never be known;
And the sorrows that fall on thy fellows
Shall be lighter than thine own.

“ Thou shalt have to wrestle with passions
Far deeper and stronger than theirs;
If thou fallest thine is the burden
And the deep, long shame that it bears.

“ Thou shalt ever be inly haunted,
As the low-winds haunt the trees,
With life and its wonderful changes,
And its endless mysteries.

“ And ghostly feet shall follow,
To be heard of the inner ear,
Thine own, wherever they wander,
And none but thyself shall hear.”

IN A MANSE GARDEN.

BESIDE the manse the river flows
This sweet and tender summer day,
While soft winds wanton round the rose,
Or dally with the leaves and play.

There is so much of life to meet
The compass of the dreaming eye;
So much of what is fair and sweet
To linger for a moment by.

I sit upon the old stone seat,
I watch the valley far below
Through which, as if on silver feet,
The rippling wavelets dance and flow.

I know the woods, I know the fields,
And, as the brooding eye is cast
Upon them, each in silence yields
A something from the fading past.

A sense of youth when hope was high,
And life was sweet as sweet could be,
When overhead the smiling sky
Was blue and very fair to see.

I turn away: I slowly walk
The garden path; the scent of flowers
That hang upon the dewy stalk
Sheds sweetness through the summer hours.

The slightest stir is in the air;
Like nuns with hands upon their breast
Each blossom hangs, and everywhere
There is the perfect sleep of rest.

I pace the garden walk—I hear
A well-known whisper as I go;

It lingers gently in my ear,
Although the sound is faint and low.
I know the voice, and as I stand
I question half in doubt and fear—
“ Now, where should be the kindly hand
When voice and footsteps are so near?”
No answer. Could there only be
One single touch, as friends may give
Each unto each, with “ Lo! you see,
I touch thee knowing that I live.”
I know what spirit walks with me
This tender, silent summer day,
Though from one blossom that I see
A single petal drops away.

THE CRICKET'S SONG.

HE will not sing his loudest song,
This poet full of love and mirth,
Until the shadows which belong
To night are deep upon the hearth.
And then he sings; the little room
Is full of his persistent glee;
I almost fancy that the gloom
Trembles, so loud of voice is he.
He fills the space around; his spell
Is over all in perfect bliss,
He pipes, and yet I could not tell
A single moment where he is.
And as I listen, far away,
I stray to dearer, earlier years,

THE CRICKET'S SONG

When other hearts by night and day
Took kindly to his former peers.
They fed them, and when all the night
Drew down to make the shadows cling,
The room was full of their delight,
Such joy it was for them to sing.
Those hearts, alas! have done with time;
This latest singer of his race,
After long silence, comes to chime
This carol and to take their place.
And how he chirps! The little room
Is all too narrow for his mirth;
But let him sing to cheer the gloom,
This one true poet of the hearth.
I hear him; I am full of tears,
And cannot share his shrill delight;
Those hands that fed his early peers
Are lying on my own to-night.

THE CRICKET'S SILENCE.

LAST year I sat within my room,
And heard the cricket in the gloom
Chirp out his palpitating lay,
As if he were on holiday.
I sat and heard him, for he brought
Sad things to sadden all my thought,
And, full of fancy, I could hear
Whispers that caught my eager ear.
And I was touched by ghostly hands
That reached to me from higher lands;

THE CRICKET'S SILENCE

One touched me on the head; I bent,
I knew the touch and what it meant.

To-night no cricket can be seen
Or heard to chirp and trill between
The pauses; and the lonely hearth
Is lonelier wanting all his mirth.

Can he have met that fate which flings
Its shadow over human things,
And fled away from all I view,
Silent, like other voices, too?

I know not; only as I sit
And watch the firelight shadows flit,
The voice that trilled its rich delight
Last year is dumb to me to-night.

EVANESCENCE.

WE are but shadows, and we pass
Like sunshine on the waving grass;
Shadows that live a little time,
As summer lives and breathes her prime.

We go; but she—she never grieves,
But forms her birth of infant leaves

For the next season, and they blow
Full, as a thousand years ago

They grew, and spread to winds unseen
Their paradise of dewy green.

So be it. In their high estate
The gods that rule our human fate

Have fixed it; and their high stern doom
Is, that our race must have a tomb.

EVANESCENCE

Ah, who so bold of heart can say
The high gods shall not have their sway.

We fight in vain; our paltry life
Sinks like a bubble in the strife.

But all the seasons still renew
The colour which they hold their due.

But man. He only lives to pass
Like floating shadows on the grass.

SWEET SEVENTEEN.

NEVER through all the years to be
Can there be such a night as that night we know,
When we two stood by a hawthorn tree,
High up on a hill where the night winds blow.
Never can come such another night,
When your whisper was warm with a maiden's love,
And the stars above us were burning bright,
They will never again shine so sweet above.

Well, well, it is something after all,
In the short fleet years that the high gods give,
If into our lives some moments fall,
So full and sweet that we know we live.
And such was that night when the wind was south,
Soft as your breath, and the sighs between,
And I clasped you, dear, and felt on my mouth
The kiss of a girl of seventeen.

The years may come, and the years may go,
Draw strength from the blood and light from the eye;
There is something yet that they do not know,
A something that will not fade or die.

And I turn myself to the gods and say,
 If they hear in their halls of idle bliss,
 It is out of your power to snatch away
 That starry night and that long sweet kiss.

BLYTHE WILLIE STEWART.

I'M growin' auld, an' no' sae yauld,
 Nor yet sae gleg as I ha'e been;
 But whiles, when I am a' my lane,
 I licht my pipe an' steek my een.

Then in a crack auld things come back—
 Auld things I canna weel forget;
 An' in my ear at ance I hear
 Blithe Willie Stewart's fiddle yet.

O, weel could Willie Stewart play,
 An' jig his elbow gleg an' fell—
 The best bow han' in a' Scotlan',
 He aften tauld me sae himsel'.

An' wha like him could start a reel,
 Or country dance in barn or ha'?
 It weel was kent through a' the toon
 That Willie Stewart beat them a'.

What nichts we had in Willie's hoose
 When by the fire we gathered roun',
 When he spak' oot fu' sharp an' croose—
 "Nellie, come rax the fiddle doon."

An' he would gi'e the bow a screw,
 An' then, wi' mony a jink an' sweep,
 Play till we daun'ered to oor beds
 To hear him playin' in' our sleep.

BLYTHE WILLIE STEWART

He learnt us a', forbye, to dance,
For nane could teach like him ava';
His gleg blue een would gi'e a glance
Alang the couples in a raw.

An' "Move away," he cried, an' laid
The bow upon the fiddle strings;
An', though I ha'e to say't mysel',
We did some maist surprisin' things.

I min' a waddin' I was at,
A dozen guid Scotch miles away;
I danced until they a' did glowre,
An' whisper—"Whaur does *he* come frae?"

I think they thocht that I had come
Across the seas frae foreign lan's,
Till ane came up and said—"I see
Ye've been through Willie Stewart's han's."

He hasna left his like ahin',
An' wha are they that tak' his place?
Ane wan'ered half a mile frae hame,
Anither lost his fiddle-case.

They can do nocht but scart an' scrape
Among the strings like ony hen;
To hear them at it is eneuch
To pit what hair ane has on en'.

I carena for your foreign airs
Wi' names that break your jaws to speak;
Wi' a' their quavers an' their slides,
They turn my heart to hear their squeak.

But gi'e me Willie at his best,
His brain clear wi' a glass or twa;
An' I wad wager half a croon
That he wad fairly ding them a'.

BLYTHE WILLIE STEWART

I'm growin' auld, an' no' sae yauld,
An' gettin' stiff about the knee;
An' whiles I think a foursome reel
Wad be the very death o' me.

But if blithe Willie could come back
To lift the bow and play the reel—
Say "Lady Mary Ramsay"—fegs!
I think I yet could shake my heel.

Auld Willie's gane wi' a' his fun,
The fate o' men an' human things;
His fiddle's hingin' on the wa',
An' wha is left to touch its strings?

The best bow han' in a' the lan'
Is kirkyaird dust, as we maun be;
But still we'll min' the sweet langsyne,
An' Willie wi' his gleg blue ee.

ALEXANDER BROWN,
Man and Poet.

TRUE man and poet, in whose verse is seen
The golden tints of autumn and the thought
That links these unto man and to his lot,
That passes as the shadow that has been;
Thine eyes have sentinelled the changeful scene
In which we live and pass, as doth the mote
Within the beam, yet ever quick to note
Hope bending over graves whose grass is green.
There be far louder voices on the hill
Of which Fame shrills her trumpet. Let it be.
Calm only follows when the clamours end,
And in that tender calm thou singest still;
But sweeter than thy singing unto me
Is this—the boon of calling thee my friend.

ISA IN THE GARDEN.

ISA in the garden stands,
And the winds, with unseen hands,
Lift the midnight of her hair
From her brow so white and fair.

ISA plucks with finger-tips
One sweet rose; her crimson lips
Match the colour and the tone,
But the dew is all their own.

And I think, as ISA stands
With the rose within her hands,
Other sounds are in her ear
Than the river's gliding near.

Whispers soft as whispers be
When love lends its voice, and she
Hears its thrilling music stream
Through the wonder-gate of dream.

And then gentle whispers say—

“ISA, ISA, come away,
We have in our fairy bower
One sweet spray of orange flower;

“This we keep to clasp your brow
When your heart has breathed its vow,
And you move away beside
One who claims you as his bride.”

ISA smiles as still she stands
With the rose within her hands,
So I turn away and leave
ISA yet a maiden EVE.