

A Vision of Sappho

BY BLISS CARMAN

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Musshupad



A Vision of Sappho

BY BLISS CARMAN

ONCE upon a time there lived in Lesbos,
In a certain street in Mitylene,
A Greek woman, beautiful, accomplished.—”

Thus I might begin at the beginning,
Like the teller of a fairy story
In the old times when we lived at leisure,
Were you storm-bound here within the Ghost House,
Caught abroad and seeking sudden shelter
On this rainy afternoon in August,
(Shelley's birthday marks the date exactly)
Asking at a glance what means this litter
Of unfinished proofs and scribbled margins,
As I set a chair and bid you welcome,
While the wood fire crackles on the hearthstone,
And the rain makes music on the shingles.

You would see the mountain snake with storm-clouds,
Driving mists come up the clove, and ghostly
Wraiths of rain walk in the purple valley.
Furtively the hill-fog through the beeches
Steals in silence, enters at the window,
Shuts the world out, and mysterious stillness
Bids the soul prepare for revelation.

Hushed and waiting, one step from the doorway
Might be early Greece, some Thracian woodland
Far from dwellings, where Pan loved to wander
Drenched and musing through the rainy quiet,
With his flocks all housed, his shepherds happy,
Seeing how it fared with his wild creatures.

Hark, is that his piping grave and tender,
Or a wood-thrush in the hemlock shadows,—
One stray flute-tone from the Summer's chorus?
Did the early earth, from dreams awaking,
Hear that strain of pure deliberate music
Falter from her dewy morning shadows,
Like some glad mysterious enchantment
For the slaking of eternal sorrow?
So it lingers on for our bewitchment

With a sorcery past name or naming;
 And a magic charm, a lure and solace,
 Steal upon the world-distracted spirit
 With a sense of reverie and longing
 Pierced by some unmitigated joyance,
 Calm, immortal.

It would not surprise me,—
 Would it you?—if from the brambly thicket
 Two green eyes should peer, and we, a moment
 Blessed beyond the common lot of mortals,
 In their spell should recognize the wood-god,—
 That appealing smile, half gay, half wistful,
 And all kindly. Truth we should account it,
 Though it proved mere figment of the fancy,
 Sense once more subservient to spirit.
 Surely soul must have her own dominion
 Real as any ranged by outward vision!
 Must we to believe behold the presence,—
 Doubt the song until we see the singer?
 Like enough that thrush's song is magic.
 What more would you? Hear and be transported!

So upon the wish, we are in Hellas,
 In the purple hills, and it is summer.
 The wind wanders through the groves of ilex:
 There are sounds of birds and falling water:
 The leaves whisper full of wind and shadow:
 That red road in the ravine below us
 Leads the travelling eye through fields of mallow,
 Seeding grass and flame-bright oleander,
 Down the meadowy country to the seaboard,
 Where the breakers beat their crooning rhythms
 On the white sand. There a phantom city,
 White and small against the purple distance,
 With her looming walls and spars and towers
 Gleaming in the sun is Mitylene.
 Olive groves and feathery moonlit fountains,
 Gardens full of shade and yellow roses,
 River beds where glowed the purple iris,
 Jonquil and anemone and myrtle,
 Temples to the gods in blue-veined marble,
 Bronze and gold and ivory and vermilion,
 Theatres and baths and noble dwellings,
 Lie within her pleasant streets and borders
 Where life ran undimmed in happy beauty.
 In that long ago no man remembers.

There a people very like us moderns
 Wrought and triumphed, loved and joyed and suffered.

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On the way to welfare or misfortune;
 Dreamed the dream of youth through soft spring twilights
 With their sweet uncomprehended longings;
 Felt earth's incommunicable sadness
 In the destiny of all things mortal;
 And beheld through sunsets o'er the sea-rim
 Sails come in with stories of strange marvels,
 Foreign folk, and peril and adventure;
 Curious about the world as children,
 Always mooting some unanswered question;
 Took their pleasure; prospered, travelled, traded;
 Gave this life for beauty and repined not;
 Thanked the gods and passed and were forgotten,
 Leaving to the careless years a treasure
 Unsurpassed in lyric or in marble,
 To bear witness how eternal passion
 Sought in art what life could hardly furnish,
 Forms supreme for spirit's habitation,
 When the rosy heat of youth was glowing
 In the crucible of clay. Believe me,
 They were human long ago in Lesbos.

Shall we then go down into that city,
 Hear what news the merchants bring from Sidon;
 Listen to the sea-songs, while the sailors
 Warp their galleys out into the channel;
 See the long black ships begin to courtesy
 To the creak of rowlocks and make seaward,
 Slowly plunging as the foam salutes them?

We will gossip with the melon-vendor
 And the dark-eyed Syrian selling trinkets,
 Roam the streets, and overhear the women
 Bent upon their shopping, or returning
 From the Summer Festival. They chatter:
 "What a crowd this year to greet Adonis!"
 "Shall we be in time for the first chorus?"
 "But, my dear, Mnasicida was faithless,—"
 "You should see the gown which Phaon brought me,
 Brodered with dull gold and Tyrian crimson,
 And the loveliest of bracelets,—"
 Quickly,
 Look before she passes that next corner!
 Not as tall as you: an Oriental,
 Slim and dark; the blue-black hair that crinkles,
 Knotted at the neck; the smouldering crimson
 Mounting through the cheek's transparent tawny;
 And the earth-brown eyes that glow and darkle;
 Just the foil for her fair-haired companion
 With the azure eyes, whose arm she leaned on
 With such laughing and delicious fervor.

Who could she have been,—the lyric figure
 And the pure-toned speech? She spoke of Phaon,
 And, I fancied, called her comrade Gorgo.
 (Here another passer-by, a young girl,
 Radiant and eager to her comrade:
 "Have you heard the latest songs of Sappho?")
 Sappho's very self! And we have seen her:
 Heard the golden accent clear and gracious,
 Caught the girlish poise of head and shoulder
 And the lithe step free from throat to sandal.
 Is not that enough for one day's outing?
 Let's home now and ask our lodging keeper
 More exact report of these new lyrics.

Think of finding one of those lost love-songs
 From the books of Sappho, which for ages
 Men have hedged about with golden rumor!
 Or if one should stumble on some cadence,
 Turn of phrase, or hint of magic beauty
 Heard not save within these vanished volumes!
 Ah, not I! The letter and the substance
 Of that noble tongue may live forever;
 But the lyric soul that breathed across it,
 As a god might blow his silver syrinx
 With a magic past the reach of mortals,
 Shall no more revisit with enchantment
 Human dwellings nor the hearts of lovers.

Yet if, here and now, a sheer invention
 Just to pass an idle week of Summer,
 One should dare contrive a book of lyrics,
 With the names of Sappho and of Phaon,
 Atthis, Dica, Gorgo and Gyrinna,
 And among the latest novels leave it
 On your table with some trepidation,
 Would you not, if only for the sake of
 That Greek woman long ago in Lesbos,
 Turn the leaves and read, as in a play-book
 Long forgotten, here and there a lyric?

Here it lies at last within your hand, then,
 Just a fragmentary page of story,
 Torn across, imperfect, and unfinished,
 From the Golden History of Lovers.
 Let me trust your passion for the drama,
 Love of poetry, and Celtic insight,
 To make good the scanty text; and read it
 As you would a part, with intuition

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Of the Persons of the Play, beholding
How they lived whose moods I here have fancied.

These responsive verses (need I prompt you?)
Are the broken lines of two fond mortals
Who were lovers once in Mitylene,
When the lyric heart and fervid beauty,
With the pure mind so restrained, so eager,
Flamed the perfect poise in men and women
And the arts they wrought with such transcendence.

Whether you play Cigarette or Fanchon,
Carmen or Camille or sad Maslova,
All the actor's genius comes to aid you,—
Ardor, temperament, and understanding,—
Till the mimic words have breath and being,
Color, form and voice and melting motion,
And the very person lives before us
By that subtle witchery. I pray you
Lend this volume something of that talent
For interpretation rare and generous;
So my Sappho shall emerge transfigured,—
Fair, impassioned, witty, and most loving,—
From these pages when you have endowed her
With the gracious bearing of a woman
And the last fine unaccounted something,
Like the lyric touch that one despairs of!

Well, the rain holds up; the fog has lifted
From the dripping trees: the wooded gorge lies
Washed a bluer purple, ledge and summit,
Where the clouds still hang in lawny patches
To the peaks and shoulders of the mountains.
The familiar earth returns with sunlight,
And our day-dream vanishes in hill-mist.

No, not quite! Hark from the sombre shadows
That serene note, how it pleads and falters,
Stops and hesitates and half recovers
That lost measure from the full June chorus!
Not a wood-thrush? Then beyond all reason
You believe the Pan-pipes still at moments
Loose their burden to the winds of summer,
And their master haunts the mighty forest,
Lonely shore and rocky-bedded hill stream,
Still enamored of his own wild music
And bewildered by a sad strange wonder
At our modern ways? And from that piping
Something plaintive runs across the joyance
Of this woodland music with a cadence

Of unfathomable magic sorrow,
 While a touch of wistfulness forever
 Clings about the human theme and softens
 All our loveliest melodies to minor?
 So believe. The oldest faith is better
 Than the newest doubt, if only beauty,
 Gladness, loving kindness, strength and patience,
 Spring therefrom. Let perfect wisdom follow.

Silvery, reverberant, come with flute notes
 Up the dark ravine with joy and pathos.
 O you small brown bird among the beeches,
 Did the nightingales of Mitylene
 So outsing you in the moonlit gardens,
 Where the blue sea round the Isles of Hellas
 Plashed and murmured in those far-off summers?

Care not! Only heed the lyric moment!
 Let no yesterday and no to-morrow
 Mar the fine perfection of the present
 With regret or longing. Make the hour
 All sufficient, full and fine and joyous.
 Let mere gladness in the fleeting instant
 Do away regret and anxious forethought,
 Every task the better thus accomplished
 For the undivided spirit's rapture.
 Then whatever may befall hereafter
 Let the gods have in their holy keeping.
 You at least have hindered not the purpose
 Of creation, undistraught, unlagging,
 And unhasting to her unknown issue.
 Ah, no languor and no foolish hurry
 Vex the silver strain of that pure singing.
 Then what matter in the long hereafter
 Though our mountain thrushes do compare not
 With the nightingales of Greece for splendor,
 When the dead years rang with Sappho's glory!
 Here and now; the play of Lovely Mortals
 Has no other scene nor time; and promptly
 On the skilled and skillless falls the curtain.

Yet, remembering departed Summers,
 When you hear that broken silver sequence
 Pouring through the unfrequented valleys
 And blue passes of the rainy Catskills,
 Say, "What must have been the magic music
 From the groves of ilex, which found lodgment
 In one human heart,—how wild, how tender,
 And how faultless,—and became an echo
 In those perished songs from Mitylene!"

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