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978-1-108-05117-0 - The Collected Works of William Morris: With Introductions by his Daughter

May Morris: Volume 3: The Earthly Paradise: A Poem 1

William Morris

Excerpt

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○ F Heaven or Hell I have no power to sing,
I cannot ease the burden of your fears,
Or make quick-coming death a little thing,
Or bring again the pleasure of past years,
Nor for my words shall ye forget your tears,
Or hope again for aught that I can say,
The idle singer of an empty day.

But rather, when aweary of your mirth,
From full hearts still unsatisfied ye sigh,
And, feeling kindly unto all the earth,
Grudge every minute as it passes by,
Made the more mindful that the sweet days die—
Remember me a little then I pray,
The idle singer of an empty day.

The heavy trouble, the bewildering care
That weighs us down who live and earn our bread,
These idle verses have no power to bear;
So let me sing of names remembered,
Because they, living not, can ne'er be dead,
Or long time take their memory quite away
From us poor singers of an empty day.

Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time,
Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?
Let it suffice me that my murmuring rhyme
Beats with light wing against the ivory gate,
Telling a tale not too importunate
To those who in the sleepy region stay,
Lulled by the singer of an empty day.

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Folk say, a wizard to a northern king
At Christmas-tide such wondrous things did show,
That through one window men beheld the spring,
And through another saw the summer glow,
And through a third the fruited vines a-row,
While still, unheard, but in its wonted way,
Piped the drear wind of that December day.

So with this Earthly Paradise it is,
If ye will read aright, and pardon me,
Who strive to build a shadowy isle of bliss
Midmost the beating of the steely sea,
Where tossed about all hearts of men must be;
Whose ravening monsters mighty men shall slay,
Not the poor singer of an empty day.

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PROLOGUE: THE WANDERERS

THE ARGUMENT

CERTAIN GENTLEMEN AND MARINERS OF NORWAY, HAVING CONSIDERED ALL THAT THEY HAD HEARD OF THE EARTHLY PARADISE, SET SAIL TO FIND IT, AND SO AFTER MANY TROUBLES AND THE LAPSE OF MANY YEARS CAME OLD MEN TO SOME WESTERN LAND, OF WHICH THEY HAD NEVER BEFORE HEARD: THERE THEY DIED, WHEN THEY HAD DWELT THERE CERTAIN YEARS, MUCH HONoured OF THE STRANGE PEOPLE.

FORGET six counties overhung with smoke,
 Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke,
 Forget the spreading of the hideous town;
 Think rather of the pack-horse on the down,
 And dream of London, small and white and clean,
 The clear Thames bordered by its gardens green;
 Think, that below bridge the green lapping waves
 Smite some few keels that bear Levantine staves,
 Cut from the yew wood on the burnt-up hill,
 And pointed jars that Greek hands toiled to fill,
 And treasured scanty spice from some far sea,
 Florence gold cloth, and Ypres napery,
 And cloth of Bruges, and hogsheads of Guienne;
 While nigh the thronged wharf Geoffrey Chaucer's pen
 Moves over bills of lading—mid such times
 Shall dwell the hollow puppets of my rhymes.

A nameless city in a distant sea,
 White as the changing walls of faërie,
 Thronged with much people clad in ancient guise,
 I now am fain to set before your eyes;
 There, leave the clear green water and the quays,

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Prologue And pass betwixt its marble palaces,
 Until ye come unto the chiefest square;
 A bubbling conduit is set midmost there,
 And round about it now the maidens throng
 With jest and laughter, and sweet broken song,
 Making but light of labour new begun
 While in their vessels gleams the morning sun.
 On one side of the square a temple stands,
 Wherein the gods worshipped in ancient lands
 Still have their altars; a great market-place
 Upon two other sides fills all the space,
 And thence the busy hum of men comes forth;
 But on the cold side looking toward the north
 A pillared council-house may you behold,
 Within whose porch are images of gold,
 Gods of the nations who dwelt anciently
 About the borders of the Grecian sea.

 Pass now between them, push the brazen door,
 And standing on the polished marble floor
 Leave all the noises of the square behind;
 Most calm that reverent chamber shall ye find,
 Silent at first, but for the noise you made
 When on the brazen door your hand you laid
 To shut it after you—but now behold
 The city rulers on their thrones of gold,
 Clad in most fair attire, and in their hands
 Long carven silver-banded ebony wands;
 Then from the dais drop your eyes and see
 Soldiers and peasants standing reverently
 Before those elders, round a little band
 Who bear such arms as guard the English land,
 But battered, rent and rusted sore, and they,
 The men themselves, are shrivelled, bent and grey;
 And as they lean with pain upon their spears
 Their brows seem furrowed deep with more than years;

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For sorrow dulls their heavy sunken eyes; Prologue
Bent are they less with time than miseries.

Pondering on them the city grey-beards gaze
Through kindly eyes, midst thoughts of other days,
And pity for poor souls, and vague regret
For all the things that might have happened yet,
Until, their wonder gathering to a head,
The wisest man, who long that land has led,
Breaks the deep silence, unto whom again
A wanderer answers. Slowly as in pain,
And with a hollow voice as from a tomb
At first he tells the story of his doom,
But as it grows, and once more hopes and fears,
Both measureless, are ringing round his ears,
His eyes grow bright, his seeming days decrease,
For grief once told brings somewhat back of peace.

THE ELDER OF THE CITY

From what unheard-of world, in what strange keel,
Have ye come hither to our commonweal?
No barbarous folk, as these our peasants say,
But learned in memories of a long-past day,
Speaking, some few at least, the ancient tongue
That through the lapse of ages still has clung
To us, the seed of the Ionian race.

Speak out and fear not; if ye need a place
Wherein to pass the end of life away,
That shall ye gain from us from this same day,
Unless the enemies of God ye are;
We fear not you and yours to bear us war,
And scarce can think that ye will try again
Across the perils of the shifting plain
To seek your own land whereso that may be:
For folk of ours bearing the memory
Of our old land, in days past oft have striven

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Prologue To reach it, unto none of whom was given
 To come again and tell us of the tale,
 Therefore our ships are now content to sail,
 About these happy islands that we know.

THE WANDERER

 Masters, I have to tell a tale of woe,
 A tale of folly and of wasted life,
 Hope against hope, the bitter dregs of strife,
 Ending, where all things end, in death at last;
 So if I tell the story of the past,
 Let it be worth some little rest, I pray,
 A little slumber ere the end of day.

 No wonder if the Grecian tongue I know,
 Since at Byzantium many a year ago
 My father bore the twibill valiantly;
 There did he marry, and get me, and die,
 And I went back to Norway to my kin,
 Long ere this beard ye see did first begin
 To shade my mouth, but nathless not before
 Among the Greeks I gathered some small lore,
 And standing midst the Væring warriors heard
 From this or that man many a wondrous word;
 For ye shall know that though we worshipped God,
 And heard mass duly, still of Swithiod
 The Greater, Odin and his house of gold,
 The noble stories ceased not to be told;
 These moved me more than words of mine can say
 E'en while at Micklegarth my folk did stay;
 But when I reached one dying autumn-tide
 My uncle's dwelling near the forest side,
 And saw the land so scanty and so bare,
 And all the hard things men contend with there,
 A little and unworthy land it seemed,
 And all the more of Asgard's days I dreamed,
 And worthier seemed the ancient faith of praise.

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But now, but now—when one of all those days Prologue
Like Lazarus' finger on my heart should be
Breaking the fiery fixed eternity,
But for one moment—could I see once more
The grey-roofed sea-port sloping towards the shore,
Or note the brown boats standing in from sea,
Or the great dromond swinging from the quay,
Or in the beech-woods watch the screaming jay
Shoot up betwixt the tall trunks, smooth and grey—
Yea, could I see the days before distress
When very longing was but happiness!

Within our house there was a Breton squire
Well learned, who failed not to blow up the fire
That evermore unholpen burned in me
Strange lands and things beyond belief to see:
Much lore of many lands this Breton knew,
And for one tale I told, he told me two.
He, counting Asgard but a new-told thing,
Yet spoke of gardens ever blossoming
Across the western sea where none grew old,
E'en as the books at Micklegarth had told,
And said moreover that an English knight
Had had the Earthly Paradise in sight,
And heard the songs of those that dwelt therein,
But entered not, being hindered by his sin.
Shortly, so much of this and that he said
That in my heart the sharp barb entered,
And like real life would empty stories seem,
And life from day to day an empty dream.

Another man there was, a Swabian priest,
Who knew the maladies of man and beast,
And what things helped them; he the stone still sought
Whereby base metal into gold is brought,
And strove to gain the precious draught, whereby
Men live midst mortal men, yet never die;

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Prologue Tales of the Kaiser Redbeard could he tell
Who neither went to Heaven nor yet to Hell,
When from that fight upon the Asian plain
He vanished, but still lives to come again
Men know not how or when; but I listening
Unto this tale thought it a certain thing
That in some hidden vale of Swithiod
Across the golden pavement still he trod.

But while our longing for such things so grew,
And ever more and more we deemed them true,
Upon the land a pestilence there fell
Unheard of yet in any chronicle,
And, as the people died full fast of it,
With these two men it chanced me once to sit,
This learned squire whose name was Nicholas,
And Swabian Laurence, as our manner was;
For, could we help it, scarcely did we part
From dawn to dusk: so heavy, sad at heart,
We from the castle-yard beheld the bay
Upon that ne'er-to-be-forgotten day,
Little we said amidst that dreary mood,
And certes nought that we could say was good.

It was a bright September afternoon,
The parched-up beech-trees would be yellowing soon;
The yellow flowers grown deeper with the sun
Were letting fall their petals one by one;
No wind there was, a haze was gathering o'er
The furthest bound of the faint yellow shore;
And in the oily waters of the bay
Scarce moving aught some fisher-cobbles lay,
And all seemed peace; and had been peace indeed
But that we young men of our life had need,
And to our listening ears a sound was borne
That made the sunlight wretched and forlorn—
The heavy tolling of the minster bell;

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And nigher yet a tinkling sound did tell Prologue
 That through the streets they bore our Saviour Christ
 By dying lips in anguish to be kissed.

At last spoke Nicholas: "How long shall we
 Abide here, looking forth into the sea
 Expecting when our turn shall come to die?
 Fair fellows, will ye come with me and try
 Now at our worst that long-desired quest,
 Now, when our worst is death, and life our best?"

"Nay, but thou know'st," I said, "that I but wait
 The coming of some man, the turn of fate,
 To make this voyage; but I die meanwhile,
 For I am poor, though my blood be not vile,
 Nor yet for all his lore doth Laurence hold
 Within his crucibles aught like to gold;
 And what hast thou, whose father driven forth
 By Charles of Blois, found shelter in the North?
 But little riches as I needs must deem."

"Well," said he, "things are better than they seem,
 For 'neath my bed an iron chest I have
 That holdeth things I have made shift to save
 E'en for this end; moreover, hark to this,
 In the next firth a fair long-ship there is
 Well victualled, ready even now for sea,
 And I may say it 'longeth unto me;
 Since Marcus Erling, late its owner, lies
 Dead at the end of many miseries,
 And little Kirstin, as thou well mayst know,
 Would be content throughout the world to go
 If I but took her hand, and now still more
 Hath heart to leave this poor death-stricken shore.
 Therefore my gold shall buy us Bordeaux swords
 And Bordeaux wine as we go oceanwards.

"What say ye, will ye go with me to-night,
 Setting your faces to undreamed delight,
 Turning your backs unto this troublous hell,

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Prologue Or is the time too short to say farewell ?”

“Not so,” I said, “rather would I depart
Now while thou speakest; never has my heart
Been set on anything within this land.”

Then said the Swabian: “Let us now take hand
And swear to follow evermore this quest
Till death or life have set our hearts at rest.”

So with joined hands we swore, and Nicholas said:
“To-night, fair friends, be ye apparellèd
To leave this land, bring all the arms ye can
And such men as ye trust; my own good man
Guards the small postern looking toward St. Bride,
And good it were ye should not be espied,
Since mayhap freely ye should not go hence,
Thou Rolf in special; for this pestilence
Makes all men hard and cruel, nor are they
Willing that folk should ’scape if they must stay:
Be wise; I bid you for a while farewell,
Leave ye this stronghold when St. Peter’s bell
Strikes midnight, all will surely then be still,
And I will bide you at King Tryggvi’s hill
Outside the city gates.”

Each went his way
Therewith, and I the remnant of that day
Gained for the quest three men that I deemed true,
And did such other things as I must do,
And still was ever listening for the chime,
Half maddened by the lazy lapse of time;
Yea, scarce I thought indeed that I should live
Till the great tower the joyful sound should give
That set us free. And so the hours went past,
Till startled by the echoing clang at last
That told of midnight, armed from head to heel
Down to the open postern did I steal,
Bearing small wealth—this sword that yet hangs here
Worn thin and narrow with so many a year,
My father’s axe that from Byzantium,