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978-1-108-05118-7 - The Collected Works of William Morris: With Introductions by his Daughter

May Morris: Volume 4: The Earthly Paradise: A Poem 2

William Morris

Excerpt

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MAY

O LOVE, this morn when the sweet nightingale
Had so long finished all he had to say,
That thou hadst slept, and sleep had told his tale;
And midst a peaceful dream had stolen away
In fragrant dawning of the first of May,
Didst thou see aught? didst thou hear voices sing
Ere to the risen sun the bells 'gan ring?

For then methought the Lord of Love went by
To take possession of his flowery throne,
Ringed round with maids, and youths, and minstrelsy;
A little while I sighed to find him gone,
A little while the dawning was alone,
And the light gathered; then I held my breath,
And shuddered at the sight of Eld and Death.

Alas! Love passed me in the twilight dun,
His music hushed the wakening ousel's song;
But on these twain shone out the golden sun,
And o'er their heads the brown bird's tune was strong,
As shivering, 'twixt the trees they stole along;
None noted aught their noiseless passing by,
The world had quite forgotten it must die.

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NOW must these men be glad a little while
 That they had lived to see May once more smile
 Upon the earth; wherefore, as men who know
 How fast the bad days and the good days go,
 They gathered at the feast: the fair abode
 Wherein they sat, o'erlooked, across the road
 Unhedged green meads, which willowy streams passed through,
 And on that morn, before the fresh May dew
 Had dried upon the sunniest spot of grass,
 From bush to bush did youths and maidens pass
 In raiment meet for May apparelled,
 Gathering the milk-white blossoms and the red;
 And now, with noon long past, and that bright day
 Growing weary, on the sunny way
 They wandered, crowned with flowers, and loitering,
 And weary, yet were fresh enough to sing
 The carols of the morn, and pensive, still
 Had cast away their doubt of death and ill,
 And flushed with love, no more grew red with shame.

So to the elders as they sat, there came,
 With scent of flowers, the murmur of that folk
 Wherethrough from time to time a song outbroke,
 Till scarce they thought about the story due;
 Yet, when anigh to sun-setting it grew,
 A book upon the board an elder laid,
 And turning from the open window said:
 "Too fair a tale the lovely time doth ask,
 For this of mine to be an easy task,
 Yet in what words soever this is writ,
 As for the matter, I dare say of it
 That it is lovely as the lovely May;
 Pass then the manner, since the learned say
 No written record was there of the tale,
 Ere we from our fair land of Greece set sail;
 How this may be I know not, this I know

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That such-like tales the wind would seem to blow
From place to place, e'en as the feathery seed
Is borne across the sea to help the need
Of barren isles; so, sirs, from seed thus sown,
This flower, a gift from other lands has grown."

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THE STORY OF CUPID AND PSYCHE

THE ARGUMENT

PSYCHE, A KING'S DAUGHTER, BY HER EXCEEDING BEAUTY CAUSED THE PEOPLE TO FORGET VENUS; THEREFORE THE GODDESS WOULD FAIN HAVE DESTROYED HER: NEVERTHELESS SHE BECAME THE BRIDE OF LOVE, YET IN AN UNHAPPY MOMENT LOST HIM BY HER OWN FAULT, AND WANDERING THROUGH THE WORLD, SUFFERED MANY EVILS AT THE HANDS OF VENUS, FOR WHOM SHE MUST ACCOMPLISH FEARFUL TASKS. BUT THE GODS & ALL NATURE HELPED HER, & IN PROCESS OF TIME SHE WAS REUNITED TO LOVE, FORGIVEN BY VENUS, & MADE IMMORTAL BY THE FATHER OF GODS AND MEN.

IN the Greek land of old there was a King
 Happy in battle, rich in everything;
 Most rich in this, that he a daughter had
 Whose beauty made the longing city glad.
 She was so fair, that strangers from the sea
 Just landed, in the temples thought that she
 Was Venus visible to mortal eyes,
 New come from Cyprus for a world's surprise.
 She was so beautiful that had she stood
 On windy Ida by the oaken wood,
 And bared her limbs to that bold shepherd's gaze,
 Troy might have stood till now with happy days;
 And those three fairest, all have left the land
 And left her with the apple in her hand.
 And Psyche is her name in stories old,
 As ever by our fathers we were told.

All this beheld Queen Venus from her throne,
 And felt that she no longer was alone

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In beauty, but, if only for a while,
 This maiden matched her god-enticing smile;
 Therefore, she wrought in such a wise, that she,
 If honoured as a goddess, certainly
 Was dreaded as a goddess none the less,
 And midst her wealth, dwelt long in loneliness.

Two sisters had she, and men deemed them fair,
 But as King's daughters might be anywhere,
 And these to men of name and great estate
 Were wedded, while at home must Psyche wait.
 The sons of kings before her silver feet
 Still bowed, and sighed for her; in measures sweet
 The minstrels to the people sung her praise,
 Yet must she live a virgin all her days.

So to Apollo's fane her father sent,
 Seeking to know the dreadful Gods' intent,
 And therewith sent he goodly gifts of price,
 A silken veil, wrought with a paradise,
 Three golden bowls, set round with many a gem,
 Three silver robes, with gold in every hem,
 And a fair ivory image of the God
 That underfoot a golden serpent trod;
 And when three lords with these were gone away,
 Nor could return until the fortieth day,
 Ill was the King at ease, and neither took
 Joy in the chase, or in the pictured book
 The skilled Athenian limner had just wrought,
 Nor in the golden cloths from India brought.

At last the day came for those lords' return,
 And then 'twixt hope and fear the King did burn,
 As on his throne with great pomp he was set,
 And by him Psyche, knowing not as yet
 Why they had gone: thus waiting, at noontide
 They in the palace heard a voice outside,
 And soon the messengers came hurrying,
 And with pale faces knelt before the King,

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And rent their clothes, and each man on his head
Cast dust, the while a trembling courtier read
This scroll, wherein the fearful answer lay,
Whereat from every face joy passed away.

THE ORACLE

O FATHER of a most unhappy maid,
O King, whom all the world henceforth shall know
As wretched among wretches, be afraid
To ask the Gods thy misery to show,
But if thou needs must hear it, to thy woe,
Take back thy gifts to feast thine eyes upon,
When thine own flesh and blood some beast hath won.

“For hear thy doom! a rugged rock there is
Set back a league from thine own palace fair,
There leave the maid, that she may wait the kiss
Of the fell monster that doth harbour there:
This is the mate for whom her yellow hair
And tender limbs have been so fashionèd,
This is the pillow for her lovely head.

“O what an evil from thy loins shall spring,
For all the world this monster overturns,
He is the bane of every mortal thing,
And this world ruined, still for more he yearns;
A fire there goeth from his mouth that burns
Worse than the flame of Phlegethon the red—
To such a monster shall thy maid be wed.

“And if thou sparest now to do this thing,
I will destroy thee and thy land also,
And of dead corpses shalt thou be the King,
And stumbling through the dark land shalt thou go,
Howling for second death to end thy woe;
Live therefore as thou mayst and do my will,
And be a King that men may envy still.”

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What man was there, whose face changed not for grief
 At hearing this? Psyche, shrunk like the leaf
 The autumn frost first touches on the tree,
 Stared round about with eyes that could not see,
 And muttered sounds from lips that said no word,
 And still within her ears the sentence heard
 When all was said and silence fell on all
 'Twixt marble columns and adorned wall.

The Story
 of Cupid
 & Psyche

Then spoke the King, bowed down with misery:
 "What help is left! O daughter, let us die,
 Or else together fleeing from this land,
 From town to town go wandering hand in hand
 Thou and I, daughter, till all men forget
 That ever on a throne I have been set,
 And then, when houseless and disconsolate,
 We ask an alms before some city gate,
 The Gods perchance a little gift may give,
 And suffer thee and me like beasts to live."

Then answered Psyche, through her bitter tears,
 "Alas! my father, I have known these years
 That with some woe the Gods have dowered me,
 And weighed 'gainst riches infelicity;
 Ill is it then against the Gods to strive;
 Live on, O father! those that are alive
 May still be happy; would it profit me
 To live awhile, and ere I died to see
 Thee perish, and all folk who love me well,
 And then at last be dragged myself to hell
 Cursed of all men? nay, since all things must die,
 And I have dreamed not of eternity,
 Why weepst thou that I must die to-day?
 Why weepst thou? cast thought of shame away,
 The dead are not ashamed, they feel no pain;
 I have heard folk who spoke of death as gain—
 And yet—ah, God, if I had been some maid,
 Toiling all day, and in the night-time laid
 Asleep on rushes—had I only died

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Before this sweet life I had fully tried,
Upon that day when for my birth men sung,
And o'er the feasting folk the sweet bells rung."

And therewith she arose and gat away,
And in her chamber, mourning long she lay,
Thinking of all the days that might have been,
And how that she was born to be a queen,
The prize of some great conqueror of renown,
The joy of many a country and fair town,
The high desire of every prince and lord,
One who could fright with careless smile or word
The hearts of heroes fearless in the war,
The glory of the world, the leading-star
Unto all honour and all earthly fame—
Round goes the wheel, and death and deadly shame
Shall be her lot, while yet of her men sing
Unwitting that the Gods have done this thing.
Long time she lay there, while the sunbeams moved
Over her body through the flowers she loved;
And in the eaves the sparrows chirped outside,
Until for weariness she grew dry-eyed,
And into an unhappy sleep she fell.

But of the luckless King now must we tell,
Who sat devising means to 'scape that shame,
Until the frightened people thronging came
About the palace, and drove back the guards,
Making their way past all the gates and wards;
And, putting chamberlains and marshals by,
Surged round the very throne tumultuously.
Then knew the wretched King all folk had heard
The miserable sentence, and the word
The Gods had spoken; and from out his seat
He rose, and spoke in humble words, unmeet
For a great King, and prayed them give him grace,
While 'twixt his words the tears ran down his face
On to his raiment stiff with golden thread.

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But little heeded they the words he said,
 For very fear had made them pitiless;
 Nor cared they for the maid and her distress,
 But clashed their spears together and 'gan cry:
 "For one man's daughter shall the people die,
 And this fair land become an empty name,
 Because thou art afraid to meet the shame
 Wherewith the Gods reward thy hidden sin?
 Nay, by their glory do us right herein!"
 "Ye are in haste to have a poor maid slain,"
 The King said; "but my will herein is vain,
 For ye are many, I one aged man:
 Let one man speak, if for his shame he can."
 Then stepped a sturdy dyer forth, who said:
 "Fear of the Gods brings no shame, by my head.
 Listen; thy daughter we would have thee leave
 Upon the fated mountain this same eve;
 And thither must she go right well arrayed
 In marriage raiment, loose hair as a maid,
 And saffron veil, and with her shall there go
 Fair maidens bearing torches, two and two;
 And minstrels, in such raiment as is meet
 The God-ordained fearful spouse to greet.
 So shalt thou save our wives and little ones,
 And something better than a heap of stones,
 Dwelt in by noisome things, this town shall be,
 And thou thyself shalt keep thy sovereignty;
 But if thou wilt not do the thing I say,
 Then shalt thou live in bonds from this same day,
 And we will bear thy maid unto the hill,
 And from the dread Gods save the city still."
 Then loud they shouted at the words he said,
 And round the head of the unhappy maid,
 Dreaming uneasily of long-past joys,
 Floated the echo of that dreadful noise,
 And changed her dreams to dreams of misery.
 But when the King knew that the thing must be,

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And that no help there was in this distress,
He bade them have all things in readiness
To take the maiden out at sun-setting,
And wed her to the unknown dreadful thing.
So through the palace passed with heavy cheer
Her women gathering the sad wedding gear;
Who lingering long, yet at the last must go,
To waken Psyche to her bitter woe.
So coming to her bower, they found her there,
From head to foot rolled in her yellow hair,
As in the saffron veil she should be soon
Betwixt the setting sun and rising moon;
But when above her a pale maiden bent
And touched her, from her heart a sigh she sent,
And waking, on their woeful faces stared,
Sitting upright, with one white shoulder bared
By writhing on the bed in wretchedness.
Then suddenly remembering her distress,
She bowed her head and 'gan to weep and wail,
But let them wrap her in the bridal veil,
And bind the sandals to her silver feet,
And set the rose-wreath on her tresses sweet;
But spoke no word, yea, rather, wearily
Turned from the yearning face and pitying eye
Of any maid who seemed about to speak.

Now through the garden trees the sun 'gan break,
And that inevitable time drew near;
Then through the courts, grown cruel, strange, and drear,
Since the bright morn, they led her to the gate,
Where she beheld a golden litter wait,
Whereby the King stood, aged and bent to earth,
The flute-players with faces void of mirth,
The down-cast bearers of the ivory wands,
The maiden torch-bearers' unhappy bands.

So then was Psyche taken to the hill,
And through the town the streets were void and still;