

The Romance of Youth

AND OTHER POEMS

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“ He whom the gods love dearly dies in youth ”.
So sang the poet in the pagan past :
So, in a sort, dies every boy in sooth ;
Romantic, ardent, joyous to the last,
He runs to welcome Death, who holds him fast ;
And even as we gaze the Boy is gone,
The virile toga round his form is cast,
And “ not unclothed ” by Death “ but clothed upon ”
Into a larger life he swiftly passes on.

The Boy is dead : the Man is not the Boy
Save as the disembodied Saint is Man.
Behold his eyes have lost the light of joy ;
The naked feet on which to Death he ran,
Are booted with the buskins of grave plan
Or socks of dalliance. His curls, confined
By cap or crown, no careless breeze can fan,
Nor loving finger fondle. Calm, resigned,
He marches tow'rd the night, and leaves the dawn
behind.

Yet Childhood's dawn is part of Nature's plan:
The Boy's the treble of her harmony.
He understands her secrets more than Man,
And serves as link with bird and beast and tree.
His heart beats closer to the mystery
Of Universal Being, and his eyes
Perceive a Light that ours no longer see—
A light that lingers in the sunset skies,
Gleams faintly in the stars, and never wholly dies.

For though the boy may pass, the Boy Ideal
Will live for ever. In the hero's soul
He reigns supreme, and Saints and Sages kneel
Before his throne, for Nature's perfect whole
Is not entire without him. Fawn and foal,
Shrill-bleating lamb, all beings fair and small,
Shy woodland creatures—squirrel, stoat and mole,
Invisible birds that in the twilight call—
All share his sweet romance, but he transcends them
all.

The Boy reigned in Judaea as her King,
Her Saint, her Bard, her Prophet. 'Tis a Boy
Who never ceases in her psalms to sing
His Heavenly Father's care. His harp's a toy,
And to the end he is a child—the same
As he who eyed his friend, reserved and coy,
But gravely happy, both his cheeks aflame
With that all-glorious love that leaves no after shame.

He reigned in Greece : it was a wayward Boy,
But lovable, and pure, and twice as fair
As man can ever be, who sulked at Troy,
Nursing a petty feud—too young to bear
His weight of glory and his people's care.
But by good hap a faithful friend and strong,
Yet tender as a mother mild was there,
Who dying in his stead, drew him along
With silken cords of love to join the immortal throng.

Reigned he in Rome? One melancholy youth
Reigned in the heart of him who reigned o'er all :
But was the fair Bithynian Boy in truth
The idol of the Romans? I recall
No love like David's for the son of Saul ;
But low intrigues with slaves and pampered pages,
And frolicking with freedom—what a fall
From that pure passion sanctioned by her sages
And handed down by Greece to all succeeding ages !

In Britain boys are friendless : happy they
Whose youth is spent in shadow : for the few
Whom Birth or Genius lightens with a ray
Of early fame, grow dazzled, and pursue
Their aftercourse at hazard, as steeds do
Alarmed and riderless : and many a one
For lack of a protector kind and true,
Has died in youth ; as David might have done,
Had not his heartless king a kinder-hearted son.

Behold yon gallant youth with golden hair
That streams behind him like a comet's tail,
Who gallops gaily on a courser fair
To beard a scowling mob. A trifle pale,
But calm and confident, the stripling frail
Essays alone to win the rebel crowd.
His courtiers stand in doubt. Will youth prevail?
One breathless moment all the host is cowed,
Then Man acclaims the boy with plaudits long and
loud.

O that a friend with virile heart and brain
Had loved him ere that glorious day was done,
Caressed and cockered him, in prophet strain,
Dubbed him the great Black Prince's genial son,
Yet while well-pleased with what was well begun,
Suggested greater consequents, and so
By hortatory adulation won
The wayward will to virtue! But the glow
Of generous fire flared out, and died in ashes low.

Arthur of Brittany—the little ghost
That hovers round King John—the luckless twain
King Edward and young York, as wan almost
As their white roses, sought and sought in vain
A single faithful friend: and once again
We meet a boy King Edward, friendless too,
When fatherless he entered on his reign:

Pale patron saint of the pale scholar crew
He knew and shared their toil, their prize he never
knew.

And they whom Genius lightened fared as ill.
There was a boy whom all men marvelled at
But none befriended. In a parvis still
At eve alone with lean Church mouse and rat,
Watched by the blinking owl and wheeling bat,
He penned his wondrous poems, till he passed
Into a city attic, where he sat
More lonely still, in solitude more vast,
Until he found in Death one kindly friend at last.

And Adonais, had he met a mate—
Some young Endymion or Calidore—
Might not he to have triumphed over fate
And kept the crown he won but never wore?
But when he wandered on the Devon shore,
Or sauntered sadly o'er the Scottish heath,
A lonely exile sick at heart and sore,
He tells us almost with his latest breath
He was already "half in love with easeful Death."

It is not good the Boy should be alone:
He needs an helpmeet even more than man.
Yet if the brethren of his flesh and bone
Are framed and fashioned on a diverse plan,
A Joseph, or a lion's whelp like Dan

Destined to leap from Bashan, lives apart
Most homeless when at home. None will or can
Light up the dark recesses of his heart,
Bind up his spirit's wounds, or mollify their smart.

Most lonely at the festival of love,
He pines amid uproarious jollity :
The frosty stars in the chill vault above
Are not more far removed from mirth than he !
While rhythmic music, dance, and cries of glee
Throb round him in the lighted drawing-room,
He sadly eyes the tempest-shaken tree
That seems to beckon to him from the gloom.
What should be home to him's a prison or a tomb !

Could he but steal away and be at rest
With mother Nature and one favourite friend,
Pillow his head on some responsive breast,
Lay bare his heart, and let his Mentor blend
Sweet comfort with wise counsel at the end,
How often would the boyish Ishmaelite,
The stubborn rebel, the child Cain unbend :
For he who braves the boisterous wind's rude might,
Will cast away his cloak when once the sun shines
bright.

He cannot plead for love—his heart's in trance,
A Sleeping Beauty. Surely he has no need ?
His innocence, his halo of romance,

His boyish bloom, his very dumbness plead !
Is there no knight from lower passion freed
To succour him who has no power to call,
And can requite his service with no meed ?
Is there no Galahad or Parsifal,
Who finds in heavenly love the highest bliss of all ?

Love of the heart alone—Love all romance,
All tenderness, all purity and light,
Will wake the Sleeping Beauty from his trance,
Ennoble him, and glorify his Knight :
And when the world has seen this vision bright,
All Love will be transfigured, for the boy
So crowned in youth, and early robed in white,
Will look at woman with a purer eye,
And seek from her, in turn, the Love that cannot
die.