

WHITNEY

HELEN HAY

SONNETS AND SONGS

Helen Whitney
Sonnets and Songs

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Helen Hay Whitney

Sonnets and Songs

SONNETS

I

Ave atque Vale

As a blown leaf across the face of Time
Your name falls emptily upon my heart.
In this new symmetry you have no part,
No lot in my fair life. The stars still chime
Autumn and Spring in ceaseless pantomime.
I play with Beauty, which is kin to Art,
Forgetting Nature. Nor do pulses start
To hear your soul remembered in a rhyme.

You may not vex me any more. The stark
Terror of life has passed, and all the stress.
Winds had their will of me, and now caress,
Blown from bland groves I know. Time dreams, and I,
As on a mirror, see the days go by
In nonchalant procession to the dark.

II

“Chaque baiser vaut un roman.”

I, living love and laughter, have forgot
The way the heart has uttered melody.
As sobbing, plaintive cadence of the sea
A poet's soul should rest, remembering not
The inland paths of green, the flowers, the spot
Where fairies ring. In hermit ecstasy
Music is born, and gay or wofully
Lovers of Poesy share her lonely lot.

For you and me, Beloved, crowned with Spring,
Catching Love's flowers from off the lap of Time,

What are the songs my voice has scorned to sing?
Ghostly they hover round my heart-wise lips;
Into a kiss I fold my rose of Rhyme,
Laid like a martyr on your finger-tips.

III

As a Pale Child

As a pale child, hemmed in by windy rain,
Patiently turns to touch his well-known toys,
Playing as children play who make no noise,
Yet happy in a way; then sighs again,
To watch the world across the storm-dim pane,
And sees with wistful eyes glad girls and boys
Who romp beneath the rain's unlicensed joys,
And feels wild longings sweep his gentle brain.

So I, contented with my flowers for stars,
Stroll in my fair, walled garden happily,
Knowing no gladder game till, shrill and sweet,
I hear life's cry ring down the silent street,
And press my face against the sunlit bars
To watch the joyous spirits who are free.

IV

Flower of the Clove

Ah, Love, have pity!—I am but a child;
I ask but light and laughter, and the tears
Darken the sunlight of my fairest years.
By love made desolate, by love beguiled,
I waste the Spring. Love's harvest wains are piled
With poppies and gold grain—I glean but fears
Of empty hands, grim hunger, and the jeers
Of happy wives whose loves are reconciled.

But mine! Ah, mine is like a tattered leaf
Upon a turbid stream. I have no pride,
No life, but love, which is a bitter grief.
As a lost star I wander down your sky.

Give me your heart. Open it wide—so wide!
I must have love and laughter, or I die.

V

Too Late

Upon your stone the wine of my desire
Is spilled. Your poppy lips have grown too pale
From fasting. Your white hands will not avail
The cold eyes of your heart to light the fire.
I did not think my prayers could ever tire.
Now, like doomed ships, they flutter without sail.
Lost in a calm which held no rock, no gale—
Now, when your chilly smile bids me aspire!

So, without history, my soul is slain—
Woman of barren love; the wine was red—
Beautiful for your spending. Not again
Will the bud blossom where the frost has sped.
Timid, you dared not hark when angels sang.
All, all is lost, without one saving pang.

VI

The Supreme Sacrifice

Better than life, better than sea and morn,
And all the sun-stained fragments of the day—
Ah! more than breeze, than purple clouds that stray
Across dim twilights—I, the tempest-torn,
Fighting the stars for glory, who must scorn
Heart-drops bespread along love's cruel way
Like scattered petals on the breast of May—
Better than life I love you, I forlorn.

Better than death—the sleeping and the peace
When warm within the breast of brooding Earth
My weary heart should give its woes release,
The pitiful dark remembering not my loss,
The calm, wise years restoring joy for dearth—
Better than death, my love, my burning cross.

VII

Malua

Out of the purple treasuries of night
Came the dark wind of evening silver-starred—
Stirred on his cheek. The forest keeping ward
Breathed with a tremulous silence, and the bright,
Bare moon crowned his adoring brow with light.
The exquisite dream of beauty held him hard
In a great love, a forest love, unmarred—
Still unprofaned—by human nature's sight.

Guarding the temple gates of peace he stood,
Statue of bronze with pagan heart of stone.
Sudden, a dazzling glory lit the wood—
Moon in his soul that dimmed the moon above.
Life was revealed, a Spring-sweet maid, alone—
Beauty was woman, and the woman—Love.

VIII

Love's Legacy

As one who looks too long upon the sun
When he must turn to earth from flame-shot skies
Sees all else dark through his bereaved eyes,
And yet may watch the rainbow ribbons run
Athwart the gravity of gray and dun,
He holds the darkness dearer for the prize
Wherein his only pledge of radiance lies
When he the vast magnificence must shun.

So we who play with rainbows, having seen
The sun's own face. We may not hold the west,
Which burns against the bosom of the night,
But in the after-glow, with eyes serene,
We still may find, dear heart, the sun's bequest,
An echoed glory of our passionate light.

IX

How we would Live!

How we would live! We'd drink the years like wine,
With all to-morrows hid behind the veil,
Which is your hair; between two lilies pale—
Your slender hands—my heart should lie and shine,
A crimson rose. We'd catch the wind and twine
The evening stars—a chaplet musical—
To crown our folly, lure the nightingale
To sing the bliss your lips should teach to mine.

And if the sage, declaring life is vain,
Should frown upon the flower of all our days
And chide the sun that knows no tears of rain,
He should not tease our heart with cynic eye—
The soul's vast altar stands beyond his gaze
When two have lived—then shall they fear to die?

X

In Extremis

Nay, touch me not, nor even with your eyes
Hold mine, for I would speak you, thus afar,
Aloof and chill and lonely as a star.
The hands that urge, the hungry heart that cries,
Have wrapped my love with love's elusive lies;
The lips that burn have laid a ruddy scar
Against the truth that stands without the bar,
And blinded faith with passion's mysteries.

Night holds a single moon, day one desire—
Her golden sun; and life a love supreme,
Wherein one moment poises, crowned with fire,
White with the naked truth. Beyond control,
'Tis here, my Sun, in love's last hour extreme,
I hold aloft my bare, adoring soul.

XI

The Forgiveness

If I might see you dead, Beloved—dead—
Your false eyes closed forever to the light,
Your false smile stilled upon my aching sight;
If I might know that nevermore your head,
Cruelly fair, could lie upon the bed
Of my torn heart; if I beheld the night
Free from your living thought—ah! if I might,
Then could my desolate soul be comforted.

For this is worst of all the woes you gave—
My heart may not forgive. The tired years go
And leave the great love weeping for a grave,
Scorned and unburied, 'neath the open sky.
I could not love you less, to see you so.
Loving you more, I might forgive—and die.

XII

With Music

Dear, did we meet in some dim yesterday?
I half remember how the birds were mute
Among green leaves and tulip-tinted fruit,
And on the grass, beside a stream, we lay
In early twilight; faintly, far away,
Came lovely sounds adrift from silver lute,
With answered echoes of an airy flute,
While Twilight waited tiptoe, fain to stay.

Her violet eyes were sweet with mystery.
You looked in mine, the music rose and fell
Like little, lispings laughter of the sea;
Our souls were barks, wind-wafted from the shore—
Gold cup, a rose, a ruby, who can tell?
Soft—music ceases—I recall no more.

XIII

Alpha and Omega

I died to-day, and yet upon my eyes
A glamour of the gorgeous summer green
Still wavers, and my brain has kept a keen,
Sweet bird-song. Glad with light, the summer skies
Are sapphire, and a purple shadow lies
Across the hills—no change is on the scene
Since happy yesterday. Ah! can it mean
The body lives when stricken spirit dies?

The blow has fallen, yet I can recall
The first of days when this dead heart drew breath—
A wondrous moon-flower waking of a heart.
Strange—then as now the moment seemed to part
Body from soul, so like are birth and death;
So did I gain, and so I lost my all.

XIV

Flowers of Ice

The lights within the ice-floes are our flowers,
Lily and daffodil and violet.
Beneath these monstrous suns that never set
Tremble soft rainbows, young as Earth's first hours,
Ancient as Time. No balm of gentle showers
Make for their growth; for them, gigantic, met
The immemorial ice and sun, to get
Such blossoms—pledge of Beauty's bravest powers.

Violet and pale grass-green, the Spring-time dies
In the soft South. To us, in this grim world,
Daring with frozen heart and tearless eyes
The North's white sanctity, Fate idly throws
These alms—a deathless Spring of ice enfurled,
And over all, far flung, the sunset rose.

XV

Love and Death

I can believe that my Beloved dies,
That all her virtue, all her youth shall fail,
And life, her rosy life, grow cold and pale,
To bloom again in braver Paradise.
I must believe that death shall close her eyes,
And hold her heart beyond a heavy veil,
Where silences surround her spirit frail
And waste the form where all my loving lies.

Ah, God! but no. And is my love so weak?
Her heart may pause, may falter and grow still,
But not her laugh, the color in her cheek—
That may not fade; the catch that lifts her breath,
Sobbing against my heart. Essay your will—
These are too dear to fill *your* grave, O Death!

XVI

The Message

When one has heard the message of the Rose,
For what faint other calling shall he care?
Dark broodings turn to find their lonely lair;
The vain world keeps her posturing and pose.
He, with his crimson secret, which bestows
Heaven on his heart, to Heaven lifts his prayer,
And knows all glory trembling through the air
As on triumphal journeying he goes.

So through green woodlands in the twilight dim,

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