

Classic Poetry Series

Arthur Symons

- poems -

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Amends to Nature

I have loved colours, and not flowers;
Their motion, not the swallows wings;
And wasted more than half my hours
Without the comradeship of things.

How is it, now, that I can see,
With love and wonder and delight,
The children of the hedge and tree,
The little lords of day and night?

How is it that I see the roads,
No longer with usurping eyes,
A twilight meeting-place for toads,
A mid-day mart for butterflies?

I feel, in every midge that hums,
Life, fugitive and infinite,
And suddenly the world becomes
A part of me and I of it.

Arthur Symons

At Burgos

Miraculous silver-work in stone
Against the blue miraculous skies,
The belfry towers and turrets rise
Out of the arches that enthrone
That airy wonder of the skies.

Softly against the burning sun
The great cathedral spreads its wings;
High up, the lyric belfry sings.
Behold Ascension Day begun
Under the shadow of those wings!

Arthur Symons

At Fontainebleau

IT was a day of sun and rain,
Uncertain as a child's swift moods;
And I shall never spend again
So blithe a day among the woods.

Was it because the Gods were pleased
That they were awful in our eyes,
Whom we in very deed appeased
With barley-cakes of sacrifice?

The forest knew her and was glad,
And laughed for very joy to know
Her child was with her; then, grown sad,
She wept, because her child must go.

And Alice, like a little Faun,
Went leaping over rocks and ferns,
Coursing the shadow-race from dawn
Until the twilight-flock returns.

And she would spy and she would capture
The shyest flower that lit the grass;
The joy I had to watch her rapture
Was keen as even her rapture was.

The forest knew her and was glad,
And laughed and wept for joy and woe.
This was the welcome that she had
Among the woods of Fontainebleau.

Arthur Symons

Before the Squall

The wind is rising on the sea,
The windy white foam-dancers leap;
And the sea moans uneasily,
And turns to sleep, and cannot sleep.

Ridge after rocky ridge uplifts,
Wild hands, and hammers at the land,
Scatters in liquid dust, and drifts
To death among the dusty sand.

On the horizon's nearing line,
Where the sky rests, a visible wall,
Grey in the offing, I divine,
The sails that fly before the squall.

Arthur Symons

By Loe Pool

The pool glitters, the fishes leap in the sun
With joyous fins, and dive in the pool again;
I see the corn in sheaves, and the harvestmen,
And the cows coming down to the water one by one.
Dragon-flies mailed in lapis and malachite
Flash through the bending reeds and blaze on the pool;
Sea-ward, where trees cluster, the shadow is cool;
I hear a singing, where the sea is, out of sight;
It is noontide, and the fishes leap in the pool.

Arthur Symons

By the Pool of the Third Rosses

I heard the sighing of the reed
In the grey pool in the green land,
The sea-wind in the long reeds sighing
Between the green hill and the sand.

I heard the sighing of the reeds
Day after day, night after night;
I heard the whirring wild ducks flying,
I saw the sea-gull's wheeling flight.

I heard the sighing of the reeds
Night after night, day after day,
And I forgot old age, and dying,
And youth that loves, and love's decay.

I heard the sighing of the reeds
At noontide and at evening,
And some old dream I had forgotten
I seemed to be remembering.

I hear the sighing of the reeds:
Is it in vain, is it in vain
That some old peace I had forgotten
Is crying to come back again?

Arthur Symons

Emmy

Emmy's exquisite youth and her virginal air,
Eyes and teeth in the flash of a musical smile,
Come to me out of the past, and I see her there
As I saw her once for a while.

Emmy's laughter rings in my ears, as bright,
Fresh and sweet as the voice of a mountain brook,
And still I hear her telling us tales that night,
Out of Boccaccio's book.

There, in the midst of the villainous dancing-hall,
Leaning across the table, over the beer,
While the music maddened the whirling skirts of the ball,
As the midnight hour drew near,

There with the women, haggard, painted and old,
One fresh bud in a garland withered and stale,
She, with her innocent voice and her clear eyes, told
Tale after shameless tale.

And ever the witching smile, to her face beguiled,
Paused and broadened, and broke in a ripple of fun,
And the soul of a child looked out of the eyes of a child,
Or ever the tale was done.

O my child, who wronged you first, and began
First the dance of death that you dance so well?
Soul for soul: and I think the soul of a man
Shall answer for yours in hell.

Arthur Symons

Gipsy Love

The gipsy tents are on the down,
The gipsy girls are here;
And it's O to be off and away from the town
With a gipsy for my dear!

We'd make our bed in the bracken
With the lark for a chambermaid;
The lark would sing us awake in the morning,
Singing above our head.

We'd drink the sunlight all day long
With never a house to bind us;
And we'd only flout in a merry song
The world we left behind us.

We would be free as birds are free
The livelong day, the livelong day;
And we would lie in the sunny bracken
With none to say us nay.

The gipsy tents are on the down,
The gipsy girls are here;
And it's O to be off and away from the town
With a gipsy for my dear!

Arthur Symons

In Fountain Court

The fountain murmuring of sleep,
A drowsy tune;
The flickering green of leaves that keep
The light of June;
Peace, through a slumbering afternoon,
The peace of June.

A waiting ghost, in the blue sky,
The white curved moon;
June, hushed and breathless, waits, and I
Wait too, with June;
Come, through the lingering afternoon,
Soon, love, come soon.

Arthur Symons

In the Stalls

My life is like a music-hall,
Where, in the impotence of rage,
Chained by enchantment to my stall,
I see myself upon the stage
Dance to amuse a music-hall.

'Tis I that smoke this cigarette,
Lounge here, and laugh for vacancy,
And watch the dancers turn; and yet
It is my very self I see
Across the cloudy cigarette.

My very self that turns and trips,
Painted, pathetically gay,
An empty song upon the lips
In make-believe of holiday:
I, I, this thing that turns and trips!

The light flares in the music-hall,
The light, the sound, that weary us;
Hour follows hour, I count them all,
Lagging, and loud, and riotous:
My life is like a music-hall.

Arthur Symons

Javanese Dancers

Twitched strings, the clang of metal, beaten drums,
Dull, shrill, continuous, disquieting:
And now the stealthy dancer comes
Undulantly with cat-like steps that cling;

Smiling between her painted lids a smile,
Motionless, unintelligible, she twines
Her fingers into mazy lines,
The scarves across her fingers twine the while.

One, two, three, four glide forth, and, to and fro,
Delicately and imperceptibly,
Now swaying gently in a row,
Now interthreading slow and rhythmically,

Still, with fixed eyes, monotonously still,
Mysteriously, with smiles inanimate,
With lingering feet that undulate,
With sinuous fingers, spectral hands that thrill

In measure while the gnats of music whirr,
The little amber-coloured dancers move,
Like painted idols seen to stir
By the idolators in a magic grove.

Arthur Symons

Kisses

Sweet, can I sing you the song of your kisses?
How soft is this one, how subtle this is,
How fluttering swift as a bird's kiss that is,
As a bird that taps at a leafy lattice;
How this one clings and how that uncloses
From bud to flower in the way of roses;
And this through laughter and that through weeping
Swims to the brim where Love lies sleeping;
And this in a pout I snatch, and capture
That in the ecstasy of rapture,
When the odorous red-rose petals part
That my lips may find their way to the heart
Of the rose of the world, your lips, my rose.
But no song knows
The way of my heart to the heart of my rose.

Arthur Symons

Love and Sleep

I have laid sorrow to sleep;
Love sleeps.
She who oft made me weep
Now weeps.

I loved, and have forgot,
And yet
Love tells me she will not
Forget.

She it was bid me go;
Love goes
By what strange ways, ah! no
One knows.

Because I cease to weep,
She weeps.
Here by the sea in sleep,
Love sleeps.

Arthur Symons

The Andante of Snakes

They weave a slow andante as in sleep,
Scaled yellow, swampy black, plague-spotted white;
With blue and lidless eyes at watch they keep
A treachery of silence; infinite

Ancestral angers brood in these dull eyes
Where the long-lineaged venom of the snake
Meditates evil; woven intricacies
Of Oriental arabesque awake,

Unfold, expand, contract, and raise and sway
Swoln heart-shaped heads, flattened as by a heel,
Erect to suck the sunlight from the day,
And stealthily and gradually reveal

Dim cabalistic signs of spots and rings
Among their folds of faded tapestry;
Then these fat, foul, unbreathing, moving things
Droop back to stagnant immobility.

Arthur Symons

The Broken Tryst

That day a fire was in my blood;
I could have sung: joy wrapt me round;
The men I met seemed all so good,
I scarcely knew I trod the ground.

How easy seemed all toil! I laughed
To think that once I hated it.
The sunlight thrilled like wine, I quaffed
Delight, divine and infinite.

The very day was not too long;
I felt so patient; I could wait,
Being certain. So, the hours in song
Chimed out the minutes of my fate.

For she was coming, she, at last,
I knew: I knew that bolts and bars
Could stay her not; my heart throbbed fast,
I was not more certain of the stars.

The twilight came, grew deeper; now
The hour struck, minutes passed, and still
The passionate fervour of her vow
Ran in my heart's ear audible.

I had no doubt at all: I knew
That she would come, and I was then
Most certain, while the minutes flew:
Ah, how I scorned all other men!

Next moment! Ah! it was--was not!
I heard the stillness of the street.
Night came. The stars had not forgot.
The moonlight fell about my feet.

So I rebuked my heart, and said:
"Be still, for she is coming, see,
Next moment--coming. Ah, her tread,
I hear her coming--it is she!"

And then a woman passed. The hour
Rang heavily along the air.
I had no hope, I had no power
To think--for thought was but despair.

A thing had happened. What? My brain
Dared not so much as guess the thing.
And yet the sun would rise again
Next morning! I stood marvelling.

Arthur Symons

The Loom of Dreams

I broider the world upon a loom,
I broider with dreams my tapestry;
Here in a little lonely room
I am master of earth and sea,
And the planets come to me.

I broider my life into the frame,
I broider my love, thread upon thread;
The world goes by with its glory and shame,
Crowns are bartered and blood is shed;
I sit and broider my dreams instead.

And the only world is the world of my dreams,
And my weaving the only happiness;
For what is the world but what it seems?
And who knows but that God, beyond our guess,
Sits weaving worlds out of loneliness?

Arthur Symons

The Old Women

They pass upon their old, tremulous feet,
Creeping with little satchels down the street,
And they remember, many years ago,
Passing that way in silks. They wander, slow
And solitary, through the city ways,
And they alone remember those old days
Men have forgotten. In their shaking heads
A dancer of old carnivals yet treads
The measure of past waltzes, and they see
The candles lit again, the patchouli
Sweeten the air, and the warm cloud of musk
Enchant the passing of the passionate dusk.
Then you will see a light begin to creep
Under the earthen eyelids, dimmed with sleep,
And a new tremor, happy and uncouth,
Jerking about the corners of the mouth.
Then the old head drops down again, and shakes,
Muttering.

Sometimes, when the swift gaslight wakes
The dreams and fever of the sleepless town,
A shaking huddled thing in a black gown
Will steal at midnight, carrying with her
Violet bags of lavender,
Into the taproom full of noisy light;
Or, at the crowded earlier hour of night,
Sidle, with matches, up to some who stand
About a stage-door, and, with furtive hand,
Appealing: "I too was a dancer, when
Your fathers would have been young gentlemen!"
And sometimes, out of some lean ancient throat,
A broken voice, with here and there a note
Of unspoiled crystal, suddenly will arise
Into the night, while a cracked fiddle cries
Pantingly after; and you know she sings
The passing of light, famous, passing things.
And sometimes, in the hours past midnight, reels
Out of an alley upon staggering heels,
Or into the dark keeping of the stones
About a doorway, a vague thing of bones
And draggled hair.

And all these have been loved.
And not one ruinous body has not moved
The heart of man's desire, nor has not seemed
Immortal in the eyes of one who dreamed
The dream that men call love. This is the end
Of much fair flesh; it is for this you tend
Your delicate bodies many careful years,
To be this thing of laughter and of tears,
To be this living judgment of the dead,
An old gray woman with a shaking head.

Arthur Symons

You Remain

As a perfume doth remain
In the folds where it hath lain,
So the thought of you, remaining
Deeply folded in my brain,
Will not leave me; all things leave me -
You remain.

Other thoughts may come and go,
Other moments I may know
That shall waft me, in their going,
As a breath blown to and fro,
Fragrant memories; fragrant memories
Come and go.

Only thoughts of you remain
In my heart where they have lain,
Perfumed thoughts of you, remaining,
A hid sweetness, in my brain.
Others leave me; all things leave me -
You remain.

Arthur Symons