

Classic Poetry Series

Sydney Wheeler Jephcott

- poems -

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A Ballad of the Last King of Thule

There was a King of Thule
Whom a Witch-wife stole at birth;
In a country known but newly,
All under the dumb, huge Earth.

That King's in a Forest toiling;
And he never the green sward delves
But he sees all his green waves boiling
Over his sands and shelves;

In these sunsets vast and fiery,
In these dawns divine he sees
Hy-Brasil, Mannan and Eire,
And the Isle of Appletrees;

He watches, heart-still and breathless,
The clouds through the deep day trailing,
As the white-winged vessels gathered,
Into his harbours sailing;

Ranked Ibis and lazy Eagles
In the great blue flame may rise,
But ne'er Sea-mew or Solan beating
Up through their grey low skies;

When the storm-led fires are breaking,
Great waves of the molten night,
Deep in his eyes comes aching
The icy Boreal Light.

O, lost King, and O, people perished,
Your Thule has grown one grave!
Unvisited as uncherished,
Save by the wandering wave!

The billows burst in his doorways,
The spray swoops over his walls! --
O, his banners that throb dishonoured
O'er arms that hide in his halls --

Deserved is your desolation! --
Why could you not stir and save
The last-born heir of your nation? --
Sold into the South, a slave

Till he dies, and is buried duly
In the hot Australian earth --
The lorn, lost King of Thule,
Whom a Witch-wife stole at birth

Sydney Wheeler Jephcott

A Fragment

But, under all, my heart believes the day
Was not diviner over Athens, nor
The West wind sweeter thro' the Cyclades
Than here and now; and from the altar of To-day
The eloquent, quick tongues of flame arise
As fervid, if not unfaltering as of old,
And life atones with speed and plenitude
For coarser texture. Our poor present will,
Far in the brooding future, make a past
Full of the morning's music still, and starred
With great tears shining on the eyelids' eaves
Of our immortal faces yearning t'wards the sun.

Sydney Wheeler Jephcott

Chaucer

O gracious morning eglantine,
Making the far old English ways divine!
Though from thy stock our mateless rose was bred,
Staining the world's skies with its red,
Our garden gives no scent so fresh as thine,
Sweet, thorny-seeming eglantine.

Sydney Wheeler Jephcott

Home-Woe

The wreckage of some name-forgotten barque,
Half-buried by the dolorous shore;
Whereto the living waters never more
Their urgent billows pour;
But the salt spray can reach and cark --

So lies my spirit, lonely and forlorn,
On Being's strange and perilous strand.
And rusted sword and fleshless hand
Point from the smothering sand;
And anchor chainless and out-worn.

But o'er what Deep, unconquered and uncharted,
And steering by what vanished star;
And where my dim-imagined consorts are,
Or hidden harbour far,
From whence my sails, unblessed, departed,

Can memory, nor still intuition teach.
And so I watch with alien eyes
This World's remote and unremembered skies;
While around me weary rise
The babblings of a foreign speech.

Sydney Wheeler Jephcott

Splitting

Morning.

Out from the hut at break of day,
And up the hills in the dawning grey;
With the young wind flowing
From the blue east, growing
Red with the white sun's ray!

Lone and clear as a deep-bright dream
Under mid-night's and mid-slumber's stream,
Up rises the mount against the sunrise shower,
Vast as a kingdom, fair as a flower:
O'er it doth the foam of foliage ream

In vivid softness serene,
Pearly-purple and marble green;
Clear in their mingling tinges,
Up away to the crest that fringes
Skies studded with cloud-crag sheen.

Day.

Like birds frayed from their lurking-shaw,
Like ripples fleet 'neath a furious flaw,
The echoes re-echo, flying
Down from the mauls hot-plying;
Clatter the axes, grides the saw.

Ruddy and white the chips out-spring,
Like money sown by a pageant king;
The free wood yields to the driven wedges,
With its white sap-edges,
And heart in the sunshine glistening.

Broadly the ice-clear azure floods down,
Where the great tree-tops are overthrown;
As on through the endless day we labour;
The sun for our nearest neighbour,
Up o'er the mountains lone.

And so intensely it doth illumine,
That it shuts by times to gloom;
In the open spaces thrilling;
From the dead leaves distilling
A hot and harsh perfume.

Evening.

Give over! All the valleys in sight
Fill, fill with the rising tide of night;
While the sunset with gold-dust bridges
The black-ravined ridges,

Whose mighty muscles curve in its light.

In our weary climb, while night dyes deep,
Down the broken and stony steep,
How our jaded bodies are shaken
By each step in half-blindness taken --
One's thoughts lie heaped like brutes asleep.

Open the door of the dismal hut,
Silence and darkness lone were shut
In it, as a tidal pool, until returning
Night drowns the land, -- no ember's burning, --
One is too weary the food to cut.

Body and soul with every blow,
Wasted for ever, and who will know,
Where, past this mountained night of toiling,
Red life in its thousand veins is boiling,
Of chips scattered on the mountain's brow?

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The Dreamers

HAVE courage, O my comradry of dreamers!
All things, except mere Earth, are ours.
We pluck its passions for our flowers.
Dawn-dyed our great cloud-banners toss their streamers
Above its quaking tyrant-towers!
Making this stern grey planet shine with jewel-showers.

Our lives are mantled in forgotten glory,
Like trees that fringe yon dark hill-crest
Alight against the molten west.
The great night shuddering yields her stress of story—
The dreams that stir the past's long rest—
Strange, scented night-winds sighing on our naked breast.

Through all the spirit's spacious, secret regions—
By pathways we believed unknown—
Still thoughts immortal meet our own.
Ideas!—In innumerable legions!
Like summer's stir in forests lone
Their various music merges in time's monotone.

The dreamer sees the deep-drawn ore-veins brightening
Through all the huge blind bulk of Earth;
He led the ship around its girth;
He plays, as on the pulses of the lightning,
The song that gives its workings worth,
The song foredoomed to bring man's morrow to the birth.

Base, base mere doers, blind and dreamless;
Whose bodies engines are of toil!
Greasy with greed and lust they moil;
They cast lots for the dreamer's garment seamless,
To rot among their useless spoil;
The fathomless infinity their breath does soil.

Hail to the dream that roused the sleeping savage,
And let him from his bloody lair,
Across light's bridge, that single hair,
Above th' unpurposed, eyeless hell of ravage
That, beasts and men, the soulless share,
And left him, waking in thought's temple, Heaven's heir!

Our souls, in these vast Heavens un beholden
Of eyes, our angel-hopes embrace;
Or being's shining trail retrace,
Through pregnant skies about our forms enfolden
In rapture of our kindred race,
Until the gaze of God consume us, face to face.

Ah, God! In what undying dream of beauty
Wrought Thou our world, so strange and fair,
Afloat in Thy illusive air?—

Aye me! We know that dreaming is our duty!
These dreams more intimate than prayer;
For in Thy dream divine our laureate spirits share.

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White Paper

SNOWY-SMOOTH beneath the pen—
Richest field that iron ploughs,
Germinating thoughts of men,
Tho' no heaven its rain allows.

There they ripen, thousand-fold;
And our spirits reap the corn,
In a day-long dream of gold—
Food for all the souls unborn.

Like the murmur of the earth,
When we listen stooping low,
Like sap singing nature's mirth
Foaming up the trees that grow.

Evermore a subtle song
Sings the pen unto it, while
Fluid idea flows along,
Each new Era's mother-Nile.

Greater than ensphering Sea,
For it holds the sea and land;
Seed of every deed to be
Down its current borne like sand.

I caress thy surface sheer,
Holding thee the Absolute;
Where the things to be inhere,
Waiting their material bruit.

How I love thee! my heart's blood
Were too dull to smutch thy white!
I'll aver: no lily's bud
Lays such unction on my sight.

Suave of maiden's throat or arm,
Bliss embodied to the touch,
Has not such ambrosial charm—
Not a marble Goddess such!

Dear White Paper! All To-day
Palpitates with spirit-heat—
Only on thy whiteness may
Seers translate its rhythms sweet!

Holy Paper! all the Past
Were a rack of ruined cloud
Stripping from our orbit vast,
But thou Eternity endowed

With an actual soul of speech—
Life of life by death distilled—

That all dateless days shall reach,
As life's vine of veins is filled.

O, the glorious Heavens wrought
By Cadmean souls of yore
From pure element of Thought!
And thy leaves their silvern door!

Light they open, and we stand
Past the sovereignty of Fate;
Glad among Them, still and grand,
The Creators and Create

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