

Classic Poetry Series

William Warner

- poems -

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Albion's England (excerpt)

The Brutons thus departed hence, seven kingdoms here begun,--
Where diversely in divers broils the Saxons lost and won,--
King Edel and king Adelbright in Diria jointly reign;
In loyal concord during life these kingly friends remain.
When Adelbright should leave his life, to Edel thus he says:
"By those same bonds of happy love, that held us friends always,
By our bi-parted crown, of which the moiety is mine,
By God, to whom my soul must pass, and so in time may thine,
I pray thee, nay I conjure thee, to nourish as thine own
Thy niece, my daughter Argentile, till she to age be grown;
And then, as thou receivest it, resign to her my throne."
A promise had for this bequest, the testator he dies;
But all that Edel undertook, he afterward denies.
Yet well he fosters for a time the damsel, that was grown
The fairest lady under Heaven; whose beauty being known,
A many princes seek her love, but none might her obtain:
For gripple Edel to himself her kingdom sought to gain,
And for that cause from sight of such he did his ward restrain.
By chance one Curan, son unto a prince in Danske, did see
The maid, with whom he fell in love as much as one might be.
Unhappy youth, what should he do? his saint was kept in mew,
Nor he, nor any noble man admitted to her view.
One while in melancholy fits he pines himself away,
Anon he thought by force of arms to win her, if he may,
And still against the king's restraint did secretly inveigh.
At length the high controller Love, whom none may disobey,
Imbated him from lordliness, unto a kitchen drudge:
That so at least of life or death she might become his judge.
Access so had to see, and speak, he did his love bewray,
And tells his birth: her answer was she husbandless would stay.
Meanwhile the king did beat his brains his booty to achieve,
Nor caring what became of her, so he by her might thrive.
At last his resolution was some peasant should her wive.
And (which was working to his wish) he did observe with joy
How Curan, whom he thought a drudge, scap'd many an amorous toy.
The king, perceiving such his vein, promotes his vassal still,
Lest that the baseness of the man should let, perhaps, his will.
Assured therefore of his love, but not suspecting who
The lover was, the king himself in his behalf did woo.
The lady, resolute from love, unkindly takes that he
Should bar the noble, and unto so base a match agree;
And therefore shifting out of doors, departed thence by stealth,
Preferring poverty before a dangerous life in wealth.
When Curan heard of her escape, the anguish in his heart
Was more than much, and after her from court he did depart:
Forgetful of himself, his birth, his country, friends, and all,
And only minding (whom he miss'd) the foundress of his thrall.
Nor means he after to frequent or court or stately towns,
But solitarily to live amongst the country grounds.
A brace of years he lived thus, well pleased so to live,
And shepherd-like to feed a flock himself did wholly give.
So wasting love, by work, and want, grew almost to the wane;

But then began a second love, the worser of the twain.
A country wench, a neatherd's maid, where Curan kept his sheep,
Did feed her drove: and now on her was all the shepherd's keep.
He borrow'd on the working days his holy russets oft;
And of the bacon's fat, to make his startops black and soft;
And lest his tarbox should offend he left it at the fold;
Sweet grout, or whig, his bottle had as much as it might hold;
A sheave of bread as brown as nut, and cheese as white as snow;
And wildings or the season's fruit he did in scrip bestow.
And whilst his pie-bald cur did sleep, and sheep-hook lay him by,
On hollow quills of oaten straw he piped melody;
But when he spied her, his saint, he wip'd his greasy shoes,
And clear'd the drivel from his beard and thus the shepherd woos:
"I have, sweet wench, a piece of cheese, as good as tooth may chaw,
And bread and wildings souling well" and therewithal did draw
His lardry.

...
"Thou art too elvish, faith thou art too elvish, and too coy;
Am I (I pray thee) beggarly, that such a flock enjoy?
I know I am not; yet that thou dost hold me in disdain
Is brim abroad, and made a gibe to all that keep this plain.
There be as quaint (at least that think themselves as quaint) that crave
The match, that thou (I know not why) mayst, but mislik'st to have.

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"Then choose a shepherd. With the Sun he doth his flock unfold,
And all the day on hill or plain he merry chat can hold;
And with the Sun doth fold again; then jogging home betime,
He turns a crab, or tunes a round, or sings some merry rhyme.
Nor lacks he gleeful tales to tell, whilst round the bowl doth trot;
And sitteth singing care away, till he to bed hath got.
There sleeps he soundly all the night, forgetting morrow cares,
Nor fears he blasting of his corn nor uttering of his wares,
Or storms by seas, or stirs on land, or crack of credit lost,
Not spending franklier than his flock shall still defray the cost.
Well know I, sooth they say that say, 'More quiet nights and days
The shepherd sleeps and wakes than he whose cattle he doth graze.'
Believe me, lass, a king is but a man, and so am I;
Content is worth a monarchy, and mischiefs hit the high;
As late it did a king and his, not dwelling far from hence,
Who left a daughter, (save thyself) for fair a matchless wench."--
Here did he pause, as if his tongue had done his heart offence.--
The neatress, longing for the rest, did egg him on to tell
How fair she was, and who she was. "She bore," quoth he, "the bell
For beauty. Though I clownish am, I know what beauty is;
Or did I not, yet seeing thee, I senseless were to miss.
Suppose her beauty Helen's-like, or Helen's somewhat less,
And every star consorting to a pure complexion guess.
Her stature comely tall, her gait well graced, and her wit
To marvel at, not meddle with, as matchless I omit.
A globe-like head, a gold-like hair, a forehead smooth and high,
An even nose, on either side did shine a greyish eye;
Two rosy cheeks, round ruddy lips, white just-set teeth within;

A mouth in mean, and underneath a round and dimpled chin;
Her snowish neck with blueish veins stood bolt upright upon
Her portly shoulders; beating balls, her veined breasts, anon
Add more to beauty; wand like was her middle;

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"And more, her long and limber arms had white and azure wrists;
And slender fingers answer to her smooth and lily fists.
A leg in print, a pretty foot: conjecture of the rest,
For amorous eyes, observing form, think parts obscured best.
"With these (O thing divine) with these, her tongue of speech was spare;
But speaking, Venus seem'd to speak, the ball from Ide to bear.
With Phoebe, Juno, and with both, herself contends in face;
Where equal mixture did not want of mild and stately grace.
Her smiles were sober, and her looks were cheerful unto all;
And such as neither wanton seem, nor wayward, mell, nor gall.
A quiet mind, a patient mood, and not disdainning any;
Not gibing, gadding, gaudy, and her faculties were many.
A nymph, no tongue, no heart, no eye, might praise, might wish, might see
For life, for love, for form, more good, more worth, more fair than she.
Yea such a one, as such was none, save only she was such.
Of Argentile to say the most, were to be silent much."
"I knew the lady very well, but worthless of such praise,"
The neatress said; "and muse I do, a shepherd thus should blaze
The coat of beauty. Credit me, thy latter speech betrays
Thy clownish shape a coined show. But wherefore dost thou weep?"
The shepherd wept, and she was woe, and both doth silence keep.
"In truth," quoth he, "I am not such as seeming I profess:
But then for her, and now for thee, I from myself digress.
Her loved I,--wretch that I am and recreant to be!--
I loved her, that hated love. But now I die for thee.
At Kirkland is my father's court, and Curan is my name,
In Edel's court sometimes in pomp, till love controll'd the same;
But now--What now? Dear heart, how now? What ailest thou to weep?"
The damsel wept, and he was woe, and both did silence keep.
"I grant," quoth she, "it was too much, that you did love so much;
But whom your former could not move, your second love doth touch.
The twice beloved Argentile submitteth her to thee;
And for thy double love presents herself, a single fee;
In passion, not in person chang'd, and I, my lord, am she."
They sweetly surfeiting in joy, and silent for a space,
Whenas the ecstasy had end did tenderly embrace,
And for their wedding, and their wish got fitting time and place.
Not England (for of Hengest then was named so this land)
Than Curan had an hardier knight, his force could none withstand;
Whose sheep-hook laid apart, he then had higher things in hand,
First, making known his lawful claim in Argentile her right,
He warr'd in Diria, and he won Brenitia too in fight;
And so from treacherous Edel took at once his life and crown,
And of Northumberland was king, long reigning in renown.

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William Warner