

Xantippe and Other Verse

Amy Levy

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Xantippe and Other Verse

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Xantippe.

(A FRAGMENT.)

WHAT, have I waked again ? I never thought
To see the rosy dawn, or ev'n this grey,
Dull, solemn stillness, ere the dawn has come.
The lamp burns low ; low burns the lamp of life :
The still morn stays expectant, and my soul,
All weighted with a passive wonderment,
Waiteth and watcheth, waiteth for the dawn.
Come hither, maids ; too soundly have ye slept
That should have watched me ; nay, I would not chide
Oft have I chidden, yet I would not chide
In this last hour ; now all should be at peace.
I have been dreaming in a troubled sleep
Of weary days I thought not to recall ;
Of stormy days, whose storms are hushed long since ;
Of gladsome days, of sunny days ; alas !
In dreaming, all their sunshine seem'd so sad,
As though the current of the dark To-Be
Had flow'd, prophetic, through the happy hours.
And yet, full well, I know it was not thus ;
I mind me sweetly of the summer days,
When, leaning from the lattice, I have caught
The fair, far glimpses of a shining sea ;
And, nearer, of tall ships which thronged the bay,

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And stood out blackly from a tender sky
All flecked with sulphur, azure, and bright gold ;
And in the still, clear air have heard the hum
Of distant voices ; and methinks there rose
No darker fount to mar or stain the joy
Which sprang ecstatic in my maiden breast
Than just those vague desires, those hopes and fears,
Those eager longings, strong, though undefined,
Whose very sadness makes them seem so sweet.
What cared I for the merry mockeries
Of other maidens sitting at the loom ?
Or for sharp voices, bidding me return
To maiden labour ? Were we not apart,
I and my high thoughts, and my golden dreams,
My soul which yearned for knowledge, for a tongue
That should proclaim the stately mysteries
Of this fair world, and of the holy gods ?
Then followed days of sadness, as I grew
To learn my woman-mind had gone astray,
And I was sinning in those very thoughts
For maidens, mark, such are not woman's thoughts
(And yet, 'tis strange, the gods who fashion us
Have given us such promptings). . . .

Fled the years,
Till seventeen had found me tall and strong,
And fairer, runs it, than Athenian maids
Are wont to seem ; I had not learnt it well
My lesson of dumb patience and I stood
At Life's great threshold with a beating heart,
And soul resolved to conquer and attain. . . .
Once, walking 'thwart the crowded market place,
With other maidens, bearing in the twigs
White doves for Aphrodite's sacrifice,
I saw him, all ungainly and uncouth,
Yet many gathered round to hear his words,
Tall youths and stranger-maidens Sokrates
I saw his face and marked it, half with awe,
Half with a quick repulsion at the shape. . . .
The richest gem lies hidden furthest down,
And is the dearer for the weary search ;
We grasp the shining shells which strew the shore,
Yet swift we fling them from us ; but the gem
We keep for aye and cherish. So a soul,
Found after weary searching in the flesh
Which half repelled our senses, is more dear,
For that same seeking, than the sunny mind
Which lavish Nature marks with thousand hints
Upon a brow of beauty. We are prone
To overweigh such subtle hints, then deem,
In after disappointment, we are fooled. . . .
And when, at length, my father told me all,

Xantippe and Other Verse

That I should wed me with great Sokrates,
I, foolish, wept to see at once cast down
The maiden image of a future love,
Where perfect body matched the perfect soul.
But slowly, softly did I cease to weep ;
Slowly I 'gan to mark the magic flash
Leap to the eyes, to watch the sudden smile
Break round the mouth, and linger in the eyes ;
To listen for the voice's lightest tone
Great voice, whose cunning modulations seemed
Like to the notes of some sweet instrument.
So did I reach and strain, until at last
I caught the soul athwart the grosser flesh.
Again of thee, sweet Hope, my spirit dreamed !
I, guided by his wisdom and his love,
Led by his words, and counselled by his care,
Should lift the shrouding veil from things which be,
And at the flowing fountain of his soul
Refresh my thirsting spirit. . . .

And indeed,

In those long days which followed that strange day
When rites and song, and sacrifice and flow'rs,
Proclaimed that we were wedded, did I learn,
In sooth, a-many lessons ; bitter ones
Which sorrow taught me, and not love inspired,
Which deeper knowledge of my kind impressed
With dark insistence on reluctant brain ;
But that great wisdom, deeper, which dispels
Narrowed conclusions of a half-grown mind,
And sees athwart the littleness of life
Nature's divineness and her harmony,
Was never poor Xantippe's. . . .

I would pause

And would recall no more, no more of life,
Than just the incomplete, imperfect dream
Of early summers, with their light and shade,
Their blossom-hopes, whose fruit was never ripe ;
But something strong within me, some sad chord
Which loudly echoes to the later life,
Me to unfold the after-misery
Urges with plaintive wailing in my heart.
Yet, maidens, mark ; I would not that ye thought
I blame my lord departed, for he meant
No evil, so I take it, to his wife.
'Twas only that the high philosopher,
Pregnant with noble theories and great thoughts,
Deigned not to stoop to touch so slight a thing
As the fine fabric of a woman's brain
So subtle as a passionate woman's soul.
I think, if he had stooped a little, and cared,
I might have risen nearer to his height,

Xantippe and Other Verse

And not lain shattered, neither fit for use
As goodly household vessel, nor for that
Far finer thing which I had hoped to be. . . .
Death, holding high his retrospective lamp,
Shows me those first, far years of wedded life,
Ere I had learnt to grasp the barren shape
Of what the Fates had destined for my life.
Then, as all youthful spirits are, was I
Wholly incredulous that Nature meant
So little, who had promised me so much.
At first I fought my fate with gentle words,
With high endeavours after greater things ;
Striving to win the soul of Sokrates,
Like some slight bird, who sings her burning love
To human master, till at length she finds
Her tender language wholly misconceived,
And that same hand whose kind caress she sought,
With fingers flippant flings the careless corn. . . .
I do remember how, one summer's eve,
He, seated in an arbour's leafy shade,
Had bade me bring fresh wine—skins. . . .

As I stood

Ling'ring upon the threshold, half concealed
By tender foliage, and my spirit light
With draughts of sunny weather, did I mark
An instant, the gay group before mine eyes.
Deepest in shade, and facing where I stood,
Sat Plato, with his calm face and low brows
Which met above the narrow Grecian eyes,
The pale, thin lips just parted to the smile,
Which dimpled that smooth olive of his cheek.
His head a little bent, sat Sokrates,
With one swart finger raised admonishing,
And on the air were borne his changing tones.
Low lounging at his feet, one fair arm thrown
Around his knee (the other, high in air
Brandish'd a brazen amphor, which yet rained
Bright drops of ruby on the golden locks
And temples with their fillets of the vine),
Lay Alkibiades the beautiful.
And thus, with solemn tone, spake Sokrates:
' This fair Aspasia, which our Perikles
Hath brought from realms afar, and set on high
In our Athenian city, hath a mind,
I doubt not, of a strength beyond her race ;
And makes employ of it, beyond the way
Of women nobly gifted : woman's frail
Her body rarely stands the test of soul ;
She grows intoxicate with knowledge ; throws
The laws of custom, order, 'neath her feet,
Feasting at life's great banquet with wide throat.'

Xantippe and Other Verse

Then sudden, stepping from my leafy screen,
Holding the swelling wine-skin o'er my head,
With breast that heaved, and eyes and cheeks aflame,
Lit by a fury and a thought, I spake:
' By all great powers around us ! can it be
That we poor women are empirical ?
That gods who fashioned us did strive to make
Beings too fine, too subtly delicate,
With sense that thrilled response to ev'ry touch
Of nature's and their task is not complete ?
That they have sent their half-completed work
To bleed and quiver here upon the earth ?
To bleed and quiver, and to weep and weep,
To beat its soul against the marble walls
Of men's cold hearts, and then at last to sin !'
I ceased, the first hot passion stayed and stemmed
And frightened by the silence : I could see,
Framed by the arbour foliage, which the sun
In setting softly gilded with rich gold,
Those upturned faces, and those placid limbs ;
Saw Plato's narrow eyes and niggard mouth,
Which half did smile and half did criticise,
One hand held up, the shapely fingers framed
To gesture of entreaty ' Hush, I pray,
Do not disturb her ; let us hear the rest ;
Follow her mood, for here's another phase
Of your black-browed Xantippe. . . .'

Then I saw

Young Alkibiades, with laughing lips
And half-shut eyes, contemptuous shrugging up
Soft, snowy shoulders, till he brought the gold
Of flowing ringlets round about his breasts.
But Sokrates, all slow and solemnly,
Raised, calm, his face to mine, and sudden spake :
' I thank thee for the wisdom which thy lips
Have thus let fall among us : prythee tell
From what high source, from what philosophies
Didst cull the sapient notion of thy words ?'
Then stood I straight and silent for a breath,
Dumb, crushed with all that weight of cold contempt ;
But swiftly in my bosom there uprose
A sudden flame, a merciful fury sent
To save me ; with both angry hands I flung
The skin upon the marble, where it lay
Spouting red rills and fountains on the white ;
Then, all unheeding faces, voices, eyes,
I fled across the threshold, hair unbound
White garment stained to redness beating heart
Flooded with all the flowing tide of hopes
Which once had gushed out golden, now sent back
Swift to their sources, never more to rise. . . .

Xantippe and Other Verse

I think I could have borne the weary life,
The narrow life within the narrow walls,
If he had loved me ; but he kept his love
For this Athenian city and her sons ;
And, haply, for some stranger–woman, bold
With freedom, thought, and glib philosophy. . . .
Ah me ! the long, long weeping through the nights,
The weary watching for the pale–eyed dawn
Which only brought fresh grieving : then I grew
Fiercer, and cursed from out my inmost heart
The Fates which marked me an Athenian maid.
Then faded that vain fury ; hope died out ;
A huge despair was stealing on my soul,
A sort of fierce acceptance of my fate,
He wished a household vessel well ! 'twas good,
For he should have it ! He should have no more
The yearning treasure of a woman's love,
But just the baser treasure which he sought.
I called my maidens, ordered out the loom,
And spun unceasing from the morn till eve ;
Watching all keenly over warp and woof,
Weighing the white wool with a jealous hand.
I spun until, methinks, I spun away
The soul from out my body, the high thoughts
From out my spirit ; till at last I grew
As ye have known me, eye exact to mark
The texture of the spinning ; ear all keen
For aimless talking when the moon is up,
And ye should be a–sleeping ; tongue to cut
With quick incision, 'thwart the merry words
Of idle maidens. . . .

Only yesterday

My hands did cease from spinning ; I have wrought
My dreary duties, patient till the last.
The gods reward me ! Nay, I will not tell
The after years of sorrow ; wretched strife
With grimmest foes sad Want and Poverty ;
Nor yet the time of horror, when they bore
My husband from the threshold ; nay, nor when
The subtle weed had wrought its deadly work.
Alas ! alas ! I was not there to soothe
The last great moment ; never any thought
Of her that loved him save at least the charge,
All earthly, that her body should not starve. . . .
You weep, you weep ; I would not that ye wept ;
Such tears are idle ; with the young, such grief
Soon grows to gratulation, as, 'her love
Was withered by misfortune ; mine shall grow
All nurtured by the loving,' or, 'her life
Was wrecked and shattered mine shall smoothly sail.'
Enough, enough. In vain, in vain, in vain !

Xantippe and Other Verse

The gods forgive me ! Sorely have I sinned
In all my life. A fairer fate befall
You all that stand there. . . .
 Ha ! the dawn has come ;
I see a rosy glimmer nay ! it grows dark ;
Why stand ye so in silence ? throw it wide,
The casement, quick ; why tarry ? give me air
O fling it wide, I say, and give me light !

A Prayer.

SINCE that I may not have
Love on this side the grave,
 Let me imagine Love.
Since not mine is the bliss
Of 'claspt hands and lips that kiss,'
 Let me in dreams it prove.
What tho' as the years roll
No soul shall melt to my soul,
 Let me conceive such thing ;
Tho' never shall entwine
Loving arms around mine
 Let dreams caresses bring.
To live it is my doom
Lonely as in a tomb,
 This cross on me was laid ;
My God, I know not why ;
Here in the dark I lie,
 Lonely, yet not afraid.
It has seemed good to Thee
Still to withhold the key
 Which opes the way to men ;
I am shut in alone,
I make not any moan,
 Thy ways are past my ken.
Yet grant me this, to find
The sweetness in my mind
 Which I must still forego ;
Great God which art above,
Grant me to image Love,
 The bliss without the woe.

Ralph to Mary.

LOVE, you have led me to the strand,
 Here, where the stilly, sunset sea,
 Ever receding silently,
Lays bare a shining stretch of sand ;

Xantippe and Other Verse

Which, as we tread, in waving line,
Sinks softly 'neath our moving feet ;
And looking down our glances meet,
Two mirrored figures yours and mine.

To-night you found me sad, alone,
Amid the noisy, empty books
And drew me forth with those sweet looks,
And gentle ways which are your own.

The glory of the setting sun
Has sway'd and softened all my mood ;
This wayward heart you understood,
Dear love, as you have always done.

Have you forgot the poet wild,
Who sang rebellious songs and hurl'd
His fierce anathemas at 'the world,'
Which shrugg'd its shoulders, pass'd and smil'd?

Who fled in wrath to distant lands,
And sitting, thron'd upon a steep,
Made music to the mighty deep,
And thought, 'Perhaps it understands.'

Who back return'd, a wanderer drear,
Urged by the spirit's restless pain,
Sang his wild melodies in vain
Sang them to ears that would not hear. . . .

A weary, lonely thing he flies,
His soul's fire with soul's hunger quell'd,
Till, sudden turning, he beheld
His meaning mirrored in your eyes! . . .

Ah, Love, since then have passed away
Long years ; some things are chang'd on earth;
Men say that poet had his worth,
And twine for him the tardy bay.

What care I, so that hand in hand,
And heart in heart we pace the shore ?
My heart desireth nothing more,
We understand, we understand.

'Felo de Se.'

With Apologies to Mr. Swinburne.

FOR repose I have sighed and have struggled ; have sigh'd and have struggled in vain ;
I am held in the Circle of Being and caught in the Circle of Pain.
I was wan and weary with life ; my sick soul yearned for death ;
I was weary of women and war and the sea and the wind's wild breath ;
I cull'd sweet poppies and crush'd them, the blood ran rich and red :
And I cast it in crystal chalice and drank of it till I was dead.
And the mould of the man was mute, pulseless in ev'ry part,
The long limbs lay on the sand with an eagle eating the heart.
Repose for the rotting head and peace for the putrid breast,
But for that which is 'T indeed the gods have decreed no rest ;
No rest but an endless aching, a sorrow which grows amain :
I am caught in the Circle of Being and held in the Circle of Pain.
Bitter indeed is Life, and bitter of Life the breath,
But give me Life and its ways and its men, if this be Death.
Wearied I once of the Sun and the voices which clamour'd around :
Give them me back in the sightless depths there is neither light nor sound.
Sick is my soul, and sad and feeble and faint as it felt
When (far, dim day) in the fair flesh-fane of the body it dwelt.
But then I could run to the shore, weeping and weary and weak ;
See the waves' blue sheen and feel the breath of the breeze on my cheek :
Could wail with the wailing wind ; strike sharply the hands in despair ;
Could shriek with the shrieking blast, grow frenzied and tear the hair ;
Could fight fierce fights with the foe or clutch at a human hand ;
And weary could lie at length on the soft, sweet, saffron sand. . . .
I have neither a voice nor hands, nor any friend nor a foe ;
I am I just a Pulse of Pain I am I, that is all I know.
For Life, and the sickness of Life, and Death and desire to die ;
They have passed away like the smoke, here is nothing but Pain and I.

Sonnet.

MOST wonderful and strange it seems, that I
Who but a little time ago was tost
High on the waves of passion and of pain,
With aching heat and wildly throbbing brain,
Who peered into the darkness, deeming vain
All things there found if but One thing were lost,
Thus calm and still and silent here should lie,
Watching and waiting, waiting passively.

The dark has faded, and before mine eyes
Have long, grey flats expanded, dim and bare ;
And through the changing guises all things wear
Inevitable Law I recognise :
Yet in my heart a hint of feeling lies
Which half a hope and half a despair.

Translated from Geibel.

O SAY, thou wild, thou oft deceived heart,
What mean these noisy throbbings in my breast ?
After thy long, unutterable woe
 Wouldst thou not rest ?

Fall'n from Life's tree the sweet rose–blossom lies,
And fragrant youth has fled. What made to seem
This earth as fair to thee as Paradise,
 Was all a dream.

The blossom fell, the thorn was left to me ;
Deep from the wound the blood–drops ever flow,
All that I have are yearnings, wild desires,
 And wrath and woe.

They brought me Lethe's water, saying, 'Drink!'
'Drink, for the draught is sweet,' I heard them say,
'Shalt learn how soft a thing forgetting is.'
 I answered : 'Nay.'

What tho' indeed it were an idle cheat,
Nathless to me 'twas very fair and blest :
With every breath I draw I know that love
 Reigns in my breast.

Let me go forth, and thou, my heart, bleed on :
A lonely spot I seek by night and day,
That love and sorrow I may there breathe forth
 In a last lay.

Run to Death.

A True Incident of Pre–Revolutionary French History.

NOW the lovely autumn morning breathes its freshness in earth's face,
In the crowned castle courtyard the blithe horn proclaims the chase ;
And the ladies on the terrace smile adieux with rosy lips
To the huntsmen disappearing down the cedar–shaded groves,
Wafting delicate aromas from their scented finger tips,
And the gallants wave in answer, with their gold–embroidered gloves.
On they rode, past bush and bramble, on they rode, past elm and oak ;
And the hounds, with anxious nostril, sniffed the heather–scented air,
Till at last, within his stirrups, up Lord Gaston rose, and spoke
He, the boldest and the bravest of the wealthy nobles there :
'Friends,' quoth he, 'the time hangs heavy, for it is not as we thought,
And these woods, tho' fair and shady, will afford, I fear, no sport.

Xantippe and Other Verse

Shall we hence, then, worthy kinsmen, and desert the hunter's track
For the chateau, where the wine cup and the dice cup tempt us back ?
'Ay,' the nobles shout in chorus ; 'Ay,' the powder'd lacquey cries ;
Then they stop with eager movement, reining in quite suddenly ;
Peering down with half contemptuous, half with wonder-opened eyes
At a 'something' which is crawling, with slow step, from tree to tree.
Is't some shadow phantom ghastly ? No, a woman and a child,
Swarthy woman, with the 'gipsy' written clear upon her face ;
Gazing round her with her wide eyes dark, and shadow-fringed, and wild,
With the cowed suspicious glances of a persecuted race.
Then they all, with unasked question, in each other's faces peer,
For a common thought has struck them, one their lips dare scarcely say,
Till Lord Gaston cries, impatient, 'Why regret the stately deer
When such sport as yonder offers ? quick ! unleash the dogs away !'
Then they breath'd a shout of cheering, grey-haired man and stripling boy,
And the gipsy, roused to terror, stayed her step, and turned her head
Saw the faces of those huntsmen, lit with keenest cruel joy
Sent a cry of grief to Heaven, closer clasped her child, and fled !

* * * * *

O ye nobles of the palace ! O ye gallant-hearted lords !
Who would stoop for Leila's kerchief, or for Clementina's gloves,
Who would rise up all indignant, with your shining sheathless swords,
At the breathing of dishonour to your languid lady loves !
O, I tell you, daring nobles, with your beauty-loving stare,
Who ne'er long the coy coquetting of the courtly dames withstood,
Tho' a woman be the lowest, and the basest, and least fair,
In your manliness forget not to respect her womanhood,
And thou, gipsy, that hast often the pursuer fled before,
That hast felt ere this the shadow of dark death upon thy brow,
That hast hid among the mountains, that hast roamed the forest o'er,
Bred to hiding, watching, fleeing, may thy speed avail thee now !

* * * * *

Still she flees, and ever fiercer tear the hungry hounds behind,
Still she flees, and ever faster follow there the huntsmen on,
Still she flees, her black hair streaming in a fury to the wind,
Still she flees, tho' all the glimmer of a happy hope is gone.
'Eh ? what ? baffled by a woman ! Ah, *sapristi* ! she can run !
Should she 'scape us, it would crown us with dishonour and disgrace ;
It is time' (Lord Gaston shouted) 'such a paltry chase were done !'
And the fleeter grew her footsteps, so the hotter grew the chase
Ha ! at last ! the dogs are on her ! will she struggle ere she dies ?
See ! she holds her child above her, all forgetful of **her** pain,
While a hundred thousand curses shoot out darkly from her eyes,
And a hundred thousand glances of the bitterest disdain.
Ha ! the dogs are pressing closer ! they have flung her to the ground ;
Yet her proud lips never open with the dying sinner's cry

* * * * *

Xantippe and Other Verse

Till at last, unto the Heavens, just two fearful shrieks resound,
When the soul is all forgotten in the body's agony !
Let them rest there, child and mother, in the shadow of the oak,
On the tender mother-bosom of that earth from which they came.
As they slow rode back those huntsmen neither laughed, nor sang, nor spoke,
Hap, there lurked unowned within them throbbings of a secret shame.
But before the flow'ry terrace, where the ladies smiling sat,
With their graceful nothings trifling all the weary time away,
Low Lord Gaston bowed, and raising high his richly 'broider'd hat,
'Fairest ladies, give us welcome ! 'Twas a famous hunt to-day.'