

He brings us a pledge — he will do his part
 With the best of his race and name ;” —
 And I will, for I look to live, sweetheart,
 As may suit with my mother’s fame.

—◆—
 THE FOUR BRIDGES.

I LOVE this gray old church, the low, long nave,
 The ivied chancel and the slender spire ;
 No less its shadow on each heaving grave,
 With growing osier bound, or living briar ;
 I love those yew-tree trunks, where stand arrayed
 So many deep-cut names of youth and maid.

A simple custom this — I love it well —
 A carved betrothal and a pledge of truth ;
 How many an eve, their linkèd names to spell,
 Beneath the yew-trees sat our village youth !
 When work was over, and the new-cut hay
 Sent wafts of balm from meadows where it lay.

Ah ! many an eve, while I was yet a boy,
 Some village hind has beckoned me aside,
 And sought mine aid, with shy and awkward joy,
 To carve the letters of his rustic bride,
 And make them clear to read as graven stone,
 Deep in the yew-tree’s trunk beside his own.

For none could carve like me, and here they stand,
 Fathers and mothers of this present race ;
 And underscored by some less practised hand,
 That fain the story of its line would trace,
 With children’s names, and number, and the day
 When any called to God have passed away.

I look upon them, and I turn aside,
 As oft when carving them I did erewhile ;
 And there I see those wooden bridges wide
 That cross the marshy hollow ; there the stile
 In reeds imbedded, and the swelling down,
 And the white road toward the distant town.

But those old bridges claim another look.
 Our brattling river tumbles through the one ;
 The second spans a shallow, weedy brook ;
 Beneath the others, and beneath the sun,
 Lie two long stilly pools, and on their breasts
 Picture their wooden piles, encased in swallows’
 nests.

And round about them grows a fringe of reeds,
 And then a floating crown of lily-flowers,
 And yet within small silver-budded weeds ;
 But each clear centre evermore embowers
 A deeper sky, where, stooping, you may see
 The little minnows darting restlessly.

My heart is bitter, lilies, at your sweet ;
 Why did the dewdrop fringe your chalices ?
 Why in your beauty are you thus complete,
 You silver ships — you floating palaces ?
 O ! if need be, you must allure man’s eye,
 Yet wherefore blossom here ? O why ? O why ?

O ! O ! the world is wide, you lily-flowers,
 It hath warm forests, cleft by stilly pools,
 Where every night bathe crowds of stars ; and
 bowers
 Of spicery hang over. Sweet air cools
 And shakes the lilies among those stars that lie :
 Why are not ye content to reign there ? Why ?

That chain of bridges, it were hard to tell
How it is linked with all my early joy.

There was a little foot that I loved well,
It danced across them when I was a boy ;

There was a careless voice that used to sing ;
There was a child, a sweet and happy thing.

Offt through that matted wood of oak and birch
She came from yonder house upon the hill ;
She crossed the wooden bridges to the church,

And watched, with village girls, my boasted skill :
But loved to watch the floating lilies best,
Or linger, peering in a swallow's nest ;

Linger and linger, with her wistful eyes
Drawn to the lily-buds that lay so white
And soft on crimson water ; for the skies

Would crimson, and the little cloudlets bright
Would all be flung among the flowers sheer down,
To flush the spaces of their clustering crown.

Till the green rushes — O, so glossy green —
The rushes, they would whisper, rustle, shake ;
And forth on floating gauze, no jewelled queen

So rich, the green-eyed dragon-flies would break,
And hover on the flowers — aerial things,
With little rainbows flickering on their wings.

Ah ! my heart dear ! the polished pools lie still,
Like lanes of water reddened by the west,
Till, swooping down from yon o'erhanging hill,

The bold marsh harrier wets her tawny breast ;
We scared her oft in childhood from her prey,
And the old eager thoughts rise fresh as yesterday

To yonder copse by moonlight I did go,
In luxury of mischief, half afraid,
To steal the great owl's brood, her downy snow,

Her screaming imps to seize, the while she preyed
With yellow, cruel eyes, whose radiant glare,
Fell with their mother rage, I might not dare.

Panting I lay till her great fanning wings [nigh,
Troubled the dreams of rock-doves, slumbering
And she and her fierce mate, like evil things,

Skimmed the dusk fields ; then rising, with a cry
Of fear, joy, triumph, darted on my prey,
And tore it from the nest and fled away.

But afterward, belated in the wood,
I saw her moping on the rifled tree,
And my heart smote me for her, while I stood

Awakened from my careless reverie ;
So white she looked, with moonlight round her shed,
So motherlike she drooped and hung her head.

O that mine eyes would cheat me ! I behold
The godwits running by the water edge,
The mossy bridges mirrored as of old ;

The little curlews creeping from the sedge,
But not the little foot so gayly light ;
O that mine eyes would cheat me, that I might ! —

Would cheat me ! I behold the gable-ends —
Those purple pigeons clustering on the cote ;
The lane with maples overhung, that bends

Toward her dwelling ; the dry grassy moat,
Thick mullions, diamond-latticed, mossed and gray,
And walls banked up with laurel and with bay.

And up behind them yellow fields of corn,
And still ascending countless firry spires,
Dry slopes of hills uncultured, bare, forlorn,

And green in rocky clefts with whins and briars ;
Then rich cloud masses dyed the violet's hue,
With orange sunbeams dropping swiftly through.

Ay, I behold all this full easily ;
 My soul is jealous of my happier eyes,
 And manhood envies youth. Ah, strange to see,
 By looking merely, orange-flooded skies ;
 Nay, any dewdrop that may near me shine :
 But never more the face of Eglantine !

She was my one companion, being herself
 The jewel and adornment of my days,
 My life's completeness. O, a smiling elf,
 That I do but disparage with my praise —
 My playmate; and I loved her dearly and long.
 And she loved me, as the tender love the strong.

Ay, but she grew, till on a time there came
 A sudden restless yearning to my heart ;
 And as we went a-nesting, all for shame
 And shyness, I did hold my peace, and start ;
 Content departed, comfort shut me out,
 And there was nothing left to talk about.

She had but sixteen years, and as for me,
 Four added made my life. This pretty bird,
 This fairy bird that I had cherished — she,
 Content, had sung, while I, contented, heard.
 The song had ceased ; the bird, with nature's art,
 Had brought a thorn and set it in my heart.

The restless birth of love my soul opprest ;
 I longed and wrestled for a tranquil day,
 And warred with that disquiet in my breast
 As one who knows there is a better way ;
 But, turned against myself, I still in vain
 Looked for the ancient calm to come again.

My tirèd soul could to itself confess
 That she deserved a wiser love than mine ;
 To love more truly were to love her less,

And for this truth I still awoke to pine :
 I had a dim belief that it would be
 A better thing for her, a blessed thing for me.

Good hast Thou made them — comforters rightsweet ;
 Good hast Thou made the world, to mankind lent ;
 Good are Thy dropping clouds that feed the wheat ;
 Good are Thy stars above the firmament.
 Take to Thee, take, Thy worship, Thy renown ;
 The good which Thou hast made doth wear Thy crown.

For, O my God, Thy creatures are so frail,
 Thy bountiful creation is so fair,
 That, drawn before us like the temple veil,
 It hides the Holy Place from thought and care,
 Giving man's eyes instead its sweeping fold,
 Rich as with cherub wings and apples wrought of
 gold,

Purple and blue and scarlet — shimmering bells
 And rare pomegranates on its broidered rim,
 Glorious with chain and fret work that the swell
 Of incense shakes to music dreamy and dim,
 Till on a day comes loss, that God makes gain,
 And death and darkness rend the veil in twain.

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Ah, sweetest ! my beloved ! each outward thing
 Recalls my youth, and is instinct with thee ;
 Brown wood-owls in the dusk, with noiseless wing,
 Float from yon hanger to their haunted tree,
 And hoot full softly. Listening, I regain
 A flashing thought of thee with their remembered
 strain.

I will not pine — it is the careless brook,
 These amber sunbeams slanting down the vale ;
 It is the long tree-shadows, with their look

Of natural peace, that make my heart to fail :
 The peace of nature — No, I will not pine —
 But O the contrast 'twixt her face and mine !
 And still I changed — I was a boy no more ;
 My heart was large enough to hold my kind,
 And all the world. As hath been oft before
 With youth, I sought, but I could never find
 Work hard enough to quiet my self-strife,
 And use the strength of action-craving life.
 She, too, was changed : her bountiful sweet eyes
 Looked out full lovingly on all the world.
 O tender as the deeps in yonder skies
 Their beaming ! but her rosebud lips were curled
 With the soft dimple of a musing smile,
 Which kept my gaze, but held me mute the while.
 A cast of bees, a slowly moving wain,
 The scent of bean-flowers wafted up a dell,
 Blue pigeons wheeling over fields of grain,
 Or bleat of folded lamb, would please her well ;
 Or cooing of the early coted dove ; —
 She, sauntering, mused of these ; I, following, mused
 of love.
 With her two lips, that one the other pressed
 So poutingly with such a tranquil air,
 With her two eyes, that on my own would rest
 So dream-like, she denied my silent prayer,
 Fronted unuttered words, and said them nay,
 And smiled down love till it had naught to say.
 The words that through mine eyes would clearly shine
 Hovered and hovered on my lips in vain ;
 If after pause I said but “ Eglantine,”
 She raised to me her quiet eyelids twain,
 And looked me this reply — look calm, yet bland —
 “ I shall not know, I will not understand.”

Yet she did know my story — knew my life
 Was wrought to hers with bindings many and
 strong ;
 That I, like Israel, servèd for a wife,
 And for the love I bear her thought not long,
 But only a few days, full quickly told,
 My seven years' service strict as his of old.
 I must be brief : the twilight shadows grow,
 And steal the rose-bloom genial summer sheds,
 And scented wafts of wind that come and go
 Have lifted dew from honeyed clover-heads ;
 The seven stars shine out above the mill,
 The dark delightful woods lie veiled and still.
 Hush ! hush ! the nightingale begins to sing,
 And stops, as ill contented with her note ;
 Then breaks from out the bush with hurried wing,
 Restless and passionate. She tunes her throat,
 Laments a while in wavering trills, and then
 Floods with a stream of sweetness all the glen.
 The seven stars upon the nearest pool
 Lie trembling down betwixt the lily leaves,
 And move like glowworms ; wafting breezes cool
 Come down along the water, and it heaves
 And bubbles in the sedge ; while deep and wide
 The dim night settles on the country side.
 I know this scene by heart. O ! once before
 I saw the seven stars float to and fro,
 And stayed my hurried footsteps by the shore
 To mark the starry picture spread below :
 Its silence made the tumult in my breast
 More audible ; its peace revealed my own unrest.
 I paused, then hurried on ; my heart beat quick ;
 I crossed the bridges, reached the steep ascent,
 And climbed through matted fern and hazels thick ;

Then darkling through the close green maples went,
And saw — there felt love's keenest pangs begin —
An oriel window lighted from within :

I saw — and felt that they were scarcely cares
Which I had known before. I drew more near,
And O! methought how sore it frets and wears

The soul to part with that it holds so dear :
'Tis hard two woven tendrils to untwine,
And I was come to part with Eglantine.

For life was bitter through those words repressed,

And youth was burdened with unspoken vows ;
Love unrequited brooded in my breast,

And shrank, at glance, from the beloved brows :
And three long months, heart-sick, my foot with-
drawn,

I had not sought her side by rivulet, copse, or lawn —
Not sought her side, yet busy thought no less

Still followed in her wake, though far behind ;
And I, being parted from her loveliness,

Looked at the picture of her in my mind :
I lived alone, I walked with soul opprest,
And ever sighed for her, and sighed for rest.

Then I had risen to struggle with my heart,

And said: "O heart! the world is fresh and fair,
And I am young; but this thy restless smart

Changes to bitterness the morning air :
I will, I must, these weary fetters break —
I will be free, if only for her sake.

"O let me trouble her no more with sighs!

Heart-healing comes by distance, and with time :
Then let me wander, and enrich mine eyes

With the green forests of a softer clime,
Or list by night at sea the wind's low stave
And long monotonous rockings of the wave.

"Through open solitudes, unbounded meads,
Where, wading on breast-high in yellow bloom.
Untamed of man, the shy white llama feeds —
There would I journey and forget my doom ;
O far, O far as sunrise I would see
The level prairie stretch away from me!

"Or would I sail upon the tropic seas,
Where fathom long the blood-red dulces grow,
Droop from the rock and waver in the breeze,
Lashing the tide to foam; while calm below
The muddy mandrakes throng these waters warm,
And purple, gold, and green, the living blossoms
swarm."

So of my father I did win consent,
With importunities repeated long,
To make that duty which had been my bent,
To dig with strangers alien tombs among,
And bound to them through desert leagues to pace,
Or track up rivers to their starting-place.

For this I had done battle and had won,
But not alone to tread Arabian sands,
Measure the shadows of a southern sun,
Or dig out gods in the old Egyptian lands ;
But for the dream wherewith I thought to cope —
The grief of love unmated with love's hope.

And now I would set reason in array,
Methought, and fight for freedom manfully,
Till by long absence there would come a day
When this my love would not be pain to me ;
But if I knew my rosebud fair and blest
I should not pine to wear it on my breast.

The days fled on; another week should fling
A foreign shadow on my lengthening way;

Another week, yet nearness did not bring
 A braver heart that hard farewell to say.
 I let the last day wane, the dusk begin,
 Ere I had sought that window lighted from within.

Sinking and sinking, O my heart! my heart!
 Will absence heal thee whom its shade doth rend?
 I reached the little gate, and soft within
 The oriel fell her shadow. She did lend
 Her loveliness to me, and let me share
 The listless sweetness of those features fair.

Among thick laurels in the gathering gloom,
 Heavy for this our parting, I did stand;
 Beside her mother in the lighted room,
 She sitting leaned her cheek upon her hand;
 And as she read, her sweet voice, floating through
 The open casement, seemed to mourn me an adieu.

Youth! youth! how buoyant are thy hopes! they
 turn,

Like marigolds, toward the sunny side.
 My hopes were buried in a funeral urn,
 And they sprang up like plants and spread them
 wide;

Though I had schooled and reasoned them away,
 They gathered smiling near and prayed a holiday.

Ah, sweetest voice! how pensive were its tones,
 And how regretful its unconscious pause!
 "Is it for me her heart this sadness owns,
 And is our parting of to-night the cause?"

Ah, would it might be so!" I thought, and stood
 Listening entranced among the underwood.

I thought it would be something worth the pain
 Of parting, to look once in those deep eyes,
 And take from them an answering look again.

"When eastern palms," I thought, "about me rise,
 If I might carve our names upon the rind,
 Betrothed, I would not mourn, though leaving thee
 behind."

I can be patient, faithful, and most fond
 To unacknowledged love; I can be true
 To this sweet thralldom, this unequal bond,
 This yoke of mine that reaches not to you:
 O, how much more could costly parting buy —
 If not a pledge, one kiss, or, failing that, a sigh!

I listened, and she ceased to read; she turned
 Her face toward the laurels where I stood:
 Her mother spoke — O wonder! hardly learned;
 She said, "There is a rustling in the wood;
 Ah, child! if one draw near to bid farewell,
 Let not thine eyes an unsought secret tell.

"My daughter, there is nothing held so dear
 As love, if only it be hard to win.
 The roses that in yonder hedge appear
 Outdo our garden-buds which bloom within;
 But since the hand may pluck them every day,
 Unmarked they bud, bloom, drop, and drift away.

"My daughter, my beloved, be not you
 Like those same roses." O bewildering word!
 My heart stood still, a mist obscured my view:
 It cleared; still silence. No denial stirred
 The lips beloved; but straight, as one oppress,
 She, kneeling, dropped her face upon her mother's
 breast.

This said, "My daughter, sorrow comes to all;
 Our life is checked with shadows manifold:
 But woman has this more — she may not call
 Her sorrow by its name. Yet love not told,
 And only born of absence and by thought,
 With thought and absence may return to nought."

And my belovèd lifted up her face,
 And moved her lips as if about to speak;
 She dropped her lashes with a girlish grace,
 And the rich damask mantled in her cheek:
 I stood awaiting till she should deny
 Her love, or with sweet laughter put it by.

But, closer nestling to her mother's heart,
 She, blushing, said no word to break my trance,
 For I was breathless; and, with lips apart,
 Felt my breast pant and all my pulses dance,
 And strove to move, but could not for the weight
 Of unbelieving joy, so sudden and so great,

Because she loved me. With a mighty sigh
 Breaking away, I left her on her knees,
 And blest the laurel bower, the darkened sky,
 The sultry night of August. Through the trees,
 Giddy with gladness, to the porch I went,
 And hardly found the way for joyful wonderment.

Yet, when I entered, saw her mother sit
 With both hands cherishing the graceful head,
 Smoothing the clustered hair, and parting it
 From the fair brow; she, rising, only said,
 In the accustomed tone, the accustomed word,
 The careless greeting that I always heard;

And she resumed her merry, mocking smile,
 Though tear-drops on the glistening lashes hung.
 O woman! thou wert fashioned to beguile:
 So have all sages said, all poets sung.
 She spoke of favoring winds and waiting ships,
 With smiles of gratulation on her lips!

And then she looked and faltered: I had grown
 So suddenly in life and soul a man:
 She moved her lips, but could not find a tone

To set her mocking music to; began
 One struggle for dominion, raised her eyes, [prise,
 And straight withdrew them, bashful through sur-
 The color over cheek and bosom flushed;

I might have heard the beating of her heart,
 But that mine own beat louder; when she blushed,
 The hand within mine own I felt to start,
 But would not change my pitiless decree
 To strive with her for might and mastery.

She looked again, as one that, half afraid,
 Would fain be certain of a doubtful thing;
 Or one beseeching, "Do not me upbraid!"
 And then she trembled like the fluttering
 Of timid little birds, and silent stood,
 No smile wherewith to mock my hardihood.

She turned, and to an open casement moved
 With girlish shyness, mute beneath my gaze,
 And I on downcast lashes unreproved
 Could look as long as pleased me; while, the rays
 Of moonlight round her, she her fair head bent,
 In modest silence to my words attent.

How fast the giddy whirling moments flew!
 The moon had set; I heard the midnight chime:
 Hope is more brave than fear, and joy than dread,
 And I could wait unmoved the parting time.
 It came; for, by a sudden impulse drawn,
 She, risen, stepped out upon the dusky lawn.

A little waxen taper in her hand,
 Her feet upon the dry and dewless grass,
 She looked like one of the celestial band,
 Only that on her cheeks did dawn and pass
 Most human blushes; while, the soft light thrown
 On vesture pure and white, she seemed yet fairer
 grown.