

Tasso to Leonora

By George Sterling

FOREWORD

For his declaration of love to Leonora d'Este (sister of his patron, Alfonso II, Duke of Ferrara), Torquato Tasso, one of the four great poets of Italy, was confined for seven years as a madman in the hospital of St Anne, by order of the duke. Leonora died on February the tenth, 1581, five years before his release.

Because he wanders lonely, without hope,
Because supreme despair hath slain his dream,
Love, for his very hopelessness, makes cry,
Living to thee a little as a voice.

I know not if thy heart can ever turn
To one unworthy. Thy disdain, perchance,
May come, and with unfaltering touch reveal
The might of chords that in the spirit thrill
To pain. And yet I cannot guard my lips
Forever. Comes this hush about the soul
But for love's whisper: listen ere it pass.

Thou seemest farther from me than a star,
The morning star, that hovers like a flame
Albove the great dawn-altar. So for this,
Thy terrible remoteness, must I speak.
And purer thou and sweeter than a wind
Whose wings, caught in an Eden of the rose,
Win through its maze aweary. So for this,
Thy purity and sweetness, must I speak.
Because of all the wonder that thou art
I cry my love, lest suddenly great Death
Go mad for thee, and kiss thy lips too soon.
And for the very frailty of this life
I cry my love. For as the abiding sea
Transpires a tiny firmament of foam
That, quivering, mirrors for a space the abyss
Which was its font, and that which takes its soul,
So gleams mortality, a trembling film
Between the deep within and deep without.
I, fearful lest thou take the eternal ways
And know not I remain a lonely fire
Within the night thou leavest, call to thee.

Never had lover's dusk such moon as thou!

Never had moon adoring such as mine!
For at thy spirit in her majesty
Mine own is greatly humbled, and forgets
Its haughtiness, forsaking at thy feet
Song's archangelic panoply of light,
And sits a child before thee, and is glad.
Yea, though I deem the silences of love
More beautiful than music, or the hush
Of ocean twilights, yet my soul to thine
Swoons deaf and blind, with living lips that ache
And cry to thee its joy and wonderment.
I would that I were morning to thine eyes!
I would that I were honey in thy mouth!
I would I might thrill through thee as delight,
And might in fragrance of immortal flow'rs
Besiege thee, and might take all cadences
Of riven waters and of crying chords,
The voice of bird and wind and threnody,
The deep's slow thunder, and the murmurings
Of fire, and might enthrall and mingle these,
And live to thee in music! Even thus
I, Tasso, calling from my throne of pain,
Would fathom thee, who art unfathomable,
And as a sky my love would compass thee,
Who art illimitable. Ah, low voice,
Heard above all the voices of the day!
Ah, face imperative as sleep, that night
Orbs to a star, and mingles with my dreams!
Ah, high despair, and hope of him whose hope
Is but to clasp thy spirit after death!
Though death draw down this body, still my soul—
A song between its dawn and eve of time—
Shall turn to thee for memory, and lose,
Unwept, all meed of evanescent joy,
With thee its heritage. And though thy world,
A-storm in all its citadels and courts,
Bear thee beyond me, yet its darkened might
Gives but new might to yearning. Yea, though hell
Arch over me its hurricanes of fire,
Still shall I love, nor falter, standing true
To that pure light whereof thou abidest shrine,
For which all else is dark, mine eyes being fixed
Always thereon. Yet not as they that find
Love tenderness, and sweet with pitying lips,
Find I his glories, but a thing of flame,
And with fierce mien forbidding, and with eyes

Inexorable, calm with all disdain,
And with ungracious hands, and threatening wings,
Sad for their cruel splendor. Yet his voice
Calls but thy name unceasingly—thy name,
An echo in the abysses of the heart,
That rests a time, now having found its realm
All deeps and exaltations of unrest. . .

Ah, peace for but a little! I awake,
And now again my heart is made a world
Wherein the Titans, Rapture and Despair,
Do battle each with each. Thou swayest them,
Who art the swift fulfilment of all dreams
Of love in loneliness—ideals mute
The mind uplifts for worshiping. Thy face
Restores lost visions of Hellenic nights
And all their moons that perished. Nymph and queen
Live in thee: thou art that Persephone—
Torn from the clasping day—whose maiden eyes,
'Mid one deep murmur of Plutonian harps,
Gretened in retrospection. Daphne thou;
Psyche that waits her lover in the night;
Calypso and the luring of her lyres.

Nay! Thou art more than these, howbeit their souls
Stir in thee. In humility I come,
I call, I pray, O whiter than the snows
Of orient and cloudland cold with dawn!
Thy light is from afar, and thine the heights
The stainless know. Ah! fallen from its skies,
My darker soul calls from its distances
And shadows unendurable. Judge thou
Its worship, and the hunger thou hast made,
That I, from darkness and my little worth,
Dare tell thee my adoring. But I wait,
And dawn comes drifting on its golden tides,
Or dawn comes later from reluctant mist,
Yet thou a stranger still to me, and night
Comes, though it brings not slumber, yet no voice
In me a desert. And the barren years
Darken beyond us, and the silence grows
Unto a mystery foreshadowing
The sorrows of the world. Eternity
Draws nearer with its answers, and I seem
A wandering echo in the night of Change,
The ghost of something futile and forgot,

A star lost from the sister lights. Unrest
Gives me thy face for slumber, and the day
Thy destinies as dream. And memory
Strives backward for thee to the dark of birth,
And seeks the light of antenatal life—
Finding thee almost, for thy haunting face
Thrills with the rose of unremembered dawns,
Thine eyes hold azure of a younger sea,
The depths of thine incomparable hair
Twilights in which we parted, and thy voice
The grief and music of forgotten lives.

It may be that my lips shall never touch
The cup of love brimmed with its quivering wine;
Yet sit I crowned, splendor invisible
Upon me, happy that I turn from Time
Holding one dream found perfect. It may be,
As now, that until death my yearning arms
Shall seek thee only in dream-paradise,
O pearl of oceans infinite! that Love
Sit always in unchanging solitude,
And call unheard; that nightward thou wilt turn,
Nor wilt remember, save for pitying,
My world left mist and ashes. Still my soul
Hath known thee, and may summon: Memory,
Life's shadow, holds forever at her heart
The beautiful that passeth. I am glad,
And, homeless for Eternity, have rest
In thee for Time. Had I thy very scorn,
Yet were I richer, and might smile in tears,
Clasping the pain immortal things must know.
Think not my lips would harm thee: all my heart
Trembles to thine, and, rather far than Love
Found sorrow or nepenthe, at thy feet
Would lie as dust that gathered to a rose,
And died in silence, and was dust again.