

The Sphinx

By George Sylvester Viereck

I

Within a sultry desert land,
Where neither flowers nor shadows are,
Hid to the breast in shifting sand
There stands an image secular.

‘Where Pharaoh’s sceptre gave the laws,
The thing that held me captive rests,
Strange compound of a panther’s claws
And of a woman’s rounded breasts.

Thus stood she when the princess found
The infant in his secret bed;
Thus, when the young Bithynian wound
The death-wreath for his golden head.

And monarchs came with her to dwell
On whom mad dreams had laid their ban,
From whose imperial shoulders fell
The purple cloak of Hadrian.

II

O strange beyond the strangest fears
And hopes and ancient questionings,
That I who am so young in years
Have loved the oldest of all things!

III

Ah, fount of pleasure salt with tears,
Storehouse of cunning, well of guile!
Love of my boyhood’s troubled years,
Gray silent Sphinx beside the Nile!

No hoard of silver I possessed,
No purple brought from Tyrian mart,
So, as love’s guerdon, from my breast
With fevered hand I tore the heart.

Thy granite flanks upon the gift
Closed with a mighty fluttering,
Then first within thee rose the swift
Pulsation of a living thing.

And I forgot beneath thy spell
Mine was the life within thee grown,
And mine the heart that leapt and fell
Illusory in thy breast of stone.

Mine was the folly, mine the tears
That wept the ending of my dream,
Love of my boyhood's troubled years,
Gray silent Sphinx beside the stream!

IV

O wanderer, stay where life is sweet,
And jubilant earth is glad of May,
Disturb not with incautious feet
The mystery of an elder day.

When we have sighed to fold our hands
And join the Pharaohs in the tomb,
She still shall stare across the sands
And hearken for the crack of doom!