

SAPPHO

ONE HUNDRED LYRICS BY BLISS CARMAN

1907

"SAPPHO WHO BROKE OFF A FRAGMENT OF HER SOUL FOR US TO GUESS AT."

"SAPPHO, WITH THAT GLORIOLE OF EBON HAIR ON CALMÈD BROWS— O POET-WOMAN! NONE FORGOES THE LEAP, ATTAINING THE REPOSE."

E.B. BROWNING.

INTRODUCTION

THE POETRY OF SAPPHO.—If all the poets and all the lovers of poetry should be asked to name the most precious of the priceless things which time has wrung in tribute from the triumphs of human genius, the answer which would rush to every tongue would be "The Lost Poems of Sappho." These we know to have been jewels of a radiance so imperishable that the broken gleams of them still dazzle men's eyes, whether shining from the two small brilliants and the handful of star-dust which alone remain to us, or reflected merely from the adoration of those poets of old time who were so fortunate as to witness their full glory.

For about two thousand five hundred years Sappho has held her place as not only the supreme poet of her sex, but the chief lyrist of all lyrists. Every one who reads acknowledges her fame, concedes her supremacy; but to all except poets and Hellenists her name is a vague and uncomprehended splendour, rising secure above a persistent mist of misconception. In spite of all that is in these days being written about Sappho, it is perhaps not out of place now to inquire, in a few words, into the substance of this supremacy which towers so unassailably secure from what appear to be such shadowy

foundations.

First, we have the witness of her contemporaries. Sappho was at the height of her career about six centuries before Christ, at a period when lyric poetry was peculiarly esteemed and cultivated at the centres of Greek life. Among the *Molic* peoples of the Isles, in particular, it had been carried to a high pitch of perfection, and its forms had become the subject of assiduous study. Its technique was exact, complex, extremely elaborate, minutely regulated; yet the essential fires of sincerity, spontaneity, imagination and passion were flaming with undiminished heat behind the fixed forms and restricted measures. The very metropolis of this lyric realm was Mitylene of Lesbos, where, amid the myrtle groves and temples, the sunlit silver of the fountains, the hyacinth gardens by a soft blue sea, Beauty and Love in their young warmth could fuse the most rigid forms to fluency. Here Sappho was the acknowledged queen of song—revered, studied, imitated, served, adored by a little court of attendants and disciples, loved and hymned by Alcaeus, and acclaimed by her fellow craftsmen throughout Greece as the wonder of her age. That all the tributes of her contemporaries show reverence not less for her personality than for her genius is sufficient answer to the calumnies with which the ribald jesters of that later period, the corrupt and shameless writers of Athenian comedy, strove to defile her fame. It is sufficient, also, to warrant our regarding the picturesque but scarcely dignified story of her vain pursuit of Phaon and her frenzied leap from the Cliff of Leucas as nothing more than a poetic myth, reminiscent, perhaps, of the myth of Aphrodite and Adonis—who is, indeed, called Phaon in some versions. The story is further discredited by the fact that we find no mention of it in Greek literature— even among those Attic comedians who would have clutched at it so eagerly and given it so gross a turn—till a date more than two hundred years after Sappho's death. It is a myth which has begotten some exquisite literature, both in prose and verse, from Ovid's famous epistle to Addison's gracious fantasy and some impassioned and imperishable dithyrambs of Mr. Swinburne; but one need not accept the story as a fact in order to appreciate the beauties which flowered out from its coloured unreality.

The applause of contemporaries, however, is not always justified by the verdict of after-times, and does not always secure an immortality

of renown. The fame of Sappho has a more stable basis. Her work was in the world's possession for not far short of a thousand years—a thousand years of changing tastes, searching criticism, and familiar use. It had to endure the wear and tear of quotation, the commonizing touch of the school and the market-place. And under this test its glory grew ever more and more conspicuous. Through those thousand years poets and critics vied with one another in proclaiming her verse the one unmatched exemplar of lyric art. Such testimony, even though not a single fragment remained to us from which to judge her poetry for ourselves, might well convince us that the supremacy acknowledged by those who knew all the triumphs of the genius of old Greece was beyond the assault of any modern rival. We might safely accept the sustained judgment of a thousand years of Greece.

Fortunately for us, however, two small but incomparable odes and a few scintillating fragments have survived, quoted and handed down in the eulogies of critics and expositors. In these the wisest minds, the greatest poets, and the most inspired teachers of modern days have found justification for the unanimous verdict of antiquity. The tributes of Addison, Tennyson, and others, the throbbing paraphrases and ecstatic interpretations of Swinburne, are too well known to call for special comment in this brief note; but the concise summing up of her genius by Mr. Watts-Dunton in his remarkable essay on poetry is so convincing and illuminating that it seems to demand quotation here: "Never before these songs were sung, and never since did the human soul, in the grip of a fiery passion, utter a cry like hers; and, from the executive point of view, in directness, in lucidity, in that high, imperious verbal economy which only nature can teach the artist, she has no equal, and none worthy to take the place of second."

The poems of Sappho so mysteriously lost to us seem to have consisted of at least nine books of odes, together with *epithalamia*, epigrams, elegies, and monodies. Of the several theories which have been advanced to account for their disappearance, the most plausible seems to be that which represents them as having been burned at Byzantium in the year 380 Anno Domini, by command of Gregory Nazianzen, in order that his own poems might be studied in their stead and the morals of the people thereby improved. Of the efficacy of this act no means of judging has come down to us.

In recent years there has arisen a great body of literature upon the subject of Sappho, most of it the abstruse work of scholars writing for scholars. But the gist of it all, together with the minutest surviving fragment of her verse, has been made available to the general reader in English by Mr. Henry T. Wharton, in whose altogether admirable little volume we find all that is known and the most apposite of all that has been said up to the present day about

"Love's priestess, mad with pain and joy of song, Song's priestess, mad with joy and pain of love."

Perhaps the most perilous and the most alluring venture in the whole field of poetry is that which Mr. Carman has undertaken in attempting to give us in English verse those lost poems of Sappho of which fragments have survived. The task is obviously not one of translation or of paraphrasing, but of imaginative and, at the same time, interpretive construction. It is as if a sculptor of to-day were to set himself, with reverence, and trained craftsmanship, and studious familiarity with the spirit, technique, and atmosphere of his subject, to restore some statues of Polyclitus or Praxiteles of which he had but a broken arm, a foot, a knee, a finger upon which to build. Mr. Carman's method, apparently, has been to imagine each lost lyric as discovered, and then to translate it; for the indefinable flavour of the translation is maintained throughout, though accompanied by the fluidity and freedom of purely original work.

C.G.D. ROBERTS.

Now to please my little friend I must make these notes of
spring, With the soft south-west wind in them And the marsh notes
of the frogs.

I must take a gold-bound pipe, And outmatch the bubbling
call From the beechwoods in the sunlight, From the meadows in
the rain.

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Epilogue

SAPPHO

I

Cyprus, Paphos, or Panormus May detain thee with their splendour Of oblations on thine altars, O imperial Aphrodite.

Yet do thou regard, with pity 5 For a nameless child of
passion, This small unfrequented valley By the sea, O sea-born
mother.

II

What shall we do, Cytherea? Lovely Adonis is dying. Ah, but we
mourn him!

Will he return when the Autumn Purples the earth, and the sunlight
5 Sleeps in the vineyard?

Will he return when the Winter Huddles the sheep, and
Orion Goes to his hunting?

Ah, but thy beauty, Adonis, 10 With the soft spring and the south
wind, Love and desire!

III

Power and beauty and knowledge,— Pan, Aphrodite, or Hermes,—
Whom shall we life-loving mortals Serve and be happy?

Lo now, your garlanded altars, 5 Are they not goodly with
flowers? Have ye not honour and pleasure In lovely Lesbos?

Will ye not, therefore, a little Hearten, impel, and inspire 10 One
who adores, with a favour Threefold in wonder?

IV

O Pan of the evergreen forest, Protector of herds in the
meadows, Helper of men at their toiling,— Tillage and harvest and
herding,— How many times to frail mortals 5 Hast thou not
hearkened!

Now even I come before thee With oil and honey and wheat-
bread, Praying for strength and fulfilment Of human longing, with
purpose 10 Ever to keep thy great worship Pure and undarkened.

* * * * *

O Hermes, master of knowledge, Measure and number and
rhythm, Worker of wonders in metal, 15 Moulder of malleable
music, So often the giver of secret Learning to mortals!

Now even I, a fond woman, Frail and of small understanding,
20 Yet with unslakable yearning Greatly desiring wisdom, Come to
the threshold of reason And the bright portals.

* * * * *

And thou, sea-born Aphrodite, 25 In whose beneficent
keeping Earth, with her infinite beauty, Colour and fashion and
fragrance, Glows like a flower with fervour Where woods are
vernal! 30

Touch with thy lips and enkindle This moon-white delicate
body, Drench with the dew of enchantment This mortal one, that I
also Grow to the measure of beauty 35 Fleet yet eternal.

V

O Aphrodite, God-born and deathless, Break not my spirit With
bitter anguish: Thou wilful empress, 5 I pray thee, hither!

As once aforetime Well thou didst hearken To my voice far off,—
Listen, and leaving 10 Thy father's golden House in yoked
chariot,

Come, thy fleet sparrows Beating the mid-air Over the dark earth.
15 Suddenly near me, Smiling, immortal, Thy bright regard asked

What had befallen,— Why I had called thee,— 20 What my mad
heart then Most was desiring. "What fair thing wouldst thou Lure
now to love thee?

"Who wrongs thee, Sappho? 25 If now she flies thee, Soon shall
she follow;— Scorning thy gifts now, Soon be the giver;— And a
loth loved one 30

"Soon be the lover." So even now, too, Come and release
me From mordant love pain, And all my heart's will 35 Help me
accomplish!

VI

Peer of the gods he seems, Who in thy presence Sits and hears
close to him Thy silver speech-tones And lovely laughter. 5

Ah, but the heart flutters Under my bosom, When I behold
thee Even a moment; Utterance leaves me; 10

My tongue is useless; A subtle fire Runs through my body; My
eyes are sightless, And my ears ringing; 15

I flush with fever, And a strong trembling Lays hold upon
me; Paler than grass am I, Half dead for madness. 20

Yet must I, greatly Daring, adore thee, As the adventurous Sailor
makes seaward For the lost sky-line 25

And undiscovered Fabulous islands, Drawn by the lure of Beauty
and summer And the sea's secret. 30

VII

The Cyprian came to thy cradle, When thou wast little and
small, And said to the nurse who rocked thee "Fear not thou for the
child:

"She shall be kindly favoured, 5 And fair and fashioned well, As
befits the Lesbian maidens And those who are fated to love."

Hermes came to thy cradle, Resourceful, sagacious, serene,
10 And said, "The girl must have knowledge, To lend her freedom
and poise.

Naught will avail her beauty, If she have not wit beside. She shall
be Hermes' daughter, 15 Passing wise in her day."

Great Pan came to thy cradle, With calm of the deepest hills, And
smiled, "They have forgotten The veriest power of life. 20

"To kindle her shapely beauty, And illumine her mind withal, I give
to the little person The glowing and craving soul."

VIII

Aphrodite of the foam, Who hast given all good gifts, And made
Sappho at thy will Love so greatly and so much,

Ah, how comes it my frail heart 5 Is so fond of all things fair, I can
never choose between Gorgo and Andromeda?

IX

Nay, but always and forever Like the bending yellow grain, Or quick
water in a channel, Is the heart of man.

Comes the unseen breath in power 5 Like a great wind from the
sea, And we bow before his coming, Though we know not why.

X

Let there be garlands, Dica, Around thy lovely hair. And supple
sprays of blossom Twined by thy soft hands.

Whoso is crowned with flowers 5 Has favour with the gods, Who
have no kindly eyes For the ungarlanded.

XI

When the Cretan maidens Dancing up the full moon Round some
fair new altar, Trample the soft blossoms of fine grass,

There is mirth among them. 5 Aphrodite's children Ask her
benediction On their bridals in the summer night.

XII

In a dream I spoke with the Cyprus-born, And said to her, "Mother
of beauty, mother of joy, Why hast thou given to men

"This thing called love, like the ache of a wound 5 In beauty's,
side, To burn and throb and be quelled for an hour And never
wholly depart?"

And the daughter of Cyprus said to me, "Child of the earth,
10 Behold, all things are born and attain, But only as they desire,—
-

"The sun that is strong, the gods that are wise, The loving
heart, Deeds and knowledge and beauty and joy,— 15 But before
all else was desire."

XIII

Sleep thou in the bosom Of the tender comrade, While the living
water Whispers in the well-run, And the oleanders 5 Glimmer in
the moonlight.

Soon, ah, soon the shy birds Will be at their fluting, And the
morning planet Rise above the garden; 10 For there is a
measure Set to all things mortal.

XIV

Hesperus, bringing together All that the morning star scattered,—

Sheep to be folded in twilight, Children for mothers to fondle,—

Me too will bring to the dearest, 5 Tenderest breast in all Lesbos.

XV

In the grey olive-grove a small brown bird Had built her nest and
waited for the spring. But who could tell the happy thought that

came To lodge beneath my scarlet tunic's fold?

All day long now is the green earth renewed 5 With the bright sea-
wind and the yellow blossoms. From the cool shade I hear the silver
plash Of the blown fountain at the garden's end.

XVI

In the apple boughs the coolness Murmurs, and the grey leaves
flicker Where sleep wanders.

In this garden all the hot noon I await thy fluttering footfall
5 Through the twilight.

XVII

Pale rose leaves have fallen In the fountain water; And soft reedy
flute-notes Pierce the sultry quiet.

But I wait and listen, 5 Till the trodden gravel Tells me, all
impatience, It is Phaon's footstep.

XVIII

The courtyard of her house is wide And cool and still when day
departs. Only the rustle of leaves is there And running water.

And then her mouth, more delicate 5 Than the frail wood-
anemone, Brushes my cheek, and deeper grow The purple
shadows.

XIX

There is a medlar-tree Growing in front of my lover's house, And
there all day The wind makes a pleasant sound.

And when the evening comes, 5 We sit there together in the
dusk, And watch the stars Appear in the quiet blue.

XX

I behold Arcturus going westward Down the crowded slope of night-
dark azure, While the Scorpion with red Antares Trails along the
sea-line to the southward.

From the ilex grove there comes soft laughter,— 5 My companions
at their glad love-making,— While that curly-headed boy from
Naxos With his jade flute marks the purple quiet.

XXI

Softly the first step of twilight Falls on the darkening dial, One by
one kindle the lights In Mitylene.

Noises are hushed in the courtyard, 5 The busy day is
departing, Children are called from their games,— Herds from
their grazing.

And from the deep-shadowed angles Comes the soft murmur of
lovers, 10 Then through the quiet of dusk Bright sudden laughter.

From the hushed street, through the portal, Where soon my lover
will enter, Comes the pure strain of a flute 15 Tender with passion.

XXII

Once you lay upon my bosom, While the long blue-silver
moonlight Walked the plain, with that pure passion All your own.

Now the moon is gone, the Pleiads 5 Gone, the dead of night is
going; Slips the hour, and on my bed I lie alone.

XXIII

I loved thee, Atthis, in the long ago, When the great oleanders were
in flower In the broad herded meadows full of sun. And we would
often at the fall of dusk Wander together by the silver stream,
5 When the soft grass-heads were all wet with dew, And purple-

misted in the fading light. And joy I knew and sorrow at thy
voice, And the superb magnificence of love,— The loneliness that
saddens solitude, 10 And the sweet speech that makes it durable,—
The bitter longing and the keen desire, The sweet companionship
through quiet days In the slow ample beauty of the world, And the
unutterable glad release 15 Within the temple of the holy night. O
Atthis, how I loved thee long ago In that fair perished summer by the
sea!

XXIV

I shall be ever maiden, If thou be not my lover, And no man shall
possess me Henceforth and forever.

But thou alone shalt gather 5 This fragile flower of beauty,— To
crush and keep the fragrance Like a holy incense.

Thou only shalt remember This love of mine, or hallow 10 The
coming years with gladness, Calm and pride and passion.

XXV

It was summer when I found you In the meadow long ago,— And
the golden vetch was growing By the shore.

Did we falter when love took us 5 With a gust of great desire? Does
the barley bid the wind wait In his course?

XXVI

I recall thy white gown, cinctured With a linen belt, whereon Violets
were wrought, and scented With strange perfumes out of Egypt.

And I know thy foot was covered 5 With fair Lydian broidered
straps; And the petals from a rose-tree Fell within the marble basin.

XXVII

Lover, art thou of a surety Not a learner of the wood-god? Has the

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