

Five Poems in Prose

I

FIVE POEMS
IN PROSE

THERE was a queen of goodness and of beauty living in a lonely wood where, at morn and at evening, birds sang for very love of her. Around her the grasses grew that they might feel the softness of her feet, and above her the stars shone that they might mirror themselves in her hair. The trees bent down to kiss her, bringing rich gifts of fruit and foliage: the winds sang lowly and sweetly with desire and love of her. Sometimes she lay by a stream in dreams, and when her tresses fell over her head into the water, she wondered why she was so beautiful, and why those ripening lips and eyes and comely neck had been given to her. And she dreamed of knights who were far away, tall and straight as a pine.

At night she would linger under the stars and weave strange letters and messages out of the skies, longing and longing for love. And many a king came by in robes of gold, with gifts of rich garments and promises of thrones, and they lay in worship at her feet, begging that she might love them. Yet not one dared to say within himself that he loved her—she was so beautiful that none could think himself worthy. And she tired of the kings and fine courtiers, and went forth among the shepherds on the hills and the ploughmen in the fields, but they all bent low and kissed her feet because they dared not to love her.

Until one day, when love had come not, as the sun was setting, and all the great kings and princes of the world had worshipped at her feet, sorrow came upon her, great sorrow for the love that came not. And she lay down and died near the red berries of a holly-tree; and when maidens came by to smooth out her soft limbs, and close her lovely lips and eyes, they found written on her breast:

Beauty is a burden too great to be borne.

II

ONE day two lovers were lying together on a bed of green rushes by the river, and the man's lips were pressed to the lips of his beloved, and her hair fell down over his head. But a man came

by, who was the World, to punish them for their sin; and he told them to follow him to the place of justice. Then the young man replied: "Thee have I never followed, and thy justice is not my justice." And he said again to the World: "Are there any of thy children starving—go and feed them. Are there any of thy children thirsty—give them drink. Are they naked—clothe them. All these things thou hast not done, because thou hast thought the days too short and the labour too great, and thou art hard with selfishness. Yet when love comes by with food and drink and clothes more beautiful than all the food and clothes and drink the World can give, thou callest him sinful, and would'st drive him away. Cease not to get money for thy tills and rich viands to glut thine appetite. Continue ever-grasping, unhappy and greedy, but seek thou not Love that gives all things. That, you can never find, *for Love is Sacrifice.*

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III

A MAN came slowly along the road, a white stick in his hand, singing sorrowfully of something that was lying on his heart. He was old and withered, with weary eyes, and in his steps there was great heaviness, for he had ceased to care for one place more than another. And when he ceased to sing he spoke to himself:

"Aye, it is long since and I a strong farmer, and foolish was I not to have her, that girl with the dark hair and eyes that had the colour of sloes. White she was on the forehead, and whiter was that fine soft neck of hers that put me in mind of a swan. And long will I be wandering until I hear again a thrush as sweet as the girl I could have had for the asking. Black and bitter was the day I listened to my mother with her talk of cows and of horses and of money. Black and bitter was the day I listened to the priest and his talk of fine marriages. Black and bitter was the day there was no fire and no life in my heart and I let the girl that was sweeter than the new honey go away from me. Sorrow and black misery that have been with me since and the buying of cows and of heifers for the woman of the Kavanaghs that I married. Surely she has spread out the bed

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well for me and has cared me well: and there isn't a better woman at butter-making in the parish. But there's a cold wind always blowing through the thatch and a queer pain in my heart when I'm thinking of the girl that was comelier than Deirdre. And it is likely it will be there until I find my death."

IV

SHE was young, but pale and worn, her eyes were red with weeping, and when they put her in the dock she wept again. They read out of a long paper the story of her crime, of the little thing she had borne into the world and to whom she had given suck for a few months, and then put it to sleep beneath the waters, with a heavy stone round its neck. And they asked her why she had killed her child:

"It was on a cold night," she said, "when I came along the road that leads by the river, and the moon was out and shining on it, and I saw his father coming along the road—the man that had been dead for a twelvemonth. And he stopped me and spoke to me. 'It is a long day for him to be without food,' he said, 'and there is little pity for the tinker's child. There is little need of food in the grave.' That was all he said, and I went down to the river with my child."

And they put her in a prison lest her breasts might cease to yearn.

V

A LONG avenue of poplars reached from the doorway of the house to the gateway, where the porter's lodge still remained—but uninhabited. And in the evening boys and girls would gather there to dance. Especially in the summer evenings, or in those evenings of early autumn when the rich brown colour still remained; and often from the house two would go forth to whisper some tale of love to each other. It chanced so one evening when there was great peacefulness and quiet on the air, and two people walked along the avenue, past the great house, and down to the borders of the lake, silent and sorrowful. For their love had grown cold, and though each knew of it, neither dared to speak it. They spoke

only in cold, hesitant voices, of the trees, the evening lights, the waters of the lake, the comeliness and beauty of the dark pine woods; but of that love which had drawn them together they spoke not.

"You have dreamed foolishly," a voice had whispered to him, "she is less beautiful than a hundred beautiful maidens whom you know; she is not worthy of your life. Seek you among the maidens that but await you, and one will be found with white beautiful hands to spread out the bed for you, and with young, full lips to linger on yours. But do not rest with her who no longer awakens desire in you."

And a voice would whisper to her: "Leave him who is not brave and comely, for he loves you not, and seek one from among the men who are great and strong to wrestle and to hunt. Love is no longer with you; seek now for one more worthy of your love."

And both then thought of the years they had been together, of the dreams they had woven out of one heart, the house where they had first met, where they had first embraced, and the drooping branches of the oak-tree under which they had first kissed. Without speaking they rose to part. And he stood, while she wandered down among the trees, and he heard her voice come softly through the leaves, singing in mournful and plaintive strain:

Hear me, gentle maiden,
Whosoe'er you be;
When love cometh laden
With great ecstasy,

Sorrow he will bring thee,
Hear me, maiden fair;
Sorrow he will bring thee,
And a load of care.

Love with sorrow laden!
Such a fate was mine;
Hear me, gentle maiden,
Such fate be not thine!

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He listened to the voice that was full of sorrow, and went to follow it along the narrow path. As he came clear of the bushes, he saw her step on the little wooden foot-bridge under which the stream that joined two lakes flowed. He listened, waiting to hear her sing again; but there came instead the crash of the rotten bridge, and the sound of her fall into the waters; and he saw for a moment the gleam of her white gown ere she sank. He rushed into the waters that were eddying along, and when she rose again, half-conscious, he clasped her in his arms, and she clasped him so strongly he could not move. In vain he tried to swim; they were borne on by the current. Soon he ceased to struggle and, ere he became unconscious, laid his head on hers; and with his mouth on her mouth they sank to rest.

But the trees still sing of them, and those hear who have ears for the old music:

True love lives for ever,
Never shall it pass;
Death is but a lover,
Life is but a lass.

'Neath the waters singing,
She lies smooth and fair,
While her love is twining
Garlands for her hair.

MAURICE JOY