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Lochrine: a tragedy

Algernon Charles Swinburne

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LOCRINE – A TRAGEDY

by

Algernon Charles Swinburne

DEDICATION TO ALICE SWINBURNE.

I.

The love that comes and goes like wind or fire
Hath words and wings wherewith to speak and flee.
But love more deep than passion's deep desire,
Clear and inviolable as the unsounded sea,
What wings of words may serve to set it free,
To lift and lead it homeward? Time and death
Are less than love: or man's live spirit saith
False, when he deems his life is more than breath.

II.

No words may utter love; no sovereign song
Speak all it would for love's sake. Yet would I
Fain cast in moulded rhymes that do me wrong
Some little part of all my love: but why
Should weak and wingless words be fain to fly?
For us the years that live not are not dead:
Past days and present in our hearts are wed:
My song can say no more than love hath said.

III.

Love needs nor song nor speech to say what love
Would speak or sing, were speech and song not weak
To bear the sense-belated soul above
And bid the lips of silence breathe and speak.
Nor power nor will has love to find or seek

Words indiscoverable, ampler strains of song
Than ever hailed him fair or shewed him strong:
And less than these should do him worse than wrong.

IV.

We who remember not a day wherein
We have not loved each other, — who can see
No time, since time bade first our days begin,
Within the sweep of memory's wings, when we
Have known not what each other's love must be, -
We are well content to know it, and rest on this,
And call not words to witness that it is.
To love aloud is oft to love amiss.

V.

But if the gracious witness borne of words
Take not from speechless love the secret grace
That binds it round with silence, and engirds
Its heart with memories fair as heaven's own face,
Let love take courage for a little space
To speak and be rebuked not of the soul,
Whose utterance, ere the unwitting speech be whole,
Rebukes itself, and craves again control.

VI.

A ninefold garland wrought of song-flowers nine
Wound each with each in chance-inwoven accord
Here at your feet I lay as on a shrine
Whereof the holiest love that lives is lord.
With faint strange hues their leaves are freaked and scored:
The fable-flowering land wherein they grew
Hath dreams for stars, and grey romance for dew:
Perchance no flower thence plucked may flower anew.

VII.

No part have these wan legends in the sun
Whose glory lightens Greece and gleams on Rome.
Their elders live: but these—their day is done,
Their records written of the wind in foam
Fly down the wind, and darkness takes them home.
What Homer saw, what Virgil dreamed, was truth,
And dies not, being divine: but whence, in sooth,
Might shades that never lived win deathless youth?

VIII.

The fields of fable, by the feet of faith
Untrodden, bloom not where such deep mist drives.
Dead fancy's ghost, not living fancy's wraith,
Is now the storied sorrow that survives
Faith in the record of these lifeless lives.
Yet Milton's sacred feet have lingered there,
His lips have made august the fabulous air,
His hands have touched and left the wild weeds fair.

IX.

So, in some void and thought-untrammelled hour,
Let these find grace, my sister, in your sight,
Whose glance but cast on casual things hath power
To do the sun's work, bidding all be bright
With comfort given of love: for love is light.
Were all the world of song made mine to give,
The best were yours of all its flowers that live:
Though least of all be this my gift, forgive.

July 1887.

PERSONS REPRESENTED.

LOCRINE, King of Britain.

CAMBER, King of Wales, brother to LOCRINE.

MADAN, son to LOCRINE and GUENDOLEN.

DEBON, Lord Chamberlain.

GUENDOLEN, Queen of Britain, cousin and wife to LOCRINE.

ESTRILD, a German princess, widow of the Scythian king HUMBER.

SABRINA, daughter to LOCRINE and ESTRILD.

Scene, BRITAIN.

ACT I.

SCENE I.—Troynovant. A Room in the Palace.

Enter GUENDOLEN and MADAN.

GUENDOLEN.

Child, hast thou looked upon thy grandsire dead?

MADAN.

Ay.

GUENDOLEN.

Then thou sawest our Britain's heart and head
Death-stricken. Seemed not there my sire to thee
More great than thine, or all men living? We
Stand shadows of the fathers we survive:
Earth bears no more nor sees such births alive.

MADAN.

Why, he was great of thews—and wise, thou say'st:
Yet seems my sire to me the fairer-faced -
The kinglier and the kindlier.

GUENDOLEN.

Yea, his eyes
Are liker seas that feel the summering skies

In concord of sweet colour – and his brow
Shines gentler than my father's ever: thou,
So seeing, dost well to hold thy sire so dear.

MADAN.

I said not that his love sat yet so near
My heart as thine doth: rather am I thine,
Thou knowest, than his.

GUENDOLEN.

Nay – rather seems Locrine
Thy sire than I thy mother.

MADAN.

Wherefore?

GUENDOLEN.

Boy,
Because of all our sires who fought for Troy
Most like thy father and my lord Locrine,
I think, was Paris.

MADAN.

How may man divine
Thy meaning? Blunt am I, thou knowest, of wit;
And scarce yet man – men tell me.

GUENDOLEN.

Ask not it.
I meant not thou shouldst understand – I spake
As one that sighs, to ease her heart of ache,
And would not clothe in words her cause for sighs -

Her naked cause of sorrow.

MADAN.

Wert thou wise,
Mother, thy tongue had chosen of two things one -
Silence, or speech.

GUENDOLEN.

Speech had I chosen, my son,
I had wronged thee – yea, perchance I have wronged thine ears
Too far, to say so much.

MADAN.

Nay, these are tears
That gather toward thine eyelids now. Thou hast broken
Silence – if now thy speech die down unspoken,
Thou dost me wrong indeed – but more than mine
The wrong thou dost thyself is.

GUENDOLEN.

And Locrine -
Were not thy sire wronged likewise of me?

MADAN.

Yea.

GUENDOLEN.

Yet – I may choose yet – nothing will I say
More.

MADAN.

Choose, and have thy choice; it galls not me.

GUENDOLEN.

Son, son! thy speech is bitterer than the sea.

MADAN.

Yet, were the gulfs of hell not bitterer, thine
Might match thy son's, who hast called my sire – Lochrine -
Thy lord, and lord of all this land – the king
Whose name is bright and sweet as earth in spring,
Whose love is mixed with Britain's very life
As heaven with earth at sunrise – thou, his wife,
Hast called him – and the poison of the word
Set not thy tongue on fire – I lived and heard -
Coward.

GUENDOLEN.

Thou liest.

MADAN.

If then thy speech rang true,
Why, now it rings not false.

GUENDOLEN.

Thou art treacherous too -
His heart, thy father's very heart is thine -
O, well beseems it, meet it is, Lochrine,
That liar and traitor and changeling he should be
Who, though I bare him, was begot by thee.

MADAN.

How have I lied, mother? Was this the lie,
That thou didst call my father coward, and I

Heard?

GUENDOLEN.

Nay – I did but liken him with one
Not all unlike him; thou, my child, his son,
Art more unlike thy father.

MADAN.

Was not then,
Of all our fathers, all recorded men,
The man whose name, thou sayest, is like his name -
Paris – a sign in all men's mouths of shame?

GUENDOLEN.

Nay, save when heaven would cross him in the fight,
He bare him, say the minstrels, as a knight -
Yea, like thy father.

MADAN.

Shame then were it none
Though men should liken me to him?

GUENDOLEN.

My son,
I had rather see thee – see thy brave bright head,
Strong limbs, clear eyes – drop here before me dead.

MADAN.

If he were true man, wherefore?

GUENDOLEN.

False was he;
No coward indeed, but faithless, trothless – we
Hold therefore, as thou sayest, his princely name
Unprincely – dead in honour – quick in shame.

MADAN.

And his to mine thou likenest?

GUENDOLEN.

Thine? to thine?
God rather strike thy life as dark as mine
Than tarnish thus thine honour! For to me
Shameful it seems – I know not if it be -
For men to lie, and smile, and swear, and lie,
And bear the gods of heaven false witness. I
Can hold not this but shameful.

MADAN.

Thou dost well.
I had liefer cast my soul alive to hell
Than play a false man false. But were he true
And I the traitor – then what heaven should do
I wot not, but myself, being once awake
Out of that treasonous trance, were fain to slake
With all my blood the fire of shame wherein
My soul should burn me living in my sin.

GUENDOLEN.

Thy soul? Yea, there – how knowest thou, boy, so well? -
The fire is lit that feeds the fires of hell.
Mine is aflame this long time now – but thine -
O, how shall God forgive thee this, Lochrine,
That thou, for shame of these thy treasons done,

Hast rent the soul in sunder of thy son?

MADAN.

My heart is whole yet, though thy speech be fire
Whose flame lays hold upon it. Hath my sire
Wronged thee?

GUENDOLEN.

Nay, child, I lied—I did but rave -
I jested—was my face, then, sad and grave,
When most I jested with thee? Child, my brain
Is wearied, and my heart worn down with pain:
I thought awhile, for very sorrow's sake,
To play with sorrow—try thy spirit, and take
Comfort—God knows I know not what I said,
My father, whom I loved, being newly dead.

MADAN.

I pray thee that thou jest with me no more
Thus.

GUENDOLEN.

Dost thou now believe me?

MADAN.

No.

GUENDOLEN.

I bore
A brave man when I bore thee.

MADAN.

I desire
No more of laud or leasing. Hath my sire
Wronged thee?

GUENDOLEN.

Never. But wilt thou trust me now?

MADAN.

As trustful am I, mother of mine, as thou.

Enter LOCRINE.

LOCRINE.

The gods be good to thee! How farest thou?

GUENDOLEN.

Well.

Heaven hath no power to hurt me more: and hell
No fire to fear. The world I dwelt in died
With my dead father. King, thy world is wide
Wherein thy soul rejoicingly puts trust:
But mine is strait, and built by death of dust.

LOCRINE.

Thy sire, mine uncle, stood the sole man, then,
That held thy life up happy? Guendolen,
Hast thou nor child nor husband – or are we
Worth no remembrance more at all of thee?

GUENDOLEN.

Thy speech is sweet; thine eyes are flowers that shine:
If ever siren bare a son, Lochrine,
To reign in some green island and bear sway

On shores more shining than the front of day
And cliffs whose brightness dulls the morning's brow,
That son of sorceries and of seas art thou.

LOCRINE.

Nay, now thy tongue it is that plays on men;
And yet no siren's honey, Guendolen,
Is this fair speech, though soft as breathes the south,
Which thus I kiss to silence on thy mouth.

GUENDOLEN.

Thy soul is softer than this boy's of thine:
His heart is all toward battle. Was it mine
That put such fire in his? for none that heard
Thy flatteries – nay, I take not back the word -
A flattering lover lives my loving lord -
Could guess thine hand so great with spear or sword.

LOCRINE.

What have I done for thee to mock with praise
And make the boy's eyes widen? All my days
Are worth not all a week, if war be all,
Of his that loved no bloodless festival -
Thy sire, and sire of slaughters: this was one
Who craved no more of comfort from the sun
But light to lighten him toward battle: I
Love no such life as bids men kill or die.

GUENDOLEN.

Wert thou not woman more in word than act,
Then unrevenged thy brother Albanact
Had given his blood to guard his realm and thine:
But he that slew him found thy stroke, Lochrine,

Strong as thy speech is gentle.

LOCRINE.

God assoil
The dead our friends and foes!

GUENDOLEN.

A goodly spoil
Was that thine hand made then by Humber's banks
Of all who swelled the Scythian's riotous ranks
With storm of inland surf and surge of steel:
None there were left, if tongues ring true, to feel
The yoke of days that breathe submissive breath
More bitter than the bitterest edge of death.

LOCRINE.

None.

GUENDOLEN.

This was then a day of blood. I heard,
But know not whence I caught the wandering word,
Strange women were there of that outland crew,
Whom ruthlessly thy soldiers ravening slew.

LOCRINE.

Nay, Scythians then had we been, worse than they.

GUENDOLEN.

These that were taken, then, thou didst not slay?

LOCRINE.

I did not say we spared them.