

Lament XIX



JAN KOCHANOWSKI

LAMENTS

Lament XIX

THE DREAM

TEUM. DOROTHEA PRALL

Long through the night hours sorrow was my guest
And would not let my fainting body rest,
Till just ere dawn from out its slow dominions
Flew sleep to wrap me in its dear dusk pinions.
And then it was my mother did appear
Before mine eyes in vision doubly dear;
For in her arms she held my darling one,
My Ursula, just as she used to run
To me at dawn to say her morning prayer,
In her white nightgown, with her curling hair
Framing her rosy face, her eyes about
To laugh, like flowers only halfway out.

«Art thou still sorrowing, my son?» Thus spoke
My mother. Sighing bitterly, I woke,
Or seemed to wake, and heard her say once more:

«It is thy weeping brings me to this shore:
Thy lamentations, long uncomforted,
Have reached the hidden chambers of the dead,
Till I have come to grant thee some small grace
And let thee gaze upon thy daughter's face,
That it may calm thy heart in some degree
And check the grief that imperceptibly
Doth gnaw away thy health and leave thee sick,
Like fire that turns to ashes a dry wick.
Dost thou believe the dead have perished quite,
Their sun gone down in an eternal night?
Ah no, we have a being far more splendid
Now that our bodies' coarser claims are ended.
Though dust returns to dust, the spirit, given
A life eternal, must go back to heaven,
And little Ursula hath not gone out
Forever like a torch. Nay, cease thy doubt,
For I have brought her hither in the guise
She used to wear before thy mortal eyes,
Though mid the deathless angels, brighter far
She shineth as the lovely morning star;
And still she offers up her prayers for you
As here on earth, when yet no words she knew.
If herefrom Springs thy sorrow, that her years
Were broken off before all that endears
A life on earth to mortals she might prove —

Yet think how empty the delights that move
 The minds of men, delights that must give place
 At last to sorrow, as in thine own case.
 Did then thy little girl such joy confer
 That all the comfort thou didst find in her
 Could parallel thine anguish of today?
 Thou canst not answer otherwise than nay.
 Then fret not that so early death has come
 To what was dearest thee in Christendom.
 She did not leave a land of much delight,
 But one of toil and grief and evil blight
 So plenteous, that all which men can hold
 Of their so transitory blessings, gold,
 Must lose its value through this base alloy,
 This knowledge of the grief that follows joy.

«Why do we weep, great God? That with her dower
 She bought herself no lord, that she might cower
 Before upbraidings from her husband's kin?
 That she knew not the pangs that usher in
 The newborn child? And that she could not know,
 Like her poor mother, if more racking woe
 It were to bear or bury them? Ah, meet
 Are such delights to make the world more sweet!
 But heaven hath purer, surer happiness,
 Free from all intermingling of distress.
 Care rules not here and here we know not toil,
 Misfortune and disaster do not spoil.
 Here sickness can not enter nor old age,
 And death, tear-nourished, hath no pasturage.
 We live a life of endless joy that brings
 Good thoughts; we know the causes of all things.
 The sun shines on forever here, its light
 Unconquered by impenetrable night;
 And the Creator in his majesty
 Invisible to mortals, we may see.
 Then turn thy meditations hither, towards
 This changeless gladness and these rich rewards.
 Thou know'st the world, what love of it can do:
 Found thou thine efforts on a base more true.
 Thy little girl hath chosen well her part,
 Thou may'st believe, as one about to start
 For the first time upon the stormy sea,
 Beholding there great flux and jeopardy,
 Returneth to the shore; while those that raise
 Their sails, the wind or some blind crag betrays,
 And this one dies from hunger, that from cold:
 Scarce one escapes the perils manifold.
 So she, who, though her years should have surpassed
 That ancient Sybil, must have died at last,
 Preferred that ending to anticipate
 Before she knew the ills of man's estate.
 For some are left without their parents' care,
 To know how sore an orphan's lot to bear;
 One girl must marry headlong, and then rue
 Her dower given up to God knows who;
 Some maids are seized by their own countrymen,
 Others, made captive by the Tatar clan

And held thus in a pagan, shameful thrall,
Must drink their tears till death comes ending all.

«But this thy little child need fear no more,
Who, taken early up to heaven's door,
Could walk all glad and shining-pure within,
Her soul still innocent of earthly sin.
Doubt not, my son, that all is well with her,
And let not sorrow be thy conqueror.
Reason and self-command are precious still
And yielding all to blighted hope is ill.
Be in this matter thine own lord, although
Thy longed-for happiness thou must forego.
For man is born exposed to circumstance,
To be the target of all evil chance,
And if we like it or we like it not
We still can not escape our destined lot.
Nor hath misfortune singled thee, my son;
It lays its burdens upon every one.
Thy little child was mortal as thou art,
She ran her given course and did depart;
And if that course was brief, yet who can say
That she would have been happier to stay?
The ways of God are past our finding out,
Yet what He holds as good shall we misdoubt?
And when the spirit leaves us, it is vain
To weep so long; it will not come again.
And herein man is hardly just to fate,
To bear in mind what is unfortunate
In life and to forget all that transpires
In full accordance with his own desires.
And such is Fortune's power, dearest son,
That we should not lament when she hath done
A bitter turn, but thank her in that she
Hath held her hand from greater injury.
So, yielding to the common order, bar
Thy heart to more disasters than now are;
Gaze at the happiness thou dost retain:
What is not loss, that must be rated gain.

«And finally, what profits the expense
Of thy long labor and the years gone hence,
While thou didst spend thyself upon thy books
And knewest scarce how lightsome pleasure looks?
Now from thy grafting pluck the fruit and save
Something of value from frail nature's grave.
To other men in sorrow thou hast shown
The comfort left them: hast none for thine own?
Now, master, heal thyself: time is the cure
For all; but he whose wisdom doth abjure
The common ways, he should anticipate
The healing for which other men must wait.
What is time's cunning? That it drives away
Our former haps with newer ones, more gay,
Or like the old. So man by taking thought
Perceives them ere their accidents are wrought,
And by such thinking banishes the past
And views the future, quiet and steadfast.
Then bear man's portion like a man, my son,

The Lord of grief and comfort is but one.»
Then I awoke, and know not if to deem
This truth itself, or but a passing dream.

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