

LAON AND CYTHNA

BY PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

The two excerpts I have chosen are both narrated by the shade or spirit of Laon, who is martyred along with his younger sister in the final canto (XII).

From Canto II:

XXI

I had a little sister, whose fair eyes
Were lodestars of delight, which drew me home
When I might wander forth; nor did I prize
Aught human thing beneath Heaven's mighty dome
Beyond this child: so when sad hours were come,
And baffled hope like ice still clung to me,
Since kin were cold, and friends had now become
Heartless and false, I turned from all, to be,
Cythna, the only source of tears and smiles to thee.

XXII

What wert thou then? A child most infantine,
Yet wandering far beyond that innocent age
In all but its sweet looks and mien divine;
Even then, methought, with the world's tyrant rage
A patient warfare thy young heart did wage,
When those soft eyes of scarcely conscious thought,
Some tale, or thine own fancies would engage
To overflow with tears, or converse fraught
With passion, o'er their depths its fleeing light had
wrought.

XXIII

She moved upon this earth a shape of brightness,
A power, that from its objects scarcely drew
One impulse of her being – in her lightness
Most like some radiant cloud of morning dew,
Which wanders through the waste air's pathless blue,
To nourish some far desert: she did seem
Beside me, gathering beauty as she grew,
Like the bright shade of some immortal dream

Which walks, when tempests sleep, the wave of life's dark
stream.

XXIV

As mine own shadow was this child to me,
A second self, far dearer and more fair;
Which clothed in undissolving radiancy,
All those steep paths which languor and despair
Of human things, had made so dark and bare,
But which I trod alone – nor, till bereft
Of friends, and overcome by lonely care,
Knew I what solace for that loss was left,
Thought by a bitter wound my trusting heart was cleft.

XXV

Once she was dear, now she was all I had
To love in human life – this sister sweet,
This child of twelve years old – so she was made
My sole associate, and her willing feet
Wandered with mine where earth and ocean meet,
Beyond the aerial mountains whose vast cells

The unreposing billows ever beat,
Through forests wide and old, and lawny dells,
Where boughs of incense droop over the emerald wells.

XXVI

And warm and light I felt her clasping hand
When twined in mine: she followed where I went,
Through the lone paths of our immortal land.
It had no waste, but some memorial lent
Which string me to my toil – some monument
Vital with mind: then, Cythna by my side,
Until the bright and beaming day were spent,
Would rest, with looks entreating to abide,
Too earnest and too sweet ever to be denied.

XXVII

And soon I could not have refused her – thus
Forever, day and night, we two were ne'er
Parted, but when brief sleep divided us:
And when the pauses of the lulling air
Of noon beside the sea, had made a lair

For her soothed senses, in my arms she slept,
And I kept watch over her slumbers there,
While, as the shifting visions o'er her swept,
Amid her innocent rest by turns she smiled and wept.

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XXXII

In me, communion with this purest being
Kindled intenser zeal, and made me wise
In knowledge, which in hers mine own mind seeing,
Left in the human world few mysteries:
How without fear of evil or disguise
Was Cythna! – what a spirit strong and mild,
Which death, or pain or peril could despise,
Yet melt in tenderness! what genius wild
Yet mighty, was enclosed within one simple child!

From Canto VI:

XXXIII

The meteor showed the leaves on which we sate,
And Cythna's glowing arms, and the thick ties
Of her soft hair, which bent with gathered weight
My neck near hers, her dark and deepening eyes,
Which, as twin phantoms of one star that lies
O'er a dim well, move, though the star reposes,
Swam in our mute and liquid ecstasies,
Her marble brow, and eager lips, like roses,
With their own fragrance pale, which spring but half
uncloses.

XXXIV

The meteor to its far morass returned:
The beating of our veins one interval
Made still; and then I felt the blood that burned
Within her frame, mingled with mine, and fall
Around my heart like fire; and over all
A mist was spread, the sickness of a deep

And speechless swoon of joy, as might befall
Two disunited spirits when they leap
In union from this earth's obscure and fading sleep.

XXXV

Was it one moment that confounded thus
All thought, all sense, all feeling, into one
Unutterable power, which shielded us
Even from our own cold looks, when we had gone
Into a wide and wild oblivion
Of tumult and of tenderness? or now
Had ages, such as make the moon and sun,
The seasons, and mankind their changes know,
Left fear and time unfelt by us alone below?

XXXVI

I know not. What are kisses whose fire clasps
The failing heart in languishment, or limb
Twined within limb? or the quick dying gasps
Of the life meeting, when the faint eyes swim
Through tears of a wide mist boundless and dim,

In one caress? What is the strong control
Which leads the heart that dizzy steep to climb,
Where far over the world those vapours roll,
Which blend two restless frames in one reposing soul?

...

XXXVIII

Cythna's sweet lips seemed lurid in the moon,
Her fairest limbs with the night wind were chill,
And her dark tresses were all loosely strewn
O'er her pale bosom: – all within was still,
And the sweet peace of joy did almost fill
The depth of her unfathomable look; –
And we sate calmly, though that rocky hill,
The waves contending in its caverns strook,
For they foreknew the storm, and the grey ruin shook.

XXXIX

There we unheeding sate, in the communion
Of interchanged vows, which, with a rite

Of faith most sweet and sacred, stamped our union. –
Few were the living hearts which could unite
Like ours, or celebrate a bridal night
With such close sympathies, for to each other
Had high and solemn hopes, the gentle might
Of earliest love, and all the thoughts which smother
Cold Evil's power, now linked to a sister and a brother.

XL

And such is Nature's modesty, that those
Who grow together cannot choose but love,
If faith or custom do not interpose,
Or common slavery mar what else might move
All gentlest thoughts; as in the sacred grove
Which shades the springs of Ethiopian Nile,
That living tree, which, if the arrowy dove
Strike with her shadow, shrinks in fear a while,
But its own kindred leaves clasps while the sunbeams smile;

XLI

And clings to them, when darkness may dissever

The close caresses of all duller plants
Which bloom on the wide earth – thus we forever
Were linked, for love had nursed us in the haunts
Where knowledge, from its secret source enchants
Young hearts with fresh music of its springing,
Ere yet its gathered flood feeds human wants,
As the great Nile feeds Egypt; every flinging
Light on the woven boughs which o'er its waves are
swinging.