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The Pilgrims of the Rhine

Lytton, Edward Bulwer Lytton

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Presatory poem: to the ideal

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Prefatory Poem :

TO THE IDEAL.

I.

LIKE the sweet Naiad of the Grecian's dreams,
A Spirit born of Song—unseen, all-seeing—
Lives deep within our dark Life's wandering streams—
Nymph of our soul, and brightener of our being :
She makes the common waters musical —
Binds the rude nightwinds in a silver thrall —
Bids Hybla's thyme, and Tempe's violet, dwell
Round the green marge of her moon-haunted cell :
She—The Ideal, in the Wells of Truth—
Moves, gladdening all things with a Godhead's youth !

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II.

Angel, that o'er this dark and blinded earth
 Walk'st, like a dream, dim-shewing worlds above ;—
 Arch-Vanquisher of Time and Care, thy birth
 Is of the morning !—And the Incarnate Love,
 Yea, the same Power that erst, in Galilee,
 When the bark travailed on the adverse sea,
 O'er the grim dark the meekening silence cast,
 And bade the Deep's broad bosom hush the blast—
 Still in thy presence moves with looks of light,
 Smiles in the storm, and comforts through the night.

III.

There is a world beyond the visual scope,
 Where Memory, brightening, wears the hues of Hope ;
 A life as *this* to youth's first gaze may seem
 Vague, but intense — a passion and a dream.
 There, when the earth glooms dark, we glide away,
 Soft breathes the air, and golden glows the day ;—
 Flowers bloom and forests wave,—the wild-bird calls,—
 The noon laughs loud along the waterfalls :

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Man is not there ; yet ever mayst thou mark
The River-Maid her amber tresses sleeking ;
Or, when the day is done, and through the dark
That bathes the sky, the twilight stars are breaking,
Oft mayst thou view, afar and faintly seen,
The glancing fairies on the silvered green :
Or there, what time the roseate Urns of Dawn
Scatter fresh dews, and the first sky-lark weaves
Wild meshes of glad song, the bearded Faun
Comes piping cheerly through the odorous leaves,
Dim shapes sink, mist-like, down the crystal fountain,
And fades the Oread through the green caves of the mountain.

These are thy work and world, bright Habitant
Of our own hearts ; all beings of all creeds,
So they be fair or wondrous, all are thine,
Born of thee, but undying ! and each want
Of our soul's deep desire—the eternal seeds
Planted by Heaven within the ungenial earth—
Hopes all august, and wishes all divine—
Tears, not of sadness—smiles, but not of mirth—
Seeds—wert thou *not*—all buried, till our tomb,
Spring at thy breath, and at thy bidding bloom !

IV.

We love, and loving, aye ourselves deceive,
 For Custom chills what Fate may not bereave,
 And still, as Passion sobers in its vow,
 The Angel darkens from the mortal's brow.

In vain we yearn, we pine, on earth to win
 The Being of the Heart, our boyhood's Dream ;
 Thou, the Egeria of the world within,
 The creature of the West-wind and the Beam—
 The embodied music of most sweet emotion ;
 Thou *seem'st*, but *art* not in each human love ;
 Thou shinest starlike o'er this nether ocean,
 And, starlike, hold'st thy unreach'd home above.
 Still from thy light we turn the gaze away,
 To feel the more the cumber of our clay,
 For dimly guessed and vague desires to sigh,
 And ask from earth the *Eureka* of the sky !

Thus round thy joys the soft regret adheres,
 As tones that charm, but, charming, melt to tears ;
 Yet if the pain, the recompense is thine,
 And To Imagine conquers To Repine !

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* — One day
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And still, as Persia's tender minstrel told,
 The Rose's breath inspires the common mould*,
 If not for us the eternal flow'ret springs,
 Still round our dust the ærial odour clings;
 By the loved scent the exalted earth is known,
 And grows of worth from fragrance not its own.
 Thus gave thy power the imperishable name
 To souls whose veriest frailties cradled Fame;
 Struck the bright fount of hallowing tears from woe,
 And lit with prophet fires the wild Rousseau.

And HE, the erring great, and dimly wise,
 O'er whom stern Judgment, while it censures, sighs;
 "The young, the beautiful"—whose music cast
 A haunting echo where his shadow past,
 And with a deep, yet half disdainful, art,
 Chained to his wandering home the world's mute heart;
 Was he not thine—all thine?—his failings, powers,
 Faults, fame, and all that make his memory ours?

* "One day I was delighted by the odour of a piece of earth. Art thou musk? said I. Art thou amber? It replied, I am but common earth; but the rose grew from me; its beneficent virtue penetrated my nature. Were it not for the rose I should be but common earth."—*Saadi*.

Not in this world his life : he breathed an air,
 Its light thy hope — its vapour thy despair.
 If earthlier passion, snake-like, crept within —
 If stung suspicion nursed ungenial sin —
 If his soul shrunk within one sickly dream
 Till self became his idol as his theme ;
 Yet while we blame, his mournful Image chides,
 As if we wronged the memory of a friend.
 As moonlight sways the trouble of the tides,
 Wild Minstrel, didst *thou* sway the soul, and blend
 Thyself with us as in a common cause ;
 And when thy wayward heart its rest had won,
 The eternal course of Nature seemed to pause :
 We stood stunn'd — shock'd : thy very life had grown
 A part — a power — a being of our own !

Oh who shall tell what comforts yet were thine,
 In the lone darkness of the unwatched mind ;
 What time thou stood'st beside the rushing Rhine,
 Or heard, through Nero's towers, the moaning wind ;
 Or watch'd the white moon, in thy younger day,
 O'er shrunk Ilyssus shed the dreaming ray ?
 Victim and Votary of the Ideal, none
 Shall sound thy joys, or measure thy despair !—

The harp is shattered, and the spirit gone,
And half of Heaven seems vanish'd from the air !

Yet still the murmurs of the Adrian sea
Shall blend with Tasso's song wild thoughts of thee ;
Thy shade shall gloom through old Ravenna's lair
" Till ev'n the forest leaves seem stirred with prayer ;"
And when the Future, envious of the Past,
Shall break the Argive's iron sleep at last,
Thy reverent name the Albanian youth shall keep ;—
Thy shape shall haunt the Ionian maiden's sleep ;—
Thy song shall linger by the Oread's hill,
By Love's own Isle, and Music's ancient rill ;—
And one grey halo, all unknown before,
Crest the drear wastes by Missolonghi's shore !

v.

But not to them, the Lyre-God's sons, is given
Alone the light of the Ideal Heaven :
Alike thy power o'er souls more arm'd and stern,
And Earth's great Truths drink freshness from thy urn !
In the dim cell where lofty Sidney told
The hours before the Morn on which his soul

Trod, with unfaltering steps and firm, the old
 But unworn bridge to our eternal goal,
 Arching the Drear Invisible,—the vast
 Abyss that wombs THE SECRET OF THE PAST :—
 In that lone cell what thoughts, what white-robed dreams,
 Kept watch, like vestals o'er the holy fire,
 Round the bright altar of his high desire !
 Thou, his Unfound IDEAL ! thou, whose beams
 Broke through earth's bars upon his upward eye,
 Thou, his beloved — his cherished — his adored —
 His creature — yet creator — LIBERTY !
 Thou that didst twine around the Athenian's sword,
 The wreaths made sacred when Hipparchus fell,
 Wert THOU not with him in that glorious cell ?
 Didst thou not fill the darkness with bright things,
 And mighty prophecies of times to be ?
 Thy love had wrought those fetters, but the wings,
 No chains could curb, were Eagle-plumed by thee !
 Thou gav'st the dungeon,—but the key to Heaven :
 Thou gav'st the death-blow,—but the deathless fame :
 The thunder roll'd around, but through the riven
 And stormy clouds, the Future's Angel came,
 And in the chamber where the doom'd man sate,
 Foretold the brightening march of Human Fate !

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Yes! it is thou,—when life's last hope is o'er,
And the soul sails affrighted from the shore,—
While the eternal deep spreads wide and dark,
Light'st the lone star and guid'st the helmless bark.
On the grim scaffold, with the axe on high,
To thee the patriot lifts his dauntless eye,
Recks not the crowd below, the headsman near—
The gaze—the pause—the pity and the fear.
Bright through the waste the burning column beams,
Lights the blest land—the Canaan of his dreams.
By Freedom's blood Futurity is freed,
And from each drop springs forth the Dragon Seed!

VI.

Is not thy name Consoler? Do we ask
A gift, thou calm'st us with its gilded seeming!
Life is a wayward child—thy mother-task
Is still to rock its cradle to sweet dreaming!—
Exalter as Consoler! Dost thou not
Build altars in our hearts to THE SUBLIME?
What were our thoughts without thy worship? What
Were this dark islet in the seas of Time,

Hedged round by petty wants and low desires,
 But for thy lore—the commune of the skies,—
 Great Magian of the Stars?—Thy creed inspires
 All that we ween of Noble! Poesy,—
 Religion,—and the Soul's Archangel, Fame,—
 Unconquered Liberty—the wish to be
 Better and brighter than we are—our claim
 To make men great and blest, and consummate
 Our likeness to the glorious shapes of heaven—
 The yearnings to outleap our mortal state,
 And climb Olympus—are they not all given
 By thee—all thine;—but longings to obey
 The haunting oracles that stir our clay,
 To make the Unseen with actual glories rife,
 And call the starred IDEAL into life?

The Dreams—the ivory-palaced Dreams—are thine,
 The countless brood of Earth's great mother, Sleep;—
 The gentle despots whose soft courts combine
 Against life's cares;—and with a wondrous power,
 Mightier than all men's grinding laws, controul
 E'en tears themselves!—They cover hearts that weep
 With a wild web of smiles—they bid the tomb

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Give back the Lov'd; and colour forth the hour
 With our heart's early hues and vanished bloom;
 As a nurse leads or lulls her restless child,
 They guide at will, or fondling hush, the soul:
 Our lords—*thy* slaves;—what wonder that their wild
 Voices, with prophet tales, the elder age beguil'd?

VII.

Lo! on yon couch pale Austria's crownless Boy,
 The sad Scamandrius of a fallen Troy;
 His birth the date of what august designs!
 Visions of thrones made stable to all time;
 Laugh'd France's violet vales and nodding vines;
 High swell'd the harp; exulting glowed the rhyme.
 Women, and warriors with a thousand scars,
 The veteran race of Austerlitz, the bands
 That, o'er the rent Alps, poured the avenging wars
 Into the heart of the ancestral lands
 Of Conquest's dark-winged Eagle, throng'd around;—
 "HAIL TO OUR MOTHER FRANCE, A SON IS FOUND!"

Hark, at that shout from north to south, grey Power
 Quailed on her weak hereditary thrones,

And widow'd mothers prophesied the hour
 Of future carnage to their cradled sons.
 "What, shall our race to blood be thus consigned,
 "And Até claim an heirloom in mankind?
 "Are these proud lots unshaken in the urn?"
 —Years pass—approach, pale questioner, and learn!
 Lo! on yon rock the Eagle Lord expires!
 Lo! the Son's life the moral of the Sire's!—
 What know we of thy *real* self, poor boy,—
 If thou wert brave or recreant; if thy soul
 Aspired, or drank content from vulgar joy?
 If wisdom lurked beneath that fair young brow,
 Or the dull sense lay lock'd in the controul
 Of a court's gaoler customs?—If the blood
 Leapt through the proud veins kindling;—or its flow
 Oozed from the torpid heart with lagging flood?
 If, as thy features in their softer mould
 Betokened, thou hadst something of thy sire
 Writ in thy nature, which perchance foretold,
 Had the Fates spared thy thread, that on the pyre
 Lit above lone St. Helen's, there should rise
 A phoenix from the ashes?—or if all
 The guards of slavish tongues and watchful eyes,
 The eunuch Luxury, that doth build a wall

Between a court and such thoughts as inspired
Thy Father in the vigorous airs of life,—
Whether *these* quenched the spark that might have fired
Napoleon's last, unscathed son, to strife,
And urged again the ravening Eagle's wings
Against the towers of King-descended Kings,
Who now shall tell or guess?—Fate's darkest gloom
Shuts out ev'n dreams from thine unlaurelled tomb;—
And the small web of royal flatteries,
The chamber's gossip, and the lackey's lies,
The prodigal tongues of courtly charity,
Benign alike to Bourdeaux or to thee,
Are all thy record!—So the race is run
Of the Great Corsican's world-welcomed son!

Yet this, at least, 'tis our's of thee to deem,
In Thought's wide realms not throneless, that at night,
When the world slept, the wing'd Ideal's dream
Came to thine unwatched pillow, and a light
Streamed o'er that Future never to be thine.
For merciful is youth to all;—and thou,
Son of the sword that first made Kings divine,
Wouldst nurse at least the vision and the vow,

The fancy panting for a glorious truth,
 Which are the eternal guerdon of that youth.
 Then didst thou flame before the paling world—
 Fame kept the lurid promise of thy birth ;
 Then was the Eagle flag again unfurl'd,—
 A monarch's voice cried "Havoc," to the Earth ;
 A new Philippi gained a second Rome,
 And the Son's sword avenged the greater Cæsar's doom !

VIII.

Yes ! THOU, the wild Armida of the Soul,
 Laughest to scorn the arts and arms of Kings ;
 They share the visible Empires, and controul
 The surface of Earth's tides ;—its deeper springs,
 Its higher ether, yea, unto the stars,
 And all the bright world of th' Unbounded Hope,
 The Heaven of heavens are *thine* ! nor bolts, nor bars,
 Nor courts, nor laws, can circumscribe the scope.
 The Fates themselves can wither not one leaf
 In thy unwinter'd gardens ; the dread Three
 Knock at thy gates in vain ! Heart-gnawing Grief

And false-eyed Love, and Fortune with her wheel,
 Sore Shame that dogs poor Pride, and Jealousy,
 (The shadow of hot Passion,) cannot steal
 Into thy bowers!—

When from the forfeit space
 Of Eden, God sent forth man's fallen race,
 One sacred spot, *within the spirit plac'd,*
 (Thee—the adored Ideal of Life's waste—)
 He left unguarded by the sworded host—
 A type—a shadow of the Eden lost!

IX.

Seraph that art within me! Comforter!
 Apostle, preaching holy thoughts and heaven!
 Scorned of all things base,—albeit, to err
 Is our life's lot, yet it may be forgiven
 If we err nobly, and one mean desire
 Methinks would scare the angel from its ward.
 Thus do I feed thine altars with a fire,
 Which Thought must wear a priestly robe to guard,
 And with a solemn conscience and serene,
 Watch the flame chase the mists from every scene;

Making a worship of THE BEAUTIFUL,
 Whether on earth, or in the human heart,
 And seeking, from this shadowy vale, to cull
 The flowers wherein I learn the gentle art,
 To waft an incense of sweet thoughts above ;
 Thus have I imaged Virtue as a seen
 And felt divinity, and filled with love—
 As I believe God wills us—all the springs
 In which life stirs the universe of things !

Lo ! as I write, before my lattice waves
 The wild wood where the midnight winds rejoice,
 And the lone stars are on the stream, that laves
 The green banks, wailing with a spirit's voice ;
 And these thy presence consecrates to me ;—
 'Tis not the common turf, or wave, or sky,—
 In every herb thy holiness I see,
 And in each breeze thy low voice murmurs by.—
 My heart is wed to sadness, and my frame
 Bows from the vigour of my earlier youth,
 And much it roused my rapture once to name,
 Won now too late, hath lost the power to soothe ;
 But Thou, unscath'd by Time's destroying blast,
 Coverest the wintry earth with verdure to the last !—

Still be thou mine, and in the paths of strife,
 The public toil, perchance the public wrong,
 Through which I labour out the ends of life,
 Raise my dark spirit with thy sacred song ;
 Point to ambition its more noble aim,
 To raise the lowly, nor to fear the strong ;—
 Bid me yet hope to leave a freeman's name
 With my Land's loftier hopes, not loosely twined,
 So that my grave this epitaph may claim,
 " PEACE TO HIS ERRORS—HE HATH SERVED MANKIND."

x.

Enough ! my song is closing ; and to Thee,
 Land of the North, I dedicate its lay,
 As I have done the simple tale, to be
 The Drama of this prelude.—

Far away

Rolls the swift Rhine beneath the mooned ray ;
 But to my listening ear and dreaming eye
 Murmur the pines, the blue wave ripples by ;
 Through the deep Rheingau's vine-enamour'd vale,
 I see dark shapes careering down the gale ;—

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Or hear the Lurlei's moaning Syren call,—
Or walk with Song by Roland's shattered Hall!—

Slight is the tale, and simply sad, my soul
Hath woven from some memories deeply stor'd,
Which should not voiceless die!—Die!—nay, the scroll
On which Thought's cavern streams to day are poured,
Might it endure earth's date, could not outwear
Those mournful memories ; if our souls, in truth,
Are deathless, through eternity I bear
Within the tomb that closes o'er my youth,
Thoughts that are *of* the soul, whose natures brave
Decay,—and *with* the soul shall triumph o'er the grave!

XI.

Simple the tale, nor would it lure the ear
From earth's hack sounds one instant, if the glory
Of Fancy, from the Real, did not rear
Its rainbow images and deck the story
With hues the kind Ideal lends to all,
Who, though with voice untun'd, upon her duly call!

Of one fair girl my tale, athwart whose bloom,
In the young May of life, the harsh wind sped,
And, all Hope's blossoms in that soft flower shed,
Left one lone heart to find the world a tomb!
This all I take from Truth, but THOU, more kind,
Still as our PILGRIMS sail, shalt balm the wind;
With many a tale the various way beguile,
And charm ev'n death with love's untiring smile.
Still as the sufferer droops, thy witchery calls
Wild handmaid shapes from Oberon's grassy halls.
Bids Faeries watch the soft life glide away;
And with fond dreams make beautiful decay;—
Brighten the path; keep ward above the heart,
And steal at least the venom from the dart;
Let Love receive the last untortured breath,
And Sleep lend all its loveliest hues to Death!
And when the heart lies dumb, around the tomb,
Still shall the Faeries bid the wild flowers bloom,
Woo gentlest moonbeams to the odorous grass,
And smooth the waves to music as they pass;
And still shall Fancy deem, in him who wreathes
These fading flowers, thy power not vainly breathes.
If o'er his task thy angel presence shone,
Hath his soul quaff'd no magic not its own?

No spell to lure the anxious world awhile
From truths that vex, to visions that beguile,
Chequering the darkness of surrounding strife
With the brief moonlight of a lovelier life?