

Alfred Austin (1835-1913)

1 At San Giovanni del Lago

I

I leaned upon the rustic bridge,
And watched the streamlet make
Its chattering way past zigzag ridge
Down to the silent lake.

II

The sunlight flickered on the wave, 5
Lay quiet on the hill;
Italian sunshine, bright and brave,
Though 'twas but April still.

III

I heard the distant shepherd's shout,
I heard the fisher's call; 10
The lizards glistened in and out,
Along the crannied wall.

IV

Hard-by, in rudely frescoed niche,
Hung Christ upon the tree;
Round Him the Maries knelt, and each 15
Was weeping bitterly.

V

A nightingale from out the trees
Rippled, and then was dumb;
But in the golden bays the bees
Kept up a constant hum. 20

VI

Two peasant women of the land,
Barefoot, with tresses black,
Came slowly toward me from the strand,
With their burdens on their back:

VII

Two wicker crates with linen piled,
 Just newly washed and wrung;
And, close behind, a little child
 That made the morning young. 25

VIII

Reaching the bridge, each doffed her load,
 Resting before they clomb,
Along the stony twisting road,
 Up to their mountain home. 30

IX

Shortly the child, just half its height,
 Stooped 'neath her mother's pack,
And strove and strove with all her might 35
 To lift it on her back.

X

Thereat my heart began to smile:
 Haply I speak their tongue:
"Can you," I said, "not wait awhile?
 You won't be always young. 40

XI

"Why long to share the toil you see,
 Why hurry on the years,
When life will one long season be
 Of labour and of tears?

XII

"Be patient with your childhood. Work 45
 Will come full soon enough.
From year to year, from morn till murk,
 Life will be hard and rough.

XIII

"And yours will grow, and haply I,
 Revisiting this shore, 50
In years to come will see and sigh

You are a child no more.

XIV

“Yours then will be the moil, the heat,
Yours be the strain and stress.
Pray Heaven Love then attend your feet 55
To make life’s burden less.”

XV

Thus as I spoke, with steadfast stare
She clung between the two,
Scarce understanding, yet aware
That the sad words were true. 60

XVI

Down from the mother’s face a tear
Fell to her naked feet.
“But now unto the Signor, dear,
Your poesy repeat.”

XVII

Without demur the little maid 65
Spread out her palms, and lo!
From lips that lisped, yet unafraid,
Sweet verse began to flow.

XVIII

She told the story that we all
Learn at our mother’s knee, 70
Of Eve’s transgression, Adam’s fall,
And Heaven’s great clemency:

XIX

How Jesus was by Mary’s hands
In the rough manger laid,
And by rich Kings from far-off lands 75
Was pious homage paid:

XX

Then how, though cruel Herod slew
The suckling babes, and thought

To baffle God, Christ lived and grew,
And in the temple taught. 80

XXI

She raised her hands to suit the rhyme,
She clasped them on her heart;
There never lived the city mime
So well had played the part.

XXII

When she broke off, I was too choked 85
With tenderness to speak.
And so her little form I stroked,
And kissed her on the cheek;

XXIII

And took a sweetmeat that I had,
And put it in her mouth. 90
O then she danced like a stream that's glad
When it hurries to the south.

XXIV

She danced, she skipped, she kissed "good-bye,"
She frolicked round and round:
The pair resumed their packs, and I 95
Sate rooted to the ground.

XXV

"*A rivederla!*" Then the three
Went winding up the hill.
Ah! they have long forgotten me;
But I remember still. 100

1891

(From *Narrative Poems*. London, 1891)