

Matthew Gregory Lewis (1775-1818)

19 *The Princess and the Slave*

Where fragrant breezes sigh'd through orange bowers,  
And springing fountains cool'd the air with showers,  
From pomp retired, and noon-tide's burning ray,  
The fair, the royal Nouronihar lay.  
The cups of roses, newly-cropp'd, were spread 5  
Her lovely limbs beneath, and o'er her head  
Imprison'd nightingales attuned their throats,  
And lull'd the princess with melodious notes.  
Here roll'd a lucid stream its gentle wave  
With scarce heard murmur; while a Georgian slave 10  
Placed near the couch with feathers in her hand,  
The lady's panting breast in silence fann'd,  
And chased the insects, who presumed to seek  
Their banquet on the beauty's glowing cheek.  
This slave, a mild and simple maid was she, 15  
Of common form, and born of low degree,  
Whose only charms were smiles, devoid of art,  
Whose only wealth, a gentle feeling heart.  
While thus within her secret loved retreat,  
Half sleeping, half awake, oppress'd with heat, 20  
The princess slumber'd; near her, shrill, yet faint,  
Rose the sad tones of suppliant sorrow's plaint.  
She starts, and angry gazes round: when lo!  
A wretched female, bent with age and woe,  
Drags her unsteady feet the arbour nigh, 25  
While every step is number'd by a sigh.  
Meagre and wan her form, her cheek is pale;  
Her tatter'd garments scarce her limbs can veil;  
Yet still, through want and grief, her air betrays  
Grandeur's remains, and gleams of better days. 30  
Soon as to Nouronihar's couch she came,  
Low on the ground her weak and trembling frame

Exhausted sank; and then, with gasping breast,  
She thus in plaintive tones the fair address'd.

— “If e'er compassion's tear your cheek could stain, 35  
“If e'er you languish'd in disease and pain,  
“If e'er you sympathized with age's groan,  
“Hear, noble lady, hear a suppliant's moan!  
“Broken by days of want, and nights of tears,  
“By sickness wasted, and oppress'd by years, 40  
“Beneath our sacred Mithra's scorching fire  
“I sink enfeebled, and with thirst expire.  
“Yon stream is near: oh! list a sufferer's cry,  
“And reach one draught of water, lest I die!” —

— “What means this bold intrusion?” cried the fair, 45  
With peevish tone, and discontented air;  
“What daring voice, with wearying plaint, infests  
“The sacred grove where Persia's princess rests?  
“Beggar begone, and let these clamours cease!  
“This buys at once your absence, and my peace.” — 50

Thus said the princess, and indignant frown'd,  
Then cast her precious bracelet on the ground,  
And turn'd again to sleep. With joyless eye  
The fainting stranger saw the jewel lie:  
When lo! kind Selima (the Georgian's name), 55  
Softly with water from the fountain came;  
And while, with gentle grace, she gave the bowl,  
Thus sweetly sad her feeling accents stole.

— “Humble and poor, I nothing can bestow,  
“Except these tears of pity for your woe: 60  
“Tis all I have; but yet that all receive  
“From one who fain your sorrows would relieve,  
“From one who weeps to view such mournful scenes,  
“*And would give more, but that her hand lacks means.*  
“Drink, mother! drink! the wave is cool and clear, 65

“But drink in silence, lest the princess hear!” —

Scarce are these words pronounced, when, bless'd surprise!  
The stranger's age-bowed figure swells its size!  
No more the stamp of years deforms her face;  
Her tatter'd shreds to sparkling robes give place; 70  
Her breath perfumes the air with odours sweet;  
Fresh roses spring wherever tread her feet,  
And from her eyes, where reign delight and love,  
Unusual splendour glitters through the grove!  
Her silver wand, her form of heavenly mould, 75  
Her white and shining robes, her wings of gold,  
Her port majestic, and superior height,  
Announce a daughter of the world of light!  
The princess, whom her slave's delighted cries  
Compell'd once more to ope her sleep-bound eyes, 80  
With wonder mix'd with awe the scene survey'd,  
While thus the Peri cheer'd the captive maid.

“Look up, sweet girl, and cast all fears aside!  
“I seek my darling son's predestined bride,  
“And here I find her: here are found alone, 85  
“Feelings as kind, as gracious as his own.  
“For you, fair princess, in whose eyes of blue,  
“The strife of envy, shame, and grief, I view,  
“Observe, and profit by this scene! you gave,  
“But oh! how far less nobly than your slave! 90  
“Your bitter speech, proud glance, and peevish tone,  
“Too plain declared, your gift was meant alone  
“Your own repose and silence to secure,  
“And hush the beggar, not relieve the poor!  
“Oh! royal lady, let this lesson prove, 95  
“Smiles, more than presents, win a suppliant's love;  
“And when your mandates rule some distant land,  
“Where all expect their blessings from your hand,  
“Remember, with ill-will and frowns bestow'd,  
“Favours offend, and gifts become a load!” — 100

She ceased, and touching with her silver wand  
Her destined daughter, straight two wings expand  
Their purple plumes, and wave o'er either arm;  
Next to her person spreads the powerful charm;  
And soon the enraptured wondering maid combined 105  
A faultless person with a faultless mind.  
Then, while with joy divine their hearts beat high,  
Swift as the lightning of a jealous eye  
The Peries spread their wings, and soar'd away  
To the bless'd regions of eternal day. 110

Stung with regret, the princess saw too plain,  
Lost by her fault what tears could ne'er regain!  
Long on the tablets of her humbled breast  
The Peri's parting words remain'd impress'd.  
E'en when her hand Golconda's sceptre sway'd, 115  
And subject realms her mild behests obey'd,  
The just reproof her conscious ear still heard;  
Still she remember'd, with ill grace conferr'd,  
Crowns, to a feeling mind, less joy impart,  
Than trifles, offer'd with a willing heart. 120

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