

E. R. B. Lytton ("Owen Meredith") (1831–91)

1 *Aux Italiens*

I

At Paris it was, at the Opera there; —  
And she look'd like a Queen of old time that night,  
With the wreathèd pearls in her raven hair,  
And her breast with the diamond bright.

II

The moon on the tower slept soft as snow: 5  
And who was not thrill'd in the strangest way,  
As the Troubadour sung while the gas burn'd low,  
'*Non ti scordar di me?*'

III

Side by side in our box we sat,  
Together, my bride-betroth'd and I: 10  
My gaze was fix'd on my opera-hat,  
And hers on the stage hard by:

IV

And both were silent, and both were sad.  
Queenly she lean'd on her full white arm,  
With that regal, indolent air she had; 15  
So confident of her charm!

V

I have not a doubt she was thinking then  
Of her former lord, good soul that he was!  
Who died the richest, and roundest of men,  
The Marquis of Carabas. 20

VI

That narrow gate to the kingdom of heaven,  
He was not too portly, I trust, to pass.  
I wish him well, for the jointure given  
To my lady of Carabas.

## VII

Meanwhile, I was thinking of my first love, 25  
 As I had not been thinking of aught for years,  
 Till over my eyes there began to move  
 Something that felt like tears.

## VIII

I thought of the dress that she wore last time,  
 When we stood, 'neath the cypress trees, together, 30  
 In that lost land, in her own soft clime,  
 In the crimson evening weather,

## IX

By the broken wall, on the brown grass plot;  
 And her warm white neck in its golden chain:  
 And her full, soft hair, wound into a knot, 35  
 And falling loose again:

## X

And the jasmin-flower in her fair young breast:  
 (O the faint, sweet smell of that jasmin-flower!)  
 And the last bird singing alone to his nest:  
 And the first star over the tower. 40

## XI

I thought of our little quarrels and strife;  
 And the letter that brought me back my ring.  
 And it all seem'd then, in the waste of life,  
 Such a very little thing!

## XII

For I thought of her grave below the hill, 45  
 Which the sentinel cypress tree stands over.  
 And I thought . . . 'were she only living still,  
 How I could forgive her, and love her!'

## XIII

And I swear, as I thought of her thus, in that hour,  
 And of how, after all, old things were best, 50  
 That I smelt the smell of that jasmin-flower,

Which she used to wear in her breast.

XIV

It smelt so faint, and it smelt so sweet,  
It made me creep, and it made me cold!  
Like the scent that steals from the crumbling sheet 55  
Where a mummy is half unroll'd.

XV

And I turn'd, and look'd. She was sitting there  
In a dim box, over the stage; and drest  
In the dress that I knew, with her full soft hair,  
And that jasmin in her breast! 60

XVI

She was there: and I was here:  
And the glittering horse-shoe curved between: —  
And from here to there, and from tier to tier,  
From my bride that was to have been,

XVII

To my early love, with her eyes downcast, 65  
And over her blush-rose face the shade,  
(In short from the Future back to the Past)  
There was but a step to be made.

XVIII

To my early love from my future bride  
One moment I look'd. Then I stole to the door, 70  
I traversed the passage; and down at her side  
I was sitting, a moment more.

XIX

My thinking of her, or the music's strain,  
Or something that never will be exprest,  
Had brought her back from the grave again, 75  
With the jasmin in her breast.

XX

She is not dead, and she is not wed!  
But she loves me now, and she loved me then!

And the very first word that her sweet lips said,  
My heart grew youthful again. 80

XXI

The Marchioness there, of Carabas,  
She is wealthy, and young, and handsome still,  
And but for her . . . well, we'll let that pass,  
She may marry whomever she will.

XXII

But I will marry my own first love, 85  
With her blush-rose face: for old things are best;  
And the flower in her bosom, I prize it above  
The brooch in my lady's breast.

XXIII

The world is fill'd with folly and sin,  
And Love must cling where it can, I say: 90  
For Beauty is easy enough to win;  
But one isn't loved every day.

XXIV

And I think, in the lives of most women and men,  
There's a moment when all would go smooth and even,  
If only the dead could find out when 95  
To come back, and be forgiven.

(From *Llytemnestra, and Poems Lyrical and Descriptive*.  
New Edition. *The Poetical Works of Owen Meredith*. Vol. 1.  
London, 1867)