

George Meredith (1828-1909)

6 *The Young Princess*

A Ballad of Old Laws of Love

I

I

When the South sang like a nightingale
Above a bower in May,
The training of Love's vine of flame
Was writ in laws, for lord and dame
To say their yea and nay. 5

II

When the South sang like a nightingale
Across the flowering night,
And lord and dame held gentle sport,
There came a young princess to Court,
A frost of beauty white. 10

III

The South sang like a nightingale
To thaw her glittering dream:
No vine of Love her bosom gave,
She drank no wine of Love, but grave
She held them to Love's theme. 15

IV

The South grew all a nightingale
Beneath a moon unmoved:
Like the banner of war she led them on;
She left them to lie, like the light that has gone
From wine-cups overproved. 20

V

When the South was a fervid nightingale,
And she a chilling moon,
'Twas pity to see on the garden swards,
Against Love's laws, those rival lords

As willow-wands lie strewn. 25

VI

The South had throat of a nightingale
For her, the young princess:
She gave no vine of Love to rear,
Love's wine drank not, yet bent her ear
To themes of Love no less. 30

II

I

The lords of the Court they sighed heart-sick,
Heart-free Lord Dusiote laughed:
I prize her no more than a fling o' the dice,
But, or shame to my manhood, a lady of ice,
We master her by craft! 35

II

Heart-sick the lords of joyance yawned,
Lord Dusiote laughed heart-free:
I count her as much as a crack o' my thumb,
But, or shame of my manhood, to me she shall come
Like the bird to roost in the tree! 40

III

At dead of night when the palace-guard
Had passed the measured rounds,
The young princess awoke to feel
A shudder of blood at the crackle of steel
Within the garden-bounds. 45

IV

It ceased, and she thought of whom was need,
The friar or the leech;
When lo, stood her tirewoman breathless by:
Lord Dusiote, madam, to death is nigh,
Of you he would have speech. 50

V

He prays you, of your gentleness,

To light him to his dark end.
The princess rose, and forth she went,
For charity was her intent,
Devoutly to befriend. 55

VI

Lord Dusiote hung on his good squire's arm,
The priest beside him knelt:
A weeping handkerchief was pressed
To stay the red flood at his breast,
And bid cold ladies melt. 60

VII

O lady, though you are ice to men,
All pure to heaven as light
Within the dew within the flower,
Of you 'tis whispered that love has power
When secret is the night. 65

VIII

I have silenced the slanderers, peace to their souls!
Save one was too cunning for me.
I die, whose love is late avowed,
He lives, who boasts the lily has bowed
To the oath of a bended knee. 70

IX

Lord Dusiote drew breath with pain,
And she with pain drew breath:
On him she looked, on his like above;
She flew in the folds of a marvel of love,
Revealed to pass to death. 75

X

You are dying, O great-hearted lord,
You are dying for me, she cried;
O take my hand, O take my kiss,
And take of your right, for love like this,
The vow that plights me bride. 80

XI

She bade the priest recite his words

While hand in hand were they,
Lord Dusiate's soul to waft to bliss;
He had her hand, her vow, her kiss,
And his body was borne away. 85

III

I

Lord Dusiate sprang from priest and squire;
He gazed at her lighted room:
The laughter in his heart grew slack;
He knew not the force that pushed him back
From her and the morn in bloom. 90

II

Like a drowned man's length on the strong flood-tide,
Like the shade of a bird in the sun,
He fled from his lady whom he might claim
As ghost, and who made the daybeams flame
To scare what he had done. 95

III

There was grief at Court for one so gay,
Though he was a lord less keen
For training the vine than at vintage-press:
But in her soul the young princess
Believed that love had been. 100

IV

Lord Dusiate fled the Court and land,
He crossed the woeful seas,
Till his traitorous doing seemed clearer to burn,
And the lady beloved drew his heart for return,
Like the banner of war in the breeze. 105

V

He neared the palace, he spied the Court,
And music he heard, and they told
Of foreign lords arrived to bring
The nuptial gifts of a bridegroom king
To the princess grave and cold. 110

VI

The masque and the dance were cloud on wave,
 And down the masque and the dance
 Lord Dusote stepped from dame to dame,
 And to the young princess he came,
 With a bow and a burning glance. 115

VII

Do you take a new husband to-morrow, lady?
 She shrank as at prick of steel.
 Must the first yield place to the second, he sighed.
 Her eyes were like the grave that is wide
 For the corpse from head to heel. 120

VIII

My lady, my love, that little hand
 Has mine ringed fast in plight:
 I bear for your lips a lawful thirst,
 And as justly the second should follow the first,
 I come to your door this night. 125

IX

If a ghost should come a ghost will go:
 No more the lady said,
 Save that ever when he in wrath began
 To swear by the faith of a living man,
 She answered him, You are dead. 130

IV

I

The soft night-wind went laden to death
 With smell of the orange in flower;
 The light leaves prattled to neighbour ears;
 The bird of the passion sang over his tears;
 The night named hour by hour. 135

II

Sang loud, sang low the rapturous bird
 Till the yellow hour was nigh,

Behind the folds of a darker cloud:
He chuckled, he sobbed, aloud,
The voice between earth and sky. 140

III

O will you, will you, women are weak;
The proudest are yielding mates
For a forward foot and a tongue of fire:
So thought Lord Dusiote's trusty squire,
At watch by the palace-gates. 145

IV

The song of the bird was wine in his blood,
And woman the odorous bloom:
His master's great adventure stirred
Within him to mingle the bloom and bird,
And morn ere its coming illume. 150

V

Beside him strangely a piece of the dark
Had moved, and the undertones
Of a priest in prayer, like a cavernous wave,
He heard, as were there a soul to save
For urgency now in the groans. 155

VI

No priest was hired for the play this night:
And the squire tossed head like a deer
At sniff of the tainted wind; he gazed
Where cresset-lamps in a door were raised,
Belike on a passing bier. 160

VII

All cloaked and masked, with naked blades,
That flashed of a judgement done,
The lords of the Court, from the palace-door,
Came issuing silently, bearers four,
And flat on their shoulders one. 165

VIII

They marched the body to squire and priest,
They lowered it sad to earth:

The priest they gave the burial dole
Bade wrestle hourly for his soul,
Who was a lord of worth. 170

IX

One said, farewell to a gallant knight!
And one, but a restless ghost!
'Tis a year and a day since in this place
He died, sped high by a lady of grace,
To join the blissful host. 175

X

Not vainly on us she charged her cause,
The lady whom we revere
For faith in the mask of a love untrue
To the Love we honour, the Love her due,
The Love we have vowed to rear. 180

XI

A trap for the sweet tooth, lures for the light,
For the fortress defiant a mine:
Right well! But not in the South, princess,
Shall the lady snared of her nobleness
Ever shamed or a captive pine. 185

XII

When the South had voice of a nightingale
Above a Maying bower,
On the heights of Love walked radiant peers;
The bird of the passion sang over his tears
To the breeze and the orange-flower. 190

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