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Translator: Dorothea Prall

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LAMENTS ***

Kochanowski

Laments

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

LAMENT I

LAMENT II

LAMENT III

LAMENT IV

LAMENT V

LAMENT VI

LAMENT VII

LAMENT VIII

LAMENT IX

LAMENT X

LAMENT XI

LAMENT XII

LAMENT XIII

LAMENT XIV

LAMENT XV

LAMENT XVI

LAMENT XVII

LAMENT XVIII

LAMENT XIX

LAMENTS

[1]

BY

JAN KOCHANOWSKI

VERIFIED BY

DOROTHEA PRALL

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[2]

Jan Kochanowski (1530-84) was the greatest poet of Poland during its existence as an independent kingdom. His *Laments* are his masterpiece, the choicest work of Polish lyric poetry before the time of Mickiewicz.

Kochanowski was a learned poet of the Renaissance, drawing his inspiration from the literatures of Greece and Rome. He was also a man of sincere piety, famous for his translation of the Psalms into his native language. In his *Laments*, written in memory of his little daughter Ursula, who died in 1579 at the age of thirty months, he expresses the deepest personal emotion through the medium of a literary style that had been developed by long years of study. The *Laments*, to be sure, are not based on any classic model and they contain few direct imitations of the classical poets, though it may be noted that the concluding couplet of *Lament XV* is translated from the *Greek Anthology*. On the other hand they are interspersed with continual references to classic story; and, more important, are filled with the atmosphere of the Stoic philosophy, derived from Cicero and Seneca. And along with this austere teaching there runs through them a warmer tone of Christian hope and trust; *Lament XVIII* is in spirit a psalm. To us of today, however, these poems appeal less by their formal perfection, by their learning, or by their religious tone, than by their exquisite humanity. Kochanowski's sincerity of grief, his fatherly love for his baby girl, after more than three centuries have not lost their power to touch our hearts. In the *Laments* Kochanowski embodied a wholesome ideal of life such as animated the finest spirits of Poland in the years of its greatest glory, a spirit both humanistic and universally human.

G. R. NOYES.

TO URSULA KOCHANOWSKI

[5]

A CHARMING, MERRY, GIFTED CHILD, WHO, AFTER SHOWING GREAT PROMISE OF ALL MAIDENLY VIRTUES AND TALENTS, SUDDENLY, PREMATURELY, IN HER UNRIPE YEARS, TO THE GREAT AND UNBEARABLE GRIEF OF HER PARENTS, DEPARTED HENCE.

WRITTEN WITH TEARS FOR HIS BELOVED LITTLE GIRL BY JAN KOCHANOWSKI, HER HAPLESS FATHER.

THOU ART NO MORE, MY URSULA.

*Tales sunt hominum mentes, quali pater ipse
Juppiter auctiferas lustravit lumine terras.*

[7]

LAMENT I

Come, Heraclitus and Simonides,
Come with your weeping and sad elegies:
Ye griefs and sorrows, come from all the lands
Wherein ye sigh and wail and wring your hands:
Gather ye here within my house today
And help me mourn my sweet, whom in her May
Ungodly Death hath ta'en to his estate,
Leaving me on a sudden desolate.
'Tis so a serpent glides on some shy nest
And, of the tiny nightingales possessed,
Doth glut its throat, though, frenzied with her fear,
The mother bird doth beat and twitter near
And strike the monster, till it turns and gapes
To swallow her, and she but just escapes.
"'Tis vain to weep," my friends perchance will say.
Dear God, is aught in life not vain, then? Nay,
Seek to lie soft, yet thorns will prickly be:
The life of man is naught but vanity.
Ah, which were better, then—to seek relief
In tears, or sternly strive to conquer grief?

LAMENT II

[8]

If I had ever thought to write in praise
Of little children and their simple ways,
Far rather had I fashioned cradle verse

To rock to slumber, or the songs a nurse
Might croon above the baby on her breast.
Setting her charge's short-lived woes at rest.
For much more useful are such trifling tasks
Than that which sad misfortune this day asks:
To weep o'er thy deaf grave, dear maiden mine.
And wail the harshness of grim Proserpine.
But now I have no choice of subject: then
I shunned a theme scarce fitting riper men,
And now disaster drives me on by force
To songs unheeded by the great concourse
Of mortals. Verses that I would not sing
The living, to the dead I needs must bring.
Yet though I dry the marrow from my bones,
Weeping another's death, my grief atones
No whit. All forms of human doom
Arouse but transient thoughts of joy or gloom.
O law unjust, O grimmest of all maids,
Inexorable princess of the shades!
For, Ursula, thou hadst but tasted time
And art departed long before thy prime.
Thou hardly knewest that the sun was bright
Ere thou didst vanish to the halls of night.
I would thou hadst not lived that little breath—
What didst thou know, but only birth, then death?
And all the joy a loving child should bring
Her parents, is become their bitterest sting.

LAMENT III

[9]

So, thou hast scorned me, my delight and heir;
Thy father's halls, then, were not broad and fair
Enough for thee to dwell here longer, sweet.
True, there was nothing, nothing in them meet
For thy swift-budding reason, that foretold
Virtues the future years would yet unfold.
Thy words, thy archness, every turn and bow—
How sick at heart without them am I now!
Nay, little comfort, never more shall I
Behold thee and thy darling drollery.
What may I do but only follow on
Along the path where earlier thou hast gone.
And at its end do thou, with all thy charms,
Cast round thy father's neck thy tender arms.

LAMENT IV

[10]

Thou hast constrained mine eyes, unholy Death,
To watch my dear child breathe her dying breath:
To watch thee shake the fruit unripe and clinging
While fear and grief her parents' hearts were wringing.
Ah, never, never could my well-loved child
Have died and left her father reconciled:
Never but with a heart like heavy lead
Could I have watched her go, abandonèd.
And yet at no time could her death have brought
More cruel ache than now, nor bitterer thought;
For had God granted to her ample days
I might have walked with her down flowered ways
And left this life at last, content, descending
To realms of dark Persephone, the all-ending,
Without such grievous sorrow in my heart,
Of which earth holdeth not the counterpart.
I marvel not that Niobe, alone
Amid her dear, dead children, turned to stone.

Just as a little olive offshoot grows
 Beneath its orchard elders' shady rows,
 No budding leaf as yet, no branching limb,
 Only a rod uprising, virgin-slim—
 Then if the busy gardener, weeding out
 Sharp thorns and nettles, cuts the little sprout,
 It fades and, losing all its living hue,
 Drops by the mother from whose roots it grew:
 So was it with my Ursula, my dear;
 A little space she grew beside us here,
 Then Death came, breathing pestilence, and she
 Fell, stricken lifeless, by her parent tree.
 Persephone, Persephone, this flow
 Of barren tears! How couldst thou will it so?

LAMENT VI

[12]

Dear little Slavic Sappho, we had thought,
 Hearing thy songs so sweetly, deftly wrought,
 That thou shouldst have an heritage one day
 Beyond thy father's lands: his lute to play.
 For not an hour of daylight's joyous round
 But thou didst fill it full of lovely sound,
 Just as the nightingale doth scatter pleasure
 Upon the dark, in glad unstinted measure.
 Then Death came stalking near thee, timid thing,
 And thou in sudden terror tookest wing.
 Ah, that delight, it was not overlong
 And I pay dear with sorrow for brief song.
 Thou still wert singing when thou cam'st to die;
 Kissing thy mother, thus thou saidst good-bye:
 "My mother, I shall serve thee now no more
 Nor sit about thy table's charming store;
 I must lay down my keys to go from here,
 To leave the mansion of my parents dear."
 This and what sorrow now will let me tell
 No longer, were my darling's last farewell.
 Ah, strong her mother's heart, to feel the pain
 Of those last words and not to burst in twain.

LAMENT VII

[13]

Sad trinkets of my little daughter, dresses
 That touched her like caresses,
 Why do you draw my mournful eyes? To borrow
 A newer weight of sorrow?
 No longer will you clothe her form, to fold her
 Around, and wrap her, hold her.
 A hard, unwaking sleep has overpowered
 Her limbs, and now the flowered
 Cool muslin and the ribbon snoods are bootless,
 The gilded girdles fruitless.
 My little girl, 'twas to a bed far other
 That one day thy poor mother
 Had thought to lead thee, and this simple dower
 Suits not the bridal hour;
 A tiny shroud and gown of her own sewing
 She gives thee at thy going.
 Thy rather brings a clod of earth, a somber
 Pillow for thy last slumber.
 And so a single casket, scant of measure,
 Locks thee and all thy treasure.

[14]

LAMENT VIII

Thou hast made all the house an empty thing,
Dear Ursula, by this thy vanishing.
Though we are here, 'tis yet a vacant place,
One little soul had filled so great a space.
For thou didst sing thy joyousness to all,
Running through every nook of house and hall.
Thou wouldst not have thy mother grieve, nor let
Thy father with too solemn thinking fret
His head, but thou must kiss them, daughter mine,
And all with that entrancing laugh of thine!
Now on the house has fallen a dumb blight:
Thou wilt not come with archness and delight,
But every corner lodges lurking grief
And all in vain the heart would seek relief.

LAMENT IX

[15]

Thou shouldst be purchased, Wisdom, for much gold
If all they say of thee is truly told:
That thou canst root out from the mind the host
Of longings and canst change a man almost
Into an angel whom no grief can sap,
Who is not prone to fear nor evil hap.
Thou seest all things human as they are—
Trifles. Thou bearest in thy breast a star
Fixed and tranquil, and dost contemplate
Death unafraid, still calm, inviolate.
Of riches, one thing thou dost hold the measure:
Proportion to man's needs—not gold nor treasure;
Thy searching eyes have power to behold
The beggar housed beneath the roof of gold,
Nor dost thou grudge the poor man fame as blest
If he but hearken him to thy behest.
Oh, hapless, hapless man am I, who sought
If I might gain thy thresholds by much thought,
Cast down from thy last steps after so long,
But one amid the countless, hopeless throng!

LAMENT X

[16]

My dear delight, my Ursula, and where
Art thou departed, to what land, what sphere?
High o'er the heavens wert thou borne, to stand
One little cherub midst the cherub band?
Or dost thou laugh in Paradise, or now
Upon the Islands of the Blest art thou?
Or in his ferry o'er the gloomy water
Does Charon bear thee onward, little daughter?
And having drunken of forgetfulness
Art thou unwitting of my sore distress?
Or, casting off thy human, maiden veil,
Art thou enfeathered in some nightingale?
Or in grim Purgatory must thou stay
Until some tiniest stain be washed away?
Or hast returned again to where thou wert
Ere thou wast born to bring me heavy hurt?
Where'er thou art, ah! pity, comfort me;
And if not in thine own entirety,
Yet come before mine eyes a moment's space
In some sweet dream that shadoweth thy grace.

LAMENT XI

[17]

"Virtue is but a trifle!" Brutus said
In his defeat; nor was he cozenèd.
What man did his own goodness e'er advance
Or piety preserve from evil chance?
Some unknown foe confuses men's affairs;
For good and bad alike it nothing cares.
Where blows its breath, no man can flee away;
Both false and righteous it hath power to stay.
Yet still we vaunt us of our mighty mind
In idle arrogance among our kind;
And still we gaze on heaven and think we see
The Lord and his all-holy mystery.
Nay, human eyes are all too dull; light dreams
Amuse and cheat us with what only seems.
Ah, dost thou rob me, Grief, my safeguards spurning,
Of both my darling and my trust in learning?

LAMENT XII

[18]

I think no father under any sky
More fondly loved a daughter than did I,
And scarcely ever has a child been born
Whose loss her parents could more justly mourn.
Unspoiled and neat, obedient at all times,
She seemed already versed in songs and rhymes,
And with a highborn courtesy and art,
Though but a babe, she played a maiden's part.
Discreet and modest, sociable and free
From jealous habits, docile, mannerly,
She never thought to taste her morning fare
Until she should have said her morning prayer;
She never went to sleep at night until
She had prayed God to save us all from ill.
She used to run to meet her father when
He came from any journey home again;
She loved to work and to anticipate
The servants of the house ere they could wait
Upon her parents. This she had begun
When thirty months their little course had run.
So many virtues and such active zeal
Her youth could not sustain; she fell from weal
Ere harvest. Little ear of wheat, thy prime
Was distant; 'tis before thy proper time
I sow thee once again in the sad earth,
Knowing I bury with thee hope and mirth.
For thou wilt not spring up when blossoms quicken
But leave mine eyes forever sorrow-stricken.

LAMENT XIII

[19]

Ursula, winsome child, I would that I
Had never had thee if thou wert to die
So early. For with lasting grief I pay,
Now thou hast left me, for thy sweet, brief stay.
Thou didst delude me like a dream by night
That shines in golden fullness on the sight,
Then vanishes, and to the man awake
Leaves only of its treasures much heartbreak.
So hast thou done to me, belovèd cheat:
Thou madest with high hope my heart to beat
And then didst hurry off and bear with thee
All of the gladness thou once gavest me.
'Tis half my heart I lack through this thy taking
And what is left is good for naught but aching.
Stonecutters, set me up a carven stone
And let this sad inscription run thereon:
*Ursula Kochanowski lieth here,
Her father's sorrow and her father's dear;*

LAMENT XIV

[20]

Where are those gates through which so long ago
Orpheus descended to the realms below
To seek his lost one? Little daughter, I
Would find that path and pass that ford whereby
The grim-faced boatman ferries pallid shades
And drives them forth to joyless cypress glades.
But do thou not desert me, lovely lute!
Be thou the furtherance of my mournful suit
Before dread Pluto, till he shall give ear
To our complaints and render up my dear.
To his dim dwelling all men must repair,
And so must she, her father's joy and heir;
But let him grant the fruit now scarce in flower
To fill and ripen till the harvest hour!
Yet if that god doth bear a heart within
So hard that one in grief can nothing win,
What can I but renounce this upper air
And lose my soul, but also lose my care.

LAMENT XV

[21]

Golden-locked Erato, and thou, sweet lute,
The comfort of the sad and destitute,
Calm thou my sorrow, lest I too become
A marble pillar shedding through the dumb
But living stone my almost bloody tears,
A monument of grief for coming years.
For when we think of mankind's evil chance
Does not our private grief gain temperance?
Unhappy mother (if 'tis evil hap
We blame when caught in our own folly's trap)
Where are thy sons and daughters, seven each,
The joyful cause of thy too boastful speech?
I see their fourteen stones, and thou, alas,
Who from thy misery wouldst gladly pass
To death, dost kiss the tombs, O wretched one,
Where lies thy fruit so cruelly undone.
Thus blossoms fall where some keen sickle passes
And so, when rain doth level them, green grasses.
What hope canst thou yet harbor in thee? Why
Dost thou not drive thy sorrow hence and die?
And thy swift arrows, Phoebus, what do they?
And thine unerring bow, Diana? Slay
Her, ye avenging gods, if not in rage,
Then out of pity for her desolate age.
A punishment for pride before unknown
Hath fallen: Niobe is turned to stone,
And borne in whirlwind arms o'er seas and lands,
On Sipylus in deathless marble stands.
Yet from her living wounds a crystal fountain
Of tears flows through the rock and down the mountain,
Whence beast and bird may drink; but she, in chains,
Fixed in the path of all the winds remains.
This tomb holds naught, this woman hath no tomb:
To be both grave and body is her doom.

LAMENT XVI

[22]

Misfortune hath constrained me
To leave the lute and poetry,

Nor can I from their easing borrow
Sleep for my sorrow.

Do I see true, or hath a dream
Flown forth from ivory gates to gleam
In phantom gold, before forsaking
Its poor cheat, waking?

Oh, mad, mistaken humankind,
'Tis easy triumph for the mind
While yet no ill adventure strikes us
And naught mislikes us.

In plenty we praise poverty,
'Mid pleasures we hold grief to be
(And even death, ere it shall stifle
Our breath) a trifle.

But when the grudging spinner scants
Her thread and fate no surcease grants
From grief most deep and need most wearing,
Less calm our bearing.

Ah, Tully, thou didst flee from Rome
With weeping, who didst say his home
The wise man found in any station,
In any nation.

And why dost mourn thy daughter so
When thou hast said the only woe
That man need dread is base dishonor?—
Why sorrow on her?

Death, thou hast said, can terrify
The godless man alone. Then why
So loth, the pay for boldness giving,
To leave off living?

Thy words, that have persuaded men,
Persuade not thee, angelic pen;
Disaster findeth thy defenses,
Like mine, pretenses.

Soft stone is man: he takes the lines
That Fortune's cutting tool designs.
To press the wounds wherewith she graves us,
Racks us or saves us?

Time, father of forgetfulness
So longed for now in my distress,
Since wisdom nor the saints can steel me,
Oh, do thou heal me!

[23]

LAMENT XVII

[24]

God hath laid his hand on me:
He hath taken all my glee,
And my spirit's emptied cup
Soon must give its life-blood up.

If the sun doth wake and rise,
If it sink in gilded skies,
All alike my heart doth ache,
Comfort it can never take.

From my eyelids there do flow
Tears, and I must weep e'en so
Ever, ever. Lord of Light,
Who can hide him from thy sight!

Though we shun the stormy sea,
Though from war's affray we flee,
Yet misfortune shows her face
Howsoe'er concealed our place.

Mine a life so far from fame
Few there were could know my name;

Evil hap and jealousy
Had no way of harming me.

But the Lord, who doth disdain
Flimsy safeguards raised by man,
Struck a blow more swift and sure
In that I was more secure.

Poor philosophy, so late
Of its power wont to prate,
Showeth its incompetence
Now that joy proceedeth hence.

Sometimes still it strives to prove
Heavy care it can remove;
But its little weight doth fail
To raise sorrow in the scale.

Idle is the foolish claim
Harm can have another name:
He who laughs when he is sad,
I should say was only mad.

Him who tries to prove our tears
Trifles, I will lend mine ears;
But my sorrow he thereby
Doth not check, but magnify.

Choice I have none, I must needs
Weep if all my spirit bleeds.
Calling it a graceless part
Only stabs anew my heart.

All such medicine, dear Lord,
Is another, sharper sword.
Who my healing would insure
Will seek out a gentler cure.

Let my tears prolong their flow.
Wisdom, I most truly know,
Hath no power to console:
Only God can make me whole.

[25]

LAMENT XVIII

[26]

We are thy thankless children, gracious Lord.
The good thou dost afford
Lightly do we employ,
All careless of the one who giveth joy.

We heed not him from whom delights do flow.
Until they fade and go
We take no thought to render
That gratitude we owe the bounteous sender.

Yet keep us in thy care. Let not our pride
Cause thee, dear God, to hide
The glory of thy beauty:
Chasten us till we shall recall our duty.

Yet punish us as with a father's hand.
We mites, cannot withstand
Thine anger; we are snow,
Thy wrath, the sun that melts us in its glow.

Make us not perish thus, eternal God,
From thy too heavy rod.
Recall that thy disdain
Alone doth give thy children bitter pain.

Yet I do know thy mercy doth abound
While yet the spheres turn round,
And thou wilt never cast
Without the man who humbles him at last.

Though great and many my transgressions are,
Thy goodness greater far

LAMENT XIX

[27]

THE DREAM

Long through the night hours sorrow was my guest
And would not let my fainting body rest,
Till just ere dawn from out its slow dominions
Flew sleep to wrap me in its dear dusk pinions.
And then it was my mother did appear
Before mine eyes in vision doubly dear;
For in her arms she held my darling one,
My Ursula, just as she used to run
To me at dawn to say her morning prayer,
In her white nightgown, with her curling hair
Framing her rosy face, her eyes about
To laugh, like flowers only halfway out.

"Art thou still sorrowing, my son?" Thus spoke
My mother. Sighing bitterly, I woke,
Or seemed to wake, and heard her say once more:

"It is thy weeping brings me to this shore:
Thy lamentations, long uncomforted,
Have reached the hidden chambers of the dead,
Till I have come to grant thee some small grace
And let thee gaze upon thy daughter's face,
That it may calm thy heart in some degree
And check the grief that imperceptibly
Doth gnaw away thy health and leave thee sick,
Like fire that turns to ashes a dry wick.
Dost thou believe the dead have perished quite,
Their sun gone down in an eternal night?
Ah no, we have a being far more splendid
Now that our bodies' coarser claims are ended.
Though dust returns to dust, the spirit, given
A life eternal, must go back to heaven,
And little Ursula hath not gone out
Forever like a torch. Nay, cease thy doubt,
For I have brought her hither in the guise
She used to wear before thy mortal eyes,
Though mid the deathless angels, brighter far
She shineth as the lovely morning star;
And still she offers up her prayers for you
As here on earth, when yet no words she knew.
If herefrom springs thy sorrow, that her years
Were broken off before all that endears
A life on earth to mortals she might prove—
Yet think how empty the delights that move
The minds of men, delights that must give place
At last to sorrow, as in thine own case.
Did then thy little girl such joy confer
That all the comfort thou didst find in her
Could parallel thine anguish of today?
Thou canst not answer otherwise than nay.
Then fret not that so early death has come
To what was dearest thee in Christendom.
She did not leave a land of much delight,
But one of toil and grief and evil blight
So plenteous, that all which men can hold
Of their so transitory blessings, gold,
Must lose its value through this base alloy,
This knowledge of the grief that follows joy.

"Why do we weep, great God? That with her dower
She bought herself no lord, that she might cower
Before upbraidings from her husband's kin?
That she knew not the pangs that usher in
The newborn child? And that she could not know,
Like her poor mother, if more racking woe
It were to bear or bury them? Ah, meet
Are such delights to make the world more sweet!
But heaven hath purer, surer happiness,

[28]

Free from all intermingling of distress.
Care rules not here and here we know not toil,
Misfortune and disaster do not spoil.
Here sickness can not enter nor old age,
And death, tear-nourished, hath no pasturage.
We live a life of endless joy that brings
Good thoughts; we know the causes of all things.
The sun shines on forever here, its light
Unconquered by impenetrable night;
And the Creator in his majesty
Invisible to mortals, we may see.
Then turn thy meditations hither, towards
This changeless gladness and these rich rewards.
Thou know'st the world, what love of it can do:
Found thou thine efforts on a base more true.
Thy little girl hath chosen well her part,
Thou may'st believe, as one about to start
For the first time upon the stormy sea,
Beholding there great flux and jeopardy,
Returneth to the shore; while those that raise
Their sails, the wind or some blind crag betrays,
And this one dies from hunger, that from cold:
Scarce one escapes the perils manifold.
So she, who, though her years should have surpassed
That ancient Sybil, must have died at last,
Preferred that ending to anticipate
Before she knew the ills of man's estate.
For some are left without their parents' care,
To know how sore an orphan's lot to bear;
One girl must marry headlong, and then rue
Her dower given up to God knows who;
Some maids are seized by their own countrymen,
Others, made captive by the Tatar clan
And held thus in a pagan, shameful thrall,
Must drink their tears till death comes ending all.

"But this thy little child need fear no more,
Who, taken early up to heaven's door,
Could walk all glad and shining-pure within,
Her soul still innocent of earthly sin.
Doubt not, my son, that all is well with her,
And let not sorrow be thy conqueror.
Reason and self-command are precious still
And yielding all to blighted hope is ill.
Be in this matter thine own lord, although
Thy longed-for happiness thou must forego.
For man is born exposed to circumstance,
To be the target of all evil chance,
And if we like it or we like it not
We still can not escape our destined lot.
Nor hath misfortune singled thee, my son;
It lays its burdens upon every one.
Thy little child was mortal as thou art,
She ran her given course and did depart;
And if that course was brief, yet who can say
That she would have been happier to stay?
The ways of God are past our finding out,
Yet what He holds as good shall we misdoubt?
And when the spirit leaves us, it is vain
To weep so long; it will not come again.
And herein man is hardly just to fate,
To bear in mind what is unfortunate
In life and to forget all that transpires
In full accordance with his own desires.
And such is Fortune's power, dearest son,
That we should not lament when she hath done
A bitter turn, but thank her in that she
Hath held her hand from greater injury.
So, yielding to the common order, bar
Thy heart to more disasters than now are;
Gaze at the happiness thou dost retain:
What is not loss, that must be rated gain.

"And finally, what profits the expense
Of thy long labor and the years gone hence,
While thou didst spend thyself upon thy books
And knewest scarce how lightsome pleasure looks?

Now from thy grafting pluck the fruit and save
Something of value from frail nature's grave.
To other men in sorrow thou hast shown
The comfort left them: hast none for thine own?
Now, master, heal thyself: time is the cure
For all; but he whose wisdom doth abjure
The common ways, he should anticipate
The healing for which other men must wait.
What is time's cunning? That it drives away
Our former haps with newer ones, more gay,
Or like the old. So man by taking thought
Perceives them ere their accidents are wrought,
And by such thinking banishes the past
And views the future, quiet and steadfast.
Then bear man's portion like a man, my son,
The Lord of grief and comfort is but one."

Then I awoke, and know not if to deem
This truth itself, or but a passing dream.

[31]

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LAMENTS ***

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