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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SAPPHO: A NEW RENDERING ***

SAPPHO

A New Rendering

BY

H. DE VERE STACPOOLE

LONDON

HUTCHINSON AND CO.

PATERNOSTER ROW

SAPPHO

I

Sappho lies remote from us, beyond the fashions and the ages, beyond sight, almost beyond the wing of Thought, in the world's extremest youth.

To thrill the imagination with the vast measure of time between the world of Sappho and the world of the Great War, it is quite useless to express it in years, one must express it in æons, just as astronomers, dealing with sidereal distances, think, not in miles, but in light years.

Between us and Sappho lie the Roman Empire and the age of Christ, and beyond the cross the age of Athenian culture, culminating in the white flower of the Acropolis.

Had she travelled she might have visited Nineveh before its destruction by Cyaxares, or watched the Phœnicians set sail on their African voyage at the command of Nechos. She might have spoken with Draco and Jeremiah the Prophet and the father of Gautama the founder of Buddhism. For her the Historical Past, which is the background of all thought, held little but echoes, voices, and the forms of gods, and the immediate present little but Lesbos and the Ægean Sea, whose waters had been broken by the first trireme only a hundred and fifty years before her birth.

II

Men call her the greatest lyric poet that the world has known, basing their judgment on the few perfect fragments that remain of her song. But her voice is more than the voice of a lyric poet, it is the voice of a world that has been, of a freshness and beauty that will never be again, and to give that voice a last touch of charm remains the fact that it comes to us as an echo.

For of Sappho's poetry not a single vestige remains that does not come to us reflected in the form of a quotation from the works of some admirer, some one captured by her beauty or her wisdom or the splendour of her verse, or some one, like Herodian or Apollonius the sophist of Alexandria,

who takes it to exhibit the æolic use of words or accentuation, or Hephæstion, to give an example of her choriambic tetrameters.

Only one complete poem comes to us, the Hymn to Aphrodite quoted by Dionysius of Halicarnassus, and one almost complete, the Ode to Anactoria, quoted by Longinus; all other quotations are fragments: a few lines, a few words, a word, the merest traces.

What fate gave us the shipping lists of Homer, yet denied us Sappho; preserved the *Lexicon Græcum Iliadis et Odysseæ* of Apollonius, yet cut the song to Anactoria short, and reduced the song of the orchard to three lines? or decided that Sophists and Grammarians, exhibiting dry-as-dust truths, should be a medium between her and us?

Some say that her works were burned at Constantinople, or at Rome, by the Christians, and what we know of the early Christians lends colour to the statement. Some that they were burned by the Byzantine emperors and the poems of Gregory Nazianzen circulated in their place.

But whatever the fate it failed in its evil intention. Sappho remains, eternal as Sirius, and it is doubtful if her charm and her hold upon the world would have been strengthened by the full preservation of her work.

As it is, added to the longing which all great art inspires, we have the longing inspired by suggestion. That lovely figure belonging to the feet she shows us "crossed by a brodered strap of Lydian work," would it have been as beautiful unveiled as imagined? Did she long for maidenhood? Why did the swallow trouble her, and what did the daughter of Cyprus say to her in a dream?

There is not a fragment of Sappho that is not surrounded in the mind of the reader by the rainbow of suggestion. Just as the gods draped the human form to give desire imagination, so, perhaps, some god and no fate has all but hidden the mind of Sappho.

III

Looking at it in another way one might fancy that all the demons of malignity and destruction had conspired to destroy and traduce: to destroy the works and traduce the character of the poet.

The game of defamation was begun in Athens in the age of corruption by lepers, and carried on through the succeeding ages by their kind, till Welcker came with his torch and showed these gibbering ghosts standing on nothing and with nothing in their hands.

Colonel Mure tried to put Welcker's torch out, and only burned his fingers. Comparetti snuffed it, only to make it burn the brighter. But bright or dim, the torch was only intended to show the lepers. Sappho shines by her own light in the minutest fragments of her that remain—Fragments whose deathless energy, like the energy of radium, has vivified literature in all ages and times.

IV

The mind of Sappho runs through all literature like a spangled thread.

**THE HYMN TO APHRODITE AND FIFTY-TWO FRAGMENTS,
TOGETHER WITH SAPPHO TO PHAON,
OVID'S HEROIC EPISTLE XV**

FOREWORD

Tear the red rose to pieces if you will,
The soul that is the rose you may not kill;
Destroy the page, you may, but not the words
That share eternal life with flowers and birds.

And the least words of Sappho—let them fall,
Cast where you will, some bird will rise and call,
Some flower unfold in some forsaken spot.
Hill hyacinth, or blue forget-me-not.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION
FOREWORD

- I. HYMN TO APHRODITE
II. ODE TO ANACTORIA
III. WHERE BLOOMS THE MYRTLE
IV. I LOVED THEE
V. INVOCATION
VI. CLAÏS
VII. TO A SWALLOW
VIII. LOVE
IX. WEDDING SONG
X. EVENING
XI. MAIDENHOOD
XII. MOONLIGHT
XIII. ORCHARD SONG
XIV. DICA
XV. GRACE
XVI. AS ON THE HILLS
XVII. TO ATTHIS
XVIII. AS WIND UPON THE MOUNTAIN OAKS
XIX. GOODNESS
XX. THE FISHERMAN'S TOMB
XXI. TIMAS
XXII. DEAD SHALT THOU LIE
XXIII. DEATH
XXIV. ALCÆUS AND SAPPHO
XXV. THE ALTAR
XXVI. THE ALTAR
XXVII. LOVE
XXVIII. LIKE THE SWEET APPLE
XXIX. PROPHECY
XXX. FOR THEE
XXXI. FRIEND
XXXII. THE MOON HAS SET
XXXIII. THE SKY
XXXIV. TO HER LYRE
XXXV. NEVER ON ANY MAIDEN
XXXVI. * * *
XXXVII. ANGER
XXXVIII. ADONIS
XXXIX. LEDA
XL. THE CAPTIVE
XLI. INVOCATION
XLII. YOUTH AND AGE
XLIII. FRAGMENT
XLIV. THE LESBIAN SINGER
XLV. ON THE TOMB OF A PRIESTES OF ARTEMIS
XLVI. TO A BRIDE
XLVII. HERMES
XLVIII. ADONIS
XLIX. SLEEP
L. THY FORM IS LOVELY
LI. THE BRIDEGROOM
LII. REGRET
LIII. FRAGMENT
LIV. SAPPHO TO PHAON

I

HYMN TO APHRODITE

Daughter of Zeus and Immortal,
Aphrodite, serene
Weaver of spells, at thy portal
Hear me and slay not, O Queen!

As in the past, hither to me
From thy far palace of gold,
Drawn by the doves that o'erflew me,
Come, as thou earnest of old.

Swiftly thy flock bore thee hither,

Smiling, as turned I to thee,
Spoke thou across the blue weather,
"Sappho, why callest thou me?"

"Sappho, what Beauty disdains thee,
Sappho, who wrongest thine heart,
Sappho, what evil now pains thee,
Whence sped the dart?"

"Flies from thee, soon she shall follow,
Turns from thee, soon she shall love,
Seeking thee swift as the swallow,
Ingrate though now she may prove."

Come, once again to release me,
Join with my fire thy fire,
Freed from the torments that seize me,
Give me, O Queen! my desire!

II

ODE TO ANACTORIA

That man, whoever he may be,
Who sits awhile to gaze on thee,
Hearing thy lovely laugh, thy speech,
Throned with the gods he seems to me;
For when a moment to mine eyes
Thy form discloses, silently
I stand consumed with fires that rise
Like flames around a sacrifice.
Sight have I none, bells out of tune
Ring in mine ears, my tongue lies dumb;
Paler than grass in later June,
Yet daring all
(To thee I come).

III

WHERE BLOOMS THE MYRTLE

O Muse, upon thy golden throne,
Far in the azure, fair, alone.
Sing what the Teian sweetly sang,—
The Teian sage whose lineage sprang
Where blooms the myrtle in the gay
Land of fair women far away.

IV

I LOVED THEE

I loved thee, Atthis, once,
once long ago.

V

INVOCATION

Goddess of Cyprus come (where beauty lights
The way) and serve in cups of gold these lips
With nectar, mixed by love with all delights
Of golden days, and dusk of amorous nights.

VI

CLAÏS

I have a daughter,
Claïs fair,
Poised like a golden flower in air,
Lydian treasures her limbs outshine
(Claïs, beloved one,
Claïs mine!)

VII

TO A SWALLOW

Pandion's daughter—O fair swallow,
Why dost thou weary me—
(Where should I follow?)

VIII

LOVE

Sweet mother, at the idle loom I lean,
Weary with longing for the boy that still
Remains a dream of loveliness—to fill
My soul, my life, at Aphrodite's will.

IX

WEDDING SONG

Workmen lift high
The beams of the roof,
Hymenæus!

Like Ares from sky
Comes the groom to the bride.
Hymenæus!

Than men who must die
Stands he taller in pride,
Hymenæus!

X

EVENING

Children astray to their mothers, and goats to the herd,
Sheep to the shepherd, through twilight the wings of the bird,
All things that morning has scattered with fingers of gold,
All things thou bringest, O Evening! at last to the fold.

XI

MAIDENHOOD

Maidenhood! Maidenhood! where hast thou gone from me.
Whither, O Slain!

I shall return to thee, I who have gone from thee, never again.

XII

MOONLIGHT

The stars around the fair moon fade
Against the night,
When gazing full she fills the glade
And spreads the seas with silvery light.

XIII

ORCHARD SONG

Cool murmur of water through apple-wood
Troughs without number
The whole orchard fills, whilst the leaves
Lend their music to slumber.

XIV

DICA

With flowers fair adorn thy lustrous hair,
Dica, amidst thy locks sweet blossoms twine,
With thy soft hands, for so a maiden stands
Accepted of the gods, whose eyes divine
Are turned away from her—though fair as May
She waits, but round whose locks no flowers shine.

XV

GRACE

What country maiden charms thy heart,
However fair, however sweet,
Who has not learned by gracious Art
To draw her dress around her feet?

XVI

AS ON THE HILLS

As on the hills the shepherds trample the hyacinth down,
Staining the earth with darkness, there where a flower has blown.

XVII

TO ATTHIS

Hateful my face is to thee,
Hateful to thee beyond speaking,
Atthis, who fliest from me
Like a white bird Andromeda seeking.

XVIII

AS WIND UPON THE MOUNTAIN OAKS

As wind upon the mountain oaks in storm,
So Eros shakes my soul, my life, my form.

XIX

GOODNESS

He who is fair is good to look upon;
He who is good is fair, though youth be gone.

XX

THE FISHERMAN'S TOMB

Over the fisher Pelagon Meniscus his father set
The oar worn by the wave, the trap, and the fishing net;—
For all men, and for ever, memorials there to be
Of the luckless life of the fisher, the labourer of the sea.

XXI

TIMAS

This is the dust of Tunas, who, unwed,
Passed hence to Proserpina's house of gloom.
In mourning all her sorrowing playmates shed
Their curls and cast the tribute on her tomb.

XXII

DEAD SHALT THOU LIE

Dead shalt thou lie for ever, and forgotten,
For whom the flowers of song have never bloomed;
A wanderer amidst the unbegotten,
In Hades' house a shadow ay entombed.

XXIII

DEATH

Death is an evil, for the gods choose breath;
Had Death been good the gods had chosen Death.

XXIV

ALCÆUS AND SAPPHO

ALCÆUS

Seet violet-weaving Sappho, whose soft smile
My tongue should free,
Lo, I would speak, but shame holds me the while
I gaze on thee.

SAPPHO

Hadst thou but felt desire of noble things,
Hadst not thy tongue proposed to speak no good,
Thy words had not been destitute of wings,
Nor shame thine eyes subdued.

XXV

THE ALTAR

Then the full globed moon arose, and there
The women stood as round an altar fair.

XXVI

THE ALTAR

And thus at times, in Crete, the women there
Circle in dance around the altar fair;
In measured movement, treading as they pass
With tender feet the soft bloom of the grass.

XXVII

LOVE

All delicacy unto me is lovely, and for me,
O Love!
Thy wings are as the midday fire,
Thy splendour as the sun above.

XXVIII

LIKE THE SWEET APPLE

Like the sweet apple that reddens
At end of the bough—
Far end of the bough—
Left by the gatherer's swaying,
Forgotten, so thou.
Nay, not forgotten, ungotten,
Ungathered (till now).

XXIX

PROPHECY

Methinks hereafter in some later spring
Echo will bear to men the songs we sing.

XXX

FOR THEE

For thee, unto the altar will I lead
A white goat—
 To the altar by the sea;
And there, where waves advance and waves recede,
A full libation will I pour for thee.

XXXI

FRIEND

Friend, face me so and raise
Unto my face thy face,
Unto mine eyes thy gaze,
Unto my soul its grace.

XXXII

THE MOON HAS SET

The moon has set beyond the seas,
And vanished are the Pleiades;
Half the long weary night has gone,
Time passes—yet I lie alone.

XXXIII

THE SKY

I think not with these two
White arms to touch the blue.

XXXIV

TO HER LYRE

Singing, O shell, divine!
Let now thy voice be mine.

XXXV

NEVER ON ANY MAIDEN

Never on any maiden, the golden sun shall shine,
Never on any maiden whose wisdom matches thine.

XXXVI

* * *

I spoke with Aphrodite in a dream.

XXXVII

ANGER

When anger stirs thy breast,
Speak not at all
(For words, once spoken, rest
Beyond recall).

XXXVIII

ADONIS

Ah for Adonis!
(Where the willows sigh
The call still comes
Through spring's sweet mystery.)

XXXIX

LEDA

They say, 'neath leaf and blossom
Leda found in the gloom
An egg, white as her bosom,
Under an iris bloom.

XL

THE CAPTIVE

Now Love has bound me, trembling, hands and feet,
O Love so fatal, Love so bitter-sweet.

XLI

INVOCATION

Come to me, O ye graces,
Delicate, tender, fair;
Come from your heavenly places,
Muses with golden hair.

XLII

YOUTH AND AGE

If love thou hast for me, not hate,
Arise and find a younger mate;
For I no longer will abide
Where youth and age lie side by side.

XLIII

FRAGMENT

From heaven returning;
Red of hue, his chlamys burning
Against the blue.

XLIV

THE LESBIAN SINGER

Upstanding, as the Lesbian singer stands
Above the singers of all other lands.

XLV

ON THE TOMB OF A PRIESTESS OF ARTEMIS

Voiceless I speak, and from the tomb reply
Unto Æthopia, Leto's child, was I
Vowed by the daughter of Hermocleides,
Who was the son of Saonaiades.
O virgin queen, unto my prayer incline,
Bless him and cast thy blessing on our line.

XLVI

TO A BRIDE

Bride, around whom the rosy loves are flying,
Sweet image of the Cyprian undying,
The bed awaits thee; go, and with him lying,
Give to the groom thy sweetness, softly sighing.
May Hesperus in gladness pass before thee,
And Hera of the silver throne bend o'er thee.

XLVII

HERMES

Ambrosia there was mixed, and from his station
Hermes the bowl for waiting gods outpoured;
Then raised they all their cups and made oblation,
Blessing the bridegroom (by the bride adored).

XLVIII

ADONIS

Tender Adonis stricken is lying.
What, Cytherea, now can we do?
Beat your breasts, maidens, Adonis is dying,
Rending your garments (the white fragments strew).

XLIX

SLEEP

With eyes of darkness,
The sleep of night.

L

THY FORM IS LOVELY

Thy form is lovely and thine eyes are honeyed,
O'er thy face the pale
Clear light of love lies like a veil.
Bidding thee rise,
With outstretched hands,
Before thee Aphrodite stands.

LI

THE BRIDEGROOM

Joy born of marriage thou provest,
Bridegroom thrice blest,
Holding the maiden thou lovest
Clasped to thy breast.

LII

REGRET

Those unto whom I have given,
These have my heart most riven.

LIII

FRAGMENT

Upon thy girl friend's white and tender breast,
Sleep thou, and on her bosom find thy rest.

LIV

SAPPHO TO PHAON

A NEW RENDERING OF OVID'S HEROIC EPISTLE, XV.

I

Phaon, most lovely, closest to my heart,
Can your dear eyes forget, or must I stand
Confessed in name, beloved that thou art,
Lost to my touch and in another land.
Sappho now calls thee, lyre and Lyric Muse
Forgotten, and the tears born of her wrongs
Blinding her eyes, upturned but to refuse
Phœbus, the fountain of all joyous songs.

I burn, as when in swiftmess, past the byres,
Flame takes the corn, borne by the winds that blow;
For what are Ætna's flames to my desires,
Thou, who by Ætna wanderest, O Thou!
The Lyric Muse has turned, as I from her,
Peace, Peace alone can join us once again,
The blue sea in its solitude lies fair,
But, desolate, I turn from it in pain.
No more the girls of Lesbos move my heart,
My blameless love for them is now no more,
Before my love for thee all loves depart,
Cold wanderer thou upon a distant shore.

O thou art lovely! wert thou garbed like him,
Apollo by thy side a shade would be.
Garland thy tresses with the ivy dim
And Bacchus would be less himself, by thee.
Apollo, yet, who bent, as Bacchus fell,
One to the Cretan, one to Daphne's fire,
Beside me, what are they? I cast my spell
O'er seas and lands, the music of my lyre
Echoes across the world where mortals dwell,
Renders the earth in tune with my desire.

Alcæus strikes Olympus with his song,
Boldly and wild his music finds its star.
Unto the human does my voice belong
And Aphrodite smiles on me from far.
Have I no charms? has genius lost her touch
To turn simplicity to beauty's zone?
Am I so small, whose towering height is such
That in the world of men I stand alone?

Yea, I am brown—an Æthiopian's face
Turned Perseus from his path, a flame of fire.
White doves or dark, which hath the finer grace?
Are they not equal, netted by desire?

If by no charm except thine own sweet charm
Thou can'st be moved, ah then, alas, for me!
Fires of the earth thy coldness will not warm,
And Phaon's self must Phaon's lover be.

Yet once, ah once! forgetful of the world,
You lay engirdled by this world of mine,
Those nights remain, be earth to darkness hurled,
Deathless, as passion's ecstasy divine.
My songs around you were the only birds,
My voice the only music, in your fire
With kisses, burning yet, you killed my words
And found my kisses sweeter than desire.
I filled you with delight, when close embraced;
In the last act of love I gave you heaven,
And yet again, delirious as we faced,
And yet again, till in exhaustion, even
Love's self half died and nothing more remained,
But earth and life half lost, and heaven gained.

And now, Sicilian girls—O heart of mine,
Why was I born so far from Sicily?—
Sicilian girls, unto my words incline,
Beware of smiles, of insincerity,
Beware the words that once belonged to me,
The fruits of passion and the seeds of grief;
O Cyprian by the fair Sicilian sea,
Sappho now calls thee, turn to her relief!

Shall Fortune still pursue me, luckless one,
With hounds of woe pursue me down the years?
Sorrow was mine since first I saw the sun,
The ashes of my parents knew my tears.
My brother cast the gifts of life away
For one unworthy of all gifts but gold,
Grief follows grief and on this woeful day
An infant daughter in my arms I hold.

Fates! What more can ye do, what more essay?
Phaon! ah yes, he is the last, I know.
The first, the all, the grave that once was gay,
The dark veil o'er my purple robe ye throw,
My curls no more are curls, nor scent the air
With perfume from the flowers Egyptians grow,
The gold that bound these locks of mine so fair
Has parted for the wind these locks to blow.
All arts of love were mine when he was by,
Whose sun is now the sun of Sicily.

Phaon! when I was born, the mystic three
Called Aphrodite on my birth to gaze,
And then the Cyprian, turning, called on thee
To be my fate and fill my dreams and days.
Thou for whose sake Aurora's eyes might turn
From Cephalus, or Cynthia give thee sleep,
Pouring oblivion from night's marble urn,
Bidding Endymion to watch thy sheep!

—Lo! as I write I weep, and nought appears
But Love, half veiled by broken words and tears.

You! you! who left me without kiss or tear
Or word, to murmur softly like a child
Begotten of thy voice, deception were
Less cruel far than silence, you who smiled
Falsely so often, had you no false phrase—
You who so often had false tales to tell—
No voice there, at the parting of our ways,
To say "Farewell, O Love!" or just "Farewell"!

I had no gift to give you when you passed,
And wrongs were all the gifts received from thee,
I had no words to tell you at the last
But these: "Forgo not life, forget not me."
And when I heard, told by some casual tongue,
That thou wert gone, Grief turned me then to stone,
Voiceless I stood as though I ne'er had sung,
Pulseless and lost, for ever more alone.
Without a sigh, without a tear to shed,
Grief held me, Grief who has no word to say.

Then, rising as one rises from the dead,
My soul broke forth as one breaks forth to slay.
Rending and wounding all this frame of mine,
Cursing the Gods, the moments and the years,
Now like the clouds of storm, where lightnings shine,
Uplifted, then resolving into tears.
Debased, when turns my brother in his scorn
My grief to laughter, pointing to my child;
Till madness takes me as the fire the corn
And, in reviling thee, I stand reviled.
Ah! but at night, At night I turn to thee.
In dreams our limbs are joined, as flame with flame,
In dreams again your arms are girdling me,
I taste your soul in joys I blush to name.

Ah! but the day that follows on the night,
The emptiness that drives me to the plain
To seek those spots that knew my lost delight,
The grotto that shall shield us not again.

Here lies the grass we pressed in deeds of love,
Lips, limbs entwined—I kiss the ground to-day.
The herbs lie withered, and the birds that move
Are songless, and the very trees are grey.
Night takes the day and falls upon the groves,
The nightingale alone is left to cry,
Lamenting, in the song that sorrow loves,
To Tereus she calls, to Phaon, I.

II

There is a spring, through whose cool water shows
The sand like silver, clear as seen through air.
There is a spring, above whose mirror grows
A lotus like a grove in flower fair.
Here, as I lay in tears, a spirit stood
Born of the water, then she called to me,
Sappho, pursuing Love, by Grief pursued,
Sappho, beside the blue Leucadian sea
There stands a rock, and there above the caves,
Whose wandering echoes reach Apollo's fane,
Down leaping to the blue and breaking waves,
Lovers find sleep, nor dream of love again.
Deucalion here found ease from Pyrrah's scorn,
Sappho arise, and where the sharp cliffs fall,
Thy body, that had better not been born,
Cast to the waves, the blue, blue waves that call.
I rise, and weeping silently, I go.
My fear is great, my love is greater still.
Better oblivion than the love I know,
Kinder than Phaon's is the blue wave's will.

Ye favouring breezes, guard me on this day,
Love, lend your pinions, waft me o'er the sea
Where, lovely Phœbus, on thy shrine I'll lay
My lyre, with this inscription unto thee:
"Sappho to Phœbus consecrates her lyre,
Unto the God the gift, the fire to fire."

III

Alas! and woe is me.
 But must I go?
O Phaon, Phœbus' self to me is less
Than Phaon—will you cast me down below
All broken, for the cruel rocks to press

This breast, that loved thee, ruined?—Ah! the song
Born of the Muses leaves me and the lyre
Is voiceless—they no more to me belong,
And in this darkness dies the heavenly fire.

Farewell, ye girls of Lesbos, fare ye well;
No more the groves shall answer to my song,
No more these hands shall wake the lyre to tell
Of Love, of Life—to Phaon they belong,
And he has fled.

 O Loveliness, return,
Make once again my soul to sing in joy,
Feed once again this heart with fires that burn,
Gods! can no prayers avail but to destroy,

No songs bring back the lost, no sighs recall
The lost that was my love, my life, my all?

Return! Return! Raise to the wind thy sail,
Across the sea bring back to me the years,
Eros shall lend to thee the favouring gale,
The track is sure where Aphrodite steers.
Let thy white sail be lifted on the rim
Of sky that marks the dark dividing seas.
Failing that far-off sail, remain the dim
Blue depths where once Deucalion found release.
Failing that far-off sail, the waves shall give
Death, or Forgetfulness, whilst still I live.

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SAPPHO: A NEW RENDERING ***

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