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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE EVENING HOURS ***

THE EVENING HOURS

BY

ÉMILE VERHAEREN

AUTHOR OF

"THE SUNLIT HOURS," "AFTERNOON," ETC.

TRANSLATED BY

CHARLES R. MURPHY

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MES CÔTÉS

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THE EVENING HOURS

I

Tender flowers, light as the sea's foam,
Graced our garden way;
The lapsing wind would give your hands caress
And with your hair would play.

The shade was kind to our united steps
That wandered soberly;
And from the village a child's song arose
To fill infinity.

Our ponds extended in the autumn light
Beneath the guarding reed,
And the wood's forehead showed its mobile crown
To pools upon the mead.

And we, who knew our hearts were murmuring
In union but one prayer,
Thought that it was our peaceful life the eve
Showed unveiled there.

Supremely then you saw the sky aglow
For a farewell caress;
And long and long you looked on it with eyes
Filled with mute tenderness.

II

If it be true
That garden flower or meadow tree
May hold still any memory
Of lovers past who once looked on
Their splendour or their purity,
So shall our love return once more
In that long hour of long regret
To give the rose, or in the oak restore,
Its sweetness or its strength,
Ere death come yet.

Thus shall it survive unconquered
Within the glory that belongs to simple things,
And find a joy again, in light that cleaves

The sky on summer break of day,
And find a joy again
In the sweet rain
That dwells in drops on hanging leaves.

And if on some fair eve, from depths of space,
Should come two lovers hand in hand,
The oak, like a large and puissant wing
Would reach its shadow out to where they stand,
And the rose would give them of its perfumed grace.

III

Dead is the glycin and the hawthorne flower;
But now is the time when heather-bloom is seen,
And on this so calm eve the rustling wind
Brings you the fragrance of the starved Campine.

Love and breathe them, thinking of its fate;
Over that rugged soil the storm-wind lives;
Sand and sea have made of it their prey,
Yet of the little left, it ever gives.

Of old, though autumn came, we dwelled with it,
With plain and forest, with the storm and light,
Until the angels of the Christmas time
Inscribed its legend with their winged flight.

Your heart became more simple and more sure;
We loved the villagers and the forlorn
Old women who would speak of their great age
And of old spinning-wheels their hands had worn.

Our quiet house upon the misty heath
Was frank and welcoming to all who came;
Its roof was dear to us, its door and sill,
And hearth long blackened by familiar flame.

When over vast, pale, measureless repose
The total splendour of the night was set,
A lesson of deep silence we received,
Whose ardour never shall our souls forget.

Since we were more alone amid the plain,
The dawn and evening entered more our thought,
Our eyes were franker and our hearts more sweet
And with the world's desire more fully fraught.

We found content in not exacting it;
The sadness, even, of the days was kind,
And the rare sunlight of the autumn's end
Charmed us the more that it seemed weak and blind.

Dead is the glycin and the hawthorne flower;
But now are the days when heather-bloom is seen,
Remember these, and let the rustling wind
Bring you the fragrance of the starved Campine.

IV

Draw your chair to mine
And stretch your hands to the hearth',
That I may see between your fingers
Shine
The ancient flame;
And look upon the fire
Quietly, with your eyes

That have no fear of any light,
So that for me they be the same,
Yet franker when the blaze leaps higher
Making them as from deep within you, bright.

Ah, how fair still is our life and fain!
When the clock strikes out its notes of gold
And I approach you and as a flower hold;
And a fever slow and pure,
Which we will not to restrain,
Leads the kiss, marvellous and sure,
From hand to brow, from brow to lips again.

How well I love you, O my clear beloved,
Your swooning body, caressing and caressed,
In whose depth of joy I almost drown.
All is more dear to me, your lips, your arms close-pressed,
And your kind bosom whereon my tired head
After the rapture you bestow, sinks down
Quietly, near your heart to find its rest.

I love you still more after love's sharp pain
When your goodness still more sure and motherly
Brings repose to passion's ardency,
And, when desire has cried aloud its will,
I hear approach familiar joy again,
With steps that almost silence are, it is so still.

V

Be kind and comforting to us, oh light!
And bathe our foreheads now, oh wintry ray!
When we two issue forth this afternoon
To breathe together the last warmth of day.

We loved you formerly with such a pride,
With such a love as our two souls could lend,
That a supreme and sweet and friendly flame
Is due us now that we await the end.

You are that which no man may forget,
From dawn that smites his arm unconquered
To evening when you sleep within his eyes
Your strength abolished and your splendour dead.

Always for us you were the seen desire
Spreading through all, luminous and free,
That with impassioned ardour deep and high
Seemed from our heart to seek infinity.

VI

Alas the time of crimson phlox is past
And of proud roses brightening the gate.
What matter? Still I love with all my heart
Our garden, tho' deflow'ed and desolate.

More dear than are the joyous summer noons,
My garden is that now forlornly grieves;
Oh the last perfumes languidly exhaled
By a late flower in the lingering leaves!

This evening I wandered in the paths
Over the plants my fervent touch to pass,
And falling on my knees I pressed my lips
To the wet earth among the trembling grass.

And now that it is dying and the night
Has misted all the garden with its breath,
My being that so dwells in all this ruin
Shall learn to die in sharing thus its death.

VII

The evening falls, the moon is gold....

Before the day is spent
Go out and wander in the garden walks
And pluck with gentle hands
The few remaining flowers that on their stalks
Are not yet sadly bent toward the mould.

What matter if their foliage be wan?
We still admire and love,
And still their chalices are beautiful above
The stems they rest upon.

You wander mid the borders here and there
Along a lonely path,
And the flowers you bear
Tremble in your hand that shudders as it takes.
And now your dreamy fingers
Reverently shape the sere
Roses wherein autumn lingers,
Weaving them with many a tear,
Into a crown of pale, clear flakes.

The last light dwells upon your eyes and brow
And your slow steps are sad and quiet now....

Slowly, at the vesper, through the gloam,
With empty hands you wandered home,
Leaving, upon a little humid mound,
On the path that to our doorway led,
The pale circlet that your fingers bound.
And I knew that in our garden perished,
Where winds now pass like cohorts over-head,
You would give flower again for one last time,
To our youth that lies upon the ground
Dead....

VIII

When you store away in fragrant shelves,
Some autumn eve, the fruits of orchard trees,
I seem to see you calmly ranging there
Our old, but fresh and perfumed memories.

And love returns for them as once they were,
The wind on lips and sunlight in my eyes;
I see the vanished moments once again,
Their joy, their mirth, their fevers and their cries.

The past comes back to life with such desire
To be the present with its force again,
That half-extinct fires burn with sudden flame,
My heart exults and swoons as though in pain.

Oh fruits that glow amid the autumn shadows,
Jewels fallen from the summer's string
Of gems, illumining our sombre hours,
What red awakening is this you bring!

IX

Fallen is the leafage from above
That covered all the garden with its shade;
See, between the naked boughs far off
The village roofs to the horizon fade.

While summer flamed its joy, neither of us
Saw them clustered there so near our home;
But to-day, with leaf and flower dead,
Into our thinking they more often come.

Others are living there behind those walls
And those worn thresholds with the porch above,
Having for only friends the wind and rain
And the lighted lamp to give them love.

In the fall of eve, when fires are lit,
And the pauses of the clock they heed,
Dear, as to us, the silence is to them,
The thoughts within their eyes that they may read.

Those hours of intimacy naught disturbs,
Of tender and profound tranquillity,
Blessing the instant past for having been
And finding dearer yet the one to be.

See how they hold between their trembling hands
A happiness of pain and pleasure born;
Known to each the other's body old
And aged eyes by the same sorrows worn.

The flowers of their life, they love them faded,
The final perfume and the beauty brief,
And heavy memory of glory waning,
Wasting in time's garden, leaf by leaf.

Deep in their warmth of human feeling hid,
From the winter sheltered and reduse,
Nothing abases them or makes them pine
And plead for days they are content to lose.

The quiet folk of those old villages,
What neighbours are they to our happiness!
And how we find our own tears in their eyes,
Our strength and ardour in their fearlessness!

Down there, beneath their roofs, by window-side
Or seated by the glowing fireside, thus,
Perhaps on such a night of wind and wet,
What we have thought of them they think of us.

X

When the star-lit heaven broods above our house
We sit in silence during many hours
Beneath its soft intensity of light
To feel more ardent still these selves of ours.

The silver stars are drifting on their way;
Beneath their flame and all their glistening
The great night is deeper and more deep;
Such calm there is, the sea is listening!

What matter if the sea itself be still,
If in this infinity so fair,
Pregnant now with yet unvisioned power,
Our beating hearts make all the silence there?

XI

That very love which made you be for me
A splendid garden wherein moving tree,
Made shadow over sward and docile rose,
Makes you the shelter where I now repose.

There garnered are your flowers of desire,
Your lucent goodness and your gentle fire;
But all within a peace profound are furled
Against harsh winter winds that scar the world.

My happiness is warmed within your arms;
Each little tender word you whisper charms
My ear with as familiar a delight
As in the time when lilacs blossomed white.

Your clear and merry humour daily cheers
And triumphs over the distress of years;
And you yourself smile at the silver hairs
That your lovely head so gaily wears.

When to my searching kiss your head you bow,
I care not for the lines that mark your brow,
Nor for a vein that traces its bold line
Upon your hands now safely held in mine.

You fear not; and you know most certainly
That nothing dies that dares love loyally,
And that the flame which nourishes us so
Feeds upon ruin's self that it may grow.

XII

Those clear welcoming flowers along the wall's extent
Will be no longer waiting for us at our return;
The silken waters that prolonged till they were spent,
Under a pure sweet sky no longer reach and yearn.

Of our melancholy plains the flying birds are shy;
Over the marshes pale mists begin to crawl;
Autumn, winter! Winter, autumn!—oh the cry!
In the forest do you hear the dead wood fall?

Our garden is no longer bridegroom of the light,
Where once we saw the phlox in glorious surge and flare;
Gladioli, in dust, once violent, upright,
Lingeringly have lain them down to perish there.

All is without strength or beauty, without fire,
Fleeing and quailing and crumbling and passing sadly by;
Oh, turn on me your eyes of light, for I desire
There to seek a comer of our early sky!

It is there alone our light may still abide,
The light that filled the garden once for you and me,
Long ago, when our lily lifted its white pride
And hollyhocks were an ascending ardency.

XIII

When the diamond grains of fresh snow

On our threshold lie,
I hear your steps that come and go
In the room near by.

You move the clear mirror that beside
The window stood,
And your bunch of keys strikes the drawer
Of the chest of wood.

I hear you stirring now the fire—
The live coal flares;
And hear you place by silent walls
The silent chairs.

I hear you wipe the dust from objects
As you pass,
And your ring resounds against the side
Of a vibrant glass.

And happier am I still, this eve,
With your presence dear—
To feel you close, and not to see,
But always hear.

XIV

If fate has saved us from the banal sins
Of cowardly untruth and sad pretence,
It is because we would have no constraint
Whose yoke should bend our will with violence.

Free and sunlit on your road you fared,
Strewing with flowers of will your flowers of love;
Pausing to sustain me when my head
Bowed to the weight of doubt or fear above.

Always you were of gesture kind and frank,
Knowing my heart for you forever burned;
For if I loved another—could it be?—
Always it was to your heart I returned.

So pure your eyes were in their weeping that
My truth to you became my only lord;
I spoke to you then sweet and sacred words,
Your sorrow and your pardon were your sword.

I fell asleep at evening on your breast,
Glad with return from distance false and bleak
To warmth of spring within us, glad within
Your open arms captivity to seek.

XV

No, my soul has never tired of you!

In the time of June you said to me:
"If I thought, beloved, if I thought
That my love would ever weary you,
With my sad thoughts and my lonely heart,
No matter where, I should depart...."

And sweetly sought the kiss I gave anew.

And you said again:
"One loses everything, life would repay;
What though it be of gold,
The chain

That in one harbour's ring can hold
Our human ships to-day?"

And sweetly wept for pain you could not say.

And you said
Again and yet again:
"Let us separate, before we be untrue;
Our life's too pure and high
To draw it out from fault to fault, and drain
It wearily away...." You sought to fly
From me whose desperate hands strove to retain.

No, my soul has never tired of you!

XVI

Ah, we are happy still and proud to live
When the last ray, that's seen and then is lost,
Brightens an instant the poor flowers of rime
Engraved upon our window by the frost.

Life leaps within us and hope sweeps us on;
And our garden, though it be now old,
Though its paths be strewn with fallen boughs,
Seems living, pure and dear and lit with gold.

Something invades our blood, intrepid, bright,
And urges us to incarnate again
Immense, full summer in the fervid kiss
That desperately we give each other then.

XVII

Alas, must we accept the weight of years
And find us nothing more than tranquil folk
Who give each other infantile caress
At eve, when hearth is quick with flame and smoke?

Our dear belongings, shall they see us then
Creeping from the hearth to wooden chest,
To reach the window leaning on the wall,
Sitting to give our tottering bodies rest?

If such a day must then affirm our ruin
And show the torpor brain or body fears,
In spite of this fate we shall not complain,
But keep within our breasts our captive tears.

For we shall guard these eyes of ours to watch
For morn to follow night so pitiful,
And see the sun of dawn burn on this life,
Making of earth itself a miracle.

XVIII

All little facts, the things of no account,
A letter, date, an anniversary,
A word that's spoken as on days long past,
Exalt, on these long evenings, you and me.

We solemnise, we two, these simple things
And count and recount all these gems of ours,

So that what is left of our high selves
May face valiantly these sombre hours.

And we are jealous more than it is meet
Of these poor, gentle, friendly memories
Who seat themselves with us beside the fire
With winter flowers laid across thin knees.

And the bread of happiness which once
We did partake of, now they sit and eat;
The bread on which our love has fed so long
That now it finds the very crumbs are sweet.

XIX

Come to our threshold now, oh snow,
Strew thy pallid ash,
Oh peaceful and slow falling snow;
The linden in the garden hangs its branches low
And to the sky no flights of wood-larks go.

Oh snow,
Who warmest and dost shield
The corn that is hardly sprung
With the moss, with the down
Strewn on the spreading field!
Silent snow, oh friendly one
To houses sleeping in the morning calm,
Cover our roof and brush our window-frames;
Oh luminous snow, into our very soul
To find a way do thou not scorn,
Snow that warmest still our last of dreams
Like the springing corn.

XX

When our clear garden lifted up its flow'rs
The self-accusations made by each
For failure of our love, broke into speech
In passionate hours;
And needed pardon offered and new peace
And explanations of our miseries
And tears that wet our sad and truthful eyes
Gave love increase.
But in these months of dreary rain
When all retires to earth again,
When even light is fain
To find its war with darkness vain,
No longer are our souls so strong and proud
That, rapturously, they should confess aloud.

In lowered voice our sins we say,
Though still in tenderness, not scorn;
But 'tis at twilight now and not at morn.
Sometimes we even count them, wrong by wrong,
Like things that one counts over
And puts away;
And their folly or their hurt to cover
We argue long.

XXI

With withered hands I touch your brow

And part your hair and kiss—(as the day dies
And you are briefly sleeping by the hearth)
Beneath long lashes hid, your fervent eyes.

Oh the dear tenderness of sinking day!
I think of the long years whose flight we saw,
And suddenly your life in them appears
So perfect that my love is filled with awe.

And as in that time when we were betrothed,
Ardour again is in me and has brought
Desire to kneel and touch your beating breast
With fingers that are chaste as is my thought.

XXII

Our hearts once burned in joyous days
With love as luminous as high,
But age to-day has made us weak
With faults we dare deny.

Thou dost not nourish us, oh will,
By thine ardour in the strife,
But soft benevolence alone
Colours now our life.

We near thy brink of setting, Love,
And try to hide our frailty's pain
In banal words and poor discourse
Of wisdom slow and vain.

How sad the future then would be,
If when our days grow wintrier
There flame not forth the memory
Of the proud souls we were.

XXIII

This wrinkled winter when the ruined sun
Founders in the west and sinks below,
I love to say your name, so grave and slow,
While the clock strikes another day now done.

And saying it so ravishes my voice
That from my lips it sinks into my heart,
And among all sweet words that there have part,
Makes me the most ardently rejoice.

And in the wind of dawn or evening's breath
Changeless I reiterate the theme;
Oh, think with what a passion, strong, supreme,
Shall I pronounce it at the hour of death!

XXIV

Perhaps,
On my last day,
Perhaps,
Across my window sill,
The sunlight frail and still
Will fall and for a moment stay....

My hands—my hands then poor and withered—

By its glory will be made to gold;
Slowly its kiss will glide, profound and bright,
For the last time upon my mouth and head;
And the flowers of my eyes, pale yet bold,
Before they close, shall render back its light.

Sun, I loved your strength and clarity, indeed!
My sweet and fiery poems at their height
Have held you captive in the heart of them;
Like field of wheat that surges in the might
Of summer wind my words exalted you.
Oh sun, who bring to birth and flower the stem,
Oh immense friend, of whom our pride has need,
In that so grave, imperious hour and new,
When my old heart sadly endures the test,
Be you still its witness and its guest!

XXV

Clasped about my neck and harbouring my breast,
Ah your so dear hands now and their slow caress,
When I tell you, in the evening, how my strength
Grows leaden day by day with weight of feebleness!

You wish it not that I become shadow and ruin
Like all those who obey the gloomy night's behests,
Though it be with laurel in their mournful hands
And glory sleeping in their hollow breasts.

Ah how time's harsh law is softened by your love
And how your lovely dream disconsolate tears would stem;
For the first and only time you nurse with lies
My heart that finds excuse and gives you thanks for them.

Which, however, knows all ardour is in vain
Against what is and all that must be in the strife,
And that perhaps there is profounder happiness
To end thus in your eyes my lovely human life.

XXVI

When you shall close these eyes of mine to light,
Oh kiss them long—for all that love afire
May hope to give they shall have given you
In that last look of ultimate desire.

Beneath the moveless glow of candle light,
Oh lean to them your face so fain and brave
That on them be impressed this sight alone
That they shall keep forever in the grave.

And may I feel, before the tomb is mine,
Upon the pure, white bed our hands that seek
Each other once again, and near my head
Feel for the last time repose your cheek;

And know that I shall go away with heart
Burning still for you so passionately
That even through the mute and stony earth
The dead themselves shall feel its ardency!

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