

OSCAR WILDE



THE SPHINX

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Fundacja Festina Lente

To Marcel Schwob in friendship and in admiration

In a dim corner of my room for longer than
my fancy thinks
A beautiful and silent Sphinx has watched me
through the shifting gloom.

Inviolate and immobile she does not rise she
does not stir
For silver moons are naught to her and naught
to her the suns that reel.

Red follows grey across the air, the waves of
moonlight ebb and flow
But with the Dawn she does not go and in the
night-time she is there.

Dawn follows Dawn and Nights grow old and
all the while this curious cat
Lies couching on the Chinese mat with eyes of
satin rimmed with gold.

Upon the mat she lies and leers and on the
tawny throat of her
Flutters the soft and silky fur or ripples to her
pointed ears.

Come forth, my lovely seneschal! so somnolent,
so statuesque!
Come forth you exquisite grotesque! half woman
and half animal!

Come forth my lovely languorous Sphinx! and
put your head upon my knee!
And let me stroke your throat and see your
body spotted like the Lynx!

And let me touch those curving claws of yellow
ivory and grasp
The tail that like a monstrous Asp coils round
your heavy velvet paws!

A thousand weary centuries are thine
while I have hardly seen
Some twenty summers cast their green for
Autumn's gaudy liveries.

But you can read the Hieroglyphs on the
great sandstone obelisks,
And you have talked with Basilisks, and you
have looked on Hippogriffs.

O tell me, were you standing by when Isis to
Osiris knelt?

And did you watch the Egyptian melt her union
for Antony

And drink the jewel-drunken wine and bend
her head in mimic awe
To see the huge proconsul draw the salted tunny
from the brine?

And did you mark the Cyprian kiss white Adon
on his catafalque?

And did you follow Amenalk, the God of
Heliopolis?

And did you talk with Thoth, and did you hear
the moon-horned Io weep?

And know the painted kings who sleep beneath
the wedge-shaped Pyramid?

Lift up your large black satin eyes which are
like cushions where one sinks!

Fawn at my feet, fantastic Sphinx! and sing mev all
your memories!

Sing to me of the Jewish maid who wandered
with the Holy Child,

And how you led them through the wild, and
how they slept beneath your shade.

Sing to me of that odorous green eve when
crouching by the marge

You heard from Adrian's gilded barge the
laughter of Antinous

And lapped the stream and fed your drouth and
watched with hot and hungry stare
The ivory body of that rare young slave with
his pomegranate mouth!

Sing to me of the Labyrinth in which the twi-
formed bull was stalled!
Sing to me of the night you crawled across the
temple's granite plinth

When through the purple corridors the screaming
scarlet Ibis flew
In terror, and a horrid dew dripped from the
moaning Mandragores,

And the great torpid crocodile within the tank
shed slimy tears,
And tare the jewels from his ears and staggered
back into the Nile,

And the priests cursed you with shrill psalms as
in your claws you seized their snake
And crept away with it to slake your passion by
the shuddering palms.

Who were your lovers? who were they
who wrestled for you in the dust?
Which was the vessel of your Lust? What
Leman had you, every day?

Did giant Lizards come and crouch before you
on the reedy banks?

Did Gryphons with great metal flanks leap on
you in your trampled couch?

Did monstrous hippopotami come sidling toward
you in the mist?

Did gilt-scaled dragons writhe and twist with
passion as you passed them by?

And from the brick-built Lycian tomb what
horrible Chimera came
With fearful heads and fearful flame to breed
new wonders from your womb?

Or had you shameful secret quests and did
you hurry to your home
Some Nereid coiled in amber foam with curious
rock crystal breasts?

Or did you treading through the froth call to
the brown Sidonian
For tidings of Leviathan, Leviathan or
Behemoth?

Or did you when the sun was set climb up the
cactus-covered slope
To meet your swarthy Ethiop whose body was
of polished jet?

Or did you while the earthen skiffs dropped
down the grey Nilotic flats
At twilight and the flickering bats flew round
the temple's triple glyphs

Steal to the border of the bar and swim across
the silent lake
And slink into the vault and make the Pyramid
your lupanar

Till from each black sarcophagus rose up the
painted swathed dead?
Or did you lure unto your bed the ivory-horned
Tragelaphos?

Or did you love the god of flies who plagued
the Hebrews and was splashed
With wine unto the waist? or Pasht, who had
green beryls for her eyes?

Or that young god, the Tyrian, who was more
amorous than the dove
Of Ashtaroth? or did you love the god of the
Assyrian

Whose wings, like strange transparent talc, rose
high above his hawk-faced head,
Painted with silver and with red and ribbed with
rods of Oreichalch?

Or did huge Apis from his car leap down and
lay before your feet
Big blossoms of the honey-sweet and honey-
coloured nenuphar?

How subtle-secret is your smile! Did you
love none then? Nay, I know

Great Ammon was your bedfellow! He lay with
you beside the Nile!

The river-horses in the slime trumpeted when
they saw him come
Odorous with Syrian galbanum and smeared with
spikenard and with thyme.

He came along the river bank like some tall
galley argent-sailed,
He strode across the waters, mailed in beauty,
and the waters sank.

He strode across the desert sand: he reached
the valley where you lay:
He waited till the dawn of day: then touched
your black breasts with his hand.

You kissed his mouth with mouths of flame:
you made the horned god your own:
You stood behind him on his throne: you called
him by his secret name.

You whispered monstrous oracles into the
caverns of his ears:
With blood of goats and blood of steers you
taught him monstrous miracles.

White Ammon was your bedfellow! Your
chamber was the steaming Nile!
And with your curved archaic smile you watched
his passion come and go.

With Syrian oils his brows were bright:
and wide-spread as a tent at noon
His marble limbs made pale the moon and lent
the day a larger light.

His long hair was nine cubits' span and coloured
like that yellow gem
Which hidden in their garment's hem the
merchants bring from Kurdistan.

His face was as the must that lies upon a vat of
new-made wine:
The seas could not insapphirine the perfect azure
of his eyes.

His thick soft throat was white as milk and
threaded with thin veins of blue:
And curious pearls like frozen dew were
broidered on his flowing silk.

On pearl and porphyry pedestalled he was
too bright to look upon:
For on his ivory breast there shone the wondrous
ocean-emerald,

That mystic moonlit jewel which some diver of
the Colchian caves
Had found beneath the blackening waves and
carried to the Colchian witch.

Before his gilded galiot ran naked vine-wreathed
corybants,

And lines of swaying elephants knelt down to
draw his chariot,

And lines of swarthy Nubians bare up his litter
as he rode
Down the great granite-paven road between the
nodding peacock-fans.

The merchants brought him steatite from Sidon
in their painted ships:

The meanest cup that touched his lips was
fashioned from a chrysolite.

The merchants brought him cedar chests of rich
apparel bound with cords:

His train was borne by Memphian lords: young
kings were glad to be his guests.

Ten hundred shaven priests did bow to Ammon's
altar day and night,

Ten hundred lamps did wave their light through
Ammon's carven house--and now

Foul snake and speckled adder with their young
ones crawl from stone to stone

For ruined is the house and prone the great
rose-marble monolith!

Wild ass or trotting jackal comes and couches
in the mouldering gates:

Wild satyrs call unto their mates across the
fallen fluted drums.

And on the summit of the pile the blue-faced
ape of Horus sits
And gibbers while the fig-tree splits the pillars
of the peristyle

The god is scattered here and there: deep
hidden in the windy sand
I saw his giant granite hand still clenched in
impotent despair.

And many a wandering caravan of stately
negroes silken-shawled,
Crossing the desert, halts appalled before the
neck that none can span.

And many a bearded Bedouin draws back his
yellow-striped burnous
To gaze upon the Titan thews of him who was
thy paladin.

Go, seek his fragments on the moor and
wash them in the evening dew,
And from their pieces make anew thy mutilated
paramour!

Go, seek them where they lie alone and from
their broken pieces make
Thy bruised bedfellow! And wake mad passions
in the senseless stone!

Charm his dull ear with Syrian hymns! he loved
your body! oh, be kind,

Pour spikenard on his hair, and wind soft rolls
of linen round his limbs!

Wind round his head the figured coins! stain
with red fruits those pallid lips!
Weave purple for his shrunken hips! and purple
for his barren loins!

Away to Egypt! Have no fear. Only one
God has ever died.
Only one God has let His side be wounded by a
soldier's spear.

But these, thy lovers, are not dead. Still by the
hundred-cubit gate
Dog-faced Anubis sits in state with lotus-lilies
for thy head.

Still from his chair of porphyry gaunt Memnon
strains his lidless eyes
Across the empty land, and cries each yellow
morning unto thee.

And Nilus with his broken horn lies in his black
and oozy bed
And till thy coming will not spread his waters on
the withering corn.

Your lovers are not dead, I know. They will
rise up and hear your voice
And clash their cymbals and rejoice and run to
kiss your mouth! And so,

Set wings upon your argosies! Set horses to
your ebon car!
Back to your Nile! Or if you are grown sick of
dead divinities

Follow some roving lion's spoor across the copper-
coloured plain,
Reach out and hale him by the mane and bid
him be your paramour!

Couch by his side upon the grass and set your
white teeth in his throat
And when you hear his dying note lash your
long flanks of polished brass

And take a tiger for your mate, whose amber
sides are flecked with black,
And ride upon his gilded back in triumph
through the Theban gate,

And toy with him in amorous jests, and when
he turns, and snarls, and gnaws,
O smite him with your jasper claws! and bruise
him with your agate breasts!

Why are you tarrying? Get hence! I
weary of your sullen ways,
I weary of your steadfast gaze, your somnolent
magnificence.

Your horrible and heavy breath makes the light
flicker in the lamp,

And on my brow I feel the damp and dreadful
dews of night and death.

Your eyes are like fantastic moons that shiver
in some stagnant lake,
Your tongue is like a scarlet snake that dances
to fantastic tunes,

Your pulse makes poisonous melodies, and your
black throat is like the hole
Left by some torch or burning coal on Saracenic
tapestries.

Away! The sulphur-coloured stars are hurrying
through the Western gate!
Away! Or it may be too late to climb their silent
silver cars!

See, the dawn shivers round the grey gilt-dialled
towers, and the rain
Streams down each diamonded pane and blurs
with tears the wannish day.

What snake-tressed fury fresh from Hell, with
uncouth gestures and unclean,
Stole from the poppy-drowsy queen and led you
to a student's cell?

What songless tongueless ghost of sin crept
through the curtains of the night,
And saw my taper burning bright, and knocked,
and bade you enter in?

Are there not others more accursed, whiter with
leprosy than I?

Are Abana and Pharpar dry that you come here
to slake your thirst?

Get hence, you loathsome mystery! Hideous
animal, get hence!

You wake in me each bestial sense, you make me
what I would not be.

You make my creed a barren sham, you wake
foul dreams of sensual life,
And Atys with his blood-stained knife were
better than the thing I am.

False Sphinx! False Sphinx! By reedy Styx
old Charon, leaning on his oar,
Waits for my coin. Go thou before, and leave
me to my crucifix,

Whose pallid burden, sick with pain, watches
the world with wearied eyes,
And weeps for every soul that dies, and weeps
for every soul in vain.

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