

HÉLOÏSE

(*aetas 17. A.D. 1118*)

A. BEATRICE HICKSON

Alone, she walked, this scholar maid. The mist
Of languorous twilight her white beauty kiss'd
With scented perfumes of the drowsy air
Laden with subtle fragrances, and rare
Migrants from summer's essence. At her feet
Nodded the pastoral flowers, and the sweet
White pansies shone, like stars, amid the shade
Of purpling comrades in the dusky glade.

Faint murmurings of distant bees she heard,
As 'round some willow stump they dimly stir'd
In the soft gloam—and fancied how such trees
Had sheltered, once, the white time-honoured bees
Of Vergil—in the ether of whose kind
Sages had thought dwelt something of God's mind;
And deemed the small aërial beings wise
Died not—but winged their way to Paradise
To hold dominion over realms fair
Of starry kingdoms in the upper air.

And now, beyond, across the placid plain,
She saw white oxen plough the fields again;
Nothing had changed since the great golden days—
And, pondering thus, she gave her master praise;
Since he it was who first unsealed her eyes
To Beauty's vision of the earth and skies;
To birds in flight, with motion sure and free;
To changing coasts and glory of the sea.
Beauty it seems was ever Vergil's theme,
Beauty of fact and beauty of the dream.
Even the lowly insects he could raise
And render them immortal by his praise.

The Nuns had spoken of such different things
 At Argenteuil—of saints and angel wings,
 But never of life's beauty or its joy;
 "With relics and dead martyrs they employ
 Their time—and making altar-pieces fine
 To celebrate a feast, or dress a shrine—
 Whilst lovely days of youth go slipping by.
 Nothing they know of Vergil's earth and sky—
 By walls enclosed, they live and pray and die."

Thus, but for Vergil, she had never known
 Nature's embracing loveliness, nor grown
 To feel herself a portion of this whole
 Pulsating Earth, which strangely moves the soul
 To longing, and the seeking heart to guess
 At something blended with its loveliness—
 An urge recurrent in the cosmic strain,
 Which thrills the flesh to ecstasy and pain;
 A power so puissant in its bliss or woe
 That mind and reason it can overthrow. . .
 Æneas knew it when he took his flight
 From Carthage—and the awful flames, alight
 On Dido's blazing pyre, proclaimed its might.

Yet, after he had left proud Dido's home,
 Æneas founded that great city—Rome.
 'Twas better, thus, from love to turn aside
 And make his name immortal, ere he died—
 Since even nature yields her cogent sway
 To Fate's commands, which mortals must obey.
 And often, when she read the pages o'er
 Which told their tale, in Vergil's god-like lore,
 She saw before her, passing down life's ways,
 The conquerors and kings of other days.
 Her pulses beat to clash of mail and spears—
 Yet Dido's sorrow moved her eyes to tears;
 And, once, twixt dusk and dawn, she, dreaming, heard
 A far-off voice, which all her being stirr'd,
 Lone Dido, crying, o'er the distant sea;
 "Nothing has been that is not yet to be."

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 So mused, pale Héloïse, at evening chime.
 Ere she was forfeit to the toll of Time.