Edmund Clarence Stedman (1833-1908)

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The Fountain of Youth

"There sleeps beneath some favored sky,
   Beyond the desert's track,
A fountain fraught with magic power
   To bring our lost youth back.

"Who quaffs from it a plenteous draught,
   Shall shed time's envious stains,
And feel the ruddy wine of youth
   Go bounding through his veins."

So sang the poets long ago,
   And many a pilgrim, worn with age,
Went forth in unavailing search—
   A weary pilgrimage.

They could not read the hidden sense
   Of this fair fount the poets sung,
The springs of kindness in the heart
   Keep it forever young.

For age comes not with time alone—
   Our wrinkles and gray hairs
Are but the creased and faded robes
   The youthful spirit wears.

EDMUND CLARENCE STEDMAN
1833-1908

Anonyma: Her Confession

If I had been a rich man's girl,
   With my tawny hair, and this wanton art
Of lifting my eyes in the evening whirl
   And looking into another's heart;
Had love been mine at birth, and friends
   Caressing and guarding me night and day,
With doctors to watch my finger-ends,
   And a parson to teach me how to pray;

If I had been reared as others have,—
   With but a tithe of these looks, which came
From my reckless mother, now in her grave,
   And the father who grudged me even his name,—
Why, I should have station and tender care,
   Should ruin men in the high-bred way,
Passionless, smiling at their despair,
   And marrying where my vantage lay.

As it is, I must have love and dress,
   Jewelled trinkets, and costly food,
For I was born for plenteousness,
   Music and flowers, and all things good.
To that same father I owe some thanks,
   Seeing, at least, that blood will tell,
And keep me ever above the ranks
   Of those who wallow where they fell.

True, there are weary, weary days
   In the great hotel where I make my lair,
Where I meet the men with their brutal praise,
   Or answer the women, stare for stare.
'T is an even fight, and I'll carry it through,—
   Pit them against me, great and small:
I grant no quarter, nor would I sue
   For grace to the softest of them all.

I cannot remember half the men
   Whose sin has tangled them in my toils,—
All are alike before me then,
   Part of my easily conquered spoils:
Tall or short, and dark or fair,
   Rich or famous, haughty or fond,
There are few, I find, who will not forswear
   The lover's oath and the wedding bond.

Fools! What is it that drives them on
   With their perjured lips on poison fed;
Vain of themselves, and cruel as stone,
   How should they be so cheaply led?
Surely they know me as I am,—
   Only a cuckoo, at the best,
Watching, careless of hate and shame,
To crouch myself in another's nest.

But the women,—How they flutter and flout,
The stupid, terribly virtuous wives,
If I but chance to move about
Or enter within their bustling hives!
Buz! Buz! In the scandalous gatherings,
When a strange queen lights amid their throng,
And their tongues have a thousand angry stings
To send her traveling, right or wrong.

Well, the earth is wide and open to all,
And money and men are everywhere,
And, as I roam, 't will ill befall
If I do not gain my lawful share:
One drops off, but another will come
With as light a head and heavy a purse;
So long as I have the world for a home,
I'll take my fortune, better or worse!

Holyoke Valley

"Something sweet
Followed youth, with flying feet,
And will never come again."

How many years have made their flights,
Northampton, over thee and me,
Since last I scaled those purple heights
That guard the pathway to the sea;

Or climbed, as now, the topmost crown
Of western ridges, whence again
I see, for miles beyond the town,
That sunlit stream divide the plain?

There still the giant warders stand
And watch the current's downward flow,
And northward still, with threatening hand,
The river bends his ancient bow.

I see the hazy lowlands meet
The sky, and count each shining spire,
From those which sparkle at my feet
To distant steeples tipt with fire.

For still, old town, thou art the same:
The redbreasts sing their choral tune,
Within thy mantling elms aflame,
As in that other, dearer June,

When here my footsteps entered first,
And summer perfect beauty wore,
And all thy charms upon me burst,
While Life's whole journey lay before.

Here every fragrant walk remains,
Where happy maidens come and go,
And students saunter in the lanes
And hum the songs I used to know.

I gaze, yet find myself alone,
And walk with solitary feet:
How strange these wonted ways have grown!
Where are the friends I used to meet?

In yonder shaded Academe
The rippling metres flow to-day,
But other boys at sunset dream
Of love, and laurels far away;

And ah! From yonder trellised home,
Less sweet the faces are that peer
Than those of old, and voices come
Less musically to my ear.

Sigh not, ye breezy elms, but give
The murmur of my sweetheart's vows,
When Life was something worth to live,
And Love was young beneath your boughs!

Fade beauty, smiling everywhere,
That can from year to year outlast
Those charms a thousand times more fair,
And, O, our joys so quickly past!

Or smile to gladden fresher hearts
Henceforth: but they shall yet be led,
Revisiting these ancient parts,
Like me to mourn their glory fled.
To Bayard Taylor, with a Copy of The Iliad

Bayard, awaken not this music strong,
While round thy home the indolent sweet breeze
Floats lightly as the summer breath of seas
O'er which Ulysses heard the Sirens' song.
Dreams of low-lying isles to June belong,
And Circe holds us in her haunts of ease;
But later, when these high ancestral trees
Are sere, and such melodious languors wrong
The reddening strength of the autumnal year,
Yield to heroic words thy ear and eye;—
Intent on these broad pages thou shalt hear
The trumpets' blare, the Argive battle-cry,
And see Achilles hurl his hurtling spear,
And mark the Trojan arrows make reply!

ADAH ISAACS MENKEN
1835–1868

My Heritage

"My heritage!" It is to live within
The marts of Pleasure and of Gain, yet be
No willing worshiper at either shrine;
To think, and speak, and act, not for my pleasure,
But others'. The veriest slave of time
And circumstances. Fortune's toy!
To hear of fraud, injustice, and oppression,
And feel who is the unshielded victim.
    Cold friends and causeless foes!
    Proud thoughts that rise to fall.
Bright stars that set in seas of blood;
Affections, which are passions, lava-like
Destroying what they rest upon. Love's
Fond and fervid tide preparing icebergs