

*Alfred, Lord Tennyson*  
*The Ancient Sage*



Let be thy wail and help thy fellow men,  
And make thy gold thy vassal not thy king,  
And fling free alms into the beggar's bowl,  
And send the day into the darken'd heart;

**a** THOUSAND SUMMERS ERE THE TIME OF CHRIST  
From out his ancient city came a Seer  
Whom one that loved, and honour'd him, and yet

Was no disciple, richly garb'd, but worn  
From wasteful living, follow'd — in his hand  
A scroll of verse — till that old man before  
A cavern whence an affluent fountain pour'd  
From darkness into daylight, turn'd and spoke.

This wealth of waters might but seem to draw  
From yon dark cave, but, son, the source is higher,  
Yon summit half-a-league in air — and higher,  
The cloud that hides it — higher still, the heavens  
Whereby the cloud was moulded, and whereout  
The cloud descended. Force is from the heights.  
I am wearied of our city, son, and go  
To spend my one last year among the hills.  
What hast thou there? Some deathsong for the Ghouls  
To make their banquet relish? let me read.

“How far thro' all the bloom and brake  
That nightingale is heard!  
What power but the bird's could make  
This music in the bird?  
How summer-bright are yonder skies,  
And earth as fair in lute!  
And yet what sign of aught that lies  
Behind the green and blue?  
But man to-day is fancy's fool  
As man hath ever been.  
The nameless Power, or Powers, that rule  
Were never heard or seen.”

If thou would'st hear the Nameless, and wilt dive  
Into the Temple-cave of thine own self,  
There, brooding by the central altar, thou  
May'st haply learn the Nameless hath a voice,  
By which thou wilt abide, if thou be wise,  
As if thou knewest, tho' thou canst not know;  
For Knowledge is the swallow on the lake  
That sees and stirs the surface-shadow there  
But never yet hath dipt into the abysm,  
The Abysm of all Abysms, beneath, within  
The blue of sky and sea, the green of earth,  
And in the million-millionth of a grain  
Which cleft and cleft again for evermore,  
And ever vanishing, never vanishes,  
To me, my son, more mystic than myself,  
Or even than the Nameless is to me.

And when thou sendest thy free soul thro' heaven,  
Nor understandest bound nor boundlessness,  
Thou seest the Nameless of the hundred names.

And if the Nameless should withdraw from all  
Thy frailty counts most real, all thy world  
Might vanish like thy shadow in the dark.

“And since — from when this earth began —  
The Nameless never came  
Among us, never spake with man,  
And never named the Name” —

Thou canst not prove the Nameless, O my son,  
Nor canst thou prove the world thou movest in,  
Thou canst not prove that thou art body alone,  
Nor canst thou prove that thou art spirit alone,  
Nor canst thou prove that thou art both in one:  
Thou canst not prove thou art immortal, no  
Nor yet that thou art mortal — nay my son,  
Thou canst not prove that I, who speak with thee,  
Am not thyself in converse with thyself,  
For nothing worthy proving can be proven,  
Nor yet disproven: wherefore thou be wise,  
Cleave ever to the sunnier side of doubt,  
And cling to Faith beyond the forms of Faith!  
She reels not in the storm of warring words,  
She brightens at the clash of “Yes” and “No,”  
She sees the Best that glimmers thro' the Worst,  
She feels the Sun is hid but for a night,

She spies the summer thro' the winter bud,  
She tastes the fruit before the blossom falls,  
She hears the lark within the songless egg,  
She finds the fountain where they wail'd "Mirage"!

"What Power? aught akin to Mind,  
The mind in me and you?  
Or power as of the Gods gone blind  
Who see not what they do?"

But some in yonder city hold, my son,  
That none but Gods could build this house of ours,  
So beautiful, vast, various, so beyond  
All work of man, yet, like all work of man,  
A beauty with defect — till That which knows,  
And is not known, but felt thro' what we feel  
Within ourselves is highest, shall descend  
On this half-deed, and shape it at the last  
According to the Highest in the Highest.

"What Power but the Years that make  
And break the vase of clay,  
And stir the sleeping earth, and wake  
The bloom that fades away?  
What rulers but the Days and Hours  
That cancel weal with woe,  
And wind the front of youth with flowers,  
And cap our age with snow?"

The days and hours are ever glancing by,  
And seem to flicker past thro' sun and shade,  
Or short, or long, as Pleasure leads, or Pain;  
But with the Nameless is nor Day nor Hour;  
Tho' we, thin minds, who creep from thought to thought,  
Break into "Thens" and "Whens" the Eternal Now  
This double seeming of the single world! —  
My words are like the babblings in a dream  
Of nightmare, when the babblings break the dream.  
But thou be wise in this dream-world of ours,  
Nor take thy dial for thy deity,  
But make the passing shadow serve thy will.

"The years that made the stripling wise  
Undo their work again,  
And leave him, blind of heart and eyes,

The last and least of men;  
Who clings to earth, and once would dare  
Hell-heat or Arctic cold,  
And now one breath of cooler air  
Would loose him from his hold;  
His winter chills him to the root,  
He withers marrow and mind;  
The kernel of the shrivell'd fruit  
Is jutting thro' the rind;  
The tiger spasms tear his chest,  
The palsy wags his head;  
The wife, the sons, who love him best  
Would fain that he were dead;  
The griefs by which he once was wrung  
Were never worth the while" —

Who knows? or whether this earth-narrow life  
Be yet but yolk, and forming in the shell?

"The shaft of scorn that once had stung  
But wakes a dotard smile."

The placid gleams of sunset after storm!

"The statesman's brain that sway'd the past  
Is feebler than his knees;  
The passive sailor wrecks at last  
In ever-silent seas;  
The warrior hath forgot his arms,  
The Learned all his lore;  
The changing market frets or charms  
The merchant's hope no more;  
The prophet's beacon burn'd in vain,  
And now is lost in cloud;  
The plowman passes, bent with pain,  
To mix with what he plow'd;  
The poet whom his Age would quote  
As heir of endless fame —  
He knows not ev'n the book he wrote,  
Not even his own name.  
For man has overlived his day,  
And, darkening in the light,  
Scarce feels the senses break away  
To mix with ancient Night."

The shell must break before the bird can fly.

“The years that when my Youth began  
Had set the lily and rose  
By all my ways where'er they ran,  
Have ended mortal foes;  
My rose of love for ever gone,  
My lily of truth and trust —  
They made her lily and rose in one,  
And changed her into dust.  
O rosetree planted in my grief,  
And growing, on her tomb,  
Her dust is greening in your leaf,  
Her blood is in your bloom.  
O slender lily waving there,  
And laughing back the light,  
In vain you tell me 'Earth is fair'  
When all is dark as night.”

My son, the world is dark with griefs and graves,  
So dark that men cry out against the Heavens.  
Who knows but that the darkness is in man?  
The doors of Night may be the gates of Light;  
For wert thou born or blind or deaf, and then  
Suddenly heal'd, how would'st thou glory in all  
The splendours and the voices of the world!  
And we, the poor earth's dying race, and yet  
No phantoms, watching from a phantom shore  
Await the last and largest sense to make  
The phantom walls of this illusion fade,  
And show us that the world is wholly fair.

“But vain the tears for darken'd years  
As laughter over wine,  
And vain the laughter as the tears,  
O brother, mine or thine,  
For all that laugh, and all that weep  
And all that breathe are one  
Slight ripple on the boundless deep  
That moves, and all is gone.”

But that one ripple on the boundless deep  
Feels that the deep is boundless, and itself  
For ever changing form, but evermore  
One with the boundless motion of the deep.

“Yet wine and laughter friends! and set  
The lamps alight, and call  
For golden music, and forget  
The darkness of the pall.”

If utter darkness closed the day, my son —  
But earth’s dark forehead flings athwart the heavens  
Her shadow crown’d with stars — and yonder — out  
To northward — some that never set, but pass  
From sight and night to lose themselves in day.  
I hate the black negation of the bier,  
And wish the dead, as happier than ourselves  
And higher, having climb’d one step beyond  
Our village miseries, might be borne in white  
To burial or to burning, hymn’d from hence  
With songs in praise of death, and crown’d with flowers!

“O worms and maggots of to-day  
Without their hope of wings!”

But louder than thy rhyme the silent Word  
Of that world-prophet in the heart of man.

“Tho’ some have gleams or so they say  
Of more than mortal things.”

To-day? but what of yesterday? for oft  
On me, when boy, there came what then I call’d,  
Who knew no books and no philosophies,  
In my boy-phrase “The Passion of the Past.”  
The first grey streak of earliest summer-dawn,

The last long stripe of waning crimson gloom,  
As if the late and early were but one —  
A height, a broken grange, a grove, a flower  
Had murmurs “Lost and gone and lost and gone!”  
A breath, a whisper — some divine farewell —  
Desolate sweetness — far and far away —  
What had he loved, what had he lost, the boy?  
I know not and I speak of what has been.  
And more, my son! for more than once when I  
Sat all alone, revolving in myself  
The word that is the symbol of myself,  
The mortal limit of the Self was loosed,  
And past into the Nameless, as a cloud  
Melts into Heaven. I touch’d my limbs, the limbs

Were strange not mine — and yet no shade of doubt,  
But utter clearness, and thro' loss of Self  
The gain of such large life as match'd with ours  
Were Sun to spark — unshadowable in words,  
Themselves but shadows of a shadow-world.

“And idle gleams will come and go,  
But still the clouds remain”;

The clouds themselves are children of the Sun.

“And Night and Shadow rule below  
When only Day should reign.”

And Day and Night are children of the Sun,  
And idle gleams to thee are light to me.  
Some say, the Light was father of the Night,  
And some, the Night was father of the Light,  
No night no day! — I touch thy world again —  
No ill no good! such counter-terms, my son,  
Are border-races, holding, each its own  
By endless war: but night enough is there  
In yon dark city: get thee back: and since  
The key to that weird casket, which for thee  
But holds a skull, is neither thine nor mine,  
But in the hand of what is more than man,  
Or in man's hand when man is more than man,  
Let be thy wail and help thy fellow men,  
And make thy gold thy vassal not thy king,  
And fling free alms into the beggar's bowl,  
And send the day into the darken'd heart;  
Nor list for guerdon in the voice of men,  
A dying echo from a falling wall;  
Nor care — for Hunger hath the Evil eye —  
To vex the noon with fiery gems, or fold  
Thy presence in the silk of sumptuous looms;  
Nor roll thy viands on a luscious tongue,  
Nor drown thyself with flies in honied wine;  
Nor thou be rageful, like a handled bee,  
And lose thy life by usage of thy sting;  
Nor harm an adder thro' the lust for harm,  
Nor make a snail's horn shrink for wantonness;  
And more — think well! Do-well will follow thought,  
And in the fatal sequence of this world  
An evil thought may soil thy children's blood;

But curb the beast would cast thee in the mire,  
And leave the hot swamp of voluptuousness  
A cloud between the Nameless and thyself,  
And lay thine uphill shoulder to the wheel,  
And climb the Mount of Blessing, whence, if thou  
Look higher, then — perchance — thou mayest — beyond  
A hundred ever-rising mountain lines,  
And past the range of Night and Shadow — see  
The high-heaven dawn of more than mortal day  
Strike on the Mount of Vision!

So, farewell.<sup>1</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> First published in 1885.