

*Alfred, Lord Tennyson*  
*The Blind Seer of Thebes*

**The tolling of his funeral bell  
Broke on my Pagan Paradise.**



**I** WISH I WERE AS IN THE YEARS OF OLD  
While yet the blessed daylight made itself  
Ruddy thro' both the roofs of sight, and woke  
These eyes, now dull, but then so keen to seek  
The meanings ambush'd under all they saw,  
The flight of birds, the flame of sacrifice,  
What omens may foreshadow fate to man  
And woman, and the secret of the Gods.

My son, the Gods, despite of human prayer,  
Are slower to forgive than human kings.  
The great God, Arēs, burns in anger still  
Against the guiltless heirs of him from Tyre  
Our Cadmus, out of whom thou art, who found  
Beside the springs of Dircē, smote, and still'd  
Thro' all its folds the multitudinous beast  
The dragon, which our trembling fathers call'd  
The God's own son.

A tale, that told to me,  
When but thine age, by age as winter-white  
As mine is now, amazed, but made me yearn  
For larger glimpses of that more than man  
Which rolls the heavens, and lifts and lays the deep,  
Yet loves and hates with mortal hates and loves,  
And moves unseen among the ways of men.

Then, in my wanderings all the lands that lie  
Subjected to the Heliconian ridge  
Have heard this footstep fall, altho' my wont  
Was more to scale the highest of the heights  
With some strange hope to see the nearer God.

One naked peak — the sister of the Sun  
Would climb from out the dark, and linger there  
To silver all the valleys with her shafts —  
There once, but long ago, five-fold thy term  
Of years, I lay; the winds were dead for heat;  
The noonday crag made the hand burn; and sick  
For shadow — not one bush was near — I rose  
Following a torrent till its myriad falls  
Found silence in the hollows underneath.

There in a secret olive-glade I saw  
Pallas Athēnē climbing from the bath  
In anger; yet one glittering foot disturb'd  
The lucid well; one snowy knee was prest

MYSTIC VERSE AND INSIGHTS SERIES  
TIRESIAS, THE BLIND SEER

Against the margin flowers; a dreadful light  
Came from her golden hair, her golden helm  
And all her golden armour on the grass,  
And from her virgin breast, and virgin eyes  
Remaining fixt on mine, till mine grew dark  
For ever, and I heard a voice that said  
“Henceforth be blind, for thou hast seen too much,  
And speak the truth that no man may believe.”

Son, in the hidden world of sight that lives  
Behind this darkness, I behold her still  
Beyond all work of those who carve the stone  
Beyond all dreams of Godlike womanhood,  
Ineffable beauty, out of whom, at a glance  
And as it were, perforce, upon me flash'd  
The power of prophesying — but to me  
No power — so chain'd and coupled with the curse  
Of blindness and their unbelief who heard  
And heard not, when I spake of famine, plague  
Shrine-shattering earthquake, fire, flood, thunderbolt,  
And angers of the Gods for evil done  
And expiation lack'd — no power on Fate  
Theirs, or mine own! for when the crowd would roar  
For blood, for war, whose issue was their doom,  
To cast wise words among the multitude  
Was flinging fruit to lions; nor, in hours  
Of civil outbreak, when I knew the twain  
Would each waste each, and bring on both the yoke  
Of stronger states, was mine the voice to curb  
The madness of our cities and their kings.

Who ever turn'd upon his heel to hear  
My warning that the tyranny of one  
Was prelude to the tyranny of all?  
My counsel that the tyranny of all  
Led backward to the tyranny of one?

This power hath work'd no good to aught that lives  
And these blind hands were useless in their wars.  
O therefore, that the unfulfill'd desire,  
The grief for ever born from griefs to be  
The boundless yearning of the prophet's heart —  
Could that stand forth, and like a statue, rear'd  
To some great citizen, win all praise from all  
Who past it, saying, “That was he!”

In vain!  
Virtue must shape itself in deed, and those  
Whom weakness or necessity have cramp'd  
Within themselves, immerging, each, his urn

In his own well, draws solace as he may.

Mencœceus, thou hast eyes, and I can hear  
Too plainly what full tides of onset sap  
Our seven high gates, and what a weight of war  
Rides on those ringing axles! jingle of bits,  
Shouts, arrows, tramp of the horn-footed horse  
That grind the glebe to powder! Stony showers  
Of that ear-stunning hail of Arēs crash  
Along the sounding walls. Above, below  
Shock after shock, the song-built towers and gates  
Reel, bruised and butted with the shuddering  
War-thunder of iron rams; and from within  
The city comes a murmur void of joy,  
Lest she be taken captive — maidens, wives,  
And mothers with their babblers of the dawn,  
And oldest age in shadow from the night,  
Falling about their shrines before their Gods,  
And wailing, “Save us.”

And they wail to thee!  
These eyeless eyes, that cannot see thine own,  
See this, that only in thy virtue lies  
The saving of our Thebes; for, yesternight,  
To me, the great God Arēs, whose one bliss  
Is war and human sacrifice — himself  
Blood-red from battle, spear and helmet tipt  
With stormy light as on a mast at sea,  
Stood out before a darkness, crying, “Thebes,  
Thy Thebes shall fall and perish, for I loathe  
The seed of Cadmus — yet if one of these  
By his own hand — if one of these — ”

My son,  
No sound is breathed so potent to coerce,  
And to conciliate, as their names who dare  
For that sweet mother land which gave them birth  
Nobly to do, nobly to die. Their names,  
Graven on memorial columns, are a song  
Heard in the future; few, but more than wall  
And rampart, their examples reach a hand  
Far thro’ all years, and everywhere they meet  
And kindle generous purpose, and the strength  
To mould it into action pure as theirs.

Fairer thy fate than mine, if life’s best end  
Be to end well! and thou refusing this,  
Unvenerable will thy memory be  
While men shall move the lips; but if thou dare —  
Thou, one of these, the race of Cadmus — then

No stone is fitted in yon marble girth  
Whose echo shall not tongue thy glorious doom,  
Nor in this pavement but shall ring thy name  
To every hoof that clangs it, and the springs  
Of Dircē laving yonder battle-plain,  
Heard from the roofs by night, will murmur thee  
To thine own Thebes, while Thebes thro' thee shall stand  
Firm-based with all her Gods.

The Dragon's cave

Half hid, they tell me, now in flowing vines —  
Where once he dwelt and whence he roll'd himself  
At dead of night — thou knowest, and that smooth rock  
Before it, altar-fashion'd, where of late  
The woman-breasted Sphinx, with wings drawn back  
Folded her lion paws, and look'd to Thebes.  
There blanch the bones of whom she slew, and these  
Mixt with her own, because the fierce beast found  
A wiser than herself, and dash'd herself  
Dead in her rage; but thou art wise enough  
Tho' young, to love thy wiser, blunt the curse  
Of Pallas, bear, and tho' I speak the truth  
Believe I speak it, let thine own hand strike  
Thy youthful pulses into rest and quench  
The red God's anger, fearing not to plunge  
Thy torch of life in darkness, rather — thou  
Rejoicing that the sun, the moon, the stars  
Send no such light upon the ways of men  
As one great deed.

Thither, my son, and there

Thou, that hast never known the embrace of love  
Offer thy maiden life.

This useless hand!

I felt one warm tear fall upon it. Gone!  
He will achieve his greatness.

But for me,

I would that I were gather'd to my rest,  
And mingled with the famous kings of old  
On whom about their ocean-islets flash  
The faces of the Gods — the wise man's word  
Here trampled by the populace underfoot  
There crown'd with worship — and these eyes will find  
The men I knew, and watch the chariot whirl  
About the goal again, and hunters race  
The shadowy lion, and the warrior-kings  
In height and prowess more than human, strive  
Again for glory, while the golden lyre

Is ever sounding in heroic ears  
Heroic hymns, and every way the vales  
Wind, clouded with the grateful incense-fume  
Of those who mix all odour to the Gods  
On one far height in one far-shining fire.

“One height and one far-shining fire!”  
And while I fancied that my friend  
For this brief idyll would require  
A less diffuse and opulent end,  
And would defend his judgment well,  
If I should deem it over nice —  
The tolling of his funeral bell  
Broke on my Pagan Paradise,  
And mixt the dream of classic times,  
And all the phantoms of the dream,  
With present grief, and made the rhymes,  
That miss’d his living welcome, seem  
Like would-be guests an hour too late,  
Who down the highway moving on  
With easy laughter find the gate  
Is bolted, and the master gone.  
Gone onto darkness, that full light  
Of friendship! past, in sleep, away  
By night, into the deeper night!  
The deeper night? A clearer day  
Than our poor twilight dawn on earth —  
If night, what barren toil to be!  
What life, so maim’d by night, were worth  
Our living out? Not mine to me  
Remembering all the golden hours  
Now silent, and so many dead,  
And him the last; and laying flowers,  
This wreath, above his honour’d head,  
And praying that, when I from hence  
Shall fade with him into the unknown,  
My close of earth’s experience  
May prove as peaceful as his own.<sup>1</sup>



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