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ASTONISHING POETRY OF EMMA TATHAM

Tatham was born Oct. 31, 1829, in London, and was educated at home. She began to compose poetry at an early age. In 1847, she moved with her family to Margate, a disruption which caused in her a severe depression for the next two years. However, it was during this period that she wrote many of her better poems, prompting one critic, when these were first published in 1854, to compare her to Shelley. She died in 1855, after a painful illness, and just a few weeks short of her 26th birthday.

THE DREAM OF PYTHAGORAS

By Emma Tatham

«The soul was not then imprisoned in a gross mortal body, as it is now: it was united to a luminous, heavenly, ethereal body, which served it as a vehicle to fly through the air, rise to the stars, and wander over all the regions of immensity.»

PYTHAGORAS, in *Travels of Cyrus*.

PYTHAGORAS, amidst Crotona's groves,
One summer eve, sat; whilst the sacred few
And favour'd at his feet reclin'd, entranc'd,
List'ning to his great teachings. O'er their heads
A lofty oak spread out his hundred hands
Umbrageous, and a thousand slant sunbeams
Play'd o'er them; but beneath all was obscure
And solemn, save that, as the sun went down,
One pale and tremulous sunbeam, stealing in
Through the unconscious leaves her silent way,
Fell on the forehead of Pythagoras
Like spiritual radiance; all else wrapt
In gloom delicious; while the murmuring wind,
Oft moving through the forest as in dreams,
Made melancholy music. Then the sage
Thus spoke: «My children, listen; let the soul
Hear her mysterious origin, and trace
Her backward path to heaven. 'Twas but a dream;
And yet from shadows we may learn the shape
And substance of undying truth. Methought
In vision I beheld the first beginning
And after-changes of my soul. O joy!
She is of no mean origin, but sprang

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From loftier source than stars or sunbeam know.
Yea, like a small and feeble rill that bursts
From everlasting mountain's coronet,
And, winding through a thousand labyrinths
Of darkness, deserts, and drear solitudes,
Yet never dies, but gaining depth and power,
Leaps forth at last with uncontrollable might
Into immortal sunshine and the breast
Of boundless ocean, - so is this my soul.
I felt myself spring like a sunbeam out
From the Eternal, and my first abode
Was a pure particle of light, wherein,
Shrined like a beam in crystal, I did ride
Gloriously through the firmament on wings
Of floating flowers, ethereal gems, and wreaths
Of vernal rainbows. I did paint a rose
With blush of day-down, and a lily-bell
With mine own essence; every morn I dipt
My robe in the full sun, then all day long
Shook out its dew on earth, and was content
To be unmark'd, unworshipp'd and unknown,
And only lov'd of heaven. Thus did my soul
Live spotless like her source. 'Twas mine to illumine
The palaces of nature, and explore
Her hidden cabinets, and, raptur'd, read
Her joyous secrets. O return, thou life
Of purity! I flew from mountain-top
To mountain, building rainbow-bridges up -
From hill to hill, and over boundless seas:
Ecstasy was such life, and on the verge
Of ripe perfection. But, alas! I saw
And envied the bold lightning, who could blind
And startle nations, and long'd to be
A conqueror and destroyer, like to him.
Methought it was a glorious joy, indeed,
To shut and open heaven as he did,
And have the thunders for my retinue,
And tear the clouds, and blacken palaces,
And in moment whiten sky, and sea,
And earth: therefore I murmur'd at my lot,
Beautiful as it was, and that one murmur
Despoil'd me of my glory. I became
A dark and tyrant cloud driven by the storm,
Too earthly to be bright, too hard of heart
To drop in mercy on the thirsty land;
And so no creature lov'd me. I was felt

A blot where'er I came. Fair Summer scorn'd
And spurn'd me from her blueness, for, she said
I would not wear her golden fringe, and so
She could not rank me in her sparkling train.
Soft Spring refused me, for she could not paint
Her rainbows on a nature cold as mine,
Incapable of tears. Autumnn despised
One who could do no good. Dark Winter frown'd
And number'd me among his ruffian host
Of racers. Then unceasingly I fled
Despairing through the murky firmament,
Like a lone wreck athwart a midnight sea,
Chased by the howling spirits of the storm,
And without. At last, one day I saw
In my continual flight, a desert blank
And broad beneath me, where no water was;
And there I mark'd a weary antelope,
Dying for thirst, all streched out on the sand,
With her poor trembling lips in agony
Press'd to a scorch'd-up spring; then, then at last
My hard heart, and I could weep. At once
My terrible race was stopped, and I did melt
Into the desert's heart, and with my tears
I quench'd the thirst of the poor antelope.
So having pour'd myself into the dry
And desolate waste, I sprang up a wild flower
In solitary beauty. There I grew
Alone and feverish, for the hot sun burn'd
And parch'd my tender leaves, and not a sigh
Came from the winds. I seemed to breathe an air
Of fire, and had resign'd myself to death,
When lo! a solitary dewdrop fell
Into my burning bosom; then, for joy,
My spirit rush'd into my lovely guest,
And I became a dewdrop. Then, once more,
My life was joyous, for the kingly sun
Carried me up into the firmament,
And hung me in rainbow, and my soul
Was robed in seven bright colors, and became
A jewel in the sky. So did I learn
The first great lessons; mark ye them, my sons.
Obedience is nobility; and meek
Humility is glory; self alone
Is base; and pride is pain; patience is power;
Beneficence is bliss. And now first brought
To know myself and feel my littleness,

I was to learn what greatness is prepar'd
For virtuous souls, what mighty war they wage,
What vast impossibilities o'ercome,
What kingdoms, and infinitude of love,
And harmony, and never-ending joy,
And converse, and communion with the great
And glorious Mind unknown, - are given to high
And godlike souls.

«Therefore the winds arose,
And shook me from the rainbow where I hung,
Into the depths of ocean; then I dived
Down to the coral citadels, and roved
Through crystal mazes, among pearls and gems,
And lovely buried creatures, who had sunk
To find a jewel of eternal life.
Sweet babes I saw clasp'd in their mothers' arms;
Kings of the north, each with his oozy crown;
Pale maidens, with their golden streaming hair
Floating in solemn beauty, calm and still,
In the deep, silent, tideless wave; I saw
Young beautiful boys wash'd down from reeling masts
By sudden storm; and brothers sleeping soft,
Lock'd in each other's arms; and countless wealth,
And curling weed, and treasure'd knots of hair,
And mouldering masts, and giant hulls that sank
With thunder sobbing; and blue palaces
Where moonbeams, hand in hand, did dance with me
To the soft music of the surging shells,
Where all else was at rest. Calm, calm, and hush'd,
And stormless, were those hidden depths, and clear
And pure as crystal. There I wander'd long
In speechless dreamings, and wellnigh forgot
My corporal nature, for it seem'd
Melting into the silent infinite
Around me, and I peacefully began
To feel the mighty universe commune
And converse with my; and my soul became
One note in nature's harmony. So sweet
And soothing was that dream-like ecstasy,
I could have slept into a wave, and roll'd
Away through the blue mysteries forever,
Dreaming my soul to nothing; I could well
Have drown'd my spark of immortality
In drunkenness of peace; I knew not yet
The warrior life of virtue, and the high
And honourable strife and storm that cleanse

And exercise her pinions. I was now
To learn the rapture of struggle made
For immortality and truth; therefore
The ocean toss'd me to his mountain chains,
Bidding me front the tempest; fires of heaven
Were dancing o'er his cataracts, and scared
His sounding billows; glorious thunders roll'd
Beneath, above, around; the strong winds fought,
Lifting up pyramids of tortured waves,
Then dashing them to foam. I saw great ships
As feathers on the opening sepulchres
And starting monuments,
And the gaunt waves leap'd up like fountains fierce,
And snatch'd down frighten'd clouds, then shouting – fell,
And rose again. I, whirling on their tops,
Dizzy flew over masts of staggering ships,
Then plunged into black night. My soul grew mad
Ravish'd with intense magnificence
Of the harmonious chaos, for I heard
Music amidst the thunders, and I saw
Measure in all the madness of the waves
And whirlpools; yea, I lifted up my voice
In praise of the Eternal, for I felt
Rock'd in His hand, as in a cradling couch;
Rejoicing in His strength; yea, I found rest
In the unbounded roar, and fearless sang
Glad echo to the thunder, and flash'd back
The bright look of lightning, and did fly
On the dark pinions of the hurricane spirit
In rapturous repose; till suddenly
My soul expanded, and I sprang aloft
Into the lightning flame, leaping for joy
From cloud to cloud. Then, first I felt my wings
Wave into immortality, and flew
Across the ocean with a shouting host
Of thunders at my heels, and lit up heaven,
And earth and sea, with one quick lamp, and crown'd
The mountains with a momentary gold,
Then cover'd them with blackness. Then I glanced
Upon the mighty city in her sleep,
Pierced all her mysteries with one swift look,
Then bade my thunders shout. The city trembled;
And charm'd with sublime outcry, I paus'd
And listen'd. Yet had I to rise and learn
A loftier lesson. I was lifted high
Into the heavens, and there became a star,

And on my new-form'd orb two angels sat.
The one thus spoke: 'O spirit, young and pure!
Say, thou be my shrine? I am of old,
The first of all things, and of all greatest;
I am the Sovereign Majesty, to whom
The universe is given, though for a while
I war with rebels strong; my name is Truth.
I am the Spirit of wisdom, love and power,
And come to claim thee; and if thou obey
My guiding, I will give thee thy desire,
Even eternal life.' He ceas'd, and then
The second angel spoke. 'Ask not, O soul!
My name; I bid thee free thyself, and know
Thou hast the fount of life in thy own breast,
And need'st no guiding: be a child no longer;
Throw off thy fetters, and with me enjoy
Thy native independence, and assert
Thy innate majesty; Truth binds not me,
And yet I am immortal; be thou, too,
A god unto thyself.'

«But I learn'd
My own deep insufficiency, and gazed
Indignant on th' unholy angel's face,
And pierced its false refulgence, knowing well
Obedience only is true liberty
For spirits form'd to obey; so best they reign.
Straight the base rebel fled, and ruled by Truth,
I roll'd unerring on my shining road
Around a glorious centre; free, though bound,
Because love bound me, and my law became
My life and nature; and my lustrous orb
Pure spirits visited: I wore a light
That shone across infinitude, and serv'd
To guide returning wanderers. I sang
With all my starry sisters, and we danced
Around the throne of Time, and wash'd the base
Of high Eternity like golden sands.
There first my soul drank my music, and was taught
That melody is part of heaven, and lives
In every heaven-born spirit like her breath;
There did I learn, that music without end
Breathes, murmurs, swells, echoes, and floats, and peals,
And thunders through creation, and in truth
Is celestial language, and the voice
Of love; and now my soul began to speak
The speech of immortality. But yet

I was to learn a lesson more severe –
To shine alone in darkness, and the deeps
Of sordid earth. So did I fall from heaven
Far into night, beneath the mountains roots
There, as a diamond burning amidst things
Too base for utterance. Then, alas! I felt
The stirrings of impatience, pining sore
For freedom, and communion with the fires
And majesties of heaven, with whom erewhile
I walk'd, their equal. I had not yet learn'd
That our appointed place is loftiest,
However lowly. I was made to feel
The dignity of suffering. O, my sons!
Sorrow and joy are but the spirit's life;
Without these she is scarcely animate;
Anguish and bliss ennoble: either proves
The greatness of its subject, and expands
Her nature into power; her every pulse
Beats into new-born force, urging her on
To conquering energy. – Then was I cast
Into hot fires and flaming furnaces,
Deep in the hollow globe; there did I burn
Deathless in agony, without murmur,
Longing to die, until my patient soul
Fainted into perfection: at that hour,
Being victorious, I was snatch'd away
To yet another lesson. I became
A date-tree in the desert, to pour out
My life in dumb benevolence, and full
Obedience to each wind of heaven that blew.
The traveller came – I gave him all my shade,
Asking for no reward; the lost bird flew
For shelter to my branches, and I hid
Her nest among my leaves; the sunbeams ask'd
To rest their hot and weary feet awhile
On me, and I spread out my every arm
To embrace them, fanning them with all my plumes.
Beneath my shade the dying pilgrim fell
Praying for water; I cool dewdrops caught
And shook them on his lip; I gave my fruit
To strengthen the faint stranger, and I sang
Soft echoes to the winds, living in nought
For self; but in all things for others' good.
The storm arose, and patiently I bore
And yielded to his tyranny; I bow'd
My tenderest foliage to his angry blast,

And suffer'd him to tear it without sigh,
And scatter on the waste my all of wealth.
The billowing sands o'erwhelm'd me, yet I stood
Silent beneath them; so they roll'd away,
And rending up my roots, left me a wreck
Upon the wilderness.

«'T was thus, my sons,
I dream'd my spirit wander'd, till at length,
As desolate I mourn'd my helpless woe,
My guardian angel took me to his heart,
And thus he said: 'Spirit, well tried and true!
Conqueror I have made thee, and prepar'd
For human life; behold! I wave the palm
Of immortality before thine eyes:
'T is thine; it shall be thine, if thou aright
Acquit thee of the part yet remains,
And teach what thou hast learn'd.'
«This said, he smil'd
And gently laid me in my mother's arms.
Thus for vision brought me – then it fled,
And all was silence. Ah! 't was but a dream;
This soul in vain struggles for purity;
This self-tormenting essence may exist
For ever; but what joy can being give
Without perfection! vainly do I seek
That bliss for which I languish. Surely yet
The Day-spring of our nature is to come;
Mournful we wait that dawning; until then
We grovel in the dust – in midnight grope,
For ever seeking, never satisfied.»

Thus spake the solemn seer, then pausing, sigh'd
For all was darkness.