

ODE
ON A LYCIAN TOMB

S. WEIR MITCHELL, M. D.

My dear Kate -

you too have
suffered -

Wen

Comas 1899

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BY
S. WEIR MITCHELL, M. D.



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IN MEMORIAM

INTRODUCTION

On this famous monument, known as Les Pleureuses, and now in the museum at Constantinople, one and the same mourning woman is carved in many attitudes of grief. These eighteen figures stand niched between Doric columns. Above and below are funeral scenes — battle and the chase.

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I

What gracious nunnery of grief is here !
One woman garbed in sorrow's every mood ;
Each sad presentment celled apart, in fear
Lest that herself upon herself intrude
And break some tender dream of sorrow's day,
Here cloistered lonely, set in marble gray.

ODE ON A LYCIAN TOMB.

Oh, pale procession of immortal love
Forever married to immortal grief!
All life's high-passioned sorrow far above,
Past help of time's compassionate relief:
These changeless stones are treasuries of regret
And mock the term by time for sorrow set.

Ah me! What tired hearts have hither come
To weep with thee, and give thy grief a voice;
And such as have not added to life's sum
The count of loss, they who do still rejoice
In love which time yet leaveth unassailed,
Here tremble, by prophetic sadness paled.

ODE ON A LYCIAN TOMB.

Thou who hast wept for many, weep for me,
For surely I, who deepest grief have known,
Share thy stilled sadness, which must ever be
Too changeless, and unending like my own,
Since thine is woe that knows not time's release,
And sorrow that can never compass peace.

He too who wrought this antique poetry,
Which wakes sad rhythms in the human heart,
Must oft with thee have wondered silently,
Touched by the strange revealments of his art,
When at his side you watched the chisel's grace
Foretell what time would carve upon thy face.

ODE ON A LYCIAN TOMB.

If to thy yearning silence, which in vain
Suggests its speechless plea in marbles old,
We add the anguish of an equal pain,
Shall not the sorrow of these statues cold
Inherit memories of our tears, and keep
Record of grief long time in death asleep?

Ah me! In death asleep; how pitiful,
If, in that timeless time the soul should wake
To wander heart-blind where no years may dull
Remembrance, with a heart forbid to break.
— Dove of my home, that fled life's stranded ark,
The sea of death is shelterless and dark.—

ODE ON A LYCIAN TOMB.

Cold mourner set in stone so long ago,
Too much my thoughts have dwelt with thee apart
Again my grief is young: full well I know
The pang re-born, that mocked my feeble art
With that too human wail in pain expressed,
The parent cry above the empty nest!

Come back, I cried. "I may not come again.
Not islandless is this uncharted sea;
Here is no death, nor any creature's pain,
Nor any terror of what is to be.
'Tis but to trust one pilot; soon are seen
The sunlit peaks of thought and peace serene."

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II

Fair worshipper of many gods, whom I
In one God worship, very surely He
Will for thy tears and mine have some reply,
When death assumes the trust of life, and we
Hear once again the voices of our dead,
And on a newer earth contented tread.

Doubtless for thee thy Lycian fields were sweet,
Thy dream of heaven no wiser than my own ;
Nature and love, the sound of children's feet,
Home, husband, friends ; what better hast thou known ?
What of the gods could ask thy longing prayer
Except again this earth and love to share ?

ODE ON A LYCIAN TOMB.

For all in vain with vexed imaginings,
We build of dreams another earth than ours,
And high in thought's thinned atmosphere, with wings
That helpless beat, and mock our futile powers,
Falter and flutter, seeing nought above,
And nought below except the earth we love.

Enough it were to find our own old earth
With death's dark riddle answered, and unspoiled
By fear, or sin, or pain; where joy and mirth
Have no sad shadows, and love is not foiled,
And where, companioned by the mighty dead,
The dateless books of time and fate are read.

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III

What stately melancholy doth possess
This innocent marble with eternal doom!
What most imperious grief doth here oppress
The one sad soul which haunts this peopled tomb
In many forms that all these years have worn
One thought, for time's long comment more forlorn!

Lo grief, through love instinct with silentness,
Reluctant, in these marbles eloquent,
The ancient tale of loss doth here confess
The first confusing, mad bewilderment,
Life's unbelief in death, in love fore-spent,
Thought without issue, child-like discontent.

ODE ON A LYCIAN TOMB.

Time, that for thee awhile did moveless seem,
Again his glass hath turned: I see thee stand
Thought-netted, or, like one who in a dream
Self-wildered, in some alien forest land
Lone-wandering, in endless mazes lost,
Wearily stumbles over tracks re-crossed.

Oft didst thou come in after days to leave
Roses and laurel on thy warrior's grave,
And with thy marble self again to grieve,
Glad of what genius unto sorrow gave,
Interpreting what had been and would be,
Love, tears, despair, attained serenity.

ODE ON A LYCIAN TOMB.

There are whom sorrow leaves full-wrecked. The great
Grow in the urgent anguish of defeat,
And with mysterious confidence await
The silent coming of the bearer's feet;
Wherefore this quiet face so proudly set
To front life's duties, but naught to forget.

For life is but a tender instrument
Whereon the master hand of grief doth fall,
Leaving love's vibrant tissue resonant
With echoes, ever waking at the call
Of every kindred tone: so grief doth change
The instrument o'er which his fateful fingers range.

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