



1894
THE SPHINX
by Oscar Wilde

In a dim corner of my room
For longer than my fancy thinks,
A beautiful and silent Sphinx
Has watched me through the shifting gloom.

Inviolate and immobile
She does not rise, she does not stir
For silver moons are nought to her,
And nought to her the suns that reel.

Red follows grey across the air
The waves of moonlight ebb and flow
But with the dawn she does not go
And in the night-time she is there.

Dawn follows Dawn, and Nights grow old
And all the while this curious cat
Lies crouching on the Chinese mat
With eyes of satin rimmed with gold.

Upon the mat she lies and leers,
And on the tawny throat of her
Flutters the soft and fur
Or ripples to her pointed ears.

Come forth my lovely seneschal,
So somnolent, so statuesque,
Come forth you exquisite grotesque,
Half woman and half animal,

Come forth my lovely languorous Sphinx,
And put your head upon my knee
And let me stroke your throat and see
Your body spotted like the Lynx,

And let me touch those curving claws
Of yellow ivory, and grasp
The tail that like a monstrous Asp
Coils round your heavy velvet paws.

A thousand weary centuries
Are thine, while I have hardly seen
Some twenty summers cast their green
For Autumn's gaudy liveries,

But you can read the Hieroglyphs
On the great sandstone obelisks,
And you have talked with Basilisks
And you have looked on Hippogriffs

O tell me, were you standing by
When Isis to Osiris knelt,
And did you watch the Egyptian melt

Her union for Anthony,

And drink the jewel-drunken wine,
And bend her head in mimic awe
To see the huge pro-consul draw
The salted tunny from the brine?

And did you mark the Cyprian kiss
With Adon on his catafalque,
And did you follow Amanalk
The god of Heliopolis?

And did you talk with Thoth, and did
You hear the moon-horned Io weep
And know the painted kings who sleep
Beneath the wedge-shaped Pyramid?

Lift up your large black satin eyes
Which are like cushions where one sinks,
Fawn at my feet, fantastic Sphinx,
And sing me all your memories.

Sing to me of the Jewish maid
Who wandered with the Holy Child,
And how you led them through the wild,
And how they slept beneath your shade.

Sing to me of that odorous
Green eve when crouching by the marge
You heard from Adrian's gilded barge
The laughter of Antinous,

And lapped the stream, and fed your drouth,
And watched with hot and hungry stare
The ivory body of that rare
Young slave with his pomegranate mouth.

Sing to me of the Labyrinth
In which the two-formed bull was stalled,
Sing to me of the night you crawled
Across the temple's granite plinth

When through the purple corridors
The screaming scarlet Ibis flew
In terror, and a horrid dew
Dripped from the moaning Mandragores,

And the great torpid crocodile
Within the great shed slimy tears,
And tore the jewels from his ears
And staggered back into the Nile,

And the Priests cursed you with shrill psalms
As in your claws you seized their snake
And crept away with it to slake
Your passion by the shuddering palms.

Who were your lovers, who were they
Who wrestled for you in the dust?
Which was the vessel of your Lust,

What Lemn had you every day?

Did giant lizards come and crouch
Before you on the reedy banks?
Did Gryphons with great metal flanks
Leap on you in your trampled couch,

Did monstrous hippopotami
Come sidling to you in the mist
Did gilt-scaled dragons write and twist
With passion as you passed them by?

And from that brick-built Lycian tomb
What horrible Chimaera came
With fearful heads and fearful flame
To breed new wonders from your womb?

Or had you shameful secret guests
And did you hurry to your home
Some Nereid coiled in amber foam
With curious rock-crystal breasts;

Or did you, treading through the froth,
Call to the brown Sidonian
For tidings of Leviathan,
Leviathan of Behemoth?

Or did you when the sun was set,
Climb up the cactus-covered slope
To meet your swarthy Ethiop
Whose body was of polished jet?

Or did you while the earthen skiffs
Dropt down the gray Nilotic flats
At twilight, and the flickering bats
Flew round the temple's triple glyphs

Steal to the border of the bar
And swim across the silent lake
And slink into the vault and make
The Pyramid your lupanar,

Till from each black sarcophagus
Rose up the painted, swathed dead,
Or did you lure unto your bed
The ivory-horned Trageophos?

Or did you love the God of flies
Who plagued the Hebrews and was splashed
With wine unto the waist, or Pasht
Who had green beryls for her eyes?

Or that young God, the Tyrian,
Who was more amorous than the dove
Of Ashtaroth, or did you love
The God of the Assyrian,

Whose wings that like transparent talc
Rose high above his hawk-faced head
Painted with silver and with red

And ribbed with rods of Oreichalch?

Or did huge Apis from his car
Leap down and lay before your feet
Big blossoms of the honey-sweet,
And honey-coloured nenuphar?

How subtle secret is your smile;
Did you love none then? Nay I know
Great Ammon was your bedfellow,
He lay with you beside the Nile.

The river-horses in the slime
Trumpeted when they saw him come
Odorous with Syrian galbanum
And smeared with spikenard and with thyme.

He came along the river bank
Like some tall galley argent-sailed
He strode across the waters, mailed
In beauty and the waters sank.

He strode across the desert sand,
He reached the valley where you lay,
He waited till the dawn of day,
Then touched your black breasts with his hand.

You kissed his mouth with mouth of flame,
You made the horned-god your own,
You stood behind him on his throne;
You called him by his secret name,

You whispered monstrous oracles
Into the caverns of his ears,
With blood of goats and blood of steers
You taught him monstrous miracles,

While Ammon was your bedfellow
Your chamber was the steaming Nile
And with your curved Archaic smile
You watched his passion come and go.

With Syrian oils his brows were bright
And wide-spread as a tent at noon
His marble limbs made pale the moon
And lent the day a larger light,

His long hair was nine cubits span
And coloured like that yellow gem
Which hidden in their garments' hem,
The merchants bring from Kurdistan.

His face was as the must that lies
Upon a vat of new-made wine,
The seas could not insapphirine
The perfect azure of his eyes.

His thick, soft throat was white as milk
And threaded with thin veins of blue
And curious pearls like frozen dew

Were broidered on his flowing silk.

On pearl and porphyry pedestalled
He was too bright to look upon
For on his ivory breast there shone
The wondrous ocean-emerald,-

That mystic, moonlight jewel which
Some diver of the Colchian caves
Had found beneath the blackening waves
And carried to the Colchian witch.

Before his gilded galiot
Ran naked vine-wreathed corybants
And lines of swaying elephants
Knelt down to draw his chariot,

And lines of swarthy Nubians
Bore up his litter as he rode
Down the great granite-paven road,
Between the nodding peacock fans.

The merchants brought him steatite
From Sidon in their painted ships;
The meanest cup that touched his lips
Was fashioned from a chrysolite.

The merchants brought him cedar chests
Of rich apparel, bound with cords;
His train was borne by Memphian lords;
Young kings were glad to be his guests.

Ten hundred shaven priests did bow
To Ammon's altar day and night,
Ten hundred lamps did wave their light
Through Ammon's carven house,- and now

Foul snake and speckled adder with
Their young ones crawl from stone to stone
For ruined is the house, and prone
The great rose-marble monolith;

Wild ass or strolling jackal comes
And crouches in the mouldering gates,
Wild satyrs call unto their mates
Across the fallen fluted drums.

And on the summit of the pile,
The blue-faced ape of Horus sits
And gibbers while the fig-tree splits
The pillars of the peristyle.

The God is scattered here and there;
Deep hidden in the windy sand
I saw his giant granite hand
Still clenched in impotent despair.

And many a wandering caravan
Of stately negroes, silken-shawled,
Crossing the desert, halts appalled

Before the neck that none can span.

And many a bearded Bedouin
Draws back his yellow-striped burnous
To gaze upon the Titan thews
Of him who was thy paladin.

Go seek his fragments on the moor,
And wash them in the evening dew,
And from their pieces make anew
Thy mutilated paramour.

Go seek them where they lie alone
And from their broken pieces make
Thy bruised bedfellow! And wake
Mad passions in the senseless stone!

Charm his dull ear with Syrian hymns;
He loved your body; oh be kind!
Pour spikenard on his hair and wind
Soft rolls of linen round his limbs;

Wind round his head the figured coins,
Stain with red fruits the pallid lips;
Weave purple for his shrunken hips
And purple for his barren loins!

Away to Egypt! Have no fear;
Only one God has ever died,
Only one God has let His side
Be wounded by a soldier's spear.

But these, thy lovers, are not dead;
Still by the hundred-cubit gate
Dog-faced Anubis sits in state
With lotus lilies for thy head.

Still from his chair of porphyry
Giant Memnon strains his lidless eyes
Across the empty land and cries
Each yellow morning unto thee.

And Nilus with his broken horn
Lies in his black and oozy bed
And till thy coming will not spread
His waters on the withering corn.

Your lovers are not dead, I know,
And will rise up and hear thy voice
And clash their symbols and rejoice
And run to kiss your mouth,- and so

Set wings upon your argosies!
Set horses to your ebon car!
Back to your Nile! Or if you are
Grown sick of dead divinities;

Follow some roving lion's spoor
Across the copper-coloured plain,
Reach out and hale him by the mane

And bid him to be your paramour!

Crouch by his side upon the grass
And set your white teeth in his throat,
And when you hear his dying note,
Lash your long flanks of polished brass

And take a tiger for your mate,
Whose amber sides are flecked with black,
And ride upon his gilded back
In triumph through the Theban gate,

And toy with him in amorous jests,
And when he turns and snarls and gnaws,
Oh smite him with your jasper claws
And bruise him with your agate breasts!

Why are you tarrying? Get hence!
I weary of your sullen ways.
I weary of your steadfast gaze,
Your somnolent magnificence.

Your horrible and heavy breath
Makes the light flicker in the lamp,
And on my brow I feel the damp
And dreadful dews of night and death,

Your eyes are like fantastic moons
That shiver in some stagnant lake,
Your tongue is like a scarlet snake
That dances to fantastic tunes.

Your pulse makes poisonous melodies,
And your black throat is like the hole
Left by some torch or burning coal
On Saracenic tapestries.

Away! the sulphur-coloured stars
Are hurrying through the Western gate!
Away! Or it may be too late
To climb their silent silver cars!

See, the dawn shivers round the gray,
Gilt-dialled towers, and the rain
Streams down each diamonded pane
And blurs with tears the wannish day.

What snake-tressed fury, fresh from Hell,
With uncouth gestures and unclean,
Stole from the poppy-drowsy queen
And led you to a student's cell?

What songless, tongueless ghost of sin
Crept through the curtains of the night
And saw my taper burning bright,
And knocked and bade you enter in?

Are there not others more accursed,
Whiter with leprosy than I?
Are Abana and Pharpar dry,

That you come here to slake your thirst?

False Sphinx! False Sphinx! By reedy Styx,
Old Charon, leaning on his oar,
Waits for my coin. Go thou before
And leave me to my crucifix,

Whose pallid burden, sick with pain,
Watches the world with wearied eyes.
And weeps for every soul that dies,
And weep for every soul in vain!!.

THE END