

**TAORMINA, AND
OTHER POEMS**

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Taormina, and other poems by Helen Lowe

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HELEN LOWE

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TAORMINA.

WE stood on Taormina's topmost height,
In the resplendent air, the sea below
Gleamed to the farthest west, and opposite
Old Etna leaned against the southern sky ;
His feet upon the shore, with forest belt,
Broad shoulder swathed in snow, the giant lay
Majestic, motionless, and we beheld
Our life-long dream's fulfilment ; but his crest
Grey vapours shadowed, mingling with the smoke
Breathed from his fiery torment through all time.
Then one said, " Soon the morning mist will rise,
I wait for the unveiling, be it till noon ;
Having come so far it were a grief and shame
To turn, the best unseen." We had performed
Our traveller-duty, amid the ruins marked
Proscenium, vomitories, arch and niche,
The Roman's brick-work, and diviner touch
Of ancient Greek—all that the garrulous guide

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Could tell of solemn common place, or name
In old-world story chronicled around.
Above hung Mola on th' o'er-toppling crag,
Eyre for eagles meet, not dwelling-place
For men of solid earth ; below you trace
Vestige of Norman and Saracenic tombs,
And far along the shores see Acis flows,
And Cyclop rocks there by the monster flung
Thousands of years ago, and yet beyond,
Where the last headland melts into the sky,
Lies buried Syracuse ; so having noted
Each name and place, the others soon went down
For shelter to the hut where the keen guard
Kept horde of questionable relicts, such
As curious credulity will barter
For broad piastres ; I alone remained
With him who willed to rest on that world-famed,
All glorious-sighted promontory ; both
Watching the mount's cloud-curtain shift and
change
With the light breeze, now lifted till the fields
Of ~~ether~~ snow gleamed on our hopes, now low,
Cowering mid-way ; well was it there to wait,
A worn and broken marble block our seat,
The fine grass gemmed with blossoms, scented thyme

Honied as neighbouring Hybla's, marigolds
Flaming profuse and rosy cyclemen,
And milk-wort white and blue—the very flowers
Plucked by Persephone in Enna's fields,
Just over yonder hills, and at our feet
A solitary fragment of Greek art,
Acanthus carved in stone, each fine true line
Curving with perfect grace, lay half concealed
In rank tufts of its living prototype
Green flourishing on nature's deathless lap.
The air breathed ecstasy, the vernal sun
Flooded the universal round with gold,
And molten sapphire shone the Ionian main ;
Yet desolate, the past was everywhere.
Over Sicilia, wide as eye or thought
Could range to Grecian isles far down the west,
The sunset glory of past ages lingers ;
Still resonant with song and tale divine,
Æonian echoes breathe from out these seas
And murmuring fade along forsaken shores.

Breaking the silence charmed, somewhat of this
I spake, and my companion, turning slow
From contemplation of the giant mount,
Replied, " I here could envy you, so versed
In classic lore, vocal with speech and song

O'er-mastering dull oblivion—dumb to me,
Early inured in science and the ways
Of most prosaic commerce. I have read
In school-days how Enecladus, the strongest
Of Titans, there lies chained, his fiery struggles
Convulsing half the isle; still Etna's wonders,
Ages on ages burning, yet unspent,
His glaciers under fire-floods, his miles
Of smoking craters—can Enecladus—
Or was it Typhens—enhance these? I own
These fables shorn of radiant verse to me,
Too rashly wrong the majesty and awe
Of nature's state." "But are they wholly fables?"
I answered. "We are told in holy writ
That there were giants once, and sons of God
Walked earth with men, and loved their daughters
fair;
Faint legends whisper through all lands of races
Lost in the secret past, and it may be,
Though fashioned and ensouled by finest fancy,
Truth masks her in these myths, could wisdom
find."
He smiled, not given to many words, but quoted:
"The wise best know how much remains unknown,
So, love the marvellous." And I resumed:

“ Were it not pleasanter and fitter deem
That by the margin of yon yellow sands
Once Galathea and her sister-nymphs
Green-kirtled glided from the sparkling wave,
Or, even the monster shepherd, Polypheme,
Piped from the impending cliff, than to believe
In sordid tribes, half ape, half man, beyond
The reach of backward thought, whose sole memorial
An arrow-headed flint? And wherefore pry
With mole-eyed science, since three thousand years
Of glory told and done is venerable
With hoar antiquity above her gulf
Of eras eocene, existence’ dawn?”

While idly glancing thus at vastest themes
The hours stole on, when a wind wandering came
From thymy hill-tops sweet, a glad surprise.
And lo! where Etna’s vapour-curtain stirs
Uprolling, soon the summit will be clear.
Nay, treacherous, tantalizing, cruel as fate,
Again descending slow and closing round
The dense mist hung its pall between our eyes
And their desire; we knew the broad grey plume
Sirocco spreads, when from his burning lair
In Afric sands, Carthagenic’s furnace tomb
He dips in midway brine and moistly soars;

Feeling his languid breath our hearts grew faint,
But courage! yet is time for change, and ever
Look to the sunny side; look and rejoice!
For turning northward we beheld the hills
Gathering luxuriant round in serried hosts,
From shore to shore, till where with jealous guard
They circle round Palermo's golden shell
Beside the ever iridescent wave;
And saw Calabria's coast, the narrowing straits,
And we recalled our sailing through the night
From the Tyrrhene into Æolian seas;
How with first dusk of dawn we ventured up,
Braving the wet deck and the chilling air,
(Let none suppose Italian breezes bland
Till past his vernal equinox the sun
Outstrips the bull upon his heavenward path)
We watched our vessel cleave the furrowed foam,
And saw the wide-winged sea-birds dive and float,
Saw graceful dolphins—fancy stirring sight—
In even pairs, as reined by unseen hand,
Course, leaping alongside.

And we beheld

Through silvery shadows stealing gradual forth,
Under the cold eye of mysterious morn,
Those isles and headlands fumed and full of wonder;