

**LYRICS FROM  
THE CHINESE**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649756599

Lyrics from the Chinese by Helen Waddell

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.  
Cover @ 2017

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**HELEN WADDELL**

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**FROM THE CHINESE**

BY  
**HELEN WADDELL**

BOSTON AND NEW YORK  
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY  
1913

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1913

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TO MY FATHER

LIBRARY



## INTRODUCTION

It is by candlelight one enters Babylon; and all roads lead to Babylon, provided it is by candlelight one journeys. It was by candlelight that John Milton read *Didorus Siculus*, and by the Third Book he had voyaged beyond the Cape of Hope and now was past Mozambique, and already felt freshly blowing on his face

*'Sabean odours from the spicie shore  
Of Arabia the blest.'*

It was by candlelight that the sea coast of Bohemia was discovered, and the finding of it made a winter's tale. Baghdad is not a city to be seen by day; candlelight is the only illumination for all Arabian nights.

One sees most by candlelight, because one sees little. There is a magic ring, and in it all things shine with a yellow shining, and round it wavers the eager dark. This is the magic of the lyrics of the twelfth century in France, lit candles in 'a case-



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ment ope at night,' starring the dusk in Babylon ; candles flare and gutter in the meaner streets, Villon's lyrics, these ; candles flame in its cathedral-darkness, Latin hymns of the Middle Ages, of Thomas of Celano and Bernard of Morlaix. For if Babylon has its Quartier Latin, it has also its Notre Dame. The Middle Ages are the Babylon of the religious heart.

Every literature has its Babylon. Or rather, like that other Babylon, not of the spirit, Babylon is one, and all nations have drunk of her wine. She, too, is the haven desired of 'everyone that saileth any whither' by reason of her costliness, her merchandise of gold and precious stones and pearls, of fine linen and purple and silk and scarlet, thynic wood and ivory, cinnamon and incense, wine and souls of men ; and this Babylon too will have fallen when the sound of the flute is no more heard in her, and 'the light of a candle shall shine no more at all.' All languages are spoken in Babylon, yet with the same accent ; here are gateways of the Moors in Spain, Venetian waterways, streets of Old Paris, and over all the undiscerning twilight. All men meet in Babylon who go on pilgrimages, for all roads end in Babylon, the Road of the San Grael, the Road of the Secret Rose.

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It is long since the East made good its claim to Babylon in one thousand and one nights, and now among all the taverns there is none more crowded than the Inn of the Rubaiyat; yet on the farther side the city stretches dim and all but unexplored. There are even the fragments of an old wall in the heart of it, the ruins of an 'East Gate,' and beside it the shimmering darkness of a clump of willows. The scholars—for even scholars sometimes come to Babylon—have identified it as Yuen-K'ew, sometime chief city of the province of Ch'in, but this was by daylight; the theory is only tenable if Yuen-K'ew is the Chinese for Babylon.

For the Babylon beyond the broken wall is Old Babylon; its temple-lights are Songs of Sacrifice that were old when Buddha died. There are waste places with dark pools and the ghostly gleam of lotus; black reaches of a palace moat; and once a Chinese lantern flashes on a wall leprous with lichen and hideously stained. The streets are narrow, but they climb up and up, past darkened houses and 'mounds of red earth from whose sides strange trees grow out,' and suddenly break into broad daylight, and wide grassy spaces, with the swift flight of swallows overhead. Looking down, Babylon lies in a luminous mist shot through with

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points of fire; but on the other side there is a great stretch of quiet water, and in its depths one sees the city of all legends, the oldest Babylon of all. There was morning glory on the trellis of the palace garden of Wei, and through fathoms of clear water one sees it yet. The very sunlight is molten; and the echoes of a drinking-song come faint but very joyous. The sound has travelled far. That water is thirty centuries deep.

It is through two stout volumes of 'The Chinese Classics' that this road to Babylon runs; a pleasant edition, printed at Hong Kong, and sold there 'At the Author's.' That author was Dr. Legge, sometime missionary in China, late Professor of Chinese at Oxford. He was not the first to find the road it was a Jesuit Father of the eighteenth century one Père Lacharme, who first passed under the 'East Gate' into the city of the Shih-King, but he wrote of it in Latin, and the book was not popular. This is the easier road; every lyric has its Chinese text, black and unfamiliar and satisfying; beneath it a prose translation of unflinching accuracy, and footnotes that unravel all things, from the habits of a sinister plant called tribulus—Shakespeare would have had it in his witches'