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Phantastes Chapter 5: Pygmalion

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Pygmalion

By Thomas Lovell Beddoes

There stood a city along Cyprus' side
Lavish of palaces, an arched tide
Of unrolled rocks; and, where the deities dwelled,
Their clustered domes pushed up the noon, and swelled
With the emotion of the god within,—
As doth earth's hemisphere, when showers begin
To tickle the still spirit at its core,
Till pastures tremble and the river-shore
Squeezes out buds at every dewy pore.
And there were pillars, from some mountain's heart,
Thronging beneath a wide, imperial floor
That bent with riches; and there stood apart
A palace, oft accompanied by trees,
That laid their shadows in the galleries
Under the coming of the endless light,
Net-like;—who trod the marble, night or day,
By moon, or lamp, or sunless day-shine white,
Would brush the shaking, ghostly leaves away,
Which might be tendrils or a knot of wine,
Burst from the depth of a faint window-vine,
With a bird pecking it: and round the hall
And wandering staircase, within every wall
Of sea-ward portico, and sleeping chamber,
Whose patient lamp distilled a day of amber,
There stood, and sate, or made rough steeds their throne,
Immortal generations wrung from stone,
Alike too beautiful for life and death,
And bodies that a soul of mortal breath
Would be the dross of.

Such a house as this
Within a garden hard by Salamis,
(Cyprus's city-crown and capital
Ere Paphos was, and at whose ocean-wall
Beauty and love's paternal waves do beat
That sprouted Venus;) such a fair retreat
Lonely Pygmalion self inhabited,
Whose fiery chisel with creation fed
The ship-wrecked rocks; who paid the heavens again
Diamonds for ice; who made gods who make men.
Lonely Pygmalion: you might see him go
Along the streets where markets thickest flow,
Doubling his gown across his thinking breast,
And the men fall aside; nor only pressed

Out of his elbows' way, but left a place,
A sun-room for him, that his mind had space
And none went near; none in his sweep would venture,
For you might feel that he was but the centre
Of an inspired round, the middle spark
Of a great moon, setting aside the dark
And cloudy people. As he went along
The chambered ladies silenced the half-song,
And let the wheel unheeded whirl and skim,
To get their eyes blest by the sight of him.
So locks were swept from every eye that drew
Sun for the soul through circles violet-blue,
Mild brown, or passionate black.

Still, discontent,
Over his sensual kind the sculptor went,
Walking his thoughts. Yet Cyprus' girls be fair;
Day-bright and evening-soft the maidens are,
And witching like the midnight, and their pleasure
Silent and deep as midnight's starry treasure.
Lovely and young, Pygmalion yet loved none.
His soul was bright and lovely as the sun,
Like which he could create; and in its might
There lived another Spirit wild and bright,
That came and went; and, when it came, its light
On these dim earthy things, turn where he will,
Its light, shape, beauty were reflected still.
Day-time and dark it came; like a dim mist
Shelling a god, it rolled, and, ere he wist,
It fell aside, and dawned a shape of grace,
And an inspired and melancholy face,
Whose lips were smile-buds dewy:—into him
It rolled like sun-light till his sight was dim,
And it was in his heart and soul again,
Not seen but breathed.

There was a grassy plain,
A pasture of the deer,—Olympus' mountain
Was the plain's night, the picture of its fountain:
Unto which unfrequented dell and wood
Unwittingly his solitary mood
Oft drew him.—In the water lay
A fragment of pale marble, which they say
Slipped from some fissure in the agued moon,
Which had caught earth-quake and a deadly swoon
When the sun touched her with his hilly shade.
Weeds grew upon it, and the streamlet made
A wanton music with its ragged side,

And birds had nests there. One still even-tide,
When they were perched and sleeping, passed this man,
Startling the air with thoughts which over-ran
The compass of his mind: writing the sand
Idly he paused, and laid unwitting hand
On the cold stone. How smooth the touch! It felt
Less porous than a lip which kisses melt,
And diamond-hard. That night his workmen wrought
With iron under it, and it was brought,
This dripping quarry, while the sky was starry,
Home to the weary, yearning statuary.
He saw no sky that day, no dark that night,
For through the hours his lamp was full of light,
Shadowing the pavement with his busy right.
Day after day they saw not in the street
The wondrous artist: some immortal feat
Absorbed him; and yet often in the noon,
When the town slept beneath the sweltering June,
—The rich within, the poor man on the stair,—
He stole unseen into the meadow's air,
And fed on sight of summer, till the life
Was too abundant in him; and so, rife
With light creative, he went in alone,
And poured it warm upon the growing stone.
The magic chisel thrust, and gashed, and swept,
Flying and manifold; no cloud e'er wept
So fast, so thick, so light upon the close
Of shapeless green it meant to make a rose:—
And as insensibly out of a stick,
Dead in the winter-time, the dew-drops quick,
And the thin sun-beams, and the airy shower
Raise and unwrap a many-leaved flower,
And then a fruit: so from the barren stock
Of the deer-shading, formless valley-rock,
This close stone-bud, he, quiet as the air,
Had shaped a lady wonderfully fair,
—Dear to the eyes, a delicate delight,—
For all her marble symmetry was white
As brow and bosom should be, save some azure
Which waited for a loving lip's erasure,
Upon her shoulder, to be turned to blush.
And she was smooth and full, as if one gush
Of life had washed her, or as if a sleep
Lay on her eye-lid, easier to sweep
Than bee from daisy. Who could help a sigh
At seeing a beauty stand so lifelessly,

But that it was too beautiful to die?
Dealer of immortality,
Greater than Jove himself,—for only he
Can such eternize as the grave has ta'en,
And open heaven by the gate of pain,—
What art thou now, divine Pygmalion?
Divine! gods counting human. Thou hast done
That glory, which has undone thee for ever.
For thou art weak, and tearful, and dost shiver
Wintrily sad; and thy life's healthy river,
With which thy body once was overflown,
Is dried and sunken to its banks of bone.
He carved it not; nor was the chisel's play,
That dashed the earthen hindrances away,
Driven and diverted by his muscle's sway.
The winged tool, as digging out a spell,
Followed a magnet wheresoe'er it fell,
That sucked and led it right: and for the rest,
The living form, with which the stone he blest,
Was the loved image stepping from his breast.
And therefore loves he it, and therefore stays
About the she-rock's feet, from hour to hour,
Anchored to her by his own heart: the power
Of the isle's Venus therefore thus he prays.
“Goddess, that made me, save thy son, and save
The man, that made thee goddess, from the grave.
Thou know'st it not; it is a fearful coop
Dark, cold, and horrible,—a blinded loop
In Pluto's madhouse' green and wormy wall.
O save me from't! Let me not die, like all;
For I am but like one: not yet, not yet,
At least not yet; and why? My eyes are wet
With the thick dregs of immature despair;
With bitter blood out of my empty heart.
I breathe not aught but my own sighs for air,
And my life's strongest is a dying start.
No sour grief there is to me unwed;
I could not be more lifeless being dead.
Then let me die. . Ha! did she pity me?
Oh! she can never love. Did you not see,
How still she bears the music of my moan!
Her heart? Ah! touch it. Fool! I love the stone.
Inspire her, gods! oft ye have wasted life
On the deformed, the hideous, and the vile:
Oh! grant it, my sweet rock,—my only wife.
I do not ask it long: a little while,—

A year,—a day,—an hour,—let it be!
For that I'll give you my eternity.
Or let it be a fiend, if ye will send
Something, yon form to humanize and bend,
Within those limbs,—and, when the new-poured blood
Flows in such veins, the worst must soon be good.
They will not hear. Thou, Jove,—or thou, Apollo—
Ay, thou! thou know'st,—O listen to my groan
'Twas Niobe thou drov'st from flesh to stone:
Shew this the hole she broke, and let her follow
That mother's track of steps and eyelid rain,
Treading them backwards into life again.
Life, said I? Lives she not? Is there not gone
My life into her, which I pasture on;
Dead, where she is not? Live, thou statue fair,
Live, thou dear marble,—or I shall go wild.
I cover thee, my sweet; I leave thee there,
Behind this curtain, my delicious child,
That they may secretly begin to give
My prayer to thee: when I return, O live!
Oh! live,—or I live not." And so he went,
Leaving the statue in its darksome tent.

Morn after morn, sadder the artist came;
His prayer, his disappointment were the same.
But when he gazed she was more near to woman;
There was a fleshy pink, a dimple wrought
That trembled, and the cheek was growing human
With the flushed distance of a rising thought,
That still crept nearer:—yet no further sign!
And now, Pygmalion, that weak life of thine
Shakes like a dew-drop in a broken rose,
Or incense parting from the altar-glows.
'Tis the last look,—and he is mad no more:
By rule and figure he could prove at large
She never can be born,—and from the shore
His foot is stretching into Charon's barge.
Upon the pavement ghastly is he lying,
Cold with the last and stoniest embrace:
Elysium's light illumines all his face;
His eyes have a wild, starry grace
Of heaven, into whose depth of depths he's dying.
—A sound, with which the air doth shake,
Extinguishing the window of moonlight!
A pang of music dropping round delight,
As if sweet music's honiest heart did break!
Such a flash, and such a sound, the world

Is stung by, as if something was unfurled
That held great bliss within its inmost curled.
Roof after roof, the palace rends asunder;
And then—O sight of joy and placid wonder!
He lies, beside a fountain, on the knee
Of the sweet woman-statue, quietly
Weeping the tears of his felicity.