

# Legendary Ladies of the Poets

BY RICHARD LE GALLIENNE

IN addition to the well-authenticated "muses" of certain poets, women of known name and history who have been loved and sung into that literary legend we grandiosely speak of as "immortality," the world of poetry is haunted by less-defined shapes of womanhood, women who live for us only in the verse which they have ostensibly inspired, often mere decorative names at the head of a poem, flowery nominations, pretty labels, as it were, on the conserves of past emotions. Such are Petrarch's Laura, Herrick's Julia, Waller's Saccharissa, and, more shadowy still, the fragrant sisterhood of Lesbias, Chloes, and Corinnas, from the days of Catullus, Horace, and Ovid to the coming of Wordsworth's Lucy and Tennyson's Mariana.

The question "Who is Sylvia?" may be asked equally in vain of many another name lyrically illustrious, and it is to be feared that such pretty names too often stand for no one faithfully loved girl, but for many girls loved faithlessly and thus collectively honored—or, to put it more magnificently, "not woman, but the angel that is the type of all women." As a matter of fact, all love-poems, however sincerely addressed to one woman, who may indeed be the immediate provocation of them, are actually inspired by and written to all women. The poet is by nature a born lover of women, and however faithfully he may deem himself to be celebrating the one woman of the moment, or even of a lifetime, it is his general sentiment for the sex at large that really floods his poem with vitality and gives it universality. Usually, too, the one great love of a poet's life is the culmination of other lesser loves, which are absorbed in it, as by a process of transmigration. The dead passion for Chloe lives again in the live passion for Corinna, and even the casual tenderness learned from a forgotten Amaryllis may

contribute to the perfection of that deeper emotion reserved for the heart's Beatrice or Laura. "How many suns it takes to make one speedwell blue!"

Besides, woman in general must also share with a still more universal muse the credit of a poet's inspiration, no less a muse than Nature herself, which is a poet's first and last passion, and of whom woman is but one, though the chief, accident. In the inspiration of all great love-poems woman must consent to divide honors with the universe; with the starry night, with the sea's mystery, or the singing of some April bird. She is so much to the poet because she stands for so much more, mysteriously gathering up in her strange being the diffused thrill and marvel of existence. Probably if a poet told the truth, he would admit that the moon or the sea is more to him than any woman, however wonderful; but a woman is as near as he can get to those mysteries:

"Sometimes thou seemest not as thyself  
alone

But as the meaning of all things that are."

It is in that mood that a poet loves his beloved best—when, that is, she transcends herself and becomes the sacramental vessel of the universe. One might compare a woman's eyes to those magic crystals employed by seers for the purpose of divination.

The poet's rapt gaze is not at them, but through them into that spiritual azure of which they are the fairy windows. For this reason, perhaps, then, a poet's ranging fancy, from one fair face to another, should not be imputed to him for a vulgar inconstancy, but rather for a divine instinctive constancy to the spirit of beauty in all things which he was born to seek, to worship, and to celebrate.

It is this universal quality of a poet's love that in its turn gives to its accidental

objects their universal significance and appeal, thus charging the beloved's name with more than a merely personal historical meaning, and making it symbolize for all men certain types of beauty and certain ways of loving. Even where the poet's mistress is historically individualized, as in the case of Beatrice Portinari, she ceases to be one individual woman and becomes the symbol for all time of love in its loftiest spiritual exaltation, as that Clodia, the pleasure-loving wife of Quintus Metellus Celer, who wept so bitterly at the death of her sparrow, and likewise poisoned her husband, becomes for all time, as the Lesbia of Catullus, the symbol of love whose joys are mainly of the senses. "The poet's Lesbia, the poet's Beatrice, ours is the choice," it comes naturally to Meredith to write: for these two names have become fixed formulæ of expression, a part of the picture-language of mankind.

Similarly Petrarch's Laura is not remembered for herself, for any of those gifts and graces Petrarch so industriously sang; but as the symbol of the lifelong faithfulness and high-flown adoration of her lover. The interest that survives for us in Laura and Petrarch to-day is not in the poetry, or even in the lovers themselves, but in the spiritual and social conditions of a time which could make possible a kind of fame that should elevate a private love-affair into a matter of public European importance. Consider this incident and its significance. When Charles of Luxemburg paid a visit to Avignon—Laura's city—being entertained at a great festival in his honor, at which all the local nobility attended, he desired that, among the ladies present, Laura should be pointed out to him. This being done, he motioned the other ladies aside, and, approaching Laura, he gazed with reverent interest into her face for a moment, and then respectfully kissed her on the forehead and on the eyelids. Thus even in her own lifetime had Laura become a canonized figure; and nearly two hundred years after, when her tomb was discovered and opened, no less a king than Francis the First was there to do her honor. Through Laura alone we realize how real and influential a

fact was that troubadour convention of which Petrarch's poetry was the supreme culmination, and what a genuine force it must have been in the spiritual development of the time. The love of Petrarch for Laura was not, indeed, regarded as merely a private affair, but as a crowning conspicuous example of what one might call the public worship of Womanhood, just then elevated by the troubadours into a sort of poetic religion. The fact of Laura being the wife of another man, Hugh de Sade, a noble of her own rank, was, of course, but in keeping with the curious troubadour convention, which in the choice of a married woman for its muse implied the high platonism of its adoration.

Love of an object too high for its attainment, and therefore a love of pure spirit, though expressed in the language of passion, was its ideal. That is the reason why troubadour poetry for the most part, Petrarch's included, is such dreary reading. It is so evidently mere literary ingenuity displaying itself in a vacuum of feeling, the bloodless euphuism born of the feigned worship of an abstraction. Thus Laura, for all Petrarch's protestation, became less a woman than a theme, much as in our time the death of Arthur Hallam grew to be less a grief to Tennyson than a starting-point for meditation on death and immortality. Yet Petrarch was very positive that none should doubt either the reality of his mistress or his passion. There is extant a letter of his to his friend the Bishop of Lombez, who, it would appear, had manifested a modern scepticism on the subject of his grand passion. "Would to God," writes Petrarch, "that my Laura were indeed but an imaginary person and my passion for her but sport! Alas! it is rather a madness! Hard would it have been, and painful, to feign so long a time—and what extravagance to play such a farce in the world! No, we may counterfeited the action and voice of a sick man, but not the paleness and wasted looks of the sufferer; and how often have you witnessed both in me."

Petrarch has recorded his first meeting with Laura in a famous inscription in his copy of Virgil preserved at Milan. After the manner of Dante in the *Vita*

*Nuova*, he writes: "Laura, illustrious by her own virtues, and long celebrated by my verses, I beheld for the first time, in my early youth, on the 6th of April, 1327, about the first hour of the day, in the church of Saint Claire in Avignon: and in the same city, in the same month of April, the same day and hour, in the year 1348, this light of my life was withdrawn from the world while I was in Verona, ignorant, alas! of what had befallen me."

Petrarch had, therefore, been writing sonnets to Laura for twenty-one years, as he was to continue doing at intervals for another twenty-six. Surely a monstrous constancy. Schlegel has said that Laura herself might well have been *ennuyé* had she been compelled to read the whole of Petrarch's sonnets to her at a sitting; and Byron has his own cynical explanation of the matter:

"Think you, if Laura had been Petrarch's wife  
He would have written sonnets all his life?"

Though it seems to be a general truth that the voice of the nightingale is hushed by marriage—as sings George Meredith:

"... the nightingale scarce ever charms  
the long twilight:  
Mute with the cares of the nest"—

yet some married men have written exceedingly long and dull poems on their wives, as some wives have inspired some excellent poetry, too. The once famous Castara of William Habington is an example of the muse matrimonial. Habington was a pious man of the metaphysical school of poets that enjoyed a certain vogue during the first half of the seventeenth century, and he prides himself on the propriety of his inspiration. "If," he says, ironically, in a preface, "the innocency of a chaste muse should be more acceptable and weigh heavier in the balance of esteem than a fame begot in adultery of study, I doubt I shall leave no hope of competition"; and again he says: "When love builds upon the rock of chastity, it may safely condemn the battery of the waves and threatenings of the wind, since time, that makes a mockery of the firmest struc-

tures, shall itself be ruined before that be demolished." Would that the poet were as good as the husband, yet Castara—in life Lucia, daughter of the first Lord Powis—has contrived to live in literary history through verses such as these:

"Like the violet which, alone,  
Prosper in some happy shade,  
My Castara lives unknown,  
To no looser eye betray'd,  
For she's to herself untrue  
Who delights i' th' public view. . .

"She her throne makes reason climb,  
While wild passions captive lie:  
And, each article of time,  
Her pure thoughts to heaven fly:  
All her vows religious be,  
And her love she vows to me."

Another very different champion of the muse matrimonial is John Donne. Through all the crust of metaphysical conceits there breaks in Donne's poetry the flame of white interior fires, set alight by one of the bravest and most attractive wives in the history of love. Anne More was the daughter of Sir George More, lord lieutenant of the Tower, a father whose sternness made a runaway marriage necessary, and whose implacability hampered the devoted couple for years. Yet, through all, their love wore a gallant feather of romance—romance productive of no less than twelve children, as well as Donne's finest poems, and living still in one or two anecdotes of a peculiarly vivid humanity. Such is the story of Donne during an absence from England seeing his wife in a vision. She was in childbed at the time, but did not die. "I have seen," he told a friend who was with him, "my dead wife pass twice by me through this room, with her hair hanging about her shoulders and a dead child in her arms." We get a glimpse of her spirit in her wish, on the occasion of one of Donne's enforced business visits abroad, to accompany her husband dressed as a page. One has a childish wish that he had given in to her whim and taken her with him. He wrote her a charming lyric instead:

"Sweetest love, I do not go,  
For weariness of thee,

Nor in hope the world can show  
A fitter love for me;  
But since that I  
At the last must part, 'tis best,  
Thus to use myself in jest  
By feignèd deaths to die."

For another absence he has this gayer  
solace:

"By absence this good means I gain,  
That I can catch her  
Where none can watch her,  
In some close corner of my brain.  
There I embrace and kiss her;  
And so I both enjoy and miss her."

But the brave story, like all brave  
stories, had to end; and she was to leave  
Donne alone with a new-born child,  
their twelfth, when he was but forty-  
two. Her death was to make him a great  
divine, as her love had made him a great  
poet. Who does not know those solemn  
lines written against his burial:

"Whoever comes to shroud me, do not harm  
Nor question much  
That subtle wreath of hair about mine  
arm;  
The mystery, the sign, you must not  
touch,  
For 'tis my outward soul,  
Viceroy to that, which unto Heav'n being  
gone,  
Will leave this to control,  
And keep these limbs, these provinces  
from dissolution."

As some of these half-legendary wom-  
en live as the symbols of the great ways  
of loving, love's passion, love's idealism,  
love's faithfulness, so others stand for  
the more tender, playful aspects of love,  
or survive by some trait of manner, some  
one charm, or even some trick of dress.  
So Lesbia, as we have said, lives by her  
little sparrow, which still chirps so pret-  
tily and pathetically—*ad solam domi-  
nam usque pipilabat*—in royal Latin till  
this day:

"O it was sweet to hear him twitter-twitter  
In the dear bosom where he made his  
nest!  
Lesbia, sweetheart, who shall say how  
bitter  
This grief to us—so small to all the  
rest? . . .

"And in no other bosom would he sing,  
But sometimes sitting here and some-  
times there,

On one bough and another, would he sing—  
Faithful to Lesbia—as I am to her. . . .

"Foul shades of Orcus, evil you befall!  
'Tis true you smote her little sparrow  
dead—

But this you did to Lesbia worse than all:  
You made her eyes with weeping—O  
so red!"

Ben Jonson's Celia, who seems to have  
been no one in particular, lives for us  
only with her eyes, as Sir John Suck-  
ling's "dearest princess Aglaure" by her  
delicious feet, those feet that

"beneath her petticoat,  
Like little mice, stole in and out,  
As if they fear'd the light,"

and Waller's Saccharissa by her famous  
girdle:

"A narrow compass! and yet there  
Dwelt all that's good, and all that's fair.  
Give me but what this ribbon bound,  
Take all the rest the sun goes round."

Waller's great fame as a poet is hard  
to realize nowadays, and even the name  
of "Saccharissa" seems to survive with  
a sort of silent derision as being an ex-  
treme example, almost a parody, of the  
affected names under which it was once  
the fashion for poets to celebrate their  
mistresses. Probably the "Sophonisba"  
of James Thomson—

"O Sophonisba! Sophonisba O!"

reached the limit of affectation. Lady  
Dorothea Sydney, eldest daughter of the  
Earl of Leicester, whose hand Waller in  
vain sought, in his frigid courtly fash-  
ion, was a personality deserving a more  
warm-blooded immortality. But true  
passion was as lacking to Waller's nature  
as it is to his poetry. He was, it would  
seem, the first poet to abstain from in-  
toxicating drink. He was almost as well  
known as a "water-drinker" as a wit;  
and of his "wit" one ungallant example  
does not show him in a very favorable  
light either as a lover or even a gentle-  
man. It is said that when both he and  
Saccharissa, then the widowed Lady  
Sunderland, had grown somewhat elder-  
ly, she had met him at some reception,  
and, smilingly reminding him of their  
young days, had asked him, "When will  
you write such fine verses on me again?"

"When you are as young, madam, and as handsome as you were then," was the brutal answer of her one-time lover. Very evidently she had done well in bestowing her hand elsewhere, and it is presumed that Waller was then too old to be called out for his insolence. It is rather the reverse of an honor that Saccharissa should live by association with such a coxcomb. It is pleasanter to think of her as the sister of Algernon Sydney.

As Saccharissa by her girdle, so Herriek's Julia lives by her "tempestuous petticoat," that most bewitching and gallant of all immortal garments. Julia's mortal identity is even more completely hidden in her anonymous immortality than her buxom comeliness was hidden in "the winning wave" of her famous petticoat, and there is no reason to wish her more definitely individualized. Herriek was not the man to have a great love-affair: woman was to him a seductive impersonality, a being of bloom and bright eyes, red lips, pearly teeth, and rounded contours, good to go a-Maying with—just a woman, but *not* "a spirit too." He confessed that he never wished for marriage, and though he wrote some fine religious poetry he was, as a rule, very well contented with the charming surfaces, the flower-like forms and perfumes of things; and he loved women as he loved his daffodils, with a pagan simplicity of satisfaction in their beauty and freshness, an enjoyment untainted with cynicism, and, though touched with pathos, never troubled with those Wordsworthian thoughts too deep for tears. It is a healthy, sweet-smelling, May-morning world, a veritable Hesperides, of golden apples and "golden lads and lasses," in which he invites us to go a-Maying—whether it be with Julia or Corinna is all one to the easy-going, light-hearted vicar:

"Rise, and put on your foliage, and be seen  
To come forth, like the springtime, fresh  
and green,  
And sweet as Flora. Take no care  
For jewels for your gown or hair;  
Fear not, the leaves will strew  
Gems in abundance upon you. . . ."

He might well have preached worse sermons to his Devonshire parishioners.

As one turns over the leaves of any collection of old love-songs, many another flower-like name "pleads against oblivion," surely not in vain; for in nothing is the preservative magic of words more strikingly illustrated than in the manner in which, by little more than the musical mention of a name, they contrive to make it live for us with a creative suggestiveness. All that is needed is a name—not necessarily a beautiful one—and a lyrical word or two, a brief rhythm sincerely accented with feeling, enough stalk, so to speak, to carry the flower, and we have evoked for us as by enchantment an undying face of legend.

Such is old Skelton's "merry Margaret":

" . . . merry Margaret  
As midsummer flower,  
Gentle as falcon,  
Or hawk on the tower."

Such, too, is Champion's Amaryllis:

"I care not for these ladies,  
That must be wooed and prayed:  
Give me kind Amaryllis,  
The wanton country maid."

Such sometimes even is the power of the mere title of a poem, as Lovelace's "To Lucasta on going to the Wars" or Cleveland's "On Phyllis—Walking before Sunrise."

Such, to come to later times, is Lamb's magic with "When Maidens such as Hester Die"; or Landor's immortalizing sigh over Rose Aylmer. Alfred de Musset and Rossetti—with those names that are "five sweet symphonies"—employ this gift with charming results.

All that seems to be necessary is for the poet to love the name enough, and to speak it or sing it or sigh it as though he loved it, to carve it like Rosalind's on some tree in the forest, and the miracle is done. Next to nothing need be said, except her name, called out on that wind of Time that blows so many beautiful names about the world. Not idly, therefore, have the poets claimed to set the names of their beloved among the stars. Their lightest song has proved their power to keep their word, and only those women are forgotten who have been as unfortunate as she of whom it was said:

"She had no poet—and she died."



# Socrates Invents a New Sin

ANOTHER "KEEPING UP WITH LIZZIE" STORY

BY IRVING BACHELLER

THE wedding of Miss Betsey Smead and the Hon. Socrates Potter was a fine, old-fashioned comedy, distinguished by some novel lines and incidents now a part of the imperishable history of Pointview.

"I'm scairt and perfectly defenseless," Socrates said that evening in answer to my jest as he stood in a group of merry-makers. "You must be kind to me. I'm an island of silence in a sea o' noise, and as the late Mr. Jeffries said to a rival, 'Nobody is permitted to land on me this evening.' My beach is strewn with silver plate and jewels and gold-headed canes. Bill Warburton is responsible for the most of it. I suppose there's no great gain without some small loss."

He got even by putting this notice over his mantel, and it became the talk of the town:

"Burglars are warned, if they wish to get out of here without trouble, not to take the chairs, or the wood-box, or the kitchen table, or the crockery, or the pots and pans, or the contents of the what-not. A full assortment of jewels, including tiaras, studs, stick-pins, and finger-rings, will be found in a box on the top shelf of the hall closet and may be taken without resistance. The silver plate and gold-headed canes are stored in a chest under the bed of Bill Warburton on Potter's Hill."

In August, about six months after the wedding, I learned of a social earthquake in that community, the shock of which had shaken the continent. I hastened to the land of Lizzie and found the Hon. Socrates Potter under a cloud of tobacco smoke in his law office with a heavy report of legislative proceedings in his lap and his feet on a table. He slowly closed the book and tossed it upon his desk.

"Guilty or not guilty?" I demanded.

"Both," he answered. "I have a large and growing stock of both guilt

and innocence. Just what grade and pattern do you require?"

I came at once to the subject which had brought me there.

"Would you mind turning the key in that door?" he asked. "Thanks! You see, I am the inventor of a new sin and it promises to be very popular. It will fill a long-felt need. There are sure to be imitators who will try to rob me o' some o' my guilt. Now the fact is it's my best possession. I prize and cling to it, and when I open my heart I have to be careful. I have offended the bishops and head men of the Connecticut churches. I have charged that they feed certain regiments in the Army of the Faithful with a cheap, stale, and harmful quality o' goods, thereby filling their camps with sickness and hunger and every byway with deserters. Not that I blame the bishops and head men. I suppose they're doin' the best they can, but I demand fresh, wholesome food for the rank and file, and plenty of it. Then, further, I am guilty of hopes—fond hopes, that we who try to follow the Man of Peace may get together and make a king's army instead of being scattered in corporal's guards. I've blazed a trail to that end and therein is my offense.

"It happened in this way. The Rev. Robert Knowles was, until recently, pastor o' the First Congregational Church o' Pointview. He was young, handsome, good-hearted, and amiable, but as a fountain o' light and inspiration he was not a success. He came wrapped in broadcloth and fine linen—a kind o' matrimonial prize package. The trustees hoped that he would revive the interest o' the young people in Sunday worship; and he did, but it was the worship o' youth and beauty. As he strode along the streets his face and form were an excellent advertisement,