

1817

TO CHARLES COWDEN CLARKE

John Keats

Keats, John (1795-1821) - Widely regarded as the most talented of the English romantic poets, Keats, whose work was poorly received during his lifetime, could not have foreseen his later recognition. Ironically, he wrote for his own epitaph: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water." To Charles Cowden Clarke (1817) - Opening lines: Oft have you seen a swan superbly frowning, / And with proud beast his own white shadow crowning; ...

TO CHARLES COWDEN CLARKE

Oft have you seen a swan superbly frowning,
 And with proud breast his own white shadow crowning;
 He slants his neck beneath the waters bright
 So silently, it seems a beam of light
 Come from the galaxy: anon he sports,
 With outspread wings the Naiad Zephyr courts,
 Or ruffles all the surface of the lake
 In striving from its crystal face to take
 Some diamond water drops, and them to treasure
 In milky nest, and sip them off at leisure.
 But not a moment can he there insure them,
 Nor to such downy rest can he allure them;
 For down they rush as though they would be free,
 And drop like hours into eternity.
 Just like that bird am I in loss of time,
 Whene'er I venture on the stream of rhyme;
 With shatter'd boat, oar snapt, and canvass rent
 I slowly sail, scarce knowing my intent;
 Still scooping up the water with my fingers,

In which a trembling diamond never lingers.
 By this, friend Charles, you may full plainly see
 Why I have never penn'd a line to thee:
 Because my thoughts were never free, and clear,
 And little fit to please a classic ear;
 Because my wine was of too poor a savour
 For one whose palate gladdens in the flavour
 Of sparkling Helicon:- small good it were
 To take him to a desert rude, and bare,
 Who had on Baiae's shore reclin'd at ease,
 While Tasso's page was floating in a breeze
 That gave soft music from Armida's bowers,
 Mingled with fragrance from her rarest flowers:
 Small good to one who had by Mulla's stream
 Fondled the maidens with the breasts of cream;
 Who had beheld Belphoebe in a brook,
 And lovely Una in a leafy nook,
 And Archimago leaning o'er his book:
 Who had of all that's sweet tasted, and seen,
 From silv'ry ripple, up to beauty's queen;

From the sequester'd haunts of gay Titania,
 To the blue dwelling of divine Urania:
 One, who, of late, had ta'en sweet forest walks
 With him who elegantly chats, and talks

The wrong'd Libertas,- who has told you stories
 Of laurel chaplets, and Apollo's glories;
 Of troops chivalrous prancing through a city,
 And tearful ladies made for love, and pity:
 With many else which I have never known.
 Thus have I thought; and days on days have flown
 Slowly, or rapidly- unwilling still
 For you to try my dull, unlearned quill.
 Nor should I now, but that I've known you long;
 That you first taught me all the sweets of song:
 The grand, the sweet, the terse, the free, the fine;
 What swell'd with pathos, and what right divine:
 Spenserian vowels that elope with ease,
 And float along like birds o'er summer seas;
 Miltonian storms, and more,
 Miltonian tenderness;
 Michael in arms, and more, meek Eve's fair slenderness,
 Who read for me the sonnet swelling loudly
 Up to its climax and then dying proudly?
 Who found for me the grandeur of the ode,

Growing, like Atlas, stronger from its load?
 Who let me taste that more than cordial dram,
 The sharp, the rapier-pointed epigram?
 Show'd me that epic was of all the king,
 Round, vast, and spanning all like Saturn's ring?
 You too upheld the veil from Clio's beauty,
 And pointed out the patriot's stern duty;
 The might of Alfred, and the shaft of Tell;
 The hand of Brutus, that so grandly fell
 Upon a tyrant's head. Ah! had I never seen,
 Or known your kindness, what might I have been?
 What my enjoyments in my youthful years,
 Bereft of all that now my life endears?
 And can I e'er these benefits forget?
 And can I e'er repay the friendly debt?
 No, doubly no;- yet should these rhymings please,
 I shall roll on the grass with two-fold ease:
 For I have long time been my fancy feeding

With hopes that you would one day think the reading
 Of my rough verses not an hour misspent;
 Should it e'er be so, what a rich content!
 Some weeks have pass'd since last I saw the spires

In lucent Thames reflected:- warm desires
 To see the sun o'erpeep the eastern dimness,
 And morning shadows, streaking into slimness
 Across the lawn fields, and pebbly water;
 To mark the time as they grow broad, and shorter;
 To feel the air that plays about the hills,
 And sips its freshness from the little rills;
 To see high, golden corn wave in the light
 When Cynthia smiles upon a summer's night,
 And peers among the cloudlets jet and white,
 As though she were reclining in a bed
 Of bean blossoms, in heaven freshly shed.
 No sooner had I stepp'd into these pleasures
 Than I began to think of rhymes and measures:
 The air that floated by me seem'd to say
 "Write! thou wilt never have a better day."
 And so I did. When many lines I'd written,
 Though with their grace I was not oversmitten,
 Yet, as my hand was warm, I thought I'd better
 Trust to my feelings, and write you a letter.
 Such an attempt required an inspiration
 Of a peculiar sort,- a consummation;-

Which, had I felt, these scribblings might have been
 Verses from which the soul would never wean:
 But many days have passed since last my heart
 Was warm'd luxuriously by divine Mozart;
 By Arne delighted, or by Handel madden'd;
 Or by the song of Erin pierc'd and sadden'd:
 What time you were before the music sitting,
 And the rich notes to each sensation fitting.
 Since I have walk'd with you through shady lanes
 That freshly terminate in open plains,
 And revel'd in a chat that ceased not
 When at night-fall among your books we got:
 No, nor when supper came, nor after that,

Nor when reluctantly I took my hat;
 No, nor till cordially you shook my hand

Mid-way between our homes:- your accents bland
Still sounded in my ears, when I no more
Could hear your footsteps touch the grav'ly floor.
Sometimes I lost them, and then found again;
You chang'd the footpath for the grassy plain.
In those still moments I have wish'd you joys

That well you know to honour:- "Life's very toys
"With him," said I, "will take a pleasant charm;
"It cannot be that aught will work him harm."
These thoughts now come o'er me with all their might:
Again I shake your hand,- friend Charles, good night.

THE END