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# AFTERGLOW

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# AFTERGLOW

A POEM

BY

AMELIA JOSEPHINE BURR

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## FOREWORD



LEGEND has grown up in the Dolomite Alps, in the Tyrol, commemorating an event which took place over one hundred years ago. At the present, Civetta is made a special point of interest to the sight-seer penetrating a little further than the railroad into the fastnesses of the high mountains to see a region rich in fine scenery and rich in human interest.

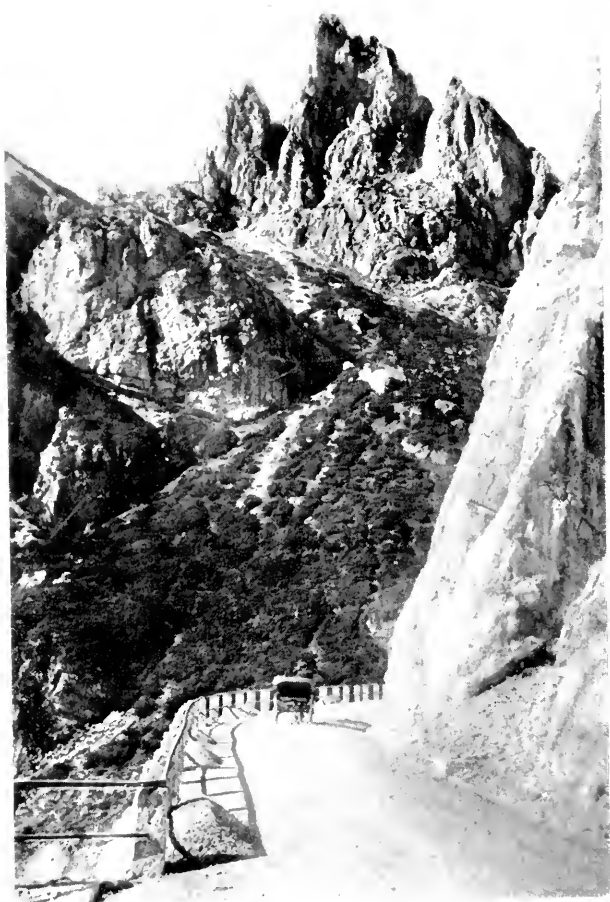
The main route is one traveled by the hardy peoples of the north in the quest of sunshine and the sea, and over which the conquering legions of Rome sought fields for new dominion. It was originally hewed out by the forced labor of prisoners of war, and within a century, repaired or rebuilt by the Austrian for a new invasion of the Summer South by the chilled northern races seeking health in the sun of Tuscony or Venice; seeking quickening of imagination in the art treasure of museum or in the ruins long grown over by newer cities; opening to generous youth the romantic lure of southern sunshine and southern story which ever draw them onward to the unseen always lying just over the horizon of a rock barrier. A return current arising in the south seeks health in cold of the high valleys; and a fresh vision to rekindle the quiescent romance of life in narrowed skies dipping down to mountain peaks.

The impelling curiosity of the traveler brings diverse peoples together in the sequestered valley, until tradition shut in there, becomes the heritage of all.

The particular legend of the poem is centered in the narrow mountain valley at the foot of Mount Civetta, a valley filled in by a land-slip from the neighbor mountain, the debris lying across the valley blocked a stream and formed a lake high up in the mountains, as had been done many a time before, drowning a village.

The poet, Browning-like, has caught one story from the many tragedies told by those who lived and lost by living. The story of one woman and one child buried by the avalanche; the husband's outcry against the unfeeling might of the mountain which had been as a tower of strength to them; against the God who had not helped, who "let such things be;" of the broken life again taken up and through long, long years of Nature's healing, at last, leading back to acquiescence in the prayer of the stricken "His will on earth be done"; seeing through the resistless power of Nature to the infinite peace of the All-Father's love.

SUSANNA PHELPS GAGE.





# AFTERGLOW

By AMELIA JOSEPHINE BURR

No, no, signora, I am not too old—  
I still can swing an oar—and you are light.  
Eighty—full eighty years—and see, how strong!  
I learned to row in Venice; there ten years  
I was a gondolier. When I came back,  
I rowed upon this lake. . . . You know at first  
Only the little wild Cordevole  
Went roaring through the valley; there was then  
No lake, signora, only villages,  
Tilled fields and vineyards, and the saw-mills droned  
Loud as the river—sixty years ago.  
The water's clear today—look down—you see  
The village there below you? Down—straight down—  
The house that stands a little way apart—  
That was my house. There was beside the door  
A rose-bush growing, that I planted there  
The day our child was born, and right beside  
We marked her height each birthday, and we laughed  
Because she could not overtake the rose.  
“But some day she will have to stoop,” we said,  
“To pluck the roses”—there were just two marks—  
Long, long ago they were washed out, and yet  
I see them there today as I look down.  
Shall we go on?

'Twas sixty years ago.

We married young, signora—we were poor  
But we were strong, and—when one loves, it seems  
Youth is too brief and sweet to wait apart  
Until one prospers. There's a savour, too,  
In hard-won bread with love to season it—  
You understand. And children as we were,  
We walked upon the mountain-tops of joy.  
Look how Civetta towers, peak on peak,  
Soft in its rosy pallor; she was pale  
For all her strength. How often I have said  
Civetta taught her cheeks their faint sweet glow.

She was not ruddy like the other girls.  
"I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills,"  
The priest would say, and then, "the strength of them  
"Is also His." It seemed to us we built  
Our nest within the hollow of God's hand  
There in the valley, for about us rose  
The hills like guardian angels, and we named  
The child Civetta, for the mountain seemed  
Strong as a saint to us. Yet spite of that,  
'Twas Piz we held the dearest, like a hoar  
Old kindly giant, brooding o'er the pass  
To keep out evil comers. Ah, those days!  
You would not think, seeing that silent house  
Below the water, what it used to be.  
There never was a throat so full of music  
As my Costanza's—always I could hear  
A snatch of song that told me where she was.  
Her heart was full of joy—how could it help  
But bubble into melody? And when  
She slept, it seemed the nightingale sang on  
The night through, in her stead. The little one  
Was like her mother. We had made two marks  
Beside the rose-bush. . . . sixty years ago. . . .  
We had worked hard, signora, and had saved  
To buy a yoke of oxen; so I went  
Down to Belluno, for the market-day.  
The two went with me to the valley's mouth,  
For in a village at the foot of Piz  
Costanza's cousin lived, and there she said  
That they would stay the night, the earlier  
To greet me on the morrow, and we all  
Could journey home together. So we planned  
Walking together toward the valley's mouth,  
Civetta on my shoulder; and I asked  
If I should buy a kerchief for my dear,  
But she said no—I was to buy instead  
Some trinket for the child. That was her way.  
And then, because it wrung my heart to go,  
I lifted up mine eyes unto the hills  
And saw the forest-bearded face of Piz  
Bending as if he blessed us, and my heart  
Was glad as at a sign from heaven. I said:  
"May God and Piz watch over you." And so—  
And so I left them at the valley's mouth.  
She took the faded kerchief from her head,  
Waving it as I went, and I could see  
The sunlight on her hair. When I no more  
Could see her face, her hair was shining still.

And the next day I bought my oxen there,  
In the Belluno market,—comely beasts  
With gentle eyes, and on their horns I bound  
Garlands of poppies. She will clap her hands,  
I thought, and kiss them 'twixt the gentle eyes,  
And hold Civetta up to fondle them.  
And since she had forbidden me to buy  
A kerchief for her head, I bought instead  
A silver pin to wear on holy-days.  
So light of heart I was that all the way  
I laughed and sang aloud, and all the way  
I lifted up my face unto the hills  
That made me glad. But when at last I came  
In sight of home—I could not see my home,  
For Piz was gone, and that which had been Piz  
Crammed all the valley's entrance, and below  
Three villages were buried. *They* were there. . . .  
A neighbour told me all there was to tell—  
Little enough. A sudden rending crash,  
And all was done. I stood and could not speak.  
The knowledge fell upon me as the hill  
Fell upon them. He wept who told it me.  
I did not weep—I laughed, remembering  
How I commended them to God and Piz,  
And thus it was they had kept faith with me!  
And then he bade me take my goods and go  
Up to a higher village, for the fall  
Had dammed Cordevole, and silently  
The creeping waters rose and rose and rose.  
And then I laughed again. What use to me  
Were house or goods? I gave my goods to him,  
The pair of oxen and the silver pin;  
He had a wife—a kindly soul who nursed  
Costanza in her travail. So I turned  
Nor looked again upon my empty house;  
Turned and went back the way that I had come. . . .  
But as I went, I did not lift my face.  
I hoped some mountain kindlier than the rest  
Would fall upon me, too—but none would fall—  
And all the grass was full of little flowers.  
So I went down to Venice—to the sea;  
No mountains there.

Signora! Pardon me—  
I had not thought my tale would make you weep.  
You are too kind—all this was long ago—  
In sixty years there's time for tears to dry.  
And yet it leaves a scar; see, even now  
There's only bareness . . . yonder. Older still,

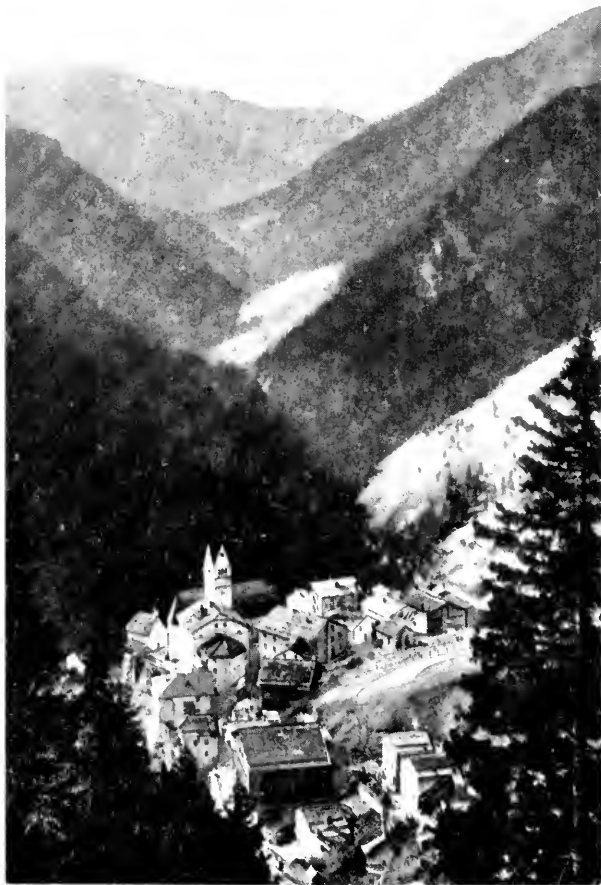
The naked wilderness that seems Peron—  
Not all the summers of five centuries  
Have made it green again.

I used to think  
That when I came to die, and stood at last  
Right face to face with God, I would not wait  
For Him to judge me—'twas for me to judge.  
I would speak out: "Why did you do this thing?  
I trusted You. Why did You do this thing,  
You and the mountains, if indeed the strength  
Of them is Yours?" But since I did not die,  
I said, "I will have naught of them henceforth,  
God and the mountains. They have smitten me  
Unjustly, cowardly. I trusted them,  
And then they struck a woman and a child  
Suddenly in the darkness. Cowardly!"  
So for ten years I never went to mass  
Nor looked upon the hills. But I would stand  
Often before the crucifix and think,  
"Oh, Brother Signor Jesu, you have known  
How He betrays a trust. You trusted too,  
And He forsook you in your agony."  
I was so young, signora—I had known  
Only our people, simple, kindly, good;  
But in the city I saw other things—  
Greed, hatred and uncleanness—and I saw  
The sea . . . signora, do you know the sea?  
As year by year I saw the ships come in,  
Some prosperous and gay with little flags,  
And some all battered, scarce escaped alive,  
And—saw the women watch for other ships  
That never came—I thought, "Here is a thing  
Cruel as God and treacherous as the hills,  
That favours or destroys just for a whim."  
Until one day, musing as I was wont  
Before the crucifix, it came to me:  
Perchance Costanza, as the mountain fell,  
Cried out on me—and I was far away.  
Had I been near, I might have died with her,  
But saved her—no. It may be as she died  
She, too, cried out, "Thou hast forsaken me!"  
Was God as powerless as I? Did He  
Suffer like me?

I took that afternoon  
No passengers; I rowed out all alone  
And moored my boat, and went where I could look

Straight out to sea; and all night long I lay  
Upon the sands, and tried to think it clear.  
And when the morning broke, I saw the sea  
Shining before me, and I did not fear  
Nor hate it, for at last I understood  
There was in it no malice and no love;  
Indifferent, it fulfilled its destiny,  
And if its tempests rent the waves alone  
Or beat a ship to driftwood, it nor knew  
Nor cared. If men must needs go forth on it,  
Theirs be the peril, theirs the profit, too.  
The lives of men are nothing to the sea,  
The lives of men are nothing to the hills.  
Their strength is not of God, but all their own.  
Ten years it was since I had said a prayer,  
But there, beside the sea, in the pale dawn—  
'Twas a gray dawn and cold—I stood and prayed.  
"Lord God," I said, "forgive me for my hate.  
You who have suffered, You can understand  
And know the cry of pain. You saw Your son  
Slain by a thing pitiless as the sea,  
Blind as the hills, and You could give no help.  
Lord God, for my own grief I had no tears,  
But for Your grief, and mine, and all the world's." . . .

So I left Venice, and went back again.  
There in Belluno, all men spoke to me  
Kindly, a little hushed, as if afraid;  
They thought I had been mad. As I went back  
I neither spoke nor sang, but walked erect,  
Head up, and looked the mountains in the face.  
I could not hate them any more, you see—  
They knew not what they did. I understood  
How Cristo could forgive upon the cross.  
It seemed to me I walked, my hand in God's,  
And sometimes as we went, I thought He wept  
And that I whispered, "Lord, be comforted;  
This thing must be." And so I came again  
Into the valley. All was as you see.  
Again the grass was full of little flowers,  
For it was spring; the water was not clear  
But green and turbid from the melting snows,  
And I saw nothing. I was glad of that;  
One learns to bear a little at a time.  
The folk had taken up their life again,  
As one must do, and all about the lake  
I saw again the vineyards and tilled fields  
And heard the saw-mills drone. My neighbour came



And made me free of all his goods; he said  
My yoke of oxen so had prospered him  
That he could halve his farm with me. His wife  
Was with him, and I saw the silver pin  
Set in her hair. She marked my eyes on it  
And made to take it out—down her kind face  
The tears were running—but I stayed her hand.  
It did not give me pain to see it there.  
I made my home with them, but would not take  
Aught of his land. What did I want of land?  
I had forgotten how to hold a plow.  
I built myself a boat, and back and forth  
I rowed upon the lake, ferrying folk  
And burdens, as they came and called to me.  
And slowly, day by day, the water cleared;  
First I could see the tree-tops, then the tops  
Of chimneys . . . and at last I saw the house. . . .  
I thought the rose-bush still was by the door  
Turned to a water-weed. Only two marks—  
It may be there are roses where she is.  
And in the winter when I could not row  
I joined the timberers on the mountain-side.  
They marvelled at me, for I had no fear.  
What should I fear? And often in the snow  
Men came to deadly hurt, and those who wept  
Would turn to me, knowing I understood.  
Then would I say to them, “Be comforted,  
This thing must be—” as I had said to God.  
But though I prayed, I could not go to mass  
And hear the priest, who did not understand,  
Mock at Him, calling Him all powerful,  
Master of all the world—who could not save  
His son, nor aught that any man held dear.

My neighbour's youngest child I loved the best;  
Her eyes were like Civetta's, and she sang  
Always about her play, and as she grew,  
About her work. There was a lad she loved;  
An honest lad—we timbered on the hills  
Together in the winter, and one learns  
To read a man, in that white loneliness.  
And on a day, a dead bough sharp with ice  
Fell on his head; a little while it seemed  
That he was mad, and then he fell asleep  
And breathed, but did not waken. Through the snow  
I bore him to the village in my arms.  
And when I saw my darling in the door  
I strove to say to her, “Be comforted,

This thing must be—" But I could only say  
 "My child, my child!" At last there came a night  
 It seemed that he must die; her hand in mine  
 We sat beside him, and the clock ticked loud  
 Upon the wall—the minutes seemed to trip  
 Upon each others' heels, so fast they ran.  
 I cannot tell you how it came to me,  
 But all at once I spoke: "This is not all,  
 The grief and dumb endurance. There is more—  
 There is a hidden meaning in it all,  
 And what for us is loneliness and tears  
 Shall blossom in the hearts of the unborn  
 To beauty, for we suffer not in vain  
 Although we cannot see the end, not now  
 Nor ever, with these eyes. Since God is love,  
 Although His ways be strange, they all lead home.  
 The patient wrestling of our shaken hearts,  
 The pitiless sea, the cruel strength of these  
 The hills—are His. His will for earth be done."  
 And she beside me, slipping to her knees,  
 Laid her hot forehead on my hands and said,  
 "His will for earth be done"—but all at once  
 He stirred—and she crept near, and raised herself  
 And looked into his face—and I could see  
 His opening eyes, and hear a whisper, faint  
 As falling embers, but in his own voice—  
 "Costanza. . . ." 'Twas her name. So I went out  
 Under the stars and left those two alone.

See, 'tis their chimney smoking; and that house  
 With all the roses and the little ones  
 About the door, is his—their eldest boy's—  
 The boy they named for me. So many homes  
 I can call mine!

Here is the shore at last;  
 Just one more stroke.  
 I have not wearied you?













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