

**SOPHIA TRENTON,
A MORAL POEM**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649760879

Sophia Trenton, a moral poem by Leonard Bacon

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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LEONARD BACON

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BY LEONARD BACON

[Phi Beta Kappa Poem at Stanford University, June 19, 1920
Reprinted from the Chapter Proceedings]

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SOPHIA TRENTON

A MORAL POEM

"The relation of organism to organism
is the most important of all relations."—
DARWIN, *The Origin of Species*.

1.

The Autumn sun streamed through the lecture-room.
Girls swished into their seats with clicks and clatters.
Without, the trolleys rushed by with a boom,
As if intent upon tremendous matters.
A gay wind bent the maple's ragged plume
Against the window, tossing the leaves in tatters.
Sophia Trenton in the foremost row
Felt strange and homesick and extremely low.

2.

She was not like a flower, (my heroines
Are painted as a homely muse dictates),
Nor wicked as the seven deadly sins,
Nor the sweetest of girl-undergraduates.
Nor was she one with ruthless hand that spins
The twisted thread of other people's fates.
Frankly in talents, as in form and face,
Sophia was a little commonplace.

3.

Still she had freshness and a morning-look.
"Everyone," say the French, "is fair at twenty."
Her bosom, as she bent above her book,
Had the right curve to please the cognoscenti,
And her mouth's corner had a pleasant crook,
Implying dimples, when she smiled, in plenty.
She was not smiling now. Of all things human,
Nothing's so lonely as a shy freshwoman.

4.

She thought of the white house in Schuyler Falls
And morning-glories by the picket-fence.
It only made Columbia's clanging halls
Seem more impersonal and more immense.
Dull times there are when memory appalls.
And she was overwhelmed by the cold sense
That she had lost more than could e'er be garnered
At Morningside, particularly at Barnard.

5.

She thought of the "apartment" twelve by ten,
That gave upon the grimy court and chill,
Of dawn she had not hated until then,
Of a heavy sun that somehow lacked the will
To scale uninteresting skies again,
Of coal-dust-flecked milk-bottles on her sill,
Of cats, at midnight in adjacent yards,
Howling their passions much like modern bards.

6.

Just then all point device, and brisk, and right
Upon the dot, the lecturer came in—
A startling man to her, for any might
Have startled her, who checked pale thought within.
Perhaps the future held some haggard light.
Quiet came o'er the rustle and the din.
It might be glory had not all departed.
A street car clanged far off. The lecture started.

7.

The lecturer's voice was good. Its pleasant sound
Came sweet upon her ears—a mellow timbre
That suited well his theme somehow, who round
The mountains of Romance appeared to clamber,
And to walk safe upon enchanted ground
Where he found treasures of pure gold and amber,
Which he revealed to awestruck contemplation
As the true basis of an education.

8.

The lecture was a poem in its way,
At least free verse, unusually free,
Although in this it differed, I must say,
Being allusive in a high degree.
He quoted much from poets grave and gay,
And his voice leaped when he said 'poetry,'
So that Sophia taxed her wandering wit,
Wondering if he perhaps were fond of it.

9.

And much she heard that struck her with amazement,
Queer phrases full of sounds and fever-heats,
Catchwords of ecstasy and of abasement
In which the imprisoned spirit throbs and beats.
He slammed the sash of many a magic casement.
(Little Sophia had not read her Keats,
Although sad Ruth was never more forlorn,
Sick—sick for her home amid the alien corn.)

10.

He told them Shelley was the pioneer
Of spiritual poetry, whose ways
Led over heights so awful that men fear
To follow—that his verse was all ablaze
With light—and that the pure in spirit hear
A faëry melody in Adonais,
And the world-revolution's dreadful sound
Trumpeting when Prometheus is unbound.

11.

Then with a swift transition on he went.
Nothing is swifter than a swift transition;
Not Congress on appropriation bent,
Nor troops that storm an enemy's position,
Nor financiers on dividends intent,
Nor the rightabout of a skilled politician.
When changing ground, a lecturer of tact
Beats these and wireless—everything in fact.

12.

"The Greeks," he said, "Parthenon—violet crown—
Sappho"—he lingered with a languorous air
On the words as though he loved them. Up and down
Her spine she tingled, flushing to her hair.
And though she might have wondered, I must own,
As Pope says, "how the devil he got there,"
She was much thrilled instead, though by the way,
She thought that Sappho was a lewd French play.

13.

Now many a half-thought was half-suggested,
And now he paused on demi-dreams to dwell,
Sophia thought that she was interested,
Although in what it had been hard to tell.
Somehow she felt the powers of evil bested,
And the big devil bound fast again in Hell
With chains of words, although I can't conjecture
How this could be accomplished by a lecture.

14.

Those Greeks he spoke of—with her shining eyes
She saw them suddenly. They ceased to be
The half-tone figures of school histories.
Now they gleamed out upon her flamingly.
Large, gracefully audacious, calm and wise
Creatures she thought of, and could almost see
Halfway between the actual and ideal.
Suddenly she knew that they had once been real.

15.

This be it known the lecturer did *not* know,
And never had been led even to suspect.
He was not a bad fellow as men go,
But frankly he was after an effect,
A practice which is apt to bring men low.
Witness how many poets have been wrecked
Upon that rock. He had woven all his web
Out of the bowels of Sir Richard Jebb,

16.

And Gilbert Murray. Twenty years before
Himself to learning had John Percy given,
A sacrifice to literary lore,
By the fierce whips of the twin-devils driven,
Poverty and Vanity, who overbore
Judgment. And it had seemed a glimpse of heaven
That vision of long academic calm,
Laborious, earnest, pleasant as a palm.

17.

So he was actor on that meaner stage
Whose sole prop is the professorial chair.
He played his part, expounding many a page
Where never difficulty lurked in lair.
Thence many a notion did he disengage,
Especially notions that were not there.
(In the interests of the stricter metricality
Notion I wrote instead of triviality.)

18.

And he was very greatly to be pitied,
And yet more pitiable, alas! he knew it,
For he had been irrevocably committed
To talk about a thing and not to do it.
Men suffer thus however nimble-witted,
And find not, though they seek peace and ensue it,
Their minds in a perpetual bereavement,
Wanting the strong embraces of achievement.

19.

Not that he was not highly publicationous,
Each year a volume more or less he tallied—
The simulacrum of a book, but Gracious!
What reader e'er so hardy ever rallied
His forces to the sticking-point audacious,
And faced that ghost of learning thin and pallid?
Ah! never, never shall that reader be
Saving perhaps another Ph. D.,