



# THE LAMENT OF THE FOREST

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In joyous summer, when the exulting earth  
Flung fragrance from innumerable flowers  
Through the wide wastes of heaven, as on she took  
In solitude her everlasting way,  
I stood among the mountain heights, alone!  
The beauteous mountains, which the voyager  
On Hudson's breast far in the purple west  
Magnificent, beholds, the abutments broad  
Whence springs the immeasurable dome of heaven.  
A lake was spread before me, so serene  
That I had deemed it heaven with silver clouds,  
Had not the drowning butterfly, or wing.  
Of skimming swallow, ever and anon  
Wrinkled its glorious face with spreading rings.  
It was Earth's offering to the imperial sky  
That in their rugged palms the mountains held  
Aloft. Around it rose precipitous steeps,  
With rock, and crag, and dell, and cavern dank;  
Which seemed an amphitheatre hugely built  
By mighty Titans when the world was young;  
And though the Flood o'erwhelmed the builders, hurled  
Downward its loftiest battlements, and crushed  
The massive seats, columns and arches vast;  
Silent and desolate, it rears on high  
A thousand Colosseums heaped in one!  
Forests of shadowy pine, hemlock and beech,  
And oak and maple ever beautiful,  
O'er every rent and boss of ruin spread,  
Rank above rank arrayed: the topmost pines  
Quivered among the clouds, and on the lake,  
Peaceful and calm, the lower woods looked down,  
A silent people through the lapsing years.

Beside that lake I lingered long, like one  
Who gazes on the face of her he loves,  
Entranced in thoughts too glad for utterance.  
I watched the breeze upon the mountain's breast  
Tosst he clouds, the green like pine angels and on birchen their heavenward foliage gray: flight,  
Inhaled the perfume from the azalea's flower,  
And small white violet, whose honied breath  
Made the air sweet, and marked the wavelets break,  
Casting the pollen of the rifled flowers  
In mimic rage, like gold-dust, on the shores.  
The sun descended, and the twilight spread  
Its soft empurpled wings; and that blessed hour,  
When spirits stooping from the crimson clouds

Commune with man, whose grovelling instincts now  
Are laid aside as robes of earthliness  
By Nature's pure and solitary fount.

Over my senses stole a sweet repose,  
And dreams, which are but wakefulness of soul —  
A brief exemption from encumbering clay. I heard a sound  
'T was wild and strange; a voice  
As of ten thousand! Musical it was —  
A gush of richest concord, deep and slow;  
A song that filled the universal air!  
It was the voice of the great Forest, sent  
From every valley and dark mountain top  
Within the bosom of this mighty land.

Mortal, whose love for our umbrageous realms  
Exceeds the love of all the race of man;  
Whom we have loved; for whom have opened wide  
With welcome our innumerable arms;  
Open thine ears! The voice that ne'er before  
Was heard by living man, is lifted up,  
And fills the air — the voice of our complaint.  
Thousands of years! — yea, they have passed away  
As drops of dew upon the sunlit rose,  
Or silver vapors of the summer sea;  
Thousands of years! like wind-strains on the harp,  
Or like forgotten thoughts, have passed away  
Unto the Bourne of unremembered things.  
Thousands of years! When the fresh earth first broke  
Through chaos, swift in new-born joy even then  
The stars of heaven beheld us waving high  
Upon the mountains, slumbering in the vales:  
Or yet the race of man had seen their light,  
Before the virgin breast of earth was scarred  
By steel, or granite masses rent from rocks  
To build vast Thebes or old Persepolis,  
Our arms were clasped around the hills, our locks  
Shaded the streams that loved us, our green tops  
Were resting places for the weary clouds.  
Then all was harmony and peace; but Man  
Arose — he who now vaunts antiquity —  
He the destroyer — and in the sacred shades  
Echo, whose voice had answered to the call  
Of thunder or of winds, or to the cry  
Of cataracts — sound of sylvan habitants  
Or song of birds — uttered responses sharp

And dissonant ; the axe unresting smote  
Our reverend ranks, and crashing branches lashed  
The ground, and mighty trunks, the pride of years,  
Rolled on the groaning earth with all their umbrage.  
Stronger than wintry blasts, and gathering strength.  
Swept that tornado, stayless, till the Earth,  
Our ancient mother, blasted lay and bare '  
Beneath the burning sun. The little streams  
That oft had raised their voices in the breeze  
In joyful unison with ours, did waste  
And pine as if in grief that we were not.  
Our trackless shades, our dim ubiquity,  
In solemn garb of the primeval world,  
Our glory, our magnificence, were gone ;  
And but on difficult places, marsh or steep,  
The remnants of our failing race were left,  
Like scattered clouds upon the mountain-top.  
The vast Hyrcanian wood, and Lebanon's  
Dark ranks of cedar were cut down like grass ;  
And man, whose poets sang our happy shades,  
Whose sages taught that Innocence and Peace,  
Daughters of Solitude, sojourned in us.  
Held not his arm, until Necessity,  
Stern master e'en of him, seized it and bound,  
And from extinction saved our scanty tribes.

'Seasons there were, when man, at war with man,  
Left us to raze proud cities, desolate  
Old empires, and pour out his blood on soil  
That once was all our own. When death has made  
All silent, all secure, we have returned,  
Twisted our roots around the prostrate shafts  
And broken capitals, or struck them deep  
Into the mould made richer by man's blood.  
Such seasons were but brief: so soon as earth  
Was sanctified again by shade and art,  
Again resolved to nature, man came back,  
And once more swept our feeble hosts away  
'Yet was there one bright, virgin continent  
Remote, that Roman name had never reached,  
Nor ancient dreams, in all their universe;  
As inaccessible in primal time  
To human eye and thought, as Uranus  
Far in his secret void. For round it rolled  
A troubled deep, whose everlasting roar  
Echoed in every zone ; whose drear expanse

Spread dark and trackless as the midnight sky;  
And stories of vast whirlpools, stagnant seas,  
Terrible monsters, that with horror struck  
The mariner's soul, these held aloof full long  
The roving race of Europe from that land,  
The land of beauty and of many climes,  
The land of mighty cataracts, where now  
Our own proud eagle flaps his chainless wing.

'Thus guarded through long centuries, untouched  
By man, save him, our native child, whose foot  
Disdained the bleak and sun-beat soil, who loved  
Our shafted halls, the covert of the deer,  
We flourished, we rejoiced. From mountain top  
To mountain top we gazed, and over vales  
And glimmering plains we saw our banners green  
Wide waving yet untorn. Gladly the Spring  
On bloomy wing shed fragrance over us;  
And Summer laughed beneath our verdant roof,  
And Autumn sighed to leave our golden courts;  
And when the crimson leaves were strewn in showers  
Upon the ample lap of Oregon,  
Or the great Huron's lake of lazuli,  
Winter upraised his rude and stormy songs,  
And we in a wild chorus answered him.  
O peace primeval! would thou hadst remained !  
What moved thee to unbar thine, emerald gates,  
O mighty Deep ! when the destroyer came ?  
Strayed then thy blasts upon Olympus' air,  
Or were they lulled to breezes round the brow  
Of rich Granada's crafty conqueror,  
When with strong wing they should have rushed upon  
Our enemy, and smitten him, as when  
The fleet of Xerxes on the Grecian coast  
Was cast like foam and weed upon the rocks!

'But impotent the voice of our complaint:  
He came ! Few were his numbers first, but soon  
The work of desolation was begun  
Close by the heaving main ; then on the banks  
Of rivers inland far, our strength was shorn,  
And fire and steel performed their office well.  
No stay was there — no rest. The tiny cloud  
Oft seen in torrid climes, at first sends forth  
A faint light breeze; but gathering, as it moves,  
Darkness and bulk, it spans the spacious sky

With lurid palm, and sweeps stupendous o'er  
The crashing world. And thus comes rushing on  
This human hurricane, boundless as swift.

Our sanctuary, this secluded spot,  
Which the stern rocks have guarded until now,  
Our enemy has marked. This gentle lake  
Shall lose our presence in its limpid breast,  
And from the mountains we shall melt away,  
Like wreaths of mist upon the winds of heaven.

Our doom is near : behold fr6m east to west  
The skies are darkened by ascending smoke;

Each hill and every valley is become  
An altar unto Mammon, and the gods  
Of man's idolatry — the victims we.

Missouri's floods are ruffled as by storm,  
And Hudson's rugged hills at midnight glow  
By light of man-projected meteors.

We feed ten thousand fires : in our short day  
The woodland growth of centuries is consumed ;  
Our crackling limbs the ponderous hammer rouse  
With fervent heat. Tormented by our flame,  
Fierce vapors struggling hiss on every hand.

On Erie's shores, by dusky Arkansas,  
Our ranks are falling like the heavy grain  
In harvest-time on Wolga's distant banks.

'A few short years ! — these valleys, greenly clad,  
These slumbering mountains, resting in our arms,  
Shall naked glare beneath the scorching sun,  
And all their wimpling rivulets be dry.  
No more the deer shall haunt these bosky glens,  
Nor the pert squirrel chatter near his store.  
A few short years! —our ancient race shall be,  
Like Israels', scattered 'mong the tribes of men.'