

THE LAST MID-NIGHT OF SUMMER

HENRY MORFORD

Published in *The Knickerbocker*
January 1862 (59:1)

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University of Arizona Antebellum Magazine Edition Project
April 16, 2015

I start at the door with a sudden shock,
And shiver, before I turn the lock,
As I hear, far off, the mid-night clock.

The last mid-night of summer sounds,
Like a ghostly watchman crying his rounds,
Or the baying of Actæon's phantom hounds.¹

The crickets are singing their sad refrain,
Their dirge for the summer's perished reign,
In the long grass under the window-pane.

The stars are bright in the deep-blue sky –
Bright, and many, and oh! so high!
And each looks at me with a sleepless eye.

Summers ago they looked at me
Thus sadly and long, and silently,
As if there was something hidden to see.

Summers ago, in a half-affright,
I shrank away from their piercing sight,
Even as I am shrinking to-night.

Summers ago, they bade me do
Something I missed, if I ever knew;
And they speak the same to-night, in the blue.

¹ In Greek mythology, the hunter Actæon was transformed into a stag by the goddess Artemis as punishment for his unintentionally looking upon her during a bath. As a stag, Actæon was subsequently tracked and destroyed by his own hounds ("Actæon").

Summer is gone – the white stars say –
We kissed its dying lips to day,
And scarcely knew it was passing away.

Summer is gone: its waves no more
Will tremble low music along the shore;
They must meet the winter with sullen roar.

Summer is gone – its whispering leaves,
Its golden wealth of garnered sheaves;
And something within us pines and grieves.

Good-by to the hours in woodland haunts –
To the sea-side and the lake romance:
Kate² will flirt no more, nor Isabel dance.³

Go in, as growing years require;
Put out the ashes of young desire,
And think of sitting down by the fire.

With youth, and love, and faith, and hope,
With all that widened the mental scope,
And made us able with fortune to cope;

With Mary's smile and Madge's kiss,⁴
And hours full maddened with lawless bliss –
The heart's true summer – goodbye to this!

Look down, white stars! There is nothing to see;
But the world may sound with plummet⁵ free;
And cricket, chirp on, but not for me.

Can you bring me back the summer fair,
And give me something of wrong to repair?
No? Then let the dead lie still as they were.

² Possibly a reference to the heroine of "Kate Crackernuts," an English/Scottish romantic fairytale in which Kate cares for and eventually seduces a troubled prince ("Kate Crackernuts").

³ Possibly a reference to the Scottish myth "King Orfeo," in which Orfeo rescues his beloved Isabel from peril by playing a beautiful instrumental tune for her ("King Orfeo"; "Scottish Lore").

⁴ A reference to Lady Mary Shelton and her sister, Lady Margaret Shelton ("Madge"). Accounts of the feats of the two sisters are hazy, and their historical identities are often merged into one. It is generally agreed upon, however, that the two lived among early 16th century English royalty and that one of these sisters may have had an affair with King Henry VIII (Barnhill).

⁵ *Plummet*: "A piece of lead or other heavy material attached to a line, used for measuring the depth of water; a sounding lead." The analogy of earth as a plummet (or as a subject being measured with a plummet) is further propagated by the use of the verb "sound" earlier in the same line.

If Margaret's⁶ lips can kiss again,
By the alchemy of regretful pain,
Then sorrow and thought may be not in vain.

But if nothing past can ever return,
Nor lamps gone out rekindle and burn,
There is nothing to hope and little to learn.

Not deader when I lie in the mould
Shall be my sight and hearing cold,
Than in the sleep that to-night shall enfold.⁷

Good-by to summer! Let it go!
Other summers may dawn ere our heads lie low;
And if not, there have been enough, I know.

So enter the house and lock the door.
Let the stars shine on, and the cricket pour
His sad refrain; it is summer no more.



⁶ A second reference to Lady Margaret Shelton.

⁷ *Not deader . . . shall enfold*: i.e., tonight's sleep will cause my senses to shut down as if I were in a grave.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Henry Morford paints a remorseful picture of the bygone joys of summer in a manner that resonates across time and space. At the poem's commencement, we see the narrator cowering in his home, dreading the onset of the fateful midnight clock chime on the final evening of summer. From the lonely confines of the house, narrator and reader alike are taken out into the harsher, colder natural climes, wherein we encounter all of nature's despondency embodied in the mournful tunes of tiny crickets. From there, reader and narrator are vaulted up to the cosmos, wherein it is discovered that the stars guard both the past and present fates of men. After leaving the stars behind, we scale back down to the level of the crickets once again, who at this point grieve more tragically for summer's loss than ever. Finally, we follow the narrator back into his house, that is, the world of men, wherein we find that lamps have been extinguished and doors have been locked in the face of winter's inevitable onset.

The most powerful undercurrent which seems to run through Morford's poem is that of regret. The mandates of the stars, personified throughout the poem as Apollonian guides for the troubled narrator, seem to illuminate the man's secrets and his past: "Summers ago they looked at me / Thus sadly and long, and silently, / as if there was something hidden to see / . . . Summers ago, they bade me do / something I missed, if I ever knew" (13-20). The narrator's unfulfilled goals, represented as a dying summer, dictate the course of this poem. These unattained ideals in the narrator's life flair into brightness in what seems to be one final pang of nostalgia just prior to the onset of the narrator's winter.

The key components of the narrator's summer bliss are listed as "youth, and love, and faith, and hope" (37). These traits are meant to embody what the narrator refers to as the "heart's true summer" (42). Even when describing these idealistic periods of summer bliss, however, the narrator seems to take on a rather negative assessment of the cruelty of his own existence. After listing the most wonderful aspects of the "summer" period of his life, the author states that these aspects "made us able with fortune to cope," as if fortune itself were a malignant entity which only summer joys could combat (39).

The idea of winter, then, must accordingly be associated with the poem's recurring trope of death. The fact that the narrator faces his own mortality in his ode to summer seems both bitter and fitting at once, for with his grounded mindset also comes a sense of maturity. The narrator learns to forsake his youthful "hours full maddened with lawless bliss" in favor of a wiser approach to the passage of time (41). We can see that he ultimately comes to terms with his own pending fate when he climactically states "Good-by to summer! Let it go! / Other summers may dawn ere our heads lie low; / and if not, there have been enough, I know" (58-60). Although the narrator holds out some hope for the recurrence of summer, it is clear from this phrasing that the narrator has come to terms with the fact that he has already seen a sufficient number of years on earth.

Additionally, Morford's coming winter seemingly carries a strong undertone of warlike foreboding in sharp contrast to his gay descriptions of the prior summer. This foreboding can be seen in the mention of the winter's "sullen roar," which may easily stand to represent the pounding of battle drums. Morford published "The Last Mid-night of Summer," a poem which heavily alludes to lost hope and coming doom, less than one year after the official commencement of the American Civil War in 1861. Contextually, it seems difficult to imagine that Morford would have been able to use such terminology without the dawn of the Civil War on his mind. Perhaps the source of the narrator's great remorse, the forsaking of a bygone summertime of "youth, and love, and faith, and hope," lies in the loss of American unity.

Ultimately, whether it is read as an ode to mortality or as a Civil War dirge, Morford's poem inevitably leaves us with strong sense of remorse. This remorse reaches into our past experiences and forces us to question their gravity and import. The stars of Morford's poem demand to know whether we lived our lives to the fullest while we had the brightness of summer (i.e., youth) illuminating our paths. This summer, once lost, seemingly can only be grasped at in fruitless pleas to the powerless, mournful crickets: "Can you bring me back the summer fair, / and give me something of wrong to repair? / No? Then let the dead lie still as they were" (46-48). It is ultimately shown that neither the crickets of nature, nor the stars of the cosmos, nor the self-made houses of men are capable of redeeming the past. Morford thus demonstrates that the sum of his narrator's missed opportunities amounts to the destruction of his legacy. In this way, Morford uses the travails of a philosophical narrator to depict the temporally limited nature of every man's quest for significance.

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