

*The Tower*

(1928)

W.B. YEATS



RENARD PRESS

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## THE TOWER

## SAILING TO BYZANTIUM

### I

That is no country for old men. The young  
In one another's arms, birds in the trees –  
Those dying generations – at their song,  
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,  
Fish, flesh or fowl, commend all summer long  
Whatever is begotten, born and dies.  
Caught in that sensual music all neglect  
Monuments of unaging intellect.

### II

An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless  
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing  
For every tatter in its mortal dress,  
Nor is there singing school but studying  
Monuments of its own magnificence;  
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come  
To the holy city of Byzantium.

## THE TOWER

### III

Oh, sages standing in God's holy fire  
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,  
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,\*  
And be the singing-masters of my soul.  
Consume my heart away; sick with desire  
And fastened to a dying animal  
It knows not what it is; and gather me  
Into the artifice of eternity.

### IV

Once out of nature I shall never take  
My bodily form from any natural thing,  
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling  
To keep a drowsy emperor awake;  
Or set upon a golden bough to sing  
To lords and ladies of Byzantium  
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.\*

## THE TOWER \*

### I

What shall I do with this absurdity –  
Oh, heart, oh, troubled heart – this caricature,  
Decrepit age that has been tied to me  
As to a dog's tail?

Never had I more  
Excited, passionate, fantastical  
Imagination, nor an ear and eye  
That more expected the impossible –  
No, not in boyhood when with rod and fly,  
Or the humbler worm, I climbed Ben Bulben's back  
And had the livelong summer day to spend.  
It seems that I must bid the Muse go pack,  
Choose Plato and Plotinus\* for a friend  
Until imagination, ear and eye,  
Can be content with argument and deal  
In abstract things; or be derided by  
A sort of battered kettle at the heel.

## THE TOWER

### II

I pace upon the battlements and stare  
On the foundations of a house, or where  
Tree, like a sooty finger, starts from the earth;  
And send imagination forth  
Under the day's declining beam, and call  
Images and memories  
From ruin or from ancient trees,  
For I would ask a question of them all.

Beyond that ridge lived Mrs French, and once  
When every silver candlestick or scone  
Lit up the dark mahogany and the wine.  
A serving man that could divine  
That most respected lady's every wish  
Ran and with the garden shears  
Clipped an insolent farmer's ears  
And brought them in a little covered dish.

Some few remembered still when I was young  
A peasant girl commended by a song,  
Who'd lived somewhere upon that rocky place,  
And praised the colour of her face,  
And had the greater joy in praising her,  
Remembering that, if walked she there,  
Farmers jostled at the fair  
So great a glory did the song confer.



## THE TOWER

And certain men, being maddened by those rhymes,  
Or else by toasting her a score of times,  
Rose from the table and declared it right  
To test their fancy by their sight;  
But they mistook the brightness of the moon  
For the prosaic light of day –  
Music had driven their wits astray –  
And one was drowned in the great bog of Cloone.

Strange, but the man who made the song was blind;  
Yet, now I have considered it, I find  
That nothing strange; the tragedy began  
With Homer that was a blind man,  
And Helen has all living hearts betrayed.\*  
Oh, may the moon and sunlight seem  
One inextricable beam,  
For if I triumph I must make men mad.

And I myself created Hanrahan\*  
And drove him drunk or sober through the dawn  
From somewhere in the neighbouring cottages.  
Caught by an old man's juggleries  
He stumbled, tumbled, fumbled to and fro  
And had but broken knees for hire  
And horrible splendour of desire;  
I thought it all out twenty years ago:

Good fellows shuffled cards in an old bawn;\*  
And when that ancient ruffian's turn was on  
He so bewitched the cards under his thumb  
That all but the one card became