

The Golden Age

A Collection of Pastoral Tales

Sylvain Maréchal

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They say there was a Time called the Golden Age,
When sacrifices were made to the naked Truth,
When artless Innocence walked with a sure step:
For Virtuous hearts this Time still exists.

Publisher's Preface.

Oh you who wish to taste pure felicity!
Far from the big cities, take your exercise in the fields,
We find in the fields (nearer to Nature)
The precious remains of the peaceful Golden Age.

What do we see in the cities? Pompous and often tasteless palaces. We tread on ground hardened by wearying, muddy cobblestones; fetid streams of mire seem to be the natural element of those who cross them. We must flee before fast steeds, harnessed to noisy carts. We attend spectacles where it is made a law to disfigure Nature; everywhere we see temples served by self-interest; courts where throats are cut legally; aligned gardens that make you yawn, if you stroll through them alone, & that on the banner days are revolting in their shameless luxury. At each step we encounter untrustworthy traders, a coarse rabble of soldiers and a stupified populace. The women have all the vices of the men, & and the men all those of the women.

Clear skies, pure streams, lawns that relax the traveler & and rest the eyes; the varied songs of a thousand birds; the labors of the docile ox; the milk of the charitable cow; the fleeces of herds as gentle as they are; the coolness of the forest; the scent & radiance of flours; the flavor of fruit; the sublime spectacle of the rising of the sun; the moving calm of evening; the health, joy, contentment and peace communicated by the three kingdoms of Nature: they all invite man to come to the fields, & they should all keep him there.

Excerpt from Livre de tous les âges, ou du Pibrac moderne, *by P. Silvain Maréchal. Paris, 1775, in-12°, p.*

Apologue. The Scepter and the Crook.

For the connoisseur tempted to purchase them,
A scepter was placed on sale beside a crook;
A Wise Man, seeing them, chose the lighter of the two;
Both were weighed: the Wise Man was a Shepherd.

N. B. This collection of tales is the work of a shepherd. People of taste will perhaps be only too aware of its shortcomings & rustic style: it is not for them that this book is published. We propose its reading only to young men whom the pleasures of the capital have still not rendered *blasé*, to women who have been able to preserve that blossom of sensitivity that time in the big cities soon withers. The mother of a family can put this collection in the hands of her children. The chastest virgin could stare at the pictures it contains. If they are not always painted in a spirited manner; if they do not offer those spicy effects that hold so much charm for experience connoisseurs, they could at least be interesting for the innocence of the subjects & the purity of the colors.

THE RELIQUARY.

Zulmi & Daphné loved one another, with a love like that in the idylls of Theocritus, in the eclogues of Virgil, & and in the pastorals of Gessner. They loved as we love when love is forbidden & indeed their parents oppsed with all their authority the union of their hearts.

THE JUST MAN.

On a beautiful autumn evening, the old Lysander, seated before his hut, facing the darkening west, enjoying one more time the last rays of the setting sun, which was becoming, like him, weaker & less fiery.

From time to time he raised his eyes toward the heavens & asked them for an end to his life as peaceful as the decline of his age. Some moments later, the spectacle of Nature made him forget the great number of his years: for the ninetieth time he saw it submit to the changing of the seasons. Lysander had always seen & admired it; Lysander saw & admired it still; Nature is so beautiful!

Sensing that he was enjoying it for the last time, he remained for a long time in a pious ecstasy. Quietly & without being seen, Philander, the eldest of his children, had come up behind him. He respected at first the eloquent silence of the venerable old man; but the respect soon gave way to love. The son rushed into the arms of his father, who cried: "If I finished my life in this moment, my last day would be a happy one." The embraced again, & he added: "My son, I long ago promised you a hymn, the *Canticle of the Just*. The hour that I had set aside for it has, I think, arrived; listen to me, Philander, for perhaps the last time... my voice is weak; but it will always have enough strength for such a beautiful subject."

And he sang:

How sweet it is to be virtuous!

The life of the just man goes by as peacefully as the tranquil waters of the pure brook that flows slowly across the pasture. Like them, the just man leaves behind him abundance & happiness! Like them, we desire it, we cherish it and we lament it when it is gone.

How sweet it is to be virtuous!

Nature watches over the just man at all times. She presides at his birth & gives him parents as wise as there are tender, who take care of his youth & train him in virtue. In a little while he becomes as hardy as them. The first use of his strength is to aid his already feeble relations; he would return to them all that he has received. But soon nature speaks to his heart: he feels the need of the companion. A worthy lover offers herself to his innocent desires. The most tender love soon captivates him in the sweetest of bonds. An amiable & numerous posterity is the fruit of such holy nuptials: they derive their happiness from that of their children, in order to earn a fair return in the results. The years multiply. These virtuous spouses bend bit by bit under their weight; finally, they succumb: lamented by their relations, content with them, they die as they have lived.

How sweet it is to be virtuous!

The unfortunate bless the just man; his countrymen love him; strangers hold him in esteem. The sweetest pleasures all gather together under his humble roof. Merry words & innocent games

enchant his leisure time, crown his meals & incline him to undertake new labors: & to complete his happiness, Friendship, loving Friendship, seats itself at his table.

How sweet it is to be virtuous!

For the just man the dawn is always beautiful, the day always serene, nature always in its springtime. The awakening of the just man is the signal for joy; his moments are all full: the unfortunate counts almost all of them for him. Night does not overtake the just man before he has profited from the day: sweet sleep comes then to close his eyelids; he sleeps & does not fear to be awakened by the rumblings of remorse. Peace is the companion of innocence: the calm of the night is no deeper than that in his heart..

How sweet it is to be virtuous!

The wicked, it is true, shares the light of day with the just man; the night extends its peaceful veils over one as over the other. Nature spreads her benefits over both: but how well she distinguishes between virtue and vice! These same presents of fair nature, which bring pleasure to the just man who enjoys them, are a source of evil for the wicked man who abuses them; the ruby liqueur of Bacchus gives the sober man the strength that it takes from the intemperate.

How sweet it is to be virtuous!

Sometimes, too, somber clouds darken the fair days of the just man: his pleasures are sometimes mixed with pain. But it is an ingenious precaution of Nature, to make him feel more clearly the cost of happiness. Whatever setbacks he experiences, he always maintains a good heart, a clear mind, a beautiful soul. A consoling voice does not cease crying to him: Fear nothing; you are just.

How sweet it is to be virtuous!

Nature loves the just man: she grants him a happy childhood, a fine youth, a friendly old age. She gives him wise parents, a chaste spouse, loving children, true friends; perfect health, fertile land, a fortunate life, a comforting death. The just man is a good son, good husband, good friend.

How sweet it is to be virtuous!

“But tears fill your eyes, my son!” said the old man, embracing him. “I love to see you sympathetic to this reflection! So always be just, & you will always be happy. Seek to do good, & you will find happiness.

These were the last words of Lysander. He did not know that Death, who had been behind him for some time, had not dared to interrupt such a touching scene with his presence. Hardly had the old man finished, than she showed herself to him. Lysander saw her without dread; he awaited her without fear. He embraced Philander once more. Death seized that moment, struck him..... & the soul of the father passed into that of his son.

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1782

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Working translation by Shawn P. Wilbur.

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