

EMILY AND THE BARDS SUBLIME

EMILY MADE THE ROUNDS of her charges every weekday morning as soon as she arrived at the museum. Officially, she was assistant curator, in charge of the Hall of Poets. In her own mind, however, she was far more than a mere assistant curator: she was a privileged mortal, thrown into happy propinquity to the greatest of the Immortals—the *bards sublime*, in the words of one of their number, *whose distant footsteps echo through the corridors of Time*.

The poets were arranged alphabetically rather than chronologically, and Emily would begin with the pedestals on the left of the hall—the A's—and make her way around the imposing semicircle. That way she was always able to save Alfred, Lord Tennyson till the last, or very nearly the last. Lord Alfred was her favorite.

She had a pleasant good-morning for each of the poets, and each of them responded characteristically; but for Lord Alfred she had a pleasant phrase or two as well, such as, "Isn't it a beautiful day for writing?" or "I do hope the *Idyls* don't give you any more trouble!" Of course she knew that Alfred wasn't really going to do any writing, that the old-fashioned pen and the ream of period paper on the little escritoire beside his chair were there just for show, and that anyway his android talents did not go beyond reciting the poetry which his flesh-and-blood prototype had written centuries ago; but just the same, it did no harm to pretend, especially when his Tennyson tapes responded with something like, "*In the Spring a livelier iris changes on the burnish'd dove; in the Spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love—*" or, "*Queen rose of the rosebud garden of girls, come hither, the dances are done, in gloss of satin and glimmer of pearls, Queen lily and rose in one—*"

When Emily had first taken over the Hall of Poets she had had great expectations. She, like the museum directors who had conceived of the idea, had devoutly believed that poetry was *not* dead, and that once the people found out that they could listen to the magic words rather than having to read them in dusty books, and, moreover, listen to them falling from the lips of an animated life-size model of their creator, neither hell nor high taxes would be able to keep the people away. In this, both she and the museum directors had been out of tune.

The average twenty-first-century citizen remained as immune to Browning-brought-to-life as he had to Browning-preserved-in-books. And as for the dwindling literati, *they* preferred *their* poetic dishes served the old-fashioned way, and in several instances stated publicly that investing animated dummies with the immortal phrases of the Grand Old Masters was a technological crime against the humanities,

But in spite of the empty years, Emily remained faithfully at her desk, and up until the morning when the poetic sky collapsed, she still believed that someday someone would take the right-hand corridor out of the frescoed foyer (instead of the left which led to the Hall of Automobiles, or the one in the middle which led to the Hall of Electrical Appliances) and walk up to her desk and say, "Is Leigh Hunt around? I've always wondered *why* Jenny kissed him and I thought maybe he'd tell me if I asked," or "Is Bill Shakespeare busy right now? I'd like to discuss the melancholy Dane with him." But the years flew by and the only people who ever took the right-hand corridor besides Emily herself were the museum officials, the janitor and the night watchman. Consequently, she came to know the bards sublime very well, and to sympathize with them in their ostracism. In a way she was in the same boat as they were. . .

On the morning when the poetic sky collapsed, Emily made her rounds as usual, unaware of the imminent calamity. Robert Browning had his customary "*Morning's at seven; the hill-side's dew-pearl'd*" in answer to her greeting, and William Cowper said briskly, "*The twentieth year is well-nigh past since first our sky was overcast!*" Edward Fitzgerald responded (somewhat tipsily, Emily thought) with his undeviating "*Before the phantom of False morning died, methought a Voice within the Tavern cried, When all the Temple is prepared within, why lags the drowsy Worshipper outside?*" Emily walked past his pedestal rather brusquely. She'd never seen eye to eye with the museum directors with regard to the inclusion of Edward Fitzgerald in the Hall of Poets. In her mind he had no real claim to immortality. True, he had infiltrated his five translations of Omar with an abundance of

original imagery, but that didn't make him a genuine poet. Not in the sense that Milton and Byron were poets. Not in the sense that Tennyson was a poet.

Emily's step quickened at the thought of Lord Alfred, and two undernourished roses bloomed briefly on her thin cheeks. She could hardly wait till she reached his pedestal and heard what he had to say. Unlike the tapes of so many of the other poets, his tapes always came up with something different—possibly because he was one of the newer models, though Emily disliked thinking of her charges as models.

She came at last to the treasured territory and looked up into the youthful face (all of the androids were patterned after the poets as they had looked in their twenties). "Good morning, Lord Alfred," she said.

The sensitive synthetic lips formed a lifelike smile. The tapes whirred soundlessly. The lips parted, and soft words emerged:

*"For a breeze of morning moves,
And the planet of Love is on high,
Beginning to faint in the light that she loves
On a bed of daffodil sky—"*

Emily raised one hand to her breast, the words gamboling in the lonely woodland of her mind. She was so enchanted that she couldn't think of any of her usual pleasantries on the exigencies of writing poetry and she stood there silently instead, staring at the figure on the pedestal with a feeling akin to awe. Presently she moved on, murmuring abstracted good-mornings to Whitman, Wilde, Wordsworth, Yeats—

She was surprised to see Mr. Brandon, the curator, waiting at her desk. Mr. Brandon rarely visited the Hall of Poets; he concerned himself almost exclusively with the technological displays and left the management of the bards to his assistant. He was carrying a large book, Emily noticed, and that was another source of surprise: Mr. Brandon wasn't much of a reader.

"Good morning, Miss Meredith," he said. "I have some good news for you."

Immediately Emily thought of Percy Bysshe Shelley. The present model had a tape deficiency and she had mentioned the matter to Mr. Brandon several times, suggesting that he write Androids, Inc. and demand a replacement. Perhaps he had finally done so, perhaps he had received an answer. "Yes, Mr. Brandon?" she said eagerly.

"As you know, Miss Meredith, the Hall of Poets has been somewhat of a letdown to all of us. In my own opinion it was an impractical idea in the first place, but being a mere curator I had nothing to say in the matter. The Board of Directors wanted a roomful of verse-happy androids, so we ended up with a roomful of verse-happy androids. Now, I am happy to say, the members of the board have finally come to their senses. Even they have finally realized that poets, as far as the public is concerned, are dead and that the Hall of Poets—"

"Oh, but I'm sure the public's interest will be awakened soon," Emily interrupted, trying to shore up the trembling sky.

"The Hall of Poets," Mr. Brandon repeated relentlessly, "is a constant and totally unnecessary drain on the museum's financial resources and is pre-empting space desperately needed by our expanding display in the Hall of Automobiles. I'm even happier to say that the Board has finally come to a decision: starting tomorrow morning the Hall of Poets will be discontinued to make room for the Chrome Age period of the Automobile display. It's by far the most important period and—"

"But the poets," Emily interrupted again. "What about the poets?" The sky was falling all around her now, and intermingled with the shards of blue were the tattered fragments of noble words and the debris of once proud phrases.

"Why, we'll put them in storage, of course." Mr. Brandon's lips gave brief tenure to a sympathetic smile. "Then, if the public's interest ever is awakened, all we'll need to do is uncrate them and—"

"But they'll smother! They'll die!"

Mr. Brandon looked at her sternly. "Don't you think you're being a little bit ridiculous, Miss Meredith? How can an android smother? How can an android die?"

Emily knew her face had reddened, but she held her ground. "Their words will be smothered if they can't speak them. Their poetry will die if nobody listens to it."

Mr. Brandon was annoyed. There was a touch of pinkness in his sallow cheeks and his brown eyes had grown dark. "You're being very unrealistic about this, Miss Meredith. I'm very disappointed in you. I thought you'd be delighted to be in charge of a progressive display for a change, instead of a mausoleum filled with dead poets."

"You mean I'm going to be in charge of the Chrome Age period?"

Mr. Brandon mistook her apprehension for awe. Instantly his voice grew warm. "Why, of course," he said. "You didn't think I'd let someone else take over your domain, did you?" He gave a little shudder, as though the very thought of such a consideration was repugnant. In a sense it was: someone else would demand more money. "You can take over your new duties first thing tomorrow, Miss Meredith. We've engaged a moving crew to transfer the cars tonight, and a gang of decorators will be here in the morning to bring the hall up to date. With luck, we'll have everything ready for the public by the day after tomorrow. . . . Are you familiar with the Chrome Age, Miss Meredith?"

"No," Emily said numbly, "I'm not."

"I thought you might not be, so I brought you this." Mr. Brandon handed her the big book he was carrying. "*An Analysis of the Chrome Motif in Twentieth Century Art*. Read it religiously, Miss Meredith. It's the most important book of our century."

The last of the sky had fallen and Emily stood helplessly in the blue nibble. Presently she realized that the heavy object in her hands was *An Analysis of the Chrome Motif in Twentieth Century Art* and that Mr. Brandon had gone. . . .

Somehow she got through the rest of the day, and that night, just before she left, she said farewell to the poets. She was crying when she slipped through the electronic door into the September street and she cried all the way home in the aircab. Her apartment seemed cramped and ugly, the way it had seemed years ago, before the bards sublime had come into her life; and the screen of her video set stared out of the shadows at her like the pale and pitiless eye of a deep-sea monster.

She ate a tasteless supper and went to bed early. She lay in the empty darkness looking through her window at the big sign across the sheet. The big sign kept winking on and off, imparting a double message. On the first wink it said: TAKE SOMI-TABLETS. On the second: *ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ*. She lay there sleepless for a long while. Part of the time she was the Lady of Shalott, robed in snowy white, floating down the river to Camelot, and the rest of the time she was holding her breath again beneath the surface of the swimming hole, desperately hoping that the neighborhood boys, who had caught her swimming bare, would tire of their cruel laughter and their obscene words and go away so that she could crawl out of the cold water and get her clothes. Finally, after she had buried her flaming face for the sixth time, they did go away, and she stumbled, blue and trembling, up the bank, and struggled furiously into the sanctuary of her dacron dress. And then she was running, wildly running, back to the village, and yet, strangely, she wasn't running at all, she was floating instead, lying in the boat and robed in snowy white, floating down the river to Camelot. *A gleaming shape she floated by, dead-pale between the houses high, silent into Camelot,* And the knights and the people came out upon the wharf, the way they always did, and read her name upon the prow, and presently Lancelot appeared—Lancelot or Alfred, for sometimes he was one and sometimes he was the other and lately he had come to be both. "*She has a lovely face,*" Lancelot-Alfred said, and Emily of Shalott heard him clearly even though she was supposed to be dead: "*God in His mercy lend her grace, the lady of Shalott.*" . . . "

The moving crew had worked all night and the Hall of Poets was unrecognizable. The poets were gone, and in their places stood glittering representations of twentieth-century art. There was something called a "Firedome 8" where Robert Browning had sat dreaming of E.B.B., and a long, low, sleek object with the improbable name of "Thunderbird" pre-empted the space that Alfred, Lord Tennyson had made

sacred.

Mr. Brandon approached her, his eyes no less bright than the chrome decor he had come to love. "Well, Miss Meredith, what do you think of your new display?"

Emily almost told him. But she held her bitterness back. Getting fired would only estrange her from the poets completely, while, if she continued to work in the museum, she would at least have the assurance that they were near. "It's—it's dazzling," she said.

"You think it's dazzling now, just wait till the interior decorators get through!" Mr. Brandon could barely contain his enthusiasm. "Why, I almost envy you, Miss Meredith. You'll have the most attractive display in the whole museum!"

"Yes, I guess I will," Emily said. She looked bewilderedly around at her new charges. Presently: "Why did they paint them such gaudy colors, Mr. Brandon?" she asked.

The brightness in Mr. Brandon's eyes diminished somewhat. "I see you didn't even open the cover of *An Analysis of the Chrome Motif in Twentieth Century Art*," he said reprovingly. "Even if you'd as much as glanced at the jacket flap you'd know that color design in the American automobile was an inevitable accompaniment to the increase in chrome accouterments. The two factors combined to bring about a new era in automobile art that endured for more than a century."

"They look like Easter eggs," Emily said. "Did people actually *ride* in them?"

Mr. Brandon's eyes had regained their normal hue and his enthusiasm lay at his feet like a punctured balloon. "Why, of course they rode in them? I think you're being deliberately difficult, Miss Meredith, and I don't approve of your attitude at all!" He turned and walked away.

Emily hadn't meant to antagonize him and she wanted to call him back and apologize. But for the life of her she couldn't. The transition from Tennyson to the Thunderbird had embittered her more than she had realized.

She put in a bad morning, helplessly watching the decorators as they went about refurbishing the hall. Gradually, pastel walls acquired a brighter hue, and mullioned windows disappeared behind chrome Venetian blinds. The indirect lighting system was torn out and blazing fluorescents were suspended from the ceiling; the parqueted floor was mercilessly overlaid with synthetic tile. By noon the hall had taken on some of the aspects of an oversized lavatory. All that was lacking, Emily thought cynically, was a row of chrome commodes.

She wondered if the poets were comfortable in their crates, and after lunch she ascended the stairs to the attic storeroom to find out. But she found no crated poets in the big dusty loft; she found nothing that had not been there before—the outofdated relics that had accumulated through the years. A suspicion tugged at the corner of her mind. Hurriedly she descended the stairs to the museum proper and sought out Mr. Brandon. "Where are the poets?" she demanded when she found him directing the alignment of one of the automobiles.

The guilt on Mr. Brandon's face was as unmistakable as the rust spot on the chrome bumper before which he was standing. "Really, Miss Meredith," he began, "don't you think you're being a little un—"

"Where are they?" Emily repeated.

"We—we put them in the cellar." Mr. Brandon's face was almost as red as the incarnadine fender he had just been sighting along.

"Why?"

"Now, Miss Meredith, you're taking the wrong attitude toward this. You're—"

"Why did you put them in the cellar?"

"I'm afraid there was a slight change in our original plans." Mr. Brandon seemed suddenly absorbed in the design in the synthetic tile at his feet. "In view of the fact that public apathy in poetical matters is probably permanent, and in view of the additional fact that the present redecorating project is more of a drain upon our finances than we anticipated, we—"

"You're going to sell them for scrap!" Emily's face was white. Furious tears coalesced in her eyes, ran down her cheeks. "I hate you!" she cried. "I hate you and I hate the directors. You're like crows. If something glitters you pick it up and hoard it away in your old nest of a museum and throw out all the good things to make room for it. I hate you I hate you I hate you!"

"Please, Miss Meredith, try to be realistic . . ." Mr. Brandon paused when he discovered that he was talking to unoccupied air. Emily was a flurry of footsteps and a prim print dress far down the row of cars. Mr. Brandon shrugged. But the shrug was a physical effort, not at all casual. He kept thinking of the time, years ago, when the thin girl with the big haunted eyes and the shy smile had approached him in the Hall of Electrical Appliances and asked him for a job. And he thought of how shrewd he had been—only "shrewd" didn't seem to be the right word now—in making her assistant curator, which was an empty title that no one else wanted because it rated less than janitor's wages, and in foisting the Hall of Poets on her so that he himself could spend his time in pleasanter surroundings. And he remembered the inexplicable change that had come over her in the ensuing years, how the haunted quality had gradually disappeared from her eyes, how her step had quickened, how bright her smile had become, especially in the morning. Angrily, Mr. Brandon shrugged again. His shoulders felt as though they were made of lead.

The poets were piled in an unsung corner. Afternoon sunlight eked through a high cellar window and lay palely on their immobile faces. Emily sobbed when she saw them.

It was some time before she found and extricated Alfred. She propped him up on a discarded twentieth-century chair and sat down facing him in another. He regarded her almost questioningly with his android eyes. Thocksley Hall,' " she said.

*"Comrades, leave me here a little, while as yet 'tis early morn:
Leave me here, and when you want me, sound upon the bugle horn—"*

When he had finished reciting 'Locksley Hall," Emily said: "Morte d'Arthur," and when "Morte d'Arthur" was over, she said: "The Lotus-Eaters." And all the while he recited, her mind was divided into two parts. One part was absorbed with the poetry, the other with the dilemma of the poets.

It wasn't until the middle of "Maud" that Emily became aware of the passage of time. With a start she realized that she could no longer see Alfred's face, and, glancing up at the window, she saw that it was gray with twilight. Alarmed, she got to her feet and made her way to the cellar stairs. She found the light switch in the darkness and climbed the stairs to the first floor, leaving Alfred alone with "Maud." The museum was in darkness, except for a night light burning in the foyer.

Emily paused in the dim aura of the light. Apparently no one had seen her descend into the cellar, and Mr. Brandon, assuming that she had gone home, had turned the place over to the night watchman and gone home himself. But where was the night watchman? If she wanted to get out she would have to find him and ask him to open the door. But did she want to get out?

Emily pondered the question. She thought of the poets piled ignominiously in the cellar and she thought of the glittering vehicles usurping the hallowed ground that was rightfully theirs. At the crucial moment her eyes caught the glint of metal coming from a small display beside the door.

It was an ancient firemen's display, showing the fire-fighting equipment in use a century ago. There was a chemical fire extinguisher, a miniature hook and ladder, a coiled canvas hose, an ax ... It was the light ricocheting from the burnished blade of the ax that had first attracted her attention.

Hardly conscious of what she was doing, she walked over to the display. She picked up the ax, hefted it. She found that she could wield it easily. A mist settled over her mind and her thoughts came to a halt. Carrying the ax, she moved down the corridor that once had led to the Hall of Poets. She found the switch in the darkness and the new fluorescents exploded like elongated none, blazed harshly down on twentieth-century man's contribution to art.

The cars stood bumper to bumper in a large circle, as though engaged in a motionless race with each other. Just before Emily was a bechromed affair in gray—an older model than its color-bedaubed companions, but good enough for a starter. Emily approached it purposefully, raised the ax, and aimed for the windshield. And then she paused, struck by a sense of wrongness.

She lowered the ax, stepped forward, and peered into the open window. She looked at the imitation leopard-skin seat covers, the bedialed dashboard, the driving wheel. . . Suddenly she realized what the wrongness was.

She moved on down the circle. The sense of wrongness grew. The cars varied as to size, color, chrome decor, horsepower and seating capacity, but in one respect they did not vary at all. Every one of them was empty.

Without a driver, a car was as dead as a poet in a cellar.

Abruptly Emily's heart began pounding. The ax slipped from her fingers, fell unnoticed to the floor. She hurried back along the corridor to the foyer. She had just opened the door to the cellar when a shout halted her. She recognized the night watchman's voice and waited impatiently till he came close enough to identify her.

"Why, it's Miss Meredith," he said when he came up to her. "Mr. Brandon didn't say anybody was working overtime tonight."

"Mr. Brandon probably forgot," Emily said, marveling at the ease with which the lie slipped from her lips. Then a thought struck her: why stop at one lie? Even with the aid of the freight elevator, her task wasn't going to be easy. Why indeed! "Mr. Brandon said for you to give me a hand if I needed any help," she said. "And I'm afraid I'm going to need lots of help!"

The night watchman frowned. He considered quoting the union clause appropriate to the situation—the one stipulating that a night watchman should never be expected to engage in activities detrimental to the dignity of his occupation—in other words, to work. But there was a quality about Emily's face that he had never noticed before—a cold determined quality not in the least amenable to labor-union clauses. He sighed. "All right, Miss Meredith," he said.

"Well, what do you think of them?" Emily asked.

Mr. Brandon's consternation was a phenomenon to behold. His eyes bulged slightly and his jaw had dropped a good quarter of an inch. But he managed a reasonably *articulate* "Anachronistic."

"Oh, that's because of the period clothes," Emily said. "We can buy them modern business suits later on, when the budget permits."

Mr. Brandon stole a look into the driver's seat of the aquamarine Buick beside which he was standing. He made an effort to visualize Ben Jonson in twenty-first-century pastels. To his surprise he found the effort rewarding. His eyes settled back in place and his vocabulary began to come back.

"Maybe you've got something here at that, Miss Meredith," he said. "And I think the Board will be pleased. We didn't really want to scrap the poets, you know; it's just that we couldn't find a practical use for them. But now—"

Emily's heart soared. After all, in a matter of life and death, practicality was a small price to have to pay. . . .

After Mr. Brandon had gone, she made the rounds of her charges. Robert Browning had his usual "*Morning's at seven; the hill-side's dew-pearl'd*" in response to her greeting, though his voice sounded slightly muffled coming from the interior of his 1958 Packard, and William Cowper said briskly from his new upholstered eminence: "*The twentieth year is well-nigh past since first our sky was overcast!*" Edward Fitzgerald gave the impression that he was hurtling along at breakneck speed in his 1960 Chrysler, and Emily frowned severely at his undeviating reference to Khayyām's tavern. She saved Alfred, Lord Tennyson till the last. He looked quite natural behind the wheel of his 1965 Ford, and a casual observer would have assumed that he was so preoccupied with his driving that he saw nothing but the chrome-laden rear end of the car ahead of him. But Emily knew better. She knew that he was really seeing Camelot, and the Island of Shalott, and Lancelot riding with Guinevere over a burgeoning English countryside.

She hated to break into his reverie, but she was sure he wouldn't mind.

"Good morning, Lord Alfred," she said.

The noble head turned and the android eyes met hers. They seemed brighter, for some reason, and his voice, when he spoke, was vibrant and strong:

*"The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfills Himself in many ways. . . ."*

