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The Story of Azron

By ✓

Alice Wellington Rollins

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In Memory

of

Arthur W. Wellington

To whom Knowledge was the Supreme Joy, but whose Love of
Science had not chilled his interest in Art or his Belief
in Affection, and for whom now the Great
Question has been Answered.

The Story of Azron

Azron, the Builder, loving his white stones
Dearly as other men love gold,—or fame,—
Wrought with them wondrous things in wondrous
ways.

On the broad market-place there rose in state
The civic palace he had builded well,
Stately indeed; not decked with traceried veins
Of over-ornament to feed his pride;
But dignified, with broad and tranquil lines,
And fitted for its office. Farther on,
The Queen's wide mansion rose in royal state,
So beautiful that nature did not grudge
This reign of art, but nearer came, to crowd
Her roses, and her lawns of fragrant grass,
Her tall straight trees, her swaying bough and
breeze,
Her nightingales, her brilliant fountains, clear
With delicate water singing as it fell,
Around the loved and lovely building. Near,

Hidden in gardens fragrant with the rose,
Were simpler homes, through whose wide-open
halls

The children of the happy played and ran,
Filling the place full of a joyous peace,
And—only thing Azron lacked art to give—
Bright laughter of warm lips.

And farther on,
Crowning the crescent of a shadowy hill,
Rose a fair dome, with countless minarets—
Mosque, synagogue, cathedral—matters not;
But some rich building given to reverent thought,
Where man outpours more than he asks for; where
Joy comes for shelter from its too much sun;
Where Agony comes, not to pray, but fain
To crush its prayer, to lose all thought of self,
Even need of help; where Feeling conquers
Thought;

Where creed and dogma matter not, so long
As trembling hearts grow stronger than the strong,
And strong hearts become tender. In the towers,
Etched white against the gleaming eastern sky,
Were hidden chimes; and when the eastern sun
Rose glowing, answering its mute appeal
Like some dumb Memnon smitten with delight,

They rang out delicate music; with the day
Ushering in glad thoughts of joy to come
Surely with light; and when the darkness fell,
The glittering sun in royal pageant still,
Sank out of sight, while still the hidden chimes
Sang of a happiness surely to come with sleep.

 This, too, was Azron's; his each bending
 arch,—

Falling, yet never fallen—on whose curves,
Trembling to earth, but never leaving heaven,
Clung heavy marbles crusted with carven thoughts,
Or sculptured angels, or with delicate vines
Bearing white carven flowers; a flower, a thought,
An angel, white as snow each in mid-air,
And wonderful in beauty: all were his,
Azron, the Builder's.

 His each bit of blue,
Morsel of glorious tropic heaven, clasped close
Out of the vast wide splendor of the sky,
Framed by the stones, where Azron had let in
This blue mosaic of air in tower or wall,
Opened for one sweet breath.

 His equally
The straight wall, holding carven angels niched,
With folded peace clasped close in small white hands;

And his the brilliant glory of rich rays
Falling through wide glass, stained with regal
 dyes,
On wonderful mosaic of the floor,
His too.

 The carven balconies were his;—
Lovingly running round the still, white wall,
Warm with rich tapestries, and leaning out
Into the warmth below.

 His, here and there,
Tablets of marble, teased into delicate lace,
Or frost-work, fine as cobweb on the lawn,
By patient chiseling.

 His the bronze doors that closed
The loveliness within from that without;
Or opened, that the silent aisles might fill
With something still were lacking; with swift
 thrill

Of living thought, not thoughts in marble: Hope,
Brighter than flame of candle; Ecstasy,
Fainting like incense in the reverent air;
Endurance, matching silent marbles, worn
With waiting; Joy, with brilliant eyes ashine,
Needing no stained glass to increase its glow;
Pain, closer hid from sight than that pale peace
In sculptured hands; warm, living fire of life,

That streamed through all the veins of that rich
hall,
Making it perfect.

All was Azron's, all—
Even the thoughts of heedless worshippers
Were often his; they praised him, mightiest
Of Builders.

And yet nought was Azron's, nought—
Filled with his thoughts was the great building—
filled;

But the great building touched no thought in him.
Unbent his knee; his eyes were never cast
Downward in proud humility; but sought,
With restless glance, minutest points, to see
If all be beautiful. On the cold floor,
No gentle woman kneeling with hushed heart,
Had prayed for Azron; never child of his
Had laughed in home of his; he made no laws
In civic palace built for lawyer's fame;
Never was he admitted to the court
Of the fair mansion he had built the Queen
For her to dwell in. Plainest of the plain,
His one room in a cottage seemed to him
Enough for him; his cot was straight and thin,
Whereon he lay at night, with restless eyes

Piercing the roof to find more perfect thoughts
For his work always: here should be a tower,
Or there a dome; or a pagoda there;
A cornice should be added to that wall,
A fountain built into that garden; there
Roses should bloom; but who should pluck them
then—
Once there—he cared not; never a rose cared he!

Then suddenly there sprang within his soul
A longing; not for home, or love, or faith,
Or even for greater fame; but he would build
Something—he knew not what—more beautiful,
Only for beauty's sake; it should not be
Built for a single use of art or life;
It should not serve the purpose of a Queen,
Or of the State; it should be his—all his—
For beauty's sake. For once he would not be
Hampered by knowing this, or feeling that,
To be unsuitable; whatever here
Or there were lovely in itself, should be
Wrought to existence. Ah! but just to heap
Chalcedony on onyx, garnet's bloom
On white of marble, turquoise blue as heaven
In golden fretwork, fine as glowing stars,
Just as he pleased! To have none else to please,

Not even his own sense of what was fine;
But just to heap beauty on loveliness—
A straight line here,—a curve there,—as he pleased;
Agate on jasper, iron wrought like web,
Mother-of-pearl inlaid with pearls themselves,
Or ivory tinted to warm golden white,
With amethysts as rich in purple dyes
As a king's cloak; and stuffs enwrought with gems
Should tinge all white with warmth of coloring
And texture; pillars straight and firm, and tall,
Should uphold,—what, he knew not yet; may be
Nothing, if only they sprang light and lithe
As palm trees out of doors. Perhaps a dome,
Where wandering angels, losing themselves in flight,
Seeking a heaven, yet never finding one
Fairer than that Azron had given them,
Should float in air, yet never float beyond.
Lightly the dome should rest but on the points
Of delicate wall, as heaven's azure sky
Rests upon earth, scarce touching it at all.
No chimes—nay, not the sweetest—should lure here
A worshipper; but like faint sense of myrrh,
Hidden—yet making eloquent the air—
The loveliness of what he meant to build
Should reach the listening world, and silently
Draw to its feet those who would understand.

So Azron planned; and so at last, indeed,
Wrought Azron; all else ceased for him to be.
Rich was he, with the wealth of Queen and State,
For all that he had done for them; and rich
With many a private fortune, gladly spent
For one of those rare homes Azron could build—
None better—with its gardens of tall palms,
And blossoming rose, and softly-scented earth,
White with the falling orange blossoms; all
Surrounding beauty lovelier still within.
Rich was he; and he spent with lavish care
His costliest on that he meant to build,
Not knowing why he built it.

And to see

Azron at work, the wise men left their books,
Children their play; how wonderful it was!
Glorious to the ever-questioning eyes
Its beauty kindled, and then satisfied.
And yet,—and yet—ever there came at length
After long glance of wondering delight,
The same plain question, “Azron, what is it for?”

Then Azron frowned; “What is it for?” said he.
“For nought, but that I will it should be so.
Is it not beautiful?”—“Yes,” they said—and then,
They turned away.

Indignant, then, but calm,
Azron would turn once more to choose his gems,
His snowy marbles, onyx veined with sun,
Or amber, sun itself, or black-browed jet,
Or ivory like cream, or burning gold,
Or glittering crystal. Ever and anon,
Came patient camels laden heavily
With sacks they poured down, kneeling at his feet,
With garnets, or red rubies, from the hills,
Filled to the brim. Then Azron would outpour
The glittering heap, sifting them carelessly
As a child sifts cheap grains of falling sand,
Choosing now here, now there, from all the heap,
Maybe a dozen exquisite bright gems,
Glowing with joy to be so chosen; while
The eager children, lingering near to find
Some bit of marble, or discarded gem,
Buried their joyous hands in the red stones,
And laughed for pleasure.

Or again, some day,
A lonely diver with a single pearl
Brought it to Azron. Azron paid, and smiled,—
Undaunted by the cost of pricelessness,—
Lavishing jewels where he would; now here,
Now there; and lighting his most lovely room
With gems, instead of candles or stained glass.

“No stain,” he said, smiling at his own words,
“Even of royal dyes.” White diamonds
Should lend their light to him from their proud
souls;

Not borrow light from sun, or fire; or flame—
Shining with their own splendor.

So he wrought.

Nor was it only delicate ornament
That made it all so fair; each slender arch,
Drooping beneath the lovely weight it bore,
Obeyed each law Azron said he should scorn.
Firm was each marble set in its white place;
Strong the foundation underneath the whole,
Whereon rose Azron’s daintiest fantasy
Of pillar or of gem; the symmetry
Was perfect, though he said he should not care
For it to be so; never did he swerve,
By as much as a single hair, from line,
Or curve, or angle, as it should be; each
Melted in each, as finest, strictest law
Dictated; each was firm, and fine, and true.
So long had Azron’s mind dwelt patiently
In ordered ways; so carefully had he
Studied art, science, law, unflinchingly,
That now the subtle chains of his own past
Bound him by laws he could not but obey,

Whether he would or not; he could not be
Wayward, nor could he, even if he would,
Will to be wilful. He had builded well
From knowledge once, and careful choice of all
Most beautiful; till now he builded well
From instinct.

And yet, even as he worked,
There rankled in his heart the constant thought,
“Why should they ask me so persistently
What is it for?” Though he denied their right
To question, still their question haunted him—
“What is it for?”

And one day as he leaned
Against a palm-tree, idle, while the sun
Shone still on unset jewel, uncut stone,
No longer following his own high thought,
Teased and perplexed by restless wondering
Of what he still assured himself need not
Tease and perplex him, but which ever did,
A lonely, silent man, with eager eyes
That say “I seek what I shall never find,
Yet I seek always,” wandered slowly past,
Nor paused to wonder at the work, or ask
“What is it for?” and Azron, piqued at last
By strange indifference, dreading still to hear
The hated question, and yet daring it,

Himself hailed the stranger: "Will you look
At this that I am building? Tell me, now,
What think you it is for?"

Then he who looked,
Slowly, though courteously, with evident pain
Lifted his eyes from his own heart, and saw
The gleam of marble shining in the sun
Against a sapphire sky; with a strained look
Of one who long has turned his eyes away
Even from lovely things, to nurse a grief,
There came at last into his eyes a sense
Of beauty, patiently enwrought with charm
Of color, light, and strength; and then at last
He murmured questioningly, "Is it the tomb
Of one beloved?"

"Nay," answered Azron, "nay;
Such loveliness is for the living, not
The dead."

"But death comes to the living, too,
Azron; and though its pallor is so cold,
It may be lit with memories that glow
Like yonder jewels; they are not like flame—
A living, leaping flame: yet shall not die
As living flame may die. Too small it is,
Yon building, for a temple; though it be
Beautiful, none would care to dwell therein;

With simple light of ordinary day
Shut out, although the glittering gems may make
A jewelled rainbow light more fine than day.
But as a shrine for hopes that need no light—
Since they can never blossom any more—
Hidden from day, but shining in the dark—
Keeping that sacred which can never die,
Though never live again”—his wandering eyes
Turned even from the beauty that was there,
To dwell again on that dull vacant pain
In his own heart he half feared he might lose,
Letting himself be happy for an hour.

“Then you
Have loved?” said Azron, studying his face.
“Nay,” said the stranger, lifting his proud head
Like a young god, with eyes a-light at last,
“That were not strange; all men have loved;
but I
Have been loved!”

“And the one you loved is dead?”
“The one I love is dead.”
“Yet I, who know
No sorrow such as yours, half envy you.”
And to himself Azron half thought in pain,
“Strange! for he seems a quite, quite common
man,

Transfigured by a grief." And then aloud,
Though gently, "Was it really then so much
To you?"

"So much, Azron? so much? if I
Could feel the light touch of her hand once more
Upon my arm, though for a moment brief
As seemed the years I spent with her, for that
One touch, one look again into her eyes,
I, who am poor, would give—would give—would
give,—"

His voice sank to a whisper as he drooped
His head upon his breast, and murmured low,
"Almost my memories."

And he turned and went.

"Strange! strange!" said Azron. "Sad he
seemed, and yet

He would not lose his sorrow. I, content,
Who never had a grief, have never loved,
Or been loved, feel that sad man must have known
Something that I have missed. Well-fed, content,
I would be hungry! How the gods must smile!
Strange that we should be left so at a loss;—
Here there is food without the appetite,
There hunger without food; and there again
A simple hunger, given its simple food,
Yet craving thirstily to feel a thirst

It sees, but understands not. Pale and worn,
The hermit lies upon his couch at night,
Knowing his life no sequel of fine deeds,
Only of things not done; a garment frayed—
Spotless, it may be; yet unbeautiful—
Asking himself 'What has my life been for?
I who have done no harm, yet done no good.'
Yet equally, more wearily will he
Who has snatched all he craved, indulged in all,
Only to find his pleasure on his lips
Burn to cold ashes, dead and pleasureless,
Worn with satiety, far worse than thirst,
Ask himself drearily 'What is it for?'
And even he who walks content a round
Of simple duties—never swerving once,
Without struggle or temptation, knows
Somewhere there is a stimulus and strain,
That missing, he has missed some subtle thing,
To crave which may be dangerous, but fine.
He, too, must ask himself, or we for him,
'What is it for—the calmness or the strength?'
I have won proud success in all things fine;
Yet see far humbler men far happier,
With love, or faith, or hope, or even like him
Who has gone yonder, with a memory.
Would that the gods would touch my lips but once

With divine fire, though left unsatisfied!
I have built here a tomb for one beloved,
Yet have I no beloved to lay therein.
What is it for? the joy, or the success,
One ever lacking in the other? Strange!
We should be calm at first, and at the last
We should be calm; yet know well all between—
The gamut of the suffering, the thrill,
The fervor, and the trembling, the despair—
To know all and to be all, as we should.
'Tis the old fable of the serpent, Time,
With his tail caught back to his mouth; it ends
Where it began, yet is the orbit wide.
'Tis the old riddle of the sphinx: '*what for?*'
Aye! now I know!" and springing eagerly
With smile half cynical, half sad, as he
Found on his own lips with such desperate need
The question he had hated and denied,
He caught his chisel, hastened to his bench,
And kneeling on one knee before one more
Pale page of uncarved marble, murmured fast,
"Here will I ask it! here in marble! here
Will I carve well the restless, patient sphinx,
With eyes that burn, though prisoned all the while
In dull cold stone: what is Life for? what for?"

And he wrought well; but suddenly there came
A tremor and a chill through his right arm.
Turning his face, he saw beside him there
A woman like an angel, or perchance
An angel like a woman; so supreme
The look she bent upon him where she stood,
Silent, superb and beautiful, that he,
Still holding fast his chisel, stammered forth,
“What art thou? art thou Love?—at last, for me?”
“Not Love,” she answered; “Azron, I am Death!”
“Nay,” and he grasped his chisel firmer still,
“I cannot die! See, I am young! not yet
Have I fulfilled all that is in my soul.
I ask not for dull life of plodding clods
That know not the divine; I ask not life
For a wild round of pleasure or mad deeds;
I ask not love, if it be not for me.
I ask but work! I would but finish this!
If all the thoughts burning within my brain—
Not foolish thoughts, but thoughts for which men
wait—
Are to die now unuttered, if my strength
Of will and purpose, of proud energy,
Of eagerness to see but the divine
And then reveal it to blind, waiting men,
Must perish unexpressed—what is it for?”

“Azron,” the angel answered him, “thy sphinx
Asks, but it answers also; what hast thou
Answered to those who ask of thine own work,
‘What is it for?’ Didst thou not say to them
‘It matters not, so it be beautiful’?

Thy sphinx with restless eyes that ask,

would fain

Question, ‘What is Life for?’ but the proud mouth,

The patient sweetness of the even brows,

The perfect poise of changeless attitude,

The finely modelled cheek, the unparted lips,

Answer, ‘it matters not! it matters not!

If only it be beautiful!’ Nay, this,

Thy greater work, this glorious tomb of thine,

Not for a living woman, but for her,

The sphinx that asks and answers, is it not

A living answer to the living cry?

‘What is it for?’ they ask; and thou hast said,

‘It matters not, for it is beautiful.’

It may be I have secrets to reveal

When thou hast crossed the portal of the dead;

It may be, I have none: it matters not.

Lay each straight marble firm in its white place;

Choose well each burnished gem; let all be fair

And orderly; and then it matters not

What it is for, or when the chisel falls.

Despair not, Azron, thou hast builded well;
But now—ask me no more!—it matters not!”

And Azron’s head sank slowly on his breast,
The chisel fell.

And when they found him there,
He had been answered. As they lifted him,
Tenderly, mournfully, and gazing saw
The look on his dead face, one gently said,
“Let us not bear him hence; here should he lie;
The work he loved should praise him; let this be
His tomb, his resting place, his epitaph.”
There was he laid to rest, and on the gate
Of carven ivory they wrote in gold
That all might know at last, “This is the tomb
Of one Beloved!”



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