THE HILL OF VENUS.

The Argument.
THIS STORY TELLS OF A CERTAIN MAN WHO BY STRANGE ADVENTURE FELL INTO THE POWER OF VENUS, AND WHO, REPENTING OF HIS LIFE WITH HER, WAS FAIIN TO RETURN TO THE WORLD AND AMEND ALL, BUT MIGHT NOT; FOR HIS REPENTANCE WAS REJECTED OF MEN, BY WHOMSOEVER IT WAS ACCEPTED.

CERTAIN summer afternoon day hung
Doubtful 'twixt storm and sunshine, and the earth
Seemed waiting for the clouds to spread, that chung
About the south-east, ere its morning mirth,
Ere all the freshness of its hopeful birth
Should end in dreadful darkness, and the clash
Of rain-beat boughs and wildering lightning-flash.

Such a tide brooded o'er the ancient wood,
Wild with sour waste and rough untended tree,
Which, long before the coming of the Rood,
Men held a holy place in Germany;¹
Yea, and still looked therein strange things to see,
Still deemed that dark therein was uglier
Than in all other wilds, more full of fear.

Grim on that day it was, when the sun shone
Clear through the thinner boughs, and yet its light
Seemed threatening; such great stillness lay upon
The wide-head oaks, such terror as of night

¹held a holy place in Germany: Morris emphasizes the antiquity of Venus's worship, as Sabine Baring-Gould had done in his account of the same legend in Curious Myths of the Middle Ages (Cambridge, 1865).
Waylaying day, made the sward yet more bright,
As, blotting out the far-away blue sky,
The hard and close-packed clouds spread silently.

Now 'twixt the trees slowly a knight there rode,
Musing belike; a seemly man and fair,
No more a youth, but bearing not the load
Of many years; he might have seen the wear
Of thirty summers: why he journeyed there
Nought tells the tale, but Walter doth him name,
And saith that from the Kaiser's court he came.

Dull snow seemed his thoughts, as on he went
From tree to tree, with heavy knitted brow,
And eyes upon the forest grass intent;
And oft beneath his breath he muttered low,
And once looked up and said: The earth doth grow
Day after day a wearier place belike;
No word for me to speak, no blow to strike:

Once I looked not for this and it has come;
What shall the end be now I look for worse?
Woe worth the dull walls of mine ancient home,
The ragged fields laid 'neath the ancient curse!  
Woe worth false hope that dead despair doth nurse;
Woe worth the world's false love and babbling hate:
O life, vain, grasping, uncompassionate!

He looked around as thus he spake, and saw
That he amidst his thoughts had ridden to where
The close wood backward for a space did draw,
Leaving a plain of sweet-grown sward all clear,
Till at the end thereof a cliff rose sheer
From the green grass, o'er which again arose
A hill-side clad with fir-trees dark and close.

2ward: grassy area.
3The ancient curse: In Ludwig Tieck's version of the tale, the mountain had been accursed in local lore for four centuries.
He muttered: Yea, the end is hell and death,
The midmost hid, yet the beginning Love.
Ah me! despite the worst Love threateneth,
Still would I cling to the skirts thereof;
If I could hope his sadness still could move
My heart for evermore. A little taste
Of the king's banquet, then all bare and waste

My table is; fresh guests are hurrying in
With eager eyes, there to abide their turn,
That they more hunger therewithal may win!
Ah me! what skill for dying love to yearn?
Yet, O my yearning! though my heart should burn
Into light feathery ash, blown here and there,
After one minute of that odorous flare.

With that once more he hung his head adown;
The name of Love such thoughts in him had stirred,
That somewhat sweet his life to him was grown,
And like soft sighs his breathing now he heard;
His heart beat like a lover's heart afear;
Of such fair women as he erst had seen,
The names he named, and thought what each had been.

Yet, as he told them over one by one,
But dimly might he see their forms, and still
Some lack, some coldness, cursed them all, and none
The void within his straining heart might fill;
For evermore, as against his will,
Words of old stories, turned to images
Of lovelier things, would blur the sight of these.

Long dwelt he in such musings, though his beast
From out his hand had plucked the bridle-rein,
And, wandering slowly onward, now did feast
Upon the short sweet herbage of the plain;
So when the knight raised up his eyes again,
Behind his back the dark of the oak-wood lay,
And nigh unto its end was grown the day.

He gazed round toward the west first, and the stream,
Where all was bright and sunny, nor would he
Have deemed himself deep fallen into a dream
If he had seen the grass swept daintily
By raiment that in old days used to be;
When white 'neath Pallas' smile and Juno's frown
Glimmered Venus from the gold slow slipping down.

But void was all the meadow's beauty now,
And to the east he turned round with a sigh,
And saw the hard lift' blacker and blacker grow
Neath the world's silence, as the storm drew nigh;
And to his heart there went home suddenly
A sting of bitter hatred and despair,
That these things, his own heart had made so fair,

He might not have; and even as he gazed,
And the air grew more stifling yet and still,
Down in the east a crooked line blazed,
And soon the thunder the eve's hush did fill,
Low, yet, but strong, persistent as God's will.
He cried aloud: A world made to be lost,
A bitter life 'twixt pain and nothing tossed!

And therewithal he stooped and caught the rein,
And turned his horse about till he did face
The cavern in the hill, and said: Ah, vain
My yearning for enduring bliss of days
Amidst the dull world's hopeless, hurrying race,
Where the past gain each new gain makes a loss,
And yestreen's golden love to-day makes dross!

And as he spake, slowly his horse 'gan move
Unto the hill: To-morrow and to-day,
Why should I name you, so I once hold Love
Close to my heart? If others fell away,
The was because within their souls yet lay

Pallas: Athena.
Sight: slight rise or elevation.
Some hope, some thought of making peace at last
With the false world, when all their love was past.

But strangely light therewith his heart did grow,
He knew not why; and yet again he said:
A wondrous thing that I this day must trow
In tales that poets and old wives have made!
Time was when duly all these things I weighed.
Yet, O my heart, what sweetens the dull air?
What is this growing hope, so fresh and fair?

Then therewithal louder the thunder rolled,
And the world darkened, for the sun was down;
A fitful wind 'gan flicker o'er the wold,'
And in scared wise the woods began to moan,
And fast the black clouds all the sky did drown;
But his eyes glittered, a strange smile did gleam
Across his face, as in a happy dream.

Again he cried: Thou callest me; I come;
I come, O lovely one! Oh, thou art nigh;
Like a sweet scent, the nearness of thine home
Is shed around; it lighteth up God's sky:
O me, thy glory! Therewith suddenly
The lightning streamed across the gathering night,
And his horse swerved aside in wild affright.

He heeded not except to spur him on;
He drew his sword as if he saw a foe,
And rode on madly till the stream he won,
And, even as the storm-wind loud 'gan blow,
And the great drops fell pattering, no more slow,
Dashed through the stream and up the other bank,
And leaped to earth amidst his armour's clank,

And faced the wild white rain, and the wind's roar,
The swift wide-dazzling lightning strange of hue,
The grining thunder, saying: No more, no more,

Helpless and cruel, do I deal with you,
Or heed the things the false world calleth true.
Surely mine eyes in spite of you behold
The perfect peace Love's loving arms enfold.

Then, whirling o'er his head his glittering sword,
Into the night he cast it far away;
And turning round, without another word
Left the wild tumult of the ruined day,
And into the darkness that before him lay
Rushed blindly, while the cold rain-bearing wind
Wailed after him, and the storm clashed behind.

A few steps through black darkness did he go,
Then turned and stayed, and with his arms outspread
Stood tottering there a little while, as though
He fain would yet turn back; some words he said
If the storm heard, then fell, and as one dead
Lay long, not moving, noting not how soon
Above the dripping boughs outshone the moon.

E woke up with the tears upon his cheek,
As though awakened from some dream of love;
And as his senses cleared felt strange and weak,
And would not open eyes or try to move,
Since he felt happy and yet feared to prove
His new-born bliss, lest it should fade from him
Even as in waking grows the love-dream dim.

A hush hush was there round about, as though
Best, bird, and creeping thing went each their ways,
Yet needs must keep their voices hushed and low,
For worship of the sweet love-laden days.
Most heavenly odours floated through the place,
Where'er it was, wherein his body lay,
And soft the air was as of deathless May.

At last he rose with eyes fixed on the ground,
And therewithal his armour's clinking seemed

6wold: hill or upland area in open country.
An overloud and clean unlooked-for sound:
He trembled; even yet perchance he dreamed,
Though strange hope o'er his wondering heart there streamed;
He looked up; in the thickest of a wood
Of trees fair-blossomed, heavy-leaved, he stood.

He turned about and looked; some memory
Of time late past, of dull and craving pain,
Made him yet look the cavern's mouth to see
Anigh behind him: but he gazed in vain,
For there he stood, as a man born again,
'Midst a close break of egantine' and rose,
With no deed now to cast aside or choose.

Yet, as a man new-born at first may hear
A murmur in his ears of life gone by,
Then in a flash may see his past days clear,
The pain, the pleasure, and the strife, all nigh,
And stripped of every softening veil and lie,
So did he hear, and see, and vainly strive
In one short minute all that life to live.

But even while he strove, as strong as sleep,
As swift as death, came deep forgetfulness,
Came fresh desire unnamed, his heart did leap
With a fresh hope, a fresh fear did oppress
The new delight, that else cried out to bless
The unchanging softness of that unknown air,
And the sweet tangle round about him there.

Trembling, and thinking strange things to behold,
The interwoven boughs aside he drew,
And softly, as though sleep he would did hold,
And he should not awake it, passed them through
Into a freer space; yet nought he knew
Why he was thither come, or where to turn,
Or why the heart within him so did burn.

Eglantine: sweetbriar.
The girls would sit before the loom,
And sing no song, and play no play;  
Alone from dawn to hot mid-day,
From mid-day unto evening,  
The men astir would work, nor sing,  
Mid weary thoughts of man and God,  
Before thy feet the wet ways trod.
Unkissed the merchant bore his care,  
Unkissed the knights went out to war,  
Unkissed the mariner came home,  
Unkissed the minstrel men did roam,  
Or in the stream the maids would stare,  
Nor know why they were made so fair;  
Their yellow locks, their bosoms white,  
Their limbs well wrought for all delight,  
Seemed foolish things that waited death,  
As hopeless as the flowers beneath  
The weariness of unkissed feet:
No life was bitter then, or sweet.  
Therefore, O Venus, well may we  
Praise the green ridges of the sea  
O'er which, upon a happy day,  
Thou cam'st to take our shame away.
Well may we praise the curdling foam  
Amidst the which thy feet did bloom,  
Flowers of the gods; the yellow sand  
They kissed atwixt the sea and land;  
The bee-beset ripe-seeded grass,  
Through which thy fine limbs first did pass;  
The purple-dusted butterfly,  
First blown against thy quivering thigh;  
The first red rose that touched thy side,  
And overblown and fainting died;  
The flickering of the orange shade,  
Where first in sleep thy limbs were laid;  
The happy day's sweet life and death,  
Whose air first caught thy balmy breath.

*upon a happy day:* Lemprière's lengthy entry on Venus gave prominence to her ocean-birth and the wide dispersion of her cult.
Adown the wave of song; his heart waxed hot
With a new thought of life, remembered not,
Save as a waste passed through with loathing sore
Unto a life which, if he gained no more

Than this desire, lonely, unsatisfied,
This name of one unknown, unseen, was bliss;
And if this strange world were not all too wide,
But he some day might touch her hand with his,
And turn away from that ungranted kiss
Not all unpitied, nor unhappy quite,
What better knew the lost world of delight?

Now, while he thought these things, and had small heed
Of what was round him, changed the place was grown
Like to a tree-set garden, that no weed,
Nor winter, or decay had ever known;
No longer now complained the dove alone

Over his head, but with uneawaring voice
"Twixt leaf and blossom did the birds rejoice.

No longer strove the sun and wind in vain
To reach the earth, but bright and fresh they played
About the flowers of a wide-stretching plain,
Where 'twixt the soft sun and the flickering shade
There went a many wild things, unafraid
Each of the other or of the wanderer,
Yea, even when his bright arms drew nayear.

And through the plain a little stream there wound,
And far o'er all there rose up mountains grey,
That never so much did the place surround,
But ever through their midstmost seemed a way
To whatsoe'er of lovely through them lay.
But still no folk saw Walter; nay, nor knew
If those were dreams who passed the wild wood through.

But on he passed, and now his dream to prove
Plucked down an odorous fruit from overhead,

Opened its purple heart and ate thereof?
Then, where a path of wondrous blossoms led,
Beset with lilies and with roses red,
Went to the stream, and felt its ripples cold,
As through a shallow, strewn with very gold

For pebbles, slow he waded; still no stay
He made, but wandered toward the hills; no fear
And scarce a pain upon his heart did weigh;
Only a longing made his life more dear,
A longing for a joy that drew nayear;
And well-nigh now his heart seemed satisfied,
So only in one place he should not hide.

And so he ever wandered on and on,
Till clearer grew the pass 'twixt hill and hill;
Lengthened the shadows, sank adown the sun,
As though in that dull world he journeyed still
Where all day long men labour, night to fill
With dreams of toil and trouble, and arise
To find the daylight cold to hopeless eyes.

Some vague thought of that world was in his heart,
As, meeting sunset and grey moonrise there,
He came unto the strait vale that did part
Hill-side from hill-side; through the golden air,
Far o'er, there lay another valley fair;
Red with the sunset ran the little stream:
Ah me! in such a place, amidst a dream,

Two sundered lovers, each of each forgiven,
All things known, all things past away, might meet:
Such place, such time, as the one dream of heaven,
Midst a vain life of nought. With faltering feet
He stayed a while, for all grew o'er-sweet;
He hid his eyes, lest day should come again
As in such dream, and make all blank and vain.

*Opened its purple heart and ate thereof: an addition in Morris's tale.*
He trembled as the wind came up the pass;
Was it long time 'twixt breath and breath thereof?
Did the shade creep slow o'er the flower-strewn grass?
Was it a long time that he might not move,
Lest morn should bring the world and slay his love?
Surely the sun had set, the stream was still,
The wind had sunk adown behind the hill.

Nay, through his fingers the red sun did gleam;
In cadence with his heart's swift beating now
Beat the fresh wind, and fell adown the stream.
Then from his eyes his hands fell, and e'en so
The blissful knowledge on his soul did grow
That she was there, her speech as his speech, stilled
By very love, with love of him fulfilled.

O close, O close there, in the hill's grey shade,
She stood before him, with her wondrous eyes
Fixed full on his! All thought in him did fade
Into the bliss that knoweth not surprise,
Into the life that hath no memories,
No hope and fear; the life of all desire,
Whose fear is death, whose hope consuming fire.

Naked, alone, unsmiling, there she stood,
No cloud to raise her from the earth; her feet
Touching the grass that his touched, and her blood
Throbbing as his throbbed through her bosom sweet;
Both hands held out a little, as to meet
His outstretched hands; her lips each touching each;
Praying for love of him, but without speech.

He fell not and he knelt not; life was strong
Within him at that moment; well he thought
That he should never die; all shame and wrong,
Time past and time to come, were all made nought;
As, springing forward, both her hands he caught;
And, even as the King of Love might kiss,
Felt her smooth cheek and pressed her lips with his.

What matter by what name of heaven or earth
Men called his love? Breathing and loving there
She stood, and clung to him; one love had birth
In their two hearts, he said; all things were fair,
Although no sunlight warmed the fresh grey air
As their lips sundered. Hand in hand they turned
From where no more the yellow blossoms burned.

Louder the stream was, fallen dead was the wind,
As up the vale they went into the night,
No rest but rest of utter love to find
Amidst the marvel of new-born delight;
And as her feet brushed through the dew, made white
By the high moon, he cried: For this, for this
God made the world, that I might feel thy kiss!

HAT, is the tale not ended then? Woe's me!
How many tales on earth have such an end:
I longed, I found, I lived long happily,
And fearless in death's fellowship did wend?
On earth, where hope is that two souls
May blend
That God has made; but she, who made her then
To be a curse unto the sons of men?

And yet a flawless life indeed that seemed
For a long while: as flowers, not made to die
Or sin, they were: no dream was ever dreamed,
How short soe'er, wherein more utterly
Was fear forgot or weariness worn by;
Wherein less thought of the world's woe and shame,
Of men's vain struggles, o'er the sweet rest came.

Men say he grew exceeding wise in love,
That all the beauty that the earth had known,
At least in seeming, would come back, and move
Betwixt the buds and blossoms overblown;
Till, turning round to that which was his own,
Bind would he grow with ecstasy of bliss,
And find unhoped—for joy in each new kiss.
Men say that every dear voice love has made
Throughout that love-filled loneliness would float,
And make the roses tremble in the shade
With unexpected sweetness of its note
Till he would turn unto her quivering throat,
And, deaf belike, would feel the wave of sound
From out her lips change all the air around.

Men say he saw the lovers of old time;
That ORPHEUS led in his EURYDICE,
Crooning o'er snatches of forgotten rhyme,
That once had striven against eternity,
And only failed, as all love fails, to see
Desire grow into perfect joy, to make
A lonely heaven for one beloved's sake.

THISBE he saw, her wide white bosom bare;
Thereon instead of blood the mulberries' stain;
And single-hearted PYRAMUS anear
Held in his hand tufts of the lion's mane,
And the grey blade that stilled their longings vain
Smote down the daisies. Changeless earth and old,
Surely thy heart amid thy flowers is cold!

HELEN he saw move slow across the sward,
Until before the feet of her she stood
Who gave her, a bright bane and sad reward,
Unto the PARIS that her hand yet wooed:
Trembled her lips now, and the shame-stirred blood
Flushed her smooth cheek; but hard he gazed, and yearned
Unto the torch that Troy and him had burned.

Then ARIADNE came, her raiment wet
From out the sea, to her a prison wall,
A highway to the love she could not get.
Then upon PHYLLIS' ivory cheeks did fall
The almond-blossoms. Then, black-haired and tall,
Came DIDO, with her slender fingers laid
On the thin edge of that so bitter blade.

Then, what had happened? was the sun darker now?
Had the flowers shrunk, the warm breeze grown a-chill?
It may be; but his love therewith did grow,
And all his aching heart it seemed to fill
With such desire as knows no chain nor will:
Shoulder to shoulder quivering where they lay,
In a changed world that had not night nor day.

A loveless waste of ages seemed to part,
And through the cloven dullness BRYNHILD came,
Her left hand on the fire that was her heart,
That paled her cheeks and through her eyes did flame,
Her right hand holding SIGURD'S; for no shame
Was in his simple eyes, that saw the worth
So clearly now of all the perished earth.

Then suddenly outbroke the thrushes' sound,
The air grew fresh as after mid-spring showers,
And on the waves of soft wind flowing round
Came scent of apple-bloom and gillyflowers.

11 Thisbe: Thisbe and Pyramus, lovers in ancient Babylon. Pyramus committed suicide when he thought Thisbe had been killed by a lion, and Thisbe later came upon his body and likewise killed herself. According to the legend, their blood reddened the fruit of the mulberry tree.
12 Sad reward: the "award" of Helen to Paris which precipitated the Trojan War.
13 Arians: The daughter of Minos and Pasiphae, Ariadne gave Theseus the thread he used to find his way out of the Labyrinth after he had killed the Minotaur. Theseus later married her, then abandoned her on the island of Naxos. In some accounts, she eventually married the god Dionysus.
14 Phyillis: The daughter of Lycurgus, king of Thrace, Phyllis killed herself when Theseus's son Demophon left her to return to Athens. Ovid inserted an imaginary letter from her to Demophon in the Heroides, and Lemppâtre reports the legend that "Phyllis was changed by the gods into an almond tree, which is called phylis by the Greeks.
15 Blade: After Aeneas deserted Dido, she threw herself on her funeral pyre.
16 Gillyflowers: any of several plants of the genus Dianthus, which include the carnation and the wallflower.
And all the world seemed in its morning hours,
And soft and dear were kisses, and the sight
Of eyes, and hands, and lips, and bosom white.

Yea, the earth seemed a-babbling of these twain,
TRISTRAM and YESEULT, as they lingered there,
All their life-days now nothing but a gain;
While death itself, wrapped in love's arms, must bear
Some blossoms grown from depths of all despair,
Some clinging, sweetest, bitterest kiss of all,
Before the dark upon their heads should fall.

Others he saw, whose names could tell him nought
Of any tale they might have sorrowed through;
But their lips spake, when of their lives he sought,
And many a story from their hearts he drew,
Some sweet as any that old poets knew,
Some terrible as death, some strange and wild
As any dream that hath sad night beguiled.

But all with one accord, what else they said,
Would praise with eager words the Queen of Love;
Yet sometimes while they spake, as if with dread,
Would look askance adown the blossomed grove;
Till a strange pain within his heart would move,
And he would cling to her enfolding arm,
Trembling with joy to find her breast yet warm.

Then a great longing would there stir in him,
That all those kisses might not satisfy;
Dreams never dreamed before would gather dim
About his eyes, and trembling would he cry
To tell him how it was he should not die;
To tell him how it was that he alone
Should have a love all perfect and his own.

17 TRISTRAM and YESEULT: Legendary lovers from a twelfth-century romance. Tristram and Isolde also made an appearance in Tennyson's 1871 "The Last Tournament."
Twixt lessening joy and gathering fear, grew thin
That lovely dream, and glimmered now through it
Gleams of the world cleft from him by his sin;
Hell's flames withal, heaven's glory, 'gan to flit
Athwart his eyes sometimes, as he did sit
Beside the Queen, in sleep's soft image laid;
And yet awhile the dreadful dawn was stayed.

And in that while two thoughts there stirred in him,
And this the first: Am I the only one
Whose eyes thy glorious kisses have made dim?
And what then with the others hast thou done?
Where is the sweetness of their sick love gone?
Ah me! her lips upon his lips were laid,
And yet awhile the dreadful dawn was stayed.

And in that while the second thought was this:
And if, wrapped in her love, I linger here
Till God's last justice endeth all our bliss,
Shall my eyes then, by hopeless pain made clear,
See that a vile dream my vain life held dear,
And I am lone? Ah, cheek to his cheek laid!
And yet awhile the dreadful dawn was stayed.

How long who knoweth? and be sure meanwhile,
That could man's heart imagine, man's tongue say,
The strange delights that did his heart beguile
Within that marvellous place from day to day,
Whoso might hearken should cast clean away
All thought of sin and shame, and laugh to scorn
The fear and hope of that delaying morn.

But the third thought at last, unnamed for long,
Bloomed, a weak flower of hope within his heart;
And by its side unrest grew bitter strong,
And, though his lips said not the word, Depart;
Yet would he murmur: Hopeless fair thou art!
Is there no love amid earth's sorrowing folk?
So gared the dreadful dawn, and thus it broke.

For on a night, amid the lily and rose,
Peaceful he woke from dreams of days bygone;
Peaceful at first; and, seeing her lying close
Beside him, had no memory of deeds done
Since long before that eve he rode alone
Amidst the wild wood; still awhile himseemed
That of that fair close, those white limbs he dreamed.

So there for long he lay in happy rest,
All one too full of peace to wish to wake
From dreams he knows are dreams. Upon her breast
The soft wind did the dewy rose-leaves shake;
From out a gleaming cloud the moon did break;
Till, mid her balmy sleep, toward him she turned,
And into his soul her touch his baseness burned.

Then fled all peace, as in a blaze of flame,
Rushed dreadful memory back; and therewithal,
Amid the thoughts that crowding o'er him came,
Clear vision of the end on him did fall;
Rose up against him a great fiery wall,
Built of vain longing and regret and fear,
Dull empty loneliness, and blank despair.

A little space in stony dread he lay,
Till something of a wretched hope at last
Amidst his tangled misery drave its way.
Slowly he rose, and, cold with terror, passed
Though blossomed boughs, whose leaves, upon him cast
As he brushed by, seemed full of life and sound,
Though noiselessly they fell upon the ground.

But soon he fled fast: and his goal he knew;
For each day's life once burdened with delight
Rose clear before him, as he hurried through
That lonely hell the grey moon yet made bright;
And midst them he remembered such a night
Of his first days there, when, hand locked in hand,
Sleepless with love, they wandered through the land;
And how, as thus they went, and as he thought
If he might still remember all her speech
Whatso fresh pleasure to him might be brought,
A grove of windless myrtles they did reach,
So dark, that closer they chung each to each,
As children might; and how the grove nigh done,
They came upon a cliff of smooth grey stone;

And how, because the moon shone thereabout
Betwixt the boughs grown thinner, he could see,
Gazing along her smooth white arm stretched out,
A cavern mid the cliff gape gloomily;
And how she said: Hither I guided thee,
To show thee the dark danger and the death,
But if thou have heed, of thy love and faith.

Ah me! the memory of the sunrise sweet
After that warning little understanded,
When stole the golden sun unto her feet,
As she lay sleeping by the myrtle-wood,
Watched by his sleepless longing! O how good
Those days were! fool, go back, go back again;
Shalt thou have lived and wilt thou die in vain?

So cried he, knowing well now what it meant,
That long-passed warning; that there gaped the gate
Whereby lost souls back to the cold earth went
Then through his soul there swept a rush of hate
'Gainst hope, that came so cruel and so late
To drive him forth from all the joys he knew,
Yet scarcely whispering why or whereunto.

Therewith he stayed: midst a bright mead he was,
Whose flowers across her feet full oft had met
While he beheld; a babbling stream did pass
Unto the flowery close that held her yet.
O bliss grown woe that he might ne'er forget!
But how shall he go back, just, e'en as now,
Oft, o'er again that bliss from him to throw?

He cried aloud with rage and misery,
But once again gat onward through the night;
Nought met him but the wind as he drew nigh
That myrtle-grove, black 'gainst the meadow bright;
Nought followed but the ghost of dead delight;
The boughs closed round him as still on he sped,
Half deeming that the world and he were dead.

But when he came unto the open space,
Grey with the glimmer of the moon, he stayed
Breathless, and turned his white and quivering face
Back toward the spot where he had left her, laid
Beneath the rose-boughs by their flowers down-weighed,
As if he looked e'en yet to see her come
And lead him back unto her changeless home.

Nought saw he but the black boughs, and he cried:
No sign, no sign for all thy kisses past!
For all thy soft speech that hath lied and lied!
No help, no cry to come back? Ah, at last
I know that no real love from me I cast;
Nought but a dream; and that God knoweth too;
And no great gift He deems this deed I do.

O me! if thou across the night wouldst cry,
I through this dusky twilight of the moon
Thou wouldst glide past and sob a-going by,
Then would I turn and ask no greater boon
Of God, than here with thee to dwell alone,
And wait His day! but now, behold, I flee,
Lest thy kissed lips should speak but mocks to me!

But now I flee, lest God should leave us twain
Forgotten here when earth has passed away,
Nor think us worthy of more hell or pain
Than such a never-ending, hopeless day!
No sign yet breaketh through the glimmering grey!
Nought have I, God, for thee to take or leave,
Unless this last faint hope thou wilt receive!
And with that word he rushed into the cave.
But when the depths of its chill dark he gained,
Turning he saw without the black boughs wave;
And oh, amidst them swayed her form unstained!
But as he moved to meet her, all things waned;
A void unfathomed caught him as he fell
Into a night whereof no tongue can tell.

INTO bright sun he woke up suddenly,
And sprang up like a man with foes beset
Amidst of sleep, and crying an old cry
Learned in the tiltyard; blind and tottering yet,
He stretched his hand out, that a tree-trunk met
Dank with the dew of morn, and through his blood
A shiver ran, as hapless there he stood.

Until, though scarce remembering aught at all,
Clearly he saw the world and where he was;
For as he gazed around his eyes did fall
Upon a tree-encompassed plain of grass,
Through which anigh him did a fair stream pass.
He stood and looked, nor a long while did dare
To turn and see what lay behind him there.

At last he did turn, and the cave's mouth, black,
Threatening, and dreadful, close to him did see,
And thither now is first thought drove him back;
A blind hope mingled with the misery
That gan to close about him; and yet he
Had no will left to move his feet thereto.
Yea, vague that past joy seemed; yea, hardly true.

Again he looked about: the sun was bright,
And leafless were the trees of that lone place,
Last seen by him amid the storm's wild light:
He passed his hand across his haggard face,
And touched his brow; and therefrom did he raise,
Unwittingly, a strange-wrought golden crown,
Mingled with roses, faded now and brown.

The cold March wind across his raiment ran
As his hand dropped, and the crown fell to earth;
An icy shiver caught the wretched man
As he beheld his raiment of such worth
For gems, that in strange places had their birth,
But frail as is the dragon-fly's fair wing
That down the July stream goes flickering.

Cold to the very bone, in that array
He hugged himself against the biting wind,
And toward the stream went slow upon his way;
Nor yet amidst the mazes of his mind
The whole tale of his misery might he find,
Though well he knew he was come back again
Into a lost world fresh fulfilled of pain.

But ere he reached the rippling stony ford,
His right foot smote on something in the grass,
And, looking down, he saw a goodly sword,
Though rusted, tangled in the weeds it was;
Then to his heart did better memory pass,
And in one flash he saw that bygone night,
Big with its sudden hopes of strange delight.

For, lo you, now his blanched and unused hand
Clutched the spoiled grip of his once trusty blade!
There, holding it point downward, did he stand,
Until he heard a cry, and from a glade
He saw a man come toward him; sore afraid
Of that new face he was, as a lone child
Of footsteps on a midnight road and wild.

There he stood still, and watched the man draw near;
A forester, who, gazing on him now,
Seemed for his part stayed by some sudden fear
That made him fit a shaft unto his bow,
As his scared heart wild tales to him did show
About that haunted hill-side and the cave,
And scarce he thought by flight his soul to save.
Now when he saw that, out into the stream
The knight strode, with a great and evil cry,
Since all men suddenly his foes did seem:
Then quailed the man, yet withal timidly
His bowstring drew, and close the shaft did fly
To Walter's ear, but the carle turned and fled,
E'en as he drew the bowstring to his head.

But the knight reached the other side, and stood
Staring with hopeless eyes through that cold day;
And nothing that he now might do seemed good:
Then muttered he: Why did I flee away?
My tears are frozen, and I cannot pray;
Nought have I, God, for thee to take or leave,
Unless that last faint hope thou didst receive.

But as he spake these words unwittingly,
He moaned; for once again the moonlit place
Where last he said them did he seem to see,
And in his heart such longing did that raise,
That a bright flush came o'er his haggard face
And round he turned unto the cliff once more,
And moved as if the stream he would cross o'er.

Who shall tell what thought stayed him? who shall tell
Why pale he grew? of what was he afraid,
As, turning, fast his hurried footsteps fell
On the wind-bitten blooms of spring delayed?
What hope his dull heart bore, as brown birds made
Clear song about the thicket's edge, when he
Rushed by their thorny haunts of melody?

Heavily now his feet, so well wont, trod
The blind ways of the wood, till it grew thin,
And through the beech-trunks the green sunlit sod
He saw again; and presently did win
Into another cleared space, hemmed within
A long loop of the stream, and midst most there
Stood the abode of some stout wood-dweller.
Into the empty house he passed withal:
As in a dream the motes did dance and grow
Amidst the sun, that through the door did fall
Across its gloom, and on the board did show
A bag of silver pieces, many snow,
The goodman’s market-silver; and a spear
New-shafted, bright, that lay athwart it there.

Brooding he stood, till in him purpose grew;
Unto the peasants’ coffer, known of old,
He turned, and raised the lid, and from it drew
Raiment well worn by miles of wind-beat wold;
And, casting to the floor his gauzy gold,
Did on these things, scarce thinking in meanwhile
How he should deal with his life’s new-born toil.

But now, being clad, he took the spear and purse,
And on the board his clothes begemmed he laid,
Half wondering would their wealth turn to a curse
As in the tales he once deemed vainly made
Of elves and such-like. Once again he weighed
The bright web in his hand, and a great flood
Of evil memories fevered all his blood,

Blinded his eyes, and wrung his heart full sore;
Yet grew his purpose among men to dwell,
He scarce knew why, nor said he any more
That word Return: perchance the threatened hell,
Disbelieved once, seemed all too possible
Amid this anguish, wherefrom if the grain
Of hope should fall, then hell would be a gain.

He went his ways, and once more crossed the stream,
And hastened through the wood, that scantier grew,
Till from a low hill he could see the gleam
Of the great river that of old he knew,
Which drank the woodland streams: ‘neath the light blue
Of the March sky, swirling and bright it ran,
A wonder and a tale to many a man.

He went on, wondering not; all tales were nought
Except his tale; with ruin of his own life,
To ruin the world’s life, hopeful once, seemed brought;
The changing year seemed weary of the strife
Ever recurring, with all vain hope rise;
Earth, sky, and water seemed too weak and old
To gain a little rest from waste and cold.

He wondered not, and no pain smote on him,
Though from a green hill on the further side,
Above the green meads set with poplars slim,
A white wall, buttressed well, made girdle wide
To towers and roofs where yet his kin did bide:
His father’s ancient house; yea, now he saw
His very pennon toward the river draw.

No pain these gave him, and no scorn withal
Of his old self; no rage that men were glad
And went their ways, whatso on him might fall;
For all seemed shadows to him, good or bad;
At most the raiment that his yearning clad,
Yearning made blind with misery, for more life,
If it might be, love yet should lead the strife.

He stood a space and watched the ferry-boat
Take in its load of bright and glittering things;
He watched its head adown the river float,
As o’er the water came the murmurings
Of broken talk; and as all memory clings
To such dumb sounds, so dreamlike came back now
The tale of how his life and love did grow.

He turned away and strode on, knowing not
What purpose moved him; as the river flowed
He hastened, where the sun of March blazed hot
Upon the bounding wall and hard white road,
The terraced blooming vines, the brown abode
Where wife and child and dog of vine-dressers
With mingled careless clamour cursed his ears.
How can words measure misery, when the sun
Shines at its brightest over plague and ill?
How can I tell the woe of any one,
When the soft showers with fair-hued sweetness fill,
Before the feet of those grief may not kill,
The tender meads of hopeful spring, that comes
With eager hours to mock all hopeless homes?

So let it pass, and ask me not to weigh
Grief against grief: ye who have ever woke
To wondering, ere came memory back, why day,
Bare, blank, immovable, upon you broke,
Untold shall ye know all; to happy folk
All heaviest words no more of meaning bear
Than far-off bells saddening the summer air.

But tells my tale, that all that day he went
Along the highway by the river side,
Urged on by restlessness without intent;
Until when he was caught by evening-tide,
Worn out withal, at last must he abide
At a small homestead, where he got him food
And bed of straw, among tired folk and rude.

A weary ghost within the poor hall there,
He sat amidst their weariness, who knew
No whit of all his case, yet half with fear
And half with scorn gazed on him, as, with few
And heavy words, about the fire they drew,
The goodman and goodwife, both old and grey,
Three stout sons, and one rough uncared-for may.

A ghost he sat, and as a ghost he heard
What things they spoke of; but sleep-laden night
Seemed to have crushed all memory of their word,
When on the morrow, in the young sun's light,
He plodded o'er the highway hard and white;
Unto what end he knew not: though swift thought
Memory of things long spoken to him brought.

That day he needs must leave the streamside road,
Whereon he met of wayfarers no few;
For sight of wondering eyes now 'gan to goad
His misery more, as still more used he grew
To that dull world he had returned unto;
So into a deep-banked lane he turned aside,
A little more his face from men to hide.

Slowly he went, for afternoon it was,
And with the long way was he much forworn;
Nor far between the deep banks did he pass,
Ere on the wind unto his ears was borne
A stranger sound than he had heard that morn,
Sweet sound of mournful singing; then he stayed
His feet, and gazed about as one afraid:

He shuddered, feeling as in time long past,
When mid the utter joy of his young days
The sudden sound of music would be cast
Upon the bright world with the sun ablaze,
And he would look to see a strange hand raise
The far-off blue, and God in might come down
To judge the earth, and make all hid things known.

And therewithal came memory of that speech
Of yesternight, and how those folk had said,
That now so far did wrong and misery reach,
That soon belike earth would be visited
At last with that supreme day all dread;
When right and wrong, and weal and woe of earth,
Should change amid its fiery second birth.

He hastened toward the road as one who thought
God's visible glory would be passing by,
But, when he looked forth tremblingly, saw nought
Of glorious dread to quench his misery;
There was the sky, and, like a second sky,
The broad stream, the white road, the whispering trees
Swaying about in the sound-laden breeze.
For higher and higher ever came the song,
And presently at turning of the way
A company of pilgrims came along,
Mostly afoot, in garments brown and grey:
Slowly they passed on through the windy day,
Led on by priests who bore aloft the rood,
Singing with knitted brows as on they strode.

Then sank his heart adown, however sweet,
Pensive and strange, their swinging song might be,
For nought like this he had in heart to meet;
But rather something was he fain to see,
That should change all the old tale utterly;
The old tale of the world, and love and death,
And all the wild things that man's yearning saith.

Nathless did he abide their coming there,
And noted of them as they drew anigh,
That in that fellowship were women fair,
And young men meet for joyous company,
Besides such elders as might look to die
In few years now, or monks who long had striven
With life desired and feared, life for death given.

Way-worn they seemed, yet many there strode on,
With flashing eyes and flushed cheeks, as though all
Within a little space should be well won:
Still as he gazed on them, despair did fall
Upon his wasted heart: a fiery wall
Of scorn and hate seemed 'twixt their hearts and his;
While delicate images of bygone bliss

Grew clear before his eyes, as rood and saint
Gleamed in the sun o'er raiment coarse and foul,
O'er dusty limbs, and figures worn and faint:
Well-nigh he shrieked; yet in his inmost soul
He felt that he must ask them of their goal,
And knew not why: so at a man he clutched,
Who, as he passed, his shoulder well-nigh touched.

Where goest thou then, O pilgrim, with all these?
Say me not! cried he; unto life I go,
To life at last, and hope of rest and peace;
I whom my dreadful crime hath hunted so
For years, though I am young: O long and slow
The way to where the change awaiteth me:
To Rome, where God nigh visible shall be!

Where He who knoweth all, shall know this too,
That I am man, 'en that which He hath made,
Nor be confounded at aught man can do.
And thou, who seemest too with ill down-weighed,
Come on with us, nor be too much afraid,
Though some men deem there is but left small space
Or ere the world shall see the Judge's face.

He answered not, nor moved; the man's words seemed
An echo of his thoughts, and, as he passed,
Word and touch both might well be only dreamed.
Yes, when the vine-clad terraced hill at last
Had hid them all, and the slim poplars cast
Blue shadows on the road, that scarce did show
A trace of their past feet, he did not know

But all had been a dream; all save the pain,
That, mingling with the solid things around,
Showed them to be not wholly vague and vain,
And him not dead, in whatso hard bonds bound
Of wandering fate, whose source shall ne'er be found.
He shivered, turned away, and down the same
Deep lane he wandered whence 'en now he came.

He toward the night through hapless day-dreams passed,
That knew no God to come, no love: he stood
Before a little town's grey gate at last,
And in the midst of his lost languid mood
Turned toward the western sky, as red as blood,
As bright as sudden dawn across the dark,
And through his soul fear shot a kindling spark.
But as he gazed, the rough-faced gate-warder,
Who leaned anigh upon his spear, must turn
Eyes on him, with an answering anxious fear,
That silent, questioning, dared not to learn,
If he too deemed more than the sun did burn
Behind the crimson clouds that made earth grey,
If yet perchance God’s host were on its way.

So too, being come unto his hostelry,
His pain was so much dulled by weariness,
That he might hearken to men’s words, whereby
It seemed full sure that great fear did oppress
Men’s hearts that tide, that the world’s life, grown less
Through time’s unnoted lapse, this thousandth year
Since Christ was born, unto its end drew near.

Time and again, he, listening to such word,
Felt his heart kindle; time and again did seem
As though a cold and hopeless tune he heard,
Sung by grey mouths amidst a dull-eyed dream;
Time and again across his heart would stream
The pain of fierce desire whose aim was gone,
Of baffled yearning, loveless and alone.

Other words heard he too, that served to show
The meaning of that earnest pilgrim train;
For the folk said that many a man would go
To Rome that Easter, there more sure to gain
Full pardon for all sins, since frail and vain,
Cloud-like the very earth grew ‘neath men’s feet:
Yea, many thought, that there at Rome would meet

The half-forgotten Bridegroom with the Bride,
Stained with the flushed feast of the world; that He,
Through wrack and flame, would draw unto His side
In the new earth where there is no more sea.
So spake men met together timorously;
Though pride slew fear in some men’s souls, that they
Had lived to see the firm earth melt away.

Next morn were folk about the market-cross
Gathered in throngs, and as through these he went
He saw above them a monk’s brown arms toss
About his strained and eager mouth, that sent
Strong speech around, whose burden was Repent;
He passed by toward the gate that Romeward lay.
Yet on its other side his feet did stay.

Upon a daisied patch of road-side grass
He cast himself, and down the road he gazed;
And therewithal the thought through him did pass,
How long and wretched was the way he faced.
Therewith the smouldering fire again outblazed
Within him, and he moaned: O empty earth,
What shall I do, then, midst thy loveless dearth?

But as he spake, there came adown the wind
From out the town the sound of pilgrims’ song,
And other thoughts were borne across his mind,
And hope strove with desire so hopeless strong,
Till in his heart, wounded with pain and wrong,
Something like will was born; until he knew
Now, ere they came, what thing he meant to do.

So through the gate at last the pilgrims came,
Led by an old priest, fiery-eyed and grey;
Then Walter held no parley with his shame,
It stood before him midmost of the way.
Will one man’s sin so heavy on you weigh,
His cried, that ye shall never reach your end?
Unto God’s pardon with you would I wend.

The old man turned to him: My son, he said,
Come with us, and be of us! turn not back
When once thine hand upon the plough is laid;
The telling of thy sin we well may lack,
Because the Avenger is upon our track,
And who can say the while we tarry here,
Amid this seeming peace, but God draws near?
The crowd had stayed their song to hear the priest,
But now, when Walter joined their company,
Like a great shout it rose up and increased,
And on their way they went so fervently
That swept away from earth he seemed to be;
And many a thought o'er which his heart had yearned
Amid their fire to white ash now seemed burned.

For many days they journeyed on, and still
What're he deemed that he therein should do,
The hope of Rome his whole soul seemed to fill;
And though the priest heard not his story through,
Yet from him at the last so much he knew,
That he had promised when they reached the place
To bring him straight before the Pope's own face.

Through many a town they passed; till on a night
Long through the darkness they toiled on and on
Down a straight road, until a blaze of light
On the grey carving of an old gate shone;
And as the tears fell down from many an one,
And rose a quavering song, for they were come
Unto the threshold of that mighty Rome.

They entered: like a town of ghosts it seemed
To Walter, a beleaguered town of ghosts;
And he felt of them, little though he dreamed
Amid his pain of all the marshalled hosts
That lay there buried mid forgotten boasts;
But dead he seemed as those his pleasures were,
Dead in a prison vast and void and drear.

Unto a convent that eve were they brought,
Where with the abbot spake the priest for long,
Then bade the hapless man to fear him nought,
But that the Pope next day would right his wrong;
And let thy heart, quoth he, O son, be strong,
For no great space thou hast to sin anew:
The days of this ill world are grown but few.

Night passed, day dawned, and at the noon thereof
The priest came unto Walter: Fair my son,
Now shalt thou know, he said, of God's great love;
Moreover thou shalt talk with such an one
As hath heard told the worst deeds man hath done,
And will not start at thine or mock at thee:
Be of good heart, and come thy ways with me.

Amid the tumult of his heart, they went
Through the calm day by wonders wrought of old;
And fresh young folk they met, and men intent
On eager life; the wind and the sun's gold
Were fresh on bands of monks that did uphold
The carven anguish of the rood above
The wayfarers, who trusted in God's love.

But no more dead the grey old temples seemed
To him than fresh-cheeked girl or keen-eyed man;
And like a dream for some dim purpose dreamed,
And half forgotten, was the image wan
Nailed on the cross: no tremor through him ran,
No hope possessed him, though his lips might say,
O love of God, be nigh to me to-day!

For surely all things seemed but part of him;
Therefore what help in them? Still on he passed
Through all, and still saw nothing blurred or dim,
Though with a dread air was the world o'ercast,
As of a great fire somewhere; till at last,
An a fair convent door the old priest stayed,
And touched his fellow's shoulder, as he said:

Thou tremblest not; thou look'st as other men:
Come then, for surely all will soon be well,
And like a dream shall be that ill day when
Thou hangedst on the last smooth step of hell!
But from his shoulder therewith his hand fell,
And long he stared astonished in his place,
At a new horror fallen o'er Walter's face.
Then silently he led him on again
Through daintily wrought cloisters, to a door,
Whereby there stood a gold-clad chamberlain:
Then, while the monk his errand to him bore,
Walter turned round and cast a wild look o'er
Fair roof, and painted walls, and sunlit green,
That showed the slim and twisted shafts between.

He shut his eyes and moaned, and e'en as clear
As he beheld these, did he now behold
A woman white and lovely drawing near,
Whose face amidst her flower-wreathed hair of gold
Mocked the faint images of saints of old;
Mocked with sweet smile the pictured mother of God,
As o'er the knee-worn floor her feet trod.

Through his shut eyes he saw her still, as he
Heard voices, and stepped onward, as he heard
The door behind him shut to noisily,
And echo down the cloisters, and a word
Spoke by a thin low voice: Be not afraid!
Look up! for though most surely God is nigh,
Yet nowise is He with us visibly.

He looked up, and beside him still she stood,
With eyes that seemed to question: What dost thou?
What wilt thou say? The fever of his blood
Abated not, because before him now
There sat an old man with high puckered brow,
Thin lips, long chin, and wide brown eyes and mild,
That o'er the sternness of his mouth still smiled.

Wilt thou kneel down, my son? he heard him say;
God is anigh, though not to give thee fear;
Folk tell me thou hast journeyed a long way,
That I the inmost of thine heart might hear;
It galls me that thou holdest me so dear.
But more of this thy love I yet would win,
By telling thee that God forgives thy sin.

He knelt down, but all silent did abide
While the Pope waited silent on the ground
His eyes were fixed, but still anigh his side
He knew she stood; and all the air around
Was odorous with her; yea, the very sound
Of her sweet breath, moving of hair and limb,
Mixed with his own breath in her ears of him.

Outside the sparrows twittered; a great tree
Stirred near the window, and the city's noise
Still murmured: long the Pope sat patiently
Amaid that silence, till the thin weak voice
Spoke out and said: O son, have the world's joys
Maid thee a coward? what is thy degree?
Despite thy garb no churl thou seemst to me.

Fearfully Walter raised his eyes, and turned,
As though to ask that vision what to say,
And with a bitter pain his vexed heart burned,
When now he found all vanished clean away:
Great wrath stirred in him; shame most grievous lay
Upon his heart, and spreading suddenly
His hands abroad, he 'gan at last to cry:

Look at me, father! I have been a knight,
And held my own midst men, such as I kneel
Before thee now, amidst a hopeless fight
Have I stood firm against the hedge of steel,
Casting aside all hope of life and weal
For nought, because folk deemed I would do so,
Though nought there was to gain or win unto.

Yet before thee, an old man small and weak,
I quail indeed: not because thou art great,
Nor because God through thy thin pipe doth speak,
As all folk trow: but, rather, that man's hate,
Man's fear, God's scorn, shall fall in all their weight
Upon my love when I have spoken out:
Yes, let me bide a minute more in doubt!
Man hates it and God scorches, and I, e'en I,
How shall I hate my love and scorn my love?
Weak, weak are words, but, O my misery!
More hate than man's hate in my soul doth move;
Greater my scorn than scorn of God above,
And yet I love on. Is the pain now
That thou some hope unto my heart mayst show?

Some hope of peace at last that is not death?
Because with all these things I know for sure
I cannot die, else had I stopped my breath
Long time ago; thereto hath many a lure
Drawn on my hand; but now God doth endure,
And this my love, that never more shall bring
Delight to me or help me anything.

Calm sat the Pope, and said: Hope, rather, now;
For many a sinner etwhile have I shriver
As utterly o'erwhelmed in soul as thou,
Who, when awhile with words his mouth had striven,
Went forth from me at peace and well forgiven.
Fall we to talk; and let me tell thee first,
That there are such as fain would be the worst

Amongst all men, since best they cannot be,
So strong is that wild lie that men call pride;
And so to-day it is, perchance, with thee:
Cast it aside, son; cast it clean aside,
Nor from my sight thine utmost vileness hide;
Nought worse it makes thy sin, when all is done,
That every day men do the same, my son!

The strained lines of the kneeling wretch's face
Were softened; as to something far away
He seemed a-listening; silent for a space
The two men were; who knows what 'twixt them lay,
What world of wondrous visions, of a day
Past or to come? to one lost love so clear,
God's glory to the other present there.

As last the Pope spake; well-nigh musical
His voice was grown, and in his thin dry cheek
There rose a little flush; Tell of thy fall,
And how thy weak heart its vain lust must seek,
Casting the kind and treading down the weak!
Tell all the blindness of thy cruelties,
Thy treason, thine unkindness, and thy lies!

And be forgiven: these things are of earth;
The fire of God shall burn them up space,
And leave thee calm in thy pure second birth;
No sin, no lust forgotten, in the place
Where, listen to the glory of God's face,
The souls that He hath made for ever move
Mid never-dying, never-craving love.

How fair shall be the dawning of that day
When thy cleared eyes behold the thing thou wast,
Wherefore, and all the tale: hate cast away,
And all the yearning of thy love at last
Full satisfied, and held for ever fast!
O never-dying souls, how sweet to hear
Your laughter in the land that knows no fear!

All this thou gainest if to God thou turn,
Since nought but with thy fellows hast thou dealt,
And well He worteth how vexed hearts may yearn,
Who in the very midst of them hath dwelt,
Whose own soul, too, the world's hard wrong hath felt,
The serpent's burning clutch upon his heel:
Speak, then, and pray, and earn unending weal!

A strange look crossed the knight's face as he said:
Surely all these shall love their God full well;
Good to be one of these; yet have I read
That other things God made, and that they dwell
In that abode He made, too, men call hell.
If every man that will become God's friend
Shall have great joy that never more shall end,
Yet is it so that evil dureth still,
Unslain of God: what if a man's love cling,
In sore despite of reason, hope, and will,
Unto the false heart of an evil thing?
O me! he cried, that scarce heard murmuring
Beside me, and that faint sound of thy feet!
Must thou be wordless this last time we meet?

Then the Pope trembled, for, half-risen now,
Walter glared round him through the empty air:
O man, he said, speak out: what seest thou?
What ill thing 'twixt thy God and thee stands there?
Ah, me! cried Walter, kind thou wert and fair
In the past days, and now wilt thou be gone,
And leave me with this cruel God alone?

Is it then so as I have deemed cerewhile,
That thou fear'st God too, even as I fear?
That I shall see the death of thy kind smile,
When, hand in hand, amid the unshadowed air,
Unto God's face forgot we draw anear?
O mocking lie, that told me while ago,
One minute's bliss was worth unending woe!

The Pope caught at the staff across his knees,
And, rising, stood, leaned heavily thereon,
And said: Why kneel'st thou midst words like these?
Rise up, and tell me swift what thou hast done,
E'en as one man speaks to another one;
Or let me go, lest I begin to deem
That I myself spake thus in some ill dream!

But, cowering down again, cried out the knight:
Nay, leave me not! wait, father; thou shalt hear!
Lo, she is gone now! surely thou said'st right;
For the whole world is trembling with my fear
And tainted with my sin: I will speak clear
And in few words, and know the end at last,
Yea, though e'en now I know myself outcast.

Hast thou not heard about the gods, who erst
Held rule here where thou dwellest? dost thou think
That people 'neath their rule were so accurst
That they forgot in joy to eat and drink,
That they slept not, and loved not, and must shrink
From the world's glory? how if they loved these
Thou'ltallest devils and their images?

And did God hate the world, then, for their sake,
When fair the sun rose up on every day,
And blade and bloom through the brown earth did break,
And children were as glad as now? nay, nay,
Time for thy wrath yet; what if these held sway
Even now in some wise, father? Nay, say then,
Hast thou not heard, from certain Northern men,

Of lonely haunters of the wild-woods there,
Not men, nor angels, soulless as men deem,
But their bodily shape most wondrous fair?
What thinkest thou I tell thee of some dream,
Some wandering glimmer of the moon's grey beam,
Such when men's hearts sink mid black-shadowed trees,
And unknown words are in the tangled breeze?

Belike I dreamed then! O belike some shade
Of thought that is I saw with these mine eyes!
I saw her feet upon the blossoms laid,
The flowers o'er which no God-made sun shall rise!
Belike I am a mad fool mid the wise,
But nothing therefore of God's wrath need fear,
Because my body and soul I gave her there.

What must I name her, then, ere thou mayst know
What thing I mean? or say where she doth dwell,
And that new life unto me did show,
Which thou wilt deem a corner cut from hell,
Set in the world lest all go there too well?
Lo, from THE HILL OF VENUS do I come,
That now henceforth I know shall be my home!
He sprang up as he spoke, and faced the Pope,
Who through his words had stood there trembling sore,
With doubtful anxious eyes, whence every hope
Failed with that last word; a stern look came o'er
His kind vexed face: Yea, dwell there evermore!
He cried: just so much hope I have of thee
As on this dry staff fruit and flowers to see!

Walter laughed loud, and knew not who was there,
And who was gone, nor how long he abode
Within that place; or why his feet must fare
Round about Rome that night; or why that load
Was on his heart; or why next morn the road
Beneath his hurrying feet was white and dry,
And no cloud flecked the sunny April sky.

He knew not, though he wondered at all these,
And where he went; but nought seemed strange to him,
And nought unknown, when the great forest-trees
Around a cleared space of the wood were dim
In windless dawn with white mist that did swim
About a pine-clad cliff, above a stream
Dark, scarcely seen, and voiceless as a dream.

No ignorance, no wonder, and no hope
Was in his heart, as his firm feet passed o'er
The shallow's pebbles and the flowery slope,
And reached the black-mouthed cavern, the dark door,
Unto the fate now his for evermore,
As now at last its echoing stony dearth
And dull dark closed betwixt him and the earth.

What more would ye hear of him?
Meseem
It passes mind of man to picture well
His second sojourn in that land; yet gleams
There might be thence, if one had heart to tell
In sleepless nights, of horrors passing hell,
Woe's me! for who shall help me if I erred!
Yet God, I deemed, had given me that last word.

O God, if I have done thee deadly wrong,
And lost a soul thou wouldst have saved and blessed,
Yet other words thou knowest were on my tongue,
When 'twixt that soul and mine thine image pressed:
Thou wilt remember this and give him rest!
And as for me, thou knowest I fear thee nought,
Since this my body and soul thine own hand wrought.

The sun was sunken now, the west was red,
And still the birds poured forth their melody;
A marvellous scent about him seemed to spread,
Mid strange new bliss the tears his eyes drew nigh;
He smiled and said: Too old to weep am I;
Unless the very end be drawing near,
And unimagined sounds I soon shall hear.

And yet, before I die, I needs must go
Back to my house, and try if I may write,
For there are some things left for me to do,
Ere my face glow with that ineffable light.
He moved and stooped down for his staff; still bright
The sky was, as he cast his eyes adown,
And his hand sought the well-worn wood and brown.

With a great cry he sprung up; in his hand
He held against the sky a wondrous thing,
That might have been the bright archangel's wand,
Who brought to Mary that fair summoning;
For lo, in God's unfaltering timeless spring,
Summer, and autumn, had that dry rod been,
And from its barrenness the leaves sprang green,

And on its barrenness grew wondrous flowers,
That earth knew not; and on its barrenness
Hung the ripe fruit of heaven's unmeasured hours;
And with strange scent the soft dusk did it bless,
And glowed with fair light as earth's light grew less,
AD eyes there were the while the tale was told,
And few among the young folk were so bold
As to speak out their thoughts concerning it,
While still amidst that concourse they did sit.
But some, when to the fresh bright day they turned,

And smooth cheeks even in that freshness burned,
'Neath burning glances might find words to speak,
Wondering that any tale should make love weak
To rule the earth, all hearts to satisfy;
Yet as they spake, perchance, some doubt went by
Upon the breeze, till out of sight and sound
Of other folk their longing lips had found,
If but a little while, some resting-place,
On hand, on bosom, on bright eager face.

BUT the old men, learned in earth's bitter lore,
Were glad to leave untouched the too rich store
Of hapless memories, if it might be done;
And wandered forth into the noonday sun
To watch the blossoms budding on the wall,
And hear the rooks among the elm-trees call,
And note the happy voices on the breeze,
And see the lithe forms; making out of these
No tangled story, but regarding them
As hidden elves upon the forest's hem
Gaze on the dancers through the May-night green,
Not knowing aught what troubled looks may mean.
AH, doubt and shame they well might have indeed.
Cry out upon them, ye who have no need
Of life to right the blindness and the wrong!
Think scorn of these, ye who are made so strong,
That with no good-night ye can loose the hand
That led you erst through love's sweet flowery land!
Laugh, ye whose eyes are piercing to behold
What makes the silver seas and skies of gold!
Pass by in hate, ye folk, who day by day
Win all desires that lie upon your way!
Yet mid your joyous wisdom and content,
Methinks ye know not what those moments meant.
When ye, yet children, mid great pleasure stayed,
Wondering for why your hearts were so down-weighed
Or if ye ever loved, then, when her eyes
In happiest moments changed in sudden wise,
And nought ye knew what she was thinking of;
Yet, O belike, ye know not much of love,
Who know not that this meant the fearful threat,
The End, forgotten much, remembered yet
Now and again, that all perfection mocks.
And yet the door of many a tale unlocks,
Makes love itself, saith one, with all its bliss.
Ah, could I speak the word that in me is!
I dare not, lest to cursing it should turn.
But hearken: if Death verily makes Love burn,
It is because we evermore should cry,
If we had words, that we might never die:
Words fail us: therefore, O thou Death, we say,
Thus do we work that thou mayst take away!
Look at this beauty of young children's mirth,
Soon to be swallowed by thy noiseless death!
Look at this faithful love that knows no end
Unless thy cold thrill through it thou shouldst send!
Look at this hand ripening to perfect skill
Unless the fated measure thou didst fill;
This eager knowledge that would stop for nought,
Unless thy net both chase and hunter caught!
O Death! with deeds like these 'gainst thee we pray,
That thou, like those thou slewest, mayst pass away!

And these folk, these poor tale-tellers, who strove
In their wild way the heart of Death to move,
E'en as we singers, and failed, e'en as we,
Surely on their side I at least will be,
And deem that when at last, their fear worn out,
They fell asleep, all that old shame and doubt
Shamed them not now, nor did they doubt it good
That they in arms against that Death had stood.
AH me! all praise and blame, they heed it not;
Calm are the yearning hearts that once were hot;
And all those images of love and pain,
Wrought as the year did wax, perfect, and wane,
If they were verily loving there alive,
No pleasure to their tale-tellers could give.
And thou, O tale of what these sleepers were,
Wish one good-night to them thou holdest dear,
Then die thyself; and let us go our ways,
And live awhile amid these latter days!