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The Marsh  
of Acheron

By FRED WOODROW

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Dedication.

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TO AN AGED MOTHER

AT WHOSE KNEES WE WERE TAUGHT TO PRAY.

*“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,”*

THIS HUMBLE USE OF A PAGAN DREAM

TO ILLUSTRATE A CHRISTIAN VERITY,

IS REVERENTLY INSCRIBED.

## INTRODUCTION.

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THESE verses are meant to illustrate the central idea of Socrates, as unfolded in his philosophic vision, "The Vision of Er."

The consequences of sin, its gradations in guilt, its retributive conditions, and the essential verity taught in the subsequent words and works of Christ—that in order to be forgiven man must forgive—are broadly and grandly outlined in the vision of the ancient sage.

"Forgive us our trespasses *as we forgive them that trespass against us.*" To restate this divine condition of God's mercy, we give the vitalised idea, guessed at by Socrates, and taught with authority by Christ.

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I.

PAGAN PHILOSOPHY.

As in some ocean cave, remote from light and ample  
sky,

The resonance of tide and wave  
And seas that sweep around the orb,  
Its darkened hollows lave;

Or, mirror'd in a brook, the lambent glories of the  
skies,

And zones of fire, that blaze in space,  
Recast their splendors in the drop  
Upon a pebble's face;

So in the straitened soul of man are voices not his  
own,

Diviner sounds on human strings,  
And in the shades of mysteries  
Are lights of better things.

Not left without a light to guide his steps across the  
star,

To worlds beyond and ends unknown,  
The whereabouts, beyond his ken,  
The destiny, his own.

For Sage, and Seer, and Prophet old, whate'er his  
 race or creed,  
 Had of the Infinite his light  
 Eclipsed perchance, but never quenched,  
 In reason's darkest night.

Supreme above all evil powers, invisible and dread,  
 The unerased Divine decree,  
 That from the iron gates of doom  
 Escape for man should be.

This way or that, the royal road, the nearest to the  
 foot,  
 For such as would the hill ascend;  
 A human need the upward step,  
 A living God the end.

From man to God, from doubt to truth, no seeker so  
 remote  
 But o'er the black and dread abyss  
 There is one plank to span the gulf  
 Beneath the precipice.

Nor age nor creed, nor race nor clime, nor man be-  
 neath the sun,  
 Forgot in that Eternal plan  
 Which keeps, on Time's engulfing flood,  
 An ark for drowning man.

As is the warmth of spring-tide skies diffused in mist  
and rain,

That gently deal with branch and root,  
As Summer gently rounds her noons  
To ripen perfect fruit;

So, graciously the truth came forth, with growth of  
human need,

In segments shown the God-made plan  
To merge a midnight in a morn,  
And shape a perfect man.

Scorn not the faiths of those who err, however far  
astray.

A thread is in the tangled skein;  
And, woven in the finished cloth,  
The lost is found again.

In dreams and hints of what might be, old sages  
mused and lived,

And half announced the truth they sought  
In what might be a stammer'd word,  
Or lone and mystic thought.

So, on the borders of the known, in solitudes un-  
searched

Wider horizons, Faith discerns;  
And on its altars in the dark,  
The fire of worship burns.

Of heaven and hell, of fate and doom, eternity and  
soul,  
The sage and seer predict or dream,  
Philosophy, the darken'd stair  
To Deity supreme.

So spake the Sage of Acheron, in fable-cradled  
truth,  
And clouded thought; half hid, as stars  
When drifting mists obscure their light  
Behind the shadowed bars.

His mind embracing in its scope the destinies of  
man,  
Probations, futures, hopes, and fates,  
When sin to dungeons leads the soul,  
And Judgment shuts the gates.

## II.

### THE MARSH OF ACHERON.

A SPIRIT den, remote from earth, in some abysmal  
space,  
Shut in itself, lone, isolate,  
A dreary blank, stagnation, death,  
Accursed and desolate.

No mountain crag, sublimely piled above the drifting  
clouds,  
With diadems of sparkling snow,  
Or leaping streams that cleave the rocks  
To swell the floods below.

No music of a billow brave, or trickle of a brook,  
Or silver space of restful lake  
Among the sheaves of yellow grain,  
Or willows of the brake.

Nor comes the breath of panting breeze, from lips of  
sunny zones,  
Nor gentle whispers of the wind,  
With honey of the fragrant flowers  
They kissed and left behind.

No melodies of singing birds, heard in the moonlit  
 grove,  
 Shy minstrels of the summer night,  
 Or lark that from the upper skies  
 Spreads music with the light.

The castaway of some lost barque may reach a lonely  
 strand,  
 And from his prison in the sea  
 May watch the wing of passing gull  
 And dream of being free.

Some midnight star, in steady poise, or speech of  
 wind may tell  
 Of hope and home, where not forgot,  
 A benediction sails the deeps  
 To cheer his lonely lot.

The criminal with bloody hands may climb the  
 scaffold stair,  
 Cringe 'neath the overhanging rope,  
 And on the tearless crowd may look,  
 But look in vain for hope.

Yet shines the sun above his head, and sings the  
 little bird;  
 His glazing eye may reach the sky,  
 And Faith, that climbs the azure heights,  
 Ennoble him to die.

But Acheron, condemned and cursed, in impotence  
resigns

Its loathsomeness to living death,  
And breathes in poisoned atmosphere  
Its own diseasèd breath.

And here in broad democracy of common curse and  
fate,

The royal mind that went astray,  
The leprous soul that herded swine  
And loved its sinful way.

Concealment past, deception vain; seen in the  
clouded cup,

The drop of death congealed within;  
The bitterness the nectar leaves,  
When sweetness leaves the sin.

Of conscience yet a latent spark, light in a broken  
lamp,

Perchance to be a purer flame,  
And kindle yet a whiter ray  
In ashes left of shame.

### III.

#### CRY AND COGITATION.

As heard along the storm-swept shore,  
When Ocean shakes his mane of white,  
Roars at the silent crags, and leaps  
The blackened spaces of the night :  
So sweep o'er falling avalanche,  
In leopard strides, precipitate,  
The winds that storm the starless sky,  
And scale the mountain's granite gate.

Amid the elemental din,  
The misery and dying cry  
Of some poor mariner who sinks  
Beyond the harbour bar to die.  
Refused a haven by the storm,  
He gives the weary struggle o'er ;  
The vesper of a drowning man,  
The welcome of a brighter shore.

So lifted up a pleading voice  
Among the lost of Acheron,  
Born of remorse, awakened fear,  
And retrospect of mercies gone ;  
Not utterly without a hope,  
Yet anchored in a stern despair —  
Perchance some fate may carry up  
The burden of a sinner's prayer.



“Can this be life? or is it death?  
Am I a soul? Am I a thought?  
A memory without a will,  
To iron bondage brought?”

In what I am, a mystery,  
In what may be, a fear,  
In what I was, an agony,  
A folly and a tear.

Enough of what was once is left  
To make remembrance pain;  
Enough to know the broken bell  
Can never ring again.

What cannot be, methinks I know;  
From what may be, I shrink:  
The terror of a precipice  
Is standing on its brink.

Remote from suns and stars and moons  
In this dread place I wait.  
Perchance some mercy unrevealed  
May ope the dungeon gate.”

#### IV.

#### THE DECREE OF THE GODS.

THE angel guard at Acheron's gate stood stately and  
alone,  
His pinions as auroral fires that light the arctic zone,  
His gaze was as the lightning's flash, his sword a  
leaping flame,  
And reeled the darkened hemisphere beneath his  
mighty frame;  
A messenger of that vast host that serve the gods of  
space,  
Horizons none to circle time, and boundaries none in  
place;  
Where Form is not, where Void's supreme, where  
spreads no eagle's wing,  
Where round the fires of central suns no circling  
planets swing.

In ways unseen and mysteries, beyond the ken of man,  
They fill the post invisible in heaven's wondrous plan,  
From which the spectral hosts of Wrong retreat with  
broken blade,  
And Evil fails to rob the gods of what their hands had  
made.  
From these bright ranks invisible, a sentry kept the gate,  
Where in the swamps of Acheron the dead await their  
fate.

Upon his ear the spirit-cry falls with despairing wail;  
 He spreads his wings of light above the spectral  
 mourners pale;

He speaks, and o'er the waste is heard the thunder  
 of his voice,

“How can the lost for mercy hope? How can the  
 cursed rejoice?

Within a man the evidence that sin is not forgot,  
 Nor time, nor death obliterates the foul and damning  
 spot;

The all of man is in his sin, the sin in all the man,  
 Exemption has no heaven hid where hell fills out the  
 span.

For to the measure of the soul the measure of the sin,  
 The pitcher, or the broken cup, the gauge of what's  
 within.

The great and small, the wise, the fool, each in his  
 grade and kind;

The guilt of sin leaves not a part that is not sin be-  
 hind,

In height and depth, in breadth and length, each in  
 his own degree.

The less, the great, the greater yet; the brook, the  
 lake, the sea.

For you, O souls, the gods decree a time-suspended fate,  
 Till such as ye have sinned against forget the hurt  
 and hate;

Ye stay, though time itself expires, and earth shall be  
 no more,

Till suns be dark, till seas be dry as sand upon the  
 shore;

Till then, ye prisoned souls of men, till Mercy comes,  
 ye wait  
 Ere by my living hand I lift the bar of Acheron's  
 gate."

So spake the seraph, and withdrew to depths of sable shades,  
 Where, as upon a western cloud, the sunset glory  
 fades;  
 So waned away the holy light that had on Acheron  
 shone,  
 And damps were dark, and souls were dumb as lips  
 of sculptured stone.  
 The snake and worm and spotted toad hid in the  
 sodden slime,  
 And spectral forms of hideous mien, peculiar to the  
 clime,  
 Breathed discontent and misery in sin-infected air,  
 And, gasping in the stifling damps, partook of man's  
 despair.  
 Perplexed souls, consumed of shame, and dread of  
 days to be;  
 And Fate, a bare suspended sword, to fall as gods  
 decree.

V.

CONSCIENCE SUMMONS ITS WITNESSES.

By memory and retrospect  
The long entombèd dead appear,  
With chiding voice and bitter curse,  
And anguish borrowed of the past,  
Of sin, and shame, and fear.

From humble grave and royal tomb,  
From pyramid and potter's fields,  
From coral beds of purple seas,  
The dead beneath the prison stones,  
Escutcheons, tablets, shields.

A spectral host: souls halt and maimed,  
Deformed, defiled, and trouble-scarred;  
The glory born of mind and gods,  
The royal face upon the coin,  
Defaced, debased, and marred.

From river-mud and pauper straw,  
The face that wears a frozen shame,  
Set like a stone in mute reproach  
Of him the traitor of her love  
And vandal of her fame.

He sees the form, he knows the face,  
 The broadened brow divine and fair;  
 Hears what its cold, dead lips have said,  
 And sees the flash in glaring eyes,  
     Amidst the tangled hair.

Can deep regret, or bitter tear,  
 The virtue lost again restore?  
 Can aught bring back the loveliness  
 That perished in his vile embrace,  
     To live again no more?

A memory in shrivelled skin,  
 Of scanty crust and grudgeth crumb,  
 And blistered lips at plenty's breast,  
 To plead for sustenance and find  
     Maternal answer dumb.

Of granaries that cracked with grain,  
 With famine at the close-barred door;  
 The bread of God denied a man  
 Whose hands were clean of every crime  
     But that of being poor.

From battle-field a bloody hand  
 In service of Ambition's lust,  
 With gaping scar and palsied grip,  
 Consigned as food to hungry wolf,  
     Or scattered with the dust.

For feather in a chieftain's plume,  
 For glory in a bandit's crown,  
 The sacred gift of human life,  
 The holy claim of love and kin,  
     Denied and trampled down.

From shambles of the crimsoned earth,  
 Behold the grim and spectral host.  
 The curses of its countless dead  
 To blight the Victor's stolen bays,  
     And damn his proudest boast.

From temple nave and altar step  
 A pilgrim, desolate and blind,  
 Perverted in his will and creed;  
 A shackle on the limping foot,  
     A cloud upon the mind.

With reeling gait, unconscious act,  
 Mind vagrant from its steady poise,  
 The spirit attributes defiled,  
 Nor left aspiring foot to scale  
     The ditch in which it dies.

A ruin, wreck, and sacrifice  
 Consumed in sacrilegious fire,  
 The pure, the good, the God-designed,  
 To pander with the vile, and die  
     In perishing desire.

Cajoled and coaxed to evil ends,  
 The tempter, subtle as the snake  
 Coiled in the scented shade of flowers,  
 To stretch itself when sleepers dream,  
 And bite them ere they wake.

A mother's face o'er this lost boy,  
 Sad prophetess with whitened hair,  
 Bespeaks the retributive fate  
 Of such as wrought the ruin dire,  
 And must the judgment share.

Oh, stern impeachment of the lost !  
 Oh, verdict just of gods and men !  
 Oh, judgment writ on page of tears !  
 With nought to change the grim decree  
 Or stay the iron pen.

The hunger and thirst, the shame and the tear,  
 The neck with a yoke, the heart with a fear,  
 The robbed of the right, the burdened with wrong,  
 The cry of the weak, the curse of the strong,  
 The truth that was hid, the broken of trust,  
 The scorn of the good, the hate of the just,  
 The wrongs and the sins of man with man, —  
 Forgive them who may, forget them who can.  
 Go forth, ye dead souls, go dry up the tears,  
 The witnessing blood that is staining the spheres;  
 For cut in the rocks the name and the deed.  
 Go rub them away, or the gods may read :  
 For Justice decrees, and nothing denies, —  
 "The soul with a sin is the soul that dies."



## VI.

### CONFESSION AND DESPAIR.

THE thirsty Arab thinks he spies, beyond the tawny  
sand,  
The palms and vines and waterfalls of some enchanted  
land,  
And hurries on his panting steed to grass and grateful  
stream,  
Yet finds the paradise he seeks, delusion and a dream.  
Or in a woodland's darkened nook, benighted travel-  
ler sees  
A lamp that glows in cottage pane beneath the forest  
trees;  
And dreams of kindly face and cheer, and glow of  
ruddy fire;  
Of gentle maid and matron kind, and hospitable sire,  
And shapes his course by brook and brake to reach  
the promised rest,  
Wades thro' the stream and climbs the hill, with un-  
abated zest,  
To find the light he seeks recede across the pathless  
moor,  
And but a shade where fancy saw an open cottage door.  
So what of light and hope might be, if but auspicious  
spark,  
A glint forecast on eastern cloud, of dawn to follow  
dark.

Within its own extinguishment a denser midnight left,  
 As is the deeper hopelessness when of its dreams be-  
 reft,  
 Heard like a moan upon the shore, when tides roll  
 slow and faint,  
 A chastened dirge, a hymnal low, confessional, com-  
 plaint.

“ Eternal justice has its rounds,  
 The circle is complete,  
 Sins, sped away on lifting wings,  
 Return with bleeding feet.

From whence it came the guilt returns,  
 The One comes back as Two;  
 In every cause a consequence  
 To double all we do.

As echo answers to the voice,  
 And music to the string;  
 So Judgment is the sounding-board  
 On which the changes ring.

We cannot be, to foe or friend,  
 More than of us they know;  
 The black is black forevermore,  
 The snow remains the snow.

Forgiveness from the souls we cursed?  
An ocean rolls between :  
Nor sail of ship, nor wing of bird  
'Tween shore and shore are seen.

Forgiveness is the gift of gods,  
It has no spring in sin,  
And what can come from out man's soul  
That was not first within ?

The past! alas! a changeless shade  
That is, and is to be  
Forever on the tides of time,  
A dead face in the sea."

VII.

THE ANGEL'S REPRIMAND.

PERSONAL MERCY, THE CONDITION OF FAVOUR WITH THE  
GODS.—FORGIVENESS INVOKED FOR THE MUTUAL SAL-  
VATION.

ACROSS the angel-sentry's brow there swept a passing  
frown,  
As sweeps a cloud across the sun before its going  
down;  
The angel spread his wings of light, and poised above  
the gloom,  
Rang out sonorous syllables across the marsh of  
doom.  
“Hear me, ye witnesses,” he cried, “of guilt and  
hurt and hate,  
To you these souls, by gods consigned, their destiny  
and fate.  
To you they owe the awful debt nor time nor tears  
can pay,  
And love alone can cancel sin and wipe the stain  
away.  
To you by gods it stands decreed, deliverance or  
doom;  
Ye are the only lamps to light, or clouds to damn the  
gloom.

Can ye forgive ? If not, beseech the gods for such a  
grace,  
For if ye lack this gift divine, ye have with gods no  
place.  
For souls of men, to be at rest, they must that resting  
know  
There is no heaven in the skies for what are hells  
below.  
For space itself has no abyss where soul of man finds  
peace,  
Till hate and wrath and enmity within himself shall  
cease.  
Yourselves are doomed, as are these souls, to home-  
lessness in space,  
Till mercy is your brightest world, and love your  
sweetest grace.  
As like begets its kindred like, the music to the string,  
And to the will of flying bird the beating of the wing,  
So in the mystery of love and rhythm of heaven's plan,  
To be in harmony with God, forgive your fellow-man.  
Seal not, O Souls! another's doom, by making it  
your own,  
And sow again the seed of death, to reap the crop  
that's sown.  
Till stars are quenched and suns are cold these souls  
in prisons stay,  
Till ye, accusers of their guilt, forgive and lead the way.  
For none can reach the heavenly gate, or mount the  
jasper wall,  
That leaves an unforgiven soul in bonded woe and  
thrall."

## VIII.

### THE FORGIVING ACCUSERS.

VICTIMS AND SUFFERERS RETURN.—THE SPIRIT OF MERCY  
BRINGS FORGIVENESS AND LIBERATION.

YEARS flee away in silent flight  
To spaces of the vast abyss,  
O'er continents and zones;  
Rocks crumble, as the centuries tread  
On mountain-tops and silent dead,  
Dominions, kings, and thrones.

And still the Marsh of Acheron  
A prison is for helpless souls  
Awaiting their release;  
If time, perchance, should change their fate,  
And enter in the dungeon gate  
The messengers of peace.

If Love at last with sceptre held,  
O'er memories of guilt and wrong,  
Its undivided sway;  
And Mercy, in the heart of man,  
Fulfilling the diviner plan,  
Should hail redemption's day.

By lower loves the higher found,  
The first in man, the last in God,  
    The greater from the less;  
As he who trains a springtide vine  
May fill his flagon with the wine,  
    When autumn treads the press.

And mirrored in its love of man,  
The love that centres in a god,  
    The highest and the best;  
And living nearest heaven's door,  
That holds the poorest of the poor  
    The closest to its breast.

For what is lost, a saving hand;  
For blemish and for bruise, a balm;  
    For thirsty lips, a spring;  
And in the depths of dark despair,  
And stillness of the midnight air,  
    The sound of angel's wing.

The softer touch, the sweeter tone,  
The most, for such as have the least,  
    Of honey, milk, and wine;  
Where darkness is, and winter frost,  
And men despond, and souls are lost,  
    Sweet Charity divine !

Evangel this, divinely fair,  
The angel hailed at Acheron,  
And swung the iron gate;  
Flung in the Marsh the massive key,  
And worshipped at the mystery  
Of Mercy changing Fate.



IX.

MERCY LIBERATES THE IMPRISONED.

THE TRANSFORMATION.—FROM ACHERON TO PARADISE.

BEHOLD a vision warm and bright,  
Benign as hue of rainbow, spread  
Upon a stormy sky;  
And on the air a joyful note,  
As from a linnet's tuneful throat,  
A woodland melody.

Shone through the fog the blessed light,  
The dreary swamps were bright and green,  
Birds whistled in the grove;  
The flash of waterfall, the sheen  
Of limpid brooks and grateful stream,  
And silvered wing of dove.

Heard once again the friendly voice,  
And music of the fireside lute,  
And chime of swinging bell;  
Browsed on the plain the bleating flocks,  
And shadowed by the mountain rocks,  
The temple in the dell.

And as the sun, thro' thick-plied husk  
 Of buried seed, awakes the germ  
     To leave its darkened bed;  
 In cracking shell and crumbling clod,  
 And o'er the turf that robes the sod,  
     Its royal branches spread :

So warmed and thrilled, revived, revealed,  
 A waking sense of new delight,  
     Transforming soul and scene,  
 Of suns and skies; gods, angels, men,  
 A revelation in the ken  
     Of soul-entrancing dream.

The circle of the universe  
 In every segment true;  
     Nowhere a vagrant line.  
 The merging of the human will  
 With purposes that roundly fill,  
     The human and divine.

Peace with the gods and peace with men,  
 The one absorbs the two  
     In unit consecrate;  
 And he who spares no man his love  
 From that he prays to find above,  
     Behold him separate.

X.

THE OLD FAITH AND THE NEW.

So rose and set — the early suns of ancient thought  
On mysteries of soul and fate;  
Of gods and men, sin, judgment, hell,  
And paradises consecrate.

Of soul and sin, futurities and destinies,  
Enough of light to see a shade,  
And lofty minds to scale the heights  
From which the farther heavens fade.

Thus in a folded bud, the blossom yet to be;  
In crimsoned east, the coming sun;  
In trickling springs, the rivers broad,  
Across a continent to run.

Till in the hour born to greet the greater needs,  
The brighter light, the broader plan,  
And by the cross of Christ revealed  
Redemption there for fallen man.

XI.

THE ANGELIC INVOCATION.

THE CELESTIAL MESSENGER WORSHIPS AT THE ALTAR OF  
DIVINE LOVE, AND ADORES ITS MAJESTY AND MERCY.

O LOVE divine! Love infinite! O majesty! O mys-  
tery of the Eternal mind!  
Expiring suns, and waning moons, and paling fires  
of burning star, — they come, they pass away.  
The centuries as raindrops fall in oceans of eternity;  
and time shall cease to be.  
But thou, O Deity supreme! O Infinite of infinities!  
there is no change in thee.  
Love was thy name, O mighty one, ere rolled the  
wondrous waves of light upon the shores of time;  
When man was not, nor seraph wing made music in  
the solitudes of spaces, spheres, and stars,  
Thou wast, and art, and still wilt be, in all that is,  
and is to be, a Love unquenchable.

Methought in this, the rounded noon of truth and  
love,  
I heard a later angel sing,  
As 'twixt the mountains and the stars  
The fuller chimes of Mercy ring.

Man, brooding on his planet home, what can he  
 know, or grasp, or see of thee, O living God?  
 How count his years, his centuries: his chronicles of  
 name and fame on thy eternal page?  
 His tears, his woes, his agonies, his deeper gloom of  
 spirit-storm, dim not a single star.  
 He comes, he goes, dust unto dust; he crumbles  
 with his crowns and thrones—and stars still  
 shine on seas.  
 But thou, O Majesty supreme! in all thy splendour  
 uncreate, the unapproachable,  
 For this thy handiwork, a man, thou hast reserved  
 immortal place, in thy august design;  
 O'er seraph hosts, in spheres or suns, o'er death itself,  
 o'er sin and doom, thy palaces his home;  
 Declared to him thy Fatherhood; sublimest mystery  
 of thought—sonship of man to thee!  
 God manifest in human form, incarnate love, a  
 Roman cross, and bloody agony;  
 By mystery or sacrifice, atonement made, and justice  
 met, the bonded soul redeemed.  
 The boasted wisdom of the sage fails in its loftiest  
 flight, thy mysteries to reach.  
 Enough for human heart to know that faith in thee  
 absolves its guilt, and he who will, may seek  
 The Christ of God, the shining road, away from sin  
 and sin's abyss, to thee, O God, to thee!"



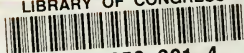








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