

THE VISION OF NIMROD.

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THE  
VISION OF NIMROD

BY  
CHARLES DE KAY  
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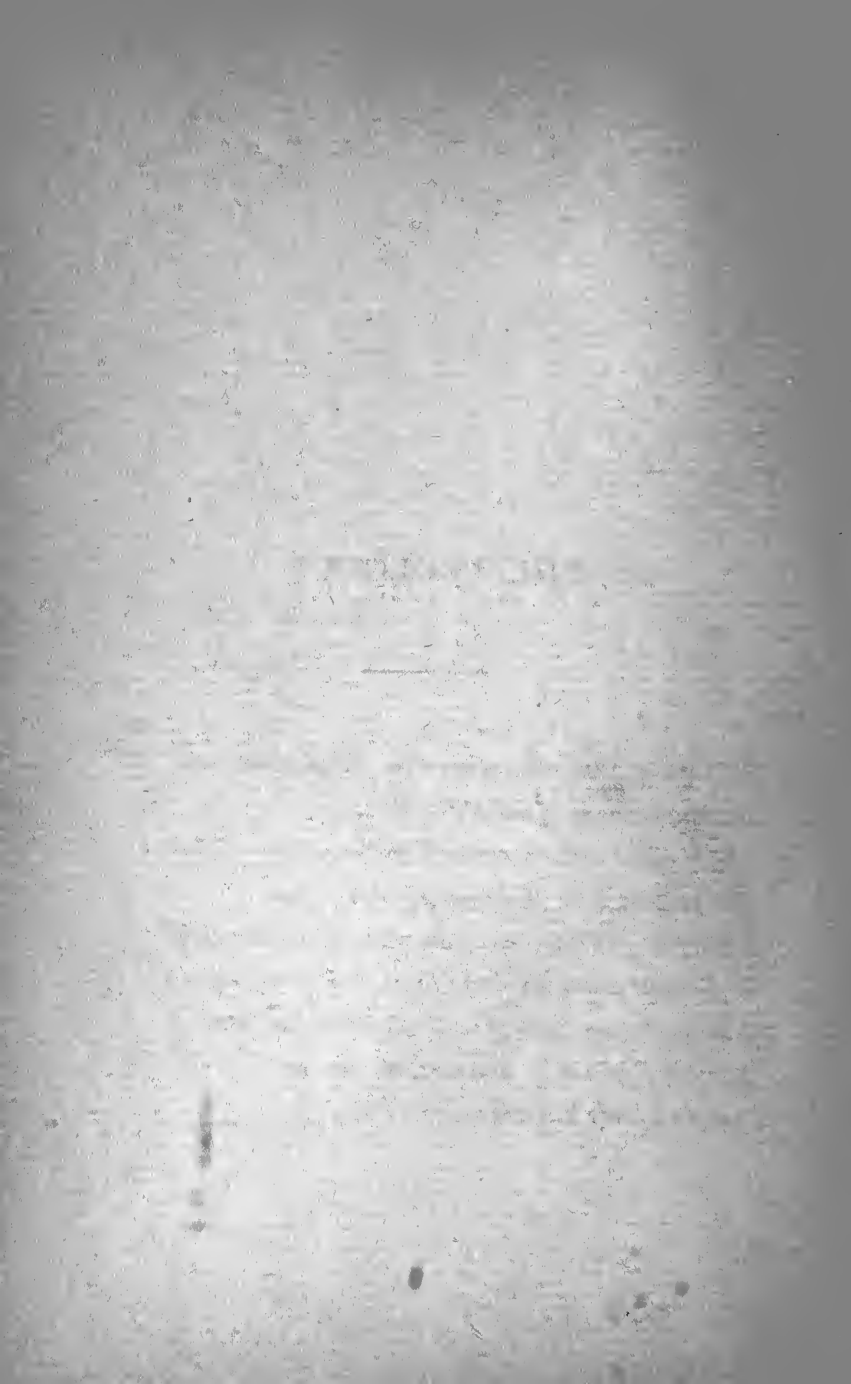
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## THE PROLOGUE



## THE PROLOGUE.

---

*No bard of those who stirred the old glorious time,  
Firdausi, Saadi, Fami the sublime,  
Might chant of Gourred and her lover true  
The prophet Ali. Still are rhymes to you  
Grateful? Their loves that shot a deathless light  
In this our century's morn through Persian night—  
Like new moon with the splendid daystar blent—  
Shall live in nimble numbers, nor be pent  
Longer by dry historian in his tome.*

*The visions which these lovers far from home  
Met in the waste shall us amaze and teach.  
See Nimrod rise and tell the truth of each  
At his old court, describe the birth of things  
From soulless matter, trace through fins and wings  
The breath that sways creation low and high ;  
Hear him rebuild the pile which should defy  
The heavens, and then confess him, last of all,  
Of that unhallowed flame which wrought his fall.*

*And after ? When is told the perilous plight  
Of Gourred captured, then a second night  
May yield the spectre of that queen betrayed  
Who Nimrod ruled.*

*But ere this, to my aid  
Come, gentle souls, who gladly tales rehearse  
In intertwined and overlapping verse !  
Poets must have their audience. It behooves  
Singers who fail to strike the popular grooves  
To hide their lyres, nor still the people vex.*

*Yet question ever must the soul perplex  
Of what men like, what like not. In the end  
The hoot of enemy and psalm of friend  
Mix to a sound confused that lasts for some  
Brief space, for others after lips are dumb  
Below the soil. But who knows whether he,  
Or he shall live, to-day or later? See  
How the broad comet awe and marvel casts,  
Then is forgot. The little north star lasts.*





I

THE PERSIAN REFORMERS



I

THE PERSIAN REFORMERS

---

THE dusk lies thick upon the deep-grooved river  
Where Babylon once stood in all her pride ;  
Up from the waste there runs a lonely shiver ;  
A jackal prowls across the desert wide.  
On a strange peak are men. Two forms are sitting  
Motionless, black, as if engraved in stone ;  
Dumb since the lapwings to their nests were flitting,  
Still while the owl was quavering forth his moan.  
Whose are these figures two  
Sombre of hue ?

“Freedom to love!” Was theirs that plaintive strain  
Piercing the shades that over Asia quivered?  
Birds at the omen stir, yet grasp again  
With trembling feet the branches of a shivered  
And desperate tree, whose gaunt roots to the side  
Of ruins on the barren mound are clinging.  
Who could house there? Who was the mourner sighed  
About the hour when the great bats go winging  
Slower their sated flight  
Through the brown night?

Whom his grief chokes and silent wrath convulses,  
With chin on breast, buried in hopeless thought,  
Has Ali for his name. The gentler pulses  
Stir in a lady so celestial-wrought  
In face and figure that admiring kindred  
Long long before had given her for name  
Gourred-oul-Ayn, Rest of the Eyes. That hind’red  
Nothing that soon they cast her words of shame!  
Fickle are men and swift  
Their grace to shift,

And where their love was great their hate is bitter,  
As sweetest milk soon turns to sourest whey ;  
So where with flowers the jungles loveliest glitter  
There poisons linger deadliest by the way.  
Who stands so firm, that sometimes he has not  
Felt faith, truth, hope, earth, solid rock dissolving,  
Felt that a sneering god has laid a plot  
To break his victim on the slow-revolving  
Wheel of the groaning years  
With blood and tears?

Since the last glimmer of the sun down rushing  
Ali had lain and wrestled hard with gloom ;  
Within his brain was night like blackness crushing  
The last of light before the day of doom.  
But on his face the eyes of that sweet woman  
Were tenderly and most divinely bent,  
While through her heart a gust of superhuman  
Clean passion for her sorrowing comrade went ;  
Then did he know great calm  
Flow from her palm.

“Nokteh,” she said, and laid her smooth, warm fingers  
Upon the knotted hands that fiercely burned,  
“Nokteh,” she pleaded, “Heart of Truth, why lingers  
Dumbness so obstinate and so unearned?  
Speak; let your words, fruitful as citron flowers,  
Bloom from strong soil about my listening ear;  
Speak; let your wisdom like the autumnal showers  
Rain on the desert of your silence drear.  
Better may two sustain  
Pleasure and pain.”

Then from recesses of his laboring chest  
Came a slow sigh, of grief as he were dying,  
Yet answer made to her benign request  
Happier in tone, but woeful still replying:  
“Gourred-oul-Ayn, I am not selfish-sad.  
But oh, the doubt that has come roaring, surging  
About my heart had almost set me mad,  
All else in seas of horror deep submerging,  
When your sweet dove-like hand  
Told me of land.

“’Tis you I grieve for, O my matchless Gourred!

I cannot bear remember it was I,

I, guilty wretch! with whom away you hurried;

For me, an outcast through the world you fly;

You hear affronts and undergo temptations,

Daily you bear the Mollah’s learnèd prate;

This very day the latest of our stations

Exposed you to the insult of the great,

Offering their gold for love

To the white dove.

“You could aim high. Did not that Jewish malice

Called Hand-of-Sultan promise you a seat

Second to none at Stamboul in the palace

If on his camel you would cross your feet?

It is too much. You were a Moslem woman

Born to the veil, to couches, slumbrous ease,

Meant with a nod a host of slaves to summon

And make your master but the first of these:

Gourred, I have too long

Done you great wrong!

“What though my writings hide beneath a mass  
Of flowery verbiage the great news we offer.  
Our foes are keen, and, as in river grass  
The pitfall lurks for elephants, the scoffer  
Has digged for us a pit. The Persian hand  
Can reach thus far, although I only utter  
To earnest pilgrims through this Turkish land  
Truths clean as those that in the rain clouds mutter,  
Facts to which Asia knew  
Of old the clue.

“But fight I may not;—though another morning  
Shall see us tracked, made captive, led in chains,  
Though violence follow swiftly on the warning  
We had to-day from him, who but refrains  
His stroke one hour to strike more certainly . . .  
Outcast and fugitive, what arduous duties  
Are these you share! What pardon can there be  
If lawless men should shame your glorious beauties  
When the next sun shall reign  
O'er this old plain?”



Over his lips another hand came sliding  
Gentle as south winds on the myrtle boughs,  
Then in a voice, mellow in words of chiding,  
Goured her passion on his brow bestows :  
“Pride of my life, know it was not your beauty  
That drew me on ; no, nor your manly form ;  
The choice it was of more than one great duty  
Which in this world I live but to perform.  
Yours I resolved to be,  
Eternally—

“Why?—were there not men richer, manlier, fairer,  
Who longed and sighed this frame of mine to win?  
Ay, but like you which one of all was sharer  
Of wealth so pure and jewel-like within !  
'Twas your star soul, your planet mind, O Sayid !  
Drawing me on with such resistless might  
As moves gazelles, when they by streams have played,  
Suddenly toward the waste to wing their flight.  
Sayid, my desert's green  
Where you are seen.

“Oh, how this woman’s life of mine is fragrant  
With honor, Sayid, since I came with you!  
A doer of good, a teacher, though a vagrant ;  
Once a lost flower that in the canebrake grew.  
By this the harem with its dreary vices  
Had made of me a tyrant and a slave,  
A wretch whose body with its charm entices  
A spouse allowed another’s love to crave !  
From that corrupting den  
You drew me then

“When I the dust of my own door shook off  
And made with you from that time forth my dwelling,  
Vowed that no hardship, woe, nor want, nor scoff,  
Nor crime of man, my maiden thoughts dispelling,  
Should break our faith, or block our chosen path.  
Though you foretell, O greatest of all minds !  
That we shall perish by the mole-eyed wrath  
Of men whom selfishness forever blinds ;  
Still, till that time shall come,  
You are my home.”

Up toward the stars their hands her comrade lifted  
And cried: "Ye steadfast, that do yonder shine,  
If you have strength, let upon her be sifted  
Such even happiness as ne'er was mine!  
Chase from the hearts of men those evil tenets  
Taught by a seer who fell before a jinn;  
The race this lady runs, O let her win it,  
And save this nation from its cancerous sin;  
Deaden Mohammed's name  
With his great shame!

"He, my great forefather in race and mind,  
Swerved from his path, the lusts of flesh obeying:  
He his own conscience and his friends would blind  
With forms of prayer, with silly fasts, which, preying  
On the firm flesh, left souls as foul as ever.  
Scarce to his Paradise the tender race  
Of helpful women reach through strong endeavor.  
Tyrant, he scorned the weak; he lacked of grace  
And meanly humbled those  
Through whom he rose!

“ But may you, Gourred, see life’s utmost station,  
When that which Frankish hypocrites pretend  
Shall really be throughout the Persian nation.

Then veils and harems all shall be at end ;  
Woman shall stand in sunlight, modest, honored ;  
Shall freely choose one mate to be her own ;  
Then she that falls is openly dishonored,  
But she that keeps her pure and clean is known.  
Not, as behind one screen,  
Clean and unclean.

“ But I have news, O comforter in sorrow !  
Hidden from you, because you are so dear ;  
Yet I must tell it, lest a sneer to-morrow  
From cruel foes shall drive you to despair.  
Our Boush-Reweeyéh—whom I made the Gate  
Wherethrough the faithful to our doctrines enter,  
The learned doctor, the wise man of state,  
The nearest yet to me, who am the Centre—  
Tempted by hates abhorred,  
Has drawn the sword.

“ In lieu of peace he offers war. Alas !

On threatening Moslem curses he bestoweth.

No longer meek, unhinderable as grass,

In humblest guise the patient way he goeth.

So fell Mohammed. Ah, he would be founder

Of temporal realms for me the prophet high !

He would be conqueror, would he? not expounder

Of creeds that raise men from their misery !

Blood, Gourred, has been spilt.

Ours is the guilt.

“ Ay, hide your face, poor man-deceivèd lady,

The worst draws nigh. For though all Persia's head

Is careless or for Koran or for Kadi

And scorns whate'er the greatest prophet said—

Buddha, Mohammed, Moses, gentle Christ—

Still, when reform attacks a Moslem tenet,

He will be quick the Mollah's cry to list,

Nor can the pureness of our dogma screen it,

Nor us our holy zeal

From his cool steel !”—

“Peace, let it come!” spoke out that trusty spirit.

“We’ve done our best; what more is there to say?  
If neither Shah nor people see the merit

Our creed contains, ’tis time we went our way.  
But do not groan for me. What thing am I

To cause in you so deeply sad a feeling?

I live to please you, not alarmed to fly

Dangers real, fancied, perils that come stealing

O’er a mind, as when stars

An earthmist mars.

“Ah, can you dream that I should cease,” cried Gourred,

“From aiding you upon this mission high?

If for one hour I keep you from that worried,

Sad, hunted look gazelles have when they die,

I am repaid! O Ali, I’m your brother,

Sister and wife, your father, race and town,

And mine it is, O prophet pure, to smother

A little of the woe that weighs you down;

I, not so strong as you,

Yet am more true.

“ List to my parable : These hawthorns staunch  
That lean apart, that storms still more may sunder,  
What though the raven croak within their branch ?  
Far down below, the rocky mound soil under,  
Their roots have gripped about the self-same stones.  
Soft in the twig, their slanting trunks are harder,  
But on their wrapped and married roots cyclones  
May pour their fury ! All that envious ardor  
Serves but to steel the more  
Their pith, their core.

“ Such is our fate ; consider ! You did rightly  
To break away from that lone citadel  
Where foes and friends supposed you poring nightly  
O'er themes of life to come in heaven or hell.  
Why should not we ourselves advance the church ?  
We, making converts 'mid these pilgrims zealous,  
Hasten the day that triumph boldly perch  
Upon our faith, when Moslemin most callous  
From their old rotten creed  
Joy to be freed.

“But if we must die, let us die together,  
And, ere we go, further your god-sent work,  
Loosing, as camels from a cruel tether,  
The wives of Iran who in harems lurk.  
Oh, that a man should imitate the beasts  
That chew the cud—their lusts forever sating!  
The ancient king who lorded o’er these wastes  
Was humbled to an ox the marsh-grass eating,  
Because his heart within  
Reeked with that sin.

“Yes, to this day in all these cities men  
On cheek or forehead bear a scar assignant  
Of God’s displeasure. That strange mark of wen,  
Those scars in shape of date and sores malignant,  
What mean they, save that for some centuries  
Doom is deferred? To-morrow in his ire  
Floods may dislodge them from their seats of ease;  
Like windfall figs they may be drowned in mire;  
Lightning may leave no trace  
Of their lost race.



“ My friend and husband, lord, and only master,  
Be comforted, blows could not drive away  
Your Consolation-of-the-Eyes ; disaster,  
Hunger, nor thirst shall her firm soul dismay ;  
But speak again, for on this mound is brooding  
I know not what of ghostly and of strange ;  
A chill expectancy itself obtruding  
As though it came from past our human range !  
Closer ! oh, clasp me tight  
Against this fright ! ”



II

THE VISION OF NIMROD



## II

### THE VISION OF NIMROD.

---

NO sun, no moon. Northward the star Orion,  
The star of Nimrod, had the zenith won,  
When from the waste the roaring of a lion  
Boomed like the bursting of a signal gun.  
They saw with fright the even dusk of night  
Roll to a shape, black on the starlit heaven,  
And lo, a Lion of enormous might,  
Shadowy, shaggy! From his jaws of ravin  
Issued the awful sound  
That shook the ground.

And as they gazed, speechless with mortal terror,

It took new form like ocean's clouds at morn ;

The lion changed ;—that surely was no error

Which saw a bull shaking his dreadful horn ?

But hardly of the new shape were they 'ware

When the brute's head of him so fiercely charging

Turned human ; a grave face with curling hair,

Its ordered locks on breast and back discharging,

Loomed through the dusky night

And stayed their flight.

Then from the face, locked with a steadfast meaning

Upon their eyes, the shape took change and flow,

And lo, a giant on a war-club leaning,

Lifted on high, held the dark plain below.

Purple and golden on his stalwart shoulders

His garments lay, but spotted all and torn,

Like robe that long in royal cavern molders ;

And round his neck upon a chain was worn,

Like a strange cross to see,

An amber key.

But all that coat, by tooth of time corroded,  
Was full of eyes and little crescent moons  
And peaches over-ripeness has exploded—  
Pomegranates cloven by a score of noons.  
The war-club whereupon his left hand rested  
Was scaly like a pinecone huge in size ;  
Against those two his shadowy bulk he breasted  
And with his right hand pointed toward the skies.  
Then in a voice of dread  
Croaking, he said :

“ Barbarians ! Once, with sages of Chaldee,  
I, Nimrod, watched upon a tower's back,  
Marking the planets creep most cunningly  
A pinnacle past, which sharply cut their track ;  
Methought this arm, that was all rigid grown  
With following slow their motions wise and stealthy,  
Grew boundless large, reached upward to yon sown  
Broad field, the sky, with red ripe star-fruits wealthy,  
Plucked and consumed them still  
At my fair will !

“’Twixt Kaf and Kaf, those hills that wall the world,  
My body stretched, and from my heaving breast  
The streams of breath, against the hard sky hurled,  
Were turned to clouds that veered at my behest.  
Anon the horizon with sharp white was lit  
And by that glare the veil of things was riven ;  
The door to strange new lands was suddenly split,  
As if I, earth, had caught a glimpse of heaven.  
I saw how great that bliss,  
How petty this !

“That was the hour of evil fates descending ;  
From that strange night I was not merely man :  
Where’er I marched crowds must be still attending  
Me, the great midpoint of the earthly plan.  
Euphrates was the life-blood of my heart ;  
Tigris a vein that throbbed with ceaseless motion ;  
In me the firs of Ararat had part  
And I was earth, air, fire and boundless ocean !  
Folly from that black day  
Held me in sway.



“ From Ur the town I marched with vainness blinded  
And founded empires in the teeming plain ;  
Lured to revolt ten cities fickle-minded,  
And dared the gods that could not save their slain.  
I was their god. I was the lord of all,—  
Each step a new town or a plundered palace.  
I drowned a land with break of water wall ;  
Repeopled it, when kindness grew from malice.  
Who reckoneth all my crimes?  
He falls who climbs.

“ Of Babylon I made the stateliest city  
The earth has yet upon its surface known.  
Nation I fenced from nation without pity  
That all might wend toward Babylon alone.  
Tribe might not trade with tribe, nor north with south,  
But all must barter at my market centre ;  
Nor eastman speak with westman mouth to mouth  
Unless they first within my limits enter.  
Thus grew each tongue and art  
Slowly apart.

“ But my own folk and all the priestly pack  
Grew fat with passage of the tribes deceived.  
Shameless were they ; they tolled from every sack,  
From each exchange a shameless moiety thieved.  
Shrewdly the dialects could they translate  
And turn each service to a wicked profit.  
Still was their care the tongues to separate ;  
At dullness in their victims still they scoffèd,  
But I, to see them plod,  
Jeered all as god.

“ A vulture was my crest, with locust pinions ;  
Soon the unhappy tribes its meaning found.  
No signs of life my warriors left. My minions  
Seized, slew, burnt all or stamped into the ground.  
Less wise, more fierce than Kush, my glorious father,  
I heeded not the locusts' after state :  
They waste and rot, but the sick remnants gather  
And seek bare heights ere that it prove too late.  
Men, locusts—wheat or chaff—  
The grim stars laugh.

“Wastes are the home of flowers most aromatic ;  
Gums, savory fruits, grow from a rocky ground ;  
Arabian plains, wild deserts Asiatic  
Perfect a steed nobler than masters found.  
Ah, had I fled this folk, these plains luxurious,  
Reta'en the antique cliff homes of my stock,  
Prosperity would not have turned me furious,  
A sounder brain withstood the triumphal shock !  
The flaming stars were wroth ;  
They lured their moth.

“ Among the peaks that round my fathers glistened  
Men are more godlike though their wealth be small.  
Would to my guardian spirit I had listened  
And turned me east, back to the world's great wall!  
Then had I lived a life of hardy leisure,  
With time to think, to govern well and brood  
On those high thoughts which form the only treasure  
That is not time's or swift corruption's food :  
Perhaps till these last days  
I should have praise.

“ But, spite of crimes, spite of my wealth and glory,  
Of me what know ye, men of a puny age ?  
I am a rumor, an uncertain story,  
A vanished smoke, a scarce-remembered page !  
The angry peoples showed they could be kinder  
To my great fame than after-following kings,  
For hate still kept a little sour reminder  
When every mark of me had taken wings.  
Whate'er on brick I traced  
My sons effaced.

Yes, my own sons, for whom I bear these curses,  
Melted my statues, overturned my grave,  
Hammered from living rock the deep-hewn verses  
That from oblivion my vast fame should save.  
Thrice was this mass of brickwork, seamed with ravage,  
All newly builded by succeeding kings :  
What of the rage of desert-dwelling savage ?  
From sons a treachery far deeper stings !  
Every one hundredth year  
Some man must hear,

“ Must hear how they betrayed me, yes, and ponder  
O'er my great crimes, my splendor and my fall,  
How messengers from some great godhead yonder  
In vain approach, Nimrod from sin to call.  
I know not who he is, foretold by many,  
For on my mind weighs a thick cloud of doubt,  
Like fogs across these barren plains and fenny,  
So fertile once, they laughed at want and drought.  
List, though you shrink with fear,  
Tremble, but hear!”

How can be told the terror and the quaking  
Which on those lovers fell, when first they heard  
The giant spectre his confession making  
With many a groan and heart-confounding word?  
But Gourred, in the warm embrace of Sayid,  
Was first to dare and whisper him of cheer,  
Whereat he, too, waxed firm and undismayed.  
“ Nimrod,” he cried in accents bold and clear,  
“ Tell on, thou hapless ghost,  
All thy great boast!”

The spectral limbs of him his lot complaining  
Grew denser as to lesser size he shrank.  
Then a rough voice to gentler accents training,  
His centuried silence to those hearers frank  
With joy he broke. Beneath his stark arms fluttered  
The windy robes that foglike round him swept  
Ever as still his ordered speech he uttered ;  
Thus, while the two closer together crept  
Fast, like a ship's blown sail,  
Ran the strange tale.

III

AHRAM FOUND





III

AHRAM FOUND.

---

“LONG, O barbarians, is my wordy story,  
For great the events which crowded all my reign.  
What though my path became less rude and gory,  
Still to the highest I did not attain.  
Wherefore my station, nor divine, nor human,  
Is now to live a dreadful death in life;  
Nor yet a shade, nor given the strength to summon  
Myself once more to actual mortal strife:  
Where, o'er the sea of sand,  
Dust pillars stand

“There do I whirl upon the parched wayfarers  
A writhing form whose head is hid in cloud,  
Whose pitiless skirts have never yet been sparer  
Of aught alive they caught within their shroud ;  
But when the caravan lies deeply buried  
Beneath the wide folds of my sandy cloak,  
With a small mouth I slowly drain the worried  
Still-pulsing hearts of men whom pebbles choke,  
Ever to mortal brood  
Linked by that food ;

“And ever doomed to still repeat the action  
Which most I loathe, bewail and now lament.  
I have no choice. An unwithstood attraction  
Forces me slay the men whom wastes have spent.  
Thus do I torments suffer far more horrid  
Than those of spirits that are burned in hell ;  
They purge them of their sins in caverns torrid ;  
I, ever sinning, with fresh crime must dwell,  
Smirched by an endless flood  
Of guiltless blood.

“ Yet fear not me. The day that in ascendant  
That star is found named after me on high  
I know my crimes, I seek a true descendant  
Of ancient seers, and him with words I ply.  
So that he learn from my unholy doings  
The dangers of an all-too-powerful sway,  
Perchance the good of my heroic ruings  
May slowly leak into the wide world’s day.  
Sayid, remember well  
All I shall tell !

“ Earth grew too small for me ; I dared high heaven,  
And soon a chariot, cunningly made light,  
Stood yoked to eagles ready to be driven  
From earth on mighty wings in all men’s sight.  
I took my seat. The eagles all, unhooded,  
Arose as if to meet the ascending sun ;  
But when so grievously they felt them loaded,  
This way and that the coward birds did run:  
Out was great Nimrod thrust,  
Rolled in the dust !

“Then who durst laugh? Only my runners trusty  
Whispered, that far in Ararat a tribe  
Of low-born shepherds mocked my journey dusty  
By falcons loosed with gross and shameful gibe.  
Wherefore I drew my myriad host together,  
And northward marched in silent, boding rage;  
Hemmed in that folk so close, not even a feather  
Could slip from out my crafty-latticed cage.  
Savage and grim they fought,  
But all were caught.

“Some to the block, some for the flames elected,  
Some to the lake, some to a living grave;  
The rest—men, women, and fair boys selected—  
Were southward haled for me and mine to slave.  
Upon our march one stalwart captive ever  
Freshened the sad and cheered with counsel wise,  
Taught where to dig to find the vanished river,  
Read words of comfort on the star-sown skies:  
Ahram this leader's name;  
Great was his fame.

“ Him did I mark for death, a victim curious  
For that grim god who haunts Euphrates’ plain,  
Him did I honor with a robe luxurious,  
Spices, wine, gold—eunuchs, a prince’s train.  
Still by my stealthy gifts he would not profit  
But parted all among his suffering kin ;  
Held to his folk more ragged than a prophet ;  
Marched in their ranks, haggard, but clear from sin.  
Ahram at my right hand  
I caused to stand.

“ ‘ Ahram,’ I cried, ‘ what haughtiness of spirit  
Bids you condemn the gifts I deign to cast ?  
Have you no care my gracious smile to merit ?  
Do you not know this hour may be your last ?  
Say that you live, say that I curb my anger,  
Soon may a life snap like a weaver’s thread ;  
Brittle as whirling wheels that burst with clangor  
How soon may not your stubborn soul have fled  
And with regretful shriek  
The dead land seek ?

“ ‘Wherefore it seems the part of one so wise  
To seize the momentary chance-flung pleasures,  
Stand by my chariot in a prince’s guise,  
Help to crush nations and divide their treasures !  
Born to command, what strange and childish folly  
Weds you to rags and this poor broken tribe ?  
Shake off, shake off unmanly melancholy  
And be my captain, vizier, priest and scribe—  
Else, lest too much be said,  
Look to your head !’

“ ‘Nimrod,’ quoth he, ‘within the stars ’tis written  
How things shall terminate ’twixt you and me.  
You fatten me to form a victim, smitten  
For some vile god, bred of the tropic sea !  
But for that god I shall not die. I know  
Too much of heaven and earth, the spirit land,  
Of dreams and portents and the murmurs low  
From magic trees, of jinns to deserts banned.  
Your hand shall you refrain,  
As from your brain !’

“ ‘ Without me vain will be your vast endeavor,  
But my strong aid all demons shall outwit.  
Your sons, without me, shall establish never  
Your royal line, nor in your chariot sit.  
Save me, who knows the rules whereby assemble  
The fateful stars that sway a nation's birth?  
Save me, who reads the meaning of each tremble  
Within the heart of earthquake-shaken earth?  
Gems are but mud ; I own  
Wisdom's great stone !

“ ‘ Nimrod,' he spake, ' know you what means the name  
Of Hero, and what fame the man inherits,  
Who wins thereto through paths devoid of blame,  
And gains therewith reward for lofty merits?  
I am a Hero, not the same that you  
Have reached by conquests of surrounding nations,  
But one who's lord in realms withdrawn from view  
And makes clean victories by his godlike patience.  
Angels by him are seen  
Glorious of mien ;

“ ‘And all the past and all the terrible future  
Are known to him, darkly, yet far more clear  
Than e’er to priests who on your altars butcher  
Cattle or slaves that omens may appear.  
My knowledge now all other men surpasses  
Save two great seers, bowed by unkindly time,  
Who sit unmoved within the Eastern passes  
Of Caucasus, their beards congealed with rime ;  
They from disdain of speech  
No more can teach.

“ ‘And would you know who are the earthly heroes ?  
Then seek the hater who controls his soul.  
What brow was calm, the day the whelming sea rose ?  
Within what breast do triple lifebloods roll ?  
Know you the man can lay his hand in passion  
Upon a bride, and yet from her refrain ;  
Who, full of hot desires, can daily fashion  
His tongue to virtue and his flesh to pain ?  
One who affronts affairs—  
Never despairs ?



“ ‘Nimrod, the hero’s not his own self-maker,  
He comes resultant from a thousand things.  
The anxious potter is a frequent breaker  
Of jars. Too seldom one is found that rings  
Perfect, and stands all sound and deftly painted.  
Just so obscure must families pass away  
Before one man is found in nothing tainted,  
Before their heaping virtues in one clay  
Meet—and some lucky morn  
A hero’s born !

“ ‘Sad is that land where sons with foreheads brazen  
Withstand their fathers, and forget the meed  
Of service to the mother hands that chasten  
Their foolishness and froward wills at need.  
Great though the boasts of long-descended princes  
Their claims are worthless, saving when the folk  
Tables them in their hearts, and all evinces  
That love, not force, has kept them in their yoke.  
Only the house that’s pure  
Long can endure.

“ Now if we owe to our divine ancestors

The larger good which comes to us at birth ;  
But to base parents half the sin that festers

Within our breasts—much in a narrow girth—  
Whom shall we worship soonest, whom embellish

With choicest gifts, though only a name remains ;  
Whom shall we feast, in hopes that they may relish  
Elixirs pressed from sweet and wind-blown grains?

To the good parents' shade  
Hymns should be made

“ And costly statues to such chiefs erected

As made men by their works more glad and wise.  
They from the great the lowly have protected,  
Have been the loftiest in a humble guise.

But as to gods—what know we of their favor,  
Hatred or scorn, their attributes or forms?

Is not the human heart the true enslaver  
Of destinies, the raiser of all storms?

Dumb, with unselfish ways,  
Give the gods praise !”

“ ‘Beware!’ I cried, ‘tempt not the gods, O Ahram,  
Though you be wise surpassing man’s degree!  
Great are the dead, but fearful the alarum  
That sounds when demons rise revengefully.  
What harm can come from my august ancestors?  
But dreadful is the sting that dragon wields  
Who wallows in the mighty swamp, and pesters  
The slaves who till my rich rank southern fields!  
Surely you work, as priest,  
Magic at least?’ ”

“ ‘Magic,’ quoth Ahram, ‘has its sovereign uses;  
But if, so fond, of wizard craft you crave,  
I can expound its good and its abuses:  
Witchcraft is not for kings, but for a slave.  
Have patience, Nimrod; if I seem obscure,  
It is my tongue that silence long has swollen;  
It is my brain which has not pictured sure  
Dim phrases from my soul too early stolen.  
Trust through each new surprise  
Me, who am wise!’ ”

“Yet more he spake. But I took little profit  
In words like those ; yet, won by slow degrees,  
I raised so high the leather-jerked prophet,  
He stood erect when all men bowed their knees.  
Our converse was of matters great ; as, wonders,  
Quick flights of birds, strange tracks within the sand,  
Omens low muttered in the speech of thunders,  
Dull sounds perceived by them in mines that stand,  
Stars that have rolled the same  
Years without name.

“Down the great stream now altered and deserted  
Floated for many a day our royal raft ;  
The while the slaves my braves with dance diverted  
Ahram exposed to greedy ears his craft ;  
But when within the blooming banks we entered  
Of vast canals around great Babylon,  
My thoughts, my heart on Ahram all were centred ;  
About his loins I cast my regal zone ;  
Upon his thumb I thrust  
My ring of trust.

“ Listen the tale which Ahram oft recited,  
Which I have oft, in these sad centuries,  
Retold to prophets shuddering, yet delighted.  
Better have spoken to the passing breeze !  
Too dull, too slothful, they have feared their fellows ;  
They dared not to the sneering world repeat  
What they had learned. They trembled at the billows  
Of vulgar bigotry ! Or priest, or state,  
Awed them with threats of shame,  
Tortures, the flame.

“ But listen, ye ! Perhaps the spark of rigor  
Is not all dead that once through Asia ran ;  
Perhaps, to free yourselves, you may find vigor  
To oust the impostor with his Alcoran.  
Receive from Ahram, then, his best possession  
Deep and abstruse, for overthrow of sin.  
Ponder it well. Here is the root-confession.  
Thus Ahram saw the forming of the jinn.  
Strain on my face your eyes ;  
Peace, and be wise ! ”



IV

THE TARN OF KAF





IV

THE TARN OF KAF.

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“‘ FAR in the east where sacred hills aspire,  
Which you call Kaf and earth's most distant rim,  
Hides among cliffs that soar like frozen fire  
A hollow vale. Up to its ragged brim.  
Are awful shapes pictured in solid stone  
Of every live thing which the soil has gendered ;  
But to the vale such souls can pierce alone  
As those whom years of self-restraint have rendered  
Simple and sanctified,  
Devoid of pride.

“Such was I once, such hope to be, O Nimrod !  
And that is why, taught by an aged seer,  
I passed the shadowy straits and trod the dim road  
Of that gray vale deep in the crags austere.  
Alone I marched, bearing for every weapon  
One word upon my tongue, a word of might,  
A little word, which, said aright, will deepen  
The sun by day and lame the wings of night !  
Down through those shapes rainworn  
I strode forlorn.

“On me from dim and time-bleared eyes they smiled ;  
They grinned with mouths cracked by a million years ;  
They could not speak, nor did they move an eyelid,  
And yet I saw their hatred, knew their jeers,  
And slowly, slowly felt my footsteps lagging  
The while a thought stirred in my trembling hairs  
How in my heart the life was oozing, flagging,  
Was giving way to stony veins like theirs ;  
Fear made my brain so numb,  
My lips were dumb.

“‘ For scarce the first great terrace had I threaded,  
    Wheneas a longing quenchless-deep I knew  
To take my stand amid the figures dreaded  
    Which, grim and sneering, from the rockbed grew.  
It seemed so wise to change the heat of toiling  
    For cool hard veins like theirs, for dreams divine !  
To know all things aright without once soiling  
    A finger in life’s filth ! to watch the brine,  
        But never long to taste  
        The bitter waste.

“‘ Never round me shall close such heavenly mansion  
    Of wisdom, as at touch of magic wand,  
Never again arrive the wide expansion  
    Of brain that went with horror hand in hand.  
Truly, I said, too weak to aid the living,  
    Too scornful of honors, I’ll be rich in gain  
Of wit past all ! Here am I freed from giving  
    My hoarded wisdom back again to men ;  
        Wrapt in my thoughts sublime,  
        I’ll smile at time.’

“Ahram!” (I cried) “to Nimrod came that seeming.

Like you, I too believed myself divine.

A thin domain was your vast land of dreaming;

The actual world, its fields and towns, are mine.

How fared you then? was it forgot, your peril?

Did you like me give way to selfish dreams?

Speak! what rare gem of knowledge 'mid the sterile

Sheer crags of Kaf unknown, unwitnessed gleams?

Say, did you farther win

And see the Jinn?”

“ ‘The word, O Nimrod! that was my salvation:

The name no man may utter, save when death

Stares in his face, when he that sways creation

Wills that one live, not die of what one saith.

That name is written, but in rock not graven,

Nor traced in sand, nor digged in lines of turf,

Nor built in walls, nor scrawled upon high heaven,

Nor wreathed in loops of island-fringing surf!

Down in the ocean's deep

That name doth sleep.

“‘ It sleeps. For though a word, it is a creature,  
And, as it lies, wound in its fold on fold,  
It is alive, and yet its coilings feature  
The word, the name of him who is not told.  
He willed, and lo ! the dragon where he slumbered  
Uncoiled him once, and with the movement drew  
The waters from above till they encumbered  
More lands, O king, than ever fell to you !  
’Twas a great seer of old  
Saw him unfold.

“‘ First came the ocean up the rivers charging  
Like foaming boars resistless in their might,  
And all the fields grew lakes; their brims enlarging  
Drove the folk upward toward the hills in fright.  
Then fell the rain—not stol’n from out the sky,  
But dropt in sheér, all-overpowering masses,  
And what the sea had spared the torrents ply  
With hideous rush. As in the marsh the grasses  
Before wild oxen stoop  
The peoples droop.

“ Regard an ant-hill which a summer freshet  
Surrounds at foot with ever-gathering waves.  
The busy crowd that watch the floods enmesh it  
Rush o'er the hill and in and out their caves.  
In vain. Inexorable, the creeping waters  
Climb the long slope that's now an island made;  
Then of the soil those small and busy daughters  
In clustering mass the flinty skies upbraid  
Since, without knowing why,  
They all must die.

“ Such was the fate of men throughout these valleys  
And circling hills upon that day of doom,  
When, at the sounding of a Name, the chalice  
Of ocean overflowed, and all the gloom  
Of antique night came down to double fears  
In men aghast; when at old ocean's foot  
Stirred the great snake that in his image bears  
A hieroglyph, of human script the root;  
When the stars, blanching, heard  
That awful word.

“ ‘Twas it first gave a clue to all things noted  
Upon the earth by every tribe of man ;  
For till that day the human speech had floated  
This way and that without a chart or plan.  
From that time forth speech was o’er space ascendant,  
And sound, though hushed, was conqueror o’er time ;  
Then wise men talked to their remote descendant  
By graven rune, by deep and pregnant rhyme.  
Nimrod, my tongue was stirred  
To frame that word.

“ “ My lips but moved, and lo ! the spell was shattered.  
Light grew my feet as wings, and firm, clear-eyed,  
I passed on through those statues grim and battered  
And left them frozen in their sneers and pride.  
Down through a beetling pass I came unaided,  
Downward a perilous way from ledge to ledge  
Till the broad sky had nigh to twilight faded.  
Within the deep where hills together wedge  
A round black tarn did stare  
Dead as the air.

“The eye of night, the womb of earth, the navel  
Of teeming worlds, but lustreless and blank!  
Yet, as a stone in which magicians grave all  
The future dark in many an artful rank,  
That tarn was pregnant with the wisdom few  
Of mortal minds were ever made to cherish,  
And fewer still but half suspect a clue  
And key thereof; but most men blindly perish  
Ignorant how they came,  
Whence, for what game.

“So there I stood, close to the very brink  
Of some gray secret in that mere profound.  
At what might come my flesh began to shrink;  
I trembled, as the sacred planes are found  
Shaking their palsied, tossing tops together  
Within the hush which runs before a quaking,  
When, in a sultry lull of rumbling weather,  
The demons of the rock a breath are taking  
Ere they together clash  
With dreadful crash.



““ But down I crouched, mumbling the one word ever  
With eyelids rounded on that moveless mere,  
Lucid of mind, certain I would not sever  
My steps from there till all things should appear.  
The lake was brown and deep ; it looked congealed ;  
But in the depth fine crystals 'gan to form  
Dim, like a scattered caravan concealed  
Behind the sand veils of a desert storm ;  
Evenly all about  
Shapes started out—

““ Shapes that are not shapes, yet have life and motion,  
Join and disjoin, that make each other prey,  
Grow fat, absorbing by a slow attraction  
The mates with whom they seem at first to play :  
And, when too large, a fine wide cleft appears  
Across the shadowy and unshapely masses ;  
They break in twain ; each side his own way steers,  
Then grows anew and through the same race passes.  
Marvelous, of deep import,  
Is that grim sport.

“Then through the dusky wave is seen a mountain  
Slowly arising in the tarn opaque,  
Troubled, as if its core were all a fountain  
Of rock ebullient underneath the lake.  
Great shapes like flowers about its top in cluster  
Sit as if quick and warmed upon a hearth;  
And yet from out the rock no fiery lustre  
Shines from the bowels of mysterious earth,  
Neither does steam or flame  
Rise from the same.

“But as the ocean under storm and shadow  
Forever changes, and the billows slant  
This way and that upon their barren meadow  
In answer to the east wind's varied chant,  
So does the mound, those wine-brown waters under,  
Glimmer and gloom with deep internal stress.  
Meseems that now a great and unknown wonder  
To air and sunlight is about to press.  
Slight is the foremost change,  
Subtle and strange.

“ ‘The flowery bed about the summit growing  
Defines itself and sways as if it wills.  
Studded with myriad threads a purpose showing,  
Surely the groping mass existence fills !  
Within the breathless lake they raise fine currents  
Upward and downward, till the solid mere  
Seems, having lost its former still endurance,  
To suck down bubbles from the atmosphere.  
So is the dry rock fresh  
With living flesh.

“ ‘And slowly, slowly on the mound is motion  
In that confused and semi-conscious mass :  
A shaping is, to banners such as ocean  
Waves from its sunken cliffs in giant grass.  
Of these some bloom on withen stalks and shaky,  
They spread wide bells in gorgeous-colored row  
Whose armlike petals whirl in movement snaky  
And that dark wave in many a vortex throw.  
Mightiest of all of them  
One breaks its stem

“ ‘And up it sways, glad of its new-found powers,  
With even pulsings through its jellied bulk,  
Then turns about and o’er the surface towers  
A domelike back, smooth, an amazing hulk.  
There hangs well pleased, the while its threadlike fingers  
Grope through the lake netting an unseen prey ;  
Anon it moves, hurries apart, or lingers  
Where’er it list within the hill-bound bay.  
’Twas liquid clay, congealed,  
Round like a shield.

“ ‘ But from the crest of that submergèd crater  
I saw great arms, each like a mighty snake,  
Reach up to clasp the mass of living matter  
And the wide disk in thousand fragments break.  
Below the spot a monster lay, so hideous  
That tongue may not its filthiness relate :  
A wreath of wormlike arms ; two dull, perfidious,  
Blue, glaring eyes ; a form swelled up with hate ;  
A hide that hardly feels  
Its cancerous weals.

“ ‘No bones it had. Those limbs did not belong  
To tremulous water, nor to earthcrust solid.  
Sans feet, sans wings, it poured itself along  
In oozy coils, and on its victim volleyed  
A mass of slimy arms with jaws all studded.  
These, on the desperate victim closing, sank  
Into his flesh. The limbs though lopped still budded  
With limbs anew. A horrible midmouth drank  
Its live prey, throe on throe,  
With tortures slow.

“ ‘What found itself within those arms involved  
Left hope behind. The central mass was tumid  
With moving lumps that, swelling, then resolved  
Themselves all smooth once more. The captive  
doomed.  
Saw great bleared eyes, a puffed hide red and pale,  
And, if at sea, the waters all on sudden  
Turned jet with ink, or red with fire. No tail  
This ogre had; weapons, nor stone, nor wooden,  
Brazen, nor iron could  
Draw from it blood.

“‘Now if the former shape it quite devoured,  
Or by some change grew out of it, who knows?  
Brief was its own life, for a fish endowered  
With triple strength within the weird pool rose.  
All clad in frightful mail the fish ascended  
Out of the foam that monster’s lashing made,  
And when the contest for the sea was ended  
Glad in his might the fish his pomp displayed.  
Proudly from rim to rim  
'Gan he to swim.

“‘But still the mound increased with widening acres  
And soon its roof kissed the wild water’s plane.  
The fish was gone, but through the fringing breakers  
Crawled such a shape as never salty main,  
Deserts, nor woods, nor crags that wound high heaven  
Contain to-day—a beast so huge and bad,  
The sight alone a nation would have driven  
To slay itself, stung with an impulse mad:  
Thence cunning lizards trace  
Their wicked race.

“About his neck when from the wave he rose  
Were coral gills, through which he sucked the vapor  
That filled the hollow vale. From stunted nose  
All down his back to where his tail was taper  
A fringe of wavy, blotchy hummocks shivered;  
But while I gazed both tail and red gills shrank,  
Being useless, now the marshy island quivered  
Beneath his tread. A while the air he drank  
Through his vast yawn, and then  
Paced his domain.

“ ‘Bellowed the slimy thing, thereby assignant  
In echoes from the funnel-shaped high hills,  
Its lordship over all. In eyes malignant  
Glittered a thousand after-hatching ill.  
Within the roar there muttered a forewarning  
Of wars and murders, deaths in after-times,  
Of brutal ignorance and fiendish learning,  
Of thoughtful lusts and coldly-pondered crimes.  
Such was the rancor, it  
Its own tail bit!

“ ‘ Reared on its hinder legs it marched in wrath  
About the isle freshborn from out the ocean,  
Gnashing long jaws at all upon its path  
And pawing air with strange incessant motion.  
Anon upon its body hard and scaly  
Began to grow a white and gentle down,  
And the forearms, which seemed at first all maily,  
Grew fledge with plumage gray, green, black and  
brown.

‘ Nimrod ! ’ wise Ahram said,  
‘ I grew afraid.

“ ‘ For wings it longed, and wings it won. Distorted  
With fear of what might come I crouched forlorn.  
Behold ! the wings were spread, and up it sported  
As for the third thin element ’twere born.  
But on the island where its race had issue  
New births arose of ever-warring shapes  
And mighty plants, spongy and soft of tissue,  
Clad with gray verdure all the uplifted capes.  
There giant reptiles stood  
As in a wood.



“ ‘ Then on the isle was bellowing and commotion,  
    Whilst one grim monster with another strove ;  
With tusk and horn the spawn of earth and ocean  
    Their hideous strengths against each other drove,  
Till at the last a fearful beast was master,  
    Amazing thewed, with fourfold, plate-like horns,  
Tushes that but to look on mean disaster  
    And writhen trunk that every creature scorns.  
        Loud she began to bray,  
        Chief in the fray.

“ ‘ Whereat the reptile bird which far was wheeling,  
    Far o’er the summits of the mountains stark,  
Drew down to view what rival had been stealing  
    Upon his home within the island dark.  
He fell from high as tumbleth sheer a lavine  
    Along the slopes of pure Himal’yan snow,  
Proud of his force, ready to make a ravin  
    Of that slow beast which dared him there below :  
        Then with their thunder-shock  
        The isle did rock ;

“ And long they struggled, till his wing was twisted  
Beneath the tushes of that queen of herds;  
Then the vast weight descended where it listed,  
And crushed to death the greatest of all birds.  
So vast a bulk was that which won the tourney  
Mere living things her life could not sustain;  
Wherefore she browsed within the jungle ferny  
And stuffed her carcass with a pallid grain.  
Deep were her loins and wide,  
Stupid her pride.

“ Beneath the belly where the hide was folded  
A pouch there was, wherein she did bestow  
Her brood ere they to perfect shape were molded  
And cared for them with huge caress and slow.  
Her dream that they should hold the isle was blasted,  
For from the wood a smaller beast forth crept  
Whose sabre teeth of grass had never tasted  
But ever flesh from living bone they stripped:  
Roaring with voice of fear,  
Straight he drew near.

“ With hoofs, teeth, horns, began a conflict dire;  
The greater brute in power was a king,  
But the lithe other, hot with fourfold fire,  
Was far more swift upon his foe to spring.  
The snarling, bleeding, rending and bone-crunching  
That there ensued can never all be told;  
At last I saw the tiger-monster hunching  
Across the neck of that beast over-bold.  
’Twas like a waterspout  
In days of drought

“ That whirls along the sea beneath a cloud,  
But, meeting once a sandy promontory,  
Empties its tons of water with a loud  
Concussant jar. Thus on the arena gory  
Fell the huge bulk, the largest that the sun  
Has seen, save one, or shall see looking downward,  
The clumsiest compound of all beasts that run,  
Swim, creep, or fly, that lurk in seas, or sunward  
Rear from the swampy grass  
Their ’mazing mass.

“ ‘ For she contained within her bony box  
The forces found in hundred later creatures :  
The horns of bulls, the teeth of river-ox,  
The legs of horses, and the diverse natures  
Of beasts that followed through the centuries.  
A clumsy pattern whence succeeding ages  
Drew many forms that frighten not, but please.  
So, ever widening by progressive stages,  
Spread in that valley life  
Through endless strife.

“ ‘ But all this while the air, the lake, the island  
Had suffered change. More perfect each was found :  
The air was clearer, lake more fresh, and dry land  
Appeared where first was all a soggy ground.  
In place of fern and fungus woodlands towered,  
Within whose branches hid a manifold  
Bird, beast and insect life in leaves embowered  
Its varied tale of love and warfare told,  
Safe from that brute of guile  
A little while.

“ ‘ But soon arose a tyrant in the forest  
In shape like man, yet was not man at all ;  
Right mild of sway and yet of strength the sorest  
If any dared to stir his angry gall.  
Amid the boughs his dwelling was. Delicious  
To him were fruits and water dipped with leaves.  
Great was his wit ; a sly beast and malicious,  
Working his ends by thought which force deceives.  
’Gainst the fierce tiger brood  
Great was his feud.

“ ‘ There soon I spied them to the proof advancing,  
The crouching cat, the wily manlike ape,  
Whose great right hand a mighty beam was lancing  
With aim the tiger was too dull to ’scape.  
The timber flew, the wounded beast sprang shrieking  
Upon the ape ; but he, with heavy stones,  
Beat in the massive skull, a vengeance wreaking  
With flashing teeth and horrid growling groans,  
And him, though wounded sore,  
To ground he bore ;

“To ground he bore the lithe and lovely peril  
And, shaking wrathfully the lifeless mass  
With broad long tushes, green as is a beryl,  
Into his mouth he caused the blood to pass.  
Short was his reign. For of his kindred others  
Opposed his sway. The island was a field  
Whereon great apes forever slew their brothers  
That unto them in wiliness must yield.

Soon, on the apelike plan,  
Issued a man.

“Till now the broods of fish and beast and bird  
Lived planless, still their daily wants sufficing.  
Now had a king of all of them appeared  
With forethought armed, by subtle craft enticing  
All living to their ruin, or to serve  
His own shrewd ends. He made so great a slaughter  
That hardly could the race of beasts observe  
What killed them. Fish with wood he slew, with water  
Drowned the dull cavern bear  
Within his lair.

“ ‘The cunning brain that slew the greatest beasts  
Imposed on all a fierce incessant battle,  
From dry wood rubbed his fire, and at his feasts  
Treated his captives like submissive cattle.  
Beasts fly from beasts. By rocks and trees concealed  
They rear their young, they prosper, though they  
tremble ;  
But man so keen, so fierce a wit did wield,  
That no place served where quarry might assemble ;  
Quickly he followed, still  
The weak to kill.

“ ‘Weak though his force, by his unearthly guile  
All apes he beat, all birds and beasts o’ercame ;  
Then with his fellow man an endless coil  
Of fights, deceits and slaughters he did frame.  
Polished he grew, luxurious and conceited,  
And where before deceitfulness meant life,  
His brothers he from malice pure defeated,  
Forever mixed in fierce relentless strife,  
Where still the wiliest one  
Forever won.

“Then was it plain that he of all, alone,  
Each sound could imitate and read the intention  
Concealed behind an act. For he was prone  
To save himself by sly or bold invention ;  
And thereto framed an ever-varying code,  
A fruitful web of gestures and grimaces  
Whereto success in many a fight he owed,  
Wherefrom came aid in thousand perilous cases  
Now that with fellow man  
His craft could plan.

“And whilst before by signs and guttural barks  
Men called to men ; now a most wise invention  
Of chanting tones the varying spirit marks  
With ordered speech, wherethrough a separate men-  
tion  
Each bird and beast receives, each tree, each wind,  
The mountains, lakes, the fruits and herbs and rivers ;  
But those who spake right soon did leave behind  
Their duller foes. Who bent not to their wishes  
Was snapped as snaps a reed,  
Plucked like a weed.



“ Then faster, faster rose continual changes  
Till men there were so equal in their brain  
That each defends the forest that he ranges,  
Not safe, but ready to attack, maintain  
An equal battle, or by flight to 'scape ;  
And next began the luxuries to gather,  
The useless arts that good and evil shape  
In even measure. For great wealth is father  
To vice and to fine arts  
In equal parts.

“ But the small tarn that once was close and narrow  
Had grown apace into an isly mere,  
Where one kept flocks, the next made axe and harrow,  
Plowed, and from earth drew bread. And then  
with clear  
Brown ferment of his grain he brewed a liquor  
Stronger than what, from tender grapes out-pressed,  
A third man drank. In boats, still quicker, quicker  
Across the waves they forayed east and west,  
Fought, and made peace, and lied ;  
Wived, multiplied.

“ ‘ Their manners grew so strangely complicated  
My wildered brain the cause in vain would ask  
Why this was done, not that : as, why they mated  
With that mate, not with this ; and why one task  
Gave health and strength, another slow extinction ;  
Why men that held them proudest fell most soon ;  
Why they were barren who had most distinction,  
And they bred strongest who were hardiest grown ;  
Why Use and sad Abuse  
Warred without truce ?

“ ‘ Yet some grew wise beyond all human bounds  
And at their deaths, or violent, or peaceful,  
Out of the mouths of such, with moaning sounds,  
A Something fluttering, took on shape, or graceful  
Or else as bestial as those monsters grim  
That went before. Then well I marked their nature :  
The beautiful ghost was issuant from him  
Whose life had been of service to each creature ;  
The hideous bred in shoals  
From cruel souls.

“For there was seen amid the warring men  
That twain of spirits born from finer ether:  
The hater of mankind who loves to pain  
All creatures, he who has a heart for neither  
Virtue, nor youth, nor age, nor weak, nor foolish;  
Of him did giant minds evolve the jinn  
With powers unholy and with aspect ghoulish,  
Dowered with strength through many a guile to win  
    Luck from the good, and yet  
    Endless regret.

“The other spirit was of equal force,  
But all his thought was how to cure the ailing,  
Succor the needy, and to arrest the course  
Of headlong miseries, support the failing,  
Aid the advance of prosperers, and joy  
In all things good. The pathways most laborious  
This fairy trod, for things which most annoy  
To him were sweet, absorbing, high, most glorious,  
    Once their resultant stood  
    For some light good.

“ But if I shuddered when that monster’s wings  
Grew out before, how did I shake and shiver  
When into space, as light as smoke outrings  
Spiral from tents, those jinns began to quiver  
Their pinions in the air! Like boys possessed  
With horror of a spectre in the gloaming  
I girt my loins and upward madly pressed,  
Sure that I heard a rustling and a foaming  
As if the mere did rise  
Me to surprise!

“ And as from tier to tier of hills I fled,  
Among the rocks I saw on either side  
Forms like the forms that through their lives had sped  
Before my sight. There lay, all petrified,  
The plantlike fish and fishlike plants, the true  
Life-bearing beasts, and, near the last high portal,  
Again those statues which had power to glue  
My hasting feet by whispers of immortal  
Bliss, if I did but dare  
To linger there.

“ ‘ One on a tortoise sat, and one within  
A shark’s wide mouth ; a third form stood boar-  
headed ;

A fourth, half lion ; and another’s grin  
Was that of apes ; while he I no less dreaded  
Handled an axe ; the seventh was a bowman ;  
The eighth blew soundless on a magic flute ;  
The ninth, a saint of piety unhuman ;  
The tenth, a gay swain in a warrior’s suit ;  
Each figure in its way  
Willed me to stay.

“ ‘ Why did I fly ? Mayhap it had been better  
With them my lot to cast. Then, Nimrod, you  
Had found me not, when that most grievous fetter  
About my nation cast resistless drew  
Our remnant hither to great Babylon.

Alas, alas ! Who knows the best in fortune ?  
Sure is but this : those demons would have won,  
Charming with spells that subtly can importune,  
Had not a now-lost face  
Pleaded for grace ! ’ ”

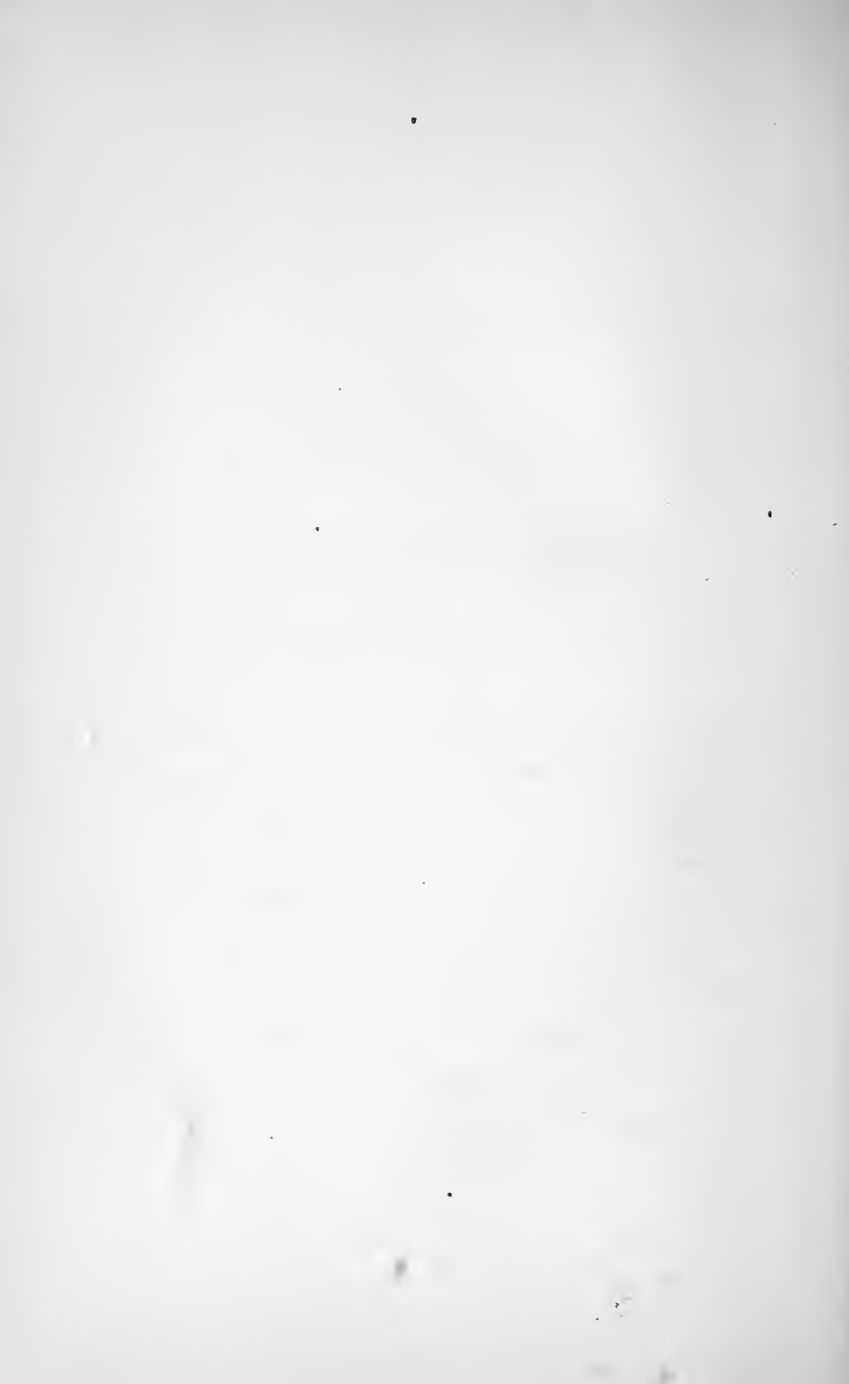
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“ Thus, O barbarians, Ahram told the tale  
Of life’s progressive and antique creation ;  
Once only found he that miraculous vale  
In Himalaya, saw the jinns’ evasion  
Once only ! What the strange recital meant  
How can I tell, a ghost who sees all blurry ?  
Yet ’tis of import lofty, and was sent  
To lesson me, to save me from the sorry  
Fate of my after years.  
Open your ears,

“ Open your ears ! Ere downy-footed morn,  
Warming the sky with beckoning rosy fingers,  
Has broke the dusk and from my shoulders torn  
What wretched simulacrum thereon lingers,  
Revolve what efforts at the first I made  
To keep the path of right, and how I faltered.  
But turn again when falls the evening’s shade  
And hear my story out, no word being altered  
From the first sad refrain  
Of this old pain.”

V

ESTHER THE VESTAL





V

ESTHER THE VESTAL

---

“ON these wide plains, which once stood all a-ripple  
With grain by strange-tongued, swarthy races sowed,  
I gave the remnant of wise Ahram's people  
A goodly portion and a guard bestowed ;  
But in my palace where the wealth of nations,  
Gems, vases, carpets, what the silk-worm spins  
Were thickly cast, the highest of all stations  
Was held by Ahram always clad in skins.  
Counselor, treasurer,  
My key he bare.

“ How shall I count the works of public weal  
By Ahram fathered and my nations finished ?  
The fields reclaimed ? his superhuman zeal  
To plan canals and mighty dikes that ’minished  
Floods in the season of the Hyades ?  
On every side of Babylon the wondrous  
Are rivers deeper made ; the Indian seas  
Stretch to my quays of bronze, whereat the ponderous  
Whale and the desert ship  
A like wave sip.

“ But chiefly I sought, from him in wit abounding,  
To learn the future of the fateful skies,  
To see how soon a second flood, confounding  
These plains again, my kingdom might surprise ;  
For well I pondered how, before my sire  
Pushed westward, warring on ancestral foes,  
The sky fell down, the sea frothed up, till higher  
Than all the hills save Ararat it rose.  
Then were the nations found  
Like conies drowned.

“As god I moved, yet, prone to human errors,  
I longed to be from other gods assured.  
Evil foreknown is shorn of half its terrors  
And at the last with steadfastness endured.  
Should I an ark contrive, strong-ribbed, gigantic,  
Like those few souls who plowed the old whelming sea,  
Wherein to shut myself against the frantic,  
Wild spray of men that madly then would flee  
Upward ascending waves  
And unhewn graves?”

“Or should I seize on all the Western regions  
And on their highest and most holy peak  
Plant me a temple whence my harnessed legions  
Should spread the earth’s remotest bounds to seek?  
Or on the edge of my embowered gardens  
Should I cause grow a most enormous wall  
Of mortised stone with well-burnt lime that hardens  
With time the more, the more that showers fall—  
Thus, when the ooze waxed high,  
To keep me dry?”

“But then I feared, should I my kingdom alter,  
The robber hordes from past the Caspian gates  
Would sack my towns, leading my folk in halter,  
Trample my fields, level the fruit-hung dates.  
Or, if I built the wall, ten thousand wretches  
Would desperate climb along the rising flood  
And swarm like rats when some old willow stretches  
Its arm in pity toward the struggling brood.  
‘Ahram,’ I cried thought-wan,  
‘Find me a plan!’

“And Ahram pondered. At the last he claimed  
A year to seek the deathless truth, a permit  
For six months’ counsel with the old and famed  
And six months’ brooding as a mountain-hermit.  
I gave the year, and Ahram to my keeping  
Left his small tribe, his kindred and his flocks.  
I saw no spoiler through their lands went reaping,  
No hand of violence dared unbar their locks.  
Ahram was far away  
One year and day.

“Now in my train the eunuch Bitsu stood  
Chief of my household. His, to gather tidings  
Of distant wars, revolts, the secret brood  
Of thoughts of minds ambitious that have hidings  
In towns of strength. He spied upon the slaves,  
The thousand wives, the soldiers of my harem.  
At his least word a swift-foot runner braves  
The perilous waste, the hail-storm’s dread alarm.  
Bitsu, once Ahram gone,  
Was quick to fawn.

“‘King!’ thus he cried. ‘God, to whom earthly nations  
Are dust, and whom the sky has loaned! Great god!  
Is it your will that all the hid relations  
Of men submit to your approving nod?  
O king of kings, Ahram preserves some treasure  
Secret, rare, tempting, in his new-built town.  
I have not seen it, but I know the measure  
Of wealth that he for that thing will disown!  
’Tis a strange gem he saves  
Too great for slaves.

“ ‘ Without your leave the vizier [who is greater,  
It seems, than Nimrod even] sent back men  
Of his own tribe, and put to death as traitor  
That chief who led us to his mountain den ;  
And then from out the valleys where the snow  
Lies half the year was brought this bulky jewel,  
Vase of fine metal, ark or idol, so  
Enchanting that no rare and costly fuel  
Burns on its altar stair  
Too rich, too rare.

“ ‘ Say but the word, and to an inner chamber  
Which no man sees, not even his tribal kin,  
My spearmen break, my nimble footmen clamber  
And from the town that secret we shall win.’  
But—‘ Peace !’ I cried ; ‘ tempt me no more ! I ask  
Of Ahram wonders deep and mind-perplexing ;  
’Tis not for us to mar his god-like task,  
With greedy souls his little household vexing.  
Get you back whence you came,  
You and your shame !’

“He fled. When Ahram came, his shining forehead  
Told that the problem had been solved at last.  
I knew his brain contained the temple storied  
Should save the future and condone the past.  
Three days we talked, three nights and days great  
Ahram  
Told me the plan of his gigantic charm ;  
Three days and nights my wonder-stricken harem  
Watched without rest for sounds of joy or harm ;  
When, suddenly, east and west  
My runners raced.

“’Twas then I raised in Babylon the building,  
Trophy of conquests o’er the sky and earth,  
Whose gold the kings replaced by paltry gilding,  
Whose mimicked form but roused my hollow mirth.  
Fools that they were to try replace the hidden  
Wise, planet-reckoned secrets of that fane !  
The demons laugh when fondly they are bidden ;  
Monarchs that wisdom lack must build in vain.  
Mine was the only one  
That favor won.

“ Ay, many enigmas lay within the plans  
And projects Ahram drew for all men’s wonder.  
And first it stood a symbol to the clans  
Of following epochs that the king, whose plunder  
Was drawn from every nation, could ordain  
A mausoleum such as Egypt’s princes  
Had not to show on Nile’s o’erteeming plain.  
It was the tomb for one who nowise minces  
Words, but whose lightest say  
Kings must obey.

“ But to the living world the fabric beacons  
The fame of Kush, my father huge of arm ;  
Thus was inculcate, so wise Ahram reckoned,  
Regard for parents ; thus was raised a charm  
To save an impious city from o’erthrowal.  
Who saw at morn that land-mark ’gainst the sun,  
Sure of much offspring, won a rich bestowal  
Of flocks and grain ; who watched it, day being done,  
To him thrice profits grew ;  
His wives were true.



“ So on this spot, to all the stars propitious,  
A mighty, square foundation was intrenched ;  
With blood from bulls, instead of slaves pernicious,  
Ahram in mystic rite the area drenched.  
Its basement was of rock and sun-baked brick,  
Square, wisely cornered ; it would hold a river ;  
Vaulted it was and dark, with walls so thick  
No raging sea might ever make it quiver !  
Window it had but one  
And always shone

“ Therethrough the north star red, the wise, the healthy ;  
Its ruddy eye forever pierced the murk,  
Fixing in magic chains those spirits filthy  
That in the bowels of earth uneasy lurk.  
This star alone forever holds his station  
Without one change which eye of man may see,  
A ruby pivot, whereon all the nation  
Of heavenly ones revolve eternally.  
Sublimest sentinel,  
He stares on hell.

“ By cloudy nights, when all the sky was wild,  
The spirits black, the jinn, the elf, the devil  
Rode on the wind, the flowers of earth defiled,  
Tore at the tower and havoc played in revel,  
Should yet the north star, when the storm clouds drift  
By will of God a little way asunder,  
Drive but one gold dart through a fortunate rift—  
Back to their holes the swarming demons blunder,  
Fearing the diamond lance  
Of his clean glance.

“ If men dared creep therethrough by torchlight dim,  
They saw, low molded on the slimy walling,  
Monsters of hideous view, misshapen, grim,  
With grisly mien the stoutest heart appalling.  
Vast scaly beasts with eyes replete with loathing,  
Pale, flabby worms in tortuous intercoil  
And snakes like weeds a rocky cavern clothing  
Seemed the foul den with their foul skins to soil.  
And yet a strange cold smile  
Grinned from the pile;

“ For they were glad, those figures worse than bestial,  
Though far too vile to care for aught on earth  
Save their own dross ; they loathed all things celestial  
And ate the spawn to which they gave a birth.  
Their lumpish limbs they rent from one another  
Where in a dreadful battle they were knit,  
Nor felt a hurt. Each bleeding dragon brother  
Fought with his stumps and though in death throes  
bit.

Of them the sudden fright  
Would blanch hair white.

“ Into this square base from Euphrates led  
A deep canal o'er-vaulted all and hidden  
From light and men. By sluices great was stayed  
The rush of sudden waters, until bidden  
To flood the whole. A granite chest stood there  
Empty, but carved with all my wars laborious ;  
There, sealed in lead, my earthly frame should wear  
About it water and above a glorious  
Sky-reaching, marvelous tower,  
Sign of my power.

“Then on the deep foundation thick and roomy  
    Builted throughout by that short swarthy race  
Which tilled the marshes when my father gloomy  
    His blood-stained triumphs from the East did trace,  
I causèd seven of the proudest peoples  
    Skillful with tools and forced to labors rude  
To raise this model of your mosques and steeples,  
    This tower pyramidal and diverse-hued  
        Which like the mountains hoar  
        Steadfast should soar.

“It was a mountain in itself. It told  
    Of Eastern hills that gave my father being.  
On the long plains, which then far smoother rolled,  
    It soared from earth as though to heaven fleeing  
Up from the squalor of the low-roofed town.  
    Was the sun fierce, or came the wintry breezes,  
Still kept the tower, or at foot, or crown,  
    Cool for the parched, or warmth for him who freezes,  
        Just as, when seasons change,  
        Hill-dwellers range.

“ Then were Euphrates’ face and all my borders  
Crawling with slaves who still my praises sung ;  
A hundred tribes obedient to my orders  
Hailed me a god in each conflicting tongue.  
No king might stay, however dread of power,  
His hand from laboring, despite his worth,  
Nor even might Nimrod’s self withhold his hour  
Of work to raise the lordliest flower of earth.  
The architect approved  
But no hand moved.

“ Black was the first tier. Those were Nile-horse tamers  
Who baked the pitchy bricks and laid them clear.  
White was the next, whereof the smooth-limbed framers  
Were clean-cut Greeks from out their isly mere.  
Saffron the third ; only the endless treasures  
Of Indian kings such costly tint could buy ;  
To dye those bricks what unrecorded measures  
Of tender roots their husbandmen supply !  
These were the first of seven  
’Twixt earth and heaven.

“ My Medes and Persians then their necks submitted  
And toiled to rear a story all of blue.

The mariners of warlike Sidon fitted

Their share of porcelain red as blood in hue.

The sixth was silver ; their fierce spirit broken,

Iberians wrought it, from the sunset drawn ;

The seventh was sheathed in gold and stood a token

Of princes humbled near the gates of dawn.

Each one was given two names—

Honors and shames.

“ For each was sign of some great monarch’s ravin,

But each spoke, too, of a celestial star :

My heavenly captains were the planets seven

That rain down victory in each glorious war.

About the whole a horse-shoe wall was builded

Black, with one issue toward the southern plain,

Whose inner face with hunting scenes was gilded :

There lay a lioness by javelin slain ;

A mountain cow lay here

Pierced by a spear.

“ Beyond, the workmen of my swarthy nation  
Had molded fine upon a pitchy ground  
The hill whereon the king his chase did station,  
The plain on which a varied prey was found.  
Above were seen the gentle birds of heaven  
Whom well-taught hawks on tireless wing pursued,  
Doves which the falcon from their nest had driven,  
And ducks whose feathers were with blood imbrued.  
These were the scenes which shone  
Within that zone.

“ But at the portal of those precincts holy  
Two figures crouched, of most majestic mien ;  
So cunning framed that they might baffle solely  
The jinns which keep the land from growing green.  
Upon the right, hewn from one rock gigantic,  
There kneeled a bull ; but all his upper frame  
Was like a man’s. The virtues necromantic  
Of this great charm all demons male could tame.  
On his tongue’s tip alway  
One finger lay.

“ And on the left, over the way, was lying  
A mighty leopardess with sword-like claws,  
Yet woman all above. Now, she replying  
With gesture meet, yet different, gives pause  
With hollow right hand to her shelly ear ;  
And, while with rage the leopard claws are gripping,  
Her clear, calm, slumbrous-lidded traits appear  
To yearn for sounds all other ears outstripping,  
While her clenched left is pressed  
Tight to her breast.

“ Such talismans of watchful care and cunning  
Did Ahram found, so that no evil jinn  
Female or male, no hungry spirit dunning  
For ghostly food and prayers which lighten sin  
Should dare invade the temple of the fire,  
Which as a flame stiffened to brick and stone  
Still from a round hearth skyward should aspire,  
So long as issued from the bull no tone,  
And while that palm of her  
Never made stir.



“How frame the wonders, mark the heavenly traces  
To those who knew revealed within the pile?  
So squared the basement was, alternate faces  
Looked eastward, south, west, northward o’er the  
plain.

The strange huge shadow swung about the basis  
With tale of moons, of seasons, hours of day,  
An index vast, whose most entangled mazes  
My beggar architect thought out in play,  
Wherein he did disguise  
Truths of the skies.

“Of gold and sunshine and of angels South  
The first fane argued; of the North and glittering  
Moon-rays, the next; the third, of sprites of drouth,  
Ruddy, by West all husbandmen embittering;  
The fourth of saffron and of morning dyes  
Round the whole compass; but the fifth, of heaven  
And upward height and blue from noonday skies.  
Downward and black, the lowest of the seven  
Did for all being fix  
Dimensions six.

“And that fane sixth, the greatest saving one,  
Betokened centers which have no dimension,  
Yet being, are. Weigh all the building’s sum,  
And Ahram’s subtle and matured invention  
Placed that as mid-point where the balances  
Would straightly poise, nor jog.—

But why discover  
Problems, when things of beauty, sure to please,  
Crowd to a mind that runs with memories over  
While the tongue, rusty, trips  
Between the lips?

“From right to left about the flashing mass  
Arose a spiral stair, the tower ringing,  
Whereon aloft my jeweled throne could pass  
As round the Polestar goes the dragon singing;  
But on the crest—a glittering far-seen wonder  
Of jade, of amber and of facet-stone—  
With mine own hands I built to the god of thunder  
The sacred fane where he might house alone,  
With couch both soft and wide  
For his own bride.

“ Her had my seer selected from his folk;  
She was the gem that hid within his dwelling;  
A maid of spirit, never galled by yoke,  
By name of Esther splendid fatēs foretelling.  
With fearful oaths, by lightning-bolt and thunder,  
By evil genii, by my father’s beard,  
I swore no man her sacred zone should sunder,  
But always, high in the pure sky up-reared,  
She in the shrine should spread  
The air-god’s bed.

“Small was the care that Nimrod had for women!  
Of wondrous queens too many I had known  
Eager to be my sport, my slave, my leman,  
Whose beauty well had won a separate throne.  
One after one I threw them by, disgusted,  
Yet the least glorious in these pygmy days  
Would shine like moons compared with targets rusted  
Beside the beauties whom ye moderns praise!  
Esther was given grace  
To see my face.

“ Her veil was drawn. Ah, what a heavenly splendor  
Broke from her form upon my jaded eyes !  
‘ Prophet,’ I cried, ‘ ’tis well you did not render  
Account to me of this most glorious prize !  
But I have sworn. Load her with gifts and station  
A woman’s guard about the elected maid ;  
Bid that a herald to each subject nation  
Trumpet the name of her whom I have made  
Greatest of women ; ay,  
Bride of the sky !’

“ She was so quiet ! Yet, methought, most thrilling  
That stillness was. And when each lazy sheath  
Sloped over eyes like opals, I was willing  
To swear her loveliest yet. But when beneath  
Shot out the startled radiance of those eyes,  
O, then she seemed no earthly, fleshly creature ;  
I stood aghast, lest toward the envious skies  
She might ascend before my hand could reach her,  
Draw her close, breath to breath,  
Once ere my death !

“But no! Though Iran could contain no woman  
Safe from my will, this single girl alone  
Had been reserved by vows so superhuman  
That far away from my embrace she'd grown.  
Strange are the deeds of love! That my great body  
Should tremble leaflike at a captive maid,  
Should glow with rapture while a cheek grows ruddy,  
And at a frown turn anxious and afraid!  
She and the seer of mine  
Were half divine.

“Betwixt her brows Ishtar had set her seal  
Shaped like an oval mole. In other maidens  
Haply that mark a blemish would reveal;  
Not so with her: it was in rhyme, in cadence  
With all her wondrous charm for joy and harm.  
Nor perfect was her figure, nor quite even  
The features of her face; yet all was warm  
With such a look! as if from glowing heaven  
Falling, to woman turned,  
The love-star burned.



VI

THE UPPER FANES





VI

THE UPPER FANES

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“ BUT let me strive, although the night be waning,  
To tell by rote a portion of the scene  
That once shone here, though naught be now remain-  
ing

In proof of memories of what things have been  
Upon a chosen, separate day those seven

Tall stories, each with dark rites, were begun  
That from a subtile reckoning with heaven

I and my peoples every ill might shun.

Space was o'ercome. Superb

Time felt my curb.

“ And first we were the day’s great wheel renouncing :  
His shrine of gold, second to none in worth,  
The six times variegated stories crowning,  
Spired aloft far from the awestruck earth.  
To each there was a fourfold statued portal,  
Since four times seven the days of every moon ;  
Four doors, seven stories and the fane immortal  
Are twelve all told from monsoon to monsoon.  
Year, month and day and hour  
Stood in its power.

“ The four doors of the topmost fane were built  
Of glittering sunstone and of topaz golden.  
They seemed from far undecked, yet were they drilled  
With marvelous gravings. You had there beholden  
In delicate networks of incisèd lines  
Lions, bulls, boars, the shape of Behemoth ;  
In deep green emeralds there were pictured pines  
And banyan-trees of huge and vigorous growth ;  
Tongue could not name the swarms  
Of sun-vowed forms !

“When first the sun-god’s matin eyes came beaming  
In at the eastern door of his own fane  
With hands of gold he touched fine harps, the dreaming  
Sky’s bride to call from slumber’s tangled skein.  
Above the cities of the plain the tender  
Evasive strains dropt gently from the sky;  
The peoples knelt and toward that morning splendor  
Their cleansèd brows and wide palms stretched on high;  
Low on the sun-gilt spire  
Burned Esther’s fire.

“Within the sun-god’s fleckless habitation  
No altar was, no rug of any hue;  
All was clear glass, wherein by duplication  
A thousand-fold the sun himself did view.  
A single diamond window overhead  
Focussed his rays, just as he reached high heaven,  
And lit the sandal-wood which Esther spread  
To catch the bounty by the sun-god given.  
Yet did she never dare  
To enter there!

“No woman might that holy fane invade ;

    But Esther, at the western doorway kneeling,  
Plenished each noon her fire, though sore afraid,

    Lest the great god, his soundless sun-bolt dealing,  
Should strike her dead. But when her torch was lit

    Up to her shrine upon the platform giddy  
Like frightened dove to dovecote she would flit

    With bated breath, with cold hands, feet unsteady.

    Then knew all Babylon

    That noon was on.

“But when came evening with a rest from toil

    The hidden harps, gift from the Orient's princes,  
Rang out their music o'er the teeming soil

    To master worn with watching, slave that winces  
At cruel goad. Then tower-ward turned each face,

    Spoke litanies for me and for their altars,  
Against the powers of darkness begged for grace,

    Intoned, or whispered, as they stood, the psalters

    That sing how all men yearn

    For sun's return.

“ Thus was appeased the first day of the seven ;  
The next belonged to her who shines most bright  
When stars are palest and the gloomy heaven  
Has lost all traces of the sun-god’s light.  
The silvery moon that hunts when clouds are thick  
Within the shrine was bidden to her dwelling ;  
Moon that gives love, but empty all and sick,  
No sooner forming than at once dispelling,  
Quick as the mists that steal  
Past her white wheel.

“ The outer wall in mansions eight and twenty  
Divided was, wherein low-graven stood  
Symbols of stars that drought portend, or plenty  
Of rain or wind, and formed a dial rude  
For the whole month. But inside at the centre  
A pillar rose of half-transparent stone :  
Should one at nightfall in that precinct enter,  
The mass with such unearthly pallor shone  
As if a lamp it bore  
Deep in its core.

“Of crystal were the jambs and lintels made ;  
The thresholds four, precious with jewels stranger,  
Were formed of moonstones that are used in aid  
Of those the moon has brought in secret danger.  
Sad are the maidens by the moonstroke blighted !  
They rise from sleep, drawn by a hidden force ;  
Through perilous ways they stare ; they walk unlighted  
Like murderers mad with shadowy wild remorse ;  
Waking from hideous dreams  
With crazy screams.

“But inward round the tier, all silver crusted,  
Fair wrought by captives from the western isles,  
A tale of grief was to the walls intrusted—  
How bootless love that heavenly queen beguiles.  
O'er hill and dale the fair was pictured flying  
To overtake her love with golden hair ;  
Her lover deaf, who wist not of her sighing  
And saw not, blind, the marks of her despair !  
Then in a pleasant land  
She seems to stand,

“Where at the last her lover is o’ertaken :  
He lies upon a couch of spicy leaves ;  
But his sweet eyelids, though with kisses shaken,  
Will never ope for any wile she weaves.  
And farther on the artful western painter  
Had limned her flying back in sore dismay,  
Whereat the charm grew faint and ever fainter  
Until he woke and blithely hied his way :  
Thereat the queen renewed  
Her following rude.

“And once again she’s caught him ; but alas !  
What deadly spite is this ? He cannot see her.  
Swiftly from sight her lovely form must pass  
Just when he waits and seems no more to flee her !  
She waves her arms—alas ! he is unconscious ;  
Her bosom bares, but all her charms are naught ;  
She fain would shriek, but not a whisper launches  
From out the mouth of her with love distraught.  
Nay, than thin air her white  
Hand is less light.

“Thereby was seen where those Iberians savage  
A hunt had drawn. They showed with crafty skill  
Upon the youth a boar commit such ravage  
That all his life upon the grass did spill.  
Thereon was pictured how his heavenly lover,  
Stricken with anguish at his mortal pain,  
Above him, weeping, in the air did hover,  
Shrieked and implored for help—yet all in vain!  
On her hard virgin breast  
Rocked him to rest

“And mourned his loss with woodland ways of sorrow,  
With band of nymphs disheveled and forlorn,  
Satyrs in sackcloth and sly fauns that borrow  
For once a visage tearful, sad and worn.  
Within the cave he stretched, embalmed and fragrant  
As once he lay beneath the strange sleeping-spell;  
Thither by night she turned her footsteps vagrant  
Her anguish to the rocks and woods to tell.  
Such was Fate’s bitter boon  
To the pale moon.



“Whose was the third day and the third high story?

Beneath the platform of the queen of night  
The fane was built for him who loves the gory

Affronts of battle and the thick of fight.

He is the god of that small angry star

Red as the sky when sun in wrath is setting  
Which, most portentous of a coming war,

Is cause of fame's and misery's begetting.

These walls the blood-stained hands  
Of pirate bands

“From Sidon faring stained with carnal juices

Bright red like blood. The cornices within  
Were hung with targets, weapons for all uses,  
Trumpets that bray across the battle-din.

The floor was all a field of grassy fire

That flickered still, yet never lower burned,  
So true to life, the foot was lifted higher

As if the lesson never could be learned.

For 'tis a hot, quick fire,  
The war-god's ire.

“ And round about the art of skilled Phœnicians  
Had painted fresh the taking of a town.  
High on a tower a score of wan magicians  
Besought the planet on their foes to frown.  
Along the town-walls iron-souled defenders  
With boiling lead, with stone and spear and dart  
Fight with a useless rage that only renders  
The victor dire and adamant of heart.  
There, on the lower plane,  
A dreadful train

“ Of harnessed men strode on with leveled lances  
In windy rows, as when the pulsing breeze  
Bows into even ranks as it advances  
The wintry tops of glittering ice-bound trees.  
They storm the wall ; they swarm at every angle ;  
They cut and thrust ; they fling the quenchless torch ;  
Though arms are lopped, their teeth the foe can mangle  
Reckless of how the gathering flames may scorch.  
Beyond, a stately fleet  
The sight did greet

“ Where too was battle and a dire commotion :  
    Against each other like to mad bulls ran  
The myriad-footed galleys. All the ocean  
    Was full of wrecks as far as eye could scan.  
Here lay two hulks, whereon a tide of seamen  
    Flowed to and fro in grapple desperate ;  
There, on a captive merchantman, the women  
    Destroyed themselves to escape a terrible fate.  
        The sea with blood is red :  
        Countless the dead.

“ Next there was limned a plain encumbered densely  
    With horse and foot, with chariots flecked with gore,  
O'er which there hung the horror that intensely  
    Grips at the nerves in hushes just before '  
The jar of battle. Eyes might hear the moan,  
    The hideous crash, the carnage and the madness.  
With broken armor all the field was sown  
    And through it stalked the war-god, smiling gladness,  
        Sucking some grateful death  
        With each new breath.

“The doorways to the shrine of Mars had arches  
Of spotty bloodstone, while each pillar’s head  
Was formed like skulls of wolves that dog the marches  
Of wounded braves. Rubies of gleaming red  
These had for eyes, and on each bare skull stood  
The red-pate bird that startles the lone forest  
With taps like drum, when against fields of blood  
The dogs howl loudest, wives are weeping sorest :  
Such was the grisly fane  
Of man’s great bane.

“Now underneath, unto the fourth day given,  
Spread out the temple of the tiny star  
Which never frankly shines in midmost heaven  
But hides its head before the god of war.  
Blue was the house that planet, the dissembler,  
The slippery one was bidden to invade ;  
A merchant race, for merchandise a trembler,  
The far-fetched tiles of sky-sprung azure made,  
Tiles by the folk designed  
Of farther Inde.

“ The hall within was lined with diverse metal  
Whereon by craftsmen were sly pictures sealed  
With fire in low relief; thus: men who settle  
A barter, and, their perjuries revealed,  
Make off with ill-got gains; a subtle thief  
Who crawls upon a campment in the dawning  
To steal a blood-horse, but when caught reproof  
Obtains by witty lies and crafty fawning.  
Such were the scenes applied  
To the east side.

“ Along the north stretched out a snowy region  
Wherein lithe youths were sweating at their play,  
Made mimic war between each mimic legion  
And trained their bodies all the livelong day.  
O'er snow, near by, one saw a file of deer  
Were swiftly drawing cars of merchandise  
And farther on the courts of towns appear  
Where orators lead captive all men's eyes,  
Swaying the mobile throng  
Toward right or wrong.

“ Upon the west was made a sea in motion  
With tossing ships careening to the blast ;  
Adventurers were seen appeasing ocean  
By costly presents on the waters cast.  
Not far away there rose a range of hills  
Where men for ores, the furnace melted, burrow ;  
Here for a heavy crop the sand they till  
And there the beds of empty streams they furrow,  
Even as my Median bands  
Searched the far strands.

“ And furthermore, the southern wall adorning,  
In caravans from torrid climes are seen  
Beasts and strange birds, men who are all men’s  
scorning  
For monstrous shape, for fierce or puny mien ;  
Men of vast strength, men of a baby’s size,  
With heads too great, or feet like elephants,  
Serpents in baskets, many a brook-won prize  
Of glittering gems, healing and hard-found plants ;  
Bark from envenomed trees  
Which cure disease.

“The ceiling was a miracle of art

With sapphires deep and palest turquoise blended.

A sky was there, whereof one cloudy part

Was milky quartz ; as if a storm had ended

Across the darker clouds was drawn that bridge

Of wondrous hues whereon the sky's great father

Sends earthward fast his messenger as pledge

That for a time his wrath shall cease to gather,

Revenging fast insult

With lightning bolt.

“Like palm-trees were the pillars of the gates

Of this lithe god, around the which were tangled

Wise serpents topaz-green ; each one his mate's

Mouth, tail and middle touched in peace, nor  
mangled

With teeth his friend. Thus was the fane. Far greater

The shrine below, for o'er each august portal

Was shaped in ebon the strong serpent-hater,

The eagle which if not slain is immortal,

Nor e'er is dying found

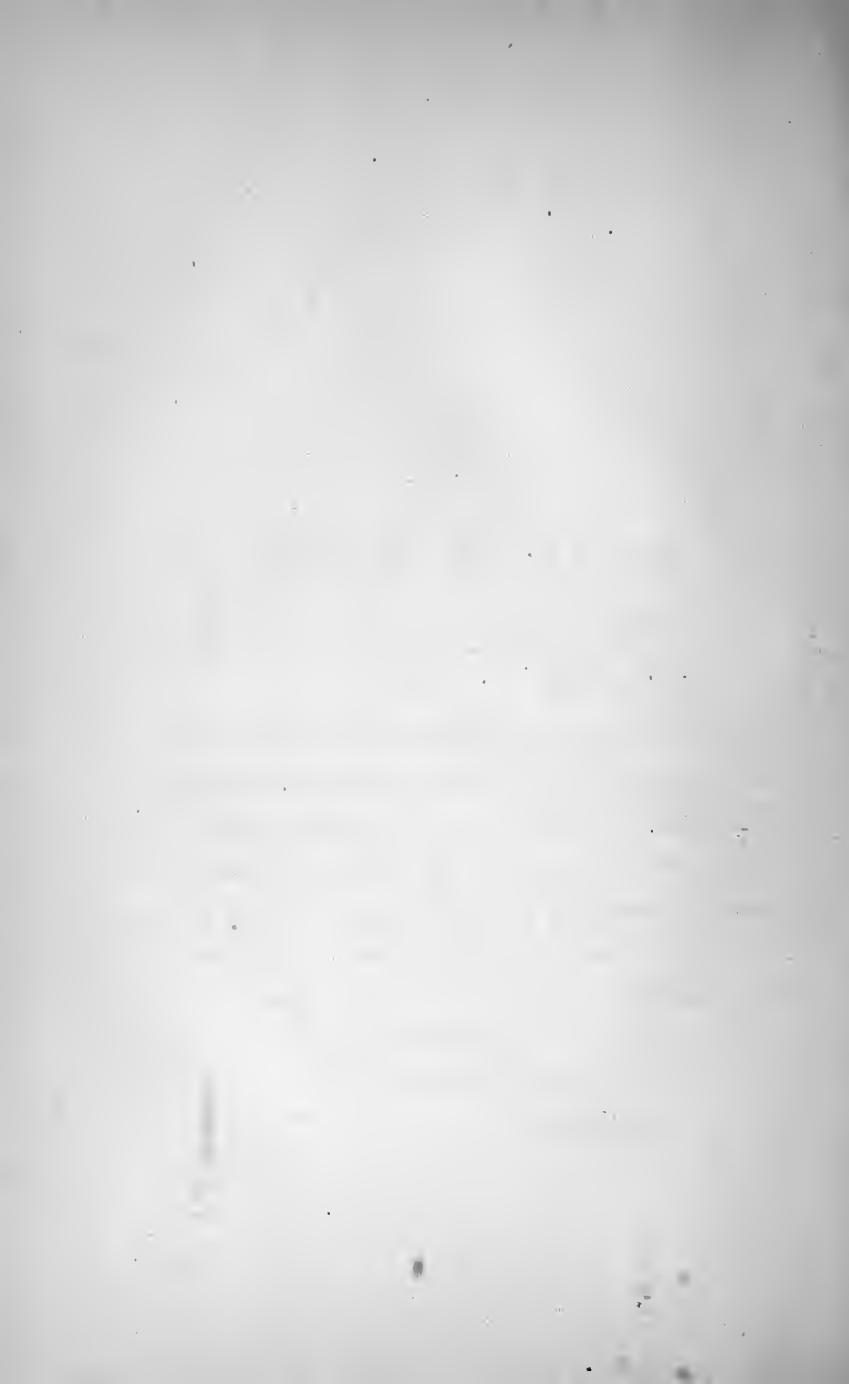
On the earth's round.

For eagles that as nestlings learn to gaze  
    Deep in the eye of the great world-reviver  
And are destroyed unless they stand the blaze  
    Unwinking; eagles are their own depriver  
Of outworn life. When beak and claws are grown  
    So crook, they cannot rend or strike the quarry,  
Sunward in tempest towering, sheerly down  
    They dash upon the ocean! and a sorry  
    Featherless, shapeless form  
    Sinks in the storm.



VII

THE LOWER TEMPLES



## VII

### THE LOWER TEMPLES

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“ COULD you have passed the gateways of the story  
    Third from the earth, vowed to the great fifth day,  
It would have seemed that in an oak-grove hoary  
    With age, yet lusty, chanced your feet to stray.  
The ceiling seemed with leafy boughs bespread  
    And upper walls with mighty tree-trunks dense;  
But underneath on carven screens were read  
    Tales of high prowess, victories immense  
    O'er the astounding, rude  
    Titanic brood.

“The place was sacred to that royal star  
Which sails majestic through supernal ether;  
Of mighty force to help the earth or mar;  
The cloud-compeller, the white mountain-wreather,  
The thunderer in hail-storm or in rain,  
The god whose voice is heard in wailing branches,  
Who, toying with the crocus on the plain,  
Shakes the hill-passes with his avalanches;  
Who levels towns, who stirs  
Ripe chestnut burrs.

“And there along the wainscot, deftly graven,  
Were banqueters who smiled above a feast:  
Here sat a king; there priests with crowns all shaven  
In shape of sun or moon. The royal beast  
Lay there as watchdog to the throne, the lion.  
Before them filed an army, one array  
Of pompous pride, and at their head the scion  
Of kingly line his mincing horse did play.  
Such was the festal sight  
Upon the right.

“ But let me tell you how the gates were framed :

Of amethyst the southern door was builded,  
Friendly to drunkards of their vice ashamed.

With yellow sards the northern posts were gilded.  
Upon the east stood pillars of dark jade,  
Concealing, half revealing crafty gravings.

The western doorway was of loadstone made  
That draws from far metals in slender shavings  
Even as the sun draws still  
Earth's every hill.

“ To left the ranks of royal oaks were broken

By olive groves ; on panels of dark wood  
Stood fields of tender grain but late awoken

From wintry sleep, and next in furrows stood  
The eldest of a band of husbandmen ;

Up to the clouds a grateful hand he lifted  
In thanks for purging wind and gend'ring rain  
And with weak arms a mimic snow he sifted  
Of seeds in hope to please  
The lord of trees.

“But on the next wall was a dire contention  
Between the generous god and those rude sons  
Of chaos and commotion. Deep invention  
Can only stem the force that, like to tons  
Of mindless stone, their swollen bodies wield!  
The god of rain was pictured with his lightning  
Streaming resistless o’er his awful shield,  
The sheen whereof, all lesser giants fright’ning,  
Drove to their former berth  
In heart of earth.

“Yet farther on was seen the first great forming  
Of iron weapons. From the mountain side  
The god had digged the ore, and fashioned, warming  
In lambent flame, a sword so sharp, hard, wide,  
The tooth of time it blunted.

On a tyrant  
The blade he tried. The latter fled away,  
Dropping from nerveless arms the last aspirant  
To his old throne, an own son ; them to slay  
Always had been his wont  
Before that brunt.

“And he, of his own offspring the afflicter,  
Was honored, too, in seventh and lowest tier ;  
But mighty lay betwixt him and his victor  
The shrine of her who dulls the wargod’s spear,  
Strips of their pride divinities the greatest,  
Humbles to dust the careless, snubs disdain—  
A goddess who, if earliest not is latest  
And in the hearts of graybeards still shall reign.  
She who within her sphere  
Has not a peer.

“Whom do I mean save Ishtar? Nimrod even,  
I, hard-thewed hunter, at the last was crushed  
Beneath her ivory heel. Within that haven  
All noises rude, all voices rough were hushed.  
Cooing of doves, the amorous cat’s soft purring  
Were there allowed, but of the voice of men  
Only those mellow with the heart’s deep stirring  
Echoing about the murmurous chambers ran.  
List how to earth that flame  
Of white love came !

“ It was in spring-time, in the world’s fair morning,  
When gracious, fickle and alluring sea  
Yearned for still earth with such deep-rooted longing  
That stirred at heart was her immensity.  
From every part the ocean drew her finer,  
More spiritual essence into foamy wave,  
Whereof the allied winds became refiner,  
And, far by south, to one close spiral drave,  
Where lay, as though in bower,  
The world’s one flower—

“ Ishtar the white, the rosy, the transparent.  
Her fragrant head was pillowed on a hand  
Cunningly ’twixt her yellow locks apparent  
As smoothy milkstones hide in golden sand.  
Her dimpled elbow on the wave reclining  
Gave to her weight a little, but no more ;  
Her sun-bright tresses were not wet but shining  
With humid kisses of the dark-green floor.  
Her counterfeit could move  
To dreams of love.



“ That was great Ishtar’s making. Phrygian Greeks  
Engraved her thus within the marble palace  
Sixth from the top. For hers is still the week’s  
Sixth day amongst you. Half within the chalice  
Of one wide-petaled lotus-bloom she lay ;  
About her sported dolphins ; through the billows  
Bending before her they did steer their way  
And drew the goddess on her perfumed pillows.  
There the clear marble stone  
With soft hues shone

“ Not painted, but in darkness fashioned slowly  
Within the heart of subtly-shaping earth.  
The craft to cut that stone had vanished wholly  
Long years before ye moderns had your birth.  
The floor of Ishtar was of stone so clear  
It looked a sea, a still lake or a mirror  
Wherein inverted did the fane appear :  
The entering novice was at first in error  
Lest in a cool wave’s lip  
Her sandal dip.

“ And here and there upon the walls were chiseled  
Most lifelike groves of myrtle, rose and peach ;  
Apples of love, pomegranates which to grizzled  
And languid age a youthful vigor teach.  
Among their leaves were sparrows ; swans and doves  
Were mimicked well along that pooly mirror ;  
The bird was there that all too fondly loves  
Its absent mate and dies of lonely terror.  
In the wide lintel's cope  
Its eye did ope

“ One rose-white jewel set with pearl and beryl  
Yellow, white, green, whereof the shifty sheen  
Was told again within the waters sterile  
Of that false pool. The opal great, I ween,  
A symbol was of love that hides from sight,  
Yet burns the hotter still, albeit hidden ;  
And in strange ways and devious comes to light,  
Arrives, goes, turns, and goes for good, unbidden :  
For love a deep touch-stone—  
Ishtar's alone.

“ Hers was a fane the greatest of all others  
And lowest too, save that of Father Time,  
The shrine of Saturn, the hoar god who smothers  
His infant sons in fell destruction’s slime.  
Because the rest are Ishtar’s slaves : the master  
That moves the sun, the empress of the moon,  
The war-god fierce, the god who dreads disaster,  
The festal banqueter who loves high-noon—  
All who have come to earth  
Through seas of birth

“ Must deal with Ishtar beautiful and dread ;  
Behind her couch like beggars they must station  
Till in her oval mirror she have read  
Their fates in love. Now even such probation  
Portrayed was there. Upon a bank of snow  
With red raw feet was such a suitor standing.  
He trembled much and on his hands did blow,  
Frozen or parched at Ishtar’s light commanding.  
Hot, cold like snow, in turn  
Her love doth burn.

“ But vaster yet were portals deep and roomy  
Of agate, onyx and of serpent stone  
Which frowned about the temple black and gloomy  
Where Saturn brooded, molded on his throne.  
About his nape his arms were sadly twined.

His face was hid. A few locks white and scattered  
Hung down between. To desperate change resigned  
He crouched like one with whom they little mattered,  
Things on the old earth's ball,  
Great things or small!

“ All wrought in fired earths, his back so broad  
Shored up, it seemed, a main wall of the tower;  
So, should he come to life and seize his sword,  
Which like a sickle moon in her first hour  
Shone by his side, the fabric o'er his neck  
Had split right through. Then all the shrill gods'  
chiding  
Had not availed to save their homes from wreck,  
Nor all the strength within their spheres residing  
Prop for a moment's tide  
Their ruined pride!

“Above his head a cypress wreathed gaunt arms  
Whereon there sate an ancient raven pair ;  
Into his ears these gray birds croaked their charms :  
One told the future and kept green despair  
At loss of just such days as still the other,  
Memory by name, recounted croak by croak.  
He seem'd to long the actual day to smother,  
Live yesterday, to-morrow's tide invoke,  
Rather than bear the sour  
Present's dark hour.

“About the four sides of this empty shrine,  
The wall's foot and the doorway lintels lining,  
Ran a strange rounded beading, whose design  
Was slowly seen, until at last the shining  
False eyes of one huge snake revealed its form.  
Around the fane it stretched, until o'ertaking  
Its own thick tail, the motionless gray worm  
Laid fast thereto. Above, through jungles breaking,  
Were elephants whose feet  
'Twere death to meet.

“ Now in the space betwixt the tower and wall  
Of horseshoe form that round about was builded  
There stood a sacred grove, wherein grew tall  
The windy hill-pines, whose long cones were gilded  
To catch the sun’s glint. On the other side,  
A clump of granates, every apple covered  
With silver like the moon’s. These grew the pride  
Of twice six priests elect, who always hovered  
With careful guard around  
The holy ground.

“ A well there was deep sunken in each grove,  
Of virtues sovereign and of magic seeming;  
That of the sun among the pines did prove  
Most strange by night. For then there glowed a  
gleaming  
Deep in its entrails, as the tube it were  
That star-men point against the glittering fires ;  
Therethrough the sun, though lost to upper air,  
Could still be seen, the while the moon aspires  
And sheds her still white rain  
Across the plain.

“ That other spring, bubbling among the apples,  
Was all the moon's, and greatest was its might  
When quivering heat from off the moist land dapples  
The noon horizon with unsteady light.  
Then, were the moon far wandered from the sky,  
A sheen of silver in the darksome water  
Pledged her return ; she was not lost for aye,  
But to the votary rightly that besought her  
Would tell what bridal bed  
The fates would spread.

“ The twelve priests of the sun and moon were clad  
In robes of separate hue, therein enwoven  
Celestial signs. A mystic rite they had,  
The sacred mold with golden mattocks cloven  
To plant with grain, the crop wherefrom they gave  
To all men of the earth because 'twas holy.  
Landsmen from far the sacred seed did crave  
And pilgrims fared to Babylonia solely  
A handful to obtain  
Of lucky grain.

“There had you stood in bowery Babylon  
And gazed afar at that my loftiest wonder ;  
You had conjectured of the secrets done  
In stone and brick the flashing tier-tints under. “  
The sun and moon shrines were my royal head ;  
Mars was the courage in my breast residing ;  
Mercury for my active heart stood stead :  
Four greater gods were thus my frame dividing ;  
But the dread upmost shrine  
My crown divine !

“My lower man was symboled by the three :  
Jupiter, Venus, Saturn the deep-brooding ;  
Symbols they were of the wide-searching sea.  
The two above, to my broad chest alluding,  
Stood for the air. The still superior ones  
For fire ethereal, that to which inferior  
Is air and shines the brightest in the sun’s  
Omnipotent, all-gendering, deep interior.  
Thus sprang the cone-shaped god  
Up from the sod.



“A dreary secret has not yet been told.

Unknown to Ahram, at the eunuch's bidding,  
With murder every story was befouled,

This place seven times by guile of Ahram ridding.  
Bitsu had caused of each land one chief man

In brickwork to be walled, unfed, unwatered.  
Ahram for all the wisdom of his plan

Heard not, absorbed, how the dry mouths of slaugh-  
tered

Chiefs, their far countries' pride,  
For vengeance cried !

“It was an ancient custom of our land

Which Ahram cursed. Yet Bitsu showed me clearly  
How their seven sprites like guardian souls would stand  
Within their live entombments late and early.

Alas, 'twas they who lured the foulest jinns,

Wind-devils, demons and the ghosts uncanny

Whose clawlike hands could grapple where my sins

Had left within the pile too many a cranny-

Still shouldered out more wide

By those inside !

“’Twas done. East, west, north, south the humbled  
nations

Departed, dazzled by my godlike pride.

My fame was blown to earth’s remotest stations,

To seas remote and farthest mountain-side.

And as in bands they fled, their labors ended,

They saw my throne, bright with the jeweled glare,

By all the pomp of Babylon attended

Ever ascending by the spiral stair :

Curses in many a tongue

Backward they flung.

“ I heard them not. I only marked the gleaming

Of countless cities and the endless chain

Of slaves and booty-laden camels streaming

From every land o’er the deep Shinar plain.

On high I saw the radiant vestal beckon

A brother god toward the celestial house.

Was it so strange that I should lawful reckon

Whatever passion in my breast might rouse ?

The pile which tortures built

Was used for guilt.

“ Before the threshold of the sun I bade  
The pomp cry halt. Then from my dais golden  
Leaping, alone prostration short I made  
To fire directly to the sky beholden ;  
And all alone I scaled the highest peak  
Where Esther stood in robe of many colors,  
The hues whereof should fright the jinns who seek  
To plague that holy one with spiteful dolors.  
    Wrapped in her priestess-hood  
    Fair Esther stood.

“ Know you how Spring ascends the mountain valleys  
In fragrant dances on the line of snows,  
Enrobed in wind half-cool, half-warm, that dallies  
With vineyards now, and now by snow peak blows?  
When vernal hills are green with dainty guesses,  
With hope, with promise of delicious pain,  
And sun from udders of the glacier presses  
The foamy milk, life to the thirsty plain—  
    Know you the zest that fills  
    Spring in the hills?

“ Thus did it seem before the glowing face  
Of Esther, captive-slave and priestess-royal,  
In whom such keenness and such zest held place  
With natural genius. And then first did loyal  
Untainted thoughts for any woman rise  
Within my cynic breast. ’Twas not embraces  
I longed to win, but that in scornful eyes  
I might perceive of tenderness the traces—  
Yes, what none else should see,  
All meant for me !

“ She did not kneel. With looks that were a threat  
She held of that most sacred shrine the portal ;  
Her head was godlike on her shoulders set  
With poise indignant. Through her flowing kirtle  
Shone a white knee that would not bend, though I,  
The mightiest lord of earth, were there approaching ;  
Her blue-black silken hair about did fly  
With kisses soft on clear white cheeks encroaching ;  
Anger more lovely made  
This wondrous maid.

“ Ah, little know ye, this lean shadow seeing,  
The splendor of my port in that brave time ;  
My stature grand with haughty look agreeing,  
My regal gait, my awful nod sublime !  
Esther was human. Could she fail to glow  
At such as I was? Could she keep from dreaming  
Of power like mine, of all I might bestow ?  
Could she restrain her restless brain from scheming  
Triumphs that lay so near  
Her own career ?

“ ‘ Nimrod ! ’ she spake, in low voice ill-compressed,  
‘ ’Tis well you come. Your slave has made good trial  
Of all this office. Blandly your request  
From Ahram came, backed by the mandate royal.  
To him naught say I, but to you, the head,  
Whom less I fear, albeit no less I’m humble,  
To you I say: Spare me this golden bed.  
Never again at lots obscure I’ll grumble  
So that you set me free  
From hence to flee.

“ I am no priest or seer ; I am a woman  
Used to dear friends, to gossips, daily tasks.  
Why should I house alone, or with inhuman  
Faint spectres whom the incorporate ether masks ?  
Ahram but did your bidding. Oh, too well  
He knows the mind to sway with turnings specious—  
This is not life,’ she cried, ‘ or else a hell  
To one like me that finds an hour more precious  
Which eyes of love have known,  
Than years, alone !

“ ‘ Why should we women always live in fetters ?  
Why am I not a man, to come and go ?  
All men save one are equals, not my betters :  
As hot they find the sun, as cold the snow.  
What is this sex ? A bugbear used to frighten  
Poor women into servitude more base !  
Oh, hard are men who do not seek to lighten  
The burdens on the weaker of their race !  
Yet, though I bend to might,  
Death may set right.

“ ‘The grievous wrong that you and Ahram do—  
O Nimrod, look me in the eyes and listen!  
I swear by him who reigns within the blue  
And her whose locks by all earth’s rivers glisten,  
By gods above the air, below the ground,  
Your father’s grave and by your beard most royal,  
That, self-slain, as a spectre I will hound  
You, Nimrod, to destruction, if denial  
Of my petition slips  
Your fateful lips!

“ ‘I am alone,’ she wailed, ‘lone on the summit  
Of this luxurious pile, more sad and poor  
Than girls in hovels whose dull pulses quicken  
When well-known fingers grope against the door.  
All night I lie among the embroidered pillows  
And hear the wind howl in the gates of brass,  
I see it wave my robes like even billows  
On Tigris when the south wind stamps the grass.  
Cold, Nimrod, is the side  
Of your god’s bride.

“‘Liar!’ she cried, ‘am I to waste my daytime  
And bloom because you’re king and choose to say  
This god exists, or if he lives, his playtime  
To such as me will stoop to give away?  
Let me go hence, back to my hoary father;  
Bid Ahram lead me to our sterile home,  
Once more to live in tents, once more to gather  
The hardy flocks that o’er the hillsides roam.  
Our chiefs tempt not the skies—  
And tell no lies.

“‘Think you,’ she raged, ‘I fear your godlike power  
Or tremble as I seize your sacred beard?  
Behold, I care not if from off the tower  
You cast me! To the last I still shall gird.  
What have I done, that no sweet craving fingers  
Shall grasp this barren and ungracious breast?  
Without a son who o’er my ashes lingers  
How shall it be when I have sunk to rest?  
No one with gifts will bribe  
The demon tribe.



“ ‘ Another priestess for this pageant summon  
And drive me hence, I care not how forlorn,  
So that I see again the pathways human,  
Wed and be gay, bear, as I once was born,  
And hear my children cry, laugh, sing and prattle.  
Look how I rend my gold-embroidered vest !  
Thus, Nimrod, king of kings and lord of battles,  
Thus may your kingdom fare, if my request  
Falls on a deafened ear.  
Hear, Nimrod, hear !’

“ How could I chide that loveliness unruly ?  
No god, I knew, could look on her unmoved ;  
Wherefore I was ashamed and glozed untruly,  
Faltered, spoke soft, pleaded while I reproved.  
Then from my neck I raised the chain of coral,  
Whereon there hung my wondrous egg-shaped pearl,  
Pearl that had force to soothe the fiercest quarrel,  
Pearl that was torn from out the most perilous whirl  
Where the Red Inlet shocks  
Against the rocks.

“ Pearls are the sign of Ishtar ; since in Spring,  
When love revertant all creation hallows,  
At crack of dawn the chiming dewdrops fling  
Their lustrous globes along the expectant shallows ;  
Those drops which sun with first all-quickening ray  
Has struck athwart their mimic worlds of crystal  
Are changed to pearl. Deep in the breathless bay  
As flowers the pollen crave with trembling pistil  
Yearn for those fine sea-bells  
The wide-mouthed shells.

“ Great pearls are lonely and their savage haunt  
Is in the deep where shark and sea-wolf wander.  
How many a diver paid with life for vaunt  
Of seizing this ! How many a merchant, fonder  
Of gold than ease, has lost his all for it !  
And even as beauty is an agent hallowed  
To awe mind-troubles ; so a poison-fit  
Is broke if pearls are touched upon or swallowed ;  
Pearls will the bane out-thrust  
Of diamond dust !

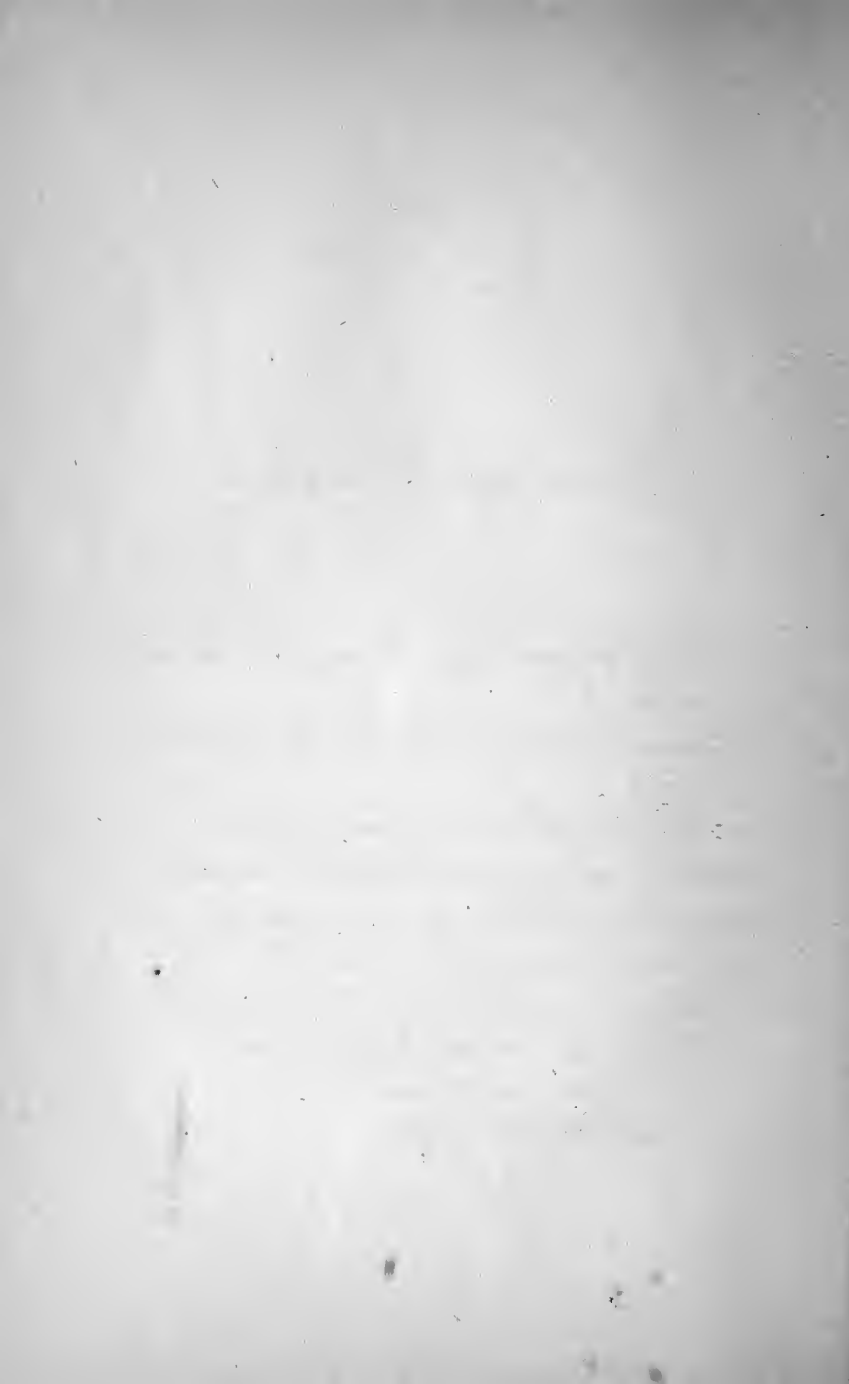
“ Was it the pearl? I know not. But of Esther  
The anger faded as from Elam’s range  
Fade into blue the spiteful clouds that pester  
The virginal peaks. Rapturous was the change.  
And she was calm, but in her eyes there brooded  
A look that would not speak, yet crazed my brain,  
A strange desire and bliss that lay yet hooded—  
Bliss with a vast ambition in its train!  
‘ Where is the god,’ I cried,  
‘ Would scorn this bride?’

“ She smiled. And from the black depths of her eyes  
A gleam shot forth. Find him, it seemed to murmur!  
Shamed from the radiant maiden of the skies  
Great Nimrod turned. A slave had been no firmer.  
Went and took council with his priests and sages,  
Questioned the oracles of cave and tree,  
Pored o’er the mysteries on the breeze-blown pages  
Of leaves that sibyls trace most cunningly;  
Thence came the answers bold—  
The gods ask gold!



IX

BITSU THE EUNUCH



## IX

### BITSU THE EUNUCH

---

“‘GOLD!’ cried the priests. ‘For each great god  
an idol

Golden-robed, jeweled! Works of the fine-meshed  
loom!

Then shall each enter as the groom to bridal

His marvelous wrought and most luxurious room.

That being done, the high god of the lightning

Shall condescend to his terrestrial couch

And then no more her lone torch vainly brightening

Shall Esther desolate and unwedded couch!’

Only dark Ahram’s mood

Fierce waxed and rude.

“ ‘What, not enough!’ he cried ; ‘ each planet tall  
Is honored so, their every gift required,  
Gold and fine sculptures decking every wall  
And images that folk may be delighted !  
For hath not Ishtar idols, and old Time,  
Saturn the wise? All else are far too mighty  
That hands should shape their effigies sublime,  
Our faith too feeble, minds obscure and flighty.  
An idol only stains  
The holiest fanes.

“ ‘ Be not, O king, deceived ! Regard my warning.  
Bitsu and these, now, as of old, are bent  
On their own profit, not the tower’s adorning  
And long that gold on their own flesh be spent.  
I hear their whispers, see their intrigues slow  
To nip the bud of giant-like endeavors :  
What pains doth not this eunuch sly bestow  
On the chaste priestess ! Gladly would he sever  
The pure clean amity  
’Twixt her and me !’



“ More calm he spake : ‘ O Nimrod, stop your ears,  
Nor stand estranged while plans are green and tender !  
Wait till the grave and solid-making years  
Your projects test, your edicts perfect render.  
To noisome minds leave the foul idol brood  
And all their trail of personal defilement :  
Show to the nations who in ebb and flood  
This centre pass no crowning state beguilement.  
Try, through their worship, men’s  
Foulness to cleanse !

“ ‘ But you, ye sleek priests, best beware ; I know  
Your greed, your hate, your secret slimy plotting ;  
Toward me, toward Nimrod, ye would coil your slow  
Pale circles of deceit. While I, unwotting,  
Would build a glorious throne, a race, a faith,  
Ye would be laying sly eggs of destruction—  
O filthy flies !—wherefrom the worm that slay’th  
Comes to turn fair to inward foul corruption.  
Rouse not the mountain bear !  
Bitsu, have care !’

“ It was the floor of hoary Saturn’s fane,  
Which then we held for grave and secret meeting.  
Proud Ahram stand at my right hand had ta’en ;  
Bitsu, upon the stone his forehead beating,  
Knelt on my left. Before my royal chair  
Sat the twelve grove priests with their abject faces ;  
Listened, and weighing all our words with care,  
Stirred not for terror from their several places.  
Bitsu, his beardless head  
Raising, thus said :

“ ‘ Ahram, great lord and right hand of the king !  
Upon my brow unfairly lights displeasure.  
Your wisdom, past the wit of man, should fling  
Such thoughts aside. By your great soul you  
measure  
Me, a poor worm, that’s only half a man.  
To fly like you too feeble is my spirit.  
We lack the grasp to follow out your plan  
Your virtue so transcends our humble merit.  
Slaves, we take thought alone  
For Nimrod’s throne.

“Have we blasphemed the temples, groves and tower?

Nay, now! They show the glorious thought of twain:  
Nimrod the god and his own prophet, our  
Great lawgiver and most exhaustive brain.

But we are baser, to the people nearer ;

We see their wants, we hear their cries of need,  
We read the heart-beats of the vulgar clearer  
For having lived administ'ring their creed.

This tower, some festal morn,  
Will stand forlorn

“And Dagon's fane and Ishtar's grove at Ur  
Shall win the masses to their gloomy porches.

Not all your might, O king of kings, can stir

The people from their old inveterate orgies !  
The gods, they'll cry, must not be mocked for whims  
Of Nimrod even, still less of a stranger !

These fears, O lord of lords, are not mere dreams ;

We, humble slaves, but warn you of the danger

With a rash hand on such  
Old faiths to touch !

“Ahram is wise ; Ahram is good and pure ;  
All must admire our prophet's quenchless spirit ;  
But who save he so spotless may endure ?  
Who is the fellow-angel can come near it ?  
All other men, to keep them from far worse,  
At times must loose the rein and roll in orgies ;  
The vulgar ease their minds with blow and curse,  
Since every man his evil demon urges  
    Out his good angel thrust,  
    To plunge in lust.

“Wherefore great Ahram errs in charging greed  
    Upon these priests. They read the ancient annals :  
First is the throne, and for the throne there's need  
    That worship run in the old slippery channels.  
Next is the folk : crimes will be past belief  
    If holy revels do not draw the danger :  
The robber, murderer, ravisher and thief  
    Will plague the people, fright away the stranger—  
    Pleasures no longer balk  
    Rebellious talk.

“Thus do we rede. But O, we are most humble,  
We only dare to raise for good our voice.  
In counsels even the greatest mind may stumble;  
'Tis best to take of many plans a choice.  
Wondrous, O king, is this your lofty tower  
And wide your fame among the nations blown;  
Tribes no one knew are suppliants to your power;  
Kings over sea ask friendship at your throne,  
And of your wondrous seer  
Farthest lands hear.

“But as for me—poor me, too mean to tremble!  
True, often I with radiant Esther talk;  
But, that I blame the sage, or e'er dissemble  
In any way, or seek his plans to balk  
I here deny. It were enough for me  
That Esther holds him high. Though neither woman  
Nor man, alas! yet is not Bitsu free  
To love great persons? has he nothing human?  
And Esther, is not she  
Barren like me?’

“ He ceased and Ahram, white with hidden rage,  
Reached out his clenched hand with indignant gesture:  
He sought by art his fiery heart to assuage,  
And yet, repressed, it shook his shaggy vesture.  
As when among the woods the urchins track  
A porcupine, and swiftly round it sweeping,  
Harm it with stones, and all its hairy back  
Bristles with wrath ; so, at his enemy keeping  
Ever apart and safe,  
In like wise chafe

“ Ahram’s strong hands. His sharp-cut Adam’s apple  
Throbs in his throat ; his large dark eyes, like stars  
Rayed by long lashes, with his foemen grapple  
Fierce as when Sirius all the desert chars.  
His eagle nose snuffs battle ; so a steed  
Will look when neighing toward the gathering ravens ;  
His chin grows hard ; his bent mouth straight as reed  
And of his brow the steep and pallid heavens  
Toss like the smooth cloud crust  
Before the gust.

“ ‘Slaves?’ he repeated. ‘Ay, we’re all mere slaves,  
And humble too. For all is not death given?  
Yet who would sink so low, he no more craves  
To rise an angel through the spheres of heaven?  
We know the truth. Are we so weak and mean  
As yield to falsehood through unmanly terror?  
We lust. Why therefore should we wish to screen  
The fact by lies, join falsehood unto error?  
Should we not raise the yoke  
That weighs the folk?’

“ ‘Behold this pile, like to the frame of man  
Soaring from dust! On Space and Time ’tis founded  
As all things human are. The cyclic plan  
With sea-sprung Generation next we rounded.  
The Belly then, that for the frame provides ;  
The Heart, that gives the fabric life and action ;  
The Chest, which on the others bravely rides ;  
The lower Head, that feels the moon’s attraction.  
Then we the Crown designed—  
The glorious mind !

“ Shall we invert this order? Shall we stake  
In grimy mold the palm-tree, bloom and branches,  
Trying good dates from ropy roots to shake?  
Shall we deny the truth because our paunches  
May lack for honey cakes and Syrian wine?  
Which should be leader, pray you,—brain, or belly?  
Rather the sea shall wave above the pine  
And mountains to their tops lie salt and shelly  
Ere Nimrod, great and wise,  
Govern through lies!

“ But judge between us, Nimrod. Now that he  
Invites assault, what say you to the magic  
This flattering eunuch plies to injure me?  
Behold me here. A hundred times a tragic  
Unholy death was shaped for me by him  
Who yonder kneels a paragon of meekness!  
Had he but won, within my every limb  
Anguish had crept upon the heels of weakness  
And I had gone in gloom  
Down to the tomb.



“ ‘For know, great king, this eunuch, love pretending,  
Prayed of me hairs from chin and lip and head,  
‘Since they,’ quoth he, ‘their owner’s wisdom lending,  
Will turn to gold my own most spurious lead.’

I gave the hairs, for who am I to say

Such things are naught? and yet how little wotted  
The foolish gift was meant my health to slay!

The hairs were begged by one who merely plotted  
By treacheries high or low  
Me to o’erthrow.

“ ‘It was a night framed for vile deeds when I,

Prompted by bodings of a lurking evil,  
Walked my own housetop and with careful eye  
Beheld in this man’s garden, like a devil

In form to see, a figure that was bowing

Before a flame. Moved by a silly fear,  
Scaling the wall, I watched this eunuch mowing,

As maniacs mow, before an image drear

Molded of wax of bee

To feature me.

““ Anon from out the fire where they lay

He plucked his brazen pins all white and glowing,  
And, muttering spells, in every shameful way

Pierced my wax effigy, on that bestowing  
Whatever tortures he on me would vent.

At length when curse grew weary and the idol  
Was crumbled sore, the rest was slowly spent  
With blistering coals. And still the doll he'd sidle  
Near to the gnawing flame  
And cry my name.

““ This is the man, O king magnanimous,

Who talks of friendship and is quick at fawning!  
Dream not I fear his magic. 'Tis not thus

Ahram is humbled. He who braved the yawning  
Stark Himalayan hell can safely laugh

At old-wife sorceries of a nerveless eunuch!  
He who has fashioned this enormous staff

For the king's fame on sun and star-text runic  
Smiles at his juggler sticks  
And petty tricks!

“ Then started Bitsu as if stung by asp :

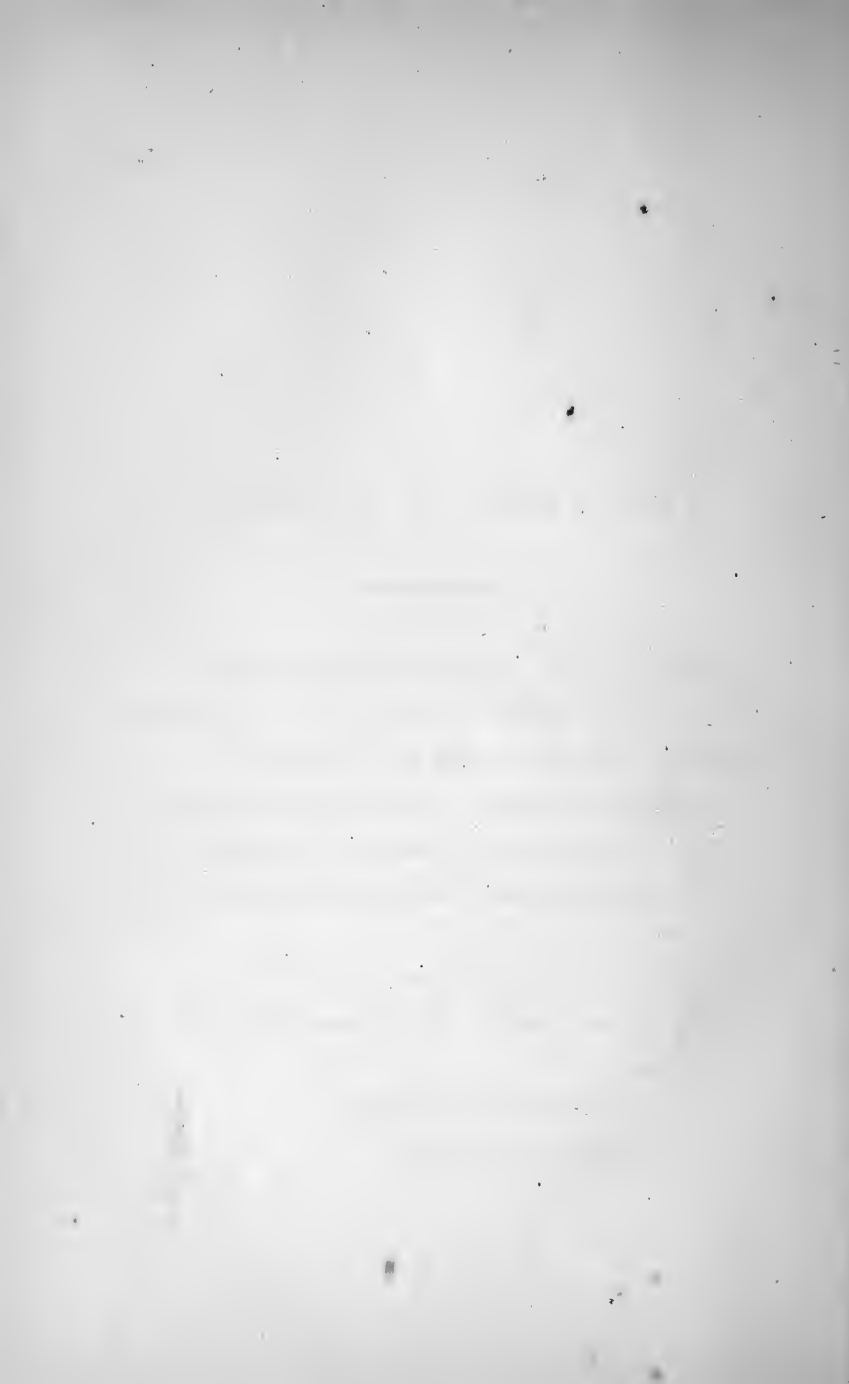
‘ O King ! ’ he cried, ‘ too far this prophet ventures.  
If what he saw were true, he failed to grasp  
The aim of what his gall so fiercely censures.  
But let it pass. Upon this earth there be  
Spirits in flesh that dream not they are evil,  
Souls three times washed of hell-fire in the sea  
Who dwell in great minds as in corn the weevil,  
Festering, till all within  
Is black with sin.

“ At times they show their demonlike possession  
Under dark brows that meet in cloudy stream ;  
Their eyelids red, of sinister expression,  
Half veil at heart a drop of lurid flame.  
Surely against the Evil Eye ’tis rightful  
To guard one’s life ! O King, behold it there !  
’Twas from such spell, unconscious, slow and frightful,  
I shielded me, before the demoniac stare  
Should drain of force my veins  
With searching pains ! ’



X

THE PRIDE OF INTELLECT



X

THE PRIDE OF INTELLECT

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“ THUS ’twixt the eunuch and the fiery sage  
Was wordy battle—scarce they knew my presence.  
Rising, I bade them cease their useless rage,  
And, leant on Bitsu’s shoulder, to the pleasance  
Within the temple wall I passed in thought,  
The while the priests withdrew them and the mas-  
ter  
Into the fane retired. Anon he sought  
The topmost shrine. With mien that spake disas-  
ter  
To Esther’s high abode  
Wrathful he strode ;

“Which Bitsu noting, an expressive motion  
Louder than tongue addressed my wavering heart.  
He dared no word, but yet he roused a notion  
So sinister that through my every part  
On swept the tide of jealousy! Magicians  
Scarce drop a clear drop in a crystal flood  
When all turns black. Within my brain suspicions  
Made sudden revolution. All was rude  
Boisterous, unreasoning hate,  
Senseless as fate.

“I could not rest. ’Twixt love and hate’s attraction  
On Ahram’s traces to the sun-god’s fane  
I needs must follow. Nowise by inaction  
Could I unbind my bosom of its chain.  
My dais rose in silence by the stair  
Spiral and long that wound about the tower.  
I had them bear me to the higher air  
That sunshine colors to a later hour.  
There where the moon was banned  
I bid them stand



“And hide them till I come ; then all alone,  
While the last ray within the sun-fane mutters,  
Upward I softly saunter where the tone  
Of Ahram’s voice through the faint music flutters,  
As leaves will drop through cobwebs.

By the fane

I stand to catch the purport of their talking,  
Nowise ashamed my royal ears to stain  
With private matters, so that I am balking  
One who too freely moved  
Near her I loved.

“ Esther was speaking : ‘ Ahram, king and lord,  
Be patient, each one has his woe and trouble.  
Right well I know how in your heart abhorred  
Is all the pomp of priestcraft ; all the double  
Deceitful talk of augurs. But, alas !

In carrying out your mighty thoughts and measures  
You crush the folk as elephants the grass  
When to the lake they’re marching.

All our pleasures

To you but folly seem,  
A worthless dream.

“ Yet think of me. What life is this I lead?  
For your sake I have tried it, and forever  
Bade home and men farewell. And yet the steed,  
However proud in trappings and however  
Raised to a palace manger, longs to fly  
Back to the desert where his kindred gather;  
Yes, though his hoofs be gold, if he can spy  
A loop-hole, he will break his chain, and rather  
Parch, than enjoy the wave  
That cools a slave.

“ And so I long for those old times, when we  
Lolled by the summer tents, or, in the mountains,  
Told at the fires of winter tales of glee:  
How in the elms lurked maidens; in the fountains  
Hid lovely boys whose laughter, sometimes heard,  
Blent with the wind in tree-tops and the babble  
Of brooks, with flutings of the unseen bird;  
And some affirmed a faintly-falling gabble  
Was speech of elves; and some,  
The pheasant's drum.

“ O, leave this place and take me with you ! Listen  
To one whose heart forewarns her what is best !  
This place is foul, although with gems it glistens ;  
This town, this nation, never can have rest.

Ahram, I know not clearly what I mean :

A horrid something steeps and wraps this tower !  
All is so fair, and yet, I swear, unclean  
Is every fane, and o'er this temple lower  
Clouds that shall be by sun  
Never undone.

“ ‘ You fear no demons, but alas for me !

What power have I to save me from possession  
By sevenfold imps that dwell below the sea,  
By earless devils deaf to all concession,  
Sexless, who live far down in earth, at times  
Rising with sulphurous thunders ?

Though your magic  
Should keep such off, not all the sun-god's chimes  
Mayhap shall save your vestal from a tragic  
Mentionless lot by night  
Or death through fright

“‘ At hands of jinns who haunt the mountain peaks.

But yet again I say, the eyes of evil  
Have smit this pile with taint. The temple reeks  
With unseen blotches, cankers, that deceive all  
You men of wisdom. Lips of baleful force  
Over the whole have jabbered imprecations ;  
All is unwholesome, from the topmost course  
Story by story to the grim foundations  
Where fires of myrrh and nard  
Earth's bosom charred.

“‘ Nay, smile not ! You are greater, wiser far  
Than woman e'er can be. Yet women often  
Have vague forewarnings of a truth. A star  
Is sometimes traced, though mists the outlines soften  
To blurry haze, and eyes which see it best  
May fail to mark the little lamps that beacon  
Around great moving planets. In my breast  
All is so dark my words must fail to quicken,  
Alas, your skeptic ear ;  
Yet hear me, hear !'

“ A silence fell. Viewed from that giddy height  
The town embowered in trees, the country gleaming  
With silvery crisscross of canals, the light  
From myriad dwellings, and the sky-shine dreaming  
On the broad river—all was visionary,  
Sublime, unreal—a checker-board methought,  
And I the giant, who, from cloudlands airy,  
Conning the little squares, most lightly ought  
With outstretched hand to gain  
The mimic plain.

“Then Ahram spake: ‘O dearly-loved, sweet Esther!  
There was a time when need of speech like yours  
Had never been. The good old times were blester,  
Yet not so great as these. Ambition’s lures  
Once I would readily have scorned. But now  
That, forced on me, a mighty task is given,  
How can I linger, how refuse and how  
Dream o’er again, as then I did, that heaven  
Of wedded life with you  
The lovely, true?

“ ‘ Nimrod had mercy on my captive lot  
And raised me to be chief of all his servants,  
Then every remnant of our nation got  
A benefit thereafter. No observance  
Of cringing habits gained me rank, but pure  
Fidelity to what is best of spirit  
In Nimrod and mankind. While stars endure  
This world the same great maxims shall inherit:  
Self-sacrifice and love  
For all that move.

“ ‘ I am not harsh. Within this breast is beating  
As warm a love for you as ever burned ;  
But if I yield to you, I shall be cheating  
Millions of wretches, e'en like them that yearned  
In vain for mercy to the skies, and raised  
Their torn eyesockets to the ruthless great,  
Or lingered, with injustice sickened, dazed  
By crimes of kings, or bowed beneath the weight  
Of priests, whose devilish faith  
Grinds, crushes, slay'th.

“ ‘ What may not self-denial reach? Indulgence!

Alas, to what undoing does it come?

Where lives a woman in divine effulgence

Of sanctity like yours? Must you have home—

You—called to stand a monument of beauty,

Inward and outward, something raised o'er sin,

To whom her purity is more than duty—

A spiritual mother of those truths that win

Surely, as through the tides

Tigris outglides?

“ ‘ Behold yon ash-gray, just now rosy portals

Of the great sun! When from my cheeks the red

Fades and I go to join the wise immortals

That live indeed, though live men call them dead,

I will not leave a blemish on my soul;

I will not creep among the shades in terror;

I will not, sick of conscience, miss the goal;

I will not plead that crime is earthly error,

Whereto—not I alone—

All men are prone.

“ ‘ But as the wheel of fifty golden spears,  
Whirled by the sun-god, every morning pierces  
The sluggish serpent of the fog and tears  
Its shadowy hide before the light immerses  
The landscape in a glory ; so may I,  
Breaking the rings of crawling ignorance,  
Let fall the radiant light of truth from high,  
Cast error back into the baser haunts  
Where men are beasts, and fall  
Deepest of all.

“ ‘ And you ? You will not be my comrade here,  
My follower there, my spiritual full completion ?  
Your golden chains are heavy, but I fear  
Far heavier are those chains which the magician  
Bitsu the eunuch seeks to load you with.  
Frighting with tales of goblins, his endeavor  
Has been, will be, like worms that bore the pith  
Of goodly shrubs, by little gnawings clever  
To undermine my work.  
Yea, he doth lurk



“ ‘ In seeming harmless guise about my feet.

When there shall seem to him a crisis brewing  
He'll slime my path. His crooked, small deceit

Will catch with Nimrod to my sure undoing.

And even you, who should be firm as steel

To all I plan, into your soul may enter

The thin edge of a doubt. Even you will feel

Hurt to your dear heart's golden-ruddy centre

Because of my neglect

Of you, elect.

“ ‘ Yet, though I know my fate, no further shunning

Exists for me. Like him who hunts wild goats

And finds himself with swift momentum running

Across a knife-like ridge ; beneath him floats,

Far down below, a cloud ; aghast, he fears

To halt one instant, lest his nerve should alter ;

Ever with restless ardor on he steers

In deadly terror lest his purpose falter ;—

Thus do I haste forlorn

From morn to morn.

“‘Watch me in pity. Add not your complaint  
To all the burden of my coming battle.

Let me be hermit, stay yourself a saint,

And turn an adder’s ear to all the tattle  
Of eunuchs, slaves and slavish priests.

Ay, so

To speech of kings, should ever Nimrod, losing  
His present awe, upon your state bestow

That flattery which resides in kingly choosing,—

Let him not cause light blame

To smirch your name.’

“‘You are not just!’ arose her passionate voice

As nightingales awake the shadowy thicket.

‘You fear not demons, yet will show no choice

For one god more than other. Good or wicked  
Are all alike to your sublime disdain.

If they exist not, why this sumptuous tower  
Fashioned throughout by human sweat and pain?

What are these mummeries? what the bridal-dower

Bestowed within these gates

On one who waits?’

“ ‘ Listen ! ’ he cried. ‘ This structure is for those  
That see not what on each green leaf is written.  
They must have gods and foes of gods ; the blows  
Of their own hands they fancy jinns have smitten.  
They ask for temples ; eight of them are few.  
They long for idols, and when we deny them  
Will worship pebbles, rags of sundry hue,  
Or call on gods of pottery which they buy then  
With half a harvest crop  
From a mean shop.

“ ‘ But to the wise this talisman hath meaning  
Most orderly, complete, sublime, eterne.  
Each story imitates the gradual weaning  
Of mind from matter. Herewithin discern  
From tier to tier man’s grosser thought of heaven,  
As ore in flames, by gradual steps refined,  
And in this fane superior to the seven  
Know that I honor Him whose boundless mind  
Exists in every groove  
Where atoms move.

“‘ Now mark, tall spirit! These Chaldeans teach  
The earth is like a shield all hollow under;  
The sun, when he has run his daily reach,  
Hissing divides the ocean waves asunder  
And sinks to Hades. Thence by magic might  
He hoists him through the eastern sea to lighten  
The shades of one day more. Yet truly sight  
Hath never seen one ocean quicklier brighten  
Or one shore sparkle more  
Than other shore.

“‘ We deem us wise. What if a tiny beetle,  
An insect vile that haunts the lowest ground,  
Should read the earth-shape better, should unseat all  
The fancies sage Chaldeans dare propound?  
Out of the bog the beetle molds a sphere  
To house its eggs; with kind and clumsy ardor  
Under the sun across the sandy mere  
Rolls his small ball of germs the tricky hoarder:  
Thus is our earth revolved—  
The problem solved.

“ ‘ This earth’s a sphere that hangs in midmost heaven  
And round it moves, or seems to move, the sun,  
And where his rays bear down with heat most even  
Life most prolific on his path is spun.  
Life loves the sun. By him is life engendered,  
Wherefore all life looks westward at day’s end  
And yearns that way, because the sun has rendered  
One daylight more for timorous man to spend.  
Westward all beings move  
Inspired by love

“ ‘ Of light and life, fearful that each day’s end  
May prove the last. And so, did nothing stay them,  
Westward the nations round the globe would wend,  
Slowly but surely circling. What delay them?  
Their own great vices! the unstinted store  
Of wealth the sun piles on their way; the folly  
Which makes them boast their riches, ay, and more—  
The hatred of their neighbors who are wholly  
Wanting in wealth and ease!  
Such men as freeze

“Far in the north by dismal hut and tent,  
Alone, and battling with all natural rigors;  
Such grow so strong that when the bands are rent  
Which bind them in their tribes, the wretched diggers  
Of winter roots, the fur-clad brutes, the men,  
Who, starving, freezing, hate the southern nations,  
Burst like the mined levee between the fen  
And river! Then come wars and desolations  
Like to which those were mild  
When Nimrod spoiled.

“They too desire the sun. They too will languish  
For full-yearred summers and to southward march  
With sateless maws, regardless of the anguish  
That runs before them, of the wastes to parch  
Their headlong hordes, and of the ancient towns  
Their stupid force o'erthrows, still less the learning  
Of patient men their ignorant violence drowns.  
Thus do they southward wander, slaughtering, burn-  
ing—  
At last with rue their track  
To wander back.

“ Thus, O fair Esther, by two instincts spurred  
The mass of races south and westward jostle,  
Slowly and gropingly; full oft they erred  
From one straight path. As when two golf-men hustle  
The golfing ball at once to south and west  
And neither gains, but in the hurly-burly  
Betwixt the two southwestward it is pressed,  
So have the nations, gradually but surely,  
Poured, nor as yet have ceased  
From the northeast.

“ Your eyes are wide! Yea, what has this to do  
With you and yours? Be patient. Every nation  
That slays another in its turn must rue  
The deed performed. There lies a just equation  
In every act: the conquerer in turn  
Is weakened, scattered, hurled in fragments broken  
Back by the conquered; to each race hath stern  
Revengeful Mars alternate courage spoken.  
Through battles lost and won  
Man blunders on.

“ ‘Have we not sat beside the foamy shore  
Of our vast lake among the steadfast mountains  
And watched the billows rise, stop, break and pour  
Slanting along the beach their turbid fountains?  
Thus do the nations, slanting on that zone  
The sun puts round the earth, descend by torrents—  
Only in ruins to dissolve when grown  
Too proud, too rich, the scorn, the just abhorrence  
Of One who loathes the flood  
Of human blood!

“ ‘Now mark. Great Nimrod’s line, descended far  
From out the northeast ranges, smote the nations  
Southward and westward till their cruel war  
Reached the blue Nile. Here were their central  
stations  
And hither back they rallied, hurled by those  
Black warriors once their servants. Nimrod’s power  
Has shaped an empire here; but still as rose  
The sun of yesterday and braved his hour,  
Nimrod shall have his day,  
Then pass away.



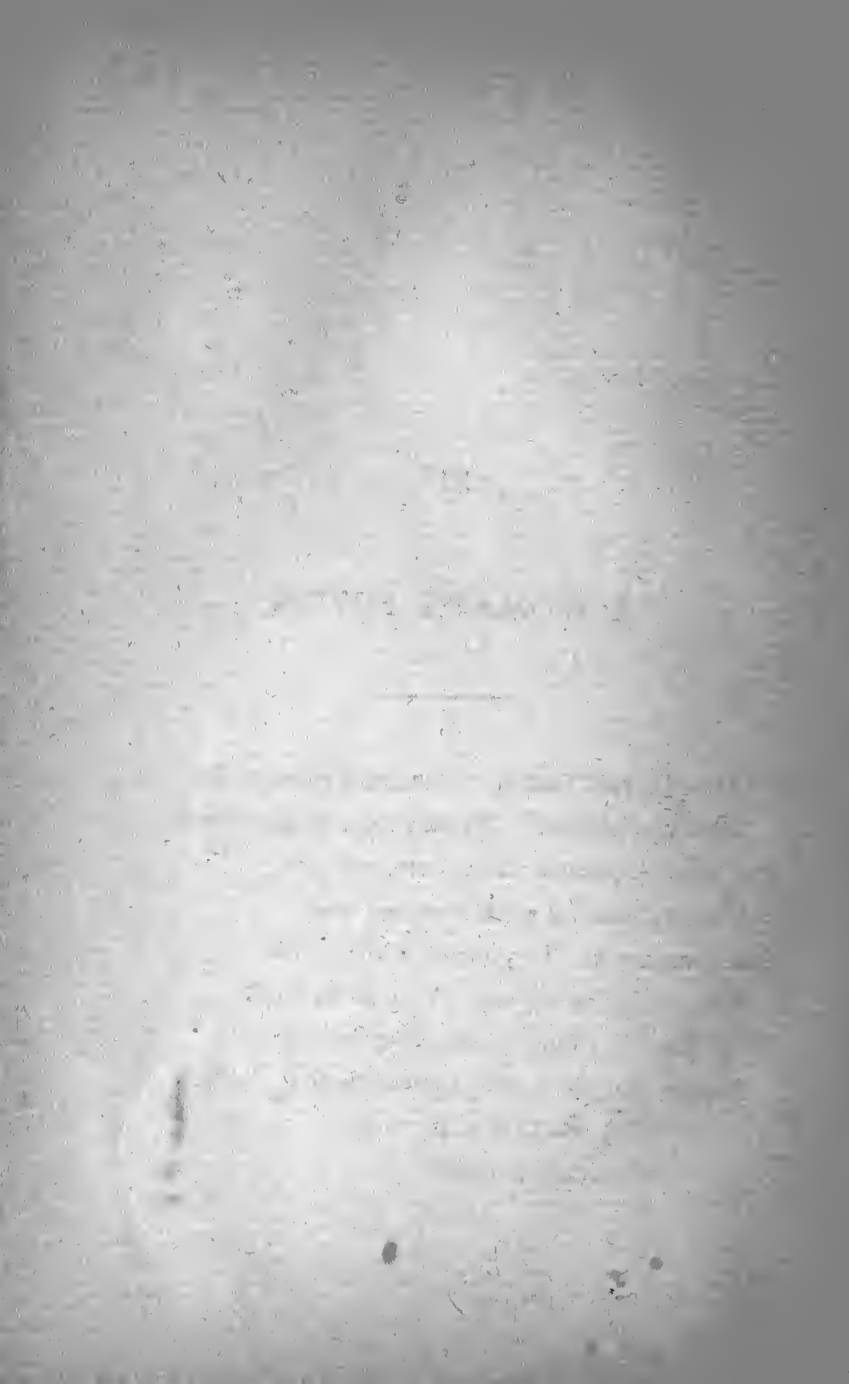
“‘And we? This southern folk has laid its hand  
Upon our necks ; let us but wait, disasters  
Are sure to reach our conquerors, and the land  
That knew us slaves shall cringe to us as masters.  
But where’s the good? Shall we remain the sport  
Of Mars, who drives now this way, now the other?  
Brains are the only weapons, and that fort  
No foot can storm, no wave nor flame can smother,  
Is built in hearts that brood  
Only on good.

“‘ Know then that I was chosen, ’gainst my will,  
To help mankind through Nimrod’s mighty power,  
Raise them from groveling instincts and to fill  
Their stubborn hearts with kindness. ’Tis the dower  
Fate has allotted me. Within my hand  
I bear my life ; but, while the chance is given,  
Ahram shall build his projects, though the sand  
Be shifty underneath. They are the leaven  
That saves great Nimrod’s name  
From lasting shame.

“So shall this nation by my projects led  
    Know greatness, peace and glorious progress; even  
As when the trade-winds blow and sails are spread  
    And merchantmen, by changeless breezes driven,  
Fare boldly o'er the laughing sea; their nests  
    When halcyons build in safety on the waters,  
When infinite peaceful freshness cools and rests  
    After long speechless drought Arabia's daughters:  
    So shall each human hive  
    Through me revive!’

XI

A WOMAN'S POWER



XI

A WOMAN'S POWER

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“‘ALAS!’ cried Esther, ‘what have these to do  
With you and me? Think you, a single mower  
Can reap Euphrates valley? no, not you,  
Nor any man by work however sour  
Can compass it. To your own kin, to me  
First duties owing are. You do so muffle  
Your mind in clouds heroic, that you see  
Shapes that exist not, arguments that shuffle  
With cruel facts, as when  
Magic blinds men!’

“Nay, hear me out !” cried Ahram. “Once for all  
Being here, perforce we must our lots encounter.  
To do men good, no thought, no act must fall  
Unused for careful ends. We may not saunter  
At ease through life with children at the knee,  
A tender spouse against our shoulders leaning.  
Ourselves a perfect sacrifice must be :  
All thoughts like that from out our bosoms weaning  
We must march on alone  
With hearts like stone.

“Yet with a sacrifice we gain a payment  
Far higher than aught else that men have known,  
Far richer than brown gold or silken raiment,  
Ay, loftier, sweeter than the happy throne  
Of those who live to love as other men.  
For loving man or woman is a peril ;  
But, love mankind ! ah, then you're happy, then  
You sow the grain that never can be sterile,  
Though on ungrateful ground  
The seed be found.

“ ‘ The loftiest love of human twain—what is it  
But earthy dross entire or else in part?  
Love of mankind exhales a scent exquisite  
As winds that blow from out the snowy heart  
Of clear pure mountains. Not one selfish taint  
Of marsh-bred flowers, and not an amorous breathing  
Of lovesick trees, nor one narcotic plaint  
Such as from out the lily's calix seething,  
Tells that the lily's soul,  
So white, is foul !

“ ‘ How are we nobler than the beasts and birds,  
The wanton fishes and the selfish flowers?  
He who his loins against that passion girds  
Can rightly claim his manhood. He who lowers  
Himself to beasts shall die like them. But those  
Who fight themselves and keep that demon under,  
For them at last no heat of sun, no snows,  
No lightning-bolt, no watery waste shall sunder  
From the great prize, the throne  
On Wisdom's stone.

“ Yet listen, Esther, it may be that later,  
Our tasks once done and Nimrod's favor lost,  
Inferior duties may usurp the greater  
And we, released from those high fates which crossed  
Our peaceful ways, may see once more the hills,  
Our childhood's cradle, may inhale the ether  
Life-lengthener, joy and antidote to ills  
Which blows about our home. When that comes  
neither  
Wisdom shall lure nor pride  
Me from your side ! ’

“ With that, O mortals, from his seat uprose  
Wise Ahram, comforted in heart, and ready  
To face the world again. As honey flows  
From fragrant lips of flow'rs to lure the steady,  
Straight-wingèd bees from off the appointed path  
Esther, her utterance thick with honeyed languor,  
Murmured his name: ‘ Ahram ! Ay me ! and hath  
Your heart no room for aught but schemes and anger ?  
Have you no vein that's warm ?  
See this bare arm



“ ‘ How shapely, white, coursed with blue veins a-tingle  
With love for you! Now fancy it all dry  
Of light and life: Such is the man who, single,  
Thinks to fulfill a brain-sick destiny!  
Give o'er such thoughts heroic! Feel my heart  
Bounding against my side as though to sever  
The space, the cruel gap, the gulfs that part  
One sphere of love in twain. If you were ever  
True, sever not your face  
From my embrace!

“ ‘ But love me rightly, in a human fashion,  
Nor seek to ape the gods whom pride doth stay,  
And they not always, from a natural passion.  
Love is a birthright. He who love would slay  
Is punished sore with thousand starting troubles!  
Nor think to set yourself o'er rules that bind,  
Surely as sightless death befalleth bubbles,  
The man who scorns the rights of womankind.  
Ahram, respect in me  
Love's majesty!’

“ Then through a fissure of the wall I saw  
What drove me frantic with crushed love and jealous:  
Around a sunburnt neck white lilies draw  
A throbbing circle; in a living trellis  
Of arms and silken hair is Ahram bound,  
Restless, yet yielding to the fascination ;  
His bow-shaped, parted lips give forth no sound,  
But in his starlike eyes a supplication  
Kneels to her wayward face  
And begs for grace.

“ But she with one hand closes up those orbs  
And on his lips pours her whole soul in passion :  
The blissful pressure every vein absorbs  
In yearning pain. From him could sculptors fashion  
The man who sees in forest drear and lone  
The fragrant witch-snake, who, around him ringing  
Her aromatic coils, so dear has grown  
He smiles, aware that death's against him clinging.  
Thus did forgetful sleep  
Wise Ahram steep

“One moment and no more. Then back he started,  
Awake to fate and all the crime he dreamed.  
With trembling hand the embrace delicious parted  
And now to fly resolved and now he seemed  
Resolved to stay and ply a cruel tongue.  
But all in vain. Behind his sinewy members  
Soft ambush lay, and round his shoulders hung  
A lithe and swaying form. Those ash-grown embers  
Of his old fiery love—  
He felt them move.

“‘Nay, I must go!’ he cried. ‘Ah, no, no—cruel!’  
‘You know not what you ask!’—‘I claim your love!’—  
‘Take these and these!’—Those kisses were but fuel  
To her long starving flame. ‘By sky above,  
By earth below and those great souls that hover  
Betwixt them both, I will not let you go  
Till you affirm that still you are my lover,  
Till on your lips and in your eyes you show  
I am your only pride,  
Your love, your bride!’

“‘You are!’ he cried, alternate pale and red.

‘I loved you more than self and thought to smother  
The thing for good of men. It seemed so dead

I hoped to touch you gently as a brother  
A sister greets. Far otherwise it is.

Alas for me! I am poor clay, I tremble.  
Where is the antidote against such bliss?

You are unearthly! How can I dissemble  
With words when blushes speak  
Upon my cheek?’

“Thereat he made to clasp her tighter yet ;

But she, afraid, or as a prudent winner,  
Got her away and soon a space had set

Betwixt them both. Like a detected sinner  
Wise Ahram stands ; but next, as one who feels

A load withdrawn, nor yet a moment speaking,  
Guiltily, wanly looking back, he steals

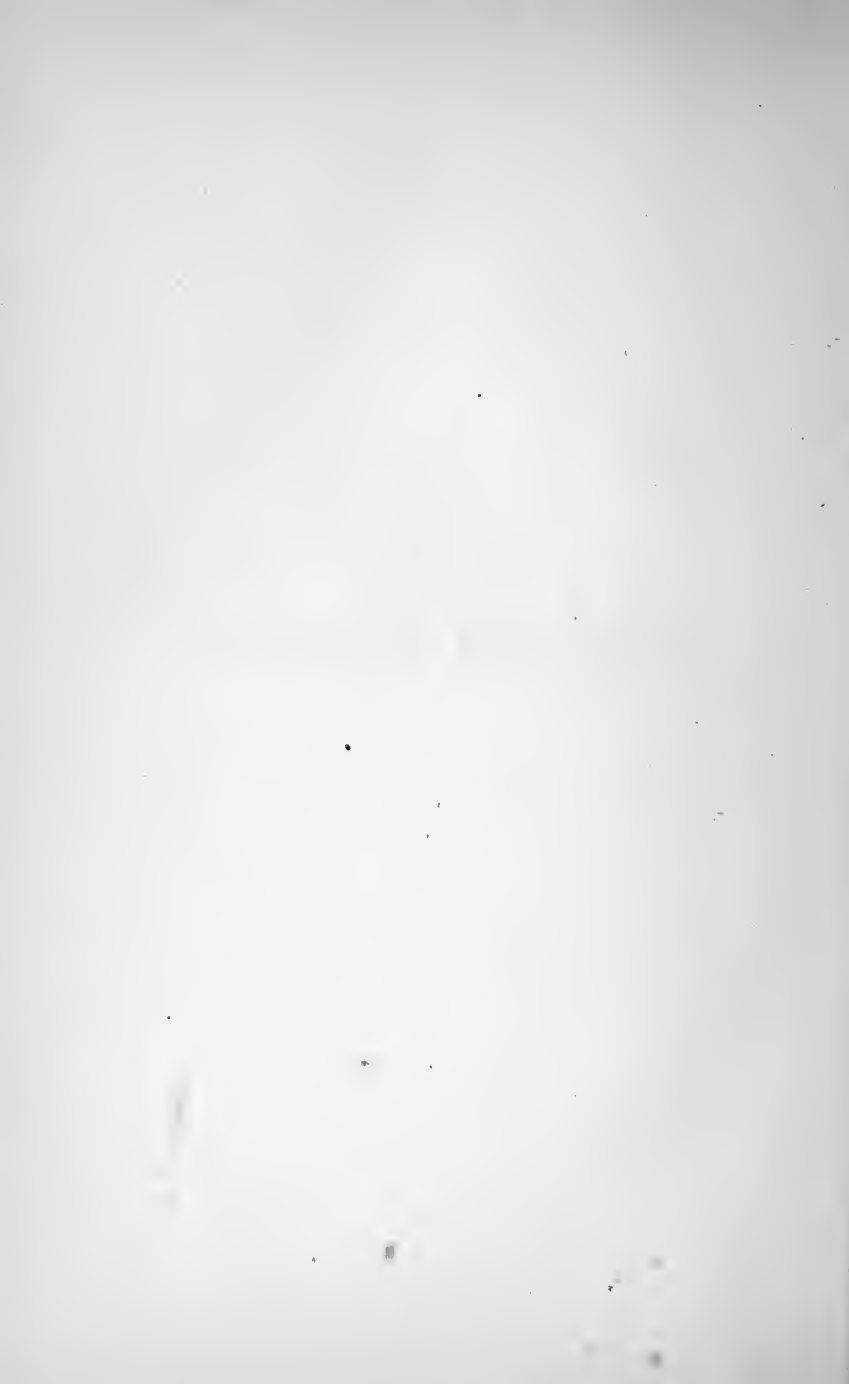
Off to the door. But still her eyes keep seeking

Lures for his quick return :

Like brands they burn.

“ One instant there he stood. ‘ You’ve humbled me  
Who weened me proof against my lower nature.  
I blame not you. I go myself to free  
From stings of love, from thought of every feature  
Of your too ardent form. Alas, you rouse  
The dragon passion that obscures the shining  
Of sunlike virtue. What no law allows  
May hap ere morn. But when your dreams come  
twining  
About your head, beware  
I am not there !’

“ He fled, and Esther with her torchlike eyes  
Seemed still his vanished features to peruse.  
‘ Ah !’ murmured she, ‘ what blissful terror flies  
Through every limb ! Those words I cannot choose  
But thus translate : Great Ahram has surrendered !  
This very night, who knows ? we shall be one.  
This very night, O victory ! shall have rendered  
Twin hearts too glad that they should greet a sun  
That frights too soon, too soon  
The lovelorn moon.’



XII

THE DEED OF NIMROD

THE LIFE OF SAMUEL JOHNSON

By James Boswell  
1791

Vol. I

London: Printed by A. Millar, in Strand, 1791.



## XII

### THE DEED OF NIMROD

---

“AY me! and where was I? Upon them gazing

My blood was fire, my brain a whirling flame.

Her visage was a spell; her form was crazing

My every instinct without care for shame.

I could have sprung on my departing servant

And torn him limb from limb.

I could have laid

On her a ruthless hand. Then vainly fervent

Wild, maiden prayers my furious love had stayed!

Yet which way could I turn

To cool my burn?

“ Burst forth? reveal myself a vile eavesdropper?  
Cast Nimrod up to Ahram’s silent scorn?  
Arouse in Esther an aversion proper  
Toward one of dignity so all-forlorn?  
With halting step a-tiptoe down I stole  
Revolving close a thousand vagrant fancies,  
How to possess her fond and inmost soul,  
How to make head against the o’erwhelming chances,  
Setting ’gainst Ahram’s claim  
My royal name.

“ Thus found I Bitsu. ‘Counsel me,’ I said,  
‘And you shall never live to rue the action,  
Counsel me Esther to my royal bed,  
But not unwilling. Let my own attraction  
Or that of power as queen and only spouse  
Urge her to violate the sacred sealing  
Whereby she’s sealed and all her god-borne vows!  
Give me relief, for this my brain is reeling  
With her great loveliness,  
Her sweet distress!’

“ Thereat the swarthy eunuch turned so pale  
That I did laugh. ‘ What now, thou beast unhuman !  
Hast thou a heart, and can thy soul avail  
To love with manliness a glorious woman ? ’—  
‘ Nimrod ! ’ he cried, ‘ Great god of heaven and earth,  
Jeer not your slave. I do love Esther truly :  
No one so well can prize her matchless worth  
For no ignoble thought doth wound unduly  
Her perfect purity,  
Her chastity.

“ ‘ Give me but time to think ! ’—‘ Time is for slaves. —  
‘ She will not hear your suit. ’—‘ She must. Consider ! ’—  
‘ I know not what to rede. ’—‘ Why then, my braves  
Shall have their sport with you ! ’—  
‘ O godlike bidder,  
Have mercy on a man who loves, next you,  
The one you love, with deep respect and honor. ’—  
‘ I have, for you live yet ! ’ Twere well I slew  
Ten thousand such, for that they looked upon her !  
Think on it, Bitsu ; see,  
It cannot be

“ ‘ But that, once queen, fair Esther will discover  
How vast a height she stands above the swarm  
Of this world’s women. Then her godlike lover  
And faithful eunuch will receive her warm  
Heart-given thanks ; those windy words the sage  
Has stuffed her with will seem the silliest fables  
And you shall form, in your decrepit age,  
Our chosen counsellor, seated at our tables,  
Third in our mighty realm,  
Close to the helm ! ’

“ That struck. Sly Bitsu, in a flash perceiving  
The fall of Ahram and his own tall gain,  
Esther’s reward when she had done with grieving  
For Ahram’s loss, and more, the perilous strain  
On my unruly passions, in the caves  
Of his unholy fancy spawned a hideous  
And tempting plot that oiled the boiling waves  
Of passion with smooth hope. What turns insidious  
Of argument I wove  
To prop my love !

“ Then straight I hied me to my palace, clamorous  
For wine and roses, dancers and the slaves  
Who stir the languid pulse with hymnals amorous  
Of wave-borne Ishtar and the song that raves  
Of love new loves begetting. And soothsayers  
Pondered what hidden fortune should be mine  
Ere break of day, if, after gifts and prayers  
In Friday’s house, I should another shrine  
Brave with unhallowed love  
And seize its dove.

“ ‘ Great,’ cried the wizards, ‘ is your star to-night  
With Venus standing in conjunction patent.  
Whate’er you plan will surely turn to right.  
In you, if love you ask, success is latent  
Such as you never dreamt since life began !’  
Whereat made bold, with Bitsu and no other,  
When night had long surpassed her midmost span,  
I sought the temple of Ishtar the god’s mother.  
There, vowing gifts, I sighed  
And suppliant cried :

“ ‘ Ishtar! Anunit! Thou who like to fire  
O'er the fallows dawnest on benighted men ;  
Ishtar! Anunit! Gladdener of the sire,  
He that long has childless and unfruitful lain ;  
Ishtar! Anunit! Stealthy as hyænas,  
Bold as stalks the lion marching on his prey ;  
Ishtar! Anunit! From creation seen as  
Goddess of the four skies, whom the gods obey :  
Ponder in thy majesty  
All I wrought for thee !

“ ‘ Ishtar! Anunit! We the temple widest  
Save alone thy father's here endowed to thee ;  
Ishtar! Anunit! here perchance residest  
Thou whose servant day is, heaven thy canopy.  
Ishtar! Anunit! Still the mountains hurtle  
'Neath the hand that oft the vault of sky unlocks ;  
Ishtar! Anunit! Thou whose rains are fertile,  
Dawner, great begetter of life in arid rocks,  
Ponder in thy majesty  
All I wrought for thee !’



“ If Babylon lay fettered in a spell

Of midnight magic, so, too, Nimrod wandered  
Dazed by the fogs of devilish lust that well

From depths of souls unhappy which have pandered  
To a weak will. Nerved for a desperate deed

I marched wide-eyed to take a sleeping city.  
The more I dwelt upon the crime my speed

Grew more. I hastened to forestall my pity.

Ghost-like my shame I bore

From floor to floor.

“ Far to the south the royal stars, the Crown

Bade me be king. Above my head Orion  
Those stars of mine in aidance showered down

Nerve and address. From palace court a lion  
Caged for my sport lifted his awful voice,

And with a whisper through the tower ever  
Lapsed the sweet waters where with silvery noise

They purged each story ere they found the river,

Whenceforward sevenfold

Holier it rolled.



“Yet did I often linger by the way :

Meseems that voices from the scampering geckos  
Reach my scared ear ; meseems that sounds betray  
My purpose, that my footsteps wake the echoes  
The loudlier now I strive to make them lighter,  
And that the beating of my timorous heart—  
Poor battering heart of Nimrod the fierce fighter !—  
Roars like a drum, whereat from sleep might start  
A slumbering girl—to lame  
Nimrod with shame !

“ The hanging parted—there upon a couch  
In richness worth a kingdom lay the maiden  
Bathed in dim light. The night-lamps near her crouch  
In jars of jadestone with incisions laden.  
Breathless she looks, and yet most quick. Her lips  
Half parted as to speak. Her eyelids tender  
Scarce shut ; her bosom bared ; her lovely hips  
Marred by fine gossamer-linen folds that render  
Whiter the silvery skin  
That shines within.

“ I stood upon the holiest spot of all  
    Within my kingdoms, in the shrine devoted  
To him who most unbearably lets fall  
    His wrath upon mankind. Surely I doted  
When thus to that forbidden couch I stole  
    Whereon she lay, the girl whom gods were witness  
As set aside for vestal. My fierce soul  
    Curdled with terror. ‘ It would be in fitness  
        With my just meed,’ I said,  
        ‘ If I fell dead !’

“ Was she awake? . . . There seemed a smile to play  
    About the clear curved eyebrows and the bended  
And pouting lips. Her lashes seemed to stray  
    Ranged on the fair cheek with a grace intended.  
Pink were her ears, and through the alabaster  
    Of neighboring parts the red was spreading still.  
She lay there waiting for a heavenly master  
    To say the word, when, buoyant to his will,  
        Up she would float and leave  
        Mortals to grieve.

“ Was she aware? . . . The firm young virgin bosoms  
Dinted by slender forearm, which did seem  
Most like two snowballs topped with sweet-briar blossoms,  
Nor heaved in long-drawn waves, as when the dream  
Is deep, unvexed ; nor was it swayed, the pool  
In whose clear white shone the sweet pearl, her navel,  
With gentle pulses answering to the rule  
Of her soft breathing ! . . . Ah, who may unravel  
The thoughts, or keen, or blind  
Of womankind ?

“ She is awake ! . . . Her shapely wondrous thighs  
Lie far too firm, and the slim legs, round-ankled,  
Stretch their fine curves straightforward thoughtfulwise.  
She breathes like one in whom there never rankled  
Suspicion of an equal, who knows well  
Her power, and though man gaze upon her glories  
Moves not, her pride being wide as gates of hell,—  
One who is glad because her beauty worries  
Men that insanelly grope  
Toward a false hope.

“Nay, she *doth* sleep! . . . She sleeps as angels might  
Secure in Paradise, and all the quiet  
That armors virtuous minds. The spot so white,  
Lucent and smooth, nor on the arm, yet nigh it,  
Nor quite upon the breast, has such a lustre  
It seems of opal. In that dusk profound  
Her jet-black hair in many a blooming cluster  
Takes purplish hues; upon which royal ground  
White as a swan afloat  
Swims her round throat.

“Three steps, no more! and I was by her side  
Tingling with warmth of her delicious body;  
Heard of her fragrant breath the balmy tide  
Run to and fro, in time with pulses ruddy  
Of veins celestial; quaked with mortal dread  
Lest the least noise my victim should be waking;  
Glanced o'er my shoulder, down and overhead  
Lest wrathful sprite his vengeance might be taking,  
And gasped as if a wraith  
Choked my poor breath.

“ So craven stood I, nowise sure that she  
Who lay there, tempting, warm and almost smiling,  
Might not be conscious of my agony  
Of love and fear. But if she were, no whiling  
Was needful now. But if not, what would hap  
When I with ruthless violence should trouble  
Those spheres untouched before, my strong arms wrap  
That lily candid in enchainments double  
Of sin and luxury  
She might not flee ?

“ There was a time, when warring in the hills  
With fierce Carduchians I was ambushed, hunted  
And hurled toward an abyss. Still memory thrills  
To think of how, when sword and spear were blunted  
With deathful blows, no choice at last remained  
Save from the cliff to throw myself ; preferring  
To court death so than surely to be slain,  
Honor too mighty on my foes conferring.  
There did I doubting wait  
In wan debate ;

“Yet was the later anguish greater far.

Anon my hand toward the jade lampstand hurried,  
Then paused because my senses were at war.

In her great loveliness my eyes lay buried,  
And cried the light should stay!

My lips were wroth,  
That they so long from her ripe lips were parted.  
My knees, that ne'er before had known of sloth,  
Shook, yet with longing toward their mistress started.  
O'er all, my coward soul  
Strained for control!

“One hand approached the lamp, while knees were bent  
In adoration of her grace; its fellow  
Yearning to snap the last impediment  
Moved toward her bosom.

Hark! what murmurs mellow  
Float on her lips? ‘At last to claim his right  
Comes my true lord!’ But eyes are fast shut, neither  
Does feature change nor any awakening light  
Break the calm glory of the slumbrous breather.  
Sudden . . . the light was crossed! . . .  
Esther was lost.”

XIII

HAND-OF-SULTAN





XIII

HAND-OF-SULTAN

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TENSE was the silence o'er that crumbly mound  
When Nimrod from his long recital stinted.  
Ali and Gourred on the tile-strewn ground  
Sat close embraced. Then first they marked how  
glinted  
A wondrous pallor on the horizon east  
And knew the dayspring nigh ; that while the demon  
Waxed to a bulgy height, and, sighing, ceased  
With tale half told. But Gourred sweet, a woman  
Most curious, durst implore  
Nimrod for more.

“Barbarians,” quoth the great ghost at the last,

“I need no urging my strange tale to finish,  
But ask that you, whenso the sun is passed

The midnight’s nadir, my old pain diminish  
By listening to the rest I yearn to tell.

Now while I turn me to my desert prison  
See ye revolve my words and actions well!

Lo! as I speak the cruel sun has risen

And with disdainful light

Hurls me from sight.”

O’er Phraat the holy, past the Shushan hills,

The red had grown, and now the fog-belt whitened.  
His shadowy bulk was honeycombed as rills

Will mine a snowbank. Ever more it lightened  
Till where great Nimrod stood to ease his mind

A roll of mist curled upward, slowly floated  
Off toward the waste. Ever with arms entwined,

Sunk in a stupor, on the mist-wreath gloated

Gourred and Sayid. Then

Noise rose of men.

The light still grows, and on the sherdy plain  
Where to old dawns a brilliant city started  
Points glitter. What—has Babel come again?

Thus, while their lips in anxious stare are parted  
Bursts the new sun all flaming on the mound,  
Bathes them, drops lower, then on lances hovers  
Near and below. There comes a shouting sound—  
At last the foe has found the pilgrim lovers!

Jeering the horsemen sweep

Toward the old keep.

10\*

How long shall cowards flourish, and how long  
The tender brow of day grow tough and brazen  
With gazing on the never-ending wrong  
Man heaps on man? In what age shall the blazon  
Of Lord Protector to the meek be one  
That all outcrows the haughtiest war-stained title,  
Or bannerets earned by service baselier done,  
Or pompous shields, of lucre the requital?  
When shall men feel in meekness  
The strength of weakness?

A million times the sun with equal care  
And patient visage cheered the deep-grooved valley.  
The millionth time, O sight to cause despair!  
The scene must needs with all the foregone tally.  
For in the arms of a dark-featured rider  
Was Gourred borne; nor could she shrink away;  
While Ali, bruised and pinioned, marched beside her  
Half stripped, and bleeding from the uncalled-for fray.  
Coarse phrase and villainous jeers  
Burned in their ears.

Before the horseman, as a leader, yet  
    In deadly fear of men so loud and reckless  
Upon an ass a tremulous man was set,  
    Who now that lady eyed and now the necklace  
Of antique beads which with his sordid hand  
    He'd caught from Gourred's lovely curving shoulders.  
What was his thought? What had his cunning planned?  
    None knew among those ignorant beholders  
        Who had been safely fain  
        A gift to gain.

And on they trail across the seed-pearl rain  
    Of melody the larks pour from the zenith  
Washing their bosoms of the earthy stain  
    Won while the night upon her star-throne queeneth.  
The datepalm, proud of beauty and of use,  
    Waves a kind welcome to the passers sorry,  
As being too gentle to perceive the clues  
    Of their strange motions. Only aromas myrrhy  
        Rise from the hurrying hoofs  
        As mild reproofs.

The buffalo that on the stagnant pool  
    Sways his broad muzzle like an alligator  
To stare surprise ; the savage boars that rule  
    In jungles dense on Tigris, as the satyr  
Ruled of old time ; the treacherous maneless lion  
    Hunted of Nimrod, and the abhorrent wolf,  
The fox's bastard, and the watchdog's scion,  
    Who changes form poor woodmen to engulf—  
        None, such was Gourred's charm,  
        Had done them harm.

Nor these wild Arabs that with brandished spears  
    Had scaled the height by two pale saints defended  
Had acted so, nor blows and brutal jeers  
    Upon these lambs of innocence expended,  
Stood not behind them a most shameless force,  
    One that makes vulgar, smirches still the cleanly  
And dries each generous impulse at the source. . .  
    Dull souls, unable to decipher keenly  
        This truth : There's none so bold  
        Keeps ill-earned gold.

Thus to the town of Hillah are they come.

But, at their advent, the bazaar's loose rabble  
Hoot and swarm fast. So bees with venomous hum  
Swarm round a thievish Death's-head moth and  
squabble

Who shall sting first. But Hand-of-Sultan, he  
Who rode the ass, had cast about sweet Gourred  
That veil she scorned, lest the low folk should see  
And feel the heavenly splendor of her forehead  
And turn from foes to friends  
Against his ends.

The Kadi of the town was his ally;  
It boots not wherefore, if it were not honest.  
Dragging the saints to his divan, the cry  
Unmanly rose :  
" O Kadi, thou that shonest  
So many years a not inferior sun  
To Judge Hakeem, thy musklike reputation  
Smells sweet with the Pasha, who forms but one  
With Scheik-oul-Islam, fountain of salvation.  
Here on thy judgment stone  
I claim mine own.

“Hamsa of Hillah, who to all the tribes  
Art known for judgments upright and unswerving,  
Behold an unbeliever who with gibes  
Smirches the name of the Prophet! Undeserving  
Is he of life, for odious blasphemies.  
But that is nothing to mine aim. Consider  
Only this woman; for the Sultan's ease  
With hard-won means I bought, a generous bidder,  
Her from her master here  
With conscience clear.

“And when methought he stept aside to write  
A bill of sale, behold, with shameless forehead  
Forth had he fled into the waste and night,  
And only now I found him and this Gourred,  
My purchased slave, in hiding on the mound  
Where stands the keep in ruins. Wisest Kadi,  
I claim my slave, or else my thousand pound;  
My slave the rather, for with her no lady  
At Stamboul can compare  
She is so fair.



“The money let him have. My witnesses  
Are ready. Is it right, a tricky Persian  
Should cheat poor Hand-of-Sultan of his fees?  
I charge you listen, and whatever version  
This man of guile may frame, believe him not.  
A pretty pass, when the hard-working trader  
Pays and gets no return! For bought is bought  
And he'd no right to take her or persuade her  
When the price once was told,  
The fair slave sold.”

But while his cone-shaped bonnet the wise Kadi  
Donned with an air of virtue, from her face  
Swept her long veil that sorely injured lady  
And on the justice poured her sun-bright grace.  
Mildly she spoke. “My lord judge, it would seem  
This slaver deems himself a marvelous jurist,  
If that to prove his crazy charge he dream;  
For who is sure, although his right be surest?  
And he is wondrous bold  
Pilgrims to hold

“ Who look no home to have, no friends, no wealth!

True is it that he made the scandalous offer  
To this my lord and comrade, me by stealth  
Conveying to Stamboul, to fill their coffer  
With proceeds of my freedom basely sold.

What answer was I need not say. The rather  
Hear who he is to whom his slave-curst gold

This blind man tendered, from the tale to gather  
The crime that he has done,  
Infamy won.

“ He who stands there abused and fettered sore  
Has in his veins the blood of the Prophet! Hasten  
Ye Arabs rude a Sayid to adore!

See you not? even Hand-of-Sultan, brazen  
Jew that he is, begins to tremble. Well,

Loosen his bonds! Now, on this Mirza Sayid  
Ali Mohammed, came at birth the spell

That hung about the Prophet; for there playèd  
About him balsamed air,  
Odors most rare.

“ For he was set apart of Allah, light  
By thought and pen upon the world to lavish.  
The turban green he wears not, though his right,  
As I wear not a veil ; since just such slavish  
Badges are they of vices in our peoples.

For Mollahs, Kadis, great men all and some  
On their pure lives must stand like deep-base steeples—  
Woman, no more a slave,  
Learn to be brave.

“ We fight for freedom. We do not rely  
On rights prescriptive, such as both inherit.  
Teaching the gospel of this Prophet high  
From God revealed through his abounding merit,  
Where Meccawards the Persian pilgrims throng  
We preach our faith—the first faith great Moham-  
med  
Taught at Medina clean of blood and wrong.  
Nor have we fled, nor have we hid, nor shammèd,  
Nor lied, nor bought, nor sold,  
Nor touched his gold.

“But what grips he within his greedy talons  
Thin, long and dry, predacious like a bird’s?  
It is my rosary which he did not balance  
To snatch from me! What use is there of words  
To argue need of change in all the laws  
That hamper women in the Moslem nations,  
When, like the lambkin in the cruel claws  
Of vulture, she who has no strong relations,  
Is seized with blow and scoff,  
Bound, hurried off

“To feed the lust of some great man, and rouse  
In harems anguish, hatred and contention,  
Perhaps to cause the breakage of deep vows  
Or sow between stepchildren fierce contention;  
Adding to burdens of the humble; wasting  
On vanities the taxes of a town;  
Through sloth and intrigue and divorces hasting  
From plane to plane forever down and down—  
Mother of Moslem child  
Bartered and soiled!—

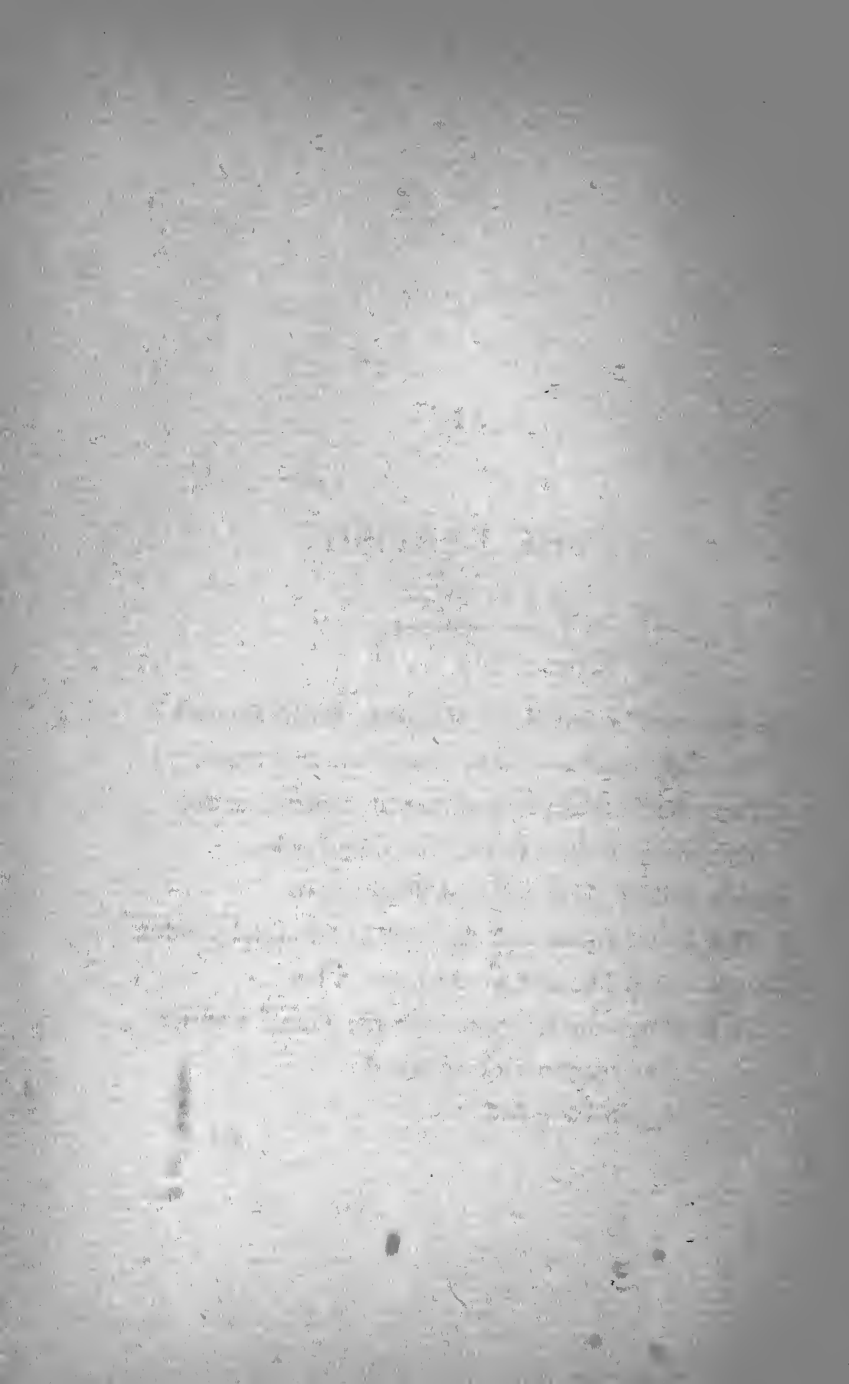
“What rule is that in early years whereunder  
Our offspring spoil? What school is it for them  
Where gluttony, lies and intrigue, heartbreak, blunder  
Still alternate? One man as well might stem  
The waves of ocean with his feeble arms  
As rear his children virtuous in a harem.  
So many wives, and just so many harms!  
But since 'tis ignorance keeps them bad, alarm  
Should beat in every place  
To save the race

“From utter rot, by holding every man  
To his one wife and teaching her the beauty  
Of knowledge and high thoughts, the daily plan  
Of work, the sweets of cleanliness and duty.  
And therewithal, for sake of those who earned  
Such freedom, loosen wives from shameful fetters  
Of veils and cloistered walls! For these are spurned  
Daily by wicked women, while their betters  
Languish within the rope  
Sans love, sans hope!



XIV

THE DERVISH





XIV

THE DERVISH

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“GIVE leave” cried Hand-of-Sultan, for he fancied  
The judge was moved by eloquence and looks,  
“’Twas magic that ye two were at, when chanced  
My Arabs on your track. In holy books  
Stands written, Harut-Marut demons are  
That haunt the mound they call of Nimroud yonder.  
This talisman I feared would prove a bar  
To holding you, lest you from me should wander  
And by those demons led  
Again have fled.

“And trust not, Kadi, this bold she-magician!

What proof is given we have a Sayid here?

Do Sayids, then, blaspheme and rouse sedition?

With wine and women, then, are they austere?”

But while he spake behind his ample robe

He toward the Kadi four thin claws extended

Which signified, No more this matter probe,

And four pounds are your fee! And thus he ended.

So eloquent, they say,

Is yellow clay

Which has no tongue and yet all tongues can silence!

“The case is grave,” the worthy judge replied,

“If she is yours, why did you him such violence?

Why so much force, if right be on your side?

I must look farther in the case. Speak out

You that are said to be a prophet. Utter

Your thought, nor longer dream, nor stare about,

Nor, like to men that talk in trances, mutter!”—

Through Ali's purple eyes

There shot surprise

“But speech came not; for in the attentive gang  
Of ruffians of the bazaar and Arab shepherds  
A tattered youth of piteous visage sprang  
Light as o'er hurdles vault the beauteous leopards.  
Lovely he was, for all his rags and dirt,  
And seized the sight with pleasure and with pity;  
A blood-soaked bandage told his feet were hurt.  
He turned about with motion quick and witty,  
And drew within the fold  
A Dervish old.

“The Dervish had a mien of majesty  
Conscious, like one who bears great news. Most  
haughty  
His nod was. Face and bearing somewhat free  
Brought low salaams from that slave-trader naughty,  
And made the Kadi him a place assign  
On his own carpet. Likewise by his turban  
Believers read the unmistaking sign  
That oft he'd been to Mecca. Then more urban  
He did the Kadi greet  
And took his seat.

“Welcome, O holy pilgrim from afar,”

The justice said, “You come when most is wanted  
One who is practiced in the subtle war

Of wits that scholars wage within the vaunted  
Halls of right Moslem learning. It is true

That Hand-of-Sultan claims this fair-faced woman  
As his bought slave. But now there’s naught to do ;

What better were, to pass the time, than summon

These doctors to dispute

Religion’s root ?

“It likes me well so,” condescended he,

“For I have heard the lady’s strange oration ;  
But,” quoth the Dervish, “is it right that we

Before a Jew of mysteries make relation  
Sacred to Moslem only? Heretics

Must be confuted ; but for unbelievers  
There is no hope, and ’tis most wrong to mix  
Discourse before such scoffers and deceivers

As Jews and Christians are.

I come from far

“ With him my son and bring in yonder sack  
    Broidered thus richly jewels that are destined  
For Hamsa, Kadi of Hillah ; but my back  
    Soon must I turn on this well-built predestined  
Illustrious town, of whom the inhabitants  
    Are famed for learning, courage and free-giving.  
I cannot stay, I must avoid the haunts  
    Of luxury ; for always I am living  
        On dry bread and the stale  
        Of desert well.”

At this the justice opened wide his eyes.  
    Mashallah, was his thought, at last, uncourted,  
Has luck fallen to you, Hamsa? have your wise  
    Enactments far as Stamboul been reported?  
Are you about to be Hakeem, Emir—  
    Pasha perhaps? Upon his townsmen gloated  
This justice vain and strove unmoved to appear ;  
    Then glared on Gourred while in heart he doted :  
        “ A better wife than she  
        I may not see.”

“ True, holy man ! ” broke in the wily Jew,  
“ I am not one to hear the secret proffers  
Of argument, called *ketman*, which the few  
And friendly make between them. But no scoffers  
Are tribes of Judah ’gainst your Moslem faith.  
I’m here to claim as mine this goodly woman  
Whom I affirm, by Azraël who slayeth,  
Was bought from him whom once more I do summon.”  
Then made he other sign  
With fingers nine.

But, “ Listen, ” Ali cried in musical  
Fine scholar-phrases like the texts of Koran,  
“ To Jew and Christian, Moslem, Hindu, all  
The tribes of man on coasts however foreign  
My Gospel speaks. I cry the name of God,  
The one high God of Moses, Christ, Mohammed,  
Yet differently. He lives in every clod  
As well as souls for diamond beauty famèd.  
Creator—thus alone  
Can he be known.

“Seven ways he shows existenee. For which seven  
Seven Arabic letters stand. These are on earth  
Mere pale reflections of the signs in heaven  
He placed to chronicle creation’s birth.  
Force, Power and Will are seen in sun, moon, Mars ;  
In Mercury Action ; Jove means Condensation ;  
Glory in Venus ; by that sage of stars,  
Old Saturn, Revelation first had mention.  
These are to men and brutes  
His Attributes.

“Last night with her, my adopted sister, friend  
And true disciple I beheld the vision  
Of Nimrod and, till darkness was at end,  
Heard a strange tale of Ahram, whose old mission  
Was like to mine, like to Mohammed’s, like  
To that sweet Christ’s, whom Israel crucified ;  
And then once more I felt that me shall strike  
A similar fate, that briefly I shall bide  
Within the incarnate span  
Of mortal man.

“ In Koufa’s moldering mosque, where bled to death  
     Ali the martyr, I was early witness  
 In vision of the saint who for the faith  
     Died which to those rude days had special fitness.  
 Methought I saw him hacked and disemboweled,  
     And a clear sound that seemed the lightning’s voice  
 A like reward to the reformer voweled,  
     Whereat the foolish should once more rejoice,  
         Ignorant toward what seed  
         The martyrs bleed.

“ But my great mission shall not be in vain,  
     We’re God’s own ; he is ours ; from him we borrow  
 Our wondrous robe of fleshly joy and pain—  
     And lay it back within the chest to-morrow.  
 He is unique, moveless, eterne, unseen.  
     None is but he. But I his prophet latest  
 Share that great glory with my saints eighteen  
     Whereof one is a woman. Thou that statest  
         Wise Gourred is a slave  
         Dost merely rave.



“ She is so high above all women other  
That when she dies of some terrific death  
Her soul shall kindle in another Mother  
Of Purity, and our eternal faith  
Live on through persecutions! . . . O high Gate  
With sevenfold arch, through which the godhead enters  
And lo, the world! . . . O God-breaths early and late—  
Each one a prophet in whose teaching centres  
Some truth, to oversoar  
One barrier more! . . . ”

So speaking, deeply the rapt prophet pondered  
At the divan, nor was aware of aught  
But his great subject, and still on had wandered  
Back had not him the hoary Dervish brought :  
“ Hamsa the Kadi! surely this is one  
By look and speech of lofty race and learning.  
I marvel that the case was e'er begun.  
Dismiss it, and direct the Jew, for spurning  
True Moslem, first restore  
The chain she wore.

“ And recompense this pretty boy, my son,  
Who in your service beat his feet all bloody.  
Ah viper ! ” rose his voice, “ hereafter shun  
Plots of such scope, or you shall stake your body !  
Raven of ill that ere the dawn hast tried  
To filch this treasure ; wolf in cunning ; greedy  
As boar, and crafty as the fox ; cool-eyed  
Tenacious as chameleons ! a speedy  
Reward shall you obtain  
But nothing gain !

“ Two-colored as the pie, and doglike fawning,  
False as sheet-lightning and as locust swift,  
You shall regret, ere comes another dawning,  
Lies have been husbanded with such unthrift.  
Think you a Kadi such as this could fail  
To see she was no slave, nor ever bartered  
For aught at all ? Think you the crazy tale  
Will credence get ? Or are you of those chartered  
Liars who are believed  
By men deceived ? ” . . .

Then as in vain the Jew to stop him struggled—

“Make way” he cried, “let these unchallenged pass!

Come, boy, and show the Kadi what you smuggled

O'er hill and dale, through sands and river-grass!

And since I'm poor, and this my son is fair,

Young and straight-limbed, but torn and stained  
with travel,

O, all ye true believers, do not spare

Your wealth, but give of largess, and unravel

The knots that spoil the grace

Of his sweet face!”

A merry humor twinkled in the eye

Of that sad boy as with an eel-like motion

He ran from man to man. His courteous cry

Was scholarly and pressing. Now devotion

To thoughts sublime had kept the Prophet there,

Had Gourred not with dignity departed.

He followed; on their way each head was bare

Some even kissed the skirt of him who smarted

Still from the cruel blows

Of former foes.

And many a gift they had that morn received  
From Hand-of-Sultan, in the boy did gather.  
For all the Kadi's radiant look perceived  
And his good luck, they hoped, their own would  
father ;

And with deep groans the slaver doled a pile  
Of silver, and the judge, not long entreated,  
Gave a rich ring and gained a beaming smile.  
Then at a nod the laughing youngster flitted  
Off, and the Dervish sate  
Serene, sedate.

"Come, Holy Father," quoth the Kadi then,  
"Undo thy bag and show to all each jewel  
For me brought, Hamsa, Kadi, chief of men !  
To good men gracious, to the wicked cruel !  
I marvel whence they are ; from Ispahan ?  
(Poor uncle, are you dead ?) Or my decisions—  
Have they so pleased rich men of Hamadan  
They send me gifts ? I too have had my visions :  
They were of much more gold  
Than hands could hold !"

Serene he smiled, that Dervish, and his beard  
Gently caressed. "Jewels are here," he muttered,  
"Richer than any you have seen or heard  
Cited in song or e'er in elf-tales uttered.  
Look but on this!" . . . and from the sack he drew  
A little scroll and read: *The life is short  
Of the voracious beast.* . . . The scroll he threw  
Into the judge's lap. "Heard you report  
Of pearl," asked he, "more rare,  
More rich, more fair?"

"And see this diamond: *He who digs a pit  
For others often falls therein!*" . . . Scroll second  
Fell on the Kadi's robe. But him a fit  
Of fury strangled, for he saw he'd reckoned  
Without his host. He rolled his greedy eyes  
Like swine in yard tormented, toward the mocker  
In helpless wrath, o'ercome by quick surprise.  
Grotesque he leaned and goggling, like the knocker  
Of bronze Franks mould like boars  
To deck their doors.

Now when the keen-eyed Dervish saw returning  
 Speech, and the thundercloud about to burst,  
 Quoth he: "I fear my jewels you are spurning.  
 Yet here is *Take no bribe* among the first.  
 But hush, no word! I have within my budget  
 News that ye dream not :—THE GREAT SULTAN'S  
 DEAD!

Ha, there is news! nor do I longer grudge it.  
 Fly Jew and Kadi! Ruffians, fly! o'erhead  
 Hang the long-treasured blows  
 Of lifelong foes!

"Hillah's in secret ferment and conspiring  
 With shut bazaar! Bad news flies fast! The road  
 To Bagdad is beset! Hear ye that firing?  
 Old bloodfeuds knock for you at each abode!" . . .  
 He said no more, for at the signal shot  
 The whole divan—Jew, Kadi, Arabs—tumbled  
 Out from the court, as though upon the spot  
 Where devils dance they had unwitting stumbled;  
 And while each hurried fast  
 Forth slowly passed

The Dervish blithe, and presently discovered  
A ruinous house, apart, and foul to see,  
But entering, there he found a carpet covered  
Before the fountain with a banquet free,  
With wine and coffee, fruits and tender meats,  
Succulent roots and all that warms the senses,  
And there his well-robed boy the Dervish greets.  
Then down they sit and banquet like to princes,  
Quaff and drown care with sups  
From oft-drained cups.

Against the outer gate there was a knocking.  
Behold, 'twas Gourred, seeking for the seer  
Asylum. Lo, and there the Dervish, mocking  
With goodly feast his piety austere !  
“ Well met,” he cried, “ Come to the banquet ; bless  
Allah who cast me in your way this morning.  
Your theory's fine, but give me worldliness !  
Ho, boy, more wine ! Nay, Prophet, be not scorning  
Safety, good food, and cheer !  
You see me here

“The only man in Hillah cool and happy.

And why? Because with twice-filed tongue I’ve  
drawn

That juice from wood time-seasoned both and sappy—

I mean the gold fools hold for me in pawn!

I have no house for which to tremble. Taxes

I levy; never pay them. And the star

I worship best is that which wanes and waxes

Reflected in the wine from yonder jar.

The round heaven of my soul

Is you, O bowl!”

Then Ali woke as one who starts from dreams

And found sweet Gourred going. “It is fated,”

Quoth he, “this frank deceiver, who now seems

Only for fleshly vanities created,

Shall zealous be for our great faith beyond

All others; who, in his mere sport and leisure

Freed you and me from insult and from bond,

Shall find in martyrdom his keenest pleasure.

Sit we, and seek to gain

This master brain!”



So, while all Hillah is aquake with fears—

Each gun at rest, who's Sultan no one knowing—

These earnest sit till the lean moon appears

Yellowing apace while the night's breath is blowing.

The Prophet rose: "I rank you now as one

Of mine, though obstinate. My teaching ponder.

For as each comet to the hearth of sun

Returns at last, how far soe'er he wander,

You, O most deep and bold,

Shall join our fold.

"We must depart to comfort Nimrod worried

By fearful crimes. We can no longer stay.

Perchance we ne'er shall meet on earth. Yet Gourred

And I shall love you, though from far away.

Meantime, farewell my brother martyr! When

At your grim hour of trial flames are lapping

Your weary feet, hold fast in memory then

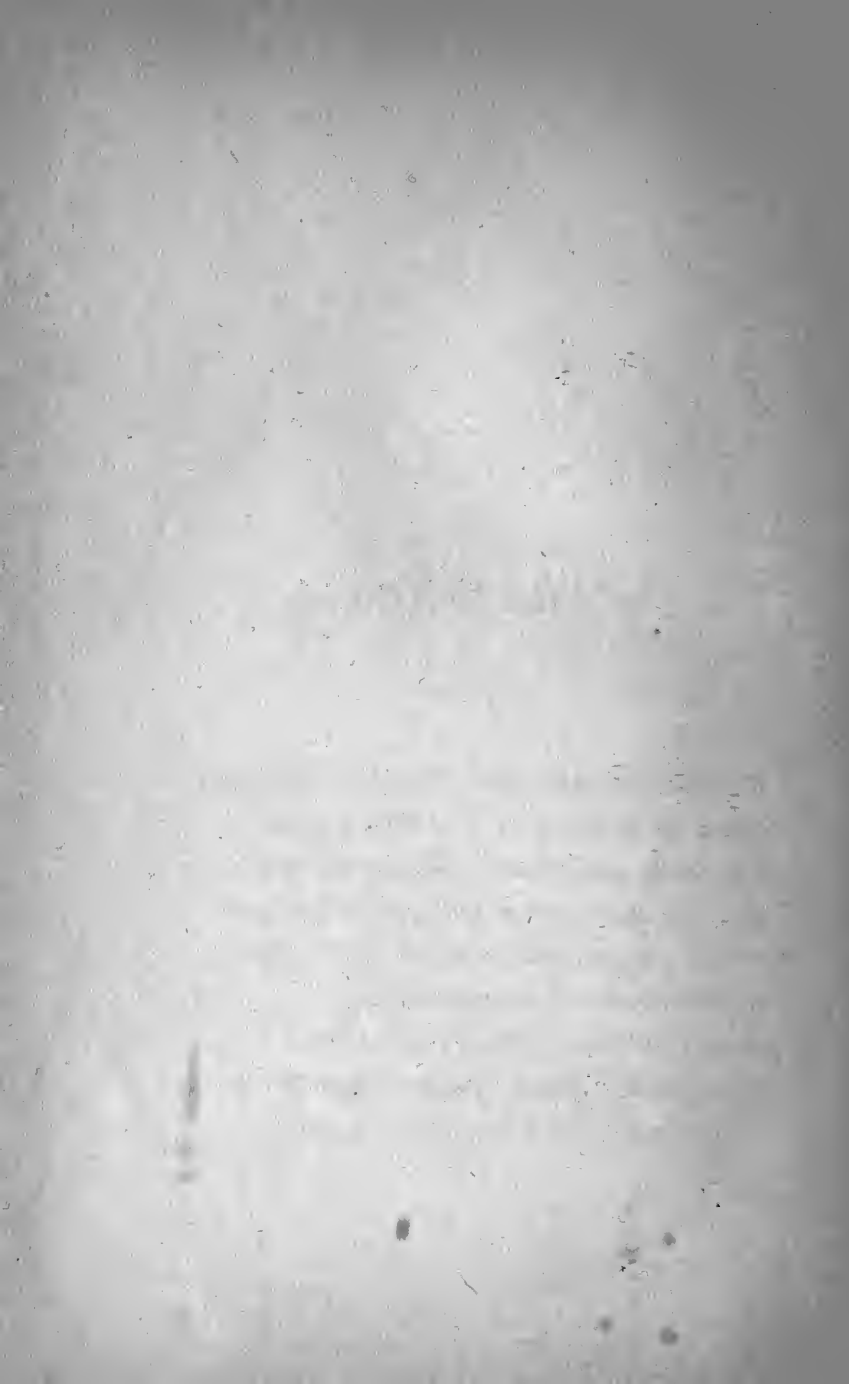
How on this day the grace of God was wrapping

You—thus I say, select—

You, the elect!" . . .

They passed as pass the roebuck and the hind  
Shapely, deep-eyed, a perfect man and woman.  
The Dervish pondered. All the world seemed rind  
Without the melon; all our pleasures human  
Stale; then a horror of his former life  
Of naught and naughtiness with power possessed  
him—  
The folly, groping and the aimless strife—  
Till half he had of shallowness confessed him.  
So, brooding on God, he paced  
Forth to the waste.

THE EPILOGUE



## THE EPILOGUE

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*FAREWELL, sweet friends. The kernel of the tale  
Shows not in books, nor is at shops for sale.  
The frame around about is history learned  
From scholar-statesman Gobineau, who earned  
Honors enough from his fair Mother France.  
Reckless is she, yet eager for advance  
In arts and letters—Genius with a torch  
That radiates clearly from her pillared porch  
Central among old Europe's varied fanes!*

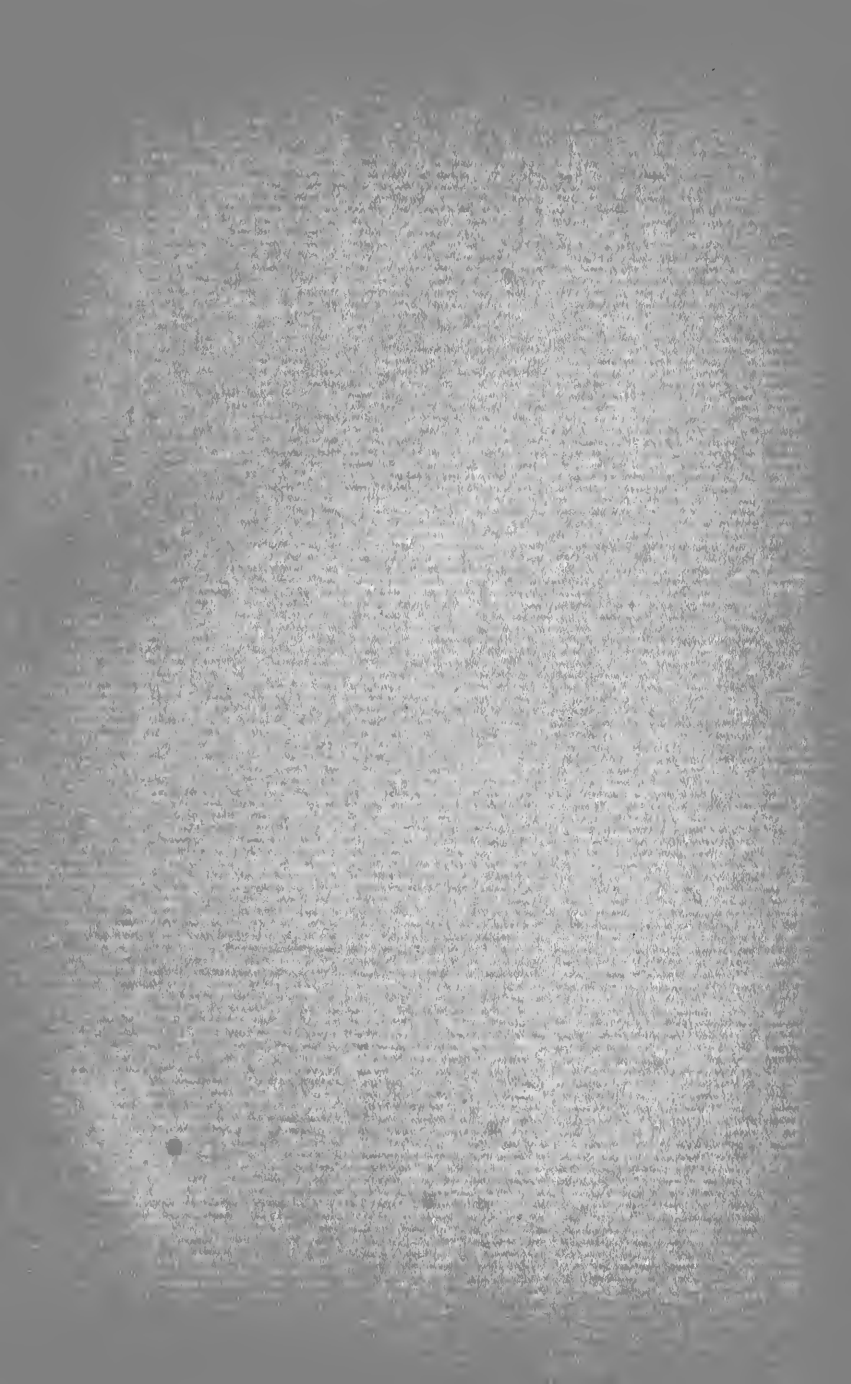
*The fate of the reformer thus contains  
Fates of old Nimrod, as in Chinese box  
Carved by slow craftsmen without lids or locks  
An inner form of kindred shape is seen.  
I give you symbols. For whate'er has been  
Exists to-day in those two caskets strange,  
This earth and our smooth brain ; nor out of range  
Are future marvels in behind the eye  
And here below the blue skull of the sky.*

*Now should ye long to know the second trance  
Of wailing ghosts and all the sad romance  
Of Ali and his Gourred—who more glad  
Than Charles de Kay? But should ye find it bad,  
Right well he can console himself, be sure ;  
Blithely your censure or neglect endure ;  
And ne'er regret the days of thankless toil  
And fruitless spending of the midnight oil  
Risky on the chance his country's folk to please.*

*For poets sing like wind among the trees  
Now high, then low ; now sweetly, then most ill ;  
And as, to writing, there is need of quill  
And paper too ; as wind is naught sans leaves ;  
Even so the singer who no praise receives  
Is pen sans paper ; breeze sans tree ; a hand  
Without the harp ; a king that lacks of land ;  
A nerveless lion ; a trustee disgraced ;  
An actor mouthing grandly toward the waste.*















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