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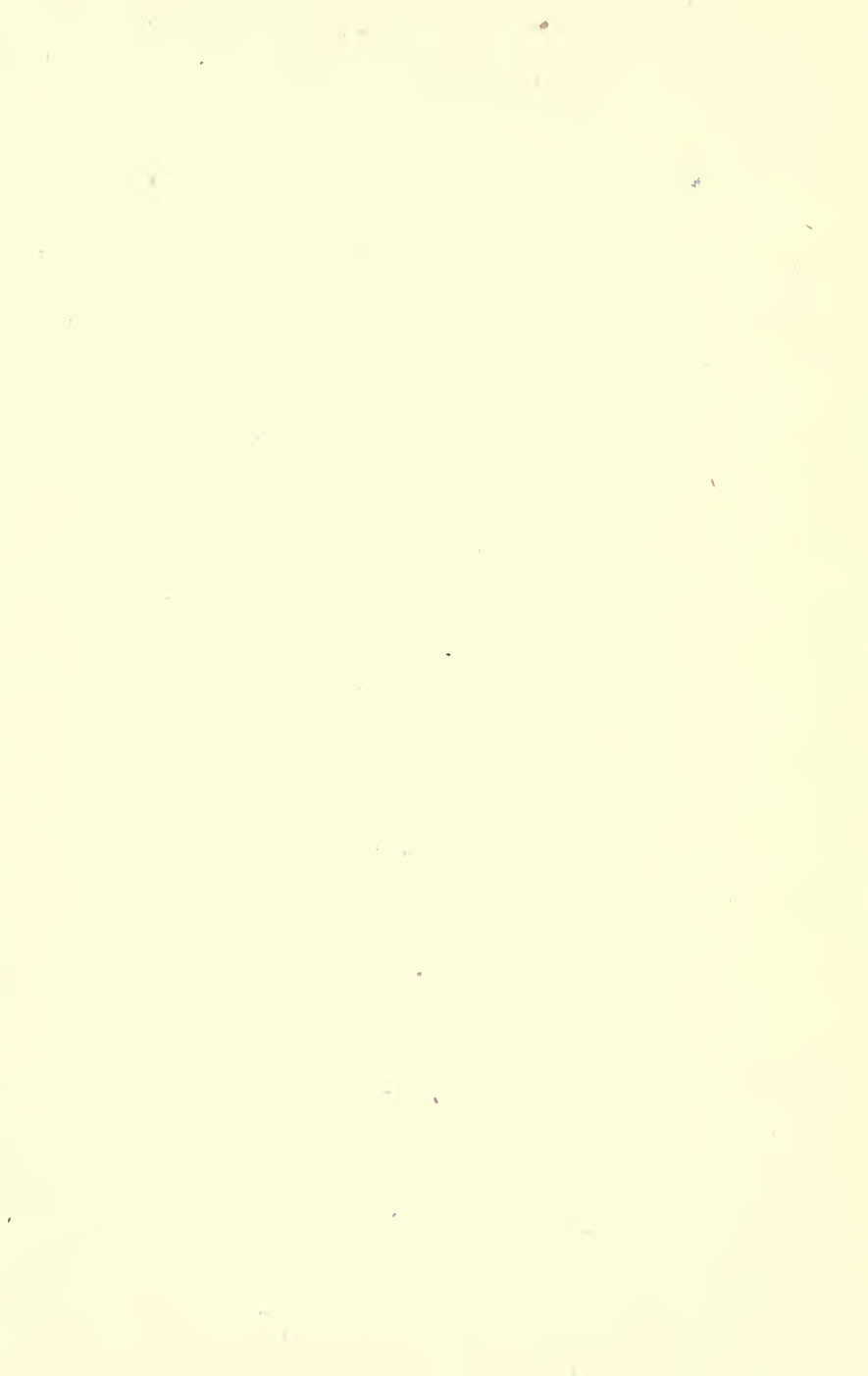


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**AVON'S HARVEST**

**EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON**

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AVON'S HARVEST

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*Poems*

THE CHILDREN OF THE NIGHT  
CAPTAIN CRAIG  
THE TOWN DOWN THE RIVER  
THE MAN AGAINST THE SKY  
MERLIN  
LANCELOT  
THE THREE TAVERNS

*Plays*

VAN ZORN. A COMEDY IN THREE  
ACTS  
THE PORCUPINE. A DRAMA IN THREE  
ACTS

# AVON'S HARVEST

BY

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

**New York**

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TO  
SETH ELLIS POPE



## AVON'S HARVEST

Fear, like a living fire that only death  
Might one day cool, had now in Avon's eyes  
Been witness for so long of an invasion  
That made of a gay friend whom we had known  
Almost a memory, wore no other name  
As yet for us than fear. Another man  
Than Avon might have given to us at least  
A futile opportunity for words  
We might regret. But Avon, since it happened,  
Fed with his unrevealing reticence  
The fire of death we saw that horribly

Consumed him while he crumbled and said nothing.  
So many a time had I been on the edge,  
And off again, of a foremeasured fall  
Into the darkness and discomfiture  
Of his oblique rebuff, that finally  
My silence honored his, holding itself  
Away from a gratuitous intrusion  
That likely would have widened a new distance  
Already wide enough, if not so new.  
But there are seeming parallels in space  
That may converge in time; and so it was  
I walked with Avon, fought and pondered with  
    him,  
While he made out a case for So-and-so,  
Or slaughtered What's-his-name in his old way,  
With a new difference. Nothing in Avon lately  
Was, or was ever again to be for us,

Like him that we remembered; and all the while  
We saw that fire at work within his eyes  
And had no glimpse of what was burning there.

So for a year it went; and so it went  
For half another year — when, all at once,  
At someone's tinkling afternoon at home  
I saw that in the eyes of Avon's wife  
The fire that I had met the day before  
In his had found another living fuel.  
To look at her and then to think of him,  
And thereupon to contemplate the fall  
Of a dim curtain over the dark end  
Of a dark play, required of me no more  
Clairvoyance than a man who cannot swim  
Will exercise in seeing that his friend  
Off shore will drown except he save himself.

To her I could say nothing, and to him  
No more than tallied with a long belief  
That I should only have it back again  
For my chagrin to ruminate upon,  
Ingloriously, for the still time it starved;  
And that would be for me as long a time  
As I remembered Avon — who is yet  
Not quite forgotten. On the other hand,  
For saying nothing I might have with me always  
An injured and recriminating ghost  
Of a dead friend. The more I pondered it  
The more I knew there was not much to lose,  
Albeit for one whose delving hitherto  
Had been a forage of his own affairs,  
The quest, however golden the reward,  
Was irksome — and as Avon suddenly  
And soon was driven to let me see, was needless.

It seemed an age ago that we were there  
One evening in the room that in the days  
When they could laugh he called the Library.  
“ He calls it that, you understand,” she said,  
“ Because the dictionary always lives here.  
He’s not a man of books, yet he can read,  
And write. He learned it all at school.”— He  
    smiled,  
And answered with a fervor that rang then  
Superfluous: “ Had I learned a little more  
At school, it might have been as well for me.”  
And I remembered now that he paused then,  
Leaving a silence that one had to break.  
But this was long ago, and there was now  
No laughing in that house. We were alone  
This time, and it was Avon’s time to talk.

I waited, and anon became aware  
That I was looking less at Avon's eyes  
Than at another thing that had a gleam  
Quite of its own. "And what the devil's that?"  
I questioned.—"Only what you see," said Avon;  
"Merely a dagger on a dictionary.  
Daggers are out of date, but there you are.  
Take it; and if you like it, shave with it."

"If that's the merry best that you can do,  
My friend," said I, willing to lay it back,  
"I recommend that you be serious."—  
"You are the judge and only arbiter  
Of that," said he; "and that's why you are here.  
Your name is Resignation for an hour,  
So be resigned. I shall not praise your work,  
Or strive in any way to make you happy.



My purpose only is to make you know  
How clearly I have known that you have known  
There was a reason waited on your coming,  
And, if it's in me to see clear enough,  
To fish the reason out of a black well  
Where you see only a dim sort of glimmer  
That has for you no light."

" I see the well,"

I said, " but there's a doubt about the glimmer —  
Say nothing of the light. I'm at your service;  
And though you say that I shall not be happy,  
I shall be if in some way I may serve.  
To tell you fairly now that I know nothing  
Is nothing more than fair."—" You know as much  
As any man alive — save only one man,  
If he's alive. Whether he lives or not  
Is rather for time to answer than for me;

And that's a reason, or a part of one,  
For your appearance here. You do not know him,  
And even if you should pass him in the street  
He might go by without your feeling him  
Between you and the world. I cannot say  
For sure he would, but I suppose he might."

"And I suppose you might, if urged," I said,  
"Say in what water it is that we are fishing.  
You that have reasons hidden in a well,  
Daggers on dictionaries, men that walk  
The streets and are not either dead or living  
For company, are surely, one would say  
To be forgiven if you may seem distraught —  
I mean distrait. I don't know what I mean.  
I only know that I am at your service,  
And that your ornament there on the book

Is not at all a proper toy for children.  
We're not exactly in the nursery now,  
I know — though I may soon be there myself.  
Unless your living dead man comes to life,  
Or is less indiscriminately dead,  
I shall go home."

“No, you will not go home,”  
Said Avon; “or I beg that you will not.”  
So saying, he went slowly to the door  
And turned the key. “Forgive me and my  
manners,  
But I would be alone with you this evening.  
The key, as you observe, is in the lock;  
And you may sit between me and the door,  
Or where you will. And if that thing annoys you,  
Take it, and hide it. I'm not using it.

It's there merely by way of illustration."

"If there are to be many of them like that,  
We'll as well have your tale without your pic-  
tures,"

I told him. "I am not much given to nerves,  
But that thing savors of experience  
Too surely, and of active intimacies  
Too sharply. But no matter; the Lord giveth,  
The Lord taketh away. I trust myself  
Always to you and to your courtesy.  
Only remember that I cling somewhat  
Affectionately to the old tradition."—

"I understand you and your part," said Avon;  
"And I dare say it's well enough, tonight,  
We play around the circumstance a little.  
I've read of men that half way to the stake

Would have their little joke. It's well enough;  
Rather a waste of time, but well enough."

I listened as I waited, and heard steps  
Outside of one who paused and then went on;  
And, having heard, I might as well have seen  
The fear in his wife's eyes. He gazed away,  
As I could see, in helpless thought of her,  
And said to me: "Well, then, it was like **this**.  
Some tales will have a deal of going back  
In them before they are begun. But this one  
Begins in the beginning — when he came.  
I was a boy at school, sixteen years old,  
And on my way, in all appearances,  
To mark an even-tempered average  
Among the major mediocrities  
Who serve and earn with no especial noise

Or vast reward. I saw myself, even then,  
A light for no high shining; and I feared  
No boy or man — having, in truth, no cause.  
I was enough a leader to be free,  
And not enough a hero to be jealous.  
Having eyes and ears, I knew that I was envied,  
And as a proper sort of compensation  
Had envy of my own for two or three —  
But never felt, and surely never gave,  
The wound of any more malevolence  
Than decent youth, defeated for a day,  
May take to bed with him and kill with sleep.  
So, and so far, my days were going well,  
And would have gone so, but for the black tiger  
That many of us fancy is in waiting,  
But waits for most of us in fancy only.  
For me there was no fancy in his coming,

Though God knows I had never summoned him,  
Or thought of him. To this day I'm adrift  
And in the dark, out of all reckoning,  
To find a reason why he ever was,  
Or what was ailing Fate when he was born  
On this alleged God-ordered earth of ours.  
Now and again there comes one of his ilk —  
By chance, we say. I leave all that to you.  
Whether it was an evil chance alone,  
Or some invidious juggling of the stars,  
Or some accrued arrears of ancestors  
Who throve on debts that I was here to pay,  
Or sins within me that I knew not of,  
Or just a foretaste of what waits in hell  
For those of us who cannot love a worm,—  
Whatever it was, or whence or why it was,  
One day there came a stranger to the school.

And having had one mordacious glimpse of him  
That filled my eyes and was to fill my life,  
I have known Peace only as one more word  
Among the many others we say over  
That have an airy credit of no meaning.  
One of these days, if I were seeing many  
To live, I might erect a cenotaph  
To Job's wife. I assume that you remember;  
If you forget, she's extant in your Bible."

Now this was not the language of a man  
Whom I had known as Avon, and I winced  
Hearing it — though I knew that in my heart  
There was no visitation of surprise.  
Unwelcome as it was, and off the key  
Calamitously, it overlived a silence  
That was itself a story and affirmed



A savage emphasis of honesty  
That I would only gladly have attuned  
If possible, to vinous innovation.  
But his indifferent wassailing was always  
Too far within the measure of excess  
For that; and then there were those eyes of his.  
Avon indeed had kept his word with me,  
And there was not much yet to make me happy.

“So there we were,” he said, “we two together,  
Breathing one air. And how shall I go on  
To say by what machinery the slow net  
Of my fantastic and increasing hate  
Was ever woven as it was around us?  
I cannot answer; and you need not ask  
What undulating reptile he was like,  
For such a worm as I discerned in him

Was never yet on earth or in the ocean,  
Or anywhere else than in my sense of him.  
Had all I made of him been tangible,  
The Lord must have invented long ago  
Some private and unspeakable new monster  
Equipped for such a thing's extermination;  
Whereon the monster, seeing no other monster  
Worth biting, would have died with his work done.  
There's a humiliation in it now,  
As there was then, and worse than there was then;  
For then there was the boy to shoulder it  
Without the sickening weight of added years  
Galling him to the grave. Beware of hate  
That has no other boundary than the grave  
Made for it, or for ourselves. Beware, I say;  
And I'm a sorry one, I fear, to say it,  
Though for the moment we may let that go.

And while I'm interrupting my own story  
I'll ask of you the favor of a look  
Into the street. I like it when it's empty.  
There's only one man walking? Let him walk.  
I wish to God that all men might walk always,  
And so, being busy, love one another more."

"Avon," I said, now in my chair again,  
"Although I may not be here to be happy,  
If you are careless, I may have to laugh.  
I have disliked a few men in my life,  
But never to the scope of wishing them  
To this particular pedestrian hell  
Of your affection. I should not like that.  
Forgive me, for this time it was your fault."

He drummed with all his fingers on his chair,

And, after a made smile of acquiescence,  
Took up again the theme of his aversion,  
Which now had flown along with him alone  
For twenty years, like Io's evil insect,  
To sting him when it would. The decencies  
Forbade that I should look at him for ever,  
Yet many a time I found myself ashamed  
Of a long staring at him, and as often  
Essayed another focus, preferably  
That least engaging of exotic steel,  
Which in the distance, on the dictionary,  
Shone, I conceived, with something of the fire  
That lived in Avon's eye. At other times  
There might be cold things creeping in my hair,  
At which my scalp would shrink,— at which,  
again,  
I would arouse myself with a vain scorn,

Remembering that all this was in New York —  
As if that were somehow the banishing  
For ever of all unseemly presences —  
And listen to the story of my friend,  
Who, as I feared, was not for me to save,  
And, as I knew, knew also that I feared it.

“ Humiliation,” he began again,  
“ May be or not the best of all bad names  
I might employ; and if you scent remorse,  
There may be growing such a flower as that  
In the unsightly garden where I planted,  
Not knowing the seed or what was coming of it.  
I’ve done much wondering if I planted it;  
But our poor wonder, when it comes too late,  
Fights with a lath, and one that solid fact  
Breaks while it yawns and looks another way

For a less negligible adversary.  
Away with wonder, then; though I'm at odds  
With conscience, even tonight, for good assurance  
That it was I, or chance and I together,  
Did all that sowing. If I seem to you  
To be a little bitten by the question,  
Without a miracle it might be true;  
The miracle is to me that I'm not eaten  
Long since to death of it, and that you sit  
With nothing more agreeable than a ghost.  
If you had thought a while of that, you might,  
Unhappily, not have come; and your not coming  
Would have been desolation — not for you,  
God save the mark! — for I would have you here.  
I shall not be alone with you to listen;  
And I should be far less alone tonight  
With you away, make what you will of that.

I said that we were going back to school,  
And we may say that we are there — with him.  
This fellow had no friend, and, as for that,  
No sign of an apparent need of one,  
Save always and alone — myself. He fixed  
His heart and eyes on me, insufferably,—  
And in a sort of Nemesis-like way,  
Invincibly. Others who might have given  
A welcome even to him, or I'll suppose so —  
Adorning an unfortified assumption  
With gold that might come off with afterthought —  
Got never, if anything, more out of him  
Than a word flung like refuse in their faces,  
And rarely that. For God knows what good  
    reason,  
He lavished his whole altered arrogance  
On me; and with an overweening skill,

Which had sometimes almost a cringing in it,  
Found a few flaws in my tight mail of hate  
And slowly pricked a poison into me  
In which at first I failed at recognizing  
An unfamiliar subtle sort of pity.  
But so it was, and I believe he knew it;  
Though even to dream it would have been  
absurd —

Until I knew it, and there was no need  
Of dreaming. For the fellow's indolence,  
And his malignant oily swarthinness  
Housing a reptile blood that I could see  
Beneath it, like hereditary venom  
Out of old human swamps, hardly revealed  
Itself the proper spawning-ground of pity.  
But so it was. Pity, or something like it,  
Was in the poison of his proximity;



For nothing else that I have any name for  
Could have invaded and so mastered me  
With a slow tolerance that eventually  
Assumed a blind ascendancy of custom  
That saw not even itself. When I came in,  
Often I'd find him strewn along my couch  
Like an amorphous lizard with its clothes on,  
Reading a book and waiting for its dinner.  
His clothes were always odiously in order,  
Yet I should not have thought of him as clean—  
Not even if he had washed himself to death  
Proving it. There was nothing right about him.  
Then he would search, never quite satisfied,  
Though always in a measure confident,  
My eyes to find a welcome waiting in them,  
Unwilling, as I see him now, to know  
That it would never be there. Looking back,

I am not sure that he would not have died  
For me, if I were drowning or on fire,  
Or that I would not rather have let myself  
Die twice than owe the debt of my survival  
To him, though he had lost not even his clothes.  
No, there was nothing right about that fellow;  
And after twenty years to think of him  
I should be quite as helpless now to serve him  
As I was then. I mean — without my story.  
Be patient, and you'll see just what I mean —  
Which is to say, you won't. But you can listen,  
And that's itself a large accomplishment  
Uncrowned; and may be, at a time like this,  
A mighty charity. It was in January  
This evil genius came into our school,  
And it was June when he went out of it —  
If I may say that he was wholly out

Of any place that I was in thereafter.  
But he was not yet gone. When we are told  
By Fate to bear what we may never bear,  
Fate waits a little while to see what happens;  
And this time it was only for the season  
Between the swift midwinter holidays  
And the long progress into weeks and months  
Of all the days that followed — with him there  
To make them longer. I would have given an  
    eye,  
Before the summer came, to know for certain  
That I should never be condemned again  
To see him with the other; and all the while  
There was a battle going on within me  
Of hate that fought remorse — if you must have  
    it —  
Never to win, . . . never to win but once,

And having won, to lose disastrously,  
And as it was to prove, interminably —  
Or till an end of living may annul,  
If so it be, the nameless obligation  
That I have not the Christian revenue  
In me to pay. A man who has no gold,  
Or an equivalent, shall pay no gold  
Until by chance or labor or contrivance  
He makes it his to pay; and he that has  
No kindlier commodity than hate,  
Glossed with a pity that belies itself  
In its negation and lacks alchemy  
To fuse itself to — love, would you have me say?  
I don't believe it. No, there is no such word.  
If I say tolerance, there's no more to say.  
And he who sickens even in saying that —  
What coin of God has he to pay the toll

To peace on earth? Good will to men — oh, yes!  
That's easy; and it means no more than sap,  
Until we boil the water out of it  
Over the fire of sacrifice. I'll do it;  
And in a measurable way I've done it —  
But not for him. What are you smiling at?  
Well, so it went until a day in June.  
We were together under an old elm,  
Which now, I hope, is gone — though it's a crime  
In me that I should have to wish the death  
Of such a tree as that. There were no trees  
Like those that grew at school — until he came.  
We stood together under it that day,  
When he, by some ungovernable chance,  
All foreign to the former crafty care  
That he had used never to cross my favor,  
Told of a lie that stained a friend of mine

With a false blot that a few days washed off.  
A trifle now, but a boy's honor then —  
Which then was everything. There were some  
words

Between us, but I don't remember them.  
All I remember is a bursting flood  
Of half a year's accumulated hate,  
And his incredulous eyes before I struck him.  
He had gone once too far; and when he knew it,  
He knew it was all over; and I struck him.  
Pound for pound, he was the better brute;  
But bulking in the way then of my fist  
And all there was alive in me to drive it,  
Three of him misbegotten into one  
Would have gone down like him — and being  
larger,  
Might have bled more, if that were necessary.

He came up soon; and if I live for ever,  
The vengeance in his eyes, and a weird gleam  
Of desolation — if I make you see it —  
Will be before me as it is tonight.  
I shall not ever know how long it was  
I waited his attack that never came;  
It might have been an instant or an hour  
That I stood ready there, watching his eyes,  
And the tears running out of them. They made  
Me sick, those tears; for I knew, miserably,  
They were not there for any pain he felt.  
I do not think he felt the pain at all.  
He felt the blow. . . . Oh, the whole thing was  
bad —  
So bad that even the bleaching suns and rains  
Of years that wash away to faded lines,  
Or blot out wholly, the sharp wrongs and ills

Of youth, have had no cleansing agent in them  
To dim the picture. I still see him going  
Away from where I stood; and I shall see him  
Longer, sometime, than I shall see the face  
Of whosoever watches by the bed  
On which I die — given I die that way.  
I doubt if he could reason his advantage  
In living any longer after that  
Among the rest of us. The lad he slandered,  
Or gave a negative immunity  
No better than a stone he might have thrown  
Behind him at his head, was of the few  
I might have envied; and for that being known,  
My fury became sudden history,  
And I a sudden hero. But the crown  
I wore was hot; and I would happily  
Have hurled it, if I could, so far away



That over my last hissing glimpse of it  
There might have closed an ocean. He went  
home

The next day, and the same unhappy chance  
That first had fettered me and my aversion  
To his unprofitable need of me  
Brought us abruptly face to face again  
Beside the carriage that had come for him.  
We met, and for a moment we were still —  
Together. But I was reading in his eyes  
More than I read at college or at law  
In years that followed. There was blankly  
nothing

For me to say, if not that I was sorry;  
And that was more than hate would let me say —  
Whatever the truth might be. At last he spoke,  
And I could see the vengeance in his eyes,

And a cold sorrow — which, if I had seen  
Much more of it might yet have mastered me.  
But I would see no more of it. ‘Well, then,’  
He said, ‘have you thought yet of anything  
Worth saying? If so, there’s time. If you are  
silent,

I shall know where you are until you die.’  
I can still hear him saying those words to me  
Again, without a loss or an addition;  
I know, for I have heard them ever since.  
And there was in me not an answer for them  
Save a new roiling silence. Once again  
I met his look, and on his face I saw  
There was a twisting in the swarthinness  
That I had often sworn to be the cast  
Of his ophidian mind. He had no soul.  
There was to be no more of him — not then.

The carriage rolled away with him inside,  
Leaving the two of us alive together  
In the same hemisphere to hate each other.  
I don't know now whether he's here alive,  
Or whether he's here dead. But that, of course,  
As you would say, is only a tired man's fancy.  
You know that I have driven the wheels too fast  
Of late, and all for gold I do not need.  
When are we mortals to be sensible,  
Paying no more for life than life is worth?  
Better for us, no doubt, we do not know  
How much we pay or what it is we buy."  
He waited, gazing at me as if asking  
The worth of what the universe had for sale  
For one confessed remorse. Avon, I knew,  
Had driven the wheels too fast, but not for gold.

“ If you had given him then your hand,” I said,  
“ And spoken, though it strangled you, the truth,  
I should not have the melancholy honor  
Of sitting here alone with you this evening.  
If only you had shaken hands with him,  
And said the truth, he would have gone his way,  
And you your way. He might have wished you  
dead,  
But he would not have made you miserable.  
At least,” I added, indefensibly,  
“ That’s what I hope is true.”

He pitied me,  
But had the magnanimity not to say so.  
“ If only we had shaken hands,” he said,  
“ And I had said the truth, we might have been  
In half a moment rolling on the gravel.

If I had said the truth, I should have said  
That never at any moment on the clock  
Above us in the tower since his arrival  
Had I been in a more proficient mood  
To throttle him. If you had seen his eyes  
As I did, and if you had seen his face  
At work as I did, you might understand.  
I was ashamed of it, as I am now,  
But that's the prelude to another theme;  
For now I'm saying only what had happened  
If I had taken his hand and said the truth.  
The wise have cautioned us that where there's hate  
There's also fear. The wise are right sometimes.  
There may be now, but there was no fear then.  
There was just hatred, hauled up out of hell  
For me to writhe in; and I writhed in it."

I saw that he was writhing in it still;  
But having a magnanimity myself,  
I waited. There was nothing else to do  
But wait, and to remember that his tale,  
Though nearly done, as I divined it was,  
Yet hovered among shadows and regrets  
Of twenty years ago. When he began  
Again to speak, I felt them coming nearer.

“Whenever your poet or your philosopher  
Has nothing richer for us,” he resumed,  
“He burrows among remnants, like a mouse  
In a waste-basket, and with much dry noise  
Comes up again, having found Time at the bottom  
And filled himself with its futility.  
‘Time is at once,’ he says, to startle us,  
‘A poison for us, if we make it so,

And, if we make it so, an antidote  
For the same poison that afflicted us.  
I'm witness to the poison, but the cure  
Of my complaint is not, for me, in Time.  
There may be doctors in eternity  
To deal with it, but they are not here now.  
There's no specific for my three diseases  
That I could swallow, even if I should find it,  
And I shall never find it here on earth."

" Mightn't it be as well, my friend," I said  
" For you to contemplate the uncompleted  
With not such an infernal certainty? "

" And mightn't it be as well for you, my friend,"  
Said Avon, " to be quiet while I go on?  
When I am done, then you may talk all night —

Like a physician who can do no good,  
But knows how soon another would have his fee  
Were he to tell the truth. Your fee for this  
Is in my gratitude and my affection;  
And I'm not eager to be calling in  
Another to take yours away from you,  
Whatever it's worth. I like to think I know.  
Well then, again. The carriage rolled away  
With him inside; and so it might have gone  
For ten years rolling on, with him still in it,  
For all it was I saw of him. Sometimes  
I heard of him, but only as one hears  
Of leprosy in Boston or New York  
And wishes it were somewhere else. He faded  
Out of my scene — yet never quite out of it:  
'I shall know where you are until you die,'  
Were his last words; and they are the same words



That I received thereafter once a year,  
Infallibly on my birthday, with no name;  
Only a card, and the words printed on it.  
No, I was never rid of him — not quite;  
Although on shipboard, on my way from here  
To Hamburg, I believe that I forgot him.  
But once ashore, I should have been half ready  
To meet him there, risen up out of the ground,  
With hoofs and horns and tail and everything.  
Believe me, there was nothing right about him,  
Though it was not in Hamburg that I found him.  
Later, in Rome, it was we found each other,  
For the first time since we had been at school.  
There was the same slow vengeance in his eyes  
When he saw mine, and there was a vicious twist  
On his amphibious face that might have been  
On anything else a smile — rather like one

We look for on the stage than in the street.  
I must have been a yard away from him  
Yet as we passed I felt the touch of him  
Like that of something soft in a dark room.  
There's hardly need of saying that we said  
nothing,  
Or that we gave each other an occasion  
For more than our eyes uttered. He was gone  
Before I knew it, like a solid phantom;  
And his reality was for me some time  
In its achievement — given that one's to be  
Convinced that such an incubus at large  
Was ever quite real. The season was upon us  
When there are fitter regions in the world —  
Though God knows he would have been safe  
enough —  
Than Rome for strayed Americans to live in,

And when the whips of their itineraries  
Hurry them north again. I took my time,  
Since I was paying for it, and leisurely  
Went where I would — though never again to move  
Without him at my elbow or behind me.  
My shadow of him, wherever I found myself  
Might horribly as well have been the man —  
Although I should have been afraid of him  
No more than of a large worm in a salad.  
I should omit the salad, certainly,  
And wish the worm elsewhere. And so he was,  
In fact; yet as I go on to grow older,  
I question if there's anywhere a fact  
That isn't the malevolent existence  
Of one man who is dead, or is not dead,  
Or what the devil it is that he may be.  
There must be, I suppose, a fact somewhere,

But I don't know it. I can only tell you  
That later, when to all appearances  
I stood outside a music-hall in London,  
I felt him and then saw that he was there.  
Yes, he was there, and had with him a woman  
Who looked as if she didn't know. I'm sorry  
To this day for that woman — who, no doubt,  
Is doing well. Yes, there he was again;  
There were his eyes and the same vengeance in  
    them  
That I had seen in Rome and twice before —  
Not mentioning all the time, or most of it,  
Between the day I struck him and that evening.  
That was the worst show that I ever saw,  
But you had better see it for yourself  
Before you say so too. I went away,  
Though not for any fear that I could feel

Of him or of his worst manipulations,  
But only to be out of the same air  
That made him stay alive in the same world  
With all the gentlemen that were in irons  
For uncommendable extravagances  
That I should reckon slight compared with his  
Offence of being. Distance would have made him  
A moving fly-speck on the map of life,—  
But he would not be distant, though his flesh  
And bone might have been climbing Fujiyama  
Or Chimborazo — with me there in London,  
Or sitting here. My doom it was to see him,  
Be where I might. That was ten years ago;  
And having waited season after season  
His always imminent evil recrudescence,  
And all for nothing, I was waiting still,  
When the *Titanic* touched a piece of ice

And we were for a moment where we are,  
With nature laughing at us. When the noise  
Had spent itself to names, his was among them;  
And I will not insult you or myself  
With a vain perjury. I was far from cold.  
It seemed as for the first time in my life  
I knew the blessedness of being warm;  
And I remember that I had a drink,  
Having assuredly no need of it.  
And after that there were no messages  
In ambush waiting for me on my birthday.  
There was no vestige yet of any fear,  
You understand — if that's why you are smiling."

I said that I had not so much as whispered  
The name aloud of any fear soever,  
And that I smiled at his unwonted plunge

Into the perilous pool of Dionysus.  
“ Well, if you are so easily diverted  
As that,” he said, drumming his chair again,  
“ You will be pleased, I think, with what is coming;  
And though there be divisions and departures,  
Imminent from now on, for your diversion  
I’ll do the best I can. More to the point,  
I know a man who if his friends were like him  
Would live in the woods all summer and all winter,  
Leaving the town and its iniquities  
To die of their own dust. But having his wits,  
Henceforth he may conceivably avoid  
The adventure unattended. Last October  
He took me with him into the Maine woods,  
Where, by the shore of a primeval lake,  
With woods all round it, and a voyage away

From anything wearing clothes, he had reared  
somehow

A lodge, or camp, with a stone chimney in it,  
And a wide fireplace to make men forget  
Their sins who sat before it in the evening,  
Hearing the wind outside among the trees  
And the black water washing on the shore.  
I never knew the meaning of October  
Until I went with Asher to that place,  
Which I shall not investigate again  
Till I be taken there by other forces  
Than are innate in my economy.

'You may not like it,' Asher said, 'but Asher  
Knows what is good. So put your faith in Asher,  
And come along with him.' He's an odd bird,  
Yet I could wish for the world's decency  
There might be more of him. And so it was



I found myself, at first incredulous,  
Down there with Asher in the wilderness,  
Alive at last with a new liberty  
And with no sore to fester. He perceived  
In me an altered favor of God's works,  
And promptly took upon himself the credit,  
Which, in a fashion, was as accurate  
As one's interpretation of another  
Is like to be. So for a frosty fortnight  
We had the sunlight with us on the lake,  
And the moon with us when the sun was down.  
'God gave his adjutants a holiday,'  
Asher assured me, 'when He made this place';  
And I agreed with him that it was heaven,—  
Till it was hell for me for then and after.  
There was a village miles away from us  
Where now and then we paddled for the mail

And incidental small commodities  
That perfect exile might require, and stayed  
The night after the voyage with an antique  
Survival of a broader world than ours  
Whom Asher called The Admiral. This time,  
A little out of sorts and out of tune  
With paddling, I let Asher go alone,  
Sure that his heart was happy. Then it was  
That hell came. I sat gazing over there  
Across the water, watching the sun's last fire  
Above those gloomy and indifferent trees  
That might have been a wall around the world,  
When suddenly, like faces over the lake,  
Out of the silence of that other shore  
I was aware of hidden presences  
That soon, no matter how many of them there  
were,

Would all be one. I could not look behind me,  
Where I could hear that one of them was breathing,  
For, if I did, those others over there  
Might all see that at last I was afraid;  
And I might hear them without seeing them,  
Hearing that other one. You were not there;  
And it is well for you that you don't know  
What they are like when they should not be there.  
And there were chilly doubts of whether or not  
I should be seeing the rest that I should see  
With eyes, or otherwise. I could not be sure;  
And as for going over to find out,  
All I may tell you now is that my fear  
Was not the fear of dying, though I knew soon  
That all the gold in all the sunken ships  
That have gone down since Tyre would not have  
paid

For me the ferriage of myself alone  
To that infernal shore. I was in hell,  
Remember; and if you have never been there  
You may as well not say how easy it is  
To find the best way out. There may not be one.  
Well, I was there; and I was there alone —  
Alone for the first time since I was born;  
And I was not alone. That's what it is  
To be in hell. I hope you will not go there.  
All through that slow, long, desolating twilight  
Of incoherent certainties, I waited;  
Never alone — never to be alone;  
And while the night grew down upon me there,  
I thought of old Prometheus in the story  
That I had read at school, and saw mankind  
All huddled into clusters in the dark,  
Calling to God for light. There was a light

Coming for them, but there was none for me  
Until a shapeless remnant of a moon  
Rose after midnight over the black trees  
Behind me. I should hardly have confessed  
The heritage then of my identity  
To my own shadow; for I was powerless there,  
As I am here. Say what you like to say  
To silence, but say none of it to me  
Tonight. To say it now would do no good,  
And you are here to listen. Beware of hate,  
And listen. Beware of hate, remorse, and fear,  
And listen. You are staring at the damned,  
But yet you are no more the one than he  
To say that it was he alone who planted  
The flower of death now growing in his garden.  
Was it enough, I wonder, that I struck him?  
I shall say nothing. I shall have to wait

Until I see what's coming, if it comes,  
When I'm a delver in another garden —  
If such an one there be. If there be none,  
All's well — and over. Rather a vain expense,  
One might affirm — yet there is nothing lost.  
Science be praised that there is nothing lost."

I'm glad the venom that was on his tongue  
May not go down on paper; and I'm glad  
No friend of mine alive, far as I know,  
Has a tale waiting for me with an end  
Like Avon's. There was here an interruption,  
Though not a long one — only the while we heard,  
As we had heard before, the ghost of steps  
Faintly outside. We knew that she was there  
Again; and though it was a kindly folly,  
I wished that Avon's wife would go to sleep.

“ I was afraid, this time, but not of man —  
Or man as you may figure him,” he said.  
“ It was not anything my eyes had seen  
That I could feel around me in the night,  
There by that lake. If I had been alone,  
There would have been the joy of being free,  
Which in imagination I had won  
With unimaginable expiation —  
But I was not alone. If you had seen me,  
Waiting there for the dark and looking off  
Over the gloom of that relentless water,  
Which had the stillness of the end of things  
That evening on it, I might well have made  
For you the picture of the last man left  
Where God, in his extinction of the rest,  
Had overlooked him and forgotten him.  
Yet I was not alone. Interminably

The minutes crawled along and over me,  
Slow, cold, intangible, and invisible,  
As if they had come up out of that water.  
How long I sat there I shall never know,  
For time was hidden out there in the black lake,  
Which now I could see only as a glimpse  
Of black light by the shore. There were no stars  
To mention, and the moon was hours away  
Behind me. There was nothing but myself,  
And what was coming. On my breast I felt  
The touch of death, and I should have died then.  
I ruined good Asher's autumn as it was,  
For he will never again go there alone,  
If ever he goes at all. Nature did ill  
To darken such a faith in her as his,  
Though he will have it that I had the worst  
Of her defection, and will hear no more



Apologies. If it had to be for someone,  
I think it well for me it was for Asher.  
I dwell on him, meaning that you may know him  
Before your last horn blows. He has a name  
That's like a tree, and therefore like himself —  
By which I mean you find him where you leave  
him.

I saw him and The Admiral together  
While I was in the dark, but they were far —  
Far as around the world from where I was;  
And they knew nothing of what I saw not  
While I knew only I was not alone.  
I made a fire to make the place alive,  
And locked the door. But even the fire was dead,  
And all the life there was was in the shadow  
It made of me. My shadow was all of me;  
The rest had had its day, and there was night

Remaining — only night, that's made for  
shadows,

Shadows and sleep and dreams, or dreams with-  
out it.

The fire went slowly down, and now the moon,  
Or that late wreck of it, was coming up;  
And though it was a martyr's work to move,  
I must obey my shadow, and I did.

There were two beds built low against the wall,  
And down on one of them, with all my clothes on,  
Like a man getting into his own grave,  
I lay — and waited. As the firelight sank,  
The moonlight, which had partly been consumed  
By the black trees, framed on the other wall  
A glimmering window not far from the ground.  
The coals were going, and only a few sparks  
Were there to tell of them; and as they died

The window lightened, and I saw the trees.  
They moved a little, but I could not move,  
More than to turn my face the other way;  
And then, if you must have it so, I slept.  
We'll call it so — if sleep is your best name  
For a sort of conscious, frozen catalepsy  
Wherein a man sees all there is around him  
As if it were not real, and he were not  
Alive. You may call it anything you please  
That made me powerless to move hand or foot,  
Or to make any other living motion  
Than after a long horror, without hope,  
To turn my face again the other way.  
Some force that was not mine opened my eyes,  
And, as I knew it must be,— it was there.”

Avon covered his eyes — whether to shut  
The memory and the sight of it away,  
Or to be sure that mine were for the moment  
Not searching his with pity, is now no matter.  
My glance at him was brief, turning itself  
To the familiar pattern of his rug,  
Wherein I may have sought a consolation —  
As one may gaze in sorrow on a shell,  
Or a small apple. So it had come, I thought;  
And heard, no more with any wonderment,  
The faint recurring footsteps of his wife,  
Who, knowing less than I knew, yet knew more.  
Now I could read, I fancied, through the fear  
That latterly was living in her eyes,  
To the sure source of its authority.  
But he went on, and I was there to listen:

“ And though I saw it only as a blot  
Between me and my life, it was enough  
To make me know that he was watching there —  
Waiting for me to move, or not to move,  
Before he moved. Sick as I was with hate,  
Reborn, and chained with fear that was more than  
fear,

I would have gambled all there was to gain  
Or lose in rising there from where I lay  
And going out after it. ‘ Before the dawn,’  
I reasoned, ‘ that will be a difference here.  
Therefore it may as well be done outside.’  
And then I found I was immovable,  
As I had been before; and a dead sweat  
Rolled out of me as I remembered him  
When I had seen him leaving me at school.  
‘ I shall know where you are until you die,’

Were the last words that I had heard him say ;  
And there he was. Now I could see his face,  
And all the sad, malignant desperation  
That was drawn on it after I had struck him,  
And on my memory since that afternoon.  
But all there was left now for me to do  
Was to lie there and see him while he squeezed  
His unclean outlines into the dim room,  
And half erect inside, like a still beast  
With a face partly man's, came slowly on  
Along the floor to the bed where I lay,  
And waited. I had waited for so long  
That I began to fancy there was on me  
The stupor that explorers have alleged  
As evidence of nature's final mercy  
When tigers have them down upon the earth  
And wild hot breath is heavy on their faces.

I could not feel his breath, but I could hear it;  
Though fear had made an anvil of my heart  
Where demons, for the joy of doing it,  
Were sledging death down on it. And I saw  
His eyes now, as they were, for the first time —  
Aflame as they had never been before  
With all their gathered vengeance gleaming in  
    them,

And always that unconscionable sorrow  
That would not die behind it. Then I caught  
The shadowy glimpse of an uplifted arm,  
And a moon-flash of metal. That was all. . . .

“When I believed I was alive again  
I was with Asher and The Admiral,  
Whom Asher had brought with him for a day  
With nature. That’s about the whole of it,

Except the thing there on the dictionary.  
They found it on me with the point of it  
Touching my throat. I had not moved since then;  
And it was not for some uncertain hours  
After they came that either would say how long  
That might have been. It should have been much  
longer.

All you may add will be your own invention,  
For I have told you all there is to tell.  
Tomorrow I shall have another birthday,  
And with it there may come another message —  
Although I cannot see the need of it.  
You may as well take that thing home with you,  
And so be sure that I'm not using it.  
They may arrest you, but good night! — and  
thank you."

He smiled, but I would rather he had not.



I wished that Avon's wife would go to sleep,  
But whether she found sleep that night or not  
I do not know. I was awake for hours,  
Toiling in vain to let myself believe  
That Avon's apparition was a dream,  
And that he might have added, for romance,  
The rest of it which I had taken away  
For reasons not in Avon's dictionary.  
But each recurrent memory of his eyes,  
And of the man himself that I had known  
So long and well, made soon of all my toil  
An evanescent and a vain evasion;  
And it was half as in expectancy  
That I obeyed the summons of his wife  
A little before dawn, and was again  
With Avon in the room where I had left him,  
But not with the same Avon I had left.

The doctor, an august authority,  
With eminence abroad as well as here,  
Looked hard at me as if I were the doctor  
And he the friend. "I have had eyes on Avon  
For more than half a year," he said to me,  
"And I have wondered often what it was  
That I could see that I was not to see.  
Though he was in the chair where you are looking,  
I told his wife — I had to tell her something —  
It was a nightmare and an aneurism;  
And so, or partly so, I'll say it was.  
The last without the first will be enough  
For the newspapers and the undertaker;  
Yet if we doctors were not all immune  
From death, disease, and curiosity,  
My diagnosis would be sorry for me.  
He died, you know, because he was afraid —

And he had been afraid for a long time;  
And we who knew him well would all agree  
To fancy there was rather more than fear.  
The door was locked inside — they broke it in  
To find him — but she heard him when it came.  
There are no signs of any visitors,  
Or need of them. If I were not a child  
Of science, I should say it was the devil.  
I don't believe it was another woman,  
And surely it was not another man."

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