

CONRADIN: A PHILOSOPHICAL BALLAD ❁
BY C. R. ASHBEE.

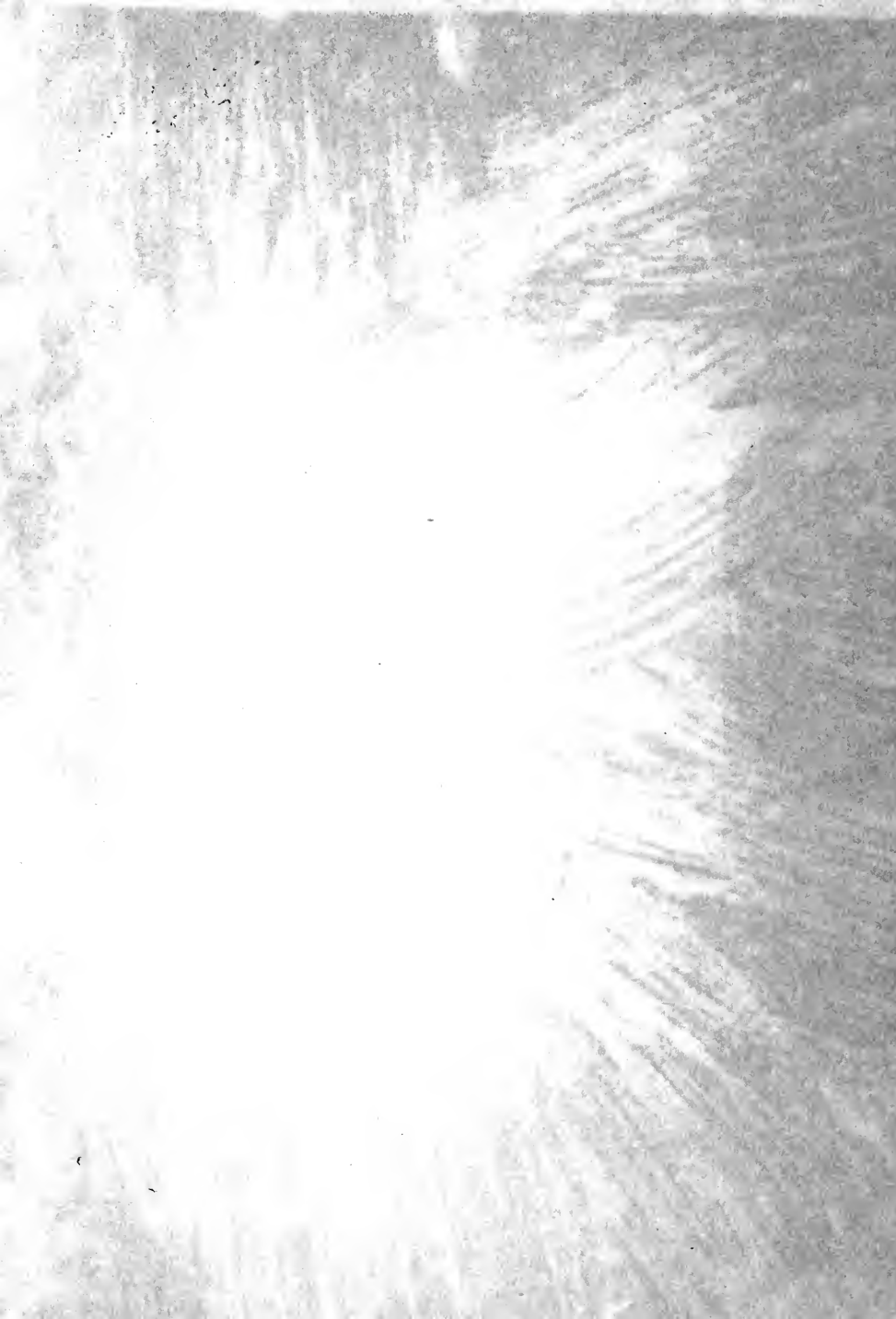
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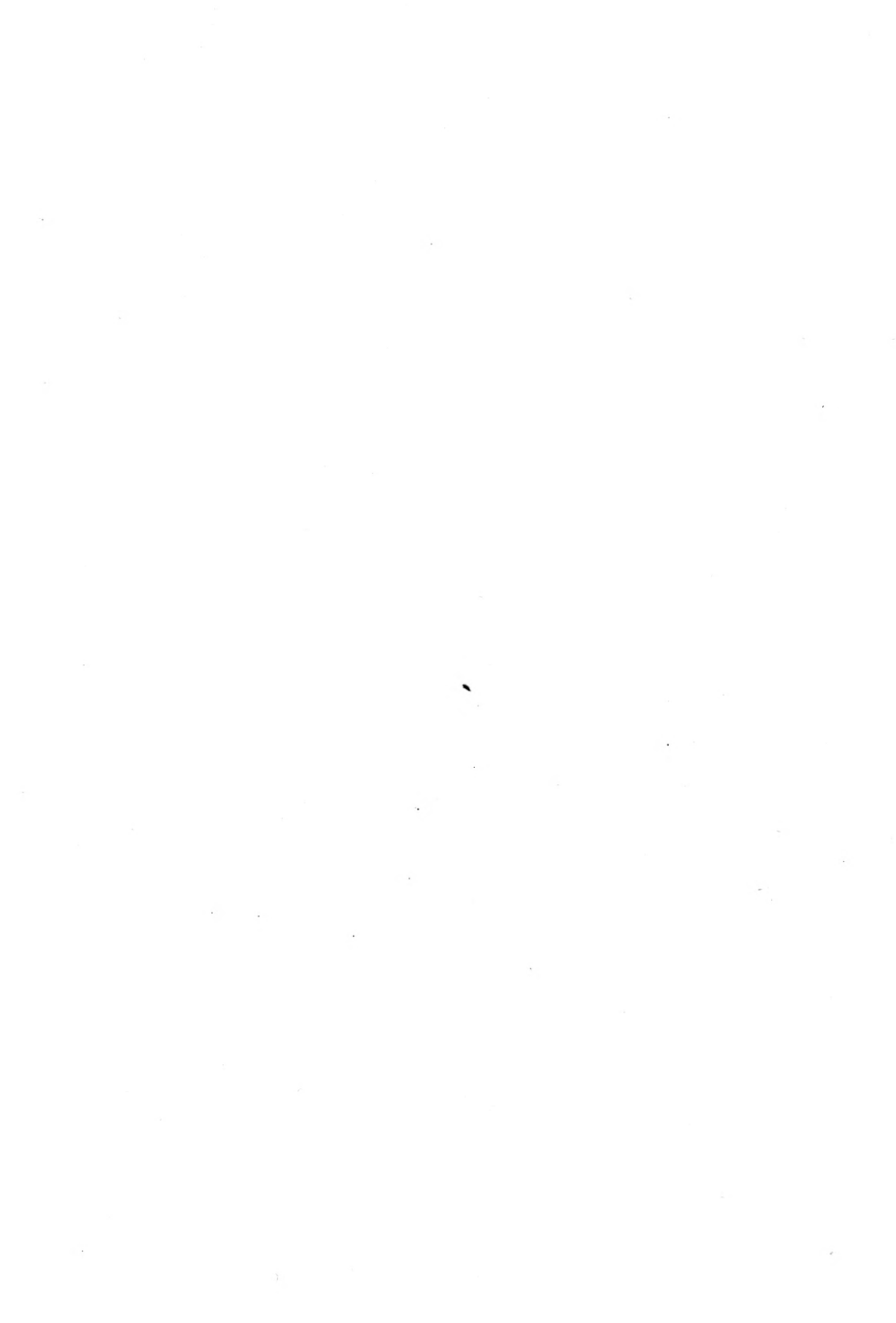
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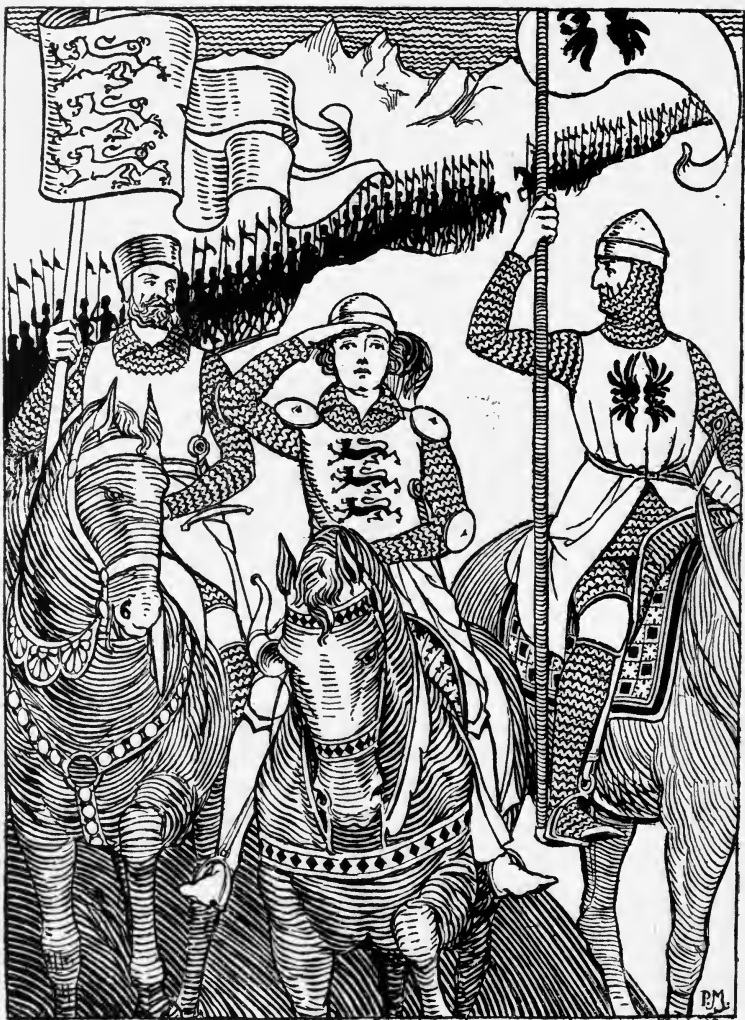




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CONRADIN: A PHILOSOPHICAL BALLAD ❁
BY C. R. ASHBEE.

TO
T. B. S. H.
KNOWN, AND BE-
LOVED BY ALL
WHO KNOW HIM,
AS
THE
COLONEL.



CONRADIN. ❀



HIS is the ballad of Conradin
Who had no guile & knew no sin;
A lad but sixteen summers old,
A beautiful lad with locks of gold,
A silver horn at his saddle bow,
A circlet of gold on his royal brow,
And a green plume hanging down below.

‘Say, who will away to the South with me,
‘Where the yellow citron fringes the sea;
‘And ancient Etna silently blows
‘White smoke wreaths through her cap of snows,
‘With twice ten-hundred mounted men
‘Will I win my grandsire’s crown agen,
‘Who’ll to the South, be brave, be wise,
‘And see the Sicilian Paradise?’

Conradin rode over the frozen snow,
He looked on Lombardy lying below,
And there was joy in his boyish eyes
As he staked his life and his all for the prize,
To rewin the Sicilian Paradise.

They sang him songs of the beaconing South
And the legends that laugh from mouth to mouth;
Of the Courts of Kings that once had been,
Of purple pageants Byzantine,

Dim Carthaginian memories,
And Dionysius, cunning and wise,
Of the panther craft of Agathocles,
Of old Timoleon's honoured name,
Of the sons of Tancred, how each came
Flashing Southward with swords of flame
To quench them in the Sicilian seas,
What is the Church's drone to these?
What are her curses and chants to us?
Ours are the songs of Theocritus,
The stars and the deep blue summer skies,
The light and the hope and the enterprise,
Ours the Sicilian Paradise!



Conradin tossed his cap on high,
'Come all ye gallants from far and nigh,
'We're for the South to do or die!'



And as he laughing rode along
He heard a wail of Southern song;
Cadences that quaver and quail
To some plaintive long-lost Dorian scale;
And there danced before him a bright-eyed boy,
With the gust of sunburnt life in his joy,
Tousle-headed and lissom of limb,
Wild & wayward, who mocked at him.



Barefoot he danced in breeks and shirt,
Tumbling triangles in the dirt,

With looks that said, a smile from me
Is more than worth a dynasty.
Down from your horse, let the big world be,
And leap and laugh and bathe with me;
Down from your horse, let the big world go,
I'll tell you all you need to know;
My song's as old as it is new,
If you haven't a sixpence, a ha'penny will do,
If you haven't a ha'penny—God bless you!
If you can't be blessed, let the big world be,
Down from your horse and dance with me!



Conradin laughed and echoed his joy,
And tossed an apple to the boy;
Then heard as he looked back wistfully;
'Stay, stay! Oh won't you stay with me!'



'I'll stay with you when the world grows old,
'When the song shall cease and the heart turn cold.'



Still on he rode to the South and it seemed
As if nothing could die, and he laughed and dreamed;
And treasured fragments that lay by the way,
Some charioteer, some marble Muse,
The gift of a Hiero of Syracuse:
And music there was, and dance, as when
In some Southern city of swarming men,
The rhythmic Pastorale hums

Down street as the ancient Earth spirit comes,
With children's voices and pipes and drums;
For the great life moves on drowsily,
Things change in name, but do not die;
And ever he fixed his boyish eyes
On the far Sicilian Paradise.



What of a dancing plume of green?
Is the joy of the sunlight always seen,
Or do night and darkness move between?



A horseman, splendid, rugged, old,
Rode out of a sunset of red and gold,
And reining in with lifted lance,
Made Conradin obeisance.



Strong was the swish of his charger's tail,
Beneath the ring of gilded mail.
You might hear the creak of each leathern girth
As the great beast strained, and pawed the earth.



'My sire was the son of a Norman knight,
'Who fought with the great Count in every fight,
'And I have followed the wake of the wise
'With the keen swift sword of enterprise.
'I have sailed in ships from the Western Seas,
'And climbed the pillars of Hercules,



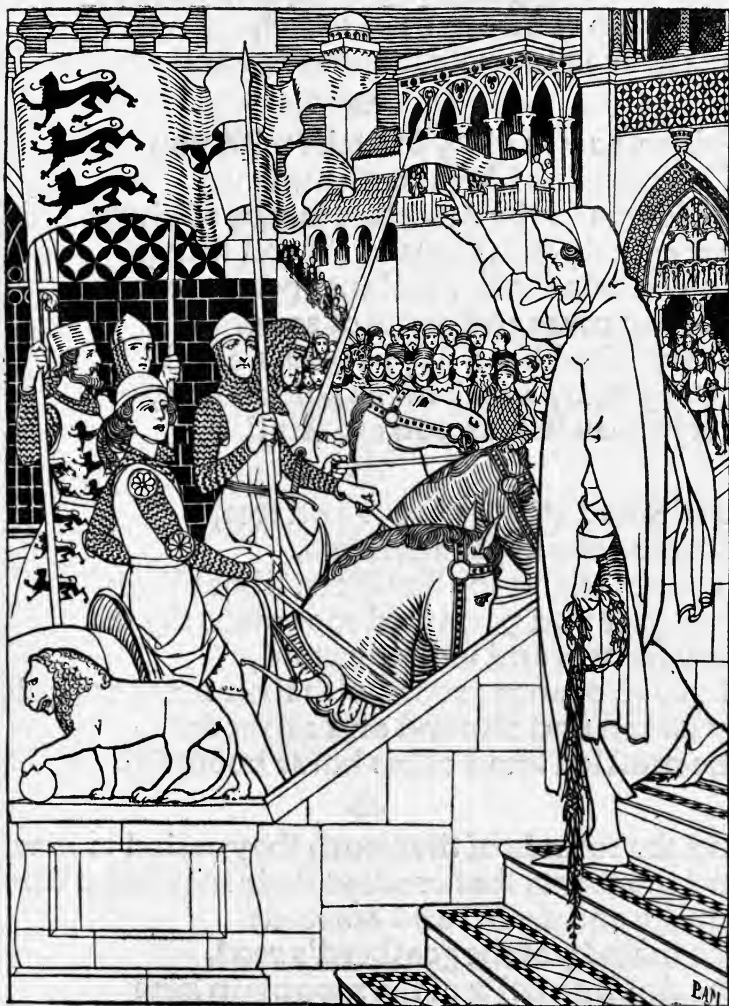
'Looking out as fãr as man may look.
'I have read King Roger's mighty book,
'And on his disc of silver traced
'All the weary ways my fœt have paced.
'I have rhymed, I have heard philosophy
'Where the bones of Aristotle lie
'In the tomb that swings between earth and sky.
'I have fought for the Cross in Palestine,
'I have loved, I have drunk the Sicilian wine;
'I have trodden Lybia's wide expanse,
'And gazed with learned Arabians
'Through Palermo's fretted palace bars
'At the milky ways and drifts of stars;
'Now nought more remains to do
'But to follow my trail to the end with you;
'Oh let me come with you! old am I,
'I have lived: but I know when it's good to die.'



'And death to me,' Conradin cried,
'Is like a drink at the mountain side,
'Or a maiden's kiss to catch as I ride,
'We'll on together, the world is wide.'



He came to Bologna, the street was old,
It echoed his march, the bronze bells tolled,
The wondering people thronged to behold
The sunlight flash on his locks of gold,
His green plume shone, the boy was fãir,
And soft to the touch was his glove of vaire.



A scholar stepped into the marble street,
Hooded in red from head to feet,
And spoke him welcome strange and sweet.



'Prince, as you ride, Oh, take with you
' This wreath of Amaranth and rue,
' It blooms in the deathless tombs of kings,
' It may help you to ward off evil things.
' Your uncle Enzo, gallant and strong,
' Witty in verse and sweet of song,
' He perished here, have a care, a care!
' Betrayed by a lock of his golden hair,
' Yet he was fair, as you are fair!'



Southward still by grove and tree,
By paths of purple anemone,
By rocks where the Southern lilies climb,
On clover and perfumed mountain thyme.
Over mosses and violets untold,
Through orange groves with their lamps of gold,
By lemon and almond and asphodel
The muffled tread of his horse hoofs fell.



And the sounds of the South they called to him,
And the scents that cradled their memories dim,
Spurge and fennel and aniseed;
The melody of the goatherd's reed,
The tinkling bells of the mountain kine
Mid wrecks of polished travertine,

In dells where unpent waters foam,
Through the broken aqueducts of Rome,
Where on ledges of hot white rock between
The lizards bask in blazing green,
And he felt the wonder Sybilline.



Then sudden like some mystery
Of grove and fire and haunted tree
A woman stood there musingly.
And they cried, 'A witch!' but he answered, 'No!
'She's a sibyl again from long ago,
'She will tell me things I crave to know!'



Through the orange flowers and leafage dim,
With lips Cumean she spoke to him,
'Look into my eyes, behold, I swear
'By the silver horn that swings at your side,
'By the Golden Circlet you wear in your pride,
'By your plume of green and your golden hair,
'By the touch of your checquered glove of vaire,
'That you shall come to your Kingdom fair!'



'When shall I come to my Kingdom, say!
'You wonderful Sybil that light my way?'



'When the lips of Hellas no longer are mute,
'When the justice of Rome is beyond dispute,
'When faith shall lie down like a child asleep,

‘And honour a world-wide vigil keep,
‘When science shall guide the people’s ways
‘And beauty become their hymn of praise!’



‘Oh then may I ride with a heart that is gay,
‘For Hellas sings to me all the way,
‘The justice of Rome is mine to give,
‘And faith is for them that rightly live;
‘And as for honour, who would fear,
‘The vigil of honour is always here;
‘And what of science? That’s for the wise
‘Who touch the Sicilian Paradise;
‘While beauty stands clear to all mortal eyes.’



He knew no guile and had no sin,
And on to the South rode Conradin.



But wistfully, doubtfully, dimly there came
Through the orange grove with its lamps of flame,
Through almond and olive and asphodel
The after sound of her oracle.



‘My child, the Sicilian Paradise
‘Can only be seen by the very wise,
‘Could you wake that masterful fairyland,
‘Could you reach the South, could you understand,
‘Could you touch the magic and know and see,
‘Ah, what a world might this world be!



'But the way of truth is hard and long,
'We may win it with science, or win it with song;
'A kiss, or a touch of philosophy
'May make our blind eyes dimly see!'



What of the note of the silver horn,
Will it call unechoed, far forlorn,
Or waken the slumber of some new morn?



Ever as young Conradin rode,
By his saddle bow a shadow strode,
Out of the dark and into the light,
The shadow that sleeps nor day nor night,
Whose silent-footed movement brings
The timeless, shapeless, nameless things.
'They have woven a mesh, they have chanted a spell
'That centuries may not untell,
'Black cowls, brown cowls, priests and friars,
'Have strewn your path with thorns and briars,
'And crosses of torture, child beware!
'They have set a trap, they have laid a snare.'



What of the circlet of gold, shall it bind
Alike the locks and the restless mind,
And what if the wind of life be unkind?



As Conradin rode a dusky hand
Touched his bridle and bade him stand,
And an Eastern man in the sun's eye,

Holding a cup, stood splendidly.
 His draperies of ample white,
 Were bound with a bar of azurite,
 And his turban glittered with festoons
 Of beryl and jade and great jagoons
 Tassled with gold thread fine and thin,
 On the olive brown of his polished skin;
 And he looked fãr out at Conradin.



While from the speechless deep of his eyes
 Woke Oriental mysteries,
 Still standing there he lifted up
 To Conradin his silver cup.



‘Tis a giftless gift,’ they cried, ‘oh, shrink
 ‘From a cup that is poisoned do not drink.’
 But his fãith was fearless and prevailed,
 He took the cup, he never quailed.



‘Conradin, I would not poison thee
 ‘With the sweet white grape of Malvasie,
 ‘Nay, rather kiss thy garment’s hem,
 ‘As once long since in Jerusalem
 ‘I touched thy grandsire’s, great was he
 ‘Among earthly kings, so may you be!
 ‘They say that the empire of the West
 ‘Lies with him in his tomb at rest;
 ‘They say that the empire of the East
 ‘Ceased, when the breath of his body ceased.

'He saw whence the Gospel of pity came,
'And the Gospel of Beauty emblazons his fame.
'His was a mighty work begun,
'For the East and the West did he make one;
'A mightier work remains to do,
'Would that it might be done by you!'



Spake Conradin, 'Thou Eastern man,
'May the God we honour help me through!
'I drink to the work that he began,
'I drink to him and I drink to you.'



'Allah il Allah ride and be wise,
'Thou art blessed!' said he of the Eastern eyes,
'He drank from this Cup in his Paradise.
'I saw him asleep in his shroud of stone
'In the porphyry tomb where he lies alone,
'A cross in his hands I did enfold,
'And I laid on his brow a crescent of gold.
'They have risen both, and both shall set,
'Christ's cross and the crescent of Mahomet,
'And the wisdom and virtue of both shall be
'As thy beauty, things of eternity;
'But the Kismet of beauty goes with thee.'



What of the beauty in locks of gold,
Or golden circlets about the brow,
Or a silver horn at the saddle bow
If fate be fixed ere the tale is told!

Grim thoughts like ghostly shapes did throng
With the shadow at his side along,
They did point and grin at Conradin,
To his joy they throbbed an undersong.



Go back, go back to the kindly North
Whence you so bravely sallied forth:
She is neither so false, nor yet so old,
She is austere and self controlled:
The Cactus by the Sicilian Strand
Puts forth a minatory hand,
There are things you do not understand.
The Kingdom you seek, the Paradise,
In the far distant future lies,
Go back to the hearth and the northern home,
And wait, for your Kingdom shall surely come.



Conradin answered the thoughts that flew
Like fireflies in a moon of blue:
'I know not if the things be true,
'Or if the things you tell be lies,
'But beautiful things were made for the wise,
'And I seek the Sicilian Paradise!'



But still the shadow held its way
Along with him by night and day.
And as it held along it clove
To a hundred others, around, above,

Moving fitfully, mocking, grim,
And every shadow whispered him:--



‘Your grandsire died with his face to the wall,
‘He let his royal sceptre fall,
‘And Dante saw him burning in Hell,
‘In the lowest pit with the infidel.
‘He died unshriven & unaneled,
‘The Church’s curse his eyelids sealed,
‘For the Devil drew him in at Hell’s gate
‘Perishing excommunicate,
‘And you shall be as he has been!
‘The Church has cursed the Ghibelline.’



‘If I may be as he has been,---
‘The philosopher King whose eyes have seen
‘The wisdom that should guide men’s ways,
‘Then here’s to God my hymn of praise.
‘My grandsire died ere he reached his prime,
‘Two hundred years before his time.
‘My grandsire’s dooms were finer far
‘Than all your cruel Churches are,
‘For the gentle Christ you preach as true
‘Hath little or naught in common with you:
‘My grandsire saw there were greater things,
‘And he was great among earthly Kings.
‘The curses of your Pope Innocent
‘Shall mean to me what to him they meant:
‘What were they to him; what are they to me,



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'The decretals of your Pope Gregory.
'My grandsire was brave as he was wise,
'And he saw the Sicilian Paradise!'



And as he mused, his soul afire
With earnest of his deep desire
There met him a grey Franciscan friar,
'Go to, would you make the Church a mock?
'You who come of the serpent stock,
'Who have sucked the poison of Eastern men
'The Infidel & the Saracen,
'Hard Roman & unhallowed Greek,—
'Away! your quest is far to seek—
'And as you seek so shall you find,
'For life to those without faith is blind!'



Life without faith, to some is full
Of a larger faith more masterful,
To them as of old to Conradin
It moves with neither guile nor sin.



To them it is good from first to last,
They see the future still in the past;
Still Naxos stretches a welcoming hand
Through the sea of blue & the golden sand,
And there rises in sunlight & strength agen,
Apollo, leader and lord of men,
As he sailed from Corinth across the sea
Bringing Hellas to Sicily.

To them from afar Philistis smiles
Her silver dream through the centuries,
The look that beckons, warns, beguiles,
Reserved, compassionately wise,
And the tremulous veil still kisses her cheek
With the strong & tender touch of the Greek.
Arethusa the nymph is there as of old
Life giving, song giving, clear & cold,
She watered the lips of the weary crews
That came to the sorrow of Syracuse
Chanting the verse of Euripides
As they pined to return to the Attic seas.
Giver of song so men avow
She cooled blind Homer's lips & brow,
Giver of strength so men aver,
And Nelson's seamen drank of her.



Shadows, shadows, why do they crawl
Like firelit phantoms across the wall
Or mutes that move at a funeral.



Conradin rode to the walls of Rome,
And he wound his silver horn at the Dome,
Where a thousand priests were chanting within
Christian curses for Conradin.
But the sound of his horn was clear as a star,
It pierced the anathemas from afar,
And its silvery note a tremor sent
Through the icy heart of Pope Innocent.

A priest peered forth from the Appian way
Among fallen stones & wormwood grey,
Crossed himself and hurried away.



Our life is full of joy and hope,
But there's a power behind the Pope,
A greater power that looms behind,
The power that sways the human mind,
That has buried the past, and left us blind;
Black cowls, brown cowls,—all who strive
To keep grey ignorance alive.



What of the beauty of golden hair?
And what of a chequered glove of vair?
Will the flash of a fine green plume deprive
This world of the sorrow it well would spare,
If we keep grey ignorance alive?



To Benevento came Conradin,
With wreathes and flowers they drew him in,
Like a fresh wild wood song was the sheen
Of the Southern sun on his plume of green.



But an old hag screamed as he rode along;—
'Your uncle Manfred, wise and strong,
'Was murdered here, alack, alack!
'And his beautiful body all bruised and black,
'Stripped and stark, neath a noisome sack,

'Was hawked for sale on an ass's back,
'There's no way through for such as you,
Go back, my beautiful boy, go back!'



'There's never a going back for me
'From the South that holds my destiny.
'To the South I go to see with these eyes
'The porphyry tomb where my grandsire lies,
'In his robe of eufic broideries.
'There where the tale of mankind is told
'Upon walls that shine with encrusted gold;
'And Christ the infinitely strong,
'From apses that glitter at evensong
'With enamelled light and angels' wings,
'Gives the crown to the Norman Kings.
'My grandsire's crown is mine to own,
'We hold our crown from Christ alone!'



'From Christ alone shall you hold your crown;
'Go South, but watch as the sun goes down!'



The plain of Grandella when day grows late
Is cheerless, wild and desolate;
Ere yet the scirocco has chilled it through,
The iris stabs it with spears of blue,
And when the sun strikes hot o'er head
The scarlet anemone shines blood red;
The plain of Grandella is cold and brown
Of an evening after the sun goes down.

A goatherd stood in the midst of his fôld,
Stood like some fine shape chisled of old,
He was proud with the pride that alone is given
To those who live under the open heaven,
Some fãir Greek God may hap, agen
Incarnate among simple men.
He touched his goats with tenderness,
Each had a noiseless soft caress;
For shepherds love long silences.
He turned as Conradin came that way,
And gave him 'Benedicete!'

Oh! you who live under the open sky
'Is yonder wood alive, or why
'Do the shadows cluster there so grey?'
Said he, 'Strange horsemen ride that way.'

Slowly the shepherd began to peel
With his clasp-knife bits of the evening meal.
Each amber goat with silken hair,
Got its polished slice of prickly pear,
And as they nuzzled and turned away,
Spake to him and each other, as who should say,
We've no concern with the battles of Kings,
But with human, with gentle, eternal things.

'Your eyes are keener than other's eyes,
'What of the night, oh weatherwise?'

He answered, 'Sir, 'tis a changing moon,
'And the evening shadows come too soon.'

'Shadows and clouds have I left in the North,
Say! what will to-morrow's sun bring forth?'

He answered simply, 'Sir, who knows!
'Tis cold here when the sirocco blows,
'The sirocco blows from the South, adieu;
'And may the South prove kind to you!'
He wrapped his shawl about his head,
And beckoned his amber flock to bed.

On the plain of Grandella the chilling moon
Has sharpened the shadows all too soon:
'Tis not the iris that stabs it through,
But broken spears of cruel blue,
'Tis not the anemone burns it red,
But the scarlet blood of the silent dead,
While both alike grow black and thin
As the pale white ghosts unshadowed, flit
Dolorously over it,
Silently moving out and in:
And still to the South goes Conradin.

To the South but with neither sword nor shield,
Tied and bound from the stricken field,
While on the plain of Grandella lies
Lost, his Sicilian Paradise.

It is given to men to prophesy
That the good shall prevail and the evil die:
Yet lest our dreams shall have no avail,
Lest the hope we have for mankind shall fail,
The good must die and the ill prevail
Ere the sweet new life be ushered in:
And thus it was with Conradin.



They have trodden his plume of green in the mud,
And his golden locks are stained with blood,
His silver horn have they flung away,
Find it, find it, ye who may!
His golden circlet they've melted down,
They made him a ballad instead of a Crown,
He cried as they tied him to the tree,
'How had my mother grieved for me
'Had she lived this luckless day to see!'



Then his checquered glove of vaire he threw
Into the throng; 'I give it to you—
'To such as can hold it be this gauge,
'To them I bequeathe my heritage!'



But yet men say that he was wise,
That he saw the Sicilian Paradise,
That they slew him never at all, & some
Declare that his Kingdom is yet to come.



Men say that the sound of his silver horn
Can be rightly heard but by those once born:
Men say that the light on his plume of green
Can never where misery bides, be seen:
That his circlet of gold shall crown mankind,
When the world shall move to one conscious mind,
That the gauge of his checquered glove of vaire
Must be taken up by men elsewhere
Who are full of pity, and wise, and fair.



For him there was neither guile nor sin:
And this is the ballad of Conradin.



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