

ACELDAMA,

A PLACE TO BURY STRANGERS IN,

A Philosophical Poem

By

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"Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal."

ST. JOHN xii., 24, 25.

It was a windy night, that memorable seventh night of December, when this philosophy was born in me. How the grave old Professor wondered at my ravings! I had called at his house, for he was a valued friend of mine, and I felt strange thoughts and emotions shake within me. Ah! how I raved! I called to him to trample me, he would not. We passed together into the stormy night. I was on horseback, how I galloped round him in my phrenzy, till he became the prey of a real physical fear! How I shrieked out I know not what strange words! And the poor good old man tried all he could to calm me; he thought I was mad! The fool! I was in the death struggle with self: God and Satan fought for my soul those three long hours. God conquered—now I have only one doubt left—which of the twain was God ? Howbeit, I aspire!

"And falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out. . . . Inasmuch as that field is called in their proper tongue Aceldama, that is to say—the field of blood."

—ACTS i., 18, 19.

DEDICATION

DIVINE PHILOSOPHER! Dear Friend!
Lover and Lord! accept the verse
That marches like a sombre hearse,
Bearing Truth's coffin, to the end.

Let man's distorted worships blend
In this, the worthier and the worse,
And penetrate the primal curse.
Alas! They will not comprehend.

Accept this gospel of disease
In wanton words proclaimed, receive
The blood-wrought chaplet that I weave.

Take me, and with thine infamies
Mingle my shame, and on my breast
Let thy desire achieve the rest.

Midnight, 1897—1898.

ACELDAMA

*"Six months and I sit still and hold
In two cold palms her cold two feet;
Her hair, half grey, half ruined gold,
Thrills me and burns me in kissing it.*

*Love bites and stings me through to see
Her keen face made of sunken bones,
Her worn-out eyelids madden me,
That were shot through with purple once."*

SWINBURNE, "The Leper"
Poems and Ballads, 1866.

ACELDAMA

DARK night, red night. This lupanar
Has rosy flames that dip, that shake,
Faint phantoms that disturb the lake
Of magic mirror-land. A star
Like to a beryl, with a flake
Of olive light
Struck through is dull profound, is steadfast in the
night.

I.

I AM quite sane, quite quiet. Sober thought
Is as a wolf to my mad dreams. My brain
Beats to the double stroke; the double strain
Warps its gray fibers, all the dream is wrought
A spider-tapestry; the old blood-stain
Spreads through the air
Some hot contagious growth to slay men unaware.

II.

I have discovered God! His ghastly way;
Of burning ploughshares for my naked feet
Lies open to me—shall I find it sweet
To give up sunlight for that mystic day
That beams its torture whose red banners beat
Their radiant fire
Into my shrivelled head, to wither Love's desire?

III.

I was a child long years ago, it seems,
Or months it may be—I am still a child—
They pictured me the stars as wheeling wild
In a huge bowl of water; but my dreams
Built it of Titan oak, its sides were piled
Of fearful wood
Hewn from God's forests, paid with sweat and tears and
blood.

IV.

I crept, a stealthy, hungry soul, to grasp
Its vast edge, to look out to the beyond;
To know. My eyes strained out, there was no bond,
No continuity, no bridge to clasp,
No pillars for the universe. Immond,
Shapeless, unstayed,
Nothing, Nothing, Nothing, Nothing! I was afraid.

V.

That was my sanity. Brought face to face
 Suddenly with the infinite, I feared.
 My brain snapped, broke; white orange-wings
appeared
On stronger shoulders set, a carapace,
 A chariot. I did essay that weird
 Unmeasured dome,
Found in its balance, peace; found in its silence, home.

VI.

That was my madness. On bright plumage poised
 I soared, I hovered in the infinite;
 Nothing was everything; the day was night,
Dark and deep light together, that rejoiced
 In their strange wedlock. Marvellously white
 All rainbows kissed
Into one sphere that stood, a circumambient mist.

VII.

I climbed still inwards. At the moveless point
Where all power, light, life, motion concentrate,
I found God dwelling. Strong, immaculate,
He knew me and he loved! His lips annoint
My lips with love; with thirst insatiate
He drank my breath,
Absorbed my life in His, dispersed me, gave me death.

VIII.

This is release, is freedom, is desire;
This is the one hope that a man may gain;
This is the lasting ecstasy of pain
That fools reject, the dread, the searching fire
That quivers in the marrow, that in vain
Burns secretly
The unconsumed bush where God lurks privily.

IX.

This was a dream—and how may I attain?
How make myself a worth acolyte?
How from my body shall my soul take flight,
Being constrained in this devouring chain
Of selfishness? How purge the spirit quite
Of gross desires
That eat into the heart with their corrupting fires?

X.

Old Buddha gave command; Jehovah spake;
Strange distant gods that are not dead to-day
Added their voices; Heaven's desert way
Man wins not but by sorrow—let him break
The golden image with the feet of clay!
Let him despise
That earthen vessel which the potter marred—and rise!

XI.

As life burns strong, the spirit's flames grows dull;
The ruddy-cheeked sea-breezes shame its spark;
Wan rainy winds of autumn on the dark
Leafless and purple moors, that rage and lull
With a damned soul's despair, these leave their mark,
Their brand of fire
That burns the dross, that wings the heart to its desire

XII.

No prostitution may be shunned by him
Who would achieve this Heaven. No satyr-song,
No maniac dance shall ply so fast the throng
Of lust's imagining perversely dim
That no man's spirit may keep pace, so strong
Its pang must pierce;
Nor all the pains of hell may be one tithe as fierce.

XIII.

All degradation, all sheer infamy,
 Thou shalt endure. Thy head beneath the mire
 And dung of worthless women shall desire
As in some hateful dream, at last to lie;
 Woman must trample thee till thou respire
 That deadliest fume;
The vilest worms must crawl, the loathliest vampires
 gloom.

XIV.

Thou must breath in all poisons; for thy meat,
 Poison; for drink, still poison; for thy kiss
 A serpent's lips! An agony is this
That sweats out venom; thy clenched hands, thy feet
 Ooze blood, thine eyes weep blood, thine anguish is
 More keen than death
At last—there is no deeper vault of hell beneath!

XV.

Then thine abasement bringeth back the sheaves
Of golden corn of exaltation,
Ripened and sweetened by the very sun
Whose far-off fragrance steals between the leaves
Of the cool forest, filling every one
That reaps yon gold
With strange intoxications mad and manifold.

XVI.

Only beware gross pleasure—the delight
Of fools: the ecstasy, the trance of love—
Life's atom-bonds must strain—aye, and most move,
And all the body be forgotten quite,
And the pure soul flame forth, a deathless dove,
Where all worlds end!
If thou art worthy God shall greet thee for a friend.

XVII.

I am unworthy. In the House of Pain
 There are ten thousand shrines. Each one enfolds
 A lesser, inner, more divine, that holds
A sin less palpable and less profane.
 The inmost is the home of God. He moulds
 Infinity,
The great within the small, one stainless unity!

XVIII.

I dare not to the greater sins aspire;
 I might—so gross am I—take pleasure in
 These filthy holocausts, that burn to sin
A damned incense in the hellish fire
 Of human lust—earth's joys no heaven may win,
 Pain holds the prize
In blood-stained hands; Love laughs, with anguish in
 His eyes.

XIX.

These little common sins may lead my lust
 To more deceitful vices, to the deeds
 At whose sweet name the side of Jesus bleeds
In sympathy new-nurtured by the trust
 Of man's forgiveness that his passion breeds—
 These petty crimes!
God grant they grow intense in newer, worthier times!

XX.

Yet—shall I make me subject to a pang
 So horrible? O God, abase me still!
 Break with Thy rod my unrepentant will,
Lest Hell entrap me with an iron fang!
 Grind me, most high Jehovah, in the mill
 That grinds so small!
Grind down to dust and powder Pride of Life—and all!

XXI.

In every ecstasy exalt my heart;
 Let every trance make loose and light the wings
 My soul must shake, ere her pure fabric springs
Clothed in the secret dream-delights of Art
 Transcendent into air, the tomb of Things;
 Let every kiss
Melt on my lips to flame, fling back the gates of Dis!

XXII.

Give me a master! Not some learned priest
 Who by long toil and anguish has devised
 A train of mysteries, but some despised
Young king of men, whose spirit is released
 From all the weariness, whose lips are prized
 By men not much—
Ah! let them only once grow warm, my lips to touch!

XXIII.

Ah! under his protection, in his love
 With my abasements emulating his,
 We surely should attain to That which Is,
And lose ourselves, together, far above
 The highest heaven, in one sweet lover's kiss,
 So sweet, so strong
That with it all my soul should unto him belong.

XXIV.

An ecstasy to which no life responds,
 Is the enormous secret I have learned:
 When self-denial's furnace-flame has burned
Through love, and all the agonizing bonds
 That hold the soul within its shell are turned
 To water weak;
Then may desires obtain the cypress crown they seek.

XXV.

Browning attained, I think, when Evelyn Hope
Gave no response to his requickening kiss;
In the brief moment when exceeding bliss
Joined to her sweet passed soul his soul, its scope
Grew infinite for ever. So in this
Profane desire
I too may join my song unto his quenchless quire.

XXVI.

When Hallam died, did Tennyson attain
When his warm kisses drew no answering sigh
From that poor corpse corrupted utterly,
When four diverse sweet dewes exude to stain
With chaste foul fervour the cold canopy?
Proud Reason's sheath
He cast away, the sword of Madness flames beneath!

XXVII.

Read his mad rhymes; their sickening savour taste;
Bathe in their carnal and depraving stream:
Rise, glittering with the dew-drops of his dream,
And glow with exaltation; to thy waist
Gird his gold belt; the diamond settings gleam
With fire drawn far
Through the blue shuddering vault from some amazing
star.

XXVIII.

Aubrey attained in sleep when he dream this
Wonderful dream of women, tender child
And harlot, naked all, in thousands piled
On one hot writhing heap, his shameful kiss
To shudder through them, with lithe limbs defiled
To wade, to dip
Down through the mass, caressed by every purple lip.

XXIX.

Choked with their reek and fume and bitter sweat
His body perishes, his life is drained,
The last sweet drop of nectar has not stained
Another life, his lips and limbs are wet
With death-dews! Ha! The painter has attained
As high a meed
As his who first begot sweet music on a reed.

XXX.

And O! my music is so poor and thin!
I am poor Marsyas; where shall I find
A wise Olympas and a lover kind
To teach my mouth to sing some secret sin,
Faint, fierce, and horrible, to tune my mind,
And on a reed
Better beloved to bid me discourses at his need?

XXXI.

Master! I think that I have found thee now:
Deceive me not, I trust thee, I am sure
Thy love will stand while ocean winds endure,
Our quest shall be our quest till either brow
Radiate light, till death himself allure
Our love to him
When life's desires are filled beyond the silver brim.

XXXII.

Here I abandon all myself to thee,
Slip into thy caresses as of right,
Live in thy kisses as in living light,
Clothing in thy love, enthronéd lazily
In thine embrace, as naked as the night,
As lover and lover
More pure, more keen, more strong than all my dreams
discover.

EPILOGUE.

My heavy hair upon my olive skin
 (Baise la lourde crinière!)
Frames with its ebony a face like sin.
 My heavy hair!

You touched my lips and told me I was fair;
 It was your wickedness my love to win.
(Baise la lourde crinière!)
Your passion has destroyed my soul—what care
 If you desire me, and I hold you in
My arms a little, and you love for lair
 My heavy hair!

It is a fatal web your fingers spin.
 (Baise la lourde crinière!)
Let our love end as other loves begin,
 Or, slay me at The Moment, unaware,
Or, kiss in mutual death-pang, if you dare—
Or one day I will strange you within
 My heavy hair!

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