

ACELDAMA.

*“ I contemplate myself in that dim sphere  
Whose hollow centre I am standing at  
With burning eyes intent to penetrate  
The black circumference, and find out God.”*

# 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.

**I**T 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.

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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.*

*à toi.*

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 woof to my mad dreams. My brain  
Beats to the double stroke ; the double strain  
Warpes 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 oarage-wings appeared  
On stronger shoulders set, a carapace,  
A chariot. I did essay that wierd  
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 anoint  
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 unconsuméd bush where God lurks privily.

IX.

This was a dream—and how may I attain ?  
How make myself a worthy 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 Buddh 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 thong  
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 damnéd 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 dews 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 love 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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