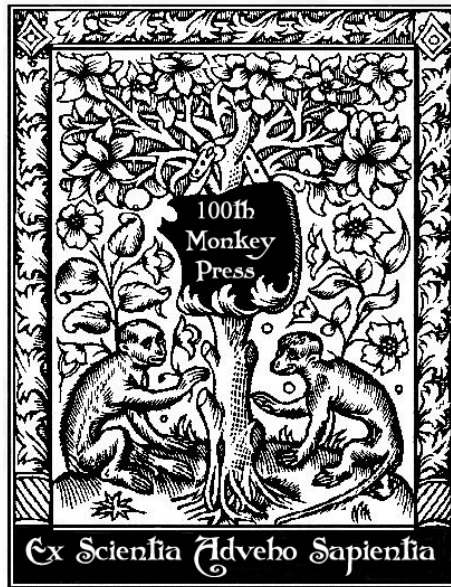


THE HONOURABLE ADULTERERS

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“When a critical mass is achieved within a species, the behavior is instantaneously transferred to and exhibited by all members of the species”

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I.

HIS STORY.

I LOOKED beneath her eyelids, where her eyes
Like stars were deep, and dim like summer
skies ;
I looked beneath their lashes ; and behold !
My own thought mirrored in their maiden gold.
Shame drew to them to cloud their light with lies,
And shrank back shamed ; and Love waxed bright
and bold.

The devilish circle of the fiery ring
Became one moment like a little thing,
And Truth and God were near us to withdraw
The veil of Love's unalterable law.
We feared no fury of the jealous King,
But, lest in honour love should find a flaw.

Only our looks and trembling lips we dread,
And the dear nimbus of a lover's head,
The dreamy splendour and the dim delight
That feels the fragrance fallen from the night,

When soul to soul is locked, and eyes are wed,
 And lips not touched kiss secretly by sight.

These things we fear, and move as in a mist
 One from the other, and we had not kissed.
 Only the perfume of her lips and hair
 Love's angel wafted slowly to me there,
 And as I went like death away I wist
 Its savour faded, nor my soul aware.

I turned and went away, away, away,
 Out of the night that was to me the day,
 And rode to meet the sun to hide in light
 The sorrow of the day that was the night.
 So I rode slowly in the morning gray,
 And all the meadows with the frost were white.

And lo ! between the mountains there uprose
 The winter sun ; and all the forest glows,
 And the frost burns like fire before my eyes,
 While the white breeze awoke with slumberous sighs
 And stirred the branches of the pine ; it knows,
 It surely knows how weary are the wise.

Even my horse my sorrow understands,
 Would turn and bear me to those western lands ;
 In love would turn me back ; in love would bring
 My thirsty lips to the one perfect spring—
 My iron soul upon my trembling hands
 Had its harsh will ; my bitterness was king.

So verily long time I rode afar.
 My course was lighted by some gloomy star
 That boded evil, that I would not shun,
 But rather welcome, as the storm the sun,
 Lowering and red, a hurtful avatar,
 Whose fatal forehead like itself is dun.

It was no wonder when the second day
 Showed me a city on the desert way,
 Whose brazen gates were open, where within
 I saw a statue for a sign of sin,
 And saw the people come to it and pray,
 Before its mouth set open for a gin.

And seeing me, a clamour rose among
 Their dwarfish crowds, whose barbarous harsh tongue
 Grated, a hateful sound ; they plucked me down,
 And mocked me through the highways of the town,
 And brought me where they sang to censers swung
 A grotesque hymn before her body brown.

For Sin was like a woman, and her feet
 Shone, and her face was like the windy wheat ;
 Her eyes were keen and horrible and cold,
 Her bronze loins girdled with the sacred gold ;
 Her lips were large, and from afar how sweet !
 How fierce and purple for a kiss to hold !

But somehow blood was black upon them ; blood
 In stains and clots and splashes ; and the mud
 Trampled around her by the souls that knelt,

Worshipping where her false lewd body dwelt
 Was dark and hateful ; and a sleepy flood
 Trickled therefrom as magic gums that melt.

I had no care that hour for anything :
 Not for my love, not for myself ; I cling
 Desperate to despair, as some to hope,
 Unheeding Saturn in their horoscope ;
 But I, despair is lord of me and king ;
 But I, my thoughts tend ever to the rope.

But I, unknightly, recreant, a coward,
 Dare not release my soul from fate untoward
 By such a craven's cunning. Nay, my soul
 Must move unflinching to what bitter goal
 The angry gods design—if gods be forward
 I am a man, nor fear to drain the bowl.

And some old devil, dead no doubt and damned,
 But living in her life, had wisely crammed
 Her fierce bronze throat with such a foul device
 As made her belly yearn for sacrifice.
 She leered like love on me, and smiled, and shammed,
 And did not pity for all her breast of spice.

They thrust me in her hateful jaws, and I
 Even then resisted not, so fain to die
 Was my desire, so weary of the fight
 With my own love, so willing to be quite
 Sure of my strength by death ; and eagerly
 Almost I crossed the barrier keen and white.

And lo ! a miracle ! Her carven hand
 Is lifted, and the little space is spanned,
 And I am plucked from out her maw, and set
 Down on the pedestals whose polished jet
 Shone like a mirror out of hell—I stand
 Free, where the blood of other men is wet.

So slowly, while the mob stood back, I went
 Out of the city, with no life content,
 And certain I should meet no death at last.
 And, riding ever to the stubborn east,
 I came upon a shore whose ocean bent
 In one long curve, where folk were making feast.

So with no heart to feast, I joined the mirth,
 Mingled the dances that resound the earth,
 And laughing looked in every face of guile,
 And answered fans with quick and subtle smile,
 Ten thousand little loves were brought to birth,
 Ten thousand loves that laughed a little while.

No ; for one woman did not laugh, too wise,
 But came so close, and looked within my eyes
 So deeply that I saw not anything.
 Only her eyes grew, as a purple ring
 Shielding the sun, they grew, they uttered lies—
 They fascinate and cleave to me and cling.

And in their uttermost profound I saw
 The veil of Love's unalterable law

Lifted, and in the shadow far behind
Dim and divine, within the shadow blind
My own love's face most amorously draw
Out of the deep toward my cloudy mind.

And suddenly I felt a kiss enclose
My whole live body, as a rich red rose
Folding its sweetness round the honey-bee.
I felt a perfect soul embracing me,
And in my spirit like a river flows
A passion like the passion of the sea.

II.

HER STORY.

HE did not kiss me with his mouth ; his eyes
 Kissed mine, and mine kissed back ; it was
 not wise,
 But yet he had the strength to leave me ; so
 I was so glad he loved enough to go.

My arms could never have released his neck ;
 He saved our honour from a single speck.
 And so he went away ; and fate inwove
 The bitterest of treason for our love.

For scarce two days when sickness took the King,
 And death dissolved the violence of the ring,
 I ruled alone ; I left my palace gate
 To see if Love should have the laugh at Fate.

And so I violated Death, and died ;
 And in the other land my spirit cried
 For incarnation ; conquering I came
 Within my soulless body as a flame.

Endowing which with sacred power I sought
 A little while, as thought that seeks for thought,
 And found his changeless love endure as mine,
 And all his passion round me as a vine.

So clinging fibres of desire control
 My perfect body, and my perfect soul
 Shot flakes of light toward him, and my eyes,
 Seeking his face, were made divinely wise.

So, solemn, silent, 'mid a merry folk
 I bound him by my forehead's silver yoke,
 And grew immense about him and within,
 And so possessed him wholly, without sin.

For I had crossed the barrier and knew
 There was no sin. His lips reluctant grew
 Ardent at last as recognizing me,
 And love's wild tempest sweeps upon his sea.

And I, I knew not anything, but know
 We are still silent, and united so,
 And all our being spells one vast To Be,
 A passion like the passion of the sea.