

Ahab

Part i.

The polished silver flings me back
Dominant brows and eyes of bronze,
A curling beard of vigorous black,
And dusky red of desert suns
Burnt in my cheeks. Who saith me Nay?
Who reigns in Israel to-day?

Samaria in well-ordered ranks
Of houses stands in honoured peace:
Sweet nourishment from Kenah's banks
Flows, and the corn and vine increase.
In two pitched fields the Syrian hordes
Fled broken from our stallion swords.

Ay me! But that was Life! I see
Now, from that hill, the ordered plain;
The serried ranks like foam flung free,
Long billows, flashing on the main
Past the eye's grip their legions roll—
Anguish of death upon my soul!

For, sheltered by the quiet hill,
Like two small flocks of kids that wait,
Going to water, ere the chill
Flow from the East's forsaken gate,
Lie my weak spears: O trembling tide
Of fear false-faced and shifty-eyed!

God! how we smote them in the morn!
Their ravening tides rolled back anon,
As if the cedared crest upturn
Roared from uprooted Lebanon
Down to the sea, its billows hurled
Back, past the pillars of the world!

Ah, that was life! I feel my sword
Live, bite, and shudder in my hand,
Smite, drink, the spirit of its lord
Exulting through the infinite brand!
My chariot dyed with Syrian blood!
My footmen wading through the flood!

Ay! that was life! Before the night
Dipped its cool wings, their hosts were stricken
Like night itself before the light.
An hundred thousand corpses sicken
The air of heaven. Yet some by speed
Escape our vengeance—ours, indeed!

Fate, the red hound, to Apehek followed.
Some seven and twenty thousand died,
When the great wall uprising hollowed
Its terror, crashed upon its side,
And whelmed them in the ruin. Strife,
Strength, courage, victory—that is Life!

Then—by my father's beard! What seer
Promised me victory? What sage
Now in my triumph hour severe
Spits out red oracles of rage?
Jehovah's. The fanatic churl
Stands—see his thin lips writhe and curl!

“Because thou has loosed the kingly man,
To uttermost destruction's dread
In my almighty power and plan
Appointed, I will have thy head
For his, thy life for his make mine,
And for his folk thou hast spared, slay thine.”

But surely I was just and wise!
Mercy is God's own attribute!
Mercy to noble enemies
Marks man from baser mould of brute,
To fight their swordsmen—who would shirk?
To slay a captive—coward's work!

“I have loved mercy,” that He said;
Nor bade me slay the Syrian Chief.
Yet my head answers for his head;
My people take his people's grief.
Sin, troth, to spare one harmless breath,
Sith all my innocents earn death!

By timely mercy peace becomes,
And kindly love, and intercourse
Of goodly merchandise, that sums
Contention in united force.
“Praise who, relenting, sheweth pity;
Not him who captureth a city!”

A wild strong life I've made of mine.
Not till my one good deed is done—
Ay! for that very deed divine—
Comes the fierce mouth of malison.
So grows my doubt again, so swell
My ancient fears for Israel.

I hurled Jehovah's altars down;
I slew and I pursued his priests;
I took a wife from Zidon Town;
I gave his temple to the beasts;
I set up gods and graven shapes
Of calves and crocodiles and apes.

Myself to sorceries I betook;
All sins that are did I contrive,
Sealed in the Thora's dreadful book—
I live, and like my life, and thrive!
Doth God not see! His ear is dull?
Or His speech strangled, His force null?

Nay, verily! These petty sins
His mercy and long-suffering pardon.
What final crime of horror wins
At last His gracious heart to harden?
What one last infamy shall wake
His anger, for His great Name's sake?

Is there one sin so horrible
That no forgiveness can obtain,
That flings apart the bars of hell,
For which repentance shall be vain?
Ay! but there is! One act of ruth
Done in my rash unthinking youth!

Who wonders if I hold the scale
 Poised in my deep deliberate mind,
Between the weight of Zidon's Baal
 And Judah's God—each in his kind
A god of power—each in his fashion
The hideous foeman of compassion?

The blood alike of man and beast
 The worship of each God demands.
All priests are greedy—gold and feast
 Pour from the poor folk to their hands.
The doubtful power from heaven to strike
The levin bolt they claim alike.

I take no heed of trickery played
 By cunning mad Elijah's skill,
When the great test of strength was made
 On Carmel's melancholy hill,
And on the altar-stone the liar
Cried "Water," and poured forth Greek fire!

Then while the fools peer heavenward,
 Even as he prays, to see the skies
Vomit the flash, his furtive sword
 Fast to the flinty altar flies.
Whoof! the wild blaze assures the clods
 Jehovah is the God of gods!

Nor do I set peculiar store
 By tricks twin-born to this they show
When, with well-simulated lore
 Of learning, Baal's great hierarchs go
Into the gold god's graven shell
 And moan the ambiguous oracle.

In my own inmost heart I feel,
Deep as a pearl in seas of Ind,
A vision, keen as tempered steel,
Lofty and holy as the wind,
And brighter than the living sun:
If these be gods, then there is none!

Baal and Jehovah, Ashtoreth
And Chemosh and these Elohim,
Life's pandars in the brothel, Death!
Cloudy imaginings, a dream
Built up of fear and words and woe.
All, all my soul must overthrow.

For these are devils, nothing doubt!
Yet nought should trouble me: I see
My folk secure from foes without,
Worship in peace and amity
Baal and Jehovah, sects appeased
By peace assured and wealth increased.

Yet am I troubled. Doubt exists
And absolute proof recoils before me.
Truth veils herself in awful mists,
And darkness wakens, rolling o'er me,
When I approach the dreadful shrine,
In my own soul, of the divine.

And what cries laughing Jezebel?
Golden and fragrant as the morn,
Painted like flames adorning Hell,
Passions and mysteries outworn,
Ever enchanting, ever wise,
And terror in her wondrous eyes!

Her fascination steals my strength,
Her luxury lures me as she comes;
Reaches her length against my length,
And breaks my spirit; life succumbs—
A nameless avatar of death,
Incarnate in her burning breath.

I know her gorgeous raiment folded
In snaky subtle draperies,
All stalwart captains mighty-moulded
To lure within her sorceries,
Within her bed—and I, who love,
See, and am silent, and approve!

Strange! Who shall call the potter knave
Who moulds a vessel to his will?
One, if he choose, a black-browed slave:
One, if he choose, a thing of ill,
Writhing, misshapen, footless, cruel:
One, like a carved Assyrian jewel?

Shame on the potter heavy sit,
If he revenge his own poor skill,
That marred a work by lack of wit,
By heaping infamy and ill
On the already ruined clay,
Shame on the potter, then, I say!

But what cries laughing Jezebel?
Scornful of me as all her lovers,
More scornful as we love her well!
“Good king, this rage of doubt discovers
The long-hid secret! All thy mind
A little shadow lurks behind.”

Hers are the delicate sorceries

In black groves: hers the obscure, unseen
Rites in dim moonlight courts; the wise

Dreadful occasions when the queen
Like to a bat, flits, flits, to gloat
Blood-drunk upon a baby's throat!

Therefore: all doubt, this fierce unrest

Between that knowledge self bestows
And leaves of palm, and palimpsest,
Scrawled sacred scrolls, whose legend goes
Beyond recorded time, and founts
Its age beyond all history's bounds;

Therefore: all search for truth beyond

The doubtful canon of the law,
The bitter letter of the bond
Given when Sinai shook with awe,
They swear; all wit that looks aslant
Shamed at the shameful covenant;

Therefore: this brooding over truth

She much avers cuts short my day,
Steals love and laughter from my youth,
Will dye my beard in early grey.
"Go forth to war! Shall Judah still
Set mockery to thy kingly will?"

May be. I often feel a ghost

Creeping like darkness through my brain;
Sensed like uncertainty at most,
Nowise akin to fear or pain.
Yet it is there. To yield to such
And brood, will not avail me much.

Ho! harness me my chariot straight,
My white-maned horses fleet and strong!
Call forth the trumpeters of state!
Proclaim to all Samaria's throng:
The King rides forth! Hence, slaves! Away!
Haste ye! The King rides forth today.

Part ii.

Would God that I were dead! Like Cain,
My punishment I cannot bear.
There is a deep corrosive pain
Invades my being everywhere.
Sprung from a seed too small to see,
A monster spawns and strangles me.

'Tis scarce a week! In power and pride
I rode in state about the city;
Took pleasure in the eager ride,
Saw grief, took pleasure in my pity;
Saw joy, took pleasure in the seeing,
And the full rapture of well-being.

Would God that I had stayed, and smote
My favourite captain through the heart,
Caught my young daughter by the throat,
And torn her life and limbs apart,
Stabbed my queen dead: remorse for these
Might aye, not match, these miseries.

For, hard behind the palace gate,
I spied a vineyard fair and fine,
Hanging with purple joy, and weight
Of golden rapture of the vine:
And there I bade my charioteer
Stay, and bid Naboth to appear.

The beast! A gray, deceitful man,
With twisted mouth the beard would hide,
Evil yet strong: the scurril clan
Exaggerate for its greed and pride,
The scum of Israel! At one look
I read my foe as in a book.

The beast! He grovelled in the dust.
I heard the teeth gride as he bowed
His forehead to the earth. Still just,
Still patient, passionless, and proud,
I ruled my heavy wrath. I passed
That hidden insult: spake at last.

I spake him fair. My memory held
Him still a member of my folk;
A warrior might be bold of eld,
My hardy spearman when we broke
The flashing lines of Syrians. Yea!
I spake him fair. Alas the day!

“Friend, by my palace lies thy field
Fruitful and pleasant to the sight.
Therefore I pray thee that thou yield
Thy heritage for my delight.
Wilt thou its better? Or its fee
In gold, as seemeth good to thee?

“Content thyself!” As by a spell
He rears his bulk in surly rage.
“The Lord forbid that I should sell
To thee my father’s heritage!”
No other word. Dismissal craves?
Nay, scowls and slinks among his slaves.

Hath ever a slave in story dared
Thus to beard openly his lord?
My chariot men leapt forth and flared
Against him with indignant sword.
Why wait for king's word to expunge
Live so detested with one lunge?

"Cease!" My strong word flamed out. The men
Shook with dead fear. They jumped and caught
With savage instinct, brutal ken,
At what should be my crueller thought:
Torture! And trembled lest their haste
Had let a dear life run to waste.

They argued after their brute kind.
I have two prides; in justice, one:
In mercy, one: "No ill I find
In this just man," I cried; "the sun
Is not defiled, and takes no hurt
When the worm builds his house of dirt.

"Curse ye Jehovah! He abides,
Hears not, nor smites; the curse is pent
Close with the speaker; ill betides
When on himself the curve is bent,
And like the wild man's ill-aimed blow,
Hits nought, swerves, swoops, and strikes him low.

"Let the man go!" The short surprise
Sinks in long wonder: angrily
Yet awed they spurn him forth. "Arise!
O swine, and wallow in thy sty!
The King hath said it." Thus the men
Turned the beast free—to goad again.

For not the little shadow shapes
An image ever in my brain ;
Across my field of sight there gapes
Ever a gulf, and draws the pain
Of the whole knowledge of the man
Into its vague and shifting span.

Moreover, in that gulf I see
Now the bright vineyard sweet and clean,
Now the dog Naboth mocking me
With rude curt word and mouth obscene
Wried in derision—well relied
Dog's insolence on monarch's price.

Ah, friend! Some winds may shake a city!
Some dogs may creep too near a feast!
Thou, reckoning on my scorn, my pity,
Thine own uncleanness as a beast:
Wilt thou not take thy count again?
Seest thou the shadow on my brain?

It grows, it grows. Seven days slide past:
I groan upon an empty bed:
I turn my face away: I fast:
There cometh in my mouth no bread.
No man dare venture near to say:
"Why turns the King his face away?"

It grows. Ah me! the long days slide;
I brood; due justice to the man
Dogging desire. A monarch's pride
Outweighs his will: yet slower ran
To-day the thought: "I will no wrong:"
"The vines are cool," more sweet and strong

There is no sleep. All natural laws
Suspend their function: strange effects
And mighty for so slight a cause!
What whim of weakling strength protects
This dog of Satan at my gate
From the full whirlwind of my hate?

What mighty weakness stays the king
If he arise, and cast desire
Far from its seat and seed and spring
To Hinnom the detested fire?
Ay! both were wise. Madness alone
Sits throned on the king's vacant throne.

Dogs! Who dares break on me? "Dread lord!
Mightiest of monarchs!"—"Cease, thou crow!
Thine errand! ere the eunuch's sword
Snatch thy bald head off at a blow."
"Mercy, World's Light!" Swings clear and clean
The call "Room for the Queen! The Queen!"

Strong as a man, the Queen strides in.
Even she shrank frightened!—my aspect
More dreadful than all shapes of sin
Her dreams might shape or recollect,
Hideous with fasting, madness, grief,
Beyond all speaking or belief.

But the first glance at those bold eyes!
Ah! let me fling me at her feet!
Take me, O love! Thy terror flies.
Kiss me again, again, O sweet!
O honeyed queen, old paramour,
So keen our joy be and so sure!

“The king would be alone!” Fast fly
The trembling lackeys at her voice.
Lapped in her billowy breasts I lie,
And love, and languish, and rejoice,
And—ah—forget! The ecstatic hour
Bursts like a poppy into flower.

Back! thou black spectre! In her arms
Devouring and devoured of love,
Feeding my face in myriad charms,
As on a mountain feeds a dove,
Starred with fresh flowers, dew-bright, and pearly
With all the light of all the world:

Back! With the kisses ravaging fast
Upon my panting mouth, the eyes
Darting hot showers of light, the vast
And vicious writings, the caught sighs
Drunk with delight, on love’s own throne,
The moment where all time lies prone:

Back! At the very central shrine,
Pinnacled moment of excess
Of immolation’s blood divine:
Back! from the fleshy loveliness:
Back! loved and loathed! O face concealed!
Back! One hath whispered “Naboth’s field.”

I am slain. Her body passion-pearled
Dreams her luxurious lips have drawn
My spirit, as the dust wind-whirled
Sucks up the radiance of the dawn
In rainbow beauty—yet remains
Mere dust upon the barren plains.

Reluctance to reveal my grief
Is of my sickness a strange feature.
Yea, verily! beyond belief
Is the machinery of man's nature!
If thus spake Solomon in kind
Of body, I of soul and mind!

The lazy accents stir at last.
The scented air: "Oh, wherefore, lord,
Is thy soul sad? This weary fast
Strikes to my heart a lonely sword!"
In brief words stammered forth I spoke
My secret; and the long spell broke.

And now the gilded sin of her
Leapt and was lambent in a smile:
"Give me but leave to minister
This kingdom for a little while!
The vineyard shall be thine. O king,
This trouble is a little thing!"

I gave to her the signet's gold
Carved in the secret charactery,
Whose flowers of writing bend and fold
The star of Solomon, the eye
Whence four rays run—the Name! the seal
Written within the burning wheel.

And now I lean with fevered will
Across the carven screen of palm.
All nature holds its function still;
The sun is mild; the wind is calm;
But on my ear the voices fall
Distant, and irk me, and appal.

Two men have sworn the solemn oath:
 “God and the king this dog blasphemed,”
Two judges, just, though little loth,
 Weigh, answer. As on one who dreamed
Comes waking—in my soul there groaned:
“Carry forth Naboth to be stoned!”

Nine days! And still the king is sad,
 And hides his face, and is not seen.
The tenth! the king is gaily clad;
 The king will banquet with the queen;
And, ere the west be waste of sun,
Enjoy the vinyard he hath won.

All this I hear as one entranced.
 The king and I are friend and friend,
As if a cloud of maidens danced
 Between my vision and the end.
I see the king as one afeared,
Hiding his anguish in his beard.

I laugh in secret, knowing well
 What waits him in the field of blood;
What message hath the seer to tell;
 What bitter Jordan holds its flood
Only for Ahab, sore afraid
What lurks behind the vine’s cool shade.

Yet well I see the fates are sure,
 And Ahab will descend, possess
The enchanting green, the purple lure,
 The globes of nectared loveliness,
And, as he turns! who wonders now
The grim laugh wrinkles on my brow?

I see him, a fantastic ghost,
The vineyard smiling white and plain,
And hiding ever innermost
The little shadow on his brain;
I laugh again with mirthless glee,
As knowing also I am he.

A fool in gorgeous attire!
An ox decked bravely for his doom!
So step I to the great desire.
Sweet winds upon the gathering gloom
Bend like a mother, as I go,
Foreknowing, to my overthrow.