

II.

THE NIGHTMARE

Up, up, my bride ! Away to ride
Upon the nightmare's wings !
The livid lightning's wine we'll drink,
And laugh for joy of life, and think
Unutterable things !

The gallant caught the lady fair
Below the arms that lay
Curling in coils of yellow hair,
And kissed her lips. "Away !"

The lover caught his mistress up
And lifted her to heaven,
Drank from her lips as from the cup
Of poppies drowsed at even.

"Away, away, my lady may !
The wind is fair and free ;
Away, away, the glint of day
Is faded from the ghostly grey
That shines beyond the sea."

The lordly bridegroom took the bride
As giants grasp a flower.
"A night of nights, my queen, to ride
Beyond the midnight hour."
The bride still slept ; the lonely tide
Of sleep was on the tower.

“Awake, awake! for true love’s sake!
The blood is pulsing faster.
My swift veins burn with keen desire
Toward those ebony wings of fire,
The monarchs of disaster!”
The golden bride awoke and sighed
And looked upon her master.

The bride was clad in spider-silk;
The lord was spurred and shod.
Her breasts gleamed bright and white as milk.
Most like the mother of God;
His heart was shrouded, his face was clouded,
Earth trembled where he trod.

“By thy raven tresses; by those caresses
We changed these five hours past;
By the full red lips and the broad white brow
I charge thee stay; I am weary now;
I would sleep again — at last.”

“By thy golden hair; by the laughter rare
Of love’s kiss conquering,
By the lips full red and the ivory bed
I charge thee come, I am fain instead
Of the nightmare’s lordly wing!”

The bride was sad and spoke no more.
The tower erect and blind
Rocked with the storm that smote it sore,
The thunder of the wind.

Swift to their feet the nightmare drew
And shook its gorgeous mane.
“Who rideth me shall never see
His other life again.

“Who rideth me shall laugh and love
In other ways than these.”

“Mount, mount!” the gallant cried, “enough
Of earthly ecstasies!”

The pale bride caught his colour then :
The pale bride laughed aloud,
Fronting red madness in her den :
“The bride-robe be my shroud !

“The bride-robe gave me light and clean
To kisses’ nuptial gold.
Now for a draught of madness keen !
The other lips are cold.”

They mount the tameless thundering side ;
They sweep toward the lea ;
The mare is wild ; they spur, they ride,
Mad master and hysteric bride,
Along the lone grey sea.

The pebbles flash, the waters shrink !
(So fearful are those wings !)
The lightning stoops to let them drink.
They see each other’s eyes, and think
Unutterable things.

And now the sea is loose and loud ;
Tremendous the typhoon
Sweeps from the westward as a shroud,
Wrapping some great god in a cloud,
Abolishing the moon.

And faster flying and faster still
They gallop fast and faster.
“Turn, turn thy rein !” she shrieked again,
“ ‘Tis edged with sore disaster.”
He looked her through with sight and will : —
The pale bride knew her master.

And now the skies are black as ink,
The nightmare shoreward springs ;
The lightning stoops to let them drink.
They hold each other close, and think
Unutterable things.

The roar of earthquake stuns the ear ;
The powers volcanic rise,
Casting the lava red and sheer
A million miles in ether clear
Beyond the labouring skies.

Ghastlier faces bend around
And gristlier fears above.
They see no sight : they hear no sound ;
But look toward the hill profound
End and abyss of love.

The water and the skies are fallen
Far beyond sight of them.
All earth and fire grasp and expire :
The night hath lost her starry host,
Shattered her diadem.

Eternity uplifts its brink
To bar the wizard wings.
The lightning stoops to let them drink.
They silently espouse, and think
Unutterable things.

The nightmare neighs ! The untravelled ways
Are past on fervid feet.
The limits of the limitless
Flash by like jewels on a dress,
Or dewdrops fallen in wheat.

“ O love ! O husband ! Did you guess
I did not wish to go ?
And now — what rapture can express

This? — do you feel and know?
The girl's arms close in a caress;
Her lips are warm aglow;
She looks upon his loveliness: —
The night has frozen the old stress;
His mouth is cold as snow!

But closer to the corpse she links,
And closer, closer clings.
Her kiss like lightning drops and drinks.
She burns upon his breast, and thinks
Unutterable things.

Now half a moment stayed the steed;
And then she thought he sighed; —
And then flashed forward thrice the old speed: —
And then she knew he had died.

But close to him clings she yet,
And feeds his corpse with fire,
As if death were not to forget
And to annul desire.

And therefore as the utter space
Sped past by hour and hour,
She feeds her face upon his face
Like a bird upon a flower.

“Awake, awake! for love's own sake!
I grow so faint and cold;
I charge thee by the bridal bed,
The violet veins, and the lips full red,
And the hours of woven gold!”

And colder now the bride's lips grow
And colder yet colder,
Until she lies as cold as snow,
Her head against his shoulder.

The nightmare never checked its pace.
The lovely pair are gone
Together through the walls of space
Into oblivion.