

## THE NAMELESS QUEST.

THE king was silent. In the blazoned hall  
Shadows, more mute than at a funeral  
True mourners, waited, waited in the gloom ;  
Waited to hear what child was in the womb  
Of his high thoughts. As dead men were we all ;  
As dead men wait the trumpet in the tomb.

The king was silent. Tense the high-strung air  
Must save itself by trembling—if it dare.  
Then a long shudder ran across the space ;  
Each man ashamed to see his fellow's face,  
Each troubled and confused. He did not spare  
Our fear—he spake not yet a little space.

After a while he took the word again :  
“Go thou then moonwards on the great salt plain ;  
So to a pillar. Adamant, alone,  
It stands. Around it see them overthrown,  
King, earl, and knight. There lie the questing slain,  
A thousand years forgotten—bone by bone.

“No more is spoken—the tradition goes :  
‘There learns the seeker what he seeks or knows,’  
Thence—none have passed. The desert leagues may  
    keep  
Some other secret—some profounder deep  
Than this one echoed fear : the desert shows  
Its ghastly triumph—silence. There they sleep.

“There, brave and pure, there, true and strong, they  
    stay  
Bleached in the desert, till the solemn day  
Of God’s revenge—none knoweth them : they rest  
Unburied, unremembered, unconfessed.  
What names of strength, of majesty, had they ?  
What suns are these gone down into the West ?

“Even I myself—my youth within me said :  
Go, seek this folly ; fear not for the dead,  
And God is with thine arm. I reached the ridge,  
And saw the river and the ghastly bridge  
I told you of. Even then, even there, I fled.  
Nor knight, nor king—a miserable midge !

“Yet from my shame I dare not turn and run.  
My oath grows urgent as my days are done.  
Almost mine hour is on me : for its sake  
I tell you this, as if my heart should break,  
The infinite desire—a burning sun.  
The listening fear—the sun-devouring snake !”

The king was silent. None of us would stir.  
I sat, struck dumb, a living sepulchre.  
For—hear me! in my heart this thing became  
My sacrament, my pentecostal flame.  
And with it grew a fear—a fear of Her.  
What Her? Shame had not found itself a name.

Simply I knew it in myself. I brood  
Ten years—so seemed it—O! the bitter food  
In my mouth nauseate! In the silent hall  
One might have heard God's sparrow in its fall.  
But I was lost in mine own solitude—  
I should not hear Mikhael's trumpet-call.

Yet there did grow a clamour shrill and loud:  
One cursed, one crossed himself, another vowed  
His soul against the quest; the tumult ran  
Indecorous in that presence, man to man.  
Stilled suddenly, beholding how I bowed  
My soul in thought: another cry began.

“Gereth the dauntless! Gereth of the Sea!  
Gereth the loyal! Child of royalty!  
Witch-mothered Gereth! Sword above the strong,  
Heart pure, head many-wiled!” The knightly throng  
Clamour my name, and flattering words, to me—  
If they may 'scape the quest—I do them wrong;

They are my friends—Yet something terrible  
Rings in the manly music that they swell.

They are all caught in this immense desire  
Deeper than heaven, tameless as the fire.  
All catch the fear—the fear of Her—as well,  
And dare not—even afraid, I must aspire.

A spirit walking in a dream, I went  
To the high throne—they shook the firmament  
With foolish cheers. I knelt before the queen  
And wept in silence. Then, as it had been  
And angel's voice and touch, her face she bent,  
Lifted and kissed me—oh! her lips were keen!

Her voice was softer than a virgin's eyes :  
“Go! my true knight: for thither, thither lies  
The only road for thee; thou hast a prayer  
Wafted each hour—my spirit will be there!”  
Too late I knew what subtle Paradise  
Her dreams and prayers portend: too fresh, too fair!

I turned more wretched than myself knew yet.  
I told my nameless pain I should forget  
Its shadow as it passed. The king did start,  
Gripped my strong hands, and held me to his heart,  
And could not speak a moment. Then he set  
A curb of sorrow and subdued its dart.

“Go! and the blessing of high God attend  
Thy path, and lead thee to the doubtful end.  
No tongue that secret ever may reveal.  
Thy soul is god-like and thy frame is steel;

Thou mayst win the quest—the king, thy friend,  
Gives thee his sword to keep thee—Gereth, kneel!

“I dub thee Earl; arise!” And then there rings  
The queen’s voice: “Shall my love not match the  
king’s?”

Here, from my finger drawn, this gem of power  
Shall guard thee in some unimagined hour.  
It hath strange virtue over mortal things.  
I freely give it for thy stirrup’s dower.”

I left the presence. Now the buffeting wind  
Gladdens my face—I leave the court behind.  
Am I Stark mad? My face grows grim and grave;  
I see—O Mary Mother, speak and save!  
I stare and stare until mine eyes are blind—  
There was no jewel in the ring she gave!

Oh! my pure heart! Adulterous love began  
So subtly to identify the man  
With its own perfumed thoughts. So steals the  
grape  
Into the furtive brain—a spirit shape  
Kisses my spirit as no woman can.  
I love her—yes; and I have no escape.

I never spoke, I never looked! But she  
Saw through the curtains of the soul of me,  
And loved me also! It is very well.  
I am well started on the road to Hell.

Loved, and no sin done! Ay, the world shall see  
The quest is first—a love less terrible.

Yet, as I ride toward the edge of snow  
That cuts the blue, I think. For even so  
Comes reason to me: “Oh, return, return!  
What folly is it for two souls to burn  
With hell’s own fire! What is this quest of woe?  
What is the end? Consider and discern!”

Banish the thought! My working reason still  
Is the rebellious vassal to my will.  
Because I will it. That is God’s own mind.  
I cast all thought and prudence to the wind:  
On, to the quest! The cursed parrot hill  
Mocks on, on, on! The thought is left behind.

Night came upon me thus—a wizard hand  
Grasping with silence the reluctant land.  
Through night I clomb—behind me grew the light  
Reflected in the portal of the night.  
I reached the crest at dawn—pallid I stand  
Uncomprehending of the sudden sight.

The river and the bridge! The river flows,  
Tears of young orphans for its limpid woes.  
The red bridge quivers—how my spirit starts,  
Its seeming glory built of widows’ hearts!  
And yet I could disdain it—heaven knows  
I had no dear ones for their counterparts.

Yet the thought chilled me as I touched the reins.  
Ah! the poor horse, he will not. So remains,  
Divided in his love. With mastered tears  
I stride toward the parapet. My ears  
Catch his low call; and now a song complains.  
The bridge is bleeding and the river hears.

Ah! God! I cannot live for pity deep  
Of that heart-quelling chant—I could not sleep  
Ever again to think of it. I close  
My hearing with my fingers. Gently goes  
A quivering foot above them as they weep—  
I weep, I also, as the river flows.

Slowly the bridge subsides, and I am flung  
Deep in the tears and terrors never sung.  
I swim with sorrow bursting at my breast.  
Yet I am cleansed, and find some little rest.  
Still from my agonised unspeaking tongue  
Breaks: I must go, go onward to the quest.

Again the cursed cry: “What quest is this?  
Is it worth heaven in thy lover’s kiss?  
A queen, a queen, to kiss and never tire!  
Thy queen, quick-breathing for your twin desire!”  
I shudder, for the mystery of bliss;  
I go, heart crying and a soul on fire!

“Resolve all question by a moonward tread.  
Follow the moon!” Even so the king had said.

My thought had thanked him for the generous breath  
Wherewith he warned us: for delay were death.  
And now, too late! no moon is overhead—  
Some other meaning in the words he saith?

Or, am I tricked in such a little snare?  
I lifted up my eyes. What soul stood there,  
Fronting my path? Tall, stately, delicate,  
A woman fairer than a pomegranate.  
A silver spear her hands of lotus bear,  
One shaft of moonlight quivering and straight.

She pointed to the East with flashing eyes:  
“Thou canst not see her—but my Queen shall rise.”  
Bowed head and beating heart, with feet unsure  
I passed her, trembling, for she was too pure.  
I could have loved her. No: she was too wise.  
Her presence was too gracious to endure.

“She did not bid me go and chain me to her,”  
I cried, comparing. Then, my spirit knew her  
For One beyond all song—my poor heart turned:  
Then, 'tis no wonder. And my passion burned  
Mightier yet than ever. To renew her  
Venom from those pure eyes? And yet I yearned.

Still, I stepped onward. Credit me so far!  
The harlot had my soul: my will, the star!  
Thus I went onward, as a man goes blind,  
Into a torrent crowd of mine own kind;

Jostlers and hurried folk and mad they are,  
A million actions and a single mind.

“What is thy purpose, sweet my lord?” I pressed  
One stalwart. “Ah! the quest,” he cried, “the quest.”  
God’s heart! the antics, as they toil and shove!  
One grabs a coin, one life, another love.  
All shriek, “The prize is mine!” as men possessed.  
I was not fooled at anything thereof.

Rather I hated them, and scorned for slaves;  
“Fools! all your treasure is at last the grave’s!”  
Mine eyes had fixed them on the sphinx, the sky.  
“Is then this quest of immortality?”  
And echo answered from some unseen caves:  
Mortality! I shrink, and wonder why.

Strange I am nothing tainted with this fear  
Now, that had touched me first. For I am here  
Half-way I reckon to the field of salt,  
The pillar, and the bones—it was a fault  
I am cured of! praise to God! What meets mine ear,  
That every nerve and bone of me cries halt?

What is this cold that nips me at the throat?  
This shiver in my blood? this icy note  
Of awe within my agonising brain?  
Neither of shame, nor love, nor fear, nor pain,  
Nor anything? Has love no antidote,  
Courage no buckler? Hark! it comes again.

Friend, hast thou heard the wailing of the damned?  
Friend, hast thou listened when a murderer sham'd  
Pale smiles amid his fellows as they spoke  
Low of his crime: his fear is like to choke  
His palsied throat. How, if Hell's gate were slammed  
This very hour upon thy womanfolk?

Conceive, I charge thee! Brace thy spirit up  
To drink at that imagination's cup!  
Then, shriek, and pass! For thou shalt understand  
A little of the pressure of the hand  
That crushed me now. Yes, yes! let fancy sup  
That grislier banquet than old Atreus planned!

Mind cannot fathom, nor the brain conceive,  
Nor soul assimilate, nor heart believe  
The horror of that Thing without a Name.  
Full on me, boasting, like Death's hand it came,  
And struck me headlong. Linger, while I weave  
The web of mine old agony and shame.

A little shadow of that hour of mine  
Touches thy heart? Fill up the foaming wine,  
And listen for a little! How profound  
Strikes memory keen-fanged; memory, the hound  
That tracks me yet—a shiver takes my spine  
At one half-hint, the shadow of that sound.

Where am I? Seven days my spirit fell,  
Down, down the whirlpools and the gulfs of hell:

Seven days a corpse lay desolate—at last  
Back drew the spirit and the soul aghast  
To animate that clay—O horrible!  
The resurrection pang is hardly past.

Yet in awhile I stumbled to my feet  
To flee—no nightmare could be worse to meet.  
And, spite of that, I knew some deadlier trap  
Some worm more poisonous would set—mayhap!  
I turned—the path? My horror was complete—  
A flaming sword across the earthquake gap.

I cried aloud to God in my despair.  
“The quest of quests! I seek it, for I dare!  
Moonward! on, moonward!” And the full moon shone,  
A glory for God’s eyes to dwell upon,  
A path of silver furrowed in the air,  
A gateway where an angel might have gone.

And forward gleamed a narrow way of earth  
Crusted with salt: I watch the fairy birth  
Of countless flashes on the crystal flakes,  
Forgetting it is only death that makes  
Its home the centre of that starry girth.  
Yet, what is life? The manhood in me wakes.

The absolute desire hath hold of me.  
Death were most welcome in that solemn sea;  
So bitter is my life. But carelessness  
Of life and death and love is on me—yes!

Only the quest! if any quest there be!  
What is my purpose? Could the Godhead guess?

So the long way seemed moving as I went,  
Flashing beneath me; and the firmament  
Moving with quicker robes that swept the air.  
Still Dian drew me to her bosom bare,  
And madness more than will was my content.  
I moved, and as I moved I was aware!

The plain is covered with a many dead.  
Glisten white bone and salt-encrusted head,  
Glazed eye imagined, of a crystal built.  
And see! dark patches, as of murder spilt.  
Ugh! "So thy fellows of the quest are sped!  
Thou shall be with them: onward, if thou wilt!"

So was the chilling whisper at my side,  
Or in my brain. Then surged the maddening tide  
Of my intention. Onward! Let me run!  
Thy steed, O Moon! Thy chariot, O Sun!  
Lend me fierce feet, winged sandals, wings as wide  
As thine, O East wind! And the goal is won!

Was ever such a cruel solitude?  
Up rears the pillar. Quaintly shaped and hued,  
It focussed all the sky and all the plain  
To its own ugliness. I looked again,  
And saw its magic in another mood.  
A shapeless truth took image in my brain.

A hollow voice from every quarter cries :  
‘O thou, zelator of this Paradise,  
Tell thou the secret of the pillar! None  
Can hear thee, of the souls beneath the sun.  
Speak, or the very Godhead in thee dies.  
For we are many and thy name is One.’

The Godhead in me! As a flash there came  
The jealous secret and the guarded name.  
The quest was mine! And yet my thoughts confute  
My intuition; and my will was mute.  
My voice—ah! flashes out the word of flame :  
“Eternal Beauty, One and absolute!”

The overwhelming sweetness of a voice  
Filled me with Godhead. “Still remains the choice!  
Thou knowest me for Beauty! Canst thou bear  
The fuller vision, the abundant air?”  
I only wept. The elements rejoice;  
No tear before had ever fallen there.

I thought within myself a bitter thing,  
Standing abased. The golden marriage ring  
The queen had given—how her beauty stank  
Now in mine yes, where once their passion drank  
Its secret sweets of poison. Let the spring  
Of love once dawn—all else hath little thank!

Yet resolute I put my love away.  
I could not live in this amazing day.

Love is the lotus that is sickly sweet,  
That makes men drunken, and betrays their feet :  
Beauty, the sacred lotus : let me say  
The word, and make my purity complete.

The whole is mine, and shall I keep a part ?  
O Beauty, I must see thee as thou art !  
Then on my withered gaze that Beauty grew—  
Rosy quintessence of alchemic dew !  
The Self-informing Beauty ! In my heart  
The many were united : and I knew.

Smitten by Beauty down I fell as dead—  
So strikes the sunlight on a miner's head.  
Blind, stricken, crushed ! That vast effulgence stole,  
Flooded the caverns of my secret soul,  
And gushed in waves of weeping. I was wed  
Unto a part, and could not grasp the whole.

Thus, I was broken on the wheel of Truth.  
Fled all the hope and purpose of my youth,  
The high desire, the secret joy, the sin  
That coiled its rainbow dragon scales within.  
Hope's being, life's delight, time's eager tooth ;  
All, all are gone ; the serpent sloughs his skin !

The quest is mine ! Here ends mortality  
In contemplating the eternal Thee.  
Here, She is willing. Stands the Absolute  
Reaching its arms toward me. I am mute,

I draw toward. Oh, suddenly I see  
The treason-pledge, the royal prostitute.

One moment, and I should have passed beyond  
Linked unto spirit by the fourfold bond.  
Not dead to earth, but living as divine,  
A priest, a king, an oracle, a shrine,  
A saviour! Yet my misty spirit conned  
The secret murmur: "Gereth, I am thine!"

I must have listened to the voice of hell.  
The earthly horror wove its serpent spell  
Against the Beauty of the World: I heard  
Desolate voices cry the doleful word  
"Unready!" All the soul invisible  
Of that vast desert echoed, and concurred.

The voices died in mystery away.  
I passed, confounded, lifeless as the clay,  
Somewhere I knew not. Many a dismal league  
Of various terror wove me its intrigue,  
And many a demon daunted: day by day  
Death dogged despair, and misery fatigue.

Behold! I came with haggard mien again  
Into the hall, and mingled with the train,  
A corpse amid the dancers. Then the king  
Saw me, and knew me—and he knew the ring!  
He did not ask me how I sped: disdain  
Curled his old lips: he said one bitter thing.

“You crossed the bridge—no man’s heart trod you  
there?”

Then crossed his breast in uttering some prayer :

“I pray you follow of your courtesy,

My lord!” I followed very bitterly.

“Likes you the sword I gave?” I did not dare

Answer one word. My soul was hating me.

He bade me draw. I silently obeyed.

My eye shirked his as blade encountered blade.

I was determined he should take my life.

“Went your glance back—encountering my wife?”

“Taunt me!” I cried; “I will not be afraid!”

My whole soul weary of the coward strife.

He seemed to see no opening I gave,

But hated me the more. Serene and suave,

He fenced with deep contempt. I stumble, slip,

Guard wide—and only move his upper lip.

“You know I will not strike, Sir pure and brave!

Fight me your best—or I shall find a whip!”

That stung me, even me. He wronged me, so :

Therefore some shame and hate informed the blow;

Some coward’s courage pointed me the steel;

Some strength of Hell: we lunge, and leap, and wheel;

Hard breath and laboured hands—the flashes grow

Swifter and cruel—this court hath no appeal!

He gladdened then. I would not slip again

And baulk the death of half its shame and pain.

I, his best sword, must fall, in earnest fight.  
The old despair was coward—he was right.  
Now, king, I pay your debt. A purple stain  
Hides his laced throat—I sober at the sight.

“King, you are touched!” “Fight on, Earl Lecherer!”  
I cursed him to his face—the added spur  
Sticks venom in my lunge—a sudden thrust!  
No cry, no gasp; but he is in the dust,  
Stark dead. The queen—I hate the name of her!  
So grew the mustard-seed, one moment’s lust.

I too was wounded: shameful runs the song.  
She nursed me through that melancholy long  
Month of despair: she won my life from death.  
Ah God! she won that most reluctant breath  
Out of corruption: love! ah! love is strong!  
What waters quench it? King Shalomah saith.

I am the king: you know it, friend! We wed.  
That is the tale of how my wooing sped.  
And oh! the quest: half won—incredible?  
I am so brave, and pure—folk love me well.  
But oh! my life, my being! That is dead,  
And my whole soul—a whirlwind out of hell!