

THE WHORE IN HEAVEN

HERE dwells an image, deathlessly divine,
With beauty's armour panoplied, more strong
Than Styx could make Æacides; a shrine
Of subtle passion, and unsleeping song,
In every soul that knows the emotional
Swift sound that wings the slave's despairing call.
There, in the harbour of supreme success,
It lingers, wrapt in its own loveliness.

No invocation of the myriad rays
Of thousand-coloured flowers may move its peace:
No manifold keen music where the ways
Of lofty corridors, and foaming seas,
And crag-hewn pinnacles, accept the wind's
Wild fingers: not even the eagle-piercing mind's
Chill sword of thought: a woman's agony
Yet draws its beauty from the sacred sea.

Hear how this fell. A stern Dissenter dwelt
Lone in a fertile valley: lonely he,
Lonelier the sharp-faced wife: each day they knelt
In loveless worship: thrice a week they see

The chill damp chapel. God denied them not
One chance of sight and love : their bed begot
The loveliest child angels e'er prayed above,
A maiden that an anchorite would love.

She grew to beauty and to thoughts divine,
Yet knelt each day in prayer to such a Thing
As could not (so she knew) create the vine,
The air, the linnet, and the water-spring,
And every week some red-nosed ranter jarred
Her tender ears—(yes, life was very hard!).
Then she guessed Love. A village boy she took,
And drew his soul out with her amorous look.

The stream sang merrier and the grass grew green ;
The leaves made murmur as she drew him down
Into her maiden arms : the far-off queen
She guessed so happy in her golden crown
She never envied after : for she wrung
Love's secret, understanding, heart and tongue
Its strange desire ; sage heads the linnets nod,
Chirping : " So Lilian has found her God ! "

No ! For she might not in her joy discern
The real fountain of delight. She took
The carrion crow to be the golden erne,
Saw dainty covers, and misread the book,
The world was open to her now—she went
From passion unto passion, sacrament
To profanation : and the village knew
She asked for lovers, and cared little who.

There is one end to this mistake of hers.

Imagine terror and the father's wrath,
The mother's dry-eyed scorn: the very curs
Yelp as she weeps along the little path
Toward the train: imagine how the years
Mingled her wine-cup with the wanton's tears
And leave her worn and weary and alone;
A face of brass, a serpent's heart of stone.

She had one curse: against the cruel men
That reared her without knowledge of mankind,
Her parents and their leprous faith; but then
She had one virtue: pitiful her mind
Toward all gentle spirits: she had given
Many a sister half a help to heaven;
Many a sister half a help that knew her face
Lovely behind her destiny's disgrace.

The stern Dissenter was a godly man,
And robbed his master. Flying from his home,
He reached the city, poor, without a plan
To fill his belly. Wretched did he roam
Begging through London. On a winter's night
His daughter found him, frozen in the light
Of some cold damp: her wheels triumphant
She laughed with Hell, and cursed him from her soul.

Then suddenly came pity. She commands
The carriage to stay still. For nigh an hour
She set her teeth and clenched her gauded hands.
Alternate gusts her swaying soul devour.

Hate, triumph, justice, with their hardness strove
Pity, pure pity; and I think, the love
Of some God's angel. Now the strife is past;
She took her father home with her at last.

Now, in that moment, quite a miracle!
Through all the shell of miserable sin,
Through all the blackness of the gulf of Hell,
She sees Truth's angel. She is locked within
No irrefragable bars; her spirit woke
From its dull slavery; her passion broke
Her history's prison, from that hour to endure
Mighty as tempest and as spring wind pure.

After a year her changed life met its fate.
There came a man and loved her, and her soul
The first time knew true sympathy. Elate,
That pure joy filled her body's broken bowl
With infinite fresh fire and purer wine;
Her whole life grew one exquisite divine
Flower of the sunlight; memory alone
Held its stern sceptre on a cruel throne.

She simply fled and would not see his face.
A noble folly! In the countryside
Where her harsh youth was nurtured, in the place
Where she revolted, she lay down and died.
With crossed hands folded on her budded breast
She closed her eyes, and slept the sweet long rest
Where the true peace of purity is drawn.
She lay there dead; her spirit sought the dawn,

Where the vast whiteness of the Godhead sate,
A fearful glory shone upon the throne,
And through the diamond music of the gate
She entered, unresisting and alone,
Up to God's presence. Then that calm voice rolled
Flecking its whiteness with immortal gold:
"Daughter of Earth, take thou thy proper stand,
Virgin of Virgins, at My own right hand!"