

Morphia

*Originally published in the July 1914 edition
of The English Review.*

THIRST!
Not the thirst of the throat,
Though that he the wildest and worst
Of physical pangs—that smote
Alone to the heart of Christ,
Wringing the one wild cry
“I thirst!” from His agony,
While the soldiers drank and diced:
Not the thirst benign
That calls the worker to wine;
Not the bodily thirst
(Though that be frenzy accurst)
When the mouth is full of sand,
And the eyes are gummed up, and the ears
Trick the soul till it hears
Water, water at hand,
When a man will dig his nails
In his breast, and drink the blood
Already that clots and stales
Ere his tongue can tip its flood,
When the sun is a living devil
Vomiting vats of evil,
And the moon and the night but mock
The wretch on his barren rock,
And the dome of heaven high-arched
Like his mouth is arid and parched—
And the caves of his heart high-spanned
Are choked with alkali sand!

Not this! but a thirst uncharted
Body and soul alike
Traitors turned black-hearted,
Seeking a space to strike

In a victim already attuned
To one vast chord of wound;
Every separate bone
Cold, an incarnate groan
Distilled from the icy sperm
Of Hell's implacable worm;
Every drop of the river
Of blood aflame and a-quiver
With poison secret and sour—
With a sudden twitch at the last
Like certain jagged daggers.
(With blood-shot eyes dull-glassed
The screaming Malay staggers
Through his village aghast).
So blood wrenches its pain
Sardonic through heart and brain.
Every separate nerve
Awake and alert, on a curve
Whose asymptote's name is "never"
In a hyperbolic "for ever"
A bitten and burning snake
Striking its venom within it,

As if it might serve to slake
The pain for the tithe of a minute.
Awake, for ever awake!
Awake as one never is
While sleep is a possible end,
Awake in the void, the abyss
Whose thirst is an echo of this
That martyrs, world without end,
(World without end, amen!)
The man that falters and yields
For the proverb's "month and an hour"
To the lure of the snow-starred fields
Where the opium poppy's aflower.

Only the prick of a needle
Charged from a wizard well
Is this sufficient to wheedle
A soul from heaven to hell?
Was man's spirit weaned
From fear of its ghosts and gods
To fawn at the feet of a fiend?
Is it such terrible odds—
The heir of ages of wonder,
The crown of earth for an hour,
The master of tide and thunder
Against the juice of a flower?
Ay! in the roar and the rattle
Of all the armies of sin,
This is the only battle
He never was known to win.

Slave to the thirst—not thirst
As here it is weakly written,
Not thirst in the brain black-bitten,
In the soul more sorely smitten!
One dare not think of the worst!
Beyond the raging and raving
Hell of the physical craving
Lies, in the brain benumbed.
At the end of time and space,
An abyss, unmeasured, unplumbed—
The haunt of a face

She it is, she, that found me
In the morphia honeymoon;
With silk and steel she bound me,
In her poisonous milk she drowned me,
Even now her arms surround me,
Stifling me into the swoon
That still—but oh, how rarely!—
Comes at the thrust of the needle,
Steadily stares and squarely,

Nor needs to fondle and wheedle
Her slave agasp for a kiss,
Her's whose horror is his
That knows that viper womb,
Speckled and barred with black
On its rusty amber scales,
Is his tomb—
The straining, groaning, rack
On which he wails—he wails!

Her cranial dome is vaulted.
Her mad Mongolian eyes
Aslant with the ecstasies
Of things immune, exalted
Far beyond stars and skies,
Slits of amber and jet—
Her snout for the quarry set
Fleshy and heavy and gross,
Bestial, broken across,
And below it her mouth that drips
Blood from the lips
That hide the fangs of a snake,
Drips on venomous udders
Mountainous flanks that fret,
And the spirit sickens and shudders
At the hint of a worse thing yet.

Olya! the golden bait
Barbed with infinite pain,
Fatal, fanatical mate
Of a poisoned body and brain!
Olya, the name that leers
Its lecherous longing and knavery,
Whispers in crazing ears
The secret spell of her slavery.

Behind me, behind and above,
She stands, that mirror of love.

Her fingers are supple-jointed;
her nails are polished and pointed,
And tipped with spurs of gold:
With them she rowels the brain.
Her lust is critical, cold;
And her Chinese checks are pale,
As she daintily picks, profane
With her octopus lips, and the teeth
Jagged and black beneath,
Pulp and blood from a nail.

One swift prick was enough
In days gone by to invoke her:
She was incarnate love
In the hours when I first awoke her.
Little by little I found
The truth of her, stripped of clothing,
Bitter beyond all bound,
Leprous beyond all loathing.
Black, the plague of the pit,
Her pustules visibly fester,
Cancerous kisses that bit
As the asp caressed her.

Dragon of lure and dread,
Tiger of fury and lust,
The quick in chains to the dead,
The slime alive in the dust,
Brazen shame like a flame,
An orgy of pregnant pollution
With hate beyond aim or name—
Orgasm, death, dissolution!
Know you now why her eyes
So fearfully glaze, beholding
Terrors and infamies
Like filthy flowers unfolding?
Laughter widowed of ease,
Agony barred from sadness,

Death defeated of peace,
Is she not madness?

She waits for me, lazily leering,
As moon goes murdering moon;
The moon of her triumph is nearing:
She will have me wholly soon.

And you, you puritan others,
Who have missed the morphia craving,
Cry scorn if I call you brothers,
Curl lip at my maniac raving,
Fools, seven times beguiled,
You have not known her? Well!
There was never a need she smiled
To harry *you* into hell!

Morphia is but one
Spark of its secular fire,
She is the single sun—
Type of all desire
All that you would, you are—
And that is the crown of a craving.
You are slaves of the wormwood star.
Analysed, reason is raving.
Feeling, examined, is pain.
What heaven were to hope for a doubt of it
Life is anguish, insane;
And death is—not a way-out of it!