

The Sevenfold Sacrament

By Alice Wesley Torr

*Originally published in the November 1911
issue of the English Review.*

I

In eddies of obsidian,
At my feet the river ran
Between me and the poppy-prankt
Isle, with tangled roots embanked,
Where seven sister poplars stood
Like the seven Spirits of god.

Soft as silence in mine ear,
The drone and rustle of the weir
Told in bass the treble tale
Of the embowered nightingale.
Higher, on the patient river,
Velvet lights without a quiver
Echoed through their hushèd rimes
The garden's glow beneath the limes.
Then the sombre village, crowned
By the castellated ground,
Where in cerements of sable,
One square tower and one great gable
Stood, the melancholy wraith
Of a false and fallen faith.
Over all, supine, enthralling,
The young moon, her faint edge falling
To the dead verge of her setting,
Saintly swam, her silver fretting
All the leaves with light. Afar
Toward the Zenith stood a star,
As of all worthiness and fitness
The luminous eternal witness.

So silent was the night, that I
Stirred the grasses reverently
And hid myself. The garden's glow

Darkened, and all the gold below
Went out, and left the gold above
To its sacrament of love,
Save where, to sentinel my station,
Gold lilies bowed in adoration.

Had I not feared to move, I might
Have hid my shame from such a night!
Man is not worthy to intrude
His soullessness on solitude;
Yet God hath made it to befriend
Pilgrims, that His peace may pend,
A dove upon the dire and dark
Waters that assail the ark,
And lure their less love to His own
Life is a song, a speech, a groan,
As may be; none of these have part
In the silence of His heart.

II

Lapsed in that unweanèd air,
I awaited, unaware
What might fall. The silence wrapped
Veil on veil about me, trapped
By the siren Night, whose words
Were the river and the birds.
So close it swaddled me, and bound
My being in the pure profound
Of its own stealthy intimacy,
Had Artemis come panting by,
Silver-shod with bow and quiver
Hunting along the reedy river,
And called me to the chase, I should
Have neither heard nor understood.
Or had Zeus his dangerous daughter,
Aphrodite, from the water
Risen all shining, her soft arms
Open, all her spells and charms
Melted to one lure divine
Of her red mouth pressed to mine,
I had neither heard nor seen
Nor felt the Idalian.

Between

My soul and all its knowledge of
The universe of light and love,
Thought, being, nature, time and space,
The Mother's heart, the Father's face,
All that was agony or bliss,
Stretched an infinite abyss.
All that behind me! but my soul,
With no star left to point the pole,
Witless and banned for grace or goal,
Beggared of all its wealth, bereft
Of all its images, unweft
Its magic web, its tools all broken,
Its Name forgot, its Word unspoken,
Widowed of its undying Lord,
Its bowl of silver broke, its cord
Of gold unloosed, its shining ladders
Thrown down, its ears more deaf than adders,
Its windows blind, its music stopped,
From its place in Heaven dropped,
From its starry throne was hurled
Beyond the pillars of the world—
Borne from the abyss of light
To the Dark Night!

III

The moon had sunk behind the tower
When, for a moment by the power
Of nature, as even the eagle's eye
Turns wearied from the sun, did I
Fall from the conning crag, that springs
Above the Universe of Things,
Into the dark impertinence
Of the mirrored lies of sense.
Yet, when I sought the stars to espy
And rede the runes of destiny,
Mine eyes their wonted office failed,
So diligently God had veiled
Me from myself! I could not hear
The drone and rustle of the weir.
No help in that world or in this!
I was alone in the abyss.

IV

No *Whence!* no *Whither!* and no *Why!*
Not even *Who* evokes reply.
No vision and no voice repay
My will to watch, my will to pray.
Vain is the consecrated vesture;
Vain the high and holy gesture;
Vain the proven and perfect spell
Enchanting heaven, enchaining hell.
Unyoked the horses from the car
Wherein I waged celestial war:
Mine angel sheathes again his sword
At the Interdiction of the Lord.
Even hell is shut, lest spite and strife
Should show my soul a way to life.

Hope dies; faith flickers and is gone.
Love weeps, then turns its soul to stone.
All nearest, highest, holiest things
Drop off; the soul must lose her wings,
And, crippled, find, with no one clue
The infinite maze to travel through,
The goal unguessed, the path untrod,
And stand unhelmed, unarmed, unshod,
Naked before the Unknown God.
Oh! stertorous, oh! strangling strife
That cleaves to love, that clings to life!
The Will is broken, falls afar
Extinct as an accursèd star.
The Self, one moment held behind,
Whirls like a dead leaf in the wind
Down the Abyss. The soul is drawn
To that Dark Night that is the dawn
Through halls of patience, palaces
Of ever deeper silences,
Æons and æons and æons
Of lampless empyreans
Darker and deeper and holier, caves
Of night unstirred by wind, great graves
Of all that is or could ever be
In Time or Eternity.

Drawn, drawn, inevitably spanned,
Tirelessly drawn by some strange hand,

Drawn inward in some sense unkennd
Beyond all to an appointed end,
No end foreseen or hoped, drawn still
Beyond word or will
Into Itself, drawn subtly, deep
Through the dreamless deaths whose shadow is sleep.
Drawn, as dawn shows, to the inmost divine,
To the temple, the nave, the choir, the shrine,
To the altar where in the most holy cup
The wine of its blood may be offered up.

Nor is it given to any son of man
To hymn that sacrament, the One in Seven,
Where God and priest and worshipper
Deacon, asperger, thurifer, chorister,
Are one as they were one ere time began,
Are one on earth as they are one in heaven;
Where the soul is given a new name,
Confirming with an oath the same,
And with celestial wine and bread
Is most delicately fed,
Yet suffereth in itself the curse
Of the infinite universe,
Having made its own confession
Of the mystery of transgression;
Where it is wedded solemnly
With the ring of space and eternity,
And where the oil, the Holiest Breath,
With Its first whisper dedicateth
Its new life to a further death.

V

I was cold as earth: the night
Had given way. One star hung bright
Over the church, now gray;
I rose up to greet the ray
That thrilled through elm and chestnut, lit
The grass, made diamonds of it,
And bade the weir's long smile of spray
Leap with laughter for the day.
The birds woke over all the weald;
The sullen peasants slouched afield;
The lilies swayed before the breeze

That murmured matins in the trees;
The trout leapt in the shingly shallows.
Soared skyward the great sun, that hallows
The pagan shrines of labour and light
As the moon consecrates the night.
Labour is corn and love is wine.
And both are blessèd in the shrine;
Nor is he for priest designed
Who partakes only in one kind.

Thus musing joyous, twice across
Under the weir I swam, to toss
The spray back; then the meadows claim
The foot's fleet ecstasy aflame.
And having uttered my thanksgiving
Thus for the sacrament of living,
I lit my pipe, and made my way
To break fast, and the labour of the day.