

WILFRID BLUNT

SATAN ABSOLVED: A
VICTORIAN MYSTERY

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Satan Absolved: A Victorian Mystery

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Satan Absolved: A Victorian Mystery

PREFACE

In publishing this poem, the Author feels that some apology is needed. It deals with matters of a kind not usually treated in modern verse, and which ask to be approached, if at all, with dignity and reverence. He trusts that he will not be found lacking on this essential point. Nevertheless, he cannot expect but that he may wound by his plain speaking the feelings of those among his readers who sincerely believe that Nineteenth Century Civilisation is synonymous with Christianity, and that the English Race, above all those in existence, has a special mission from Heaven to subdue and occupy the Earth. The self-complacency of the Author's countrymen on this head is too deeply seated to be attacked without offence. He has not, however, shrunk from so attacking, and from insisting on the truth that the hypocrisy and all-acquiring greed of modern England is an atrocious spectacle – one which, if there be any justice in Heaven, must bring a curse from God, as it has surely already made the angels weep. The destruction of beauty in the name of science, the destruction of happiness in the name of progress, the destruction of reverence in the name of religion, these are the pharisaic crimes of all the white races; but there is something in the Anglo-Saxon impiety crueller still: that it also destroys, as no other race does, for its mere vain-glorious pleasure. The Anglo-Saxon alone has in our day exterminated, root and branch, whole tribes of mankind. He alone has depopulated continents, species after species, of their wonderful animal life, and is still yearly destroying; and this not merely to occupy the land, for it lies in large part empty, but for his insatiable lust of violent adventure, to make record bags and kill. That things are so is ample reason for the hardest words the Author can command.

To his fellow poets and poetic critics the Author too would say a word. He has chosen as the vehicle of his thought a metre to which in English they are unaccustomed, the six-foot Alexandrine couplet. For some reason which the Author has never understood, this, the classic metre in France, has stood in disrepute with us. Yet he ventures to think that, for rhetorical and dramatic purposes, it is infinitely preferable to our own heroic couplet, and preferable even, in any hands but the strongest, to our traditional blank verse. He believes, moreover, that if our skilled dramatists would make trial of it, it would, by its extreme flexibility and the natural break of its cesura, enable them to capture that shyest of all shy things – success in a rhymed modern play. At least, he trusts that they will give it their consideration, and not condemn him off-hand because, having a rhetorical subject to deal with, he has treated it rhetorically and in what he considers the best rhetoric form, though both rhetoric and Alexandrines are out of fashion.

Lastly, he has to discharge, in connection with his poem, a double debt of gratitude. The poem, unworthy as it is, is, by permission, dedicated to the first of living thinkers, Mr. Herbert Spencer. To his reasoned and life-long advocacy of the rights of the weak in Man's higher evolution is due all that in the poem is intellectually worthiest, to this and to the inspiration of much personal encouragement and sympathy received by the Author at a moment of public excitement when it was onerous yet necessary for the Author to speak unpopular truths.

To Mr. Spencer's great name the Author would add the name of that other senior of the ideal world, Mr. George Frederick Watts, the first of living painters, with whom, while the poem was in progress, it was his privilege to spend many emotional hours in high communings on Life and Death and the tragic Beauty of the world. He would thank him publicly here for the leave generously given him to add to the volume its chief ornament, the frontispiece, which is a reproduction of Mr. Watts' Angel of Pity weeping over the dead birds' wings.

To both these heroic workers in the cause of good the Author in gratitude inscribes himself their faithful servant, disciple, and friend.

Fernycroft, New Forest.

July 27th, 1899.

SATAN ABSOLVED A Victorian Mystery

(In the antechamber of Heaven. Satan walks alone. Angels in groups conversing)

Satan

To-day is the Lord's "day." Once more on His good pleasure
I, the Heresiarch, wait and pace these halls at leisure
Among the Orthodox, the unfallen Sons of God.
How sweet in truth Heaven is, its floors of sandal wood,
Its old-world furniture, its linen long in press,
Its incense, mummeries, flowers, its scent of holiness!
Each house has its own smell. The smell of Heaven to me
Intoxicates and haunts – and hurts. Who would not be
God's liveried servant here, the slave of His behest,
Rather than reign outside? I like good things the best,
Fair things, things innocent; and gladly, if He willed,
Would enter His Saints' kingdom – even as a little child (*laughs*).
I have come to make my peace, to crave a full "amaun,"
Peace, pardon, reconciliation, truce to our daggers-drawn,
Which have so long distraught the fair wise Universe,
An end to my rebellion and the mortal curse
Of always evil-doing. He will mayhap agree
I was less wholly wrong about Humanity
The day I dared to warn His wisdom of that flaw.
It was at least the truth, the whole truth I foresaw
When he must needs create that simian "in His own
Image and likeness." Faugh! the unseemly carrion!
I claim a new revision and with proofs in hand,
No Job now in my path to foil me and withstand.
Oh, I will serve Him well!
(*Certain Angels approach*). But who are these that come
With their grieved faces pale and eyes of martyrdom?
Not our good Sons of God? They stop, gesticulate,
Argue apart, some weep, – weep, here within Heaven's gate!
Sob almost in God's sight! ay, real salt human tears,
Such as no Spirit wept these thrice three thousand years.
The last shed were my own, that night of reprobation
When I unsheathed my sword and headed the lost nation.
Since then not one of them has spoken above his breath
Or whispered in these courts one word of life or death
Displeasing to the Lord. No Seraph of them all,
Save I this day each year, has dared to cross Heaven's hall

And give voice to ill news, an unwelcome truth to Him.
Not Michael's self hath dared, prince of the Seraphim.
Yet all now wail aloud. What ails ye, brethren? Speak!
Are ye too in rebellion?

Angels

Satan, no. But weak
With our long earthly toil, the unthankful care of Man.

Satan

Ye have in truth good cause.

Angels

And we would know God's plan,
His true thought for the world, the wherefore and the why
Of His long patience mocked, His name in jeopardy.
We have no heart to serve without instructions new.

Satan

Ye have made a late discovery.

Angels

There is no rain, no dew,
No watering of God's grace that can make green Man's heart,
Or draw him nearer Heaven to play a godlier part.
Our service has grown vain. We have no rest nor sleep;
The Earth's cry is too loud.

Satan

Ye have all cause to weep
Since you depend on Man. I told it and foretold.

Angels

Truly thou didst.

Satan

Dear fools! But have ye heart to hold
Such plaint before the Lord, to apprise Him of this thing
In its full naked fact and call your reckoning?

Angels

We dare not face his frown. He lives in ignorance.
His pride is in His Earth. If He but looks askance
We tremble and grow dumb.

Satan

And ye will bear it then?

Angels

We dare not grieve His peace. He loves this race of men.

Satan

The truth should hardly grieve.

Angels

He would count it us for pride.
He holds Mankind redeemed, since His Son stooped and died.
We dare not venture.

Satan

See, I have less than you to lose.
Give me your brief.

Angels

Ay, speak. Thee He will not refuse.
Mayhap thou shalt persuade Him.

Satan

And withal find grace.
The Lord is a just God. He will rejudge this case,
Ay, haply, even mine. O glorious occasion!
To champion Heaven's whole right without shift or evasion
And plead the Angels' cause! Take courage, my sad heart,
Thine hour hath come to thee, to play this worthiest part
And prove thy right, thine too, to Heaven's moralities,
Not worse than these that wait, only alas more wise!

Angels

Hush! Silence! The Lord God! (*Entereth the Lord God, to whom the
Angels minister. He taketh His seat upon the throne*).

The Lord God

Thank ye, my servants all.
Thank ye, good Seraphim. To all and several,
Sons of the House, God's blessing – who ne'er gave God pain.
Impeccable white Spirits, tell me once again
How goeth it with the World, my ordered Universe,
My Powers and Dominations? Michael, thou, rehearse

The glory of the Heavens. Tell me, star and star,
Do they still sing together in their spheres afar?
Have they their speech, their language? Are their voices heard?

Michael

All's well with the World. Each morn, as bird to answering bird,
The Stars shout in Thy glory praise unchanged yet new.
They magnify Thy name.

The Lord God

Truth's self were else untrue.
Time needs be optimist nor foul its own abode.
Else were Creation mocked – and haply I not God.
In sooth all's well with the World. And thou my Raphael,
How fare the Spirit hosts? Say, is *thy* world, too, well?

Raphael

All's well with the World. We stand, as aye, obedient.
We have no thought but Thee, no asking, no intent
More than to laud and worship, O most merciful,
Being of those that wait.

Satan (*aside*)

The contemplative rule
Out-ministers the active. These have right to boast,
Who stand aye in His presence, beyond the Angel host.

The Lord God

And none of ye grow weary?

Raphael

Nay in truth.

The Lord God

Not one?

Satan (*aside*)

God is a jealous God. He doubteth Thee.

Raphael

Nay, none.
We are not as the Angels.

The Lord God

These have their devoirs,
The search, the novelty. Ye drowse here in your choirs,
Sleep-walkers all, – while these, glad messengers, go forth
Upon new joyous errands, Earthwards, South and North,
To visit men and cities. What is strange as Man?
What fair as his green Globe in all Creation's plan?
What ordered as his march of life, of mind, of will?
What subtle as his conscience set at grips with ill?
Their service needs no sleep who guide Man's destinies.
Speak, Gabriel, thou the last. Is Man grown grand and wise?
Hath he his place on Earth, prince of Time's fashionings,
Noblest and fairest found, the roof and crown of things?
Is the World joyful all in his most perfect joy?
Hath the good triumphed, tell, o'er pain and Time's annoy,
Since Our Son died, who taught the way of perfect peace?
Thou knowest it how I love these dear Humanities.
Is all quite well with Man?

Gabriel

All's well with the World, ay well.
All's well enough with Man.

Satan (*aside*)

Alas, poor Gabriel.

The Lord God

How meanest thou "enough"? Man holdeth then Earth's seat,
Master of living things. He mild is and discreet,
Supreme in My Son's peace. The Earth is comforted
With its long rest from toil, nor goeth aught in dread,
Seeing all wars have ceased, the mad wars of old time.
The lion and the lamb lie down in every clime.
There is no strife for gold, for place, for dignities,
All holding My Son's creed! The last fool hath grown wise.
He hath renounced his gods, the things of wood and stone!

Gabriel

The Christian name prevaieth. Its dominion
Groweth in all the lands. From Candia to Cathay
The fear of Christ is spread, and wide through Africa.

The Lord God

The fear and not the love?

Gabriel

Who knoweth Man's heart? All bow,
And all proclaim His might. The manner and the how

It were less safe to argue, since some frailties be.
We take the outward act to prove conformity.
All's well enough with Man – most well with Christendom.

The Lord God

Again thou sayest “enough.” How fareth it in Rome?
Hath My vicegerent rest?

Gabriel

He sitteth as of old
Enthroned in Peter's chair with glories manifold.
He sang a mass this morning and I heard his prayer.

The Lord God

For Peace?

Gabriel

And Power on Earth.

The Lord God

And were the monarchs there,
The great ones in their place? Did a3ll pray with one breath?

Gabriel

Some priests and poor I saw,

Satan (*aside*)

The poor he always hath.

Gabriel

His guards, his chamberlains.

The Lord God

The mighty ones, the proud,
Do they not kneel together daily in one crowd?
Have they no common counsel?

Gabriel

Kings have their own needs,
Demanding separate service.

Satan (*aside*)

Ay, and their own creeds.
One cause alone combines them, and one service – mine.

The Lord God

Thou sayest?

Gabriel

Man still is Man.

The Lord God

We did redeem his line
And crown him with new worship. In the ancient days
His was a stubborn neck. But now he hath found grace,
Being born anew. His gods he hath renounced, sayest thou?
He worshippeth the Christ? What more?

Gabriel

Nay, 'tis enow.
He is justified by faith. He hath no fear of Hell
Since he hath won Thy grace. All's well with Man, – most well.

The Lord God

“All's well”! The fair phrase wearie. It hath a new false ring.
Truce, Gabriel, to thy word fence. Mark my questioning.
Or rather no – not thou, blest Angel of all good,
Herald of God's glad tidings to a world subdued,
Thou lover tried of Man. I will not question thee,
Lest I should tempt too sore and thou lie cravenly.
Is there no other here, no drudge, to do that task
And lay the secret bare, the face behind the mask?
One with a soul less white, who loveth less, nay hates;
One fit for a sad part, the Devil's advocate's;
One who some wrong hath done, or hath been o'erborne of ill,
And so hath his tongue loosed? O for Soul with will!
O for one hour of Satan!

Satan

He is here, Lord God,
Ready to speak all truths to Thy face, even “Ichabod,
Thy glory is departed,” were *that* truth.

The Lord God

Thou? Here?

Satan

A suppliant for Thy pardon, and in love, not fear,
One who Thou knowest doth love Thee, ay, and more than these.

The Lord God

That word was Peter's once.

Satan

I speak no flatteries;
Nor shall I Thee deny for this man nor that maid,
Nor for the cock that crew.

The Lord God

Thou shalt not be gainsaid.
I grant thee audience. Speak.

Satan

Alone?

The Lord God

'Twere best alone.
Angels, ye are dismissed. (*The angels depart.*) Good Satan, now say on.

Satan (*alone with The Lord God*)

Omnipotent Lord God! Thou knowest all. I speak
Only as Thy poor echo, faltering with words weak,
A far-off broken sound, yet haply not unheard.
Thou knowest the Worlds Thou madest, and Thine own high word
Declaring they were good. Good were they in all sooth
The mighty Globes Thou mouldedst in the World's fair youth,
Launched silent through the void, evolving force and light.
Thou gatheredst in Thy hand's grasp shards of the Infinite
And churnedst them to Matter; Space concentrated,
Great, glorious, everlasting. The Stars leaped and fled,
As hounds, in their young strength. Yet might they not withdraw
From Thy hand's leash and bond. Thou chainedst them with law.
They did not sin, those Stars, change face, wax proud, rebel.
Nay, they were slaves to Thee, things incorruptible.
I might not tempt them from Thee.

The Lord God

And the reason?

Satan

Hear.
Thou gavest them no mind, no sensual atmosphere,
Who wert Thyself their soul. Though thou should drowse for aye,
They should not swerve, nor flout Thee, nor abjure Thy way,
Not by a hair's breadth, Lord.

The Lord God

Thou witnessest for good.

Satan

I testify for truth. In all that solitude
Of spheres involved with spheres, of prodigal force set free,
There hath been no voice untrue, no tongue to disagree,
No traitor thought to wound with less than perfect word.
Such was Thy first Creation. I am Thy witness, Lord.
'Twas worthy of Thyself.

The Lord God

And of the second?

Satan

Stop.

How shall I speak of it unless Thou give me hope;
I who its child once was, though daring to rebel;
I who Thine outcast am, the banished thief of Hell,
Thy too long reprobate? Thou didst create to Thee
A world of happy Spirits for Thy company,
For Thy delight and solace, as being too weary grown
Of Thy sole loneliness – 'twas ill to be alone.
And Thou didst make us pure, as Thou Thyself art pure.
Yet was there seed of ill – What Spirit may endure
The friction of the Spirit? Where two are, Strife is.
Thou gavest us mind, thought, will; all snares to happiness.

The Lord God

Unhappy blinded one. How sinnedst thou? Reveal.

Satan

Lord, through my too great love, through my excess of zeal.
Listen. Thy third Creation...

The Lord God

Ha! The Earth! Speak plain.
Now will I half forgive thee. What of the Earth, of men?
Was that not then the best, the noblest of the three?

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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