

STODDART THOMAS TOD

THE DEATH-WAKE

Thomas Stoddart
The Death-Wake

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Thomas Tod Stoddart
The Death-Wake or Lunacy; a
Necromaunt in Three Chimeras

INTRODUCTION TO THE DEATH-WAKE

Piscatori

Piscator

An angler to an angler here,
To one who longed not for the bays,
I bring a little gift and dear,
A line of love, a word of praise,
A common memory of the ways,
By Elibank and Yair that lead;
Of all the burns, from all the braes,
That yield their tribute to the Tweed.

His boyhood found the waters clean,
His age deplored them, foul with dye;
But purple hills, and copses green,
And these old towers he wandered by,
Still to the simple strains reply
Of his pure unrepining reed,
Who lies where he was fain to lie,
Like Scott, within the sound of Tweed.

A. L.

INTRODUCTION

The extreme rarity of *The Death-Wake* is a reason for its republication, which may or may not be approved of by collectors. Of the original edition the Author says that more than seventy copies were sold in the first week of publication, but thereafter the publisher failed in business. Mr. Stoddart recovered the sheets of his poem, and his cook gradually, and perhaps not injudiciously, expended them for domestic purposes.

Apart from its rarity, *The Death-Wake* has an interest of its own for curious amateurs of poetry. The year of its composition (1830) was the great year of *Romanticisme* in France, the year of *Hernani*, and of Gautier's *gilet rouge*. In France it was a literary age given to mediæval extravagance, to the dagger and the bowl, the cloak and sword, the mad monk and the were-wolf; the age of Pétrus Borel and MacKeat, as well as of Dumas and Hugo. Now the official poetry of our country was untouched by and ignorant of the virtues and excesses of 1830. Wordsworth's bolt was practically shot; Sir Walter was ending his glorious career; Shelley and Byron and Keats were dead, and the *annus mirabilis* of Coleridge was long gone by. Three young poets of the English-speaking race were producing their volumes, destined at first to temporary neglect. The year 1830 was the year of Mr. Tennyson's *Poems, chiefly Lyrical*, his first book, not counting *Poems by Two Brothers*. It was also the year of Mr. Browning's *Pauline* (rarer even than *The Death-Wake*); and it was the year which followed the second, and perhaps the most characteristic, poetical venture of Edgar Allan Poe. In Mr. Tennyson's early lyrics, and in Mr. Poe's, any capable judge must have recognised new notes of romance. Their accents are fresh and strange, their imaginations dwell in untrodden regions. Untouched by the French romantic poets, they yet unconsciously reply to their notes, as if some influence in the mental air were at work on both sides of the Channel, on both sides of the Atlantic. Now, in my opinion, this indefinite influence was also making itself felt, faintly and dimly, in Scotland. *The Death-Wake* is the work of a lad who certainly had read Keats, Coleridge and Shelley, but who is no imitator of these great poets. He has, in a few passages, and at his best, an accent original, distinct, strangely musical, and really replete with promise. He has a fresh unborrowed melody and mastery of words, the first indispensable sign of a true poet. His rhymed heroic verse is no more the rhymed heroic verse of *Endymion*, than it is that of Mr. Pope, or of Mr. William Morris. He is a new master of the old instrument.

His mood is that of Scott when Scott was young, and was so anxious to possess a death's head and cross-bones. The malady is "most incident" to youth, but Mr. Stoddart wears his rue with a difference. The mad monkish lover of the dead nun Agathé has hit on precisely the sort of fantasy which was about to inspire Théophile Gautier's *Comédie de la Mort*, or the later author of *Gaspard de la Nuit*, or Edgar Poe. There is here no "criticism of life;" it is a criticism of strange death; and, so far, may recall Beddoes's *Death's Jest-Book*, unpublished, of course, in 1830. Naturally this kind of poetry is "useless," as Mr. Ruskin says about Coleridge, but, in its *bizarre* way, it may be beautiful.

The author, by a curious analogy with Théophile Gautier, was, in these days, a humourist as well as a poet. In the midst of his mad fancies and rare melodies he is laughing at himself, as Théophile mocked at *Les Jeunes France*. The psychological position is, therefore, one of the rarest. Mr. Stoddart was, first of all and before all, a hardy and enthusiastic angler. Between 1830 and 1840 he wrote a few beautiful angling songs, and then all the poetry of his character merged itself in an ardent love of Nature: of hill, loch and stream – above all, of Tweed, the fairest of waters, which he lived to see a sink of pollution. After 1831 we have no more romanticism from Mr. Stoddart. The wind, blowing where it listeth, struck on him as on an Æolian harp, and "an uncertain warbling made," in the true Romantic manner. He did write a piece with the alluring name of *Ajalon of the Winds*, but not one line of it survives. The rest is not silence, indeed, for, in addition to his lays of trout and salmon, of Tweed and Teviot, Mr. Stoddart wrote a good deal of prose, and a good deal of perfectly

common and uninspired verse. The Muse, which was undeniably with him for an hour, abandoned him, or he deserted her, being content to whip the waters of Tweed, and Meggat, and Yarrow. Perhaps unfavourable and unappreciative criticism, acting on a healthy and contented nature, drove him back into the common paths of men. Whatever the cause, the *Death-Wake* alone (save for a few angling songs) remains to give assurance of a poet "who died young." It is needless to rewrite the biography, excellently done, in *Angling Songs*, by Miss Stoddart, the poet's daughter (Blackwoods, Edinburgh, 1889). Mr. Stoddart was born on St. Valentine's Day 1810, in Argyll Square, Edinburgh, nearly on the site of the Kirk of Field, where Darnley was murdered. He came of an old Border family. Miss Stoddart tells a painful tale of an aged Miss Helen who burned family papers because she thought she was bewitched by the seals and decorated initials. Similar follies are reported of a living old lady, on whose hearth, after a night of destruction, was once found the impression of a seal of Mary of Modena. I could give only too good a guess at the *provenance* of *those* papers, but nobody can interfere. Beyond 1500 the family memories rely on tradition. The ancestors owned lands in the Forest of Ettrick, and Williamhope, on the Tweed hard by Ashestiel. On the Glenkinnon burn, celebrated by Scott, they hid the prophets of the Covenant "by fifties in a cave." One Williamhope is said to have been out at Drumclog, or, perhaps, Bothwell Brig. This laird, of enormous strength, was called the Beetle of Yarrow, and was a friend of Murray of Philiphaugh. His son, in the Fifteen, was out on the Hanoverian side, which was *not* in favour with the author of *The Death-Wake*. He married a daughter of Veitch of The Glen, now the property of Sir Charles Tennant. In the next generation but one, the Stoddarts sold their lands and took to commerce, while the poet's father won great distinction in the Navy. The great-great-grandfather of the poet married a Miss Muir of Anniston, the family called cousins (on which side of the blanket I know not) with Robert II. of Scotland, and, by another line, were as near as in the sixth degree of James III.

As a schoolboy, Mr. Stoddart was always rhyming of goblin, ghost, fairy, and all Sir Walter's themes. At Edinburgh University he was a pupil of Christopher North (John Wilson), who pooh-poohed *The Death-Wake* in *Blackwood*. He also knew Aytoun, Professor Ferrier, De Quincey, Hartley Coleridge, and Hogg, and was one of the first guests of Tibbie Sheils, on the spit of land between St. Mary's and the Loch of the Lowes. In verses of this period (1827) Miss Stoddart detects traces of Keats and Byron, but the lines quoted are much better in *technique* than Byron usually wrote.

The summer of 1830 Mr. Stoddart passed in Hogg's company on Yarrow, and early in 1831 he published *The Death-Wake*. There is no trace of James Hogg in the poem, which, to my mind, is perfectly original. Wilson places it "between the weakest of Shelley and the strongest of Barry Cornwall." It is really nothing but a breath of the spirit of romance, touching an instrument not wholly out of tune, but never to be touched again.

It is unnecessary to follow Mr. Stoddart through a long and happy life of angling and of literary leisure. He only blossomed once. His poem was plagiarised and inserted in *Graham's Magazine*, by a person named Louis Fitzgerald Tasistro (vol. xx.). Mr. Ingram, the biographer of Edgar Poe, observes that Poe praised the piece while he was exposing Tasistro's "barefaced robbery."

The copy of *The Death-Wake* from which this edition is printed was once the property of Mr. Aytoun, author of *Lays of the Scottish Cavaliers*, and, I presume, of *Ta Phairshon*. Mr. Aytoun has written a prefatory sonnet which will be found in its proper place, a set of rhymes on the flyleaf at the end, and various cheerful but unfeeling notes. After some hesitation I do not print these frivolities.

The copy was most generously presented to me by Professor Knight of St. Andrews, and I have only seen one other example, which I in turn contributed to fill the vacant place in the shelves of Mr. Knight. His example, however, is far the more curious of the twain, by virtue of Aytoun's annotations.

I had been wanting to see *The Death-Wake* ever since, as a boy, I read the unkind review of it in an ancient volume of *Blackwood's Magazine*. In its "pure purple mantle" of glazed cloth, with paper label, it is an unaffectedly neat and well-printed little volume.

It would be unbecoming and impertinent to point out to any one who has an ear for verse, the charm of such lines as —

"A murmur far and far, of those that stirred
Within the great encampment of the sea."

Or —

"A love-winged seraph glides in glory by,
Striking the tent of its mortality."

(An idea anticipated by the as yet unknown Omar Khayyam).

Or —

"Dost thou, in thy vigil, hail
Arcturus in his chariot pale,
Leading him with a fiery flight
Over the hollow hill of night?"

These are wonderful verses for a lad of twenty-one, living among anglers, undergraduates, and, if with some society of the lettered, apparently with none which could appreciate or applaud him.

For the matter of the poem, the wild voyage of the mad monkish lover with the dead Bride of Heaven, it strikes, of course, on the common reef of the Romantic – the ridiculous. But the recurring contrasts of a pure, clear peace in sea and sky, are of rare and atoning beauty. Such a passage is —

"And the great ocean, like a holy hall,
Where slept a seraph host maritimal,
Was gorgeous with wings of diamond."

Once more, when the mad monk tells the sea-waves we recognise genuine imagination.

"That ye have power and passion, and a sound
As of the flying of an angel round,
The mighty world, that ye are one with Time,"

A sympathetic reader of *The Death-Wake* would perhaps have expected the leprosies and lunacies to drop off, and the genius, purged of its accidents, to move into a pure transparency. The abnormal, the monstrous, the boyish elements should have been burned away in the fire of the genius of poetry. But the Muses did not so will it, and the mystic wind of the spirit of song became of less moment to Mr. Stoddart than the breeze on the loch that stirs the trout to feed. Perhaps his life was none the less happy and fortunate. Of the many brilliant men whom he knew intimately – Wilson, Aytoun, Ferrier, Glassford Bell, and others – perhaps none, not even Hogg, recognised the grace of the Muse which (in my poor opinion) Mr. Stoddart possessed. His character was not in the least degree soured by neglect or fretted by banter. Not to over-estimate oneself is a virtue very rare among poets, and certainly does not lead to public triumphs. Modesty is apt to accompany the sense of humour which alleviates life, while it is an almost insuperable bar to success.

Mr. Stoddart died on November 22nd, 1880. His last walk was to Kelso Bridge "to look at the Tweed," which now murmurs by his grave the self-same song that it sings beside Sir Walter's tomb

in Dryburgh Abbey. We leave his poem to the judgment of students of poetry, and to him we say his own farewell —

Sorrow, sorrow speed away
To our angler's quiet mound,
With the old pilgrim, twilight grey,
Enter thou the holy ground.

There he sleeps, whose heart was twined
With wild stream and wandering burn,
Wooer of the western wind,
Watcher of the April morn.

A. L

THE DEATH-WAKE OR LUNACY

Sonnet to the Author

O wormy Thomas Stoddart who inheritest
Rich thoughts and loathsome, nauseous words, & rare!
Tell me, my friend, why is it that thou ferrest
And gropest in each death-corrupted lair?
Seek'st thou for maggots, such as have affinity
With those in thine own brain? or dost thou think
That all is sweet which hath a horrid stink?
Why dost thou make Hautgout thy sole divinity?
Here is enough of genius to convert
Vile dung to precious diamonds, and to spare,
Then why transform the diamond into dirt,
And change thy mind wh. shd. be rich & fair
Into a medley of creations foul,
As if a Seraph would become a Goul?

W.E.A

1834

CHIMERA I

An anthem of a sister choristry!
And like a windward murmur of the sea,
O'er silver shells, so solemnly it falls!
A dying music shrouded in deep walls,
That bury its wild breathings! And the moon,
Of glow-worm hue, like virgin in sad swoon,
Lies coldly on the bosom of a cloud,
Until the elf-winds, that are wailing loud,
Do minister unto her sickly trance,
Fanning the life into her countenance;
And there are pale stars sparkling, far and few
In the deep chasms of everlasting blue,
Unmarshall'd and ungather'd, one and one,
Like outposts of the lunar garrison.

A train of holy fathers windeth by
The arches of an aged sanctuary,
With cowl, and scapular, and rosary
On to the sainted oriel, where stood,
By the rich altar, a fair sisterhood —
A weeping group of virgins! one or two
Bent forward to a bier, of solemn hue,
Whereon a bright and stately coffin lay,
With its black pall flung over: – Agathè
Was on the lid – a name. And who? – No more!
'Twas only Agathè.

'Tis o'er, 'tis o'er, —
Her burial! and, under the arcades,
Torch after torch into the moonlight fades;
And there is heard the music, a brief while,
Over the roofings of the imaged aisle,
From the deep organ panting out its last,
Like the slow dying of an autumn blast.

A lonely monk is loitering within
The dusky area, at the altar seen,
Like a pale spirit kneeling in the light
Of the cold moon, that looketh wan and white
Through the deviced oriel; and he lays
His hands upon his bosom, with a gaze
To the chill earth. He had the youthful look
Which heartfelt woe had wasted, and he shook
At every gust of the unholy breeze,
That enter'd through the time-worn crevices.

A score of summers only o'er his brow
Had pass'd – and it was summer, even now,
The one-and-twentieth – from a birth of tears,
Over a waste of melancholy years!
And *that* brow was as wan as if it were
Of snowy marble, and the raven hair
That would have cluster'd over, was all shorn,
And his fine features stricken pale as morn.

He kiss'd a golden crucifix that hung
Around his neck, and in a transport flung
Himself upon the earth, and said, and said
Wild, raving words, about the blessed dead:
And then he rose, and in the moonshade stood,
Gazing upon its light in solitude;
And smote his brow, at some idea wild
That came across: then, weeping like a child,
He falter'd out the name of Agathè;
And look'd unto the heaven inquiringly,
And the pure stars.

"Oh shame! that ye are met,
To mock me, like old memories, that yet
Break in upon the golden dream I knew,
While she —*she* lived: and I have said adieu
To that fair one, and to her sister Peace,
That lieth in her grave. When wilt thou cease
To feed upon my quiet! – thou Despair!
That art the mad usurper, and the heir,
Of this heart's heritage! Go, go – return,
And bring me back oblivion, and an urn!
And ye, pale stars, may look, and only find,
The wreck of a proud tree, that lets the wind
Count o'er its blighted boughs; for such was he
That loved, and loves, the silent Agathè!"
And he hath left the sanctuary, like one
That knew not his own purpose – The red sun
Rose early over incense of bright mist,
That girdled a pure sky of amethyst.
And who was he? A monk. And those who knew
Yclept him Julio; but they were few:
And others named him as a nameless one, —
A dark, sad-hearted being, who had none
But bitter feelings, and a cast of sadness,
That fed the wildest of all curses – madness!

But he was, what *none* knew, of lordly line,
That fought in the far land of Palestine,

Where, under banners of the cross, they fell,
Smote by the armies of the infidel.
And Julio was the last; alone, alone!
A sad, unfriended orphan, that had gone
Into the world, to murmur and to die,
Like the cold breezes that are passing by!

And few they were that bade him to their board;
His fortunes now were over, and the sword
Of his proud ancestry dishonour'd – left
To moulder in its sheath – a hated gift!

Ay! it was so; and Julio had fain
Have been a warrior; but his very brain
Grew fever'd at the sickly thought of death,
And to be stricken with a want of breath! —
To be the food of worms – inanimate,
And cold as winter, – and as desolate!
And then to waste away, and be no more
Than the dark dust! – The thought was like a sore
That gather'd in his heart; and he would say, —
"A curse be on their laurels!" and decay
Came over them; the deeds that they had done
Had fallen with their fortunes; and anon
Was Julio forgotten, and his line —
No wonder for this frenzied tale of mine!

Oh! he was wearied of this passing scene!
But loved not death: his purpose was between
Life and the grave; and it would vibrate there,
Like a wild bird that floated far and fair
Betwixt the sun and sea!

He went, and came,
And thought, and slept, and still awoke the same, —
A strange, strange youth; and he would look all night
Upon the moon and stars, and count the flight
Of the sea waves, and let the evening wind
Play with his raven tresses, or would bind
Grottoes of birch, wherein to sit and sing:
And peasant girls would find him sauntering,
To gaze upon their features, as they met,
In laughter, under some green arboret.

At last, he became monk, and, on his knees,
Said holy prayers, and with wild penances
Made sad atonement; and the solemn whim,
That, like a shadow, loiter'd over him,
Wore off, even like a shadow. He was cursed

With none of the mad thoughts that were at first
The poison of his quiet; but he grew
To love the world and its wild laughter too,
As he had known before; and wish'd again
To join the very mirth he hated then!

He durst not break the vow – he durst not be
The one he would – and his heart's harmony
Became a tide of sorrow. Even so,
He felt hope die, – in madness and in woe!
But there came one – and a most lovely one
As ever to the warm light of the sun
Threw back her tresses, – a fair sister girl,
With a brow changing between snow and pearl,
And the blue eyes of sadness, fill'd with dew
Of tears, – like Heaven's own melancholy blue, —
So beautiful, so tender; and her form
Was graceful as a rainbow in a storm,
Scattering gladness on the face of sorrow —
Oh! I had fancied of the hues that borrow
Their brightness from the sun; but she was bright
In her own self, – a mystery of light!
With feelings tender as a star's own hue,
Pure as the morning star! as true, as true;
For it will glitter in each early sky,
And her first love be love that lasteth aye!

And this was Agathè, young Agathè,
A motherless, fair girl: and many a day
She wept for her lost parent. It was sad
To see her infant sorrow; how she bade
The flow of her wild spirits fall away
To grief, like bright clouds in a summer day
Melting into a shower: and it was sad
Almost to think she might again be glad,
Her beauty was so chaste, amid the fall
Of her bright tears. Yet, in her father's hall,
She had lived almost sorrowless her days:
But he felt no affection for the gaze
Of his fair girl; and when she fondly smiled,
He bade no father's welcome to the child,
But even told his wish, and will'd it done,
For her to be sad-hearted – and a nun!

And so it was. She took the dreary veil,
A hopeless girl! and the bright flush grew pale
Upon her cheek: she felt, as summer feels
The winds of autumn and the winter chills,
That darken his fair suns. – It was away,

Feeding on dreams, the heart of Agathè!

The vesper prayers were said, and the last hymn
Sung to the Holy Virgin. In the dim,
Gray aisle was heard a solitary tread,
As of one musing sadly on the dead —
'Twas Julio; it was his wont to be
Often alone within the sanctuary;
But now, not so – another: it was she!
Kneeling in all her beauty, like a saint
Before a crucifix; but sad and faint
The tone of her devotion, as the trill
Of a moss-burden'd, melancholy rill.

And Julio stood before her; – 'twas as yet
The hour of the pale twilight – and they met
Each other's gaze, till either seem'd the hue
Of deepest crimson; but the ladye threw
Her veil above her features, and stole by
Like a bright cloud, with sadness and a sigh!

Yet Julio still stood gazing and alone,
A dreamer! – "Is the sister ladye gone?"
He started at the silence of the air
That slumber'd over him – she is not there.

And either slept not through the live-long night,
Or slept in fitful trances, with a bright,
Fair dream upon their eyelids: but they rose
In sorrow from the pallet of repose;
For the dark thought of their sad destiny
Came o'er them, like a chasm of the deep sea,
That was to rend their fortunes; and at eve
They met again, but, silent, took their leave,
As they did yesterday: another night,
And neither spake awhile – A pure delight
Had chasten'd love's first blushes: silently
Gazed Julio on the gentle Agathè —
At length, "Fair Nun!" – She started, and held fast
Her bright hand on her lip – "the past, the past,
And the pale future! There be some that lie
Under those marble urns – I know not why,
But I were better in that only calm,
Than be as I have been, perhaps, and am.
The past! – ay! it hath perish'd; never, never,
Would I recall it to be blest for ever:
The future it must come – I have a vow" —
And his cold hand rose trembling to his brow.
"True, true, I have a vow. Is not the moon

Abroad, fair Nun?" – "Indeed! so very soon?"
Said Agathè, and "I must then away." —
"Stay, love! 'tis early yet; stay, angel, stay!"
But she was gone: – yet they met many a time
In the lone chapel, after vesper chime —
They met in love and fear.

One weary day,
And Julio saw not his loved Agathè;
She was not in the choir of sisterhood
That sang the evening anthem, and he stood
Like one that listen'd breathlessly awhile;
But stranger voices chanted through the aisle.
She was not there; and, after all were gone,
He linger'd: the stars came – he linger'd on,
Like a dark fun'ral image on the tomb
Of a lost hope. He felt a world of gloom
Upon his heart – a solitude – a chill.
The pale morn rose, and still, he linger'd still.
And the next vesper toll'd; nor yet, nor yet —

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