

ALDRICH THOMAS BAILEY

THE SISTERS' TRAGEDY,
WITH OTHER POEMS,
LYRICAL AND DRAMATIC

Thomas Aldrich

**The Sisters' Tragedy, with Other
Poems, Lyrical and Dramatic**

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Thomas Bailey Aldrich

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THE SISTERS' TRAGEDY

A. D. 1670

AGLAE, a widow

MURIEL, her unmarried sister.

IT happened once, in that brave land that lies
For half the twelvemonth wrapt in sombre skies,
Two sisters loved one man. He being dead,
Grief loosed the lips of her he had not wed,
And all the passion that through heavy years
Had masked in smiles unmasked itself in tears.
No purer love may mortals know than this,
The hidden love that guards another's bliss.
High in a turret's westward-facing room,
Whose painted window held the sunset's bloom,
The two together grieving, each to each
Unveiled her soul with sobs and broken speech.

Both still were young, in life's rich summer yet;
And one was dark, with tints of violet
In hair and eyes, and one was blond as she
Who rose—a second daybreak—from the sea,
Gold-tressed and azure-eyed. In that lone place,
Like dusk and dawn, they sat there face to face.

She spoke the first whose strangely silvering hair
No wreath had worn, nor widow's weed might wear,
And told her blameless love, and knew no shame—
Her holy love that, like a vestal flame
Beside the sacred body of some queen
Within a guarded crypt had burned unseen
From weary year to year. And she who heard
Smiled proudly through her tears and said no word,
But, drawing closer, on the troubled brow
Laid one long kiss, and that was words enow!

MURIEL.

Be still, my heart! Grown patient with thine ache,
Thou shouldst be dumb, yet needs must speak, or break.
The world is empty now that he is gone.

AGLAE.

Ay, sweetheart!

MURIEL.

None was like him, no, not one.
From other men he stood apart, alone
In honor spotless as unfallen snow.
Nothing all evil was it his to know;
His charity still found some germ, some spark
Of light in natures that seemed wholly dark.
He read men's souls; the lowly and the high
Moved on the self-same level in his eye.
Gracious to all, to none subservient,
Without offence he spake the word he meant—
His word no trick of tact or courtly art,
But the white flowering of the noble heart.
Careless he was of much the world counts gain,
Careless of self, too simple to be vain,
Yet strung so finely that for conscience-sake
He would have gone like Cranmer to the stake.
I saw—how could I help but love? And you—

AGLAE.

At this perfection did I worship too . . .
'Twas this that stabbed me. Heed not what I say!
I meant it not, my wits are gone astray,
With all that is and has been. No, I lie—
Had he been less perfection, happier I!

MURIEL.

Strange words and wild! 'Tis the distracted mind
Breathes them, not you, and I no meaning find.

AGLAE.

Yet 'twere as plain as writing on a scroll
Had you but eyes to read within my soul.—
How a grief hidden feeds on its own mood,
Poisons the healthful currents of the blood
With bitterness, and turns the heart to stone!
I think, in truth, 'twere better to make moan,

And so be done with it. This many a year,
Sweetheart, have I laughed lightly and made cheer,
Pierced through with sorrow!

Then the widowed one
With sorrowfullest eyes beneath the sun,
Faltered, irresolute, and bending low
Her head, half whispered,

Dear, how could you know?
What masks are faces!—yours, unread by me
These seven long summers; mine, so placidly
Shielding my woe! No tremble of the lip,
No cheek's quick pallor let our secret slip!
Mere players we, and she that played the queen,
Now in her homespun, looks how poor and mean!
How shall I say it, how find words to tell
What thing it was for me made earth a hell
That else had been my heaven! 'Twould blanch your cheek
Were I to speak it. Nay, but I will speak,
Since like two souls at compt we seem to stand,
Where nothing may be hidden. Hold my hand,
But look not at me! Noble 'twas, and meet,
To hide your heart, nor fling it at his feet
To lie despised there. Thus saved you our pride
And that white honor for which earls have died.
You were not all unhappy, loving so!
I with a difference wore my weight of woe.
My lord was he. It was my cruel lot,
My hell, to love him—for he loved me not!

Then came a silence. Suddenly like death
The truth flashed on them, and each held her breath—
A flash of light whereby they both were slain,
She that was loved and she that loved in vain!

THE LAST CAESAR

1851-1870

I

Now there was one who came in later days
To play at Emperor: in the dead of night
Stole crown and sceptre, and stood forth to light
In sudden purple. The dawn's straggling rays
Showed Paris fettered, murmuring in amaze,
With red hands at her throat—a piteous sight.
Then the new Caesar, stricken with affright
At his own daring, shrunk from public gaze

In the Elysee, and had lost the day
But that around him flocked his birds of prey,
Sharp-beaked, voracious, hungry for the deed.
'Twixt hope and fear behold great Caesar hang!
Meanwhile, methinks, a ghostly laughter rang
Through the rotunda of the Invalides.

II

What if the boulevards, at set of sun,
Reddened, but not with sunset's kindly glow?
What if from quai and square the murmured woe
Swept heavenward, pleadingly? The prize was won,
A kingling made and Liberty undone.
No Emperor, this, like him awhile ago,
But his Name's shadow; that one struck the blow
Himself, and sighted the street-sweeping gun!

This was a man of tortuous heart and brain,
So warped he knew not his own point of view—
The master of a dark, mysterious smile.

And there he plotted, by the storied Seine
And in the fairy gardens of St. Cloud,
The Sphinx that puzzled Europe, for awhile.

III

I see him as men saw him once—a face
Of true Napoleon pallor; round the eyes
The wrinkled care; mustache spread pinion-wise,
Pointing his smile with odd sardonic grace
As wearily he turns him in his place,
And bends before the hoarse Parisian cries—
Then vanishes, with glitter of gold-lace
And trumpets blaring to the patient skies.

Not thus he vanished later! On his path
The Furies waited for the hour and man,
Foreknowing that they waited not in vain.

Then fell the day, O day of dreadful wrath!
Bow down in shame, O crimson-girt Sedan!
Weep, fair Alsace! weep, loveliest Lorraine!

So mused I, sitting underneath the trees
In that old garden of the Tuileries,
Watching the dust of twilight sifting down
Through chestnut boughs just toucht with autumn's brown—
Not twilight yet, but that illusive bloom
Which holds before the deep-etched shadows come;
For still the garden stood in golden mist,
Still, like a river of molten amethyst,
The Seine slipt through its spans of fretted stone,
And, near the grille that once fenced in a throne,
The fountains still unbraided to the day
The unsubstantial silver of their spray.

A spot to dream in, love in, waste one's hours!
Temples and palaces, and gilded towers,
And fairy terraces!—and yet, and yet
Here in her woe came Marie Antoinette,
Came sweet Corday, Du Barry with shrill cry,
Not learning from her betters how to die!
Here, while the Nations watched with bated breath,
Was held the saturnalia of Red Death!
For where that slim Egyptian shaft uplifts
Its point to catch the dawn's and sunset's drifts
Of various gold, the busy Headsman stood. . . .
Place de la Concorde—no, the Place of Blood!

And all so peaceful now! One cannot bring
Imagination to accept the thing.

Lies, all of it! some dreamer's wild romance—
High-hearted, witty, laughter-loving France!
In whose brain was it that the legend grew
Of Maenads shrieking in this avenue,
Of watch-fires burning, Famine standing guard,
Of long-speared Uhlans in that palace-yard!
What ruder sound this soft air ever smote
Than a bird's twitter or a bugle's note?
What darker crimson ever splashed these walks
Than that of rose-leaves dropping from the stalks?
And yet—what means that charred and broken wall,
That sculptured marble, splintered, like to fall,
Looming among the trees there? . . . And you say
This happened, as it were, but yesterday?
And here the Commune stretched a barricade,
And there the final desperate stand was made?
Such things have been? How all things change and fade!
How little lasts in this brave world below!
Love dies; hate cools; the Caesars come and go;
Gaunt Hunter fattens, and the weak grow strong.
Even Republics are not here for long!

Ah, who can tell what hour may bring the doom,
The lighted torch, the tocsin's heavy boom!

IN WESTMINSTER ABBEY

"The Southern Transept, hardly known by any other name but Poet's Corner."

DEAN STANLEY.

TREAD softly here; the sacredest of tombs
Are those that hold your Poets. Kings and queens
Are facile accidents of Time and Chance.
Chance sets them on the heights, they climb not there!
But he who from the darkling mass of men
Is on the wing of heavenly thought upborne
To finer ether, and becomes a voice
For all the voiceless, God anointed him:
His name shall be a star, his grave a shrine.

Tread softly here, in silent reverence tread.
Beneath those marble cenotaphs and urns
Lies richer dust than ever nature hid
Packed in the mountain's adamant heart,
Or slyly wrapt in unsuspected sand—
The dross men toil for, and oft stain the soul.
How vain and all ignoble seems that greed
To him who stands in this dim claustral air
With these most sacred ashes at his feet!
This dust was Chaucer, Spenser, Dryden this—
The spark that once illumed it lingers still.
O ever-hallowed spot of English earth!
If the unleashed and happy spirit of man
Have option to revisit our dull globe,
What august Shades at midnight here convene
In the miraculous sessions of the moon,
When the great pulse of London faintly throbs,
And one by one the stars in heaven pale!

ALEC YEATON'S SON

GLOUCESTER, AUGUST, 1720

The wind it wailed, the wind it moaned,
And the white caps flecked the sea;
"An' I would to God," the skipper groaned,
"I had not my boy with me!"

Snug in the stern-sheets, little John
Laughed as the scud swept by;
But the skipper's sunburnt cheek grew wan
As he watched the wicked sky.

"Would he were at his mother's side!"
And the skipper's eyes were dim.
"Good Lord in heaven, if ill betide,
What would become of him!"

"For me—my muscles are as steel,
For me let hap what may;
I might make shift upon the keel
Until the break o' day.

"But he, he is so weak and small,
So young, scarce learned to stand—
O pitying Father of us all,
I trust him in Thy hand!"

"For Thou, who markest from on high
A sparrow's fall—each one!—
Surely, O Lord, thou'lt have an eye
On Alec Yeaton's son!"

Then, helm hard-port; right straight he sailed
Towards the headland light:
The wind it moaned, the wind it wailed,
And black, black fell the night.

Then burst a storm to make one quail
Though housed from winds and waves—
They who could tell about that gale
Must rise from watery graves!

Sudden it came, as sudden went;
Ere half the night was sped,

The winds were hushed, the waves were spent,
And the stars shone overhead.

Now, as the morning mist grew thin,
The folk on Gloucester shore
Saw a little figure floating in
Secure, on a broken oar!

Up rose the cry, "A wreck! a wreck!
Pull, mates, and waste no breath!"—
They knew it, though 'twas but a speck
Upon the edge of death!

Long did they marvel in the town
At God his strange decree,
That let the stalwart skipper drown
And the little child go free!

AT THE FUNERAL OF A MINOR POET

[One of the Bearers soliloquizes:]

. . . Room in your heart for him, O Mother Earth,
Who loved each flower and leaf that made you fair,
And sang your praise in verses manifold
And delicate, with here and there a line
From end to end in blossom like a bough
The May breathes on, so rich it was. Some thought
The workmanship more costly than the thing
Moulded or carved, as in those ornaments
Found at Mycaene. And yet Nature's self
Works in this wise; upon a blade of grass,
Or what small note she lends the woodland thrush,
Lavishing endless patience. He was born
Artist, not artisan, which some few saw
And many dreamed not. As he wrote no odes
When Croesus wedded or Maecenas died,
And gave no breath to civic feasts and shows,
He missed the glare that gilds more facile men—
A twilight poet, groping quite alone,
Belated, in a sphere where every nest
Is emptied of its music and its wings.
Not great his gift; yet we can poorly spare
Even his slight perfection in an age

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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