

Browning Elizabeth Barrett

**The Poetical Works of Elizabeth
Barrett Browning. Volume 2**



Elizabeth Browning
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THE ROMAUNT OF MARGRET

Can my affections find out nothing best,
But still and still remove?

Quarles.

I

I plant a tree whose leaf
The yew-tree leaf will suit:
But when its shade is o'er you laid,
Turn round and pluck the fruit.
Now reach my harp from off the wall
Where shines the sun aslant;
The sun may shine and we be cold!

O hearken, loving hearts and bold,
Unto my wild romaunt.
Margret, Margret.

II

Sitteth the fair ladye
Close to the river side
Which runneth on with a merry tone
Her merry thoughts to guide:
It runneth through the trees,
It runneth by the hill,
Nathless the lady's thoughts have found
A way more pleasant still
Margret, Margret.

III

The night is in her hair
And giveth shade to shade,
And the pale moonlight on her forehead white
Like a spirit's hand is laid;
Her lips part with a smile
Instead of speakings done:

I ween, she thinketh of a voice,
Albeit uttering none.
Margret, Margret.

IV

All little birds do sit
With heads beneath their wings:
Nature doth seem in a mystic dream,
Absorbed from her living things:
That dream by that ladye
Is certes unpartook,
For she looketh to the high cold stars
With a tender human look
Margret, Margret.

V

The lady's shadow lies
Upon the running river;
It lieth no less in its quietness,
For that which resteth never:
Most like a trusting heart
Upon a passing faith,

Or as upon the course of life
The steadfast doom of death.
Margret, Margret.

VI

The lady doth not move,
The lady doth not dream,
Yet she seeth her shade no longer laid
In rest upon the stream:
It shaketh without wind,
It parteth from the tide,
It standeth upright in the cleft moonlight,
It sitteth at her side.
Margret, Margret.

VII

Look in its face, ladye,
And keep thee from thy swoond;
With a spirit bold thy pulses hold
And hear its voice's sound:
For so will sound thy voice
When thy face is to the wall,

And such will be thy face, ladye,
When the maidens work thy pall.
Margret, Margret.

VIII

"Am I not like to thee?"
The voice was calm and low,
And between each word you might have heard
The silent forests grow;
"The like may sway the like;"
By which mysterious law
Mine eyes from thine and my lips from thine
The light and breath may draw.
Margret, Margret.

IX

"My lips do need thy breath,
My lips do need thy smile,
And my pallid eyne, that light in thine
Which met the stars erewhile:
Yet go with light and life
If that thou lovest one

In all the earth who loveth thee
As truly as the sun,
Margret, Margret."

X

Her cheek had waxèd white
Like cloud at fall of snow;
Then like to one at set of sun,
It waxèd red alsò;
For love's name maketh bold
As if the loved were near:
And then she sighed the deep long sigh
Which cometh after fear.
Margret, Margret.

XI

"Now, sooth, I fear thee not —
Shall never fear thee now!"
(And a noble sight was the sudden light
Which lit her lifted brow.)
"Can earth be dry of streams,
Or hearts of love?" she said;

"Who doubteth love, can know not love:
He is already dead."
Margret, Margret.

XII

"I have" ... and here her lips
Some word in pause did keep,
And gave the while a quiet smile
As if they paused in sleep, —
"I have ... a brother dear,
A knight of knightly fame!
I broidered him a knightly scarf
With letters of my name
Margret, Margret.

XIII

"I fed his grey goshawk,
I kissed his fierce bloodhound,
I sate at home when he might come
And caught his horn's far sound:
I sang him hunter's songs,
I poured him the red wine,

He looked across the cup and said,
I love thee, sister mine."
Margret, Margret.

XIV

IT trembled on the grass
With a low, shadowy laughter;
The sounding river which rolled, for ever
Stood dumb and stagnant after:
"Brave knight thy brother is!
But better loveth he
Thy chalice wine than thy chaunted song,
And better both than thee,
Margret, Margret."

XV

The lady did not heed
The river's silence while
Her own thoughts still ran at their will,
And calm was still her smile.
"My little sister wears
The look our mother wore:

I smooth her locks with a golden comb,
I bless her evermore."
Margret, Margret.

XVI

"I gave her my first bird
When first my voice it knew;
I made her share my posies rare
And told her where they grew:
I taught her God's dear name
With prayer and praise to tell,
She looked from heaven into my face
And said, *I love thee well.*"
Margret, Margret.

XVII

IT trembled on the grass
With a low, shadowy laughter;
You could see each bird as it woke and stared
Through the shrivelled foliage after.
"Fair child thy sister is!
But better loveth she

Thy golden comb than thy gathered flowers,
And better both than thee,
Margret, Margret."

XVIII

Thy lady did not heed
The withering on the bough;
Still calm her smile albeit the while
A little pale her brow:
"I have a father old,
The lord of ancient halls;
An hundred friends are in his court
Yet only me he calls.
Margret, Margret.

XIX

"An hundred knights are in his court
Yet read I by his knee;
And when forth they go to the tourney-show
I rise not up to see:
'T is a weary book to read,
My tryst's at set of sun,

But loving and dear beneath the stars
Is his blessing when I've done."
Margret, Margret.

XX

IT trembled on the grass
With a low, shadowy laughter;
And moon and star though bright and far
Did shrink and darken after.
"High lord thy father is!
But better loveth he
His ancient halls than his hundred friends,
His ancient halls, than thee,
Margret, Margret."

XXI

The lady did not heed
That the far stars did fail;
Still calm her smile, albeit the while ...
Nay, but she is not pale!
"I have more than a friend
Across the mountains dim:

No other's voice is soft to me,
Unless it nameth *him*."
Margret, Margret.

XXII

"Though louder beats my heart,
I know his tread again,
And his fair plume aye, unless turned away,
For the tears do blind me then:
We brake no gold, a sign
Of stronger faith to be,
But I wear his last look in my soul,
Which said, *I love but thee!*"
Margret, Margret.

XXIII

IT trembled on the grass
With a low, shadowy laughter;
And the wind did toll, as a passing soul
Were sped by church-bell after;
And shadows, 'stead of light,
Fell from the stars above,

In flakes of darkness on her face
Still bright with trusting love.
Margret, Margret.

XXIV

"He *loved* but only thee!
That love is transient too.
The wild hawk's bill doth dabble still
I' the mouth that vowed thee true:
Will he open his dull eyes
When tears fall on his brow?
Behold, the death-worm to his heart
Is a nearer thing than *thou*,
Margret, Margret."

XXV

Her face was on the ground —
None saw the agony;
But the men at sea did that night agree
They heard a drowning cry:
And when the morning brake,
Fast rolled the river's tide,

With the green trees waving overhead
And a white corse laid beside.
Margret, Margret.

XXVI

A knight's bloodhound and he
The funeral watch did keep;
With a thought o' the chase he stroked its face
As it howled to see him weep.
A fair child kissed the dead,
But shrank before its cold.
And alone yet proudly in his hall
Did stand a baron old.
Margret, Margret.

XXVII

Hang up my harp again!
I have no voice for song.
Not song but wail, and mourners pale,
Not bards, to love belong.
O failing human love!
O light, by darkness known!

O false, the while thou treadest earth!

O deaf beneath the stone!

Margret, Margret.

ISOBEL'S CHILD

– so find we profit,
By losing of our prayers.

Shakespeare.

I

To rest the weary nurse has gone:
An eight-day watch had watchèd she,
Still rocking beneath sun and moon
The baby on her knee,
Till Isobel its mother said
"The fever waneth – wend to bed,
For now the watch comes round to me."

II

Then wearily the nurse did throw
Her pallet in the darkest place
Of that sick room, and slept and dreamed:

For, as the gusty wind did blow
The night-lamp's flare across her face,
She saw or seemed to see, but dreamed,
That the poplars tall on the opposite hill,
The seven tall poplars on the hill,
Did clasp the setting sun until
His rays dropped from him, pined and still
As blossoms in frost,
Till he waned and paled, so weirdly crossed,
To the colour of moonlight which doth pass
Over the dank ridged churchyard grass.
The poplars held the sun, and he
The eyes of the nurse that they should not see
– Not for a moment, the babe on her knee,
Though she shuddered to feel that it grew to be
Too chill, and lay too heavily.

III

She only dreamed; for all the while
'T was Lady Isobel that kept
The little baby: and it slept
Fast, warm, as if its mother's smile,
Laden with love's dewy weight,
And red as rose of Harpocrate
Dropt upon its eyelids, pressed

Lashes to cheek in a sealèd rest.

IV

And more and more smiled Isobel
To see the baby sleep so well —
She knew not that she smiled.
Against the lattice, dull and wild
Drive the heavy droning drops,
Drop by drop, the sound being one;
As momentarily time's segments fall
On the ear of God, who hears through all
Eternity's unbroken monotone:
And more and more smiled Isobel
To see the baby sleep so well —
She knew not that she smiled.
The wind in intermission stops
Down in the beechen forest,
Then cries aloud
As one at the sorest,
Self-stung, self-driven,
And rises up to its very tops,
Stiffening erect the branches bowed,
Dilating with a tempest-soul
The trees that with their dark hands break
Through their own outline, and heavy roll

Shadows as massive as clouds in heaven
Across the castle lake
And more and more smiled Isobel
To see the baby sleep so well;
She knew not that she smiled;
She knew not that the storm was wild;
Through the uproar drear she could not hear
The castle clock which struck anear —
She heard the low, light breathing of her child.

V

O sight for wondering look!
While the external nature broke
Into such abandonment,
While the very mist, heart-rent
By the lightning, seemed to eddy
Against nature, with a din, —
A sense of silence and of steady
Natural calm appeared to come
From things without, and enter in
The human creature's room.

VI

So motionless she sate,
The babe asleep upon her knees,
You might have dreamed their souls had gone
Away to things inanimate,
In such to live, in such to moan;
And that their bodies had ta'en back,
In mystic change, all silences
That cross the sky in cloudy rack,
Or dwell beneath the reedy ground
In waters safe from their own sound:
Only she wore
The deepening smile I named before,
And *that* a deepening love expressed;
And who at once can love and rest?

VII

In sooth the smile that then was keeping
Watch upon the baby sleeping,
Floated with its tender light
Downward, from the drooping eyes,
Upward, from the lips apart,

Over cheeks which had grown white
With an eight-day weeping:
All smiles come in such a wise
Where tears shall fall or have of old —
Like northern lights that fill the heart
Of heaven in sign of cold.

VIII

Motionless she sate.
Her hair had fallen by its weight
On each side of her smile and lay
Very blackly on the arm
Where the baby nestled warm,
Pale as baby carved in stone
Seen by glimpses of the moon
Up a dark cathedral aisle:
But, through the storm, no moonbeam fell
Upon the child of Isobel —
Perhaps you saw it by the ray
Alone of her still smile.

IX

A solemn thing it is to me
To look upon a babe that sleeps
Wearing in its spirit-deeps
The undeveloped mystery
Of our Adam's taint and woe,
Which, when they developed be,
Will not let it slumber so;
Lying new in life beneath
The shadow of the coming death,
With that soft, low, quiet breath,
As if it felt the sun;
Knowing all things by their blooms,
Not their roots, yea, sun and sky
Only by the warmth that comes
Out of each, earth only by
The pleasant hues that o'er it run,
And human love by drops of sweet
White nourishment still hanging round
The little mouth so slumber-bound:
All which broken sentiency
And conclusion incomplete,
Will gather and unite and climb
To an immortality
Good or evil, each sublime,
Through life and death to life again.
O little lids, now folded fast,
Must ye learn to drop at last
Our large and burning tears?
O warm quick body, must thou lie,

When the time comes round to die,
Still from all the whirl of years,
Bare of all the joy and pain?
O small frail being, wilt thou stand
At God's right hand,
Lifting up those sleeping eyes
Dilated by great destinies,
To an endless waking? thrones and seraphim.
Through the long ranks of their solemnities,
Sunning thee with calm looks of Heaven's surprise,
But thine alone on Him?
Or else, self-willed, to tread the Godless place,
(God keep thy will!) feel thine own energies
Cold, strong, objectless, like a dead man's clasp,
The sleepless deathless life within thee grasp, —
While myriad faces, like one changeless face,
With woe *not love's*, shall glass thee everywhere
And overcome thee with thine own despair?

X

More soft, less solemn images
Drifted o'er the lady's heart
Silently as snow.
She had seen eight days depart
Hour by hour, on bended knees,

With pale-wrung hands and prayings low
And broken, through which came the sound
Of tears that fell against the ground,
Making sad stops. – "Dear Lord, dear Lord!"
She still had prayed, (the heavenly word
Broken by an earthly sigh)
– "Thou who didst not erst deny
The mother-joy to Mary mild,
Blessèd in the blessèd child
Which hearkened in meek babyhood
Her cradle-hymn, albeit used
To all that music interfused
In breasts of angels high and good!
Oh, take not, Lord, my babe away —
Oh, take not to thy songful heaven
The pretty baby thou hast given,
Or ere that I have seen him play
Around his father's knees and known
That *he* knew how my love has gone
From all the world to him.
Think, God among the cherubim,
How I shall shiver every day
In thy June sunshine, knowing where
The grave-grass keeps it from his fair
Still cheeks: and feel, at every tread,
His little body, which is dead
And hidden in thy turfy fold,
Doth make thy whole warm earth a-cold!
O God, I am so young, so young —

I am not used to tears at nights
Instead of slumber – not to prayer
With sobbing lips and hands out-wrung!
Thou knowest all my prayings were
'I bless thee, God, for past delights —
Thank God!' I am not used to bear
Hard thoughts of death; the earth doth cover
No face from me of friend or lover:
And must the first who teaches me
The form of shrouds and funerals, be
Mine own first-born belovèd? he
Who taught me first this mother-love?
Dear Lord who spreadest out above
Thy loving, transpierced hands to meet
All lifted hearts with blessing sweet, —
Pierce not my heart, my tender heart
Thou madest tender! Thou who art
So happy in thy heaven alway,
Take not mine only bliss away!"

XI

She so had prayed: and God, who hears
Through seraph-songs the sound of tears
From that belovèd babe had ta'en
The fever and the beating pain.

And more and more smiled Isobel
To see the baby sleep so well,
(She knew not that she smiled, I wis)
Until the pleasant gradual thought
Which near her heart the smile enwrought,
Now soft and slow, itself did seem
To float along a happy dream,
Beyond it into speech like this.

XII

"I prayed for thee, my little child,
And God has heard my prayer!
And when thy babyhood is gone,
We two together undefiled
By men's repinings, will kneel down
Upon His earth which will be fair
(Not covering thee, sweet!) to us twain,
And give Him thankful praise."

XIII

Dully and wildly drives the rain:
Against the lattices drives the rain.

XIV

"I thank Him now, that I can think
Of those same future days,
Nor from the harmless image shrink
Of what I there might see —
Strange babies on their mothers' knee,
Whose innocent soft faces might
From off mine eyelids strike the light,
With looks not meant for me!"

XV

Gustily blows the wind through the rain,
As against the lattices drives the rain.

XVI

"But now, O baby mine, together,
We turn this hope of ours again

To many an hour of summer weather,
When we shall sit and intertwine
Our spirits, and instruct each other
In the pure loves of child and mother!
Two human loves make one divine."

XVII

The thunder tears through the wind and the rain,
As full on the lattices drives the rain.

XVIII

"My little child, what wilt thou choose?
Now let me look at thee and ponder.
What gladness, from the gladnesses
Futurity is spreading under
Thy gladsome sight? Beneath the trees
Wilt thou lean all day, and lose
Thy spirit with the river seen
Intermittently between
The winding beechen alleys, —
Half in labour, half repose,
Like a shepherd keeping sheep,

Thou, with only thoughts to keep
Which never a bound will overpass,
And which are innocent as those
That feed among Arcadian valleys
Upon the dewy grass?"

XIX

The large white owl that with age is blind,
That hath sate for years in the old tree hollow,
Is carried away in a gust of wind;
His wings could beat him not as fast
As he goeth now the lattice past;
He is borne by the winds, the rains do follow
His white wings to the blast outflowing,
He hooteth in going,
And still, in the lightnings, coldly glitter
His round unblinking eyes

XX

"Or, baby, wilt thou think it fitter
To be eloquent and wise,
One upon whose lips the air

Turns to solemn verities
For men to breathe anew, and win
A deeper-seated life within?
Wilt be a philosopher,
By whose voice the earth and skies
Shall speak to the unborn?
Or a poet, broadly spreading
The golden immortalities
Of thy soul on natures lorn
And poor of such, them all to guard
From their decay, – beneath thy treading,
Earth's flowers recovering hues of Eden, —
And stars, drawn downward by thy looks,
To shine ascendant in thy books?"

XXI

The tame hawk in the castle-yard,
How it screams to the lightning, with its wet
Jagged plumes overhanging the parapet!
And at the lady's door the hound
Scratches with a crying sound.

XXII

"But, O my babe, thy lids are laid
Close, fast upon thy cheek,
And not a dream of power and sheen
Can make a passage up between;
Thy heart is of thy mother's made,
Thy looks are very meek,
And it will be their chosen place
To rest on some beloved face,
As these on thine, and let the noise
Of the whole world go on nor drown
The tender silence of thy joys:
Or when that silence shall have grown
Too tender for itself, the same
Yearning for sound, – to look above
And utter its one meaning, LOVE,
That *He* may hear His name."

XXIII

No wind, no rain, no thunder!
The waters had trickled not slowly,
The thunder was not spent

Nor the wind near finishing;
Who would have said that the storm was diminishing?
No wind, no rain, no thunder!
Their noises dropped asunder
From the earth and the firmament,
From the towers and the lattices,
Abrupt and echoless
As ripe fruits on the ground unshaken wholly
As life in death.
And sudden and solemn the silence fell,
Startling the heart of Isobel
As the tempest could not:
Against the door went panting the breath
Of the lady's hound whose cry was still,
And she, constrained howe'er she would not,
Lifted her eyes and saw the moon
Looking out of heaven alone
Upon the poplared hill, —
A calm of God, made visible
That men might bless it at their will.

XXIV

The moonshine on the baby's face
Falleth clear and cold:
The mother's looks have fallen back

To the same place:
Because no moon with silver rack,
Nor broad sunrise in jasper skies
Has power to hold
Our loving eyes,
Which still revert, as ever must
Wonder and Hope, to gaze on the dust.

XXV

The moonshine on the baby's face
Cold and clear remaineth;
The mother's looks do shrink away, —
The mother's looks return to stay,
As charmèd by what paineth:
Is any glamour in the case?
Is it dream, or is it sight?
Hath the change upon the wild
Elements that sign the night,
Passed upon the child?
It is not dream, but sight.

XXVI

The babe has awakened from sleep
And unto the gaze of its mother,
Bent over it, lifted another —
Not the baby-looks that go
Unaimingly to and fro,
But an earnest gazing deep
Such as soul gives soul at length
When by work and wail of years
It winneth a solemn strength
And mourneth as it wears.
A strong man could not brook,
With pulse unhurried by fears,
To meet that baby's look
O'erglazed by manhood's tears,
The tears of a man full grown,
With a power to wring our own,
In the eyes all undefiled
Of a little three-months' child —
To see that babe-brow wrought
By the witnessing of thought
To judgment's prodigy,
And the small soft mouth unweaned,
By mother's kiss o'erleaned,
(Putting the sound of loving
Where no sound else was moving
Except the speechless cry)
Quickened to mind's expression,
Shaped to articulation,
Yea, uttering words, yea, naming woe,

In tones that with it strangely went
Because so baby-innocent,
As the child spake out to the mother, so: —

XXVII

"O mother, mother, loose thy prayer!
Christ's name hath made it strong.
It bindeth me, it holdeth me
With its most loving cruelty,
From floating my new soul along
The happy heavenly air.
It bindeth me, it holdeth me
In all this dark, upon this dull
Low earth, by only weepers trod.
It bindeth me, it holdeth me!
Mine angel looketh sorrowful
Upon the face of God.¹

XXVIII

¹ For I say unto you that in Heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in Heaven —*Matt.* xviii, 10.

"Mother, mother, can I dream
Beneath your earthly trees?
I had a vision and a gleam,
I heard a sound more sweet than these
When rippled by the wind:
Did you see the Dove with wings
Bathed in golden glisterings
From a sunless light behind,
Dropping on me from the sky,
Soft as mother's kiss, until
I seemed to leap and yet was still?
Saw you how His love-large eye
Looked upon me mystic calms,
Till the power of His divine
Vision was indrawn to mine?

XXIX

"Oh, the dream within the dream!
I saw celestial places even.
Oh, the vistas of high palms
Making finites of delight
Through the heavenly infinite,
Lifting up their green still tops
To the heaven of heaven!
Oh, the sweet life-tree that drops

Shade like light across the river
Glorified in its for-ever
Flowing from the Throne!
Oh, the shining holinesses
Of the thousand, thousand faces
God-sunned by the thronèd One,
And made intense with such a love
That, though I saw them turned above,
Each loving seemed for also me!
And, oh, the Unspeakable, the He,
The manifest in secrecies
Yet of mine own heart partaker
With the overcoming look
Of One who hath been once forsook
And blesseth the forsaker!
Mother, mother, let me go
Toward the Face that looketh so!
Through the mystic wingèd Four
Whose are inward, outward eyes
Dark with light of mysteries
And the restless evermore
'Holy, holy, holy,' – through
The sevenfold Lamps that burn in view
Of cherubim and seraphim, —
Through the four-and-twenty crowned
Stately elders white around,
Suffer me to go to Him!

XXX

"Is your wisdom very wise,
Mother, on the narrow earth,
Very happy, very worth
That I should stay to learn?
Are these air-corrupting sighs
Fashioned by unlearnèd breath?
Do the students' lamps that burn
All night, illumine death?
Mother, albeit this be so,
Loose thy prayer and let me go
Where that bright chief angel stands
Apart from all his brother bands,
Too glad for smiling, having bent
In angelic wilderment
O'er the depths of God, and brought
Reeling thence one only thought
To fill his own eternity.
He the teacher is for me —
He can teach what I would know —
Mother, mother, let me go!

XXXI

"Can your poet make an Eden
No winter will undo,
And light a starry fire while heeding
His hearth's is burning too?
Drown in music the earth's din,
And keep his own wild soul within
The law of his own harmony?
Mother, albeit this be so,
Let me to my heaven go!
A little harp me waits thereby,
A harp whose strings are golden all
And tuned to music spherical,
Hanging on the green life-tree
Where no willows ever be.
Shall I miss that harp of mine?
Mother, no! – the Eye divine
Turned upon it, makes it shine;
And when I touch it, poems sweet
Like separate souls shall fly from it,
Each to the immortal fyte.
We shall all be poets there,
Gazing on the chiefest Fair.

XXXII

"Love! earth's love! and *can* we love
Fixedly where all things move?
Can the sinning love each other?
Mother, mother,
I tremble in thy close embrace,
I feel thy tears adown my face,
Thy prayers do keep me out of bliss —
O dreary earthly love!
Loose thy prayer and let me go
To the place which loving is
Yet not sad; and when is given
Escape to *thee* from this below,
Thou shalt behold me that I wait
For thee beside the happy Gate,
And silence shall be up in heaven
To hear our greeting kiss."

XXXIII

The nurse awakes in the morning sun,
And starts to see beside her bed
The lady with a grandeur spread

Like pathos o'er her face, as one
God-satisfied and earth-undone;
The babe upon her arm was dead:
And the nurse could utter forth no cry, —
She was awed by the calm in the mother's eye.

XXXIV

"Wake, nurse!" the lady said;
"We are waking – he and I —
I, on earth, and he, in sky:
And thou must help me to o'erlay
With garment white this little clay
Which needs no more our lullaby.

XXXV

"I changed the cruel prayer I made,
And bowed my meekened face, and prayed
That God would do His will; and thus
He did it, nurse! He parted us:
And His sun shows victorious
The dead calm face, – and *I* am calm,
And Heaven is hearkening a new psalm.

XXXVI

"This earthly noise is too anear,
Too loud, and will not let me hear
The little harp. My death will soon
Make silence."
And a sense of tune,
A satisfied love meanwhile
Which nothing earthly could despoil,
Sang on within her soul.

XXXVII

Oh you,
Earth's tender and impassioned few,
Take courage to entrust your love
To Him so named who guards above
Its ends and shall fulfil!
Breaking the narrow prayers that may
Befit your narrow hearts, away
In His broad, loving will.

THE ROMAUNT OF THE PAGE

I

A knight of gallant deeds
And a young page at his side,
From the holy war in Palestine
Did slow and thoughtful ride,
As each were a palmer and told for beads
The dews of the eventide.

II

"O young page," said the knight,
"A noble page art thou!
Thou fearest not to steep in blood
The curls upon thy brow;
And once in the tent, and twice in the fight,
Didst ward me a mortal blow."

III

"O brave knight," said the page,
"Or ere we hither came,
We talked in tent, we talked in field,
Of the bloody battle-game;
But here, below this greenwood bough,
I cannot speak the same.

IV

"Our troop is far behind,
The woodland calm is new;
Our steeds, with slow grass-muffled hoofs,
Tread deep the shadows through;
And, in my mind, some blessing kind
Is dropping with the dew.

V

"The woodland calm is pure —

I cannot choose but have
A thought from these, o' the beechen-trees,
Which in our England wave,
And of the little finches fine
Which sang there while in Palestine
The warrior-hilt we drave.

VI

"Methinks, a moment gone,
I heard my mother pray!
I heard, sir knight, the prayer for me
Wherein she passed away;
And I know the heavens are leaning down
To hear what I shall say."

VII

The page spake calm and high,
As of no mean degree;
Perhaps he felt in nature's broad
Full heart, his own was free:
And the knight looked up to his lifted eye,
Then answered smilingly —

VIII

"Sir page, I pray your grace!
Certes, I meant not so
To cross your pastoral mood, sir page,
With the crook of the battle-bow;
But a knight may speak of a lady's face,
I ween, in any mood or place,
If the grasses die or grow.

IX

"And this I meant to say —
My lady's face shall shine
As ladies' faces use, to greet
My page from Palestine;
Or, speak she fair or prank she gay,
She is no lady of mine.

X

"And this I meant to fear —
Her bower may suit thee ill;
For, sooth, in that same field and tent,
Thy *talk* was somewhat still:
And fitter thy hand for my knightly spear
Than thy tongue for my lady's will!"

XI

Slowly and thankfully
The young page bowed his head;
His large eyes seemed to muse a smile,
Until he blushed instead,
And no lady in her bower, pardiè,
Could blush more sudden red:
"Sir Knight, — thy lady's bower to me
Is suited well," he said.

XII

Beati, beati, mortui!

From the convent on the sea,
One mile off, or scarce so nigh,
Swells the dirge as clear and high
As if that, over brake and lea,
Bodily the wind did carry
The great altar of Saint Mary,
And the fifty tapers burning o'er it,
And the lady Abbess dead before it,
And the chanting nuns whom yesterweek
Her voice did charge and bless, —
Chanting steady, chanting meek,
Chanting with a solemn breath,
Because that they are thinking less
Upon the dead than upon death.

Beati, beati, mortui!

Now the vision in the sound
Wheelet on the wind around;
Now it sweepeth back, away —
The uplands will not let it stay
To dark the western sun:

Mortui!— away at last, —

Or ere the page's blush is past!
And the knight heard all, and the page heard none.

XIII

"A boon, thou noble knight,
If ever I servèd thee!
Though thou art a knight and I am a page,
Now grant a boon to me;
And tell me sooth, if dark or bright,
If little loved or loved aright
Be the face of thy ladye."

XIV

Gloomily looked the knight —
"As a son thou hast servèd me,
And would to none I had granted boon
Except to only thee!
For haply then I should love aright,
For then I should know if dark or bright
Were the face of my ladye.

XV

"Yet it ill suits my knightly tongue
To grudge that granted boon,
That heavy price from heart and life
I paid in silence down;
The hand that claimed it, cleared in fine
My father's fame: I swear by mine,
That price was nobly won!

XVI

"Earl Walter was a brave old earl,
He was my father's friend,
And while I rode the lists at court
And little guessed the end,
My noble father in his shroud
Against a slanderer lying loud,
He rose up to defend.

XVII

"Oh, calm below the marble grey
My father's dust was strown!
Oh, meek above the marble grey
His image prayed alone!
The slanderer lied: the wretch was brave —
For, looking up the minster-nave,
He saw my father's knightly glaive
Was changed from steel to stone.

XVIII

"Earl Walter's glaive was steel,
With a brave old hand to wear it,
And dashed the lie back in the mouth
Which lied against the godly truth
And against the knightly merit
The slanderer, 'neath the avenger's heel,
Struck up the dagger in appeal
From stealthy lie to brutal force —
And out upon the traitor's corse
Was yielded the true spirit.

XIX

"I would mine hand had fought that fight
And justified my father!
I would mine heart had caught that wound
And slept beside him rather!
I think it were a better thing
Than murdered friend and marriage-ring
Forced on my life together.

XX

"Wail shook Earl Walter's house;
His true wife shed no tear;
She lay upon her bed as mute
As the earl did on his bier:
Till – 'Ride, ride fast,' she said at last,
'And bring the avengèd's son anear!
Ride fast, ride free, as a dart can flee,
For white of blee with waiting for me
Is the corse in the next chambère.'

XXI

"I came, I knelt beside her bed;
Her calm was worse than strife:
'My husband, for thy father dear,
Gave freely when thou wast not here
His own and eke my life.
A boon! Of that sweet child we make
An orphan for thy father's sake,
Make thou, for ours, a wife.'

XXII

"I said, 'My steed neighs in the court,
My bark rocks on the brine,
And the warrior's vow I am under now
To free the pilgrim's shrine;
But fetch the ring and fetch the priest
And call that daughter of thine,
And rule she wide from my castle on Nyde
While I am in Palestine.'

XXIII

"In the dark chambère, if the bride was fair,
Ye wis, I could not see,
But the steed thrice neighed, and the priest fast prayed,
And wedded fast were we.
Her mother smiled upon her bed
As at its side we knelt to wed,
And the bride rose from her knee
And kissed the smile of her mother dead,
Or ever she kissed me.

XXIV

"My page, my page, what grieves thee so,
That the tears run down thy face?" —
"Alas, alas! mine own sistèr
Was in thy lady's case:
But *she* laid down the silks she wore
And followed him she wed before,
Disguised as his true servitor,
To the very battle-place."

XXV

And wept the page, but laughed the knight,
A careless laugh laughed he:
"Well done it were for thy sistèr,
But not for my ladye!
My love, so please you, shall requite
No woman, whether dark or bright,
Unwomaned if she be."

XXVI

The page stopped weeping and smiled cold —
"Your wisdom may declare
That womanhood is proved the best
By golden brooch and glossy vest
The mincing ladies wear;
Yet is it proved, and was of old,
Anear as well, I dare to hold,
By truth, or by despair."

XXVII

He smiled no more, he wept no more,
But passionate he spake —
"Oh, womanly she prayed in tent,
When none beside did wake!
Oh, womanly she paled in fight,
For one belovèd's sake! —
And her little hand, defiled with blood,
Her tender tears of womanhood
Most woman-pure did make!"

XXVIII

— "Well done it were for thy sistèr,
Thou tellest well her tale!
But for my lady, she shall pray
I' the kirk of Nydesdale.
Not dread for me but love for me
Shall make my lady pale;
No casque shall hide her woman's tear —
It shall have room to trickle clear
Behind her woman's veil."

XXIX

– "But what if she mistook thy mind
And followed thee to strife,
Then kneeling did entreat thy love
As Paynims ask for life?"
– "I would forgive, and evermore
Would love her as my servitor,
But little as my wife.

XXX

"Look up – there is a small bright cloud
Alone amid the skies!
So high, so pure, and so apart,
A woman's honour lies."
The page looked up – the cloud was sheen —
A sadder cloud did rush, I ween,
Betwixt it and his eyes.

XXXI

Then dimly dropped his eyes away
From welkin unto hill —
Ha! who rides there? – the page is 'ware,
Though the cry at his heart is still:
And the page seeth all and the knight seeth none,
Though banner and spear do fleck the sun,
And the Saracens ride at will.

XXXII

He speaketh calm, he speaketh low, —
"Ride fast, my master, ride,
Or ere within the broadening dark
The narrow shadows hide."
"Yea, fast, my page, I will do so,
And keep thou at my side."

XXXIII

"Now nay, now nay, ride on thy way,
Thy faithful page precede.
For I must loose on saddle-bow
My battle-casque that galls, I trow,
The shoulder of my steed;
And I must pray, as I did vow,
For one in bitter need.

XXXIV

"Ere night I shall be near to thee, —
Now ride, my master, ride!
Ere night, as parted spirits cleave
To mortals too beloved to leave,
I shall be at thy side."
The knight smiled free at the fantasy,
And adown the dell did ride.

XXXV

Had the knight looked up to the page's face,
No smile the word had won;
Had the knight looked up to the page's face,
I ween he had never gone:

Had the knight looked back to the page's geste,
I ween he had turned anon,
For dread was the woe in the face so young,
And wild was the silent geste that flung
Casque, sword to earth, as the boy down-sprung
And stood – alone, alone.

XXXVI

He clenched his hands as if to hold
His soul's great agony —
"Have I renounced my womanhood,
For wifehood unto *thee*,
And is this the last, last look of thine
That ever I shall see?

XXXVII

"Yet God thee save, and mayst thou have
A lady to thy mind,
More woman-proud and half as true
As one thou leav'st behind!
And God me take with Him to dwell —
For Him I cannot love too well,

As I have loved my kind."

XXXVIII

She looketh up, in earth's despair,
The hopeful heavens to seek;
That little cloud still floateth there,
Whereof her loved did speak:
How bright the little cloud appears!
Her eyelids fall upon the tears,
And the tears down either cheek.

XXXIX

The tramp of hoof, the flash of steel —
The Paynims round her coming!
The sound and sight have made her calm, —
False page, but truthful woman;
She stands amid them all unmoved:
A heart once broken by the loved
Is strong to meet the foeman.

XL

"Ho, Christian page! art keeping sheep,
From pouring wine-cups resting?" —

"I keep my master's noble name,
For warring, not for feasting;
And if that here Sir Hubert were,
My master brave, my master dear,
Ye would not stay the questing."

XLI

"Where is thy master, scornful page,
That we may slay or bind him?" —

"Now search the lea and search the wood,
And see if ye can find him!
Nathless, as hath been often tried,
Your Paynim heroes faster ride
Before him than behind him."

XLII

"Give smoother answers, lying page,
Or perish in the lying!" —
"I trow that if the warrior brand
Beside my foot, were in my hand,
'T were better at replying!"
They cursed her deep, they smote her low,
They cleft her golden ringlets through;
The Loving is the Dying.

XLIII

She felt the scimitar gleam down,
And met it from beneath
With smile more bright in victory
Than any sword from sheath, —
Which flashed across her lip serene,
Most like the spirit-light between
The darks of life and death.

XLIV

Ingemisco, ingemisco!

From the convent on the sea,
Now it sweepeth solemnly,
As over wood and over lea
Bodily the wind did carry
The great altar of St. Mary,
And the fifty tapers paling o'er it,
And the Lady Abbess stark before it,
And the weary nuns with hearts that faintly
Beat along their voices saintly —

Ingemisco, ingemisco!

Dirge for abbess laid in shroud
Sweepeth o'er the shroudless dead,
Page or lady, as we said,
With the dews upon her head,
All as sad if not as loud.

Ingemisco, ingemisco!

Is ever a lament begun
By any mourner under sun,
Which, ere it endeth, suits but *one*?

THE LAY OF THE BROWN ROSARY

FIRST PART

I

"Onora, Onora," – her mother is calling,
She sits at the lattice and hears the dew falling
Drop after drop from the sycamores laden
With dew as with blossom, and calls home the maiden,
"Night cometh, Onora."

II

She looks down the garden-walk caverned with trees,
To the limes at the end where the green arbour is —
"Some sweet thought or other may keep where it found her,
While, forgot or unseen in the dreamlight around her,
Night cometh – Onora!"

III

She looks up the forest whose alleys shoot on
Like the mute minster-aisles when the anthem is done
And the choristers sitting with faces aslant
Feel the silence to consecrate more than the chant —
"Onora, Onora!"

IV

And forward she looketh across the brown heath —
"Onora, art coming?" – what is it she seeth?
Nought, nought but the grey border-stone that is wist
To dilate and assume a wild shape in the mist —
"My daughter!" Then over

V

The casement she leaneth, and as she doth so
She is 'ware of her little son playing below:

"Now where is Onora?" He hung down his head
And spake not, then answering blushed scarlet-red, —
"At the tryst with her lover."

VI

But his mother was wroth: in a sternness quoth she,
"As thou play'st at the ball art thou playing with me?
When we know that her lover to battle is gone,
And the saints know above that she loveth but one
And will ne'er wed another?"

VII

Then the boy wept aloud; 't was a fair sight yet sad
To see the tears run down the sweet blooms he had:
He stamped with his foot, said – "The saints know I lied
Because truth that is wicked is fittest to hide:
Must I utter it, mother?"

VIII

In his vehement childhood he hurried within
And knelt at her feet as in prayer against sin,
But a child at a prayer never sobbeth as he —
"Oh! she sits with the nun of the brown rosary,
At nights in the ruin —

IX

"The old convent ruin the ivy rots off,
Where the owl hoots by day and the toad is sun-proof,
Where no singing-birds build and the trees gaunt and grey
As in stormy sea-coasts appear blasted one way —
But is *this* the wind's doing?

X

"A nun in the east wall was buried alive
Who mocked at the priest when he called her to shrive,
And shrieked such a curse, as the stone took her breath,

The old abbess fell backwards and swooned unto death
With an Ave half-spoken.

XI

"I tried once to pass it, myself and my hound,
Till, as fearing the lash, down he shivered to ground —
A brave hound, my mother! a brave hound, ye wot!
And the wolf thought the same with his fangs at her throat
In the pass of the Brocken.

XII

"At dawn and at eve, mother, who sitteth there
With the brown rosary never used for a prayer?
Stoop low, mother, low! If we went there to see,
What an ugly great hole in that east wall must be
At dawn and at even!

XIII

"Who meet there, my mother, at dawn and at even?
Who meet by that wall, never looking to heaven?
O sweetest my sister, what doeth with *thee*
The ghost of a nun with a brown rosary
And a face turned from heaven?

XIV

"Saint Agnes o'erwatcheth my dreams and erewhile
I have felt through mine eyelids the warmth of her smile;
But last night, as a sadness like pity came o'er her,
She whispered – 'Say *two* prayers at dawn for Onora:
The Tempted is sinning.'"

XV

"Onora, Onora!" they heard her not coming,
Not a step on the grass, not a voice through the gloaming;
But her mother looked up, and she stood on the floor
Fair and still as the moonlight that came there before,
And a smile just beginning:

XVI

It touches her lips but it dares not arise
To the height of the mystical sphere of her eyes,
And the large musing eyes, neither joyous nor sorry
Sing on like the angels in separate glory
Between clouds of amber;

XVII

For the hair droops in clouds amber-coloured till stirred
Into gold by the gesture that comes with a word;
While – O soft! – her speaking is so interwound
Of the dim and the sweet, 't is a twilight of sound
And floats through the chamber.

XVIII

"Since thou shrivest my brother, fair mother," said she
"I count on thy priesthood for marrying of me,
And I know by the hills that the battle is done.

That my lover rides on, will be here with the sun,
'Neath the eyes that behold thee."

XIX

Her mother sat silent – too tender, I wis,
Of the smile her dead father smiled dying to kiss:
But the boy started up pale with tears, passion-wrought —
"O wicked fair sister, the hills utter nought!
If he cometh, who told thee?"

XX

"I know by the hills," she resumed calm and clear,
"By the beauty upon them, that HE is anear:
Did they ever look *so* since he bade me adieu?
Oh, love in the waking, sweet brother, is true,
As Saint Agnes in sleeping!"

XXI

Half-ashamed and half-softened the boy did not speak,
And the blush met the lashes which fell on his cheek:
She bowed down to kiss him: dear saints, did he see
Or feel on her bosom the BROWN ROSARY,
That he shrank away weeping?

SECOND PART

A bed. Onora, sleeping. Angels, but not near

First Angel

Must we stand so far, and she
So very fair?

Second Angel

As bodies be.

First Angel

And she so mild?

Second Angel

As spirits when
They meeken, not to God, but men.

First Angel

And she so young, that I who bring
Good dreams for saintly children, might
Mistake that small soft face to-night,
And fetch her such a blessed thing
That at her waking she would weep
For childhood lost anew in sleep.
How hath she sinned?

Second Angel

In bartering love;
God's love for man's.

First Angel

We may reprove
The world for this, not only her:
Let me approach to breathe away
This dust o' the heart with holy air.

Second Angel

Stand off! She sleeps, and did not pray.

First Angel

Did none pray for her?

Second Angel

Ay, a child, —

Who never, praying, wept before:
While, in a mother undefiled,
Prayer goeth on in sleep, as true
And pauseless as the pulses do.

First Angel

Then I approach.

Second Angel

It is not WILLED.

First Angel

One word: is she redeemed?

Second Angel

No more!
The place is filled.

[Angels vanish

Evil Spirit (in a Nun's garb by the bed)

Forbear that dream – forbear that dream! too near to heaven
it leaned.

Onora (in sleep)

Nay, leave me this – but only this! 't is but a dream, sweet
fiend!

Evil Spirit

It is a *thought*.

Onora (in sleep)

A sleeping thought – most innocent of good:
It doth the Devil no harm, sweet fiend! it cannot if it would.
I say in it no holy hymn, I do no holy work,
I scarcely hear the sabbath-bell that chimeth from the kirk.

Evil Spirit

Forbear that dream – forbear that dream!

Onora (in sleep)

Nay, let me dream at least.
That far-off bell, it may be took for viol at a feast:
I only walk among the fields, beneath the autumn-sun,
With my dead father, hand in hand, as I have often done.

Evil Spirit

Forbear that dream – forbear that dream!

Onora (in sleep)

Nay, sweet fiend, let me go:

I never more can walk with *him*, oh, never more but so!

For they have tied my father's feet beneath the kirk-yard stone,

Oh, deep and straight! oh, very straight! they move at nights alone:

And then he calleth through my dreams, he calleth tenderly,
"Come forth, my daughter, my beloved, and walk the fields with me!"

Evil Spirit

Forbear that dream, or else disprove its pureness by a sign.

Onora (in sleep)

Speak on, thou shalt be satisfied, my word shall answer thine.
I heard a bird which used to sing when I a child was praying,
I see the poppies in the corn I used to sport away in:
What shall I do – tread down the dew and pull the blossoms
blowing?
Or clap my wicked hands to fright the finches from the
rowan?

Evil Spirit

Thou shalt do something harder still. Stand up where thou
dost stand
Among the fields of Dreamland with thy father hand in hand,
And clear and slow repeat the vow, declare its cause and kind,
Which not to break, in sleep or wake thou bearest on thy
mind.

Onora (in sleep)

I bear a vow of sinful kind, a vow for mournful cause;
I vowed it deep, I vowed it strong, the spirits laughed
applause:
The spirits trailed along the pines low laughter like a breeze,
While, high atween their swinging tops, the stars appeared
to freeze.

Evil Spirit

More calm and free, speak out to me why such a vow was
made.

Onora (in sleep)

Because that God decreed my death and I shrank back afraid.
Have patience, O dead father mine! I did not fear to die —
I wish I were a young dead child and had thy company!
I wish I lay beside thy feet, a buried three-year child,
And wearing only a kiss of thine upon my lips that smiled!
The linden-tree that covers thee might so have shadowed
twain,
For death itself I did not fear – 't is love that makes the pain:
Love feareth death. I was no child, I was betrothed that day;
I wore a troth-kiss on my lips I could not give away.

How could I bear to lie content and still beneath a stone,
And feel mine own betrothed go by – alas! no more mine
own —

Go leading by in wedding pomp some lovely lady brave,
With cheeks that blushed as red as rose, while mine were
white in grave?

How could I bear to sit in heaven, on e'er so high a throne,
And hear him say to her – to *her*! that else he loveth none?
Though e'er so high I sate above, though e'er so low he spake,
As clear as thunder I should hear the new oath he might take,
That hers, forsooth, were heavenly eyes – ah me, while very
dim

Some heavenly eyes (indeed of heaven!) would darken down
to *him*!

Evil Spirit

Who told thee thou wast called to death?

Onora (in sleep)

I sate all night beside thee:

The grey owl on the ruined wall shut both his eyes to hide
thee,

And ever he flapped his heavy wing all brokenly and weak,
And the long grass waved against the sky, around his gasping
beak.

I sate beside thee all the night, while the moonlight lay forlorn
Strewn round us like a dead world's shroud in ghastly
fragments torn:

And through the night, and through the hush, and over the
flapping
wing,

We heard beside the Heavenly Gate the angels murmuring:
We heard them say, "Put day to day, and count the days to
seven,

And God will draw Onora up the golden stairs of heaven.
And yet the Evil ones have leave that purpose to defer,
For if she has no need of Him, He has no need of her."

Evil Spirit

Speak out to me, speak bold and free.

Onora (in sleep)

And then I heard thee say —

"I count upon my rosary brown the hours thou hast to stay!

Yet God permits us Evil ones to put by that decree,
Since if thou hast no need of Him, He has no need of thee:
And if thou wilt forgo the sight of angels, verily
Thy true love gazing on thy face shall guess what angels be;
Nor bride shall pass, save thee" ... Alas! – my father's hand's
a-cold,
The meadows seem ...

Evil Spirit

Forbear the dream, or let the vow be told.

Onora (in sleep)

I vowed upon thy rosary brown, this string of antique beads,
By charnel lichens overgrown, and dank among the weeds,
This rosary brown which is thine own, – lost soul of buried
nun!

Who, lost by vow, wouldst render now all souls alike undone,
—

I vowed upon thy rosary brown, – and, till such vow should
break,

A pledge always of living days 't was hung around my neck —
I vowed to thee on rosary (dead father, look not so!),

I would not thank God in my weal, nor seek God in my woe.

Evil Spirit

And canst thou prove ...

Onora (in sleep)

O love, my love! I felt him near again!

I saw his steed on mountain-head, I heard it on the plain!

Was this no weal for me to feel? Is greater weal than this?

Yet when he came, I wept his name – and the angels heard
but *his*.

Evil Spirit

Well done, well done!

Onora (in sleep)

Ah me, the sun! the dreamlight 'gins to pine, —
Ah me, how dread can look the Dead! Aroint thee, father
mine!

She starteth from slumber, she sitteth upright,
And her breath comes in sobs, while she stares through the
night;
There is nought; the great willow, her lattice before,
Large-drawn in the moon, lieth calm on the floor:
But her hands tremble fast as their pulses and, free
From the death-clasp, close over – the BROWN ROSARY.

THIRD PART

I

'Tis a morn for a bridal; the merry bride-bell
Rings clear through the green-wood that skirts the chapelle,
And the priest at the altar awaiteth the bride,
And the sacristans slyly are jesting aside
At the work shall be doing;

II

While down through the wood rides that fair company,
The youths with the courtship, the maids with the glee,
Till the chapel-cross opens to sight, and at once
All the maids sigh demurely and think for the nonce,
"And so endeth a wooing!"

III

And the bride and the bridegroom are leading the way,
With his hand on her rein, and a word yet to say;
Her dropt eyelids suggest the soft answers beneath,
And the little quick smiles come and go with her breath
When she sigheth or speaketh.

IV

And the tender bride-mother breaks off unaware
From an Ave, to think that her daughter is fair,
Till in nearing the chapel and glancing before,
She seeth her little son stand at the door:
Is it play that he seeketh?

V

Is it play, when his eyes wander innocent-wild
And sublimed with a sadness unfitting a child?
He trembles not, weeps not; the passion is done,
And calmly he kneels in their midst, with the sun
On his head like a glory.

VI

"O fair-featured maids, ye are many!" he cried,
"But in fairness and vileness who matcheth the bride?
O brave-hearted youths, ye are many! but whom

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

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