

JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER.

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# JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER.

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## JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER.



WAS in the olden days of Israel,  
When, from her people, rose up mighty  
men

To judge and to defend her ; ere she knew,  
Or clamoured for, her coming line of kings,  
A father, rashly vowing, sacrificed  
His daughter on the altar of the Lord ;—  
'Twas in those ancient days, coeval deemed  
With the song-famous and heroic ones,  
When Agamemnon, taught divinely, doomed  
*His* daughter to expire at Dian's shrine,—  
So doomed, to free the chivalry of Greece,  
In Aulis lingering for a favouring wind,  
To waft them to the fated walls of Troy.

Two songs with but one burden, twin-like tales.  
Sad tales! but this the sadder of the twain ;—  
This song, a wail more desolately wild ;  
More fraught this story with grim fate, fulfilled :  
Nor with less ghastly grandeur opening,  
Amid the blare and blazonry of war,  
Than did the seizure of the Grecian girl,  
This sore surprisal of the Hebrew maid,—  
Not less the crowd, nor less the public gaze,  
Than that at Aulis, filled with Grecian bands,  
Advancing sternly with fanatic cries,  
To hale the victim to a horrid end,  
Surrounded her in *her* catastrophe.  
For it befel upon high holiday  
In Gilead, whose quaint-built capital,  
Old Mizpeh, filled her streets with all her throng,  
When Jephthah, followed by his patriot host,  
From Ammon vanquished and her cities spoiled,  
Returned triumphant. Banners filled the air,  
And martial music, and a roar of joy

From the wild, welcoming multitude, that stood  
Dense as primeval woods, aspiring, spread  
In carnival attire of brightest hues,  
O'er balcony and beam, o'er tower and tree,  
Thick as the blooms of spring on orchard walls ;  
And, climbing, clustered on adventured heights  
Till nought was vacant : top of tallest pile  
Was covered, and the nest of crow and crane  
Invaded, whilst the grinning urchin sat  
Astraddle on the gilded, yielding vane.  
Thence cheers incessant showered, with widening  
    way,  
And noise like that heard when the hoary flood  
Pours over rocks, or tempests tear the sky ;  
While, underneath, the thick-as-locusts crowd,  
Like to the whirlpool, roared with long acclaims ;  
That still moved onward, and were still renewed  
To meet the advancing victor, in whose way  
White, billowy turbans waved, or upward flew,  
As flies the foam before the advancing keel,

Proud steering toward the harbour, whilst, behind,  
Like circling waters gurgling round the helm,  
The still-receding sound of jubilee  
Rang mellow as the peals of distant bells.  
So swelled the pomp, the poetry, of the hour  
To that glad host, and conquering Jephthah, filled  
With honour and applaudings—now subdued,  
For, as when comes the usher with his rod,  
Into some vast assembly, and proclaims  
The entrance of a great one nigh at hand,  
The sound of myriad murmuring tongues is hushed,  
Around him sunk the tumult, for, behold !  
With timbrels and with dances, forth to meet him,  
His daughter comes, attended by her maids,—  
His only daughter, and his only child,—  
And, fondly falling on his neck, exclaims :

“ My father, oh, my father, let me clasp you,  
Safe in these arms from arms of cruel foes !  
I and my maidens, as is meet, come first

To greet you, and to lead you home triumphant :  
Oh, come with me, with us, oh, come, and let us  
Lead you swift home to give your household joy!  
Joy now be on your head, and on your household's,  
And wrap you, as a mantle, sweet content,—  
Father, thrice happy, greatest grown in war,—  
War whose rude rage, though brief, hath seemed so  
    long,  
As, like a weary watchman on his tower,  
I gazed for your great coming day by day,  
And kept unbroken vigil. Oh, my father,  
How have I longed for this ! by night, by day,  
Prayed for your victory, for your safety prayed.  
Both granted : let me hail you even now,  
Deliverer of Israel, lord of Gilead :—  
Gilead that cast you out, and deemed you born  
To base dishonour, yet now calls you home,  
To soar to station, and to reap renown.”

But Jephthah turned away from her his face,

And, with brief gasps of breath, faint-voiced, re-  
sponds :

“ My daughter, thou hast brought me very low,  
Else high as victory's top, or Gilead's chair,  
Wherein, of right, I now may sit and rule.  
Oh, God ! oh, God ! break, heart, break, break !  
burst, eyes !

Daughter, avaunt ! thou dost tear out mine eyes.  
Oh, wretched eyes, to see what now they see ;  
‘ Thrice-blessed eyes, not now beholding thee ! ’  
He said, and waved his wondering child away,  
And rent his clothes ; while, frightened and abashed,  
The maiden-train returning, pale he stood  
In a dumb agony, and shook, as might  
The corn-sheaf shake upon the storm-struck field.  
As might the corn-sheaf shake and spill the ear,  
So shook his body nigh to spill his soul.  
Trembling, astonished, mute ; he stood, convulsed,  
With heart o'erfilled ; till, as the rain-swollen brook,

Obstructed by the wreck it bears along,  
Rising, at length o'erflows its own made dam,  
His anguish thus escaped his ashy lips :

“ Oh, earth and heaven ! oh, misery extreme !  
Wake, earth and heaven, or sleep for ever now.  
Jephthah, awake, and gaze upon thy ruin.  
What have I done ? Ah, what hast *thou* done,  
daughter ?  
How hast thou rushed into the snare, pet bird !—  
Oh, rush, thou sun, in horror from the sky ;  
Set, be eclipsed ; leave the blue heavens void !  
For I have slain my daughter, slain my child.  
Oh, void my heart ; void, dark, the lordly hall !  
For I have quenched its contemplated light.  
Oh, life, thou now hast lost thy light, thy charm.  
How shall I live, henceforth, and grope my way  
With the dread monster in this moment born ?  
Oh, monster of a moment, hideous hour ;  
End of my life, crushing calamity ;

Murderer of all my days, birthday of nameless  
woes !

Woe, woe is me until life's latest day !  
Die, day, die,—dawn no more,—be ever dark ;  
Wake me not on the morrow,—be no morrow :  
Death, come to me,—if thou be darkness, come ;  
Or, if forgetfulness, possess me now,  
That so I may forget to do a deed,  
To cause the shuddering stars forsake their spheres,  
Provoke the solid sun to melt away,  
And shine on me no more. Grow dark, sad sun ;  
No longer burn, ye midnight stars : to me  
Henceforward all is nothingness and shade.  
Oh, to be nothing !—cast, no longer, shade  
Upon the earth, as over it I crawl :  
To be a crawling worm ! that knoweth nothing ;  
Crushed by the casual foot, it writhes awhile,  
Then, dull, has done ; a thing we may divide  
(As I am now divided from my child),  
And it shall straight forget that it was one,

And, healing, live as two. Oh, happy worm,  
Would I were thou, oblivious, innocent.  
But I am the abhorrèd adder, the  
Envenomed viper, a self-stinging asp ;  
I, crueller than the brood-devouring bear ;—  
Crueller than Cain : he broke his brother bough,  
I tear the total tree. Whither shall I fly !—  
Lend me your wings, ye winds ; blow me away  
Into the dark and unknown uttermost,  
Like the rent sail into the scowling sea ;  
Rend me in pieces, ye disjoining whirlwinds ;  
Rend, rend me from myself ; or bid remembrance  
Perish, dizzy in your twisting track ; or ye,  
Tower-toppling and tumultuary tempests,  
Dash me against the rock, foam-like, to pieces ;  
Drive, scatter me like dust upon the plain ;  
Swift, with the breath of your indignant wrath,  
Disperse, dispel the fool. Oh, fool, fool, fool,  
Rash fool, base knave, to pledge her ! swindler I,  
Dishonourable gamester, an embezzling boy,

To stake a treasure that was not mine own,  
And, with my sordid shekels, to fling down  
A borrowed jewel, that outweighs them all !  
Lost irretrievably ! The swallowing sea  
Casts up again the drowning wretch, but Heaven  
Restores not the devoted gift ; and who  
Shall take the quarry from the soaring eagle,  
Or pluck the prey from out the lion's jaws ?  
Who shall go scatheless and not suffer loss  
That dare attempt to stipulate with Heaven,  
And bribe Jehovah to bestow success ?  
Punish me, people, in my passing pride ;  
Fling me for food to vultures and to eagles ;  
Give me to wolves, or offer me to lions ;  
For I have given my daughter up to death ;—  
Myself, who gave her her beginning, have  
Pronounced the fatal fiat of her end.  
Oh, friends, despise me not that thus I weep !  
Oh, wonder not that I before you rage !  
Behold a rash, a wretched, ruined man !

Hear me, for I must speak, though you should  
curse me ;

Listen, though, hearing, you should learn to loathe  
me.

Close were the armies gathered : Israel here,  
There Ammon, bold embattled ; insolent,  
And claiming Gilead as his own, of old.  
Dark were the heavens, and lowered upon our lines  
(Oh, darker still was my fatuity !),

And much I feared, yet much I longed, to know  
The issue of the pained and pregnant hour,  
That, in the dim, cloud-curtained firmament,  
With gusty throes and sullen thunders moaned,  
And seemed to writhe as on a bed of travail,  
And, with huge, globy drops, enormous weep,  
And yearn to be delivered ; whilst I stood—  
Near me no priest, to shed from his gemmed  
breastplate

Prophetic light of Urim and of Thummim.  
What could I do ? What did I do ? I cried,

' Lord God of Israel, the tribes' defence,  
Their hope in peace, their help when waging war ;  
Jehovah, hear me, hear thy servant, Lord :  
If, without fail, thou shalt this day deliver  
Into my hands the Ammonitish host,  
Then shall it be, that whatsoever thing  
Shall issue first from out my doors to meet me,  
When I return, victorious and in peace,  
Shall be thine own, and, slain upon thine altar,  
As a burnt-offering, be there consumed.'  
Oh, rashly, rashly for my peace, I vowed !  
Oh, dearly, dearly was the victory bought !  
Its price, your ransom, my dear daughter,—she,  
Compared (oh, foolish, vain comparison !)  
With whom the glory of this victory  
Seems utter darkness, misery, and shame.  
Shorten this shameful spectacle ; withhold  
The rest of what now seems mere mockery.  
What am I midst these honours but a wretch ?  
I nothing have therein, now nothing prize :

Strip me of all, now that my child is gone ;  
Sword, shield, and judge's staff, all emblems take  
That may betoken proud authority :  
Take Gilead's chair, take all you promised me - -  
Alas ! not Gilead's chair, with present power,  
Nor future fame from this proud feat of arms,  
Nor all the fulness of these fertile hills,  
Were an equivalent for yon lone lamb,  
That hither came, gay skipping from the fold.  
Let me begone : what right has Jephthah here ?  
To sit in sackcloth and in ashes rather,  
Or on the noisome dunghill make his seat,  
Than lingering thus midst piping jubilee.  
Away, and turn your music into moans,  
Your acclamations into words of woe.  
Abase the banners, be your arms reversed,  
Bid the loud trumpet learn a sudden quiet,  
And let pale Silence sit midst Mizpeh's walls ;  
This inappropriate pageant be dissolved,  
And me dismissed to wander where I may."

Thus wildly did the warrior deplore  
His folly, wringing his mailed hands. The crowd,  
Affrighted as afflicted, and deferring  
To such sore sorrow, silently dispersed ;  
And now his daughter, entering his door,  
With gesture warm, and bitter tears, began :

“ Come in, companions ; sit beside me, mother,  
For I have brought you grief instead of joy.  
Lo, I have angered, and not pleased, my father,  
Who frowned upon me in his wild-eyed wrath,  
And thrust me from him as a thing unclean.  
What have I done to grieve my glorious sire ?  
What to provoke his singular distress ?  
I saw him tremble, felt his bosom heave,  
As if it would have cast me from its place.  
As we have seen, from Carmel, the great sea  
Heaving the laden ships, so heaved he me,  
Laden with love, and lying on his breast.  
Soft as the sobbing surge, at first, he spoke,

Then, ire with horror struggling in his mien,  
Bade me begone, and, ere my limbs obeyed,  
Addressed me in mysterious words of blame.  
Why did he blame me? How have I deserved them?  
Why did he rend his clothes, and rend my heart?  
Oh, let me weep upon your bosom, mother!  
Flow, tears, and dim these late sad-seeing eyes;  
Be soiled, ye cheeks; be blemished, you that  
    blanched  
Before the mystic meaning of his gaze,  
That gloomy gaze at which my soul grew dark.  
Dark, dark, and strangely darker, grows my soul.  
My brightest moment dashed to sudden gloom,  
My proudest period turned to public shame!  
Now shall the daughters of the foe deride me,  
Grim Ammon gladden in my father's pain.  
My father, stern, but not, before, unkind,  
Why am I grown offensive to thy sight?  
Time was, our meeting was as much thy pleasure  
As my recurring joy. Then, whence this change?

Time was, thou hastenedst back unto thy child,  
Who, raptured, ran and fell into thine arms,  
To hang unchidden on thy neck ; with tears  
Dissolve herself upon thee, unrebuked ;  
While thou, with answering endearments, swelled  
The torrent of her bliss ;—when but an hour's  
Unhazardous absence in the fruitful field  
On each renewed return brought new-reaped smiles ;  
But now, when coming from war's fatal field,  
Thou driv'st me from thy presence, and appearest  
To fear, or loathe me, nor declarest wherein  
I have, by chance, unwittingly done wrong.  
Maids, tell me, if you know, what troubles Jephthah ?  
Divine to me, dear mother, if you may,  
What hath your daughter done to vex your lord ?”

To which the mother, outwardly serene,  
But inly troubled, in soft tones responds :

“ Thy sire is weary and distempered, child,

With heat of blood and battle. Lay thy head  
Upon my lap : he will be here anon,  
And bless thee, ay, and bless thee, dearest one,  
Unsayings those mysterious words of blame.  
Why shouldst thou fear ? Cease sighing, dry thy  
tears,  
And let thy maidens play upon the harp,  
And soothe thee with the mellow-throated strain,—  
With songs that tell how warriors, returned  
From sword and fire, have shown transformed and  
grim,  
Like to the elements where late they wrought  
Out deeds of dire destruction ; growing rude,  
Who heretofore were gentle ; lieu of smiles,  
Enveloping their brows with foreign frowns ;  
Holding aloof from paths of peaceful men,  
While woman waits, and watches for the hour  
When the new mood shall leave them,—as the nurse  
Watches the phases of the maddening moon,—  
To seize the moment when the war-sick one

Shall know again his soundness, and discard,  
As a foul garment, his worn air of sad  
Or sullen seeming. Such even now may be  
Thy sire's estate. The carnage of the field,  
With twenty cities bleeding and despoiled  
(So runs, thou knowest, the tidings), may have  
wrought

To his distraction ; hence he knew thee not,  
Although he seemed to know ; or, knowing, deemed  
A front and bearing unfamiliar  
Wisest to compass some yet secret end ;  
So harshly blew upon thee, like keen March,  
When he did mean the blue-eyed, laughing sky,  
And dancing breezes of rejoicing June."

She said, and, at her signal, half the maids  
Recovered their discarded instruments,  
Psaltery, and dulcimer, and sacred harp,  
Blazoned with gold and twined around with flowers.  
The other half the sober distaff took,

And spun fair flax,—less fair than their fair fingers ;  
Less rich, that dyed of purple, or of azure,  
And that which rivalled evening's golden clouds,  
Than were their various beauties, all confessed ;  
And, while the wheels whirred like the hum of bees,  
The chant rose softly as flow summer winds  
Over ambrosial downs, or through the copse  
Where linnets sing, or woods where wild doves woo.  
But she, for whose soul's weal the music rose,  
Felt not its charm ; unlulled, unsoothed ; but sat,  
Tossed on a sea of doubt and fear. As one  
Who, in the cozy cabin, sits below,  
And hears the moaning of the windy main,  
Perchance forebodes, so she, the while they sung,  
Revolving mournful with her wondering soul,  
Secluded, silent, dim, sat desolate  
Within the tent of her dishevelled hair.  
A grief that comprehended not its cause  
Consumed her ; and, as passed the tints of day  
Out at the windows of the west, the light

Ebbed from her eyes, the colour from her cheeks  
And lower, and still lower yet, she drooped,  
As droops a fair and stately household plant  
That misses its accustomed watering ;  
And, still no tidings from the absent Jephthah,  
At length around her sat her maidens mute,  
And looked into each other's face, perplexed.

He, in a dark delirium of distress,  
Had sought a neighbouring wooded glen, and there  
With Heaven thus pleaded for his forfeit child :

“ God, God, oh, God, demand not, stern, thy  
due !

If I have ever moved thee by my prayers,  
If favour ever found before thine eyes,  
If I am father to my daughter, she  
The only heir to my affections,—if  
I am an heir of Abraham, the sad sire  
Who to Moriah went to slay his son,

But for whose need thou didst provide a ram,  
Oh, hear me now, dispense, or else provide !  
Behold, I am a rash, imperfect man,  
With but one cherished child, a daughter, lamb,  
Whose life I staked, not knowing what I did.  
Forgive, forego ; or say what ransom thou  
Demand'st, what price. I give thee all I have  
Save her : take all, take me ; e'en take the mother.  
Take my whole household, all that throng my fields ;  
Choose Tabor for thine altar ; I will pile  
It with the choice of Bashan's lusty herds,  
And flocks of fatlings, and, for fuel, thither  
Will bring umbrageous Lebanon to burn ;  
Whilst, in the stead of wine and oil, there shall  
Pour over it the blood of heathen kings,  
So her blood thou wilt spare, and, gracious, give  
To me some token that my prayer is heard."

He said, and stood awaiting for the sign,  
And hears above the hoarse, bough-bending wind,

The hill-wolf howling on the neighbouring height,  
And bittern booming in the pool below.  
Some drops of rain fell from the passing cloud,  
That sudden hides the wanly shining moon,  
And from the scabbard instant dropped his  
sword,  
And, with long, living leaps and rock-struck clang,  
From side to side, and slope to sounding slope,  
In gleaming whirls swept down the dim ravine  
(Ill omen !): and, mute trembling, as he stood  
Helmless (to his astonished view), his daughter,  
All in sad disarray, appeared, and straight,  
Before him prostrated, embraced his knees,  
And thus in tearful agony began :

“ Father, how have I trespassed on your love ?  
Whatwise may be regained your lost regard ?  
Forgive me wherein you have been offended.  
How shall I live to know I lack your love ?  
How might I die, and leave you in displeasure ?”

“And wouldst thou dare to die, did I demand it?”

He suddenly and solemnly inquired :

And she :

“Oh, do not thus demand of me !

Why do you seek to measure my obedience,  
That toward yourself is wide as is my duty,—  
Which, indeed, boundless is ? Oh, ask me not  
What I would dare ! What could I dare, that were  
More dread than to endure your ire ? What death  
More terrible than life, from you estranged ?”

“Am I estranged ?” he answered, ruefully :

“Looks, looks my countenance strange ? Look in  
mine eyes,  
And, as thou lov'st me, tell me truly, if  
Thou seest thy father, yet seest Jephthah there.”

“You look full wild,” she said, “full sad, most  
strange ;—

Oh, stranger than my trembling tongue can say !

For such expression as you bend on me,  
 Methinks, dwelt not before in human eye.  
 Turn not again my trust in you to terror,  
 Nor rend my heart before you, as you rent  
 Your clothes before the wondering crowd to-day.  
 Why did you rend them ? Tell me : it were ill  
 I should not learn. I shall inquire, shall now  
 Presume to search you for your secret sorrow.  
 What grief have you your daughter may not know?  
 What wound that she may not attempt to heal ?"

So saying, shrewdly she perused his face,  
 And further would have questioned ; but he, cold,  
 And, half-rebuking, sinister resumed :

" Seek not to know too soon : why shouldst thou  
     pluck  
 Upon thy head the knowledge of thy doom ?  
 Yet shalt thou know this night, whose canopy  
 Hangs over thee as for a funeral-pall.

See how the stars are studding it like tinsel  
(Ah, tinsel is the portion of us all!),  
Or bosses of bright silver. Lo, the moon,  
Withdrawn behind the clouds: the scene knows  
change.

Prepare thyself for change, I bid thee, girl;  
A change so dire, death's self not direr, daughter;  
And which to contemplate must draw deep tears  
From all the world hereafter, and e'en now  
Gives me—to whom is due blithe banqueting—  
To drink the deluge and the wine of woe.  
Away with thee, away, dear daughter; fly  
Back to thy mother, and inform her that  
It had been better had she not conceived thee,—  
Yea, better had herself been never born."

And she arose obedient, more dismayed;  
And, with light, sandalled foot, athwart the night,  
Fled home,—where Rumour's foot arrived before  
her;

And, as the hunted and yet panting hare  
Sits quivering in its just-recovered form,  
So she sate, mutely trembling midst the maids.  
The maidens silent sit, and comfort not ;  
Her mother paces wildly to and fro ;  
And, as the wounded deer or stricken ewe  
Butts at the foe that menaces its young,  
So she, though racked with horrible alarm,  
With word, and look, and gesture of proud scorn,  
Repellant, keeps the dire report at bay.

“ My child,” she cried, “ be of good cheer ; mine  
own,  
Despise, disdain, and disbelieve this dark,  
This horrid and injurious report ;—  
Too horrid to be entertained,—far too,  
Too impious to be performed, in thought.”  
Whilst Jephthah entering, and the maids with-  
drawn,  
She thus, outbursting, angrily demands :

“Jephthah, what hast thou done, that thus report  
Belies thee, and half-immolates thy child?  
Behold her there, and in what piteous plight,—  
And peradventure needless this alarm.  
Yet something thou hast done : declare it soon,  
Lest, in her panic, she indeed do die.”

“And die she must,” responded Jephthah, slowly.  
To which the mother, fiery quick, retorts :

“So all must die, so she must die ; but when ?  
So thou, so I, so all that live and breathe ;  
But not die now ; nor by unhallowed act ;  
But through calm Nature's stage and slow process,  
Receiving each the measure of his days ;  
Not hurried to the melancholy close  
By an enormity unnamed, unknown.”  
To which thus Jephthah, still in sternest tones :

“As are the time and circumstance of birth,

So are the hour and character of death,  
Fixed by the firm and ordering hand of Heaven.  
'Tis Heaven that now demands her sacrifice——"  
"Her sacrifice!" the mother shrieked: "'tis false."  
"Keep silence, wife," continued Jephthah, faltering;  
"And thou, my darling, thou, my daughter, listen;  
Oh, hearken, hearken; mail thine ears to hear  
The heaviest sound that, through ear, e'er smote  
heart!

Alas! oh, horrible necessity!

Alas! to hear it from thy father's tongue!

Alas, alas, my child! alas my daughter!

It cannot be but thou forthwith must die!"

And the deep fountains of his heart broke up;  
He wildly wept, sobbed, wrung his hands; oft called  
By name upon his daughter; paralyzed,  
Pale, speechless, all unmoved amidst his wails;  
And still he calls, still she unchanged abides;  
As one, whom polar cold has numbed to death,  
Abides unchanging in the wintry air;—

Still uttering endearing epithets,  
He stood, nor left her side, but over her  
Hung fondly ; whilst the mother round the room  
Swept in wide eddies, as the seething foam  
Around the rim of the vexed vortex flies,  
Or round her den the lioness, bereaved :  
As these rage round their confines, now paced  
    she,  
Uttering denunciation 'gainst her lord,  
And fierce defiance to his fatal vow.

“ Outrageous man,” she cried, “ away, begone.  
Or ere I curse thee, who hast cursed my child.  
Is this the triumph thou didst promise me ?  
Is this the meeting that was fondly dreamed of ?  
This thine arrival, that, in lieu of bringing  
To my house glory, gladness to my heart,  
Comes like a robber, taking from me all ?  
All men are robbers, like the Ammonite,—  
Even thou, for thou wouldst rob me of my child ;

Blighted by thee, and, in thy purpose, stolen,  
As altar-fuel, that might shed a flame  
To light thy taper-glory in the field.  
Out, hideous glory ! what is public weal,  
If merely it must mean a private woe ?  
Woe to thee, Jephthah, if thou thus hast sworn !  
Woe to thee, husband, if thou slay my child !  
I will denounce thee to the ear of Heaven,  
I will call thunder on thee from above,  
And leaping lightnings,—ay, and will invoke  
(And not in vain) each Hebrew mother's curse  
Upon thee ; nor stay there, but they shall join  
Their prayers with mine to urge for thy destruction.  
Thou cruel man, as ruthless as fell Ammon,  
Whose children pass to Moloch through the fire.  
Think'st thou Jehovah will accept such victim ?  
No ; rather will the altar's roaring flames  
Dart on thyself, devouring, as they once,  
Fierce issuing from the presence of the Lord,  
Darted on impious Nadab and Abihu,

When unto Him they offered with strange fire.  
Beware, beware, I charge thee, Jephthah ; know  
I have not borne her thee to be destroyed.  
What ! shall the offspring by the father die !—  
Ay, wring thy hands, as now thou wring'st my  
heart ;  
Cry out aloud, as now thou mak'st *me* cry.  
Fathers, like beasts, seek to devour their young ;  
Man is divested of humanity.  
Away, thou bloody man ; begone from here,  
Thou false professor of parental love  
And care. What carest thou ? Thou lov'st her  
not,  
Else hadst thou not forgotten that her love  
So strong must surely bring her first to meet thee."

To which, in anguish, Jephthah answered :

“ Peace,

Again I bid thee peace, opprobrious woman,  
Nor interpose loud lamentations where

'Twere best to hold a dumb, though deep, distress.  
Canst thou with words mete out thine agony ?  
Then is that slight that should be infinite.  
To strive t'express this misery were as vain as  
Strive with a bucket to bail out the sea.  
Alas ! alas ! Oh, heavy, heavy fate !  
Neither the sea's loud roar, when it doth lift  
Its storm-struck billows to the scowling sky,  
That scourges it meantime with lashing winds,  
Till it, tormented, tossing boils, nor yet  
Thy loudest outcries and vehement shrieks,  
Nor all thy sex's choir of Babel tongues,  
Could reach the top of this high-towering grief,  
Whose summit soars athwart the brazen heavens,  
And, piercing to Jehovah's sacred seat,  
Pleads with him, pleads, but pleads, alas ! in  
vain.  
Hence, prythee, wife, expostulate no more,  
Nor teach our death-doomed daughter to revile  
me.

What I have done you are possessed of ; what  
Endured, may never be your lot to learn.  
Suffice, that I have carefully revolved  
The law of vows, traditions, and explored  
The mazy walks of casuistry, which lead  
To nothing ; leaving only more ensnared  
My weary, wandering thought's entangled foot :—  
No way is found but one, which, being followed,  
Must lead her to the doleful door of death.”

As swiftest motion looks like perfect rest,  
So Jephthah's daughter had appeared to sleep—  
Not sleep, but too intense attention—while  
This sad, momentous colloquy obtained ;  
But, starting at its last and ominous word,  
Weltering in tears, now rose, and, even as one  
Wild waking from a fearful dream, demands :

“Death ? death ? and must I die, then ? What  
is death ?

I know not, yet do fear it. Father, father,  
I fear to learn what 'tis; urge me not towards it.  
Oh, think how hard it is to die when young!  
To leave the light; to leave the sun and moon;  
To leave the earth, and glory of the heavens;  
To see no more your countenance, nor my mother's;  
To lie enlocked within the stony ground,  
Deaf, blind, to all forgetful. Father, hear me;  
How shall I soften you? Oh, mother, be  
My intercessor! Spare me, father, spare me;  
Cut me not down ere my harvest comes;  
Oh, gather not the handful of my days  
In a thin sheaf of all unripened blades!  
Fell me not whilst a sapling,—let me grow  
And shadow you. Oh, listen now! oh, listen!  
Imprison me in some sad cell, deep dungeon;  
Wrap me in chains; scourge me seven times a  
day,  
Seven times a night, till harassment and pain  
Wear out my strength; but, Jephthah, not at once

Demand my end ; still let me live, though lost,  
And, weary, wear out life's brief, bitter lease.  
Give me not up unto the monster Death.  
Oh, hearken, be propitiated ! lo,  
I will resign all pleasure, and accept  
Of pain ; forsake all company, all delight ;  
Music and mirthful motion ; lonely dwell,  
Pining deep down beneath the fretted bars,  
That measure me a few blue feet of sky,—  
All I shall ever see, who never, never more  
May from my lattice watch the brooding east  
Bearing the solemn dawn ; nor, risen, scale  
The dewy hill, to mark how Gilead  
Glow in the eye of all-awakening morn ;  
No more, upon the upland lingering,  
Behold the weary sun's low, cloud-coifed head  
Droop in the drowsy west ; nor twilight dim,  
Sickening through shadows of mysterious eve,  
Die midst the starry watches of the night.  
These shall remain, remembered, but not seen,—

You only by me seen, you and my mother.  
Oh, let me live to tend you when you're old !  
Let me grow old like you and all the world.  
Holds not the world another victim ? Must  
I be the herald of your victory  
To those redoubtable, grim ancestors,  
Whose bones are mouldering, whose souls are  
    where,—  
Alas ! I know not where, not where they sit,  
Or weary wander round the coasts of darkness,  
Lonesome and lost, or, peradventure, perished ?  
Must *I* now perish ? Mark, my mother pleads,  
Silent, yet loud. One half of me is hers ;  
How, then, shalt thou destroy the other, yet  
Leave *her* part whole ? It may not be that I  
Must die : you feign—yet I forgive you. Say,  
This agony is a distracted dream ;  
Say that I dream away a troubled night,—  
But, oh, pronounce not that awakening word  
That gives me to the knife and gory altar,

And you, perchance, to sin, remorse, and shame !  
Father, I cannot, must not, dare not die."

"I dare not let thee live, yet would now dare,  
Yea, now do long to die for thee," cried Jephthah:  
"Living or dying, I am thine, thou mine.  
Inseparable, I shall die with thee ;  
With thee, in thought (which is the real presence),  
Shall tread the weird and wonder land of Death,  
Although condemned awhile to walk the earth,  
And breathe the vital air. My child, my life,  
Our spirits part not, though our forms be severed.  
I go with thee, in spirit, nor will leave thee,  
But dimly lead thee on with my right hand,  
Until thou findest rest. By night, by day,  
Still will I meditate on thee, and what thou wert ;  
Still talk to thee in dreams ; with thee, midst light,  
Hold tranced, and frequent, visionary commune.  
Be this thy comfort ; this be mine :—but, oh,  
How shall I part with thee ? for go thou must,

And leave me lone lamenting : I have sworn,  
And cannot from my honoured oath go back,  
For by its answer has success been won.  
Heaven, having in its privilege to take  
The highest forfeit, taketh even thee ;  
Whom neither gold, exhausting Ophir's fields,  
Nor all the herds of Gilead's hills, could buy.  
Oh, hadst thou been less dutiful, less fair !  
But thou hast been the sunshine of my years,  
The hope, the care, the solace of my heart,  
That has been poured perennial upon thee,  
Fount-like, even from the moment when there came  
To me thy cry announcing thou wert born ;  
And when thy mother, scarce her travail o'er,  
Smiled as I took thee in mine arms rejoicing ;  
And, smitten by thy wondrous beauty, long,  
Admiring, held thee ; all my wroth forgetting  
(Or turned to tenderness my wroth), that thou  
(Her long-deferrèd gift) wert not a male.  
Was ever man-child by its parents more

Beloved than thou? more cherished, nurtured,  
trained?

Our sole ambition, to behold in thee

All the acquirements of Egyptian dames,

Joined to the graces of a Hebrew maid ;—

To make thee all that in thy nature lay

And Heaven intended, even what thou art,

Noblest of daughters, paragon of maids.

So hath been done, 'twould seem ; thus rendering  
thee

More worthy Heaven's acceptance, of myself,

Of Israel, and of the heroic cause

To purchase which, and sanctify, thou diest.

Let this support thy soul,—the noble reason

For which thou perishest before thy prime.

Reflect upon the everlasting honour

Of those who give their lives to save their race.

'She,' shall thine say, 'performed her father's  
vow ;

And with her life (oh, blameless, lovely life !)

Purchased our rescue from a worse than death ;  
From shame, dishonour, bonds, and slavery !'  
Thou shalt receive a present homage, and  
The song of Israel's gratitude shall fill  
The world and time with thy transcendent fame.  
Then do not droop at death, since death is such ;  
Nor, dying, drag me down, who need all strength,  
All human prop, who am so weighed upon,  
So broken, crushed, beneath the power Divine."

He ceased, and, from the maid and mother, long,  
Sobs unto sobs succeeded, as the eaves  
Continue dripping after heavy rain.  
Nought else was heard except the mother's moans,  
Until the daughter thus the silence brake :

"Ah, vainly you have charmed unto my heart,  
Father!—and yet you may have charmed full wisely :  
There *is* some signal bliss awaiting those  
Who perish for their country ;—*but* to perish,

To pass away, and all so early,—oh,  
Why was I born, why fashioned, as they say,  
So fairly, if so soon to be destroyed,  
Reduced to sable ashes ? This white form,  
To disappear like snow ; this blood's swift fervour,  
Be as brief summer heat ; this gushing heart,  
To dry up as the pool ; these limbs, to warp  
And roll themselves up like a scorching scroll.  
Nay, father, mock me not with idle tales  
Of how you doated on me at my birth :  
Love seems not love that does not love for ever,  
And you, indeed, at length have ceased to love me.  
Yet spare me ; let me live, and still love you,  
Though Heaven should frown on me, thus living,  
    loving.  
Spare me, oh, spare me, father, Jephthah, spare  
    me !  
Youth was not made to die, but live to cherish  
The aged ; so was I to cherish thee.  
Do not, I pray you, do not hem me in,

Scared by the forms of violated vows,—  
Vows rashly made, and violently kept,—  
Nor to the altar rudely drag me bound,  
T'expire thereon amidst unseemly shrieks.  
Respect me for the duty I have shown you ;  
Regard this form, if it indeed be fair,  
Nor make it e'en too foul to look upon."

To which thus Jephthah, desperate, retorts :  
"Oh, spare me, daughter, these most piteous plead-  
ings !

Lest thou plead but too well. Know that in vain  
I have implored Jehovah, by his mercy,  
To spare thee, and, so sparing, to spare me.  
I pray thee do not cleave my heart again.  
I had believed the agony was passed,  
My purpose firm ; but thou dost shake it, child,  
More rudely than could other mortal tongue.  
Forbear, forbear : behold, I am as one  
Who walks, while in his sleep, upon the leads.

Startle me not ; permit me to go on,  
For to return were worse than to proceed."

And, as the lion on its prey, he glared  
Upon her, till she shook anew with terror ;  
And to and fro swift paced before her, as  
The lion paces 'thwart its iron den,  
What time he, hungry, growls, and shakes the bars,  
Impatient snuffing the discovered food ;—  
Fiercely and foully glared he, till the mother,  
All re-aroused, eruptive, harsh, began :

"Thou shalt not immolate her ; I withstand  
Thee. Who hath made thee Heaven's vicege-  
rent? If  
Heaven have indeed appropriated her,  
Then Heaven shall take her, in its chosen way,—  
Strike with its thunderbolts, with sickness scathe  
her ;  
Else send swift accident, or bid await

The slow, but certain, ravage of her grief,  
Or in whatever way it may resolve  
To gather her to itself ; but thou shalt never  
Imbrue thy hands in thine own offspring's blood.  
Thou bloody man, would it not stain mine honour,  
It were affirmed she bore no blood of thine,  
Unsympathetic, most forgetful father?  
Ah, hadst thou known a mother's full affection,  
Thou wouldst have thought of the contingency,  
That she, or I, might meet thee, and bestow  
The earliest welcome in our gushing love !  
What strong as love ? Whose love so great as ours,  
Anticipating all inferiors',  
Forestalling friends' ? My friendless girl, arise,  
And plead with thine inexorable parent.  
Parent, behold thy child ! see her aghast ;  
Note her distress. Oh, Jephthah, look upon her,  
Fair as an angel, wretched as the lost !  
Child, wherefore art thou lost in reverie ?  
Awake, and bid thy father to awake

Out of his horrible delusion. Speak  
Unto him, pray unto him, ay, rebuke him ;  
Pluck from his breast obduracy, and plant  
Therein new tenderness. Old tempers then  
Shall be renewed, old hopes restored ; his tale  
Of early fondness then be verified,  
Of welfare prove prophetic. Ah, I read  
Thine eye : thou waver'st : dost thou waver ? Oh,  
To waver now would wound thyself to death !  
To parley is to perish :—wouldst thou perish ?  
Oh, wouldst thou perish, proud one, in thy prime ?  
The prime of all would perish, shouldst thou  
drop,  
And Nature, rising from her thousand seats,  
Go wander, weeping, seeking thee, her crown ;—  
She, crownless, lorn of thee, and drunk with tears ;  
Drowned in the dimming deluge of heaven's rains,  
That would, in the confusion of their fall,  
Make blind the earth's great gaze. Fixed is thy  
gaze.

What means that undecipherable look ?  
Let, let me read thy tear-beblotted eyes."

She said, and, frantic, long and fix'dly gazed  
Into her daughter's fair, fermenting face ;  
Even as augurs on the victim gazed  
To learn great issues touching states and kings ;  
So gazing, heard her daughter slow respond :

" Mother, I change ; life changes into death ;  
Wastes, withers, dies. I look before me, and,  
As all is brown and barren when the year  
Falls into age, all white in winter, now,  
Before my prescient and forecasting soul,  
Life's future seems an ancient battlefield,  
Where my slain hopes lie like unburied bones ;  
And, as I look upon the lengthening lapse,  
All is monotonous mortality.  
Deep darkness gathers o'er my prospect, mother,  
As vapours round the mountain-top, or fog

Covers the sullen surface of the sea.  
Nought is there seen save this sore sacrifice.  
Where'er I gaze is set with fear and peril.  
As the wrecked sailor, solitary seated  
Upon a black and billow-beaten rock,  
Sea-girt, looks wistfully for land or sail,  
Yet nothing sees, save, in the yeasty gulf,  
Scattered around him, grim and flinty spires,—  
As he, the prisoner of the ocean, kept  
By the impassable, tumultuous billows,  
Dwells ever there ; or, if he venture down,  
Soon, shuddering, seeks again his slippery crag ;  
So I, upon this horrible dilemma,—  
This sore, supernal task, to choose between  
Mine own decease, my father's foul dishonour,  
Sit sad, surrounded by contrary currents,  
And pale, opposing, spectral, dumb desires.  
To live were to behold a constant dying :  
To die were to encounter death itself,—  
Which frights me yet the more, and I recoil

Again towards life, as the spent tidal wave  
Recoils, rolled backward to the watery waste.  
What shall I do, since life appears so precious,  
So odious the hated name of death ?  
Which shall be chosen, which shall I elect  
To be my portion ;—say, which *may* I choose,  
Where choice is none, nor to me left election ?  
How can I 'scape since Heaven has chosen me ?  
How be denied, since it indeed demands ?  
Heaven does demand me. As at parting hour  
Still comes the trusty servant all too soon,  
To take me from the evening pastime home,  
So does the envious end of my brief life  
Arrive, to summon and convey me home  
Unto the tomb, and the cold, closing coffin.  
Yet is it the approach thereto seems hardest.  
Sore seems it for the sick, unsaddled soul  
To tread, pain-pierced, upon the barbèd thorns,  
That lie, like caltrops, round ; ungathered up,  
One after one, by the slow hand of years,—

Hopes, changed to disappointments, keen regrets,  
All, lying, left to sting the youthful spirit.  
It is a bitter thing to die when young :  
To be no more on earth, compelled to leave  
The world and all its wonders unexplored,  
Miss further friendship, lose the hope of love ;  
To leave all things we loved, admired, most  
cherished,  
Forgot, perhaps forgetting. But no more :  
Less lovely now appears the face of years.  
As the moth winds its way unto the flame,  
Through lessening circles and infatuate rounds,  
So I, impelled through meditation's maze,  
Approach unto the altar's fiery goal,  
Drawn, and, it may be, dazzled by my doom.  
Oh, doom delightful even as 'tis dread !  
Were it not great to die for Israel,—  
To free a father from a flood of woe ?  
Father, you shall not say I disobeyed.  
Let me not need now disobey you, mother,

But give me leave to knock at death's pale gate,  
Whereat indeed I must, by duty drawn,  
By nature shown the sacred way to yield.  
Behold, the coasting cloud obeys the breeze ;  
The slanting smoke, the invisible, sweet air ;  
The towering tree its leafy limbs resigns  
To the embraces of the wilful wind :  
Shall I, then, wrong, resist the hand of Heaven ?  
Take me, my father, take, accept me, Heaven ;  
Slay me or save me, even as you will."

As one who strives with spells and lawless rites  
To raise the fiend, or spirits of the dead,  
Alarmed might stand, amazed at his success,  
Now Jephthah daunted stood, astounded, mute,  
Then sunk, as might some suddenly sapped tower,  
And wept upon the bosom of his wife.  
Drawn by the sound of his outbursting grief,  
Afraid, the maiden-train return, and gaze  
Upon his daughter, as the band of boys

Gaze on their playmate killed, or trembling flock  
Gaze, gathered round the lightning-stricken lamb.  
Silent they sat, and wept, until the floor  
Grew moist with tears, as Gideon's fleece with dew ;  
Nor sound of lamentation rose ; sobs sole,  
And these but seldom, sullen silence broke.  
Thus they before her dwelt, watching her looks,  
Even as dwelt Job's comforters round him ;  
Neither did she, while wore the night away,  
Speak, but, with woe-filled eyes fixed on the ground,  
Or upwards cast, sat motionless ; and, save  
Such movement of the moist, informing eyes,  
And momentary shudder, such as gives  
The poplar when the gust sweeps through its boughs,  
Appear serene as silent ; till she raised  
Her hand for their attention, and her voice  
Thus solemn on the midnight hour arose :

“ Pity me, maidens, pity me, I pray you,  
And let me pour my soul into your ears.

I am a fallen cloud, I float no more  
Up to the zenith ;—ah, that phrase, ‘no more!’  
No more, I pray, of these weak-hearted tears.  
Strengthen me with your aspects, with your looks  
Assist me ; oh, encourage me, and cease  
Now mourning ! wail not over me in vain,  
But soothe, support me ; with your words con-  
sole ;  
So shall the memory of my latest hour  
Prove grateful to you when I am no more.  
‘No more, no more.’ Still that recurring phrase  
Tolls in my set discourse, a funeral knell.  
Now is the burden of it all ‘No more.’  
No more shall, wandering, we go gather flowers,  
Nor tune our voices by the river’s brink,  
Nor in the grotto-fountain cool our limbs,  
Nor, walking in the winter, woo the sun.  
No more, when winter eves are dark and chill,  
Shall we assemble round the ingle’s blaze,  
To listen to the annals of our sires—

Of Egypt, of the crossing the Red Sea,  
And all the story of the wilderness ;  
But you shall miss me in your 'customed walks,  
Nor hail me midst the gambol in the meads ;  
Nor at the fount, nor wooing winter's sun,  
Nor listening in the household ingle-blaze,  
Shall you behold me ; thence for ever gone ;  
Consumed to ashes, gathered in an urn,  
Transformed, disfigured, suddenly become  
Revolting relics for the grave, at best  
The ghastly garnish of a mausoleum.  
There you may come lamenting me, there ask,  
Wherefore so young I died ;—or, rather, ask,  
When you shall thither go, why was I born ;  
Wherefore we made such sweet acquaintanceship ;  
Why did we love each other as in vain ;  
Wherefore the rosy future deck with gold,—  
A future I, alas ! did never see ;  
But, in its stead, night, blank, black, overcast ;  
Night, utter darkness, meet for bridal lamps ;—

Alas ! for me you burned no bridal lamps,  
Nor did you cry for me, 'The bridegroom comes !' ”

She ceased ; and thus her mother, by these words  
Roused from the stupor of a speechless grief :

“What hast thou said ? What meant this childish  
moan,

This talk of night and utter darkness, girl ?  
Oh, thou art mad, infatuated, child,  
And pilest night and darkness on my soul,  
Refusing to be saved. Thou miserable one,  
How shall I save thee, saving not thyself ?  
Wouldst thou bereave me of thyself ; my life,  
My hope, my joy, my care ; mine all in all ?  
My friend in life, rememberer when I'm gone.  
Lo, thou didst save me in thy birth from shame  
Of being childless : wouldst thou leave me in  
My barren age (most bare and barren then !)  
Where thy glad coming found me, sad, ashamed ?

Oh, shame upon thy father, shame upon him !  
Far better 'twere to bend the neck to Ammon,  
Than bow the heart to this calamity.  
Vile was the oath that hath involved us in it,  
Accursed the hour thy father vowed so rashly,  
Its memory for ever be unblessed !  
Blessed now the barren womb, the un milked breasts ;  
Blessed they who have no offspring ; thrice blessed  
    she  
Who hath not, like myself, an only child."

She ended, for a company of priests  
Now solemn enter. At the sight all start,  
All gaze upon them in renewed alarm,—  
All, save the patient victim whom they sought,  
Who, rising at their presence, thus them spake,  
In tones of gentle chiding and surprise :

"Nay, not so sudden, not so prompt, I pray  
    you :

Spare me some little moments more of life.  
Jehovah is eternal, hazards not  
The loss of offering by a brief delay.  
Let me collect my sad, disordered soul,  
And ask it, is it ready now to die.  
You shall not wait me long,—but not to-night,  
While the full moon is shining, and the stars,  
Careering, seem to play behind the swift-  
Winged clouds. Behold, how pleasant is the air,  
Soft-sighing, plaintive ; and the nightingale,  
Methinks, discourses wildly in the wood.  
Hark ! how the wood awakes, and starts to sing  
A solemn anthem, and remotely hums  
The mellow tumbling of the waterfall.  
All beats with life, all yet is youthful, and  
Rejoicing in the trust of coming days,  
Even as I am young, and late was joyful  
In trusted affluence of untold years.  
Oh, tarry for awhile, ye men of God !  
See how yon silvery solitary sheds

Her melancholy beams upon the earth,  
Making the night more grateful than the day,—  
Grateful yet grim to me, if it must needs  
Be the dim passage to my parting soul.  
Ah, let me live, at least another night,  
To hold communion with this wondrous scene!"  
She paused ; and, upward gazing, the full moon  
Shone in her large and sorrowful fixed eyes.  
So might a statue seem to gaze for ever,  
Or halo-circled saint still look toward heaven.  
As on its pedestal the statue dwells,  
And holy eyes of saint from canvas beam,  
So stood she, rapt. So holy prophets, saints,  
And holy virgin-martyrs, may have stood,  
Entranced amidst the flames, and gazed on high.  
All on her gazed, but none the silence broke,  
Till thus she murmured, as in self-commune :

“ Brief are the pangs of death ; the bliss enduring  
Of having bought my country her repose,

My sire some peace, and left him undishonoured.  
Herein consists the joy—for there is joy—  
Amidst my sadness : to know that in this strait  
I have obeyed him ; conscious thus that I  
Have saved my people, though have lost myself.  
Joy ! joy ! that unto me such strength is given,  
To offer up my life, all that I have,  
And to the last to love him who demands it ;  
Yet happier to know, has not been lost  
His love, in anywise, nor great approval.  
'Tis true I somewhat quail, yet that is little :  
Though my frame trembles, yet the soul is still,  
And dread the blade seems that shall pierce my  
    form,  
And fierce the fire that shall devour it. Yet  
Let this my sacrifice be due appraised.  
I yield not life because I love it not,  
Because I not desire it. Witness, Heaven,  
That stern requires it, if it be not sweet ;  
If bitter be not found death's proud approach ;

And if, along with my black, buried ashes,—  
Even as babes untimely born, and laid  
Upon the confined bosom of the mother,—  
There shall not with my relics lie a world  
Of perished hopes, and past, but keen, regrets.  
Keen is the edge of this sharp retrospect,  
To be no more o'er smarting memory drawn.  
Oblivion, come now. Come, father, Jephthah,  
Behold me here, no longer what I was,  
Your gay, and wilful, thoughtless, selfish child ;  
But, by the terror of the time transformed,  
Self-bound before you and these awful priests,  
A sad, subdued, and solemn sacrifice.”

Again she paused, and, with yet raised regard,  
Stood with drooped arms, crossed at the marble  
wrists,  
As if, in fancy, for the altar bound :  
So stood, composed, all to her fate resigned ;  
Peace on her face and patience in her eyes,

Until her father, overcome, constrained,  
At sight of her so offering, thus began :

“ Oh, thou that giv'st thee to my fatal hand,  
How shall I yield thee up again ? oh, thou  
That yield'st thyself, my lamb without a blemish !  
Thou cleavest to me, child ; thou art indeed  
Self of myself, soul of my soul, the heart,  
The essence of my being. Oh, how shall I be  
Without thee ? how shall I part with thee, yet  
keep  
Myself ? how let thee go, who art the centre  
Of life's illimitable circumference,  
The kernel of my cogitation, and  
My affection's core ? How shall I set thee up  
Again, how reinstate thee in thy youth's  
Bright happiness ? for I have called thee down  
From life's light mountain into death's dark vale !  
Oh, could I but restore thee to thyself !  
Could I be what I was awhile ago,

Or ever Gilead called me to the field,  
And my vague vow secured me victory,  
That gave me the control of all her wealth,  
Alas, too little now to ransom thee !  
Poor, poor is Jephthah, Gilead, midst thy herds,  
Sick, sick to dying, midst thy healing balm ;  
Self-wounded when his daughter's self he sold.  
Sell me to sickness and perennial pain ;  
Lock me in dungeon, where ne'er liberty  
Shall enter and undraw the brazen bars,  
So she, my child, be free. How shall I buy,  
How ransom her, redeem ? Priests, if ye know  
Of some vicarious victim, if myself,  
Slaughtered upon the altar,—ay, or she  
Who bore her, there,—for even she should die,—  
May be accepted in her stead ; or both  
Of us combined, embracing laid, declare.  
Yea, if to suffer sole that double death,  
Ten thousand times ten thousandfold redoubled,  
Shall be to me ordained, I gladly bear it,

And to the altar march more cheerfully  
Than ever yet to battle. Show me how  
May be delivered that devoted form,  
And, swifter than the bridegroom to the bride,  
Or arrow to the mark, I run, I fly,  
To find, to forge the means ; though they be  
hidden  
On highest hills, midst snow-encompassed crags,  
Where mortal foot hath never trod, and where  
The eagle shall assail mine eyes, that dare  
To look upon her eaglets : thither will  
I go ;—explore on Maön's mighty mount,  
Or hoary Hachilah's all-hiding hill ;  
And, for the secret, sift the desert sands,  
As miner sifts the stream for grains of gold.  
Oh, preciouser than gold, my daughter's life,  
Which I will seek to save on Sinai's self,  
And its twin sister, Horeb, questioning  
Jehovah, should he thereon show himself,  
As he aforetime did to Moses ; or,

If he refrain, I will interrogate  
The heaven-frequenting clouds, if they do know  
His purpose, or, descending to the shore,  
Swift navigate unto the utmost isles,  
And, should no satisfaction meet me there,  
Seek in the waters, walking through the bowels  
Of the tempestuous and gloomy sea.  
Speak,—yet not hastily answer ; ponder well.  
As I would search midst Nature's dredest  
    haunts,  
Search ye for me your ceremonial law :  
Search, search, oh, search ! deny me not herein,  
Nor disappoint me, all ye men of God,  
For on your lips my last lone hope depends."

He ended ; and, with fierce, demanding look,  
Silent, still stood appealing ; life and death,  
Salvation and destruction, waiting on  
Their words ;—nor waited long before a priest,  
In saddest tones, reluctant thus responds :

“Jephthah, thy will is done. Ere here we  
came

Well had we pondered, and, with heavy groans,  
Wandered amidst the statutes of the law,  
If, peradventure, we might find some path  
To lead thee safely, though with wounded feet,  
From the fulfilment of thy luckless vow :—  
A fruitless task, for nothing have we found  
To clear thy cumbered conscience of its load,—  
To meet thy case, and lighten it of woe.  
No ransom may there be, no compromise,  
No transfer of the curse from the devoted ;  
Nor dispensation is there in our power.  
Thou mayest not go back from thy rash vow,  
Nor palter with the Holiest in an oath,  
Lest He destroy thyself along with her,  
And back to slavery resign the land.  
Nothing, once dedicate to Heaven, returns ;  
Nought, so to Heaven devoted, is withdrawn,  
However costly, or however dear ;—

Much less when, as in thy estate, not only  
Hath Heaven, by its proper part performed,  
The stubborn compact ratified and sealed,  
But when of the possessions 'tis the prime,  
The fairest, choicest, nearest of them all."

As from strong manhood each decade strikes  
down  
Some prop of vigour, till the whole frame falls ;  
So, whilst the priest addressed him, Jephthah  
drooped  
At each sore sentence, and, when ceased the  
words,  
Fell on his daughter's neck, and kissed her with  
Such passion as lorn lovers kiss with when  
They, parting, still repeat the sad salute ;—  
So parting, one a mournful mariner,  
Compelled upon some world-encircling voyage,  
Midst gulfs, bays, currents, rocks, and shallow  
sands,

Wild continents, and savage isles ; a voyage  
From which the voyager never may return.  
So did he kiss her, while big sobs and groans,  
Loud sounding 'twixt each fond, fierce paroxysm,  
Leaped from his bosom, as the surges leap  
Out of the bosom of the sounding sea ;  
And still prolonged the violent embrace,  
Till, from her ecstasy recalled, she thus,  
Soft as the murmurs of a brook, complained :

“ Why hast thou roused me, father, from my  
dream,

So sweet, so strange ? Oh, listen to it, father !  
I dreamed that I was walking in blest meads,  
With great Manasseh, patriarch of our tribe,  
And there encountered Deborah and Jaël,  
Who smiled upon me gracious, and embraced  
Me, leading me along towards deep recess,  
To sound of solemn music, and the song  
Of Miriam and of Moses interjoined,

While on my brow there beamed a crown of  
gold.

There, midst ambrosial winds, and full of bliss,  
I sate in grateful rest ; yet knew not why  
I late had toiled, why unto grief become  
Obnoxious. Pass away, pale grief, for I  
Would bide with thee no more ; but let content  
Convey me back upon careering clouds,  
Into that land of absolute repose.  
Father, methinks 'tis but to go before you  
Into that land of light, where all seemed blest.  
Cease sorrowing. Raise up my mother, now  
Fallen beneath the burden of this hour.  
Oh, cherish her, my father ! Jephthah, heal her  
Great sickness by the medicinal power  
The strong and good bear ever toward the weak.  
Behold, she is reviving ; gently raise her.  
Oh, nurse her tenderly, and watch her age,  
She who watched over me and nursed my  
youth !

If she has been most dear to you, henceforth  
Let her be dearer still ; transfer to her  
The love you bore toward me, and yet regard  
her

The more for my sad sake. Farewell, farewell,  
To both, to all. All is now consummated.  
Light, light, I leave thee ;—yet am I a lamp,  
Extinguished now, to be relit for ever.  
Life dies ; but, in its stead, death lives.  
And now, ye waiting, venerable priests,  
Behold me ready to your hands. Forth lead me,  
As if in triumph, to my early grave ;  
Whereunto youth and maiden shall bring garlands  
Of yearly growth, and annual tribute pay  
Of panegyric to my memory,  
Shrined in their songs, before their fires rehearsed ;  
Recording how, inviolable, stood  
The bounds of Israel, by my blood secured.  
Nor more shall they thus celebrate myself  
Than laud my sire ; who, in his day of might,

Swore, not in vain, unto the Lord, who gave  
Him victory, although he took his child ;—  
Took her, but gave him, in her stead, his country,  
With a renowned, imperishable name."

So spake she ; and, when ended, all yet stood  
Listening : as, when hath ceased a heavenly air,  
The spell-bound hearers move not, but expect  
The reawaking of the strain. So, rapt,  
They stood, while Jephthah, filled with love and  
awe,  
Worshipped her soul ; as bridegroom might the  
shade  
Of a lost bride ; or, once, Pygmalion  
Adored the statue his own hands had formed.

Thus passed away this ancient Hebrew maid,  
Transcendent, and surpassing poets' praise ;  
Who bowed her to a parent's urgent need,  
Enduring an irreparable wrong.

Two moons she wandered o'er the mountain's  
wild ;  
Midst awful shadows and pale, spectral sheen,  
Mourned with her maidens her virginity ;  
Then, rendering herself to the grim end,  
Died, self-forgetful ;—yet, immortal, lives,  
Loved and remembered to the end of time.





I.

OH, Fate supreme, Fate, tell me whence thou art ?  
Speak, phantom ; wert thou from the deep of time  
Evoked ? Or hast thou stood (as o'er that mart  
Of Rhodes once stood its colossus sublime)  
Over Eternity's dread, bankless sea ?  
And have all things known thine encompassment ?  
And shall the future be the slave of thee,  
Thou Gorgon-visaged, dire necessity ?  
Who and what art thou, that thou shouldst me bind,  
And seem the secret master of my mind ?  
I hate thee, Fate, and would 'gainst thee rebel,  
As 'gainst the Omnipotent once the king of hell !  
Yet, if thou be'est the name of God's high will,  
I do submit thy purpose to fulfil.

II.

UP from the deep Annihilation came,  
And shook the shore of nature with his frame :  
Vulcan, nor Polyphemus of one eye,  
For size or strength could with the monster vie ;  
Who, landed, round his sullen eyeballs rolled,  
While dripped the ooze from limbs of mighty mould.  
But who the bard that shall in song express  
(For he was clad) the more than Anarch's dress ?  
All round about him hanging were decays,  
And ever-dropping remnants of the past ;—  
But how shall I recite my great amaze  
As down the abyss I saw him coolly cast  
Slowly, but constantly, some lofty name,  
Men thought secure in bright, eternal fame ?

III.

Oh, blank Oblivion ! Oh, perfect sleep  
Of memory, to wake no more !—  
To be compelled to wander on the deep  
Of the hereafter, as a soul might creep  
On Lethe's shore. Oh, soul, forbear :  
I'd rather grapple still with whatsoe'er  
The past may grieve me. Oh, deceive me not  
With ignorance worse than recollection's lot !  
Oh, do not dream my anxious mind to bless  
By (of this life) a dark forgetfulness !  
No, Retrospection, better were thy roar  
Of thoughts tumultuous heard for evermore :  
Yea, let me rather (though it might be worse)  
Long shake with fits of anguish-toothed remorse.

IV.

CHILDHOOD alone is glad. With it time flees  
In constant mimes and bright festivities.  
It, like the ever-restless butterfly,  
Or seeks or settles on some flower of joy.  
Youth chases pleasure, but oft starteth pain ;  
And love, youth's birthright, oft is love in vain ;  
While manhood follows wealth, or woos ambition,  
That are but courted cares ; and, with transition  
Insensible, he enters upon age ;  
Thence gliding like a spectre from life's stage,  
E'en through the door of dotage. So he passes  
To second childhood ; but, as quickening gases,  
Being fled, leave zestless a once cheering draught,  
We grow not merry though the Dotard laughed.

THE world, and even its perfection, man,—  
Nay, woman also, more than man divine,  
Charm me not now as once ; and for new scenes  
My soul, with languor smit, begins to pine.  
Nature seems ransacked now, and discontent  
Speaks in my breast of some primeval want.  
Usage has palled all things. Hunger alone  
And thirst, and constant elemental strife,  
Seem keep existence sweet ; 'tis they have thrown  
The relish over, are the salt of life.  
Knowledge is ever fatal, for Romance  
Can only live in shades of ignorance.  
Oh, ignorance, thou art youth ; youth hath alone  
true zest ;  
Oh, youth, return to my oblivious breast.

VI.

“STRIVE not to call back youth, nor ignorance ;  
Nor magnify the poor delights of sense ;  
Nor, recreant, supplicate thy years' return,  
And the great lesson of thy life unlearn :  
For knowledge is Divine, nor canst thou run  
Through all its wide inheritance, sad one.  
Onward in peace, and seek for truth Divine,  
And, if thou pinest, but for wisdom pine.”  
Thus unto me an unseen Genius spake,  
And bade me, smilingly, fresh courage take ;  
All gently raised me, and into mine ear  
Poured admonition loving, though severe ;  
Till, as I listened, my despair wings took  
At his benign and music-toned rebuke.

VII.

OPEN, my heart, thy ruddy valves ;  
It is thy master calls ;  
Let me go down, and, curious, trace  
Thy labyrinthine halls.  
Open, O heart, and let me view  
The secrets of thy den ;  
Myself unto myself now show  
With introspective ken.  
Expose thyself, thou covered nest  
Of passions, and be seen ;  
Stir up thy brood, that in unrest  
Are ever piping keen.  
Ah ! what a motley multitude.  
Magnanimous and mean !

VIII.

Now we are with the innumerable dead,  
Whose dumb abode responds not to our tread ;  
Lo, we at length, deep labouring, have come  
Into the world's enormous catacomb :  
Quick, let us silence break. Shades, rise into the air,  
Whether age, or violence, or corroding care,  
Or slow disease, once passed the fatal share  
Across your lives. Lo, what a sudden night  
Around me draws, and overwhelms the light !  
Are ye all human souls ? Ye awful throng,  
Ye shadows, tell me, if ye may, how long  
Ye have been gathering. Ah ! and shall Death still  
Heap Pelion on mortal Ossa's hill ?  
Alas, your gesture answers, " Yea, he will."

IX.

To spend dull evenings when dull day is done,  
To be distressed until the couch be won ;  
In food, and sleep, and labour to sum life,  
And die ignobly in the last grim strife,  
Without eternity's great hope or dread,  
Behold a being multitudes have led.  
To start each morn afresh for life and fame,  
As lamps new trimmed project a brighter flame ;  
Along day's hours conduct the noble care,  
And for eve's leisure the crude thought prepare ;  
To shorten night, and to forestall the day,  
The part ordained for some, though few, to play.  
Men start remote, and still diverging wend ;  
At length how distant if they never end !

THE day was lingering in the pale north-west,  
And night was hanging o'er my head,—  
Night where a myriad stars were spread ;  
While down in the east, where the light was least,  
Seemed the home of the quiet dead.  
And, as I gazed on the field sublime,  
To watch the bright, pulsating stars,  
Adown the deep where the angels sleep  
Came drawn the golden chime  
Of those great spheres that sound the years  
For the horologe of time.  
Millenniums numberless they told,  
Millenniums a millionfold  
From the ancient hour of prime.

XI.

SEE how the Morn awakes. Along the sky  
Proceeds she with her pale, increasing light,  
And, from the depths of the dim canopy,  
Drives out the shadows of departing night.  
Lo, the clouds break, and gradually more wide  
Morn openeth her bright, rejoicing gates ;  
And ever, as the orient valves divide,  
A costlier aspect on their breadth awaits.  
Lo, the clouds break, and in each opened schism  
The coming Phœbus lays huge beams of gold,  
And roseate fire, and glories that the prism  
Would vainly strive before us to unfold ;  
And, while I gaze, from out the bright abysm  
Sol's flaming disc is to the horizon rolled.

XII.

'Twas Sabbath morn. I lay 'neath pensive spell,  
And saw, in reverie or waking dream,  
My life elapse, in likeness of a stream  
That in a slant and steady torrent fell,  
As if it gushed beneath the force supreme  
Of some high reservoir or lofty well.  
E'en such a stream I saw as, from a bank  
Verdant with mosses and perpetual dank,  
I have observed leap forth when heavy rains  
Have, through the uplands filtered, fed earth's veins  
To bursting. This I saw with troubled eye,  
Anticipating when the stream no more  
In ceaseless, crystalline cascade should pour,  
But sudden stop, or slowly dribble dry.

XIII.

'Twas on a day, and in high, radiant heaven,  
An angel lay beside a lake reclined,  
Against whose shores the rolling waves were driven,  
And beat the measure to the dancing wind.  
There, rapt, he meditated on that story  
Of how Jehovah did of yore expel  
Heaven's aborigines from grace and glory,—  
Those mighty angels that did dare rebel.  
And, as he mused upon their dread abode  
And endless penance, from his drooping hands  
His harp down sank, and scattered all abroad  
Its rosy garland on the golden sands ;  
His soul mute wondering that the All-wise Spirit  
Should have allowed the doom of such demerit.

XIV.

THE stars are glittering in the frosty sky,  
Frequent as pebbles on a broad sea-coast ;  
And o'er the vault the cloud-like galaxy  
Has marshalled its innumerable host.  
Alive all heaven seems ! with wondrous glow  
Tenfold refulgent every star appears,  
As if some wide, celestial gale did blow,  
And thrice illumine the ever-kindled spheres.  
Orbs, with glad orbs rejoicing, burning, beam,  
Ray-crowned, with lambent lustre in their zones,  
Till o'er the blue, bespangled spaces seem  
Angels and great archangels on their thrones ;  
A host divine, whose eyes are sparkling gems,  
And forms more bright than diamond diadems.

HARK to the sighing of yon fading tree,—  
Yon tree that rocks as if with sense distressed ;  
It seems complaining that its destiny  
Should send the gale to desolate its breast.  
Oh, heed it, wind ! oh, listen to its sigh !  
Regard the pathos of its falling leaves ;  
Attend unto its oft-repeated cry,  
And slack the fury that the boughs bereaves.  
Lo, have they not rejoiced in summer days ?  
And have they not felt peace in summer nights ;  
Warded from beast the scorching noontide blaze,  
Guided, for man, the fireflies' evening flights ?  
Oh, sweep not, then, so rudely o'er each spray !  
But let them gently, slowly pass away.

XVI.

HUSHED in a calm beyond mine utterance,  
See in the western sky the evening spread ;  
Suspended in its pale, serene expanse,  
Like scattered flames, the glowing cloudlets red.  
Clear are those clouds; and that pure sky's profound,  
Transparent as a lake of hyaline ;  
Nor motion, nor the faintest breath of sound,  
Disturbs the steadfast beauty of the scene.  
Far o'er the vault the winnowed welkin wide,  
From the bronzed east unto the whitened west,  
Moored, seem, in their sweet, tranquil, roseate pride,  
Those clouds the fabled islands of the blest ;—  
The lands where pious spirits breathe in joy,  
And love and worship all their hours employ.

XVII.

'Tis solemn darkness ; the sublime of shade ;  
Night, by no stars nor rising moon relieved ;  
The awful blank of nothingness arrayed,  
O'er which my eyeballs roll in vain, deceived.  
Upward, around, and downward I explore,  
E'en to the frontiers of the ebon air ;  
But cannot, though I strive, discover more  
Than what seems one huge cavern of despair.  
Oh, Night, art thou so grim, when, black and bare  
Of moonbeams, and no cloudlets to adorn,  
Like a nude Ethiop 'twixt two houris fair,  
Thou stand'st between the evening and the morn ?  
I took thee for an angel, but have wooed  
A cacodæmon in mine ignorant mood.

XVIII.

How great unto the living seem the dead !  
How sacred, solemn ; how heroic grown ;  
How vast and vague, as they obscurely tread  
The shadowy confines of the dim unknown !—  
For they have met the monster that we dread,  
Have learned the secret not to mortal shown.  
E'en as gigantic shadows on the wall  
The spirit of the daunted child amaze,  
So on us thoughts of the departed fall,  
And with phantasma fill our gloomy gaze.  
Awe and deep wonder lend the living lines,  
And hope and ecstasy the borrowed beams ;  
While fitful fancy the full form divines,  
And all is what imagination dreams.

XIX.

How often do I hear thee, CHRIST CHURCH BELL,  
Tolling the quarters through the busy day,  
And, with repeated, monitory knell,  
Announce, the moments still refuse to stay,  
Till midnight, when the Hour-host hie away  
Amidst the sound of thy Cathedral swell !  
Then do I start from vigil, and essay  
To catch these by the skirts, who from me fly,  
All spectral, fleeting in a wild array,  
And, to my hailing, give me but “ Good-bye !”  
Good-bye for ever, HOURS !—but, CHRIST CHURCH  
BELL,  
Through hours, days, weeks, and ages coming long,  
May'st thou continue, day and night, to tell  
Of Time's soft flight, with thy loud iron tongue.

WHAT of the Past remains to bless the Present ?  
The memory of good deeds.  
But what of great ones ? Ambition to ambition  
    leads,  
And, each step higher, but cries, "Aspire,"  
And restless step to restless step succeeds.  
What is the boasted bubble, reputation ?  
To-day it is the world's loud cry,  
Which may to-morrow die,  
Or roll from generation unto generation,  
And magnify, and grow to fame,—  
That quenchless glory round a great man's name.  
What is the good man's adequate reward ?  
Sense of his rectitude, and felt beatitude  
Of God's regard.



