



## CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

### 1830–1894

#### *The Convent Threshold*

There's blood between us, love, my love,  
There's father's blood, there's brother's blood;  
And blood's a bar I cannot pass:  
I choose the stairs that mount above,  
5 Stair after golden skyward stair,  
To city and to sea of glass.<sup>1</sup>  
My lily feet are soiled with mud,  
With scarlet mud which tells a tale  
Of hope that was, of guilt that was,  
10 Of love that shall not yet avail;<sup>o</sup>  
Alas, my heart, if I could bare  
My heart, this selfsame stain is there:  
I seek the sea of glass and fire  
To wash the spot, to burn the snare;  
15 Lo, stairs are meant to lift us higher:  
Mount with me, mount the kindled stair.

Your eyes look earthward, mine look up.  
I see the far-off city grand,  
Beyond the hills a watered land,

*be beneficial*

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<sup>1</sup> *city ... sea of glass* Revelation 21:2 tells of “the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven”; in Revelation 4:4–6, “a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne [...] And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal.” Revelation 15:2 also describes “a sea of glass mingled with fire” (see line 13).

- 20 Beyond the gulf a gleaming strand  
 Of mansions<sup>1</sup> where the righteous sup;  
 Who sleep at ease among their trees,  
 Or wake to sing a cadenced<sup>o</sup> hymn *rhythmic*  
 With Cherubim and Seraphim;<sup>2</sup>
- 25 They bore the Cross, they drained the cup,<sup>3</sup>  
 Racked,<sup>o</sup> roasted, crushed, wrenched limb from limb, *tortured*  
 They the offscouring<sup>o</sup> of the world: *outcasts*  
 The heaven of starry heavens unfurled,  
 The sun before<sup>o</sup> their face is dim. *compared to*
- 30 You looking earthward, what see you?  
 Milk-white, wine-flushed among the vines,  
 Up and down leaping, to and fro,  
 Most glad, most full, made strong with wines,  
 Blooming as peaches pearled with dew,
- 35 Their golden windy hair afloat,  
 Love-music warbling in their throat,  
 Young men and women come and go.
- You linger, yet the time is short:  
 Flee for your life, gird up<sup>4</sup> your strength
- 40 To flee; the shadows stretched at length  
 Show that day wanes, that night draws nigh;  
 Flee to the mountain, tarry<sup>o</sup> not. *delay*  
 Is this a time for smile and sigh,  
 For songs among the secret trees
- 45 Where sudden blue birds nest and sport?  
 The time is short and yet you stay:  
 Today while it is called today<sup>5</sup>  
 Kneel, wrestle, knock, do violence, pray;  
 Today is short, tomorrow nigh:
- 50 Why will you die? why will you die?

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1 *mansions* Dwelling places; shortly before his death, Jesus tells his disciples, "In my father's house are many mansions.... I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:2). *Strand* (line 20) can mean either "shore" or "line" (of mansions).

2 *Cherubim and Seraphim* Like *Angels* and *Archangels* (line 94), members of the traditional hierarchy of heavenly beings that serve God.

3 *They bore ... cup* References to the suffering of Jesus; he was forced to carry the cross on which he would be executed, and he prayed to be spared torture and death ("Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done" [Luke 22:42]).

4 *gird up* Prepare.

5 *Today while it is called today* "But exhort one another daily, while it is called Today; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin" (Hebrews 3:13).

You sinned with me a pleasant sin:  
 Repent with me, for I repent.  
 Woe's me the lore<sup>o</sup> I must unlearn! *knowledge*  
 Woe's me that easy way we went,  
 55 So rugged when I would return!  
 How long until my sleep begin,  
 How long shall stretch these nights and days?  
 Surely, clean Angels cry, she prays;  
 She laves<sup>o</sup> her soul with tedious tears: *washes*  
 60 How long must stretch these years and years?  
  
 I turn from you my cheeks and eyes,  
 My hair which you shall see no more—<sup>1</sup>  
 Alas for joy that went before,  
 For joy that dies, for love that dies.  
 65 Only my lips still turn to you,  
 My livid<sup>o</sup> lips that cry, Repent. *pale*  
 Oh weary life, oh weary Lent,<sup>2</sup>  
 Oh weary time whose stars are few.  
  
 How should I rest in Paradise,  
 70 Or sit on steps of heaven alone?  
 If Saints and Angels spoke of love  
 Should I not answer from my throne:  
 Have pity upon me, ye my friends,<sup>3</sup>  
 For I have heard the sound thereof:  
 75 Should I not turn with yearning eyes,  
 Turn earthwards with a pitiful pang?<sup>o</sup> *pain*  
 Oh save me from a pang in heaven.  
 By all the gifts we took and gave,  
 Repent, repent, and be forgiven:  
 80 This life is long, but yet it ends;  
 Repent and purge your soul and save:  
 No gladder song the morning stars  
 Upon their birthday morning sang<sup>4</sup>  
 Than Angels sing when one repents.

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1 *My hair ... more* Nuns traditionally cover their hair with a headdress.

2 *Lent* In the Christian calendar, the period of penitence and self-denial that leads up to Easter.

3 *Have pity upon me, ye my friends* See Job 19:21: "Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, O ye my friends; for the hand of God hath touched me."

4 *the morning stars ... sang* In the Bible, God asks Job "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? [...] When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" (Job 38:4–7). Rossetti combines this with Luke 15:7: "joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance."

- 85 I tell you what I dreamed last night:  
 A spirit with transfigured face  
 Fire-footed clomb<sup>o</sup> an infinite space. *climbed*  
 I heard his hundred pinions<sup>o</sup> clang, *wings*  
 Heaven-bells rejoicing rang and rang,
- 90 Heaven-air was thrilled with subtle scents,  
 Worlds spun upon their rushing cars:<sup>o</sup> *chariots*  
 He mounted shrieking: "Give me light."<sup>1</sup>  
 Still light was poured on him, more light;  
 Angels, Archangels he outstripped
- 95 Exultant in exceeding might,  
 And trod the skirts<sup>o</sup> of Cherubim. *robes*  
 Still "Give me light," he shrieked; and dipped  
 His thirsty face, and drank a sea,  
 Athirst with thirst it could not slake.<sup>o</sup> *satisfy*
- 100 I saw him, drunk with knowledge, take  
 From aching brows the aureole<sup>o</sup> crown— *halo*  
 His locks writhed like a cloven<sup>o</sup> snake— *severed*  
 He left his throne to grovel down  
 And lick the dust of Seraphs' feet:
- 105 For what is knowledge duly weighed?  
 Knowledge is strong, but love is sweet;  
 Yea all the progress he had made  
 Was but to learn that all is small  
 Save<sup>o</sup> love, for love is all in all. *except*
- 110 I tell you what I dreamed last night:  
 It was not dark, it was not light,  
 Cold dews had drenched my plenteous hair  
 Through clay;<sup>o</sup> you came to seek me there. *earth*  
 And "Do you dream of me?" you said.
- 115 My heart was dust that used to leap  
 To you; I answered half asleep:  
 "My pillow is damp, my sheets are red,  
 There's a leaden tester<sup>o</sup> to my bed: *canopy*  
 Find you a warmer playfellow,
- 120 A warmer pillow for your head,  
 A kinder love to love than mine."  
 You wrung your hands; while I like lead  
 Crushed downwards through the sodden earth:  
 You smote<sup>o</sup> your hands but not in mirth, *struck together*
- 125 And reeled but were not drunk with wine.

1 *Give me light* The spirit described in this dream resembles the fallen angel Lucifer, who in Christian belief was cast out of heaven for rebelling against God; his name means "bringer of light."

For all night long I dreamed of you:  
 I woke and prayed against my will,  
 Then slept to dream of you again.  
 At length I rose and knelt and prayed:  
 130 I cannot write the words I said,  
 My words were slow, my tears were few;  
 But through the dark my silence spoke  
 Like thunder. When this morning broke,  
 My face was pinched, my hair was grey,  
 135 And frozen blood was on the sill  
 Where stifling in my struggle I lay.

If now you saw me you would say:  
 Where is the face I used to love?  
 And I would answer: Gone before;<sup>1</sup>  
 140 It tarries veiled in paradise.  
 When once the morning star shall rise,  
 When earth with shadow flees away  
 And we stand safe within the door,  
 Then you shall lift the veil thereof.  
 145 Look up, rise up: for far above  
 Our palms are grown,<sup>2</sup> our place is set;  
 There we shall meet as once we met  
 And love with old familiar love.

—1862

### *The Prince's Progress*

Till all sweet gums<sup>3</sup> and juices flow,  
 Till the blossom of blossoms blow,<sup>o</sup>  
 The long hours go and come and go,  
 The bride she sleepeth, waketh, sleepeth,  
 5 Waiting for one whose coming is slow:—  
 Hark! the bride weepeth.

*bloom*

“How long shall I wait, come heat come rime?”<sup>o</sup>—  
 “Till the strong Prince comes, who must come in time”

*frost*

1 *before* Ahead, in advance; one of the collects (prescribed devotional readings) in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer reads, “exalt us unto the same place whither our Saviour Christ is gone before.”

2 *Our palms are grown* The palm is the reward of the saved soul in heaven; see Revelation 7:9 (“After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude . . . clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands”). Compare Alfred Tennyson’s ★“St Simeon Stylites” (1842), line 20: “The meed of saints, the white robe and the palm.”

3 *gums* Resin-like secretions from various trees and shrubs.

(Her women say), “there’s a mountain to climb,  
 10 A river to ford. Sleep, dream and sleep:  
 Sleep” (they say): “we’ve muffled the chime,  
 Better dream than weep.”

In his world-end palace the strong Prince sat,  
 Taking his ease on cushion and mat,  
 15 Close at hand lay his staff and his hat.  
 “When wilt thou start? the bride waits, O youth.”—  
 “Now the moon’s at full; I tarried<sup>o</sup> for that,  
 Now I start in truth.

*delayed*

“But tell me first, true voice of my doom,<sup>o</sup>  
 20 Of my veiled bride in her maiden bloom;  
 Keeps she watch through glare and through gloom,  
 Watch for me asleep and awake?”—  
 “Spell-bound she watches in one white room,  
 And is patient for thy sake.

*fate*

25 “By her head lilies and rosebuds grow;  
 The lilies droop, will the rosebuds blow?  
 The silver slim lilies hang the head low;  
 Their stream is scanty, their sunshine rare;  
 Let the sun blaze out, and let the stream flow,  
 30 They will blossom and wax<sup>o</sup> fair.

*grow*

“Red and white poppies grow at her feet,  
 The blood-red wait for sweet summer heat,  
 Wrapped in bud-coats hairy and neat;  
 But the white buds swell, one day they will burst,  
 35 Will open their death-cups<sup>1</sup> drowsy and sweet—  
 Which will open the first?”

Then a hundred sad voices lifted a wail,  
 And a hundred glad voices piped on the gale:  
 “Time is short, life is short,” they took up the tale:  
 40 “Life is sweet, love is sweet, use today while you may;  
 Love is sweet, and tomorrow may fail;  
 Love is sweet, use today.”

While the song swept by, beseeching and meek,  
 Up rose the Prince with a flush on his cheek,

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1 *death-cups* Poppies, which have narcotic properties, are traditionally associated with sleep and with death.

45 Up he rose to stir and to seek,  
 Going forth in the joy of his strength;  
 Strong of limb if of purpose weak,  
 Starting at length.

Forth he set in the breezy morn,  
 50 Across green fields of nodding corn,<sup>o</sup>  
 As goodly a Prince as ever was born,  
 Carolling with the carolling lark;—  
 Sure his bride will be won and worn,<sup>1</sup>  
 Ere fall of the dark.

*grain*

55 So light his step, so merry his smile,  
 A milkmaid loitered beside a stile,<sup>2</sup>  
 Set down her pail and rested awhile,  
 A wave-haired milkmaid, rosy and white;  
 The Prince, who had journeyed at least a mile,  
 60 Grew athirst at the sight.

“Will you give me a morning draught?”<sup>o</sup>—  
 “You’re kindly welcome,” she said, and laughed.  
 He lifted the pail, new milk he quaffed;<sup>o</sup>  
 Then wiping his curly black beard like silk:  
 65 “Whitest cow that ever was calved  
 Surely gave you this milk.”

*drink**drank*

Was it milk now, or was it cream?  
 Was she a maid, or an evil dream?  
 Her eyes began to glitter and gleam;  
 70 He would have gone, but he stayed instead;  
 Green they gleamed as he looked in them:  
 “Give me my fee,” she said.—

“I will give you a jewel of gold.”—  
 “Not so; gold is heavy and cold.”—  
 75 “I will give you a velvet fold  
 Of foreign work<sup>3</sup> your beauty to deck.”—  
 “Better I like my kerchief rolled  
 Light and white round my neck.”—

1 *won and worn* To “win and wear” a lover is to court them successfully and enjoy their favor.

2 *stile* Step for crossing over a fence.

3 *work* Ornamental workmanship; *fold* Cloth or covering.

“Nay,” cried he, “but fix your own fee.”—  
 80 She laughed, “You may give the full moon to me;  
 Or else sit under this apple-tree  
 Here for one idle day by my side;  
 After that I’ll let you go free,  
 And the world is wide.”

85 Loth° to stay, yet to leave her slack,°  
 He half turned away, then he quite turned back:  
 For courtesy’s sake he could not lack  
 To redeem his own royal pledge;  
 Ahead too the windy heaven lowered<sup>1</sup> black  
 90 With a fire-cloven<sup>2</sup> edge.

*reluctant / slow*

So he stretched his length in the apple-tree shade,  
 Lay and laughed and talked to the maid,  
 Who twisted her hair in a cunning° braid  
 And writhed° it in shining serpent-coils,  
 95 And held him a day and night fast° laid  
 In her subtle toils.<sup>3</sup>

*skillful  
wound  
firmly*

At the death of night and the birth of day,  
 When the owl left off his sober play,  
 And the bat hung himself out of the way,  
 100 Woke the song of mavis° and merle,°  
 And heaven put off its hodden<sup>4</sup> grey  
 For mother-o’-pearl.

*thrush / blackbird*

Peeped up daisies here and there,  
 Here, there, and everywhere;  
 105 Rose a hopeful lark in the air,  
 Spreading out towards the sun his breast;  
 While the moon set solemn and fair  
 Away in the West.

“Up, up, up,” called the watchman lark,  
 110 In his clear *réveillée*:<sup>5</sup> “Hearken, oh hark!  
 Press to the high goal, fly to the mark.

<sup>1</sup> *lowered* Frowned, darkened.

<sup>2</sup> *fire-cloven* Split by lightning.

<sup>3</sup> *subtle toils* Treacherous snares.

<sup>4</sup> *hodden* Coarse, undyed woolen cloth.

<sup>5</sup> *réveillée* A signal, often used in military contexts, that it is time to get up.



Up, O sluggard,<sup>o</sup> new morn is born;  
 If still asleep when the night falls dark,  
 Thou must wait a second morn.”

*lazy one*

115 “Up, up, up,” sad glad voices swelled:  
 “So the tree falls and lies as it’s felled.  
 Be thy bands loosed, O sleeper, long held  
 In sweet sleep whose end<sup>o</sup> is not sweet.  
 Be the slackness girt and the softness quelled<sup>1</sup>  
 120 And the slowness fleet.”<sup>o</sup>

*result**swift*

Off he set. The grass grew rare,  
 A blight lurked in the darkening air,  
 The very moss grew hueless and spare,  
 The last daisy stood all astunt;<sup>o</sup>  
 125 Behind his back the soil lay bare,  
 But barer in front.

*stunted*

A land of chasm and rent,<sup>o</sup> a land  
 Of rugged blackness on either hand:  
 If water trickled its track was tanned  
 130 With an edge of rust to the chink;<sup>2</sup>  
 If one stamped on stone or on sand  
 It returned a clink.

*rupture*

A lifeless land, a loveless land,  
 Without lair or nest on either hand:  
 135 Only scorpions jerked in the sand,  
 Black as black iron, or dusty pale;  
 From point to point sheer rock was manned  
 By scorpions in mail.<sup>o</sup>

*armor*

A land of neither life nor death,  
 140 Where no man buildeth or fashioneth,  
 Where none draws living or dying breath;  
 No man cometh or goeth there,  
 No man doeth, seeketh, saith,  
 In the stagnant air.

1 *Be the ... quelled* Let the idleness be prepared for action and the weakness overcome.

2 *chink* The crevice through which the water trickles.

145 Some old volcanic upset<sup>o</sup> must *disturbance*  
 Have rent the crust<sup>1</sup> and blackened the crust;  
 Wrenched and ribbed it beneath its dust  
     Above earth's molten centre at seethe,  
 Heaved and heaped it by huge upthrust  
 150      Of fire beneath.

Untrodden before, untrodden since:  
 Tedious land for a social Prince;  
 Halting, he scanned the outs and ins,  
     Endless, labyrinthine,<sup>o</sup> grim, *maze-like*  
 155 Of the solitude that made him wince,  
     Laying wait for him.

By bulging rock and gaping cleft,<sup>o</sup> *chasm*  
 Even of half mere daylight reft,<sup>2</sup>  
 Rueful<sup>o</sup> he peered to right and left, *sorrowful*  
 160 Muttering in his altered mood:  
 "The fate is hard that weaves my weft,  
     Though my lot be good."<sup>3</sup>

Dim the changes of day to night,  
 Of night scarce dark to day not bright.  
 165 Still his road wound towards the right,  
     Still he went, and still he went,  
 Till one night he spied a light,  
     In his discontent.

Out it flashed from a yawn-mouthed cave,  
 170 Like a red-hot eye from a grave.  
 No man stood there of whom to crave  
     Rest for wayfarer<sup>o</sup> plodding by: *traveler*  
 Though the tenant were churl or knave<sup>4</sup>  
     The Prince might try.

175 In he passed and tarried not,  
 Groping his way from spot to spot,  
 Towards where the cavern flare glowed hot:—  
     An old, old mortal, cramped and double,<sup>o</sup> *bent*

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1 *rent the crust* Torn the earth.

2 *Even of ... reft* Deprived of even feeble daylight.

3 *The fate ... good* Even though my ultimate destiny is good, a cruel fate is shaping my experience (in weaving, the weft threads are horizontal, while the warp threads are vertical).

4 *churl or knave* Both words can describe either a peasant or an ill-mannered person.

Was peering into a seething-pot,<sup>o</sup>  
 180 In a world of trouble.

*cauldron*

The veriest atomy<sup>1</sup> he looked,  
 With grimy fingers clutching and crooked,  
 Tight skin, a nose all bony and hooked,  
 And a shaking, sharp, suspicious way;  
 185 Blinking, his eyes had scarcely brooked<sup>2</sup>  
 The light of day.

Stared the Prince, for the sight was new;  
 Stared, but asked without more ado:  
 “May a weary traveller lodge with you,  
 190 Old father, here in your lair?  
 In your country the inns seem few,  
 And scanty the fare.”<sup>o</sup>

*food*

The head turned not to hear him speak;  
 The old voice whistled as through a leak  
 195 (Out it came in a quavering squeak):  
 “Work for wage is a bargain fit:  
 If there’s aught of mine that you seek  
 You must work for it.

“Buried alive from light and air  
 200 This year is the hundredth year,  
 I feed my fire with a sleepless care,  
 Watching my potion wane or wax:  
 Elixir of Life<sup>3</sup> is simmering there,  
 And but one thing lacks.

205 “If you’re fain<sup>o</sup> to lodge here with me,  
 Take that pair of bellows you see—  
 Too heavy for my old hands they be—  
 Take the bellows and puff and puff:  
 When the steam curls rosy and free  
 210 The broth’s boiled enough.

*desirous*

“Then take your choice of all I have;  
 I will give you life if you crave.

1 *The veriest atomy* The merest skeleton.

2 *had scarcely brooked* Would barely have tolerated.

3 *Elixir of Life* In alchemical tradition, an immortality potion.

Already I'm mildewed for the grave,  
 So first myself I must drink my fill:  
 215 But all the rest may be yours, to save  
     Whomever you will."

"Done," quoth the Prince, and the bargain stood.  
 First he piled on resinous wood,  
 Next plied the bellows in hopeful mood;  
 220 Thinking, "My love and I will live.  
 If I tarry, why life is good,  
     And she may forgive."

The pot began to bubble and boil;  
 The old man cast in essence<sup>1</sup> and oil,  
 225 He stirred all up with a triple coil  
     Of gold and silver and iron wire,  
 Dredged<sup>o</sup> in a pinch of virgin soil,  
     And fed the fire.

*sprinkled*

But still the steam curled watery white;  
 230 Night turned to day and day to night;  
 One thing lacked, by his feeble sight  
     Unseen, unguessed by his feeble mind:  
 Life might miss him, but Death the blight  
     Was sure to find.

235 So when the hundredth year was full  
 The thread was cut<sup>2</sup> and finished the school.  
 Death snapped the old worn-out tool,  
     Snapped him short while he stood and stirred  
 (Though stiff he stood as a stiff-necked mule)  
 240 With never a word.

Thus at length the old crab was nipped.  
 The dead hand slipped, the dead finger dipped  
 In the broth as the dead man slipped,—  
     That same instant, a rosy red  
 245 Flushed the steam, and quivered and clipped<sup>o</sup>  
     Round the dead old head.

*flew*

<sup>1</sup> *essence* Concentrated extract of a plant or other substance.

<sup>2</sup> *The thread was cut* In Greek mythology, Atropos, one of the three Fates, would cut the thread of each person's life when their time had come to die.

The last ingredient was supplied  
(Unless the dead man mistook or lied).

Up started<sup>o</sup> the Prince, he cast aside

*jumped*

250 The bellows plied through the tedious trial,  
Made sure that his host had died,  
And filled a phial.<sup>o</sup>

*bottle*

“One night’s rest,” thought the Prince: “This done,  
Forth I speed with the rising sun:

255 With the morrow I rise and run,  
Come what will of wind or of weather.  
This draught of Life when my Bride is won  
We’ll drink together.”

Thus the dead man stayed in his grave,

260 Self-chosen, the dead man in his cave;  
There he stayed, were he fool or knave,  
Or honest seeker who had not found:  
While the Prince outside was prompt to crave  
Sleep on the ground.

265 “If she watches, go bid her sleep;  
Bid her sleep, for the road is steep:  
He can sleep who holdeth her cheap,  
Sleep and wake and sleep again.

Let him sow, one day he shall reap,  
270 Let him sow the grain.

“When there blows a sweet garden rose,  
Let it bloom and wither if no man knows:  
But if one knows when the sweet thing blows,  
Knows, and lets it open and drop,

275 If but a nettle<sup>1</sup> his garden grows  
He hath earned the crop.”

Through his sleep the summons rang,  
Into his ears it sobbed and it sang.  
Slow he woke with a drowsy pang,

280 Shook himself without much debate,  
Turned where he saw green branches hang,  
Started though late.

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1 *nettle* Weed that stings when touched.

For the black land was travelled o'er,  
 He should see the grim land no more.  
 285 A flowering country stretched before  
     His face when the lovely day came back:  
 He hugged the phial of Life he bore,  
     And resumed his track.

By willow courses he took his path,  
 290 Spied what a nest the kingfisher<sup>1</sup> hath,  
 Marked<sup>o</sup> the fields green to aftermath,<sup>2</sup>  
     Marked where the red-brown field-mouse ran,  
 Loitered awhile for a deep-stream bath,  
     Yawned for a fellow-man.

*noticed*

295 Up on the hills not a soul in view,  
 In the vale not many nor few;  
 Leaves, still leaves, and nothing new.  
     It's oh for a second maiden, at least,  
 To bear the flagon,<sup>o</sup> and taste it too,  
 300      And flavour the feast.

*pitcher*

Lagging he moved, and apt to swerve;  
 Lazy of limb, but quick of nerve.  
 At length the water-bed took a curve,  
     The deep river swept its bankside bare;  
 305 Waters streamed from the hill-reserve—  
     Waters here, waters there.

High above, and deep below,  
 Bursting, bubbling, swelling the flow,  
 Like hill-torrents after the snow,—  
 310 Bubbling, gurgling, in whirling strife,  
 Swaying, sweeping, to and fro,—  
     He must swim for his life.

Which way?—which way?—his eyes grew dim  
 With the dizzying whirl—which way to swim?  
 315 The thunderous downshoot<sup>3</sup> deafened him;  
     Half he choked in the lashing spray:  
 Life is sweet, and the grave is grim—  
     Which way?—which way?

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<sup>1</sup> *kingfisher* Bird with bright blue wings.

<sup>2</sup> *aftermath* The second growth of a crop after the first has been harvested.

<sup>3</sup> *downshoot* Fall of water.

- A flash of light, a shout from the strand:<sup>°</sup> *shore*  
 320 “This way—this way; here lies the land!”  
 His phial clutched in one drowning hand;  
 He catches—misses—catches a rope;  
 His feet slip on the slipping sand:  
 Is there life?—is there hope?
- 325 Just saved, without pulse or breath,—  
 Scarcely saved from the gulp of death;  
 Laid where a willow shadoweth—  
 Laid where a swelling turf<sup>1</sup> is smooth.  
 (O Bride! but the Bridegroom lingereth  
 330 For<sup>°</sup> all thy sweet youth.) *despite*
- Kind hands do and undo,  
 Kind voices whisper and coo:  
 “I will chafe his hands”—“And I”—“And you  
 Raise his head, put his hair aside.”  
 335 (If many laugh, one well may rue:<sup>°</sup> *regret*  
 Sleep on, thou Bride.)
- So the Prince was tended with care:  
 One wrung foul ooze from his clustered hair;  
 Two chafed his hands, and did not spare;<sup>°</sup> *hold back*  
 340 But one propped his head that drooped awry:<sup>°</sup> *to the side*  
 Till his eyes oped,<sup>°</sup> and at unaware *opened*  
 They met eye to eye.
- Oh a moon face in a shadowy place,  
 And a light touch and a winsome<sup>°</sup> grace, *charming*  
 345 And a thrilling tender voice which says:  
 “Safe from waters that seek the sea—  
 Cold waters by rugged ways—  
 Safe with me.”
- While overhead bird whistles to bird,  
 350 And round about plays a gamesome<sup>°</sup> herd: *frisky*  
 “Safe with us”—some take up the word—  
 “Safe with us, dear lord and friend:  
 All the sweeter if long deferred  
 Is rest in the end.”

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1 turf Grassy area.

355 Had he stayed to weigh and to scan,  
 He had been more or less than a man:  
 He did what a young man can,  
     Spoke of toil and an arduous<sup>o</sup> way—  
 Toil tomorrow, while golden ran  
 360     The sands of today.

*difficult*

Slip past, slip fast,  
 Uncounted hours from first to last,  
 Many hours till the last is past,  
     Many hours dwindling to one—  
 365 One hour whose die is cast,<sup>1</sup>  
     One last hour gone.

Come, gone—gone for ever—  
 Gone as an unreturning river—  
 Gone as to death the merriest liver—  
 370 Gone as the year at the dying fall—  
 Tomorrow, today, yesterday, never—  
     Gone once for all.

Came at length the starting-day,  
 With last words, and last, last words to say,  
 375 With bodiless cries from far away—  
     Chiding<sup>o</sup> wailing voices that rang  
 Like a trumpet-call to the tug and fray;<sup>2</sup>  
     And thus they sang:

*rebuking*

“Is there life?—the lamp burns low;  
 380 Is there hope?—the coming is slow:  
 The promise promised so long ago,  
     The long promise, has not been kept.  
 Does she live?—does she die?—she slumbers so  
     Who so oft has wept.

385 “Does she live?—does she die?—she languisheth  
 As a lily drooping to death,  
 As a drought-worn bird with failing breath,  
     As a lovely vine without a stay,<sup>o</sup>  
 As a tree whereof the owner saith,  
 390     ‘Hew<sup>o</sup> it down today.’”

*support*

*cut*

1 *die is cast* Here *die* is the singular form of “dice.” According to tradition, when Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon river with his army, initiating a civil war in Rome, he proclaimed “alea iacta est” (the die is cast): that is, the dice have been rolled and we have passed the point of no return.

2 *tug and fray* Struggle and conflict.



Stung by that word the Prince was fain  
 To start on his tedious road again.  
 He crossed the stream where a ford was plain,  
 He clomb<sup>o</sup> the opposite bank though steep, *climbed*  
 395 And swore to himself to strain and attain  
 Ere he tasted sleep.

Huge before him a mountain frowned  
 With foot of rock on the valley ground,  
 And head with snows incessant crowned,  
 400 And a cloud mantle<sup>o</sup> about its strength, *cloak*  
 And a path which the wild goat hath not found  
 In its breadth and length.

But he was strong to do and dare:  
 If a host<sup>o</sup> had withstood<sup>o</sup> him there, *army / opposed*  
 405 He had braved a host with little care  
 In his lusty<sup>o</sup> youth and his pride, *vigorous*  
 Tough to grapple though weak to snare.  
 He comes, O Bride.

Up he went where the goat scarce clings,  
 410 Up where the eagle folds her wings,  
 Past the green line of living things,  
 Where the sun cannot warm the cold,—  
 Up he went as a flame enrings<sup>o</sup> *encircles*  
 Where there seems no hold.

415 Up a fissure<sup>o</sup> barren and black, *ravine*  
 Till the eagles tired upon his track,  
 And the clouds were left behind his back,  
 Up till the utmost peak was past.  
 Then he gasped for breath and his strength fell slack;  
 420 He paused at last.

Before his face a valley spread  
 Where fatness<sup>o</sup> laughed, wine, oil, and bread, *abundance*  
 Where all fruit-trees their sweetness shed,  
 Where all birds made love to their kind,  
 425 Where jewels twinkled, and gold lay red  
 And not hard to find.

Midway down the mountain side  
 (On its green slope the path was wide)  
 Stood a house for a royal bride,

430 Built all of changing opal stone,  
 The royal palace, till now descried<sup>o</sup> *seen*  
 In his dreams alone.

Less bold than in days of yore,<sup>o</sup> *long ago*  
 Doubting now though never before,  
 435 Doubting he goes and lags the more:  
 Is the time late? does the day grow dim?  
 Rose, will she open the crimson core  
 Of her heart to him?

Above his head a tangle glows  
 440 Of wine-red roses, blushes, snows,  
 Closed buds and buds that unclosed,  
 Leaves, and moss, and prickles too;  
 His hand shook as he plucked a rose,  
 And the rose dropped dew.

445 Take heart of grace!<sup>1</sup> the potion of Life  
 May go far to woo him a wife:  
 If she frown, yet a lover's strife  
 Lightly raised can be laid<sup>o</sup> again: *calmed*  
 A hasty word is never the knife  
 450 To cut love in twain.

Far away stretched the royal land,  
 Fed by dew, by a spice-wind fanned:  
 Light labour more, and his foot would stand  
 On the threshold, all labour done;  
 455 Easy pleasure laid at his hand,  
 And the dear Bride won.

His slackening steps pause at the gate—  
 Does she wake or sleep?—the time is late—  
 Does she sleep now, or watch and wait?  
 460 She has watched, she has waited long,  
 Watching athwart the golden grate<sup>2</sup>  
 With a patient song.

Fling the golden portals<sup>o</sup> wide, *gates*  
 The Bridegroom comes to his promised Bride;

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<sup>1</sup> *Take heart of grace* Gather your courage.

<sup>2</sup> *athwart the golden grate* Through the golden window-bars.

465 Draw the gold-stiff curtains aside,  
       Let them look on each other's face,  
       She in her meekness, he in his pride—  
       Day wears apace.<sup>1</sup>

      Day is over, the day that wore.  
 470 What is this that comes through the door,  
       The face covered, the feet before?  
       This that coming takes his breath;  
       This Bride not seen, to be seen no more  
       Save° of Bridegroom Death?

*except*

475 Veiled figures carrying her  
       Sweep by yet make no stir;  
       There is a smell of spice and myrrh,<sup>2</sup>  
       A bride-chant burdened with one name;  
       The bride-song rises steadier  
 480       Than the torches' flame:

      “Too late for love, too late for joy,  
       Too late, too late!  
       You loitered on the road too long,  
       You trifled at the gate:  
 485 The enchanted dove upon her branch  
       Died without a mate;  
       The enchanted princess in her tower  
       Slept, died, behind the grate;  
       Her heart was starving all this while  
 490       You made it wait.

      “Ten years ago, five years ago,  
       One year ago,  
       Even then you had° arrived in time,  
       Though somewhat slow;  
 495 Then you had known her living face  
       Which now you cannot know:  
       The frozen fountain would have leaped,  
       The buds gone on to blow,  
       The warm south wind would have awaked  
 500       To melt the snow.

*would have*

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1 *wears apace* Passes swiftly.

2 *myrrh* Aromatic resin used in incense.

“Is she fair now as she lies?  
 Once she was fair;  
 Meet<sup>o</sup> queen for any kingly king,  
 With gold-dust on her hair.  
 505 Now these are poppies in her locks,  
 White poppies she must wear;  
 Must wear a veil to shroud her face  
 And the want graven<sup>o</sup> there:  
 Or is the hunger fed at length,  
 510 Cast off the care?

*suitable**engraved*

“We never saw her with a smile  
 Or with a frown;  
 Her bed seemed never soft to her,  
 Though tossed of down;  
 515 She little heeded what she wore,  
 Kirtle,<sup>o</sup> or wreath, or gown;  
 We think her white brows often ached  
 Beneath her crown,  
 Till silvery hairs showed in her locks  
 520 That used to be so brown.

*skirt*

“We never heard her speak in haste:  
 Her tones were sweet,  
 And modulated just so much  
 As it was meet:  
 525 Her heart sat silent through the noise  
 And concourse<sup>o</sup> of the street.  
 There was no hurry in her hands,  
 No hurry in her feet;  
 There was no bliss drew nigh to her,  
 530 That she might run to greet.

*crowding*

“You should have wept her yesterday,  
 Wasting upon her bed:  
 But wherefore should you weep today  
 That she is dead?  
 535 Lo, we who love weep not today,  
 But crown her royal head.  
 Let be these poppies that we strew,<sup>o</sup>  
 Your roses are too red:  
 Let be these poppies, not for you  
 540 Cut down and spread.”

*scatter*