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Belshazzar's Feast

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BELSHAZZAR'S FEAST.

'TWAS night in Babylon, — yet many a beam
Of lamps, far glittering from her domes on high,
Shonè, brightly mingling in Euphrates' stream,
With the clear stars of that Chaldean sky,
Whose azure knows no cloud : — each whisper'd sigh
Of the soft night-breeze through her terrace-bowers
Bore softer tones of joy and melody,
O'er an illumin'd wilderness of flowers ;
And the glad city's voice went up from all her towers.

But prouder mirth was in the blazing hall,
Where, midst adoring slaves, a gorgeous band !
High at the stately midnight-festival,
Belshazzar sat enthron'd ! — there luxury's hand
Had shower'd around all treasures that expand
Beneath the burning East ; — all gems that pour
The sun-beams back ; — all sweets of many a land,
Whose gales waft incense from their spicy shore ;
But mortal pride look'd on, and still demanded more.

With richer zest the banquet may be fraught,
 A loftier theme may wake th' exulting strain !
 The lord of nations spoke, — and forth were brought
 The spoils of Salem's devastated fane :
 Thrice holy vessels ! — pure from earthly stain,
 And set apart, and sanctified to Him,
 Who deign'd within the oracle to reign,
 Reveal'd, yet shadow'd ; making noon-day dim,
 To that most glorious cloud between the cherubim.

They came, and louder swell'd the voice of song,
 And pride flash'd brighter from the kindling eye,
 And He who sleeps not, heard th' elated throng,
 In mirth that play'd with thunderbolts, defy
 The Rock of Zion ! — Fill the nectar high,
 High in the cups of consecrated gold !
 And crown the bowl with garlands, ere they die,
 And bid the censers of the temple hold
 Offerings to Babel's gods, the mighty ones of old !

Peace ! is it but a phantom of the brain,
 Thus shadow'd forth the senses to appal,
 Yon fearful vision ? — who shall gaze again
 To search its cause ? — along th' illumin'd wall,

Startling, yet rivetting the eyes of all,
 Darkly it moves, — a hand, a human hand,
 O'er the bright lamps of that resplendent hall,
 In silence tracing, as a mystic wand,
 Words all unknown, the tongue of some far distant land.

There are pale cheeks around the regal board,
 And quivering limbs, and whispers deep and low,
 And fitful starts ! — the goblet, richly stor'd,
 Untasted foams, the song hath ceas'd to flow,
 The waving censer drops to earth, — and lo !
 The king of men, the monarch, rob'd with might,
 Trembles before a shadow ! — say not so !
 The child of dust, with guilt's prophetic sight,
 Shrinks from the Dread Unknown, th' avenging Infinite.

But haste ye ! — bring Chaldea's gifted seers,
 The men of prescience ! — haply to their eyes,
 Which track the future through the rolling spheres,
 Yon mystic sign may speak in prophecies.
 They come, — the readers of the midnight skies,
 They that give voice to visions ! — but in vain !
 Still wrapt in clouds the awful secret lies ;
 It hath no language midst the starry train ;
 There is no earthly voice heaven's mysteries to explain.

Then stood forth one, a child of other sires,
 And other inspiration ! — one of those,
 Who on the willows hung their captive lyres,
 And sat, and wept, where Babel's river flows.
 His eye was bright, and yet the deep repose
 Of his pale features half o'erawed the mind,
 And imag'd forth a soul whose joys and woes
 Were of a loftier stamp than aught assign'd
 To earth ; a being seal'd and sever'd from mankind.

Yes ! — what was earth to him, whose spirit pass'd
 Time's utmost bounds ? — on whose unshrinking sight
 Ten thousand shapes of burning glory cast
 Their full resplendence ? — majesty and might
 Were in his dreams ; — for him the veil of light,
 Shrouding heaven's inmost sanctuary and throne,
 The curtain of th' Unutterably Bright,
 Was rais'd ! — to him, in awful splendor shown,
 Ancient of Days ! e'en Thou, mad'st Thy dread pre-
 sence known !

He spoke : — the shadows of the things to come,
 Pass'd o'er his soul : — “ O king, elate in pride !
 God hath sent forth the writing of thy doom,
 The One, the living God, by thee defied ;

He, in whose balance earthly lords are tried,
 Hath weigh'd, and found thee wanting. 'Tis decreed,
 The conqueror's hands thy kingdom shall divide,
 The stranger to thy throne of power succeed ;
 The days are full, they come, — the Persian and the
 Mede !”

There fell a moment's thrilling silence round,
 A breathless pause ! the hush of hearts that beat,
 And limbs that quiver : — is there not a sound,
 A gathering cry, a tread of hurrying feet ? —
 'Twas but some echo, in the crowded street,
 Of far-heard revelry, the shout, the song,
 The measur'd dance to music wildly sweet,
 That speeds the stars, their joyous course along, —
 Away ! nor let a dream disturb the festal throng !

Peace yet again ! — Hark ! steps in tumult flying,
 Steeds rushing on, as o'er a battle-field !
 The shout of hosts exulting or defying,
 The press of multitudes that strive or yield !
 And the loud startling clash of spear and shield,
 Sudden as earthquake's burst ! — and blent with these,
 The last wild shriek of those whose doom is seal'd
 In mirth's full tide ! — all rising on the breeze,
 As the long deepening roar of fast advancing seas !

And nearer yet the trumpet's voice is swelling,
 Loud, shrill, and savage, drowning every cry !
 And lo ! the spoiler in the regal dwelling,
 Death bursting on the halls of revelry !
 Ere on their brows one fragile rose-leaf die,
 The sword hath rag'd thro' joys devoted train ;
 Ere one bright star be faded from the sky,
 Empire is lost, Belshazzar with the slain,
 And the dread lesson given, which proves all others vain.

Fall'n is the golden city ! in the dust,
 Spoil'd of her crown, dismantled of her state,
 She that hath made the strength of towers her trust,
 Weeps by her dead, supremely desolate !
 She that beheld the nations at her gate,
 Thronging in homage, shall be call'd no more
 Lady of Kingdoms ! — who shall mourn her fate ?
 Her guilt is full, her march of triumph o'er ;
 What widow'd land shall now *her* widowhood deplore ?

Sit thou in silence ! thou, that wert enthron'd
 On many waters ! thou, whose augurs read
 The language of the planets, and disown'd
 The mighty name it blazons ! — veil thy head,

Daughter of Babylon ! the sword is red
From thy destroyer's harvest, and the yoke
Is on thee, O most proud ! — for thou hast said,
“ I am, and none besides.” — Th' Eternal spoke,
Thy glory was a spoil, thine idol-gods were broke.