

The EVE OF
STAGNIES



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The EVE OF ST. AGNES

TO MRS. FANNY R. LUPTON

*I offer and dedicate that
part of the work done upon
this book which is deserving
of the honor; in appreciation
of a friendship.*

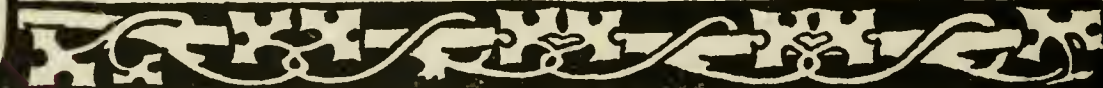
Ralph Fletcher Seymour



THE
SAINTE



A POEM






EVE OF MAGNES



At the
FINE ARTS
BUILDING
MICHIGAN
AVENUE
CHICAGO
ILL. USA

JOHN KEATS



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RALPH FLETCHER SEYMOUR



Ralph Fletcher Seymour

THE EVE OF ST. AGNES

A POEM *by*
JOHN KEATS
WITH A PREFACE
WRITTEN FOR IT BY
EDMUND GOSSE

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PUBLISHED AT THE FINE
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AVENUE
CHICAGO ILLINOIS U S A

by
RALPH FLETCHER SEYMOUR

THE EVE OF ST. AGNES
A PREFACE BY
EDMUND GOSSE



HAT WE
KNOW OF
THE HIS-
TORY OF
KEAT'S EN-
CHANTING
ROMANCE,
"THE EVE OF
ST. AGNES"
COMES TO

us almost entirely from a sort of
running journal which he sent
to his brother & sister-in-law in
America. From this source we

The Eve of Saint Agnes

learn that he spent some time at Chichester after the death of Tom Keats in December 1818. He probably went down to the friends in Chichester before Christmas, for he was back at Wentworth Place, Hampstead, in the last week of January 1819. He writes to Mr. and Mrs. George Keats (Feb. 14, 1819) "Nothing worth speaking of happened at (Chichester.) I took down some of the thin paper & wrote on it a little poem, called "St Agnes Eve" which you will have as it is when I have finished the blank part of the rest for you."

In his next packet he sends the copied draft to America. These remarks Lord Houghton had doubtless overlooked when he said that "The

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Eve of St. Agnes was begun on a visit to Hampshire," for Keats does not seem to have gone to Winchester, in the latter County, until August 1819. It would doubtless be safe, however, in accordance with a letter to Bailey, to say that the poem was finished at Winchester. In September, Keats writes: ~
~ "I am now engaged in revising 'St. Agnes Eve' and studying Italian."

By November he already takes the finished poem as a type of one class of his productions & writes to Taylor, "I wish to diffuse the colouring of 'St Agnes Eve' throughout a poem in which character and sentiment would be the figures to such drapery."


The Eve of Saint Agnes



THE original MS. of the poem, on the "thin paper" which Keats took down with him to Chichester, is now in the splendid library of Mr. Godfrey Locker-Lampson at Rowfant. His father, Mr. Frederick Locker, bought it of a bookseller in London after the death of Severn. The first seven stanzas are unfortunately lost, but from this point onwards the MS. is perfect. There are many cancelled readings, some of them of great interest; these have been carefully preserved by Mr. Buxton Foreman in his noble edition of the writings of Keats (1883). In every instance, these corrections are for the better and emphasize the admirable judg~

A Preface

ment of the poet. Finally, the poem took its place in the famous volume entitled "Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes and other Poems," published by Taylor & Hessey in the summer of 1820, at the very moment of the fatal breakdown of Keats's health. Beyond these particulars there seems to be nothing preserved as to the circumstances or the time of the composition of 'St Agnes Eve'.

UT these indications are quite enough to enable us to place its entire history in the eventful year 1819, when the genius of Keats was at its height, and his physical health tottering to its catastrophe

The Eve of Saint Agnes



THE Eve or Vigil of St Agnes is the 20th of January, and it is not impossible that Keats began his poem on that very night of the year 1819.

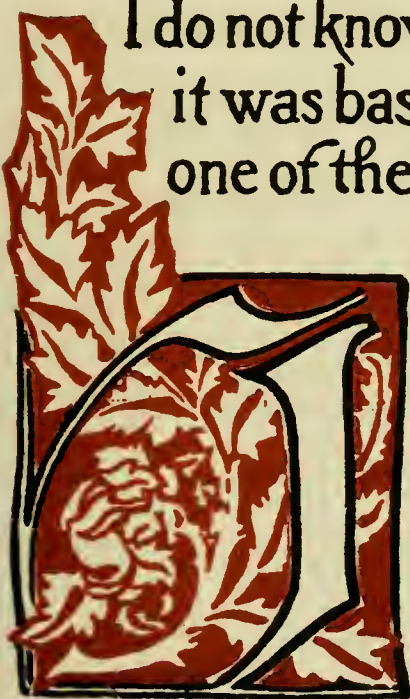
From his windows at Chichester he might see the flocks, silent in "winter fold"; his lonely walks might disturb the hare and send her "limping thro' the frozen grass." It is, at all events, to be pointed out that the poet was perfectly correct in connecting these images of midwinter with his festival, and that some of his commentators, who have stated that Halloween is the Eve of St. Agnes, are quite incorrect.

Hallowmass or All hallowstide is, on the contrary, held late in the

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autumn, and All Hallow's Eve is the 31st of October. Where Keats found his attribution to St. Agnes of the power of summoning up the image of true love, I am not aware. That power is universally allowed to the Saints in congress on the Vigil of their day of united mass, & that in many countries. But what authority had Keats for attributing it particularly to St. Agnes?

I do not know, but I conjecture that it was based upon a mistake in one of the books he was reading.



IN a work on antiquities which was popular in Keats's day, Ben Jonson is quoted as describing the powers of St Agnes to reveal to the enamoured their

The Eve of Saint Agnes

future husbands or wives. For any such passage I have searched the works of Ben Jonson in vain, but in his masque of "The Satyr" we may find these lines:-

*She can start our franklins' daughters
In their sleep with shrieks & laughter,
And on sweet St. Anna's night
Feed them with a promised sight,
Some of husbands, some of lovers,
Which an empty dream discovers.*

In default of any reference to St. Agnes, we may take (I think) this allusion to a very different personage, St. Anne, as probably having started Keats on his adorable imaginative adventure. Whether Anne or Agnes, vigil or mass, the source really matters nothing to us: what is essential is the incomparable result.

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The exact reference is evidently not to be traced by mortal man, for even the excellent Leigh Hunt, whose enthusiastic commentary of the poem in the 'London Journal' of 1835 was the earliest claim put forward for the highest honours for 'The Eve of Saint Agnes'—falls into a hopeless muddle about the date of the festival. There are some disturbing elements of common fact which wither up the delicacy of a vision by their frosty impact. It is doubtless best for us not to try to know too brutally what was only dimly divined even by Madeline and Porphyro.

The Eve of Saint Agnes



IN the legend of St. Agnes, upon which we need not further dwell, there is only one slight feature which Keats might (or might not) have liked to use had he happened to be aware of it. That exquisite cup of cold green in a white shrine, the snowflake, is dedicated to this saint, whose innocency, ~ for her symbol is the new-born lamb, ~ and her purity, as exemplified in this coyest and coolest of all flowers, are needed to permit her with decorum to undertake this sensitive office of present



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Ling in the hollow of the night the mirrored forms of lovers to those who long for them.

CERTAIN points with regard to the form of 'The Eve of St. Agnes' are worthy of attention. The technical characteristics of it show to a remarkable degree the result of Keats's close study of the Elizabethan poets. The stanza he employs is the Spenserian, a metre of which he made no use elsewhere, except in the unworthy

The Eve of Saint Agnes

fragment of "The Cap and Bells.

In the poem before us, the stanza is conducted with a voluptuous richness not excelled by Thomson, Shelly or Tennyson, or even by Spenser himself. The poem is one of those short narratives in formal rhymed verse which it is convenient to call "romances."

In adopting for 'Isabella' & 'The Eve of St. Agnes' this form, it is not to be doubted that Keats was intentionally restoring to English poetry what had been a signal adornment of it in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

He was competing with those classical narratives in elaborate stanzaic form of which the 'Venus and Adonis' of Shakespeare was

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the most popular and the 'Scilla's Metamorphosis' of Lodge the earliest & typical specimen. The great difficulty in these tales, ~ which were so little removed except by the length from the lyric ~ was to preserve the spontaneity of the emotion and at the same time, the vitality of the narrative, ~ in other words to be rapturously imaginative, and yet (let us not fear the word) continuously amusing.

It must be said that in the skill with which he overcomes this difficulty Keats has no rival, except himself. To discover a romance in which vision & evolution are held so admirably in the balance throughout as in the 'Eve of St. Agnes', we must turn to

The Eve of Saint Agnes

another work of Keats himself, ~ to 'Isabella, or the Pot of Basil'.



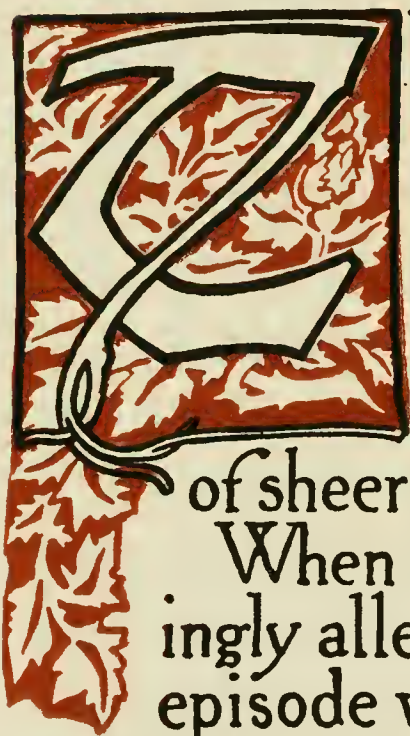
THE whole tissue and colouring of 'St. Agnes Eve' betray the hectic conditions in which the great and wonderful poet was working. He said himself, "I am scarcely content to write the best verses, from the fever they leave behind. I want to compose without this fever. I hope I shall one day," he added, but that day was never to dawn. There is perhaps no other masterpiece in English literature in which an equal physical ecstasy is apparent. Like his own Porphyro, the poet is

A Preface

faint with a species of agony, as one who enjoys to the very edge of self-control a perfume or a flavor, a rapture of melody or a splendour of vision. A very little more and the delight would degenerate into delirium, but this step is not taken, the artist continues master of himself. In just an epithet here or an image there the danger is suggested, only to be majestically avoided. But further than this, in the transport of the nerves, sane art can hardly go. The rapture of this poem is proper to a lyric; it is almost without precedent that it should be supported, without a break, throughout so long a romance. It is, however, sup-

The Eve of Saint Agnes

ported, and with such a breathless ravishness of all the senses, that in certain stanzas it almost passes, beyond ecstasy, into positive trance.



HIS poem of 'The Eve of St. Agnes' is as fine an example as literature presents to us of the value and power of sheer imaginative vision. When the Carlyles mockingly alleged that the central episode was nothing but "a dream in a store-room," Mrs. Browning indignantly replied that "no dream could ever be made a work of art," unless dreamed by some *animosus infans*, "like

APreface

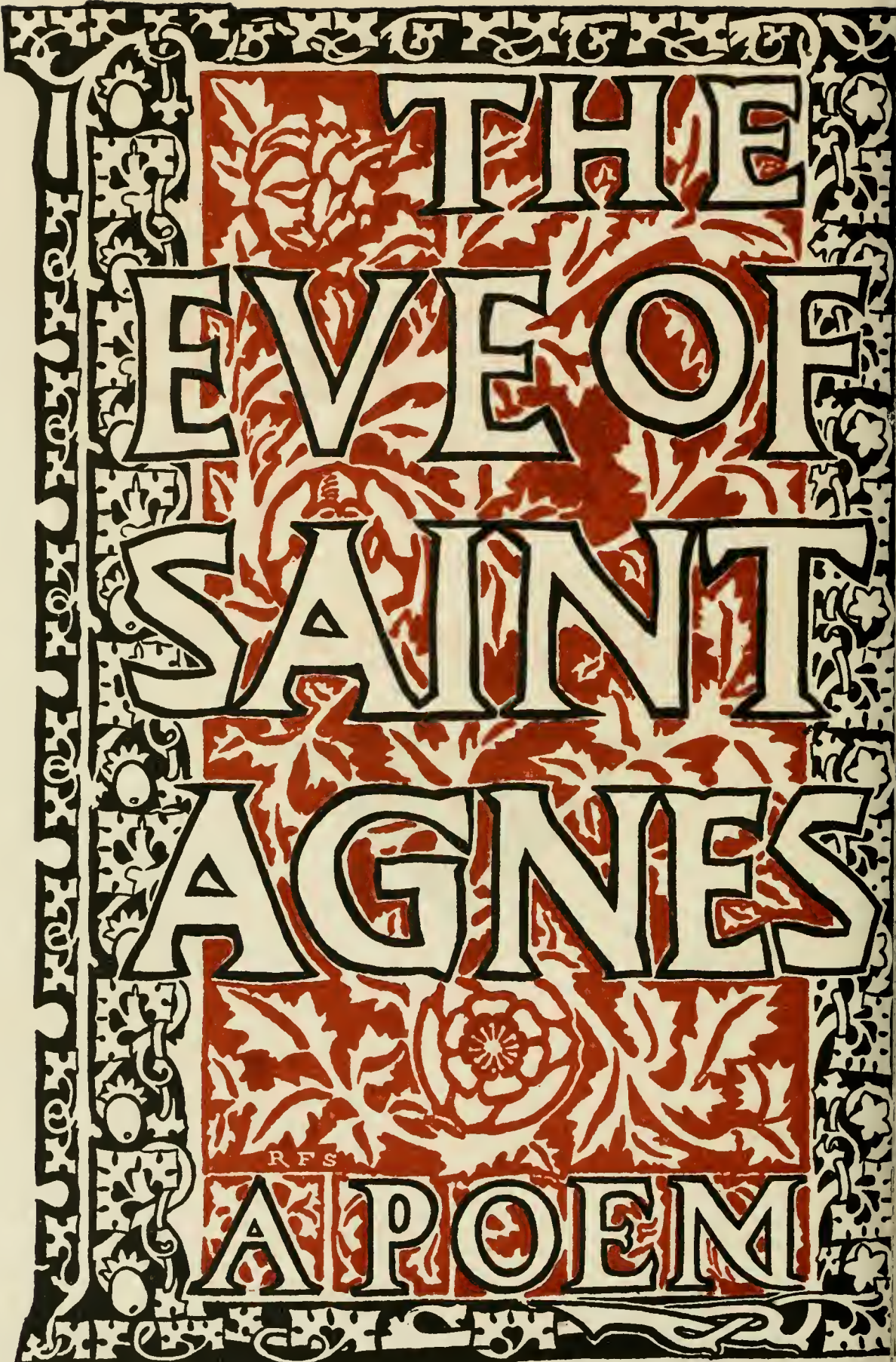
Keats himself. To the sneer that the poem is all concerned with the senses, every one who knows what poetry is will reply, Yes, but the senses idealized. Here is poetry pure & simple, with no admixture of non-poetic or even sub-poetic elements. Here is the imagination in its quintessence. Nor, while English literature survives, is it likely that a poem will be written more perennially or deservedly attractive to the youthful, the ardent, and the unsophisticated.

Edmund Gosse

THE EVE OF
ST. AGNES

JOHN KEATS ^{by}





THE
EVE OF
SAINT
AGNES
A POEM

RFS



Agnes' Eve.... Ah, bitter
chill it was!

The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold,
The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen ^{grass}
And silent was the flock in wooly fold:
Numb were the Beadsman's fingers while he to'd
his rosary, and while his frosted breath,
Like pious incense from a censer old,
Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without a death,
Dast the sweet Virgin's picture, while his
prayer he saith.

II

His prayer he saith, this
patient holy man;
Then takes his lamp, &
riseth from his knees,
And back returneth, meagre, bare-
foot, wan,
Along the chapel aisle by slow degrees
The sculptur'd dead, on each side,
seem to freeze,
Emprison'd in black, purgatorial rails;
Knights, ladies, praying in dumb orat'ries,
He passeth by; & his weak spirit fails
To think how they may ache in icy
hoods and mails.

III

Northward he turneth
through a little door,
And scarce three steps, ere Music's
golden tongue
Flatter'd to tears this aged man and
poor;

But no~ already had his death bell rung;
 The joys of all his life were said & sung:
 His was harsh penance on St. Agnes' eve:
 Another way he went, and soon among
 Rough ashes sat he for his soul's reprieve,
 And all night kept awake, for sinners sake
 to grieve.

III

That ancient Beadsman
 heard the prelude soft;
 And so it chanc'd, (for
 many a door was wide,
 From hurry to and fro.) Soon, up aloft,
 The silver, snarling trumpets 'gan to chide:
 The level chambers, ready with their pride,
 Were glowing to receive a thousand guests;
 The carved angels, ever eager-ey'd,
 Star'd, where upon their heads the
 cornice rests
 With hair blown back, and wings put
 crosswise on their breasts.

v

At length burst in the argent
 revelry,
 With plume, tiara, and
 all rich array,
 Numerous as shadows haunting faeril
 The brain, new stuff'd in youth, with
 triumphs gay
 Of old romance. These let us wish away,
 And turn, sole-thoughted, to one Lady there,
 Whose heart had brooded, all that wintry day,
 On love, and wing'd St. Agnes' saintly care,
 As she had heard old dames full many
 times declare.

vi

They told her how, upon
 St. Agnes' Eve,
 Young virgins might
 have visions of delight,
 And soft adorings from their loves
 receive

ST. AGNES

Upon the honey'd middle of the night,
If ceremonies due they did aright;
As, supperless to bed they must retire,
And couch supine their beauties, lily
white;
Nor look behind, nor sideways, but
require
Heaven with upward eyes for all
that they desire.





Full of this whim was thought-
ful Madeline;
The music, yearning like a God in pain,
She scarcely heard: her maiden eyes divine
Fix'd on the floor, saw many a sweeping train
Pass by.... she heeded not at all: in vain
Came many a tiptoe, amorous cavalier,

And back retir'd; not cool'd by high disdain,
 But she saw not: her heart was otherwhere:
 She sigh'd for Agnes' dreams, the sweet-
 est of the year.

VIII.

She danced along with vague,
 regardless eyes,
 Anxious her lips, her breath-
 ing quick and short:
 The hallow'd hour was near
 at hand: she sighs
 Amid the timbrels, and the
 throng'd resort
 Of whisperers in anger, or in sport;
 Wild looks of love, defiance, hate and scorn,
 Goodwink'd with faery fancy: all amort,
 gave to St. Agnes and her lambs unshorn,
 And all the bliss to be before tomor-
 row morn.

IX



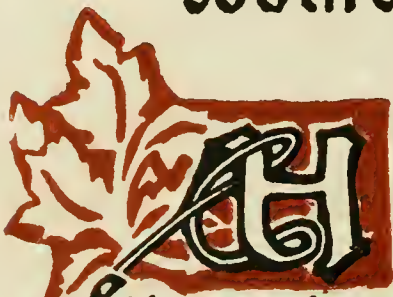
purposing each moment
to retire,

She linger'd still. Mean-
time, across the moors,

Had come young Porphyro, with heart ^{on fire}
For Madeline. Beside the portal doors,
Buttress'd from moonlight, stands he,
and implores

All saints to give him sight of Madeline,
But for one moment in the tedious hours.
That he might gaze & worship all unseen;
Perchance speak, kneel, touch, kiss ~ in
sooth such things have been.

X



He ventures in: let no buzz'd
whisper tell;

All eyes be muffled, or a hundred swords
Will storm his heart, Love's fev'rous citadel
For him those chambers held bar-
barian hordes,

Hyena foemen, and hot-blooded lords,
 Whose very dogs would execrations howl
 Against his lineage: not one breast affords
 Him any mercy, in that mansion soul,
 Save one old beldame, weak in body
 and in soul.

XI

Ah, happy chance! the
 aged creature came,
 Shuffling along with
 ivory-headed wand,
 To where he stood, hid from
 the torch's flame,
 Behind a broad hall pillar, far beyond
 The sound of merriment and chorus bland:
 He startled her, but soon she knew his face
 And grasped his fingers in her palsied hand,
 Saying, "Mercy, Porphyro! hie thee
 from this place;
 They are all here tonight, the whole
 blood-thirsty race!

XII

GET hence! get hence!
there's dwarfish hilde brand;
he had a fever late, and
in the fit

he cursed thee and thine, both house & land:
Then there's that old Lord Maurice, not a whit
More tame for his gray hairs.... Alas me! flit!
Flit like a ghost away"... "Ah, Gossip dear,
We're safe enough; here in this arm-chair sit,
And tell me how"... "Good Saints! not
here, not here;
Follow me, child, or else these stones
will be thy bier."

XIII

He follow'd through a lowly
arched way,
Brushing the cobwebs with his lofty
plume,
And as she mutter'd, "Well-a.... well-
a-day!"
He found him in a little moonlight room,

Pale lattic'd, chill, and silent as a tomb,
 "Now tell me where is Madeline," said he,
 "Oh tell me, Angela, by the holy loom
 Which none but secret sisterhood
 may see,

When they St. Agnes' wool are weav-
 ing piously."

XIV



St. Agnes! Ah! it is St.
 Agnes' Eve...

Yet men will murder
 upon holy days:

Thou must hold water in a witch's sieve,
 And be liege-lord of all the Elves and
 Fays,

To venture so: it fills me with amaze,
 To see thee, Porphyro! St. Agnes' Eve!
 God's help! my lady fair the conjurer plays
 This very night: good angels her deceive!
 But let me laugh awhile, I've mickle
 time to grieve."

XVIII

Ah! why wilt thou affright a feeble soul?
A poor, weak, palsy-stricken, churchyard thing,
Whose passing-bell may ere the midnight toll;
Whose prayers for thee, each morn and evening,
Were never miss'd."..... Thus plaining,
doth she bring
A gentler speech from burning Porphyro;
So woeful, and of such deep sorrowing,
That Angela gives promise she will do
Whatever he shall wish, beside her weal
or woe.

XIX

Which was, to lead him, in close secrecy,
Even to Madeline's chamber, & there hide
him in a closet, of such privacy
That he might see her beauty unespied,

And win, perhaps that night a peerless bride,
 While legion'd faeries pac'd the coverlet,
 And pale enchantment held her sleepy-ey'd.
 Never on such a night have lovers met,
 Since Merlin paid his Demon all the mon-
 strous debt.

XX

I shall be as thou wishest,"
 said the Dame:
 "All cates and dainties
 shall be stored there

Quickly on this feast-night; by the
 tambour-frame

her own lute thou wilt see: no time to spare,
 For I am slow and feeble, and scarce dare
 On such a catering trust my dizzy head.
 Wait here, my child, with patience; kneel
 in prayer

The while: Ah! thou must needs the lady wed,
 Or may I never leave my grave among
 the dead."



XXIV

A

casement high and
triple-arch'd there was,
All garlanded with
carven imag'ries

Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches
of knot-grass,

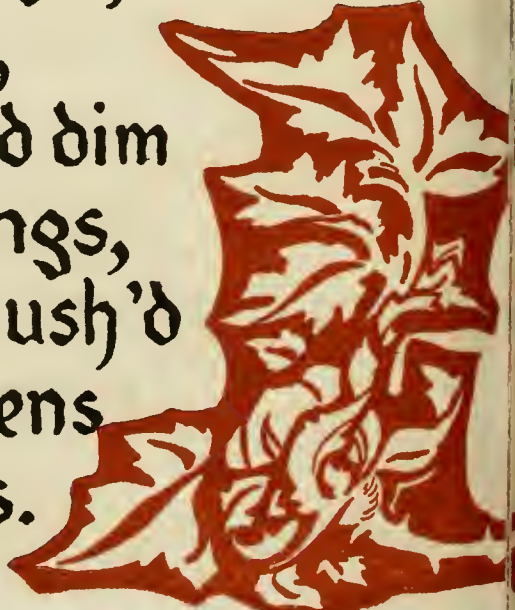
And diamonded with panes of quaint
device,

Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,
As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings;

And in the midst, 'mong thousand
heraldries,

And twilight saints, and dim
emblazonings,

A shielded scutcheon blush'd
with blood of queens
and kings.



Rull on this casement
 shown the wintry moon,
 And threw warm gules
 on Madeline's fair breast,
 As down she knelt for heaven's grace
 and boon;
 Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together
 prest,
 And on her silver cross soft amethyst,
 And on her hair a glory, like a saint:
 She seem'd a splendid angel, newly
 drest,
 Save wings, for heaven:— Porphyro
 grew faint:
 She knelt, so pure a thing, so free from
 mortal taint.






his heart revives: he
 vespers done,
Of all its wreathed
pearls her hair she fres;
Unclasps her warmed
jewels one by one;

Loosens her fragrant boddice; by degrees
 Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees:
 Half-hidden, like a mermaid in sea-weed,
 Pensive awhile she dreams awake, and sees,
 In fancy, fair St. Agnes in her bed,
 But dares not look behind, or all the
 charm is fled.

XXVII

oon, trembling in her soft
 and chilly nest,
 In sort of wakeful swoon, perplex'd she lay,
 Until the poppi'd warmth of sleep oppres'd
 her soothed limbs, and soul fatigued
 away;

Flown, like a thought, until the morrow-day
 Blissfully haven'd both from joy and pain;
 Clasp'd like a missal where swart

Paynims pray;
 Blinded alike from sunshine and from rain
 As though a rose should shut, and be a
 bud again.

XXVIII



tolen to this paradise,
and so entranced,
Porphyro gaz'd upon her
empty dress,

And listen'd to her breathing, if it chanced
To wake into a slumberous tenderness;
Which when he heard, that minute
did he bless,

And breath'd himself: then from the
closet crept,

Noiseless as fear in a wide wilderness,
And over the hush'd carpet, silent, stept,
And 'tween the curtains peep'd, where,
lo!— how fast she slept.

XXIX



hen by the bedside, where
the faded moon

Made a dim, silver twilight, soft he set
A table, and, half anguish'd, threw thereon
A cloth of woven crimson, gold, and jet:—

O for some drowsy Morphean amulet!
 The boisterous, midnight, festive clarion,
 The kettle-drum, and far-heard clarionet,
 Affray his ears, though but in dying tone:
 The hall door shuts again, and all the
 noise is gone.

XXX

And still she slept an azure-
 lidded sleep,
 In blanched linen, smooth,
 and lavender'd,
 While he from forth the closet brought
 a heap
 Of candied apple, guince, and plum,
 and gourd;
 With jellies softer than the creamy curd,
 And lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon;
 Manna and dates, in argosy transfer'd
 From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one,
 From silken Samarcand to cedar'd
 Lebanon.

XXXI

These delicacies he heap'd
with glowing hand
On golden dishes and in
baskets bright

Of wreathed silver: sumptuous they stand
In the retired quiet of the night,
Filling the chilly room with perfume light.—

“And now, my love, my seraph fair, awake!
Thou art my heaven, and I thine eremite.
Open thine eyes, for meek St. Agnes' sake,
Or I shall drowse beside thee, so my soul
doth ache.”

XXXII

Thus whispering, his warm,
unnerved arm
Sank in her pillow. Shaded
was her dream
By the dusk curtains:—'twas a
midnight charm
Impossible to melt as iced stream:

The lustrous salvers in the moonlight gleam;
 Broad golden fringe upon the carpet lies:
 (t seem'd he never, never could redeem
 From such a steadfast spell his lady's eyes;
 So mus'd awhile, entoil'd in woofed
 phantasies.

XXXIII

Awakening up, he took
 her hollow lute,~
 Tumultuous,~ and, in chords
 that tenderest be,
 He play'd an ancient ditty, long since mute,
 in Provence call'd, "La Belle dame sans mercy":
 Close to her ear touching the melody;~
 Wherewith disturb'd, she utler'd a
 soft moan:
 He ceas'd~ she panted quick~ and
 suddenly
 Her blue affrayed eyes wide open shone:
 Upon his knees he sank, pale as smooth~
 sculptured stone.



Eyes were open, but
she still beheld,
Now wide awake, the
vision of her sleep:
There was a painful
change, that night
expell'd

The blisses of her dream so pure and deep
 At which fair Madeline began to weep,
 And moan forth witless words with
 many a sigh;

While still her gaze on Porphyro would keep;
 Who knelt, with joined hands and piteous eye,
 Fearing to move or speak, she look'd so dream-
 ingly.

XXXV

Ah, Porphyro!" said she, "but
 even now

thy voice was at sweet tremble in mine ear,
 Made tuneable with every sweetest vow;
 And those sad eyes were spiritual and clear:
 How chang'd thou art! how pallid, chill,
 and drear!

Give me that voice again, my Porphyro,
 Those looks immortal, those complain-
 ings dear!

Oh leave me not in this eternal woe,
 For if thou diest, my Love, I know not
 where to go.

XXXVI

Beyond a mortal man
impassion'd far
At these voluptuous
accents, he arose,
Ethereal, flush'd, and like a throbbing star
Seen mid the sapphire heaven's deep
repose;
Into her dream he melted, as the rose
Blendeth its odour with the violet, ~
Solution sweet: meantime the frost-
wind blows
Like Love's alarum pattering the sharp
sleet
Against the window-panes; St. Agnes'
moon hath set.

XXXVII

Tis dark: quick pattereth
the flaw-blown sleet:
'Tis no dream, my bride, my Madeline!
'Tis dark: the iced gusts still rave and bea
"No dream, alas! alas! and woe is mine!

Porphyro will leave me here to fade & pine.—
 Cruel! what traitor could thee hither bring?
 I curse not, for my heart is lost in thine,
 Though thou forsakest a deceived thing;—
 A dove solorn and lost with sick unpruned
 wing.”

XXXVIII

M Madeline! sweet dreamer
 lovely bride!
 Say, may I be for aye thy
 vassal blest?

Thy beauty's shield, heart-shap'd and
 vermeil dy'd?

Ah, silver shrine, here will I take my rest
 After so many hours of toil and quest,
 A famish'd pilgrim, ~ sav'd by miracle.

Though I have found, I will not rob thy nest
 Saving of thy sweet self; if thou
 think'st well

To trust, fair Madeline, to no rude infidel.



ARK! 'tis an elfin storm
from faery land,
Of haggard seeming,
but a boon indeed:

Arise~arise! the morn-
ing is at hand;~


The bloated wassaillers will
never heed:~

Let us away, my love, with
happy speed;

There are no ears to hear, or eyes
to see,~

Drown'd all in Rhenish and the
sleepy mead.

Awake! arise! my love, and fearless be,
For o'er the southern moors I have a
home for thee".



HE hurried at his words,
beset with fears,
For there were sleeping
dragons all around,
At glaring watch, per-
haps, with ready spears~
Down the wide stairs a dark-
ling way they found~
In all the house was heard no
human sound.
A chain-droop'd lamp was
flickering by each door;
The arras, rich with horseman, hawk,
and hound,
Flutter'd in the besieging wind's uproar;
And the long carpets rose along the
gusty floor.

XLII



nd they are gone: aye,
ages long ago
These lovers fled away
into the storm.

That night the Baron dreamt of many a woe,
And all his warrior-guests with shade
and form

Of witch, and demon, and large coffin-worm,
Were long be-nightmar'd. Angela the old
Died palsy-twitch'd, with meagre
face deform,

The Beadsman, after thousand aves told,
For aye unsought for slept among his
ashes cold.

“HERE ENDETH THE YOUNG AND
DIVINE POET, BUT NOT THE DELIGHT
AND GRATITUDE OF HIS READERS,
FOR, AS HE SINGS ELSE-
WHERE;”

“A thing of beauty is a joy forever.”





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