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L-M PERINE.

1
Robert Browning

273
-1837

Saul

Designed and
hand colored by
Lolita Perine



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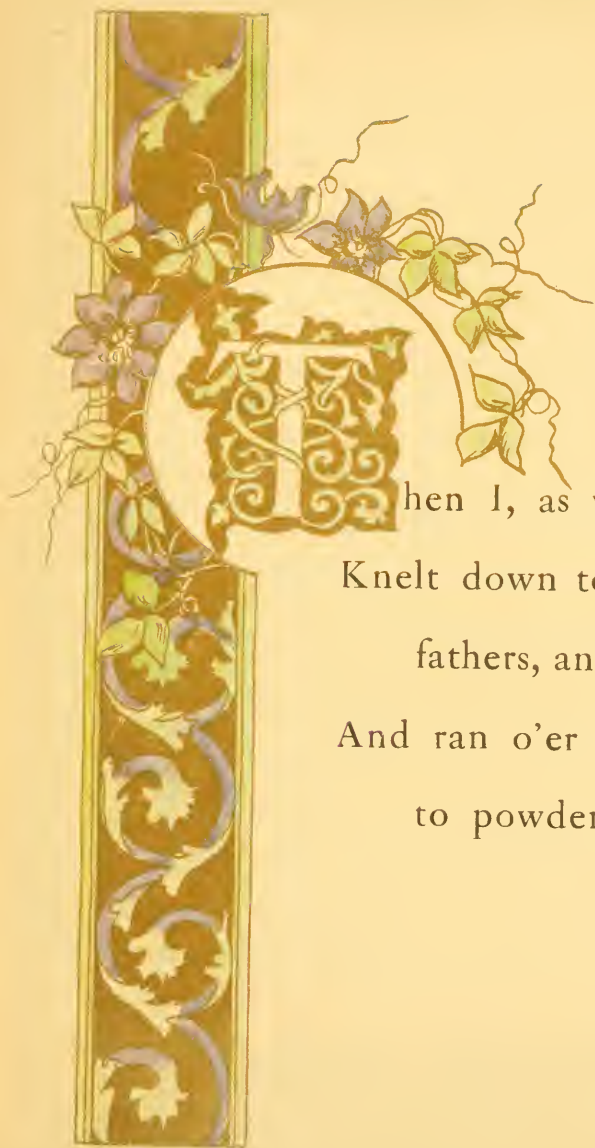
S a u l

I

SAID Abner, "At last thou art come!
Ere I tell, ere thou speak,
Kiss my cheek, wish me well!" Then I
wished it, and did kiss his cheek.
And he, "Since the King, O my friend, for
thy countenance sent,
Neither drunken nor eaten have we; nor until
from his tent
Thou return with the joyful assurance the
King liveth yet,
Shall our lips with the honey be bright, with
the water be wet.
For out of the black mid-tent's silence, a
space of three days,
Not a sound hath escaped to thy servants, of
prayer nor of praise,
To betoken that Saul and the Spirit have
ended their strife,
And that, faint in his triumph, the monarch
sinks back upon life.

II

“Yet now my heart leaps, O beloved! God’s
child with his dew
On thy gracious gold hair, and those lilies
still living and blue
Just broken to twine round thy harp-strings,
as if no wild heat
Were now raging to torture the desert!”



hen I, as was meet,
Knelt down to the God of my
fathers, and rose on my feet,
And ran o'er the sand burnt
to powder.



III

Then I, as was meet,
Knelt down to the God of my fathers, and
rose on my feet,
And ran o'er the sand burnt to powder. The
tent was unlooped;
I pulled up the spear that obstructed, and
under I stooped;
Hands and knees on the slippery grass-patch,
all withered and gone,
That extends to the second enclosure, I
groped my way on
Till I felt where the foldskirts fly open. Then
once more I prayed,
And opened the foldskirts and entered, and
was not afraid
But spoke, "Here is David, thy servant!"
And no voice replied.
At the first I saw nought but the blackness;
but soon I descried
A something more black than the blackness—
the vast, the upright

Main prop which sustains the pavilion: and
slow into sight

Grew a figure against it, gigantic and blackest
of all.

Then a sunbeam, that burst through the tent-
roof. showed Saul.

IV

He stood as erect as that tent-prop, both
arms stretched out wide
On the great cross-support in the centre, that
goes to each side;
He relaxed not a muscle, but hung there as,
caught in his pangs
And waiting his change, the king-serpent all
heavily hangs,
Far away from his kind, in the pine, till
deliverance come
With the spring-time,—so agonized Saul,
drear and stark, blind and dumb.

V

Then I tuned my harp,—took off the lilies we
twine round its chords
Lest they snap 'neath the stress of the noon-
tide—those sunbeams like swords!
And I first played the tune all our sheep know,
as, one after one,
So docile they come to the pen-door till folding
be done.
They are white and untorn by the bushes, for
lo, they have fed
Where the long grasses stifle the water within
the stream's bed;
And now one after one seeks its lodging, as
star follows star
Into eve and the blue far above us,—so blue
and so far!

VI

—Then the tune, for which quails on the corn-
land will each leave his mate
To fly after the player; then, what makes the
crickets elate
Till for boldness they fight one another: and
then, what has weight
To set the quick jerboa a-musing outside his
sand house—
There are none such as he for a wonder, half
bird and half mouse!
God made all the creatures and gave them our
love and our fear,
To give sign, we and they are his children, one
family here.

VII

Then I played the help-tune of our reapers,
their wine-song, when hand
Grasps at hand, eye lights eye in good friend-
ship, and great hearts expand
And grow one in the sense of this world's life.
—And then, the last song
When the dead man is praised on his journey
—“Bear, bear him along

With his few faults shut up like dead flowerets!
—Are balm seeds not here
To console us? The land has none left such
as he on the bier.
Oh, would we might keep thee, my brother!”
—And then, the glad chaunt
Of the marriage,—first go the young maidens,
next, she whom we vaunt
As the beauty, the pride of our dwelling.—
And then, the great march

Wherein man runs to man to assist him and
buttress an arch

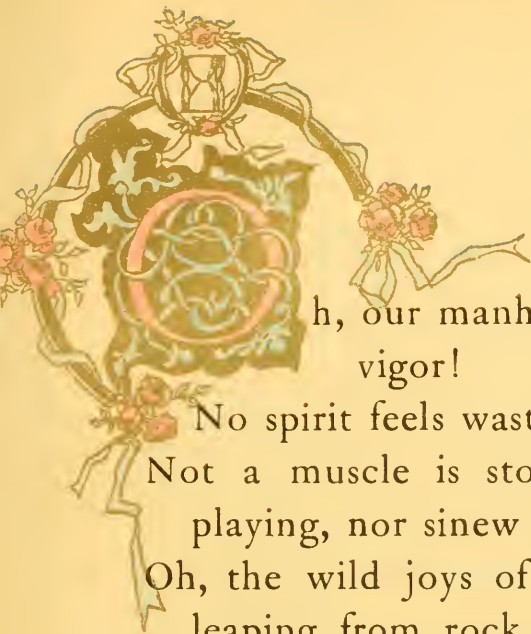
Nought can break; who shall harm them, our
friends? Then, the chorus intoned

As the Levites go up to the altar in glory
enthroned.

But I stopped here: for here in the darkness
Saul groaned.

VIII

And I paused, held my breath in such silence,
and listened apart;
And the tent shook, for mighty Saul shud-
dered: and sparkles 'gan dart
From the jewels that woke in his turban, at
once with a start,
All its lordly male-sapphires, and rubies coura-
geous at heart.
So the head: but the body still moved not, still
hung there erect.
And I bent once again to my playing, pur-
sued it unchecked,
As I sang,—



h, our manhood's prime
vigor!

No spirit feels waste,
Not a muscle is stopped in its
playing, nor sinew unbraced.
Oh, the wild joys of living! the
leaping from rock up to rock,
The strong rending of boughs from
the fir-tree, the cool silver shock
Of the plunge in a pool's living
water, the hunt of the bear,
And the sultriness showing the
lion is couched in his lair.

IX

“Oh, our manhood’s prime vigor!
No spirit feels waste,
Not a muscle is stopped in its playing, nor
sinew unbraced.
Oh, the wild joys of living! the leaping from
rock up to rock,
The strong rending of boughs from the fir-
tree, the cool silver shock
Of the plunge in a pool’s living water, the
hunt of the bear,
And the sultriness showing the lion is couched
in his lair.
And the meal, the rich dates yellowed over
with gold dust divine,
And the locust-flesh steeped in the pitcher,
the full draught of wine,
And the sleep in the dried river-channel where
bulrushes tell
That the water was wont to go warbling so
softly and well.

How good is man's life, the mere living! how
fit to employ
All the heart and the soul and the senses for-
ever in joy!
Hast thou loved the white locks of thy father,
whose sword thou didst guard
When he trusted thee forth with the armies,
for glorious reward?
Didst thou see the thin hands of thy mother,
held up as men sung
The low song of the newly-departed, and hear
her faint tongue
Joining in while it could to the witness, 'Let
one more attest,
I have lived, seen God's hand through a life-
time, and all was for best?'
Then they sung through their tears in strong
triumph, not much, but the rest.
And thy brothers, and help and the contest,
the working whence grew
Such results as, from seething grape-bundles,
the spirit strained true:
And the friends of thy boyhood—that boy-
hood of wonder and hope,
Present promise and wealth of the future
beyond the eye's scope,—
Till lo, thou art grown to a monarch; a people
is thine;

And all gifts, which the world offers singly, on
one head combine!

On one head, all the beauty and strength, love
and rage (like the throe

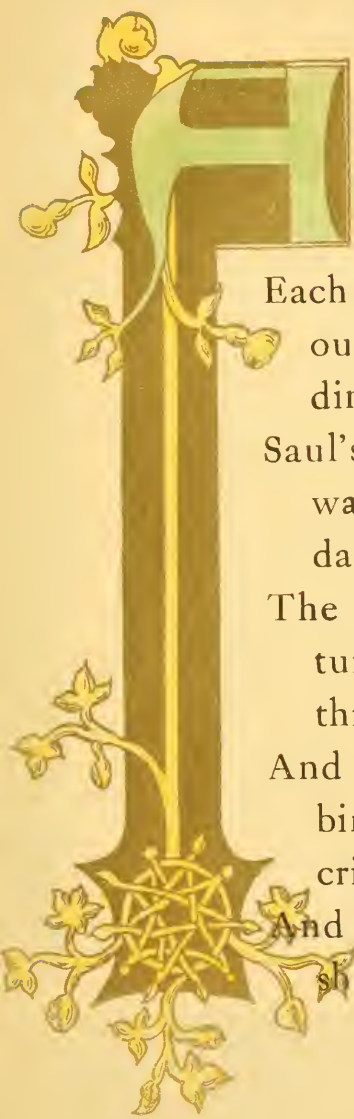
That, a-work in the rock, helps its labor and
lets the gold go)

High ambition and deeds which surpass it,
fame crowing them,—all

Brought to blaze on the head of one creature—
King Saul!"

X

And lo, with that leap of my spirit,—heart,
hand, harp and voice,
Each lifting Saul's name out of sorrow, each
bidding rejoice
Saul's fame in the light it was made for—as
when, dare I say,
The Lord's army, in rapture of service, strains
through its array,
And upsoareth the cherubim-chariot—"Saul!"
cried I, and stopped,
And waited the thing that should follow.
Then Saul, who hung propped
By the tent's cross-support in the centre, was
struck by his name.
Have ye seen when Spring's arrowy summons
goes right to the aim,
And some mountain, the last to withstand her,
that held (he alone,
While the vale laughed in freedom and
flowers) on a broad bust of stone



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And upsoareth the cheru-
bim-chariot — “Saul!”
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And waited the thing that
should follow.

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S a u l

15

A year's snow bound about for a breast-plate,
—leaves grasp of the sheet?
Fold on fold all at once it crowds thunderously
down to his feet,
And there fronts you, stark, black, but alive
yet, your mountain of old,
With his rents, the successive bequeathings of
ages untold—
Yes, each harm got in fighting your battles,
each furrow and scar
Of his head thrust 'twixt you and the tempest—
all hail, there they are!
—Now again to be softened with verdure,
again hold the nest
Of the dove, tempt the goat and its young to
the green on his crest
For their food in the ardors of summer. One
long shudder thrilled
All the tent till the very air tingled, then sank
and was stilled
At the King's self left standing before me,
released and aware.
What was gone, what remained? All to
traverse 'twixt hope and despair;
Death was past, life not come: so he waited.
Awhile his right hand
Held the brow, helped the eyes left too vacant
forthwith to remand

To their place what new objects should enter:
'twas Saul as before.
I looked up and dared gaze at those eyes, nor
was hurt any more
Than by slow pallid sunsets in autumn, ye
watch from the shore,
At their sad level gaze o'er the ocean—a sun's
slow decline
Over hills which, resolved in stern silence,
o'er-lap and entwine
Base with base to knit strength more intensely:
so arm folded arm
O'er the chest whose slow heavings subsided.

XI

What spell or what charm
For, awhile there was trouble within me,
what next should I urge
To sustain him where song had restored him?
—Song filled to the verge
His cup with the wine of this life, pressing all
that it yields
Of mere fruitage, the strength and the beauty:
beyond, on what fields,
Glean a vintage more potent and perfect to
brighten the eye
And bring blood to the lip, and commend
them the cup they put by?
He saith, "It is good;" still he drinks not: he
lets me praise life,
Gives assent, yet would die for his own part.

XII

Then fancies grew rife
Which had come long ago on the pasture,
when round me the sheep
Fed in silence—above, the one eagle wheeled
slow as in sleep;
And I lay in my hollow and mused on the
world that might lie
'Neath his ken, though I saw but the strip
'twixt the hill and the sky:
And I laughed—"Since my days are ordained
to be passed with my flocks,
Let me people at least, with my fancies, the
plains and the rocks,
Dream the life I am never to mix with, and
image the show
Of mankind as they live in those fashions I
hardly shall know!
Schemes of life, its best rules and right uses,
the courage that gains,
And the prudence that keeps what men strive
for."

And now these old trains
Of vague thought came again; I grew surer;
so, once more the string
Of my harp made response to my spirit, as
thus—

XIII

“Yea, my King,”
I began—“thou dost well in rejecting mere
comforts that spring
From the mere mortal life held in common by
man and by brute :
In our flesh grows the branch of this life, in
our soul it bears fruit.
Thou hast marked the slow rise of the tree,—
how its stem trembled first
Till it passed the kid’s lip, the stag’s antler;
then safely outburst
The fan-branches all round; and thou mindest
when these too, in turn,
Broke a-bloom and the palm-tree seemed per-
fect: yet more was to learn,
E’en the good that comes in with the palm-
fruit. Our dates shall we slight,
When their juice brings a cure for all sorrow?
or care for the plight

Of the palm's self whose slow growth produced
them? Not so! stem and branch
Shall decay, nor be known in their place, while
the palm-wine shall stanch
Every wound of man's spirit in winter. I
pour thee such wine.
Leave the flesh to the fate it was fit for! the
spirit be thine!
By the spirit, when age shall o'ercome thee,
thou still shalt enjoy
More indeed, than at first when unconscious,
the life of a boy.
Crush that life, and behold its wine running!
Each deed thou hast done
Dies, revives, goes to work in the world; until
e'en as the sun
Looking down on the earth, though clouds
spoil him, though tempests efface,
Can find nothing his own deed produced not,
must everywhere trace
The results of his past summer-prime,—so,
each ray of thy will,
Every flush of thy passion and prowess, long
over, shall thrill
Thy whole people, the countless, with ardor,
till they too give forth
A like cheer to their sons, who in turn, fill the
South and the North

With the radiance thy deed was the germ of.
Carouse in the past!
But the license of age has its limit; thou diest
at last:
As the lion when age dims his eyeball, the
rose at her height,
So with man—so his power and his beauty for-
ever take flight.
No! Again a long draught of my soul-wine!
Look forth o'er the years!
Thou hast done now with eyes for the actual;
begin with the seer's!
Is Saul dead? In the depth of the vale make
his tomb—bid arise
A gray mountain of marble heaped four-
square, till, built to the skies,
Let it mark where the great First King slum-
bers: whose fame would ye know?
Up above see the rock's naked face, where the
record shall go
In great characters cut by the scribe,—Such
was Saul, so he did;
With the sages directing the work, by the
populace chid,—
For not half, they'll affirm, is comprised there!
Which fault to amend,
In the grove with his kind grows the cedar,
whereon they shall spend

(See, in tablets 'tis level before them) their
praise, and record
With the gold of the graver, Saul's story,—
the statesman's great word
Side by side with the poet's sweet comment.
The river's a-wave
With smooth paper-reeds grazing each other—
when prophet-winds rave:
So the pen gives unborn generations their due
and their part
In thy being! Then, first of the mighty,
thank God that thou art!"

XIV

And behold while I sang . . . but O Thou
who didst grant me that day,
And before it not seldom hast granted thy
help to essay,
Carry on and complete an adventure,—my
shield and my sword
In that act where my soul was thy servant,
thy word was my word,
Still be with me, who then at the summit of
human endeavor
And scaling the highest, man's thought could,
gazed hopeless as ever
On the new stretch of heaven above me—till,
mighty to save,
Just one lift of thy hand cleared that dis-
tance—God's throne from man's grave:
Let me tell out my tale to its ending—my
voice to my heart
Which can scarce dare believe in what marvels
last night I took part,

As this morning I gather the fragments, alone
with my sheep,
And still fear lest the terrible glory evanish
like sleep!
For I wake in the gray dewy covert, while
Hebron upheaves
The dawn struggling with night on his shoul-
der, and Kidron retrieves
Slow the damage of yesterday's sunshine.

XV

I say then,—my song
While I sang thus, assuring the monarch, and
ever more strong
Made a proffer of good to console him—he
slowly resumed
His old motions and habitudes kingly. The
right hand replumed
His black locks to their wonted composure,
adjusted the swathes
Of his turban, and see—the huge sweat that
his countenance bathes,
He wipes off with the robe; and he girds now
his loins as of yore,
And feels slow for the armlets of price, with
the clasp set before.
He is Saul, ye remember in glory,—ere error
had bent
The broad brow from the daily communion;
and still, though much spent

Be the life and the bearing that front you,
the same, God did choose,
To receive what a man may waste, desecrate,
never quite lose.
So sank he along by the tent-prop till, stayed
by the pile
Of his armor and war-cloak and garments, he
leaned there awhile,
And sat out my singing,—one arm round the
tent-prop, to raise
His bent head, and the other hung slack—till
I touched on the praise
I foresaw from all men in all time, to the man
patient there;
And thus ended, the harp falling forward.
Then first I was 'ware
That he sat, as I say, with my head just above
his vast knees
Which were thrust on each side around me,
like oak roots which please
To encircle a lamb when it slumbers. I
looked up to know
If the best I could do had brought solace: he
spoke not, but slow
Lifted up the hand slack at his side, till he
laid it with care
Soft and grave, but in mild settled will, on my
brow: through my hair

The large fingers were pushed, and he bent
back my head, with kind power—
All my face back, intent to peruse it, as men
do a flower.
Thus held he me there with his great eyes
that scrutinized mine—
And oh, all my heart how it loved him! but
where was the sign?
I yearned—"Could I help thee, my father,
inventing a bliss,
I would add, to that life of the past, both the
future and this;
I would give thee new life altogether, as good,
ages hence,
As this moment,—had love but the warrant,
love's heart to dispense!"



yearned — “Could I help thee, my father, inventing a bliss,
I would add, to that life of the past, both the future and this;
I would give thee new life altogether, as good, ages hence,
As this moment, — had love but the warrant, love’s heart to dispense!”

XVI

Then the truth came upon me. No harp
more—no song more! out-broke
“I have gone the whole round of creation: I
saw and I spoke:
I, a work of God’s hand for that purpose,
received in my brain
And pronounced on the rest of his handwork—
returned him again
His creation’s approval or censure; I spoke as
I saw:
I report, as a man may of God’s work—all’s
love, yet all’s law.
Now I lay down the judgeship he lent me.
Each faculty tasked.
To perceive him, has gained an abyss, where a
dewdrop was asked.
Have I knowledge? confounded it shrivels at
Wisdom laid bare.
Have I forethought? how purblind, how
blank, to the Infinite Care!

Do I task any faculty highest, to image success?
I but open my eyes,—and perfection, no more
and no less,
In the kind I imagined, full-fronts me, and
God is seen God
In the star, in the stone, in the flesh, in the
soul and the clod.
And thus looking within and around me, I
ever renew
(With that stoop of the soul which in bending
upraises it too)
The submission of man's nothing-perfect to
God's all-complete,
As by each new obeisance in spirit, I climb to
his feet.
Yet with all this abounding experience, this
deity known,
I shall dare to discover some province, some
gift of my own.
There's a faculty pleasant to exercise, hard to
hoodwink,
I am fain to keep still in abeyance, (I laugh as
I think)
Lest, insisting to claim and parade in it, wot
ye, I worst
E'en the Giver is one gift.—Behold, I could
love if I durst!

But I sink the pretension as fearing a man
may o'ertake

God's own speed in the one way of love: I
abstain for love's sake.

—What, my soul? see thus far and no farther?
when doors great and small,

Nine-and-ninety flew ope at our touch, should
the hundredth appall?

In the least things have faith, yet distrust in
the greatest of all?

Do I find love so full in my nature, God's
ultimate gift,

That I doubt his own love can compete with
it? Here, the parts shift?

Here, the creature surpass the Creator—the
end, what Began?

Would I fain in my impotent yearning do all
for this man,

And dare doubt he alone shall not help him,
who yet alone can?

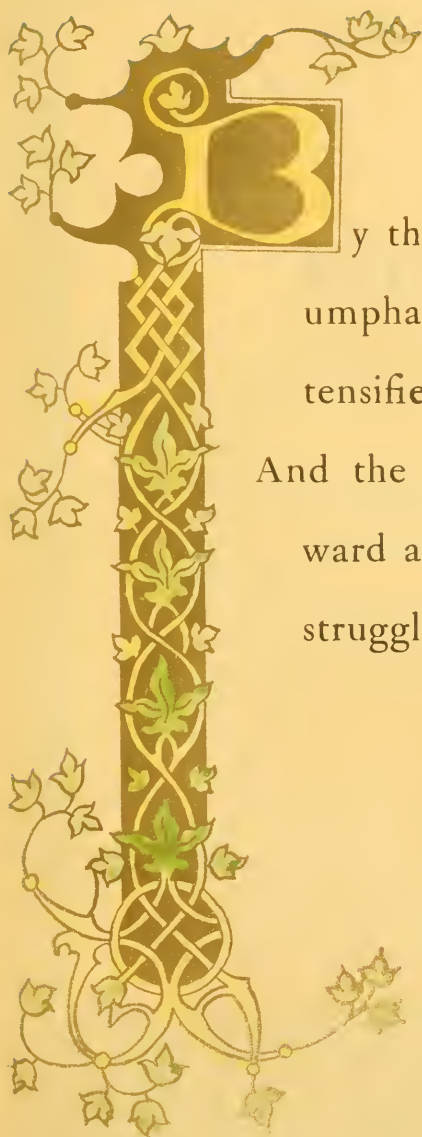
Would it ever have entered my mind, the
bare will, much less power,

To bestow on this Saul what I sang of, the
marvelous dower

Of the life he was gifted and filled with? to
make such a soul,

Such a body, and then such an earth for
insphering the whole?

And doth it not enter my mind (as my warm
tears attest),
These good things being given, to go on, and
give one more, the best?
Ay, to save and redeem and restore him,
maintain at the height
This perfection,—succeed with life's day-
spring, death's minute of night?
Interpose at the difficult minute, snatch
Saul the mistake,
Saul the failure, the ruin he seems now,—
and bid him awake
From the dream, the probation, the prelude,
to find himself set
Clear and safe in new light and new life,—a
new harmony yet
To be run, and continued, and ended—who
knows?—or endure!
The man taught enough by life's dream, of the
rest to make sure;
By the pain-throb, triumphantly winning in-
tensified bliss,
And the next world's reward and repose, by
the struggles in this.



By the pain-throb, tri-
umphantly winning in-
tensified bliss,
And the next world's re-
ward and repose, by the
struggles in this.

XVII

"I believe it! 'Tis thou, God, that givest, 'tis
I who receive:

In the first is the last, in thy will is my power
to believe.

All's one gift: thou canst grant it moreover,
as prompt to my prayer

As I breathe out this breath, as I open these
arms to the air.

From thy will, stream the worlds, life and
nature, thy dread Sabaoth:

I will? the mere atoms despise me! Why
am I not loth

To look that, even that in the face too? Why
is it I dare

Think but lightly of such impuissance? What
stops my despair?

This;—'tis not what man Does which exalts
him, but what man Would do!

See the King—I would help him but cannot,
the wishes fall through.

Could I wrestle to raise him from sorrow,
grow poor to enrich,
To fill up his life, starve my own out, I would
—knowing which,
I know that my service is perfect. Oh, speak
through me now!
Would I suffer for him that I love? So
wouldst thou—so wilt thou!
So shall crown thee the topmost, ineffablest,
uttermost crown—
And thy love fills infinitude wholly, nor leave
up nor down
One spot for the creature to stand in! It is
by no breath,
Turn of eye, wave of hand, that salvation
joins issue with death!
As thy Love is discovered almighty, almighty
be proved
Thy power, that exists with and for it, of
being Beloved!
He who did most, shall bear most; the strong-
est shall stand the most weak.
'Tis the weakness in strength that I cry for!
my flesh, that I seek
In the Godhead! I seek and I find it. O
Saul, it shall be
A Face like my face that receives thee; a Man
like to me

Thou shalt love and be loved by, forever: a
Hand like this hand
Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee!
See the Christ stand!"

XVIII

I know not too well how I found my way
home in the night.
There were witnesses, cohorts about me, to
left and to right,
Angels, powers, the unuttered, unseen, the
alive, the aware:
I repressed, I got through them as hardly, as
strugglingly there,
As a runner beset by the populace famished
for news—
Life or death. The whole earth was awak-
ened, hell loosed with her crews;
And the stars of night beat with emotion,
and tingled and shot
Out in fire the strong pain of pent knowledge:
but I fainted not,
For the Hand still impelled me at once and
supported, suppressed
All the tumult, and quenched it with quiet,
and holy behest, .

Till the rapture was shut in itself, and the
earth sank to rest.

Anon at the dawn, all that trouble had
withered from earth—

Not so much, but I saw it die out in the day's
tender birth;

In the gathered intensity brought to the
gray of the hills;

In the shuddering forests' held breath; in the
sudden wind-thrills;

In the startled wild beasts that bore off, each
with eye sidling still

Though averted with wonder and dread; in
the birds stiff and chill

That rose heavily, as I approached them,
made stupid with awe:

E'en the serpent that slid away silent, he
felt the new law.

The same stared in the white humid faces
upturned by the flowers;

The same worked in the heart of the cedar
and moved the vine-bowers:

And the little brooks witnessing murmured,
persistent and low,

With their obstinate, all but hushed voices—
"E'en so, it is so!"

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