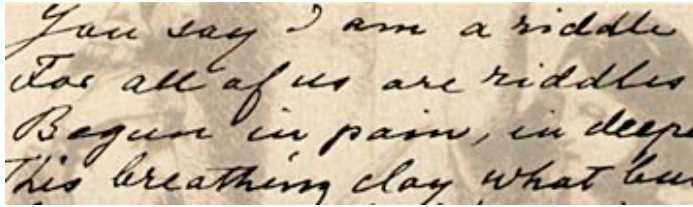


A Riddle



You say I am a riddle – it may be
For all of us are riddles unexplained.
Begun in pain, in deeper torture ended,
This breathing clay what business has it here?
Some petty wants to chain us to the Earth,
Some lofty thoughts to lift us to the spheres,
And cheat us with that semblance of a soul
To dream of Immortality, till Time
O'er empty visions draws the closing veil,
And a new life begins – the life of worms,
Those hungry plunderers of the human breast.
For this Hope dwindles as we fathom Truth:
Forgotten to forget – and is that all?
To-day a man, with power to act and feel,
A mirror of the Universe, wherein
Creation's centred rays combine to form
The focus of Intelligence; to-day
A heart so deeply loving that it seems
As if that band uniting soul to soul,
Were but Religion in a brighter form;
To-day all this – to-morrow a cold corpse,
A something worse than clay which stinks and rots.
Kind hands may strew their flowers, kind eyes may drop
A tear of pity o'er the buried dust;
But worms will feed long after friends are gone,
And, after all, what matters love of theirs

When all of us, that was, is at an end.

Thus far we all are riddles, but not so
In friendly intercourse of polished men.
There never did I shun to show myself
In open light – at least the faults I have.
If mask I wear it is the mask of Pride
Which scorns to show the miseries of the heart
And never stoops to beg Compassion's tear.
But since that closeness of the guarded breast
Is deemed a failing, since you wish to read
The bitter annals of a wasted life,
Lest you should deem me worse than truth can show,
Here will I sketch the likeness of my soul.
The time is fitting for the storm without,
Seems as an echo to the storm within,
And lightnings breaking through the dark of night
Match in their fury those that rend the heart.

Most men look back upon their childhood's days
With deep regret that they cannot return,
For in that age, if Love denies its roses,
It breeds no thorns to poison Beauty's touch,
The heart as yet beats with an even pulse,
Free from the throbs alike of bliss and woe;
A mother's kiss can set the face a-beaming
With smiles that breathe of innocence and joy;
A toy denied can cloud it o'er again
Till the fair cheek o'erflows with trickling tears;
Yet has that joy no deep, voluptuous swell,
Nor are those tears with bitterness imbued.
Man's halcyon days! weaned from a mother's breast,
But not yet weaned from her endearing care,

We hail the future as a fairy-land
And light its prospect with the rays of Hope,
That inward sunshine of the budding soul.
It shines on all, yet shone not then on me,
For torture, in the shape of illness, threw
A gloom around me from the dawn of life.
My cradle looked a death-bed, and for years
A mother watched with ever anxious care,
Though little chance, to save the flickering light.
I scarce could gather strength to drain the breast
And then convulsions followed, till I gasped
Upon the brink of Nothingness – my frame
A school for Agony, with Death for goal.
Thus passed some years, while Life with Death contending,
Hung o’ver Chaos on a single thread,
But spun by Destiny, such threads will hold
Till man is brought to tear them with a curse.

Not that to me life seems an idle burden:
I look upon it as a noble gift,
A gem from Nature’s hand for man to polish
Till sparkling beams repay him for his toil.
A wretch is he who, for some petty cause,
Of grief, or disappointment, or distress,
Would barter light for darkness, thought for dust;
But when the rays of that same gem of ours
Prove but the finery of deluding paste,
When light is wasted on a desert soil,
When the soul glimmers through a tottering frame,
May we not woo the stillness of that night
Which has no morrow? Sometimes when the mind
Reviews the past, and from its miseries draws
A future parallel, that fatal thought
Intrudes, but ‘tis ignoble, for to be

Is something still, and were we doubly mean.
What if that Sun which lights us from above
Should set for ever, would not each of us
Count the last ray that still kept off the night?
What if that Sun which lights us from within
Be slow to set, should we shut out its rays?
And can we not, from the wide scene around,
From earth, from skies, from the Creator's store
Of beauteous moulds draw matter for the mind
To fill its void and chase the clouds of sorrow?
Is there no face, that, looking into ours,
Feeds on its joy or smiles its pain away?
Is there no maid to tend the sick of soul?
No heart with sweet [v. 2] responsive love?
Is there no link between us and the world
Wherewith to join Affection's broken chain?
Alas! For those that cannot claim a share
In the sweet ties of human brotherhood,
Who never knew the bliss of charity,
That charity which gold cannot supply.
Life unto them is but a demi-death
And terrors hunt them to an early grave.

But I perceive, my thoughts are gone a-wondering
They needs must follow where their magnet leads.
Now to my theme. I left the infant whining,
A paltry thing conscious of nought but woe.
We find him now a boy. His weakness still
Makes him a stranger in the little world
Wherein he moves: when fellow-boys are playing
He joins them not, a pensive looker-on;
And thus debarred the pleasures of his age
His mind keeps brooding over those to come.
With an Imagination made to scale

The utmost heights to which the mind can soar
I had no judgement then to check its flight
Or trace the drawbacks on its golden dreams.
The past, the present, with their conscious woe,
Seemed but a stepping-stone to future bliss;
And where is he, who in his early days
Has not blown hopes, those bubbles of the mind,
Whose tints grow richer as the substance thins,
Then burst, leaving their mockery behind.
But blown in youth they mostly burst much later,
And colour life, the charming cheats they are.

Facing the world I saw there was but little
Which had not been embellished in my dreams;
I viewed the scenery which spread around
My early home with an observing eye,
Yet did not much exult, for Fancy drew
Within a landscape brighter far and wider,
Pregnant with beauties of ideal growth:
There was no spot but the rich loom of Nature
Had woven a carpet for the treading foot;
The forests were of more majestic height,
And on the leaf there was a richer hue;
The mountains stretched their huge, fantastic shapes
On high, but on their tops there was no snow;
An ocean bordered on Eternity,
But it was calm and gentle as a child,
Its surface clear, and clear its conscience too,
If such it had, for it had made no wrecks;
Eternal sunshine made eternal summer,
And when the night spread shadows over Earth
There rose a moon – the hallowed lamp of Love.
And men were not what we do find them here:
No petty misers trembling for their hoards;

No lechers gloating o'er forbidden charms;
No sale of honour for the gain of bread;
No Vanity to feed the mind on glare
That great allurements of the reckless crowd;
No treacherous Envy, with its bilious face
That leaves in poison what it finds in joy;
No Calumny, with social wit endowed,
To rob the absent of their honest fame;
No, nothing of the kind; and woman too
Was far from what a real world can show;
No skilled coquettes to mock at deeper feelings
Because their own are of the shallow kind;
Who deem it conquest if they charm a fool
Devoid of sense to look their falsehood through;
No matrons either, careless of their duty,
And all that honour, all that sense commands,
Who feed the cravings of their rotten hearts;
And sap the Altar of Domestic Peace.
No; Modesty was there all women's dower,
A sacred gift to keep Contagion off:
That gift, could we put woman's heart to test,
Would prove its purest essence: with that guard
What husband would not lay his head secure
On such a bosom, trustful of its truth.
Yea, all was perfect in that brain-born world
Of which I was the soul; and round me flocked
The beauteous, and the gifted, and the great,
And deeply drank my boyish vanity
The incense of its own Idolatry!

Such my ideal life. 'Twas foolish sure
To view the future through that rosy glass,
But Youth must pass its school, and one by one
Its air-build castles crumble into dust.

Ambition in its dawn is apt to build
On a grand scale, but cannot measure then
The dizzy heights which we must climb for fame.
I still remember, when I read of men
Whose deeds are treasured up in History's page,
Or dwelt upon the thoughts of those long dead
That yet have might to kindle living souls,
A strange emotion gathered in my breast.
'Twas but a thrill which I cannot describe,
Yet scarcely Love, when heart 'gainst heart is beating,
When it unfolds its sweet delusive store;
Can match that bliss – I never felt the like.
And now 'tis gone: experience soon will show
That lofty thoughts must come from lofty power,
That eagles soar but as their wings can bear,
And then Ambition's impotence doth fret
A cancer on the soul, corroding youth.
Men talk of hells – the deepest is within
When jar the springs of Nature's harmony.

But hope is blind. The sailor trusts his skill
Nor dreams of wrecks when he puts off from shore,
And the young sailor o'er that chartless sea
Which we call Time ne'er asks if shoals be nigh.
Thus confident I left in early youth
My home for distant lands beyond the sea,
But, strange to say, even when the Ocean spread
Its grandeur round, it struck me not as new –
My Mind had pictured Oceans far more wide.
I came to Paris – – that's an Ocean too
Where Passion blows its storms, and makes more wrecks
Than the salt brine e'er made. Whoe'er explores
The vast, unfathomed gulf of Vice and Folly
Must pay his tribute to its idol Pleasure

Till he perceives he took her painted face
For the rich charms of Nature's healthy glow;
Then turns disgusted from degrading scenes
And looks for quiet to refresh the heart.
Alas! when youth has lost its faith in love,
When we have known the soul and heart to rot
In woman long before her charms are gone,
We pay for that experience a price
Which Fortune's brightest gift cannot refund.
We learn to scoff at Purity itself
And search for rouge on modest Virgin's cheek.
I found it so. When Passion first expands
'Tis not too nice to feed on common fruits,
And Vice has charms which blind us for a while.

Thus I drank deeply from its cup, but soon
I found its nectar poisoned with its dregs,
I sought for higher feeling and I found
That there are treasures in the tender breast
Which Dissipation never can destroy.
The sunken wretch who traffics with her charms
To earn her daily bread with daily shame,
May stir our senses into Passion's fire
Till slaked the thirst of brutal appetite;
But when the tide of feeling ebbs away
What man but feels a gnawing at his heart,
A gnawing of remorse for self-disgrace.
It is because there is a nobler nature
In polished men which cannot all be checked;
They too may stoop at times to worship Vice.
But know the value of her venal charms,
Nor can the sweetness of her kiss efface
The after-taste which its pollution leaves.
I've tried all kinds of love, from love ideal,

To the most abject hungry Vice bestows,
And know too well for me what weight they carry
When each is balanced in Enjoyment's scales.
Pure love ennobles while it charms the soul,
Yet is such love not much in fashion now
Since hopes and dreams are sacrificed to facts;
And hence it is that the same incense burns
On Virtue's altar and Corruption's shrine.
Not so with me. I have my darker hours
When gloomy bodings weigh upon the soul,
When the heart pants for something to adore
As if an angel could be born a maid,
As if Perfection were no brain-born dream.
I am a Dotard – let the wiser sneer!
I am a suckling still at Fancy's breast,
And if no living soul will cling to mine
I lull my heart with day-dreams bright and sweet
Or with the shadows of my former joys;
For once a being beautiful and good
Looked up to me, to me alone, for love.
No selfish motive drew the link between us,
No parents whispered of a proper match;
Why then loved she? because it was her nature
As fragrance is the nature of the rose,
And what is love but a still purer essence,
The sweeter fragrance of the breathing rose!
Remembrance fondly linger o'er those days
Of bygone bliss, but ere we pass to them
Glance we a moment o'er another scene.

There was a time when life had lost its zest
And disappointment gnawed me to the heart.
'Twas not indulgence had brought on surfeit
But something worse – that dread, corroding doubt,

The bitter sediment of baffled hopes,
Which makes the world appear a juggling mask
And Beauty's self raise nothing but a sneer,
Till, brooding o'er the mysteries of death,
We almost woo its close to such a scene.
I entered on that scene my heart o'erflowing
With sympathy – I sought for a return:
I looked to man for friendship, and to woman
For what should be a closer friendship – love.
In both I was deceived for I had chosen
Not with discernment as becomes a man,
But upon trust, the foolish boy I was.
Th'advances of my heart were met with jeers
Till, schooled in vice, I could return the jest;
Or else pretended friendship proved a show
To mask a selfish purpose. In disgust
I turned from such, and sought at woman's hands,
Beneath the softness of a gentler breast,
For more congenial feelings: there I learned
To look on Love as Prostitution's bawd,
On Youth and Beauty as a dress for Vice.
He who has soared not upon Fancy's wing,
Whose fiction never lent its glowing colours
To an ideal world, he cannot share
The deep depression which the dreamer feels
When all the beauties of his mind's creation
Are brought to stumble o'er Reality,
When upon test he finds the empty dreams,
Yet sweeter thus than all that life bestows.
Despondent shuns he then the wanton world,
And trains his soul to sickly solitude;
And thus his noble gifts are idly wasted
In mental palsy – uncreative thought.

Such was my state of self-wrought misery
 When love came to my rescue. At a ball
 It chanced. I stood there gazing at the throng,
 And it may be the splendour of the scene,
 Contrasting with my inward wretchedness,
 Wrought on my face a more than usual sadness
 For one there was who marked that gloom of mine,
 And as our eyes occasionally met
 Her's seemed to struggle with a rebel tear.
 Such are the starting points of those affections
 Which fill a life: a tear, a smile, a word,
 May form a link which only Death can tear.
 On went the dance, and joining it with her
 I felt a load fast sinking from my heart.
 "Erewhile I traced deep sadness on your brow:
 "Is it the loss of any dear to you
 "Affects you so?" – "No, Lady, not for friends,
 "But friendship's loss I mourn: the faith I had
 "In better feelings has been shaken long;
 "For wheresoe'er I look there's Egotism
 "And vanity, the main-spring of this world."
 "Perhaps 'tis so, yet should you not despond,
 "For man is made to hold his head aloft
 "And struggle 'gainst an adverse fate; if life
 "Strews not your path with roses, still there's left
 "One great resource, the culture of your mind.
 "You men can act: it is a noble lot
 "To be endowed with a creative power
 "For others' good – a sin to waste that power.
 "We of the weaker sex, we cannot share
 "Such aspirations: 'tis our humbler lot
 "To sweeten yours and share your joys and sorrows."

I deeply felt the truth her words avouched,

But deeper still I felt the love I bore.
I came a scoffer with a settled sneer:
I went an altered and a better man;
My life, till then a dreary desert like,
Revived to bliss and hope. I had an aim,
A heavenly aim [v. 3] – to win that lovely girl
And to be worthy her. The smile of old
Revisited my lips, and with it came
New vigour to my mind: I felt it soar
On Inspiration's wing to other spheres,
The spheres of Love and Poesy; I felt
Supremely happy; and we met again,
And oft again, till we had grown to be
A Heaven to one another; and I heard
The sweet confession of her Love; and sealed
It with a kiss, the chaste and hollowed kiss
Of pure affection though no eye was there,
Save the Almighty's to keep watch o'er us.

This might have ended in the usual manner,
And brought the joys and griefs of wedded life;
But 'twas not so ordained: another bridegroom
Had stronger claims – she's wedded to her grave.
Those flashing eyes where is their tempered fire?
Those wooing lips where is their ruby hue?
The thoughtful sadness of that beauteous brow,
Th'angelic softness of that lovely face,
The grace that decked, the soul that lit her charms,
Who can detect them where her dust is laid?
Think you that rubbish which we leave behind,
Those ashes of the frame and mind can earn,
Religion's promise of celestial life?
They need no dung in Heaven so we may make
Us easy on that score and rot in peace.

Yet when such bands are torn, when man is left
A lonely hermit in a busy world,
To brood o'er griefs for which there is no cure,
'Tis sweet to dream that we may meet again
With those we mourn for: 'tis a lie at best,
But pleasant lies may mask an ugly truth,
At least to weaker minds: the strong require
A solid ground whereon to build their hopes.

Mine are but few. My love is with the dead;
Nor was I there to soothe her latest hour,
But came to gaze upon a putrid corpse
Such as but fools can cherish. At the sight
A shudder seized me, and I turned away
In frenzied anguish unrelieved by tears.
They came at length, and as they freely flowed,
A calm came o'er my spirits: kneeling down
I raised my eyes towards Heaven and prayed
To the great Father there who gives and takes.
The day went down and through the dead of night
The stars shone lovely, and their rays to me
Seemed as a mystic answer from above.
And so they were: what are those rays which fill
His universe but messages from God
Could we but read their meaning. As I gazed
My soul, elated with the grandeur round,
Felt deeply humbled at my petty grief,
And I resolved to shake it off as much
As man has strength to do, and to devote
My life to nobler duties. From that hour
I have not shared the pleasure of the crowd,
Nor moved in Beauty's eye Compassion's tear,
But I have learned to study Nature's book
And comprehend its pages, and extract

From their deep love a solace for my grief.
