

THE CATACOMBS:

A PRIZE POEM,

RECITED

In the Theatre, Oxford,

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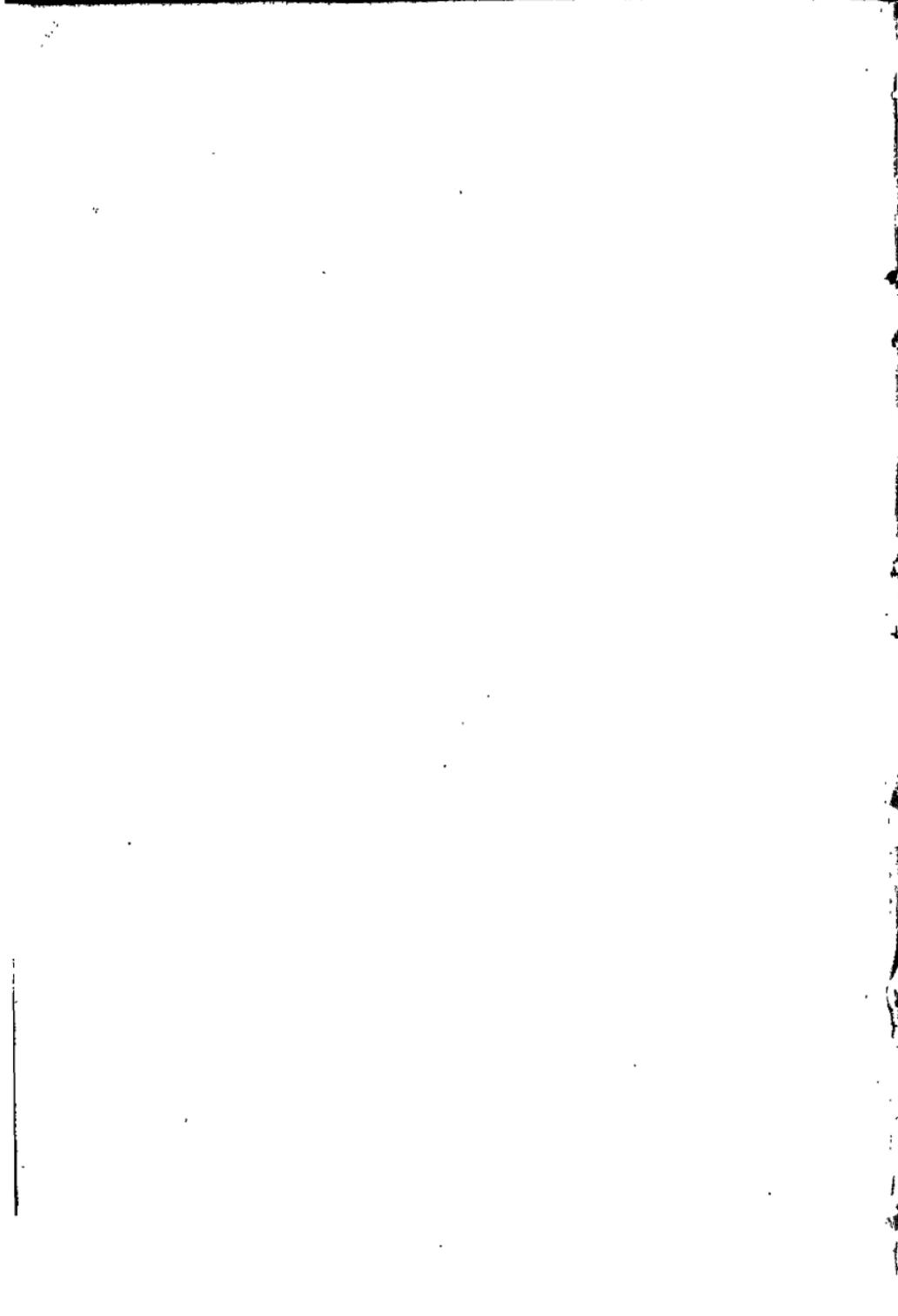


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THE

CATACOMBS.



STRENGTH is departed, Nero, from thy
Rome ;

Her valour gone from her who was the
home

Of valiant men ; for Modesty hath fled
The city, and her ancient shame is dead.
Yea, faith is faint in any unseen God,
And men look only to thy tyrannous nod.
Lo ! on the face of every man is fear ;
And on the faces of thy servants near
Thy throne, a fearful hope from day to day,
Of getting riches by a hazardous way.

Thou art bewitch'd to work iniquity,
 And all the waters of the Upper Sea,
 And of the Nether could not wash thee clean,
 O Rome, and make thee now what thou hast been :
 For thou hast taken to thee all the sin
 Of all the earth, and there is blood within
 Thy palaces which crieth unto heaven
 For vengeance, and thy senators are given
 Entirely unto lust : How long, O Light,
 Being holy, wilt thou brook the unhallow'd sight
 Of deeds of darkness done, of shame forgot,
 By evil men whom day rebuketh not !

Yet, didst thou know it, there is salt in thee,
 O Rome, and thou art sav'd by it, to see
 Its work hereafter : herein too the ways
 Of God are shewn, which after many days
 Are justified :—where greatest sin is rife—
 In Cæsar's household—is thy salt of life.
 But Cæsar's house hath every soft delight
 Which flesh can know ; the handling and the sight
 Of this world's fairest things : How then shall they
 Be suffer'd in this house who give them Nay—
 Whose good things are unseen, and carnal hand
 Hath never touch'd them ? Canst thou understand,

O Rome, what such men say ? Thou canst not ? Then,
Because thou canst not, rid thee of the men—
Yea, rid thee of the men !—for thine and their's
Are diverse. But the men in Christian prayers,
And holy works, beyond the sound of strife,
Waiting expectant till thy death in life
Shall have become in thee more fully death,
Shall breathe on thee hereafter living breath,
And quicken thee with touch of saintly hands,
To be the joy of Latin-speaking lands.
Till then let Cæsar fill the goblet high
With princely joys, and drain his pleasures dry ;
For lo ! there are in waste and wilderness
Men, who by persecution and distress,
Are waxing strong : wherefore be mad, O Mirth,
Ere the remembrance of thee pass from earth !





HERE was a man of Rome in Nero's day
Whose name was Portius ; just, his friends did
say,

And righteous : of himself, his only thought,
That he was hollow, faithless, worthy nought.
The same, full twenty years before, had heard
A stranger preach in Rome the blessed Word ;
And, seeing that the preaching was with power,
It came to pass that he believ'd that hour.
But, stricken by the fear of pitch and flame,
And, being of Cæsar's household, held by shame,
He had not heart, by reason of his fears,
And shame, to own his Lord these many years.

Now when his buried faith was growing dim,
He had a little daughter born to him :
And she was very fair, and every day
Grew fairer ; but upon her father lay

A sorrow, and the child became a grief,
Because he feared to tell her his belief.
Yet would he sometimes take her on his knee,
And try to teach her something covertly ;
But only chased away the smiles she had,
So troubled were his eyes, his face so sad.

As she grew older, Portia question'd more ;
Then ceas'd, because her father's heart was sore.
But when she ceas'd, his pain became too great
For him to bear alone ; wherefore, though late,
He told her all ; and what he told her came
As new tunes come, when we have dreamt the same.

Then both had peace ; and Portius, waxing bold,
Avow'd his faith, to Rome his secret told.
Thereafter Portius with his daughter fled ;
And those who knew not spake of them as dead :
But those who knew were dumb ; so men at last
Forgot them, and a twelvemonth had not pass'd.
The seventh month of days was well-nigh done,
And all the while they had not seen the sun ;
Their dwelling-place the sunless Catacombs—
The True Light their's, the outer darkness Rome's.

But they were not alone ; for thither came
The company of those who knew the name
Of Jesus Christ ; they met for praise and prayer,
And Christian converse on the Lord's Day there.
And oh ! the prisoners doated on that Day ;
And when at eve the Brethren went away,
Their hearts would sink within them as the sound
Of feet departing ceas'd, and all around
Their vacant ears began to hear once more
The hateful water dropping on the floor.

So six months pass'd ; and in the seventh fell
The hand of God on Portia, for the cell
Had bred a fever : five days all alone
Her father tended her ; and every moan
She made, he shudder'd, thinking of her death ;
And as she sank, he listened for her breath
With horror, knowing how it touch'd his case,
Who should be solitary in the place.
When he had lost the reckoning of the week
For sorrow, hearing little voices speak
Into his ears, or far away, which said
That Christ had never risen from the dead—
When he had curs'd the dear Lord's holy name,
Upon the Lord's own Day the Brethren came.

They comforted the father in his grief,
And to the daughter brought a late relief—
Too late : yet such that she had strength to say
With open'd eyes—"The dear Lord rose to-day"—
Then presently she pass'd into His rest,
And Portius cross'd her hands upon her breast.

No word was spoken, but the Brethren stood
In silence, feeling silence to be good.
And Portius spake not, for his thoughts were new
And had not words : then tenderly he drew
Her veil over her face, smoothing her hair
With fondly lingering hands and reverent care :
And when it all was smoothèd softly down,
He spoke : and it was of her golden crown
He spoke, which she should wear in heaven above,
In presence of the Lamb whose name is Love.
Then spake the Brethren, nor in sorrow spake,
Of her as of a sleeper who should wake
And see the Lord, and as of one whose pain
Was over, unto whom her death was gain.

When they had spoken thus, they carried her
To burial ; and an only follower,

Her father, walked behind : through dismal halls
Their torch-thrown shadows stalk'd along the
walls ;

Through corridors where wholesome air was spent,
Now blue, now green, their flickering torches went :
At last they reach'd the chamber of the tomb,
And halted as before a wall of gloom.

Here laid they down their burden on the ground,
And fix'd their torches in a ring around.
Then kneeling, all began that prayer to say
Which Jesus, when He taught them how to pray,
Taught His disciples ; but the words alone
Reach'd Portius, for his heart had turn'd to stone
Within him, and his little faith had fled,
In walking through the vaults behind his dead.
And when the Brethren praycd,—“Thy kingdom
come,”—

He rais'd a mocking laugh which struck them dumb ;
But when at last, with trembling utterance,
They finish'd the prayer, a stony trance
Had fix'd his desperate eyes. Then to the praise
Of the Ascended One whom latter days
Should see descending, rose a stately hymn,
Which spake of Angels and of Seraphim,

Which do His pleasure in the heights of Heaven,
And in the ends of Earth ; to whom are given
The keys of Hell : then in a softer strain,
Of Him, they sang, Who as a lamb was slain ;
Then, with a nobler march of music, told
Concerning One whose girdle was of gold,
Whose shining garment reach'd unto the ground,
Whose hairs were white as snow, His voice the sound
Of many waters : and they sang of those
Who surely shall arise since He arose—
Whose raiment He hath wash'd, and all their tears
Wip'd from their eyes ; into whose blessed years
Nor weeping comes, nor death, nor any night,
But evermore the Lamb shall be their light.

So sang the Brethren : and behold ! He stood
Who promis'd, in the midst to do them good.
For when the lonely echoes of the place
Had ceas'd to sing, lo ! Portius hid his face
In both his hands, and wept, who ne'er before
Had wept : and thus the Lord opened the door
Of his closed heart, and entered in once more.

They took the maiden up, and raising her
Most gently, laid her in the sepulchre :

It was a narrow niche cut in the wall,
One of a hundred in that burial hall.
Here slept the lowly ones to whom the name
Of Jesus Christ the Saviour early came :
And "Peace" was graven o'er each humble head,
In token of the peace of the Christian dead.
No heathen ashes these which heathen friends
Loving, had lost in night which never ends,
And written o'er them words of wild despair,
Cursing the gods who pluck'd a flower so fair,
Or root so strong, or branch so flourishing
Out of the garden of sweet life to bring
It unto death and death's undreamt-of ill :
But these were sleepers in whose sleep the will
Of God was revered by surviving grief,
Which though it sorrow'd, thrust not out belief ;
The Cross, or sacred Fish was cut o'er such—
Small symbol of a love which lov'd so much.

In company of these they left her there—
A maid most pure, most dutiful, most fair.
Above her, Andreas, a slave, essay'd
To make a cross : and when the cross was made,
To write beneath it,—“Portia fell asleep
In Jesus :”—which he cut so clear and deep,

That men may read it yet, and learn of it
That God by foolishness confounds the wit
Of worldly men, calling not many wise,
Not many noble in the people's eyes.





THE eagles of thine ancient glory, Queen,
O! how are they cast down! He who hath
seen

Thee clothèd in the purple of thy power
In days of old, and sees thee at this hour
The home of failing fortunes,—his to say
How valour fails when virtue flees away.
Thy sons were men of might, till blindness came
And hid from them the holy face of Shame,
Which blush'd beholding how their might was turned
To boasting, and their boasting, since it spurned
The common truth, had passed to feebleness,
And feebleness was parent of distress,
Which in its turn, for lack of company,
Had join'd itself to Lust and Luxury.
Thus Shame had cause for blushing: Then was spoken
A word in Heaven, and a seal was broken;

And straightway Nemesis fell from her height—
Fell like a falling star that blinds the sight,
And lit upon a high conspicuous place,
With Heaven's own anger burning on her face :
Then standing there she drew a mighty breath,
And rais'd her hand, and thundered—" Sin is Death !"
Then verily thy sin with grievous blow
Did smite thee, Queen, and lay thee very low,
And thou wast taken up for dead, and they
Who took thee up were men whom day by day
Thou hadst been tracking to the death ; and still
They tended thee remembering not the ill
Which thou hadst wrought them : so in many years
They made thee whole and banish'd all thy fears
Touching the sword of sin, by purging sin
Which is itself the sword : then entered in
Meekness, and thou didst serve who wast before
The mistress,—chang'd indeed, yet Rome once more.



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