

ISEULT AT TINTAGEL

(FROM TRISTRAM OF LYONESSE)

BUT that same night in Cornwall oversea
 Couched at Queen Iseult's hand, against her knee,
 With keen kind eyes that read her whole heart's pain
 Fast at wide watch lay Tristram's hound Hodain,
 The goodliest and the mightiest born on earth,
 That many a forest day of fiery mirth
 Had plied his craft before them; and the queen
 Cherished him, even for those dim years between,
 More than of old in those bright months far flown
 When ere a blast of Tristram's horn was blown
 Each morning as the woods rekindled, ere
 Day gat full empire of the glimmering air,
 Delight of dawn would quicken him, and fire
 Spring and pant in his breath with bright desire
 To be among the dewy ways on quest:
 But now perforce at restless-hearted rest
 He chafed through days more barren than the sand,
 Soothed hardly but soothed only with her hand,
 Though fain to fawn thereon and follow, still
 With all his heart and all his loving will

Desiring one divided from his sight,
For whose lost sake dawn was as dawn of night
And noon as night's noon in his eyes was dark.
But in the halls far under sat King Mark,
Feasting, and full of cheer, with heart uplift,
As on the night that harper gat his gift :
And music revelled on the fitful air,
And songs came floated up the festal stair,
And muffled roar of wassail, where the king
Took heart from wine-cups and the quiring string
Till all his cold thin veins rejoiced and ran
Strong as with lifeblood of a kinglier man.
But the queen shut from sound her wearied ears,
Shut her sad eyes from sense of aught save tears,
And wrung her hair with soft fierce hands, and prayed :
 ' O God, God born of woman, of a maid,
Christ, once in flesh of thine own fashion clad ;
O very love, so glad in heaven and sad
On earth for earth's sake alway ; since thou art
Pure only, I only impure of spirit and heart,
Since thou for sin's sake and the bitter doom
Didst as a veil put on a virgin's womb,
I that am none, and cannot hear or see
Or shadow or likeness or a sound of thee
Far off, albeit with man's own speech and face
Thou shine yet and thou speak yet, showing forth grace—
Ah me ! grace only shed on souls that are
Lit and led forth of shadow by thy star—

Alas! to these men only grace, to these,
 Lord, whom thy love draws Godward, to thy knees—
 I, can I draw thee me-ward, can I seek,
 Who love thee not, to love me? seeing how weak,
 Lord, all this little love I bear thee is,
 And how much is my strong love more than this,
 My love that I love man with, that I bear
 Him sinning through me sinning? wilt thou care,
 God, for this love, if love be any, alas,
 In me to give thee, though long since there was,
 How long, when I too, Lord, was clean, even I,
 That now am unclean till the day I die—
 Haply by burning, harlot-fashion, made
 A horror in all hearts of wife and maid,
 'Hateful, not knowing if ever in these mine eyes
 Shone any light of thine in any wise
 Or this were love at all that I bore thee?'

And the night spake, and thundered on the sea,
 Ravening aloud for ruin of lives: and all
 The bastions of the main cliff's northward wall
 Rang response out from all their deepening length,
 As the east wind girded up his godlike strength
 And huddled in hard against that high-towered hold
 The fleeces of the flock that knows no fold,
 The rent white shreds of shattering storm: but she
 Heard not nor heeded wind or storming sea,
 Knew not if night were mild or mad with wind.

'Yea, though deep lips and tender hair be thinned,

Though cheek wither, brow fade, and bosom wane,
 Shall I change also from this heart again
 To maidenhood of heart and holiness ?
 Shall I more love thee, Lord, or love him less—
 Ah miserable ! though spirit and heart be rent,
 Shall I repent, Lord God ? shall I repent ?
 Nay, though thou slay me ! for herein I am blest,
 That as I loved him yet I love him best—
 More than mine own soul or thy love or thee,
 Though thy love save and my love save not me.
 Blest am I beyond women even herein,
 That beyond all born women is my sin,
 And perfect my transgression : that above
 All offerings of all others is my love,
 Who have chosen it only, and put away for this
 Thee, and my soul's hope, Saviour, of the kiss
 Wherewith thy lips make welcome all thine own
 When in them life and death are overthrown ;
 The sinless lips that seal the death of sin,
 The kiss wherewith their dumb lips touched begin
 Singing in heaven.

' Where we shall never, love,
 Never stand up nor sing ! for God above
 Knows us, how too much more than God to me
 Thy sweet love is, my poor love is to thee !
 Dear, dost thou see now, dost thou hear tonight,
 Sleeping, my waste wild speech, my face worn
 white,

—Speech once heard soft by thee, face once kissed red!—
In such a dream as when men see their dead
And know not if they know if dead these be?
Ah love, are thy days my days, and to thee
Are all nights like as my nights? does the sun
Grieve thee? art thou soul-sick till day be done,
And weary till day rises? is thine heart
Full of dead things as mine is? Nay, thou art
Man, with man's strength and praise and pride of life,
No bondwoman, no queen, no loveless wife
That would be shamed albeit she had not sinned.'

And swordlike was the sound of the iron wind,
And as a breaking battle was the sea.

'Nay, Lord, I pray thee let him love not me,
Love me not any more, nor like me die,
And be no more than such a thing as I.
Turn his heart from me, lest my love too lose
Thee as I lose thee, and his fair soul refuse
For my sake thy fair heaven, and as I fell
Fall, and be mixed with my soul and with hell.
Let me die rather, and only; let me be
Hated of him so he be loved of thee,
Lord: for I would not have him with me there
Out of thy light and love in the unlit air,
Out of thy sight in the unseen hell where I
Go gladly, going alone, so thou on high
Lift up his soul and love him—Ah, Lord, Lord,
Shalt thou love as I love him? she that poured

From the alabaster broken at thy feet
An ointment very precious, not so sweet
As that poured likewise forth before thee then
From the rehallowed heart of Magdalen,
From a heart broken, yearning like the dove,
An ointment very precious which is love—
Couldst thou being holy and God, and sinful she,
Love her indeed as surely she loved thee?
Nay, but if not, then as we sinners can
Let us love still in the old sad wise of man.
For with less love than my love, having had
Mine, though God love him he shall not be glad.
And with such love as my love, I wot well,
He shall not lie disconsolate in hell:
Sad only as souls for utter love's sake be
Here, and a little sad, perchance, for me—
Me happy, me more glad than God above,
In the utmost hell whose fires consume not love!
For in the waste ways emptied of the sun
He would say—"Dear, thy place is void, and one
Weeps among angels for thee, with his face
Veiled, saying, *O sister, how thy chosen place
Stands desolate, that God made fair for thee!
Is heaven not sweeter, and we thy brethren, we
Fairer than love on earth and life in hell?*"
And I—with me were all things then not well?
Should I not answer—"O love, be well content;
Look on me, and behold if I repent."

This were more to me than an angel's wings.
Yea, many men pray God for many things,
But I pray that this only thing may be.'

And as a full field charging was the sea,
And as the cry of slain men was the wind.

'Yea, since I surely loved him, and he sinned
Surely, though not as my sin his be black,
God, give him to me—God, God, give him back!
For now how should we live in twain or die?
I am he indeed, thou knowest, and he is I.
Not man and woman several as we were,
But one thing with one life and death to bear.
How should one love his own soul overmuch?
And time is long since last I felt the touch,
The sweet touch of my lover, hand and breath,
In such delight as puts delight to death,
Burn my soul through, till spirit and soul and sense,
In the sharp grasp of the hour, with violence
Died, and again through pangs of violent birth
Lived, and laughed out with refluent might of mirth;
Laughed each on other and shuddered into one,
As a cloud shuddering dies into the sun.
Ah, sense is that or spirit, soul or flesh,
That only love lulls or awakes afresh?
Ah, sweet is that or bitter, evil or good,
That very love allays not as he would?
Nay, truth is this or vanity, that gives
No love assurance when love dies or lives?'

This that my spirit is wrung withal, and yet
No surelier knows if haply thine forget,
Thou that my spirit is wrung for, nor can say
Love is not in thee dead as yesterday ?
Dost thou feel, thou, this heartbeat whence my heart
Would send thee word what life is mine apart,
And know by keen response what life is thine ?
Dost thou not hear one cry of all of mine ?
O Tristram's heart, have I no part in thee ?'

And all her soul was as the breaking sea,
And all her heart anhungered as the wind.

'Dost thou repent thee of the sin we sinned ?
Dost thou repent thee of the days and nights
That kindled and that quenched for us their lights,
The months that feasted us with all their hours,
The ways that breathed of us in all their flowers,
The dells that sang of us with all their doves ?
Dost thou repent thee of the wildwood loves ?
Is thine heart changed, and hallowed ? art thou grown
God's, and not mine ? Yet, though my heart make moan,
Fain would my soul give thanks for thine, if thou
Be saved—yea, fain praise God, and knows not how.
How should it know thanksgiving ? nay, or learn
Aught of the love wherewith thine own should burn,
God's, that should cast out as an evil thing
Mine ? yea, what hand of prayer have I to cling,
What heart to prophesy, what spirit of sight
To strain insensual eyes toward increate light,

Who look but back on life wherein I sinned ? ’

And all their past came wailing in the wind,
And all their future thundered in the sea.

‘ But if my soul might touch the time to be,
If hand might handle now or eye behold
My life and death ordained me from of old,
Life palpable, compact of blood and breath,
Visible, present, naked, very death,
Should I desire to know before the day
These that I know not, nor is man that may ?
For haply, seeing, my heart would break for fear,
And my soul timeless cast its load off here,
Its load of life too bitter, love too sweet,
And fall down shamed and naked at thy feet,
God, who wouldst take no pity of it, nor give
One hour back, one of all its hours to live
Clothed with my mortal body, that once more,
Once, on this reach of barren beaten shore,
This stormy strand of life, ere sail were set,
Had haply felt love’s arms about it yet—
Yea, ere death’s bark put off to seaward, might
With many a grief have bought me one delight
That then should know me never. Ah, what years
Would I endure not, filled up full with tears,
Bitter like blood and dark as dread of death,
To win one amorous hour of mingling breath,
One fire-eyed hour and sunnier than the sun,
For all these nights and days like nights but one ?

One hour of heaven born once, a stormless birth,
For all these windy weary hours of earth ?
One, but one hour from birth of joy to death,
For all these hungering hours of feverish breath ?
And I should lose this, having died and sinned.'

And as man's anguish clamouring cried the wind,
And as God's anger answering rang the sea.

'And yet what life—Lord God, what life for me
Has thy strong wrath made ready ? Dost thou think
How lips whose thirst hath only tears to drink
Grow grey for grief untimely ? Dost thou know,
O happy God, how men wax weary of woe—
Yea, for their wrong's sake that thine hand hath done
Come even to hate thy semblance in the sun ?
Turn back from dawn and noon and all thy light
To make their souls one with the soul of night ?
Christ, if thou hear yet or have eyes to see,
Thou that hadst pity, and hast no pity on me,
Know'st thou no more, as in this life's sharp span,
What pain thou hadst on earth, what pain hath man ?
Hast thou no care, that all we suffer yet ?
What help is ours of thee if thou forget ?
What profit have we though thy blood were given,
If we that sin bleed and be not forgiven ?
Not love but hate, thou bitter God and strange,
Whose heart as man's heart hath grown cold with change,
Not love but hate thou showest us that have sinned.'

And like a world's cry shuddering was the wind,

And like a God's voice threatening was the sea.

'Nay, Lord, for thou wast gracious; nay, in thee
No change can come with time or varying fate,
No tongue bid thine be less compassionate,
No sterner eye rebuke for mercy thine,
No sin put out thy pity—no, not mine.
Thou knowest us, Lord, thou knowest us, all we are,
He, and the soul that hath his soul for star:
Thou knowest as I know, Lord, how much more worth
Than all souls clad and clasped about with earth,
But most of all, God, how much more than I,
Is this man's soul that surely shall not die.
What righteousness, what judgment, Lord most high,
Were this, to bend a brow of doom as grim
As threats me, me the adulterous wife, on him?
There lies none other nightly by his side:
He hath not sought, he shall not seek a bride.
Far as God sunders earth from heaven above,
So far was my love born beneath his love.
I loved him as the sea-wind loves the sea,
To rend and ruin it only and waste: but he,
As the sea loves a sea-bird loved he me,
To foster and uphold my tired life's wing,
And bounteously beneath me spread forth spring,
A springtide space whereon to float or fly,
A world of happy water, whence the sky
Glowed goodlier, lightening from so glad a glass,
Than with its own light only. Now, alas!

Cloud hath come down and clothed it round with storm,
And gusts and fits of eddying winds deform
The feature of its glory. Yet be thou,
God, merciful: nay, show but justice now,
And let the sin in him that scarce was his
Stand expiated with exile: and be this
The price for him, the atonement this, that I
With all the sin upon me live, and die
With all thy wrath on me that most have sinned.'

And like man's heart relenting sighed the wind,
And as God's wrath subsiding sank the sea.

'But if such grace be possible—if it be
Not sin more strange than all sins past, and worse
Evil, that cries upon thee for a curse,
To pray such prayers from such a heart, do thou
Hear, and make wide thine hearing toward me now;
Let not my soul and his for ever dwell
Sundered: though doom keep always heaven and hell
Irreconcilable, infinitely apart,
Keep not in twain for ever heart and heart
That once, albeit by not thy law, were one;
Let this be not thy will, that this be done.
Let all else, all thou wilt of evil, be,
But no doom, none, dividing him and me.'

By this was heaven stirred eastward, and there came
Up the rough ripple a labouring light like flame;
And dawn, sore trembling still and grey with fear,
Looked hardly forth, a face of heavier cheer

Than one which grief or dread yet half enshrouds,
Wild-eyed and wan, across the cleaving clouds.
And Iseult, worn with watch long held on pain,
Turned, and her eye lit on the hound Hodain,
And all her heart went out in tears: and he
Laid his kind head along her bended knee,
Till round his neck her arms went hard, and all
The night past from her as a chain might fall:
But yet the heart within her, half undone,
Wailed, and was loth to let her see the sun.

And ere full day brought heaven and earth to flower,
Far thence, a maiden in a marriage bower,
That moment, hard by Tristram, oversea,
Woke with glad eyes Iseult of Brittany.