

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

Even gravitation and the swing of the stars, and the fire of unnumbered suns, is really very trifling when we consider that that is all: a few incandescent balls hung up in unmeasured space. Why clutter up the space at all? There is nothing gained.

If one could only find some way of exploding the world, of so deranging every magnetic influence of our solar system that the fragments would hurtle through space, chasing system after system into a series of celestial explosions, till entire creation should bang off like a line of fireworks and the whole box of tricks be destroyed!

LONDON

October.—It is an unwise thing to wait for Fate. It is a reckless thing to stake life against the opening of the heavens and the interposition of chance.

Why I came back to London I do not know. Why I drifted through those months in Holland, there in the straightness of its canals, weary of the little red houses, buffeted by the dark other world.

And now I have come back, come back like a dog to die. London is hideously empty; one day raucous sunlight, the next gibbering damp and cold. I walk every day in St. James's Park, walk as far as Carlton House Terrace, and let myself be overpowered by the outside grandeur of houses I know.

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What did I expect? what miracle, what dropping of wealth from the clouds? My life has been full of such queer chance that I never dreamed that in my extremity Fate would fail me. Evidently the game is played; well, I shall do my part since there is nothing left but to die: I can at least die gaily. But after all life holds one with vicious strength, with unmatched fascination. I am young, I am strong, my blood beats joyously to the wind, the pleasure of flowers can even on a day like this flush my cheeks with the abandon of their perfume.

I lay down life full, complete, vital; it is no played-out fabric that I am tearing the soul out of; and I am sorry for my body more than anything else. I look on it almost as something apart from me; it can't share in the future forgetfulness of life, it must be destroyed out of beauty—the smooth white flesh, the leap of blood,

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the soft hair and questioning eyes. It is such a soft, tender piece of flesh; I hate to think of it dead and perhaps carelessly touched. I am so sorry, so grieved that I have to treat it like this, and take away from it the mind's protection. But it is the "myself" I enjoy killing, the myself that stood back at critical moments, that chained my will, that forbade my complete freedom. It is the mind that gets eternity if there is any, but this inherited mass of murderous contradictions will be for ever dead. It is almost useless for an adventurous mind to drag some characters through existence; they will fail you at the last moment and say "no" when every dictate and planned necessity of your life demands an instant "yes."

They talk of the last moments of drowning men, when they review their whole life, but I have a multitude of last moments. I have set the day, the hour, and every

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minute brings it inexorably nearer. I walk in the park and stir the dead leaves with my parasol, and to-day I went into a tea-room to hear the tinkle of voices and cups and the low clamour of the violins. Walking back across the park the sky was palely blue and touched here and there with stars, and against the luminous sky showed the tracery of the bare boughs. The sound of the city was subdued, the sheep on the grass were huddled and asleep—and in three days I shall be dead. I almost laughed at the thought, and gathered my skirts around me a little more closely so that I could hear the rustle of my silk petticoats. I opened the fur at my throat, I watched the pressure of my feet as I walked swiftly over the hard paths. I felt the liveness, the vigour of my body as I walked. I am young to die.

Sometimes I lean over to the fire and wonder just what has brought me to these

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sad and tragic days. Yes, Rossetti, "what most or least impelled my onward way?" Ambition is a curse if you are not armour-proof against everything else, unless you are willing to sacrifice yourself to your ambition. And I have not been. I wanted the riches and the beauty of every moment, too. It never pays to give yourself where you want to go. A woman who is ambitious must get what she wants through disgust, not pleasure.

But am I so unhappy? Have I not lived? I have been loved, I have seen and heard many beautiful things, and—I, too, have loved in my own way.

I have no regrets. I have never harmed anyone—anything I have suffered has been my own folly or my own accepted risk.

But I protest against death because I see and enjoy and love the good of life so utterly, the delight of things that oth-

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ers accept as usual or pass by unnoticed; the rapture of perfume, of dawns and twilights, the abandonment of music, the transformation of Art, the mere delight of being human and the gifts of the trained senses. I can feel the exquisiteness like that of a jewel or flower that is transfixed in a page of Flaubert or Gautier, or lean from a carriage touched to grief by the tenderness of the golden melting lights in the haze of a London evening before darkness has quite fallen.

And people live on in their dull health who have never read words as a sensuous act, who would call the transmission of a gas jet through fog into the tremor of excited nerves a result of bad digestion or of lunacy. And they who never see Da Vinci's "Madonna of the Rocks," who have never heard the intoxication of a symphony, will live on, dine on, continue to drink their champagne—and I must die.

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I have just been reading Flaubert's *Salammbo*, and it makes an explanation for me, it is a reason why I am counting now the hours till I shall be dead. These are the words and phrases and moods that created the world I fought to enter, to possess. The words tinkle over the pages and make a chain that is dragging me down to death.

Pomegranates, coral dust, vermillion, filigree, porphyry, a network of blue pearls, nard, flamingoes, ambergris, amber; exquisite words luminous with the radiance of unknown nights and days and unseen suns and undiscovered oceans. I wanted my world of ivory and green diamonds, of lotus-covered rivers, of alabaster terraces bordered by the pink blossoms of dwarf oleanders.

They have all seduced me, these sedulous phrases of unknown vistas, shadows of passion and visions of glamour.

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Gautier, Flaubert, we cannot reproduce their world by anything but money. It is a physical world illuminated by the sun of the senses.

The soul was invented to satisfy the jealousy of those who haven't any money.

I have fathomed to-day the tremendous negative delight of pride. I had been out; the swirl of the autumn keen air streaked with sword-like sun, the smell of the leaves rustling through the air, the ocean of cool sky and sun-smitten clouds, the electricity of the riotous sense of cold, throbbed my blood to responsive flame. I couldn't die. I was so young, I enjoyed it so, and the world was so beautiful; anything, anyway, only let me live. So I wrote to Oscar. I knew of his self-satisfied smile, his complacent consciousness that he was my only resource, his smug feeling that I turned in my extremity to him. I braved all that

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and wrote that I would stay, that I was willing to stay in London as he wished. Then when the letter was written I read it over with the blood slowly turning to fire in my cheeks. I stoop to beg to him! I ask my life of anyone! I yield an iota of what I wished to do! I looked out of the window. The wind was still whirling the leaves, but the light was turning grey; the exquisite chill was still there, but it was like the steel of a sword, not the iced fillip of wine. I went over to the glass: my eyes and face were flaming with shame; and I turned back and tore the letter into shreds. My pride was dearer than life; the pleasure of giving it my life intoxicated me. I am stronger after all than the disaster of being human.

THE END

