

BUDDHA

A POEM

WHICH OBTAINED
THE CHANCELLOR'S MEDAL
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ENGLISH VERSE
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BY

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BUDDHA

“Ce qui est ferme, est par le temps détruit,
Et ce qui fuit, au temps fait resistance.”

DU BELLAY.

“It is true, Simha, that I preach extinction, but only the extinction of pride, lust, evil thought and ignorance, not that of forgiveness, love, charity and truth.”

BUDDHA, *The Sermon to Sadhu Simha*.

DEEPER in time than the mind understands
Were shaped the crumbling contours of earth's lands,
And from a wilderness of mist and night
The still Himálayas rose in scarps of light.
Before men lived, man and the earth were one—
A world unshaped beneath the flaming sun;
Within the cloud of fabled centuries
Ganges and Indus and the tropic seas
In darkness were conceived, in darkness thrust
Upon the world of tempest and of dust.
Chaotic night in which the seas began
Begot the body and the power of man,
And in the scoriac pits of barren earth
Were strown the seeds of elemental birth.
Time made the individual forms from dust
And builded Everest from the earth's crust,
And fashioned man apart, and darkly wrought
The frame of life. This word the Buddha taught
That all the beauty and the mystery
Of all the living land that eyes may see,
And all man's power, are risen from the void.
The fashion and the form shall be destroyed,
The frame corporeal shattered as a sherd,
Void shall be freed in void, the life interred:
Above the body and the fleshly sense
Looms up a spectre of Impermanence.

It is the changeless secret of our pain
The Buddha taught, that we who turn again
After our many births to void,—that we
Cling to man's individuality.
The understanding of man's misery
Was given to him who found beneath the Tree,
From pain released and from joy's aftermath,
The Middle Way, the Noble Eightfold Path.

Closed round with triple walls, made blind to truth,
Made blind to man, Gautama in his youth,
Shut from the earth, stumbling, untaught, at strife,
Put by unread the parable of life.
The hills and flowering lands were lost to him;
Walls of the palace shut him from the dim
Vision of temples in the shimmering day,
White paths, and waggons in the ringing way,
The din of earth's bazaar; there peepul leaves
Wavered above the fretted temple eaves
In vivid fields where nature manifold
Rose in strong beauty from the fibrous mould,
Nature which is the flower that falls to seed,—
Blossom of dawn, at dark a stricken weed:
That book of truth was hidden from his eyes;
The palace dome shut out from him the skies
And the clear dawn that sings, the dusktide still;
Often the golden palace hall would fill
With passing sun, a chancing folly gleaming,
Momently spun above his bowed head dreaming.
Through that great hall the lovely dancers swayed,
Like twilight shapes, from niche and colonnade
In the reflected day of jewelled panes;
Sometimes the shining birds from unwall'd plains
Flitted as shadows on his walls, and song
Spoke from the flowering world. And there rose strong
Music of every carven instrument

Through that great hall, a mist of tone and scent
Mingling and parted, instant and remote,
Mountainous flood or fall of mote on mote
Of whirling gleams; all a world's mystery
Snared in a sound. The hand of luxury
Touched him and made him blind, so that he groped
Baffled and pathless for a truth unhoped,
A truth not understood, distant, perverse,
The truth whose witness was the universe.

Then in a day it seemed the swift dance swinging
Beneath those walls, the riot and the singing,
Told of a meaning that no voice had spoken.
Truth rose a vision there, the toil was broken,
The sensual toil that held him; love's caress
Died from his lips that closed on nothingness;
The impermanence of all terrene desire,
Passion and thirst, the yearning and the fire,
Was shown to him. That day the music seemed
A cry from the far world of which he dreamed,
Eager and still, that thrilled above the sea
Of dancing forms receding. Silently
He beckoned Channa to him, and they went
Together from the hall of merriment
And passed out to the city in the sun.
Then as they trod the paths there followed one
Who came before them in the populous way,
Wizened and bowed and feeble, robed in grey;
"This is the shape of Age," then Channa said,
"Whom death attends, to lay the wrinkled head
In earth, and close the eyes." And there came by
Others; a sick man lisped with mouth awry,
Who paused before them, clothed in loathly gear;
And as they looked on him there passed a bier,
The grey corpse laid upon the wood unmasked;
"Shall I then also die?" Gautama asked. . .
Dusk gathered softly, and the curtained air

Quickened with curling dust; the rout and blare
Of market ended, peace of night began;
Now in the time of stillness came a man
Begging an alms of them, clasping his bowl,
Who said, "In Contemplation lies the goal
Of life; all man's desire is changeable,
O Prince; peace only is immutable;
Body and Self are as a temporal dress
Bringing all grief, and all man's bitterness" . . .
Night rose upon the inane lands of sky
A wilderness of stars that soundlessly
Voyaged apart, nomad, remote from men;
Gautama praised the yogi, parting then,
And turned toward the starlit palace hall,
Saying, "The star, even as man, is thrall
To his own shape, torn from the void and whole."
Troubled, he watched the slow clouds sagging roll
Above the slender towers, darkening
The flickering lights of sky; then wondering
Entered the palace hall that gleamed unstirred.
From obscure colonnades, rustling, he heard
Winds of the garden, the low winds, dissever
Leaf from thin leaf, and knew it was for ever
He must depart from all that in life past
He had desired and praised, and go at last
Among the paths of earth, servant of Good.
He crossed the palace hall, a moment stood
Raising the jewelled net that masked from sight
The palace garden, paused, and to the night
Passed out, assured. The new moon's pitted rim
Gleamed as an unsheathed sword preceding him.

After wide wandering of many days
He came among bowed trees where the sun's rays
Broke not, and rested there, taking for food
Scant millet seed and wild fruits of the wood,

And made his home, that he might there attain
Perfect Enlightenment through body's pain.
And the years passed, yet still the temporal mesh
Prevailed; his eyes grew hollow and the flesh
Wrinkled and ill and weak, still unreleased.
There came a day of summer when he ceased
The austere strife that brought no dawn of light,
And sought earth's towns and fields, the eremite
Turned wanderer again. Sujáta brought
Him rice-milk in a gold dish richly wrought;
He ate and was revived, knowing all passed
The suffering, hearing the call at last
To seek the Tree of Wisdom in the grey
Roads of the woods. Silent he took his way.

He found strange peace there. All the woods were shrouded
With shadowy banners, and the swift unclouded
Sunlight stooped down in veering wraiths of gold;
And he came so to gladness manifold,
And he came so where there seemed end of all
Striving and hate, the individual
Clinging to life, the grief and thirst for love.
Now as he took his way, circled above
Kingfishers following, and many birds
Dusk-plumed, that sang uncomprehended words;
Serpents and peacocks and the company
Of devas followed to the sacred Tree,
And snake-girls fluting, and the nága king,
And every beast and creature, hastening.
From the green cavern of the arching Tree,
Tossing, rose up a vision suddenly—
The host of Mára tramping, a dark rout,
Dwarfs stooping low, hailed on with pipe and shout,
Misshapen, blind, lips drooped as in disdain,
The incarnate forms of evil and of pain;
But at the fall of dusk the host was gone
When in his thought, cloudless, the still light shone

Of perfect revelation, and at peace
In the veiled woods the Buddha found release
From the delusions of the living dust—
Man's striving and man's yearning and man's lust.

In hazardous ways of earth, with hands unskilled,
From unsubstantial clay men dreaming build
These walls that shrine the house of life, these walls
Of Self, that stand not when the lone house falls,
These boundaries wherein dreamers would keep
Garnered the senses' harvest they would reap,
This confine where we would for ever hold
The spirit's riches firm as quarried gold;
But from the pit of night a swift wind springs
Shrouding the lintel with unearthly wings,
Shrouding the doorway of that house with death;
And the dream boundaries fall at a breath.
From what dim source man rose we do not know,
Nor to what moonless sea the life-streams flow,
But through all worlds the eternal Master sends
His voice, "Nothing begins and nothing ends."
The eternal matrix bears, the eternal tomb
Receives, remoulds the children of the womb,
And both are joined as one, the source and grave
As one, beneath time's shadowing architrave.
How shall the Self endure? since Self is torn
A moment from the void without a bourn.
"This passing dream, this ghost to which we cling,
This is the Self, this is the suffering."

Once to Benares' Deer Park when the day
Waked the still town, came in the blossoming way
A teacher who had knowledge of life's land,
And spoke this word, that men might understand.