

Julian and Maddalo: A Conversation.

I RODE one evening with Count Maddalo
Upon the bank of land which breaks the flow
Of Adria towards Venice. A bare strand
Of hillocks, heaped from ever-shifting sand,
Matted with thistles and amphibious weeds,
Such as from earth's embrace the salt ooze breeds,
Is this; an uninhabited sea-side,
Which the lone fisher, when his nets are dried,
Abandons; and no other object breaks
The waste but one dwarf tree and some few stakes 10

Broken and unrepaired, and the tide makes
A narrow space of level sand thereon,
Where 't was our wont to ride while day went down.
This ride was my delight. I love all waste
And solitary places; where we taste
The pleasure of believing what we see
Is boundless, as we wish our souls to be;
And such was this wide ocean, and this shore
More barren than its billows; and yet more
Than all, with a remembered friend I love 20
To ride as then I rode;--for the winds drove

The living spray along the sunny air
Into our faces; the blue heavens were bare,
Stripped to their depths by the awakening north;
And from the waves sound like delight broke forth
Harmonizing with solitude, and sent
Into our hearts aërial merriment.
So, as we rode, we talked; and the swift thought,
Winging itself with laughter, lingered not,
But flew from brain to brain,--such glee was ours, 30
Charged with light memories of remembered hours,
None slow enough for sadness; till we came
Homeward, which always makes the spirit tame.
This day had been cheerful but cold, and now
The sun was sinking, and the wind also.
Our talk grew somewhat serious, as may be
Talk interrupted with such raillery
As mocks itself, because it cannot scorn
The thoughts it would extinguish. 'T was forlorn,
Yet pleasing; such as once, so poets tell, 40
The devils held within the dales of Hell,
Concerning God, freewill and destiny;
Of all that earth has been, or yet may be,
All that vain men imagine or believe,
Or hope can paint, or suffering may achieve,

We descanted; and I (for ever still
Is it not wise to make the best of ill?)
Argued against despondency, but pride
Made my companion take the darker side.
The sense that he was greater than his kind 50
Had struck, methinks, his eagle spirit blind
By gazing on its own exceeding light.
Meanwhile the sun paused ere it should alight,
Over the horizon of the mountains. Oh,
How beautiful is sunset, when the glow
Of Heaven descends upon a land like thee,

Thou Paradise of exiles, Italy!

Thy mountains, seas and vineyards and the towers
Of cities they encircle!--It was ours
To stand on thee, beholding it; and then, 60

Just where we had dismounted, the Count's men
Were waiting for us with the gondola.

As those who pause on some delightful way
Though bent on pleasant pilgrimage, we stood
Looking upon the evening, and the flood,
Which lay between the city and the shore,
Paved with the image of the sky. The hoar

And aëry Alps towards the north appeared,
Through mist, an heaven-sustaining bulwark reared
Between the east and west; and half the sky 70
Was roofed with clouds of rich emblazonry,

Dark purple at the zenith, which still grew
Down the steep west into a wondrous hue
Brighter than burning gold, even to the rent
Where the swift sun yet paused in his descent
Among the many-folded hills. They were
Those famous Euganean hills, which bear,
As seen from Lido through the harbor piles,
The likeness of a clump of peaked isles;
And then, as if the earth and sea had been 80
Dissolved into one lake of fire, were seen
Those mountains towering as from waves of flame
Around the vaporous sun, from which there came
The inmost purple spirit of light, and made
Their very peaks transparent. 'Ere it fade,'
Said my companion, 'I will show you soon
A better station.' So, o'er the lagune

We glided; and from that funereal bark
I leaned, and saw the city, and could mark
How from their many isles, in evening's gleam, 90
Its temples and its palaces did seem

Like fabrics of enchantment piled to Heaven.

I was about to speak, when-- 'We are even
Now at the point I meant,' said Maddalo,
And bade the gondolieri cease to row.

'Look, Julian, on the west, and listen well
If you hear not a deep and heavy bell.'

I looked, and saw between us and the sun

A building on an island,--such a one

As age to age might add, for uses vile, 100

A windowless, deformed and dreary pile;

And on the top an open tower, where hung
A bell, which in the radiance swayed and swung;
We could just hear its hoarse and iron tongue;
The broad sun sunk behind it, and it tolled
In strong and black relief. 'What we behold

Shall be the madhouse and its belfry tower,'

Said Maddalo; 'and ever at this hour

Those who may cross the water hear that bell,
Which calls the maniacs each one from his cell 110

To vespers.'--'As much skill as need to pray

In thanks or hope for their dark lot have they

To their stern Maker,' I replied. 'O ho!

You talk as in years past,' said Maddalo.

'T is strange men change not. You were ever still

Among Christ's flock a perilous infidel,

A wolf for the meek lambs--if you can't swim,

Beware of Providence.' I looked on him,

But the gay smile had faded in his eye,--

'And such,' he cried, 'is our mortality; 120

And this must be the emblem and the sign

Of what should be eternal and divine!

And, like that black and dreary bell, the soul,

Hung in a heaven-illuminated tower, must toll

Our thoughts and our desires to meet below

Round the rent heart and pray--as madmen do

For what? they know not, till the night of death,

As sunset that strange vision, severeth

Our memory from itself, and us from all

We sought, and yet were baffled.' I recall 130

The sense of what he said, although I mar

The force of his expressions. The broad star

Of day meanwhile had sunk behind the hill,

And the black bell became invisible,

And the red tower looked gray, and all between,

The churches, ships and palaces were seen

Huddled in gloom; into the purple sea

The orange hues of heaven sunk silently.
We hardly spoke, and soon the gondola
Conveyed me to my lodgings by the way. 140

The following morn was rainy, cold, and dim.
Ere Maddalo arose, I called on him,
And whilst I waited, with his child I played.
A lovelier toy sweet Nature never made;
A serious, subtle, wild, yet gentle being,
Graceful without design, and unforeseeing,
With eyes--oh, speak not of her eyes!--which seem
Twin mirrors of Italian heaven, yet gleam
With such deep meaning as we never see
But in the human countenance. With me 150
She was a special favorite; I had nursed
Her fine and feeble limbs when she came first
To this bleak world; and she yet seemed to know

On second sight her ancient playfellow,
Less changed than she was by six months or so;
For, after her first shyness was worn out,
We sate there, rolling billiard balls about,
When the Count entered. Salutations past--
'The words you spoke last night might well have cast
A darkness on my spirit. If man be 160

The passive thing you say, I should not see
Much harm in the religions and old saws,
(Though I may never own such leaden laws)
Which break a teachless nature to the yoke.
Mine is another faith.' Thus much I spoke,
And noting he replied not, added: 'See
This lovely child, blithe, innocent and free;
She spends a happy time with little care,
While we to such sick thoughts subjected are
As came on you last night. It is our will 170

That thus enchains us to permitted ill.
We might be otherwise, we might be all
We dream of happy, high, majestic.
Where is the love, beauty and truth we seek,
But in our mind? and if we were not weak,
Should we be less in deed than in desire?'
'Ay, if we were not weak--and we aspire
How vainly to be strong!' said Maddalo;
'You talk Utopia.' 'It remains to know,'
I then rejoined, 'and those who try may find 180
How strong the chains are which our spirit bind;
Brittle perchance as straw. We are assured
Much may be conquered, much may be endured

Of what degrades and crushes us. We know
That we have power over ourselves to do
And suffer--what, we know not till we try;
But something nobler than to live and die.
So taught those kings of old philosophy,
Who reigned before religion made men blind;
And those who suffer with their suffering kind 190
Yet feel this faith religion.' 'My dear friend,'
Said Maddalo, 'my judgment will not bend
To your opinion, though I think you might
Make such a system refutation-tight
As far as words go. I knew one like you,
Who to this city came some months ago,
With whom I argued in this sort, and he
Is now gone mad,--and so he answered me,--
Poor fellow! but if you would like to go,
We 'll visit him, and his wild talk will show 200
How vain are such aspiring theories.'

'I hope to prove the induction otherwise,
And that a want of that true theory still,
Which seeks "a soul of goodness" in things ill,
Or in himself or others, has thus bowed
His being. There are some by nature proud,
Who patient in all else demand but this--
To love and be beloved with gentleness;
And, being scorned, what wonder if they die
Some living death? this is not destiny 210
But man's own wilful ill.'

As thus I spoke,
Servants announced the gondola, and we
Through the fast-falling rain and high-wrought sea
Sailed to the island where the madhouse stands.
We disembarked. The clap of tortured hands,
Fierce yells and howlings and lamentings keen,
And laughter where complaint had merrier been,
Moans, shrieks, and curses, and blaspheming prayers,
Accosted us. We climbed the oozy stairs
Into an old courtyard. I heard on high, 220
Then, fragments of most touching melody,
But looking up saw not the singer there.
Through the black bars in the tempestuous air
I saw, like weeds on a wrecked palace growing,
Long tangled locks flung wildly forth, and flowing,
Of those who on a sudden were beguiled
Into strange silence, and looked forth and smiled

Hearing sweet sounds. Then I: 'Methinks there were
 A cure of these with patience and kind care,
 If music can thus move. But what is he, 230
 Whom we seek here?' 'Of his sad history
 I know but this,' said Maddalo: 'he came
 To Venice a dejected man, and fame
 Said he was wealthy, or he had been so.
 Some thought the loss of fortune wrought him woe;
 But he was ever talking in such sort
 As you do--far more sadly; he seemed hurt,
 Even as a man with his peculiar wrong,
 To hear but of the oppression of the strong,
 Or those absurd deceits (I think with you 240
 In some respects, you know) which carry through
 The excellent impostors of this earth
 When they outface detection. He had worth,
 Poor fellow! but a humorist in his way.'
 'Alas, what drove him mad?' 'I cannot say;
 A lady came with him from France, and when
 She left him and returned, he wandered then
 About yon lonely isles of desert sand
 Till he grew wild. He had no cash or land
 Remaining; the police had brought him here; 250
 Some fancy took him and he would not bear
 Removal; so I fitted up for him
 Those rooms beside the sea, to please his whim,
 And sent him busts and books and urns for flowers,
 Which had adorned his life in happier hours,
 And instruments of music. You may guess
 A stranger could do little more or less
 For one so gentle and unfortunate;
 And those are his sweet strains which charm the weight
 From madmen's chains, and make this Hell appear 260
 A heaven of sacred silence, hushed to hear.'
 'Nay, this was kind of you; he had no claim,
 As the world says.' 'None--but the very same
 Which I on all mankind, were I as he
 Fallen to such deep reverse. His melody
 Is interrupted; now we hear the din
 Of madmen, shriek on shriek, again begin.
 Let us now visit him; after this strain
 He ever communes with himself again,
 And sees nor hears not any.' Having said 270
 These words, we called the keeper, and he led
 To an apartment opening on the sea.
 There the poor wretch was sitting mournfully

Near a piano, his pale fingers twined
One with the other, and the ooze and wind
Rushed through an open casement, and did sway
His hair, and starred it with the brackish spray;
His head was leaning on a music-book,
And he was muttering, and his lean limbs shook;
His lips were pressed against a folded leaf, 280
In hue too beautiful for health, and grief
Smiled in their motions as they lay apart.

As one who wrought from his own fervid heart
The eloquence of passion, soon he raised
His sad meek face, and eyes lustrous and glazed,
And spoke--sometimes as one who wrote, and thought
His words might move some heart that heeded not,
If sent to distant lands; and then as one
Reproaching deeds never to be undone
With wondering self-compassion; then his speech 290
Was lost in grief, and then his words came each
Unmodulated, cold, expressionless,
But that from one jarred accent you might guess
It was despair made them so uniform;
And all the while the loud and gusty storm
Hissed through the window, and we stood behind
Stealing his accents from the envious wind
Unseen. I yet remember what he said
Distinctly; such impression his words made.

'Month after month,' he cried, 'to bear this load, 300
And, as a jade urged by the whip and goad,
To drag life on--which like a heavy chain
Lengthens behind with many a link of pain!--
And not to speak my grief--oh, not to dare
To give a human voice to my despair,
But live, and move, and, wretched thing! smile on
As if I never went aside to groan;

And wear this mask of falsehood even to those
Who are most dear--not for my own repose--
Alas, no scorn or pain or hate could be 310
So heavy as that falsehood is to me!
But that I cannot bear more altered faces
Than needs must be, more changed and cold embraces,
More misery, disappointment and mistrust
To own me for their father. Would the dust
Were covered in upon my body now!
That the life ceased to toil within my brow!

And then these thoughts would at the least be fled;
Let us not fear such pain can vex the dead.

'What Power delights to torture us? I know
That to myself I do not wholly owe
What now I suffer, though in part I may.
Alas! none strewed sweet flowers upon the way
Where, wandering heedlessly, I met pale Pain,
My shadow, which will leave me not again.
If I have erred, there was no joy in error,
But pain and insult and unrest and terror;
I have not, as some do, bought penitence
With pleasure, and a dark yet sweet offence;
For then--if love and tenderness and truth
Had overlived hope's momentary youth,
My creed should have redeemed me from repenting;
But loathed scorn and outrage unrelenting
Met love excited by far other seeming
Until the end was gained; as one from dreaming
Of sweetest peace, I woke, and found my state
Such as it is--

'O Thou my spirit's mate!
Who, for thou art compassionate and wise,
Wouldst pity me from thy most gentle eyes
If this sad writing thou shouldst ever see-- 340
My secret groans must be unheard by thee;
Thou wouldst weep tears bitter as blood to know
Thy lost friend's incommunicable woe.
'Ye few by whom my nature has been weighed
In friendship, let me not that name degrade
By placing on your hearts the secret load
Which crushes mine to dust. There is one road
To peace, and that is truth, which follow ye!
Love sometimes leads astray to misery.
Yet think not, though subdued--and I may well 350
Say that I am subdued--that the full hell
Within me would infect the untainted breast
Of sacred Nature with its own unrest;
As some perverted beings think to find
In scorn or hate a medicine for the mind
Which scorn or hate have wounded--oh, how vain!
The dagger heals not, but may rend again!
Believe that I am ever still the same
In creed as in resolve; and what may tame
My heart must leave the understanding free, 360

Or all would sink in this keen agony;
 Nor dream that I will join the vulgar cry;
 Or with my silence sanction tyranny;
 Or seek a moment's shelter from my pain
 In any madness which the world calls gain,
 Ambition or revenge or thoughts as stern
 As those which make me what I am; or turn
 To avarice or misanthropy or lust.
 Heap on me soon, O grave, thy welcome dust!
 Till then the dungeon may demand its prey, 370
 And Poverty and Shame may meet and say,
 Halting beside me on the public way,
 "That love-devoted youth is ours; let 's sit
 Beside him; he may live some six months yet."
 Or the red scaffold, as our country bends,
 May ask some willing victim; or ye, friends,
 May fall under some sorrow, which this heart
 Or hand may share or vanquish or avert;
 I am prepared--in truth, with no proud joy,
 To do or suffer aught, as when a boy 380
 I did devote to justice and to love
 My nature, worthless now!--

'I must remove
 A veil from my pent mind. 'T is torn aside!
 O pallid as Death's dedicated bride,
 Thou mockery which art sitting by my side,
 Am I not wan like thee? at the grave's call
 I haste, invited to thy wedding-ball,
 To greet the ghastly paramour for whom
 Thou hast deserted me--and made the tomb
 Thy bridal bed--but I beside your feet 390
 Will lie and watch ye from my winding-sheet--
 Thus--wide-awake though dead--yet stay, oh, stay!
 Go not so soon--know not what I say--
 Hear but my reasons--I am mad, I fear,
 My fancy is o'erwrought--thou art not here;
 Pale art thou, 't is most true--but thou art gone,
 Thy work is finished--I am left alone.

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 'Nay, was it I who wooed thee to this breast,
 Which like a serpent thou envenomest
 As in repayment of the warmth it lent? 400
 Didst thou not seek me for thine own content?
 Did not thy love awaken mine? I thought
 That thou wert she who said "You kiss me not

Ever; I fear you do not love me now"--
In truth I loved even to my overthrow
Her who would fain forget these words; but they
Cling to her mind, and cannot pass away.

.
'You say that I am proud--that when I speak
My lip is tortured with the wrongs which break
The spirit it expresses.--Never one 410
Humbled himself before, as I have done!
Even the instinctive worm on which we tread
Turns, though it wound not--then with prostrate head
Sinks in the dust and writhes like me--and dies?
No: wears a living death of agonies!
As the slow shadows of the pointed grass
Mark the eternal periods, his pangs pass,
Slow, ever-moving, making moments be
As mine seem,--each an immortality!

.
'That you had never seen me--never heard 420
My voice, and more than all had ne'er endured
The deep pollution of my loathed embrace--
That your eyes ne'er had lied love in my face--
That, like some maniac monk, I had torn out
The nerves of manhood by their bleeding root
With mine own quivering fingers, so that ne'er
Our hearts had for a moment mingled there
To disunite in horror--these were not
With thee like some suppressed and hideous thought
Which flits athwart our musings but can find 430
No rest within a pure and gentle mind;
Thou sealedst them with many a bare broad word,
And sear'dst my memory o'er them,--for I heard
And can forget not;--they were ministered
One after one, those curses. Mix them up
Like self-destroying poisons in one cup,
And they will make one blessing, which thou ne'er
Didst imprecate for on me,--death.

.
'It were
A cruel punishment for one most cruel,
If such can love, to make that love the fuel 440
Of the mind's hell--hate, scorn, remorse, despair;
But *me*, whose heart a stranger's tear might wear
As water-drops the sandy fountain-stone,
Who loved and pitied all things, and could moan
For woes which others hear not, and could see

The absent with the glance of fantasy,
And with the poor and trampled sit and weep,
Following the captive to his dungeon deep;
Me--who am as a nerve o'er which do creep
The else unfelt oppressions of this earth, 450
And was to thee the flame upon thy hearth,
When all beside was cold:--that thou on me
Shouldst rain these plagues of blistering agony!
Such curses are from lips once eloquent
With love's too partial praise! Let none relent
Who intend deeds too dreadful for a name
Henceforth, if an example for the same
They seek:--for thou on me look'dst so, and so--
And didst speak thus--and thus. I live to show
How much men bear and die not!

.
 'Thou wilt tell 460
With the grimace of hate how horrible
It was to meet my love when thine grew less;
Thou wilt admire how I could e'er address
Such features to love's work. This taunt, though true,
(For indeed Nature nor in form nor hue
Bestowed on me her choicest workmanship)
Shall not be thy defence; for since thy lip
Met mine first, years long past,--since thine eye kindled
With soft fire under mine,--I have not dwindled,
Nor changed in mind or body, or in aught 470
But as love changes what it loveth not
After long years and many trials.

 'How vain
Are words! I thought never to speak again,
Not even in secret, not to mine own heart;
But from my lips the unwilling accents start,
And from my pen the words flow as I write,
Dazzling my eyes with scalding tears; my sight
Is dim to see that characterized in vain
On this unfeeling leaf, which burns the brain
And eats into it, blotting all things fair 480
And wise and good which time had written there.

Those who inflict must suffer, for they see
The work of their own hearts, and this must be
Our chastisement or recompense.--O child!
I would that thine were like to be more mild
For both our wretched sakes,--for thine the most

Who feelest already all that thou hast lost
Without the power to wish it thine again;
And as slow years pass, a funereal train,
Each with the ghost of some lost hope or friend 490
Following it like its shadow, wilt thou bend
No thought on my dead memory?

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'Alas, love!

Fear me not--against thee I would not move
A finger in despite. Do I not live
That thou mayst have less bitter cause to grieve?
I give thee tears for scorn, and love for hate;
And that thy lot may be less desolate
Than his on whom thou tramplest, I refrain
From that sweet sleep which medicines all pain.
Then, when thou speakest of me, never say 500
"He could forgive not." Here I cast away
All human passions, all revenge, all pride;
I think, speak, act no ill; I do but hide
Under these words, like embers, every spark
Of that which has consumed me. Quick and dark
The grave is yawning--as its roof shall cover
My limbs with dust and worms under and over,
So let Oblivion hide this grief--the air
Closes upon my accents as despair
Upon my heart--let death upon despair!" 510

He ceased, and overcome leant back awhile;
Then rising, with a melancholy smile,
Went to a sofa, and lay down, and slept
A heavy sleep, and in his dreams he wept,
And muttered some familiar name, and we
Wept without shame in his society.
I think I never was impressed so much;
The man who were not must have lacked a touch
Of human nature.--Then we lingered not,
Although our argument was quite forgot; 520
But, calling the attendants, went to dine
At Maddalo's; yet neither cheer nor wine
Could give us spirits, for we talked of him
And nothing else, till daylight made stars dim;
And we agreed his was some dreadful ill
Wrought on him boldly, yet unspeakable,
By a dear friend; some deadly change in love
Of one vowed deeply, which he dreamed not of;
For whose sake he, it seemed, had fixed a blot

Of falsehood on his mind which flourished not 530
But in the light of all-beholding truth;
And having stamped this canker on his youth
She had abandoned him--and how much more
Might be his woe, we guessed not; he had store
Of friends and fortune once, as we could guess
From his nice habits and his gentleness;
These were now lost--it were a grief indeed
If he had changed one unsustaining reed
For all that such a man might else adorn.
The colors of his mind seemed yet unworn; 540
For the wild language of his grief was high--
Such as in measure were called poetry.
And I remember one remark which then
Maddalo made. He said--'Most wretched men
Are cradled into poetry by wrong;
They learn in suffering what they teach in song.'

If I had been an unconnected man,
I, from this moment, should have formed some plan
Never to leave sweet Venice,--for to me
It was delight to ride by the lone sea; 550
And then the town is silent--one may write
Or read in gondolas by day or night,
Having the little brazen lamp alight,
Unseen, uninterrupted; books are there,
Pictures, and casts from all those statues fair
Which were twin-born with poetry, and all
We seek in towns, with little to recall
Regrets for the green country. I might sit
In Maddalo's great palace, and his wit
And subtle talk would cheer the winter night 560
And make me know myself, and the firelight
Would flash upon our faces, till the day
Might dawn and make me wonder at my stay.
But I had friends in London too. The chief
Attraction here was that I sought relief
From the deep tenderness that maniac wrought
Within me--'t was perhaps an idle thought,
But I imagined that if day by day
I watched him, and but seldom went away,
And studied all the beatings of his heart 570
With zeal, as men study some stubborn art
For their own good, and could by patience find
An entrance to the caverns of his mind,
I might reclaim him from this dark estate.

In friendships I had been most fortunate,
Yet never saw I one whom I would call
More willingly my friend; and this was all
Accomplished not; such dreams of baseless good
Oft come and go in crowds and solitude
And leave no trace,--but what I now designed 580
Made, for long years, impression on my mind.
The following morning, urged by my affairs,
I left bright Venice.

After many years,
And many changes, I returned; the name
Of Venice, and its aspect, was the same;
But Maddalo was travelling far away
Among the mountains of Armenia.

His dog was dead. His child had now become
A woman; such as it has been my doom
To meet with few, a wonder of this earth, 590
Where there is little of transcendent worth,
Like one of Shakespeare's women. Kindly she,
And with a manner beyond courtesy,
Received her father's friend; and, when I asked
Of the lorn maniac, she her memory tasked,
And told, as she had heard, the mournful tale:
'That the poor sufferer's health began to fail
Two years from my departure, but that then
The lady, who had left him, came again.
Her mien had been imperious, but she now 600
Looked meek--perhaps remorse had brought her low.
Her coming made him better, and they stayed
Together at my father's--for I played
As I remember with the lady's shawl;
I might be six years old--but after all
She left him.' 'Why, her heart must have been tough.
How did it end?' 'And was not this enough?
They met--they parted.' 'Child, is there no more?'
'Something within that interval which bore
The stamp of *why* they parted, *how* they met; 610
Yet if thine aged eyes disdain to wet
Those wrinkled cheeks with youth's remembered tears,
Ask me no more, but let the silent years
Be closed and cased over their memory,
As yon mute marble where their corpses lie.'
I urged and questioned still; she told me how
All happened--but the cold world shall not know.