

THE SHROUD OF COLOR

BY COUNTÉE P. CULLEN

"Lord, being dark," I said,—"I cannot
bear

The further touch of earth, the scented air;
Lord, being dark, forewilled to that
despair

My color shrouds me in, I am as dirt
Beneath my brother's heel; there is a hurt
In all the simple joys which to a child
Are sweet; they are contaminate, defiled
By truth of wrongs the childish vision fails
To see. Too great a cost this birth entails.
I strangle in this yoke drawn tighter than
The worth of bearing it—just to be Man!
I am not brave enough to pay the price
In full; I lack the strength to sacrifice.

"I who have burned my hands upon a star,
And climbed high hills at dawn to view
the far

Illimitable wonderments of earth,
For whom all cups have dripped the wine
of mirth,

For whom the sea has strained her honeyed
throat

Till all the world was sea, and I a boat
Unmoored, on what strange quest I willed
to float;—

Who wore a coat of many colored dreams,
Thy gift, O Lord; I whom sun-dabbled
streams

Have washed; whose bare brown thighs
have held the sun

Incarcerate until his course was run;
I who considered man a high-perfected
Glass where loveliness could lie reflected,—
Now that I sway athwart Truth's deep
abyss,

Denuding man for what he was and is,
Shall breath and being so inveigle me
That I can damn my dreams to hell, and be
Content, each new-born day, anew to see
The streaming crimson vintage of my
youth

Incarnadine the altar-slab of Truth?

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"Or hast Thou, Lord, somewhere I cannot
see,

A lamb imprisoned in a bush for me?

"Not so? Then let me render one by one
Thy gifts, while still they shine. Some
little sun

Yet gilds these thighs; my coat, albeit
worn,

Still holds its colors fast; albeit torn,
My heart will laugh a little yet, if I
May win of Thee this grace, Lord: on this
high

And sacrificial hill, 'twixt earth and sky,
To dream still pure all that I loved, and
die."

Across the earth's warm, palpitating crust
I flung my body in embrace; I thrust
My mouth into the grass and sucked the
dew;

Then gave it back in tears my anguish
drew.

So hard I pressed, against the ground I felt
The smallest sand grain like a knife, and
smelt

The next year's flowering—all this to speed
My body's dissolution, fain to feed
The worms. And so I groaned, and spent
my strength

Until, all passion spent, I lay full length
And quivered like a flayed and bleeding
thing.

So lay till lifted on a great black wing
That had no mate nor flesh-apparent
trunk

To hamper it. With me all time had sunk
Into oblivion; when I awoke
The wing hung poised above two cliffs
that broke

The bowels of the earth in twain, and cleft
The seas apart. Below, above, to left,

To right, I saw what no man saw before:
 Earth, hell, and heaven; sinew, vein, and
 core.
 All things that swim, or walk, or creep, or
 fly,
 All things that live and hunger, faint and
 die,
 Were made majestic then and magnified
 By sight so purged and deified.
 The smallest bug that crawls was taller
 than
 A tree; the mustard seed loomed like a
 man.
 The earth that writhes eternally with pain
 Of birth, and woe of taking back her slain,
 Laid bare her teeming bosom to my sight,
 And all was struggle, gasping breath, and
 fight.
 A blind worm here dug tunnels to the
 light,
 And there a seed, racked with heroic pain,
 Thrust eager tentacles at sun and rain;
 It climbed, it died; the old love conquered
 me
 To weep the blossom it would never be.
 But here a bud won light; it burst and
 flowered
 Into a rose whose beauty challenged,
 "Coward!"
 There was no thing alive save only I
 That held life in contempt, and longed to die.
 And still I writhed, and moaned, "The
 curse, the curse!
 Than animated death, can death be
 worse?"

*"Dark child of sorrow, mine no less, what
 art
 Of mine can make thee see and play thy
 part?
 The key to all strange things is in thy heart."*

What voice was this that coursed like
 liquid fire
 Along my flesh, and turned my hair to
 wire?
 I raised my burning eyes, beheld a field
 All multitudinous with carnal yield,
 A grim, ensanguined mead whereon I saw
 Evolve the ancient, fundamental law

Of fist and talon, tooth and nail and claw.
 There with the force of living hostile
 hills,
 Whose clash the hemmed-in vale with
 clamor fills,
 With greater din contended fierce majestic
 wills
 Of beast with beast, of man with man, in
 strife
 For love of what my heart despised, for
 life
 That unto me at dawn was now a prayer
 For night, at night a bloody heart-wrung
 tear
 For day again. For *this*, these groans
 From tangled flesh and interlocked bones.
 And no thing died that did not give
 A testimony that it longed to live.
 Man, strange composite blend of brute and
 God,
 Pushed on, nor backward glanced where
 last he trod.
 He seemed to mount a misty ladder flung
 Pendant from a cloud, yet never gained a
 rung
 But at his feet another tugged and clung.
 My heart was still a pool of bitterness,
 Would yield nought else, nought else con-
 fess.
 I spoke (although no form was there
 To see, I knew an Ear was there to hear),
 "Well, let them fight: they *can* whose
 flesh is *fair*."

Swift lightning flashed; a wave of thunder
 shook
 My wing; a pause, and then a speaking,
 "Look!"

I scarce dared trust my ears or eyes for awe
 Of what they heard and dread of what they
 saw,
 For, privileged beyond degree, this flesh
 Beheld God and His heaven in the mesh
 Of Lucifer's revolt, saw Lucifer
 Glow like the sun, and like a dulcimer
 I heard his sin-sweet voice break on the
 yell
 Of God's great warriors: Gabriel,

Saint Clair and Michael, Raphael and
Israfel.

And strange it was to see God with His
back

Against a wall, to see Christ hew and hack,
Till Lucifer, pressed by the mighty Pair,
And losing inch by inch, clawed at the air
With fevered wings; then, lost beyond
repair,

He tricked a mass of stars into his hair;
He filled his hands with stars, crying as he
fell,

"A star's a star although it burns in hell!"
So God was left to His divinity
Omnipotent at that most costly fee.

There was a lesson here, but still the clod
In me was sycophant unto the rod,
And cried, "Why mock me thus? Am I a
God?"

*"One trial more; this failing then I give
You leave to die; no further need to live."*

Then suddenly a strange, wild music smote
A chord long impotent in me; a note
Of jungles, primitive and subtle, throbbed
Against my echoing breast, and tomtoms
sobbed

In every pulse beat of my frame. The din
A hollow log bound with a python's skin
Can make wrought every sense to ecstasy,
And I was wind and sky again, and sea,
And all sweet things that flourish, being
free;
Till all at once the music changed its key.

And now it was of bitterness and death,
The cry the lash extorts, the broken
breath

Of liberty enchained. And yet there ran
Through all a harmony of Faith in Man,
A knowledge all would end as it began.
All sights and sounds and aspects of my
race

Accompanied this melody, kept pace
With it, with music all their hopes and
hates

Were charged, not to be downed by all
the fates.

And suddenly it was borne upon my brain
How being dark and living through the
pain

Of it is courage more than angels have. I
knew

What tumults lashed the tree that grew
This body that I was, this cringing *I*
That feared to contemplate a changing
sky,

This *I* that groveled, whining, "Let me
die,"

While others struggled in Life's abattoir.
The cries of all dark people near and far
Were billowed over me, a mighty surge
Of woe in which my petty grief must
merge

And lose itself. I had no further urge
For death. I raised my dust-grimed head,
And though my lips moved not, God knew
I said,

"Lord, not for what I saw in flesh or bone
Of fairer men, not raised on faith alone,
Lord, I will live—persuaded by mine own.
I cannot play the recreant to these;
My spirit has come home that sailed the
doubtful seas."

With the whiz of a sword that severs space
The wing dropped down at a dizzy pace,
And flung me on my hill, flat on my face,
Flat on my face I lay defying pain,
Glad of the blood in my smallest vein,
And in my hand I clutched a loyal dream
Still spitting fire: bright twist and coil and
gleam,

And chiseled like a hound's white tooth.
"Oh, I will match you yet!" I cried to
Truth.

Right glad I was to stoop to what I once
had spurned,
Glad even unto tears; I laughed aloud, I
turned

Upon my back, and though the tears for
joy would run,
My sight was clear; I looked and saw a
rising sun.