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978-1-108-05120-0 - The Collected Works of William Morris: With Introductions by his Daughter

May Morris: Volume 6: The Earthly Paradise: A Poem 4

William Morris

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The Collected Works of William Morris

A creative titan of the Victorian age, William Morris (1834–96) produced a prodigious variety of literary and artistic work in his lifetime. In addition to his achievements as a versatile designer at the forefront of the arts and crafts movement, Morris distinguished himself as a poet, translated Icelandic sagas and classical epics, wrote a series of influential prose romances, and gave lectures promoting his socialist principles. His collected works, originally published in 24 volumes between 1910 and 1915, were edited by his daughter Mary (May) Morris (1862–1938), whose introductions to each volume chart with insight and sympathy the development of her father's literary, aesthetic and political passions. Volume 6 contains the fourth part of *The Earthly Paradise* (1868–70), Morris' ambitious collection of verse tales.

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*With introductions by
his daughter May Morris*

VOLUME 6:
THE EARTHLY PARADISE: A POEM 4

WILLIAM MORRIS



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D. G. Rossetti, del.

Ernest Walker Ph. sc.

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**THE COLLECTED WORKS
OF WILLIAM MORRIS**

**WITH INTRODUCTIONS BY
HIS DAUGHTER MAY MORRIS**

**VOLUME VI
THE EARTHLY PARADISE
A POEM
IV**

**LONGMANS GREEN AND COMPANY
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INTRODUCTION

IN the advertisements at the end of the *Völsunga Saga*,* Part IV of “The Earthly Paradise” is announced for October 1870, and though not ready this month, as the letters of the autumn show, it was out early in December. The letters written in the spring of the year give some indication of the work my father had in hand.

On March 12 he writes to mother at Hastings:

“I have been hard at work, but have not done much except the translations as they are rather pressing now, and I want to get all my Volsung work done this week; then I shall set to work about Gabriel’s review which I must say rather terrifies me. . . .

“I did hope to be able to give you the news of my hair being cut this morning, but I had to stay in fair copying for *Strangeways*. . . . I send you a *Spectator* with a review not bad as things go. . . . I shall write to the littles in a day or two and try to find something pretty to send them; why haven’t the little rascals written to me?”

The review mentioned in this letter was one for “The Academy”† that Rossetti was particularly anxious that he should write of his newly published poems. He found it difficult, as the compression of a theory of poetry into three columns must be. The “fair copying for *Strangeways*” is of course “The Earthly Paradise,” of which they were the printers.

The next month my mother was at Firbank, Robertsbridge, Madame Bodichon’s house, where Rossetti was painting at the time. My father writes to her again about work:

“April 27th 1870.

“On Sunday I did a good day’s work at the *Venusberg* and sat up to 3½ last night writing it all out; I think I may finish this last part this week; but then I have to re-write a good deal of the earlier part. I had a pleasant evening with Brown and Hüffer:‡ Ellis came in later and quite distinguished him-

* Published early in 1870; see Volume VII.

† It appeared May 14, 1870.

‡ Brown is of course Ford Madox Brown, and Hueffer was his son-in-law.

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self in the way of talk. I have just parted from Gabriel (and oysters) at Rule's: he is pleased with his binding and so am I. The book seems selling well, 250 copies . . . I have sent in my review; I read it to Brown on Friday and he thought it good; the editor has asked me to write a notice on the Academy pictures this year but I have refused; as there would'nt be ½ a dozen pictures that I [could] speak of without using more forcible words than people expect to see in print."

All through the year he was working diligently at "The Earthly Paradise" and at Northern things, some of his play-work being the writing and decoration of manuscripts, which he had taken up with great eagerness; and the late autumn found him in the condition of mind that comes over people who are taking leave of a big piece of work. On November 25 he writes to mother, who is staying at Torquay with the womenfolk, grandma and Aunt Henrietta and some of the others:

"I am still hard at work over the proofs; but 'twill soon all be done: I expect to get a copy or two by about the 3rd in which case you will have it down there; but I don't suppose the book will be published before the 10th. The other vols. have been moving a bit these past days; and Colvin's article has appeared,* which I send herewith: I think it may be considered satisfactory . . .

"I went yesterday to order myself some new clothes; but was so alarmed at the chance of turning up something between a gamekeeper and a methodist parson, that I brought away some patterns in my hand to show Webb: but haven't seen him yet . . .

"I feel rather lost at having done my book: I find now I

* I take this opportunity, writing of reviews, to say that among the most clear-sighted and just critics of my father's early work was the late Mr. Joseph Knight. His reviews of "The Earthly Paradise" are still worth reading, and he was the first (within a week of its publication) to recognize the value of "The Defence of Guenevere" in "The Literary Gazette" of March 6, 1858.

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liked working at it better than I thought. I must try and get something serious to do as soon as may be . . .

“Have the kids written? Such a rumpus this morning. May enjoying a good tease and Jenny expressing herself in boo hoo.”

The book which had been in his thoughts for so many years had at last gone from him, the strain of the final moments was over, and he was left relaxed and lonesome, yearning after the companion that was now no longer his. All this yearning, all the unwillingness to part with his Book, is gathered in the loving farewell of L'Envoi, and as we have seen he cannot quite keep it out of the letters of this month. To mother at Torquay he writes again at the end of November the following—so charmingly suggestive of varying moods:

[Nov. 30th 1870.]

“I don't suppose the book will be out much before you come home. . . . I confess I am dull now my book is done; one doesn't know sometimes how much service a thing has done us till it is gone: however one has time yet; and perhaps something else of importance will turn up soon. Meantime, one great event has occurred—the ordering of a suit of clothes: Ellis took me to a place in the city, where I was gratified by the tailor complimenting [me] on my great works before he measured me.

“I think, yes I think tomorrow I shall entrust the head which accomplished the Earthly Paradise to the scissors and comb of a hairdresser.”*

A few days later she receives a letter containing a sudden revelation of the sacred hidden self, such as he indulged in

* The last sentence in this letter needs a gloss: he had to go to the hairdresser, as mother was away from home. She was hair-cutter to the family, and periodically cropped our thick and curly locks with a celerity and boldness that in later days has fairly taken my breath away. Sometimes she overdid it and then there was a general family protest.

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perhaps even less than most people, in spite of the affectionately frank relation in which he stood to his intimate friends. I suppose indeed that highly sensitive people can scarcely bring themselves to talk on serious matters that touch on life and death except with extreme reserve, and but rarely.

I quote the previous paragraph of the letter as it mentions another matter to be referred to later.

[December 3, 1870.]

“Picture is hung up again; perhaps it looks better, but I can’t see much difference, one *can’t* see it and never will be able in that room. Meanwhile the room looks very little altered for the new papering: the paint looks queer and ‘foxy.’ . . . The book won’t be out till Tuesday; so it’s no use sending one down to you . . .

“As for living, dear, people like you speak about don’t know either what life or death means, except for one or two supreme moments of their lives when something pierces through the crust of dullness and ignorance and they act for the time as if they were sensitive people.

“For me I don’t think people really want to die because of mental pain, that is if they are imaginative people: they want to live to see the play played out fairly—they have hopes that they are not conscious of. Hillao! here’s cheerful talk for you. I beg your pardon, dear, with all my heart.”

The picture mentioned is the portrait of my mother, (*v. frontispiece*, Vol. V) which hung at the end of the Queen Square sitting room over a great Italian chest of cypress wood. The room was very light in key and the picture dark and rich, so they rather spoiled each other. The portrait had been back to the studio to be worked on, and mother in commenting on this passage of the letter is evidently disappointed and asks if it is not improved; he writes again:

Monday Dec. 5th

Dearest Janey, . . .

As to the picture I didn’t say it wasn’t improved; it visibly is; but it is darker you know if anything, and the light on it

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Emery Walker Ph. x

"May"

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of course is the same—in addition I don't think the frame suits it: it wants something more florid, a big dark-toned picture like that. . . .

It was a noble room, that Queen Square parlour: no litter about, nothing to distract the eye from the breadth and simplicity of it. The house was planned like so many Queen Anne houses in London, a long room with its row of five windows facing the Square opening on to a smaller one, called the Blue Room, which itself opened into a little room still further back, a projection into the ample paved yard behind which did duty for "back garden." At the bottom of the yard, as we have seen, was the former ball-room of fine proportions approached by a corridor. We children played in the yard sometimes, but I rather think that it was on my account that this came to be forbidden; for one day I started out to bury my best doll (she was named Lady Audley because of her yellow hair) in the flower-boxes below the corridor where the painters worked; the amusement and suspension of work caused by this innocent occupation obliged the heads of the house to veto it in the interests of the business. What queer little animals children are! My best beloved doll was a discarded little jointed lay-figure of father's, whose name was John. When mother was specially unwell and lay abed, I used to bring him down wrapped in a ragged piece of green baize (he had no wardrobe) to pay her a visit. She had to kiss the dint on his gaunt nose, much to my father's amusement, and I thought my treasure would surely comfort her. I am glad that our parents allowed us to love homely dolls and improbable birds that creaked and bowed, and fairy books, and all the silly delightful things that they had flourished on.

This gossip about dolls and things is really "part of the story," inasmuch as we were lucky children not to be saddled with parents full of theories—"experimental parents," if I may call them so without disrespect to the elders. I have heard my father speak of the children of X and Y and Z, who were being lovingly subjected to experiments in diet or cloth-

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ing or training or play, as “poor little devils” with real pity in his voice. “Children bring each other up,” he often said, and as one of a large family he knew it by experience.

The Bellerophon story came to be so long that it was divided into two parts, the second part, telling of the hero’s adventures in Lycia, being of course by far the longest. In the printer’s manuscript it starts as “The Story of Bellerophon,” and the argument covers the incidents in “Bellerophon at Argos” and “Bellerophon in Lycia.”

At the beginning of “Bellerophon in Lycia” a little song was struck out, in itself too delicate to be overlooked. The introductory lines and three pages following the lyric were also discarded, to judge by the pagination of the manuscript.

There twixt the languid leaves
And o’er blown blossom he awhile did go,
Striving to think, but still that eager face
Wild with its love, and grief and hope and fear
Must he behold; and that sweet voice must hear
Sad and heart-piercing: but nigh where he did pass
Neath sweeping lime-boughs lay a bank of grass
And underneath the shadows there was laid
Unwitting of him, a fair Lycian maid
Not heeding if in that hot windless tide
The loosened clasp should let the linen glide
From off her shoulder, careless that the crown
Of roses from her head had fallen down;
But lying there faint words as of a song
She murmured, and her fingers moved among
The strings of a small harp that lightly lay
Upon her breast, till as one thrusts away
A listless mood she raised herself at last
And pensive music on the hot air cast:

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A sweet garden by the sea
 Did my true love give to me,
 The All-father's paradise
 Was not wrought in fairer wise;
 Ah how lone, how lone it is.

There the birds sing songs for me
 And the murmur of the sea
 Do I hear day-long, night-long,
 Nothing there may do me wrong;
 Ah how lone, how lone it is.

There 'twixt blossomed trees and sea
 He let build a house for me
 Therein is there wealth of gold
 Tales on walls and floor are told;
 Ah how lone, how lone it is.

Many a slave he gat for me
 On that beach along the sea,
 From Mysian land and Argive land
 Did the captive women stand;
 Ah how lone, how lone it is.

Twixt lily-bed and white-crowned sea
 Tales of love folk tell to me;
 Songs they sing of happy dreams,
 But the o'erword ever seems,
 Ah how lone, how lone it is.

Sometimes do folk say to me
 When the murmur of the sea
 At dead ebb is far away,
 "Forget him, he died yesterday."
 Ah how lone, how lone it is.

Or when west winds make the sea
 Mad and loud, they say to me,
 "Weeping makes thine eyes less fair,
 Tomorrow morn shall he be here,"
 Ah how lone, how lone it is.

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When tomorrow comes to me
I shall not hear the unquiet sea,
When today is yesterday
No more shall I weep and say,
“Ah how lone, how lone it is.”

He stopped the while she sang, she saw him not
As 'neath the moveless boughs in that green spot
She sang, and when the last words of the song were spent
Unto her feet she gat and slowly went
Another way, as one made well nigh sad
Amidst of joyous life . . .

There are two passages in this volume where I have not followed the one-volume edition (the text adopted). If they had been mere printers' slips they would have been left unrecorded, but that is not quite the case. In “Bellerophon at Argos,” page 72:

Dwelling with few folk in her woodland shrine

“few” appears as “new” in the one-volume and Kelmscott editions, the first edition and the Silver Library follow the manuscript.

In “Bellerophon in Lycia,” page 239:

Or when some fairest one whose fervent love
Seems strong the world from out its course to move,

here all the editions give “curse”—the manuscript has “course,” and this I have preserved.

In addition to the manuscript of the whole “Earthly Paradise” which passed through the printers' hands, I have had the use not only of the first form of “The Hill of Venus,” written in the early 'sixties, but also of a collection of late though fragmentary manuscripts, on which I am basing the following notes. In this collection the draft of “The Land East of

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the Sun” is immediately followed by a fragment of “The Hill of Venus.” Here they stand side by side within the same binding, these strange companions revealing different moods of the author, different themes taken at a different pace. The delicate fairy story was apparently written with swiftness and ease of composition; the wild romantic legend which concludes the book taxed his skill and he did not bring it to a satisfactory conclusion without a good deal of labour.

The poem as it appears in the quarto manuscripts is very close to the conception of Tieck in its construction and atmosphere. It is so utterly different from the tale in the form my father adopted in “The Earthly Paradise” that I feel obliged to give a slight account of the story as he told it then. It will be remembered that in the early list * this tale comes before “Jason,” and, though not necessarily written before it, it is in the same mood of observation.

The Swabian priest in whose mouth the tale is put, thus begins:

I saw a forest once in Germany
Set in a lordship called Turingia,

and describes the coming on the cave, and the warning he receives from a herd near by against its dangers. He passes on;

And so in time I came to Ratisbon
And there I met a certain ancient knight,

who tells the story:

So then the ancient man
This story of the sorceress began.

In the face of this network of story-tellers I must collect myself and take up the tale as editor. Walter (who was Lawrence in the early manuscript, and thereafter Amyot, which name he kept till the printer came in sight), on passing

* See the list on p. xv of the third volume of this edition. I have “The Hill of Venus” down as Vol. 6, having numbered the book consecutively, but on his label the author has written “Vol. 8.”

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through the cave, finds himself not in the magic woodland of the later poem, but in a fair valley with a city in its midst, all distinctly visualized and described.

And gilded spires and vanes were borne aloft
 From the fair walls by carven turrets high,
 And doves and pigeons in their flutterings soft,
 With bright unknown birds thereabout did fly,
 And from the windows came melodiously
 The sound of music that made all things seem
 Half dim and fleeting, like a happy dream.

The streets are crowded with happy lovers, and he makes bold to stop a damsel—one of a hurrying group—to enquire whither they go. She bids him follow her to the temple. He stays outside its golden veil and hears the invocation to Venus:

Lady Venus, where art thou
 We are faint with waiting now,

.
 Haply in the northern breeze
 Of the hurrying world without,
 She is tangled mid the rout
 Of Diana, and they go
 Ever slower, and more slow,
 Careless of the fleeting hart;
 Each one thinking for her part
 That her summer slips away,
 And no hope has she by day,
 And no happiness by night.

Or beneath the flickering light
 Stands she by some torchlit door,
 Where across the rose-strewn floor,
 With her trembling, tender feet,
 Her unknown delight to meet,

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Goes the pale new-wedded bride
Slowly letting her smock glide
To the roses of the floor.

Lo our Queen is at the door
Gold-clad, yet her hair is wet
With the washing of the sea.
O sweet Queen, we kneel to thee.

He enters the temple on this and sees Venus sitting, clothed, on her throne. She bids him serve her for a month and then after doing her homage he is to fight a tourney in her honour, when she will reveal herself

As when from out the green sea first I came
Hidden of nought; . . .

The part ends with a long description of Venus at the bath and a vague suggestion of the Queen of Sorcery performing strange rites under the moon.

The third part describes the tourney—a tourney of glamour with no real opponent. I give the following stanza, it will be readily understood, not for the quality of the verse, but for this idea of magic in it:

And in his mind again the ill thought came
That all those things he saw, were but shadows
Set round him but to keep his heart aflame.
The smiling folk, the graceful girls in rows,
His damsel, and the bodies of his foes,
All were but deadly meshes of her net
About his fluttering soul in order set.

The lists are described and the beautiful song (preserved through all the vicissitudes of composition) makes its appearance here:

Before our Lady came on earth (p. 289).

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At the end of this part Amyot is brought to the temple of Venus and receives his reward.

Part IV describes his life with Venus for the next three months. Like all the earlier quarto manuscripts, the subjects for illustration are noted on the opposite pages. Those indicated for this part are “16.—playing in garden (like Ship of Fools). 17.—same but like Romance of Rose. 18.—in boat.” These directions to the artist (from some favourite manuscripts or printed books that were in his mind) will indicate the general character of this part of the poem. At last Venus feels the call of the sea:

ere dawn was fully come
She woke, and fell a-longing for the sea,
And the broad yellow sands of her old home,
Where by their black boats fisher people be;
And longed to hear the wind sing mightily
With little changing song from point to point,
And in its waves her body to anoint.

She leaves him, and when he wakes he realizes that he is

Left all alone within this wicked place;
Left naked of her love, and growing old.

The valley is deserted and the town ruined, the only person left being his guide. He refuses her love and comes out into the world again. In the last part, which follows the legend closely, he goes to Rome, confesses, is cursed by the Pope, and returns to the Hill.

No less than three distinct attempts are preserved in the collection of later drafts above referred to: even the fair copy prepared for the printer shows traces of considerable revision and omission. He is working on it in 1870 and contemplates rewriting the first part of the tale. The three attempts before me cannot be earlier than the end of 1869, and one feels in reading them a certain indecision of treatment. Up to the last

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moment, the author seems to have been tempted to emphasize the psychological interest so strongly marked in the poem as it stands, running the risk of changing the centre of interest from his hero to Venus, and of representing her not as the impassive self-sufficing god but as a character in the play, and Walter not as the medieval knight he was at first and came to be again at the end, moved by broadly human motives.

Draft A (I take them in the order in which they happen to be bound) seems to be a complete but shortened form of the poem as it stands in the printed text. It is numbered in stanzas and closely written on both sides of the page in the hurried draft manner. It begins at stanza 33 of the published poem “He turned about,” etc., and finishes with the return to the Hill. A good deal of it was afterwards rejected—one whole block of twenty-five stanzas being omitted.

In the second draft, B, which like the third was written in the author’s “copying hand,” presupposing earlier forms, the author was finding what he wanted—indeed, a large section of it was actually sent to the printer as finished copy—the remainder being discarded altogether. It indicates a rather different conception of both Venus and the Knight. Venus is no longer the sorceress but a personality with human interests. It is very introspective, full of the doubts and vacillations of the man who is sated and afraid, but cannot break loose from his passion. Some interesting stanzas show what one may call Venus’s point of view:

“What thing dost thou desire
I cannot give? Has not thy fickle mouth
Been full of praises of the sweet strange fire
That dieth not, of the heart-cleaving drouth
Unquenchable; the sight of deathless youth
And changeless beauty? Shall I take away
These things once given?—Shall night follow day?

“The thing thou seem’st to lack

xxj

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I have not and I know not; if it lay
 Within mine hand to give, yet should I say
 The having it would never better thee,
 Restless and lonely ever shalt thou be.

“Be wise, come back if for a while again!
 I am the thing that thou didst cry to have,
 That rest and refuge from dull common pain
 For which within the world thou didst so crave:
 Whence came I, where I wend, what thing shall save
 My beauty from the swift decay of earth
 I know not; but my heart is full of mirth:

“My heart is full of mirth, and all is good;
 Good the slow creeping longing and the ruth
 That grows to restless fever of the blood,
 Good the sweet blindness, good the flash of truth
 That dies and comes again; and good the growth
 Of half regret and half forgetfulness
 That as the days wear the worn heart doth bless.

“Yea even good awhile the emptied heart
 To which but half believed quite scorned is pain,
 Ere it is garnished for another part,
 Good the new love the old shall not disdain
 And all the sweetness sweet come back again—
 —O come thou back, curse me, weep on my breast,
 Belike it is thou hast not known the best!”

Besides the song “Before our Lady came on earth” this fragment contains another experiment in lyric on the same theme, written in another mood:

Still in the world old tales of Her they tell

They gaze upon the images men made
 Long time ago, before they grew afraid
 xxij

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To call upon her beauty for their aid;
 “Alas,” they say, “that she no more is here!”

But who knows, who knows what great happiness
 The heart of such a happy man would bless
 As wandered hither from the world’s distress?
 O the kind heart of her that dwelleth here.

The third fragment C works on B and selects passages and single stanzas from it, but it, too, is almost completely rejected. Both this and the draft A had an episode where Amyot, despairing and exhausted, wakes up in the hospital in Rome after falling fainting in the streets. In A this occurs before the Knight’s visit to the Pope; in C, while the monk has gone to arrange the visit, Amyot

with his intent
 Grown stronger, and because of strength, more met
 By old despair, by old desire grown vile,
 Stood with his hand upon a pillar set
 And glaring at the door, and for a while
 His hopelessness he strove hard to beguile
 With thinking: “Ah let all things go their ways;
 I will return, and yet win happy days.”

Then he muses on his love and sees Venus in vision, in the following verses, which were originally written long before on half sheets of note-paper, as may be seen in the facsimile. I think my father must have given them up rather unwillingly:

What hope in her to turn to? There between
 The blossoming trees she stood, in such a shade,
 That e’en the very air seemed well-nigh green,
 With one hand on a smooth stemmed sapling laid
 The other on her white breast, where there played
 From over-head a thin bright flickering ray
 Upon the place whereon his head once lay.

xxiij

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The burning kisses of a thousand years
 Had sullied not her skin in any place;
 The groans of ruined men, lost lovers' tears,
 So many a last despairing close embrace,
 Had brought no wrinkle to her happy face,
 No pain or terror yet had e'er made less
 That long-enduring perfect loveliness.

And still no smile, no triumph in her eyes,
 No frown upon her smooth white brows and fair,
 No trouble on her mouth for memories
 Of days past, and the lips once trembling there,
 No coldness to keep back, no pride to scare
 Gave hope of any change for bad or good,
 The soul of worshipped beauty there she stood.

Ah what is fair beside her? the first day
 When o'er the ruined winter blithe birds sing,
 The summer eve when storms have passed away,
 The blossomed boughs of happy dying spring,
 The meadows in the May-tide flourishing—
 All these we have, and lose with little pain
 And nigh forget them till they come again.

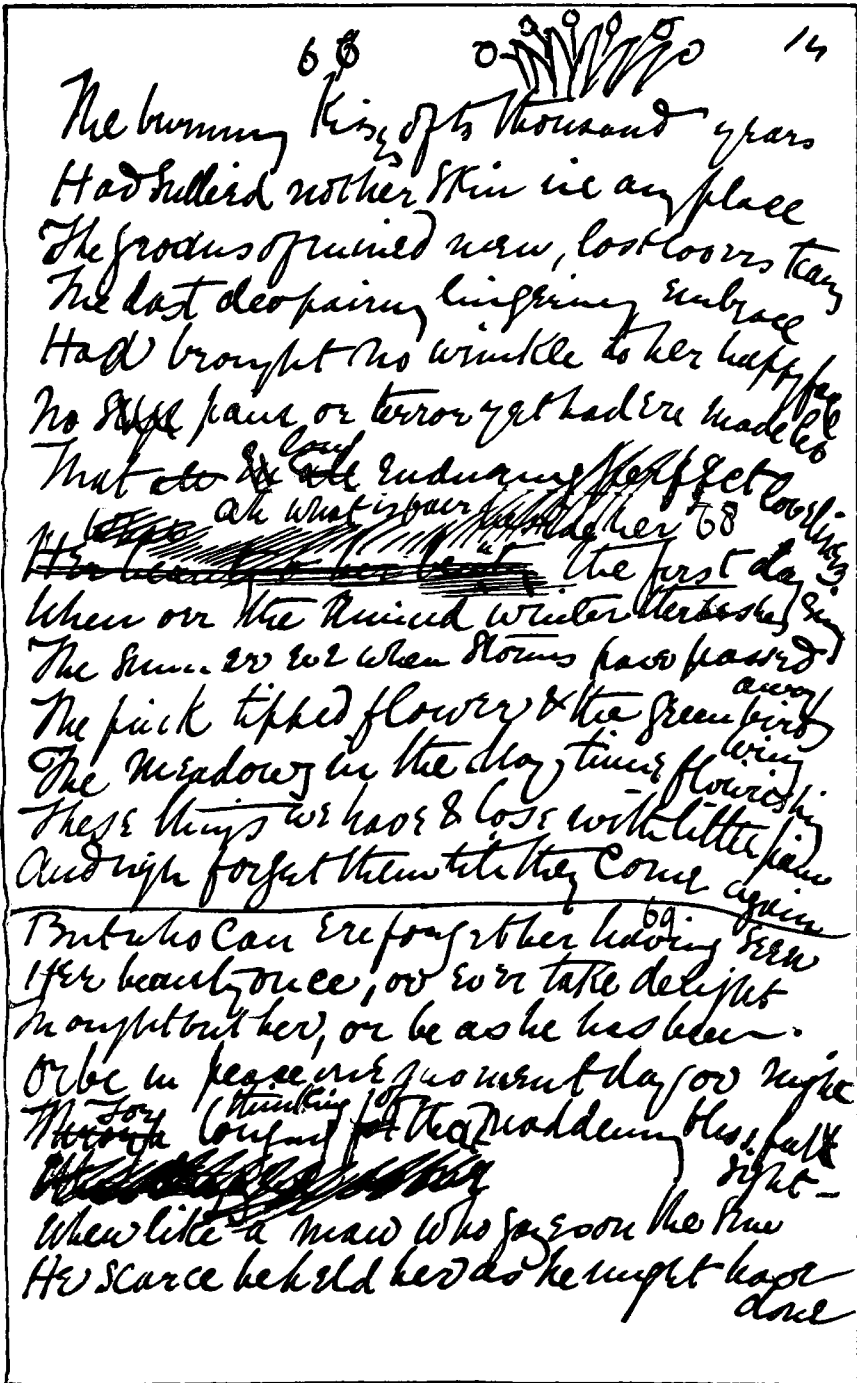
But who can e'er forget her, having seen
 Her beauty once, or ever take delight
 In aught but her, or be as he has been,
 Or rest in peace a moment day or night,
 For thinking of the tremor of his sight,
 When, like a man who gazes on the sun
 He scarce beheld her as he might have done?

Thereon the bewildered editor finds Amyot back again in
 the Hill—before leaving it, in doubt and bitterness and love
 out-worn. Standing once more in the cave that leads out into
 the world, he cries:

“I go to seek if Love may yet be found
 Within the arms of death.”

and the fragment breaks off.

xxiv



Facsimile of an unpublished "Hill of Venus" MS.

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At the risk of repeating myself I must emphasize the fine quality of much of the verse in this third fragment so ruthlessly sacrificed, where passages like

And all the toiling world, that e'en then lay
Resting a little 'neath the peaceful show
Of the grey night.

or

O idle words unto her ears are these!
O idle words; and nought she promiseth
Except the ceaseless flow of images
Of love, the casting by of thought of Death.

are constantly met with.

My father's ending for the tale varies from that of the legend; in this and the quarto MS. the Pope simply curses Tannhäuser and gives him no hope of Paradise, and in both of them Tannhäuser's return is the despairing outcome of the curse; in the poem as it was published the curse is the outcome of Walter's declaration that he belongs to the Hill—an interesting touch, as it carries the legend beyond the atmosphere of medieval piety. The fine epilogue of the death of the Pope has every appearance of having been written straight off. I shall always be grateful for the preservation of the Venusberg legend as it was before Wagner's hand—which had not yet attained its later mastery—stamped it for always in people's minds as “the” story of material and ideal love. The intrusion into this splendid legend of the holy Elizabeth and all she stands for in the operatic world of sentiment is not to be borne without protest.

“The curious reader,” wanting to follow this rather late legend as far as may be, should look through two suggestive papers by Gaston Paris, on “Le Paradis de la reine Sibylle” and “Tannhäuser,” where the author tracks it to its appearance in Italy at the end of the fourteenth century, surmising for it of course a Celtic origin.