

Canto One

*The Joy of Union; the Ordeal of the Foreknowledge
of Death and the Heart's Grief and Pain*

FATE followed her foreseen immutable road.
Man's hopes and longings build the journeying wheels
That bear the body of his destiny
And lead his blind will towards an unknown goal.
His fate within him shapes his acts and rules;
Its face and form already are born in him,
Its parentage is in his secret soul:
Here Matter seems to mould the body's life
And the soul follows where its nature drives.
Nature and Fate compel his free-will's choice.
But greater spirits this balance can reverse
And make the soul the artist of its fate.
This is the mystic truth our ignorance hides:
Doom is a passage for our inborn force,
Our ordeal is the hidden spirit's choice,
Ananke is our being's own decree.
All was fulfilled the heart of Savitri
Flower-sweet and adamant, passionate and calm,
Had chosen and on her strength's unbending road
Forced to its issue the long cosmic curve.
Once more she sat behind loud hastening hooves;
A speed of armoured squadrons and a voice
Far-heard of chariots bore her from her home.
A couchant earth wakened in its dumb muse
Looked up at her from a vast indolence:
Hills wallowing in a bright haze, large lands
That lolled at ease beneath the summer heavens,
Region on region spacious in the sun,
Cities like chrysolites in the wide blaze
And yellow rivers pacing lion-maned

Led to the Shalwa marches' emerald line,
A happy front to iron vastnesses
And austere peaks and titan solitudes.
Once more was near the fair and fated place,
The borders gleaming with the groves' delight
Where first she met the face of Satyavan
And he saw like one waking into a dream
Some timeless beauty and reality,
The moon-gold sweetness of heaven's earth-born child.
The past receded and the future neared:
Far now behind lay Madra's spacious halls,
The white carved pillars, the cool dim alcoves,
The tinged mosaic of the crystal floors,
The towered pavilions, the wind-rippled pools
And gardens humming with the murmur of bees,
Forgotten soon or a pale memory
The fountain's splash in the white stone-bound pool,
The thoughtful noontide's brooding solemn trance,
The colonnade's dream grey in the quiet eve,
The slow moonrise gliding in front of Night.
Left far behind were now the faces known,
The happy silken babble on laughter's lips
And the close-clinging clasp of intimate hands
And adoration's light in cherished eyes
Offered to the one sovereign of their life.
Nature's primaeval loneliness was here:
Here only was the voice of bird and beast, —
The ascetic's exile in the dim-souled huge
Inhuman forest far from cheerful sound
Of man's blithe converse and his crowded days.
In a broad eve with one red eye of cloud,
Through a narrow opening, a green flowered cleft,
Out of the stare of sky and soil they came
Into a mighty home of emerald dusk.
There onward led by a faint brooding path
Which toiled through the shadow of enormous trunks

And under arches misers of sunshine,
They saw low thatched roofs of a hermitage
Huddled beneath a patch of azure hue
In a sunlit clearing that seemed the outbreak
Of a glad smile in the forest's monstrous heart,
A rude refuge of the thought and will of man
Watched by the crowding giants of the wood.
Arrived in that rough-hewn homestead they gave,
Questioning no more the strangeness of her fate,
Their pride and loved one to the great blind king,
A regal pillar of fallen mightiness
And the stately care-worn woman once a queen
Who now hoped nothing for herself from life,
But all things only hoped for her one child,
Calling on that single head from partial Fate
All joy of earth, all heaven's beatitude.
Adoring wisdom and beauty like a young god's,
She saw him loved by heaven as by herself,
She rejoiced in his brightness and believed in his fate
And knew not of the evil drawing near.
Lingering some days upon the forest verge
Like men who lengthen out departure's pain,
Unwilling to separate sorrowful clinging hands,
Unwilling to see for the last time a face,
Heavy with the sorrow of a coming day
And wondering at the carelessness of Fate
Who breaks with idle hands her supreme works,
They parted from her with pain-fraught burdened hearts
As forced by inescapable fate we part
From one whom we shall never see again;
Driven by the singularity of her fate,
Helpless against the choice of Savitri's heart
They left her to her rapture and her doom
In the tremendous forest's savage charge.
All put behind her that was once her life,
All welcomed that henceforth was his and hers,

She abode with Satyavan in the wild woods:
Priceless she deemed her joy so close to death;
Apart with love she lived for love alone.
As if self-poised above the march of days,
Her immobile spirit watched the haste of Time,
A statue of passion and invincible force,
An absolutism of sweet imperious will,
A tranquillity and a violence of the gods
Indomitable and immutable.

At first to her beneath the sapphire heavens
The sylvan solitude was a gorgeous dream,
An altar of the summer's splendour and fire,
A sky-topped flower-hung palace of the gods
And all its scenes a smile on rapture's lips
And all its voices bards of happiness.
There was a chanting in the casual wind,
There was a glory in the least sunbeam;
Night was a chrysoprase on velvet cloth,
A nestling darkness or a moonlit deep;
Day was a purple pageant and a hymn,
A wave of the laughter of light from morn to eve.
His absence was a dream of memory,
His presence was the empire of a god.
A fusing of the joys of earth and heaven,
A tremulous blaze of nuptial rapture passed,
A rushing of two spirits to be one,
A burning of two bodies in one flame.
Opened were gates of unforgettable bliss:
Two lives were locked within an earthly heaven
And fate and grief fled from that fiery hour.
But soon now failed the summer's ardent breath
And throngs of blue-black clouds crept through the sky
And rain fled sobbing over the dripping leaves
And storm became the forest's titan voice.
Then listening to the thunder's fatal crash

And the fugitive pattering footsteps of the showers
And the long unsatisfied panting of the wind
And sorrow muttering in the sound-vexed night,
The grief of all the world came near to her.
Night's darkness seemed her future's ominous face.
The shadow of her lover's doom arose
And fear laid hands upon her mortal heart.
The moments swift and ruthless raced; alarmed
Her thoughts, her mind remembered Narad's date.
A trembling moved accountant of her riches,
She reckoned the insufficient days between:
A dire expectancy knocked at her breast;
Dreadful to her were the footsteps of the hours:
Grief came, a passionate stranger to her gate:
Banished when in his arms, out of her sleep
It rose at morn to look into her face.
Vainly she fled into abysses of bliss
From her pursuing foresight of the end.
The more she plunged into love that anguish grew;
Her deepest grief from sweetest gulfs arose.
Remembrance was a poignant pang, she felt
Each day a golden leaf torn cruelly out
From her too slender book of love and joy.
Thus swaying in strong gusts of happiness
And swimming in foreboding's sombre waves
And feeding sorrow and terror with her heart, —
For now they sat among her bosom's guests
Or in her inner chamber paced apart, —
Her eyes stared blind into the future's night.
Out of her separate self she looked and saw,
Moving amid the unconscious faces loved,
In mind a stranger though in heart so near,
The ignorant smiling world go happily by
Upon its way towards an unknown doom
And wondered at the careless lives of men.
As if in different worlds they walked, though close,

They confident of the returning sun,
They wrapped in little hourly hopes and tasks, —
She in her dreadful knowledge was alone.
The rich and happy secrecy that once
Enshrined her as if in a silver bower
Apart in a bright nest of thoughts and dreams
Made room for tragic hours of solitude
And lonely grief that none could share or know,
A body seeing the end too soon of joy
And the fragile happiness of its mortal love.
Her quiet visage still and sweet and calm,
Her graceful daily acts were now a mask;
In vain she looked upon her depths to find
A ground of stillness and the spirit's peace.
Still veiled from her was the silent Being within
Who sees life's drama pass with unmoved eyes,
Supports the sorrow of the mind and heart
And bears in human breasts the world and fate.
A glimpse or flashes came, the Presence was hid.
Only her violent heart and passionate will
Were pushed in front to meet the immutable doom;
Defenceless, nude, bound to her human lot
They had no means to act, no way to save.
These she controlled, nothing was shown outside:
She was still to them the child they knew and loved;
The sorrowing woman they saw not within.
No change was in her beautiful motions seen:
A worshipped empress all once vied to serve,
She made herself the diligent serf of all,
Nor spared the labour of broom and jar and well,
Or close gentle tending or to heap the fire
Of altar and kitchen, no slight task allowed
To others that her woman's strength might do.
In all her acts a strange divinity shone:
Into a simplest movement she could bring
A oneness with earth's glowing robe of light,
A lifting up of common acts by love.

All-love was hers and its one heavenly cord
Bound all to all with her as golden tie.
But when her grief to the surface pressed too close,
These things, once gracious adjuncts of her joy,
Seemed meaningless to her, a gleaming shell,
Or were a round mechanical and void,
Her body's actions shared not by her will.
Always behind this strange divided life
Her spirit like a sea of living fire
Possessed her lover and to his body clung,
One locked embrace to guard its threatened mate.
At night she woke through the slow silent hours
Brooding on the treasure of his bosom and face,
Hung o'er the sleep-bound beauty of his brow
Or laid her burning cheek upon his feet.
Waking at morn her lips endlessly clung to his,
Unwilling ever to separate again
Or lose that honeyed drain of lingering joy,
Unwilling to loose his body from her breast,
The warm inadequate signs that love must use.
Intolerant of the poverty of Time
Her passion catching at the fugitive hours
Willed the expense of centuries in one day
Of prodigal love and the surf of ecstasy;
Or else she strove even in mortal time
To build a little room for timelessness
By the deep union of two human lives,
Her soul secluded shut into his soul.
After all was given she demanded still;
Even by his strong embrace unsatisfied,
She longed to cry, "O tender Satyavan,
O lover of my soul, give more, give more
Of love while yet thou canst, to her thou lov'st.
Imprint thyself for every nerve to keep
That thrills to thee the message of my heart.
For soon we part and who shall know how long
Before the great wheel in its monstrous round

Restore us to each other and our love?"
Too well she loved to speak a fateful word
And lay her burden on his happy head;
She pressed the outsurging grief back into her breast
To dwell within silent, unhelped, alone.
But Satyavan sometimes half understood,
Or felt at least with the uncertain answer
Of our thought-blinded hearts the unuttered need,
The unplumbed abyss of her deep passionate want.
All of his speeding days that he could spare
From labour in the forest hewing wood
And hunting food in the wild sylvan glades
And service to his father's sightless life
He gave to her and helped to increase the hours
By the nearness of his presence and his clasp,
And lavish softness of heart-seeking words
And the close beating felt of heart on heart.
All was too little for her bottomless need.
If in his presence she forgot awhile,
Grief filled his absence with its aching touch;
She saw the desert of her coming days
Imaged in every solitary hour.
Although with a vain imaginary bliss
Of fiery union through death's door of escape
She dreamed of her body robed in funeral flame,
She knew she must not clutch that happiness
To die with him and follow, seizing his robe
Across our other countries, travellers glad
Into the sweet or terrible Beyond.
For those sad parents still would need her here
To help the empty remnant of their day.
Often it seemed to her the ages' pain
Had pressed their quintessence into her single woe,
Concentrating in her a tortured world.
Thus in the silent chamber of her soul
Cloistering her love to live with secret grief
She dwelt like a dumb priest with hidden gods

Unappeased by the wordless offering of her days,
Lifting to them her sorrow like frankincense,
Her life the altar, herself the sacrifice.
Yet ever they grew into each other more
Until it seemed no power could rend apart,
Since even the body's walls could not divide.
For when he wandered in the forest, oft
Her conscious spirit walked with him and knew
His actions as if in herself he moved;
He, less aware, thrilled with her from afar.
Always the stature of her passion grew;
Grief, fear became the food of mighty love.
Increased by its torment it filled the whole world;
It was all her life, became her whole earth and heaven.
Although life-born, an infant of the hours,
Immortal it walked unslayable as the gods:
Her spirit stretched measureless in strength divine,
An anvil for the blows of Fate and Time:
Or tired of sorrow's passionate luxury,
Grief's self became calm, dull-eyed, resolute,
Awaiting some issue of its fiery struggle,
Some deed in which it might for ever cease,
Victorious over itself and death and tears.

The year now paused upon the brink of change.
No more the storms sailed with stupendous wings
And thunder strode in wrath across the world,
But still was heard a muttering in the sky
And rain dripped wearily through the mournful air
And grey slow-drifting clouds shut in the earth.
So her grief's heavy sky shut in her heart.
A still self hid behind but gave no light:
No voice came down from the forgotten heights;
Only in the privacy of its brooding pain
Her human heart spoke to the body's fate.