

# TA GRAMMATA

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## I

High on an ancient crag a dwelling stood,  
A many-windowed hall of strange design;  
No other building graced the neighbourhood;  
Cliffs on all sides fell down in beetling line,  
Save where worn, winding stairs aspired to twine  
Their passage upward. On an April day,  
A young man laboured up the steep incline,  
Step after limestone step, without delay  
Until he faced the solemn mansion, mute and grey.

Its high dome seemed a brain; its windows, eyes  
Into whose darkened gaze he peered, to guess  
What lay within; and as he made surmise,  
A maiden stood near by in silver dress,  
A girl of chaste and grey-eyed loveliness,  
Who gave him greeting: "In this high retreat  
We think on wisdom. If thou wilt, address  
Thy thought to this, forsake the dust and heat  
Even for a day, and see life steadily, complete"!

"Yea, that I will!" said he. "For all things flow,  
And I, named Desiderius, now vex  
My soul for what abides and shall not go.  
Some dreamers seek for Luck, or Strength, or Sex,  
Or Wealth, or Law, or Implements complex,  
Adventure, Science, Healing, Creed, or Art—  
But these are but as shadows, shining wrecks  
That drift towards rocks of death. Console my heart!"  
"Come then," she gently sighed, "and join our life apart!"

A coiled snake, carved in gold, the Ring of Life  
 And symbol of Eternity, was placed  
 Above the iron door. "Forgo all strife  
 For ever, in that sign!" she said in haste.  
 "Thy task commences there." Then on they paced  
 To where a mighty mirror, poised on high,  
 Bore on it, through an upper window traced,  
 A vision of the outer world and sky—  
 The hill, the slumbering plain, and cloud-shapes wandering by.

"Behold," said she, "the semblances of earth  
 That seem so firm but are so fugitive!  
 Here shalt thou learn to test their fleeting worth  
 In this, the Hall of Mirrors where we live."  
 Then saw he how the mirror's face did give  
 Reflection towards a mighty gleaming prism,  
 Passing its beauty through that crystal sieve  
 In sundered light, and sifting all that schism  
 Of colour o'er a second mirrored mechanism.

He gazed upon this second sheet of light;  
 He watched his world dissolving, flake by flake,  
 To rainbow glories, ranged from violet night  
 Through green to dawning scarlet. "Hark," he spake,  
 "These colours sing, breathe perfume, throb, and shake!"—  
 "Yea," said his guide, "these are the garbs of sense  
 In which we clothe perception. Here we take  
 The illusive raiment off, to seek intense  
 For what reality may mark intelligence.

Below this spectrum, and above, we find  
 Two essences that cheat the naked eye.  
 The vague, grey universals of the mind  
 Spread ghostlike here; in yonder darkness lie  
 The unimagined *Ding an sich* and shy  
 Shapeless hypostases of utter things.  
 And now, mark well the art by which we try  
 To win for life the lore this mirror brings  
 And give the heart of man immortal nourishings!"

Just where the spectral speculum drew line  
 Between dim dark and colour, craft had bent  
 Its glassy face, sharp-angled to decline  
 The darker unseen essence, while it sent  
 All colours and the phantom element  
 Of concept through a prism, converse-curved,  
 And laid their light, mysteriously blent,  
 Upon a final mirror, which conserved  
 Brave, shining characters that never shook or swerved.

“These are the sacred Grammata,” she said,  
 “A fusion, in imaginative flame,  
 Of thought and feeling, radiantly shed  
 In deathless signs, unchangeably the same.  
 These are the golden gifts for which we came:  
 Apart from these, all mortals that draw breath  
 Are lost for evermore to praise or blame;  
 They lie in Hell like sheep, and greedy Death  
 Gnaweth upon them; yea, their portion perisheth.

“Relentless as the malison of Zeus  
 Is Time’s unresting judgment on our days;  
 All scrutinies of fortune but deduce  
 Poignant impermanence of works and ways,  
 Like arrows shot by night or shifting haze  
 Across the deep. And since these Characters  
 Share not this mortal nature that decays,  
 Learn well the Grammata, whose form confers  
 Immortality against Time, that never errs.  
 Soon must thou leave this citadel of peace  
 And journey through the Mountains of the Seers;  
 The measure of thy gift shall not increase  
 Till thou hast passed there. Traverse next with fears  
 The Vale of Grief, and from man’s tragic tears  
 Learn wisdom without arrogance, to seal  
 Thy entry to the Kingdom of Dead Years.  
 For there, at last, old kings shall make appeal  
 To thee in silent ways that I may not reveal.

"The dust of daily toil may blind thee oft;  
 Self-puzzledom of reason blur thy track;  
 The phantoms of despair may whisper soft;  
 The faded hand of care may hold thee back;  
 But guard the Letters, like a zodiac  
 Whose astrologic power can never fail;  
 For through their talisman thou canst not lack.  
 Thou hast a secret nothing can assail;  
 Against it even gates of Hell shall not prevail!"

## II

A day soon dawned when Desiderius  
 Set thoughtful forth to seek the mountained West.  
 Slowly he walked; and as he journeyed thus,  
 He bore on ivory tablets in his breast  
 The sacred Signs in golden script impressed.  
 Above his head, a fleet of myriad sails,  
 The white clouds drifted onward without rest;  
 Or floated, vaporous flakes, across the dales,  
 Sifting the checkered sunlight through their shifting veils.

All day the cloudland pageantry marched on  
 To music of the wind upon the heath—  
 Sometimes stupendous shapes of snow that shone,  
 Dazzling the eye; sometimes in silver wreath  
 As exquisite as lace; or red beneath  
 The flames of sunset, cloaks with golden frill;  
 Or dancing, withered leaves, before the breath  
 Of twilight winds; or, as the night grew still,  
 Hanging like shadowy hawks above the moonlit hill.

But when the morn came back crepuscular,  
 There rose to eastward, o'er the gloaming plain,  
 Pale columns of white mist that mounted far  
 And toppled back in drifting dust of rain.  
 Then through dawn's sombre fabric throbbed a vein  
 Of rosy lift, as from divine desire;  
 Then scarlet, purple, crimson lent their stain,  
 Until the welkin, as the sun rose higher,  
 Was one mad, molten sea of iridescent fire.

To westward lay the mountains of the Seers,  
 Across whose silent crests, as sunrise came,  
 The glaciers writhed beneath Apollo's spears,  
 Gigantic snowy snakes with scales of flame.  
 Long avalanches leaped in bright acclaim  
 And sent their smoking tribute up to heaven;  
 Out of the towering rock's primeval frame,  
 Gold-billowed cataracts, that flashed like levin,  
 Crashed into dark abysses with deep-bellowing steven.

Blue skies of noon-day found the traveller  
 High on a mountain-path, beside a brook,  
 Where moss and flow'r conspired to confer  
 A mass of jewelled colour on each nook:  
 The Alpine rose and hare-bell gently shook;  
 The gentian swayed beside them in the breeze,  
 Bluer than ocean; with exultant look,  
 Flushed lilies kissed the white anemones  
 And heather clasped narcissus round the shining knees.

Rock-pools, in patterned shadow, caught the noon,  
 And golden flakes of light, like falling leaves,  
 Sank softly through their depths. In green festoon,  
 Vines over-hung the branches, emerald weaves  
 Of chrysoprase and jade and shattered sheaves  
 Of viridescent wonder, sheen, and grace.  
 Soft as the silvery voice of summer eves,  
 The wind in leafy laughter stole to chase  
 The busy, murmuring bees about the dreaming place.

But steep behind those bright-enamelled dells  
 The mountains towered upward, height on height,  
 To one sheer wall of shining sentinels  
 Above the whispering pinewoods, dark as night,  
 That masked the middle slopes. With strange delight,  
 Young Desiderius gazed mutely up  
 In vague and dizzy rapture at the sight,  
 And felt as if all glory in one cup  
 Had been heaped up for his ecstatic soul to sup.

Beyond all thought of bliss he e'er had dreamed,  
 Fairer than Eden's walls of flame forbidden,  
 Those ramparts rose; majestic, too, they seemed,  
 Like those vast walls of Death, to mortals hidden,  
 Circumvallating Heav'n, on which have stridden  
 The ever-blessed maniples of God.  
 And by that sight his soul was over-riden  
 As with hunger, a strong joy that trod  
 In passion o'er his spirit, fierce and fiery-shod.

But as he labored upward o'er the pass  
 By which the road pierced through, he fumbled out  
 His ivory page, and as he read, alas,  
 His passioned mood was stricken through with doubt.  
 A universal sadness seemed to flout  
 His ecstasy; he saw, before his feet,  
 A cloak of human sorrow wrapt about  
 The circling of the seasons as they beat  
 In spring and winter, storm and sunshine, cold and heat.

And yet a solemn spirit seemed to bless  
 The grandeur and the beauty of those hills,  
 A chastened sense of brooding holiness  
 As if man's inmost nature, joys and ills,  
 Were one with some dim Power that fulfils  
 Its Being through these forms, arrays a stage  
 As wide as sea and stars for human wills  
 To play their tragic parts from age to age,  
 And mutely moves with joy man's darkling grief to assuage.

### III

Beyond the pass, the road sank almost sheer  
 To reach a vale, a forested abyss  
 From which arose, to greet his startled ear,  
 A ceaseless moan, a universal hiss.  
 Down through those trees a sort of syphilis  
 Corroded root and branch; brown rot and rust  
 Ate herb and shrub unsated; unremiss,  
 The grub and caterpillar fed their lust  
 Of maw on lacerated leaf and bark's torn crust.

Along his path, upon that lower ground,  
 As shades of evening darkened o'er his head,  
 A herd of pain-racked red deer staggered round:  
 Their ears oozed fungus, thick as clotted thread;  
 Great festering open ulcers overspread  
 Their mangy flanks and ringworm-ridden nose;  
 And inward pus-fat parasites sent red  
 Foul flux of suppurative phlegm to close  
 The choking mouth with mortal anguish as it rose.

And there were ticks, whose tiny pincers plucked  
 The living skin and burrowed in the flesh,  
 And gnats that stung, and savage flies that sucked  
 The thick blood from the throat, and turned afresh  
 To lay soft eggs, whose maggots bred a mesh  
 Of wriggling, feeding torture in the wound.  
 In vain the suffering victim then might thresh—  
 As surely as a haggard whale harpooned,  
 It must endure its swelling torment till it swooned.

By every herb lurked serpents, swift to strife;  
 On every hand he saw their horror stretched  
 With fangs of torture fleshed in nerves of life.  
 A screaming frog, half swallowed, twitched and retched,  
 Held in those reptile jaws; a rabbit fetched  
 Shrill gaspings from a throat that felt the screw  
 Of scaly-coiled constriction; terror etched  
 Such piteous anguish on its face as threw  
 The traveller into shuddering nausea at the view.

As he was spitting sparrows on a thorn,  
 Alive and shrieking; then a vulture swooped  
 Upon a hare, and raised it, clutched and torn,  
 In greedy talons, while wing'd fellows trooped  
 In haste behind, and, snatching as he stooped,  
 Tore at the writhing prey; a-swarm with flies,  
 A fawn stood, caught in mire, its weak neck drooped,  
 And on its head, unmindful of its cries,  
 Crows croaked with pleasure, picking out its staring eyes.

A weasel held a partridge by the throat  
 And drank her blood; the trembling chicks she left  
 Were crouched alive by hungry rat and stoat;  
 A vampire-bat slid from a rocky cleft  
 And with its thirsty, unclean muzzle reft  
 An antelope of life. A wolf howled wild  
 In exultation at his bleating theft  
 From scattered flocks; with oozing blood defiled,  
 A snarling grizzly gnawed the warm corpse of a child.

He saw all Nature playing fugues of pain  
 Upon the nerves of sense, and grew afraid—  
 Tossed in a contemplative hurricane,  
 A meditating reed that reeled and swayed.  
 He saw that tooth and talon had been made  
 As operative symbols of Design;  
 Praise to a God seemed mocking masquerade,  
 As, with profounder fear, he watched the line  
 Of human fate in that dark pattern intertwine.

He could not think of earth as wholly bad,  
 Like that grim garth of Attalus that held  
 Envenomed flowers only. Man was glad  
 In godlike apprehension, acts that spelled  
 The rarest pity, reason that excelled  
 In pure nobility, and moods as chaste  
 As snow itself. But faith was all dispelled  
 As with stark honesty of soul he faced  
 The unintelligible woes of tragic waste.

Upon a village dung-heap by his path,  
 A white-haired leper cursed his very birth:  
 "Why is light given," cried his tortured wrath,  
 "To man, whose way is hidden upon earth?  
 Is mine the strength of stones, the whale's great girth,  
 That the Almighty's arrows through me thrust  
 And drink my spirit up, that once had worth?  
 My flesh is clothed with worms and clods of dust!  
 Why does affliction come upon the pure and just?"



Another old man's voice, like broken life  
 Cried: "Howl, howl, howl! O you are men of stones:  
 Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,  
 And thou no breath at all, my daughter?" Groans  
 From that crazed father mingled with the moans  
 Of one who hung upon a gallows-tree,  
 Crowned on with thorns, nailed firmly, flesh and bones,  
 And gazed aloft in piercing agony,  
 Crying: "Why hast thou, O my God, forsaken me!"

Yet as the pilgrim took from out his breast  
 The shining Script, he felt the sweet relief  
 Of daybreak after nightmare—not true rest  
 From slumbering cancellation of all grief,  
 But passion purged by pain till peace was chief  
 And captain of his heart. He knew not why  
 Acceptance came; life had seemed cruel and brief:  
 But now he neither wished nor feared to die.  
 Out of the Shadowed Vale he walked with head held high.

## IV

And after many days the wanderer found  
 A kingdom by a tideless Western Deep,  
 Beneath whose waters continents lay drowned  
 But on whose shores, grey, solitary, steep,  
 Old barrow, cairn, and cromlech lay asleep;  
 And myriad mossy sepulchres were spread,  
 And mouldering epitaphs did keep  
 A chorus of wistful voices of the dead  
 Who stood there, meditating, overhead.

On a hill a towered castle stood,  
 Facing that boundless sea, so grey and cold;  
 The marbles of its massive walls held good,  
 Though all their weathered face was worn and old,  
 Lichened to brown and melancholy gold.  
 And there the pilgrim sought an inner fane,  
 And thinking on kings' converse, once foretold,  
 He leaned where ancient lambs had once been slain  
 Upon an altar, and read out his Letters plain.

Then, strange as fire, his tingling sense divined  
 Pale kings who smote vain hands upon the door,  
 Their voice an inner wailing in the wind.  
 He read again; they thronged the long, dim floor  
 In shadowy rank on rank; they stood before  
 The altar, pleading loud, he knew not what.  
 Once more he read: and, comprehending, tore  
 His breast apart, and poured his heart's blood hot  
 Upon the altar, as the sacrifice they sought.

Their voices cleared. One solemn king began:  
 "Not without blood, this offering thou hast made,  
 Couldst thou receive our converse; for a man,  
 To hear us, must himself be half a shade.  
 And but through such as these there is displayed  
 No wisdom, work, nor knowledge, nor device  
 Within the grave, nor joy for lovers laid  
 Dead cheek beside dead cheek—yea, there's no price  
 Whereby the soul of man may taste earth's glories twice!

"We loved the play of billows in the wind,  
 The hawthorns with their plumage of white fire;  
 We watched the sunset arras as it thinned  
 To ghostly lace; we saw the day retire,  
 Borne on the wings of twilight, and the choir  
 Of starry minstrels issue forth ablaze,  
 And then at last in dawn's clear flame expire.  
 But all these things have vanished from our gaze,  
 And silence is the wage of all our earthly ways.

"Dust lies upon our lips: and yet we live  
 Through these bright Grammata that thou hast learned;  
 By these we speak to him who dares to give  
 His blood for our dead voices. Thou hast burned  
 To speak with us; and we, whose hearts have yearned,  
 Here, in the ancient stillness, for thy hail,  
 Shall share the immortal moods that once we earned,  
 Though they from earth have faded as a tale  
 That childhood hears by evening while the shadows fail."

"Think", said another, "soberly on Death,  
 And humbly sigh to know thy human peers  
 A few poor, piteous bones that once had breath.  
 Thy boldest boasts avail not, nor thy fears,  
 To staunch the unending stillicide of years  
 Or stay cold Lethe's current. Therefore set  
 All arrogance aside, and shed slow tears,  
 Tender with pensive pity and regret,  
 For all the earth's unseeing passion, pride and fret.

"To look, without desire, on women's faces;  
 To praise, untouched by envy, famous men;  
 To breathe a sigh for stricken grief's embraces;  
 To sympathize when pleasure comes again;  
 To thread with candour falsehood's daily fen;  
 To write thy wrongs in ashes ere the dark;  
 To accept the call of death, respond Amen  
 In simpleness of soul, and quench thy spark—  
 This is true wisdom's bright and sanctifying mark."

"Our thoughts live on, immortal and unmixed!"  
 Cried out a third. "In this calm world of ours  
 They abide as brave, unfading phrases, fixed  
 With lead in rock forever. Time devours  
 Life's shadow-show, but cannot touch these towers.  
 We are not dead, who live in memory!  
 As long as man's remembrance guards the powers  
 Of these pure Letters, they will keep us free  
 And give our poignant longings immortality!"

And there the humble pilgrim knew his heart  
 A pulse within the spirit of his kind;  
 He felt all sentiment of self depart;  
 The living past swept round him, and his mind.  
 Was filled with voices, echoes that enshrined  
 Their beauty, quick and fragrant, in his sense.  
 With these he lived, and still, as days declined;  
 Wrought on the rock his Letters as defence  
 Against the dying present's dim impermanence.