

George Meredith (1828-1909)

1 Archduchess Anne

I

I

In middle age an evil thing
 Befell Archduchess Anne:
She looked outside her wedding-ring
 Upon a princely man.

II

Count Louis was for horse and arms; 5
 And if its beacon waved,
For love; but ladies had not charms
 To match a danger braved.

III

On battlefields he was the bow
 Bestrung to fly the shaft: 10
In idle hours his heart would flow
 As winds on currents waft.

IV

His blood was of those warrior tribes
 That streamed from morning's fire,
Whom now with traps and now with bribes 15
 The wily Council wire.

V

Archduchess Anne the Council ruled,
 Count Louis his great dame;
And woe to both when one had cooled!
 Little was she to blame. 20

VI

Among her chiefs who spun their plots,
 Old Kraken stood the sword:
As sharp his wits for cutting knots

Of babble he abhorred.

VII

He revered her name and line, 25
Nor other merit had
Save soldierwise to wait her sign,
And do the deed she bade.

VIII

He saw her hand jump at her side
Ere royally she smiled 30
On Louis and his fair young bride
Where courtly ranks defiled.

IX

That was a moment when a shock
Through the procession ran,
And thrilled the plumes, and stayed the clock, 35
Yet smiled Archduchess Anne.

X

No touch gave she to hound in leash,
No wink to sword in sheath:
She seemed a woman scarce of flesh;
Above it, or beneath. 40

XI

Old Kraken spied with kennelled snarl,
His Lady deemed disgraced.
He footed as on burning marl,
When out of Hall he paced.

XII

'Twas seen he hammered striding legs, 45
And stopped, and strode again.
Now Vengeance has a brood of eggs,
But Patience must be hen.

XIII

Too slow are they for wrath to hatch,
Too hot for time to rear. 50
Old Kraken kept unwinking watch;

He marked his day appear.

XIV

He neighed a laugh, though moods were rough
With standards in revolt:
His nostrils took the news for snuff, 55
His smacking lips for salt.

XV

Count Louis' wavy cock's plumes led
His troops of black-haired manes,
A rebel; and old Kraken sped
To front him on the plains. 60

XVI

Then camp opposed to camp did they
Fret earth with panther claws
For signal of a bloody day,
Each reading from the Laws.

XVII

'Forefend it, heaven!' Count Louis cried, 65
'And let the righteous plead:
My country is a willing bride,
Was never slave decreed.

XVIII

'Not we for thirst of blood appeal
To sword and slaughter curst; 70
We have God's blessing on our steel,
Do we our pleading first.'

XIX

Count Louis, soul of chivalry,
Put trust in plighted word;
By starlight on the broad brown lea, 75
To bar the strife he spurred.

XX

Across his breast a crimson spot,
That in a quiver glowed,
The ruddy crested camp-fires shot,

As he to darkness rode. 80

XXI

He rode while omens called, beware
Old Kraken's pledge of faith!
A smile and waving hand in air,
And outward flew the wraith.

XXII

Before pale morn had mixed with gold, 85
His army roared, and chilled,
As men who have a woe foretold,
And see it red fulfilled.

XXIII

Away and to his young wife speed,
And say that Honour's dead! 90
Another word she will not need
To bow a widow's head.

XXIV

Old Kraken roped his white moustache
Right, left, for savage glee:
— To swing him in his soldier's sash 95
Were kind for such as he!

XXV

Old Kraken's look hard Winter wears
When sweeps the wild snow-blast:
He had the hug of Arctic bears
For captives he held fast. 100

II

I

Archduchess Anne sat carved in frost,
Shut off from priest and spouse.
Her lips were locked, her arms were crossed,
Her eyes were in her brows.

II

One hand enclosed a paper scroll, 105
Held as a strangled asp.
So may we see the woman's soul
In her dire tempter's grasp.

III

Along that scroll Count Louis' doom 110
Throbb'd till the letters flamed.
She saw him in his scornful bloom,
She saw him chained and shamed.

IV

Around that scroll Count Louis' fate
Was acted to her stare,
And hate in love and love in hate 115
Fought fell to smite or spare.

V

Between the day that struck her old,
And this black star of days,
Her heart swung like a storm-bell tolled
Above a town ablaze. 120

VI

His beauty pressed to intercede,
His beauty served him ill.
— Not Vengeance, 'tis his rebel's deed,
'Tis Justice, not our will!

VII

Yet who had sprung to life's full force 125
A breast that loveless dried?
But who had sapped it at the source,
With scarlet to her pride!

VIII

He brought her waning heart as 'twere
New message from the skies. 130
And he betrayed, and left on her
The burden of their sighs.

IX

In floods her tender memories poured;
They foamed with waves of spite:
She crushed them, high her heart outsoared, 135
To keep her mind alight.

X

— The crawling creature, called in scorn
A woman! — with this pen
We sign a paper that may warn
His crowing fellowmen. 140

XI

— We read them lesson of a power
They slight who do us wrong.
That bitter hour this bitter hour
Provokes; by turns the strong!

XII

— That we were woman once is known: 145
That we are Justice now,
Above our sex, above the throne,
Men quaking shall avow.

XIII

Archduchess Anne ascending flew,
Her heart outsoared, but felt 150
The demon of her sex pursue,
Incensing or to melt.

XIV

Those counterfloods below at leap
Still in her breast blew storm,
And farther up the heavenly steep 155
Wrestled in angels' form.

XV

To disentangle one clear wish
Not of her sex, she sought;
And womanish to womanish
Discerned in lighted thought. 160

XVI

With Louis' chance it went not well
When at herself she raged;
A woman, of whom men might tell
She doted, crazed and aged.

XVII

Or else enamoured of a sweet 165
Withdrawn, a vengeful crone!
And say, what figure at her feet
Is this that utters moan?

XVIII

The Countess Louis from her head 170
Drew veil: 'Great Lady, hear!
My husband deems you Justice dread,
I know you Mercy dear.

XIX

'His error upon him may fall;
He will not breathe a nay. 175
I am his helpless mate in all,
Except for grace to pray.

XX

'Perchance on me his choice inclined,
To give his House an heir:
I had not marriage with his mind,
His counsel could not share. 180

XXI

'I brought no portion for his weal
But this one instinct true,
Which bids me in my weakness kneel,
Archduchess Anne, to you.'

XXII

The frowning Lady uttered, 'Forth!' 185
Her look forbade delay:
'It is not mine to weigh your worth;
Your husband's others weigh.

XXIII

'Hence with the woman in your speech,
For nothing it avails 190
In woman's fashion to beseech
Where Justice holds the scales.'

XXIV

Then bent and went the lady wan,
Whose girlishness made grey
The thoughts that through Archduchess Anne 195
Shattered like stormy spray.

XXV

Long sat she there, as flame that strives
To hold on beating wind:
— His wife must be the fool of wives,
Or cunningly designed! 200

XXVI

She sat until the tempest-pitch
In her torn bosom fell;
— His wife must be a subtle witch
Or else God loves her well!

III

I

Old Kraken read a missive penned 205
By his great Lady's hand.
Her condescension called him friend,
To raise the crest she fanned.

II

Swiftly to where he lay encamped
It flew, yet breathed aloof 210
From woman's feeling, and he stamped
A heel more like a hoof.

III

She wrote of Mercy: 'She was loth
Too hard to goad a foe.'
He stamped, as when men drive an oath 215

Devils transcribe below.

IV

She wrote: 'We have him half by theft.'
His wrinkles glistened keen:
And see the Winter storm-cloud cleft
To lurid skies between! 220

V

When read old Kraken: 'Christ our Guide,'
His eyes were spikes of spar:
And see the white snow-storm divide
About an icy star!

VI

'She trusted him to understand,' 225
She wrote, and further prayed
That policy might rule the land.
Old Kraken's laughter neighed.

VII

Her words he took; her nods and winks
Treated as woman's fog. 230
The man-dog for his mistress thinks,
Not less her faithful dog.

VIII

She hugged a cloak old Kraken ripped;
Disguise to him he loathed.
— Your mercy, madam, shows you stripped, 235
While mine will keep you clothed.

IX

A rough ill-soldered scar in haste
He rubbed on his cheek-bone.
— Our policy the man shall taste;
Our mercy shall be shown. 240

X

'Count Louis, honour to your race
Decrees the Council-hall:
You 'scape the rope by special grace,

And like a soldier fall.'

XI

— I am a man of many sins, 245
Who for one virtue die,
Count Louis said. — They play at shins,
Who kick, was the reply.

XII

Uprose the day of crimson sight,
The day without a God. 250
At morn the hero said Good-night:
See there that stain on sod!

XIII

At morn the Countess Louis heard
Young light sing in the lark.
Ere eve it was that other bird, 255
Which brings the starless dark.

XIV

To heaven she vowed herself, and yearned
Beside her lord to lie.
Archduchess Anne on Kraken turned,
All white as a dead eye. 260

XV

If I could kill thee! shrieked her look:
If lightning sprang from Will!
An oaken head old Kraken shook,
And she might thank or kill.

XVI

The pride that fenced her heart in mail 265
By mortal pain was torn.
Forth from her bosom leaped a wail,
As of a babe new-born.

XVII

She clad herself in courtly use,
And one who heard them prate 270
Had said they differed upon views

Where statecraft raised debate.

XVIII

The wretch detested must she trust,
The servant master own:
Confide to godless cause so just, 275
And for God's blessing moan.

XIX

Austerely she her heart kept down,
Her woman's tongue was mute
When voice of People, voice of Crown,
In cannon held dispute. 280

XX

The Crown on seas of blood, like swine,
Swam forefoot at the throat:
It drank of its dear veins for wine,
Enough if it might float!

XXI

It sank with piteous yelp, resurged 285
Electrical with fear.
O had she on old Kraken urged
Her word of mercy clear!

XXII

O had they with Count Louis been
Accordant in his plea! 290
Cursed are the women vowed to screen
A heart that all can see!

XXIII

The godless drove unto a goal
Was worse than vile defeat.
Did vengeance prick Count Louis' soul 295
They dressed him luscious meat.

XXIV

Worms will the faithless find their lies
In the close treasure-chest.
Without a God no day can rise,

Though it should slay our best. 300

XXV

The Crown it furled a draggled flag,
It sheathed a broken blade.
Behold its triumph in the hag
That lives with looks decayed!

XXVI

And lo, the man of oaken head, 305
Of soldier's honour bare,
He fled his land, but most he fled
His Lady's frigid stare.

XXVII

Judged by the issue we discern
God's blessing, and the bane. 310
Count Louis' dust would fill an urn,
His deeds are waving grain.

XXVIII

And she that helped to slay, yet bade
To spare the fated man,
Great were her errors, but she had 315
Great heart, Archduchess Anne.

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