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# A TRUE DREAM

BY

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING



New York

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1914

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*A TRUE DREAM*

(Dreamed at Sidmouth, 1833.)

I HAD not an evil end in view,  
    Tho' I trod the evil way ;  
And why I practised the magic art,  
    My dream it did not say.

I unsealed the vial mystical,  
    I outpoured the liquid thing,  
And while the smoke came wreathing out,  
    I stood unshuddering.

The smoke came wreathing, wreathing out, .  
    All mute, and dark, and slow,  
Till its cloud was stained with a fleshly hue,  
    And a fleshly form 'gan show.

Then paused the smoke — the fleshly form  
    Looked steadfast in mine ee,  
His beard was black as a thundercloud,  
    But I trembled not to see.

I unsealed the vial mystical,  
    I outpoured the liquid thing,  
And while the smoke came wreathing out,  
    I stood unshuddering.

The smoke came wreathing, wreathing out,  
    All mute, and dark and slow,  
Till its cloud was stained with a fleshly hue,  
    And a fleshly form 'gan show.

Then paused the smoke — but the mortal form  
    A garment swart did veil,  
I looked on it with fixed heart,  
    Yea — not a pulse did fail!

I unsealed the vial mystical,  
I outpoured the liquid thing,  
And while the smoke came wreathing out,  
I stood unshuddering.

The smoke came wreathing, wreathing out,  
And now it was faster and lighter,  
And it bore on its folds the rainbow's hues,  
Heaven could not show them brighter.

Then paused the smoke, the rainbow's hues  
Did a childish face express —  
The rose in the cheek, the blue in the eyne,  
The yellow in the tress.

The fair young child shook back her hair,  
And round me her arms did wreathe,  
Her lips were hard and cold as stone,  
They sucked away my breath.

I cast her off as she clung to me,  
With hate and shuddering;  
I brake the vials, and foresware  
The cursed, cursed thing.

Anon outspake a brother of mine —  
“ Upon the pavement, see,  
Besprent with noisome poison slime,  
Those twining serpents three.”

Anon outspake my wildered heart  
As I saw the serpent train —  
“ I have called up three existences  
I cannot quench again.

“ Alas! with unholy company,  
My lifetime they will scathe;  
They will hiss in the storm, and on sunny days  
Will gleam and thwart my path.”

Outspake that pitying brother of mine —

“Now nay, my sister, nay,

I will pour on them oil of vitriol,

And burn their lives away.”

“Now nay, my brother, torture not,

Now hold thine hand, and spare.”

He poured on them oil of vitriol,

And did not heed my prayer.

I saw the drops of torture fall;

I heard the shriekings rise,

While the serpents writhed in agony

Beneath my dreaming eyes.

And while they shrieked, and while they

writhed,

And inward and outward wound,

They waxed larger, and their wail  
Assumed a human sound.

And glared their eyes, and their slimy scales  
Were roundly and redly bright,  
Most like the lidless sun, what time  
Thro' the mist he meets your sight.

And larger and larger they waxed still,  
And longer still and longer ;  
And they shrieked in their pain, " Come, come  
to us,  
We are stronger, we are stronger."

Upon the ground I laid mine head,  
And heard the wailing sound ;  
I did not wail, I did not writhe —  
I laid me on the ground.

And larger and larger they waxed still,  
And longer still and longer;  
And they shrieked in their pangs, "Come, come  
to us,  
We are stronger, we are stronger."

Then up I raised my burning brow,  
My quiv'ring arms on high;  
I spake in prayer, and I named aloud  
The name of sanctity.

And as in my anguish I prayed and named  
Aloud the holy name,  
The impious mocking serpent voice  
Did echo back the same.

And larger and larger they waxed still,  
And longer still and longer;

And they shrieked in their pangs, "Come, come  
to us,

We are stronger, we are stronger."

Then out from among them arose a form

In shroud of death indued —

I fled from him with wings of wind,

With whirlwinds he pursued.

\* \* \* \* \*

I stood by a chamber door, and thought

Within its gloom to hide;

I locked the door, and the while forgot

That I stood on the outer side.

And the knell of mine heart was wildly tolled

While I grasped still the key;

For I felt beside me the icy breath,

And knew that *that* was *he*.

I heard these words, "Whoe'er doth *taste*,  
Will *drink* the magic bowl;  
So her body may do my mission here  
Companioned by her soul."

Mine hand was cold as the key it held,  
Mine heart had an iron weight;  
I saw a gleam, I heard a sound —  
The clock was striking eight.









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