

*The Two Voices
of Lord Tennyson*



CONSTITUTION OF MAN SERIES
THE TWO VOICES

Go, vexed Spirit, sleep in trust;
The right ear, that is fill'd with dust,
Hears little of the false or just.

“The Two Voices” is a poem by Alfred Tennyson written between 1833 and 1834, published in his 1842 volume of *Poems*. Tennyson wrote the poem, titled “Thoughts of a Suicide” in manuscript, after the death of his friend Arthur Henry Hallam in 1833. Tennyson explained,

When I wrote “The Two Voices” I was so utterly miserable, a burden to myself and to my family, that I said, “Is life worth anything?”

In the poem, one voice urges the other to suicide; the poet’s arguments against it range from vanity to desperation, yet the voice discredits all. The poem’s ending delivers no conclusions, and has been widely criticized — the poet finds no internal affirmation, invoking “solace outside himself.”

a STILL SMALL VOICE SPAKE UNTO ME,
“Thou art so full of misery,
Were it not better not to be?”

Then to the still small voice I said;
“Let me not cast in endless shade
What is so wonderfully made.”

To which the voice did urge reply;
“To-day I saw the dragon-fly
Come from the wells where he did lie.

“An inner impulse rent the veil
Of his old husk: from head to tail
Came out clear plates of sapphire mail.

“He dried his wings: like gauze they grew;
Thro’ crofts and pastures wet with dew
A living flash of light he flew.”

I said, “When first the world began,
Young Nature thro’ five cycles ran,
And in the sixth she moulded man.

“She gave him mind, the lordliest
Proportion, and, above the rest,
Dominion in the head and breast.”

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Thereto the silent voice replied;
"Self-blinded are you by your pride:
Look up thro' night: the world is wide.

"This truth within thy mind rehearse,
That in a boundless universe
Is boundless better, boundless worse.

"Think you this mould of hopes and fears
Could find no statelier than his peers
In yonder hundred million spheres?"

It spake, moreover, in my mind:
"Tho' thou wert scatter'd to the wind,
Yet is there plenty of the kind."

Then did my response clearer fall:
"No compound of this earthly ball
Is like another, all in all."

To which he answer'd scoffingly;
"Good soul! suppose I grant it thee,
Who'll weep for thy deficiency?

"Or will one beam be less intense,
When thy peculiar difference
Is cancell'd in the world of sense?"

I would have said, "Thou canst not know,"
But my full heart, that work'd below,
Rain'd thro' my sight its overflow.

Again the voice spake unto me:
"Thou art so steep'd in misery,
Surely 'twere better not to be.

"Thine anguish will not let thee sleep,
Nor any train of reason keep:
Thou canst not think, but thou wilt weep."

I said, "The years with change advance:
If I make dark my countenance,
I shut my life from happier chance.

"Some turn this sickness yet might take,
Ev'n yet." But he: "What drug can make
A wither'd palsy cease to shake?"

I wept, "Tho' I should die, I know
That all about the thorn will blow
In tufts of rosy-tinted snow;

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“And men, thro’ novel spheres of thought
Still moving after truth long sought,
Will learn new things when I am not.”

“Yet,” said the secret voice, “some time,
Sooner or later, will grey prime
Make thy grass hoar with early rime.

“Not less swift souls that yearn for light,
Rapt after heaven’s starry flight,
Would sweep the tracts of day and night.

“Not less the bee would range her cells,
The furzy prickle fire the dells,
The foxglove cluster dappled bells.”

I said that “all the years invent;
Each month is various to present
The world with some development.

“Were this not well, to bide mine hour,
Tho’ watching from a ruin’d tower
How grows the day of human power?”

“The highest-mounted mind,” he said,
“Still sees the sacred morning spread
The silent summit overhead.

“Will thirty seasons render plain
Those lonely lights that still remain,
Just breaking over land and main?

“Or make that morn, from his cold crown
And crystal silence creeping down,
Flood with full daylight glebe and town?

“Forerun thy peers, thy time, and let
Thy feet, millenniums hence, be set
In midst of knowledge, dream’d not yet.

“Thou hast not gain’d a real height,
Nor art thou nearer to the light,
Because the scale is infinite.

“’Twere better not to breathe or speak,
Than cry for strength, remaining weak,
And seem to find, but still to seek.

“Moreover, but to seem to find
Asks what thou lackest, thought resign’d,
A healthy frame, a quiet mind.”

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I said, "When I am gone away,
'He dared not tarry,' men will say,
Doing dishonour to my clay."

"This is more vile," he made reply,
"To breathe and loathe, to live and sigh,
Than once from dread of pain to die.

"Sick art thou — a divided will
Still heaping on the fear of ill
The fear of men, a coward still.

"Do men love thee? Art thou so bound
To men, that how thy name may sound
Will vex thee lying underground?

"The memory of the wither'd leaf
In endless time is scarce more brief
Than of the garner'd Autumn-sheaf.

"Go, vexed Spirit, sleep in trust;
The right ear, that is fill'd with dust,
Hears little of the false or just."

"Hard task, to pluck resolve," I cried,
"From emptiness and the waste wide
Of that abyss, or scornful pride!

"Nay — rather yet that I could raise
One hope that warm'd me in the days
While still I yearn'd for human praise.

"When, wide in soul and bold of tongue,
Among the tents I paused and sung,
The distant battle flash'd and rung.

"I sung the joyful Pæan clear,
And, sitting, burnish'd without fear
The brand, the buckler, and the spear —

"Waiting to strive a happy strife,
To war with falsehood to the knife,
And not to lose the good of life —

"Some hidden principle to move,
To put together, part and prove,
And mete the bounds of hate and love —

"As far as might be, to carve out
Free space for every human doubt,
That the whole mind might orb about —

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“To search thro’ all I felt or saw,
The springs of life, the depths of awe,
And reach the law within the law:

“At least, not rotting like a weed,
But, having sown some generous seed,
Fruitful of further thought and deed,

“To pass, when Life her light withdraws,
Not void of righteous self-applause,
Nor in a merely selfish cause —

“In some good cause, not in mine own,
To perish, wept for, honour’d, known,
And like a warrior overthrown;

“Whose eyes are dim with glorious tears,
When, soil’d with noble dust, he hears
His country’s war-song thrill his ears:

“Then dying of a mortal stroke,
What time the foeman’s line is broke,
And all the war is roll’d in smoke.”

“Yea!” said the voice, “thy dream was good,
While thou abodest in the bud.
It was the stirring of the blood.

“If Nature put not forth her power
About the opening of the flower,
Who is it that could live an hour?

“Then comes the check, the change, the fall,
Pain rises up, old pleasures pall.
There is one remedy for all.

“Yet hadst thou, thro’ enduring pain,
Link’d month to month with such a chain
Of knitted purport, all were vain.

“Thou hadst not between death and birth
Dissolved the riddle of the earth.
So were thy labour little-worth.

“That men with knowledge merely play’d,
I told thee — hardly nigher made,
Tho’ scaling slow from grade to grade;

“Much less this dreamer, deaf and blind,
Named man, may hope some truth to find,
That bears relation to the mind.

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“For every worm beneath the moon
Draws different threads, and late and soon
Spins, toiling out his own cocoon.

“Cry, faint not: either Truth is born
Beyond the polar gleam forlorn,
Or in the gateways of the morn.

“Cry, faint not, climb: the summits slope
Beyond the furthest flights of hope,
Wrapt in dense cloud from base to cope.

“Sometimes a little corner shines,
As over rainy mist inclines
A gleaming crag with belts of pines.

“I will go forward, sayest thou,
I shall not fail to find her now.
Look up, the fold is on her brow.

“If straight thy track, or if oblique,
Thou know’st not. Shadows thou dost strike,
Embracing cloud, Ixiōn-like;

“And owning but a little more
Than beasts, abidest lame and poor,
Calling thyself a little lower

“Than angels. Cease to wail and brawl!
Why inch by inch to darkness crawl?
There is one remedy for all.”

“O dull, one-sided voice,” said I,
“Wilt thou make everything a lie,
To flatter me that I may die?”

“I know that age to age succeeds,
Blowing a noise of tongues and deeds,
A dust of systems and of creeds.

“I cannot hide that some have striven,
Achieving calm, to whom was given
The joy that mixes man with Heaven:

“Who, rowing hard against the stream,
Saw distant gates of Eden gleam,
And did not dream it was a dream;

“But heard, by secret transport led,
Ev’n in the charnels of the dead,
The murmur of the fountain-head —

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“Which did accomplish their desire,
Bore and forebore, and did not tire,
Like Stephen, an unquenched fire.

“He heeded not reviling tones,
Nor sold his heart to idle moans,
Tho’ cursed and scorn’d, and bruised with stones:

“But looking upward, full of grace,
He pray’d, and from a happy place
God’s glory smote him on the face.”

The sullen answer slid betwixt:
“Not that the grounds of hope were fix’d,
The elements were kindlier mix’d.”

I said, “I toil beneath the curse,
But, knowing not the universe,
I fear to slide from bad to worse.

“And that, in seeking to undo
One riddle, and to find the true,
I knit a hundred others new:

“Or that this anguish fleeting hence,
Unmanacled from bonds of sense,
Be fix’d and froz’n to permanence:

“For I go, weak from suffering here:
Naked I go, and void of cheer:
What is it that I may not fear?”

“Consider well,” the voice replied,
“His face, that two hours since hath died;
Wilt thou find passion, pain or pride?

“Will he obey when one commands?
Or answer should one press his hands?
He answers not, nor understands.

“His palms are folded on his breast:
There is no other thing express’d
But long disquiet merged in rest.

“His lips are very mild and meek:
Tho’ one should smite him on the cheek,
And on the mouth, he will not speak.

“His little daughter, whose sweet face
He kiss’d, taking his last embrace,
Becomes dishonour to her race —

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“His sons grow up that bear his name,
Some grow to honour, some to shame, —
But he is chill to praise or blame.

“He will not hear the north-wind rave,
Nor, moaning, household shelter crave
From winter rains that beat his grave.

“High up the vapours fold and swim:
About him broods the twilight dim:
The place he knew forgetteth him.”

“If all be dark, vague voice,” I said,
“These things are wrapt in doubt and dread,
Nor canst thou show the dead are dead.

“The sap dries up: the plant declines.
A deeper tale my heart divines.
Know I not Death? the outward signs?

“I found him when my years were few;
A shadow on the graves I knew,
And darkness in the village yew.

“From grave to grave the shadow crept:
In her still place the morning wept:
Touch’d by his feet the daisy slept.

“The simple senses crown’d his head:
‘Omega! thou art Lord,’ they said,
‘We find no motion in the dead.’

“Why, if man rot in dreamless ease,
Should that plain fact, as taught by these,
Not make him sure that he shall cease?

“Who forged that other influence,
That heat of inward evidence,
By which he doubts against the sense?

“He owns the fatal gift of eyes,
That read his spirit blindly wise,
Not simple as a thing that dies.

“Here sits he shaping wings to fly:
His heart forebodes a mystery:
He names the name Eternity.

“That type of Perfect in his mind
In Nature can he nowhere find.
He sows himself on every wind.

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“He seems to hear a Heavenly Friend,
And thro’ thick veils to apprehend
A labour working to an end.

“The end and the beginning vex
His reason: many things perplex,
With motions, checks, and counterchecks.

“He knows a baseness in his blood
At such strange war with something good,
He may not do the thing he would.

“Heaven opens inward, chasms yawn,
Vast images in glimmering dawn,
Half shown, are broken and withdrawn.

“Ah! sure within him and without,
Could his dark wisdom find it out,
There must be answer to his doubt,

“But thou canst answer not again.
With thine own weapon art thou slain,
Or thou wilt answer but in vain.

“The doubt would rest, I dare not solve.
In the same circle we revolve.
Assurance only breeds resolve.”

As when a billow, blown against,
Falls back, the voice with which I fenced
A little ceased, but recommenced.

“Where wert thou when thy father play’d
In his free field, and pastime made,
A merry boy in sun and shade?

“A merry boy they call’d him then,
He sat upon the knees of men
In days that never come again.

“Before the little ducts began
To feed thy bones with lime, and ran
Their course, till thou wert also man:

“Who took a wife, who rear’d his race,
Whose wrinkles gather’d on his face,
Whose troubles number with his days:

“A life of nothings, nothing-worth,
From that first nothing ere his birth
To that last nothing under earth!”

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“These words,” I said, “are like the rest;
No certain clearness, but at best
A vague suspicion of the breast:

“But if I grant, thou mightst defend
The thesis which thy words intend —
That to begin implies to end;

“Yet how should I for certain hold,
Because my memory is so cold,
That I first was in human mould?

“I cannot make this matter plain,
But I would shoot, howe’er in vain,
A random arrow from the brain.

“It may be that no life is found,
Which only to one engine bound
Falls off, but cycles always round.

“As old mythologies relate,
Some draught of Lethe might await
The slipping thro’ from state to state.

“As here we find in trances, men
Forget the dream that happens then,
Until they fall in trance again.

“So might we, if our state were such
As one before, remember much,
For those two likes might meet and touch.

“But, if I lapsed from nobler place,
Some legend of a fallen race
Alone might hint of my disgrace;

“Some vague emotion of delight
In gazing up an Alpine height,
Some yearning toward the lamps of night;

“Or if thro’ lower lives I came —
Tho’ all experience past became
Consolidate in mind and frame —

“I might forget my weaker lot;
For is not our first year forgot?
The haunts of memory echo not.

“And men, whose reason long was blind,
From cells of madness unconfined,
Oft lose whole years of darker mind.

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“Much more, if first I floated free,
As naked essence, must I be
Incompetent of memory:

“For memory dealing but with time,
And he with matter, could she climb
Beyond her own material prime?

“Moreover, something is or seems,
That touches me with mystic gleams,
Like glimpses of forgotten dreams —

“Of something felt, like something here;
Of something done, I know not where;
Such as no language may declare.”

The still voice laugh'd. “I talk,” said he,
“Not with thy dreams. Suffice it thee
Thy pain is a reality.”

“But thou,” said I, “hast missed thy mark,
Who sought'st to wreck my mortal ark,
By making all the horizon dark.

“Why not set forth, if I should do
This rashness, that which might ensue
With this old soul in organs new?

“Whatever crazy sorrow saith,
No life that breathes with human breath
Has ever truly long'd for death.

“'Tis life, whereof our nerves are scant,
Oh life, not death, for which we pant;
More life, and fuller, that I want.”

I ceased, and sat as one forlorn.
Then said the voice, in quiet scorn,
“Behold, it is the Sabbath morn.”

And I arose, and I released
The casement, and the light increased
With freshness in the dawning east.

Like soften'd airs that blowing steal,
When meres begin to uncongeal,
The sweet church bells began to peal.

On to God's house the people prest:
Passing the place where each must rest,
Each enter'd like a welcome guest.

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One walk'd between his wife and child,
With measured footfall firm and mild,
And now and then he gravely smiled.

The prudent partner of his blood
Lean'd on him, faithful, gentle, good,
Wearing the rose of womanhood.

And in their double love secure,
The little maiden walk'd demure,
Pacing with downward eyelids pure.

These three made unity so sweet,
My frozen heart began to beat,
Remembering its ancient heat.

I blest them, and they wander'd on:
I spoke, but answer came there none:
The dull and bitter voice was gone.

A second voice was at mine ear,
A little whisper silver-clear,
A murmur, "Be of better cheer."

As from some blissful neighbourhood,
A notice faintly understood,
"I see the end, and know the good."

A little hint to solace woe,
A hint, a whisper breathing low,
"I may not speak of what I know."

Like an Æolian harp that wakes
No certain air, but overtakes
Far thought with music that it makes:

Such seem'd the whisper at my side:
"What is it thou knowest, sweet voice?" I cried.
"A hidden hope," the voice replied:

So heavenly-toned, that in that hour
From out my sullen heart a power
Broke, like the rainbow from the shower,

To feel, altho' no tongue can prove,
That every cloud, that spreads above
And veileth love, itself is love.

And forth into the fields I went,
And Nature's living motion lent
The pulse of hope to discontent.

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I wonder'd at the bounteous hours,
The slow result of winter showers:
You scarce could see the grass for flowers.

I wonder'd, while I paced along:
The woods were fill'd so full with song,
There seem'd no room for sense of wrong;

And all so variously wrought,
I marvell'd how the mind was brought
To anchor by one gloomy thought;

And wherefore rather I made choice
To commune with that barren voice,
Than him that said, "Rejoice! Rejoice!"

