

Canto II

Bijou Literary Annual (1828)*

"A little further, O my father, yet a little further, and we shall come into the open moonlight!" Their road was through a forest of fir-trees; at its entrance the trees stood at distances from each other, and the path was broad, and the moonlight, and the moonlight shadows reposed upon it, and appeared quietly to inhabit that solitude. But soon the path winded and became narrow; the sun at high noon sometimes speckled, but never illumined it, and now it was dark as a cavern.

"It is dark, O my father!" said Enos, "but the path under our feet is smooth and soft, and we shall soon come out into the open moonlight. Ah, why dost thou groan so deeply?"

"Lead on my child," said Cain, "guide me, little child." And the innocent little child clasped a finger of the hand which had murdered the righteous Abel, and he guided his father. "The fir branches drip upon thee my son." — "Yea, pleasantly, father, for I ran fast and eagerly to bring thee the pitcher and the cake, and my body is not yet cool. How happy the squirrels are that feed on these fir trees! they leap from bough to bough, and the old squirrels play round their young ones in the nest. I clomb a tree yesterday at noon, O my father, that I might play with them, but they leapt away from the branches, even to the slender twigs did they leap, and in a moment I beheld them on another tree. Why, O my father, would they not play with me? Is it because we are not so happy as they? Is it because I groan sometimes even as thou groanest?" Then Cain stopped, and stifling his groans, he sank to the earth, and the child Enos stood in the darkness beside him; and Cain lifted up his voice, and cried bitterly, and said, "The Mighty One that persecuteth me is on this side and on that; he pursueth my soul like the wind, like the sand-blast he passeth through me; he is around me even as the air, O that I might be utterly no more! I desire to die—yea, the things that never had life, neither move they upon the earth—behold they seem precious to mine eyes. O that a man might live without the breath of his nostrils, so I might abide in darkness and blackness, and an empty space! Yea, I would lie down, I would not rise, neither would I stir my limbs till I became as the rock in the den of the lion, on which the young lion resteth his head whilst he sleepeth. For the torrent that roareth far off hath a voice; and the clouds in heaven look terribly on me; the mighty one who is against me speaketh in the wind of the cedar grove; and in silence am I dried up." Then Enos spake to his father, "Arise my father, arise, we are but a little way from the place where I found the cake and the pitcher;" and Cain said, "How knowest thou?" and the child answered — "Behold, the bare rocks are a few of thy strides distant from the forest; and while even now thou wert lifting up thy voice, I heard the echo." Then the child took hold of his father, as if he would raise him, and Cain being faint and feeble rose slowly on his knees and pressed himself against the trunk of a fir, and stood upright and followed the child. The path was dark till within three strides' length of its termination when it turned suddenly; the thick black trees formed a low arch, and the moonlight appeared for a moment like a dazzling portal. Enos ran before and stood in the open air; and when Cain, his father, emerged from the darkness the child was affrighted, for the mighty limbs of Cain were wasted as by fire; his hair was black, and matted into loathly curls, and his countenance was dark and wild, and told in a strange and terrible language of agonies that had been, and were, and were still to continue to be.

The scene around was desolate; as far as the eye could reach, it was desolate; the bare rocks faced each other, and left a long and wide interval of their white sand.[#] You might wander on and look round and round, and peep into the crevices of the rocks, and discover nothing that acknowledged the influence of the seasons. There was no spring, no summer, no autumn, and the winter's snow that would have been lovely, fell not on these hot rocks and scorching sands. Never morning lark had poised himself over this desert; but the huge serpent often hissed there beneath the talons of the vulture, and the vulture screamed, his wings imprisoned within the coils of the serpent. The pointed and shattered summits of the ridges of the rocks made a rude mimicry of human concerns, and seemed to prophecy mutely of things that then were not; steeples, and battlements, and ships with naked masts. As far from the wood as a boy might sling a pebble of the brook,

there was one rock by itself at a small distance from the main ridge. It had been precipitated there perhaps by the terrible groan the earth gave when our first father fell. Before you approached, it appeared to lie flat on the ground, but its base slanted from its point, and between its points and the sands a tall man might stand upright. It was here that Enos had found the pitcher and cake, and to this place he led his father. But ere they arrived there they beheld a human shape; his back was towards them, and they were coming up unperceived when they heard him smite his breast and cry aloud, "Wo, is me! wo, is me! I must never die again, and yet I am perishing with thirst and hunger."

The face of Cain turned pale; but Enos said, "Ere yet I could speak, I am sure, O my father, that I heard that voice. Have not I often said that I remembered a sweet voice. O my father! this is it;" and Cain trembled exceedingly. The voice was sweet indeed, but it was thin and querulous like that of a feeble slave in misery, who despairs altogether, yet can not refrain himself from weeping and lamentation. Enos crept softly round the base of the rock, and stood before the stranger, and looked up into his face. And the Shape shrieked, and turned round, and Cain beheld him, that his limbs and his face were those of his brother Abel whom he had killed; and Cain stood like one who struggles in his sleep because of the exceeding terribleness of a dream; and ere he had recovered himself from the tumult of his agitation, the Shape fell at his feet, and embraced his knees, and cried out with a bitter outcry, "Thou eldest born of Adam, whom Eve, my mother, brought forth, cease to torment me! I was feeding my flocks in green pastures by the side of quiet rivers, and thou killedst me; and now I am in misery." Then Cain closed his eyes, and hid them with his hands— and again he opened his eyes, and looked around him, and said to Enos "What beholdest thou? Didst thou hear a voice, my son?" "Yes, my father, I beheld a man in unclean garments, and he uttered a sweet voice, full of lamentation." Then Cain raised up the shape that was like Abel, and said, "The creator of our father, who had respect unto thee, and unto thy offering, wherefore hath he forsaken thee?" Then the Shape shrieked a second time, and rent his garment, and his naked skin was like the white sands beneath their feet; and he shrieked yet a third time, and threw himself on his face upon the sand that was black with the shadow of the rock, and Cain and Enos sate beside him; the child by his right hand, and Cain by his left. They were all three under the rock, and within the shadow. The Shape that was like Abel raised himself up, and spake to the child; "I know where the cold waters are, but I may not drink, wherefore didst thou then take away my pitcher?" But Cain said, "Didst thou not find favour in the sight of the Lord thy God?" The Shape answered, "The Lord is God of the living only, the dead have another God." Then the child Enos lifted up his eyes and prayed; but Cain rejoiced secretly in his heart. "Wretched shall they be all the days of their mortal life," exclaimed the Shape, "who sacrifice worthy and acceptable sacrifices to the God of the dead; but after death their toil ceaseth. Woe is me, for I was well beloved by the God of the living, and cruel wert thou, O my brother, who didst snatch me away from his power and his dominion." Having uttered these words, he rose suddenly, and fled over the sands; and Cain said in his heart, "The curse of the Lord is on me— but who is the God of the dead?" and he ran after the Shape, and the Shape fled shrieking over the sands, and the sands rose like white mists behind the steps of Cain, but the feet of him that was like Abel disturbed not the sands. He greatly outran Cain, and turning short, he wheeled round, and came again to the rock where they had been sitting, and where Enos still stood; and the Child caught hold of his garment as he passed by, and he fell upon the ground; and Cain stopped, and beholding him not, said, "he has passed into the dark woods," and walked slowly back to the rocks, and when he reached it the child told him that he had caught hold of his garment as he passed by, and that the man had fallen upon the ground; and Cain once more sat beside him, and said— "Abel, my brother, I would lament for thee, but that the spirit within me is withered, and burnt up with extreme agony. Now, I pray thee, by thy flocks and by thy pastures, and by the quiet rivers which thou lovest, that thou tell me all that thou knowest. Who is the God of the dead? where doth he make his dwelling? what sacrifices are acceptable unto him? for I have offered, but have not been received; I have prayed, and have not been heard; and how can I be afflicted more than I already am?" The Shape arose and answered— "O that thou hadst had pity on me as I will have pity on thee. Follow me, son of Adam! and bring thy child with thee:" and they three passed over the white sands between the rocks, silent as their shadows.

Notes

[*] Canto II was published, apparently without Coleridge's knowledge or consent, in the *Bijou* of 1828, edited by W. Fraser. As Fraser remarked in his Introduction to Canto II, "Mr Coleridge, in the most liberal manner, permitted the Editor to select what he pleased from all his unpublished MSS., and it will be seen from the 'Wanderings of Cain,' though unfinished, and the other pieces bearing that Gentleman's name, that whenever he may favour the world with a perfect collection of his writings he will adduce new and powerful claims upon its respect." The manuscript had been passed on by Pickering. See Griggs VI:710-12.

[#] **Contextual Note:** From William Bartram, *Travels in North and South Carolina* (2nd ed. London: J. Johnson, 1794), 215-16:

"The morning pleasant, we decamped early: proceeding on, rising gently for several miles, over sandy, gravelly ridges, we found ourselves in an elevated, high, open, airy region, somewhat rocky, on the backs of the ridges, which presented to view, on every side, the most dreary, solitary, desert waste I had ever beheld; groups of bare rocks emerging out of the naked gravel and drifts of white sand; the grass thinly scattered and but few trees [. . .] Next we joyfully entered the borders of the level pine forest and savannahs which continued for many miles, never out of sight of little lakes or ponds, environed with illumined meadows, the clear waters sparkling through the tall pines."*

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