

# PATHS OF SILENCE.

BY

LOUIS F. BENSON.

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THESE verses were written in leisure moments of the latter part of 1877. After some amendment, they are printed now, partly because of a few expressed wishes that they might be, and partly from the writer's desire to preserve the thought of that time in what is, for several purposes, the most convenient shape.

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DEEP night, the solvent of all shapes and hues,  
Within its murky flux had now dissolved  
The crystal clear of daylight: and no light  
There was, save that atop the fluid dark  
Some crystal points insoluble, we call  
The stars, were floating softly luminous.

And to the river-bank whereon I sat  
In dreamy meditation and alone,  
No sound was borne upon the evening air,  
Nor floated on the waters, which so broad  
And deep and silent, glided on to sea.  
In all the trees, no bird did set his love  
To music, and that pensive organist,  
At whose arrival on the summer breeze,

The tones asleep within the trees are stirred  
To matchless melody, came not to-night  
Unto his forest organ: the wide woods  
Were still, as in some dim cathedral stands  
The instrument of praise with unfilled lungs  
And covered face, between the services.  
So, in the shadow and the loneliness  
Of night I sat, until my musing soul  
Was deeply thrilled into a sympathy  
With silence.

Overhead the stars rolled on,  
The hoary stars that round the thronging years  
Have swung their swerveless circuits until now,  
And kept perpetual distance from the heart  
They fill with airy longing undefined.  
Oh, boundless is the firmament of stars,  
And how to uttermost extend their paths;  
But winged is the soul for equal flight,  
And with what enginery equipped to bound  
More speedily than light from world to world.

Ere long my lifted thought pursued their course,  
And travelled on in voiceless membership  
Of this most voiceless company of worlds  
Throughout their orbits; and I trod their paths  
Of silence—circle within circle coiled,  
And circles lapping as the links of chains,  
Outspread like one vast network over space;  
And pierced and crossed and intercrossed by lines  
Of light—which, streaming through the dimness,  
    join

World unto world and to the central sun  
Of Heaven—whereupon with soundless tread  
The angels-ministrant of God do make  
Their highways, and their spirit-burdens bear  
From all His universe to Him. I seemed  
To tread the silent, hallowed paths whereon  
His stately steppings are, whose voice is not  
In thunder or in tumult, but is heard  
Like rare, soft breaths of whispered melody;  
Where, too, He leads His faithful retinue

Of worlds and angels. Oh, the paths, the paths  
Of silence, paths of angels and of worlds,  
O silent paths and paths of God! My soul  
Did feel that mortal ways are not as His,  
Nor high, nor could our timid feet climb up  
To tread beside Him; but that still, sometimes  
His hand doth lead us over paths divine,  
And that our spirits walk with God. I thought  
Of him who in the olden-storied time  
So lightly pressed his footsteps to the earth,  
That, while companions watched him, he was not,  
Being taken up by paths they could not see:  
And of the Christ, new-given unto life,  
When, with the benediction on His lips,  
He reascended from the mountain-top,  
Clad in such lustres as the angels wear.  
And like a fragrance through that upper air  
Was breathed the consciousness that even yet  
May dawn on trusting souls the radiance  
And hallowed calm of their ascension-day

Upon the prayer-scaled heights of Olivet  
Where angels linger still, and wait to weave  
New garments for new Christs.

Then turned

From these aërial avenues of light  
Unto the lower landscape I had left,  
My winged spirit from the middle air  
Down-looking, saw beneath me clearly mapped  
The ways and wanderings of human life  
Across the little plain we know as Time,  
An island in a wilderness of sea,  
White-fringed with waves upon its edge and swept  
By trade-winds from eternity. There seemed  
A network webbing it of shadowed lines,  
As though, beyond the firmament of stars,  
Some supernatural light had shone upon  
Their convoluted orbit-paths and cast  
Upon the outspread surface of the earth  
In silhouette, of these aërial paths  
The trceries. And clearly my soul saw

That these dark lines, the dusky counterpart  
And microcosm of the paths of worlds,  
Of angels and of God, defined the paths  
Whereon through shadow mortal pilgrims walk,  
And which I felt were trod most reverently  
When trod in silence, with uplifted eye  
To heaven, where in silent circles whirl  
Those stars, and voiceless since what time  
The thrill and tremor of creation rent  
Their bonds of stillness, and poured out in song  
Concentric waves of spheral harmonies,  
Which toward the centre rolling inwardly,  
Increasing with each inner orbit crossed,  
And pressing wave on wave tumultuously,  
Broke into wondrous music at the throne  
Of God.

Full many silent paths my soul  
Could trace, not seeming the most travelled roads,  
Nor broad as some smooth-laid upon the plain  
And gay with merry groupings;—trodden still

By here and there a pilgrim foot, and each  
With frequent outlooks toward the spirit-land.  
There was a shaded deep-down valley road,  
Hedged in by willows and by cypresses,  
Here crossing, there stretched parallel with streams  
Of sluggish waters, and obscure in mist ;  
And there, with lingering, hesitating step,  
Advanced a little company dark clad,  
Like shadows moving among shadows still :  
Their faces had the look of one who dreams,  
And each from those beside him seemed apart,  
As with some comrade whom I could not see  
In fellowship that had no need of speech,  
And that had lost the grace of clasping hands.  
O pilgrimage of sorrow, weary way  
Whereon like beasts of burden we must bear  
Our memories and woe. But my soul saw  
That such paths are the shadows of what roads  
God trod aforetime when he walked in flesh,  
The *viæ dolorosæ* of the Christ ;

On which so vivid was the light of lights  
That their sad image made persistent was  
Unto the Father's eye, and they shall stretch  
In shadow through all time.

One other path  
Outled beyond the suburbs of some town  
To where the fields were green and skies were blue  
With all the freshness of a summer's dawn :  
Where mountains lifted wooded slopes on high,  
And cradled limpid lakes so purely clear  
That passing seraphs saw their image there ;  
And merry waters rippled over rocks,  
And foamed in mossy cataracts, and stayed  
To let the sunbeams kiss them in the pools,  
Before they joined the river farther down  
Amid the grass and flowers of the vale.  
I knew it was the field of nature, saw  
The long-familiar features that define  
The poet's fatherland ; wherein are born  
Their rapt and wistful souls who bring to us

Glad tidings from the infinite, alone  
To them intrust, who, reverently and stilled  
To muteness, tread the unfrequented ways  
Through valleys winding and up mountain sides,  
And look and listen musingly to hear  
The hidden meanings and to find the shoots  
And blossoms of the spirit-life. Poets,  
Evangels ye and messengers of truth,  
Oh, tread with reverence beneath the dome,  
And through these columned aisles, while nature  
    kneels

At prayer. Tread softly, as some worshipper,  
Perforce made late to reach the temple-door,  
Moves noiselessly among the bended forms,  
And takes his place to pray. My soul did feel  
That who is poet doth serenely walk  
With God and in the high companionships  
That haunt the silent highways of the air,  
Over the wistful soul low-hovering,  
The while it treads along still paths to find

Among the vexing, tangled undergrowth,  
New-budded truth.

But darkest of the paths  
Whereon men tread, more fastening my gaze  
Than countless others, timid, my soul saw  
The paths of death, that seemed to reach and cross  
And interlace all fields; and enter doors  
In every house, though they were bolt and barred.  
Oh, numerous as the living forms I saw  
Were they, the shadowed paths of death.  
And some among them I could see did lead  
Through stretches of deep silence to the shore  
Where a supernal voicelessness did brood,  
As though the phantom waves of spectral seas  
Upon the edge of time lapped echoless.  
My soul did bathe and purify itself  
In such profound of silence; and I prayed  
That when my mortal feet should reach the path  
Of death, their farthest footfalls without sound  
Might tread by waters still as those, and find

A thoroughfare through silence to their rest.  
For I would die in silence. Though I know  
Some are ambitious at the last to speak,  
Responsive to inquiring looks of friends,  
With faltering breath and rounded sentences  
Their dying testimony to the faith  
Which in their lives they have professed at least,  
If not as might have been exhibited:  
Not so I would employ that hour, nor choose  
That then, religion made theatrical  
Should set so empty tableaux in the hall  
And vestibule of the realities,  
What only time in all the year of life  
The soul doth penetrate the lifted veil,  
And kneel within the holiest place of all,  
Where God is. I would die in silence; for  
When there is speech divine, he heareth best  
Who silent is, and surely in the hour  
And still of death God always speaks to us.  
Oh, I would die in silence! Though there be

Regathered then about me many forms  
Whom I have loved in life to look upon,  
And though e'en then my passing spirit claims  
The brotherhood of hearts, and friends still hold  
My pulseless hands to strengthen them, and cheer  
With sympathetic speech, while on my breast  
With tender care they lay that only flower  
Of all the earthly garden smelling sweet  
To dying senses, that one spotless flower  
Of bloom consummate and of fragrant breath,  
The flower of human love;—yet still I would  
That friendliness were eloquent to me  
With silence, while I listen for the voice  
Of God. How softly is this lower air  
By pulse and stir of rarest melody  
Made tremulous, when out of God-depths rise  
Refrains of far-off whispered music, such  
As angel-fingers play on instruments  
Supernal, and the still, small voice of Him  
Whose only is the voice attuned to ears

Fast deafening in death. Oh, I would die  
In silence, lest the influence of speech  
Erect some noisy barrier between  
My listening soul and God.

Or, if my path  
Shall wind at last through solitary vales  
Wherein no other footprint shows than mine,  
And no companion pilgrimage is there,  
Yet may it be so still as is this road  
Upon the river-bank, what time like this  
The mingled voices of the weary day  
Are hushed, and over all the failure and the sin  
The angel of the air compassionate  
Has overturned the urns wherein are stored  
The fountains of Divine forgetfulness,  
And poured the Lethe waters of the night.

How quietly this wilted leaf has dropt  
With scarce a tremor from its loosened stem.  
So I would die and quite as softly fall  
Into the strong, outstretchèd arms beneath:

Or, as the river calmly flows between  
The shadowlands to-night, and on to sea,  
Oh, would that over stilly water-ways  
My passing life, down-drifting, so might find  
A silent pathway to the waiting sea.