

The Poem

A Little Drama in Four Scenes
By Aleister Crowley

I dedicate this play to the gentleman who, on the evening of June 24th, 1898, turned back in Shaftesbury Avenue to give a halfpenny to a little girl, and thereby suggested to me the idea here rendered.

SCENES.

I. THE ANGEL OF PITY.

II. THE ANGEL OF LOVE.

III. THE ANGEL OF DEATH.

IV. THE FORM OF THE FOURTH WAS LIKE THE
SON OF GOD.

PERSONS.

PERCY BRANDON (*a Poet*).

ESMÉ VAUGHAN.

MR. VAUGHAN (*her Father*).

MR. BRANDON (*Father of Percy*).

A FRIEND TO VAUGHAN.

Butler, Footmen, etc., etc.

SCENE I.

Shaftesbury Avenue, 8.30 p.m. A gentleman walking with a friend, both in evening dress. A little ragged girl. A young man. The gentleman stops and gives the little girl a halfpenny. The young man smiles. The gentleman notices the smile, and sees how great a sadness underlies it.

VAUGHAN.

[*Turning to the young man.*]

And you—what are you doing here? Excuse my rudeness—you seem so sad.

PERCY.

I am sad to-night. I am very lonely in this place.

VAUGHAN.

There are plenty of people about.

PERCY.

People—mere shells, husks of the golden wheat that might grow even here.

VAUGHAN.

Why do you stay here?

PERCY.

I cannot think at home.

VAUGHAN.

Why think, if thinking makes you sad?

PERCY.

That I may write. I have not long to live, and I must write, write always.

FRIEND [*aside to Vaughan*].

Il me semble qu'il a faim.

PERCY.

I am hungry for a little love, a little pity. To-night you have shown me your soul, and I am not hungry any more.

VAUGHAN.

But, boy, you are starving physically. Come home with me and have some dinner. Only my daughter will be there.

PERCY.

You are very kind. Thank you.

FRIEND [*aside*].

He is a gentleman.

VAUGHAN.

But what are you doing to be alone in London?

PERCY.

Where should I go?

VAUGHAN.

Your father—

PERCY.

Has shown me the door.

VAUGHAN.

How have you quarrelled?

PERCY.

Because I must write.

VAUGHAN.

What do you write about that he dislikes?

PERCY.

He calls it waste of time.

VAUGHAN.

He may be right. What do you write about?

PERCY.

I write about all the horrible things I see, and try to find beauty in them, or to make beauty; and I write about all the beautiful things I only dream of. I love them all; yes, even that woman yonder.

VAUGHAN.

Do you find beauty in her?

PERCY.

No, but I see in her history trust a poem, to which I trust that God will write an end.

VAUGHAN.

What end can come but evil?

PERCY.

O! if I had no hope for her I should have none for myself.

VAUGHAN.

How? Have you then fallen?

PERCY.

Oh, yes, I have fallen. I am older every hour. I have wasted time, I have wasted love.

VAUGHAN.

Perhaps it is not all waste after all. There is a use for everything, nothing is destroyed—believe so, anyhow!

FRIEND.

What about this dinner of yours, Vaughan? Esmé will think us a long while gone.

VAUGHAN.

Hansom!

[Exeunt.]

SCENE II.

A year later. Vaughan's house in Mayfair. Percy's bedroom. Moonlight streams through open window in the corridor. Percy asleep. He dreams uneasily, and after a little wakes up with a start and a cry.

PERCY.

Oh! had such a bad dream. I dreamt I was straining out after a beautiful bird, and suddenly it stopped, and then I held it in my hands, and it was happy, and then I dropped down somehow into the darkness and the bird had gone—only it got so confused, and I woke up. I hear steps!

ESME [*in corridor*].

Did you call, Percy? I heard a cry as if you were in pain.

PERCY.

Esmé, I will come and talk to you in the moonlight. I want to say something that I couldn't say before, because my heart choked me.

ESME.

Come out, Percy, the moon is so white, looking out of the black sky. The sky is quite black near the moon; only far down where there are no more bright stars it is a deep, deep blue. It is bluer and deeper than the sea.

PERCY.

It is like your eyes. [*Comes out into corridor.*] Esmé! I have looked into your eyes as your eyes look into Heaven, and there I have found my Heaven. O serene depths! O faultless face of my desire! O white brow too clear! I sin against your holiness by my presence. Only the moon should see you, Esmé.

ESME [*half in tears*].

You don't mean like that, Percy, quite. Why do you say that?

Enter Vaughan in shadow. He draws back and stands watching.

PERCY.

Oh, you are crying, my heart! Do you cry because I have spoken and touched with fire the sweet child-love we have lived in all this year? Or is it that you do not understand? Or are you sorry? Or are you glad?

ESME.

I am very, very glad. [*They kiss. A little cloud passes across the moon without dimming its brightness.*] Percy! Percy!

PERCY.

My wife, my own wife, will you kiss me?

ESME.

I am too happy to kiss you!

PERCY.

Esmé, my Esmé. And we will write our poem now together.

ESME.

I cannot write; we will live our poem now together.

PERCY.

Dear heart, dear heart! And she will give us light, our dear moon out yonder, always a pure cold light: and our life shall answer a purer, warmer flame. She is like a maiden covered with lilies; your lilies have kissed roses.

ESME.

And when the moon's light fails, the light of your song.

PERCY.

Let that light be drawn from Heaven too.

ESME.

Oh, Percy, I am so glad, so glad!

PERCY.

Esmé!

ESME.

When will you begin your great poem—now?

PERCY [*as if in pain*].

Ah! my poem. I am in despair! It is so great, and I am so little, it is so pure and I am so dull of understanding. When I write I feel as it were the breath of an angel covering me with holiness, and I know— then! But now—I only write mechanically. I force myself. To-day I tore up all I wrote last night.

ESME.

Let us ask God to send you the angel, shall we?

[They kneel, with arms intertwined, at the open window, and bow their heads silently. Vaughan also prays, with arms outspread in blessing. Curtain.]

SCENE III.

Six months later.

The dining-room. Percy, Vaughan, Esmé at dinner.

Enter Butler.

BUTLER.

If you please, sir, a gentleman has called; he says he must see you at once.

VAUGHAN.

Have you told him we are at dinner?

BUTLER.

Yes, sir; but he would not take that; begging your pardon, sir, he said it was only an excuse, and he wouldn't stand any nonsense.

VAUGHAN.

An excuse! Who is the fellow?

BUTLER.

I think he is a friend of Mr. Percy's, sir.

PERCY [*alarmed*].

It might be my father. [*Aside.*] And I could have finished to-night—the very last word. Something has been singing in me all day.

VAUGHAN.

This is a serious matter, John. I will come and speak to him.

[Exit. The voices are heard outside.]

BRANDON [*stout, purple, "knobbed," and ill-tempered*].

Yes, sir. Either I see my son now, or I fetch in a policeman. Kidnapper! Yes, sir, that 's what I call you! Yes, sir! my name is Brandon. And your damned name is Vaughan, sir! And I'll drag your damned name through a police-court, sir, as soon as—as—Where's my son?

[Is heard to move towards dining-room.]

VAUGHAN.

John! shut that door. Mr. Brandon, my daughter is at dinner in that room. I cannot allow you to enter. That's where he is, you scoundrel. Out of the way, fool! [*Knocking John over, bursts the door open and enters.*] There you are, you snivelling little swine. My God! to think that damned puppy 's my son! Come out of it!

VAUGHAN [*who has entered and rung the bell for the servants*].
I shall have you locked up for assaulting my servant.

BRANDON.

And you for abducting my son. He's coming with me now or there'll be a fuss. Mark my words, you rascal.
[*Enter two Footmen.*]

VAUGHAN.

Seize that man. [*They seize and hold him after a struggle.*] Esmé! go away to your room; this is no place for you. Now, sir, say all you have to say.
[*Esmé waits in the doorway.*]

BRANDON.

Give me my son, and be damned to you. That's all; and it's plain enough, I hope.

PERCY.

Father, I am leaving Mr. Vaughan's house, as I shall only get him into trouble if I stay. But I will not come home with you, you who broke my mother's heart, and turned me from your doors penniless.

BRANDON.

Unnatural puppy!

PERCY.

My mother's spirit forgives you, and in my heart is no longer the desire for vengeance. So far have I risen, but not far enough to forget that you are the most abominable villain that plagues God's beautiful world with his infesting life.

BRANDON [*with sudden calmness*].

This to his father! What does the Bible say, you wretch?

PERCY [*to Vaughan*].

I will go, my true new father. Kiss Esmé for me a hundred times!

BRANDON [*suddenly breaking from the Footmen*].

Damn you; that's your game, is it? No, you go with me, Sir Poet.

[Rushing at his son, strikes. Percy, warding off the unexpected blow, staggers. Brandon, maddened by the idea of fighting, snatches up a knife and drives it into his heart. He falls with a low cry. Vaughan dashes forward and strikes Brandon heavily. He falls; footmen drag him off insensible.]

VAUGHAN [*bending over Percy*].

Are you hurt?

PERCY.

Oh, hardly hurt at all! Only my head a little, and I wanted so to finish the poem to-night.

ESME.

Let me come to him, father. Oh, Percy, Percy, look at me, look at me; you're not hurt, are you?

PERCY.

Am I ever hurt with your arms round me?

ESME.

Oh, but you grow whiter; you must be hurt.

VAUGHAN.

A knife! He must have stabbed him. Fetch a doctor, one of you, sharp!

[Exit a man.]

ESME.

It is his heart; see, my hand is all covered with blood. Give me a handkerchief. Here, I will staunch the wound. [*She attempts to prevent the bleeding with her handkerchief.*] Oh! Percy! [*A pause.*] Oh! Percy!

PERCY.

I am going away, Esmé. I shall see you often. When you think of me I shall always be with you. One day you will come to me, Esmé! Kiss me! Your kisses must finish my poem. One day your pen must finish it.

ESME.

You know I cannot write a line. Oh, how sorry I am for that!

PERCY [*to Vaughan*].

Good-bye, my dear, dear friend. Take care of Esmé for me. I shall watch over her myself, I and God together. She is so frail and white, and she understands. She sees my soul, and Heaven is always open to her eyes when she looks up, and she is so beautiful. Will it seem long, Esmé, till we kiss again beyond the moon there—it is the moon, isn't it, come to see that Esmé is not too sad about my dying? Be kind to her always, moon, when I am gone beyond you! You must finish my poem, Esmé; there is only a little to do. Kiss me the last time! Good-bye, my dear friends. I wish I could take your hands, but I am so weak. Kiss me, Esmé, quickly. I feel the voice of God come like a shudder in my blood; I must go to Him. Esmé! Esmé! Esmé! I am so happy!

[*Dies.*

[Esmé flings herself passionately on to the body, weeping and kissing the dead face, while all the others kneel in prayer. Curtain.]

SCENE IV.

The next morning. Esmé in bed asleep.

Enter Vaughan.

VAUGHAN.

Poor child, poor child, how are you? You have not slept, I know. Why, she is still asleep! Hush! How calmly and regularly she breathes! How fresh she looks! How she smiles! It is wonderful! It is impossible! Esmé! Esmé! it is a pity you cannot always sleep so, and never wake up to the cruel sorrow of yesterday. Ah me! When we all thought to be so happy. And in a month he would have married her: in a day he would have finished the poem. What a wonderful poem it was! One could hear, above the angels that sang, the voice of God in that awful music that made his lines quiver and shimmer like live coals. And the end was to have been so perfect: there was on the last passage of his work a hush, a silence almost as if the world—his world—awaited the voice of some great one. And now the silence is not broken. Perhaps men were not ready for those final chords. Perhaps to hear them would be to pass where he has passed! But oh! the pity! To leave his greatest task undone! To be stricken down in the last charge, a good soldier to the end! Would God he could come back only for an hour to put the keystone to his palace that he built of running brooks and trees and buds and the sound of the sea, and all the lights of heaven to window it. [*Esmé's eyes open.*] Esmé! you must wake up and kiss father!

ESME [*half awake*].

He sang to me all night, not his voice only, but a deeper voice that I understood so well as I never understood, a voice like his poem, only more beautiful even than that, and I can't remember one word, only that he kissed me all the night; and there was as it were a vapour, an incense-cloud, about me, and I could not see—and I am so happy.

VAUGHAN.

Esmé, I am here, your father.

ESME.

Ah! it comes back. He is dead. Oh, God! Oh, God! And we were to have been married a month to-day.

VAUGHAN.

And he left the poem and could not finish it.

ESME [*pointing to scattered papers on a table*].
What have you been doing with those papers, father?

VAUGHAN [*astonished*].

They are not mine, child. I did not see them till you showed me. [*Taking papers.*] Why, they are in your handwriting; what are they? [*Reading, gradually becomes aware that something strange has happened.*] It is finished—it is finished!

[*Curtain.*