

The Hound of Heaven

by Francis Thompson

I fled Him down the nights and down the days
I fled Him down the arches of the years
I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind, and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes I sped and shot precipitated
Adown titanic glooms of chasm-ed fears
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.

But with unhurrying chase and unperturb-ed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat — and a Voice beat,
More instant than the feet:

“All things betray thee who betrayest Me.”

I pleaded, outlaw-wise,
By many a hearted casement, curtained red,
trellised with inter-twining charities;
(For though I knew His love who follow-ed,
Yet was I sore adread
lest having Him, I should have nought beside)
But, if one little casement parted wide,
The gust of his approach would clash it to.
Fear wist not to evade as Love wist to pursue.

Across the margent of the world I fled,
And troubled the gold gateways of the stars,
Smiting for shelter on their clang-ed bars,
Fretted to dulcet jars
and silvern chatter the pale ports o' the moon.

I said to dawn — Be sudden; to eve — be soon —
With thy young skiey blossoms heap me over
From this tremendous Lover!
Float thy vague veil about me lest He see!

I tempted all His servitors but to find
My own betrayal in their constancy,
In faith to Him, their fickleness to me,
Their traitorous trueness and their loyal deceit.

To all swift things for swiftness did I sue,
Clung to the whistling mane of every wind,
But whether they swept, smoothly fleet,
The long savannahs of the blue,
Or whether, thunder-driven,
They clanged His chariot thwart a heaven,
Plashy with flying lightnings round the spurn of their feet,
Fear wist not to evade as Love wist to pursue.
Still with unhurrying chase and unperturb-ed pace ,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
Came on the following feet, and a Voice above their beat –

“Nought shelters thee who wilt not shelter Me.”

I sought no more that after which I strayed
In face of man or maid;
But still within the little children’s eyes
Seems something, something that replies,
They at least are for me, surely for me!
But just as their young eyes grew sudden fair,
With dawning answers there,
Their angel plucked them from me by the hair.

“Come then, ye other children, Nature’s – share
with me, said I, your delicate fellowship;
Let me greet you lip to lip,
Let me twine with you caresses,
Wantoning
with our Lady-Mother’s vagrant tresses,
Banqueting
with her in her wind-walled palace,
Underneath her azured dais,
Quaffing, as your taintless way is,
From a chalice, lucent weeping out of the dayspring.”

So it was done:
I, in their delicate fellowship was one —
Drew the bolt of Nature's secrecies,
I knew all the swift importings on the wilful face of skies;
I knew how the clouds arise,
Spum-ed of the wild sea-snortings.
All that's born or dies,
Rose and drooped with,
Made them shapers of mine own moods, or wailful, or divine —
With them joyed and was bereaven.

I was heavy with the even,
When she lit her glimmering tapers
Round the day's dead sanctities.
I laughed in the morning's eyes.
I triumphed and I saddened with all weather,
Heaven and I wept together,
and its sweet tears were salt with mortal mine.
Against the red throb of its sunset heart,
I laid my own to beat
And share commingling heat;

But not by that, by that was eased my human smart.
In vain my tears were wet on Heaven's grey cheek.
For ah! we know what each other says,
these things and I; In sound I speak,
Their sound is but their stir, they speak by silences.

Nature, poor step-dame, cannot slake my drouth;
Let her, if she would owe me,
Drop yon blue-bosomed veil of sky, and show me
The breasts o' her tenderness:
Never did any milk of hers once bless
My thirsting mouth.
Nigh and nigh draws the chase,
with unperturb-ed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
And past those nois-ed Feet,
A Voice comes yet more fleet:

"Lo, nought contentst thee who content'st not Me."

Naked, I wait thy Love's uplifted stroke!
My harness, piece by piece Thou hast hewn from me,
And smitten me to my knee,
I am defenceless, utterly.
I slept, methinks, and woke,
And slowly gazing, find me stripped in sleep.
In the rash lustihead of my young powers,
I shook the pillaring hours,
And pulled my life upon me; grimed with smears,
I stand amidst the dust o' the mounded years –
My mangled youth lies dead beneath the heap.
My days have crackled and gone up in smoke,
Have puffed and burst like sunstarts on a stream.

Yea, faileth now even dream the dreamer
and the lute, the lutanist;
Even the linked fantasies in whose blossomy twist,
I swung the earth, a trinket at my wrist,
Have yielded, cords of all too weak account
For earth, with heavy grief so overplussed.

Ah! is thy Love indeed
a weed, albeit an amaranthine weed,
Suffering no flowers except its own to mount?
Ah! must –
Designer Infinite!
Ah! must thou char the wood 'ere Thou canst limn with it?

My freshness spent its wavering shower i' the dust;
And now my heart is as a broken fount,
Wherein tear-drippings stagnate, spilt down ever
From the dank thoughts that shiver
Upon the sigh-ful branches of my mind.
Such is. What is to be?
The pulp so bitter, how shall taste the rind?
I dimly guess what Time in mists confounds,
Yet ever and anon, a trumpet sounds
From the hid battlements of Eternity,

Those shaken mists a space unsettle, then
Round the half-glimps-ed turrets, slowly wash again;
But not 'ere Him who summoneth
I first have seen, enwound
With glooming robes purpureal; cypress crowned:
His Name I know, and what his trumpet saith.
Whether man's heart or life it be that yield thee harvest,
Must thy harvest fields be dunged with rotten death?

Now of that long pursuit,
Comes on at hand the bruit.
That Voice is round me like a bursting sea:
"And is thy earth so marred,
Shattered in shard on shard?
Lo, all things fly thee, for thou fliest Me!
Strange, piteous, futile thing;
Wherefore should any set thee love apart?
Seeing none but I makes much of naught" (He said),

"And human love needs human meriting –
How hast thou merited,
Of all Man's clotted clay, the dingiest clot?
Alack, thou knowest not
How little worthy of any love thou art!
Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee,
Save Me, save only Me?
All which I took from thee, I did'st but take,
Not for thy harms,
But just that thou might'st seek it in My arms.
All which thy child's mistake
Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home:
Rise, clasp My hand, and come."

Halts by me that footfall;
Is my gloom, after all,
Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?

"Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,
I am He whom thou seekest!
Thou dravest love from thee who dravest Me."

November 13, 1907 • Heaven's Hound Got Thompson.

Thompson was running, running. He was running from his father, from his failure as a medical student, from God himself. Thousands have read “The Hound of Heaven” with tears, for it is the story of God’s pursuit of all, who, like Thompson, reject him, and try to flee from him.

*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind...*

Francis Thompson as sketched by his friend
Edward Meynell and colored by chinstitute.



The poet knew that: “All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.” But still he ran — into the slums of London, into starvation, dirt, drug addiction and disease. But why?

*...For, though I knew His love Who follow'd,
Yet I was sore adread
Lest, having Him, I must have naught beside...*

Thompson need never have starved. In 1859, he was born into a well-to-do Roman Catholic home. But his parents wanted him to become a physician, a career he detested. He failed his exams three times and then fled to London.

He failed every occupation he tried. Although his father sent a little money to him in care of a library, he was refused admission because he was so shabby. When he collapsed in the street, a prostitute rescued him. Some poems he scribbled on sugar paper were printed by Wilfred Meynell who finally rescued Thompson. Under the care of a Franciscan community, Thompson escaped his drug addiction, but his health was permanently injured.

The author of what has been called the greatest ode in the English language died **on this day, November 13, 1907**. Had the “Hound of Heaven” cornered him for keeps?