

THE DREAM OF GERONTIUS

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The Dream of Gerontius by John Henry Newman

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JOHN HENRY NEWMAN

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OF GERONTIUS**



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THE
DREAM OF GERONTIUS

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BY *J. Schuster*
CARDINAL NEWMAN

WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

BY

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JOANNI JOSEPH GORDON
ORATORII S.P.N. PRESBYTERO
CUJUS ANIMA IN REFRIGERIUM

J. H. N.

*In die Comm.
Omn. Fid. Def.
1865*



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INTRODUCTION

As a rule, when Cardinal Newman's poetry is mentioned, people think of "The Pillar of the Cloud," better known as "Lead, Kindly Light." This lyric is only one of the many beautiful poems written by an author whose fame as a writer of the finest modern prose in the English language has eclipsed his reputation as a poet. Nevertheless, he wrote a very great poem, "The Dream of Gerontius"—a poem which the intellectual world admires more and more every year, and which yields its best only after careful study and consideration. It has been described as a metrical meditation on death. It is more than that; it is the realization by means of a loving heart and a poetic imagination of the state of a just soul after death,—Gerontius typifying not the soul of a particular person imagined by Cardinal Newman, but your soul, my soul, any soul which may be fortunate enough to satisfy the judging and merciful God. No poet has ever presented the condition of the soul, as made known by the theology of the Catholic Church, so forcibly and appealingly as Cardinal Newman. The poem is filled with intense white light, and the soul on earth sees itself

as it will be at the moment before its death; as it will be when, strengthened by the last sacraments and upborne by the prayers of its friends, it approaches the bar of judgment. Separated from the body until the day of the Resurrection, when it shall be united to that glorified body, it is not sundered by death from the love of those who have loved it on earth. Gerontius about to be judged feels that he must fail

"And drop from out the universal frame
Into that shapeless, scopeless, blank abyss,
That utter nothingness"

from which the soul came, and, in its depths of fear, it pleads silently that its friends in Christ may pray for it. The dread of annihilation is upon it; it fears "the great deep"¹ to which it goes. And, in the agony of its rending from the beloved body, it thinks—for it can no longer speak—of the horror of nothingness. All its physical supports are gone. Its eyes are darkening and glazing; its feet motionless and cold; its arms and hands rigid. To those in the sick-room the body once so beautiful,

"from the graced decorum of the hair
Ev'n to the tingling sweet
Soles of the simple, earth-confiding feet,"²

is now white as white marble and as lifeless. But the soul is not dead, though the earthly parts of the body

¹ From Merlin's song in Tennyson's "Coming of Arthur."

² Coventry Patmore's "Ode to the Body."