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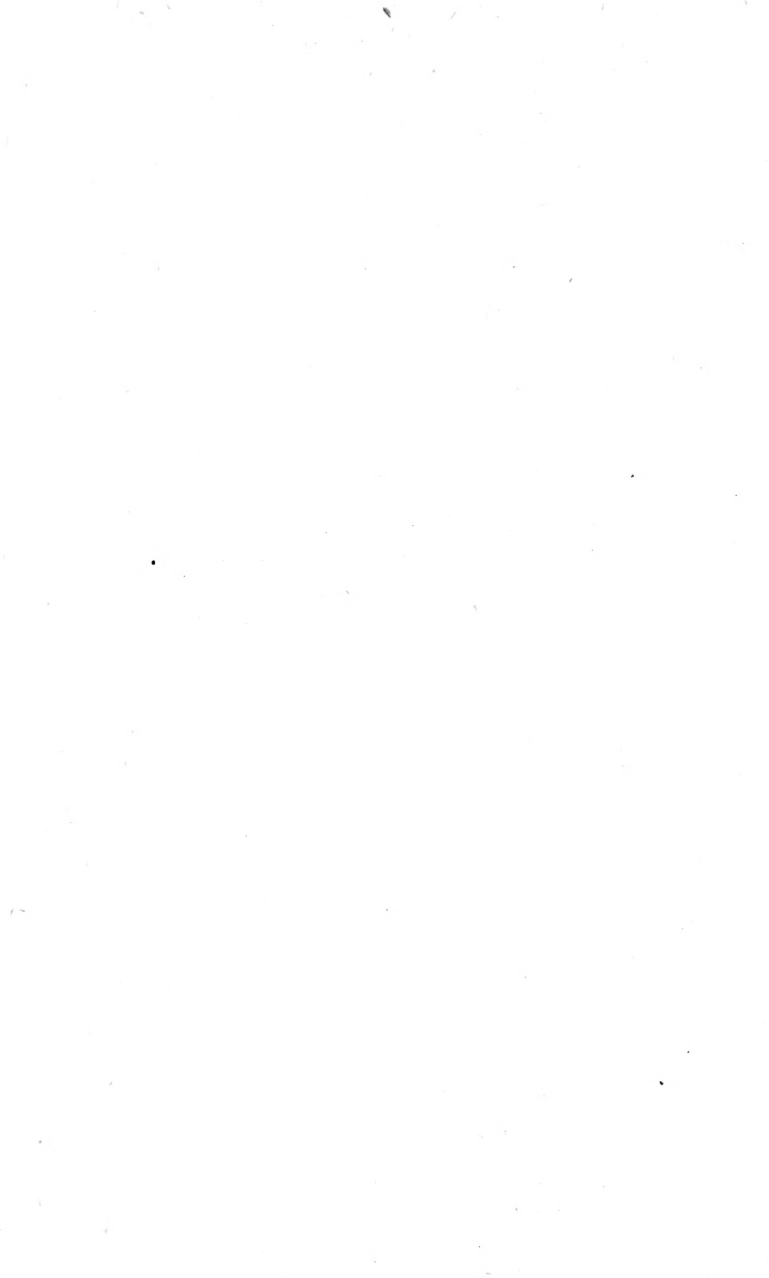






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THE QUEEN OF THE FAIRIES.



J. Currie

Currie, Mary Montgomerie (Lamb)

THE

QUEEN OF THE FAIRIES

(A VILLAGE STORY)

AND OTHER POEMS

BY

VIOLET FANE [pseud.]

AUTHOR OF "DENZIL PLACE," ETC.

LONDON

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THE QUEEN OF THE FAIRIES.



“ A little cottage girl,
She was eight years old she said,
Her hair was thick with many a curl
That cluster'd round her head.”

WORDSWORTH.

“ For now, being always with her, the first love
I had—the father's, brother's love, was changed,
I think, in somewise—”

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI.

I.

POOR little Nelly in her spotted frock
Used to sit sobbing in our village school,
Biting her short fore-finger, whilst her slate,
All blotted with her tears, hung round her neck
And seem'd a halter. From the narrow form
Her mottled baby legs hung sadly down ;

The Queen of the Fairies.

One little foot, as tho' in agony,
Press'd tightly o'er the other, or both strove
With downward-pointed toes to reach the ground.
Low at the neck, her lilac pinafore
Was drawn down sideways thro' perplexity,
Wherefrom her little round right shoulder peep'd,
Hunch'd ear-wards from the burden of her slate.

'Twas not that little Nelly's curly head
Held duller brains than children's of her age,
Yet two and two would seem to make it ache.
It may have been that we, her teachers, tried
The two and two too soon; but thus she sat,
Careworn and sad tho' only eight years old,
Some years ago upon that very form
In this our village school.

Our clergyman

Was then a good, kind, venerable man
Of nigh three-score and ten, which Holy Writ
Hath said to be the age when we of earth
Strain at our tether, which wears ragged and thin
And therefore seems to stretch, but in the main
Gains poor advantage, losing strength in length.
I was his curate;—I had seen the world,

And haunted crowds, and fled in solitudes
The din of cities. Pleasure is not good,
And leads to greater evils ;—this I knew,
But ere I knew, or had I never known,
I had loved Pleasure ;—as it was, I strove
To love the *Right* ;—'tis often very hard !

What matter if it was my poverty,
Or the long purse of some one of my kin,
Led me to make my home amongst the poor,
I doubly poor, from having once seem'd rich ?
Here in this village, where the clergyman
Was three-score years and ten, I waited on
(I sometimes thought I waited for his death).

Then little Nelly, like a stragg'ling lamb
Long erring from the fold, was brought to school
By me, the shepherd's dog. I long had watch'd,
Outside her cottage door, this lovely child
Of lawless parents ; often driven there
Rated by a resentful stepmother,
Biting her bread-and-butter into shapes
Of men and animals, or sharing it

With Wolf, her father's savage mongrel cur.
(Her father, poacher, drunkard, "ne'er do weel,"
Yet having such a careless, handsome face,
Such girth of chest, and such a merry eye,
That somehow we forgave him for his faults
And said "good-morrow" in a friendly way.)

The mother of my pretty little Nell
Forgave him too, and some ten years ago
Had married him, then died in giving birth
To this one daughter. She was said to be
"A better sort of person," born and bred
Some three good rungs above her husband's head
Upon the social ladder, and from her
It may have been that little Nelly got
Her gentle manner and her gentle look.
Then, being still a man the lasses liked,
Her father married, not a day too soon,
His second wife, a slattern and a shrew,
Who bore to him a shaggy-headed brood
Of squalid babies; twins and twins again
Year after year, and then a single child—
And thus the star of this poor family
Slowly declined, but surely.

Now it chanced
One day there came up to the cottage door,
Bearing upon her back a sickly child,
A sunburnt, black-brow'd gipsy of the lanes,
And begg'd for bread, for seeing, as she said,
So many little ones, she deem'd their mother
Would never let her beg for bread in vain
For her one dying child. But Nelly's step-
mother

Call'd her an ugly name, and used harsh words,
Saying the more there were around the board,
The more to feed ; and in her shrewish voice
Bade her begone and starve—or, if she dared,
Thieve, as it was her wont ; then call'd to Wolf
To set him at her.

Nell was standing there,
Leaning against the lintel of the door
Like some fair lily, reaching nigh the thatch,
Almost as tall as the brown hollyhock
That flower'd beside her. In her lifted hand
She held her frugal meal—'twas only bread,
But only bread the beggar-woman asked.
So, running to the weird brown woman, she held
It out towards her ; with her other hand

Upon the collar of the mongrel dog
To hold him back.

Then, raising up to heav'n
A gaunt brown finger with a silver ring,
The dark Bohemian mother utter'd a curse,
Looking towards the shaggy-headed brood
That sprawl'd beside the scraper in the sun.
But, turning round to Nelly, "These shall know
Both poverty and want," she said, "and shame
The mother that has given birth to them
Can she know shame, whilst you, my pretty maid
(You have a lucky face !) shall dress in silks,
And live and love, and one day die a queen."

So the weird woman ended ; with a bound
(Let loose from Nelly's unresisting hand,
Turn'd into stone by wonder) sprang the dog
To fasten on the gipsy of the lanes
Those sharp white fangs to which he ow'd his name.
But was she human, or some wand'ring witch
Born after date, or fairy godmother,
I know not ; but, as swung the garden gate,
They say she vanish'd, and the mongrel cur
Bit at the air he fancied was a rag.

I since have thought that in some subtle way
This prophecy did truly come to pass
(She must have been a witch !) First let me tell
How Nelly came to be a lady, dress'd
In silks and satins ; I was at the root
Of all the evil, and I blame myself
Both night and day ; altho' on meeting me,
" That God may bless you, sir, for this," she said,
" I pray each night ! " and could I but rejoice
To think that up to heav'n from such sweet lips
Floated my name ?

Our worthy clergyman
Went now and then in state, with all forewarn'd,
To mark the children's progress at their tasks—
Inspect their copy-books, and thro' his glass
Look wisely at their slates, and then a hymn
Was sung, and with some pompous words of praise
To some, or else to others of rebuke
(Most keenly felt, and held to cast a slur
Upon the after-life) he used to pass
Out thro' the rows of singing school-children,
Whose fresh young voices he could hear at home
During his mid-day meal—the Rectory
Being so near at hand, tho' screen'd by trees.

He was a parson of the port-wine school—
Kind-hearted, but good pay and little work
Had always been his motto. With him dwelt
The ladies of his family—his wife,
A handsome, sleepy woman, over-fed,
But kindly, and his daughters Anne and Fanny.
Anne was a meek, good, serviceable girl,
Willing and fearing God, and full of faith,
Not caring for the “plaiting of the hair”
Or fine apparel. (She is now my wife.)
But spruce Miss Fanny, with her wicked eyes,
And hour-glass form, dress’d in the newest fashion,
The butterfly of nearly twenty springs,
Had all that gay inconstancy of mood
Which goes with cherry cheeks and yellow hair.
Never was maid in less congenial sphere
Than Fanny at the Rectory : like me,
She had not her vocation with the poor.
Squalor and poverty, disease and death,
Were hateful to her ; whilst the halt, the lame,
The blind—in fine, all the unfortunate,
She class’d with wasps and fleas and noisome things
Sent to torment mankind, the use of which
The sceptic questions. This I said one day,

And straightway she became offended with me
And pouted fiercely, taking it to mean
That I, the Curate, would have none of her,
Wanting a wife less worldly ; for 'twas then
That foolish gossips link'd our names together,
And tho' poor Fanny could not give a heart
From breast as empty as the upper globe
Of that same hour-glass she resembled so,
Still, being vain, she loved the admiration
Of even the earth-worm underneath her heel,
And took amiss that I should, as she thought,
Say openly, " I will have none of you,"
For no prey was too mean for Fanny's net,
No mark too humble for the random darts
She shot at hazard o'er the country-side.

(Mark you, I have not named a single name
In this poor simple tale, and of my wife
Have only said that she was christen'd " Anne "—
A common name, and homely, like herself—
So I can say my say from out my heart,
Nor write as tho' my arm were in a sling.)

I like to think that in these early days

Poor little Nelly loved me ; as a child
Loves one who strives to mitigate its task
Or slur its punishment. Perchance in her
I guess'd a spirit kindred to my own—
A lover of the lovely things of earth,
Which I too loved, and so a sympathy
Sprang up between this little child and me
In these her baby days. So quick her wit
To seize and fathom some things that we taught,
A word, a movement of the hand sufficed
To make her know and love the firmament,
With all its constellations and lone stars,
And then the world she had not known was round
Till yesterday—how quickly did her sense
Travel across the map from Pole to Pole !

One day our Rector coming to the school
Absent, and in an after-dinner mood,
Took Nelly unawares, out of her turn,
Attracted doubtless by her lovely face,
And bearing in his mind some late complaints
About her slowness at arithmetic.
So, calling to her with sonorous voice,
He took her slate, first smoothing down her hair—

Being a man who, tho' in most things dense,
Could read the lines of beauty. Blushing red,
Poor Nelly gave her uncongenial task
Into his hands, with such a piteous look
I guess'd she fear'd rebuke, or even worse—
When lo! sketch'd cleverly in master-strokes,
The Rector's portrait, with his portly form,
His rough white hair and spectacles on nose,
Stood boldly out beneath a blund'ring row
Of smudgy figures. Then in abject fear
The culprit burst into a flood of tears.
The school-mistress, who scarce could read herself
(Since then the times are changed), here rush'd at her,
And thinking to propitiate the powers
By giving thus the reins to righteous wrath,
Shook her and cuff'd her soundly more than once.
But here our good old Rector interposed,
Held up his hand to stay her, and the while
Murmur'd half to himself, "'Tis very like!
'Tis very like!"

“This child has wondrous power,”
Said I, advancing, “thus to seize at will
The semblance of the countenance that strikes
Her youthful fancy; such and such a one

Were but unlike because they did not speak—
She draws with strange facility ;” and here
I held the slate to Fanny and to Anne ;
Both were delighted. Fanny quickly said,
“ This little girl shall learn to draw with me ! ”—
A happy thought, since might she not in time
Gain such perfection in the limner’s art
As might enable her to earn her bread
Less hardly than in labour coarse and vile
Amongst her rude relations ? She possess’d
Such love of art and beauty, and, alas !
Small aptitude, her jealous mentors said,
For useful knowledge. All the “ work-a-day ”
And harsh necessities of peasant life
Had well-nigh kill’d, I deem’d, a child so frail,
So fashion’d, as I thought, for better things.
So these few careless scratches on a slate
Changed little Nelly’s future ; mighty things
O’ercome of small beginnings, yet t’was strange,
Those few white lines upon a dirty slate !

At first she seem’d no better than a toy
To Fanny, list’ning only whilst she learnt
Her music or her painting ; next she join’d

In these her studies, equall'd, then surpass'd
Her fellow-pupil, tho' so young a child.
Next, as her cottage stood some miles away,
'Twas purposed she should stay for good and all
There at the Rectory, and make believe
To sew and wait on Fanny, and for this
Receive some small reward. So thus it fell
That Nelly stay'd with them, and grew each year
More lovely, and less like a peasant child,
And Fanny, who took sudden loves and hates,
Like a spoilt beauty, who is chiefly spoilt
By her own self-indulgence, made of her
Companion, sister, daughter, and white slave—
Nelly could play and sing, and draw, and sew
White linen into holes, as women will,
And it was Nelly this, and Nelly that—
All spoiling her and making much of her.
She used to read the Rector's wife to sleep,
And copy out the sermons that he droned
On Sundays, so that we might deem them his ;
Then fetch'd and carried for Fanny, who, I fear,
Confided to her all about her loves
(Which Anne was far too wise to listen to),
And lent her tales of folly and romance.

Then as she grew to budding womanhood,
She slid out of her common cotton gowns
Into those planned by Fanny, who would try
Experiments on one who look'd alike
Lovely in all ; or she would make her wear
The dresses she had wish'd to cast aside,
Deeming them ugly, but on seeing them
On Nelly's graceful form, would take them back
And wear them out herself. Thus made and marr'd,
Spoilt and improved, did Nelly seem to grow
A perfect lady, even more refined
Than pert Miss Fanny, with a softer voice
And gentler ways, and wearing on her brow
A pale, predestin'd look that touch'd the heart.

Nelly saw little of her parents now
(Her stepmother and father), when she went
Taking her earnings and a lap of toys
For Polly, Kate, and Rachel, and the twins ;
And those, the younger twins, and all the boys
(Eleven in all), they only jeer'd at her,
Urged by their jealous mother ; all the twins
Thrust out their tongues, whilst Kate and Polly vied
In mockery, till finally in tears

She left the cottage. "Where is father?" she ask'd.
"He's out," they said, "a-trapping Parson's hares,
And when he's took and shaved, and lodged in jail,
Thou'lt hold thy head less high, thou saucy minx!"

Nelly thinks 'twas the germs of sickness made
Them taunt her thus, for next we heard a fever
Had struck them one and all—Polly and Kate
And Rachel and the twins (the elder twins
Escaped by miracle, and all the boys);
But Polly died, and Rachel only rallied
After the parish people sent her shell,
Which did for Jessie (of the younger twins).
Then Nelly's father caught it, but his strength
And iron courage made him conquer it;
Tho' afterwards he never was the man
He once had been. Nelly had long'd to go
And nurse and tend them, but Miss Fanny shriek'd,
Saying it would be base ingratitude
To bring the fever to the Rectory,
Which needs must happen if she went to them;
Whilst I, who in the course of parish work
Went thither often, was not suffer'd now
To cross the threshold. Nelly sent by me

Kind messages and money, and despite
Miss Fanny's protestations, would have gone,
But hardly had she time to think of it
Before the scourge had pass'd away again.

The Rector spoke to Nell to comfort her,
Patted her head and chid her for her grief,
Saying that in this fever he could see
A hidden blessing ; but that she should know
The Lord mov'd in a most mysterious way,
Not making manifest to all His servants
His secret purpose ; but *he* saw it now
Plain as the day. The cottage was too small,
Her father's family was far too large
(Eleven in all), and so the Lord had will'd
Polly and Jessie should be laid asleep
In Christ, and hence the fever : he could see
And grasp it all !

After a quarantine
Seeming to me to be unduly long,
I went once more to see the Rector's girls,
And with them Nelly, in her mourning dress,
Wearing an angel's face. Fanny and I
Were friends again, forgetful of the past ;

For on the far horizon of her life
Appear'd a star of hope. The years had fled,
And Nelly now was nearly seventeen,
And bright Miss Fanny was Miss Fanny still,
When flash'd this luminary on her path.
And never shipwreck'd mariner who watch'd
On desert isle forsaken, hail'd a sail
With greater joy, or with a heart that beat
Much more tumultuously than Fanny's heart,
As, calling all her graces to allure
Like island bonfires, and with ev'ry flag
Floating mast-high, delightedly she hail'd
This lover who had come at last to woo.

I would that I had never seen his face
Or heard his name, and that his regiment
Had fix'd on any spot upon the earth
So that it had not been our nearest town
A short ride hence. "To give the devil his
due,"

He was a handsome captain of dragoons,
Steel-eyed, and standing nearly six feet two ;
And what was more, he was the second son
Of a great county lord, which women like,

And so I fear they seldom said him nay—
And this I saw was written on his brow.

I often talk'd to Nelly whilst he sat
Ogling Miss Fanny in the summer-house,
Stooping from time to time his length of limb
To pick her ball of worsted from the ground.
Sometimes he glistened in the panoply
Of war ; his charger all caparisoned
Would clatter up the little avenue,
Making the windows ring, and fill with caps
Of fluttering maid-servants. I could not help
Contrasting my meek advent with what seem'd
A bright triumphal entry, and I said
Slily to Nelly, " When *I* come to tea
No one looks out, and thrice I ring the bell,
Yet no one comes ; whilst now each servant strives
To cast the other's efforts in the shade."
She sigh'd, look'd down, and innocently said,
" You see he is so handsome," and then blushed ;
And from that day I felt I hated him.

So weeks went by, and spring was here again—
The time of pairing birds—and Fanny still

Was still Miss Fanny, and the tall dragoon
Still at the Rectory. I tired of him,
And long'd, I knew not why, to say some word
Provocative to combat; for no cause
My sight was wearied of his length of limb,
His eyes that look'd at women with a look
That seem'd to mean possession, and his face
"So very handsome," as poor Nelly said.
And hence I grew morose and quarrelsome,
And let fall bitter sarcasms in my talk,
Whereat he fix'd me with his steely glance,
And feeling that I could not trust myself
To meet him save in so distorted mood,
I fled his presence, and I forthwith plunged
Into my parish work, or sought the woods,
And there would sit and con old classic lore,
Or try to solve from pious Christian page
Life's strange enigmas.

Thus it chanced one day,
I linger'd 'neath the fan-like chestnut leaves,
And where the tremulous laburnum shower'd
Its wealth of unappreciated gold
Low at my feet; like to the amorous god
Who pleaded erst to prison'd Danaë,

Raining his golden kisses on her breast,
So did the yellow kisses of the flower
Light on my heart and make it warm with spring.
O god of bygone ages! well I know
Thine altars all deserted, and the fires
That warm'd them and thine heart incontinent
Died out, and yet, O sire of Perseus!
As on my breast these faint warm yellow flakes
Descended, in this prosy modern time,
Some knowledge of the pastime of thy lips
Breath'd to my soul the kisses of the flower;
Then to my heart dreams of immortal love,
Of sweet ambrosial kisses from sweet lips,
Seem'd wafted on the fragrant air of spring,
Bidding me hope, and make my evening dream
Of love, and of the multifarious forms
That lovers oft have taken to assure
Their heart's desire. I counted o'er and o'er
The loves of bygone ages, and from each
Cull'd some example or some augury
For my poor love—my love as yet unguess'd!

I knew not why into these waking dreams
Slid little Nelly's image "spic and span,"

Dress'd in Miss Fanny's faded left-off gowns,
Which look'd so much the better for their wear—
And then I found myself, I knew not why,
Regretting Nelly's humble parentage,
And then excusing it—and then (O shame!
We men are too ignoble!) catching at straws
Of vague, imagin'ry gentility—
Why Nelly's father had that noble look
Which none disputed,—such a classic line
Of brow and beard; of stories got afloat
Of Nelly's mother, how she wrote and read
English and French and German, and had been
“A better sort of person,” none denied.
These nibbling worms of caste, I fancied I
Of all men most despised, seem'd rising now
Like dragons, one by one to be impaled
By me, a poor inglorious Saint George
In rusty cassock! Thus the daylight dimm'd
Into a deep'ning twilight. That one star
That always rises o'er the fir-tree belt
Was there betimes. (I look at it each night;
It seems to me a little watching eye
That knows my past and brings it back to me.)

I was awaken'd from my reverie
By the dull thudding of a horse's hoofs
Treading on meadow grass. I look'd and saw,
Divided from me by a hawthorn hedge
Snow'd o'er with bloom, the Captain and a form
I took for Fanny's. Angrily I thought
"This man seems doom'd to haunt me ev'rywhere!"
And rose to go. He held his bridle-rein
Loosely about his arm, and came on foot,
Leading his horse along the grassy lane
That cut the copse in two. They came towards me,
I being too far off to hear their words,
Yet feeling all the guilt of eaves-dropping,
Since opposite my only exit thence
They stopp'd, as seemingly to say farewell.

It was a leafy hollow in the lane
Leading up to the darkness of the wood—
I could not see the head that on his breast
Was leaning lovingly, the hawthorn hedge
Rising just high enough to make a screen
Up to the captain's shoulder, but I knew
Her head was there, seeing his tender glance
Down-droop'd to what he often bent to kiss.

Then I felt angry, tho' I scarce knew why,
That he should make so free with women's lips—
I thought, "It is the myth of Danaë
Over again ; the glitter of the gold
Is what o'ercomes them, even when, as now,
'Tis only on his coat !" then bitterly
I turn'd to go, first having seen afar
The flitting of a speeding female form
Athwart the boughs, clad in a flutt'ring dress
Of white, and hast'ning with a quicker step
Than Fanny's usual lazy measured walk.

I met her as I near'd the Rectory,
Seemingly coming from another way,
And said to her with a malicious smile,
"Those who keep trysts should never dress in white."
She open'd her blue eyes as wondering,
And as I still was standing bant'ring her,
Nelly pass'd thro' the garden, dress'd in white,
Bound round the waist with black, and half her face
Hid in a bunch of newly gather'd flow'rs.

“ Dansez, chantez, villageois, la nuit tombe.
Sabine un jour
A tout donné, sa beauté de colombe
Et son amour,
Pour l’anneau d’or du Comte de Saldagne,
Pour un bijou”

VICTOR HUGO (*Le Fou de Tolède*).

II.

NEXT morning Joseph, my one serving man,
Brought me a letter which I laid aside,
Ne'er guessing what was in it ; then he stood
As loth to leave me, looking big with news,
And seeming vex'd that I had put aside
The letter he had brought me. “ Speak,” said I,
“ And tell me, is there anything amiss ? ”

Then, twisting round his hat, he blurted out,
“ There's pretty doings at the Rectory !
Parson's girl, Nell, that was brought up so fine,

Has gone off in the night to Gretna Green
With poor Miss Fanny's captain !”

Had I heard

His words aright, or did I rave or dream?
I stagger'd to my desk, whereon was lain
The letter, partly that my twitching hands
Might clutch at something ; ah ! it was from her !

A long, long letter ! Was it cruel or kind
To let me know that she had thought of me
Whilst waiting for her lover ? Was it kind
Or cruel, thus to dwell upon her love
Knowing (she *must* have known—all women know !)
My secret, turn'd to gall and wormwood now ?
She “loved him all along,” the letter said,—
It was a *woman's letter*—to explain ;
Beginning from the time when first she saw
This man whom I had “hated all along”
As she had lov'd him. And this love of him
Seeming her one excuse, she dwelt on it
To make me feel it. When he came at first
She deem'd it was for Fanny. Never bliss
So great as hers, or such a sweet surprise
As when she learnt the truth—not long ago.

She pray'd that she might tell it to Miss Fanny,
Fearing she might have fix'd her heart on him ;
But he had bound her o'er to secrecy,
Saying (and here he might have spoken truth)
That Fanny had not got a heart to fix,
And that her vanity had ne'er allow'd
That he should come so often to the house
Save as her own admirer, tho' he swore
He had not breathed to her one word of love.

Thus Nelly dared not speak, but begg'd the time
Of this enforced deception might be short.
She also ask'd to tell me of her love ;
But this he too forbade her. So the days
Pass'd on, and now she soon should be his wife—
The happiest of women,—might she hope
I would forgive her ? Was it such a crime
To love so loyally one's only love,
That one would follow him to do his will
Out into life, and in the dead of night
Thus leave the roof that long had seem'd a home ?
Nay, women had done bolder things than this ;
She long'd to do far more—to die for him.
But then, alas ! it is not often given

To die for those we love ! . . . So ran her words.
Alas, poor child ! and only seventeen,
And all my doing ! Had she stay'd at home
And lived in squalor and in poverty
In the old cottage with the rotting thatch,
I wonder would this gallant gentleman
Have sought her out, and at the midnight hour
Borne her away upon his saddle-bow ?
“ If you ” (the letter said towards the end)
“ Think me ungrateful, it would break my heart
If I were not too happy. Think me still
Your little Nelly.”

Having written this,
I think she must have heard her lover's signal,
For there were one or two unfinished lines,
As though she would have written something more
Had not time press'd ; and then at one o'clock
(As near as could be), softly and by stealth
She fled into the fragrant summer night,
Leaving the roof that now had sheltered her
For more than seven years.

I scarce had read
These lines that changed my life, when down the walk
I saw Miss Fanny and the Rector's wife

Coming to tell me of the night's mischance.
They did me good, since calming Fanny forced
Me into calm myself. She storm'd and raved
And wept and laugh'd most wildly, whilst the
words

“ Hypocrite ! ” “ Viper ! ” “ Base adventuress ! ”

“ Snake in the grass ! ” and many even worse

Went flying from her lips. Her mother sat
Placid, but sad, tho' now and then she sigh'd

And spoke of “ disappointment,” and her fears

That Nelly and her father, and his wife

And all the children, were “ a wicked lot ; ”

Adding to Fanny, that one could not make,

As hath been often said, a silken purse

Out of a sow's ear. Thus they sat and said

Their sev'ral says ; then Fanny feeling faint,

After her vehemence, I press'd on her

A glass of wine, and handed her her hat,

Which in her rage she flung upon the floor.

Joseph, my serving-man, who fetch'd the wine,

Here said that he had “ thought it all the time,”

But that he would have “ bitten out his tongue ”

Rather than speak of it to any one ;

And then they left me to the saddest thoughts

That ever man awaken'd to a truth
May battle with in silence and alone.

Fanny took for a fortnight to her bed
After her frenzy in my little room,
Then left it, leaving in it all her grief,
As it would seem, she look'd so bright again.
Maybe she felt consoled at having heard
The wife of her deceiver's elder brother
Had borne a son, so had she married him
She ne'er could hope to queen it at "the Keep"—
And thus she came to talk quite pleasantly
Of what had been a sorrow, only now
I had nor time nor nerve to listen to her,
Neck-deep in books and in my village poor
(Thus did I strive to kill the thoughts that came
Surging upon me in my idle hours).
But one day going to the Rectory
To civilise myself, she said to me
Quite cheerfully, she had not deem'd he loved
Poor little Nelly, till on seeing me
Conversing with her, he had ground his teeth,
And, speaking of me shortly afterwards,
Had said, "That cursèd curate," and from this

She said, she since had thought that at his heart
He felt "the green-eyed monster jealousy."

Fanny was spiteful underneath her smiles
As cat's claws under velvet ; as for me,
"Be spiteful as you will, my pretty maid,"
I thought, too sad for anger, whilst to him
I long'd to say, "Oh, call me, if you will,
'That cursèd curate' ; mock and jeer at me,
But spare our village queen, our pretty Nell !"

It was as tho' the fault of Nelly brought
Ill luck at once to all the "wicked lot,"
For some days afterwards her father stole
Some pheasants' eggs, and being seen and caught,
He closed upon the keeper, threw him down
With an old wrestling trick that was his pride,
And broke his arm. But for this violence
I think he had been treated leniently,
For knowing he could no more keep from game
Than can a fish from water, knowing too
His growing family and slender means,
Our squires would not begrudge him now and then
A passing hare or rabbit : as it was,

'Twas a bad case, they said—one to be made
Into a stern example ; so he pass'd
A year of labour in the county gaol.
When he came out he seem'd a broken man,
Hanging his head, and feeling his disgrace—
Oddly enough, since nearly all his life
This was the fate he had not fear'd to risk
With bold indiff'rence. Some said Nelly's flight
Had touch'd him more than he had cared to own,
And then the drink after his prison fare
Made double havoc with his wasted frame,
And lastly I was told " he'd had a stroke,"
And going to him, found him shrunk and pale
And rambling in his talk. Beside the fire
He sat all day, nor cared to see the sun
Or breathe the outer air ; the doctor said,
Shaking his head, " He will not poach again,"
But thought that he might linger on for years.

Thus did the sunshine seem to fade away
Out of our village, or it may have been
That so it seem'd to me. The Rector, too,
I think, miss'd little Nell about the house,
And felt her loss more than his women-folk—

Having a lighter step and softer hand
To do his bidding than the other girls.

And so the years dragg'd on, to those who work'd
Seeming less long, but not less wearisome,
And sad to me as sight of coffin'd face,
Wearing that darken'd look which says the soul
Has glided to the light of better days.

“ O bitterness of things too sweet !
O broken singing of the dove !
Love’s wings are over-fleet,
And like the panther’s feet
The feet of Love.”

SWINBURNE.

III.

“ I F it be true, O Lord ! that whom thou lov’st
Thou chastenest, then hast Thou lovèd me,
And I have lived to thank Thee for it, Lord !

“ Nelly was here to-day : she is a beggar,
And carries in her arms a little child,
Like that same gipsy who, ten years ago,
Said foolishly that she should die a queen.”

These were the words I wrote long years ago
When Nelly came a beggar to my door ;
’Twas late in an autumn evening, and the wind

Whisper'd sad mem'ries to me as I mused
Under the cedar-tree amongst my books.
I suddenly look'd up, thinking some leaf
Seem'd rustling to me almost humanly,
And there she stood before me, close at hand,
I think I see her now—my pretty Nell !

Then all the hungry craving of my heart
Seem'd to take shape and voice, and cry aloud,
And seeing her thus brought so low by shame
And poverty, who once had been so pure
And beautiful, and held her head so high—
Not scorning her for this, or asking whether
'Twere best to scorn her, holding forth my arms—
I took her by her wan, white lady's hand
And led her o'er the threshold of my door.

There I grew weak as woman at sight of her
So changed, yet almost glad, she seem'd more near,
Coming to me for shelter. (May God forgive me !)
I know not if grief makes more beautiful
All women, having met with few who grieved,
But never did the whiteness of a face
Thrill thro' me as did hers, all wan with sorrow

And dim with unshed tears : so holding her hand,
“ Stay with me, Nelly,” I said, “ and be my wife—
I care for none but you. Bury your past,
And let us live together all our lives
Far, far away from here ! ”

And then the Church,
My own advancement, and the world’s rebuke
Seem’d lesser things than little dancing gnats
That buzz towards an open window-pane
And vanish out of sight : but drawing back,
“ I’m married,” she said, and put aside my hands.

And so I do believe she deemed she was.
As firmly as yon pointed modern spire
Was grafted on to this old Norman church
By some restorer and loosed Bedlamite,
As firmly did poor Nelly think herself
Grafted upon that ancient Norman tree,
So rotten at the core !

Nelly had walk’d,
Bearing the burden of her ailing child,
Along the weary length of turnpike road
Between our village and the nearest town,
Where she had come from London.

When she near'd
The whitewash'd cottage with the rotting thatch
(Her former home), a thousand memories
Crowded upon her. Would they all be well
And glad to see her? Were the girls at home,
And had the boys found work? But first of all,
How was her father? With a trembling step
She hasten'd up the little garden walk,
And, not to take them too much unawares,
Tapp'd at the door—her old accustom'd knock
When home-returning at the evening hour
After the slipping of the inner bolt.
Her stepmother, not alter'd from the shrew
And slattern she had been, unlatch'd the door,
Then, seeing who it was, she closed it, half,
Standing herself outside, and eyeing her
From head to foot, and, pointing to the child,
With scorn reviled her, hurling at her words
Of shame and execration. Nelly stood
And listened to her curses silently,
Bowing her head until the storm was o'er,
And never "snatching at the falling knife"
Till she had said her say, then pleadingly
She ask'd for bread and shelter for the night.

But her harsh stepmother bade her begone,
And calling Wolf she would have set him at her
As at the gipsy, but the poor old dog
Knew her again, and crawling up to her
Whined at her feet. She peep'd inside the door,
And saw her two half-sisters, women grown,
Black-brow'd and comely; Kate, the elder one,
Sat crouching with a baby at her breast.
Then, looking towards the settle by the fire,
She saw her father in his Sunday smock,
Shrunk down into man of smaller size,
And staring at her blankly, underneath
The patch-work frill upon the chimney-piece
Work'd by her hands. She stretch'd her arms to him
And call'd out, "Father!" but he seem'd so deaf,
And look'd so strange, she drew away afraid,
And cov'ring with her hands her tearful eyes,
She turn'd, and passing the brown hollyhock
And shabby bee-hives, push'd the wicket-gate
And stagger'd to the road. The poor old dog,
Just too late, parted from her by the gate,
Stood straining over, crying out to her,
And saying to her, almost plain as words,
"Come back and stay with me, your true old friend!"

Nelly knew then that broken-heartedness
Is not an idle word, for at her heart
She felt a sharp, keen pain (some years ago
Our doctor told me that her heart was "wrong,"
Which made her face look always lily pale).
She walk'd along the road as in a dream,
First, going up towards the garden-gate,
She took old Wolf's rough head between her hands,
And kiss'd his ugly face and said good-bye,
Whilst from her own the warm tears fell on his,
(Too happy dog!) and so she came to me,
Walking as in her sleep, or in a dream.

What seem'd the hardest thing of all to bear
Was that *my* Nelly, taught and form'd by me
Into so sweet a thing to gaze upon,
Should love this man I hated, love him still
Despite great injury and heart-burning,
And then, (tho' she would never think it so,)
A sheer desertion. Wait a little while,
And then her marriage story shall be told.
Was it a marriage? True, she wore a ring
(In which she would be buried when she died,
She used to say, and I should bury her—

Oh, sorry consolation ! but life is made
Of parti-colour like a harlequin),
And round her neck she wore a chain of gold.
(Starving, she clung to this as pilgrims cling
To tooth of saint or fragment of the cross,
In this I was to bury her as well);
And on to this a little golden heart
(It was *his* heart, he said who gave it her),
Cleft into three divisions—in the first
The portrait of my Nelly when a girl,
(Touch'd up by her with subtle little strokes
Spoiling the likeness, but which made, she thought,
The whole more beautiful), and in the midst
An empty space, left for that callow head
That used to nestle now so near her breast
I dared not see it, wishing not to see
The likeness to its father. In the last
There was the hated semblance of a face
I had not loathed the more had it been foul
As it was comely.

But was this a marriage ?

Did these, the sentimental gauds he gave
To deck his victim, prove that he was aught
Save the seducer of her innocence ?

And, having left what 'twas his will to take
And then his will to leave, would he return?
I dare not guess—but know what wise men say
When she whose lover cannot raise the plea,
Of jealous doubt or sting of jarring word,
Is left deserted! Strange if, after all
Those tears which cannot touch a glutton heart,
He sighs again for scent of gather'd flowers,
Or fruit that fell ungather'd in his hand!

Her dream was over, but in vain I said,
“O Nelly! do not nurse an empty shadow—
Look at the truth, stand face to face with it
And conquer it, and cast the past away—
It is not worth your keeping, let it go!
Why should we cling to carrion and dead fruit?
Your past is gone as surely as *his* sail
Has faded o'er the utmost edge of sea—
And what was he you lov'd? What made you love?
Was it for worth, for service of long years,
For watching o'er your tender babyhood?
For worshipping the ground whereon you trod
Being grown to woman? Say, was it for this?
Nay! it was for the glitter of a name!

A foppish face, perchance a uniform !
What was he ? Answer me ?” But here my theme
O’ercame my reason, and against my lips
I felt poor Nelly’s hand, who murmur’d “ hush ! ”
And read a strange defiance in her eyes.
“ You will drive me from this place,” she said at
last,
“ What with your hate of him and love of me ;
I am his wife—unworthy of the name,
But still his wife. He will come back again,
Then all will be as clear to you as day.
For me, I trust him still.”

With this, one day,
We parted in the shady orchard-walk
Where I had met her. Yes, I drove her hence—
No doubt of it. Thus did I always seem
The Nemesis to hurry on my love
To meet her doom ! O Lord ! to fix on me
To work Thy will of trying her in the fire
Seem’d once most hard to bear ; tho’ now I say,
Bowing my head, ‘ O Lord ! Thy will be done.’

They brought a letter from her late next day,
A few sad hurried lines—“ Good-bye,” she said ;

“Thank you—God bless you!” (these are women’s words,

Meaning so little, or else ev’rything !)

And then she added almost word for word

That she had said at parting yesterday :

“What with your hate of him and love of me,
You drive me hence.”

Thus was she driv’n away

Into that noisy, restless, varied world,

London, the city of the Janus mask ;

The bright, the gay, the beautiful, the blest—

Which side the mask is painted with a smile ;

The fetid, fever’d, leprous, and unclean—

Upon this side we hardly dare to look,—

The side whereon the corners of the mouth

Are painted drooping downwards.

So ’twas I

Drove Nelly to that fest’ring centre of sin,

“What with my hate of him and love of her.”

Well, I *did* hate him truly ! What avails

False cant, and honey’d accents, and an eye

Down-droop’d and meek, whilst the impatient hand

Is toying with the blade that thirsts for blood?

I hated him ; I found I still could hate ;

My buried, morbid, blank ascetic life
Had not so far unsex'd me, that the thought
Of him who thus had robb'd me of my love
And flaunted her poor heart upon his sleeve,
And ta'en his will of her and thrown her by,
(Leaving his brand upon her as his own
He did not care to keep,) should stay my hate !
Ah yes, I hated him ! Then, as for love,
Thank God I loved her too ! Whatever sting
Of bitter pain such love made new to me,
It *humanised me*, driving out myself.
Indeed, I deem'd these passions, in a man
Not six-and-thirty, shamed his manhood less
Than that chill'd pulseless apathy of blood
Which says, " I do not love—I do not hate,"
And almost seems to say, " I do not live !"
But then I fear I was a sinner still—
Choosing the Church less as a means of grace
Than for a worldly end, and at this time
The " old man " strong within me.

I had found
A quiet home, I thought, for her I lov'd,
With an old widow'd dame who liv'd alone,
Save for a little grandchild, and who found

Her summer evenings lonesome when the boy
 Was laid asleep. And tho' for but three nights
 The women sat together at their work,
 Doing their sewing by the feeble light
 Of one poor candle, yet the elder one
 Already lov'd my poor deserted Nell,
 And miss'd her when her three-days' stay was o'er.
 "I had heard ill of her," the old dame said.
 "But then these here are a begrudging lot—
 Begrudging her her comfortable keep
 At Parson's. I 'most think that had she been
 One of my own dead children (they were all
 'Declinable,' and died at just her age),
 I could not miss her more!"

Alas! and I—

How have I missed her all these weary years!—
 Ah, she is gone! and so entirely gone!
 Bear with me if I paint her as she seem'd
 To one who knew her in the ardent prime
 Of an impassion'd manhood, fed with hope
 That flicker'd ere it died, as if to show
 How bright it would have beam'd, had Heaven will'd
 That it had lit him to the end of all,
 And shone like sacred taper o'er his bier!

Ah, I am foolish ! When I write as now
Of these, the years of unrequited love,
Despite my silv'ring hair, once more I deem
My little Nell is saying now, as then,
“ It cannot be ! you must not ! when you know
That I am married ! ”

She, so kind at heart,
Said this when other women would have said
(Perchance I know not, never having lov'd,
May Heaven help me ! any one save her)—
When other women would perchance have said,
“ You are not to my liking ; ” or, maybe,
“ You are too pale of cheek and sad of brow ; ”
Or else, “ You are too nameless and too poor.”
When other women would have spoken thus,
Nelly said only in a solemn tone,
These hated words, “ I'm married ! ” which to me
Seem'd more offence than any other slight
Her gentle lips could utter.

Was she wed
By Border blacksmith, or by sly hedge-priest
Hired for the purpose ? I shall never know—
But Nelly always thought a lawful tie
Had bound her to her lover until death—

She would not speak of it, and hurried o'er
The story of her early married days ;
They were "too happy," she said, "to speak about.
That was a sacred time, too good to last."
From what she said I know they dwelt together,
He making for his love a little home,
Hidden away. He was not always there,
But nearly always : only long enough
He stay'd away to let his parents guess
No shadow of the truth, since had they known
How he had wedded, all the Norman blood
Had curdled into hatred in the veins
Of his illustrious father, and a mother
Most fondly lov'd had known a broken heart,
Whilst he himself must needs go penniless.
Also, his father wish'd that he should wed
An heiress he had pointed out to her
Once when they were together, and she pass'd
Lolling in cushion'd carriage : Nelly thought
Her beautiful, but knew no jealous pang,
Being so full of trust. He therefore pray'd
That she, to prove her love, would but submit
To this concealment whilst his father liv'd,
Who was well strick'n in years—once he was dead,

He could deal with his brother easily,
And make all known. So, Nelly, being young,
Liv'd in the glamour of her growing love,
Which still wax'd greater, whilst his slowly waned
After the first two years. Another pass'd,
And Nelly still would never think him chang'd.
She long'd and watch'd and pray'd for his return,
When he was absent ; but she felt so blest,
Bearing his name, and being his own wife,
She liv'd on this when she was left alone,
And made a sunshine of it for the days.

Which is the " old, old story ? " Is it love,
Or lack of love, or love that's giv'n in vain ?
These three old stories are so very old,
I know not which would wear the whitest locks,
Were they transform'd by magic into shapes
Of tott'ring greybeards ! Lean on crutch and staff,
Ye three old men who are so very old !
Ye pantaloons who act on ev'ry stage !
But lean most heavily, thōu poor old man,
Whose name is " Love-that-has-been-giv'n--in-vain ! "
(A name which smacks of Puritanic times,
Did only " love " imply the love of Heav'n,

And calls to mind some stalwart soldier-saint,
Buff-coated and cuirass'd, of sober mien,
When Cromwell's untann'd leather stamp'd the sham
And tarnish'd tinsel from a rotten age
Of incense, imposts, frippery, and paint !—)

Nay, why repeat them ? in a simple tale
Of village life—prosaic, dull, obscure—
The love of one who, born 'neath rotting thatch,
Lov'd one who wore a gaudy uniform
And pranced on charger. Then her lack of love
For one who read on Sunday at a desk,
And christen'd, married, buried, all the week
(He being paid for this), a humble man,
Yet, worm-like, as he wriggled on the path
Trode on by those who often trode on him
(Being above him), so he once (*but* once !)
Had sigh'd to think his love so lowly born,
The love to whom he gave his love in vain !
Ah, flies and insects ! whilst the “high great gods”
Spread out your wings and pin you to a cork,
Deem you they count the feathers of your crest,
Or the imperial purple of your spots,
Or that the breath of ev'ry pigmy throe

Disturbs one small iota in the plan
Of this great universal harmony ?
Where what to us seems discord now, is naught
Save the vibration, indistinctly heard,
Of an unknown but perfect melody
Wafted from some far shore. And thus it is
That, writing now in life's autumnal shade,
And standing, as it were, upon a height,
I see those forms and feelings which of yore
Expanded 'neath the warmth of summer-sun,
Seeming far distant, dwindled to the size
Of dwarfs and marionettes,—all, all so small,
They scarce are worth the paper and the ink
With which I write of them.

So Nell was left
By him she lov'd, after three happy years,
“ Too good to last.” He sent her first a letter,
Which, reading thro' and thro' and o'er and o'er,
Seem'd meaningless as when she read it once—
For, fearing suddenly to break the truth
To one who lov'd him so, he fenced with it
(From what I gather'd), beat about the bush,
And temporised ; so that to her it held
No sadder news than this (ah, sad enough !),

That, as his regiment was bound abroad,
He needs must leave her soon, perhaps for long.
And then he said he had been rash to woo,
And rasher still to wed ere he was fix'd
In life and means ; and that he sometimes fear'd
Their marriage might not count for much in law,
Being perform'd according to the rites
Of Scotland, and they being English both—
But even were it so (he added here),
Perhaps 'twere better ! It would leave her free
To wed a worthier ! . .

(This made her heart
Throb with a sudden bound, for then she knew
She soon should be a mother, and till then
She had not felt the shadow of a doubt
About her marriage ; but she calmed herself,
Thinking perchance his grief at leaving her
Had fill'd his mind with apprehensive fears,
Which on the eve of this sad separation
Made him see all his future draped in black.)
It ended with a blessing, and the hope
That she would think of one who tho' afar
Would bear her image ever in his thoughts,
And often dream about those happy days,

Alas! so quickly over. . . . This from her
I gather'd was the purport of his words—
And then he must have left her “then and there,”
First having told a lawyer how he stood
Involv'd with one who deem'd herself his wife,
Soon to become the mother of his child.

Sometimes I think had Jessie been a boy
(So was poor Nelly's little daughter named,
Call'd after Jessie of the younger twins),
Her lover might have been her husband still—
(Since, tho' his elder brother had an heir,
It was a puny, ill-condition'd child,
And he himself was then in failing health,
Hence Nelly's son had not been left, maybe,
To such a doubtful fate as Jessie's was.)
Nelly was all alone in this, her trial,
He having sailed before he said good-bye—
“For if you break with her,” those wise men said
(Adepts at breaking promises and hearts,
Whom he, it seems, consulted), “it were best
You should not see her.”

Yet I would be just,
So I will say 'twas from no fault of his

That Nelly came to poverty and want,
For he had sent the lawyer, in whose hands
He left a goodly sum, to treat with her.
He chose, to do his bidding, one who strove
To be a man of pleasure like himself,—
A man whom nothing scandall'd, and who knew
(Or so he said) the ways of womankind.
This man had call'd her by her maiden name,
Taking with her the manner men assume
With women who have sunk themselves too low
To claim respect ; he told her of the sum
Appointed for her use and for the child,
Then said the captain's fortunes were involved,
And hence this matter, he had hoped, would be
Treated of privately. She said to me,
Something in this man's manner wounded her,
And seem'd to say, " Take nothing at his hands."
For 'twas as if these offers were his own,
And she henceforth his debtor ; he so well
Aped a sham air of generosity
That all her soul revolted, and the fear
Of poverty and hunger for poor bread
Of ev'ry day, seems not so terrible
To one whose heart is breaking, so she said,

“ If he is poor, I am more used than he
To poverty. This gold that is to spare
Should go to him. I am his lawful wife.
He will come back to me—I trust him still.
If I am *not* his wife, as you believe,
Then would I rather starve than touch his gold.
Take back the money !” Then he took it back,
First having chuck’d her underneath the chin
With sudden movement of his large white hand.
He next had mind to kiss her, but her eyes
Look’d strangely menacing.

“ Good-bye,” he said.

“ It ill becomes *you* to be proud, my dear ;
Such pride must have its fall. Then come to me,
And claim what is your due.” But Nelly said,
“ Never ! If I am ever driv’n to beg,
I’ll beg of others !” Then the lawyer turn’d
And left her to her thoughts.

That noble trust
She had in one who merited it not
Here came to solace her ; the name of debts
And money-troubles, made her think, maybe,
Her husband had been forced thus suddenly
To fly from England, leaving there this man

Executor and friend, too ignorant
Of his assuming nature ; then she thought
His father might have begg'd of him to wed
That wealthy heiress. Press'd on ev'ry side,
He might at last have fled to other climes,
His pretext that his regiment ere long
Took foreign service. So he may have fled,
But not from her, his wife—ah, not from her !

Thus ended Nelly's transient dream of love
And sweet home-life. Her little household gods
Dispersed and sold to meet the needful debts
Of ev'ry day—her home, her home no more,
She found herself a nameless sojourner
Amongst the' buzzing of the city hive,
Yet still alone. Then came upon her soul
The memory of waving summer grass
In cool, sweet meadows near a glancing stream,
And hawthorn hedges tangled o'er with 'bine
And white convolvulus, soft wingèd seed
And coral berries. Midst the hazy heat
Of arid August in the city streets,
She long'd, beside her open attic square
Of narrow casement 'neath the baking tiles,

Once more to breathe the blessèd country air.
Anon a doctor, and a kindly man,
One who was tending on her ailing child,
Gave her the wherewithal to seek at last
Her native village, likewise promising,
Should she return again, to do his best
To find her some employment, and with him
She left the knowledge of her whereabouts—
Who wrote and told the lawyer, for she thought
Her lover might return and seek for her ;
And, therefore, trusting still, she left this clue,
Then sought her country home—from which, alas !
That love I had of her, in ev'ry word
And act made manifest, had driv'n her now !

After she left me all my heart seem'd dead,
Myself a dead man walking on the earth
Through some strange whim of Destiny ;—a shade,
A blot of sadness on the pleasant fields
And mocking sunlight. It was thus I liv'd
A morbid year of almost solitude ;
For, thinking Fanny help'd to Nelly's fall,
And ignorant that Anne thought well of me,
I fled the Rectory as haunted ground,

And wrapp'd myself in books and parish work.
Then, at the end of this most dreary year,
Seeming the length of ten, a letter came
From Nelly, with the story of her life
During the time that was so long to me.

It had been short to her amidst the noise
Of toil and revelry, with crash of wheels,
Seeming to grind our better thoughts to dust.
Had hers, my Nelly's, been dispersed in air,
First being pounded into dust by wheels?
Ah, what possess'd her? what would be her fate?
I trembled as I read her written words
With consternation. "What is Nelly now?"
I thought in anguish, as I read these lines
Her hand had traced—she still so beautiful,
And still so young? What is the simple flower
Of this poor village—she who seem'd to me
A sweet unfolding bud of lily-bloom,
Shunning the burning kisses of the sun
In hidden water-springs or under shade?
A painted butterfly with wings outspread,
Flaunting each spot of beauty in the eyes
Of all beholders! I could wish them blind

For looking at her. Ah, too hapless change !
Dire metamorphose ! As I saw thee first,
Sweet Nelly, so I love to think of thee,
Not as this strange, new-spangled fire-fly thing,
But in thy common little cotton frock,
My pretty Nelly, who wert never mine !
Shedding thine infant tears upon thy slate,
In this our village school !

Be still, my heart !

(An old man's now, and past the nine-days' rage
Of love's fierce fever.) As I saw thee then,
Oh, pure and beautiful ! I think of thee,
Whole-hearted and a child, all ignorant
Of learning, loving, and of being loved,
Thy cherub face by cloud of dusky hair
O'er-shadow'd dreamily, and on thy brow
The seal of no man sealing thee to him.

“ A mere dancing-girl, who shows herself
Nightly, half-naked, on the stage, for money.”

LONGFELLOW (*Spanish Student*).

“ I know my face is bright, she said,—
Such brightness dying suns diffuse :
I bear upon my forehead shéd
The sign of what I lose,
The ending of my day, she said.”

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.

IV.

NELLY was now a dancer on the stage.
No actress she, unused to formal phrase
Or studied blandishment ; nor could she seize
The stormy temper of the tragic muse,
Or shine in comedy, altho' her grace
Had made it easy for her to assume
A part it scarce had matter'd if she marr'd,
Being so very fair. A dancing girl
In gauze and spangles, midst a motley crowd
Of contradictions, such as now delight

The hearts of those who haunt the modern stage,
Sometimes from out a nightmare, part burlesque,
Part sentimental, moral or absurd,
With here a ribald jest, and there a shade
Of somewhat almost like a poet's dream
(Marr'd by his waking into vulgar life
An hour too soon), my hapless Nelly beam'd
A ray of purer light ; her gaudy dress
Seem'd but on her those light prismatic hues
Clothing the lambent sunbeam—none the less
Pure and of heaven-born ; yet as I was
A clergyman, a man to lead the herd
To order and decorum, and on earth
Hoping to be a follower of Christ,
I dared not think of Nelly in these robes
Of Tyrian purple—almost did she seem
The “Scarlet Lady,” or that beauteous form
Sent to torment the chaste St. Anthony—
I shudder'd, overcome with fear and dread
And inward loathing for this outward show
Of beauty, which should hide as hides the pearl
In green sea-depths, or as the crested bird
Of paradise, in virgin forest shades.
Yet, could I see her thus !

Ah, well a day !

I was a young man still, tho' in my heart
The "old man" yet reigned strong and obstinate !
The old man in my heart, and in my blood
The young man hale and strong and masterful,
These waged against my soul's eternal weal
A constant warfare, whilst the victor's wreath
Seem'd bound alternately around the brows
Of good and evil angel. They are o'er,
Those moral combats ! And the after-dream
Of all these strivings of my vanish'd youth
Will soon be over too, since here am I,
Seeming the broken plaything of the years,
A foolish old man in an easy-chair,
Babbling of battles, and from time to time
Baring the cicatrice of ancient scars,
Which often ache at changes of the moon !
I should have thought that doctor, who had said
He would be friend and counsellor to her,
Might have advised her better ; but it seem'd
He was a worldling—a philosopher
Who, tho' possess'd of wisdom, was for women
A man of small ambitions. He assumed
That idleness, join'd to a pretty face,

In London, work'd for women who were weak
And pitiful to others (grateful, too,
For others' kindness, also suffering
From wrongs themselves), far more unhappiness
And chance of evil end than even work
At variance with preconceiv'd ideas
Of seemliness : and thus he counselled her,
As I have said, unwisely (or to me
So seeming), running such a chance of shame,
All for a poor five shillings ev'ry night.

She had, indeed, faced boldly the grim shapes
Of Poverty and Hunger, meeting them
And fighting them upon her needle's point,
Working her little thimble into holes ;
Nor had she spared her pencil and her pen,
But then her child was ill, and then this life,
Pent up indoors, had made her feel herself
Listless and languid.

Ah ! it may be sweet
To sit and sew beside a window frame
Clung round with honeysuckle, whilst above
Some captive songster sings from wicker cage
Of love and hope, and on a freer wing

The spirit flies to "him that is awa'"
Over the faint blue outline of the hills!
(Thus have I sometimes seen a cottage maid
Sewing at eventide, and envied her.)
But Nelly could not know the sweet content
Begot of happy love and honest toil,
And as her thimble click'd against the steel
It seem'd to drive home to her bleeding heart
Its bitter secret, and to hiss the words,
"He has forsaken you—his love is gone!"

And then it was this doctor, as I said,
A man of small ambitions, found for her
This other work. Thus she could breathe by day
The outer air, and ply her needle less,
And yet earn more than double, since at night
She sought the place I dreaded; but he said,
(This philosophic doctor,) pressing her,
"It is not true, as some would have you think,
That all who wear a spangled petticoat,
Or none at all, are worthless ev'ry way.
But even should they be, 'tis best for you
To be the one white sheep amongst the black,
Than seeking once again your village home,

Seem there the one black sheep amongst the white.”
And then, he added, this new-found employ
“ Might lead to something better.”

These last words

Fill'd me with jealous terror, for I knew
That women who were young and beautiful
And indigent, would often ask to stand—
Unable or to sing or dance or act,
Mere “ walkers on ” upon the London stage—
Disguised as flowers, or butterflies, or fish,
Or flutt'ring fairies, in some mad burlesque
Or Christmas pantomime, and oftentimes,
Beginning like my Nelly, or with naught,
Or with a poor five shillings as reward,
A week would find them fav'rite of some duke
Or noble lord, living in luxury,
Flaunting in velvets, bright with diamond rings,
Yet having lost what gold can never buy—
Could this be what that meddling doctor meant
By “ something better ? ” and my blood ran cold.

To her this “ something better ” seem'd to be
That she was now the chief of those who play'd
At being actors. In a pantomime

She was to be the first, a queen of fays,
To hover, crown'd with stars hung high in air ;
“ Thence I shall look,” she said, “ upon a sea
Of unknown faces—none will see me wear
My mimic crown of those who lov'd me once,
Nor will those strangers guess how sad at heart
Is that poor widow'd queen ! A harlequin
Will make us laugh, whilst all his children lie
Sick unto death, and he to give them bread
Forces a smile and labours to be gay,—
I feel for him ! Yet with my pretty dress,
My wand, my crown of stars, my snowy wings,
I cannot but feel some small triumphing—
If *he* could see me ! for I knew last night
That I was fair ;—too late ! my life is o'er,
And with it care for pleasing living man—
Yet I could please, maybe, had I the mind. . . .
Ah, London is a place where pretty girls
Who do not love, and yet can raise in men
What men call love, fare badly ! Fare you well !
Think you I am ashamed of what I do ?
Not I, who know I might do so much worse !
God bless you, kindest friend—again good-bye ! ”
This was the letter Nelly wrote to me.

If I should tell you that I saw her thus,
Amidst the garish glimmer of the gas—
I, preaching unto others, meek, austere,
A clergyman, a hater of the world,
Fleeing temptation more than pestilence?
I will not say, but tell you what I learnt,
Told by a friend of mine who once was there
And look'd at her, whereof the memory
Comes striding up at night by all the stairs
Whene'er he wakes and burns the midnight oil.

It was a wild, tempestuous winter's night,
The wind in gusts blew thro' the painted scenes,
Each gust an ice-blast, whilst the flaring lights
Seem'd straining as to lap with cloven tongues
The shifting canvas. As it sway'd aside
I saw—he saw (this man of whom I speak,)
The little shiv'ring fairies wrapp'd in cloaks,
Waiting their turn, all huddled in a group,
Like deer beneath an oak-tree in a storm.
They represented and embodied each
The spirits of the flowers whose names they bore,
Whereof the semblance, woven in their hair
Told which was Rosebud, Harebell, Hyacinth,

Or Jessamine ; but Dewdrop was not there,
The Queen of them, who hover'd over all,
To whom they owed their being ;—where was she,
Sweet Dewdrop crown'd with stars, who rain'd at even
Her kisses o'er the faint and fading flowers ?

The play was call'd “ The Undiscover'd Land ; ”
It was a metaphor—the land was Truth,
Where Vice was thwarted, and where Virtue gain'd
The battles fought between contending hosts
Of genii and fairies. Then ensued
Broad farce, at variance with what went before,
Which had in it the germs of better things ;
And next there was a transformation scene,
With nymphs and flower-sprites ; but still this man
Saw not the face he sought, whereat his heart
Felt void and aching, dreading some mischance,
Or that some hot accursèd breath of hell
Might have absorbed his Dewdrop. O'er him came
The fear of having travell'd far for naught,
Whilst foil'd endeavour made his blood grow chill,
And looking at the strangers' faces near,
They seem'd to him the faces of his foes
Smiling in mock'ry, and he loath'd them all.

Ah, had poor Nelly stayed away that night,
Had she but broken faith or miss'd her turn,
Or play'd the truant, only for that night !
Yet shall I e'er forget her as she first
Dawn'd on my vision? Near a dappled lake
Were nymphs and fairies, singing as they twined
In mazy dance. (Remember that I came
Raw from these pine-clad hills, the northern air
Fresh in my nostrils, and the smell of peat ;
Then think of what an "unreal mockery"
Seem'd this, to all unreal, but most to me
A dream, a mirage, a true fairyland—
And she the Queen of it !)

Ah, now she comes ! . . .

She comes, the Fairy Queen ! and ev'ry eye
Uplifted to her, seeming on the wing
Above the dappled waters of the lake ;
Yes, there she hover'd—ah, most beautiful ! . . .
Let me too join my hands and shout applause.
All shout as they behold her, wings outspread,
All shout applause—ay, what an endless din !
Doubtless the evil genii, enraged
At being driven from the truthful land,
Are howling dismally behind the scenes.

Yet, ah ! just heaven ! are those mimic cries .
 Or shrieks of agony ? . . . and yon red glare ?
 And these, the frighted fairies white and scared ?
 Was *this* what was intended in the play ?
 Is this the sight I came so far to see ?
 And Nelly fasten'd in her flimsy dress,
 With outspread wings above the dappled lake,
 Seeming an angel carved in marble, still
 And breathless as a statue in the midst,
 With half the stage on fire !

My blood runs cold

At thought of it. . . . I dare not think of it,
 Or what I did, or of how small avail . . .
 O God ! it was too terrible ! . . .

In vain

I drive this memory away from me ;
 It is too strong, and well-nigh masters me
 When I confront it ! If I could but know
 She did not suffer ! . . .

* * * * *

As I rose to leap

Amongst the smoke, upon the burning stage,

I saw a tall man, pale, upon whose arm
There hung a fainting woman. In the space
Of that one awful moment, met his eyes
And mine—the man I hated most on earth,
He too was there, by some grim accident,
With his affianced bride, to see her die
Whom once he call'd his wife.

Yes, she was dead—
Thank God, unscathed by flame. (Our doctor knew
Some years ago, you mind, her heart was wrong :
It had but ceased to beat—yes, that was all ;
She had not suffer'd.) . . .

I have wonder'd since
If she, like me, encounter'd suddenly
Those steel-grey eyes, whilst gazing, as she deem'd
On strangers' faces ? and if sight of one
Whom still she lov'd, despite of all her wrongs,
Gazing upon her acting in this place
Amidst the glare and glitter of the gas,
When he perchance had deem'd she mourn'd his loss
In solitude and tears—I've wondered since
If this, and all the glamour of the scene,
Join'd to a moment's short-lived triumphing,
Were not enough to stay that gentle heart,

Even without that ghastly shriek of "Fire!"
Which seems to echo still thro' all these years?

I wonder, too, if he who saw her there
Felt surging back to his remorseful heart
Some memory of what was once his love?
Or if dead love is really dead indeed,
A soul-less thing that may not live again,
Even should pity wake? I cannot tell,
Who know so little of all human loves,
Save that poor love I buried years ago,
Who yet said never to me—no, not once—
"I love you," or "I could have loved you well,
Had I not loved another." It has been
Ever with me the shadow on the stream,
So near, so far, the semblance of a love,
The next good thing, but not the best of all.

This is how little Jessie's mother died—
Jessie, the second Nelly of my heart;
But then that heart is such an alter'd thing!
As like to that which warm'd my vanish'd youth,
As this dry myrtle-stick within mine hand
Is like the budding branches of its sire,

Maybe just now in blossom, far away
'Neath some Italian lattice, open wide
To let the warm spring in !

Those who felt mov'd

To charity and pity, 'kin to love,
Towards the helpless orphan of poor Nell
Devised subscriptions, headed by the names
Of many noble persons in the land.
I do not know who sent that thousand pounds—
One who was nameless ; but I sometimes think
It was her father, frightened at the thought
That one of his high blood, if not his name,
Might come to want. This have I set aside
To go with all the little I may save
Towards her marriage-portion (if one day
She chance to marry), for she lives with me :
I am her father, who has none beside
To own her, neither have my wife and I
Child of our own, and so our hearts are warm
Towards this orphan. He who might have heard
Her lisping words, and felt her little hands
Clasp him towards her, now has children too—
He married that rich heiress : wealth brings wealth ;
Ere long his father and his brother died,

And next that sickly boy, till then the heir,
So now the father of my Jessie reigns
In splendour at the Keep.

I often walk
At ev'ning with her, leaning on her arm,
Towards those distant hills—for there the air
Seems fresher than below here—and from there
I look down at our village in the vale,
And the fair landscape mapp'd out to my view.
Yonder I see a ling'ring speck of white—
The ruin'd cottage with the rotten thatch,
The birthplace of her mother ; whilst beyond,
Above its princely woods of oak and beech,
Flutters the pennon from her father's towers,
To say my lord is there. 'Tis then I think,
O Life ! thou art made up of motley stuff !
How is the homespun pieced into the pile
Of silken-velvet, and the fustian smock
Patch'd from the ermine mantle of an earl !
Perchance both last the longer. . . . Yet as well
(It would have seem'd to me ere yet I knew)
Might the imperial eagle of the height
Swoop down upon some village pigeon-cot,
And choose therefrom a sober-colour'd mate,

As he, the scion of that ancient house,
Mix with the child of humble peasant sires !

Yet it may be the blending of these two
(The dove and eagle) makes of Jessie here
A bird of such rare plumage. It is said
That "eagles do not often bring forth doves,"*
And so perchance the bosom of the dove
(E'en should she choose so uncongenial mate)
Warms not an eaglet of so hook'd a bill
As he that was its sire—who rent his prey,
The terror of the fold. . . . Nay, who shall say ?
For these are myst'ries, and I hold so small
Each grade of birth, they seem but little rings
Upon an earth-worm's body, wherewithal,
E'en if propell'd more smoothly for awhile
Along his short and oft-ignoble road,
They do but lead him whither all things tend,
Towards the noisome charnel, where anon
He ends with ashes who began in mud !

* * * * *

I am the Rector now ; that kind old man
Died when he seem'd the halest, and his wife,

* "Non generant aquilæ columbas."

That handsome, sleepy woman, whom we deem'd
 But little better than a vegetable,
 Took so his death to heart that she too died,
 And sleeps beside him as she slept in life.

The Rector's open house and old port wine
 Had left his daughters poor—nay, very poor—
 Nay, almost penniless. I stepping in,
 And saying, as it were, “ You two must pack ! ”
 Ousting them of their hospitable home,
 Felt like some harsh usurper : it was then
 That I, bent on the welfare of the child,
 Poor little Jessie, lately come to me,
 And thinking 'twould not do to let her grow
 Untended (like that tall brown hollyhock
 Which still stands on, tho' Nelly's home is now
 In ruins, blooming amidst thistles, weeds,
 And wild disorder), cast mine eyes on Anne,
 Till then a seeming cipher. (Have I wrong'd,
 Maybe, this worthy woman, best of wives,
 In not with louder, more emphatic voice
 Sounding her praises ? Ah, then I am base !
 Most worthy woman ! . . .)

So I thought of her,

And what a Godsend she would be to me
And to the child ; keeping my frugal board
Within due limits, visiting the poor,
Taking them soup and jelly, and old rags
And bits of flannel ; so I said to her
One Sunday morning, as we walked from church
Beneath the same umbrella (for it rain'd),

“ Anne, we have always been old friends and true.
I am not young, my dear, nor can I give
A young man's heart, unscathed, who honestly
May say, ‘ You are my first and only love,’
This I will own to you I cannot say—
It would be wanting truth ; but we are friends,
Old friends, dear Anne. Of you I know, indeed,
Your heart is pure as virgin spring water,
Lying undelv'd in desert lands untrod,
Which ne'er has mirror'd in it face of man :
For this my soul esteems you. Will you come
And be my wife ? I, watching your calm days,
Have seen how you have loved no living man ;
So that I ask no giving up for me
Of golden visions, only your esteem
And kind good-will. There is an orphan child

Dwelling beneath my roof: she is not mine,
As Fanny says the idle gossips think—
She is the child of Nelly, whom you knew—
The girl you once adopted—let that pass ;
Her father was that captain of dragoons
Who used to flirt with Fanny, and is now
The great lord at the Castle over there.
So handsome still, that he is yet the chief
And centre figure of our flower-shows
And cricket-matches here—but let that go—
He is her father. Were she truly born
In lawful wedlock, it had been unfair
To keep her from her noble heritage ;
But he had left her mother, having pass'd
First thro' some marriage form unorthodox,
A vague, elastic linking, loop'd or loos'd
At will. It was his will to loosen it,
And almost ere poor Nelly's corpse was cold,
Torn down amidst a shrieking audience
From where she hover'd in a pantomime,
The Queen of Fairies (you remember how
A gipsy thoughtlessly once said of her
That she would die a queen?—you know all this),
He married a rich heiress, who is now

His wife, the mother of those sturdy boys
Who scamper'd o'er my turnips yesterday.
Will you be second mother to her, then ?
I swear to you I have kept nothing back,
And told you naught save truth."

She answered, " Yes,"

And we were married. But now, mark how strange,
How wondrous are the ways of womankind !
I had not credited it, had not Anne,
Whose very soul is truth, confess'd it to me—
(Deem me not vain !)—she had long look'd at me
With eyes of love ! Yes, she, so staid and prim
And self-possess'd, had loved me years ago,
And far from shrinking at the thought of Jessie,
Had married me with hump upon my back !
'Twas wonderful ! and I, who had not cast
My thoughts on her as often as I ween
I thought of that old, noseless Lady Abbess
Lying in stony slumber in our aisle,
Whom passing every single Sabbath thrice
And thrice again, and often in the week,
Had, maybe, haunted me from time to time !

That must have been my one poor day of triumph

(Perchance we all have *one* day in our lives);
Yet I had never guess'd a sadden'd man,
Rejected in his youth by one he loved,
Had found in middle-age, his hair all grey,
Two women in one day alike inclined
To share his humble and prosaic lot.

When I saw Fanny that same afternoon,
Ere Anne had told her of our morning's talk,
I found her pale and sad. She wept, and said
(Looking quite pretty in her mourning gown—
Ah, when will women know the charm of black?)
“ Poor little Fanny must go out to teach,
To be a governess. Poor little me !
Who would have thought it? Ah, poor dear papa !
Poor dear mamma ! could you but see me now !
Your little Fan ! ” and here she wept anew.
I took her hand in mine, and then it was
(Life is so full of all astonishment)
That I perceiv'd that had I said to her,
“ Oh, let me keep this hand for evermore ! ”
She had not answer'd “ No. ” But I assumed
A brother's manner, whilst with brother's voice,
“ There is no need that you should go away. ”

I said to her :—“ I wed your sister Anne ;
You shall live here as always. If you needs
Must teach to any one your pretty arts
Of singing, music, painting, and the like,
Then teach my little Jessie—let her be
Your little pupil, as her mother once.”

So Fanny lived with us, but not for long
Dared I entrust my Jessie to her care,
Since Fanny was capricious as a cat,
Showing her claws at unexpected times,
And for no reason ; thus, as I have said,
We dared not trust her with so dear a charge,
And home seems smoother since she left our roof
Some years ago ; for no sufficient cause,
A show of temper and a fancied slight.
Alas, poor Fanny ! She is sadly sour'd
At knowing that she is Miss Fanny still ;
But yet she hopes, maybe not quite in vain.

I have a curate, he is fair and slight,
And lady-handed, with a tenor voice,
Most limp and inoffensive in his ways.
He has not hair enough upon his chin

To make one honest eyebrow, and altho'
He is o'er young for Fanny, yet methinks
She has him in her toils ; a born coquette,
She will not spare his meek, defenceless years,
But vanquish him, or, if he scorns her suit,
Will pass to others, and if scorn'd by all,
Will ne'er despair, and when she dies, at least
Will die in harness.

As for Jessie here,
I have no hope save that she stay with us
To make our sunshine. Still, as o'er her head
Have fall'n the blossoms of some eighteen springs,
I fear ere long my bird may plume her wing,
And leave the shelter of our quiet home.
I have no vain ambitions, and my mind
Would shrink from pointing unto such an one
Or such another, lest (as chanceth oft)
Love should outwit me. There is our young squire
(God bless him !) with his pointers and his gun,
His hand is on our wicket, and a smile
Is on his handsome face. Yet should he come
(This man whom she may marry) from the East
Or from the West, from such a castled keep,
As that wherefrom her father's banner waves,

Or from as poor a cottage as where flow'rs
The old brown hollyhock amongst its weeds,
I care not, so he be an honest man,
And love her well, and spare her grief of heart.

“ There is one great thing in this little world,
And that is Wisdom.”

Once I saw engraved
Some hieroglyphics on an emerald,
Which meant this when translated. At the first
I found the space too cramp'd for so deep truth
(Writ in the circlet of as small a stone
As this upon my finger—it was *hers*),
And thought it told in stinted words ;—it seem'd
As “ Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin ;”
Yet as that awful message at the feast,
Written “ over against the candlestick,”
Held more of sense than we had deem'd by sound,
So did these graven characters expand
Into this pole-star of the universe.
Yes, Wisdom is the greatest good to grasp,
After our hope in heaven, and our love
(If love prove kind and pitiful, and ne'er
Intreat us spitefully). Let Pleasure go ;

Why should she linger longer than the flowers
That wreath'd her fickle brows? The trees are bare,
This is the winter—let her go her way—
For till Death dies how dare we always smile?
Yet whilst Love lives we may not always weep,
So Wisdom is the only perfect mean
Whereat to tarry, ere our life-blood chills,
Or heats to fever-fury.

It is late ;

Yonder I see a ling'ring speck of white,
The home of Jessie's mother (in my heart
She has a home which is in ruins too,
Yet it is hers for ever !) and afar
The pennon floating from her father's towers ;
Whilst here a light which bids me hasten home
Shines from the windows of the Rectory.

THE SHRINE OF THE THREE KINGS.



I.

BENEATH a grey cathedral's dome,
Which ev'ning mirrors in the Rhine,
Within a richly jewell'd shrine,
The bones of these three kings of old
At last have found an honor'd home.
King Barbarossa gave the gold,
And noble ladies of the land,
For love of Christ, when Faith was young,
Their rows of costly pearls unstrung,
And gave them with a lavish hand
To glorify the shrine, and mix
With onyx and with sardonyx,
And graven gems and rubies red,
With scroll-work all enamellèd,

And one great topaz at the head
Seeming almost a mimic sun
In size and lustre. Thus begun,
This costly shrine with ev'ry year
Grew bright with offerings ; for here,
Laid side by side on their pillow of gold,
Repose the bones of those kings of old,
The three wise men who saw the star,
Caspar, Melchior, and Baltasar.

II.

It seems a mockery to me
That you should sleep on thus, you three,
Pillowed upon one pillow ; for
Tho' all of you at once adored
Before the manger of Our Lord,
The Prince of Peace, it may have been
That fires of discord crept between
 In the after-years between you three.
Some simple cause, maybe, of strife,
 Plunder of grain, or raid of herd,
Or love of one or other's wife
 The breath of discord may have stirr'd ;

Kindling dissension and heart-burning
Between you three at a later day,
Of which we have neither legend nor word ;
For that you went back by a different way,
To baffle the malice of Herod the king,
Is all we are told in the good old Book,—
Yet you may have waged intestine wars,
And may bear on your bones the bloodless scars
Cleft by the hand of the king your brother,
When, wildly glaring at one another,
Your dark eyes fierce with a murderous look,
To the wolfish gnashing of those white teeth
How may have flash'd from without its sheath
The jewel-hilted scimitar,
Caspar, Melchior, and Baltasar !

III.

And then to lie on thus together,
Thro' years of dark and sunny weather,
In this, your narrow golden bed !
So narrow, that each poor old head,
Eyeless, and polish'd by Time, and brown,
Crown'd each with its circlet of diamond crown,

Almost touches the head of his brother king—
As tho' they were each one whispering
Some secret of State in the fleshless ear !
Their secrets would be strange to hear,
If ever those tongueless mouths find tongue,
And after the midnight mass is sung,
And after the midnight bell is rung
From the grey cathedral's growing spires,
They speak as their patriarchal sires,
Maybe in the language of old Judea !
Speak they as comrades, destin'd to share
A couch of state enrich'd with care
 By King and Kaiser of after-time,
By knight and pilgrim and lady fair ?
Or as foemen bound in the self-same cell
Under the clang of a Christian bell,
 'Midst an alien race in a colder clime ?
Was there peace betwixt you, or was there war,
Caspar, Melchior, and Baltasar ?

IV.

Ah, all these years, ye silent dead,
How many prayers around you said

Had seem'd to you of purport strange,
Could ye have heard them ! Change on change,
As stone upon stone has uprais'd this spire,
So change upon change, and desire on desire,
Ambition and rapine and hunger of blood,
The gold of the vile and the tears of the good,
Have built up this fabric which men call " Faith,"
With its flicker of life 'midst an odour of death,
As here, in this gilded chamber, are spread
These jewels and gold o'er the bones of the dead !
Do you mourn, you three, as you hear the knell
Of our hopes in heaven, our fears of hell,
And long for the days when faith was strong,

When daylight was measured by shrift and fast,
And matins and vespers and even-song ?

Do you mourn for the days ere our faith had past—
For the palmer with wallet and cockle-shell,
And sandaled shoon and oaken staff ?
Or then did you mock to yourselves, and laugh
At the twisted errors and crookèd saws,
And the Mother Church, with her ravenous jaws
Fang'd and open and eager for blood,
Like some monster that preys on her own tame
brood,

Or an idol with victims under its car,
Caspar, Melchior, and Baltasar?

V.

Yet, if it chanced that ye did smile
At stolèd priest in fretted aisle,
At the sacred feast of the Eucharist,
Or at Christians marring the words of Christ,
 To dupe the poor and to flatter the great,
And to keep the power in the hands of the priest,
Bethink you, in all this fraud and guile,
 You three, lying here in your bed of state,
Rich with the treasures of early art,
Have taken your place, and have play'd your
 part !
You were bribed with the jasper and amethyst,
 And the carven gems of the days gone by—
The gifts of the noble and chivalresque,
Wrought over in emblem and arabesque—
With the bended knees of the lady fair,
And the grey-beard pilgrims with fast and prayer ;
'Twas this faith that seems now so feeble and old
That encircled your hollow brown brows with gold,

And that made you this shrine for your mouldering
bones,

Wherein you might rest and act a lie,
Bright with the glimmer of precious stones,
And that carried you hither from lands afar,
Caspar, Melchior, and Baltasar !

VI.

“To act a lie !” for who are ye ?
Ye three impostors ! Answer me !
What do ye here in a Christian shrine,
Dragg’d from the city of Constantine
To deepen the letter of Scripture’s truth ?
Who and what were you ? In your youth
What were your pastimes and who were your loves ?
Did you camp among spicy Arabian groves,
Or dwell under the gilded minarets
Of the glittering city of Ispahan ?
Were you Jew, or Affghan, or Turkoman,
Dealers in amber and amulets,
Or seed of the loins of anointed kings ?
Ah, who would not smile if it were to be found
That you three skeletons, shrined and crown’d

With your shining chaplets of diamond rings,
Were only some poor old pagan bones,
Brought hither to preach in solemn tones
The grand old legend you did not know !
To be worshipp'd by Christian lips and knees
In this sacred fane, till the overthrow
Of man or the Church ! . . . With such thoughts
as these

Do I gaze on you now ; but the sacristan
Seeks for the mediæval key
To lock you up in your narrow home
(The consecrated golden shrine
Beneath that grey cathedral's dome,
Which ev'ning mirrors in the Rhine),
So, holding to the worthy man
His anxiously expected fee,
I leave you ; wond'ring who you are,
Caspar, Melchior, and Baltasar !

COLOGNE, *August 16, 1875.*

A LAWLESS CREED.

(IRIS TO THE WHITE CHIEF.*)

“I desire no future that will break the ties of the past.”

GEORGE ELIOT.

I F there is anything that will not die
When this, the “I” you knew, has passed away—
This slave of sun and shade, this helpless thing,—
Yet dreaming of some vague immortal germ—
If the dim fancy that my soul may live
Is but a dear delusion, nursed by Time,
And made by habit more familiar still,
Yet not more possible ; if never more
Myself (the half of you), my form, my face,

* From “The Idolaters” (unpublished).

My tender love of you, may live again,
Nor take some semblance of the shape they wore—
Then may my foolish yearnings go for naught,
And all my emmet castles in the air
Fall to the dust of vain imaginings !

Yet, if the voice that whispers to my heart,
“ Something in thee there is that will not die,”
Be not the echo of a self-made creed,
And if some essence lives when I am gone,
Dispersed, or whirl'd away by storms of air,
Or lurking in the misty river-spray,
Or hiding in the chalice of the rose—
Then will I join myself again to you,
And breathe upon your brow and fan your cheek,
And I will cling to you in spray and mist,
Or you shall see some flower and think of me—
Your very thought, absorbing half my being,
Shall breathe my spirit home again to yours,
And I will mingle with you as of old—
This is the only immortality
For which I hunger ; and when you, my life,
Have pass'd away into some other phase,
Then can we cling together in the storm,

And mingle in the light of summer days,—
This is the lawless creed of one who loves ;
Yet could I deem it *all* a fond deceit,
Then would I say, “ Give me the ‘ poppied sleep,’
And let my spirit fade away and die ! ”

THE KISS.

(FROM THE SAME.)

I WATCHED you sleeping, lying in your arms,
And drank in with mine eyes in that half-light
The dim and shadowy profile turn'd aside :
Whilst breathing with you, 'twas as tho' I shared
Half of your life, and gave you all of mine.
I was so close—so close, so wholly yours,—
Yet suddenly I, waking, seem'd to feel
So separated from you by your sleep,
So jealous of the people of your dreams,
That o'er me stealing (tho' so near—so near !)
A sense of desolation, with a kiss
I call'd you back again to life and me.
Darling, forgive me for that coward kiss—
I trust too little, loving all too much,

To bear the thought of losing what I love.
Would I could see again that half-turned face,
And lie once more in those enfolding arms—
Would I could feel but jealous of a *dream*,
And kiss away all rivals on those lips !

THE PLAIN WOMAN.

“ I WAS not born to crown of golden hair,
Or wealth of deeper brown with russet tips,
Nor was the fashion of my body fair,
Nor did the hue of roses rich and rare
Hang on my lips,—

“ Which parted not upon an even row
Of orient pearls, with dimple at the side,
Seeming to say, ‘ Come kiss me ! ’ in the glow
Of conscious blush ; nor was I arch’d of brow,
Or starry-eyed.

“ I painted some who were as fair as this,
For God had given me the power to limn
The forms of women ; neither did I miss
The grace of colder Nature—lights that kiss
The ocean’s rim,

“ Or deep black shadows under forest trees !
And I could gather wealth of flowers and fruit,
And lay them down on canvas at my ease,
And I had power to subjugate and seize
Both bird and brute.

“ I read of women who were fair, and wept
To know the world so deafen'd to my song
Because of this rough lyre, wherefrom had leapt
A grateful music, could *one* hand have swept
The cords among !

“ Or, sometimes sleeping, did I falsely seem
As fair as were the fairest ; then indeed
I wept at waking, for athwart my dream
Had flash'd a fairy prince 'neath evening's beam,
On prancing steed.

“ He was a prince so like that king of men
Who pass'd me on the road, and let me lie
At youth's lone midway milestone ; it was then
I cursed these faulty lines of Nature's pen,
And pray'd to die.

“ A little more of lavish light and shade,
A little less of that or more of this—
Here tints that glow, or there the hues that fade ;
Such subtle nothings as these few had made
Me good to kiss.

“ A careless slip by careless Nature made—
A faulty measurement, a loaded brush
Or empty palette ; I, who make a trade
Of seeking out the haunts of light and shade,
Would almost blush

“ To paint so poor a face ! Yet from within
(Unlike the faulty failures on these walls,
The rough first sketches I did but begin,
Then flung aside), above this mundane din,
A voice there calls,

“ Which says to me, ‘ Thou art not wholly base
Since thou canst work and suffer.’ Ah, my soul !
Thou hadst been fair hadst thou but been a face,
Since thou canst bear the burden of this race
Without a goal !

“ Nature hath warn’d me that I may not share
The pastimes of a brighter heritage ;
Peacocks and daws peck not the same parterre,
Nor sigh yon homely wives of Chanticleer
For gilded cage,

“ Wherein may sing some captive, on whose breast
Lingers in mockery the sunset glow
Flash’d through the green savannahs of the west,
Whereof he sings in sadness. It were best
That each should know

“ All may not match in plumage with the hues
Of tropic birds upon their varied wing ;
Each hath her sep’rate mission and her use,
And those endow’d with song-notes cannot choose,
But pipe and sing.

“ For me to weep : yet with how rich a dow r
Of woman’s highest gift, serene and pure
As is the folded chalice of a flower,
My soul had met his love ! With wondrous power
Giv’n to endure.

“ ‘Endure !’ Too cruel word ! too cruel fate !
Seal’d from the dear emotions of the blest ;
A thing too meaningless—beneath the rate
Whereat we measure common love and hate,
And doom’d to rest

“(I, who had gloried in a treasure-trove!)
Nursing a barren mem’ry all my life,
Proving the love he did not e’en disprove.
Ah ! will the lissom lady of his love,
His promised wife,

“ Bring him the treasure of so good a thing ? . . .
I know not ; for bright insects oft deceive,
Flitting upon the zephyr, murmuring,
And seeming all so fair of form and wing
That none believe

“ They bear a sting ; and women who are fair
Are often counted false—so many seek
To win their favours—flatter’d ev’rywhere—
Till love and change seem in the very air
They breathe and speak.

“ I hope for him, yet fear. . . . Oh ! if a day
Should dawn when he may know this aching pain,
This thirsting after waters turn'd astray,
This longing for those blossoms blown away
To bloom again !

“ Then may he think of one whom long ago
He pass'd in silence by ! ” . . . She turns aside,
And down her cheek in blighted sadness flow
The tears that none compassion ; whilst her brow
(Not “ starry-eyed ”)

Seem'd clouded o'er with mists of sullen thought ;
Then, turning to her work, she lightly drew
An armèd knight, his breast-plate all enwrought
With steel and gold ; her cunning pencil caught
His eyes of blue

And backward-blowing plume. This picture lay
With many a change of posture and half-light
About her chamber : she would e'en portray
The careless look with which he rode away
Out of her sight.

Thus ended her sad song ; and all unmoved

The careless swallows twitter'd as she griev'd :
The fairy prince was gone. It is unproved
If by the lissom lady that he loved

He was deceived.

Perchance,—the course of true love runs not smooth—

And we are told such things have often been :
Yet this I somehow learnt—a bitter truth—
At that lone midway milestone of her youth
He had not seen

That hapless lady of the faulty face ;

Nor, if his life had sorrows, did he deem
Those sorrows sprung of any want of grace
In her or him, in any earthly place
Or in a dream.

He rode away, nor look'd to left or right,

Nor guess'd his passing made the sole romance
Of that poor loveless life, nor knew the night
Ensuing on the evanescent light
Of his one glance !

Should he have linger'd, and with eagle eye
 Discern'd the pearl hid in so rude a shell?
Ah, if but woman's love were deep and high
And sweet as is the spice of Araby,
 This had been well !

Or if it were a thing as passing rare
 As is the mystic death-note of the swan,
Then women who are plain, or others fair,
Would seem but varied blossoms, sweet to wear
 And gaze upon.

But woman's love is oft a lighter thing
 Than is the gold dust on the butterfly,
Brush'd with too eager pressure from the wing,
And losing by too careful treasuring
 Both light and dye.

And thus it is, maybe, that on Life's road
 Men will not tarry to unearth the gem
Lurking behind the eyelids of the toad,
When such a heaven of starry lights has glow'd
 And shone for them.

And so they seek the facile, and prefer
The fairest first, nor slack their bridle-rein—
As I, who heard this lonely murmurer,
Turn to some brighter theme, away from her
Whom God made plain.

R E S T.

I AM weary, I am weary ! though the happy spring-
tide voices,
Hope-inspiring, fear dispelling, are re-echoed on
the breeze ;
Sad and drooping is my spirit, nor awakens nor
rejoices,
But it longs for rest and babbling streams and
shadows under trees.

Yes, to lie beneath a walnut-tree or cedar, in a garden
Quaint, old-fashion'd, shut away from all the
murmurs of the crowd,
Of whose gate some sculptured figure, Love or Time,
should be the warden,
And where only voice of singing-birds should dare
to breathe aloud—

Where a sun-dial would seem shrinking, chaste and
chilling, from the kisses
Of the tender clinging clematis and star-like passion-
flower ;
And the tremulous convolvulus, whose closing blue
eye misses
That faint shadow on the dial that foretells the
evening hour.

Yes, and tho' I long for Nature, yet I long and long
for ever
For a bowling-green which cypress shall environ on
all sides—
Clipt and kept from times departed into peacocks,
urns ; a river
Too, with swans and water-lilies, and a lurking boat
besides.

Are you jealous? Nay! with you, love, sun and
shade, and flowers and cedar—
All with you, love! oh, my true love!—floating
swans and lily-leaves ;

Cypress hedge with urns and peacocks—oh, my lover,
lord and leader !

All with you, with you for ever, in these dreams
my fancy weaves !

Yes, my lover—yes, with you, dear, shut away by iron
gateways

From the murmur and the bustle and the slander
of the world ;

Yes, with you beneath the walnut-tree, near sunlit
grassy pathways,

By the dial round which the clusters of convolvulus
are curl'd ;

Where the swans await their feeding by the lazy,
reedy river,

Where the boat lies moor'd away amongst the lilies
by the shore :

Ah, with you, love ! oh, my true love ! would for ever
and for ever

I could rest and dream and love you, and awake to
life no more !

THE RIDDLE.

I ASK not now, as once, what these things mean,
This earth, these seeming trees that branch and
bear,
This good and evil with this foul and fair ;
All things perceived with those that are unseen
May go their ways, I neither ask nor care
What these things mean.

Once, as a pensive child, left all alone
In some sad chamber on a rainy day,
With an intricate puzzle for his play,
Whereof the key or clue was lost and gone,
I mused and marvelled, trying every way
What these things mean.

Now I have thrown the puzzle in a heap.
Go, painted plaything ! thus I fling thee by.
Either thou art too low or else too high
To waste my care on. Vainly did I try :
Now I am weary. Maybe by-and-by
My dreams may tell me, when I fall asleep,
What these things mean.

A MEMORY.

WHERE was the place? . . Here are the wild
white roses

And clinging honeysuckle, and here a pathway
Traced in the tall red fern. Alas! the changes
Which break so many hearts at least have mended
That bent and broken bracken! So that surely
These bleeding stems and leaves were not by thee,
love,

Thus crush'd to earth, but by some forest cattle,
Some antler'd stag, or timid fawn when sleeping—
Yet I had almost said thy vanish'd foot-prints,
And mine of long ago, had mark'd for ever
To memory sacred, this our place of trysting.

The years—the years! . . . Each crowding genera-
tion

Of tall green fern has risen (quaintly twisted

And crook'd at first like crozier of an abbot),
And turned to russet, and the scythe has mown
 them,
Laying their straight brown stems upon the green
 sward,
For twenty autumns since that fateful autumn;—
No vague transmitted legend, no tradition,
No faintly floating mem'ry of that ev'ning
Is whisper'd by this heedless generation
Of feath'ry bracken, when the ev'ning breezes
Sway all the pigmy forest. E'en the roses
Deem not their faded forefather is sleeping
So near my heart! These twining honeysuckles
Are not the pink and amber witnesses
Of my first love, but fair, forgetful offspring
Of those that tangled in my shining tresses
Ere they were grey: I dare not say, my darling,
What thou wert then to me, or how thy shadow
Seems standing o'er me now as on that ev'ning!
Alas, the years! the years! . . . How strange the
 bracken
Should thus be crush'd and broken! Has the phan-
 tom
Of our dead love held revel here by moonlight

In bitter mockery? . . . The wild white roses
Are here as then, the break amongst the bracken,
The clinging pink and amber honeysuckle—
This was the place. . . .

TO TIME.

O TIME! show mercy to me and unwind
This tangled skein, or tear the strands away
That twist and knot, and cause so great delay
In this fair work I fashion'd to my mind.

Help me, old Time!

My hands are helpless ; I have toil'd so long
Mine eyes are dim, my bobbins seem possess'd—
They will not turn the right way and the best ;
So all the net-work will be netted wrong.

Help me, wise Time!

This seems to thee no doubt a little thing—
A woven shred, that will endure, alas !
As short a while as on thy shifting glass
Lingers the echo of Death's cross'd-bones' ring.

Help me, good Time!

Shuffle the strands aright ! Thou art too great

To smart with envy at the little bliss

So poor a worm as I may gain by this.

Be on my side, and let us laugh at Fate.

Help us, dear Time !

ON WORKING A COUNTERPANE.

(FROM THE GERMAN.)



I WORK'D some lilies once, and said,
“Oh, waste of needle and of thread !
Oh, waste of lilies white as milk !
Oh, waste of eyesight, time, and silk !
How short a while your hues will shed
A transient lustre o'er this bed
Empty of love ! Yes, pale, I ween,
 Will wax these leaves my fingers traced
With so much patience ! I have seen
 By time and moth and dust effaced
Old feudal hangings, broiderèd
 Doubtless by ladies fair, who graced
 Banquet and bower—yes, my time I waste
In such fool's labour !” . . . Then each lily's head
Seem'd to uprise in anger, as they said

“Where are the shadows of those ladies fled?

Of which, of silk or beauty, doth the sheen
Endure the longest? Ah, the hands that traced
Those faded colours, and the feet that paced
Those corridors all arras-curtainèd,

Are they but just a little faded too?
Of them doth there remain one tatter'd shred?

Spurn not thy work; the little thou mayst do
Is thy best, most immortal part. Between
The cradle and the tomb, thy path is spread
With things far more enduring than thy tread,
Whereof the echo dies; and pink and red
And lilies white, with broider'd stems of green,
May *be*, poor sempstress! when thou wilt have *been*,
And blossom on long after thou art dead!”

A LAMENT.

O H, betwixt the earth and heaven,
I remember
How there hung a silent mist,
On the day when first we kiss'd,
In November.

In the happy after spring-tide,
All too early,
We cull'd from off the bosom
Of the earth the snow-drop's blossom
White and pearly.

Was that pall-like mist an omen
(Oft I wonder,)
Of that pall which fell to cover
All my hopes, and loved and lover
Swept asunder?

And was that blighted snowdrop
I remember
A sad emblem of the blossom
Earth had folded to her bosom
In December ?

TO A GARDEN.

O H, happy Eden ! where I roam'd of yore
In that sweet ignorance I long for now,
Not childish innocence of fruited bough,
For I had bit my apple to the core :

But when the golden fruit seem'd doubly sweet
(Unlike the tempter of a bygone day),
A serpent came, and bade me fling away
What once he bade those first poor lovers eat.

Oh, had I never bent that magic bough
And tasted all the sweetness that it bore,
My heart had been as careless as before,
And all these bitter tears unfalling now !

Oh, curse the cruel hand that pointed where
My golden apple had its bitter flaw,
And curse the cruel eye that smiled and saw
My best illusions melting into air!

But garden—garden where I used to rove,
I bless thy orange groves and sunny sky,
I bless thy feath'ry palm-trees tow'ring high,
That overshadow'd what seem'd then my love!

THE POET.

THE poet mused at midnight near his lamp,
Trimm'd for long hours of vigil; whilst his hand,
Nervous and mobile, glowing like his cheek
(Or wan as that same cheek whene'er bereft
Of blood begot of rash enthusiasm),
Grasp'd betwixt quiv'ring forefinger and thumb
His grey goose quill, all eager for the fray.
Beside him stood a brimming beaker, fill'd
High with the sparkling wine of Rudesheim
(The wine which Goethe loved, who crown'd the grape
With after-immortality of song).
His chamber wore that look which poets love
And children shrink from; for each nestling shade
Seem'd phantom-form or spirit tangible;—
Soft sighs breathed thro' the silence,—mirror'd back
From glass and polish'd panel, started forms

Grotesque and fanciful, as tho' distraught
From their first semblance, luring on the mind
To hidden surmise, crooked and occult,
Dim labyrinthine pathways, wherewithin
'Twere vain to wander without guiding clue.
Each vein that netted o'er his feeble hand,
Making it simulate the vanish'd strength
Of manhood, dead save in the deathless soul,
If that may haply live—(yea, we are told
That too can die!)—seem'd burning to achieve
Some deed of prowess ;—all his soul on fire,
Vaulted, as knight of old, to saddle-bow,
To dare and do, urged on instinctively
By so aggressive silence, now and then
Challenged by gnawing of some midnight mouse,
Or the increasing ticking of the clock,
Which seem'd to vary its monotony
By ebb and flow of sound, as to his lips
He rais'd the wine which Goethe loved of yore,
And waited for his crowning flower of thought.
Alas! no crowning flower, tho' thousand-fold
The fleeting fancies only born to fade
Besieged the straining portals of his brain,
Crowding and clam'ring thro' its throbbing cells,

A surging sea of motion. Then he thought,
“What may I sing of? Which were good to seize
Of all these striving fancies?” And the words
Were echoed back to him, irresolute,
“What may I sing of!”

For, tho' once a child,
Cherish'd and cared for at his mother's knee
With other nurslings, bright of hair and eye
Hopeful and trusting, he had grown to man
Fastidious and sceptical, and they,
His brother nestlings, long ago had wing'd
Their sev'ral flights to varied destinies,
And now their hair was grey; whilst she was dead,
The mother who had nurtured him in youth,
And but to speak her name with bated breath
Seem'd now a sacrilege: nay, not of her,
Nor yet of childhood—who can bring it back?
We wept as children,—how much oft'ner now
Weep we to know the play-ground gates are closed!
Nay, not of what can never be again—
Song should unite some subtle note of hope
To martial music or to lilt of love!
Thus thought the poet, and he found his heart
Wand'ring away to hope and summer-time.

Wand'ring to thought of his first love—a girl
Soft eyed and innocent ; so innocent,
She knew not even Love's significance,
But deem'd it woven out of May-flowers,
Sweet music, nightingales at eventide,
And words of compliment, wherewith a kiss
Might fitly mingle—nothing more than this.
He could remember all—her voice, her eyes,
The first long kiss amongst the hazel boughs
(Her little sisters eager for the nuts,
She, listless, looking for she knew not what :—
Just then he drew her to him). Then those days
Of early summer, when they brush'd the dew
From laurel-warded lawns. Why did she rise
So very early—all the house asleep ?
She must have loved him ! But all unexplain'd
Faded from out his life this vague first love.
No word from her—a parent's stern rebuke,
And two poor letters in a childish hand,
These are the only witnesses to prove
The whole was not a dream ! Nay, one thing more,
The little glove she left that afternoon
Upon the woodland bench ; he has it now—
So small,—so small, it would but fit a child !

She was a child—too young ; how should she know ?
She could not help it ! Could he wear her glove,
Or she the larger longings of his soul ?
This has he ask'd the echoes.

Now and then

She passes by him on the path of life,
A careworn woman. In her eyes he reads
Just what he lists, according to his mood ;
Sometimes he fancies contumely and scorn,
Or seeking something lost ; or else the look
She wore that day amongst the hazel boughs,—
Her little sisters eager for the nuts,
She, listless, looking for she knew not what.
But could he write of this ? Why dip his pen
In his heart's blood, and flaunt the purple stains
Before the eyes of an unfeeling world ?

Then mused he of his lighter looser loves—
Scarcely a bond—e'en whilst their names were new
To memory, which now would play him false—
Mere passing forms—" Good-morrow" and " Good-
bye."

He shrank from these as from some soiling thought
Tainting the careless mind that harbours it.

But chiefly shrank he from all thought of her
Who once had been his wife, estranged from him
Thro' living in a world that was not his.
This was the woman who had taught his sons
To war against the wishes of their sire—
To sneer at the mere mention of his name
Whilst using it as stepping-stone to mount
To ignominious table-lands of gain !
His hand, invaded by indignant glow,
Grasp'd the grey goose quill, and impatiently
Plunged it in ink, and wishing it were gall
Pointed its spiteful point towards the scroll
Whereon he burn'd to register his wrongs.
Then, toning suddenly, as poets will,
Some shade in the complexion of his thought,
He paused, and laughing low as tho' in scorn,
He rais'd the brimming goblet to his lips,
Bow'd to some seeming shadow, and exclaim'd,
“ This to her health ! and to the man who mov'd
A millstone from my neck !—the man she loves !
A man who did not know pentameters
From sapphics or iambics, and who droned
In halting prose, what once I sung in verse,
She heeding not ! The health of both of them ! ”

He drain'd the cup and laugh'd again. His laugh
Rang false and hollow, and the empty room
Echoed it back again upon his ear,
And then he heard the cry in it for blood
And shudder'd. Was he not a man of peace,
A poet—a creator? Not for him
These atoms of imperfectness! For him
To note his meditations on the mass
Of misery—injustice—tyranny;
Grand ineffectual longings, glory, fame,
The good of nations and their victories—
The subtle elements that wrought their fall—
These were the themes to which his pen was sworn!

Yes, glory, vict'ry! . . . War should be his theme—
For he had long ago, in early youth
Embraced a soldier's life; he had beheld
Its smoke and carnage, when the haggard form
Of wanton War, the World's reproach and scourge,
Was loosed, and buried her insatiate fangs
In blood of nations. In the narrow pass
He saw in fancy, urged by whip and spur
The jaded horses, fleck'd with blood and foam,
Dragging the murderous artillery

Thro' mingling mass of mangled limbs and mire,
The strain'd wheels ploughing from the oozing
slough

Strange sights of horror, whilst the deep'ning ruts
Quarter'd and crush'd the clogging flesh and cloth
That once had been an army. This he saw
Grey in the morning ; after the retreat
Of those that had been foes. All chill and raw—
Nothing to lend false glamour to the scene,
Save a faint sickly sun that seem'd to pale
At sight of last night's carnage. He had fought
Bravely and well (tho' ever in his breast
Lurk'd less of warrior than philosopher),
And he too seem'd to sicken with the sun.
He sicken'd now. Why need he tell of this?
The bloody game of tyrants, for some end
Often as paltry and intangible
As that for which an urchin in the street
Will toss a farthing !

This soliloquy

Sadden'd the poet's heart. The fire died out
That animated heretofore his eye
Kindled at thoughts of love and vengeance. War
Calm'd him, recalling to his wand'ring mind.

How great was now his yearning after peace,
For rest, for sleep,—nay, sometimes even Death
Had seem'd desirable. To cease to be
And lie far out of reach of all the stings
Fate may reserve for us !

“ Lord over all ”

(The poet thought with solemn reverence),
“ Ruling the world—the only autocrat
Despotic and all-puissant ! Yet with us
How craftily conceal'd—how hid away !
Lest we should cease all merry-making, those
Who from amongst us treat life as a jest
Haply devised, thus keeping out of sight
The pow'r whereon all hinges ! He is there
Lurking beside you as you sip your wine,
My merry masters ! Came he not to all,—
Were he an accident, or did his dart
Spare some whilst striking others, then indeed
We had not wasted care on aught beside,
And each new age vouchsafed had seen a race
Slink into being scared and terrified,
And haunted by an omnipresent dread.
Ah me ! the pond'rous tomes wise men had fill'd
With tiresome treatise, endless argument

Of how to thwart so dread an enemy !
Teaching wise tactics ; march and countermarch
And march diagonal, with rallying square,
Alignment, echellon ! These things had men
Written in armour, and with bolted doors,
The train'd right arm all ready at a breath
To thrust and parry, and the watchful eye
Scouring each likely ambush of the foe !
Yes, Death, we owe to thee at least one debt,
My share of gratitude therefor I breathe
On bended knee : *thou art inevitable* :
For this I thank thee ! Yes, thou com'st to all.
Thus are we saved the blight of craven fear,
Knowing we may not cheat thee ! What avails
That shepherds wake by night around the fold
If from his lair the gaunt, grey, hungry wolf
Descending, leaps its hurdles without fail ?
What matter when ?—at dawn or eventide—
If not to-day, to-morrow, he will come.
We may not baffle him. Sleep, take your ease,
Ye shepherds ! Will he heed your open'd eyes
Or looks of wakeful vigil ? Fear him not.
Rest, ye defenceless flocks—fears may not save—
Pastures are green. He will not be gainsaid.

Yet may he feed on others 'ere he drink
The life-blood of thy one ewe-lamb or thee !
Nay, as for me " (the poet sadly thought,
Descending from the realms of metaphor),
" I do not fear him ! Even should he come
In ghastly form, as painters picture him,
Bony and gaunt,—a hollow skeleton,
Bearing an hour-glass with my sands run down,
I would but banter him, and pride myself
On being friendly with the common foe
Of all mankind : I wait him. Ah, the best
Beam'd not for me here in this lesser world
Where some I knew found fruits delectable
I could have been contented with had heav'n
Waned as my fingers closed on them. Alas,
These were not mine ! I do not curse or carp—
Methought that I had drown'd in Lethean wave
The memory of what were once my wounds.
Yet something hath escaped—for future pain,
And like the little vulnerable heel
Of young Achilles, unimbrued in Styx
By careless Thetis, so this heart of mine
Fronts naked all the fury of the storm
Till Fate's last arrow end its agony ! *

Maybe there is some justice in the world,
Tho' oftentimes obscured from our poor eyes!" . . .

The Poet sighed, and with his idle pen
Flick'd from the taper burning in his lamp
What old wives call a waxen winding-sheet,
Boding the death of some one. As he rose,
He saw a thin thread from the robe of morn
Streaking the shutter; all his soul felt dead
To future effort—ink and scroll and pen
And lamp low burning, seem'd a mockery—
His night of vigil, barren of sound fruit,
Had borne but Dead Sea apples and regrets
And stinging memories: a wasted night!
And now the day was here, when poets' dreams
Should hide away amongst the blinking bats,
To flit abroad with them again at eve
In mystery and shadow.

In his cloak

Folded as in a Roman toga, he,
This man of many sorrows, sallied forth
To feel upon his brow the bracing air
And mark the daily miracle of dawn.

"A wasted night!" nay, more, a wasted life!

And could it be his best desires were dead ?
No ! these were living still ; then had his brain,
Tortured, o'ercrowded, forced and over-fed,
Fail'd to submit the dictates of his soul
To this poor palsied hand—too weak to wield
A pen o'erladen with poetic fire ?
Nay, but this life was empty of ideal,
Op'ning no wid'ning vista to the view :
The life we did not ask of that high Pow'r
Who thrust on us our mediocrity,
Our trammel'd action ! or encumber'd us
With vain ambitions ; urging us with thongs
To chase illusions ; fancied fairy-forms,
That, like the lady in " Elfinland Wood,"
Turn into fleshless spectres as we near
The land of shadows, where our dreaming ends.

Thus mused the Poet. The deserted stair
Creak'd 'neath his footfall. He had deem'd his life
Once, as a garland twined of choicest flow'rs,
Each flower a thought ; each bud the harbinger
Of fresher fancies, rosier symphonies—
What was it now ? A garland fall'n apart
Ev'n by the over-weight of its own flow'rs

Thus snapt asunder ; trailing in the mire
Its desecrated roses ! One lone bloom
Still on its utmost edge flow'r'd fresh and fair,
The blossom he had call'd " Humanity,"
When all the others glow'd to tend'rer names
Baptised in tears and kisses, lying now
All mire bespatter'd. Thus his life appear'd—
Tho' as he trod them, ev'ry sep'rate stair,
Seem'd to inspire some growing phantasy
Too large to lodge upon it. As he near'd
The door that led into his garden-glades
Clouded with early dews, he stood amazed
As rooted to the threshold, for it seem'd
As if some ray of sunlight, taking shape
Incarnate, of humanity, had stray'd
Trapp'd in the tangles of a lilac-bush
Hard by his door ; since there a lovely child
Lay sleeping, folded in a faded cloak,
To which a scroll was fasten'd with a pin,
Whereon an unknown hand had traced these
words,—

" A Poem. To a Poet's Charity."

And blots of seeming tears effaced the lines
That might have follow'd. This was not a child

Deserted in the first surprise and shame
Of unbeseeming motherhood, by one
Scarce having faced the eyes of her reproach—
He was a little lad who might have told
His baby mem'ries had he been awake—
Already seem'd his locks as manifold
As Phœbus' rays, whilst from each fast clos'd eye
The curling lashes, semicircular,
Bespoke a stripling more than three years old.
And when his eyes unclosing, and his lips,
He spoke, it was as tho' the silv'ry voice
Of that May morning made articulate,
Lisp'd thro' the lilacs.

Then the Poet's heart
Leapt at the thought of something he might love,
And mould into a manhood to his mind.
A child,—a poem,—lent to him to read,
To make or mar !

Strange inconsistency
Of human nature ! He to whom his sons
Had been a race of aliens, hail'd this child
Down-dropp'd, it seem'd, from Heaven, as a boon
Therefrom vouchsafed ; almost as if a star
Had fall'n from out the purple firmament

In answer to a longing, at his feet.

“ If this should be the sequel to my dreams?”

He ask'd, as once again the oaken stair

Creak'd 'neath his footfall, whilst he held embraced

His precious burden in the faded cloak.

“ My life is o'er,” he mused. “ I curse the fate

That gave to me such knowledge of good things,

Then turn'd the taste to wormwood in my mouth

Of what I deem'd had proved ambrosia.

But I will ward, even as Heaven wards,

In old-world legends, over this young life,—

I will arouse in him ambitions,—hopes,—

That it shall be my dearest aim to crown

With bless'd fulfilment. Never shall he pine

For fruit that grows on any garden-tree

Whereof this hand of mine may reach the bough.

My child,—my poem!—He shall be to me

Rather my first real poem—and my child

Clothed with the best of what was once my own!”

He paused, soul-flooded with the new romance

Of a fresh fancy. Should his eyes behold

In this, a child of chance, his cherish'd dreams

Awake to fair realities, those shades

Take shape and substance? Whilst a younger life
Fed on the fruit of his experience
And flourish'd on it?

Thus, on this May morn
Flash'd on the dim horizon of a life
Angry at living, such a beam of light,
As when some hopeful little rosy cloud
Floats o'er the troubled blackness of the storm
Telling that somewhere, hidden out of sight
There is a sun ; a life-giver, whose rays
Will thrill the earth and wake its sleeping flow'rs.

* * * * *

What if this stripling with the golden hair
(As Life appear'd to him who read it not
In its right meaning, missing what was writ
Between the lines) seem'd "empty of ideal?"
Bright, beaming, but material, unblest'd
With those perceptions, keen, yet undefined,
The portion of the poet? All the more
Strove he who found him at his door asleep,
To mould him to the purpose of his mind.
Ah, vain delusion ! it had been as well
To guide a butterfly with rein and spur,
Or yoke the painted zebra of the wilds

To plough in his own furrows ! For in paths
Open'd by his intractable desires,
Which dominated ancient customs, creeds
And danger-signals, wander'd forth the youth
To meet his own experience, and fight
The Minotaur of ev'ry tortuous maze
With his own weapons.

This the poet saw

And trembled—thinking of that fisherman
Who loosed a Genius from the copper flask
Wherein he had been seal'd by Solomon,
And who in consternation saw him rise
And tow'r above him. Thus the poet quail'd
Before this incarnation of new force
Summon'd to self-assertion by his hand.

He was a thinker : hardly had he near'd
The fourteenth summer from that first May morn,
When, sleeping 'neath the budding lilac tree,
The poet found him in the faded cloak,—
That lightly, as accounting them of naught,
He laugh'd to scorn his mentor's cherish'd dreams,
Scoffing at old traditions. E'en the life
He gloried in (made almost insolent

Thro' very joy in living) was to him
Naught but mere latent force in matter, link'd
And co-existent with it. Death, he deem'd
Only the mute cessation of that force—
A calm, quiescent state, made necessary ;
And when men spoke of Immortality,
He shrugged his shoulders, sigh'd, and turn'd away
The flow of talk to meaner certainties.

At first the Poet deem'd that he could mould
And use this recklessness for noble ends—
Believing that all infidelity
Is but a pious impulse turn'd astray,
And easily resolv'd to its first form—
Often by only some stray gleam of light
Illuminating suddenly the soul,
And making sense subservient to Faith.
For like those faces on cathedral panes,
Paling as heaven's light transfuses them,
Which a faint auriole and the painter's art
Have changed from convict or from courtesan
To martyr or madonna, may we not
So consecrate and crown earth's common clay
As that it rise to bright imaginings?

But youth at least is ardent, and pursues
Enthusiastically, if it deigns
Pursuit at all ; nor will he turn aside
From tangled ways to those well-trodden paths,
Of which the end is ever visible,
Lending no false enchantment to the mind.
This mark'd the Poet, and his spirit ceased
To war with such opposing elements.
Almost he seem'd that mute quiescent state
Whereof the boy (who seem'd to image Life)
Had spoken lightly ; for he sat and heard,
And even at the feet of him whom once
He deem'd his pupil, did he glean the wheat
Of his discourse, and letting go the tares,
Garner'd what seem'd the best. But all so strange
Was this subversion of his first intent
That he felt numb'd and addled, as by cold,
And once his mind (till then the motive pow'r
Of all his actions) falter'd, his poor frame
Droop'd in despondency, nor reproduced
What languor stifled. Thus it came to pass
That even as a chill'd October fly,
Which yesterday clung feebly to the pane,
Falls off beneath it, to be swept away

Amongst the dust and flue before the spring—
So died the Poet, in his autumn-time,
Ere yet the thorough winter of his days
Had dimm'd his eye or snow'd upon his hair :
And he was buried in the common earth
With but one mourner.

* * * * *

He that imaged Life

The youth with Phœbus' locks, possess'd his books,
And looking at them with a larger eye
Than did his benefactor, tho' unused
To all the frenzies of poetic fire—
Alliterative, sounding sentences
And rhymes, that chain the outbursts of the soul
In captive fetters ; tho' all these were new,
His keen, discerning spirit grasp'd the sense
Lurking beneath obscurities—there flash'd
Athwart his mind, uncolour'd with the glow
Of inspiration, all that men demand
Expectant of the poet in his songs.
'Twas thus he toned that dead departed voice
To ravish modern ears, and blent anew
The combinations of his master's mind.
Little he wrote, he of the golden hair ;

But using rather pruning-knife than pen
He slash'd unmercifully at the page—
Annihilating personalities—
All special love, and vengeance, and remorse—
All individualities (e'en she,
The lady whom beneath the hazel boughs
The Poet deem'd had lov'd him), now became
(Whene'er he chanced to light upon her name),
But *Woman* in the abstract ; over all
He drew a louring cloud of mysticism,
Obscuring meaning to himself obscure,
And thus defying scrutiny. To this
He link'd abstruse conjecture, interspersed
With scientific gleanings, now and then
Obtruding suddenly, concise and square,
As here and there in some old ivied wall
A newer patch of brick-work mortar'd in
Ar es's the eye, telling that modern hands
Have touch'd the crumbling masonry. 'Twas thus
Stood out in garish contrast later truths
From old-world structures, whence the buttresses
Are falling piecemeal to a sure decay.

So did the young man change the poet's dreams,

Strain'd thro' the wine-press of his keener mind,
Till they succeeded to a second life,
Transform'd, as was the wine that Goethe lov'd
Of yore, e'en from its crude primeval grape,
Grown on the slope hard by the pointed spire
Of Rudesheim, beside the castled Rhine.
Thus gain'd the sleeping poet's waking thoughts
An after immortality in song—
A song that like a clarion thrill'd the soul,
As sackbut, shawm, and psaltery of old days ;
Or Orpheus, who charm'd e'en soulless things :
Thus did his strains awaken those who slept,
Prophetic of disaster and defeat,
Impatient of time-honour'd sophistries, ,
Yet bright with promise of a lighter dawn
To those who listen'd. And, as long ago
The Cymric chieftains heard on Conway's heights
The warning lamentation of their bard,
And fled in terror the encroaching flood,
So trembled those who heard this trumpet call
To liberty, and hope, and wider truth
Re-echo, ringing through the shutter'd panes
Of self-sustaining citadels, made strong
'Gainst misadventure only with the arms

Of ancient warfare. North, south, east, and west
Thrill'd with the triumph of the youthful bard,
Crown'd with fresh budding bays, and tho' his hand
Oft waved towards the darkness of a tomb
In self-depreciation, none the less
Crown'd they his golden locks with early bays
And cried "All hail the Poet!"

Doth it then

Need the conflicting fancies of two lives
To weave a web of perfect poetry
Wedded to perfect truth? And do we dwell
On such a borderland of faded Past
And dappled Present, that each wars with each,
Intolerant of one another's pow'r?
For those to answer whose discerning gaze
Has noted signs and changes, and who grasp
The purpose of the Poet when he sings.
My tale is only half a metaphor
And half a truth, since I have blended in
With my poor verse some strokes of light and shade
I knew in Nature. Some will understand
And recognise: or let it be enough
That she who wrote it understood the drift
Of her own fancy.

'Tis of small account
Whether my poet was of flesh and blood
Or but a lifeless type to illustrate
Some idle theory; and if the boy
Was boy indeed, or only Youth and Force,
Or some bright emanation from the sun
As scrutinizing as his kindred rays—
What signifies it? Take it in the rough
Half truth, half metaphor, my humble verse!
I would my pen could burn into the page
Such songs as sang the poet of my tale,
Improv'd and polish'd by the sunny youth!—
Here is a little thought he flung away
As all too poor and puerile for a song;
It flutter'd, like the insect that it is,
Amongst my garden-beds, and when I read
I knew that it had been a thought of mine,
So gave the little wanderer a home.

“ Die voice of mine, but thro' the dim hereafter
Echo the best of all my spirit held;
Since not mine own my weeping or my laughter,
To vanish when this feeble breath is quell'd.

Die voice of mine!

“ Die voice of mine, but let some fitful murmur
Lure on to noble aims my heart’s belov’d ;
Or Death or Love, which shall endure the firmer,
Prove it to these, to me too surely prov’d.
Live love of mine !

“ Live love of mine, to tinge the dark’ning morrows
With the reflected glamour of the spring ;
Creator of so many joys and sorrows,
(Aye, and of e’en a joy in sorrowing,)
Live love of mine !

“ Fall tears of mine, but let some hov’ring essence
Arising from the mainspring of my woe,
Float in the future, as a second presence,
Around the hearts that mourn for me below.
Fall tears of mine !

“ Sleep soul of mine, and fold thy wings for ever
If, from the glories of a second birth,
Longings, and loves, and friendships must dis sever
With all that seem’d of heaven on the earth.
Sleep soul of mine !

“ Sleep soul of mine, yet sleep not so completely
But that thou wake again at whisper'd sign ;
If thy belovèd's voice should murmur sweetly,
And promise e'en the half of what was thine.
Wake soul of mine !

“ Wake soul of mine, to learn in golden ages
The myst'ry of thine immortality,
And to illuminate on glowing pages
The secret of a perfect poetry.
Live soul of mine !”

SONNET.

ARE these dead roses what the glow
Of vanish'd summers promis'd me?
When, budding on their virgin tree
As pure as after-winter's snow
These wither'd blossoms 'gan to blow
As harbingers of sweets to be?
For, looking closely, I could see
The bursting flecks of whiteness, so . . .
Streaking the fulness of the green,
Seeming a bright foreshadowing
As gleams of sunlight smile between
The thunder-showers of the spring.
Behold my promise! it has been
Fulfilled in this poor shrivell'd thing!

UNDER THE OAKS.

WAIT for me here a little ; it is late,
Yet would I linger here amongst the oaks
And talk to them awhile, for they are friends
That over-shadow'd something which is gone
From these, the days that seem'd so far away
When, like a sunburnt gipsy of the woods,
I mused in childhood underneath their boughs.
Give me them back again, ye hoary oaks,
The lavish fancies of bare-footed youth,
When wild and drunk with Nature at her fount
I dream'd a golden future ! Trees and flow'rs
And rush-bound river heard my ardent vows,
And sigh'd an acquiescence to those dreams
So wholly gone ! . . . I search the world in vain
To find that hopeful spirit which of old
Haunted these sylvan shades ! On Alpine peaks,
Pink with the rosy light of setting suns,

And in amongst the spear-like larchen stems
In Tyrolean valleys, have I sought,
Thro' quaint old German towns, the homes of bards
And minnesingers, where the sacred stork
Whirls round the time-honour'd Cathedral spire
Or rears its young o'er-look'd by gargoyle heads,
By pointed roof and chimney.

Bright with sun,
Mine eyes have feasted on the fertile fields
Of Italy, nor met amongst the vines
My fairy of the ever-fleeing feet :
Then said I, sad at heart, " She is not here,
She is not born of outward shimmer and shine
And mere material beauty : in my heart
Perchance in those departed childish years
She may have linger'd, tho' I deem'd she dwelt
As Hamadryäd, blended nymph and branch,
Amongst the oaks of these deserted shades."

Alas, thou art not here, dear Spirit of Hope,
Thou bright persistent playmate of old days
Dead with thy sweet companion, my lost youth !
Yet tho' for ever vanish'd, still for me
These old trees hold an echo in their breasts

That will not die to perfect silence yet,
But lingers, like a hallow'd requiem
Telling the dead once liv'd !

So here to-day,
World-wearied, do I seek not quite in vain
This shadow of a shadow. Haggard, wan,
Wasted with disappointments and regrets,
I seem to see her still, tho' crown'd with thorns
And half the vapoury whiteness of her robe
Cross'd by the mighty body of an oak
In rugged coat of mail, begnarl'd and scarr'd
By 'Time and his rude helpmates (as athwart
Youth's dear illusions Life's reality
Will cast a dark'ning shadow).

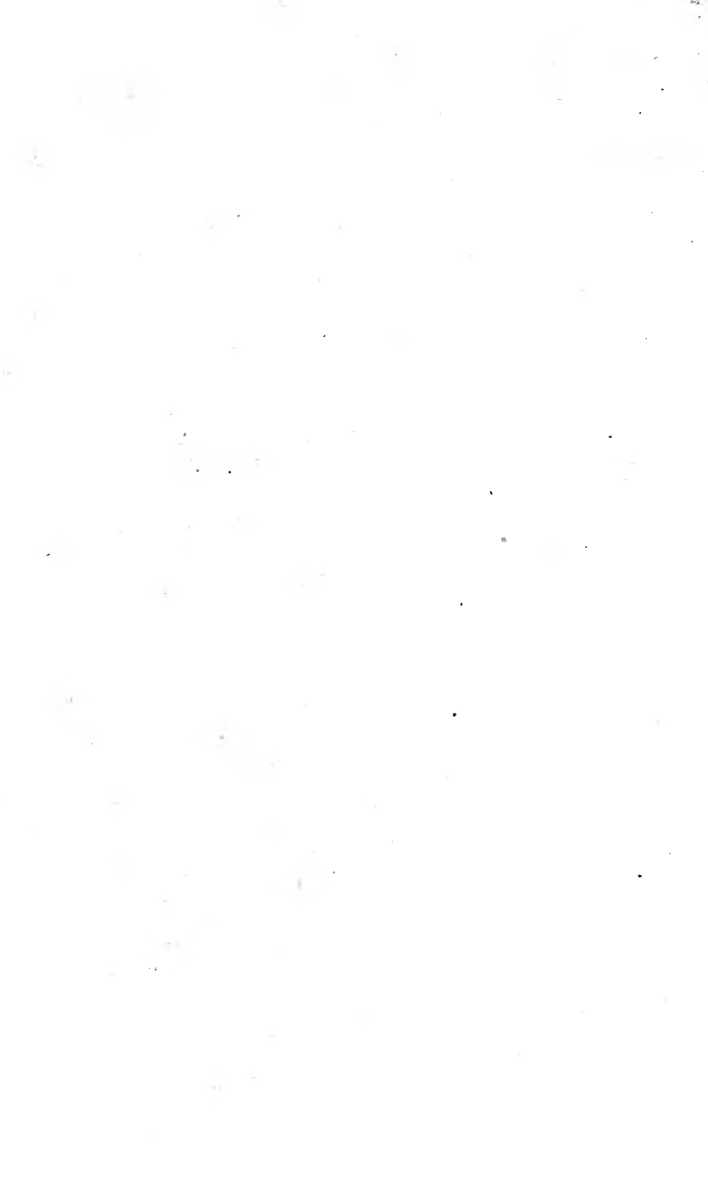
Do not die,
Sweet echo of that pretty piping voice
That told such happy tidings? Do not die,
Essence and sunlight of my former self !
Tho' all the world be empty of thee, here,
Here let me find thee ! Let me see again,
'Ere e'en my mem'ry fails me, what thou wert,
How seem'd thine aspect, and from what a breast
My innocent fancy fed, and whose soft hand
Pointed to jewels, seeming now to me

But oak-apples and acorns ! Look around
And see how hidden from the haunts of men
Is this, thy former temple, and return !
This desolation hath an earnest voice
Inviting thee, and thou can'st haunt in peace
The groves that were thy kingdom in the past !
Come back to me ! . . .

Ah, vainly do I call !

Most obdurate of spirits of empty air
Thou wilt not heed me ! and for sole response
I hear the ivy whisper in the wind,
The evensong of some belated bird,
And far away the murmur of the sea.





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