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# THE SENSITIVE PLANT



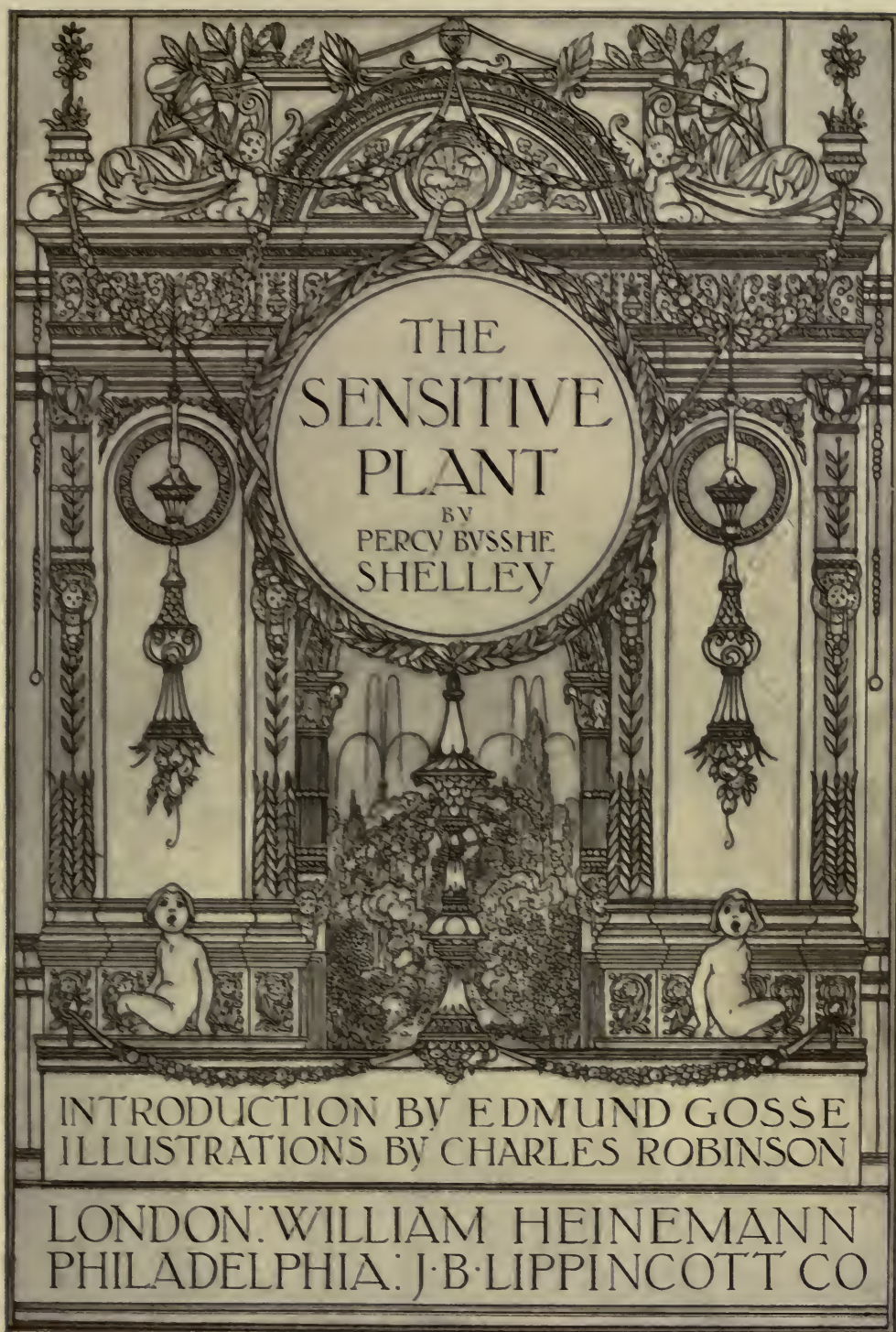








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## INTRODUCTION



THE SENSITIVE PLANT was first published in the "Prometheus Bound and other Poems" of 1820, a volume which contained as little second-rate or unnecessary verse as any volume of a like size that ever was issued. It cannot, however, have been included in the original cast of that book, of which the MS. was shipped to Ollier from Florence in December 1819. "The Sensitive Plant" must have been among the "additions" which Shelley sent to London with the proofs of his drama (May 26, 1820), if not with those which accompanied the final revise in July. The original manuscript is in the book

of Shelley papers which is now preserved in the library of Harvard College, where it is dated "March 1820." On the 26th of the preceding January, Shelley with his wife and child and Claire Clairmont had left Florence, which he thought injurious to his health, and had travelled by boat and carriage to Pisa; here they settled at an inn which bore the sign of the "Tre Donzelle." For some weeks, and until the flutter of his nerves subsided, Shelley did no work, and it is highly probable that "The Sensitive Plant" was the earliest of the splendid series of his Pisan poems.

It appears from some notes which Medwin prepared for a possible second edition of his "Life of Shelley" that "the source of the inspiration" of "The Sensitive Plant" was a lady whom few among Shelley's biographers mention, and of whom no one of them has told us as much as he might have collected. When the Shelleys arrived in Pisa they had but a single acquaintance there, Lady Mountcashell, and for a long time they saw no one but her and her companion. The place held by this interesting and highly-cultivated woman in the closing years of Shelley's career was much larger than has been generally perceived or admitted. Shelley described Lady Mountcashell to Medwin "as a superior and accomplished woman, and a great resource to him." He read Greek with her and she was "the source of the inspiration" of his "Sensitive Plant," and the scene of it was laid in her garden.

Medwin proceeds to tell us that this garden was, in dull reality, "as unpoetical a place as could well be imagined." The "Power in this sweet place," the "Eve in this Eden," was not less in need of being gazed at through the enchanted haze of illusion. In a letter written a month later than the poem, Shelley described her as "a lady of forty-five, very unprejudiced and philosophical, who has entered deeply into



the best and selectest spirit of the age, with enchanting manners, and a disposition rather to like me." In another and less-known letter (to Hogg, April 20), he speaks with enthusiasm of "a most interesting woman, in whose society we spend much of our time; you will have some idea of the sort of person," he continues, "when I tell you that I am now reading with her the 'Agamemnon' of Æschylus." This pleasant impression was presently confirmed, and it continued to exist until the close of Shelley's life, all the references to Lady Mountcashell (the "Mrs. M." of the Pisa correspondence) being cordial and confidential. But, as the inspiration of that "Lady, the wonder of her kind," whose "aëry footstep" and "trailing hair" made her to her flowers "as God is to the starry scheme," the amiable Irish peeress was in need of all the extravagance of a poet's vision to support her.

Margaret Jane, Countess of Mountcashell, was at this time nearer fifty than "forty-five" years of age, and we gather that at no period of her life had she been diaphanous or aërial. Twenty years earlier, Godwin had described her as "uncommonly tall and brawny, with bad teeth, white eyes and a handsome countenance, but with gigantic arms, which she commonly folds, naked, and exposed almost to the shoulders." With the advance of years, she had grown more solid still, but there was yet a charm about her majestic presence. She was refined, sentimental and serene; she had an infinite benevolence, and a calmness which was delicious to the tortured sensibilities of the poet. Her career had been unconventional enough and unfettered enough to satisfy the strange band which the Shelleys always collected about them in Italy, and now proceeded to reinforce at Pisa. The eldest daughter of the second Earl of Kingston, she had enjoyed the distinction of being the favourite pupil of Mary

Wollstonecroft, who went over to Ireland in the autumn of 1787 to be governess to the daughters of the Earl (then Lord Kingsborough). A warm friendship grew up between Lady Margaret and her teacher, so warm that Lady Kingsborough dismissed the latter late in 1788, on the pretence that Mary Wollstonecroft had supplanted her in the affections of her daughter. Friendly relations, however, seem to have been maintained, and perhaps continued until the death of Mary Wollstonecroft, and the birth of Shelley's wife.

Meanwhile, Margaret, of the giant arms, married Stephen Moore, the second Earl of Mountcashell, with whom her life was very unhappy. She fell in love with Mr. George W. Tighe of Rosanna, and, doing full justice to the teaching of her eminent governess, she retired with that gentleman to Italy. A rich strain of rebellion ran through the family, since Lady Mountcashell's younger sister had eloped with the notorious Colonel Fitzgerald, whom Lord Kingsborough pursued into an hotel at Mitchelstown and shot dead; while her mother herself, in spite of the rigour of her principles, fled from the society of her husband, the Earl, whom she rejoined no more. Lady Mountcashell and her lover were of mature age; they adopted the name of Mr. and Mrs. Marsh, by which they were known wherever they were still known at all. Almost at exactly the date of Shelley's drowning, Lord Mountcashell died in Ireland, and his widow immediately married Mr. Tighe. They continued, however, to reside in Italy, and apparently in so great retirement, that none of the early admirers of Shelley had the opportunity of consulting Mrs. Tighe before her death in 1835. It is to be regretted that one who saw so much of Shelley at the height of his genius, and who was so well calculated to appreciate his character and intellect, should have left scarcely a trace



on his biography. It may be conjectured that it was through the Gisbornes (Mrs. Gisborne had been a friend of Godwin) that Mary Wollstonecroft's old pupil was introduced to Mary Godwin's husband, when the exodus was made from Florence to Pisa.

That the poet was aware of the inadequacy of old Lady Mountcashell, with her stately tread and her huge arms, to represent the delicate heroine of his fairy-tale, may be gathered from the fact that, in the beginning of 1822, when he had formed an intimate friendship with the youthful Jane Williams, Shelley wrote that the latter, "we all agree, is the exact antitype of the Lady I described in 'The Sensitive Plant,' though this must have been a pure anticipated cognition, as it was written a year before I knew her." This seems a more appropriate designation.

It remains for us to endeavour to realise exactly what plant it was which Shelley had in mind when he composed this poem. The problem is not so simple as it appears. It is easy to say that the acacia-like Sensitive Plant, which grows in many English green-houses, bears the Latin name of "*Mimosa pudica*," given to it by Linnæus, and is a native of Brazil, is the obvious object of Shelley's muse. We may add that it has inconspicuous tufts of small pink blossoms, that its leaves may be described as "fan-like," and that it certainly opens them "to the light" and closes them "beneath the kisses of Night." Here, however, difficulties begin to crowd upon us, and even the non-expert reader, if he considers the poem with care, will begin to be in doubt whether Shelley was certainly thinking of "*Mimosa pudica*." Mrs. Shelley, in her preface to the "Posthumous Poems" of 1824, says of her husband that "he knew every plant by its name, and was familiar with the history and habits of every production of the earth." This seems categorical, but we

may be permitted to doubt whether Mrs. Shelley was herself capable of testing the accuracy of such "observations on natural objects."

In this dilemma, I have appealed to an eminent friend. His report, most kindly supplied to me, completes my bewilderment. From Mr. S. H. Vines, the Sherardian Professor of Botany at Oxford, I learn, what I had long suspected, that the botany of the poets is a source of deep anxiety to botanists. Shelley's flower-lore forms no exception. In the first place, the chief characteristic of the real sensitive plant is its response by movement to the stimulus of a touch or shake. But, unless the second stanza of Part III can be so interpreted, Shelley's sensitive plant responds only to the alternation of light and darkness. But here a wide field is opened, since there are many leguminous plants, besides "*Mimosa*," which have leaves that sleep at night and waken in the day. According to the poem, moreover, the plant appears to be evergreen and to be of considerable size.

In the attempt, however, to identify Shelley's plant with "*Mimosa pudica*," which is a straggling shrub not attaining a height of more than three or four feet when grown in a hot-house, the question of temperature becomes a very difficult one. For "*Mimosa pudica*" would not grow in an open garden at Pisa, or anywhere else in Italy, if the climate involved frost. But if the climate did not involve frost, then the Sensitive Plant could not be killed by it, and the poem loses its point. The only theory upon which the facts stated in the poem are prosaically explicable, is that the Sensitive Plant was bedded out, from a hot-house, for the summer, and was left to perish with cold when winter came.

Probably Shelley did not regard botanical exactitude in a case where the symbol of a sensitive moral delicacy was the main object of his imagination. He probably supposed

that the veritable Sensitive Plant ("Mimosa") could grow in a southern garden, and did not trouble himself further. It is odd that he did not, in this very connection, dwell upon the stimulus of touch upon the exquisite pinnate leaflets of the plant, and that he should seem to conceive it almost as a tree for size and conspicuous expanse. But these considerations are of merely curious significance. It is more important to notice that he manifestly identifies himself and his own passionate genius with the humble-growing plant of extreme sensitiveness to darkness and to cold. And this conception of his nervous condition and temperament repeats itself very frequently in many of the lyrics written at Pisa. We find it manifested in "The Zucca" (a poem which has much in common with "The Sensitive Plant"), in "The Serpent is shut out of Paradise," and in "Music." But we may close with two passages from Shelley's correspondence in which this hypersensitiveness is expressed in terms which are directly reminiscent of the poem before us. On the 16th of January 1821, he wrote "The wind, the light, the scent of a flower, affects me with violent emotions"; and to Claire Clairmont, on the 11th of December of the same year, "The Exotic, as you please to call me, droops in this frost—a frost both moral and physical—a solitude of the heart. . . . The Exotic, unfortunately belonging to the order of 'Mimosa,' thrives ill in so large a society." These passages very plainly identify the Poet with the exquisite subject of his verses.

EDMUND GOSSE













SENSITIVE Plant in a garden grew,  
And the young winds fed it with silver dew,  
And it opened its fan-like leaves to the light,  
And closed them beneath the kisses of Night.

## II

And the Spring arose on the garden fair,  
Like the Spirit of Love felt everywhere;  
And each flower and herb on Earth's dark breast  
Rose from the dreams of its wintry rest.









### III

But none ever trembled and panted with bliss  
In the garden, the field, or the wilderness,  
Like a doe in the noontide with love's sweet want  
As the companionless Sensitive Plant.



#### IV

The snowdrop, and then the violet,  
Arose from the ground with warm rain wet,  
And their breath was mixed with fresh odour, sent  
From the turf, like the voice and the instrument.





## V

Then the pied wind-flowers and the tulip tall,  
And narcissi, the fairest among them all,  
Who gaze on their eyes in the stream's recess,  
Till they die of their own dear loveliness;



## VI

And the Naiad-like lily of the vale,  
Whom youth makes so fair and passion so pale  
That the light of its tremulous bells is seen  
Through their pavilions of tender green;



## VII

And the hyacinth purple, and white, and blue,  
Which flung from its bells a sweet peal anew  
Of music so delicate, soft, and intense,  
It was felt like an odour within the sense;



## VIII

And the rose like a nymph to the bath addressed  
Which unveiled the depth of her glowing breast,  
Till, fold after fold, to the fainting air  
The soul of her beauty and love lay bare ;









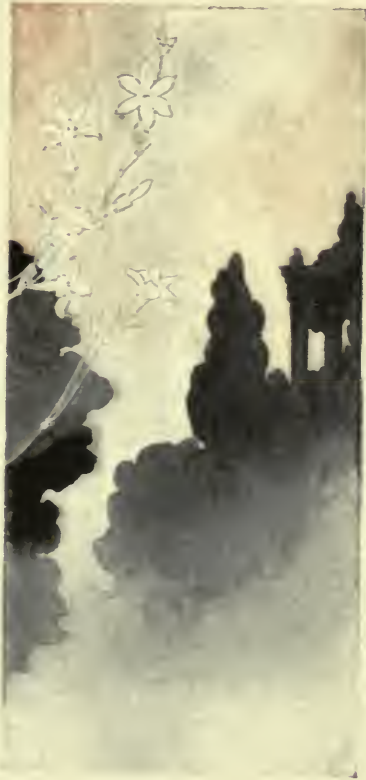
## IX

And the wand-like lily, which lifted up,  
As a Maenad, its moonlight-coloured cup,  
Till the fiery star, which is its eye,  
Gazed through clear dew on the tender sky;



X

And the jessamine faint, and the sweet tuberose,  
The sweetest flower for scent that blows;  
And all rare blossoms from every clime  
Grew in that garden in perfect prime.



# XI

And on the stream whose inconstant bosom  
Was pranked, under boughs of embowering blossom,  
With golden and green light, slanting through  
Their heaven of many a tangled hue,





## XII

Broad water—lilies lay tremulously,  
And starry river—buds glimmered by,  
And around them the soft stream did glide and dance  
With a motion of sweet sound and radiance.









### XIII

And the sinuous paths of lawn and of moss,  
Which led through the garden along and across,  
Some open at once to the sun and the breeze,  
Some lost among bowers of blossoming trees,



# XIV

Were all paved with daisies and delicate bells  
As fair as the fabulous asphodels,  
And flow'rets which, drooping as day drooped too,  
Fell into pavilions, white, purple, and blue,  
To roof the glow-worm from the evening dew.



# XV

And from this undefilèd Paradise

The flowers <as an infant's awakening eyes

Smile on its mother, whose singing sweet

Can first lull, and at last must awaken it>,

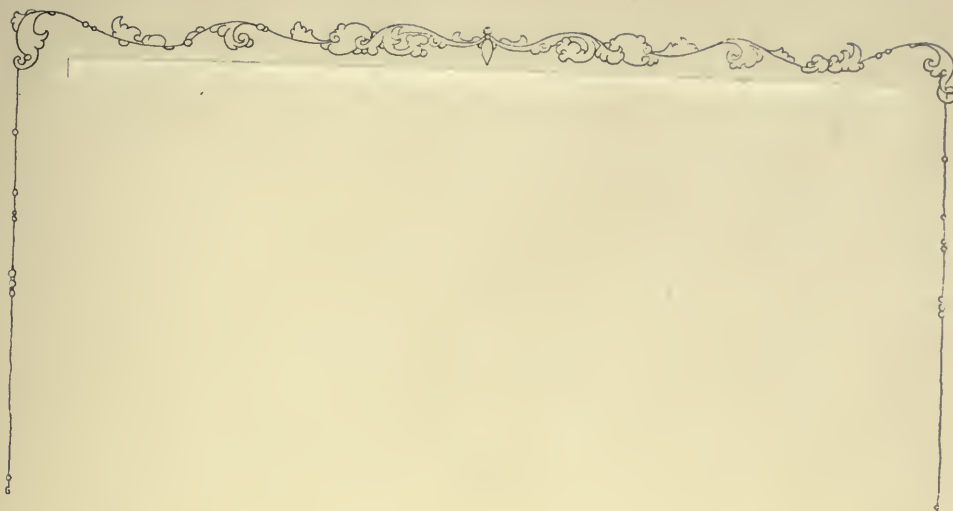


## XVI

When Heaven's blithe winds had unfolded them,  
As mine-lamps enkindle a hidden gem,  
Shone smiling to Heaven, and every one  
Shared joy in the light of the gentle sun;









## XVII

For each one was interpenetrated  
With the light and the odour its neighbour shed,  
Like young lovers whom youth and love make dear  
Wrapped and filled by their mutual atmosphere.



## XVIII

But the Sensitive Plant which could give small fruit  
Of the love which it felt from the leaf to the root,  
Received more than all, it loved more than ever,  
Where none wanted but it, could belong to the giver:





## XIX

For the Sensitive Plant has no bright flower;  
Radiance and odour are not its dower;  
It loves, even like Love, its deep heart is full,  
It desires what it has not, the Beautiful!



## XX

The light winds which from unsustaining wings  
Shed the music of many murmurings;  
The beams which dart from many a star  
Of the flowers whose hues they bear afar;



## XXI

The plumèd insects swift and free,  
Like golden boats on a sunny sea,  
Laden with light and odour, which pass  
Over the gleam of the living grass ;



## XXII

The unseen clouds of the dew, which lie  
Like fire in the flowers till the sun rides high,  
Then wander like spirits among the spheres,  
Each cloud faint with the fragrance it bears;









# XXIII

The quivering vapours of dim noontide,  
Which like a sea o'er the warm earth glide,  
In which every sound, and odour and beam,  
Move, as reeds in a single stream;



## XXIV

Each and all like ministering angels were  
For the Sensitive Plant sweet joy to bear,  
Whilst the lagging hours of the day went by  
Like windless clouds o'er a tender sky.





## XXV

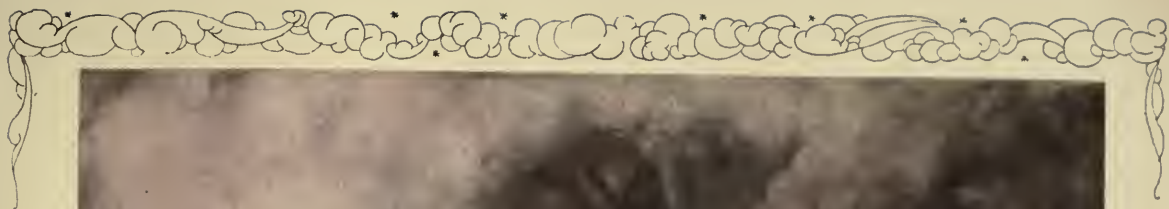
And when evening descended from Heaven above,  
And the Earth was all rest, and the air was all love,  
And delight, though less bright, was far more deep,  
And the day's veil fell from the world of sleep,



## XXVI

And the beasts, and the birds, and the insects were drowned  
In an ocean of dreams without a sound;  
Whose waves never mark though they ever impress  
The light sand which paves it, consciousness;



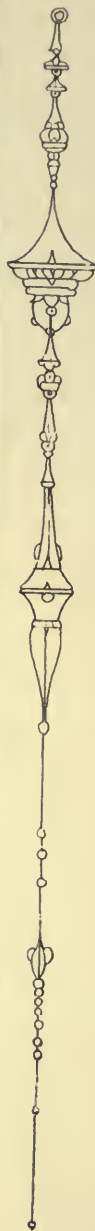
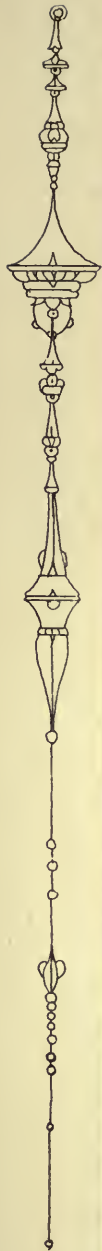


## XXVII

⟨Only overhead the sweet nightingale  
Ever sang more sweet as the day might fail,  
And snatches of its Elysian chant  
Were mixed with the dreams of the Sensitive Plant⟩;—











## XXVIII

The Sensitive Plant was the earliest  
Upgathered into the bosom of rest;  
A sweet child weary of its delight,  
The feeblest and yet the favourite,  
Cradled within the embrace of Night.







HERE was a Power in this sweet place,  
An Eve in this Eden; a ruling Grace  
Which to the flowers, did they waken  
or dream,

Was as God is to the starry scheme.

II

A Lady, the wonder of her kind,  
Whose form was upborne by a lovely mind  
Which, dilating, had moulded her mien and motion  
Like a sea-flower unfolded beneath the ocean,







### III

Tended the garden from morn to even :  
And the meteors of that sublunar Heaven,  
Like the lamps of the air when Night walks forth,  
Laughed round her footsteps up from the Earth !









## IV

She had no companion of mortal race,  
But her tremulous breath and her flushing face  
Told, whilst the morn kissed the sleep from her eyes,  
That her dreams were less slumber than Paradise:





## V

As if some bright Spirit for her sweet sake  
Had deserted Heaven while the stars were awake,  
As if yet around her he lingering were,  
Though the veil of daylight concealed him from her.







## VI

Her step seemed to pity the grass it pressed;  
You might hear by the heaving of her breast,  
That the coming and going of the wind  
Brought pleasure there and left passion behind.



## VII

And wherever her aery footstep trod,  
Her trailing hair from the grassy sod  
Erased its light vestige, with shadowy sweep;  
Like a sunny storm o'er the dark green deep.





## VIII

I doubt not the flowers of that garden sweet  
Rejoiced in the sound of her gentle feet;  
I doubt not they felt the spirit that came  
From her glowing fingers through all their frame.



## IX

She sprinkled bright water from the stream  
On those that were faint with the sunny beam ;  
And out of the cups of the heavy flowers  
She emptied the rain of the thunder-showers.







X  
She lifted their head with her tender hands,  
And sustained them with rods and osier-bands;  
If the flowers had been her own infants, she  
Could never have nursed them more tenderly.





# XI

And all killing insects and gnawing worms,  
And things of obscene and unlovely forms,  
She bore, in a basket of Indian woof,  
Into the rough woods far aloof,—



## XII

In a basket, of grasses and wild-flowers full,  
The freshest her gentle hands could pull  
For the poor banished insects, whose intent,  
Although they did ill, was innocent.



### XIII

But the bee and the beamlike ephemeris  
Whose path is the lightning's, and soft moths that kiss  
The sweet lips of the flowers, and harm not, did she  
Make her attendant angels be.



# XIV

And many an antenatal tomb,  
Where butterflies dream of the life to come,  
She left clinging round the smooth and dark  
Edge of the odorous cedar bark.

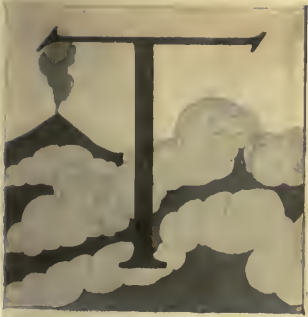
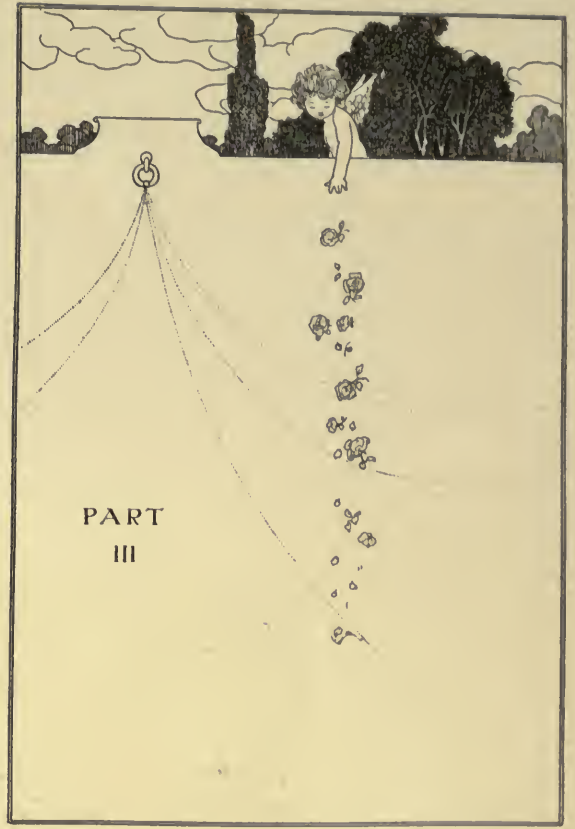


## XV

This fairest creature from earliest Spring  
Thus moved through the garden ministering  
All the sweet season of Summertime,  
And ere the first leaf looked brown—she died!







THREE days the flowers of the garden fair,  
Like stars when the moon is awakened,  
were,

Or the waves of Baiae, ere luminous

She floats up through the smoke of Vesuvius.

## II

And on the fourth, the Sensitive Plant  
Felt the sound of the funeral chant,  
And the steps of the bearers heavy and slow,  
And the sobs of the mourners, deep and low ;









### III

The weary sound and the heavy breath,  
And the silent motions of passing death,  
And the smell, cold, oppressive, and dank,  
Sent through the pores of the coffin-plank;





#### IV

The dark grass, and the flowers among the grass,  
Were bright with tears as the crowd did pass ;  
From their sighs the wind caught a mournful tone,  
And sate in the pines, and gave groan for groan.



## V

The garden, once fair, became cold and foul,  
Like the corpse of her who had been its soul,  
Which at first was lovely as if in sleep,  
Then slowly changed till it grew a heap  
To make men tremble who never weep.



## VI

Swift Summer into the Autumn flowed,  
And frost in the mist of the morning rode,  
Though the noonday sun looked clear and bright,  
Mocking the spoil of the secret night.



## VII

The rose—leaves, like flakes of crimson snow,  
Paved the turf and the moss below.

The lilies were drooping, and white, and wan,  
Like the head and the skin of a dying man.



## VIII

And Indian plants of scent and hue  
The sweetest that ever were fed on dew,  
Leaf after leaf, day after day,  
Were massed into the common clay.





## IX

And the leaves, brown, yellow, and gray, and red,  
And white with the whiteness of what is dead,  
Like troops of ghosts on the dry wind passed;  
Their whistling noise make the birds aghast.



# X

And the gusty winds waked the wingèd seeds,  
Out of their birthplace of ugly weeds,  
Till they clung round many a sweet flower's stem,  
Which rotted into the earth with them.







# XI

The water—blossoms under the rivulet  
Fell from the stalks on which they were set;  
And the eddies drove them here and there,  
As the wind did those of the upper air.





## XII

Then the rain came down, and the broken stalks  
Were bent and tangled across the walks;  
And the leafless network of parasite bowers  
Massed into ruin; and all sweet flowers.







### XIII.

Between the time of the wind and the snow  
All loathliest weeds began to grow,  
Whose coarse leaves were splashed with many a speck,  
Like the water-snake's belly and the toad's back.



## XIV

And thistles, and nettles, and darnels rank,  
And the dock, and henbane, and hemlock dank,  
Stretched out its long and hollow shank,  
And stifled the air till the dead wind stank.





## XV

And plants, at whose names the verse feels loath,  
Filled the place with a monstrous undergrowth,  
Prickly, and pulpous, and blistering, and blue,  
Livid, and starred with a lurid dew.



## XVI

Their moss rotted off them, flake by flake,  
Till the thick stalk stuck like a murderer's stake,  
Where rags of loose flesh yet tremble on high,  
Infecting the winds that wander by.



## XVII

And agaries, and fungi, with mildew and mould  
Started like mist from the wet ground cold;  
Pale, fleshy, as if the decaying dead  
With a spirit of growth had been animated!



## XVIII

Spawn, weeds, and filth, a leprous scum,  
Made the running rivulet thick and dumb,  
And at its outlet flags huge as stakes  
Dammed it up with roots knotted like water-snakes.



## XIX

And hour by hour, when the air was still,  
The vapours arose which have strength to kill  
At morn they were seen, at noon they were felt,  
At night they were darkness no star could melt.





## XX

And unctuous meteors from spray to spray  
Crept and flitted in broad noonday  
Unseen; every branch on which they alit  
By a venomous blight was burned and bit.







## XXI

The Sensitive Plant, like one forbid,  
Wept, and the tears within each lid  
Of its folded leaves, which together grew,  
Were changed to a blight of frozen glue.



## XXII

For the leaves soon fell, and the branches soon  
By the heavy axe of the blast were hewn;  
The sap shrank to the root through every pore  
As blood to a heart that will beat no more





## XXIII

For Winter came: the wind was his whip:  
One choppy finger was on his lip:  
He had torn the cataracts from the hills  
And they clanked at his girdle like manacles;



## XXIV

His breath was a chain which without a sound  
The earth, and the air, and the water bound;  
He came, fiercely driven, in his chariot—throne  
By the tenfold blasts of the Arctic zone.



## XXV

Then the weeds which were forms of living death  
Fled from the frost to the earth beneath.  
Their decay and sudden flight from frost  
Was but like the vanishing of a ghost!



## XXVI

And under the roots of the Sensitive Plant  
The moles and the dormice died for want:  
The birds dropped stiff from the frozen air  
And were caught in the branches naked and bare.









## XXVII

First there came down a thawing rain  
And its dull drops froze on the boughs again;  
Then there steamed up a freezing dew  
Which to the drops of the thaw-rain grew;



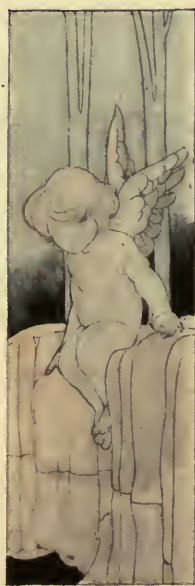
## XXVIII

And a northern whirlwind, wandering about  
Like a wolf that had smelt a dead child out,  
Shook the boughs thus laden, and heavy, and stiff,  
And snapped them off with his rigid griff.



## XXIX

When Winter had gone and Spring came back  
The Sensitive Plant was a leafless wreck;  
But the mandrakes, and toadstools, and docks, and darnels,  
Rose like the dead from their ruined charnels.









CONCLUSION



HETHER the Sensitive Plant, or that  
Which within its boughs like a Spirit sat,  
Ere its outward form had known decay,  
Now felt this change, I cannot say.

## II

Whether that Lady's gentle mind,  
No longer with the form combined  
Which scattered love, as stars do light,  
Found sadness, where it left delight,



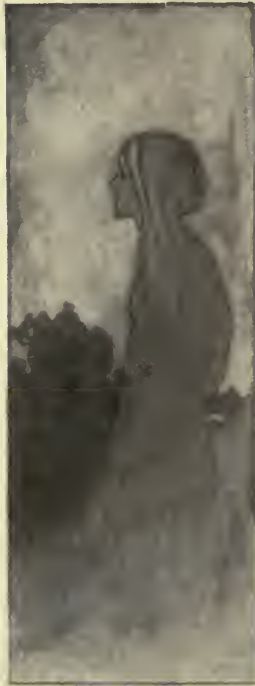
### III

I dare not guess; but in this life  
Of error, ignorance, and strife,  
Where nothing is, but all things seem,  
And we the shadows of the dream,



#### IV

It is a modest creed, and yet  
Pleasant if one considers it,  
To own that death itself must be,  
Like all the rest, a mockery.









V

That garden sweet, that lady fair,  
And all sweet shapes and odours there,  
In truth have never passed away:  
'Tis we, 'tis ours, are changed; not they.



## VI

For love, and beauty, and delight,  
There is no death nor change: their might  
Exceeds our organs, which endure  
No light, being themselves obscure.



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