

Under the shadow of a leafy bough
 That leaned toward a singing rivulet,
 One pure white stone, whereon, like crown on brow,
 The image of the vanished star was set;
 And this was graven on the pure white stone
 In golden letters — "WHILE SHE LIVED SHE SHONE."

Madam, I cannot give this story well —
 My heart is beating to another chime;
 My voice must needs a different cadence swell;
 It is yon singing bird, which all the time
 Wooeth his nested mate, that doth dispel
 My thoughts. What, deem you, could a lover's
 rhyme
 The sweetness of that passionate lay excel?
 O soft, O low her voice — "I cannot tell."

[*He thinks.*]

The old man — ay, he spoke, he was not hard;
 "She was his joy," he said, "his comforter,
 But he would trust me. I was not debarred
 Whate'er my heart approved to say to her."
 Approved! O torn and tempted and ill-starred
 And breaking heart, approve not nor demur;
 It is the serpent that beguileth thee
 With "God doth know" beneath this apple-tree.

Yea, God doth know, and only God doth know.
 Have pity, God, my spirit groans to Thee!
 I bear Thy curse primeval, and I go;
 But heavier than on Adam falls on me
 My tillage of the wilderness; for, lo!
 I leave behind the woman, and I see
 As 'twere the gates of Eden closing o'er
 To hide her from my sight for evermore.

[*He speaks.*]

I am a fool, with sudden start he cried,
 To let the song-bird work me such unrest;
 If I break off again, I pray you chide,
 For morning fleeteth, with my tale at best
 Half told. That white stone, Madam, gleamed beside
 The little rivulet, and all men pressed
 To read the lost one's story traced thereon,
 The golden legend — "While she lived she shone."

And, Madam, when the Poet heard them read,
 And children spell the letters softly through,
 It may be that he felt at heart some need,
 Some craving to be thus remembered too:
 It may be that he wondered if indeed
 He must die wholly when he passed from view;
 It may be, wished, when death his eyes made dim,
 That some kind hand would raise such stone for him.

But shortly, as there comes to most of us,
 There came to him the need to quit his home:
 To tell you why were simply hazardous.
 What said I, Madam? — men were made to roam
 My meaning is. It hath been always thus:
 They are athirst for mountains and sea foam;
 Heirs of this world, what wonder if perchance
 They long to see their grand inheritance?

He left his city, and went forth to teach
 Mankind, his peers, the hidden harmony
 That underlies God's discords, and to reach
 And touch the master-string that like a sigh
 Thrills in their souls, as if it would beseech
 Some hand to sound it, and to satisfy
 Its yearning for expression: but no word
 Till poet touch it hath to make its music heard.

[*He thinks.*]

I know that God is good, though evil dwells
 Among us, and doth all things holiest share ;
 That there is joy in heaven, while yet our knells
 Sound for the souls which He has summoned there ;
 That painful love unsatisfied hath spells
 Earned by its smart to soothe its fellow's care ;
 But yet this atom cannot in the whole
 Forget itself — it aches a separate soul.

[*He speaks.*]

But, Madam, to my Poet I return.
 With his sweet cadences of woven words
 He made their rude untutored hearts to burn
 And melt like gold refined. No brooding birds
 Sing better of the love that doth sojourn
 Hid in the nest of home, which softly girds
 The beating heart of life ; and, strait though it be,
 Is straitness better than wide liberty.
 He taught them, and they learned, but not the less
 Remained unconscious whence that lore they drew,
 But dreamed that of their native nobleness
 Some lofty thoughts, that he had planted, grew ;
 His glorious maxims in a lowly dress,
 Like seed sown broadcast, sprung in all men's view,
 The sower, passing onward, was not known,
 And all men reaped the harvest as their own.
 It may be, Madam, that those ballads sweet,
 Whose rhythmic measures yesterday we sung,
 Which time and changes make not obsolete,
 But (as a river bears down blossoms flung
 Upon its breast) take with them while they fleet —
 It may be from his lyre that first they sprung :
 But who can tell, since work surviveth fame ? —
 The rhyme is left, but lost the Poet's name.

He worked, and bravely he fulfilled his trust —
 So long he wandered sowing worthy seed,
 Watering of wayside buds that were adust,
 And touching for the common ear his reed —
 So long to wear away the cankering rust
 That dulls the gold of life — so long to plead
 With sweetest music for all souls oppressed,
 That he was old ere he had thought of rest.

Old and gray-headed, leaning on a staff,
 To that great city of his birth he came,
 And at its gates he paused with wondering laugh
 To think how changed were all his thoughts of
 fame
 Since first he carved the golden epitaph
 To keep in memory a worthy name,
 And thought forgetfulness had been its doom
 But for a few bright letters on a tomb.

The old Astronomer had long since died ;
 The friends of youth were gone and far dispersed ;
 Strange were the domes that rose on every side ;
 Strange fountains on his wondering vision burst ;
 The men of yesterday their business plied ;
 No face was left that he had known at first ;
 And in the city gardens, lo ! he sees
 The saplings that he set are stately trees.

Upon the grass beneath their welcome shade,
 Behold ! he marks the fair white monument,
 And on its face the golden words displayed,
 For sixty years their lustre have not spent ;
 He sitteth by it and is not afraid,
 But in its shadow he is well content ;
 And envies not, though bright their gleamings are
 The golden letters of the vanished star.

He gazeth up; exceeding bright appears
 That golden legend to his aged eyes,
 For they are dazzled till they fill with tears,
 And his lost Youth doth like a vision rise;
 She saith to him, "In all these toilsome years,
 What hast thou won by work or enterprise?
 What hast thou won to make amends to thee,
 As thou didst swear to do, for loss of me?"

"O man! O white-haired man!" the vision said,
 "Since we two sat beside this monument
 Life's clearest hues are all evanishèd,
 The golden wealth thou hadst of me is spent;
 The wind hath swept thy flowers, their leaves are
 shed;
 The music is played out that with thee went."
 "Peace, peace!" he cried; "I lost thee, but, in
 truth,
 There are worse losses than the loss of youth."

He said not what those losses were — but I —
 But I must leave them, for the time draws near.
 Some lose not ONLY joy, but memory
 Of how it felt: not love that was so dear
 Lose only, but the steadfast certainty
 That once they had it; doubt comes on, then fear,
 And after that despondency. I wis
 The Poet must have meant such loss as this.

But while he sat and pondered on his youth,
 He said, "It did one deed that doth remain,
 For it preserved the memory and the truth
 Of her that now doth neither set nor wane,
 But shine in all men's thoughts; nor sink forsooth,
 And be forgotten like the summer rain.
 O, it is good that man should not forget
 Or benefits foregone or brightness set!"

He spoke and said, "My lot contenteth me:
 I am right glad for this her worthy fame;
 That which was good and great I fain would see
 Drawn with a halo round what rests — its name."
 This while the Poet said, behold, there came
 A workman with his tools anear the tree,
 And when he read the words he paused awhile
 And pondered on them with a wondering smile.

And then he said, "I pray you, Sir, what mean
 The golden letters of this monument?"
 In wonder quoth the Poet, "Hast thou been
 A dweller near at hand, and their intent
 Hast neither heard by voice of fame, nor seen
 The marble earlier?" "Ay," said he, and leant
 Upon his spade to hear the tale, then sigh,
 And say it was a marvel, and pass by.

Then said the Poet, "This is strange to me."
 But as he mused, with trouble in his mind,
 A band of maids approached him leisurely,
 Like vessels sailing with a favoring wind;
 And of their rosy lips requested he,
 As one that for a doubt would solving find,
 The tale, if tale there were, of that white stone,
 And those fair letters — "While she lived she shone."

Then like a fleet that floats becalmed they stay.
 "O, Sir," saith one, "this monument is old;
 But we have heard our virtuous mothers say
 That by their mothers thus the tale was told:
 A Poet made it; journeying then away,
 He left us; and though some the meaning hold
 For other than the ancient one, yet we
 Receive this legend for a certainty: —

"There was a lily once, most purely white,
 Beneath the shadow of these boughs it grew;

Its starry blossom it unclosed by night,
 And a young Poet loved its shape and hue.
 He watched it nightly, 'twas so fair a sight
 Until a stormy wind arose and blew,
 And when he came once more his flower to greet
 Its fallen petals drifted to his feet.

"And for his beautiful white lily's sake,
 That she might be remembered where her scent
 Had been right sweet, he said that he would make
 In her dear memory a monument:
 For she was purer than a driven flake
 Of snow, and in her grace most excellent;
 The loveliest life that death did ever mar,
 As beautiful to gaze on as a star."

"I thank you, maid," the Poet answered her,
 "And I am glad that I have heard your tale."
 With that they passed; and as an inlander,
 Having heard breakers raging in a gale
 And falling down in thunder, will aver
 That still, when far away in grassy vale,
 He seems to hear those seething waters bound,
 So in his ears the maiden's voice did sound.

He leaned his face upon his hand, and thought
 And thought, until a youth came by that way;
 And once again of him the Poet sought
 The story of the star. But, well-a-day!
 He said, "The meaning with much doubt is fraught,
 The sense thereof can no man surely say;
 For still tradition sways the common ear,
 That of a truth a star DID DISAPPEAR.

"But they who look beneath the outer shell
 That wraps the 'kernel of the people's lore,'
 Hold THAT for superstition; and they tell
 That seven lovely sisters dwelt of yore

In this old city, where it so befell
 That one a Poet loved; that, furthermore,
 As stars above us she was pure and good,
 And fairest of that beauteous sisterhood.

"So beautiful they were, those virgins seven,
 That all men called them clustered stars in song,
 Forgetful that the stars abide in heaven:
 But woman bideth not beneath it long;
 For O, alas! alas! one fated even,
 When stars their azure deeps began to throng,
 That virgin's eyes of Poet loved waxed dim,
 And all their lustrous shining waned to him.

"In summer dusk she drooped her head and sighed
 Until what time the evening star went down,
 And all the other stars did shining bide
 Clear in the lustre of their old renown,
 And then — the virgin laid her down and died:
 Forgot her youth, forgot her beauty's crown,
 Forgot the sisters whom she loved before,
 And broke her Poet's heart for evermore."

"A mournful tale, in sooth," the lady saith:
 "But did he truly grieve for evermore?"
 "It may be you forget," he answereth,
 "That this is but a fable at the core
 Of the other fable." "Though it be but breath,"
 She asketh, "was it true?" Then he, "This lore
 Since it is fable, either way may go;
 Then, if it please you, think it might be so."

"Nay, but," she saith, "If I had told your tale,
 The virgin should have lived his home to bless,
 Or, must she die, I would have made to fail
 His useless love." "I tell you not the less,"
 He sighs, "because it was of no avail:
 His heart the Poet would not dispossess

Thereof. But let us leave the fable now,
My Poet heard it with an aching brow."

And he made answer thus: "I thank thee, youth:

Strange is thy story to these aged ears,
But I bethink me thou hast told a truth

Under the guise of fable. If my tears,
Thou lost beloved star, lost now, forsooth,

Indeed could bring thee back among thy peers,
So new thou shouldst be deemed as newly seen,
For men forget that thou hast ever been.

"There was a morning when I longed for fame,

There was a noontide when I passed it by,
There is an evening when I think not shame

Its substance and its being to deny;
For if men bear in mind great deeds, the name

Of him that wrought them shall they leave to die,
Or if his name they shall have deathless writ,
They change the deeds that first ennobled it.

"O golden letters of this monument!

O words to celebrate a loved renown
Lost now or wrested, and to fancies lent,

Or on a fabled forehead set for crown!
For my departed star, I am content,

Though legends dim and years her memory drown;
For what were fame to her, compared and set
By this great truth which ye make lustrous yet?"

"Adieu!" the Poet said, "my vanished star,

Thy duty and thy happiness were one.

Work is heaven's hest; its fame is sublunar:

The fame thou dost not need — the work is done.

For thee I am content that these things are;

More than content were I, my race being run,

Might it be true of me, though none thereon

Should muse regretful — 'While he lived he shone.'"

So said, the Poet rose and went his way,

And that same lot he proved whereof he spake,
Madam, my story is told out; the day

Draws out her shadows, time doth overtake
The morning. That which endeth call a lay,

Sung after pause — a motto in the break
Between two chapters of a tale not new,
Nor joyful — but a common tale. Adieu!

And that same God who made your face so fair,

And gave your woman's heart its tenderness,
So shield the blessing He implanted there,

That it may never turn to your distress,
And never cost you trouble or despair,

Nor, granted, leave the granter comfortless;
But like a river, blest where'er it flows,

Be still receiving while it still bestows.

Adieu, he said, and paused, while she sat mute

In the soft shadow of the apple-tree;

The skylark's song rang like a joyous flute,

The brook went prattling past her restlessly:

She let their tongues be her tongue's substitute:

It was the wind that sighed, it was not she:

And what the lark, the brook, the wind, had said

We cannot tell, for none interpreted.

Their counsels might be hard to reconcile,

They might not suit the moment or the spot.

She rose, and laid her work aside the while

Down in the sunshine of that grassy plot;

She looked upon him with an almost smile,

And held to him a hand that faltered not.

One moment — bird and brook went warbling on,

And the wind sighed again — and he was gone.

So quietly, as if she heard no more

Or skylark in the azure overhead,

Or water slipping past the cressy shore,
 Or wind that rose in sighs, and sighing fled —
 So quietly, until the alders hoar
 Took him beneath them; till the downward spread
 Of planes engulfed him in their leafy seas
 She stood beneath her rose-flushed apple-trees.

And then she stooped toward the mossy grass,
 And gathered up her work and went her way;
 Straight to that ancient turret she did pass,
 And startle back some fawns that were at play.
 She did not sigh, she never said "Alas!"
 Although he was her friend; but still that day,
 Where elm and hornbeam spread a towering dome
 She crossed the dells to her ancestral home.

And did she love him? — what if she did not?
 Then home was still the home of happiest years;
 Nor thought was exiled to partake his lot,
 Nor heart lost courage through foreboding fears;
 Nor echo did against her secret plot,
 Nor music her betray to painful tears;
 Nor life become a dream, and sunshine dim,
 And riches poverty, because of him.

But did she love him? — what and if she did?
 Love cannot cool the burning Austral sand,
 Nor show the secret waters that lie hid
 In arid valleys of that desert land.
 Love has no spells can scorching winds forbid,
 Or bring the help which tarries near to hand,
 Or spread a cloud for curtaining faded eyes
 That gaze up dying into alien skies.

A DEAD YEAR.

I took a year out of my life and story —
 A dead year, and said, "I will hew thee a tomb!
 'All the kings of the nations lie in glory;'
 Cased in cedar, and shut in a sacred gloom;
 Swathed in linen, and precious unguents old;
 Painted with cinnabar, and rich with gold.

"Silent they rest, in solemn salvatory,
 Sealed from the moth and the owl and the fitter
 mouse —

Each with his name on his brow.
 'All the kings of the nations lie in glory,
 Every one in his own house:'
 Then why not thou?

"Year," I said, "thou shalt not lack
 Bribes to bar thy coming back;
 Doth old Egypt wear her best
 In the chambers of her rest?
 Doth she take to her last bed
 Beaten gold, and glorious red?
 Envy not! for thou wilt wear
 In the dark a shroud as fair;
 Golden with the sunny ray
 Thou withdrawest from my day;
 Wrought upon with colors fine
 Stolen from this life of mine:
 Like the dusty Libyan kings,
 Lie with two wide-open wings
 On thy breast, as if to say,
 On these wings hope flew away;
 And so housed, and thus adorned,
 Not forgotten, but not scorned,
 Let the dark for evermore
 Close thee when I close the door;