

And what is left that I should tell?  
 I begged a kiss, I pleaded well:  
 The rosebud lips did long decline;  
 But yet I think, I think 'tis true,  
 That leaned at last into the dew,  
 One little instant they were mine.

O life! how dear thou hast become:  
 She laughed at dawn, and I was dumb,  
 But evening counsels best prevail.  
 Fair shine the blue that o'er her spreads,  
 Green be the pastures where she treads,  
 The maiden with the milking-pail!

—◆—  
 THE LETTER L.

ABSENT.

We sat on grassy slopes that meet  
 With sudden dip the level strand;  
 The trees hung overhead — our feet  
 Were on the sand.

Two silent girls, a thoughtful man,  
 We sunned ourselves in open light,  
 And felt such April airs as fan  
 The Isle of Wight;

And smelt the wall-flower in the crag  
 Whereon that dainty waft had fed,  
 Which made the bell-hung cowslip wag  
 Her delicate head;

And let alighting jackdaws fleet  
 Adown it open-winged, and pass  
 Till they could touch with outstretched feet  
 The warmed grass.

The happy wave ran up and rang  
 Like service bells a long way off,  
 And down a little freshet sprang  
 From mossy trough,

And splashed into a rain of spray,  
 And fretted on with daylight's loss,  
 Because so many blue-bells lay  
 Leaning across.

Blue martins gossiped in the sun,  
 And pairs of chattering daws flew by,  
 And sailing brigs rocked softly on  
 In company.

Wild cherry boughs above us spread  
 The whitest shade was ever seen,  
 And flicker, flicker, came and fled  
 Sun-spots between.

Bees murmured in the milk-white bloom  
 As babes will sigh for deep content  
 When their sweet hearts for peace make room,  
 As given, not lent.

And we saw on: we said no word,  
 And one was lost in musings rare,  
 One buoyant as the waft that stirred  
 Her shining hair.

His eyes were bent upon the sand,  
 Unfathomed deeps within them lay;  
 A slender rod was in his hand—  
 A hazel spray.

Her eyes were resting on his face,  
 As shyly glad by stealth to glean  
 Impressions of his manly grace  
 And guarded mien;

The mouth with steady sweetness set,  
 And eyes conveying unaware  
 The distant hint of some regret  
 That harbored there.

She gazed, and in the tender flush  
 That made her face like roses blown,  
 And in the radiance and the hush,  
 Her thought was shown.

It was a happy thing to sit  
 So near, nor mar his reverie ;  
 She looked not for a part in it,  
 So meek was she.

But it was solace for her eyes,  
 And for her heart, that yearned to him,  
 To watch apart in loving wise  
 Those musings dim.

Lost — lost, and gone ! The Pelham woods .  
 Were full of doves that cooed at ease ;  
 The orchis filled her purple hoods  
 For dainty bees.

He heard not ; all the delicate air  
 Was fresh with falling water-spray ;  
 It mattered not — he was not there,  
 But far away .

Till with the hazel in his hand,  
 Still drowned in thought, it thus befell,  
 He drew a letter on the sand —  
 The letter L.

And looking on it, straight there wrought  
 A ruddy flush about his brow ;  
 His letter woke him : absent thought  
 Rushed homeward now.

And, half-abashed, his hasty touch  
 Effaced it with a tell-tale care,  
 As if his action had been much,  
 And not his air.

And she? she watched his open palm  
 Smooth out the letter from the sand,  
 And rose, with aspect almost calm,  
 And filled her hand

With cherry bloom : and moved away  
 To gather wild forget-me-not,  
 And let her errant footsteps stray  
 To one sweet spot,

As if she coveted the fair  
 White lining of the silver weed  
 And cuckoo-pint that shaded there  
 Empurpled seed.

She had not feared, as I divine,  
 Because she had not hoped. Alas !  
 The sorrow of it ! for that sign  
 Came but to pass ;

And yet it robbed her of the right  
 To give, who looked not to receive,  
 And made her blush in love's despite  
 That she should grieve.

A shape in white, she turned to gaze ;  
 Her eyes were shaded with her hand  
 And half-way up the winding ways  
 We saw her stand.

Green hollows of the fringed cliff,  
 Red rocks that under waters show,  
 Blue reaches, and a sailing skiff,  
 Were spread below.

She stood to gaze, perhaps to sigh,  
 Perhaps to think; but who can tell  
 How heavy on her heart must lie  
 The letter L!

She came anon with quiet grace;  
 And "What," she murmured, "silent yet!"  
 He answered, "'Tis a haunted place,  
 And spell-beset.

"O speak to us, and break the spell!"  
 "The spell is broken," she replied.  
 "I crossed the running brook, it fell,  
 It could not bide.

"And I have brought a budding world  
 Of orchis spires and daisies rank,  
 And ferny plumes but half uncurled,  
 From yonder bank;

"And I shall weave of them a crown,  
 And at the well-head launch it free,  
 That so the brook may float it down,  
 And out to sea.

"There may it to some English hands  
 From fairy meadow seem to come;  
 The fairest of fairy lands —  
 The land of home."

"Weave on," he said, and as she wove  
 We told how currents in the deep,  
 With branches from a lemon grove,  
 Blue bergs will sweep.

And messages from shipwrecked folk  
 Will navigate the moon-led main,  
 And painted boards of splintered oak  
 Their port regain.

Then floated out by vagrant thought,  
 My soul beheld on torrid sand  
 The wasteful water set at naught  
 Man's skilful hand,

And suck out gold-dust from the box,  
 And wash it down in weedy whirls,  
 And split the wine-keg on the rocks,  
 And lose the pearls.

"Ah! why to that which needs it not,"  
 Methought, "should costly things be given?  
 How much is wasted, wrecked, forgot,  
 On this side heaven!

So musing, did mine ears awake  
 To maiden tones of sweet reserve,  
 And manly speech that seemed to make  
 The steady curve

Of lips that uttered it defer  
 Their guard, and soften for the thought:  
 She listened, and his talk with her  
 Was fancy fraught.

"There is not much in liberty" —  
 With doubtful pauses he began;  
 And said to her and said to me,  
 "There was a man —

"There was a man who dreamed one night  
 That his dead father came to him,  
 And said, when fire was low, and light  
 Was burning dim —

"Why vagrant thus, my sometime pride,  
 Unloved, unloving, wilt thou roam?  
 Sure home is best!' The son replied,  
 'I have no home.'

“ ‘Shall not I speak?’ his father said,  
 ‘Who early chose a youthful wife,  
 And worked for her, and with her led  
 My happy life.

“ ‘Ay, I will speak, for I was young  
 As thou art now, when I did hold  
 The prattling sweetness of thy tongue  
 Dearer than gold;

“ ‘And rosy from thy noonday sleep  
 Would bear thee to admiring kin,  
 And all thy pretty looks would keep  
 My heart within.

“ ‘Then after, ’mid thy young allies —  
 For thee ambition flushed my brow —  
 I coveted the schoolboy prize  
 Far more than thou.

“ ‘I thought for thee, I thought for all  
 My gamesome imps that round me grew;  
 The dews of blessing heaviest fall  
 Where care falls too.

“ ‘And I that sent my boys away,  
 In youthful strength to earn their bread,  
 And died before the hair was gray  
 Upon my head —

“ ‘I say to thee, though free from care,  
 A lonely lot, an aimless life,  
 The crowning comfort is not there —  
 Son, take a wife.’

“ ‘Father beloved,’ the son replied,  
 And failed to gather to his breast,  
 With arms in darkness searching wide,  
 The formless guest.

“ ‘I am but free, as sorrow is,  
 To dry her tears, to laugh, to talk;  
 And free, as sick men are, I wis,  
 To rise and walk.

“ ‘And free, as poor men are, to buy  
 If they have naught wherewith to pay;  
 Nor hope the debt, before they die,  
 To wipe away.

“ ‘What ’vails it there are wives to win,  
 And faithful hearts for those to yearn,  
 Who find not aught thereto akin  
 To make return?

“ ‘Shall he take much who little gives  
 And dwells in spirit far away,  
 When she that in his presence lives,  
 Doth never stray,

“ ‘But, waking, guideth as beseems  
 The happy house in order trim,  
 And tends her babes; and, sleeping, dreams  
 Of them and him?

“ ‘O base, O cold,’ — while thus he spake  
 The dream broke off, the vision fled;  
 He carried on his speech awake,  
 And sighing, said —

“ ‘I had — ah, happy man! — I had  
 A precious jewel in my breast,  
 And while I kept it I was glad  
 At work, at rest!

“ ‘Call it a heart, and call it strong  
 As upward stroke of eagle’s wing;  
 Then call it weak, you shall not wrong  
 The beating thing.

- “ In tangles of the jungle reed,  
Whose heats are lit with tiger eyes,  
In shipwreck drifting with the weed  
'Neath rainy skies,
- “ Still youthful manhood, fresh and keen,  
At danger gazed with awed delight,  
As if sea would not drown, I ween,  
Nor serpent bite.
- “ I had — ah, happy! but 'tis gone,  
The priceless jewel; one came by,  
And saw and stood awhile to con  
With curious eye,
- “ And wished for it, and faintly smiled  
From under lashes black as doom,  
With subtle sweetness, tender, mild,  
That did illumine
- “ The perfect face, and shed on it  
A charm, half feeling, half surprise,  
And brim with dreams the exquisite  
Brown blessèd eyes.
- “ Was it for this, no more but this,  
I took and laid it in her hand,  
By dimples ruled, to hint submiss,  
By frown unmanned?
- “ It was for this — and O farewell  
The fearless foot, the present mind,  
And steady will to breast the swell  
And face the wind!
- “ I gave the jewel from my breast,  
She played with it a little while  
As I sailed down into the west,  
Fed by her smile;

- “ Then weary of it — far from land,  
With sighs as deep as destiny,  
She let it drop from her fair hand  
Into the sea.
- “ And watched it sink; and I — and I, —  
What shall I do, for all is vain?  
No wave will bring, no gold will buy,  
No toil attain;
- “ Nor any diver reach to raise  
My jewel from the blue abyss;  
Or could they, still I should but praise  
Their work amiss.
- “ Thrown, thrown away! But I love yet  
The fair, fair hand which did the deed:  
That wayward sweetness to forget  
Were bitter meed.
- “ No, let it lie, and let the wave  
Roll over it for evermore;  
Whelmed where the sailor hath his grave —  
The sea her store.
- “ My heart, my sometime happy heart!  
And O for once let me complain,  
I must forego life's better part —  
Man's dearer gain.
- “ I worked afar that I might rear  
A peaceful home on English soil;  
I labored for the gold and gear —  
I loved my toil.
- “ Forever in my spirit spake  
The natural whisper, “ Well 'twill be  
When loving wife and children break  
Their bread with thee!”

“ ‘The gathered gold is turned to dross,  
The wife hath faded into air,  
My heart is thrown away, my loss  
I cannot spare.

“ ‘Not spare unsated thought her food—  
No, not one rustle of the fold,  
Nor scent of eastern sandalwood,  
Nor gleam of gold;

“ ‘Nor quaint devices of the shawl,  
Far less the drooping lashes meek:  
The gracious figure, lithe and tall,  
The dimpled cheek;

“ ‘And all the wonders of her eyes,  
And sweet caprices of her air,  
Albeit, indignant reason cries,  
Fool! have a care.

“ ‘Fool! join not madness to mistake;  
Thou knowest she loved thee not a whit;  
Only that she thy heart might break—  
She wanted it,

“ ‘Only the conquered thing to chain  
So fast that none might set it free,  
Nor other woman there might reign  
And comfort thee.

“ ‘Robbed, robbed of life’s illusions sweet:  
Love dead outside her closed door,  
And passion fainting at her feet  
To wake no more;

“ ‘What canst thou give that unknown bride  
Whom thou didst work for in the waste,  
Ere fated love was born, and cried—  
Was dead, ungraced?

“ ‘No more but this, the partial care,  
The natural kindness for its own,  
The trust that waxeth unaware,  
As worth is known:

“ ‘Observance, and complacent thought  
Indulgent, and the honor due  
That many another man has brought  
Who brought love too.

“ ‘Nay, then, forbid it, Heaven!’ he said,  
‘The saintly vision fades from me;  
O bands and chains! I cannot wed—  
I am not free.’”

With that he raised his face to view;  
“What think you,” asking, “of my tale?  
And was he right to let the dew  
Of morn exhale,

“ ‘And burdened in the noontide sun,  
The grateful shade of home forego—  
Could he be right—I ask as one  
Who fain would know?’”

He spoke to her and spoke to me;  
The rebel rose-hue dyed her cheek;  
The woven crown lay on her knee;  
She would not speak.

And I with doubtful pause—averse  
To let occasion drift away—  
I answered—“if his case were worse  
Than word can say,

“ ‘Time is a healer of sick hearts,  
And women have been known to choose,  
With purpose to allay their smarts,  
And tend their bruise,

“These for themselves. Content to give  
In their own lavish love complete,  
Taking for sole prerogative  
Their tendance sweet.

“Such meeting in their diadem  
Of crowning love’s ethereal fire,  
Himself he robs who robbeth them  
Of their desire.

“Therefore the man who, dreaming, cried  
Against his lot that evensong,  
I judge him honest, and decide  
That he was wrong.”

“When I am judged, ah, may my fate,”  
He whispered, “in thy code be read!  
Be thou both judge and advocate.”  
Then turned, he said —

“Fair weaver!” touching, while he spoke  
The woven crown, the weaving hand,  
“And do you this decree revoke,  
Or may it stand?”

“This friend, you ever think her right —  
She is not wrong, then?” Soft and low  
The little trembling word took flight:  
She answered, “No.”

PRESENT.

A meadow, where the grass was deep,  
Rich, square, and golden to the view,  
A belt of elms, with level sweep  
About it grew.

The sun beat down on it, the line  
Of shade was clear beneath the trees;  
There, by a clustering eglantine,  
We sat at ease.

And O the buttercups! that field  
O’ the cloth of gold, where pennons swam —  
Where France set up his liliated shield,  
His oriflamme.

And Henry’s lion-standard rolled:  
What was it to their matchless sheen,  
Their million million drops of gold  
Among the green!

We sat at ease in peaceful trust,  
For he had written, “Let us meet;  
My wife grew tired of smoke and dust,  
And London heat,

“And I have found a quiet grange,  
Set back in meadows sloping west,  
And there our little ones can range  
And she can rest.

“Come down, that we may show the view,  
And she may hear your voice again,  
And talk her woman’s talk with you  
Along the lane.”

Since he had drawn with listless hand  
The letter, six long years had fled,  
And winds had blown about the sand,  
And they were wed.

Two rosy urchins near him played,  
Or watched, entranced, the shapely ships  
That with his knife for them he made  
Of elder slips.

And where the flowers were thickest shed,  
 Each blossom like a burnished gem,  
 A creeping baby reared its head,  
 And ceced at them.

And calm was on the father's face,  
 And love was in the mother's eyes ;  
 She looked and listened from her place,  
 In tender wise.

She did not need to raise her voice  
 That they might hear, she sat so nigh ;  
 Yet we could speak when 'twas our choice,  
 And soft reply.

Holding our quiet talk apart  
 Of household things ; till, all unsealed,  
 The guarded outworks of the heart  
 Began to yield ;

And much that prudence will not dip  
 The pen to fix and send away,  
 Passed safely over from the lip  
 That summer day.

"I should be happy," with a look  
 Towards her husband where he lay,  
 Lost in the pages of his book,  
 Soft did she say ;

"I am, and yet no lot below  
 For one whole day eludeth care ;  
 To marriage all the stories flow,  
 And finish there :

"As if with marriage came the end,  
 The entrance into settled rest,  
 The calm to which love's tossings tend,  
 The quiet breast.

"For me love played the low preludes,  
 Yet life began but with the ring,  
 Such infinite sollicitudes  
 Around it cling.

"I did not for my heart divine  
 Her destiny so meek to grow ;  
 The higher nature matched with mine  
 Will have it so.

"Still I consider it, and still  
 Acknowledge it my master made,  
 Above me by the steadier will  
 Of naught afraid.

"Above me by the candid speech ;  
 The temperate judgment of its own ;  
 The keener thoughts that grasp and reach  
 At things unknown.

"But I look up and he looks down,  
 And thus our married eyes can meet ;  
 Unclouded his, and clear of frown,  
 And gravely sweet.

"And yet, O good, O wise and true !  
 I would for all my fealty,  
 That I could be as much to you  
 As you to me ;

"And knew the deep secure content  
 Of wives who have been hardly won  
 And, long petitioned, gave assent,  
 Jealous of none.

"But proudly sure in all the earth  
 No other in that homage shares,  
 Nor other woman's face or worth  
 Is prized as theirs."



I said: "*And yet no lot below  
For one whole day eludeth care.*"  
Your thought." She answered, "Even so,  
I would beware

"Regretful questionings; be sure  
That very seldom do they rise,  
Nor for myself do I endure—  
I sympathize.

"For once"—she turned away her head,  
Across the grass she swept her hand—  
"There was a letter once," she said,  
"Upon the sand."

"There was, in truth, a letter writ  
On sand," I said, "and swept from view,  
But that same hand which fashioned it  
Is given to you.

"Efface the letter; wherefore keep  
An image which the sands forego!"  
"Albeit that fear had seemed to sleep,"  
She answered low,

"I could not choose but wake it now;  
For do but turn aside your face,  
A house on yonder hilly brow  
Your eyes may trace.

"The chestnut shelters it; ah me,  
That I should have so faint a heart!  
But yester eve, as by the sea  
I sat apart,

"I heard a name, I saw a hand  
Of passing stranger point that way—  
And will he meet her on the strand,  
When late we stray?"

"For she is come, for she is there,  
I heard it in the dusk, and heard  
Admiring words, that named her fair,  
But little stirred

"By beauty of the wood and wave,  
And weary of an old man's sway!  
For it was sweeter to enslave  
Than to obey."

—The voice of one that near us stood,  
The rustle of a silken fold,  
A scent of eastern sandalwood,  
A gleam of gold!

A lady! In the narrow space  
Between the husband and the wife,  
But nearest him—she showed a face  
With dangers rife;

A subtle smile that dimpling fled,  
As night-black lashes rose and fell:  
I looked, and to myself I said,  
"The Letter L."

He, too, looked up, and with arrest  
Of breath and motion held his gaze,  
Nor cared to hide within his breast  
His deep amaze;

Nor spoke till on her near advance  
His dark cheek flushed a ruddier hue:  
And with his change of countenance  
Hers altered too.

"Lenore!" his voice was like the cry  
Of one entreating; and he said  
But that—then paused with such a sigh  
As mourns the dead.

And seated near, with no demur  
Of bashful doubt she silence broke,  
Though I alone could answer her  
When first she spoke.

She looked : her eyes were beauty's own ;  
She shed their sweetness into his ;  
Nor spared the married wife one moan  
That bitterest is.

She spoke, and, lo, her loveliness  
Methought she damaged with her tongue :  
And every sentence made it less,  
So false they rung.

The rallying voice, the light demand,  
Half flippant, half unsatisfied ;  
The vanity sincere and bland —  
The answers wide.

And now her talk was of the East,  
And next her talk was of the sea ;  
“ And has the love for it increased  
You shared with me ? ”

He answered not, but grave and still  
With earnest eyes her face perused,  
And locked his lips with steady will,  
As one that mused —

That mused and wondered. Why his gaze  
Should dwell on her, methought, was plain ;  
But reason that should wonder raise  
I sought in vain.

And near and near the children drew,  
Attracted by her rich array,  
And gems that trembling into view  
Like raindrops lay.

He spoke : the wife her baby took  
And pressed the little face to hers ;  
What pain soe'er her bosom shook,  
What jealous stirs

Might stab her heart, she hid them so,  
The cooing babe a veil supplied ;  
And if she listened none might know  
Or if she sighed ;

Or if, forecasting grief and care,  
Unconscious solace thence she drew  
And lulled her babe, and unaware  
Lulled sorrow too.

The lady, she interpreter  
For look or language wanted none,  
If yet dominion stayed with her —  
So lightly won :

If yet the heart she wounded sore  
Could yearn to her, and let her see  
The homage that was evermore  
Disloyalty ;

If sign would yield that it had bled,  
Or rallied from the faithless blow,  
Or sick or sullen stooped to wed,  
She craved to know.

Now dreamy deep, now sweetly keen,  
Her asking eyes would round him shine ;  
But guarded lips and settled mien  
Refused the sign.

And unbeguild and unbetrayed,  
The wonder yet within his breast,  
It seemed a watchful part he played  
Against her quest.

Until with accent of regret  
 She touched upon the past once more,  
 As if she dared him to forget  
 His dream of yore.

And words of little weight let fall  
 The fancy of the lower mind ;  
 How waxing life must needs leave all  
 Its best behind ;

How he had said that " he would fain  
 (One morning on the halcyon sea)  
 That life would at a stand remain  
 Eternally ;

" And sails be mirrored in the deep,  
 As then they were for evermore,  
 And happy spirits wake and sleep  
 Afar from shore :

" The well-contented heart be fed  
 Ever as then, and all the world  
 (It were not small) unshadowèd  
 When sails were furled.

" Your words " — a pause, and quietly  
 With touch of calm self-ridicule :

" It may be so — for then," said he,  
 " I was a fool."

With that he took his book, and left  
 An awkward silence to my care,  
 That soon I filled with questions deft  
 And debonair ;

And slid into an easy vein,  
 The favorite picture of the year ;  
 The grouse upon her lord's domain —  
 The salmon weir ;

Till she could feign a sudden thought  
 Upon neglected guests, and rise  
 And make us her adieux, with naught  
 In her dark eyes

Acknowledging or shame or pain ;  
 But just unveiling for our view  
 A little smile of still disdain  
 As she withdrew.

Then nearer did the sunshine creep,  
 And warmer came the wafting breeze ;  
 The little babe was fast asleep  
 On mother's knees.

Fair was the face that o'er it leant,  
 The cheeks with beauteous blushes dyed ;  
 The downcast lashes, shyly bent,  
 That failed to hide

Some tender shame. She did not see ;  
 She felt his eyes that would not stir ;  
 She looked upon her babe, and he  
 So looked at her.

So grave, so wondering, so content,  
 As one new waked to conscious life,  
 Whose sudden joy with fear is blent,  
 He said, " My wife."

" My wife, how beautiful you are !"  
 Then closer at her side reclined ;  
 " The bold brown woman from afar  
 Comes, to me blind.

" And by comparison I see  
 The majesty of matron grace,  
 And learn how pure, how fair can be  
 My own wife's face :

"Pure with all faithful passion, fair  
With tender smiles that come and go;  
And comforting as April air  
After the snow.

"Fool that I was! my spirit frets  
And marvels at the humbling truth,  
That I have deigned to spend regrets  
On my bruised youth.

"Its idol mocked thee, seated nigh,  
And shamed me for the mad mistake;  
I thank my God he could deny,  
And she forsake.

"Ah, who am I, that God hath saved  
Me from the doom I did desire,  
And crossed the lot myself had craved,  
To set me higher?

"What have I done that He should bow  
From heaven to choose a wife for me?  
And what deserved, He should endow  
My home with THEE?

"My wife!" With that she turned her face  
To kiss the hand about her neck;  
And I went down and sought the place  
Where leaped the beck—

The busy beck, that still would run  
And fall, and falter its refrain;  
And pause and shimmer in the sun,  
And fall again.

It led me to the sandy shore,  
We sang together, it and I—  
"The daylight comes, the dark is o'er,  
The shadows fly."

I lost it on the sandy shore,  
"O wife!" its latest murmurs fell,  
"O wife, be glad and fear no more  
The letter L."

THE HIGH TIDE ON THE COAST OF LINCOLN-  
SHIRE.

(1571.)

THE old mayor climbed the belfry tower,  
The ringers ran by two, by three;  
"Pull, if ye never pulled before;  
Good ringers, pull your best," quoth he.  
"Play uppe, play uppe, O Boston bells!  
Ply all your changes, all your swells,  
Play uppe 'The Brides of Enderby.'"

Men say it was a stolen tyde—  
The Lord that sent it, He knows all;  
But in myne ears doth still abide  
The message that the bells let fall:  
And there was naught of strange, beside  
The flight of mews and peewits pied  
By millions crouched on the old sea wall.

I sat and spun within the doore,  
My thread break off, I raised myne eyes;  
The level sun, like ruddy ore,  
Lay sinking in the barren skies;  
And dark against day's golden death  
She moved where Lindis wandereth,  
My sonne's faire wife, Elizabeth.

"Cusha! Cusha! Cusha!" calling,  
Ere the early dews were falling,