A VISION OF SAINTS

Once, long years since, I dreamt a dream of Greece
And fair fantastic tales of Nymph and Faun
And thin heroic forms, and ghostly gods
Floating in loveliness by grove and hill
And lake-side, all the joyous innocent grace
Of the old Pagan fancies; mixt with tales
Of passion and unhappy deeds of old,
Dark, unforgotten.

Yesternight I knew
Another dream, a vision of old Rome,
Sterner and harsher, and the new-born grace
Of sacrifice; of life which for the Truth
Bore misery to the death, while they, the blithe
Faint gods of Fancy, sank to fiends of Ill
A Vision of Saints.

Athirst for pain and blood, and the old grace
To the new suffering, and the careless lives*
That were content to enjoy, and asked no more
Than some brief glimpse of Beauty ere they died,
To grave bent brows, and tortured limbs, and all
The armoury of pain.

And once again,

As the great Master passed from Hell to Heaven,
With an angelic guide, I seemed to tread
Where in the infinite Empyrean dwell
The blessed company of Saints, and move,
Convey'd by soaring wings to highest heaven,
'Midst those who bare of old the victor's palm
And wore the crown—martyr and eremite,
Lives spent in toil for God, or fired with love,
An infinite concourse pure and white as snow;
While far away on that unbounded air,*
Scarce reached by sight were saints of hoary eold,
Who by old Nile or the Chaldean plain,
A Vision of Saints.

Through grave lives lighted by a certain hope,
Foreknew the weighing of the soul for doom,
And that unaided, darkling way which threads
The Valley of the Shadow, and passed to life
Dim centuries ere yet the Lawgiver
Strode from the fiery Hill with face afame,
Down to the listening Tribes.

Not of old days
Were all the souls I saw, nor yet of Rome,
In birth or faith, but down long vistas gray
Of centuries we fared, by endless ranks
Of sanctity, cloistered or secular,
But all of Heaven; and later born in time,
Preachers inspired and ministering souls
Of women, whom no vow nor cell immured,
But a great pity drew and pious care
For fallen lives, and those who in the world,
Not of it—poets, thinkers, lawgivers,
Lovers of Country, of the Race, of God,
High souls and just who wrought in sight of all,
Toilers obscure who worked their work and died—
Bloom, in all time, the innumerable throng
That, year by year, the Eternal Seasons raise
To make our poor world sweet.

All these I saw,
A concourse vast of every race and tribe
And tongue; till as I gazed, a shining band
New risen, and bearing on their front the mark
Of our guardian life and modern speech,
Streamed through the boundless vast; and as we passed
These saints long risen, or mortal yesterday,
I questioned him who led me of the lives
And fate of some, and he, with solemn speech,
Made answer as we went

But ere we came
To real lives, lived upon earth for Heaven,
Two gracious legends, like the vanished tales
Of older Greece, twin dreams within my dream.
Each with its precious, hidden treasure, took
My eyes awhile, twin truths on which are built
Our newer, higher hope, but of old time
Unknown or dimly felt—the blessed dream
Which all have dreamt and shall, of life which ends not
With the last breath, but, to some finer air
Escaping, doth renew itself and fare
To what high work we know not, in some sphere
Unreached by thought, yet sure; and one the strength
Of weakness, when the too strong soul bows low
Before God’s will, and doth exalt itself
Through self-surrender. These, the corner-stones
Of all our Faith, my guide, in parables
Part true, part feigned, declared to me, and I
Listened with eager ears.

And first I seemed

To greet a joyous, radiant company,
Seven comely youths who, fresh from secular sleep,
From out a caverned hillside issued blithe
To meet the long-lost day. And thus my guide:
“When Rome was Pagan still, a little band
Of ardent, generous youths who called on Christ,
Fled their idolatrous city, thinking scorn
To kneel to those false gods their souls abhorred—
And loathing that accursèd heathen rout
Turned to the silence of the lonely hills
That brood round Ephesus, and found at length
Shelter and peace, within a winding cave
High on the rock-faced side of Cælian,
And there dwelt safe, lifting their gracious hymns
In worship to the Lord.

At last there came
Some heathen passer-by, who heard the sound,
And straight betrayed them. And the tyrant sent
His soldiers, and that none came forth again
Rolled in the narrow entrance monstrous rocks,
Which shut out air and light. Then when they knew
No change of night and day, and all their food
Had failed, came Heaven-sent sleep to close their eyes.
Deep sleep which knew no waking fell on them
For the long space of nigh two hundred years.

There they slept on till now the conquering Cross
Bare sway, and 'twas a Christian Cæsar ruled
Where raged the Pagan erst. For thirty years
The pious Theodosius swayed the might
Of Rome, and then the powers of evil bred
Dark heresies to rend the seamless robe
The Pagan might not. Doubting voices cried,
'No resurrection is there, but the body
Lies rotting in the earth, and the freed soul
Weltering upon the unbounded seas of space
Is lost within the Universe, nor more
Takes its old shape. What? did the prophets know,
Moses, Esaias, and the rest, this thing?
There is no place of souls nor judgment day
Of deeds done in the flesh, nor heaven nor hell,
Only upon the earth our kingdom is.
Be wise and occupy, for never indeed
Comes any resurrection of the dead;
The dead are gone, cleave to the living alone;
Use all your nature. Lives the flower again,
The brute that comes so near us, and is full
Of faithful love and reverence for man
As man for God? If all these die and pass,
Then shall not we? What else than arrogant pride
Blinds men to fact, and fools them with a world
No eye has seen, which all the seers of old
Knew not nor proved? Nay, surely it were well
To take our lives in our own hands, and tread
Our fearless paths not looking for reward
To any dim unreal sphere, but deem
Our individual life ends with the grave,
As ends the flower in frost; or if there come
Something of higher life, yet 'tis the Race
Which profits, nought beside. Wherefore in vain
Are all your hopes of heaven, your fears of hell,
Since 'tis not men who live again, but Man.'

Thus having heard, the pious Cæsar turned,
Struck cold with doubt, as one a palsy takes,
Making his limbs hang impotent, his will
Powerless to live or die. Alone he sate,
Hating the voice, hating his doubt, himself
Who doubted, and long time from sight of men
Withdrawed himself and, clad in sackcloth, pined
With ashes on his head, yet found not peace
For all his penance, but the spectral doubt
Weighed on him like a nightmare night and day.

Now at the selfsame hour, when Cæsar strove
With his immense despair, a humble hind,
Seeking to find a shelter for his flock,
Chanced on the secret cave of Cælian,
And toiling with his fellows rolled aside
The rocks which sealed its mouth, and went his way,
Nor entered; but when now, returning dawn
Flooded the long-sealed vault with cheerful day,
It pierced to where the sleepers lay, and breathed
Some stir of coming life, and they once more
Drinking the brisk sweet breath of early morn
Opened their long-closed eyes, and woke again
To the old earth, and kept the far off past
Unchanged in memory, and spake with mirth
Of their long sleep, and the fair dreams it brought,
And said a prayer, and sang a hymn, and then,
Urged by the healthy zest of vigorous youth
Sent one among them, Malchus hight, to buy
Food for their hunger.

Fearfully he stole
Down the long steep to where great Ephesus
Shining beneath him lay. Scant change was there,
Only the stately house of Artemis
He found not where it stood. Half dazed he seemed
By too long sleep. But when he gained the gate
Of the city, on the walls behold the Cross!
The witness to the faith by which he lived,
The blessed symbol, which to own was death!
But still he seemed to dream, and wondering sought
Another gate, and there again the Cross!
And as he mused what portent 'twas he saw
The passers freely named the holy name
Which yesternight brought doom. Then with great joy,
Yet deep perplexity, he turned to greet
Some face he seemed to know, but it was strange,
And strange the fashion of the dress, and strange
'The accent of the tongue, till, half afraid,
Entering where bread was bought, and offering gol.
The seller looking saw an ancient coin
Of Decius, and would ask him whence it came,
Deeming he found by some unhallowed spell
Forbidden treasure, and the youth's strange garb
And speech, and great perplexity, enforced
The doubt, so that they bound him fast and haled him
Through the long streets, where all in vain he sought
One friendly glance, to where upon his throne
The Bishop judged; and when the aged man
Questioned him of the thing, and what had been,
And sware him on the Cross, straightway the youth—
'We fled the tyrant Decius, who would bid us
Serve the false gods, and—was it yesternight?—
Rolled ponderous rocks to seal the cave where I
And my companions slept; but now, I pray you
What is it that has been? Bear you the Cross
And fear not? Call men now upon the name
Of Christ and dread not all the bitter pains—
The dungeon, and the torture, and the stake,
The tyrannies our fathers knew and we?
What change is this assails my ears and eyes—
Strange speech, strange vestments, forms and faces strange?
Where is the shining house of Artemis?
I pray you tell me what it is has been,
'And whether I be alive or long time dead,
Deceived in dreams by long unnotated years.'

Then fell the Bishop, full of pious awe,
Prostrate at Malchus' feet—the aged man
Before the spirit clothed with changeless youth,
Since well he knew what thing his eyes had seen—
A miracle of life, raised from the grave,
A miracle of Heaven. And all the throng,
Bishop and governor, with all the great
And noble of the city, white-haired lords,
And stately matrons, coming, knelt with him
Before the youth, o'er whose unwrinkled brow
Two hundred years had passed and left no sign—
Swift-coming age before eternal youth,
Brief life before the endless life of death.
Then went they forth, that noble throng, and all
The city, to where upon the Cælian hill
The seven youthful martyrs lay so long.
There in the cave, the blessed company
Sate cheerful, wondering much to see the throng,
With Malchus leading them; and as the array
Drew nearer, heard the sound of hymns, and saw
The sacred symbol borne on high, and knew
All that had been, and that the might of Wrong
Was broken, and the world was of the Faith,
And the false gods no more; and then they raised
Their clear accordant strains in praise to heaven,
And from their happy heads crowned round with light,
And from their cheeks red with the heavenly rose,
And from their lips touched with divinest song,
An effuent glory shone, and all who saw
Knew that their eyes beheld the blessed dead.
Last, Theodosius wrestling with his doubt,
And almost conquering, sped o'er land and sea
To see the portent, and when he was come
And stood before the place the Pagan erst
Sealed fast with monstrous rocks, on the young lives
Fresh vowed to Christ, and left them there to die,
He knelt in silence, and the fire of faith
Burned high in him, and dried the deeps of doubt.
And when he looked on those immortal eyes,
And that first bloom of an immortal youth,
His faith grew perfect, and he blest the Lord
Who sent the sign. Then, with one voice sublime,
The seven awakened spirits sang, 'Believe,'
Believe through us, O Caesar! We are dead,
And yet we live. Praise Heaven that we have seen
The faith triumphant. Ere the last great day
The Lord has raised us that men should be strong,
And doubt no longer, but believe indeed
The life and resurrection of the world.'

And when their voices died away they bowed
Their heads upon their breasts, and kneeling, gave
Their spirits back to God; and all who saw,
And all who heard, Cæsar, and all the throng,
Doubted no more, but rose and did believe.”

Which things, when I had heard, again I seemed
To hear my guide, "Know, thou that hearest me,
Through the round world this fair old legend runs
Where man is higher than the beasts that die.
The Hindu, dreaming on his seething plains,
Cherishes it; the fierce false prophet stole
The story; and throughout the fabulous East
It lives and thrives to-day; the frozen North
Holds it for true; o'er all the ancient world
Some fair faint blossom of the gracious tale
Lingers, and in the modern springs anew
In witness to the light-winged hours which snatch
The swift unconscious life from youth to age.
Too fair, too fleeting, change confusing change—
Change of a day which works the work of years;
Unchanging years, which seem but as a day!"

"But with still clearer voice, and sweeter tongue,
Thus speaks the legend: 'Sleep and Death are one,
Not diverse, and to Death's long slumber comes
Awakening sure and certain, when the Dawn
Of the Last Day shall break, and shall unseal
The long-closed eyes, as that strong sun of Spring
Illumed the caves of sleep, and stirred the blood
Which else had slumbered still.' Yet since no sign
Comes from our sleepers here, the yearning hearts
Which mark the struggling breath come short and faint,
The tired eyes close, and the calm peace which smooths
The weary brow—and 'tis sleep—no more—
Yet find no proof, cherish the legend fair,
Because life longs to be, because to cease
Is terrible, because the listening soul
Waits for some whisper from beyond the grave,
Waits still, as it has waited through all time,
Waits undismayed, whate'er its form of creed,
Nor fails, though all is silence, to hold fast,
Deep in its sacred depths, too deep for thought,
The Resurrection and the Life to be."
Next 'twas a tall and stalwart form I saw,
Like Herakles of old, who strode along,
Bearing a staff which seemed to bud and bloom
Into the martyr's palm.  Fainter he showed
In outline than the rest, as if I saw
A veiled life half hid behind a cloud
Of legend, or a real life, perhaps,
Set round with precious gems of allegory
And consecration fashioned from the sum
Of meaner lives, less sinful, less cast down,
And less triumphant.  Was it parable,
Not fact, that bid him be?  Then it was well
To feign the tale—the wave of death, the power
Of evil, the strong man who turned to good,
Whose fleshly strength was broken by the weight
Of a little child—and this dim saint, the thrall
Of evil once, is precious, as the lives
We track from birth to death.

Thus then my guide
Held converse as we passed.

"No name there is
More strange and quaint and sweet than Christopher's,
Who bore the Christ.

In the far fabulous East
He served, a soldier. Nature, which so oft
Grudges her gifts, gave this man strenuous limbs
And giant strength, joined with the choicer gift
Of a keen brain, and daring will, and high
Ambition which aspires. Him the clear voice
Of high adventure called o'er land and sea,
The magical music, heard of nobler souls,
Which dulls all lower voices. More than Prince
This strenuous champion showed, a King of men,
Who saw Power shining starlike on the hills
And set his face to reach it. Luxury
Held him nor sensual ease, who was too great
For silken fetters; a strong will and arm
Bent to a higher end than those, and fired
By higher longings.

Every soul of man

Knows its own weakness, so this strength o’ergrown
Only achievement drew. O’er land and sea,
From realm to realm, he fared, seeking a Lord
Still mightier than the last, until at length
A slumbering soul, not prizing good or ill,
He found a puissant Prince and served content.

But ’mid the rugged ways of this sad world,
As now he fared unmoved, the frequent sight
Of evil; the blind rage which takes and sways
The warrior in the fight; the hopeless pain
Which unregarded cries to Heaven; the wrong
Done on the earth for ever; the great sum
And mystery of Evil, worked on him
With that strange spell of power which only takes
The strong soul captive. Here was strength indeed,
Greater than mortal, which had power to bind
The mightiest in chains, now forcing them
Despite themselves to wrong, now binding them
With sensual fetters. Was not this enough
To limit Heaven itself? So this rude soul
Bowed to it, taking Evil for his god,
A voluntary thrall. Yet not to him
The smooth soul ways of sense, the paths of wrong,
Brought pleasure of themselves; only a beat
Of pulsing life, the keenness and the glow
Of full impassioned being. So long time
He served the Lord of Evil; deeds of wrong
And anger knew he, stains of sensual sin;
So that, for dread of him, men named his name
'He Unrighteous,' but he recked not. Power and fame
Sufficed him long, and hid from him the fashion
Of his own life, and by what perilous ways
He went, and black unfathomed gulfs of Ill.

'Till one day, as he journeyed (so the tale,
The allegory of this sinful soul)
Through a thick wood, which was the deadly shade
Of sense, and of the world, which hid the heavens,
Blinding the eye of day; with wondering thought
He knew his vanquisher, the Lord of Ill,
Cower down as from a blow, hiding his eyes
From some white suffering form.

And lo! his gaze
Met that great symbol of all sacrifice
Which men have worshipped since; the soft sad eyes,
The painful limbs fixed to the Tree of Death
Which is the Tree of Life; and all the past
Fell from him, and the mystery of Love
And Death and Evil; Might which gives itself
To save the Race, and dying, breaks in twain
The vanquished strength of Hell; all these transformed
His inmost being, and his prisoned soul,
Spurning its former chain, stood fair and free,
Unfettered, for a while, and then he fell
Prone on the earth, the mild and pitying eyes
Bent on him still. There he lay motionless
A night of precious sorrow, till at last
The sun rose on the earth and on his soul,
And Dawn, returning, brought the purer Day.

But when he rose the ancient mastery
And thirst for power, springing anew in him
Once more resistless, over land and sea
Drave him to seek this new and mightier Lord
Who brake the power of Ill. So far and wide
He fared, a passionate Pilgrim, but found not
The Lord Divine—for Him indeed his eyes
Saw not as yet—filled with the pride of life,
Touched with desire for good, since it was strong,
But prizing strength alone.

Till as he fared
His footsteps chanced upon a stony land
Where sprang no herb. There, in a lonely cell,
Pondered an aged man; no other thing
Of life was there, only wan age, which paused
Upon the verge of death. His giant strength
Was flagging now. Beyond the ghostly hills
The sun was sinking, and the gray of night
Stole upward. Through the plain beneath the cell
A broad black river raged, spanned by no bridge
For travellers, but a dark road stole to it
O’ergloomed by cypress, and no raft was there
Nor ferry. Evermore beyond the shade,
Breast-high, the strong stream roared by dark as doom.

There on the brink he paused, and saw no soul,
Watching the stream of death. Great misery
And weakness took him, and he sank, o'erborne,
Prone on the strand. Then on the farther shore
The sunset, glancing for a moment, fired
A thousand palace casements, soaring spires,
And airy domes, and straight his glad soul knew
That he had seen the city of the King.

Then presently he heard a reverend voice
From out the gloom. And now the sun had set,
And all the hills were hidden.

'Son, thou com'st
Seeking the Lord of Life. There is no way
But through yon cruel river. Thou wert strong:
Take rest and thought till strength return to thee.
Arise, the Dawn is nigh.'

Then they twain went,
And there that faint soul rested many days.
But when the strong man's strength was come again
His old guide led him forth to where the road
Sank in that dark swift stream. The hills were veiled;
There was no city to see, nought but thick cloud,
And still that black flood roaring. Then he heard
The old voice whisper, 'Not of strength alone
Come they who find the Master, but cast down
And weak and wandering. Yet since strength indeed
Well used is precious, therefore shalt thou plunge
In yon cold stream. Death shall not come to thee,
Nor in those chill dark waters shall thy feet
Slip, nor thy life be swallowed. Be it thine
To bear in thy strong arms the fainting souls
Of pilgrims who pass onward day and night,"
Seeking the Lord of Light. Thou who long time
Didst serve the Lord of Evil now shalt serve
A higher; and because great penances
Are fitting for great wrong, here shalt thou toil
Long years, till haply thou shalt lose the stain
Of sense and of the world; then shall thy eyes
See that thou wouldst. Go, suffer and be strong.

Then that rude soul, treading those stony ways,
Went down into the waters. Piteous cries
Called loud to him for help, poor wayfarers
Come to life's goal; wan age and budding youth,
And childhood fallen untimely. He stooped down
With wonder mixed with pity, solacing
Those weakling limbs, and, bearing in his arms
The helpless burden, through the chill dark depths
Of those black swirling waters, undismayed,
Strode onward. Oftentimes the deadly chill
Of ice-cold floods too strong for feebler hearts
Assailed him, yet his giant stature still
Strode upright through the deep to the far shore.
And those poor pilgrims with reviving souls
Blessed him, and left the waters, and grew white
And glorified, and in their eyes he knew
A wonder and a rapture as they saw
The palace of the King, the domes, the spires,
The shining oriels sunlit into gold,
The white forms on the verge to welcome them,
And the clear heights, and the discovered heaven.

But never on his eyes, for all his toil,
Broke that clear sun, nor those fair palace roofs,
As erst upon his weakness. Day and night
He laboured unrewarded, with no gleam
Of that eternal glory, which would shine
Upon those fainting souls, whom his strong arms
Bare upward. Day and night he toiled alone
Amid the deeps of death. Oft would he rise
At midnight, when the cry of sinking lives
Called to him on the brink, and succour them
Without a thought of fear. Yea, though the floods
Roared horribly, and deep called unto deep,
Straight through those hidden depths he strode unmoved
A strong, laborious, unrewarded soul.

Was it because the blot of former sin
Clung to him still uncleansed? I cannot tell;
The stain of ill eats deep. But to my thought
Not thus the legend runs; rather, I deem
He loved in good the strength which erst enthralled
His life to ill. Therefore this striving soul
Still laboured unfulfilled.

Thus the slow years
Passed, till the giant strength at times would flag
A little, and yet bore on. But one still night,
Ere cockcrow, when the world was sunk in sleep,
A summons came; and he arising saw,
With some strange new compassion, on the brink
A childish form. A sweet sad glance, divine
Shone from the eyes. And as the strong man took
The weakling to his heart, through the great power
Of Pity with new strength, he braved the deep
Careless with that light load.

But in mid stream
The more than human force, the dauntless spirit
Which long time bore unfalt'ring the great load
Of mortal ills—ay, though the loud winds beat
And the thick night was blind—these failed him now,
And, as by some o'erwhelming weight opprest,
His flagging forces tottered; the cold wave
Rose high around him; the once haughty head
Bowed low, the waters stealing to his lip
Engulfed; the burden of the painful world
Crushed his weak shoulders; and a bitter cry
Burst from him—‘Help! I faint, I sink, I die,
I perish; I am spent, and can no more.

My strength is naught, the deep floods swallow me.
Not of myself I conquered, but of Thee.’

Then suddenly from his spent life he knew
The load withdrawn, and through the midnight gloom
There burst the glorious vision of his dreams,
The palace of the King, the domes, the spires,
The shining oriels sunlit into gold,
The heaven of heavens discovered, and a voice—
'Thou hast sustained the whole world, bearing Me
The Lord of Earth and Heaven. Rise; turn awhile
To the old shore of Time. I am the King
Thou seekest. I have known thy sin, thy pain,
Thy tears, thy penitence. If thy soul ask
Proof of these things, this sign I give to thee.
Set thou thy staff to-night upon the verge
Of these dark waters, and with break of dawn
Seek it, and thou shalt find it burgeon forth
With fair white scented blossoms. 'This shall be
Witness of what has been.'

And he, with joy,
Vanquished at length, obeyed, and with the dawn
Where stood his staff, there sprang the perfumed cup
And petals of a lily: so the tale.
Nay, but it was the rude strength of his life
Which blossomed into purity, and sprang
Into a higher self, beneath the gaze
Of a little child—Nay, but it was the might
Of conscious strength, which cast its robes of price
Down on the earth; the new self stripped and purged
Of ingrained pride, which from the deeps of death
Rose painful to the stable earth again,
And grew regenerate through humility.

So for the remnant of his days he served
The Lord of Good, a champion of the Right,
Grown meek. At last the Pagan governor
Bade him deny the Lord who succoured him;
Whom he contemning, gained a martyr's crown
Through pain and death, and is Saint Christopher."

He ended, and I mused in silent thought
On this quaint legend, when again my guide—
"Even so they toil as he, the striving souls
Who live on earth to-day engrossed with care
Willing to better our poor world, which calls
Always with piteous suffrages to Heaven—
Strong souls with deep compassion for the race,
Seeming possesst, yet vainly, since their labour
Born of the half unconscious pride of strength
Is only part for others, or for God.
But when a nobler, self-less passion fills
The heart and soul, then only fit reward
Is theirs, and from the depths of their dead selves,
And from the staff of their discarded strength,
And from the unneeded treasures of their past,
The yearning to fulfil the Perfect Scheme,
The full surrender to the Heavenly Will,
Obedience, self-effacement, sacrifice,
Life a white perfumed blossom springs to Heaven."
And as we left the haunted border-land
Of fantasy, for lives, which lived and died
In the long-vanished centuries, true indeed
Though brotiered here and there with flowers of gold
By pious hands devouter than our own,
Yet mainly true; first of the endless line
I saw a calm and Princely Presence come,
Who, stately as the Imperial Purple, bore
His robe, a saint in mien, mild, innocent,
Perfect in manhood, with clear eye serene,
And lofty port; who from the sages took
What lessons earth could give, but trod no less
The toilsome path of Duty to the end;
And as he passed I knew the Kingly ghost
Of Antonine, who knew not Christ indeed,
Yet not the less was His. I marked the calm
And thoughtful face of him who ruled himself,
And through himself the world, and ’mid the soil
And foulness of unfettered lusts kept pure
His virgin soul, and o'er the servile crowd,
Trembling, betrayed, beneath the arm'd heels
Of a long line of tyrants trodden in blood,
Wielding a blameless sceptre, stayed awhile
By a white life, and perfect, lived for good
The hurrying doom and ruin of the world.

Whom when we passed, thus spake my heavenly guide
"There are of Him, who call not on His name,
And this is of them, the best flower and fruit
Of all the Heathen world, the Sage who ruled
The race of men, for whom the fatal gift
Of power unfettered worked nor hurt nor harm,
But left his soul unchanged: for whom the gross
And sensual lusts which wrecked the hapless line
Of Cæsars were as nought, the coward fears
Of tyranny unknown, the secret arts
Of the informer hateful; but he lived
The foremost citizen of Rome—no more
Nor lower, happy, loving wife and child
And all his people as a father might
The offspring of his love. Then first indeed
Crowned, on a throne, Divine Philosophy
Swayed all the race of men, like that fair dream
Of the Athenian sage, and too great weal
Lulled them to sleep, till they forgot to prize
Their freedom lost for ever. All his soul
Was filled with love of peace, holding it more
To save a single citizen than slay
A thousand enemies. A thrifty hand
Grudging his people's toil, not less he planned
Great works and beautiful, which might enrich
The City of the world, and, loving peace,
Yet not the less the reverence for his name
Spread to earth's limits. On the distant bank
Of Phasis, to a king whom Caesar named,
The stubborn tribesmen bowed. The Parthian spared
Armenia at his nod. The Scythian hosts
On the Cimmerian shore confessed his might,
And on the wild Sarmatian plains his word
Was law, and many a barbarous chieftain came
To kneel his vassal, whom with soothing words
He would dismiss, deeming his load of rule
Sufficient without more. For that great gift
Of Rome to men, just laws and wise, his thought
Devised new gains, filled with the purest love
Of Heaven-sent equity; and that rare flower
Of tolerance which best of all adorns
The philosophic brow, which those who call
On a Diviner name learn last of all,
Which wise Aurelius knew not, nor the books
Of all the sages taught, in this pure heart
Sprang up self-sown, and bloomed in noble deeds,
From sceptic Greek and unbelieving Jew,
Shielding the faith of Christ, not carelessly,
With that contemptuous charity the fruit
Of cold and doubtful minds, but born of trust
In the old faith, and therefore generous.

Dost wonder that against so white a soul,
So pure, so innocent, so rich in love,
There burned the causeless enmity that fires
The traitor’s base ambition? Two there were;
But one the Senate doomed, the other fell
By his own hand. But when they told the saint,
Seeking to unmask some deep conspiracy,
He would not. ‘Sure,’ he said, ‘twere little gain
To learn that of the people of my love
So many hate me. Ah, fair words and high
Of one who spotless filled the blood-stained throne
Round which for two long centuries had twined
Rank growths of vile mistrust and hate and blood.

Thus through his long and peaceful years the saint
Lived cheerful. All good things were his to hold,
And hardly clouded days, because his soul
Took willingly his lot. And yet he lost
His well-loved sons before their budding age
Had come to flower. And yet 'twas his to bear
The curse of a vile woman; but his faith,
Greater than her offence, forbade him still
To hold her false; too pure, too meek a soul
To mate with such, or haply half aware
And yet forgiving all, like Him who bade
The sinner sin no more. Still on his life
The Sun of Righteousness shone clear and lit
His way with gleams of Heaven, and all his days
Were gilded, year by year, until the end,
As his who treads the duteous paths of life
And is content.
Then, when he came to die,
Commending, with calm love, his only child
And, most of all, the Empire which he loved
To him who followed him, the sage his hand
Had trained in his own virtues, tranquilly
He laid him on his bed; and when the end
Drew near, the watchers heard the failing voice
Wander in dreams, and whisper of the State
And all his hopes for her. And when he woke,
Laying all signs of sovereignty aside,
He bade them take the golden Victory,
The solemn symbol of Imperial power,
And bear it to Aurelius. Last, when now
Life's tide was ebbing fast, he summoned to him
The tribune of the guard, and uttered clear,
'As should an Emperor who led his hosts
To battle with the evil of the world,
The password of the day—one word, no more,
Calm and Imperial—'Æquanimitas.'"
And something in me seemed to rise and break
In utterance, and as we passed I cried, "
"This man was of Thy name, O Lord, and Thou,
Among the ranks of those who lived ere yet
Thou camest, or called not on Thee, having come,
Didst never leave Thyself, or then or since,
Wholly without a witness, but didst set
Thy light for all to see, these precious blooms
Of purity, these priceless lives unstained
And spent for Duty, 'mid the strifes, the lUSTs
Of a polluted world."
And then I saw
Two girlish mothers, bearing each a child
Clasped to her breast, one with the conscious pride
Of noble birth, and one a lowlier form,
Who to the other looked with loving eyes
In which the old respect was mingled now
With a new sense of equal sisterhood;
And both with rapt gaze went, as keeping still
Some memory of surprise, since first they rose
From earth to heaven; and my guide named their names
Discoursing thus:

"By the Tyrrhenian Sea
In Africa, when nigh two hundred years
Passed since Christ died, there lived a youthful wife,
Bearing her first-born infant at her breast,
Perpetua, of noble lineage, nursed
Safe in the shelter of her happy home
From maidenhood to gracious motherhood;
Nor broke there on her careless hours a sound
Of the great suffering of the painful world,
But evermore in gracious liturgies
Of homely life she spent her careless days,
Shielded from every breath of ruder air
Which might assault her, fenced about secure
By walls of love; sire, mother, brother, spouse,
Linking close arms around her, and her birth
And name, and rank and wealth, and honour of men
Made this rude path of life and rugged steep
Show, like the fields of June, a maze of flowers.

Now on those calm and slumbering days there burst
The New Faith like a flame, and the quick soul
Of the young wife was fired, and she became
A catechumen holding fast the truth,
Scorning the Pagan gods; and her young brother,
Like her, believed, and so in piety
They lived, till came an overwhelming wave
Of bloodshed once again, and they denounced
The faithful pair, and first Perpetua.

But when this great blow fell on him, her sire,
A noble, holding fast the faith of old
And loving with a father’s love his girl
And her young child, ere yet the shadow of doom
Fell on them, went to her, and of his love
Would seek to bend her, using all the strength
Which venerable age and filial awe
Might give him; bade her pause awhile and seek
Counsel of wiser heads than hers, who knew
The riddles of the Faith, and what deep truths,
Though hid by myth, maybe, and parable,
The Pagan forms concealed. But she, with clear
Undoubting faith: 'My father, canst thou change

The fashion of a vessel, giving it

Another name?' And he: 'Nay, 'twere the same

Howe'er men called it.' Then she answered straight,

With fearless voice, 'Nor canst thou change my soul,

Which bears the name of Christ.' Then with deep grief

The old man raised his hand as if to strike,

But could not, seeing her undaunted soul,

And went his way, nor troubled her; and she,

In that short time of rest, cleansing her soul

With the baptismal waters, rose refreshed,

A Christian, strong to suffer and give praise.

Then in a few brief days began the tale

Of Martyrdom. 'Tis her own voice that speaks

The story of her suffering. 'In the gloom

Of a dark prison cell, where stifling heat

And the rude insults of the brutal guard

Tortured each sense, I lay in misery.
There my young bondswoman Felicitas,
Wanting a month to labour, took with me
The sacred lustral waters, and we sate
Pining amid the squalor of the jail,
Until at last, their hard hearts moved by Heaven,
They brought my darling to me, and I gave him
Milk from my breast, and thenceforth day and night
I lived content, my child within my arms;
And those dull prison walls seemed more to me
Than my sire's palace, since I held my love
And kept my faith unchanged, and grew to be
Happier than ever in that careless life
Within my palace home.

And then one day
My brother, who was partner in my bonds,
Seeing my cheerful and undaunted soul,
Spake thus to me: "Sister, I do perceive
Thou art Heaven's favourite; therefore to thy prayer
Doubtless the Lord will grant a blessed dream,"
Sent through the watches of the night, if thou
Wilt kneel to ask it, and we too shall know
Whether the martyr's crown is ours to wear
Or shameful freedom." Then I prayed, and, lo!
In the still watches of the night, a dream,
Which showed a golden stairway to the skies.
Around it swords and hooks and all the array
Of martyrdom were ranged, and at its foot
A loathly monster, crouching, coil on coil,
To take the souls of those who fain would rise.
And when, with fear and trembling, I had passed,
Naming the sacred Name, to some blest place,
A garden, I ascended; there I saw
A shepherd with his flock around him ranged
By myriads on the grass, who welcomed me
And gave me of some mystic food, which I
Received with folded hands and took and ate.
And all the throng of saints, with one accord,
Pealed forth "Amen;" and sudden I awoke,
Hearing their voices, and upon my lips
Lingered the sweetness of that heavenly food.
And when I told my brother of my dream,
We knew our hour was come, our fate assured,
And we with nothing more of fear nor hope.

Then after many days my father came,
Borne down with grief. "Daughter," he cried, "I pray thee,
Pity these scant gray hairs. If e'er thy sire
Loved thee beyond thy brethren, cherished thee
Through all thy childhood, watched thee till thou camest
To honourable wedlock, now, I pray thee,
Have pity on him; make him not the shame
Of all mankind. Or if indeed I fail,
With all my love, to bend thee, pity her,
Thy mother, who has borne thee, and who yearns
To clasp her child again. If none of these
Move thee, have pity on thy child, who pines
Without thee, nor can live without thy breast.
Nay, daughter, have compassion! See, thy father
Kneels to thee, lady, and in tears, and is
Thy suppliant for thyself!” But I, who knew
How wise he was and tender, felt my soul
Pierced through with sorrow. Yet the Faith! the Faith!
Should I betray it? “Nay,” I said, “my father;
We all are in God’s hand, who rules all things
Even as He will.”

Then sorrowful he went.

Now, when the day was come when we should stand
For trial of the Judge Hilarion,
Even as we stood before him, set on high
For all to see, when my turn came to plead,
Confessing Christ, I heard a cry, and lo!
My father with my infant in his arms,
Conjuring me with tender words of love
To spare him and my child, whom I had given
Life, and now doomed to death, recounting all
The misery I should bring. And my sweet turned
His darling eyes on me, and smiled and stretched
His little hands to me, and seemed to seek
His mother's breast. And the stern judge himself
Besought me to have mercy and to spare
My father and my child, and bade me burn
A little incense to the gods. But I,
Some new strength firing me, which swept away
The love of sire or child, made answer straight,
"I will not," and confessed I was of Christ.
And when my father strove to force me down
And hush my voice, the stern Hilarion
Gave word that they should scourge him; and I heard
The sound of blows, and felt my father's pain
Quiver through every nerve, and grew so faint
That he should suffer thus, and all for me,
Amid his honoured age, that scarce I marked
That cold voice dealing doom, the dreadful death
Of those the fierce brutes' tooth or claw or norn
Rends limb from limb.

And then they scourged with thongs

Our brother martyrs, while ourselves indeed,
Me and my bondswoman Felicitas,
They buffeted with blows upon the face.

But many visions, through the grace of Heaven,
Came to me ere the end, and on the eve
Of the great shows, when all day long my limbs,
Racked in the cruel stocks, scarce ceased to pain,
Amid the troubled thoughts of coming doom,
The hushed arena framed with cruel faces
Ready to gloat on death, the sudden roar
As from the darkling dens the famished beast
Leapt forth in fury, and the echoing cries
From the base coward throng reclining safe
To see their fellows bleed, there came a dream
Heaven-sent. For, lo! without the dungeon door
One seemed to knock; and when I opened to him,
The martyred saint, Pomponius, stood without,
Clad in white robes of brightness, all besprent
With pomegranates of gold. One word he spake:
"Perpetua, we await thee." And I followed,
And through dark ways he led me, till we came
Forth 'mid the still arena's sudden blaze.
And then he left me, and they bade me fight
No tiger, but some loathly shape of man,
Who held a bough laden with golden fruit
For prize of victory. Then we strove long
Together; but I conquered, and I gained
The precious fruit, and suddenly I knew
That not with ravening tooth or rending claw
Alone 'twas mine to fight, but with the force
Of Evil, human-shaped, Evil without,
Evil within, if one would keep the Faith.'

Dear soul, so far she speaks, the rest for her
Is silence, but a witness speaks who saw
What things were done. When their last day was come,
On that accursed Pagan holiday,
The people heard, thrilled with a shameful joy,
The roarings of the famished brutes beneath.
And they, too, heard it, and the gathering roar
Of the more brutal crowd; sitting alone
In silence and in darkness, till the hour
When they, weak nursing mothers, faithful youths,
Noble and slave, alike went forth to face
'The oft imagined dread, the tooth, the claw,
The piercing horn, the spring, the devilish strength,
The same Hand fashioned which could frame the lamb.
Sure, 'twere no wonder if those delicate lives,
Forlorn of help, scorned, tortured, of their God
Forsaken, as their Master, had shrunk back
From that intolerable fear; but they
Shrank not at all, strong souls, but dauntless went,
Leaving their new-born joys, and the young lips
Of children at the breast, home, love, young life,
And all for Christ, fronting the horrible dread
Unmoved, unfearing—went without a word
Through hollow stifling dungeons, lost in gloom,
To where, on a sudden, blazed the noonday glare
Above the arena, and the solitude
Horrid with pitiless eyes, and the loud roar
Of the imprisoned beasts behind the bars,
That presently the cruel spite of men
Should loose on them.

And there they stood and sang
A hymn 'midst jeering thousands. On the youth
Who suffered first, a leopard, springing, bathed
His poor frame in a baptism of blood;
And when, oh, shame! they stripped those wily limbs
Before the ribald gaze of countless eyes—
They had not looked for that—a deadly chill
Took them, and what the terror of the beasts,
The lions' dreadful roaring, the fierce growl
Of the impatient tigers, the red jaws
Of the tall bears who shook their bars, the low
Fierce muttering of the bulls, whose lurid eyes
Glared on them, could not, wifely modesty
Had well-nigh done, when some new Heaven-sent shame
Touched the vile throng, who bade the jailers hide
Their nakedness; and there, in robes of white,
Naming the holy Name, they stood and took
The mad brutes’ horrible rage, and, pierced and tost
By the sharp horn, and hurled in air, and trod
By the fierce rushing feet, they lay alone,
Bleeding upon the sand, swooning away,
Or by some heavenly ecstasy possessed
Which dulled their pain.

But when Perpetua
Knew life return, she her dishevelled hair
Tied in a knot, and round her wounded limbs
Gathered her robe, and seeing on the ground
The young Felicitas, assuaged her pain
And lifted her, waiting again the rush
Of the fierce beast; but when he came no more,
The sordid crowd, still hungering for blood,
Demanded they should die before their eyes.

Then, in their midst, the dauntless martyr band
Stepped forth and gave the sacred kiss of peace,
And met swift death; but she, Perpetua,
From some unskillful hand or timorous, took
Repeated blows, and languished long, and bore
Wound upon cruel wound ere her pure spirit
Was freed and rose, and rested with the blest."

And straight my heart, hearing this piteous tale,
Was melted in me, and I seemed to cry,

"These are Thy saints, O Lord, like those whose bones
Lie scattered in Thy Alpine valleys cold,
Or who to-day by Thy idolatrous East,
Or Thy old Nile, or on the desert sands,"
Or gemlike islets of the tropic sea,
Have died without a murmur for Thy sake.
Thou askest of Thy creatures sacrifice,
And it is given, nor yet with readier soul
In the first ages of the Faith than now.
Haply with blinder courage 'twas they went,
These protomartyrs, to their doom, than those
Who die to-day. With what high flame of faith
These souls were set on fire, who met unmoved—
Delicate lives lapt round with luxury—
The scorn of men, the jeering careless crowd,
The tortures of the fiends, rather than pay
False homage to false gods! And yet, indeed,
I know not if there be not sacrifice
As willing now; the Indian well to-day
Is choked with women's corpses, who had bought
Ease, wealth, and life, nay, more—the dearer lives
Of children—had they borne to bend the knee
To the false Prophet. Nay, Thy hand, O Lord,
Is strong as it was then, Thy seeming face
Averted as 'twas then, till the last breath
Sobs from the painful lips, and Thou dost bid them
Enter into Thy joy. Thou seest all
And speakest not, but these Thy servants hear
Some still small whisper which the duller sense
Of the world may not take. But whoso hears
Thy voice, for him the aspect of things seen
And felt—the world without, the world within—
The old familiar landmarks of his life,
The heavens, the earth, the sea, no longer show
As undetermined fantasies; but all
The smiling summer plains, the storm-wrapt hills,
The clear cold dawn, the angry furious night,
Lives bright as Heaven, lives dark as nether Hell,
Joy, grief, pain, pleasure, mingle and are part
Of the unfolding mystery of Faith."
Then, as we passed, we came on one whose face
The whole world knows—so fine a soul and hand
Saw her long since, and fixed her for our eyes—
A maiden with rapt gaze, and at her side
An idle music; listening half entranced
To some celestial harmonies unheard
Save by pure souls like hers. There was no need
To name her name, when thus the tale began:

"Once in old Rome, long centuries ago,
There lived a pair, noble in rank and soul,
Who, though the Pagan idols still bare sway,
Knelt not to them, holding the faith of Christ.
And one fair girl was theirs, Cecilia,"
Nourished on thoughts of virgin purity
Which filled her cloistered gaze. No earthly love
Might touch her pure pale soul, which always viewed,
Lit only by the frosty moon of faith,
The cold clear peaks of soaring duty pierce
The still blue vault of heaven, as soar the snows
Of lifeless Alp on Alp, where comes no herb
Nor blade of green, but all the icy world
Dreams wrapt in robes of sterile purity.

For evermore to her rapt eyes the skies
Stood open, evermore to her rapt ear
Celestial music came, and strains unheard
By mortal ear amid the throng of life
Hushed all the lower tones and noise of earth
With heavenly harmonies; and the high notes
Of the angelic chanting seraphim
Would occupy her life, until her soul,
Rapt by the ravishing sound, would seem to ’scape
From her raised eyes, and float, and speed itself
Between the rhythmic wings of harmony,
Even to Heaven's gate, and was transformed and lost
Its earthly taint; and sometimes on her lips
Thin traces of the heavenly music dwelt;
Which bound the listener fast, and of her skill
Some half-remembered echoes, faint yet sweet,
Were born again on lute or pipe, and linked.
The world with Heaven; the immortal chanting quires
With earth's poor song; the anthems of the blest
With our weak halting voices, till the being
Of that fair virginal interpreter,
Pierced with keen melodies, and folded round
With golden links of gracious harmonies,
Was all possed of Heaven, and to her thought
It seemed a guardian angel stood by her
In sleep or waking hours, so that no care
For earth or earthly love might press on her.
Such sweetness touched her voice; the sacred quire
Would hearken pleased, and voices not of earth
Mingled with hers harmonious, and she drew
From voice and hand such descants as the skies
Themselves had envied, as with pipe on pipe
Conjoined with wondrous notes and varying tones
She made high music to our Lord in heaven.

Now, when this maiden lost in dreaming thought
Was of full age, her father bade her wed
A noble Roman youth, Valerian,
A Pagan yet; but she, whose filial love
Constrained her to obey, beneath her robes
Of marriage hid a robe of penance still,
And to her husband, whom indeed she loved
With wifely love, confessed her mystic tale—
How night and day, whether she slept or woke
A ghostly presence, standing at her side,
Kept watch and ward, nor left her. And when he
Asked sight of him, and proof, she bade him seek
The saintly Urban in the Catacombs,
Where he lay hid, and he consenting went,
And rose converted from his old unfaith
And was baptized; and when, a Christian now,
He sought his home again, he heard within
Enchanting music sweet, and strains divine;
And long time listening rapt, at last he came
To his wife's chamber, and beheld, indeed,
His eyes being opened by his faith, a form
Celestial standing by her, with a crown
Of roses in each hand, in scent and hue
Immortal, and the Angel as they knelt
Crowned each with them—the crown of martyrdom.

And then, because the Lord Valerian
Obeyed so well, the Angel bade him ask
What boon he would. And he: 'My lord, I have
A brother of my love, Tiburtius;
Let him believe.' And he made answer to him,
‘So shall it be, and ye shall both attain
The martyr’s crown.’ And then he passed away.
And presently Tiburtius, entering,
‘Though yet he might not see the roses, knew
Their fresh immortal sweetness flood the air
With fragrance, and he heard the gracious words
Cecilia spake, and all her proofs inspired
Of Heaven and of the truth, and so his heart
Was touched and he baptized and held the Faith.

But when the Pagan Lord, Almachius,
Who governed, heard these things, he bade them cease
To call on Christ, and when they would not, sent them
To prison dungeons foul, and thence to death.

Last, when the brothers died, his pitiless rage
Summoned Cecilia. Her, with threats of pain
And horrible death, he bade do sacrifice
To the false gods. She, with a smile of scorn,
Denied him; and the people round who heard
Her constancy, wept for the fate they knew
Waited the fair girl-wife, and, bathed in tears,
Confessed themselves to be like her, of Christ,
Till the fierce prefect, mingling rage with fear,
Spake thus: 'What art thou, woman, who dost dare
Defy the gods?' And she, with lofty scorn:
'I am a Roman noble.' Then said he,
'I ask thee of thy faith?' And she: 'Oh, blind!
See these whom my example drew to Christ,
Take them for answer.'

Then with panic haste
He sent a headsman whose keen axe should end
That high undaunted courage. He, with fear
And trembling hand, upon her slender throat
And virgin breast planting three cruel strokes,
Fled, leaving her for dead. But three days yet,
Three precious days, she lingered, strengthening all
Her converts in the Faith, and to the poor
Vowing her wealth; and last of all she sent
For Urban, and besought him of his grace
That of her palace they should make a church
For Christian worship.

Then she raised her voice
In soaring hymns of praise, and with her sang
The quire of Angels, chanting row on row
Celestial strains, and the rapt hearers knew
The sound of heavenly music and the lyres
Of the angelic company; and yet,
When her voice soared no longer, but was still,
Fair dying echoes, fainter and more faint,
Stole downward from the skies, and then were lost
Within the heavens—the music of a soul
Which joins the eternal concert and is blest.

And still where once she sang, the unfailing spell
Of music rises heavenward, day by day;
For, as she would, they built a stately church
Above her. There, when centuries were past,
The Pontiff Paschal found her body lie,
Wrapped in a tissue of gold, and by her side
Her husband and his brother.

And, again,

After long centuries they built a shrine,
And set in it a statue of the saint
In Parian marble. On her side she rests
As one asleep; the delicate hands are crossed,
Wrist upon wrist; a clinging vestment drapes
The virgin limbs, and round her slender throat
A golden circlet masks her cruel wound.
And there she lies for all to see; but still
Her voice is sounding in the Eternal Psalm
Which the Church singeth ever, evermore,
The Church on earth, the Church of Saints in Heaven."