

ms. Burney —

SIR LANCELOT.

SIR LANCELOT:

A LEGEND

OF THE MIDDLE AGES.

BY

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PREFACE.

It is now fifteen years since this poem was composed. Long before my publisher called this autumn for a second edition, I had twice carefully revised it, and on occasion of the second revision had made considerable changes. Many hundreds of verses have been omitted, a portion of the poem, which was not in its natural place before, has now been published in another volume, some hundreds of new verses have been added, a great number of alterations, chiefly of a metrical character, have been made all over the poem, and one book of it may almost be said to have been reconstructed. These changes, it is hoped, will make it somewhat more worthy of that public favour, which it has already received. The work is now more like what it was in its original conception.

The object of the poem is not an ambitious one. It has always seemed to me, that a love of natural objects, and the depth, as well as exuberance and refinement of mind, produced by an intelligent delight in scenery, are elements of the first importance in the education of the young. But, a taste for the beauties of nature being a quicker growth

than the power or habit of independent thought, it is apt in youth to wander from the right path, and lose itself in some of the devious wilds of pantheism. What I wished to effect in this poem was, to show how an enthusiastic and most minute appreciation of the beauties of nature might unite itself with Christian sentiments, Christian ritual, and the strictest expression of Christian doctrine.

Various circumstances, upon which it is needless to enter, but which have an interest to myself, led me to fix the supposed action of my poem in the reign of Henry the Third. My perfect acquaintance with all the nooks and angles of the Westmoreland Mountains, the scene of my first and very free school-days, and my familiarity with their changeful features, their biographies of light and shade, by night as well as by day, through all the four seasons, naturally decided me as to the locality of my poem. Moreover the choice of that particular epoch enabled me to make nature symbolize ritual and doctrine in a manner which was in keeping with the spirit of those ages, but which would have seemed forced and unreal if my hero had been a man of modern times, who must either have been unlikely to allegorize nature at all, or must have done so through the insight of a modern education. In this case the poem must on the one hand have been overloaded with allusions to physical science, or on the other have

failed to persuade, from the apparent ignorance which the omission of such allusions would imply.

The same choice also permitted me to restore the physical features of the country to the state in which my boyhood always persisted in representing them to me, during the many solitary afternoons, and long summer holy-days spent among the ruined halls and castles and moated houses, which are so frequent on the eastern side of those mountains, the abbeys shrinking rather to the west. The forests were replanted; the chases were filled again with deer, the ancestors of the red deer of the Duke of Norfolk which still drank at the brink of Ullswater by Lyulph's Tower; the heronries slanted again over the edges of the lakes; the unpersecuted eagles woke the echoes of Helvellyn; spear-tops glanced in the sun on the steep paths that lay like pale green threads across the mountains; the castles rang with arms; the bright ivy had not mantled the ruddy sand-stone beacons which warned men of the Scotch; the abbeys and chantries were haunted by church-music, while the lesser cells in the secluded pastoral vales heard once more the nightly aspirations of wakeful prayer, and Cistercian shepherds could scarcely be distinguished, in their white habits, from the sheep they tended, as they moved across the fells high up above their moorland granges.

As the warder on the battlements, or rather as the alchemist from his turret, saw that land of hills and woods and waters beneath the starlight long ago, so did I see it always in those ardent years. From earliest times it was to me the land of knightly days, and the spell has never yet been broken. When it became the dwelling-place of manhood and the scene of earnest labour, the light upon it only grew more golden; and now, a year-long prisoner in the great capital, that region seems to me a home whence I have been exiled, but which, only to think of, is tranquillity and joy.

FREDERICK FABER.

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DEDICATION.

DEAR Brother ! while the murmurs of my song
In reflux waves were dying on my ear,
The spoken music blending with the thrills
Of that unuttered sweetness, which remains
A cherished refuse in the poet's soul,
Still to distinguish him from all the hearts
To which, by love constrained, he hath resigned
So much of his interior self,—and while
I listened, like a practised mountaineer,
To my own voice rebounding from the heights
Of song, redoubled and prolonged returns
Of pleasant echoes,—from the far-off South
Came welcome news of thee, my dearest Friend !

Thou spakest in thine own most beautiful way,
And in the sunny visionary style
Of thy strange solemn language, of the lights
In those new skies, the Cross with starry arms,
Palpably bending at the dead of night,
The star-built Altar, Noe's sheeny Dove
Still winging her incessant flight on high,
The definite Triangle, and other such,
Girt with huge spaces of unstarry blue,
As sacred precincts round about them spread,
Through which the eye, from all obstruction clear,
Travels the heavens at midnight, and salutes
Those orbèd constellations hung thereon
Like festal lamps on some cathedral wall ;—

Emblems of Christian things, not pagan names
That nightly desecrate our northern skies.
Thus with thy spirit softly overshadowed
By the most brilliant umbrage of those stars,
Thou spakest of the snowy albatross,
Sailing in circuits round thy lonely bark,
Fondling its foamy prow as if it deemed,
And not unjustly, its companionship
A solace to thee on the desert waves ;
And underneath the great Australian trees
A light was in strange creatures' wondering eyes,—
How solemnly interpreted by thee !
O it was all so beautiful, so strange,
And with its current intercepted oft
With place for some endearment of old love,
I thought in thy wild strain how passing sweet
The poetry of those far southern seas !

Few days elapsed : there came another strain,
Fresh poetry from those far southern seas !
It sang of sickness and the fear of death,
Of suffering gently borne for love of Christ,
Who calls us to His service as He wills,
Not as we choose ; and, mingling with the strain,
Broke forth thy simple and courageous words
And peaceful trust, as happy and as bold
As a child's prayer. And wilt thou think it wrong,
That, when I prayed and wept and deeply mourned,
There was a pleasure in my mourning, such
As I have never felt in love before ?
For who that doth remember thee, how pale !
How gentle ! but would smile for very faith,
As Abraham smiled, at thine heroic words,
Which mate thine outward aspect so unfitly ?
Ah ! that was poetry tenfold more sweet

Than when thou sangst of stars, and ocean birds,
And wandering creatures underneath the trees !

O more than Brother ! my impetuous heart,
Nurtured too much on volatile impulses,
In loving thee hath learned still more to love,
And study with a covetous design,
The science of thy quiet nature, calm,
Profoundly calm amid all cares and doubts,
As though thy faculties had never had,
Or left and lost in thy baptismal font,
All power of self-disturbance, so serene
The unsuspecting greatness of thy virtue,
Thy simple-tongued humility, and love
Too self-forgetting to have much of fear !
Like one who sits upon a windy steep,
And looks into a placid lake below
Bright in the breezeless vale, so have I gazed
With long affection fathomed to its depths,
Into the inspired tranquillity of heart
On thy scarce ruffled innocence bestowed.
Dear Friend ! I speak bold words of praise, and
tears

Warrant my boldness, for I know full well
Thine eye will never see what would have pained
Thy lowliness : that supernatural calm
Of thy pure nature will be deeper still,
Unutterably deepened, ere my words,
Not written as to one alive, shall reach
The island of thy gradual martyrdom.
O no ! thou wilt be once more at my side,
A help to my weak purposes, an arm
Invisible, in intercession strong,
No part of this half dead, half dying world,
But to the region of the living gone

To pray for us, and to be reached by prayer.
When these poor lines have travelled to that shore,
Distance and exile will have fallen from thee,
Sun-withered wreaths, before the eye of death ;
Thou wilt be in my neighbourhood again,
Again come home unto my soul's embrace,
No more the frail and wasting Missionary,
But the high Mate of Angels and of Saints !

Then let this song be dedicate to thee !
If life *be* thine, forgive these words of praise,—
Thou knowest they are my friendship's first offence.
Should not this song be thine, all mountain-born ?
Are not its verses laden with sweet names,
Which to our hearts are poems in themselves ?
And unnamed landscapes are there, singular trees,
Spots of remembered sunshine or soft shade,
And unforgotten fabrics in the clouds,
Farms on the heath, and fields beside the town,
Haunts by the mere, choice gardens of the poor
Oft chance-discovered, O how much beloved
And prized by us, as luxuries that belonged
To over-tasked yet cheerful cottagers
Whose servants we, as priests, would fain become !
Such things are ever floating on my song,
Sequestered places, household scenes, inviting
Through language more descriptive than their names
A pleased detection from thy mindful heart.
Did we not learn our poetry together,
And sing those spousal verses to each other,
Among the glorious hills whose kindling heights
Gleam like familiar beacons on its course ?
Was there, except thy modesty, and growth
In meek self-sacrifice for Holy Church,
Was there one difference 'twixt our blended souls ?

O my sweet, honoured Friend! admiring love
Sues—thou remember'st how it spake of old
By the chill-flowing Rothay in the night—
Acceptance now for this religious song.
Brother! thou wert within me and around me
As it sunk down, and in my love for thee,—
Admonished by thy sufferings to a strain
Even yet more Christian,—in my love for thee
The measure tremulously fell away,
Falling, where I would leave it now for ever,
Even at thy feet, to be mine image there,
With docile admiration looking up
Hourly in thy perpetual downcast eyes!

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SIR LANCELOT.



BOOK I.

THE ASH-TREE HERMITAGE.

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THE ASH-TREE HERMITAGE.

THERE is a sound in England, from the shores
Unto the midland vales, from London streets
To the deep chase where yet a Saxon thane
In his rude homestead lingers, keeping court
Among his rustic serfs. The realm is stirred,
For the Crusaders have returned. No hour
Of day or night but at the various ports,
The island round, some straggling bark arrives.
The very hostelries are surfeited
With guests, and armèd men in wassail drowned,
And prattling squires, not seldom with a gift
Of no mean minstrelsy and racy verse ;
Who sang adventures, thousandfold, by sea
Endured, or with a blither interest
Encountered often in the chance delays
At foreign harbours,—narratives that might
Outdo the Cycle of Returns from Troy
For various intermingling of fierce war,
And love as fierce, and passionate rivalries,
And manly warriors sickening for their homes,
And of that sickness miserably cured
When home was gained, and monasteries filled
With penitents and world-worn sinners, men
Whose hearts were aged with pleasure, and, mid
these,
A gentler sort, whose souls uncommon grief
Had disenthralled from earth and love of life.

O could we waken in the woods or hills,
By city gate, or bare refectory,
Or green baronial tower, the voices old
Of ballad-singers, errant, or retained
Familiars of the banquet, not the cloud
Of beautiful, pathetic song that hangs
Upon Mycenæ's cheerless mountain-slope,
Or lone Itaki's sweetly foliaged cliffs
Which the cool sea-breeze fans incessantly,—
Not this could equal for true touching strain,
Breathed from the sanctuaries of private life,
That drama of a thousand ballads, once
Floating o'er England and rehearsing there
The feats and perils of the homeward-bound
Crusaders, daily listened to with tears,
And deeply lodged within the popular heart.

Behold! on hill and dale the autumnal sun,
Both when he rises up and when he sets,
Sheds a wan lustre o'er some cavalcade,
Threading the watery dells, or upland slopes
Ascending, through the labyrinthine woods
Gleaming with slow advance, or straggling now
On the green level of the chalky downs.
Some knight mayhap returns unto his tower,
Some baron to his castle, or a monk,
Wayworn and yet reluctant, seeks once more
His woodland abbey,—an uneasy man,
Who in the dangerous cheer of pilgrimage
Had satisfied an ardent temper, chafed
With ritual and those even sanctities
Of cloistral occupation. Often too
From out the litters, shivering in the breeze,
Some eastern beauty, dark-eyed foreigner,
Looked forth and chided in an uncouth tongue

The warrior who reined in his steed close by ;
While hourly from the hall his anxious wife,
To whom the last few hours of widowhood
Less tolerable seemed than years had been
Before, watched for the spearmen on the hill,
And little dreamed how terrible would be
The disenchantment of their meeting.

Yet

Not wanting in the breadth of this fair land
Approved fidelity, and vows renewed
In tenderest embrace, surprises sweet
At the tall striplings, the domestic knights
Of their lone mother, whom the sire had left
Wanting and not conferring aid, and girls
Confused before the keen admiring gaze
Of the fond knight, unused to read therein
The affectionate rights of his paternal eye.
And not forgotten is the chaplain grey—
But that his voice was somewhat more unclear
Least altered of the household, save the hound,
The lazy sleuth-hound couched upon the hearth
By the warm faggots, yet unrecognized,
A second generation since the knight
Had sailed for Palestine. And, now and then,
With gay pretence of needless ministries,
Old servants in their love, the young no less
Through curiosity, intruded there
To see their master, and with bustling cheer
Pressed their obtrusive hospitality
Upon their new-come fellows. O there were
Evenings in England then of such a bliss
As might for unproved intensity
Of native feeling elsewhere have no mates,—
Evenings whose innocent obscurity

Outweighed whole years of trial, there compressed
 Into impassioned hours of transport.

Thus,

Through the fair counties of the busy land,
 All thoughts were drawn and gathered into one,—
 The travel-worn Crusaders had returned,—
 Unwelcome, shall I say, or welcome? Ne'er
 Did motives blend with such strong interchange
 As then, such mingling of an affable joy
 With fears unspoken, and affrighted thought
 Lest for the past there should a reckoning come.
 And sometimes loud repining, unashamed,
 In graceless speech broke forth. Elsewhere per-
 chance

Might feeling fluctuate in some unpoised,
 And natural piety not seldom hang
 Too nicely on the balance. In that day
 Might Angels' eye have seen in human hearts
 How passion intersected passion; and truth
 Being with untruth at war, how each was then
 Involved with each, while falsehood truth might seem,
 Truth falsehood, mutually confused. Perchance
 Long centuries of feud might roll away
 Before the national manners should run clear
 Of this unholy trouble at men's hearths,
 Disturbance of the genial charities
 And moral instincts of our social life,
 Recovering, if recovered it might be,
 The dignity of simple-hearted ways.

Why cometh not Sir Lancelot De Wace?
 His hall stands empty where the silver Kent
 Turns seaward, sweetly murmuring as he pours
 Prone o'er the pebbly bed his frugal stream.
 The woodlands echo not the horn; the sea

Hard by shines idly in the summer sun,
Or, when the tide is out, the fearless gulls
Pace leisurely upon the glossy sands.
The heron by the brook scarce lifts his head
To scan the passenger: upon the hearths
No hospitable faggots burn, or lights
From the long front of windows nightly glance
Through the low woods, like rising stars that mount
Above the horizon; and the village poor,
That sought the hall for their accustomed dole,
Straggling among the beech-trees gleam no more
With their red hoods in winter's wan sunshine.
Why cometh not Sir Lancelot De Wace?

Why cometh not that Knight? Full many a heart
Among his vassal poor and menials grey
With querulous expectation waits their lord.
For the third Henry hath been crowned, and still
Sir Lancelot De Wace is in the East.
Why tarries that brave man so long from home?

Now through the tenantry dismayed there goes
A rumour that the good Sir Lancelot
By Antioch in a lonely grove hath slain,
And that not in the fair and equal lists,
His youthful rival, who had wooed and won
In fair betrothal that false-hearted maid,
Ethilda, daughter of the old Sir Guy
Of Heversham. It was a woful day
When those ill tidings spread across the land,
All up the wooded valley of the Kent,
From the fair estuary with its cliffs
Of natural causeway to the shallow mere
Within the pastoral solitudes embraced,—
With yellow flag-flowers and red willow-herb
And dimpling globes of nuphar netted o'er,

So that the splashing of the frightened coot,
Or awkward-rising heron alone betrays
The water underneath. There was one heart
Throughout the length of his ancestral lands,
A heart doubt-laden and yet sorrowful.
That Athelstan in lawful duel slain
Might be, they doubted not, nor blamed the deed ;
Only that aught unchivalrous was done
By a De Wace's hand might not be thought.
Sir Lancelot a murderer ! Nay, the old,
So credulous of ill, forthwith repelled
The foul surmise. The headstrong faith of youth
Would have done battle gladly for their lord
In vindication of his honor. Ah !
Both were by harsh and cruel proof convinced
Of the dark tidings, when a retinue
Of armed men by royal warrant took
In the king's name possession of the hall
And the wide fief of Lancelot De Wace.

Yet no one of injustice dreamed ; no tongue
Among the poor had ever word of ill
To say of Hubert, the good minister,—
Hubert de Burgh, who in disastrous times
And the loose government of Henry's youth,
The prey of worthless favorites, then controlled
The rude, rough-handed baronage, by skill
Of temperate policy, no less than arms,
And a rare abstinence in victory.
A man he was who in the general good
Discerned still clearly, and with pious care
Preserved inviolate, the silent rights
Of individual happiness. Through him
The weight wherewith an absent lord lies hard,—
And specially that absent lord a king,—

Upon his vassals, mitigation found
In the green vale of Kent. Still it was hard
For that ancestral peasantry to pay
Unto a lord, to them unknown no less
Than they, their sires, or local wants to him,
The tribute of a base, reluctant toil
In lieu of what they had been wont to bear,—
The burden of affectionate service, paid
With manly will, with manly thanks received,
A mutual obligation more than right,
By nine Sir Lancelots from sire to son.

O'er the long glen of Sleddale evening hung
With clouds of dreary grey; the heights were lost
In the dull canopy, whose stooping folds
Cast o'er the rock-strewn valley, uniform,
A cold and purple shadow, while the sun
To his invisible setting hasted down
Without one thread of crimson to disclose
How far the day was spent. With downcast eye,
And scarcely noticing the gloomy scene,
A wanderer, with a wayworn gait and air
Of deep abstraction, climbed the mountain-side
To Kentmere: it was Lancelot De Wace,
Who sought, an Excommunicated Man,
Among his native solitudes some lone
And joyless hermitage, where he might bear
Through what should yet remain to him of life,
The weight of that dread censure, and the load,
As burdensome, of drear, foreboding thought.

A humbled and heart-stricken man he was,
Who asked no mitigation of his lot,
Nor would have welcomed it, if it had come
Unsought; for, self-betrayed, before the throne
Of Henry he had claimed his punishment.

When he had been for seven whole years concealed
A hermit or a wanderer in the east,
In safety unendurable through sense
Of guilt and gnawing of unquietness.
For noble feats in Palestine achieved
From capital penalties he was released,
Only the forfeiture of his broad lands
Was then confirmed; and the unbending Church
With merciful severity had laid
Her censures on him; lest his soul, through sin
Too soon effaced, should perish in the end.

Now from the ridge Sir Lancelot's stony way
Dropped to the margin of the slimy mere,
Fringed verdantly with dark and speckled weeds
And water-plants profuse, whose shining leaves
With bloody spots of brown were all bedropped;
And tangled roots, like knotted snakes asleep,
Half under water lay, and half above:
And brittle stalks with veins of poisonous sap
Exuded strongest odors; while the nights
Of the beginning autumn inter-streaked
The fenny herbage with its golden lines
And pale, discolored red: the crisp white canes
Of reedy sedge with plaint unmusical
Grated against each other, as the wind
Rung with shrill breathing o'er the waving swamp.
The heron with discordant notice rose,
And flapping wings, upon the cloudy air;
Then, poised awhile, its plumaged rudder set
This way or that, unto Winander's isles,
Or woody pass below Glenridding Screes,
Or promontory, seaward looking, far
Towards Lune's or Leven's mouths. A single ring,
Not native, of old willow trees there stood

Round a deserted hut where dwelt erewhile
A falconer, who in Sir Lancelot's youth
Had hawked with him for many a happy hour
By this same lake.

The weary knight looked up
Into the melancholy evening, spread
O'er scenes once known so well, once loved so much ;
And for the first time with diverted thoughts
Felt that there was additional bitterness,
Even to a lot unbearable as his,
In the localities around. O days
Of our past boyhood, pregnant though ye were
With giddy humours and debasing joys,
What innocent appearance have ye, seen
Through the long gloom of penitential thought
In after years, by contrast falsified
With guilt unequal made by age alone !

O better far it were would memory
O'erleap the pleasant worldliness of youth
Which so entraps our thoughts, and rather muse
On the few wrecks by radiant childhood left
Upon the misty confines of our sense !
O purest Time, from out the recent Font
Still dewy, still with spiritual flowers
Of musky scent and snowy tint adorned,
How art thou to the hopeful, striving soul
A bath of strength and innocent delights,
With unfatigued recurrence visited !
While to the pleasure-loving soul thou seem'st
A tantalizing Eden, dimly seen
To be delectable, yet not unbarred,
But in mysterious thoughts absconded deep
From restless wish, the memory of wild acts.
Or sin-bleared eye. O there is gracious hope

Of true amendment in the heart that seeks
With sacred habit to revive the days
Of its lost childhood, from its fragrant flowers
To suck the honey of sad thought, or feed
The wells of tears with dew-drops lurking still
In earliest reminiscence unexhaled!

Like silvery breakers on the lone sea-shore,
The hoary foliage of the willows rose
And fell in regular descents, and gleamed
With dusky light upon the moorland dim.

This then, so thought the weary fugitive,
This is my welcome to my native home,
The busy greeting of my vassals, this
That arch of proud triumphal thought through which
Hope and ambition entered once so oft
In visionary pomp!

This self-same day
And self-same month, when to the hallowed East,
With dreams untarnished yet, I journeyed first,
I stood with Sigismund, the noble Pole,
On our rude galley's deck. With silent speed
Along the Servian shore we glided down
The kingly Danube, where past Drenkova
It bursts the green Carpathians through, and flows
Betwixt impending cliffs and woods o'erarched
Through sylvan horrors beautiful. The stream
In eddies deep with glossy surface wheeled
In calm solemnity. The leafy tops
Of walnut woods, for centuries unfelled,
With clematis and lithe wild vine were bound
In their own thickets prisoners, while the crags
Were hung with bells of white convolvulus,
As though a bridal were to pass that way,
A region of festoons, enwreathed for leagues

One with another, while above the trees,
Half masked, the cliffs of rich and mottled red
In heavy brows or airy minarets
Sprung emulous to catch the setting sun.
Vale after vale with tributary stream
We passed, and through their dusky wooded gates
We caught sweet momentary views beyond.
And one most touching spectacle there was,
Still unforgotten ; through an opening wide
In the rough rampart of Danubian rocks,
Far in the heart of Servia we beheld
A mountain, like a couchant lion shaped,
In softest purple clad, which for awhile
Against the saffron sky stood boldly forth,
But, as the furnace of the kindled west
Glowed more intensely, was absorbed apace,
Absorbed until incorporated wholly
With shooting gold, which, crimson grown at length,
Yielded once more from out its gorgeous womb
The outline of the hill, distinct and keen.
Oh, in that hour what sunny thoughts were mine,
What happiness, what hope exuberant !
Ah ! Sigismund, how enviable seems
Thy fate, although no warrior's grave was thine ;
But by the sunbeams withered like a flower,
Salem unreached, thy warfare was fulfilled,
And in full armour, most ungentle shroud !
Where paynim watch-fires nightly gleam, thou
sleep'st ;
In the cold moonlight by these hands entombed
Beneath a myrtle and an arbutus,
By slow Orontes laved with stately lapse
Near old Seleucia.
O most dreary change !

Most desolate ! most dark ! with hungry soul,
 Hungry of bitterness and penal woe,
 With honest acceptation do I bid
 Thee welcome ! you, harsh wailing Winds, and Moors,
 And sobbing Mosses, and cold splashing Meres,
 And bleakest Mountains, by the noisy flail
 Of the rude tempest beaten, and white shares
 Of foamy torrents ploughed,—you too I bid
 Welcome sincere, nay, grateful I may say,
 In hope the mercy of my God may work
 My punishment through you :—through you per-
 chance,

Time, Solitude, long Fast, and Living rude,
 And Silence drear, may in His love exact
 Enough to satisfy His wrath : the rest,
 A greater heap, beyond all measure great,
 The Cross might pay, pay utterly, nor be
 Impoverished ; so unsearchable its wealth.

And from thy wealth, O Nature, gathering wealth,
 Wherewith perchance despondency may be
 Enriched to meekest hope ; and venturous faith,
 By fear chastised, ennobled into love,
 I, a base sinner, shall not poorer be
 Than her who whilome in Sarepta dwelt
 A widow lone, and from thine outward forms
 A symbol, guided, chose. In her two sticks,
 To dress the unfailing sacrifice of meal
 And oil, a real sacrifice of faith
 No less than sustenance by God supplied,
 She chanced upon the saving Cross to light
 In type unlooked for ; so mayhap can I,
 By lore my spirit hath already learned
 In distant Asia, find in natural forms
 Suggestive virtue which through grace may be

In truth a poor auxiliary, yet still
An aiding supplement to one who lies
Beneath the ban of Holy Mother Church.

Next into Troutbeck Vale, a savage scene
Of matted coppice then, Sir Lancelot climbed.
And lo! a welcome of white sunshine burst
All on a sudden through the parting clouds.
The mist cleared off from Kirkstone's rocky pass,
And radiance, mounting from the glorious west
In upward sloping beams, possessed the gorge
With burning brightness, till it overflowed
That ample pass into the lower vales.
In falls of golden light it came, and rose
Till the whole glen, with splendour flooded, seemed
Full of ethereal beauty from the roots
Of the wild mountains to their rugged heights.
Sir Lancelot, whose pace uneasy thoughts
Had lately quickened, now stood still and gazed,
Then journeyed forward, weeping as he went
In silence, inexpressibly relieved.

Within the Vale of Troutbeck towards the head
There is a single woody hill, enclosed
Within the mountains, yet apart and low.
Amid the underwood around, it seems
Like a huge animal recumbent there,
Not without grace; and sweetly apt it is
To catch all wandering sunbeams as they pass,
Or volatile lights in transit o'er the vale.
And oft the travellers of this day may see
The sunny hill within a flying shower
Of greenest hue in that romantic glen.
Upon the west there is a shaggy dell
Marked with a dusky vein of alders grey,
Beneath whose shade is heard a noisy brook

Racing amid the stones ; and eastward hangs
A bell-shaped mountain which the wild winds ring
Full mournfully, and by a verdant trench
And stream that glimmers in a sunken fosse,
Divided from the isolated hill.

Both steep and smooth that grassy mountain is,
Green as the noted turf upon Scale How,
With junipers unspeckled, nor adorned
With a loose surface of unquiet fern
Which finds a wandering air upon the breast
Of earth when pensive tree-tops sleep aloft,
And with continual waving gives a light
To the still prospects. But upon the brow
Two regions of red heather are outspread
In formal shapes, like plots of garden ground,
Ending in lines so trim and straight no spade
More straightly could have delved them, through
dislike

Of other soil, or the more rapid fall,
Of the descent, or some more latent cause.
That single hill it is, with hawthorn trees
In parklike order scattered on the lawn,
Which in the month of May, with muffled boughs
Depressed by snow-drifts of chaste flower, might well
Provoke the lambs to jealousy that flit
In aimless frolic on the turf below,
Like scudding foam across the dark green sea.
And at the junction of the forkèd streams
Where two wych-elms for ever dip their oars,
And rise with starry drippings to the air,
How wildly is the full moon's orbèd face
Amid the shaken circles multiplied,
And her attendant stars rebuffed from wave
To wave, as though there had been war in heaven.

The self-same hill it is, whereon the Knight
Now sought an ancient hermitage, for years
Vacant and ruinous, which in his youth
In some long rambles he had visited.
Beneath a grassy knoll, with coronal
Of ragged ash surmounted, was the cell
Between two leaning rocks, a desolate
And uncouth residence, yet weather-proof,
And from the running brook not far removed.

Not for ablution only at the dawn,
Or rite prelusive to more solemn prayer,
Or with ingenuous craft full often used
At midnight to put back the approach of sleep,
Aiding the spirit to subdue the flesh,
Impatient of the vigil,—not alone
For all the baser ends of common life
Was the propinquity of that clear stream
A blessing: for a privilege it is
To be a dweller in a sounding vale
Of limpid waters from the mountainous rocks
Descending, sweetly chanting as they come
The praise of Baptism; so that when we walk
Abroad, in each translucent deep we see
The Font, and in the prattling shallows hear
The missionary waters going forth
From the pierced sides of those eternal heights
To fill the cleansing vessels of the Church.

O blessèd Element! how dread would seem
The exulting rivers, and the buoyant plunge
Of stony cataracts, unto the sons
Of Sem, as witnessing the abiding power
Of the destructive waters, yea, how dread
The aspect of that fatal element,
Even through the rainbow thoughts the Oath Divine

Might haply furnish to their timorous hearts!
But, O what ready consolation leaps,
Like a reflected sunbeam, from the rills
Into the Christian heart, while yet the drops
Of our New Birth, not wholly dried within,
Stir with a sweet response of hidden joy.
So that when long upon a barren moor,
Or breadth of arid pinewood, we have roamed,
How cheerfully our weary footsteps make
A needless circuit to attain a pool
Discerned amid the heather or the stems,
That we may look therein, and weep or smile
As best befits the temper of the hour!
And to my well-pleased ear each mountain brook
With various plea, the chime of tumbling falls
Or murmuring lapse, seems audibly to claim
Kindred with Jordan, in whose typical wave
All waters from the Body Virginal
Of God's dear Son received the cleansing Gift,
The Mystical Ablution of our sins
Drawn from the contact of that Sacred Flesh.

Stay, stay, poor worldly Hearts! and rest awhile
From gainful traffic, and the frivolous war
Of wordy senates, and the vulgar place
In slanderous courts, all, talents in the earth
Unprofitably hidden,—rest awhile,
And with the poet o'er this woodland bridge
Descend, or rather raise yourselves, to lean,
And watch the fish in unpolluted depths
Tarrying unmoved against the stream, old types,
Haply by apostolic teaching first divulged,
Of Him the Fish Divine through love submerged
Within the depths of poor Humanity!
Or with St. Leo, by some Latian stream

In spirit walking, let us ponder well
In every curve those still pellucid wombs
Of crystal undefiled, where now converge
The under-water beams which enter there,
Piercing the fluent brook without a wound,
And playing on the quiet stones beneath.
Within such wombs are Christian babes conceived,
With an immaculate conception, pierced
By the Invisible Spirit; for the power
He gave to Mary hath He likewise shed
Into these watery depths; what Jesus took
From her, so speaks that ancient Saint, He laid
Once more within the Sacramental Font.
These are the wombs of Mary, these the depths
Immaculate wherein the Fish resides.
But see! the golden fisher from the bridge
Shoots on his glancing wings; shall nature still
Preach on? Lo! then, ye children of the world,
That bird is crowned a king, and ever makes
The streams the limits of his realm, the rills
His pathway o'er the world, baptismal roads
Which he deserteth never, and for food
The venturous creature preys upon the fish,
Like faith upon the Flesh of Him submerged
For our behoof within those watery depths.
Ah! had we kept that same baptismal path,
The road of waters, we should not bewail
With tears—yet even those who weep are blest—
The ruffled splendour of our plumage now.

Weep, weep, ye little mosses! ever weep
With sunny trickling o'er yon giant rock!
A power abides in your celestial tears
Shed from the Rock Divine, more precious far
Than that anointing which from Aaron's beard

Went down into the outskirts of the Law !
Chime, all ye little Jordans ! as I walk,
Warning the penitent to keep the Gift
Received ; or, it were best to say, preserve
What yet remains of that baptismal power !
And while the mountains lift their mighty heads,
Companions of the sunrise, and proclaim
Christ, the true mountain, and the forests wave
Their beckoning boughs and lisp in gentle songs,
Heard by the meek in spirit, of Thy ways,
O Holy Ghost ! let this sweet valley preach
Our Baptism, let the thunder of the floods
Cry Baptism loudly to forgetful hearts,
And let the summer-hidden brooks prolong
The lesson in their accents soft and low,
And murmur Baptism to the ear of love !

O that the hermitage of all our lives,
Our hidden lives secreted with our Lord,
Might be, as was Sir Lancelot's rocky cell,
Never from running brooks too far removed !

In solemn mood of mind and with his thoughts
Grave and collected, the lone Knight surveyed
The sanctuary of cloudy years to come,
The narrow vale and clasping bound of hills,
The silent school-house of his solitude,—
Where in the eye of nature he must learn
The austere wisdom of repentance. There
So long he stood, so ardently he gazed
Upon the cell and its rough neighbourhood,
Now in the twilight dusky and obscure,
It seemed as though he waited for some sign,
Or looked to find the features of the place
Significant and legible, where he
Some tokens of the future might detect :

Till by the beauty of the night o'ercome,
Looking upon the star-lit valley, thus,
But silently within himself, he mused.

Evening hath gone, hath died upon the hills,
The vale, the river,—no one knoweth where ;
But her last lustrous breath hath passed at once
From land and sky. The sombre earth is now
But the grey, twilight-curtained bed, whereon
That death is daily died. From every point
Huge palls of black, continuous cloud are drawn
Onward and upward till they meet above
And rest upon the heights, roofing the earth
With awful nearness,—like the closing round,
Audibly wafting, of seraphic wings
To guard the slumbering world. With what a weight
Night seems to lean incumbent on the earth,
The earth still beating with the sun's late warmth!
All things are hushed except the waterfalls,
The inarticulate voices of the woods,
And scarcely-silent shining of the moon.
See how she hangs, the very soul of night,
And from the purple hollow showers on man
Her radiant pulses of unfruitful gold!

O that I had the night-bird's wing to flee
To many a dreadful glen and fishy tarn,
Which I have seen and feared by day, (in youth
Chasing the deer or anxious to reclaim
A truant falcon) that at this still hour
When night is working her chief miracles,
And with grey shadowy lights is lying bare
The very nerves of darkness, I might drink
From the deep wells of terror one chaste draught
To chill the over-lightness of my heart!

Round me are hills whose summits seem to reel

Within the unsteady atmosphere of night,
Clothed in soft gloom, like raven's plumage: there
Mid the strong folds of ether, and the zones
Of mighty clasping winds that gird with chains
The naked precipice and leaning peak,
Great things and glorious pomps are going on
Up in the birth-place of the storms and calms,
Where light and darkness fetch their utmost powers
To meet and clash in war unspeakable.
And now and then throughout the quiet night
Fragments of breezes with a liquid fall
Drop to the lowlands, whisper in the reeds,
And are drawn in beneath the silver brook,
Bearing, it may be, messages and words
Of wondrous import from the lines arrayed
Upon the unseen steeps.

But hark! the owls
Shout from the firs on Wansfell, and the eye
May trace those sailing pirates of the night,
Stooping with dusky prows to cleave the gloom,
Scattering a momentary wake behind,
A palpable and broken brightness shed
As with white wing they part the darksome air!

Thus, inmate of the Ash-tree Hermitage—
Which they who seek will surely find, if so
Imagination help them to the spot—
The lone Sir Lancelot dwelt for seven whole years
And more. By his old vassals was he served
With common necessaries duly left
Twice in the week beneath a holly bush
On a smooth slab of stone, a ministry
Connived at by the merciful old man
Who ruled St. Catherine's cloister by the lake,
If not suggested by his thoughtful love.

Yet speech did no one hold with their poor lord ;
 On such condition was it understood
 Connivance rested ; yet from brake or hill
 Full many an eye, both young and old, would watch
 To see the last De Wace, as by his cell
 He stood, or from the tangled copse emerged
 High up to wander on the open moors.

It chanced that in the bygone years his lot
 A strange, mysterious Providence had met
 In Caucasus and by the savage steppes
 Interminable, and the Asian lakes,
 Whereby the powers of nature had been made
 To him a language dimly understood,—
 A punishment, yet not without relief
 Commingled, science far above the pitch
 Of those rough days, except unto the few
 To whom the stars obediently would yield
 Nightly interpretations, and the stones
 Their latent mutabilities unfold,
 And gums and fatal saps would minister
 Their properties medicinal, for ends
 Unhallowed, and a loathsome skill.

Even such,

Only more guilty, is the fearful use
 Of nature made in these self-boasting days,
 By science unabashed before the Eye
 Of the Supreme, and not on bended knees
 Its searches prosecuting day and night.
 A base, idolatrous ritual it is,
 Whence, in oblivion oft of the First Cause,
 Self-swollen knowledge uncouth service yields
 To second causes multitudinous ;—
 Not in the beautiful and bright array
 Of mystic truths, impersonations fair

Of sight or sound, which in old Greece were wont
To minister unto the inward sense
Of what Eternal was and Infinite,
And oftentimes raised the soul above herself,—
Faith even in its short-comings beautiful ;—
But with a barren worship of poor names,
Vacant, unhelpful, unimpassioned ; loud
In novelty of dissonance,—oh ! how
Unlike the symphony true science wakes,
In sympathy absorbing to itself
The skilful tones of sweet Theology,
Which Heaven hath crowned the queen of sciences,
Mother of truth and fountain of the arts,
Pure heavenly lore, within the humble soul,
In varying tune with every want and woe
And every homeless love of humankind,—
A deep accord of everlasting praise
Preluded now, with such rehearsal as
Might win the world unto the side of Heaven,
If to the charming she would lend an ear.

Like some insidious creature, self-immured,
Which 'neath the glebe absconds, and hourly fights
Against the outward beauty of the earth
With dull corrosive diligence, so lurks
The curse of Babel at the secret root
Of popular language or the invented tongue
Of mundane science, and, each passing year,
Sunders with more effectual divorce
The mighty power of language from the Faith,
Which once with amity subserved the truth
In Creeds consigned, through spiritual power
At Pentecost infused into the Church,
From Tongues of Fire distilled, unquenchable
As is the beacon by the climbing surge.

O I could weep for that most grievous wrong
Which we commit, the trespass of our lips,
Against the noble majesty of day,
And sacred beauty of nocturnal skies !
When o'er the weary realms of Europe, God,
Upon the purple walls of midnight, deigns
To write the sweet inscriptions of His love
In starry characters, lo ! science lifts
Her forehead unabashed, and from her towers
Preaches the pagan worship, rites and spells,
Junctions and separations, there fulfilled
By red-haired Mars, or that divinest orb,
Beaming on children at their early prayers,
The lamp of evening now surnamed from her
The sea-born goddess. And upon the earth,
In patient loveliness outspread, no less
Prevails the tyranny of pagan names,
Bidding that eloquent preacher hold her peace ;
Drawing across her blazonry of types
A veil of denser woof than that of old,
Broidered with form of every living thing,
In Egypt woven for the Isiac rites.
Flowers that for innate love of Jesus sign
Their little bosoms with a summer Cross,
Choice blooms through simple mention consecrate
By the dear Saviour's Lips, and modest herbs
Which in their form or habits could remind
Past ages of the Blissful Mother, torn
Each from its little pulpit, sing by force,
Hard by the waters of our Babylon,
Of Venus, or the self-admiring boy,
Or wounded gallant whom the goddess loved.

Ah me ! we need another Pentecost
Unto the stammering nations to restore

Their unity of ritual voice again !
That deed of ill by humble men deplored
Which boastfully deformed the catholic past,
And now hath shaped three centuries to bear
Its paltry and disfigured lineaments,
Hath more than half way travelled toward a change.
Therefore, as admonition to ourselves
And grave enticement to our friends, let us,
Each in his unobtrusive measure, turn
The helm of our swift-sailing words, and steer
Our common converse by more Christian stars ;
Mindful that on the new-created earth
The first, sublimest litany that rose,
From man unto the Triune God above,
Was that miraculous Nomenclature given
With mystical intelligence to all
Created things by Adam, thus inspired
To worship God with that primeval song,—
A litany the sweetest which the earth
Had rendered, till the Church was taught to sing
The dear life-giving Dolours of her Lord !

But, not like alchemist or vigil-worn
Astrologer, Sir Lancelot entertained
Communion far sublimer than was wont,
But of a moral sort, with natural things ;
Striving in true submission to the Church
To bear her weight, yet not the less to seek
From earth consoling wisdom like her own,—
A rule whereby to mete his inward growth,
A melody to which he might attune
The variable temper of his soul :
As though some roots and remnants there might be,
Inverted strata of the treasure once
In earth laid up, when mystic tillage could

Suffice for discipline to sinless man,
By God ordained in Paradise of old,—
Through the fierce action of the ancient curse
Delved deep into the soil, but by the power
Of Christian meditation haply still
Recoverable, and which may yet escape
In obscure spots and by unthought-of ways
The jealous custody wherein it lies.
How much had been retrieved in elder times
And through the affectionate patience of the Church,
In Alexandria chiefly, had the Knight
Been duly taught when in Bologna once
He studied, and a far-famed doctor there,
While the vast hall was thronged with auditors,
In studious exposition had unlocked
The cabinets of Christian allegory.
And such communion did he now attempt
To achieve in that his penal hermitage.

SIR LANCELOT.

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BOOK II.

THE BOOKS.

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THE BOOKS.

THERE to his solitude the seasons came,
And each one took him gently by surprise,
Turning on noiseless hinges unperceived.
Spring calmly passed, like some transparent dream,
Upon the spirit of the wintry earth,
And then was in the shady summer lost,
Ere he was conscious of a growing change :
And though more palpably, yet autumn stole
With subtle step encroaching on the depths
Of summer foliage. And in nothing else
Is nature's sacred influence more confessed
A healing balsam, than in that calm use
Of present hours and opportunities
Which her unfretful transmutations breed,
And soft, deliberate beauty. Then perchance
Each season wore a trace within his heart,
Furthered his discipline, and left his soul
In some advance upon the season past.
Though the gross eye when introverted most
Must be content to measure inward growths
Attained, which in their act of growing shunned
The contemplative gaze.

For seven long years
Earth's four magnificent mutations rolled
Above him and around him, while within
His spirit yielded with responsive change.
He loved spring's downy green and brilliant veins

Of vivid fern that striped the sloping hills,
And the white splendours of her sunshine showers,
When birds beneath the rainbow arches sang
With lusty music, and the wild flowers rose
Almost beneath his footsteps as he walked.
And with a pensive humour would he watch
How summer's green grew darker in the rains
Which swept assiduously upon the hills,
Or hung in labouring folds of fleecy mist
Which shed their tear-drops imperceptibly,
And with the sunbeam wild enchantments wrought,
Or ministered nocturnal pageantry
Unto the silver moon. Autumnal days
He noted for their variable lights,
Stirring or still, on those discoloured moors
Of green sward slowly withering into white,
Hollows of tawny fern or purple heath,
And blue stones from the trickling mosses wet
Gleaming like polished marble on the steeps,
And through an atmosphere beheld, so soft,
The mountains seemed like cushions that would yield
Elastic to the pressure of the arm
Of one reclining.

In the bright cold eye
And dazzling aspect of the wintry sun,
Which from the low horizon slanting looks
Into the face, not on the heights of heaven
As in the deep and fervent midsummer
Commodiously enthroned, he loved to mark
The threads of moss which shot across the slopes,
Yellow and scarlet and refulgent green,
All round the springs in bulging pillows swollen ;
And night was never half so beautiful
As on the hills in frosty starlight spread

Snow-capped, and with a hundred echoes filled
Waked by the clear-voiced raving of the brooks.
In that pacific splendour of the stars
On wintry nights, with what a fair deceit
Is undue summer born afresh, to one
Who wanders half-way up some wooded hill !
The beeches, whose dry clinging leaves by day
Seem like the rustling shroud upon a ghost,
In the vague light now swell upon the eye
In dusky size, and outline unconfirmed
Of nodding umbrage, while the vale below
Trembles beneath a half translucent sea,
That with alternate waves of light and dark
Clothes the grey marshy fallows at our feet
With dim magnificence, as Christian thought
Sheds on the beaten path of common tasks
The aspect of infinity, by right
To duties appertaining, as to powers
Which, howsoever mean or common-place,
Enclose some portion of the Will of God.

Nor wanted he another simple joy
Bestowed in that drear sabbath of the earth ;
For wandering near the wintry streams, kept low
By frosts that seal the upland springs, he loved
The glistening star which on the ouzle's breast
Twinkles upon the ice-rimmed stones, or flits
Shooting its snowy beam all up the rill,
Winding as it may wind, and not a curve
Evading, nor a cape of meadow-land
In lawless transit crossing, like some orb
That wheels obedient on a tortuous path
Upon the trackless sky. A visitant,
That living Luminary ne'er arrives
Till with the cold of our declining year :

And—not inapt to watchful hearts will seem
The bold comparison—it bodies forth
To pious thought the Migratory Star
Of Christmas, which the swarthy Magians led
To Him new-born among the flocks and herds.

The lesser revolutions of the day,
And silent-footed night, were meted out
By him with ritual observances,
And an affectionate formality.
The sun, now burning in the azure heaven,
Now urging on his white and spectral disk
Perceptibly behind a veil of clouds,
Was his sole altar-lamp, a Voice of Light—
So may an inmate of a mountain home
Not over-boldly name the sun—a Voice,
Which from the pearly east invoked him first
To rise, and, when with risen orb it stood
Above the hills, it summoned him to prime ;
And when the vale was filled with light, it rang
With its descending beams the hour of tierce ;
Or when it sparkled in the central sky
(Not least a Voice at that deep earth-stilled hour)
Bespoke the noon-day service, and, half-way
Sloped westward, then a fresh monition gave,
Ere yet the sunset waked his vesper thoughts ;
And, the moist twilight of the compline passed,
The moon three times in her ascent proclaimed,
Stooping from out her balcony serene,
Three several nocturns, and the dubious light
Of dawn, whose sweet confusion mingles half
Night's softness with day's clear transparent hue,
Seemed interposed for lauds, that at the prayer
Of His true Church the Bridegroom might unveil
His spiritual sunrise to the soul.

Thus were his hours partitioned, and no less
Had he invented rituals minute,
Which with the fluctuations harmonized
Of our unsteady climate : patterns sweet
He found, and drew from his remembrances
Of catholic observance, and the forms
Divine of Rome's magnificent liturgies.
And gradually mounting in degree
As observation monthly added fresh
Intelligence, he to a strange extent
Evoked the spirit of earth's ritual,
The natural liturgies of storm and calm,
And swelling symphonies of choral winds
With solitary breezes blending faintly ;
While in the stately gestures of the clouds
He studied her processional. Yet poor
And feeble was the approach which he could make
Toward shadowing out a service for himself
From earth's disjointed symbols. Still from these,
And from his punishment endured with awe,
And from the grace of Christ which runneth over
Even on the outcast and the separate,
And from the weekly mass, heard in the porch
Of grey St. Catherine's by the lonely lake,
And ritual joys upon occasional feasts
In secret snatched, and only half enjoyed
As aids to penance, rather than reliefs,—
He gathered wherewithal to train his soul
Through penitential gloom to filial love :
And angels ministered without disdain
Unto that Excommunicated Man.

And other aids he had of no mean sort,
But mighty in accomplishing his end.
For not a soul inhabits the wide earth,

Inside the Church or out, which is not reached
By some stray blessing and uncertain grace
Irregular, and oft miraculous
As oft dispensing with appointed forms :
So all untiring is the love of God,
So all unsearchable the grace of Christ.

Two Books he had brought with him to the hills
By happy chance, for not more suitable
Could they have been, or to his present lot
More curiously appropriate, if he
With choice long-pondered had selected them :
Aids might they be and complements, perchance,
Which could supply unto his mind what lacked
Of self-interpretation in the earth,
To comment on her own fair mysteries
With illustrations of a moral kind.
Keys were they, aptly fitted to unlock
Her inspiration of sustaining thought,
Her subsidies of spiritual strength,
And consolations, with sublimity
No less than a relieving gentleness
Adapted to the variable walks
And destinies of fallen humanity.

One was a fragment of the Written Word,
By God consigned unto the Holy Church,
Her charter, whence with her vast mind informed
With apostolic saying, by the cloud,
That luminous pillar of our wilderness,
Of old tradition throughout her descents
Not without miracle accompanied,
She was to teach the hearts of Christian men ;
Sole teacher she, and that one Book the chief
Original fountain of her teaching ! There,
In mute magnificent procession led,

We see the fortunes of Humanity,
The various discipline of Adam's race ;
And from our childhood upward learn to weep
Or smile in cherished sympathy with him
In Bethel dreaming, or with Joseph sold
To foreign merchants, and with bursting heart
Weeping impassionedly upon the neck
Of Rachel's youngest-born. There man is seen
In fluctuations marvellous and wild,
And yet by revelation ascertained
Infallible, drawn forward to the Cross,
The everlasting haven of our kind.
There with that solitary, blameless man
Beginning, tenant of God's Paradise,
Now fallen we behold our nature led
Through dreams and expiations shadowy
In blood of beasts approached, through old
Traditions of hereditary forms
Of service primitive, and colloquies
With angel apparitions, and a law
Of onerous significance imposed
On private life and on the social state,
In its pure self a blessing, to a curse
By sin commuted unendurable,
Through prophecy translated more and more,
And goaded by a harsh captivity,
Into the dawning of Messiah's Day.
And then upon the threshold of two worlds
In the drear wilderness the Baptist stood,
And with authentic voice proclaimed aloud
The ceremonial education over,
And that the beautiful and solemn Day
Had absolutely broken in the East.

And then—O Wisdom graciously vouchsafed,

To be by us affectionately prized
And by the Church assiduously taught!—
The eye beholds how, for a few short years
Divine Exemplar, dwelt upon the earth
Goodness and Truth, the Eternal Plenitude
Of the true Godhead bodily comprised
In Flesh the blissful Mary minister'd,
Two Natures deeply intercommuning
With a mysterious intimacy, joined
In unity of Person all Divine,—
And how at length, our sole Atonement made
In His health-giving Passion, He went up
To Glory He had never left, to sit,
Yet not divorced from Flesh so late assumed,
Man, worshipped by the hierarchies of heaven.

Then far across the universal earth,
Through God's election secretly exhaled,
By sacramental links in unity
Compact, the Mystic Body grew apace,
On twelve foundation stones reposing sure ;
Which through supernal pilotage hath steered
Right o'er opposing ages westward bound,
And still shall steer, transfigured evermore
With varying splendours suitably ordained
Unto the age and sickness of the world,
Whether in her magnificent decadence,
Or fresh returns towards her primal strength.

O Book most good ! most holy ! on our knees
To be full often scanned, how blest was he,
That lonely, Excommunicated Man,
That one small portion of thy heavenly lore
At least was his, whence fervours unreprieved
Were fed, and terror deepened and chaste love,
Love far beyond a sinner's worth or hope,

Begotten of calm prayer within his soul,
And thanksgivings which hardly dared to be
Thanksgivings, as above his guilty state!

A little parchment Manuscript it was,
Laboriously written, and emblazed
With uncial letters fancifully streaked
In flourishes of vermeil and of gold,
A task of love by some most diligent monk
In cloistered leisure reverently adorned.
And therein was contained the Book of Job,
In the quaint style and sinewy rhythm composed,
And touching diction of the barbarous
And powerful Latin of the Western Church,
Rich in a strange felicity to print
Expressions picturesquely turned, and thoughts
Through bold ellipses darkly signified,
Upon the memory, by that darkness wooed
To deep attention.

And there could not be
Of Holy Writ a portion suited more
Unto the aspirations of his soul
And wholesome sadness than that Book of Job.

In the far east long centuries ago
Of which we have no count, amid the tents
Of Hus, and pastoral magnificence
Of its great men, a marvellous Voice was heard,—
Anguish, submission, patience, all conjoined
With solemn vindications, and expressed
In interrogatories boldly urged,
Yet with a reverent spirit, to the Judge
Supreme in Heaven and Maker of mankind.
The Voice it was of lorn Humanity
Turning abrupt, like oxen on the goads,
On its intolerable destiny,

Its woes intense and hungry sympathies
Unsatisfied, and craving hopes and loves,
And bodily torments vile, all unsustained
By dignity in the endurance. There,
In Hus, Humanity thus turned abrupt,
As though refusing further to advance,
With thoughtful obstinacy, not unpraised
Of God, by purblind men not understood.
And now no more by destiny pursued,
A flying victim in ignoble rout,
It turned to face the curse, and wise in faith
Questioned the lofty quarter whence it came ;
Not in the tame philosophy content
With explanations timidly beneath
God's glory, offered by the poverty
Of common consolation, and the world's
Unspiritual humility of speech,—
An unregarded offering. It was bold
In lofty thought, and in its questionings
Not ignorant. O surely not without
Divine suggestion of the nobleness
Of its original nature, and the sense
Of supernatural alliance fed
Within the spirit by deep communings
With worlds invisible, and obvious prints
Of an Almighty Presence on the earth.

Never was music heard among mankind
Like that most fluctuating Voice ! Wild strains,
Beating in awful cadence like the surge
Which marks the rough pulsations of the storm,
Making the solid shore to groan, or like
The cry of angry torture oft dispersed
By wounded eagles in the echoing vales
Of the hushed mountains. Wild and lofty strains

Were they of venturous passion now, and now
Of self-abasement dignified, which rose
And fell,—with troublous warbling of loose notes
Rose thrillingly, and with a prelude strange
Of shaken keys disorderly, and fell
With steady sound and pressure masculine,
Like a loud march in music, or the close
Of some full-hearted requiem. One while
Most querulous, yet not unsweetly so,
It sued for rest in death, and then accused
The blessed functions of the fruitful womb,
Declaring life unprized, and preaching how
The moist clods of the valley should be sweet
Unto the weary limbs and world-worn heart.

With better sense of its own majesty
And possibilities of Heaven, It then
Complained of the Almighty's mystic love
Of darkness and concealment in His ways ;
Till by the very greatness of its thoughts
Rebuked, its vileness did It straight confess
With ample self-disparagement. It brooked
The Voice of God, but in forbearance meek
Once, twice It spake, the third time answered not,
But laid its hand, a signet on its mouth ;
In lamentation skilful, not in proof,
When God, a sixth in that great colloquy,
Vouchsafed to interpose. It could not brook,—
That plaintive Voice of our Humanity,
It could not brook the Vision of our God,
(Although it quailed not at His gracious Voice)
But speechless was, abhorrent of itself.
How changed the converse since the Almighty talked
In the cool time of Asiatic day,
Beneath the umbrage of the happy groves

Where Adam dwelt, our ancestor revered,
Whose solemn memory we may cherish still
And, silent, wrap it in our tenderest thoughts!

The blazoned Manuscript a spirit was,
Instinct with grandeur, to that lonely Man ;
And his whole temper consciously was raised
With an uplifting of his thoughts, while he,
Listening the pathos of that awful Voice
From out the depths of poor Humanity,
Gazed like a seer upon the thrilling scene
Where Everlasting Mercy justified
The Voice which, unalarmed, maintained its ways.

Nor wanted he a fountain whence to draw
Improving sadness, and no less beguile
The melancholy leisure of his time.
A Book it was, in true ascetic tone
Composed, the labour of the austere pen
Of old Hieronymus, which from a monk
Of Brescia in his youth he had received,
A student in Bologna's grim arcades.
Through years of pleasure, love, and idle joust,
And in far darker scenes of wilful sin,
With a contemptuous care he had preserved
The gift, at first with courteous sneer received ;
While his companions rang a giddy change
Of gibes upon the monk who so misplaced
In sinful hands his pious offering.
But thus not seldom is the eye of age
By Heaven illuminated to discern
Upon the lineaments of youth some trace
Of character behind the character
Of our first years, hereafter to absorb
Our lives with unexpected mastery :
And thus it speaks and warns in words that seem

To indicate a most misjudging eye,
Till time avenges it upon the harsh
And forward condemnations of our youth.

For now the Penitent in that old Book
A power encountered both to heal and bless,
An angel guest most gladly entertained.
Three scant biographies the Book comprised,
Which did to him abound ; for thence he drew
An application ever fresh, because
In some sort mated to his changeful moods.

One while amid the parched Thebaid sands
With that first eremite, the holy Paul,
He conversed to the profit of his soul.
And specially at even-tide he stood,
Translated in his spirit, at the cave
Now in Egyptian sand-drifts all engulfed.
Embayed within a horrid cliff it was,
Where the scorched mountains confine on the sand,
A lonely, miserable place, yet not
Without some insulated loveliness.
It was most sweetly roofed with bluest sky
Stopping the chinks of a suspended palm,
Which overhead hung like a green alcove,
And ever found a feebly suing breeze,
Even from the sands, in whose weak breath it was
Floating and stationary both at once.
Amid its roots a lucid fountain sprung
With copious jet, and with a tinkling sound
Which seemed to augment the coolness of the place
And, touching marvel ! by the selfsame vent,
Through which the little silver column rose,
Was it continually absorbed again.
A habitation was it once where dwelt
Unlawful coiners, and in it pursued

Their trade, what time voluptuous Antony
With Cleopatra dallied by the Nile
As though Rome was not, and their implements
Lay scattered in the corners of the rock.
There Paul the Hermit dwelt, in amity
And mutual understanding marvellous
With the rough beasts ; there on his knees he died :
A lion dug his grave, while Antony,
That choice ascetic, wrapped his sacred corpse
In his own treasured cloak, the humble gift
Of Athanasius, pillar of the faith.
For miracles, upon the outer world
Effected, are but shadows from within
Of those mysterious heights of power, attained
Through the unseen miracles of faith and love,
And long afflictive penance in the soul.

In like communion with the inferior tribes
St. Francis lived, who, on Alvernia rapt,
At the Seven Hours was duly called to prayer
By a mysterious falcon on the hills,
The wandering creature self-constrained through love,
With no reluctant office, to supply
The holy purpose of a convent bell.
And there the poet of our latest times,
Poet and sage, and with lay-priesthood clothed
To wind the prelude on the magic horn
Of ancient truth, behind the cuckoo's cry
Discerned, and with obedient ear received,
The Baptist's call to deeper penitence,—
A pilgrim in the Tuscan Apennines,
Met by the admonitions of the Faith
Within that vernal liturgy consigned.

Thus was the Penitent full oft with Paul
And the wild beasts in conclave most uncouth.

Or in the noisy midnights went his thoughts
(A second history prompting now his mind)
With young Hilarion on the rough sea-shore
Of Palestine, with robbers prowling round,
Or sick from Gaza journeying to be healed.
Again in other moods his Book would lead
His rapt imagination far away
To eastern noontide, and the drowsy plains,
Where brittle salt-herbs struggle with wild thyme,
And Malchus, captive monk, who pastured there
The sheepflocks of the ungodly Saracens.

Then humble Joy, the heavenly exile, came
In various guise to that most lonely cell.
For, wandering like a pilgrim o'er the world,
She visits all and sojourneth with none;
For either churlish sin will bar her out,
Or peevish and inhospitable mirth
Will seek a quarrel with her, brooking not
The admonition of her quiet ways.
And yet, methinks, it were a thought more true,
That Joy, which knocks so often at our doors,
No prompt departure takes, but lingering still,
Like an importunate benefactor, stays
To wait a kindlier mood ; and at our feet
She lies, when we go forth, as one that asks
An alms ; and in the heyday of our dreams,
And chiefly in our foolish youth, we spurn
The Angel with as little thought, or even
With something of the whim wherewith we spurn,
With more intention than we need, the leaves
Of yellow autumn ; and then sadness comes,
Slackening the current of our dreams, and does
Her pleasant office, bending to the ground
Our lofty spirits, till our eyes find out

Her whom we thought far off, whose modest place
And most unlikely fashion staring hope
Had overlooked. Alas! we live too fast
And look too forward to be joyful men.
We get and gain too much. Our faith in Christ
Is written in our holy books, a thing
Of bliss which we can never make of it,
Or will not make of it, although we can.
And when we would constrain our worldly hearts
To attitude of joy, we but presume,
Or vex our lips to utter formal words
Which have no inward echo: for to joy
In Jesus is a spiritual gift,
A simple, childlike power, that sings its songs
Leaning upon obedience strict and calm,
And nurtured at the breast of sacred fear.

Of all the rituals to which humble Joy
Consigned herself for that most lonely Man,
Let one be named. When autumn's wailing winds,
Or silent action of November's frost,
With tawny acorns strewed the leafy ground,
There passed a pleasant change upon the place,
A sweet invasion of the solitude.
A tide of little children daily flowed
Up the deserted valley, and outspread,
Single or in associate bands, all day
To glean the woodland fruitage, and at eve
Softly receded to their distant homes
As though the sunset ruled their silent ebb.
In the first year Sir Lancelot had endured
This brief intrusion with unquiet mind.
And then his shyness bore it, as he brooked
The rustic eyes that looked on him at mass,
And with an awkward delicacy strove

To look as though they did not mean to look.
But afterward did it become a change,
A little revolution in the vale,
Which expectation looked for, and, when come,
Enjoyed without reluctance ; for it brought
An influx of sweet images, and trains
Of profitable pleasure, which it seemed
An ill-directed penance to avoid.
The merry voices cast into the woods,
Ubiquitous, like cuckoo's muffled cries,
The encounter with blythe faces, and the awe,
Endeavouring to look bold, with which they made
Frightened obeisance, and the cheerful sound
Of many footsteps tripping o'er the leaves,
The diligent ambition, often foiled,
To drag their heavy sack of acorns home,
Loaded beyond their strength, the unselfish aid
By sisters to their little brothers given,
Themselves by elder brothers all unhelped
Such images, that for a single week
Peopled the valley, yielded harmless store
Of grateful meditation, blythe or sad,
Abetted by the silence that ensued,
Itself incomparably deepened there
By those bright presences, which left it now
A melancholy breadth of shore whereon
An hour ago the sparkling waters were.

And let it not a trifling help be deemed,
A subsidy which conscience would disdain,
That, when the soft and steady south wind blew
On holy days, it wafted to his ear
From the old priory by the neighbouring lake
The pleasant admonitions of the bells.
Few hearts there are so hard that they can hear

That soothing sound unmoved, so sweet it is,
And in the spirit of old childhood steeped,
A very plaintive haunting, pregnant all
With memories of our lost maternal love,
And the first innocent delights of home.
O while association, of pure thoughts
Begotten and chaste memories, hath the power
To purify and heighten, let it not
With poor disdainful wantonness forswear
Its old and true alliance with church-bells!

There sometimes did the Penitent steal down,
Ere the green mountains in the sunrise blushed,
Unto St. Catherine's chapel by the mere ;
Half doubting, whether it were well his soul
Should feed upon sweet sounds, and drink the cup
Of exquisite church-music, to allay
For one short hour the weary strife within.
And through the underwood obscure he crept
Inside a curtain of dark elder boughs,
Shading the buttresses upon the north :
And there with many a tear, and yet a joy
Amid his tears, he heard the chanted Mass
Sound feebly through the old and solid wall.
And often in the summer did he catch,
Through open windows tremulously borne,
A breath of incense ; and, returned once more
To his lone hermitage, that odour hung
Around his temper like an atmosphere
Of blessing, sometimes undispersed for days.
To this and other holdfasts, that may seem
But trivial unto us who are so rich
In our neglected means, his spirit clung,
And by them climbed, and from them knew to draw
Apt nourishment.

Two Portals dread there are,
Whereby a thousand, thousand catholic souls,
On their invisible occupations bound,
Are passing and repassing in and out
The spiritual world the whole day through.
Chief from the blessèd Incarnation hewn,
With Blood and Water tempered, is the Gate
Of Sacramental Access to the Throne,
Unseen but not far off, of God Supreme.
Then, mighty though subordinate, the Gate
Of Prayer, or rather Gateway without gate,
Open, unsentinelled by day or night.
Thence to and fro, from earth to Heaven, and back
From Heaven to earth, the living spirits range
Through regions infinite, and see great sights,
And come across calm foretastes of the bliss
To be hereafter.

From the first of these
Sir Lancelot was for awhile repulsed
For his soul's health at last; but through the Gate
So mercifully left without a guard,
With the devotion of pure thought, and rite
Of actual prayer, his spirit hourly passed.
Yet I would fain believe, if so the thought
Acceptance find with wisdom more assured
Than mine, that, in the daily pomps and shows
Of nature, there are posterns ill discerned,
Through negligence long overgrown with weeds,
Or in the effulgence of the present Church
O'ershadowed, and by which a guided soul,
Through sweet discoveries led, may entrance gain
Into the world of spirit that confines
So closely on our own, and meet with God
Not wholly from our Eden yet withdrawn,

Or through the reconciling Cross content
His hidden Presence once more to renew
Elsewhere than in the grave disclosures made
By Holy Church in Mysteries Divine,
Yet there, there only, surely manifest.

In some deep ways and through a patient love,
Unseated often from his anxious heart
Through the distress of penitential fears,
The Excommunicated found a church
In natural things, that, shapeless as it was,
Largely enriched his poverty of means.
Even time, unaided in its silent lapse,
Not wholly powerless hath been found to heal,
To elevate, and to sustain : much more
May nature, with her simple earthly shows,
And her betrayings of unearthly powers,
Claim for herself a gift medicinal.
Some have there been of old, some may be now,
Who have devoutly faced earth's mysteries,
(Often most solemnly when least supposed)
Not with the pomp of knowledge, but the approach
Of reverent longing, and have gently worn
By the soft pressure of assiduous love
A pathway through the coloured veil of things.

Sir Lancelot was changed. Earth not in vain
Had wooed his heart, which somewhat lighter grew
Without aught being diminished of the sense
Of miserable guilt and fearful stain.
Sin seemed a stranger thing, and it was cast
To a far greater distance in his thoughts
Than heretofore, and virtue lovelier seemed,
And purity more welcome to his heart.
For slowly his repentance had outgrown
The broader shadows of remorse, and grace

In meek anticipations was perceived
A growing light amid his darker thoughts.
And joy once more unto his spirit came
In fitful visitations, like the wind
In measured pauses on a summer's day.
And beautiful as all things were around,
Most beautiful, because contributing
Most freshness and relief, was natural change.

How sweet is change! In sickness or in grief
The very alternations of our pain
Are recognized for ease: and happiness
Is fed by fluctuations in its kind;
And love that would be trustful must have change
To overtake the mutability
Of temper in its object, else the heart
O'ertops the languid passion with its growths.
And when is change more blameless or more soft
Than in the transformations of the earth
And sky? Thus after weeks of sunny days
With mind well-pleased Sir Lancelot would behold
Tenacious mists receive unto themselves
The green hill-tops and promontoried steeps
For other weeks of rain to be involved
In the cool chambers of the humid clouds.
Thence would they issue forth once more, bright cones
Of kindled herbage or of glittering rock,
Which from a region of perpetual gleams
With sunny aspect overlooked the vales.
And, thus emerging from the folds of mist
With freshened tints and store of tinkling springs,
Which fall in trills of bell-like sound from rock
To rock all down, the mountain heights appeared
New features in the scene, by novelty
Clothed in fresh interest, and with envy too

Of their so long communion up on high
With the dark spirit of the mighty mists.
And not less grateful to his mind, the more
That it by melancholy thought was so
Enhanced, was the sad change of faded earth
When summer days were shortening. The gay flush
Of the first evenings of the genial spring
Was not more acceptable to his heart,
Than chill elastic airs which nimbly breathe
O'er the white rime of an autumnal morn.
There was a quickening in them both which gave
An impulse to his soul, an industry
Of thought which could on simple joys bestow
Authentic patent of nobility.

SIR LANCELOT.



BOOK III.

THE BEAUTIFUL YEAR.

BOOK III.

THE BEAUTIFUL YEAR.

WITH what soft airs and visionary change,
Sweetly protracted, doth our English spring,
Welcome invader, march by running stream
Or woodland skirt, and capture sunny bank
And sheltered nook, and with a kind surprise
Hang his green-spotted banner in one day
Upon a score of tree-tops, whence he flings,
As from his strongholds over hill and dale,
Long leafy chains until the land is his
By conquest visible, and obvious right
Which the pleased eye accords. More sweet by far
This wayward tardiness, this gentle strife
Twixt day and night, crisp rime and genial sun,
Than spring's approach of strangely mingled speed
And tedious slowness, such as we behold
On Lombard's plain or Bergamascan slopes
Facing the warm winds of the south, where dykes,
With herbage newly flushed, glow all at once
With violets both blue and white, and tufts
Of primrose, and the periwinkle, thick
As garlands twisted for a May-day show.
Downward they nod into a thousand streams
Or threads of trickling silver, that enrich
The oozy rice-grounds, or with upward eye,
Their beauty pleading for the season, woo
The unwilling leaves from out the mulberry buds
Week after week in vain. More sweet by far

Our spring, retarded thus delightfully,
 Than the wild burst which over Provence hangs,
 As if by necromantic touch exhaled,
 A tremulous earth-born cloud of almond-bloom,
 Pale blush with pearly white ingrained, to mock
 The olive-yards. More sweet by far than when
 One sunrise over the Trinacrian fields,
 From Monte Baido to the sea that chafes
 The spurs of Etna, flings a gleamy web
 With instantaneous blossoms all outrolled
 Of tasselled cactus, woven visibly
 Before the traveller's eye as on his mule
 He goes, with wizard spring outriding him.

Dear Isle of England, where the seasons meet
 And part with such a kindly intercourse
 Of change, the weeping brightness of whose sun
 Is tempered so with alternations bland
 Of inland breezes and salubrious airs,
 Which the clouds waft from our circumfluent sea,
 Inspiring wandering breaths in summer noon,
 And slackening winter's hold upon the earth,—
 How fortunately fixed are thy sweet shores,
 Fronting the warm Atlantic! Neither heat
 Nor cold, in mutable excesses each
 When present felt least tolerable, reign
 O'er thy free landscapes with tyrannic sway,
 True vassals here, not lords, where hill and dale
 With a kind birthright of locality
 Are free as those who till the genial soil,
 More truly free, for not like them enslaved
 Unto the boast of liberty.

Not here

In desolating plague of sickly winds,
 In blistering mildew or volcano's wrath,

In vernal rivers swollen to a curse,
Or the fierce grandeurs of the avalanche,
In flood or earthquake, are deep nature's powers
In ruinous magnificence displayed:
But o'er the modest scenery, secure
In lowly features, temperate beauty reigns,
By the four seasons checquered, not disturbed.
O pleasant country! Father-land revered!
Thee and thy clime must I perforce extol,
Fit cause perceiving, fit for me who am
From morn till eve a dweller out of doors,
Not seldom later far than eve, content
Now with the neat parterre and laurel walk,
Confinement to some moods adapted most,—
Or breezy deck of elevated lawn
Which overlooks the vale, and throws the eye
Alternately upon the southern lake
Or mountain cove with mist or sunlight filled,
Purple or green with streaks of ruddy soil;
And, when loose humours will it so, I seek
With aspiration restless and unfixed
A range unlimited among the hills,
Or woody fringes of the distant meres:
In winter unconfined by cold, nor burnt
With more than welcome heat on summer days,
And often with a twilight of soft clouds,
Which most persuasively solicits thought.
And now, unlearning my past mountain life,
With thoughts like anchored things, I walk or sit
Beneath three gables of time-fretted stone,
Watching the huge mimosa's half-clothed boughs
Tracing light-fingered shadows on the house:
Or through the pointed arch of chestnut leaves,
The boasted work of sylvan architect,

Tearfully gazing on the far church-tower,
And pondering deep responsibilities, akin
To austere contemplation, not to song.

O when the snowdrop gems the bright brown
earth

Of merry England, and the tender thrush
Salutes the sunset from the budding spray,
And, pleased with his own aptness, practises
Into the night his last year's melody,—
Then may the poet, always vigilant
In such deep yearning love of humankind
As will not grieve or joy alone, detect
For the outpouring of kind sympathies
A vent in meditation on the lot
Of the plain pastoral men who in the vales
Of the fair Tyrol dwell. Ah! I have seen,
When the warm breath of deepest summer glowed
On the green slopes, earth's lineaments deformed
By frowns of vernal anger uneffaced,
Marring soft landscapes, like a troubled look
In eyes where love alone hath lawful right
To shine: the meadow-fields with stones besprent,
The paths fierce waters for themselves have hewn
Through woody steeps, the broad and staring seam
Of gravel down the centre of the vales,
The trunks of alder huddled on the banks
In wreck unsightly! Beautiful, and calm,
And darkened with sweet mantling shades, as are
Those glens of Tyrol in the summer-tide,
Who hath the heart to realize the mass
Of dead white snow, the chalets half engulfed,
The stallèd kine, the voiceless streams, the hush
Of Alpine winter terrible, a hush
Broken, most surely not relieved, by winds

And wolves alternately? There Adam's sons
Fight with the snow-drift and the elements
Unmerciful and mighty to invade
Our first prerogative; while Adam's curse,
Like an enchanted loom, incessantly
Plies round the herdsman there, yet masters not
Inventive toil and patient manliness.

O sweet are then responsibilities
Enjoining fortitude through simple love
Of wife and child, when the vexed peasant finds
In obligations lofty and divine
A tranquil haven, and an anchorage
Of chaste enjoyment, of impassioned peace,
And moral elevation, and a trust
Laid up on high, lest love begun on earth
Continuance should miss beyond the grave.
There, from the world cut off, a world they find
Of breadth sufficient for immortal souls
To move unstraitened, while the gentle queens
Of the poor fir-wood cottages with groups
Of prattling children aid the indoor tasks
Of husbandry, by Virgil's graceful muse
So touchingly depicted; and the long
Dark months of winter are illumined there
By that serenity of inward mood
Which simple wants engender, and true love
Heightens, sustains, and ratifies, content
With earth, yet with its dearest hopes beyond.

Now the eighth spring unto the Hermit came:
From the warm sunny lowlands, like a tide,
It mounted up the rivers to the vales
And rocky bays; no crash of avalanche
Relaxing its strong grasp, no fall of earth,
Or burst of angry torrents sounded there.

But day by day the pearly streams outgrew
Their parsimonious trickling, and amused
The attentive ear with merry tinkling songs,
Swelled with a pleasant science, as the sun
Thawed the white drifts, to widely dashing falls
Sonorous in the midnight hills. The rooks,
Those noisy builders, on their tasks intent,
Rifled the mossy slopes and from the trees
Snapped the light twigs, impatient to renew
Domestic bliss, while on the sunny banks
A hardy primrose here and there stole out
And looked the weak sun in the face, nor closed
Its yellow eye through all the frosty night.

Seven years of silent solitude, seven years
Of outward beauty acting on a heart,
Humbled through penance cheerfully endured,
Left not Sir Lancelot the man he was
When he disturbed the heron in the sedge
That melancholy day by Kentmere side.
Sweet change—the world-worn heart can well attest
Its sweetness—o'er his softened spirit came
With dewy freshness: and who will not own
How mountain winds and cold pure breaths of sea
Unclasp the pain which girds the aching brow,
And snap the anxious languors that are hung
As fillets round the victim who is led
A sacrifice unto the world's false gods,
Riches, or honour, or invidious place?

Chief and most holy change, by nature half,
And half by grace, to nature next of kin,
Wrought on the Penitent, was in his faith,
Which now was elevated far above
Sublimest heights which reason ever gains.
For feeling went along with every truth,

Raising the lofty doctrines of the Creed
To those high places in the patient mind
Where they the veneration should receive
Of the whole man. The very atmosphere
Of his keen intellect was purified,
As an indwelling faith did more absorb
Each day his lesser faculties; the light,
Which o'er the regions of his fancy spread,
All truths presented in dimension just
And solemn clearness, beautified no less
By distances through reverence interposed,
While dealing with the mysteries of Heaven.

As in the intervals of summer rain,
When the low clouds hang softly o'er the earth,
And the dark verdure is enriched with showers,
The light, like eloquence unto the ear,
Fixes the listening eye, which with a joy
Fathoms the cool transparent depths of air,
Wherein the distant objects seem so close
It were a feat not hard across the vale
To lean, and gather ferns and flowers that wave
Upon the mountain opposite: even such
And so translucent was the atmosphere
In which his inward faculties abode
And all their several offices discharged,
Yielding their subsidies unto the work
Of grace now stirring deeply in his soul.

Darkness and daylight, moon and braided stars,
Waters and flowers, the habits and the joys
Of all the inferior creatures, now he saw,
Saw and received them in his loving heart;
And by such visitations was his mind
With more than earthly wisdom so enriched,
That with the Universal Presence he

Came into fearful contact every hour.
Yet was it not sensation vague or dim,
Mere love of beauty, wondrously diffused
In all things like a soul, nor idle rest
In profitless sublimities, which are
But exclamations of poetic minds,
And bind no wholesome yoke upon the heart.
The presence that was round him was the Hand
Of a compassionate Master, throned apart
From all things, yet Himself sustaining all,
With all concurring yet from all distinct,
Fountain of duty, and Himself our law,
The Living God, the Spirit, Son, and Sire!

Thus with his spirit did the wilderness
On God's behalf in solemn fashion plead,
Yea, sometimes with an influence that seemed
With an imploring utterance to urge
An attitude of thought more self-rebuked,
More consciously abased before the Power,
Wisdom, and Goodness manifested there,
The Threefold Cord which binds the frame of earth,
And whence the dome of heaven suspended hangs.
All nature seemed to labour with a sense
As of the hidden Deity, and oft
Appeared as though she would unveil the shrine
Which now she covers, while the patient eye
Through her thin vesture may discern its shape,
And build upon its pattern a sweet shrine
Far in the silence of deep thought withdrawn.

The sounds of nature, the loud waterfall,
The sea-like surges of the wind, the hum
Of busy midnight like a thousand looms
Weaving the darkness for the hours, all were
The Voice of God in earthly cadence veiled.

The brightness of the earth and air and sea,
The radiant lineaments of day and night,
Steadfast or tremulous, shadowy or serene,
Did at the least, if not much more, reflect
The Eye, to Which all hearts of men lie bare.
And silence might be thought,—but specially
The deep, impassioned silence of the hills,—
To be that awful, listening Ear of God,
At Which the sounding world all day and night
With crying beasts, and infinite speech of man,
Lies close, and not a rustling in the wood,
Nor whispered sin, nor inarticulate thought,
From that unsleeping Audience can escape.

O miserably barren is the mind
By feeling unsustained, the reason cold
And, because cold, untrue, which in its acts
And formal operations misseth not
The plaintive adjuncts of the heart, nor craves
Alliance with the wants of humankind,
Smiles not when others smile, nor weeps with them,
Nor in a unity of hope delights,
And in communion of belief still less,
But, wrapped in selfish ease, from out itself
Works to a lonely end, and self-absorbed
Can watch an empire fall, a church grow weak,
And say wise things upon their waning powers,
With calmness uttered, not with prayers or tears,
And which it falsely deems philosophy!
O piteously betrayed is that young life,
Which sees a grandeur in high thoughts exiled
From general sympathy, and fain would dwell
In a poor orbit of loves, hopes, and faiths
Outside the beatings of the common heart
Of venerable nature! Doubly poor

The self-sustaining intellect whose creed
Is subject to itself, no outward help,
No strong ally from heavenly places come,
No solid tower from whence the soul may take
Her observations, and from them divine
Of things to come and hidden destinies
Which, half perceived, may be her present scope.
Ah! liberty, unwisely coveted,
Slavish exemption from obedient love,
To have a reason wherein is enshrined
No truth acknowledged greater than ourselves,
Permitted o'er our littleness to cast
Consoling shadows, and to which we pay
An inward homage of our fear and love,
And through that ritual, not unaided, grow,
Meting ourselves with measure thus sublime,
Up to the standard of divinest truths!

Far otherwise in his most worldly days
Had been Sir Lancelot's mind, with feeling fraught,
Mingling his moral being with the powers
Of his keen intellect, and to the faith
Of Holy Church submissive with an awe
Intelligent, not servile, and deep love.
To him the Creed substantial wisdom was,
Objective to himself, and bearing up
As a strong hand the feeble faith of man.
Therefore it was that in his solitude
His faith had failed him not, nor his whole mind
Collapsed upon itself in weak dismay,
When bodily health or lively spirits ceased
To feed self-trust, but called on him to lean
On holier aids external to himself,
In ritual appliances made known,
Or through a wise obedience to the Church

Acknowledged as the visible Ground of Truth.

There was no need for nature to achieve
The healing of an intellect debased
Through unbelief or frivolous self-trust.
But the blind darkness of his moral eye,
Successive films by years of sin induced,
She couched by small degrees : her beauty was
Medicinal, her operation slow
But durable ; and something there appeared
Of sweet solicitude in all her shows,
While they applied perpetual euphrasy
Unto his moral vision ; and sometimes,
When hope of pardon due proportion lost
Unto the greatness of his sins, and doubt,
Injected so, remained unwelcome guest,
She wanted not a virtue to dislodge,
By trivial apparitions oft supplied,
The intrusive stranger. From the high hill-top
In the calm sunshine did the Knight look down
Upon a frolic breeze below at play
With the light tresses of a grove of ash ;
And there was something in the gentle shock,
Wherewith sight did her office when surprised
Far off by objects she was used to judge
While hearing sate assessor at her side,
Which to uncertainty could reconcile
The inward mind, and, exorcising doubt,
Give a more ample liberty to faith
As to an eye, of reason's aid most glad,
Yet needing not the alliance which it claims.

And to this elevation of his faith
Were added now a trembling happiness
And scattered joys, which beat within his heart
Like intermitting pulses. By degrees

A softness of demeanour gently stole
Upon him, and he bore himself as one
Acting before the sight of those he loves,
Or a meek Saint, with mindful reverence fraught
Of those angelic witnesses who turn
Their beautiful regards on all he does,
Whether in attitude of prayer composed
Before his Crucifix of mossy wood,
Or with calm gait abroad among the fields
Seeking salubrious herbs, his simple fare.
Thus was it with Sir Lancelot: and there grew
A pensive tenderness within his mind,
That soon bade fair to over-rule the gloom
Which by ascetic ways he daily strove
To deepen: a meek tenderness it was,
In localized affections taking root,
Whence, out in life, domestic joys proceed
And household sanctities, then only safe
When anchored to the earth by local ties.

This new and gradual softening of the heart,
Which stole upon him like a silent bliss,
A feeling was, akin to love, disclosed
In what may not inaptly be described
As the domestic joys of lonely life,
The recompenses to the hermit given
For the sweet charities he has forsworn.

Not mean or few are they: the sense of home
Hangs like a charm about the lonely place;
And solitary nooks are set apart
With daily consecrations, by some hour
Of prayer remembered, or some gift of tears,
Or some disclosure of long-pondered truth
Whose actual dawn broke on the spirit there.
And somewhat too of mute significance

And various character becomes impressed
Upon the solitude; here morning shines
Earliest and warmest; there the green arcades
Suggest a lurking-place at sultry noon;
And there in evening's shadow it is sweet
Upon the valley's sombre side to walk,
And with responsive gaiety look forth
Upon the sunlit mountain opposite.
The bonds of sympathy are drawn more close
Between the inferior creatures and the heart,
Whether it be to birds that on the spray
Close to the door at morn or eve may chant,
Or to the patient kine, and bleating tribes,
The nomads of the moorland, which send down
A plaintive greeting from the windy heights.
Nor do the deep affections want the power,
Whereby inanimate things may be embraced
Within the heart of man with pure delight
And wisdom not unthoughtful, till the flowers,
The many-featured trees, the dropping springs,
And frowning rocks, are thankfully received
And entertained as social presences.

These were his joys, to him true pleasures tried
By actual use, of real meaning full.
Yet ah! the bare recital but sets forth
The poverty of his enjoyments, sheds
A gleam which lightens only to betray,
A wandering gleam which but illuminates
The solemn waste of his uncheerful life.

From such a scene how gratefully the heart
Turns to the sweetly-peopled hermitage
Of private life, where faith and holy hope
Are perfected in trials manifold,
And earthly love from heavenly love receives

A blissful unction ; and the days serene
Vibrate with gentlest impulse up to Heaven,
Spent in the chaste delights not deemed unfit
To shadow forth God's love to humankind,
And even, a greater mystery still, the bonds
Which link the Bridegroom to His Holy Church.

O evening ! how thy gentle-footed hours
Glide on with silent pace ! thy silver tongues—
How happily they tell the lapse of time,
More happily were it less swiftly.—Oh !
Like the calm wafting of angelic wings
Revolve the days and nights, in love and prayer,
And mutual study of the blessèd Word,
And interchange of pure imaginings,
And humble confidence, and reverence bought
By meek confession of besetting sins
And mingled tears repentant, setting forth
To all the neighbourhood an image sweet
Of love in heavenly places felt ! O Homes,
Ye countless Christian Homes, that in the Church
Are like so many grace-encircled shrines
Where pilgrims rest upon their way to heaven,
And run while they are resting ! Happy Homes,
Of conjugal self-sacrifice and love,
Heroic, equable, calm-tempered love,
Where the sweet Son of God is known and loved,
And the dear Queen of heaven keeps watch and ward
O'er all life's daily round ! Oh ! blameless joy
Tenfold enhanced, when to a listening ring
Of youthful faces the parental lips,
God's Voice, to childish faith oracular,
With patient repetition strive to teach
The Prayer of Jesus or the great Belief
Of Christian ages, or the angel's words

Hailing the Maiden-Mother of our God,
So sweet to childish ears, on childish lips
So doubly pleasant, while with anxious mind,
Discernment quickened by parental love,
Each, mutual solace seeking, doth predict,
The father now, and now the mother's heart,
From infant graces or expanding faults
The fortunes of these little ones of Christ.
Of earthly scenes this is the one most sweet,
Most graceful; but to faith's exploring eye
What beautiful solemnity is there,
What imagery of the Ways Divine!
The timid children to the Father look,
Yet by the Mother's eye directed, who
With such mute eloquence refers them there
For wisdom or support, yet wanting not
A vocal intercession when distress
Or penitent misdoing so may need,
An intercession—let the world attest
How rarely missing of the grace it asks!

That isolated hill, whereon the Cell
Behind the ash-tree curtain stood concealed,
Was by a tinkling stream half clasped, which steered
In the long summer heats in glossy threads
Of amber-coloured water through a breadth
Of azure gravel, sparkling in the sun
With fragments of bright-glistening ore detached
By vernal torrents from the mountain near.
Beneath a slope of waving broom there was
A little earthy bay that slept apart
From the main stream, which now Sir Lancelot's
care
With beaten turf had banked, and made secure
By two small sluices skilfully contrived,

Whereat the cool fresh waters entrance won,
And, making circuit of the hollow bay,
Laving its verdant lips with mimic tides,
Found egress by a slanting channel delved
Across the sward, and with blue pebbles lined,
Which to the current gave a song-like sound.
With silver dace and speckled trout the creek
Was populous ; for so the Knight preserved
What with his skilful hand he had ensnared
In little hollows or beneath the stones ;
For love of the pure creatures, not for food
Preserved, for by his hermitage no flame
Of crackling fire or wreath of smoke went up,
Token of human life.

The fishy pool

With willow-herb was edged, and with a fringe
Of pithy rush, and tall osmunda's plumes,
And juicy stalks of brittle orpine made ;
And a dead hawthorn stood upon the bank,
Whose mossy branches summer yearly clothed
In pointed ruffles of lank bryony,
Rich in autumnal corals that the winds
Unclasp with difficulty from the boughs.
Upon the middle of the bay there swam
A single Water-Lily, cradled there
In ceaseless agitation : year by year
That Lily came, and ever came alone,
By its green cordage anchored in the pool.
So merrily the lively waters shook
The central deep, and made the rushes nod,
And with brisk bubbles round the Lily wheeled,
They suffered not the snaky root to spread
Amid the shifting ooze ; so there it stayed
With its one yearly blossom from the deep,

Like the old queen of beauty, rising up,
A solitary planet which diffused
A flickering radiance on the bubbles near
And on the rushy rampart of dark green,—
A beautiful and waving orb of light.

Ah me! how sweet are joys when we have few,
Whose advent expectation prophecies
Far off, and on whose legacy of thought
Contented memory lives long afterwards!
Such was that virgin Lily to the Knight,
Which chiefly by its touching singleness
Moved him as no inapt similitude
Of his own being, anchored safely now
Within the arbour of those lonely hills,
But that in its meek celibate the flower
Knew neither sin nor penitence; but bloomed
In dutiful contentment on the pool,
Fulfilling for its hour the Will of Heaven:
Yet paler than was wont, for so it seemed,
A beauty sisterless, and like a star
Whose lonely twinkling rather grieves the eye,
Suggesting absent joys with thoughts that cloud
The vision of its solitary light;
And eager like a spirit to descend
Beneath its veil of waters, when the touch
Of autumn gave it leave, a gentle touch
Upon its tremulous eyelids,—sensitive
As the love-broken heart of tender maid,
Who, wasting inwardly, grows daily less
A thing of earth, and meekly greeting death
As her deliverance, vanishes away
More like an apparition than a life
Of flesh and blood, of smiles and tears, like ours.

For that lone Lily on the waters cold,

That fallen star, for so it might be deemed,
Which nightly to the distant moon looked up
With its unsteady eye, Sir Lancelot felt
A simple love, a moving of the heart
Which not ungratefully would find relief
Full oft in tears. There with a lover's hope,
Which no delays abate, he watched till spring,
Leaning invisibly across the pool,
Whispered the Lily from her dreaming sleep,
Lulled by the booming waters overhead.
But, when the breathing accents bade her wake,
The child of nature rose, and gently shook
The sprinkled ooze from off her genial couch,
And through the pleased and yielding waters went,
And, drawing her white wimple o'er her face,
She stood in nature's presence, while the sun,
Respecting her forlorn estate, allowed
Her beauty to decline his ardent gaze.
Silent companion all the summer long
Was she unto the Knight, and to his thought
There was within that flower a light and look
With which he communed inwardly, as though
A sweet intelligence was deeply couched
Within the lovely orb, whose starry smile
Among the sunbeams rippled on the bay.

Amid the crowd of Forms and fair Delights
Which beauty scattered o'er the hills and dells,
And lawns and woods, and rocks with herbage veined,
That pallid Lily's solitary gleam
Stood forth among them all, with single power
Contending, and eclipsing all; so deep
Was her one image graven on his heart.
For in that glorious wilderness she seemed
An eye of nature, open visibly,

By that light flowery fringe but half concealed,
And bent with eloquent regards on him,
And with a wooing sensitively felt
Within the pensive quiet of his heart!

Such is the love of nature, and the sweet
Sufficiency of single objects, lodged
Deep in the Oriental, gently tranced
With love of single trees or chosen fount.
Such is the passion, if so wild a name
To that mute worship may be given, beheld
Upon the features of the silent groups
Among the graves collected on the knolls
Which overhang Stamboul, what time the sun
Sinks o'er the golden downs of grassy Thrace,
In meditation rapt upon the dead,
Or on the blissful Unity of God,
Believed unhappily, or with the love
More oft transported of the dreamlike scene
Which glitters at their feet. For hours they sit
While joy without a tide or pulse o'erflows
Their tranquil contemplations, all possessed,
Through every inlet of their being filled,
With love of nature as a source of prayer.
The cooing of a lonely ringdove locked
Within the fibrous fans of cypress leaves,
A single eye of deep blue sea beheld
Through the light foliage of the terebinth,
The evening breath which from the Euxine steals,
Heard fluttering in the walnut branches stirred
By the cool Bosphorus—these for many an hour
They worship with unmoving eye, as joys
Even to the disembodied souls which sit
Upon the heaving waves of turf around.
And yet no Arab in the wilderness

So loved his solitary palm, no Turk
His sunset-gilded cypress, as the Knight
That virgin Lily, gently looking up
From off the moonlit bay into his face,
An eye o'erflowed with spiritual love !

And nought assisted more to raise his heart
Above his gloomy thoughts than this sweet flower,
Haunting his deep affections with a love
Serene and simple, while old happiness
Was daily gathering strength for its return.
In vain he called up mighty powers of will
And masculine resolve to lay the sprite ;
Still it returned, like waves upon the shore ;
And in his own despite he daily grew
A man of gentler thoughts and lighter heart.

But this new lightening of his spirit seemed
A pleasure not legitimately his,
And joy, a stranger long, was entertained
With almost terror, lest his penitence
Should thereby miss of its accomplishment,
And with suspicion which went far to abate
Its joyousness. But nature's yoke was on him,
Mild yet irrevocably fixed, and claimed
Over his fickle moods serenest sway,
A safe and pleasant empire, if he durst
Yield himself up to it without reserve.

This year, so chance was over-ruled, all things
Conspired against his efforts to retrieve
His ancient sadness ; for the vernal months
With an elysian softness early stole
Into the vales, and earth and sky performed
Their genial functions with a gayer rite
And more abounding grace than they were wont,
And, for the first time since Sir Lancelot came,

Now in this year the foreign cuckoo threw
His homeless cry into that hollow dell.
And never had the many songs of birds
The sylvan chantries so frequented, never
With choral harmonies responsive sent
From off the vale's two sides, alternating,
With such a festal celebration paid
To God their vernal service of sweet sound.
How vocal too was evening, when the spring
Came with a gift of balmy showers, which filled
The twilight with cool incense from the earth
And aromatic shoots, while in the rain
With scattered voices many a thrush prolonged
The vesper hymn, and in each pause the ear
Caught the low whispered undersong of leaves
Struck by the rain-drops, like the distant chords
Of harps whose sound the breezes intercept!

And not in all the seven preceding years
Had the sweet woodland tapestries been flung
So separately forth in wild-flower webs,
Or with such plain distinction of the kinds,
And with a spotless broidery less marred
By earthy rain-drops. Or to other eyes
That long variety of flowers might seem,
As month by month they defiled o'er the ground,
A Flemish guild, wherein the several trades,
By banners known, or cognizances quaint,
In waves of colour sinuously float
Along the streets of Bruges. In kinds they came,
Lawful successions, leading mimic pomps
Through the tall grass or round the twisted roots;
And with calm grace each company withdrew,
Like a soft cloud borne further by the breeze,
Before the straggling blooms which, in advance

Of their own bands, seemed forward equerries
Of their procession coming into sight.

The doorway of the Hermitage looked out
Upon a sunny bank of hazel wood,
With moist rich veins of moorland turf between,
Winding irriguously among the copse ;
And frequent openings showed of softest lawn,
Screened by the natural trellis of the boughs,
Which very homes of checquered sunshine seemed
All interspersed with lichen-spotted rocks
Whose crevices were bearded with wild thyme,
And cuckoo-plant in pendent threads o'erhung
With kindly veil the portals of the wren.
Mid the dark stems beneath whose twilight shade
It was too dark for grass, the woodland floor
A thin apparel of sweet herbs put on,
A plaited work of knotted tendrils, lined
With silky moss of dusky golden dye,
Which, gently bruised beneath the foot of one
Intruding through the copse, exhaled a scent
As though the earth had medicated been
With freshly moistened spice and odorous drugs.
And shelving slopes of broken stones were there,
Enclasped with filaments of rosy moss,
And chained with belts of ivy to the ground,
While o'er the whole as at a venture thrown,—
Whether a growth of earth or air might be
A doubt, when it was swimming in the breeze,—
A gossamer of emerald fibres spun,
With flowery points of vivid white besprent,—
The cross-wort with a delicate array
Of holy forms enough to have supplied
All nature were she bent on a crusade.

There on that bank Sir Lancelot might watch

The flowery troops in pageant moveable,
Both as they came and as they disappeared.

First, like a flock of children, purely white,
The snow-drops lead the van, while every breeze
Seems visibly to drift the lovely foam
Upon the knolls; so sweetly do they take
Each mossy nook and arbour by surprise.
Then, as one gazes on the evening sky
And sees the stars in little flashes come
Each to its place, so on the vernal earth,
Mocking the eye, the yellow primrose starts,
Till, ere the doubting sight be yet convinced,
The wood is twinkling with a thousand eyes;
And, by harmonious shading reconciled
With that low-lying atmosphere of stars,
The deep Lent-lilies glow among the flowers
Like constellations girt with lesser orbs.
Next, and most loved, as seeming to restore
The snow-drops perished in their infancy,
Comes that aerial veil of bridal white,
The thick anemones, which rather seem
The south wind's breath to mortal eye made plain
Than droves of separate flowers. Ere they be passed
Begins the march, spring hath no pomp more fair,
Of hyacinths which ring their purple bells
Into the drowsy ear of fragrant May,
Most spiritual chimes which none can hear
But poets slumbering sweetly in the shade.

When these are gone how vacant is the green
Of the same sward, a smooth and wind-swept floor
Where, like the intervals of some bright pomp
By groups in holiday attire engrossed,
The sprinkled orchis wanders up and down
With lychnis tender-eyed, and Bethlehem's star

Among the tufted spear-grass glimmering,
And, happy he who finds it! alkanet
With its deep ocean blue and bearded leaves
With crisp and silvery prickles studded o'er,—
With the bird-primrose joined, the mealy plant,
Whose pale pink leaves with gilt effulgence glow,
Streamed from the eye which like a sunbeam sleeps
Concentered in the hollow of the flower.
Then the red honeysuckle sits aloft,
All like a maiden queen with robe of state,
In attitude of one enthroned, her train
In royal folds depending from the boughs :
Till, like the rippling light of distant sea
Divulged by flying sunbeam far away,
There comes a silent glittering o'er the earth,
The advent of the sylvan pimpernel ;
And, when the day is still, the greensward seems
With living glowworms tremblingly inflamed,
Or when the wind breathes softly up the brook
A myriad eyes are winking in the sun,
And flashing golden light from off the earth.

Then the proud foxgloves bear their crimson
wands

In solemn beauty o'er the summer woods,
Nor yet disdain the melancholy bees
Plaining perpetually within their bells.
And, as they fade, the feathery meadow-sweet,
With undulating censer prodigal,
Drugs the warm breezes with its potent breath,
Through all the leafy shrines ubiquitous.
And, last, from autumn's oozy ground there springs
The snowy blossom, of Parnassus named,
Which in its cup of pencilled porcelain

Great Rome's pontifical insignia bears,
Five peacock's fans with tremulous green eyes;
And great St. John's wort guards the priestly flower
Through the dark woods with iron-mottled dress
And ebon-headed mace, while frosty winds
Send the loose rabble of autumnal leaves
In picturesque confusion thus to close
The annual Procession of the Flowers.

SIR LANCELOT.

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BOOK IV.

THE JOURNEY.

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THE JOURNEY.

Not when in glittering mail along the streets
Of Tarsus, conqueror in the tournament
Sir Lancelot reined in his Arab steed,—
Not when, with dreams of love and war entranced,
In the clear moonbeam by his tent he stood
That night, and saw cold-running Cydnus sleep
Mid citron groves (the frigid stream that gave
A well-nigh mortal chill to Philip's son,
And laid the imperial Frederick in the tomb,
What time he expiated in crusade
His disobedience to the will of Rome,
In Venice humbled) while far off the Falls
Solemn disturbance made among the woods,
And snowy Taurus glimmered like a star,
Or some celestial beacon newly raised,
The moon outfacing on the throne of night,—
Not then when youth its pleasant firstfruits paid,
And manhood with the ways of men began
To deal, with sense of power and growing pride
And inward exultation, was the Knight
So blythe, or by magnificence of thought
So loftily above the world sustained,
As when, a Penitent in sackcloth shirt
And pilgrim's mantle worn, the day and night
Came to him in that green and lonesome vale.
Firmer his step, and, as more happy now,

So was he slower in his walk, and apt,
 By pressing thoughts arrested, to stand still
 For long together, by his little bay
 Or on the moors or in the shady groves,—
 A pensive shadow, flitting now, now still :
 Where'er the thought detained him there he stood.

The mysteries of self, which to the eye
 Of conscience half alarmed, a lonely life,
 Tedious expositor ! full oft unfolds
 'Twere vain to sing. Who hath the sounding line,
 Prophet or bard, or haply both in one,
 If union such be left, who hath the line
 Wherewith to fathom the profound abyss,
 Or height, if so it should be rather named,
 Of speculation won in solitude ?

A lesson terrible to learn and long,
 Dismal the school, magnificent the prize,
 Is that concentrating of the faculties
 Of heart and mind in loneliness acquired.
 No throng of worldly objects breaks the array
 Of silent thought ; no many-coloured life
 Stands in the front of God and intercepts
 The awful tokens of His Presence here ;
 Nor cares benumb the sensibilities
 Then quick to recognize the touch of Heaven
 Where'er the solemn contact be vouchsafed,
 Oft given, and oft unheeded, in the glare
 And flying tumult of our outward lives,
 Save when divine afflictions interpose,
 And open Heaven in vision to the soul
 By dropping darkness o'er the dazzling world.

Meanwhile the herd of lower faculties,
 Of earthly fashion, slumber undisturbed.
 No puzzling multitude of avenues

Lead to the regal chambers of the soul ;
But one alone stands open, ever watched
By silence, or, which is a thing as still,
The sounds of nature undisplaced by man.
And thus the soul before the Eye of God
Is bare and open, as the midnight plain
Lies vacant to the shining of the moon.
And those few powers of mind, which have been
shaped

In their original form as instruments
Of such transcending intercourse, become,
When used alone, of comprehensive reach
And more than mortal grasp. Even as the blind
For one dull organ gain a recompense
In the strange quickening of some other power,
In musical perception of sweet sounds,
Or in a marvellous discernment given
Unto the sense of touch ; so doth the soul,
Nurtured in thoughtful solitude, perceive
Its nobler faculties thus magnified
By concentration and adoring prayer,
Whose energy is husbanded, nor lost
In spendthrift joys by fickle sense pursued,
Or poor delights of thought which gilds but earth,
And sings in lazy bowers of war and love,
And than such vain excitement seeks no more.

For seven long years Sir Lancelot now had been
The mate of solitude, and I would fain,
In unambitious verse as best beseems
The thoughts I must encounter on my path,
And names employ of dreadest sanctity,
Somewhat of this interior life depict,
By language hardly compassed, yet the soul,
Through feeling and the weakness of my words

Informed in part, the rest may well divine.

Unwise is he who in the calm of age
Lightly regards the doings of his youth,
And, with false wisdom meting out the past,
Counts it but as the memory of a land
Through which he travelled in his way; but far,
Far more unwise is he who, being young,
Conceives a disesteem of youth, affects
To speak dishonourably of its powers,
And to deny that, in its changeful moods,
There dwells creative order that evokes
The spiritual fabric of our lives
From that wild sea of impulse, which may boast,
Though hard to find, a true philosophy.

How joyously the waters of the world
With many murmurs sound about our youth,
As o'er the haven bar it shoots, and turns
Eastward or westward with uncertain will!
But, after leaving port, full oft there comes
In the first night a silent hand which gives
The helm a new direction, and at dawn,
Sole evidence of change! we see the towers
And lighthouse of our childhood's harbour, touched
With sunbeams in an unexpected place.

Nought is there so minute, no wish so weak,
But at that season it may change our course
And shift our stars; nay, sometimes it may chance
A dream will turn the rudder of our lives.

Thus in the heat of his chivalric youth
Sir Lancelot had dreamed a vivid dream,
Which gave some colour to his after-years.
Down in the valley of the Drave the tents
Were pitched in sunset's eye, while to the west
The opening gorge with such resplendent dower

Of myriad hues was filled, as best beseemed
The climbing road whose end was Italy,
The paradise of European dreams,
And goal of envious tribes. Sir Lancelot,
By what thoughts urged young love alone may tell,
Fled from the noisy wassail of the camp,
And up the sounding dell of Siser went,
The Drave's romantic tributary ; there
The moonless night came on him mid the pines.
The mountains towered above, or rather hung,
And in the luminous darkness seemed to grow
To supernatural bulk, and to contract
A frown each moment deepening : to the south
A crescent Alp rose up with fractured cove,
In some contortion of the deluge rent
And disembowelled, or in olden time
The mouth of subterraneous flame, whose lips,
Chafed by the fiery tongue, had fallen in.
A sheeny glacier on the creviced slope
Its icy talons fixed, and down the hill
With annual progress like a tortoise crawled,
Doubtless is crawling now, while summer noon
And its relaxing ether smooth the path,
A path more slowly travelled in the frosts
Of winter, yet incessantly pursued,
By night and day the varying seasons round.
The feet of destiny are not more slow
Than that mute creature ; haply not so sure,
If the calm intercession of the Saints,
Or prayer of living Church, arrest her steps.

The white-robed mountain shed a wild wan light
In lieu of the absent moon, such light mayhap
As earth to other worlds may be ordained
Itself to shed. A thousand glittering stars

Were braided in the pinetops or impaled
Upon the spearlike leaves, and with the trees
Appeared upon the low night-wind to sway.
And with inwoven dances, such as were
By feet of Delian maidens once performed,
When they set forth the wanderings of their isle
In mythic steps to tinkling citherns timed,
The fireflies played around the pillared stems,
And bore about their lanterns of green light,
Advancing and receding while the eye
Measured by them the depth of sylvan gloom.
And one small globe, in purple darkness set
Like emeralds, with a statelier measure wheeled
Over the foaming Siser, which o'erleaped
With gleamy flash a sheer and dizzy rock ;
While with the breeze that stirred the withered
leaves

Cool gusts of incense crept about the wood.

There did Sir Lancelot sleep, his ample tent
Of leaning pinetops was, made fast with stars.
He slighted not the fragrant floor of earth,
Nor feared the innocuous dews of summer night.
He sank to sleep, while images swam round
Of dearest import : to his eye there came
The hall at Heversham, and rushy fields
That seaward sloped ; and in his ear the Kent
Accustomed murmurs made among the boughs,
While now and then with light and sudden splash
A wakeful stag would bound across the stream,
And seek a lair among the dewy fern :
And with Ethilda's name upon his lips
The Knight passed onward to the fields of sleep,
Where a sweet vision waited his approach.

His eye, so seemed it in his slumber, strove

To pierce the gloomy pinewood where it stretched,
In misty length, a single sombre nave ;
While, one behind another ranged, the rings
Of fireflies swung in circles of green light,
Like rocking lamps suspended from a roof.
There suddenly among the boughs the wind
Breathed a last sigh, and with it swept away
Those living stars, and all was silence round,
The silentness of an expecting dream.
Then at the close of that cathedral nave
A white and radiant vapour softly grew,
Dazzling and formless, which with silvery gleam
Lay like a tremulous pavement round the stems.
Far off, resplendent as an Altar-piece
Illumined from behind, a Figure rose
Of beauty such as art hath ne'er conceived,
The Virgin Mother with her Infant Son.
Upon her countenance, rounded like the moon,
An orb of open features, was impressed
The secret of her fortunes, which transcend
The loftiest surmise of created mind.
The sweet maternal instinct there divulged
In deep impassioned silence, to whose depth
Each lineament the while serenely lends
An utterance almost vocal, then appeared
Calmed and arrested by profounder thoughts,
And by the intense tranquillity of bliss
Brooding in chaste enjoyment on itself.
And yet not wholly wanting was the look
Of pensive self-collection that dispersed
On the celestial seeming of her face
A beautiful timidity, through which
Her mortal birth o'er every feature reigned
Triumphant, and harmoniously o'erruled

The ineffable aspect which her heavenly lot
Upon her face transferred, where extasy,
Divinely glowing, by remembrances
Of grief was deeply moved, yet not displaced.

But in that Infant Saviour there appeared
Nought of celestial origin involved
In His fair features, where the loveliness
Of mortal childhood singly was diffused :—
Yet such a Child as might in Sanzio's soul
Have dawned upon his seeking thoughts, and filled
His beautiful conception to the brim.

Smitten with love, where there was nought to check
The bold adventure, no monition given
Which might retard its unchastised approach,
Sir Lancelot gazed in rapture on the Child.
Worship of love he proffered, without fear,
And felt no fear, all seemed so beautiful.
Straightway the vision stirred : the Mother hid
The Child, too long, too tenderly beheld,
And a dim trouble up the surface passed
Of that bright vaporious pavement spread around,
Like the black curls of wind that crisp the lake.
Anon the sheeted silver smoothed itself,
And winding music played about the wood
With ringing clearness, like the concord made
By stars that slide with music in their grooves
All day and night across the vocal spheres.

From out the vapour with a tuneful noise
Arose the Maiden Mother, with her head
Star-crowned, her feet upon the subject globe,
The writhing serpent bruised beneath her heel,
Herself by grace assumed unto a throne
And neighbourhood unspeakable. Let verse
Seek not for craft of language to declare

The seeming of the Woman glorified,
The mortal who was Mother of our God,—
Him only, singly worshipped evermore,
Singly, with equal glory to the Three!
And underneath the globe was laid a tomb,
O'er which the twelve Apostles bending gazed,
Interpreting the marvel of the flowers,
The white and speckless lilies, that broke forth
And momentarily grew, budded, flowered, and swung
Their waxen censers in the vacant tomb.
Guiding the eyes of nations and of times
Aloft the Virgin pointed to her Son,
In palpable Divinity enthroned,
Yet lacking not one token of that birth
His creature was elected to confer.

Enough : such visions were familiar then,
And to the spirit of that age akin,
Mingling the uncertain with the true, while yet
They ministered to real works of grace.
Enough that Lancelot from that day forth,
In the true knightly fashion of the times,
Was sworn a serf of Mary, with a vow
Made inwardly, and worshipping full oft
With worship falling short and frustrated
By youthful inconsistencies, below
That high devotion which belongs of right
Unto the majesty of Mary, queen
Of heaven, and empress of the Sacred Heart,—
Yet worship such as sanctified his life,
And quietly detained him near to God,
Such worship as infallibly secures
Its purity to youth, or to old age
The placid harbour of repentant love.

Now in his mountain harbour, in the calm

Of sheltered solitude, he loved to muse
Upon the Mother-Maid, nor sought to pierce
With bold enquiry that mysterious ring,
Where she is sphered apart from all the lives
Of us her fellow mortals, a reserve
Of honourable thought to her assigned,
Special, as is the blessing which our lips
In careful reverence couple with her name.
Enough that round her starry throne are stored
The precious treasures of redeeming grace,
Which grow beneath her hands, and multiply
In miracles of mercy; and enough
That easier access, so her Son hath willed,
Is nowhere granted to the sighs and tears
Of those for whom He bled upon the Cross;
Enough that Mary hath become a part
Of the dear law of grace,—an aqueduct,
Strong and far-reaching, on all shores and times
With prudent prodigality to turn
The torrents of divine compassion, once
Poured forth on Calvary,—an ordinance
Pervading all the ways of God,—a truth
Laid deep in the foundations of the faith,
And part of its integrity,—a power
Which whoso slights shall rue it evermore.
O Mystery to Christian souls endeared!
O chaste Virginity so sweetly crowning
Maternal Love! what wonder that thou art
A joy to contemplate from age to age,
Such blending of all purities as draws
Unto itself the countless hearts of men,
And once drew God to take a Human Heart?

And yet, not resting here, Sir Lancelot's love
Went sounding onward. With a feeble flight,—

A feebleness that daily gathered strength
As he was more and more assoiled from sin—
He tried the further depths of grace divine,
Further and further, by the upward light
Of that pure Mystery conducted thither,
Till so from love of Mary to the love
Of Jesus he adventured, while he learned
Through her transcending office to explore
The depth of that descent which Love essayed,
When Christ from everlasting glory came,
And was incarnate, by His creature helped,—
O rare compassion! O most dear design!—
With Veil of Flesh and Body Virginal.

Yet, self-disdaining sinner as he was,
An abject Penitent, he rather sought
To find the glory of the Saviour's Throne
By the sweet moonlight of that lesser truth:
Unwisely, for Celestial Love is found
Man's neighbour, not in circuits to be reached,
But like an Angel cleaving to his side.
He that loves Jesus must already love
The Mother whom He loved Himself with love
Surpassing words; and he who truly loves
The Mother hath already shrined the Son
In his heart's best affections, far above
All other loves, beyond all love of her.
Nay, our dear Lord will sometimes seem to hold
Our love of Him as homage less direct
Than that which at His Mother's feet we lay,
Either to teach us to what marvellous height
He hath assumed His creature, or to show
To what abyss His condescensions reach.
Thus in his love of Mary had the Knight
Gained what he purposed only to approach,

And needed not to seek the Son beyond
Who with His Mother was already found,
And to that Mother led the soul at first.
Yet such to his abasement had appeared
The lowlier wisdom, while through homage paid
Unto the Virgin Mother of the Lord
The Lord Himself was sought, and through that way
Love seemed to climb an easier ascent,
And even faith more sweetly venturous
Appeared, and Heaven far more within his reach.

While in past years he sojourned in the east
Something of a mysterious chance, heaven-sent,
His life had there encountered, whence he drew
This faith,—that he who would exorcise sin
Must strive by meditative power to place
Before his eyes in darkness and in light
The gracious aspect of his Suffering Lord,
An Apparition facing him all hours,
As palpably to tenant the blank air,
As if he saw a moving Crucifix
Meeting his eye with shadowy regards,
Such as on Peter rested in the hall,
Which, like a sunrise, look all sin away.

In lowliness to this most solemn task
He now betook himself, unaided there
By bodily similitudes which lift
The earth-attracted heart above the earth,
And by a monitory impulse raise
Our difficult devotions, and sustain
Them raised, until they freely breathe the air
Of faith's sublimest region: such supports
In loving wisdom doth the Church accord,
To him in that lone valley not vouchsafed.
But simple nature with maternal skill,

A willing fellow-worker, might supply,
Whether of knotted growths that had forestalled
Device of art, or pliant matter shaped
With facile toil, an image of the Cross,
Which he had reared upon his lowly cell,
And on two points which earliest sunrise struck
And latest sunset left, and in those bowers
And oratories of the open air
Which he frequented most, and there he taught
The indocile ivy to restrain its wreaths,
And with an unambitious clasp to sign
The Cross upon the bosom of the wood.

With such appliance armed, he bent his mind
In long continuous musing on that Form
And grave benignant Aspect, which he strove
By power of inward habit to project
Into the unpeopled light and vacant gloom,
Outwardly realized, which, like the Ark
Of wandering Israel, moving or at rest,
In permanent companionship might bless,
And as It blessed, absolve and canonize
The long outgoings of his months and years.

The help of speech, and that access of power
Which meditation gains from utterance,
And vocal plaints from time to time indulged,
He was denied, a penance self-imposed,
And meekly borne. So with intense desire
And inward recollection now he strove
By recitation of the blessed Creeds
To imprint a lively image of our Lord
Upon his spirit. With unflagging strain
And unrelaxing grasp of thought he held
His mind long poised upon each wondrous Clause,
Each gracious lineament of saving truth,

Until the countenance of the Written Faith
Broke forth in silent voices, and each word
Sang like a trumpet in his inmost soul :
And with the ringing sound his fleshy heart
Glowed like a furnace, till the Type of Him
Whose love it echoed was annealed thereon.

Even so, when on the Tuscan Apennine
Descending autumn down the beechwood slope
Her russet mantle trailed, St. Francis knelt.
His spirit hung in steadfast rapture far
Above the atmosphere of vocal prayer,
While 'twixt the beamy Seraph's folded wings
He saw the Sacred Effigy depending ;
And from the gracious Wounds, five Wells of health
To stanch the sensual issues of our sins,
There came five rays of light which was not born
Of sun or moon, but from that Orb detached
That sheds on Sion streets eternal day ;—
The city undisclosed, whose outlines faint
Tremble with indistinct pulsation now,
Like sunset quivering on the clouds of night,
Upon the bosom of the earthly Church.
Those starry pencils on his fleshy frame,
By cleansing fast and vigil now sublimed,
Haply by love, too, partially transformed,
As, when the Judgment-Fire is passed, all flesh
Shall be,—played for a little while, and left,
By their sharp radiance copied to the life,
The Saviour's awful Wounds. Such solemn power
Imagination on the bodily limbs
Usurps, concurring with intensest love
And long unbroken singleness of thought,
And with miraculous effort outwardly
Reveals the habitual aspect of the heart,

As grace and nature in the work combine.
Thus, by a hundred witnessed, Francis came
Down from Alvernia, like a vessel sealed,
And stigmatized in fashion as his Lord.

Another means Sir Lancelot took to win
The vision that he sought, a means well known
To every generation of the Saints—
By meditating livelong days and nights
On our Lord's Passion. Step by step he went
Along that Road of Sorrows, till he seemed
Even in the boldness of his pity moved
To glide into our Saviour's place, and toil
Beneath the salutary Burden, laid
Upon the Guiltless for the guilty's sake.
O dearest Fount of sadness and of weeping!
How few there are in all this busy world
That turn aside to drink thy sacred stream!
Was ever grief like that? Was ever woe
Divine as His, so blessedly endeared
To every human heart whose mortal pains
Additional fulfilments of our curse
Have been, darkening the earth? Oh ancient Grief!
The countless ages cry a blessing on thee!
From out the depths of poverty where dwell
The Unnumbered, the Neglected, comes the song
Of sorrow that hath broken forth in hymns
Exultingly: and from the high-born, kings,
And peers, and palatines, and famous minds,
And godly warriors, sounds in stately march
The music of their world-renouncing vows.

O grief of griefs! with what celestial love
Inflamed, we ponder on that Holy Week,
Within whose seven diurnal rounds compressed
Lies the whole sum and substance of the world,

The measure of all time, the ultimate crown
 Of human destinies and Love Divine,
 All, all in one completion centring deep,
 The Star that through the Passion gleams in sign
 Beneficent, the ever-blessed Cross!

Thus with determinate effort he retrieved
 What memory in her faithful keeping held
 In depths a mother's words alone can reach,
 The order of those Sacred Woes, and form
 Of their procession, by the Spirit shown
 To man fourfold from four celestial towers
 Of contemplation, movingly portrayed,
 And with pathetic variations touched,
 Touched and illumed, by blest Evangelists.

Yet, craving every help, the more to prop
 The unsteady balance of an earthly mind,
 Upon the western slope of that lone hill
 Whereon he dwelt, above the valley raised
 And from the heights detached, he for himself
 A Kreuzberg made. A difficult ascent
 He chose, a steep and natural stair time-worn
 Amid the jutting stones, and to the wind
 And rains with such a bleak exposure laid
 As had repelled the meagre skin of moss
 Which strove to creep upon the scalps of rock.
 And now upon that rugged slope did he
 Choose fourteen eminences, whence to frame
 As many Stations of remembrance, havens
 Where thought, and with thought prayer, might
 disembark
 In its too rapid voyage, and on the capes
 Might worship of that monumental shore,
 Which he was coasting with exceeding fear.
 And, at the Stations, to the rocks he tied

A simple Cross, erect save at the spots
Which should recall the sinking of our Lord
Beneath His Burden ; there he laid the Sign
Prostrate upon the stone, and with a cord
Of supple ivy bound it in its place.

And at the summit in a fissure grew
A blasted holly, from whose trunk he cut
The withered boughs, but two he left, alive
And branching from the stem on either side,
So that it stood upon that slab of rock,
Facing the sunset, as a living Cross.

There at each Station daily on his knees
He wept ; for to the Knight the gift of tears
In like abundant measure had been given
With him, Assisi's Saint, whose streaming eyes
Gushed out with water for the holy Law
Of Jesus slighted among men, as though,
Invested with such function, they were called
To be vicarious fountains of remorse
For all mankind, and, ever on the verge
Of blindness trembling, only wept the more,
And still to him the sunshine was ensured
By marvel, so men deemed, till near his death,
If death such calm translation might be named.

And not displeased was he full oft to find
Upon each tightly-fastened Cross the wool
Left by the intrusive sheep, whose presence there
To his thought desecrated not the place,
But left appropriate tribute on the Sign
Of the true Lamb, as men should lay their sins
Upon the Cross, as though from servitude
Might those inferior creatures be redeemed,
Whose snowy fleeces on the mountain side
Gleam, like the righteousness that shall displace

Our guilt, and whose most patient wrongs and pains
Elected are to bear about in type,
In language of a plaintive import preached
Oft to dull ears, the Passion of our Lord.

There, on that steep by touching symbols made
A sanctuary, did he now confront
That history of woe, which is not woe
To sinful man, but everlasting weal.
Thus, on its melancholy sweetness fed,
And by the pressure of the holy Creeds
Upon his inward spirit, and by hope,
And faith unfeignèd, and assiduous love,
The personal image of our Saviour grew
Before his eyes, a Presence on the air
Depicted, and with self-sufficing light
Upon the field of darkness silently
Irradiate ; such a type as haunted once
The bashful intellect of Christian Art
In mountainous Umbria, when before the face
Of re-awakening paganism she fled,
Taking amid the barren Apennines
Those Moulds and Aspects of a tender grace
Divinely pure,—the Mother and the Son,
The Desert-Preacher, and the lineaments
Of the great Twelve, with Paul and Barnabas
Born out of time,—from ancient days received,
And in the western family preserved
Of deep traditions, while the east ran wild
In forms debased. In exile over these
With reverential homage Christian Art
Brooded with many a tear, and mid those rocks
Died of neglect, or haply seemed to die,
Surviving still, a sleeper in the caves
Where truths withdrawn await another hour.

Such Image now Sir Lancelot beheld
Fronting him day and night ; such blessed Type
Was his, a benediction evermore.
And at all seasons, whether day-break came,
And on the foreheads of the eastern hills
Ran over with an unction of sweet light,
As from a cup filled slowly, or the peaks,
In evening's downy purple richly garbed,
Seemed from their daylight nearness to retire,
This Pictured Faith was present to his eye.
But, chiefly and most calmly, was it prized
In the cold quiet of autumnal days,
When by the leaf-choked streams he took his road,
Or the dim-curtained afternoons of mist,
Of sobbing mist and intermitting rain,
Whene'er the silent-weeping woods all day
With melancholy dripping on crisp leaves
Foster a pleasant sadness, and there come
Sounds, as of children wakening from a dream,
Of raindrops soaking through the withered herbs,
Or creatures searching for their holes, obscured
By some accession of decay, or shower
Of yellow leaves in silent circle dropped,
Each underneath the bough on which it grew.

Environed therefore with such gracious aids,
And with such spiritual furtherance now
Abetted, was it strange that he should feel
Deep joy, almost sufficiency, therein ?
Yet such his lowliness of temper, such
The habitual self-abasement of his mind,
The very rising of a happy thought
Disquieted his covetous research
Of sorrow, and his love of gloomy fears,
Sought as a duty, mercifully foiled.

He was a suitor of sad thoughts, but still
Nature was glad around him, and the peace
Of God was in his heart, and every day
Brought some new pleasure to the birth, some joy
That stood more clear of such incumbrances
As interposed before ; and many a time
Was he a prisoner taken unawares
In his own gladness, by a pleasant guile
Entrapped : even as a melancholy man,
Who with a lovely child may walk abroad,
With his own griefs too much in sympathy,
Or by the torture of unsettled thought
Abstracted from the soothing images
Of nature close at hand ; yet when he sees
How every face of every passer-by
Relaxes into pleasure, shares at length
The general sunshine, and pursues his way
Caressing his sweet satellite, and full
Of gladness such as is the food of tears.

Such change now grew upon him as he fain
Would disallow, although by what designs
To counteract it he perceived not yet.
So much he saw, that he must first dislodge
That sense of home and localized repose
Which even to that poor wilderness attached
And scene of lone self-chastisement, whose forms
Were by embodied memories now endeared,
And by the friendly aspect of the fields
Worn, when the heart and earth appear to come
To mutual understanding, through long years
Associate, and vicissitudes of lot,—
While things around, outgrowing their cold charm
Of novelty, their vacant freedom seem
To abjure, till they are peopled, like the isles

Or happy fields where fable placed the shades,
With all our past existence bright and dark.
Then, with strange joy that life had yet to show
A field of self-denial unexplored,
With firm resolve he left the Ash-tree Cell,
As the eighth summer of his sojourn there
Gave early autumn leave to reign by night
O'er that green realm which she still ruled by day.

On Lammas Day at morn Sir Lancelot went,
Turning his back upon the quiet port,
Whereat the damage of his soul had been
Repaired with such a noiseless skill. He climbed
The moor with hurried steps as in distrust
Of his own purpose, for he felt how much
He left behind in leaving that calm vale.
Onward he mounted with an obstinate gaze
Fixed on the blank blue sky, as though his heart
Had sworn an oath unto itself that he
Would send no backward lingering looks. But still,
The more he strove to cast his thoughts in front,
The more they lagged behind. The very forms
Of the old places faced him as he walked.
The sister ash-trees and the low-browed cell,
The well-known aspect of its open door,
Which with a greeting of mute cognizance
Met his returning eye, the church-like breath
Of frankincense that ruled within from boughs
Of withered pine, the lily on her bay
Dimpling in nature's solitary eye
The lucid waters with faint flashing light,
The Crosses on the Kreuzberg with the wool
Left by the sheepflocks fluttering in the breeze,
Like the last leaves of autumn,—all came round
And stood before him, palpable and clear

As he well knew his backward-looking sight
Could yet encounter them. But with a speed
Such knowledge only quickened, up the hill
He strained, and some few footsteps interposed
A ridge between the valley and himself ;
And then Sir Lancelot turned to look behind.
The vacant waste of cold fresh waves that meet
The morning gaze of him who yesternight
Slept, by the crescent lights of some huge port
Embraced, could bring a not more sad surprise
Than that new landscape which he now beheld.
His eyes, that teemed with such sweet images
And household forms in vivid groups, now fell
Upon a sunny slope of verdant moor,
With rocky slabs of azure grey, whereon
The sun and shower with emulous intent
Bright maps of yellow lichen had designed,
And sailing low with flight that almost brushed
The grass, a buzzard-cock with creaking wings
And melancholy whistle swept along.

And now two loitering hours were gone, consumed
In frequent halts, before the Knight came down
The western spur of Kirkstone, on whose slope
A little hamlet stood, securely wedged
Between two hills ; a place it was that seemed
Half houses and half foliage, interspersed
With such sweet skill that one might almost doubt
Whether the human habitations preyed
Upon the original forest, or the wood
Encroached upon the village, such an air
Of peace there was and natural solitude.

And calmly rose in curling volumes blue
The reeling spires of smoke, and to a stream
Of upper wind ascending, they were curved,

And, melting in the sunbeams, faded off,
Dissolved in odours vague of burning peat.
And to the Knight, a northern born, no scent
More delicately grateful e'er could wrap
His sense in livelier memories of the past.
For eight long penal years no fires of man
Had cheered him, with their tale so softly told
Of social bliss, and quiet histories
Of wedded hearts and faithful loves obscure.
And now with thankful spirit he inhaled
The unexpected fragrance, like a man
Whose memory some most pleasant thought eludes
Long time, and meets him at a sudden turn
In far-off lands, a pilgrim like himself.

That morning smoke! what depths did it unlock
Of childhood, by the pressure of stern years
Forcibly closed, or by the chill of age
Congealed, and wintry selfishness! What days
Of boyish plans to fish in distant tarns,
To rifle some chance brood of eaglets found
By shepherd boy, or steal the wild swan's eggs,
When through the half-awakened villages
The early peat-smoke with the cold bright air
Mingled its pleasant incense as he rode,
All in his mother's life-time,—memory clung,
To later things with less tenacious hold;—
All rose upon his mind and gently shook,
As morning shakes the dew-drops in the wood,
The depth of feeling, with a power as calm
As spring when at the bottom of the streams
She bids the long-haired plants anoint their locks
With lustrous verdure for her bridal morn.

Ah! not untruthful is the wondrous light
Wherein the soul abides, with noblest thoughts

Begirt, that wait their hour of utterance,
When Memory with Imagination sits,
Twin monarchs, throned upon the quiet mind :
Even as the rising moon and setting sun
Reign over no disparted realm, but each
Fills the whole circuit of the heavens with light
Peculiarly its own, and yet so merged
In mutual government, the very sun
In moonlight sets, the moon in sunshine climbs.
And not untruthful too, for all its sweetness,
Is that illumination which converts
The soul into a silent fairy-land
By sleight of memory, when the happy Past
Is with the Present gracefully involved.
So to one wandering in the tarnished woods
Beneath the bright autumnal moon, the boughs,
Half-stripped, appear in May's imperfect leaves
Of lucid green but just attired ; the orb
Restoring, while it hides their present hue,
That old transparent colouring of the spring.
Such double office when the memory fills,
Confusing times and places, who shall say
Whether it be the Present that illumines
The Past, or that same Past which is the moon
Of the fair Present? Such perplexity
Of joy, half extricated from the shade
Of sadness, now beset Sir Lancelot's mind,
And solving this sweet doubt he took his way.

Among the closed and silent cottages
He went, much wondering at the novel sight,
Till on the air there rose a joyous chant,
A treble of thin childish voices, stealing
Upon the quiet place and through the wood
Like the faint murmur of a brook dispersed,

Mastered by rustling leaves and sighing airs.
Thus, by the music guided, he arrived
Where o'er a wall a drooping wych-elm hung
And roofed full half the road, which suddenly
Dipped down a steep descent, and there he found
A beautiful procession winding by,
The Guild of August in its old array.
The countrymen in holiday attire,
And dames in Sunday kirtles, and a troop,
Chief actors they, of little boys and girls
Bearing religious emblems, marched along
To celebrate their Loaf-Mass at the shrine
Of sweet St. Catherine by the silver mere,
With Host of ripest and selected ears
Of that year's corn, its happy first-fruits, made.
A fragrant basket of the new-won hay,
Amid those hills in early autumn won,
They bore in front, and wands of braided rush
With wild flowers filleted, and Crosses three
In simple thought of pastoral art devised.
One with a flower-like wreath of marvellous plumes
And radiant feathers trimmed, from wondrous lands
Beyond the sea by one far-travelled brought
For his betrothed, by her more fitly given
For such good end than used for personal pride.
Another was there all of virgin white,
Circled with one live twig of leafy vine
That neither too much hid nor too much showed
The gleaming outline of the symbol dear ;
No fruitage grew depending from the stalk,
For He who hung upon that Tree of Life
Himself was fruit, and other needed none.
The third more like a natural growth of earth
Appeared, with cup-moss overgrown, and crust

Of beautiful green things akin to moss.
Then followed many a bright and gandy show
And quaint device significant, and most
Fluttered with dangling chains and knotted rush
In honour, doubtless, of St. Peter's Chains
Of which the Church memorial makes that day.

Onward they marched; the weak-voiced choir still
sang

The Benedicite for rural wealth,
For that year's vigorous growth of sappy wood,
For new-won hay and promise of the corn.
Sweetly it rose, though feebly, for 'twas ruled
That they alone who had not toiled should sing.
In truth a goodly sight it was, and type
To make men wisely sad, to see the feet
Of children tottering with a lofty Cross
Of weight beyond their own, and seeking aid,
Like souls that stay themselves upon the Church,
Their hands within their mothers' locked, to bear
Their honourable burdens to the lake.

Still on the selfsame spur of Kirkstone lives
The ancestral custom, from its day displaced
Insensibly through lapse of time, or act
Of those unweeting of its ancient form.
Still is that flowery chain of olden time
By pressure of long centuries unsnapped;
And I would pray, that have good right to pray,
A foreigner adopted to the hearths
Of that fair town and freedom of the hills,
That, from the troubled centre of the land
By nature cast apart, her sons may long
With simpler wants more readily obey
The instincts of a simpler faith, and live
In the calm light of cheerful usages,

And rites and truths of happy ancient days!

O'ercome by thoughts, where pain acutely strove
With joy, Sir Lancelot stayed behind to weep.

Onward the pageant swept; no turning eye
Witnessed his presence at the village pomp;
For all, both hearts and eyes, were forward bent
To gray St. Catherine's on Winander's shore.

And, when the querulous voices of the band
Now died far off, he left the road and passed
A purling brook which fenced an ancient park,
That so he might not cross the peopled path
Of that sweet vision.

But another sight,

Less fair, he now was destined to confront.
Down a steep lawn there ran a green arcade
Trellised with boughs of Glastonbury thorn,
Beneath whose open shade three flights of steps,
Cut in the ground and clothed with native sward,
Led from a postern of a Saxon hall
Down to the park; and at the wicket gate,
Which closed that covered way, a falconer stood:
Four birds in scarlet cowls upon his staff
Sedately perched, erect and motionless;
And two dark palfreys by a groom were held,
In trappings gay for lady's use attired,
Who to that pastime, from the Saracens
At first imported, now were sallying forth.

Behind the drooping umbrage of a tree
Sir Lancelot stood, while down the dim arcade,
Like beams of light, two youthful maidens came.
In energy of mirth, and overflow
Of words in some grave presence long pent up,
Their voices, like a peal of silver bells,
In falls of laughter rang, most musical,

As if the very pulse of joy herself
Its rapid beatings clothed in bodily sound.
Blythely they talked, and by the Holy Mass
They ratified this idle speech or that,
Or of our Virgin Lady's sainted name
Made frequent use and frivolous; yet they chanced
On such light words and with such feminine air
Of innocent pretence, that he who blamed,
Except to save his conscience as a priest,
In hall and bower was deemed a base-born churl:
And who so hardy as resist the world
When it would canonize a graceful sin?

Onward they hastened to a little mere
That northward lay, and wafted down the vale
By fits there came those silvery peals of mirth.
Forth from his covert too Sir Lancelot went;
Each laughing sound that struck his ear but seemed
To spur him forward: not the morning smoke,
Nor simple psalmody of childish choir,
Wielded the powers of memory with a strength
And speed more irresistible than now
The voices of those children of the world.
No images of blameless times, past years
Whose shades are not less soothing than their light,
No distant landscapes of the long-left shore
Of childhood, did these present sounds invoke;
But sinful joys, deluding dreams of power,
The vanity of enterprise in arms,
Months of soft self-indulgence, and wild hours
Lost in oblivious revel with his peers,
Or while he plied the bootless trade of love,—
And all that comfortless eclipse of Heaven
Which youth call knowledge of the world, and buys,
As men bought power of Satan, with a bond

Written in blood, a woful covenant.
How merrily those laughters seemed to freight
The quiet of the vale! How long the breeze
Played with the sound! yet to Sir Lancelot's ear
It was a joyless, nay, an awful sound.
It fell with such interpretation there
As baffled all its lavish melody.
None but a child would deem the passing-bell
Blythe music, yet it woos to happier thoughts
Than all the songs and viols of the world.

Westward Sir Lancelot bent his steps, nor knew
By what blind choice he was impelled that way.
Such the strange instinct working in the hearts
Of agèd men, who with habitual mood
Creep o'er the meadows to the setting sun,
Their feeble backs bent down and aspect prone,
With tardy effort from the different stiles
Freeing their limbs; yet ever by that lure,
That golden light, which gives them back their years,
And from the ground flows upward to their eyes,
Drawn on, forget to measure with their strength
The distance of that unillumined way
They must perforce return. So westward went
The Knight, and by the Brathay's glittering shore
Rested at noon, where, opposite, there rose
A single hill, the transcript of his own
In Troutbeck Vale, a miniature, whose base
Half by a mountain road was clipped, and half
By the dark flood and mural parapet
Of tall osmunda with its halberds green.
And o'er the shady slope there lightly swung
A latticed network of depending ash,
Whose scanty elegance of foliage served
Rather for aid to guide the exploring eye

To tempting coverts and moss couches spread
In sun-proof dingles, mid the whispering boughs,
And in the audience of the murmuring stream.

What though, retired in our calm temperate noons,
No admonition to the ear is given
By snow-white campanero in the woods,
From leafy turrets tolling, like the bell
Of distant convent, all along the shore
Of turbid Demerara, summoning
The quiet listening creatures, and poor slaves,
To prayer in that intolerable hour
When toil were death;—yet by the lispings leaves,
The gurgling of cool waters, and the sounds
That one by one are ceasing in the fields,
Noon here invites the soul to thought and prayer.
And thus Sir Lancelot profitably mused,
With penitent acknowledgments relieved
By tears of gratitude and speechless praise,
Upon the double vision of that morn,
Those Aspects and those Voices which revealed
The twofold Powers, the friend and foe of man,
The Church and World, each travelling on its way.

Then up the stream he went through rushy fields,
Or paths with trampled elderberries stained,
And knolls of grateful wood, until a ring
Of ancient oaks the secret entrance marked
Of a deep transverse valley: thence he passed,
Enchanted, through the sylvan paradise
Of Tilberthwaite, and Yewdale's rocky shades
And grimly purpled steeps, and to the right
Ascending, wound along the stony flank
Of a tall mountain from whose terraced sides
His eye could rest upon a sunny lake,
Spread riverlike in silvery maze behind.

SIR LANCELOT.



BOOK V.

BLACK COMBE.



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BLACK COMBE.

THE seasons are the keys of song : they can
Rich store of modulated thought unlock ;
But as in their ethereal wards they turn
There is full oft a sound of storm in heaven,
And sun and shower upon alternate winds
Ride in disordered speed across the earth.
But in the change, when summer's faltering hand
Yields her capricious sceptre to the grasp
Of noble autumn, days will intervene
Of an elysian softness which belongs
To other lands, not by our seasons claimed ;
A short-lived regency may it be deemed,
By some mild southern influence controlled.

And autumn prematurely came this year,
Or summer ended, from her place disturbed
By shocks of almost tropic thunderstorms.

Sir Lancelot journeyed slowly in the heat,
And halted often, not so much to rest
As to admire the beauty circumfused
With oriental softness in the air.

The sky was blue, but by a pearly haze
Most exquisitely veiled ; the little clouds
Lay motionless in some bright element

Of molten silver, which they had absorbed
Until they shone like planets up on high,
Or sunny fleets that rock far off at sea,
Half hidden by illuminated foam.
Eastward the distant mountains hung like banks
Of toppling cloud, in tremulous violet hue
Or marvellous tint of roseate green arrayed ;
While to the north a lazy stifled wind
Trailed a white mist transparent o'er the hills,
Where, to unreal distance thrown, Scawfell
Was palpitating in the haze.

Yet while

The unwonted aspect of the lovely day
Of eastern lands reminded him, one thing
There was which to our clime recalled his thoughts:
It was the dim perspective of the view.
The vigorous outline, lucid and compressed,
And the clear darkness of the shadows thrown
Steadfast and motionless, the firmness given
To the faint aspect of the distant hills,
Temples, and groves of trees, are special gifts
Pertaining to the radiant atmosphere
And landscapes of a southern latitude.
But, to imagination far more rich
And to the reverential eye more sweet,
And by Sir Lancelot now confessed a charm
More graceful, are our waving outlines fixed
With an aerial trembling, while the earth
With glimmering motion on her anchor rides,
Tempting the eye, well pleased to be so lured,
To rifle all the unsettled hills and shades
Of nodding wood, and piece by piece retrieve
The distant objects slowly floating up
Out of the vague obscurity wherein

(The fairy-land confusion of the noon)
They swim, sometimes approaching to the sight,
Sometimes receding, as a ship will miss
The harbour-mouth, by feeble gusts betrayed.

But lo! a lucid rim of brazen light
Steals o'er the northern hills, and from the abyss
Fabrics of castellated cloud mount up,
Labouring to roll themselves above the heights,
And, as in their unwieldy toil they dash
Against the mountains, muffled voices come
Of growling thunder, while the panting breeze,
First intermitting, wholly dies away.

It was a tempest such as rarely sounds
Among these English hills, and by a gale
Of wind succeeded, in whose boisterous rage
The creaking woods fell prostrate, and loose rocks
Clove their rough paths among the belts of pine,
A storm shortlived as fierce. Sir Lancelot,
Who once in woody Lebanon had dwelt
At Zarklè opposite the hoary plain
Of silent Balbec with the Maronites,
Thought of the snowy Sannin, in whose womb
Terrific storms are gendered; and the past,
Roused into wild accordance with the wrath
Of the blind elements, within him raged,
And with a swift eruption of hot thoughts
Ravaged that pure tranquillity, which made
His inmost heart for years a holy home
Of penitence, and very cell of prayer.

The storm had slackened; on a platform green
With hurried step the Excommunicate
Was driven to and fro by his wild thoughts.
Beneath was Duddon raving in the glen,
Now visible, now by a drifting shower

Of sleet half veiled or utterly obscured,
While the lashed mountain-sides were heard to
moan

Beneath the impetuous cataracts of wind.
Soon, like a ponderous pageant upon wheels,
The mass of toppling clouds and flying mists
Rolled seaward, bellowing as it went: and then
Came the sweet sovereignty of azure sky,
And the warm sun, and breezes musical,
Not unacknowledged in the woe-worn heart
Of the lone penitent. He knelt and prayed;
And when he rose, there was within his soul
A lightening which was almost happiness,
A sense that mercy did not yet disdain
To soothe his conscience.

And a pomp ensued
With such significant slowness on the hills
And such surpassing beauty, that his eye,
Fed from the scene, sustained his weary heart.
A mountain of a varying outline rose
Entangled in a vast array of mist,
Here dense and fleecy, there a lucid gauze,
Like a bride's veil, most beautiful to see.
Sometimes in tortuous columns it rolled forth
As from the chambers of the mountain breathed;
Rearing its broad unsteady bulk aloft,
It seemed by sunlight kindled from within:
Then all at once it broke and fell, as if
Dropped suddenly from some invisible hand,
While it disclosed a hundred dizzy feet
Of peak and precipice; then in the grasp
Of strong and eager wind caught up again,
As with a hurried impulse it involved
The mountain all in white: and it appeared

Like some gigantic creature that was torn
Upon the craggy armour of the hill,
And now lay writhing in contortions huge
And pitiful, with its voluminous spires
Catching a silver sunbeam here and there.
But soon the lacerated monster trailed
Itself across the ledges of rude scar,
And on the top of some subordinate heights,
Fir-capped, in five enormous folds coiled up
Sullen, but in repose the creature lay,
While to the open air and clear sunshine
The mountain sprung, a bold and buoyant height.

There, sculptured on the bending dome of sky,
A frieze of clouds in beautiful relief
Glowed on the ethereal concave of the west ;
Even like a land far off at sea evoked
From underneath the horizon by some spell
Of playful light into the upper air.
A chain of rosy mountains did it seem,
Fretted with shades of blue, and veins of pearl
Hung from the heights like trickling waterfalls
Voiceless, though fluent, on a summer day.
And folds of evening wood appeared to sleep
Upon those mountain sides, and single pines
On forward eminences stood, and rows
Of black-barred cedars, and the tapering spires
Of silky birch, and from the sunny glens
Rose up the smoke of fairy villages
Sunk in the cloudy gorges, and dark towers
And old cathedrals with effulgent domes
Were for awhile sustained before the eye
By the sweet light, which is its minister,
And then effaced. O beautiful Effect !
Wrought by the love of God to elevate

Our love to Him, and thus subserve His praise !
 How grateful is it to the impatient sight
 Of those returning to their mountain home,
 However brief their exile, so to meet
 This prophecy, in characters of cloud
 Engraved, of their own mountains still unseen,
 And with what all-sufficient joy they view
 That heavenly imitation of the earth,
 That exquisite and silent land of clouds !

And gorgeous preparation did the sun
 That evening make for his descent, a play
 Of such ethereal intermingling hues
 And blazonry of mists no painter durst
 Depict their faithful unreality.
 There dropped upon the hills, as though from heaven,
 A vest of coloured air, for scarce a haze
 Might it be named, so thin it was, in truth
 Impalpable but for its watery tints.
 Half purple and half crimson did it seem,
 Wherein the mountains rose, all girded round
 With shining bars of motionless white cloud,
 While on the channelled vale of greenest turf
 There lay a flood of rosy brightness shot
 Slant-wise with gold in tremulous dusky threads,
 Through which the green, unmingled, unabsorbed,
 Gleamed with the rain-drops.

O how fair the view
 When evening wandered up the vale, and touched
 With gentlest visitation hoary cliff
 And hanging wood and lawny mountain side.
 Yet was the beauty heightened and set off
 By many a plain memorial of the storm.
 The foamy Duddon forced his clamorous way
 Amid the opposing straits of rock, or brawled

With pebbly sound across the shingle blue,
Which in the morning sun had glanced like beds
Of diamond or topaz : and the brooks,
Sequestered in the few collateral glens,
Raised to a strain more loud than they were wont
Their tributary music, soft-voiced streams
Half-stifled in the echoing ravines
By the close-roofing foliage overhead :
And, sweeter symbol still of recent storm,
The pleasant exhalations of the woods,—
Fir-stem, and mossy earth, and silver birch
With aromatic breath,—how fragrant all !
Like the soft converse of a heart which hath
But lately learned in tears and sufferings deep
The kindly wisdom of adversity,
And through meek bearing purchased a degree
In that exalted faculty, whose lore
More heavenly is than aught on earth beside.

Firmer and yet more hollow grows the voice
Of ancient Duddon, and more palpable
The tingling of the woodlands, as the night
Advances her engrossing silence there.
Along the uneven edges of the hills
The gradual muster of the stars begins,
While the green groves turn glossy and obscure.
How overbearing is the loveliness
Of night, the night divine ! with her dread show
Thus hushing all the timorous earth to rest :
As though, in some supernal mantle swathed,
A sailing spirit waved his awful wing
Scarcely above the surface. How intense
The tranquil midnight of that sunken vale !
All sounds, the motions of the fluttering breeze,
The mirth of insects, and the troublous sighs

From the tall summits of unsleeping wind,—
 All seem suspended as by angel's hand,
 And gathered out from the responsive air,
 That one Sound only, one dread Soul of sound,
 Might in its fulness overflow the vale
 With influence unannoyed. That Sound it is
 Which in the Word of Life, both Old and New,
 Bears the commission to set forth in type,
 And nightly illustrate, the Voice of God,—
 The Sound of Many Waters, calm and strong,
 Most clear, most mighty ; as the thunder loud,
 When the near storm its rolling voice divides
 With sharp articulation mid the rocks,
 Yet spiritual and subtle in the air,
 The earth, the boughs, as are the whisperings
 Of a man's conscience in his solitude.

Sir Lancelot's soul rose in him, like a flower
 From which the sun with timely slowness lifts
 The burden of the rain, and from whose blooms
 The sprinkled soil falls off and leaves no stain.
 His heart, o'ercharged with thankfulness, was soothed,
 And by the very soothing roused to sing,
 As if that Voice of waters in the vale
 Called for his voice to give it words of praise.

Great God and Father ! (so in thought he sang,
 Thought that could hardly keep itself from words,)
 Great God and Father ! to acknowledge thus
 In night, silent or vocal, evermore
 Thy Presence with Thy creatures, doth fatigue
 The enraptured and adoring intellect.
 O raise my soul and spirit, and attune
 My body to their heights, that so I may,—
 Not with intensity of love outworn,
 With beauty restless, or with terror chafed,
 Or by solemnity dispirited,—

But with a lowly mind and venturous heart
Of child's affection, worship Thee, First Cause,
Fountain of Godhead, sole and unapproached,
Thine equal Son, from all eternity
Thy Son, to all eternity True Man,
And Thee too, infinite, coequal Spirit,
The personal and abiding Comforter,
And falling sinner's diligent Paraclete,—
Thee may I worship, Blessed Trinity,
Creator, Saviour, Paraclete of man!
In all the glories both of night and day,
Of land and ocean, mountain-top and dale :
But specially vouchsafe that in the night
And darkness, too symbolical of sin,
No idle thoughts, nor evil haunting past,
May claim my heart, while I the rather seek,
Even in my midnight fears, a fount of love,
Of breathless prayer and musings grave and high.
Thee, by the action of a restless mind
And the quick beatings of a heart unweaned
From earth, can I escape or shun by day.
The radiant magnificence of light
Can be a hiding-place. Romantic turns,
And alternations of a blended interest,
The bold relief of colour, and the gay
Distracting details of bright loveliness,
Sweetly distracting,—these are coverts all
Where in the depths of daylight we may hide,
Impatient of Thy Presence : but the night
Disarms the spirit which had been so bold
In the sun's eye to feel, to speak, to act ;
And in the starry concourse of the sky,
The leaning moonlit mountains, and the woods
By dusk illumination magnified,

And above all in that deep typical Voice
Of Many Waters, now authentic made
By word of revelation, I discern
Thine awful Presence, Majesty Supreme ;
And, by Thy Spirit thus solicited,
I worship Thee with trembling utterance, checked
Oft by adoring silence, till my heart,
By thought of sweetest mercies over-borne,
Mercies unasked far more than asked, will dare
To weep for very love before Thy Feet !

Along the sounding shore Sir Lancelot went,
Till down the vale he saw the murky gleam
Of the wet sands far off, which like a tongue
Pierce the green woodlands there : then o'er a bridge
He crossed the Duddon, and northwestward turned
Over some mountain roots of shaggy copse,
Till in the Vale of Whicham now he stood
Beneath the steadfast shadow of Black Combe.

From time to time a restless watchdog bayed,
And a cock crew, or from the echoing hill
The wolf's low whine, prolonged and multiplied,
Possessed the ear of night, and over-ruled
All other sounds, until the fitful breeze,
Impatient of the silence, woke once more
And with the dashing of the torrents played,
Throwing their music here and there at will.
The moon hung low : the starry firmament,
Shaking with lights innumerable, was spread
Over the mountain like an eastern tent,
Whose rocking lamps and swaying canopy
Bend in the desert wind. The mighty hill
Rose with the moon behind, and, in the shade
And layers of purple darkness, seemed to swell
Beyond the proper measure of its size,

Through that appearance wherewith solemn night
Is wont to magnify the glimmering earth.
Sir Lancelot gazed upon its dusky breadth
With reverence, while his inward awe confessed
The more than common majesty which breathes
From the mysterious features of Black Combe.

Who for the first time sees that heavy hill,
Sombre and pale, but he acknowledges
Somewhat of its unwonted character,
The fearfulness of its dark aspect joined
With wild significance of feature, felt
Deep in the spirit, puzzling thought to find
Wherefore the presence of that singular height
Lays such a weight upon the feeling heart?
A dark attraction hath that mighty hill
To fix the wandering gaze upon itself,
Whether the eye may light on its green sides,
Ruffled with combs of fretted rock, far off
At sea to Mona or the Solway bound,
Or in the distance looming, o'er the sands
Of Duddon's sylvan estuary seen
From Hawcoat or the end of Walney Isle,
Or in smooth Whicham where the quiet air
Is loaded with its shadow, while the sheep
Graze silently around its verdant foot.
A silent place is Whicham vale, and not
Without some share of that impressive gloom
Which clouds the neighbouring hill incessantly,
A lonely spot which to the eye would seem
Most melancholy, if a prattling brook
In a damp woody channel overarched,
Like those who sing most sweetly when they deem
No audience nigh, did not full oft beguile
The traveller's spirit with its merry chimes

Half baffled by the matted roof of boughs,
And yet more beautiful, false distance given
Unto the strain, cheating the well-pleased ear.

There the dark mountain stands, and seems like one
In a grim slumber by enchantment bound
Hard by the sea, whose murmur throws a voice
Into its inner glens, a solemn sound
Moaning along the treeless banks, less sweet
Than the rill's local music undisturbed,
But with a spell of power far more sublime
And mournful fascination, heavily
Ensnaring him who wanders there alone.
No matter whence the breeze may set, from land
Or from the sea, nor with what steady power
It flows along, still overhead the clouds
Mysteriously pause in their career,
By huge Black Combe retarded in the sky,
Dappling its brow with stationary shades
From hour to hour; while all the summer long
The wizard hill with an ethereal gloom,
Soft and cærulean, wraps his grassy flanks.

For druid rite and horrid sacrifice
Of savage faith, long ages past might choose
A mountain-height thus visibly with awe
Invested, to the dwellers there no less
Than to chance travellers, or the sea-borne man
Who in wild weather passes by that coast.

Not unimpressive is it there to hear,
Far in the heart of those green solitudes,
The pastoral bleating of the flocks, annoyed,
Yea, and displaced upon the silent moors,
By the harsh plaining of the sea-fowl, driven
By rude Atlantic storms to shelter there.
How piteously they strew their broken cries

O'er the wet surface of the quaking moors,
Oft by the hillside echoes taken up
And in the sinuous coves prolonged, as though
That mountain were a giant horn whereon
The sea might wind his own peculiar notes,
Disheartening such plain lovers of the land
As wander there, and question if Black Combe
Be not a blending of both elements
Most wild and mystical, throughout its breadth
Claimed audibly by ocean for his own,
The nuptial chamber of the earth and sea,
With singular celebration set apart,
And strangest rites prolonged from year to year.

He hath but little of the poet's soul
Who, passing underneath Black Combe, can go
By Duddon's shore, or through the pleasant peace
Of hollow Torver, or with southward course
To the Cistercian seat in Frudernesse
A pilgrim bent, and yet confess no weight
Laid by the sea-side mountain on his heart,
Or without difficulty extricates
The blythe and smiling scenes through which he wends
From out the shadow of that sombre height.

While yet Sir Lancelot stood, in musing wrapped,
The sunrise stole unto the higher ridge
Of the dark mountain, and the crest appeared
Through the thin mist as though it had been strewn,
Not with the sunshine, but a flaky shower
Of sprinkled snow, while on the sides beneath
Dawn separated one by one bright knolls
From out the purple mass, which swiftly grew
Translucent with green light; then from above
And from the vale beneath, both up and down
At once, the daylight tremulously crept.

Thereat the Knight commenced the smooth ascent,
Betrayed full often by the slippery sward
Already silvered by the moist sea-breeze,
Which carries autumn prematurely there,
And tarnishes the fern before its time.

Nigh to the dreary summit of Black Combe
There is a hideous fissure, scooped perchance
By ponderous eddies when the deluge swayed
Incumbent on the broken frame of earth.
Therein Sir Lancelot fixed his hermitage,
Wattled with clay and stakes in journeys brought
Frequent and toilsome from the vale below.
Behind the mountain's solid crest it stood
From the rude northwind sheltered, and ensconced
Behind a natural rampart of green turf,
Safe from the wet and blustering south which throws
Its greeting of salt spray upon the hill.
The only objects from the door beheld
Were seams of ruddy earth which interlaced
The stony cliff,—torrents of fluid soil
When the tempestuous rains came roughly down,
And sometimes lighted up as though the steep
Were braced in wizard mail, with gilded plates
Of sunshine with white silver riveted,
As the wet trickling stones the brightness caught.

It was a rougher life than he had spent
In the old Ash-tree Hermitage; for here
He had no vassals to forecast his wants.
His toils were doubled, and his scanty fare,
Rude as it was, precariously supplied.
Yet not unprofitable was the change,—
A loss which over every feature threw
Somewhat of doubt, which haply might evoke
Meekness and trust, in little things most hard

As aiding not to feed that self-respect,
Whereon endurance leans with dignity,
And a proud patience, for awhile sustained,
Mimics the gait of Christian fortitude.
A profitable task it was to learn
Amid anxieties of such a sort,
And petty hindrances, to keep unsoiled
The springs of prayer, and copious as before.
The hedgerow birds for whom the Lord purveys
Have leisure morn and eve to sing His love:
And even the abasement of a beggar's life
Is hourly sowing, oft in sterile hearts,
The seeds of patient love and happy faith.

Then sometimes would he leave his lofty cell
For days, and wander on the smooth sea-beach,
Sleeping in ragged copses which deform
That windy shore, or with a plank content
Of some wrecked ship upon the moonlit sands.
And round by pastoral Millum many a time,
Belated men would cross themselves, and tell
How they, night-foundered in the forest, saw
Sir Lancelot sleeping in a shaggy brake;
While the red vivid embers of his fire,
Fanned by the fitful airs, appeared to bring
The gloom of midnight closer round, until
The darkness hung in almost visible folds
From bough to bough, like waving tapestries.
And oft, attracted by the flickering light
From the cold moor which bordered on the wood,
With head and neck protruding through the leaves
The kine were seen, guarding, the shepherds thought,
Haply commissioned from above, the sleep
Of that forlorn and solitary man;—
Such patient vigilance and doubtful sense

Of what the scene imported was portrayed
In quiet fear upon their lineaments.
And in their touching way the peasants called
These midnight slumbers in the dusky wood
His Rests in Egypt, prompted by the scene
Rudely depicted on their chapel wall,—
The wood in Egypt, where the rushing Nile
Made a strange distant undersong all night,
The lantern hung upon the broken bough
Above St. Joseph's head, whose sleepless eyes
From time to time explored the umbrage round,
Yet ever came to rest upon the Child,
As though the sight an admonition were
To watchfulness; and, seated on the ground,
Our Lady with her left hand held the Babe,
And with her right she strove to shade her eyes
From the red streaming lamp, that she might see
His Countenance more clearly as He slept,
While with affectionate caution she had drawn
A wimple o'er His Face to keep the light
From troubling His repose; and through the leaves,
So dimly pictured, that, at first unseen,
It only grew upon the eye that looked
For long, the Ass with silent shadowy head
Gazed on the Infant Saviour, as He slept,
The only Sleeper there;—yet that wild scene
With sweet felicity was named a Rest:—
Calmer than sleep that Mother's pondering thoughts,
Vigil for Christ the most restoring peace
St. Joseph's heart could know, and for the Ass
To gaze on Him who saves both man and beast
Lifted his patient nature to a calm
Transcending far the purposes of sleep.

Oft would Sir Lancelot wander from the Point

Which fronts the Isle of Walney, to the north,
Until the sacred headland of St. Bees
Should greet his earnest gaze ; but most he sought,
For its peculiar desolation loved,
That wild sea-bank, so beautiful and lone,
Where ocean roughly knocks upon the strand,
Or laves with fawning tongue the bright-ribbed
shore,

And hardly wins the admission which he seeks
Into the sand-locked bay of Ravenglass ;
Where, but a reign before, a few poor men
Set up their fish-garths at the mouth of Esk,
Vassals protected by the powerful arm
Of the bold Penningtons, and by the Sword
Much more of great St. Michael, from whose shrine
A blessing to the rugged fishers went,
And nights serene upon the moonlit gulf.

No common inlet is that jealous bay,
A curious chamber where the Atlantic comes
Smoothing his ruffled swell, and so receives
With an innocuous ripple on his brow,
(A graceful barter of the land and sea,
The rental paid for his reluctant calm,)
An ancient tribute of sweet waters, there
Brought by three vassal streams which gently mix
Their mountain music with that other strain,
The sea's soft thunder on the outer shore.
The Esk there is, by clusters of wild tarns
Suckled in sylvan places; which shoots forth
From its rich vale by lordly Muncaster,
And shallow Mite, which from its moorland dell,
Winding amid low dislocated hills,
Comes lispng o'er the pebbles ; and clear Irt,
Translucent as his solitary lake

That images Seatallan when the sun
Burns in the glowing sky, with many a bend
Affectionately lingering near the hills,
Clasping and then unclasping many a knoll,
Procrastinates his meeting with the deep ;
Fetching a wayward sweep almost to touch
The sea, he runs within the shore awhile,
Until, by ocean found in his strange creek,
Spite of his skill he yields at length to fate,
And mingles his sweet crystals with the brine.

Four years a Hermit was the Knight enclosed
Within that mountain's solitary heart.

An utter solitude it was, yet not
By silentness enhanced, but resonant
With a perpetual sound which might appal
The timid listener in the depth of night,
Or in the misty calm of noonday moors.
Whether it was the murmur of the sea
Which travelled heavily among the glens,
The meeting of far echoes, or the moan
Of some unsleeping wind in that drear place,
Or the thick respiration of the hill
While to the sunshine it exhaled its mists,
Or greedily imbibed the globes of dew,
Or if it were the sailing of the clouds
Whose rudders made the cloven ether sound,—
I know not, but a resonance there is,
Strange and perpetual, in that savage hill.

The wind is viewless : but its voice and path
Are spiritual ; upon the mountain side
It leaves no impress ; sea or inland lake
Sustain it, as the hard highways may bear
A chariot or the throng of nimble hoofs ;
A momentary ruffling of the dust,

A momentary drifting of the spray,
And all is over; on the waving woods
The elastic foliage starts ere it be passed,
And with a studious speed obliterates
The wake it scored upon it now; and who could
hope

One livelong day to chronicle the winds
Or fluttering breezes which at times may throw
Into the mantled faces of the woods
Expression sweet, and skilfully displace
The show of mute reserve wherewith they hide
(As Holy Church secretes her mystic truths
And touching rites, until with voiceless call
The Spirit, for the humbling of an age
Or its tuition, may solicit them,
In glad spontaneous teaching then expressed)
Their beautiful interiors, trunk and branch,
Sylvan arcades, and dimly lighted naves,
And marigold windows pierced among the leaves,
And transepts dusk, and crypts of underwood
With honeysuckle groined? Ah! who could hope
To fix in song the beauty of one day
Written upon the woods, and by the wind
Upon their flexile lineaments impressed,
And at one stroke expunged? Such interchange
Of look have those green seas!

Like fruitless task
Is his, who should endeavour to record
The daily path which natural objects make
Across the spirit, trailing hope and fear
Like ploughshares after them, that, not by chance,
Here idly skim the surface, there indent
A furrow which the man walks in for years,
But knows not when or how it was upturned.

Beauty and terror, sunshine, storm, and calm,
Write their obscure inscriptions as they pass,
Rarely decyphered then; the feeling heart
Counts the bright landscapes which have moved her,
 dates

From sunsets, rainbows, or cool starry nights
Which, with a strange prerogative endowed,
Inward or outward, above other nights
That were as bright, as cool, as beautiful,
Have troubled her so sweetly with a sense
Of joy, or influx of poetic power.

Thus nature acted on Sir Lancelot's soul,
Spreading her blameless empire in the dark,
And now and then in chance disclosures gave
A sign, whereby to measure the degree
Of inward change her influence had wrought.
Somewhat of rude sublimity there was,
By strange ennobling circumstance conferred,
Which o'er that Excommunicated Man
Hung like a cloud of glorious thoughts, when they
Beset the astonished minstrel; and his mind,
To a continuous adoration strung,
Sustained his bodily strength, insensible
To the rough agency of heat and cold.
Even such propinquity there often is
'Twixt miracles and nature's humbler works,
Those higher or lower cycles which embrace
In single law the order of the world;
Single, yet with distracting aspects seen
By our weak minds, which therefore have disjoined
Palpable wonders from the common things
So much more wonderful, that their true size
Transcends the measures of our mortal thoughts,
And we account them but for what they seem.

Thus the elevation of Sir Lancelot's mind
Hardened his bodily frame, till he approached
The eye undimmed, the unabated force,
Which on the Hebrew lawgiver of old
The frequent Presence of the Almighty shed,
When years went by and furrowed not his brow,
And toil inspired had wearied not his limbs.

Amid those high capacious solitudes
The silent stars beheld the Man insphered
Among themselves; and there alone he sat,
The ample brow of that dread height his chair,
In musing wrapt, above the reveries
Of blind astrologer, and communing
With that intelligent Presence in himself
Wherewith our being is possessed through faith,
And heavenly hope, and silent love of God,
And works of mercy, shadows of the Cross.
Yet like Chaldæan mystic might he seem,
Who in the plain of Tigris, on a knoll
Above the undulating vapour raised,
Ponders the starry writing of the skies.
On that high chair, a more than kingly throne,
His thoughts were crowned by local dignity,
Sharing the elevation of the place,
And the strong freedom of the lofty height.

Above the clouds or in them, or in air
With cold and pallid brightness circumfused,
Whose dewy breathings made the stars appear
To waver in the dome, he sat; and there
Full many a night with those three powers conversed,
The Moon, the Mountain, and the Sea. Dread life
It was, unearthly, yet not all of Heaven;
A life wherein each passing hour he felt—
Inwardly bleeding as he warred therewith—

The vehement beatings of the impeded soul
Against the bars and hindrances, which met
Its upward aspirations, while it clung
Unto a thousand relics of self-love,
And in the very act the union loathed :
Disheartening warfare were it not for faith,
For supernatural alliances
In worlds unknown contracted by the soul,
For heavenly gifts, inlayings deep and rich
Of sacraments, forbidding us to deem
Unworthily of our immortal flesh,
No longer ours alone, incorporate
And knit with His, a mortal Maiden's Son,
And Word Eternal! *Therefore* we endure
The languor of this miserable strife,
As being with Him Who is invisible,—
More truly present with our Lord in Heaven
Than absent from His Presence while on earth.

SIR LANCELOT.



BOOK VI.

THE SPIRIT OF THE SEA.

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THE HISTORY OF THE

ROYAL

NAVY

BOOK VI.

THE SPIRIT OF THE SEA.

MAGNIFICENT, and, I would dare to think
Intuitive, the courage of the man,
The immortal Genoese, the demi-god
Of modern legend, who upon that sea
Sublimely shadowed over by a cloud
Of ignorant faiths, once turned his dipping prow
Right onward to discover worlds unknown,
And boldly plunged into the Atlantic fogs,
Lost to his age behind the fearful sea,
And no less hidden from it in the depth
And darkness of his solemn thoughts, withdrawn
Into the unshared grandeur of his dream.
Him I behold in spirit on the waves
Some breezy midnight contemplate the stars,
And pierce with gaze intense the livid gloom
Through which his prow sang cheerfully, and then,
With a blind motion suddenly possessed,
Twist the helm north or south with daring hand,
Impelled he knew not why, and yet elate
And tranquil, as a mighty seer who knows
How far his incantations may prevail.

Such, on his solitary mind at sea,
Was now the bearing of Sir Lancelot.
On Troutbeck Hill the mountain's rugged arms
Had clasped his spirit in a rude embrace,
And so confined his thoughts till they should search

The chambers of his conscience o'er and o'er,
And with the scourge of self-condemning grief
Should cleanse the temple. Now the ocean waves
Burst like a vision of infinity
Upon his heart and soul and intellect,
A sight as new, as strange, as wonderful
As though it never had been seen till now.
Cold bars were broken down, partitions rent,
His faith emancipated from all doubt,
And like the moon at sunrise, hope grew wan
Through nearness to the world which it had sought,
And by that nearness superseded now.
The wildness of his present solitude
Touched him, and with its royal touch set free
His thoughts, his habits; nay, his penitence
Became another thing from what it was.
The lashing surge, the hollow thundering voice
Spake like a pontiff who had power to annul
His excommunication: and forthwith
His spirit was uplifted by the sea,
And his whole being shared the enfranchisement
Of its wild scenery: grandeur around him
Begot an inward grandeur whence he dared
To deal more boldly with himself; the joy,
Which tried its half-fledged wings in Troutbeck Vale,
And which he feared as being a joy too much,
Now forth into transcending rapture burst.

By day, by night, he looked from huge Black
Combe;

The solemn sea, the deep, the unenslaved,
Rocking and roaring, angry or at rest,
Was at his feet: a gush of glorious thoughts
Rose like an unresisted tide within.
Bursts of impassioned aspiration sprang

From an impetuous strife to realize
That which was most within him, which he felt
To be a power of immortality,
Wounded with beating at its prison bars,
And now impatient grown to be uncaged.
And as he felt the knocking more and more
Of that mysterious instinct in his soul,
His spirit rose, from off its ashes rose,
Like Job of yore, and with a hardihood
Which was an act of faith it was so bold,
He turned the helm of his whole life at once ;
And with calm interval of confidence
He listened the new music of his thoughts,
Which louder sang, as when they give the ship
More to the wind ; then before God sank down
In breathless worship, and that broken prayer
Which the rapt soul in such high hour may breathe.

Thus in the Knight's declining age,—decay
Unfelt, though inwardly at work,—the sea
Delivered his imprisoned thoughts, and broke
With oft recurring impulses the chain
Of heavy grief about his spirit bound,
A blessed pupilage, but now fulfilled.
For they who would confront the thought of death
In that proximity with which the old
Must meet its silent aspect, and would fain
In unalarmed companionship therewith
Walk onward to the tomb, must first have quelled
All trivial hopes and fears, and by some shock
Of inward grace or outward providence
Have with intelligent solemnity
Dethroned the world within them, and dissolved
The meddling pageantry of visible things.

Thus in a hymnlike strain of glorious power

So spake the vocal Spirit of the Sea
Within Sir Lancelot's heart, as those deep bells
Of holy Advent, four times tolled, break forth
On the calm peace of the declining year,
Startling the soul perchance forgetful grown
Of all its fearful fortunes yet to come,
In the long train of less memorial feasts
And nameless Sundays, while within the shrine
The trumpet winds four several blasts of fear,
Heard from the trembling corners of the world.
For first the long terrific notice peals
Of the tremendous Advent of the Judge ;
A second blast resounds to wake the soul
To meet with lamp and oil at dead of night
The Infant God, who is both Spouse and Judge :
While the third trumpet sounds in sweeter strains
Exhorting us in all our fears to find
Fresh cause for exultation in our faith ;
Then the fourth trumpet, like the first one, dares
Bold love ! to bid the Judge come speedily.
And thus those advent clarions wind their blasts,
In thrilling admonitions, while the Church,
With evening antiphons most like the sighs
Of the old world before Messiah came,
Bids her majestic collects hand in hand
Walk with her children, until Christmas Eve
Dismisses the vibration from our ear,
And the fair Church illumined from within,
Her altars garnished for the midnight mass,
On the benighted world around outpours
Her gladsome witness of the Virgin-Born.
And children sing that night unto the Babe,
And Angels with them, scarce above their heads,
Delight to swell the echoes of the hymn

Into the tingling ear of starlit skies,
And the four tolls of Advent are displaced
By that nocturnal peal which shakes the towers,
And keeps the Christian cities all awake,
Between the midnight and the morning Mass.

To one within close mountains always pent
How blissful is the riot of the eye,
When it expatiates o'er the desert sea
With its exulting waters resonant,
By nought except the white horizon fenced !
Taught by thy lips, majestic Sea ! how dread
Seems the vast range of man's immortal hopes,
By calm confessed more solemnly than storm,
Time how unreal, and the cells of space
How unendurable, infinity
How possible, how near, yea, at her feet
Imaged in thee ! When from some cape the ear
A livelong day hath listened to thy voice,
A livelong day the eye insatiate fed
Upon thy plains, in gleamy distance stretched,
Grateful expanse, what wonder that the soul
Should feel herself there winged with thoughts as
strong

As eagle's pinions, keen as eagle's eyes,
Whether for upward soaring, by the sun
Undazed and to his radiant vicinage
By royal instincts drawn, or for descent,
Stooping from some invisible altitude,
Swift and unerring on their earthly prey ?

So wrought the vocal sea within his heart
That he undid the yoke of Silence laid
Upon his lips, the old ascetic fast
From words, the wholesome abstinence assigned
To raise the too light spirit, and sustain

The heavenly tone of thought thereby acquired,
As hunger on the body is imposed
A scourge to quell the frankness of the flesh,—
This first, but afterwards a means to gain
A contemplation far above the heights
The world-impeded soul can hope to reach.
Thus to the obedient doth it ever come
To find in self-denying ordinance
A two-fold use, the undressing of the soul
From its outworn attire, the purple robe
Lent by the world in cruelty to mock
Its high pretensions, and the investing it
With the pure visions and abiding joys
Of Neighbourhood unto the Throne of God.

O toil most difficult it is to tread
Our Master's royal road of hungry Fast
And aching Vigil, and a steep ascent
Leads upward far to gain the starry heights
Of Silence, when the host of vexing thoughts
And low conceptions, into tumult stirred
By all the incessant trouble of the tongue,
Through such stern discipline is banished thence;
And the tranquillity, thus hardly won,
Restores unto the fallen soul again,
In spirit found though locally withheld,
The primal garden where the Almighty talked,
Disdaining not man's feeble innocence.

Methinks they deem but weakly of the height
To which man's love of God may well aspire,
Who in such deep observances and rules,—
By generations of ascetic Saints,
As needful found, invented and made over,
The sacred science of the Canonized,
To us poor bearers of the Cross,—can see

Nought but a cold contemptuous neglect,
And handling most disdainful, of the good
And harmless creatures, and of God
A slavish unaffectionate belief,
And base opinion. Thou, dear Church of old !
And thou no less, true Church of modern days !
Canst testify the pure extatic love,
The tender spirit, self-forgetting thought,
The childlike adoration of thy Saints
Following to martyrdom the Spotless Lamb,
Their love of nature as the mirror calm
Of Him, the merciful Creator, seen
And recognized therein far more than now
When boasting knowledge hath defiled the spring
With its ignoble licence, which in pride
Repudiates the blessing of the Church,
And having bleared the eye of conscience, smites
With barrenness the regions of the mind.
Thou canst bear witness to the fervid zeal,
Wherewith they vindicated this fair earth
And the mute animals, as types beloved,
From heresy profane : thou didst behold
In them a love of Jesus unsurpassed,
An ardency of transport best concealed
Behind the curtain of a difficult tongue,
Lest in the mind impure the words should breed
Vilest similitudes of earthly love.

O then if to our fancy aught should seem
Among those reverend men uncouth or strained,
'Twere well to love the sweetly skilled device
Of an affectionate jealousy, which puts
Far from its presence, needlessly perchance,—
So men will speak, but O to those who strive,
However puny or remiss their toil,

Most needful found, and of a holy life
The lowest root and very topmost crown,—
Such blameless joys as haply might beguile
The singleness of their deep love to Christ:—
A jealousy, by true self-knowledge taught
That to be timorous with outward things
Is wisdom, for the moral world within
The shadow is of outward circumstance,
As utterly as outward seemings are
By the inward mind created and controlled.
Yet better far, so living as we do,
In softness and an anxious disesteem
Of unseen things, and homage of base wealth,—
O better far if so we could mistrust
Ourselves, and nurse our hearts in humbling fear,
Lest what *we* bear should be a mimic Cross,
So all unlike the solemn burden borne
By those who died for Christ in ancient days!

But the stern yoke of Silence, self-imposed,
Sir Lancelot now put from him: and the power
Which abstinence confers upon the use
Of daily blessings, heightened to a joy
The common gift of vocal utterance.
Prayer, sweet before, how much more sweet became,
Winged on articulate words! and thanksgivings
Flowed with a more abundant liberty,
Through the resounding channels newly turned
Of sacred language, which itself alone
Is a perpetual sacrifice of song
Unto the Eternal Word who gave at first,—
In heaven long used before, or haply then
A fresh creation for the sake of earth,—
The gift of that sweet mystery to man.
Glory and praise unto the Son be given,

Himself the first, the most expressive Word,
The Language of the Father, wherewith He
Interpreteth Himself unto mankind
By His Co-equal Son. Ah me! how pure,
How few our words should be, and full of truth,
Lest with a too light tongue and thoughtless mirth
Or worldly usage frivolous and vile,
We should profane this primitive liturgy,
This voice by God mysteriously conferred
On man, that there might never fail on earth
The sound of rational and vocal praise!

Sir Lancelot paced for hours upon the mount,
And bent his memory to recall some words
From the grave ritual of the Holy Church,
Some turn of her wise language which might hang
Its solemn fulness of petition still
About his spirit, some sweet antiphon,
Or notable inflexion of a chant,
Which with a congruous music happily
Embalms some aspiration of the heart
Of Sion's king, the heart which hath absorbed
All hearts within its own capacious range,
And to mute feelings still in every age
Hath been a spiritual tongue, the heart
Which, after God's Own Heart select, doth now
Beat like a spirit in the depths profound
Of our humanity, and in the Church
Seven times a day with cadence audible
Times the sonorous voice of Christendom.
Such fragments, as with effort he retrieved
From the remembrance of old services,
With measured recitation did he strew
Upon the flowing wind and ample hill,
Or upward sent into the blue concave

Of starry nights. Oh! what a joy it was,
Accompanied by many a sweet relief
Of tears, and some keen reminiscences
Brought from the past, the spur upon the rose
Of his new-born delight! There is no sound
In earth or sky one half so musical,
One half so moving as man's voice, in prayer,
In praise, in meditation clothed with words
And uttered on the mountain-top, no sound
Which can attain so near the Throne of God,
Or so divine in its original.

O not so sweet the noise of falling streams,
Or voluntary of the jocund breeze
Shaking its dewy wings in early morn,
Or fingering visibly its instrument
With changeful pressure of the keys, whene'er
The sunshine ripples on the waving woods!
Man's clear divided accents rise on high,
Service of natural sound more pleasing far
Than pastoral anthems breathed from off the moors
By bleating flocks, which to the wandering bell
Murmur responses, with a harmony
Set off with strange expression by the voice,
Uninterrupted, solitary, sent
From some far field or wattled pen by one
For blameless taint divided from its kind,
And listened to with sympathetic awe,
And with acclaim of beatings to console,
Exhort, or cheer, responded to by those
To whom the moorland's breezy range is free.
And not, though it be prayer, so soft a plaint
As man's, is that which rises round the farms,
The grateful supplication of the herds,
When on their placid features, gently bound

In unexpressive calm, an instinct comes,
An inward thought which moves them, on the grass
Reclining at noon-day, to low as if
They spoke to some invisible Presence nigh ;
A poor pathetic sound which, like the roar
Of hungry lions, God accepts for prayer.

And memory then so wrought with his intent,
That in a few short weeks he had retrieved
Whole portions of the Psalter, Collects brief
Condensing truths with deep felicity,
High-hearted antiphons, and woven words
Of sweet responsories, by marvellous power
Evoked from boyish reminiscences,
And hymns, especially the soothing words,
And grave acknowledgment of unseen foes,
Wherewith the Compline cheers us, when we seek
Our nightly sepulchre for such soft sleep
As must be scanty if it would be pure.
So with quick psalms and swift-winged litanies,
Whose reverent speed precluded wandering thoughts,
Seven times a day his soul was raised on high,
Raised to the liberty of cheerful hopes,
And snatched from those wild humours of dismay,
That strange disrelish of industrious prayer,
That causeless inward fainting of good thoughts,
And that vague perturbation of the mind,
Wherewith the demons will dispirit him
Who, for Christ's sake or for self-punishment,
Confronts the visions of a lonely life,
Its chilling aspect, and the cheerless voice
Of solitude, deep in the conscience heard.
Yea, thus the demons, whose own proper realm
The anchoret invades, dispirit him
With thoughts, with apparitions, frightening sounds,

And brutal contacts, and wild glaring lights,
And imitations of celestial forms,
Till he sheds vexed and unrefreshing tears,
And like a dusty wrestler, bruised and faint,
Comes forth a vanquished victor from the strife.

But highest privilege, with fervent thanks
Acknowledged, was the power once more to breathe
On the still night or fluent air of day
The Name of Jesus, of all mortal words
Dearest and best, with sacred riches fraught
Of meditation, and an endless store
Of spiritual meanings, which distil
With slow and silent dropping in our hearts,
Most like the sweet exudings of a tree
From out whose creviced rind the honeycombs
In the warm sunshine trickle. Tuneful Name,
Too common made by sinful lips which use
Their Christian rights more boldly than beseems
Their worth, inheriting unconsciously
From past sin, ill repented of, a quick
Self-trusting temper, and unbridled tongue
By reverence unchastised!

The humble Knight,
Tutored in nature's school, with sparing use
Yet with enjoyment into transport raised,
By sacred awe more keenly edged, would mix
The Blessèd Name with his soliloquies;
And, solaced thus and sweetly dignified,
His hours of lonely converse now became
Enjoyment such as he had never dreamed
Might to his wounded conscience be vouchsafed.
Of all our catholic rights, a marvellous store
And numberless, is none more sweet than that
By which we can console our grief, or else

Our love of Jesus gratify, or win
With diligent lips indulgence for our souls,
Or for the souls in penal fires detained,
The privileged iteration of that Name.
Yet never was that royal word pronounced
Without obeisance duly interposed
With an affectionate scruple ; when alone,
A homage is it to the Saviour paid
As present, with a sense that Angels nigh
Were bending as that Name escaped his lips ;
And in the throng of social intercourse
That gesture, in the Written Word ordained,
Witness may be unto oblivious eyes,
And gentle check restraining giddy tongues.

Alas ! how very far remote are we,
Whose Christian freedom with our growing sins
Grows in proportion, while our sense of sin
Becomes obtuse,—how far remote are we
From that deep meditative heart of love,
Which on our lowest privileges set
A price more precious than we deign to put
Upon our highest,—from the mind remote
Wherein the Church an annual feast ordained
In honour of that simple-sounding Word,
The Name of Jesus, feast of fervid hearts,
Like Bernard's, or like Bernardine's, which glow
With sweet intolerable fires within,
While all without is winter's frost and sleet.

Nor wanted he another liberty
From which he had endeavoured to refrain,
Unwisely as self-guided men are wont,
A holy practice which he now renewed,
At first through impulse he could not control.
For self-invented penance has no balm,

But irritates the wound it fain would heal.
When he had left the Ash-tree Hermitage,
And in the storm had crossed the distant hills,
Rounding the cornice upon Walney Scar
Entangled in a fringe of lucid mist,
He turned the invidious eminence which stops
The prospect southward ; suddenly, the cloud
Uplifting at that moment, down the vale,
As through a telescope, he saw the sea,
Angry and purple, far and wide outspread
In stormy grandeur ; with the sight there rushed
A torrent of old memories then let loose,
As from a dungeon, by the glorious view.
Unto the ground he sank upon his knees
And, trembling, signed the Cross upon his breast,
For years unworn upon that guilty heart.
He knelt in trouble, and he rose in peace ;
So tranquilly the admonition wrought !

And now with reverent licence did he seek
The aid that Sign unto his soul supplied.
Both when he knelt and when he rose from prayer,
And when a thought more touching than was wont
Flashed o'er his mind, or sight more beautiful
Than common greeted him, he bowed and signed
With love and awe the Cross upon his breast,
Partly in ritual acknowledgment
Of that invisible Presence where he stood,
Partly in admonition to himself
By outward symbol made more forcible,
And partly in the faith that Heaven so loves
The blessed Sign, that meditated wrath
Allows herself to be thereby disarmed,
And Angels come more promptly to our aid,
While evil powers behold and, shuddering, fly.

O blessèd Sign! which from my youth hath been
(Prompted by inward want, by books untaught,
Nor from example copied) my true shield
Against the invasion of unholy fears
Troubling my nights too populous with dreams
From thoughts by day too wildly overwrought;
Dear Sign! which hath in later years full oft
Repaired the mirror of eternal things
Within my heart, by angry mood displaced
Or by profane conceptions broken up,
How hast thou been to me memorial calm
Of my New Birth, a fence between my soul
And the dark world, a benediction felt
As the mute pressure of the Saviour's Hand,
Assuring timid love with healing touch,
Exorcist too of demons which beset
The Christian in his loneliness! May shame
Of my dear Master's Cross ne'er teach my heart
That unimpassioned lore, which would extol
The cold formalities of barren mind
Above the tender spirit of the Faith,
From which these pensive rituals are evoked!

O sweet Theology of nature! thou
Dost the poetic sense inform and feed
With beautiful bright symbols, round us strewn
In sybilline confusion, whence we may
By diligence a Christian cypher make,
Piecing the brilliant fragments one by one
Through guess or intuition, till we read
The mystic truths of Heaven in obvious type
Illuminated on the scroll of earth.
Attractive Scholarship! thy first essay,
Thine earliest task is o'er the blessèd Cross,
In nature's alphabet the letter chief,

Most often found. With what an eye of love
Did they of old that sacred Sign detect
Among the boughs, and in the crossing clouds,
And o'er the plains, and on the skins of beasts,
And in the cloven roots by ploughs upturned !
The gentle birds before the daylight eye
Of the blue heaven outstretch their little wings,
And, while they make the Cross, are safely borne
Through the thin ether, but if they should mar
That Sign with pinions closed, they fall to earth.
He, who on shipboard ventures, gladly finds
(Once hath it been a needful aid to me !)
The mast a Cross, and when they spread the sail,
A Body hangs thereon which doth propel
The labouring vessel ; and the voyage becomes
An admonition typical, the ship
Figuring the Church, the chafing sea the World,
The Body, dimly seen upon the Cross
Through the dark air and frequent drifting spray,
With no inapt similitude shows Him,
Whose Presence is the haven of our lives ;
The lifting up of whose Immaculate Hands,—
Outstretched upon that cruel Tree of Life,
In the prophetic evening of the world,
Whose tardy twilight lingers round us still,—
Was the sweet Vesper Sacrifice foretold,
And for long ages sung in Hebrew psalm,
Chanted within the expectant Synagogue.

Another change too had his outward life
Wrought imperceptibly within, a change
Not without import to the man who seeks
Admittance by whatever road he may
Into the world of spirit. As the sea
Had snapped the fetters of his mind, and thrown

The habit of his thoughts beyond the range
Of this terrestrial scene, so through his sleep
The silent night distilled that liberty
Into his dreams, which close relation bore
To his new circumstances; for erewhile
In liveliest apparitions had the past
Been nightly unimprisoned, and his soul
With darkest inundation of old sins
Insufferably possessed; but now his dreams
Knocked softly at the portals of the grave,
And entrance won, and through the livelong night
Ranged in the misty space that lies beyond,
And, home returning as the stars grew pale,
Had gathered truths which even his waking hours
Could recognize as holy and divine.

What though our dreams, which I may boldly call
One branch of human knowledge, yet elude
The form of shapely science, still shall we,
Through disesteem of universal faith,
Or doubt for wisdom taking, or a wish
To guard the frontiers of our barren sense
Against the encroachments of the world unseen,—
Shall we, who so much need them, disregard
Chance revelations to the spirit made
Through God's once chosen instrument, outpoured
By Angels through the conduits of sleep
In silent-stirring pictures, or sometimes
With an aerial music wheeling by,
Akin to sound, but something far more sweet
And distant? If it be allowed to man
To look upon his own immortal soul,
Next to the vision of his God the sight
Most coveted, it can alone be given
In the clear spectral twilight of a dream.

And in the bosom of this cheerless age,
If we would duly estimate the skill,
Wherewith these rites and strong persuasions built
The Individual Mind, and gave a tone
Through that unto the Social State, not vain
Will be the admonition that such things
Unto the spirit of those times were not,
Romantic speculations, as to us,
Wherewith imagination plays, and thought
Herself bewitches for a few sweet hours
From false conventions and the littleness
Of act and feeling, equalized too much
Beneath the social tyranny which now,
An intellectual feudalism, defeats
Great purposes through coward love of peace,
Dispiriting the hearts which would retrieve
Our civil grandeurs lost, or re-cement,
In all the breadth of its harmonious life,
Sovereign and subjugate at once in things
Terrene, the spiritual commonwealth
Of Holy Church. Among those ancient men
These faiths were entertained as moral powers,
Were solemnized in daily acts, the moulds
Wherein their lives were cast, and which achieved,
With mightiest effort in unlooked-for ways,
The freedom of the Individual Mind,
The choicest of all social gifts, and source
Of all political magnificence.

Yet if the mountain-top and boundless sea
To his enfranchisement of spirit gave
Somewhat of wildness, the dark vicinage
Of his rude cell had sights and sounds enough
To mellow and subdue, and to reclaim
Thoughts which might haply wing their flight too far.

There oft he sat, with many a sombre fold
Of weeping cloud pavilioned, while his mind
By the pale melancholy light inspired,
Drew mournful morals out of little things.
There, couched on high among the nodding ferns,
He dimly traced the curse of Adam's Fall
Ubiquitous, which won its silent way
Into the kingdoms of inanimate life,
As here and there a plant, beneath a law
Of beautiful arrangement made, transgressed,
And, with its nature breaking covenant,
Swerved from its sweet propriety of shape,
And putting forth unwonted powers in search
Of freedom, missed of beauty, and became
A thing deformed; yet ah! not like poor man
Transmitting an hereditary flaw,
But in its own sin dying on the hill.

And on his hermitage had curious chance
(For so we name such acts of Heaven as hide
The order and connection of their law)
Bestowed an awful faculty to train
And discipline his mind in fear; as earth
Through providential accident full oft
Thus ministers unto the soul of man.

There is a cheerless glen outside the walls
Of old Jerusalem, a dark ravine,
Not by the action of the torrent scooped,
But in some throe of earth a fracture rent,
The gloomy vale of Josaphat, a place
Where Christian legend and wild Arab faith
With old tradition, drawn from Hebrew source,
Strangely concur to fix the solemn scene
Of the Last Judgment. There on Olivet,
Even where He wept and prayed, and bore the curse

Of all our generations, Christ shall sit,
While through the dusky strait before His Eye
The spirits, in their bodies newly clothed,
Shall defile one by one. O kindly faith!
O beautiful belief! which so could fix
The last and hardly tolerable woe
Of our humanity in that dim vale,
Where mother earth with venturous love might hope
To breathe sweet admonitions to our Lord
Of the pure Flesh which He vouchsafes to wear,
And, with allowed constraint, might so inspire
The Saviour to prevail against the Judge.

And still more touching fitness will appear
In this tradition, if we bear in mind
That on the selfsame mount the Master sat,
While Judas bargained with the wicked priests,
On the fourth evening of the Holy Week,
With Four selected from His chosen Twelve;
And spake of Sion's fall in words that seemed
To overshoot their end, and covertly
The shadow with the substance to confuse,
Till the Last Judgment rose in His discourse
With awful plainness; then did He once more
The kind relieving veil of figure throw
Over the aspect of that Solemn Day,
And of the Virgins spake who went to buy
Oil for their lamps at midnight—ah! too late—
And of the Talents left with Jew and Greek
By Him, who with ascending travel sought
With His true Flesh the far-off land of Heaven,
Present as God,—and of the Corporal Works
Of Mercy done by those who shall discern
Through faith their Lord vouchsafing to the End
To suffer and be needy in the Poor.

Haply, with these localities around,
If there we must confront the searching Day,
The reminiscence of the Passion might,
Even in the awful business of that Pomp,
Stir on the infinite Abyss of Love,
As the soft breaths which flutter o'er the sea
Rivet the azure calm more sweetly there.

The fissure of Black Combe, wherein the Knight
Had built his little hermitage, appeared
In its rude details strangely similar
To that prophetic vale of Josaphat.
There nightly from his window would he lean
And look into the chasm wherein the moon
Troubled the darkness, but dispelled it not :
And by the hour his trembling soul would face
The Vision of the Judgment, till serene,
Yet not without alarm which faith as oft
Controlled, he could contemplate that array,
Pictured as to his memory it might be
In that most gloomy gorge by Sion's wall.

So had he gazed full often from his tent,
Pitched on the dusty slope of Olivet ;
Over against the tombs of Judah's kings ;
Where through the darkness the sepulchral stones
Floated, white ghastly motes, in glimmering light ;
And the slant moonbeams thrown into the glen,
Just faintly silvering o'er some crisp-leaved dome
Of mastic, vainly strove to penetrate
The murky bosom of the deep ravine ;
And the gaunt olive-roots, which forced aside
The fretted head-stones, seemed like crawling beasts,
In hideous volume coiled upon the earth,
Feeding by moonlight on the lately dead ;
While the dim vale was fathomed by the eye

Through aid of one broad hoary seam which ran,
Most like a throbbing vein of tremulous light,
Along the raven gloom,—the channel dry
Of yellow Cedron, trickling underground.

Thus while the sea by day could harmonize
His thoughts, to tranquil meditation given
Upon eternal things, the cleft by night
Exhibited that grave Solemnity,
Mutely delineated on the spot,
The very thought of which can purify
The thronged imagination, and rebuke
The sin which to its presence may intrude.
Thus life, the past, was wholly put away,
And thrust behind the more engrossing thoughts
That drew him forward to the misty breadth
Of prospect, which the near approach of death
And the grave's portals, on their silent hinge
Half turned already to the prescient eye,
Disclose unto the Christian soul, informed
With some faint knowledge of the secret things
And region of vast truths, which lies beyond
And in its measure may be travelled now ;—
Travelled with escort of unworldly thoughts,
Through rites with an adoring faith performed,
And by the clue from ancient days consigned
In Creeds, recited not without some stir,
Felt in high Heaven where Angels offer up
The choral liturgies of Mother Church,
And simple cottage prayers no less, complete
With the rich incense of His Merits, who
Travelled erewhile in three short solar days
The passages beyond the gates of death,
And doubtless left such mystic footprints there
As shall transcend the office of a sun,

Where neither sun nor moon are free to shine,
To be by us discovered as we go
Inevitable voyagers that way.

And finally, as if to close the scene
Of that harmonious discipline, wherewith
The Seaside Mountain and its neighbourhood
Had furthered, and, as best it could, filled up
The education of his soul, there came
A vision of symbolical intent,
And yet a simple pomp of natural sights,
To him accorded in the open fields.

North of the bay of Ravenglass the shore,
A champaign hitherto, begins to swell
Into blythe slopes of cultivated land.
There in a spacious field he sat, where kine,
Spotting the grass in social couples, grazed,
While he beneath a stunted oak, which leaned
To give the sea-breeze passage o'er its crown,
Stooping to save its boughs, a shelter found.
The day was one of almost breathless heat,
With unrefreshing rain-showers interspersed,
And fogs from off the sultry ocean lay
Upon the hills and plain, that seemed to shake
In the white haze-fires dancing o'er the scene
In spiral columns, while upon the west
There hung a cloud of dusky violet hue
With the live lightnings tremulously edged.
Yet was the body of the mighty cloud
Soft as a cygnet's plumage, whence there came
Low thunders, fired like distant minute-guns
Below the horizon and far-off at sea.
Then on the heated plain, which intervenes
Between the mountains and the deep, there passed
A singular mirage, pompously and slow.

With an uneasy heaving there appeared
A river huge, with glossy waters filled ;
Far off it stretched into the woods, and bore
Reflected on its face the silent trees
With exquisite fidelity, and then
To a vast lake expanded, and consumed
The solid plain and laved the mountain's base.
Forthwith the mighty ridge, parting like ships
That swing upon their anchors, opened out
Into bright straits whereby the shining lake
Made islands of the summits that were left.
And in the midst, seated upon the breast
Of the clear waters, as the travellers tell,
Of Mexico, a city now uprose,
Built of a dull red stone, with tower and spire
And battlemented gate, and most of all
Innumerable windmills fanning the warm air.

Then with the impulse of a whispering breeze—
By such a fragile tenure do we hold
All beautiful appearances on earth—
The pageant rocked, and into pieces fell,
Ruin grotesque ! and stately visions shrank
Till they were recognized for objects tame,
From the broad landscape singled by the mist
For such transfiguration.

Thus am I,

With patience never weary of the fraud,
Daily deluded by three cones of rock
Bearing aerial domes of vocal pine,
At blue Winander's head, and from my hill
The vivid silver of the lake beyond
Dazzles the sight, and cleaves the triple rocks
To separate islands, which upon the mere
Swim indistinctly and in motion seem,

Even as the Euganean hills descried
Floating like pyramids of misty blue,
By one who from his gondola at noon
Hard by the Lido looks across the sea.

But now unto the meditative Knight,
The apparition pondering, it appeared
No less than a mute prophecy of death,
On nature's part a visible shadowing forth
Of that transfiguring of earthly things
Caused by the light upon a death-bed streamed
From out eternity. Sweet type it was
Of that most beautiful apparel, veils
Clearing not hiding, which in time to come
The sacred knowledge of a future state
Shall over all the naked memories throw
Of this our mortal life, so ill discerned
In its most proper loveliness by us
Blindfold through our transgressions, and so led
By angel guides about the Promised Land,
Dwelling therein although we know it not,
Feeling the grapes of Escol, hearing sounds
As of the blessed Jordan flowing by,
But all as dark blind men, bewildered rather
Than by great truths, so dimly taught, informed.

Such was the nurture which Sir Lancelot drew
From his imprisoning and secluded Vale
And the free Mountain-top, while Loneliness
Held him, an unweaned infant, at her breast.

Tyrant, and Tempter, Mother and Nurse austere,
Fulfilling manifold functions to us men,
How shall I name thee, mighty Solitude?
Person or Thing, a Presence, Place, or Life,
Invisible Life environing our soul?
Silent or Sounding? vacant, bare, and waste,

Or populous with motley, turbid shapes ?
I know not if I love or loathe thy touch ;
And while I daily grow thine intimate,
The more I converse with thy power, the less
Can I discern thy nature, but detect
Thy changeful Aspects ever multiplied,
Charms that repel and horrors that allure ;
So that to gaze upon thy desert fields
Quickens such perilous impulses within,
As might most apt yet faintest figure find
In the wild fascination which disturbs
The thoughts of one on airy steeple fixed,
Or leaning verge of windy precipice,
Only that thou canst tempt us to a fall
Involving worse mishap than mangled limbs,—
Irreparable mischief to the soul !
One while I deem thee a close prudent power
That husbandeth my spirit's inward strength :
Another while thou art a preying fire,
Or fiery, wasteful, intermitting wind
Which dissipates ascetic wealth, acquired
Through difficult ordinance cheerfully performed,
And to my strife-worn temper thou dost prompt
A languid introversion of my thoughts,
Most cruel devastation of the heart.
One while thou art a fierce iconoclast,
And then a builder up, transmuting so
Thine offices that we may well proclaim
One only truth about thee sure and safe,—
That without clear vocation from on high
No Christian man may join his hand in thine,
Save for brief respite from the sinful world,
And only thus when in the vicinage
Of Church, and Priest, and ready Sacraments,

And that deep harbour, the Confessional.

Therefore I name thee neither Place, nor Thing,
Nor Presence (for thou canst not be withdrawn)
Nor Person (for it were too bold a word,
A title wholly sacred and divine
When that which bears it is not localized),
But thou art rather a created Life,
A life without a nature of thine own,
A Capability of good or ill,
Thirsty, insatiate, limitless, profound ;—
A Living Vase with an indwelling Power
Of dark possession or angelic strength,
Whose keen pervasive thrills find speedy road
Through Conscience, Intellect, and wayward Will,
Not without physical disturbance felt
In Contests, Sins, and Graces mystical.

Thou hast a Voice, an Eye, an Ear, a Hand,
Which have by shrinking men been realized.
Thou hast a Voice—O would that we could fear,
More than we do, all sounds and silent things,
Which breed a wholesome dread of powers unseen !—
Thou hast a Voice, which in the depth of night,
Or in the utter loneliness of noon,
A tingling concourse of innumerable sounds,
Speaks to the conscience as a priest might speak,
Whose words we honour yet will not obey.
An Eye thou hast, which can expression give
To the dumb features of the earth and sky,
Or ordinary chance of daily acts,
Piercing, reproachful, terrible, to those
Who have at heart a secret weight of sin,
Or sinful details lingering unconfessed.
And silent darkness is thine open Ear,
Greedy to drink the secrets of the soul,

And prowling near like some nocturnal spy;
And therein, seeking in its uttered words
Foolish relief, unguarded conscience tells
Sins better trusted to a pitying priest.
A Hand thou hast, which thou canst lay on those
Who in the tumult of the world forget
Duty and Self, their neighbour and their God,—
A Hand so crushing cheerfulness within,
And overlaying animal spirits so,
That underneath its pressure we may deem
Ourselves already at the Judgment Bar.
O mutable and double-featured Power!
Silent thou art and sounding, both at once:
When thou art still and seemingly inert,
Thou art the Quiver where the demons keep
Their loathsome shafts: and, when all resonant
To man's enlivened conscience, thou canst be
The Trumpet of God's Presence in the Soul!

SIR LANCELOT.

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BOOK VII.

THE LEPROSY.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

PHYSICS DEPARTMENT

PHYSICS 310

BOOK VII.

THE LEPROSY.

IN waking vision, through the fear of death
Engendered or the imposing calm of night,
What time the lively heavens were set with stars,
And the imperfect moon had sunk, I saw
Humanity, the multitudinous tribes
Of mortal men upon the hilly waste,
The spirit-peopled desert of the world,
Pining in obstinate sullenness apart,
Or in a fretful wandering seeking rest
Not unsuccessfully, and half consoled
Even by an irritable eloquence
Quick to disprove whatever hope might prompt.
And couched around them, as it were a ring
Of lions keeping guard, were marvellous Forms ;
Some lay supine, and might be deemed asleep
But for the mobile gesture of their eyes,
While others ever and anon arose,
And pacing restlessly about in search
Of something which they found not, came again
Where they had couched before, and other some
Went in and out with noiseless step and swift
Among the quiet sentinels, and gazed
Upon the pallid stars, and seemed to move
As though they read an obvious mandate there.
Such scene it was as though in Arab wilds

One came by night upon a caravan
Of pilgrims bound for Mecca, with its groups
Of sleepers scattered o'er the moonlit sands ;
And if it be the desert wind that stirs
A garment here and there, or if it be
The shudder that reveals some inward dream
We know not ;—thus those wondrous Creatures lay.
No sound but their imperious breathing smote
The listening ear ; and with infectious thrill,
Or like the soft continuous wake of wind,
There ran full oft a quick and angry start
This way and that across the voiceless herd,
Most like the breaches which a fearful dream
Makes in the slumber of a man now first
At sea, or who the day before hath climbed
A steep and ever seems to fall therefrom.

Methought that by some tokens I perceived
Those creatures were the impersonated shapes
Of all the manifold sicknesses that prey
On our sin-tainted flesh ; and mid them all
An Angel sat who made their wrath subserve
His ministries of love ; or I will say
Of seeming love and mere eventual good,
If it be more according to the mind
Of Holy Church to deem the spirits, who wield
Sickness and sorrow, instruments of ill
Indulged in their base hatred of mankind,
And for the proof of men ; yet sweeter far,
Sweeter, if lawful, the consoling hope
That to our Guardian Angel's hand the scourge
Hath been consigned ; for, if terrestrial love
When deepest is least backward to inflict
Remedial pain, angelic hands might deal
The unsparing blows, and it were sweet to lie

So suffering, sweet for sinners to look back
On sorrow with that tearful yearning love
The memory of parental chastisement
Breeds in our after years. But shall faith dread
Even in Satan's hand to rest awhile?
The tempter's touch is but an outward thing;
And his repelled suggestions leave no stain
But what a penitential psalm, rehearsed
For love of Christ, may wholly cleanse away.
The grasp of sickness, if it be his arm
Which awfully encircles our poor limbs,
May, while we shudder, be full well endured,
In memory of that passage through the air
When Christ vouchsafed to entrust His spotless
Flesh—

O love by us so miserably paid!
To Satan's handling, while he bore the Lord
Unto the temple roof.

From out the crowd
A white and voiceless creature, dull of eye
And silent-footed, was that night detached,
And on a direful ambassage sent forth
To the lone summit of the huge Black Combe.
There with envenomed kiss, as though it were
The bodiless contact of the infected wind,
And not a living spirit, it set a seal
Upon Sir Lancelot's forehead as he slept.

O Leprosy! in bygone days thou wert
An awful presence mid the sons of men,
A sign set up in merciful disdain
To overawe the soul, the like whereof,
A miracle to succour that weak faith
Which needs the arm of sight, we now possess,
Who, with deep self-reproach and muttered prayer,

Shrink as we daily see the homeless Jews,
A strange and cognizable people, cast
Their preternatural shadows in our streets.
But thou, dread Sickness! witness of the power,
And faithful image too, of human sin,
How art thou melted from among us, gone
Like unabiding snow, we know not when!
Earth hath a token less, and misseth thee
Even as the Dead Sea shore did one day miss
That single pillar of white salt that stood
Looking towards Sodom—one unlawful wish
Of base self-will most horribly fulfilled!

This is no theme for song: the stricken man,
At length the manifest victim of disease,
Descending from his mountain, bent his steps
To Calder Abbey; there, his name concealed,
He sought the intercessions of the Church,
Her potent rites, and the vicinity
Of her great sacraments; for to his mind
His sickness plainest admonition was
Of God's compassionate will, that he should leave
The nurture of his mountain solitude,
And brace his soul mid Christian sights and sounds
To suffer now, and for the end prepare,
The end which he beheld was drawing nigh,
Like a bright sunset following on a storm.

Was never consolation so confused
With awe-inspiring menace, or man's hopes
So wedded to man's fears, as then
In that old Liturgy of Lepers,—rite
Fearfully beautiful, within whose forms,
As in a piteous drama, were set forth
The woeful fortunes of our fallen race,
Which yet we love because it is our own.

O faithless world! thou growest weak and old!
How hast thou sinned that the wrath of Heaven
Should have withdrawn this presence from thy fields,
This supernatural token of the power
Of Adam's one contagious sin? And thou
Dear Mother Church! with what affectionate rites
Didst thou consign the tainted to their cells,
Immured in dread tranquillity therein
With God and their chastising Angel, there
To evoke from penance those high gifts once found
Within the Font, and in the heats of youth
Bartered and lost through passion or mischance,
In their first fulness nowhere found again!

Haply the Angels, whose far-kenning sight
Can trace the world through all its tortuous ways
And its long discipline of ages, see
How it hath ever been throughout all time,
That what men deem improvement in the lot
Of humankind is but a putting off
Some power to be like Christ, the getting rid
First of one Thorn and then another, so
Despoiling and diminishing the Crown
Which only gives the right to rule in Heaven.
Where are the daily rudenesses of life,
The imperfect satisfaction of our needs,
The keen discomforts of our mortal state,
The hardships which annealed the men of old,
The sense of want which every hour brought home
To sinful man? Are they not put aside,
So far as may be, with unblest success,
Thanks to officious science! as the lot
Of monks and of poor men, kept at arm's length
By all the effeminate appliances
Of our luxurious skill? And we perchance

Are either venturous or unwise, when we
Regret the growing softness of the times,
As being ourselves effeminate, afraid
To give ourselves to God, or bravely dare
The ancient measures of saint's love. Should we
Without these comforts summon up the heart
To do the little that we do for God,
Or persevere in those few puny acts
Which we esteem so great? What wonder then
That if in purple and fine linen swathed,
The world should play the part of Dives more
And more each passing age, and less affect
That Christ-like sorrow which the Angels seek
To penetrate with their enamoured gaze,
And, were they not so calm, might envy too
Through wish to embrace the self-same life as Christ,
And have their acts identified with His,
The exclusive privilege of Catholic Saints,—
What wonder if the jealous wrath of Heaven
Should silently withdraw neglected ills,
As slighted sacraments, which men no more
Should have the liberty to scorn! The plague,
Which recognized the sacred touch of kings,
Vanished from earth when kingly hands were held
Sacred no longer; for the world brooked not
The presence of a supernatural thing;
And so that token went, leaving the State
Weakened, yet of its weakness unaware,
Proud of the open sea, and grand career,
And with the sunshine drunk, yet full of taunts
Gainst Peter's bark that had convoyed it there.
Ah! silly kings will learn, but learn like kings,
Too late to profit by the lesson taught,
That churchless states obey not royal helms,

And that St. Peter's keys were light as air
Compared with Revolution's heavy hand.
O Sovereign People! whither wilt thou steer
These old historic states of Christendom?
Hast thou a chart, are soundings ascertained,
Did ever true discoverer report
Safe harbours o'er that wild and stormy sea?
Or shall we one day, drifting on our wreck,
Despondingly believe what some have said,
Which would be almost madness were it true,—
The world's improvement is the Christian's loss?

So long then as the favoured earth possessed
One Corporal Work of Mercy more than now,
The tending of the Lepers, Holy Church,
Mindful how oft our Saviour had vouchsafed
To appear in leprous guise unto the Saints,
Drew into one her most consoling acts,
With bland denunciaticns intermixed.
She took the Leper from the affrighted world,
Sprinkled her holy water on his brow,
Entitling him dear Victim of our God,
And gifted him with Gloves, with Knife, with Lamp,
Trumpet to hold communion with his kind,
Pannier for alms, and Pitcher for the wells,
Symbolic gifts whose meaning could sustain
A patient temper; thence unto his cell,
The abbey cross borne to the threshold first,
Was he consigned with prayer, and so exiled
From that false world whose joys delude the soul,
At Easter only suffered to emerge,
For not the tombs that day could keep their dead.
And for some ages when the Leper died,
So solemn was the love men bore to him
And almost reverence for his mystic woe,

That Mass was chanted for him in the Church
(By after Councils solemnly refused)
As for a true Confessor of the Faith,
And witness of some supernatural thing.

Thus, in symbolic vestments all arrayed,
Within a cell Sir Lancelot was immured
What time, the chanted compline o'er, the star
Of peaceful eve with uncontested right
Vicegerent was for her still absent queen,
And with the help of lingering sunset shed
A dusky brightness o'er the dewy woods.

How beautiful that night was Calder Vale !
The golden moon with shadowy splendour lent
A depth of mottled foliage to the boughs
Still leafless, and the abbey's leaden roofs
In the soft flashing beams were multiplied
An hundredfold, and on the shining meads
The whiteness of the frosty grass appeared
A portion of the moonlight, while the stream,
With its occasional broken water lit
With an uncertain scattered brightness, dived
Through the dark grove like an irregular band
Of men with lanterns in a midnight wood,
Threading their way together or dispersed.
O Moon ! thy light is like the honied tongue
Of one who tells false parables to gild
Or prompt a dubious act : when morning comes
How changed will all that sunken vale appear !

There is no image of unbroken peace
Which is not gathered now around the spot
Where so much suffering dwells, so much disease
Of mind, and labour of remorseful thoughts
Within that penitential House ; and yet
Misdeem not thou the quiet beauty shed

Upon this stern abode ; for it is not
A mockery of nature, but sets forth
In parables to disobedient man
How lovely are the ancient offices
Which these obedient elements fulfil,—
How sweet the travail of unbroken laws,
Thus imaging that pure tranquillity,
Which reigns where'er the Will of God is done.
The beasts, whose shadows, indistinct and dark,
Spot yon illumined field, lie down in peace,
If lower, yet more perfect than the peace
Which man attains ; for instinct unto them
Is a deep law that hath more promptitude
To act, than reason which is ever set
'Twixt doubtful contraries ; so unto man
Hath God, beside his reason, deigned to give
The instinct of obedience, and for this
With merciful acceptance He vouchsafes
To take, what it is misery to withhold,
The intelligent surrender of our wills
And ways to His.

In many a secret cell
Within that convent doubtless may reside
A man, whose wrecked and shattered life is cast
On this seclusion after thoughtless years
Of worshipping self-will, who, haply freed
From the more heinous acts of mortal sin,
Hath so disturbed his inward faculties,
That when grace found him, and he turned to seek
The oracles of conscience, no response
Came from the desecrated shrine ; his soul,
Eyeless and voiceless both, was overcome
With that intoxication which ensues
On long self-worship, and within his heart

Mercy must intervene to plant afresh
The finer sense of right and wrong. Ah me!
What a blind fight is life to such a man!
Hating to be alone, yet every day
Plunging more deeply into solitude,
By frequent transit into separate spheres
Of action self-imposed; craving too much
For sympathy, yet ever out at sea,
Where they who labour at appointed tasks
At best can give him but a distant hail;
Accumulating knowledge so disjointed
From honest practice, that it soon becomes
A load that overwhelms his cheerfulness;
Toiling without a blessing through neglect
Of those less lofty toils which God ordained;
Too covetous of home, yet finding none
For his unfixed affections. Wretched man!
His very nature is a law which blights
The face of home, and yet he knows it not.
How is he like the sea-birds that by night
Sleep on the dull dark ocean, and by day,
Float on the sunny billows, and they see
Where'er they go the self-same images,
The sun's white glory far within the deep,
And the blue vale of water 'twixt the waves,
Ever the same, yet ever changed; no mark,
No sign whereon to fix a local love,
No home to be remembered for its peace,
No shapely bough well known and best beloved
Within the crowded forest. Hence it is
They carol not, but wail from off the deep,
In piteous accents of impatient grief,
And some, like spirits hardened by despair,
Joy in the savage tempest;—so with him—

The home, which he so fretfully pursues,
Glides from beneath him, and he sinks at last
Beneath the direst burden man can bear,
That constant uniformity of change,
Wherein consists the worship of Self-Will.

This moonlit earth is not the earth which man
Tills from the dawn unto the setting sun :
And neither is the moonlit world of joy,
Feasting, and poetry, the real world
Where man achieves or misses of his crown.
There is a second world behind the veil,
More nigh to God, a more mysterious place,
More thickly peopled with great deeds, more full
Of spiritual Presences,—the world
Of sorrow, sickness, and of secret grief,
Where life, ejected from the outward throng,
Dwells in the quiet vestibule of death.

Look at yon summer city on the shore
Of that Italian lake ; the moon is up,
And, mingling strangely with her quiet beams,
The incessant lightning of the voiceless clouds
Clothes with white fire the hills and tremulous lake.
And there is music on the quay, and sounds
Of singers on the water far away ;
And youth is moving gaily on the banks,
Where age is sitting and appears to have
A deeper-seated joy, and in the port
The lights from out the open windows cast
Thin pillared shadows in the rippling deep,
And barks with gaudy flags shoot up and down ;
And the cool freedom of the night appears
To be sufficient of itself to cause
This universal mirth ; and mid it all,
The song, the movement, and the shooting barks,

And the pale lightning flapping o'er the hills,
How silent stands yon solemn mountain tower
Behind the city, borrowing from the moon
Darkness, not light, and frowning on the scene
As though it were a monitory thing
Appointed to restrain men's thoughts. And yet
Behind the face of this enjoyment lurks
Another world, which teaches us that life
Is not the dream of one short summer-night
Mid the moon's visionary landscapes; no!
Death is in the city, sickness, and sin,
Suffering, remorse, despair, the unheeded priest.
Haply the unknown passage of a soul
Is being accomplished at this hour, for oft
Amid the multitudinous poor death comes
And finds his victims lonely; want, neglect,
And hunger, being their only retinue:
With these stern nurses round them they confront
Their last great act, as utterly alone
As the sick beasts that lay them down to die
Beneath the pressure of their Maker's Will,
In the deep noon mid Afric's sunless woods
Or the damp lairs of Asiatic caves.

Sickness and death! Ye twin beneficent Powers!
I in the freshness of my youth am bold
To hail you as benignant spirits ordained
To lead my soul to Heaven! Ye do I hail
Ere ye have come, and practising my thoughts,
As best I may, to look you in the face,
Aye, to confront your dreadest aspect, still
Would I implore with trembling self-distrust,
Won from preceding falls, the gracious Aid,
That in your actual presence can bestow
A manly peace, which shall not make ashamed

This hardihood of words. For manifold
And dire, O Sickness! are the crucibles,
Wherein thy torturing alchemy essays
The spirit of man; and they who sought for gold
In molten stones, vain mortals! reaped a field
Hardly more profitless, great Power! than thine.

Now there are sicknesses which in a day,
And with our bodily strength all unimpaired
And love of life unquenched, would have us greet
Death, as we would an unexpected guest;
These are too fierce. Then there are slow, slow fires
Which burn the patience of a man, and dry
His prayers, and give him no vicissitude
Of suffering, wearing off that novelty
Which made him feel disease a sacred thing;
These the Saints have. And other ills there are,
Winning no sympathy, as not believed,
Lurking like serpents in some secret place
Within the body, stinging out of reach;
And these are fearful: for complaint is met
With chilling admonition, or received
With that half credence which is worse to bear,
And patience undergoes the martyrdom
Of passing for impatience. O 'tis meet
That they who tend the sick should have more faith
In them, than in the art which ill conceals
Its little power o'er man's mysterious frame!
And, with the rest, there are some sicknesses
Which are the obvious consequence of sin;
Vain scourges do they seem, which are by most
With a hard heathen manliness endured,
Whose strength is in false pride that would prefer
To reap the harvest it hath sown itself,
Than suffer by the simple Will of God.

And, lastly, in that there are stubborn men
To whom indignity is ten times worse
Than torment, there are other sicknesses,
Which shame the sufferers; these are hard to bear,
And they fall chiefly on the proud. But all
Have one beneficent unity, one source
Deep in the fountain of God's love, and preach
One soothing doctrine to the docile heart:—
Sufferings are Gifts, a Judgment is a Grace,
As short of that One Judgment which alone
Tries not, and purges not, but only seals!

And Thee, most mortal of all mortal things,
Thee would I hail, O Death! as being the gate
Which I in search of Heaven shall enter. Thou,
The commonest of daily acts, art not
Common to each, but happenest only once.
Thou wert a tyrant, for weak nature knew
No means to bring thine overwhelming power
Within the grasp of habit, and she wept
For want of that poor knowledge how to die.
This science hath been granted to her tears:
From meanest self-denials we extract
A power beyond the compass of thy strength;
For faith dies daily with her Lord, and so
By this sweet mystery art thou now dethroned.
O men! we are but actors all our lives;
We must be real once, even at the hour
When we lie down to die, and is not this
A consolation, while the light it sheds
Unteaches us the love of self-deceit?

All hail, Ye Kindred Powers! Pass on, pass on
Across Time's bounded realm, to do a work
More lasting than yourselves, to sanctify
The Elect of God! And Thou, O Tyrant Time,

Art Thou not weary, Despot ! flapping thus
Thy unwieldy wings across the suffering world,
Like a huge land-bird lost upon the ocean ;
For such the Endless Ages are to Thee ?
What though Thou rollest o'er the tribes of men
Most like a hurrying storm, the Angel waits
Who knows thy sentence and hath learned the words
By heart, and thy tremendous frame can cast
No shadow on the Infinite Mind of God,
Nor yet impair the least of His Decrees.

Such are our tyrants, Fellow Men ! and such
Our ancient gods. O let us claim the rights
Of that celestial servitude which makes
These powers our daily vassals ; let us choose
That perfect liberty which none enjoy,
But those whose will is with the Will of God,
And is, through Faith and Hope, enthralled by Love !

Such were the Presences and Powers that filled
That world, amid whose shadowy regions now
Sir Lancelot passed, a peopled loneliness,
Peopled yet not with men, as earth might seem
To outcast Cain, but conscious to himself
Of sweet alliances that hopeless man
Knew not ; yet even to the hermit Knight
There was a deepening of his solitude,
Which he encountered not without alarm.
Truly there is a mute companionship
Between our animal strength and living soul,
Which, like the intercourse a lonely man
Oft seeks with some inferior creature, serves
More ends than we opine, until disease
Hath parted them, and drained the subsidy
Of cheerful spirits which from our bodily power
Flow in upon the mind. In Troutbeck Vale,

And on the misty summit of Black Combe,
 The features of the open solitude had grown
 Familiar to him ; yet he now perceived
 That in imprisonment, the narrowed range
 Of sense and motion, and the broken trust
 In his own strength, there was a loneliness,
 Which, till it hath begun to sanctify,
 Is terrible oppression.

Ah ! how great

To one who bears impatiently the load
 Of his unuttered thoughts, his privacy
 Beyond the active circles of the world,
 Like an untravelled frontier, placed—how great
 The consolation, and the inward strength
 How wonderful, which he in secret draws
 From deep reflection on the lonely Life
 Our Lord vouchsafed to lead ! If he be rich,
 And hath with bootless envy oft desired
 That poverty ennobled by the choice
 Of God Himself,—if he be strong in health,
 And, further than the common griefs of life,
 Lacks sorrow which might make him like his Lord,—
 If the world love him, praise him, and he pines
 For outward chastisement to certify
 His heavenly sonship,—let him be alone,
 Let him be solitary, not from choice,
 The baseness of a lettered ease, or wish
 To abstract himself from that unequal strife
 In which the bad keep down the good,—and there
 The Saviour's Life is imaged on his own.
 There is his Cross, a burden sanctified
 With special and exact endurance, there
 A treasure of perfection, which the Saints,
 Cast on the social happiness of life,

Might envy, for its silence and its pains.

How lonely was the Infancy of Christ,
Beset by thoughts which rose into a sphere
Beyond the reach of mortal sympathy,
And burdened with the foresight of the Cross,
And vision of that whole amount of sin
Whose price He came to pay! How lonely too
His untold Youth in Joseph's humble house,
And sordid occupations! And His Life,
Beginning in the desert with the dark
And fallen angel for companion, seems
More and more lonely still, because He knew
What was in man, and trusted not Himself.
So that the true Creator of the world,
Environed with the obscurity of flesh,
(O that a leper such as I should dare
To speak the words!) moved on the earth He made
A Homeless Pilgrim mid the countless homes
Of men, and lairs of beasts, and nests of birds,
And rooted flowers which He Himself had clothed,—
Moved on the earth as excommunicate
From His own sweet creation, for the love
He bore to us, and to a low estate!
Amid His Twelve was one betrayer found,
Another to deny Him, and the rest
To flee His hour of need, and on the Cross,
While Mary's presence added to His grief
More than it soothed, His utter loneliness
Reached its unspeakable accomplishment,
When from the depths of anguish He complained,
That He, who was erewhile disowned of man,
Was left of God! and bowing then His Head
To that reluctant foe, which had withheld
Its hand through agonies enough to quench

Another's life long since, He gave consent,
And Death, most awful thought! drew nigh the
Cross,

And smote, last act of power! the Son of God.
And through His desolate Life we must believe,
And His protracted Passion most of all,
That to His Human Nature the Divine
Auxiliar proved, to lessen not the weight
Of untold griefs, but as a prop to give
To human flesh a superhuman power
To suffer, and to live a dying life,
Unsuccoured by the prompt relief of death.

Thus did Sir Lancelot muse, till he was cheered,
To think that Desolation had been borne,
And sanctified, and through its whole extent
Traversed with scrupulous survey by our Lord,
Until it had become a Holy Land:—

The very thought is wine unto the sick!
He was in want of soothing truths, more want
Than we can haply measure, who too much
Feed on the balsams of the Cross, ere yet
The gall hath done its work; for in those times,
Those days of high attainments, less proclaimed,
Because with less authentic warrant proved,
Were Saint Alphonso's charitable rules,
Whose safe facility he bade the world
Enjoy, and yet denied it to himself.

Months passed away with him, while sickness
wrought

Her silent transformations: from above
She seemed to drop, and on her difficult field
Toiled like a patient Angel, and observed
A beautiful order in her separate acts.
For first she cleared it of the unsightly shades

Of self-deceit, which baffle even the eye
Of conscience when it strives to penetrate ;
Then the rank herbage stripped, and laid all bare
The unlovely surface and discoloured soil.
And thus she killed self-trust: then delving deep,
With general and confused commotion shook
And troubled all the ground, both far and near,
And singled out the dry insidious stones
Which lure the fertile moisture to themselves,
And traced with special care the arid roots
Of discontinued sins, which now deprived
Themselves of power to sprout, yet intercept
The roots of virtuous plants as they descend ;
Thus Self was wholly killed, a real death
Accomplished by the severing of the Soul
From the sick Body, its chief aid in guilt.
The Body's outward hindrance set aside,
And Sin's mysterious coverts now disclosed,
She, casting her gross implements away,
Leaped in the grave, and settling fast on Sin,
Transformed herself into a cleansing fire,
Which searched the pestilence in its secret home,
And with accumulated pains burnt out
The poisonous substance, whose infectious power
Had scorched the dew-damped earth: this second
Act,

Which followed on the painful death of Self,
Effected by increase of torture, seemed
An Act of love, to its dread office nerved
By its own death, by no vindictive ends
Suggested, but unmixed beneficence,
Mysteriously inventive to avoid
A fruitless toil; and this, as after Death,
The mystical and inward Death of Self,

Might in the baths of Purgatory find
An apt resemblance, whereof some men speak
As of an ultimate baptism of the soul.

Many there are who grievously misdeem
The unfathomable ends of Corporal Pain,
And its remedial powers : and thus account
The observances of an ascetic life
As bloodless shadows, and the men who fight
Therewith as they who beat the elastic air ;
Or haply censure their hard usages
As an affront to His benignant Love,
Who, from His boundless Mercy, hath allowed
His own eternal Glory to receive
Increase from His subordinate creatures' bliss.
Happy are they, if when they reason thus,
They seek, though blindly, to extol His love,
Not rather for themselves evade those acts
The joy of which they do not comprehend,
Or thro' the instinctive hatred of high thoughts
Which passes current now for lowliness,—
The wisdom of a pusillanimous age.
Yet do they err, in pondering not the griefs
That Love is multiplying on the earth
All hours, and in adoring not the mode
Which He vouchsafes to use with our poor race,
Love seeking love among the shades of pain,
In the cool times of life, when suffering frees
The spirit from the ardours of the world,
As once at eve in Eden He pursued
His flying creature : and not less do they
That humble courage disesteem, that heart
To give as kings unto a king, infused
By our transcendent union with our Lord,
Both God and Man, the heart wherewith the Saints,

Seeking for pain when it seeks not for them,
Have ventured to be Gods unto themselves.

And error beckons error : there are men,
And *some* not proud, whose blindness might be
termed

The failing of mistaken gentleness,
Who cannot with a child's heroic trust
Lean on the Church's arm, while she displays
The final vision of Eternal Pain.

O unaffectionate Hearts ! Ungrateful Souls !
Go to the Passion, in the balance weigh
How great the amount of our Atonement made
Through corporal Suffering, count the separate
Thorns,

The undistinguishable number guess
Of cruel Lashes ; dive into the sea
Of overwhelming Sorrows to whose deeps
Language may do no more than point the way
Unto the reverent silence of our thoughts :—
And is there not a fitness that the pain,
Thro' which in part our price was paid, should be
The curse of those who have disowned the debt ?
When sorrow comes or sickness, ye are first
To cry, A blessing : shall the Saints on earth
Be sanctified by pain, yet it be called
Unseemly for the torments of the Lost ?
And, seeing that Grace hath been conferred on all,
Sufficient grace, or proximate or remote,
O shall Eternity be thought too long
For that appalling exile, when the Love
And Justice sinned against are infinite ?
For as the measure of the sin hath been,
So are the bounds of expiation ; one,
One infinite Ransom is already paid,

And till a second be found it needs must be
That Hell should be eternal. Wouldst thou know
What are the limits of thine actual guilt?
Of Catherine learn, the Sainted Genoese,
Who prayed that to her soul might be disclosed
The heinousness of but one venial sin,
And when her prayer was answered, swooned away.
Spread out your minds, ye faltering disputants!
Until they compass what the Church hath ruled;
For if ye teach an infinite Mercy joined
With only finite Justice, ye do err
Against that equal majesty which reigns
Amid the awful attributes of God,
And erring thus, it may be ye blaspheme.

But while Sir Lancelot, in the mystic realm
Of Sickness, passed thro' that benignant Death
Of Self and thro' her purgatorial fires,
No less had he experience of the truth
That Sickness is not wanton with her rod,
But she too hath a third estate, a place
Hard by her fires, a land where none can go
But they who have won patience by their prayers;
And from whose fields the visitants bring back
Strange narratives: this is her Paradise.

O worth, yea ten times worth the weary days,
The uneasy bed, the long dream-haunted nights,
Are those permitted intervals of ease,
When pain is stayed from interrupting prayer,
Or marring holy thoughts, and feebleness
Disarms the body of its power to prompt
Self-trust, or nurse those spirit-wasting moods
When with a sinful foresight many a man
Builds and unbuilds his thriftless schemes, and makes
An intellectual banquet of the future,

In such poor revel squandering golden hours,
Which might, through patience and conformity
Unto the Will of God, have yielded him
A usury the Saints would not disclaim.
And oft our childhood, like a summer cloud
Borne backward by the wind, returns to cast
A radiant shadow on the sin-worn mind,
And with it brings that softening of the heart,
That leaning towards the innocent and good,
Which in past years was virtue's best ally,
And now, an unexpected visitant,
Like a sweet apparition from the dead,
Melts the hard heart with one benignant look,
Most like the unspeakable Regard which fell
On Peter, yea, to faith's clear eye it is,
Veiled in our human memories, the Same!

Such intervals of painless calm befell
The patient Knight; the scourge in Satan's hand
From time to time was partially restrained,
That mercy might enquire how far her ends
Were furthered by affliction: for the Powers,
Justice and Mercy, love to walk the earth
Wearing each other's garb; and in their strife,
Outreaching one another in their zeal
To do the work of love, a man discerns
That marvellous concurrence of the good
And ill of life, which in respect of him,
And manifested only to himself,
A private revelation sweetly clear,
Is the supreme and blessed Will of God.

And such a respite chanced to be his lot
One morning when a fresh access of pain,
And of the inward burning, through the night
Had tried unto the uttermost his power

Of meek endurance. From the half clothed boughs,
And the wet-laden ivy leaves which hung
Above his mullioned window, fell the rain
In fitful splashes, while the cheerless wind
Fought with the mighty buttresses that met
And broke its violence : if that deep joy,
Which the soul tastes at such an hour, were born
Of sunny prospect or of welcome news,
It had not then been his ; but what he felt
Needed not outward circumstance, but leaned
Upon the invisible heights from which it came,
No self-supporting faculty, but more—
The Gift of God's Own Presence in the soul !

O Gift unspeakably divine ! to be
At peace and yet in penance :—this it is
Which forms the secret science of the Saints,—
To endure the vision of our sins, and yet
To bear, with spirit tranquillized by awe,
That Justifying Presence in ourselves
With so much love as stays the guilty mind
From being too much abashed ; and hence we learn,
That even self-accusation is a thing
Of which wise men are parsimonious, lest
They should speak evil of the things of God,
And in their estimate of sin involve
A consequence of grace ; and lowliness
Is not what some men deem it, but is nursed
More when the greatness of God's mercy falls
Like an o'erwhelming shadow on the soul,
Than when it sits in judgment on itself.]

Upon his narrow bed Sir Lancelot lay,
Though not in vocal prayer, yet with his thoughts
Upraised to Heaven in wondering gratitude :
For not less sudden was the welcome change

Than to the storm-tossed voyager when his ship
From the vexed waters springs, as from a bow,
And in a moment glides within the mole
Of some smooth port, and on her anchor there
Rides like a bird upon an inland lake.
Ah! who shall say what transport then was his!
Wonder, and peace, and joy, and fervent love,
Lightness of heart, and that unearthly sense
Of God's forgiveness which so oft ensues
On bodily pain, or on misfortune borne
In penitent submission, and, with all,
That consciousness of an immortal soul,
And of a life beyond death's reach, which grows
Upon the ruins of our animal strength,
Whose separate liberty we realize
With modest exultation and with prayer.
And with the influx of these glorious thoughts
His childhood passed into his soul once more,
Taking his nature with such calm surprise
That, ere he was aware, his ancient heart,
His simple heart of childlike faith and love,
With blissful travail was brought forth again,
And scarcely conscious of the heavenly change,
He wept some few sweet tears, and knew not why.

Long had his thoughts of mingled love and fear
In arduous meditation been sustained
Upon the Passion, not unduly deemed
The Christian's chief devotion, yet a scene
So dark, so humbling, that it well may be
At certain seasons more a source of fear
Than consolation and confiding love;
And a long vigil round the Saviour's Cross
For our weak nature needs an Easter joy
To follow, while a further help is sought

In those bland intermissions, neither fast
Nor wholly feast, the Sundays interposed
As stations in the toilsome hills of Lent,—
Toilsome for those who climb their stony sides
Amid the obscuring mists of penance wrapped,
But for the purer souls who go that road
For contemplation, and to gain some place
Nearer to Jesus, rather may we name
Those welcome heights the Happy Hills of Lent.

With this one subject occupied, his thoughts,
Like weary birds too long upon the wing
With nought but sea beneath them, had been fain
To light, but found no resting-place till now,
When, haply by suggestion from above,
A new direction given unto their course
Brought them above one solitary isle,
One region of sweet truths which lies apart,
Severed by secrecy divine, whose stores
Are haply left as part of that reward
Which is reserved for faith,—the Infancy
Of our Incarnate Lord ; a radiant tract,
Which from the Angel's covert message grows
Upon the adoring eye, while on its shore
The Shepherds watch, the Watching Angels sing,
The Cattle low around the new-born Child,
The Magians travel with the Star above,
The obedient Star, a still slow-moving point
Threading its way among the crowded orbs
Without collision, like the Will of God
Amid the multitudinous sins of men
In heavenly peace accomplishing Itself.
Beautiful Region ! on its wondrous fields,
As in compartments, but for twelve short years
The Gracious Mystery is depicted ; then

Beneath a veil of heavenly clouds withdrawn,
It mocks the disappointed eye, till faith
Finds in the muteness of the Written Word
A place for adoration more sublime,
And loving acquiescence, than might be
Haply in fuller knowledge.

On this shore
Sir Lancelot's thoughts alighted, with surprise
As great as though it had not been a place,
Which with his mother's guidance he had oft
In early days explored. For so it seemed
All new, and more than new, for it was clothed
With freshness such as novelty alone
Could never give; and on its fragrant fields
He fell, like one who with his spirits depressed,
And wanted cheerful visions overcast,
By too long sojourn amid summits bare
And the tremendous silence of the snow,
The birdless sky, and giant-featured crags,
Sinks on the Val Misocco from the heights
Of Bernardin, and feeds his hungry eye
Upon the sunny lowlands; and in folds,
Dense folds of sylvan light and shade, enchains
And masters that wild rapture which has held
His chilled imagination in its grasp
For many a wakeful night, and silent day
More visionary than the night itself;
And his unfettered thoughts, which fly abroad
Amid the exuberant change, fix here and there
In some bright spot an instantaneous home,
As dear as though the accidents of years
Had worn its features in the very soul.

Silence! self-trusting Thoughts!—and Phantasy,
Back to thy home; thou art not needed here;

And here too be the anxious craft of verse
Suspended for awhile. Thou, Spirit of Grace!
Who from the Eternal Father and the Son
Eternally proceeding, dost uphold
Meek wills, and modest intellects no less
Informest with sweet knowledge, guide my song,
Guide it along a path of simple words,
Amid whose reverential plainness men
May better hear the echo of Thy Church,
In festive liturgy or deep discourse
Illustrating the Childhood of her Lord.

And if with sedulous meaning I have sought
And anxious purpose, to reflect the strife
Of these our painful days upon my verse,
With such suggestions as may lend some aid
To those who walk in this dark land of ours,
Now let it be permitted to retire,
Where the mute Shadow of my song invites
And beckons, into a chamber where the noise
Of angry disputants is heard far off,
If heard at all, a chamber of sweet truths
Where for my profit I may dwell awhile
With Mary and Saint Joseph, and the Three
Who came with mystic Gifts, and Angel Choirs,
And simple Shepherds, and the jubilant troop
Of little Martyr-brethren who went out
First followers of the Lamb, dear pursuivants,
Who laid their bodies on the road, as pearls
Or as sown stars, to signalize the way,
Whereon the Apostles afterwards should tread,
Martyrs and Virgins, Saints and pious Kings,
And the vast concourse of the holy Church.
O let us seek at least brief shelter there,
And turn the helm of our half-shipwrecked thoughts.

Our load is hard to bear ;—the world that seems
So wise, and in some aspects so reformed,
So needful to us, and full often kind,
And of our very selves so much a part,
Hath drifted from the sole authentic Church,
Believes the false predominant therein,
And in its very piety blasphemes
Him who is true ; yet doth it raise, with speech
Respectful, and with no apparent guile,
Full many an anxious question, that demands
A ready answer, not so soothly found,
And yet which may not now be long delayed
Without the loss of many thousand souls.
The load is hard to bear :—the chance, that he,
Who, as an act of faith, shall boldly cut
All ties that bind him to his times, and thus
Live out of sympathy with modern things,
May scare the souls he haply might have won,
And wound the Heart of Jesus by a zeal
Unlike His own :—this is an anxious fear.
And then there lies the opposite chance, that he,
Who with a facile deference to the world
Should make the Church seem world-like, and
give up
Some of her heavenly maxims, and so clear
His mind by making free with truth, should learn
Hereafter to his cost that he mistook
Selfwill for lowliness, and so become
To one whole generation an offence :—
And in this fluctuating doubt is grief
Enough to cause gray hairs before their time.

O problem of an unbelieving world !
The hearts, that have been stretched upon the rack
Of this most piercing doubt, may well believe

No inward anguish can surpass its pain.
 But Oh! there is a torture worse than this,—
 The problem of the misbelieving good!
 For we would fain believe sweet things of those,
 More dear to us than words can tell, who seem
 So near the truth, yet ever fall away
 Further and further when they come most near,
 And altogether when they almost touch.
 Hard task to faith to leave all these to God,
 To trust Him and enquire not, but adore,
 In darkness which He wills not should be light,
 The merciful severities of truth.
 Only by holy living can we wring
 Light from the darkness, and at length go free
 Of our perplexing thoughts, while this great truth,
 Like a slow sunrise, dawns upon the soul,—
 That Goodness baffles Wisdom when they strive,
 And that they dwell together when at peace.

And meanwhile let us seek not to be spared
 One jot of our perplexity, nor strive
 To extricate ourselves and stand aloof
 From the world's travail, nor forswearing thus
 Our special heritage, let us succumb
 To love of quiet, or the vile repose
 Of literary ease, than pomp of life
 More irreligious far: but let us strive
 To absorb a thousand hearts into our own,
 And force with irresistible success,
 Through secret prayer and outward sympathy,
 A Christian wisdom and magnanimous change
 Upon the sickly spirit of the Age.
 For love of Christ, we may not stand apart
 From the world's strife, nor basely satisfy
 Our indolence, by that ignoble boast,

So oft the ready refuge of conceit,
That our sole dealings are with ancient days,
And that we scorn to suffer with our own?

Remembering this, yet we may enter now
The hermitage of peaceful thoughts hard by,
And with the Shepherds kneel before the Child.

Say, Mighty Mistress, O Celestial Faith!
Why in untroubled rapture standest thou
Straining thine eye into the ages past?
Ah! thou hast lit upon a wondrous scene,
Withheld from mortal gaze,—that secret Hour,—
Whether before sunrise at early prayer,
Or the noon-day retirement of the East,
Or meditative eve, or starry night—
When, as the mother of mankind conceived
From Satan's whispers that undying sin
Which is the sin of all, so at the words
Of Gabriel did the blissful Mother-Maid,
Surprised yet acquiescent, then conceive
Within her virgin-womb that Righteousness
Who is the Righteousness of all. First fount
Was that predestined hour of all those truths,
Which in harmonious order rising, each
From each, with inward melody construct
The Catholic Faith wherein we live and breathe
And are transformed into the sons of God,
And made joint-heirs with Christ the Holy Child.

Ah! see Him lying on our Lady's lap,
The Saviour and the Maker of the World,
Amid the winter's cold, the uneasy straw,
And patient feeding beasts! How wonderful
His Childhood, seeing He was God Himself!
And, because wonderful, how winning too
To us for love of whom it was endured!

Those Sacred Feet shall walk the stony ways
To do men good, who shall with foul return
Transfix them with a nail: those Infant Hands
Shall heal and bless and multiply the Bread
Of His own Flesh, and they too shall be nailed
Upon the bitter Cross; and yet for us,
To be at that Right Hand is all our hope,
To be upon that Left our only fear:
And to faith's eye that Infant Head is crowned
Already with ensanguined Thorns, which love,
Weeping, may recognize for all her sins
Foreseen and suffered, and thus learn to love,
Like Magdalen, with more importunate hope.
So did He elevate our mortal acts
And sanctify our natural griefs: He spoke,
He wept, He thirsted by the well at noon,
Haply He smiled, and yet tradition saith
He smiled not all those three and thirty years;
But wept—we cannot tell how oft He wept.
And He endured the shame of Nakedness
With the new Wine of His dear Passion wet,
In that same hour wherein He stayed the Flood
Of sin by Adam on the earth let loose;
As Noe once had blamelessly endured
In type, with words inspired upon his lips,
The drunkenness wherewith the joyous Church,
With her fresh Sacraments beside herself,
Was rudely charged ere she was three hours old.
O Nakedness of our most loving Lord,
What comely cheering figure dost thou seem
Of Adam bared unto the eye of God
And shameful in his own, yet clothed again
By Christ's unclathing of His glorious Self!
How sweet the affectionate tradition too,

By mindful Peter to the Church consigned,
 That in the lonesome night would Jesus rise,
 And visit the rude couches of His Twelve,
 And re-compose the garments disarrayed
 By graceless slumber; thus in outward deed,
 Gesture, and miracle, illustrating
 Through all those wondrous three and thirty years
 The invisible graces of His future Cross.
 Then from a Boy, O marvellous! He grew
 Like other men, in stature, and He seemed,
 Semblance for some mysterious reason worn,
 To grow in wisdom, and increase in grace.
 Yet sickness came not nigh Him, nor old age:
 But otherwise our true infirmities
 He with these notable exceptions bore.

And let not these seem strange: what cause there
 was

We know not, but with reverential love
 May ponder to our profit, if we keep
 Fast hold of that analogy of faith
 The Church exacts. Haply it was not well
 That He who was eternal should grow old
 Even in appearance: haply 'twas to show
 That now the length of years hath been unclothed
 Of its first Jewish blessing, that to die
 And be with Christ is better far than age.
 Sickness, which fled before His gracious Touch
 Or at His distant Word, might be forbidden
 To assail Himself, that so His Sacred Frame,
 And all its capabilities of grief,
 For that thrice blessed Woe might be reserved
 Wherein the world's Atonement was achieved:
 Or it might be that where the breath of sin
 Hath never passed, nor sickness nor old age

Have privilege to enter; were it so,
 Then from our Lord's Humanity we learn,
 That holiness may be a means of health,
 Ascetic fast a secret source of strength,
 Vigil more true repose than purest sleep,
 And from its wells virginity distil
 (With inward singleness of heart combined)
 An agile freedom, an elastic joy,
 And a matured simplicity of youth,
 Which may perchance anticipate the bliss
 Of that angelic vigour which shall wait
 Upon our bodies when they rise:—and yet
 (Mindful of one how rightly dear to me!)
 Let not the soul of him, who on the bed
 Of weary sickness lies, be overcast
 Because Christ hath not borne this selfsame woe,
 Nor honoured it in this specific form.
 Whether it be the aching strife of mind,
 Torture of heart or weight of bodily pain,
 Enough that in the Garden, on the Cross,
 And in His Life, *all* grief was sanctified.

O Lord! who hast unto Thy humble Saints
 Full oft imparted grace to sing or teach
 The Sorrows of Thy Passion, grant to me,
 Without offence or rude surmise to sing
 The Sorrows of Thine Infancy, a depth,
 An inland sea of Heavenly Love, enclosed
 And overshadowed by the awful hills
 Of Olivet and Calvary, which calls,
 As deep to deep, to those surpassing Acts
 And final Woes of which it was the source.
 The man, who had no childhood, fell; how strange
 The thought appears! yet Adam had a time
 Of peace and joy, but Thine from first to last,

From the rude Manger to the ruder Cross,
Was one assiduous martyrdom, but crowned
And consummated, deepened not begun,
Amid the darkness of Thy closing days.
The solitude, the chillness, and rough scenes
Of Thy Nativity, the willing Blood
Which at the bidding of the Law was shed,
The Flight to Egypt, and hard sojourn there,
The obedient Privacy within the house
Of Thy reputed Father—ah! how great
Were these humiliations to the Lord
Who fashioned, and in all those selfsame years,
As God, sustained the fabric of the world!

Yet these were but the surface of Thy Grief.
Before Thine Eyes the Passion ever stood,
A vivid apparition: Thorns and Nails,
Each separate act of fierce indignity
And wanton outrage wounded then Thy Heart
With a mysterious keenness: for 'twas said
By them of old, who with tradition's help
Interpreted the doctrine of Saint Paul,
That, for Thy use predestined, was prepared
A human body, specially ordained,
And with most exquisite organs all attuned,
For suffering and capacity of pain,
Within the bounds of true humanity.
And long ago with plaintive eloquence
In old prophetic song Thou didst address
Thyself to God, From My youth up have I
Thy terrors with a troubled mind endured,
And yet a second time, My heaviness
Is ever in My sight;—yea, ever, Lord!
And growing with Thy growth: and yet
There is behind a more surpassing grief,

Exceeding far the foresight of the Cross,
A grief men cannot measure, till they learn
Within the perfect schools of Heaven to take
The altitude of sin, and of the bar
It rears between the human soul and God.

The vision of sin was with the Holy Child ;—
All sins that lurking in the long, long past
Cried for His expiation, all the sins
Now daily perpetrated in the world,
The hidden things of this most beautiful night,
Our own short-comings of the day just gone,
All pressed into His spirit, like the Thorns
Crushed by the smiting reed into His Head.
Amid the delicate years of Infaney,
Mary's exuberant love, and Joseph's care
Full of affectionate awe, and watchful joy,
Envyng the Mother's freedom,—mid it all,
Age after age defiling in His sight,
He had respect to each particular sin.
O weary, weary burdens! borne for us
Even by the Infant Saviour, on His Heart
Bearing the Cross He bore in open day
In after years, no heavier load than this.
And while He saw how men would slight His Love,
And how each age in its peculiar way
Would crucify their Lord afresh, He cried
Unto the Father in prophetic plaint,
My God! what profit is there in My Blood?
And Thou wert Man! O Everlasting God!
And in Thyself vouchsafedst to adorn
And beautify humanity, and found
In fashion as a servant, didst descend
On our behalf to sanctify Thyself!

Gaze on His Childhood, Faith and Hope and
Love!

Gaze with the Angels that are stooping still
From heavenly heights o'er this mysterious work,
In mute or vocal adoration fixed!

Ye, above all, who seek to come forth Saints
From this perplexing strife, O rise and gaze
On this new thing created on the earth,
The Lord's Humanity: upon His Youth,
His Ministry, His crowded Passion gaze!
Ponder it well; for many have there been,
Who with false reverence, and a scanty love,
And an unquiet ignorance, have misdeemed,
To their own hurt, this doctrine of the faith,
Lowering the rule of holy life, to augment
Their trust, which is no trust, in Christ Alone.
These, when they read of some celestial height
Of our Lord's virtue, as a perfect man,
With undistinguishing impatience cry,
Behold His Godhead! oft transferring thus
To His Divinity the sacred fruits
Of His unspotted Manhood, till they lose
The force of His example, and contract
The truth to heresy, and soon forego
In act or even endeavour that strict life
Which His Humanity doth illustrate,
Or haply as an absolute rule impose.
Condemned theology it is to say
That in the law God bids impossible things
Unto His creatures: when He bids He warns,
Warns us to do what we can do, to ask
What lies beyond our strength, and by His grace
Puts it within the compass of our strength.
So rule the Fathers, who in council sate

In that fair city whose cathedral bells
Blend with the rushing of the swift Adige.

O rather fearing greatly to be wise
Above the Written Word, let us return
And through the fourfold Gospel trace the signs
Of His pure human virtue, on the Church
And her Tradition leaning, lest we err.
There let us contemplate with emulous awe
How, like a man and by a human way,
Though from the first all depths of grace were His,
And an ungrowing sanctity, He seemed
To learn obedience, and by suffering taught
To grow to that great perfectness, whereby
He was the author of eternal life
To all the obedient; haply pondering this,
We may through prayer win courage to behold
And go some little way *towards* those heights,
Which grace and our dear Lord's example make,
If hard, yet possible; and this the more,
Supported by the knowledge that we are
Of His Humanity participants,
Couched in the fluent Water and the Grain
Of Chosen Wheat, the mighty Sacraments
Which make us just with God, and deify
Our human nature through the power of faith.
This is the end of man:—far off to look,
Without approach, upon the glorious Power,
The Justice, and the Wisdom of his God,
And with the thought of these great things converse
In trembling silence, in the shadow sitting,
Self-stilled, of God's most awful Attributes
And His disclosed Perfections; one there is
Which claims a different worship, nor can be
Inactively adored, but with strong cries

And tears must be pursued, His Sanctity,
Who bids our holiness reflect His Own,
And be His Own, and therefore sent His Son
That we might better compass with His Aid
That only imitable Attribute,
Least imitable, as it seems, of all.

O Lord! upon the threshold do I stand
Of that veiled interval of twice nine years,
Which hides Thy Sacred Manhood from our view,
Till from the Jordan we behold Thee rise,
As from a second Nativity;—the seal
Of that forbidden treasure do I kiss
With humblest love; yet, O most gracious Lord!
Let me be bold thereon to found a prayer
For our poor times and Thy neglected Church.
For when I think how every passing hour
In all those eighteen years Thou didst vouchsafe
To speak or act, to worship and obey,
That every motion of Thy manhood was
Humiliation, and was infinite
Because of Thy Divinity,—amazed
Within the sea of my own troubled thoughts
I sink, perceiving that each act of Thine,
Thus infinite, might haply have redeemed,
If God so willed, the sins of all the world.
Then Lord! most good, most holy! if the world
Beyond all ancient precedents of ill
Hath visibly swerved, in order and in truth,
From Thy celestial pattern, and foregone
That catholic unity wherein consists
The vigour of its supernatural life,—
By all the merits of those silent years,
By all the deeds and sayings unrevealed
Of Thy mysterious Youth, vouchsafe to give

A second Youth to this enfeebled world,
And reinfuse the sacrament of health
Thro' its unequal and distempered limbs,
And chiefly for that end, O multiply
Thy grace upon Thy chosen seat of Rome!

Thus far, haply too far, my ardent song,
Coasting this marvellous shore, hath dared to say
How fair the land appeared; and what it left
Of fancy unexpressed shall now be laid,
With all the guesses fertile wonder breeds,
A sacrifice of silence, on the shrine.
For there be thoughts, whose grateful hardihood
May win acceptance there, for which the garb
Of words were all unmeet, and which might seem
Too venturesome if it were not that love
Is nourished on them. May they not displease
Him for whose love they have been entertained!

Such was Sir Lancelot's study, and to him
Like some devotional picture it appeared,
Where on one field a mystery is set forth
In diverse acts, and hills rise all around
Capped with blue pine-trees set against the sky,
As the old Christian artists loved to paint.
And this similitude they will not deem
Beneath the heavenly subject, who are wont
To read that sweet theology involved
In the mute gestures of the sacred groups,
Which great Angelico of old pourtrayed,
Justly beatified, as claiming rank
Amid the doctors of the Church; nor less,
With his devotional system, in his way
Of eloquent silence, comments on the faith,
Than Bonaventure or St. Thomas, freed
From many a formal strife and hard device

To which their gentle minds were forced to bow,
Though in their lightest question there is hid
More food than in the strength of other minds.

Such was the Sacred Infancy of Christ
To that lone Sufferer in his silent cell.
Ah! how consoling was this heavenly field,
This catholic pasture where his thoughts lay down
To feed and rest! For when the intellect
Is weak and overstrained, there are some truths
The passive heart can better apprehend,
Than weary reason; and her docile toil
Can recreate and tranquillize, not bend
The burdened faculties. Consoling too
Chiefly was this sweet subject now to him,
As being less intertwined with human sin
Than the great Passion, deepening penitence
More by its downcast bearing than the voice
Of open admonition; not as though
It were not guilt which instigated love
To bear that lesser yoke, but that he felt
The *visible* presence of his sins was there
Far less with him, than underneath the Cross.

Weeks fled in this devotion, and the spring
Was passing into summer, when it chanced
There came on ardent mission to the House
Of Calder an Italian monk, a man
For holy life and supernatural gifts
Alike renowned, and, it was whispered there,
Favoured with revelations; and impressed
Upon his bodily flesh it was believed
Was some tremendous cognizance, the sign
Of fearful strife with man's invisible foes.
A son he was of that mysterious land,
The barren Umbria, brother of a house,

Whose airy bells, almost in faintness lost, †
Hardly upon calm summer mornings shed
Sweet murmurs on the vale; so high it stands
Amid the many-folded Apennines.

Beautiful Mountains! who that hears your name
Is not in spite of nature and himself
Forthwith a poet? Yea, the very sound
Plays with the mind, even as the forest wind
In summer with the multitudinous trees;
So various are the chords which it doth press,
So strangely wild the symphony they make:—
Love, War, and Pleasure, memorable Crime,
The seeds of Freedom working through the soil
In a tempestuous spring of civil strife,
Antique memorials, Roman or Tyrrhene,
Legends and Towers of mediæval fame,
The verse of Dante lingering still to add
Music unto a hundred sweet-named brooks,
Art, Faith, and numberless remembrances
Gleaned in our travels there, or localized
In study's more imaginative hours
In those fair spots where all the world hath been,
If not in presence, yet with heart and eye,
Genoa, and Naples, or the glistening towns
Which Arno laves! O Range of Apennines!
How clear athwart my vision dost thou come
Mid the elm-shadowed meads by Nenna's side,
Growing so real as oft to intercept
With purple line the tower of Fotheringay!
Thee would I celebrate in grateful verse,
Mindful of that most pregnant hour when I
Sat in the heart of Pisa on the quay,
The loitering Arno at my feet, and mused

Upon the manifold story of thy hills,
Heathen or Christian.

Ah ! how went the hours
With noiseless lapse amid thy balmy skirts
Of orange blossom, and the odorous breaths
From the warm fig-leaves steaming up thy sides,
Or in the lanes where on the Mayday morns
The gentle breeze brings down a snowy shower
Of flaky wool from off the poplar boughs,
Strewing their vernal fleeces on the ways ;
While in the pale green light of olive groves
The birds would sing unto the lispng sea
All through the drowsy noon, so like the eve
Is that soft foliaged twilight ; and for leagues
The eye enjoys with rapture unappeased
The constant presence of that Earthly Sky,
That Sea whose brightness has no adequate name !

How pleasant too, more oft than need required,
The rests upon some castellated steep,
Where the red broken ground might almost seem
Wet with the blood of Guelph or Ghibelline,
And there to muse upon the stirring past,
While to the haply lifted eye there came
Strange emblem of the present,—slope and field
And woodland, diverse kinds, all chained in one
With shackles of green vine, a sunny green
Jocund and bright as Italy herself
Wearing her chains in helpless happiness !
Sweetest, because most solemn, was the hour
When in the sanctuaries of the hills
The vesper bells from many a summit tolled
Or woody ledge, amid whose latticed leaves
The clambering stars went in and out, now lost,
Now launched upon the greenly glowing sky

Of those strange twilights, while the freshening breeze
Woke in the place and wrinkled here and there,
The mantle of umbrageous chestnuts thrown
Across thy ruddy limbs ; and, touching sight !
As by the Ave summoned up, the moon
Would oft surmount some darkling eminence,
And reign at once o'er all the silent glens !

Beautiful Mountains ! not for these your gifts,
Nor for the pageantries, far off or near,
Of light and shade upon your tinted sides,
Not for the name of Dante, though revered,
Nor for the secular chronicles which ye
Illuminate, much less for works of art
Too oft subservient to voluptuous ends,—
Not for all these I fain would ornament
My verse with you, illustrious Apennines !

Hills of the Saints ! though haply ye may mate
In gifts of natural beauty with the heights
Of the whole world,—in this, more beautiful
That ye have been more sanctified ; and crowned
With a peculiar light and set apart,
A western Palestine, by mighty deeds
Of faith, and that your blue and shadowy dells
Are with miraculous presences endowed
In wild strange-featured places. In your caves
Marvellous legends have been localized
Of rescues, and of apparitions seen,
Our Lady or the Saints ; and mid your folds,
Where the scant chestnut screens not from the sun
The shining waste of stones, lies buried deep,
Untravelled still, the Preternatural Land,
The famous Umbria in eternal shades,
Umbria, the refuge of pure Christian Art
When Florence served false gods, the theatre

Of those Franciscan wonders which have stirred
With their seraphic tales the penitents
Of many an age, and cheered the godly poor.
Hills of a thousand sanctuaries ! to me
It is a consolation at this hour,
And on this unkept feast, exiled alas !
Amid the silent Alps, to think of you
Trembling amid the uproar of the bells,
Which shoot, twixt heaven and earth, one jubilant
thrill

From white Savona to the modest cape,
Which at Ugento dips into the sea,
And westward to the bright Calabrian shore
That smiles on Etna ; and uncounted prayers
Mount with the sunrise from your steeped heights,
While, in her bays beneath, the Midland Sea
Shakes off the mists of night, and with her waves
Kisses your naked feet, in sign of love,
And worships Heaven with her elysian calm.
Fair Genoa hears, and answers from her strand,
And Florence hears, and Pisa, and the streets
Of old Bologna, and the Sienese
Join in the service, and the wild wind wafts
O'er the torn sides of Radicofani
The growing echo, while the mystic Dome
Above the broad campagna's yellow waste
Shines like a beacon, to the keen-edged heights
Of far Abruzzo ; and Apulia learns
Her faith and worship from thy many arms
Which compass her about : and then, sweet Hills !
Not now alone, but for long years to come,
If years be mine, one image shall enrich
My evening solitude, that peaceful scene
The monks on Mount Carotta may behold

Close in the shaded east, not hard to see
What time the sun hath sunk, for those who place
A rock between the glory and themselves—
Where from between two streams Loreto looks
O'er the smooth Adrian, and the swinging bell
Soothes many a sea-borne voyager, as once
That sacred promontory soothed myself,
Sailing beneath unto the ports of Greece
One starlit eve!

From Umbria's spectral woods
Was that Itinerant Monk, who far and wide
Preached with a hardy zeal in many a tongue
To the rich abbeys that had now relaxed
Their Founder's obligations; for he felt,
And as a rule acknowledged in his heart,
The pressure of the times in which he lived,
When men, both high and low, had such respect
Unto their fellows, that in every act,
Oft touchingly developed, we behold
Their sense of that lay-priesthood which compels
The Christian to communicate his good,
Yet, honouring not their impulse as a law,
Sought for the sanction of the Church to speak:
And Potentates and Peers rejoiced to die
Clad in Franciscan habits, not as though
The holy garb could stand them in the stead
Of holy hearts, nor with an ignorant hope
Of entering Heaven beneath a Church disguise,—
But by this protestation to declare
More notably unto the world, how death
Cancelled their former estimate of good.

In Calder's humid vale for many a week
That wandering Preacher rested, and he heard
Full oft at noon, when silence was relaxed,

(The slumber of hot climes not needed there,
But recreating converse in its stead)
Some novel surmise canvassed by the monks
About the nameless Leper, and, the day
Ere his departure, sued the abbot's leave
To speak in secret with the unknown man,
Which he with much entreaty hardly gained.
Sir Lancelot lay that evening on his bed,
While the weak splendours of the setting sun
Fell on his wasted countenance, nor annoyed,
So impotent the beams, his half-closed eyes.
In prayer or prayer-like thought immersed, the
Knight

Perceived not when the gently opened door
Closed on the Preacher, till the silent Monk,
Crossing himself, stepped forward from the shade
And stood between the window and the couch,
So that his obscure features and his head,
Transfigured in the misty sunbeam, seemed
As some appearance not of common sort,
But with a glory circled, like the Saints
For works of love remanded to the earth.
The doubtful Knight, surprised, yet all composed,
Like a sick man when in his ear you tell
Some stirring news of earth, whose littleness
His soul in its long sufferings hath outgrown,—
Demanded of the speechless Figure, whence
He came, and for what end: and in a tone
Of tremulous sweetness, most unlike the voice
Before which Chapters quaked and Mitred Heads,
The holy Preacher thus addressed the Knight.

Sir Lancelot! the currents of our lives
Now for the third time cross, and for the last.
Ask not my name; enough that I can show

There have been passages betwixt us, such
As well may breed implicit trust in both,
And warrant open speech. Be it allowed
That I in brief resume your former years,
Not in their acts, but in the hidden course
Which they have run, and windings they have known.
There is a mercy in past sins which thou
Beyond most other men hast proved;—in this
The whole interpretation of the life
Of an Unstable Will is mostly found.
Thy one great mortal sin hath been thy shield,
By forcing lowliness upon thy soul,
Hatred of self, and penitential acts
Which in the shape of doctrine found no room,
No entrance gained in thy too happy heart.
The abundance of materials for good
Threaten perdition to a soul, unfixed
And unsustained by weight of outward griefs
Or bodily pain: a nature well may be
Too fertile in its tendencies to good,
And therein find its evil: conscience lives,
And rules in freedom, rather where the Will
Is single, and in steadiness of aim
And unity of inclination finds
The difficult balance on whose tremulous edge,
Safe as the hills, she sets her quiet throne.
And this thou wilt interpret to thyself
From out the mixed experience of the past.

In all thine acts, from boyhood to the strength
Of thy maturer years and solid strife,
This problem was thy trial—to admit
In those great matters that concern thy peace,
That to be Safe was better than to risk
Security and all thy Former Good

To attain a Possible Height : that Good itself
Grows to be Best, but only comes thereto
Through Growth which is a natural sacrament,
And has the blessing by exclusive right ;
And, finally, that Change is such an ill,
That they who scorn the appointed path of Growth,
Put all the past away, and take by storm
The fortress of perfection, either find
An empty citadel of gilded clouds,
Or in the leap from earth to heaven, by Change
Are overweighed, as by a counterpoise,
And so are lost in sin, which as a sea
Flows between Good and Best. Have not thy falls
Been just so frequent as thy vain attempts,
Upon the pinions buoyed of weak self-will,
To cross that sea and miss the tottering bridge
Of slow Attainments and of daily Acts,
Whose ends are held by Angels, and whose chains
Vibrate amid the storms, but cannot fail ?

No more of this : thy days are numbered now,
But, to the last, keep close before thy thoughts
That opposite wisdom, in neglect of which
Thy former life was moulded and so failed—
That he, who, whether in the shape of sin
Or of attainment, cuts the past away,
And drifts before his time upon the sea
Of Heavenly Mercy, enters on a voyage
Unnamed, unknown amid the elder Saints.
God's Mercy is around thee, like a deep ;
Enough for thee the prospect of it now ;
That prospect is a promise : to the rash
There is no sea which hath so many storms !

Sir Knight ! we have encountered twice before,
Twice when thy life was turning on the hinge

Of Good or Ill! Rememberest thou the day
When first we met?—my face is haply changed,
But I have vouchers thou wilt recognize.
Where two roads join, not far from mighty Rome,
We hailed each other, both in mutual need
Of some companion better than our thoughts
Then were; thou from Viterbo cam'st, and I
From Bracciano, bearing in my arms
An image of our Lady: 'twas a day
Of most uncheerful kind; Soracte stood
Half veiled, and o'er that mournful plain the clouds
Hung like a level pall, whose murky folds
There was no wind to ruffle. When we came
Unto the guard-house by the Milvian bridge
The soldiers jested on my habit; one
With impious wit refused to lift the chain,
Demanding toll for three, since though I bore
The Image in mine arms, it was a third,
And Rome was over-peopled in that way.
Stung by the cowardice that thus could vent
Its wanton insults on a helpless Monk,
Thou didst, albeit without thy gauntlets on,
Strike the rude Roman down, and his compeers
Stood silent by, with one safe act content,
Keeping the barrier latched to intercept
Our further progress; and I noted well
Thy tranquil words in that exciting hour;—
“Brother!” thou saidst, “'twere better to return;
Some little increase of the way is not
Much hardship to a Soldier or a Monk;
To me it matters not; and in good sooth
It were a better omen to thyself,
Thus barred from entering by the People's Gate,
To choose the Gate of Angels.” And forthwith,

Under the shadow of the Marian Mount,
Skirting the Tyber, we addressed our steps
Unto the Saxon suburb of great Rome.

Slowly we walked, for we were weary ; thou,
By serious converse didst beguile the way,
Relating how that some few days ago
Thou wouldst not for a monk have interfered
With soldier's sport, believing that we were
A dissolute and indulgent race, whose time
Was shared 'twixt sluggish idleness and feast.
But at Viterbo, stopped outside the gate
Which looks towards Bolsena, because the hour
Of midnight then was passed, upon the turf
Pacing in self-defence against the cold,
Thou heardst the monks within the city walls
Chanting their midnight psalms, and it was sweet,
And soothed thy weariness, and thou didst vow
A vow 'gainst thine uncharitable thoughts,
If thou shouldst haply light upon a monk
In some distress to rescue him, a vow
Which gave thee but brief credit : in reply
I told thee that in lieu of empty thanks
I rather would exhort thee to be strong
In all good purposes, for at that hour
Some mercy might be near thee, so assured
From my past life was I of this sweet truth ;—
A good deed is a prophecy of good
To him who does it,—little deeming then
That in an hour that prophecy should reap
So bounteous a fulfilment ! There are times
When with accumulated impulse life
Springs forward suddenly, and overshoots
The counted hours of time : and we were then
In one of those swift seasons. By such talk,

And by the Tyber fretting on its shore,
Which called to mind the lapping of thy lake
Of Kentmere mid its dry autumnal reeds,
Thy heart was softened, and in penitent mood
Thou sankest down abruptly on thy knees,
Confessing that to do a mortal sin
And not for prayer or pilgrimage, thou cam'st
Unto that Holy City. 'Twas an hour
Of joy that had no easier vent than tears,
When mid the rain, which then fell heavily,
Beneath the shelter of the ilex boughs
Thou mad'st a full confession of thy life
Humbly upon thy knees: the dripping rain
Which came on thy bare head and trickled down
Thy face, methought it was the fluent drops
Of Baptism coming into thee once more
By penance fetched from Heaven; and when we left
That ilex by the milestone, we beheld
The clouds dispart; and Rome's innumerable towers,
Like a transfigured city, seemed to smile
Upon the penitent who now drew nigh
In martial guise, but with a pilgrim's heart.
And both, the Popular Entrance roughly barred,
Entered the City by the Angels' Gate
Beneath the very shadow of the Shrine!

Sir Lancelot! it boots not to describe
Our second meeting, when it was, or how;
Enough that I was with thee once again
When thy good Angel overtook thee, clothed
In his most favourite guise, some wandering form
Of thy lost childhood, in a trivial sign
Invested, when from o'er the low stone wall,
Which fenced the lawn, thou saw'st the bright blue
line

Of noiseless wind move down the silver lake,
And with a slow encroachment steal away
The unruffled surface, till the drowsy trees
Flung off the weight of noon, the willow branch
Scattered the tinkling drops from off its sprays,
And the crisp foliage of the poplar boughs
Shook out its vocal leaves; and in that wind
Came Memory and thine Angel. By his help,
And with some poor suggestions from myself,
Thou wert permitted to retrieve the good
Which from thy fickle purpose had escaped.
Thou wilt remember well the time and place,
When thou wert hid, in opportune retreat,
Deep in the woody shore where huge Mont Blanc
Looks o'er the slopes of Savoy, and the spears
Of his invisible guards, uplifted high,
Glance through the quivering mist as though they
were

In actual motion on the long white wall,
And vacillating with the lazy tread
Of weary sentinels: and that same eve
Recovering from the sickness of thy thoughts,
Thou wilt remember with what fretful pace,
As though eye-stricken by the curious crowd,
In thy distempered fancy, thou didst thread,
The alleys of the purse-proud town that keeps
The outlets of the impatient Rhone, and sat'st
Upon the ramparts facing the Saleve,
Whose white-ribbed precipice the setting sun
Feebly ensanguined, while beneath thy feet
A lonely bell-frog from the reedy fosse
Rang his distinct and melancholy fall,
Not harshly, to thy travel-wearied mind
Most soothingly attuned.

Thy days are now
Fast coming to a close, yet do not fear ;
By this disease shall death no access gain,
But in a calm and very silent hour
Thou shalt do battle with him, and prevail.

Long years ago it chanced that I was sent,
A Novice in our Order, to attend
The sufferers in a lazar-house, then filled
With lepers like thyself ; and when I saw
The strange appearance and the loathsome marks
Of that disease, I turned my back and fled,
And in my haste a wooden Crucifix
Fell from my hands, and broke upon the ground.
For this fastidious weakness I imposed
Austerest penance on myself, and vowed
If I, by such a chance as well might wear
The aspect of Divine Intention, found
A leper near me, I would kiss his sores
In honour of the charity of Christ :
And whether for temptation of my pride,
Or as a guerdon for my vow, it so hath been
That ever from the hour of my embrace
The sickness hath begun to disappear.
And therefore, Brother ! I embrace thee now
As freely as I would a rosy child,
In expiation of my former sin,
And honour of the charity of Christ !

The shaded face, the uncertain stream of words,
The quiet agitation of his voice,
The clasping arms, the glory-circled head—
Was all a bodiless vision ? Was that form
A creature of the sunbeam that had passed,
And which had faded with the fading light ?
So like a silent-footed shadow came

The unlooked-for Apparition, so it went
As though it melted with the sinking ray.
And then the piping of the blackbirds grew
With such a gradual increase on his ear,
That, like a river whose far sound we lose,
Yet so recover that it does not seem
To suffer interruption, those sweet songs
So brought his former to his present thoughts,
That they o'erflowed the interval between.
Then was it all the sick man's phantasy ?
O no ! the pressure of the Monk's embrace
Still glowed upon him ; still the fervid kiss
Felt like a seal upon his leprous brow.

Sir Lancelot slept, and in his sleep he dreamed ;
Upon the darkness of the night he saw
Within an oval ring of cherubs' heads
The Blessed Mother with her Holy Child.
All mortal she appeared, and with a mien
Of very gracious woe, or wistful joy
Which rises from unconsummated hopes,
And is itself a suffering, such as might
Have been her aspect, when upon the Child
She gazed and gazed, as old Saint Simeon spake.
So to Sir Lancelot's eyes she was vouchsafed.
She, stooping from the luminous cincture, placed
Her radiant Burden in his outstretched arms :
And all was dark that moment to his sight,
Dark as the darkness after lightning, when
No thunder occupies the other sense
To throw the vision off its rigid guard.

But from the time of that Embrace, each day
The vigour of his blood returned, and drove
The leprosy before it ; and each night
The Vision was vouchsafed unto his eyes ;

And, as the Saviour's Infancy had been
An inward balm of slow distilling thoughts,
Which were a medicine to his failing heart,
So now the nightly visit of the Dream
Infused into his slumber such a peace,
That Night and Day seemed rivals in the work
Of restoration, and with emulous speed
Toiled for each other, till in nine short days,
Emancipated from his gloomy cell,
He was once more allowed the inspiring joy
Of outward sunshine and the earth's green face.

There is a cloister by the river side,
A cloister of thin pillared trees which stand
So close they hinder one another's growth ;
And up the branchless stems the sallow moss
Encroaches yearly, and across the stream
The dull red rocks with dripping cowls of weed
O'erhang that belt of wood : and O how fair
From out the covert seem the brilliant meads
And quiet abbey, when the setting sun,
Piercing the silent shades, comes unawares
Through the green leaves, and many a scattered
trunk

Is fluted with the transitory gold.

There many an hour Sir Lancelot enjoyed
The cautious happiness, as of a child
Forgiven, that timorous buoyancy which springs
In the tamed spirit of a man released
From the sick-room, who slowly gathering strength,
Lives in the partial liberty of hope,
With senses through his bodily weakness brought
In unconstrained subjection to his soul,
And mind sufficiently above the world
To be at peace therewith. The voices borne

From out the village hostelry hard by,
The sportive cries of children on the bridge,
The sounds of human labour faint and far,
The evening thrush, the dashing of the stream,
The almost silent gambols of the hares
In the tall grass,—these were his simple joys
Which called him not to lift his downcast eyes
From the brown path; for in his feeble state—
Sick men full oft have proved it to themselves,
And old men too—sound was to him far more
Than sight, as being more passively received.

Along that sounding cloister once again
He passed unto his little hermitage.
There was the mystic vale,—the broken crest
Of that dull mountain, and the blended sounds
Of earth and sea, wild birds and bleating flocks,
The pale green grass, and tightly-rooted ferns :—
All was the same, and were it not that he
Was conscious of a change, the past might seem
The sicknesses we suffer, or the deaths
We die, when in the tyrannous embrace
Of those mysterious panics of the night,
The penal dreams which follow careless days,
As if, alas ! we were already judged,
And that our doom was of eternal woe,—
Colossal fears, which come to cleanse the soul,
And scare it deeper down into itself.

SIR LANCELOT.

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BOOK VIII.

THE CONFESSION.

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THE CONFESSION.

YET once again the rudder of my song
I turn, and seek, not easily found out,
Our Lady's ancient shrine in Frudernesse.
No stag that hears the hunting-horn from far
Lies closer in his lair than did that pile
Shrink from the roving eye of hungry Scot.
Wave after wave of treeless slopes, all blithe
With yellow corn, stretched like a swelling sea
From gulf to gulf across that tongue of land
In billows of red soil that eastward dipped,
Flowing towards Morecambe Bay; and keen the
sight

That o'er those ridges looked nor overshot
That sunken trough, though by a tremulous vein
Of waving tree-tops partially betrayed.
There the Cistercian Abbey lies, embowered
In hanging groves, the view this way and that
Impeded by a folding screen of hills;
Only, where prayer must go, the eye might range
A tract of clear uninterrupted sky.

Once was that hollow dell a censer sweet
From which the sacrifice of faith and hope
And love, expressed in ritual acts divine,
In one continuous column rose to Heaven.
But now, a vulgar desolation left,
The weedy and dismantled ruin stands

A trophy, for there be who boast it so,
Round which the newly-fashioned faith may sing
Its proud idolatrous pæans, with such space
Of summer silence intervening there
As may suffice for sad and pensive hearts
To pray and weep within the broken choir,
And through devout regrets to learn the worth
Of ancient creeds, and so, by grace inspired
And with a blessing furthered, then assist
To overturn that worship which enthrones
The formal understanding in the room
Of faith profound and pure adoring love,
And with a well-contrived insertion slides
Between the sinner and the Cross a form
Of base will-worship; while in these our times
The native wants of humankind, the thirst
Of pining souls, the joyless solitude
Of craving conscience, and the painful cry
Of reason now collapsing on itself,—
All, by the grace of God, this creed outgrow,
This miserable pageant of untruth,
Feeble with three poor centuries of age.

The Vale of Nightshade was that hollow named,
The Bekansgill, amid whose poison-plants
The name of Mary, like the silent breath
From off the lily beds, imported there
Took sweet possession of the woody glen.
And in the frosty starlight, and the dawn
Of vernal days, and summer's lingering eve,
And when the storms were launched from Furness
Fells

On the vast ocean, threatening as they went,
Or when the low depending sky wept tears,
Or clung in tearful mist upon the woods

Rank with the drowsy breath of hemlock flowers,
Still, in a tide of service mounting up
To Pentecost, and falling sweetly off,
Dispersed on unmemorial weeks and days,
Till Advent heads the pilgrim year once more,
There rose the sedulous voice of holy prayer,
The silent praise of contemplative faith,
And—man's best offering to the Eye of Heaven,
Sole evidence of spiritual growth,—
The secret course of meek self-sacrifice.

How gently summer hath possessed herself
Of all the quiet being of the place !
Here do I lie within the roofless nave,
With no self-blame, while joining humbler thoughts
And lesser recollections with regrets
That from a higher and holier source proceed,
And momentary humours of despair,
Which end by breathing more courageous hopes,
Inwardly felt, of better things to come,
And sweet retrievals won through perilous change,
The present hazarding in hope to find
Foundation for the future, and outdo,—
Faith brooks not fear—the whole magnificent Past !

Yon pelletey, that in silken tufts
Innumerable, with glossy leaf and flower
Of sanguine purple, from the chink protrudes,
And sucks medicinal virtue from the stones,
May school the meditative heart to find
Meet nutriment of moral import here,
Where nature with her placid beauty clothes
The sin of man, and time, while he unveils
His melancholy features to the light
In spots like these, yet smooths his lineaments
To grace, lest thought that came to learn should steal

Affrighted from the presence of the sage.

Mingled with such reflections, personal thoughts
From these memorial ruins spring, grave joys
Of friendship plighted here in dreamy youth,
Which is not surely changed nor passed away,
Though in affectionate sallies less delighting,
And in wild sport, by growing breadth of years
Discountenanced! Those alders by the rill,
Which, brother-like, incline their mossy trunks
Upon each other, and that orchard plot
With crippled ranks of old and leaning trees,
With chaste and waxen applebloom besprent,
The tall rank sward that grows beneath their boughs,
The subterraneous tinkling of the brook,
The dull dark tufts of flowerless daffodil
That with their green mosaic pave the door
Of the antique chapter-house,—all seem to me
But images transplanted from a dream,
Themselves scarce real even where they stand;—
Yea, from that dream transferred, when the outer
world,
Its doing and its suffering, were as nought,
And our impassioned lives were proud to steer
A course apart, and friendship, like a fount
Cool-eyed and chaste, perennial sweetness gave
Without satiety; and, happiness
Being, without some want, insensible,
There rose for its completion in the soul
A hunger to be more and more beloved,
A famine that resolved to be unfilled,
Lest the bright plenty among which it dwelt
Should seem less bright, when satisfaction dulled
The sharpness of that exquisite desire.
There mid the peace and old familiar forms

Of that mute hollow, in whose weedy crypts
Time with a faltering purpose lingers now,
Enamoured of the beauty of his work,
Which more elaborate touch will only spoil,
Must I divert the channel of my song,
Even now too much arrested in its course,
While I have wandered up and down to cull
These pleasant recollections of my youth,
And from my purpose innocently strayed.

'Twas noonday on Black Combe ; Sir Lancelot
Was praying on the summit of the hill :
And thither came a pious Bernardin
From out of Furness, by the Abbot sent
With message brief but full of peace and joy.
Within the glen, upon the mountain-top,
The Church with pleased solicitude had kept
Her eye upon the separated man ;
And now the Legate had transmitted powers
By which the Penitent might be received
Once more within the pale of Holy Church.
Such were the tidings, by Sir Lancelot heard
With wonder and submissive thankfulness.

Long time he prayed to God, long time he wept,
And kissed the earth of that lone mountain-top ;
While, with contagious impulse sinking down,
The Bernardin both wept and prayed with him ;
Till in that wild and solitary place,
Sweet foretaste of communion with his kind,
The Monk embraced the Penitent, and, love
Outrunning forms, bestowed the kiss of peace.

Within St. Mary's Chapter-house the Knight
Met with that famous Abbot, Hugh de Bron,
By him saluted with grave kindness ;
And at the feet of that most holy man,

Throughout the wide Cistercian world revered,
Kneeling in penitential guise, he told
With many a pause, and most circuitous speech,
As is the wont of solitary men,
His sinful deeds, and his confession thus,
Half history and half confession, made.

O Man of God! I pray thee, hearken now ;
My tale can tell in what unthought-of ways,
And with what travail, Christ's Almighty Love
Goes out into the Babel of the world
All day and night in quest of erring souls.
Father! to me the cause of mortal sin
Was briefly this : I had been wronged in love,
A wrong which more than fathomed all the depths
Of natural forbearance, and might strain
The love, divinely tempered, of the Saints.
But what, in such a holy place as this,
Imports the mention of terrestrial love ?
The injury was another's sin, not mine ;
Therefore in my confession claims no place.
And, truth to say, so many years have past
Since from the depths of memory mortal love
Hath risen in tangible disguise of words
Upon my spirit, that I scarce could clothe
That early passion in a fitting style,
Or with accoutrement of current phrase.
Enough that I was wronged, that for that wrong,
Not for the love of Christ, I sought the East,
And through the recklessness I had of life
Was eminent in fight above my peers.

The storm of sacred war then lulled awhile,
I went in search of venturous enterprise,
Martial or politic, as chanced to come,
Among the Latin principalities

Which were as islands in the troubled East.
And in my lonely travel oft I nursed
My wrong, and diligently kept awake
The thought of vengeance ; though in early years,
Earlier than youth, good Father ! I had been
Touched with the sweetness of celestial grace,
And would have sought a cloister, had not love
Caused me to swerve from that design. Yet soon,
In lonely hazard and long journeys tried,
I felt as if that earlier stream of grace
Was being unsealed far down within my heart,—
Hopes which a sudden chance, or rather plot
Of evil powers allowed, too soon dispersed,
Temptation coming ere my soul was winged
For flight, and so was caught within the nest
Unfledged :—with that temptation will I now
Commence.

From Tarsus round the lovely bay,
Up which the eastern horn of Cyprus points,
I journeyed slowly ; every week and month
Deepened the love of nature in my heart,
Which seemed, like some angelic pioneer,
Preparing the fresh path of grace divine,
Softening the flinty rocks with gentleness
That sapped all stubborn thoughts, all base desires,
And bridging those dark chasms, which former sin,
Like a wild earthquake, rent within the soul,
By rainbows o'er whose braided arch new hopes
Went on their way, as if on solid ground.

In truth there is a sad congruity
Between the landscape and the fate of those
Exhausted realms ;—a wild and touching waste
Of sweetness, and a languid colouring.
A pensive air of pastoral loneliness,

With a monotony of change, through sun
And moon or by the infrequent shower conferred.
The pale green plains lie stretched in radiant mist,
Diversified, one knows not how, and cheered
By softness, almost mournful, of the lights
And shades which chronicle the morn and eve,
The summer and the winter, of those lands;—
Regions of dappled shadow far outspread,
Thrown from the mute procession of the clouds,
Or by the slanting sun from caps of hill
Projected, or historic barrows green,
Or our own horses, dimly magnified,
Reflected over many a rood of sward!
And, if we lie upon the ground to sleep,
How strangely o'er the surface of the earth
There comes a floating sound, a homeless voice,
Low as the creaking of a sullen moss,
From the crisp browsing of the countless herds
For a wide circuit round, by thrilling breeze
Or happy sound of labour undispersed!

And yet not unrelieved these pallid wastes
By gentler or more stirring prospect: oft
A range of olive-spotted slope is seen,
Like tented camp of Arabs, and as black
As the cold sea beneath a thundercloud,
But now and then by momentary winds
Quickened and driven in silver-twinkling waves;—
Lone straggled palms with knotted and ruined stems
Leaning or straight, the poplars of the East,
So would I name them, giving to the view
Its salient points, and sky-ward shooting spires
Mosque-like, with slight o'erhanging cupolas,
Partitioning the landscape here and there,
Grateful relief unto the gazing eye,

Like our tall-foliaged pillars of the West,
Most beautiful but shadow-grudging trees :—
A floating dome of flat-topped pines far off,
An underwood of shrubs that drop sweet gums,
A pool obscure within a formal blind
Of lentisk, or with crimson eyelids closed
Of oleander,—each for lack of change,
Is noted as a feature in the scene,
And gives perchance a date unto the day.
And oft a fallen column freshens thought,
With flutings tightly clothed in yellow rust,
And tufts of thyme are sheltered by its bulk
And grow more tall than elsewhere, and the screen
Of its broad shaft the lazy tortoise loves,
And the green lizard with its throbbing pulse
Sleeps in the heated marble grooves all day.

Marvel not, holy father, that I speak
In this calm way of nature's tranquil scenes,
And local adjuncts on my memory worn
By lapse of years, though now the narrative
Is trembling on the threshold of my crime.
My faltering tongue, reluctant to advance,
Like urchins who forget their tasks, repeats
And lingers on its words, as loath to leave
That Asiatic landscape, where it quits
The innocent sunshine of my life for ever.
The horror and amazement of fresh guilt
Have passed long since, and in the quiet depths
Of my collected conscience I discern
My sin tenfold more hateful than before.
Yet, through the usage of my thoughts, that act
Disturbs not now the adjacent memories.

O father, terrible are those fierce hours,
When our whole lives into one damning sin,

One palpable spot of blackness, are confused,
O'erwhelmed with a monotonous wretchedness,
Where sorrow, tears, and prayers, aye even remorse,
Are suffocated in the heart by blind
And general anguish; and our mortal hopes,
Those vitals of the soul, are by despair
Held under water till they perish. Oh
How oft would I have wooed those hours once more
With hearty choice, so much less terrible
Than the self-recollection which ensued!
Father! the fast and vigil, midnight prayer
And hymn at sunrise, which make up thy life,
Are mysteries far too pure to teach thee how
To fathom that abyss of mortal sin.

Penance for slighted fast, or ill-said Hours,
For broken silence, contumacious word
Against the holy Abbot ere thyself
Wert raised to that high office,—these can give
No guage to measure penance such as mine.

Fearful, I say, as were those desperate hours
When blood was wet upon me—Oh my God!
What infinite, insufferable curse
The purity of Thy dread Presence seemed,
When by degrees the vapours of my soul,
The exhalations of my conscience, grew,
Self-gathered, into one consistent orb,
One tangible and separate shade, from which
The speed of phrensied thought could never clear me,
Nor would it overshoot me if I lagged!
Behind. Ah! then it was, and not till then
My sin became my persecutor. Monk!
My penance hath not been in loneliness,
In the abhorrence of my kind, in want
Of the best consolations of our faith,—

But in the singleness of all my thoughts,
The concentration of my harassed mind
Upon one frightful action, and the strain
Of an unshifting pressure so intense
It is a miracle, of purpose wrought
Perchance as penal, reason hath not cracked
Beneath the agonizing tension; this,
Yea, this hath been the intolerable curse,
To be from my own nature thus outlawed
Into the solitude of one dark thought.
The excommunication of the Church,
If this world only measured its results,
But feebly shadows forth the length and breadth
Of that abiding and familiar hell,
Which for some years of sojourn in the East
Was nourished like a loathsome bird of prey
Upon my life of lacerated thought.

But pardon me—I wander from my tale,
And it behoves that thou shouldst hear the end.
Amid such scenes and after such a day
As those of which I spoke—ah! I remember—
A marble column prostrate, and encased
In pale discolouring of saffron rust,
And a green lizard sleeping in the grooves
With sensual enjoyment of the heat,
And with a little pulse that would outstrip
The notes of nightingales for speed—even that
Was the last image of serenity
Impressed upon my mind by earth and air,
Responded to by inward happiness.

I rode towards Antioch on that summer eve;
Nigh to the column with a sudden swerve
The road bore to the left; for half a league
Straight o'er an odorous level it was stretched

Like a blue thread, a level carpeted
With pink-eyed thyme and with a pale green turf,
All blent and intermingled in their hues,
Each muffling each, as though with sweet design.
Then o'er a hill, with golden cytissus
And brittle cactus overgrown, I passed,
And thence I could discern a glistering light
Far o'er the plain, which might or might not be
The domes of Antioch : now with steep descent
The hill dropped down into a cedarn glade,
With murmurs from an unseen river filled.

Heaven is my witness not a single thought
Detached from that exciting prospect round
Rose in my heart, no bitterness of love,
No keen awakening of my ancient wrongs.
Amid the foliage, answering to the breeze
With dusky dipping fans, I watched with joy
Patches of sunset gold which wandered on
From stem to stem, like creatures made of light.
When, thus illuminated, I beheld,
Asleep, alone, among some knotted roots,
Ethilda's foster-brother, Athelstan,
The puny stripling whose effeminate grace
And most unknighly book-lore she preferred
To me whose brow was swart with martial toils,
And whose rough wisdom was acquired in camps,
In travel, in the falsehood of a court,
And masculine encounter with the world.

To a snapped bough of cedar did I tie
My weary horse, and stole to where he slept.
I vow there was no thought of dark revenge
Inciting me—for he had wronged me not,
The wrong was hers ;—but curious impulse, joined
With fascination, as I now perceive,

And a foul tempting motion, led me on.
And there he lay, a seeming boy in years,
With limbs by far too delicate to wear
Aught but a silken doublet and soft hose,
In lieu of steel accoutrements: his head
Was pillowed on the convex of his shield;
His flaxen hair was ruffled by the wind.
He looked a child who now was sleeping off
The weariness of play; and kindliness
Might move me rather to set forth to seek
His horse which strayed somewhere about the wood,
Lest I should see him weeping when he woke.

Then a chance sunbeam passed upon his face:
He stirred not, but he smiled as if the light
Wove itself in the texture of his dreams:
He must have had the conscience of a child!
I took my fill of gazing on the youth;
And then the forced confession which I made
Unto myself that he was beautiful,
And for his very beauty could have loved him
Even as a brother, goaded my hot heart
To bitterness and rage; it was a joy
Then to recall how I had hated him:
And memory, by some marvellous influence helped,
Some strange possession, did accumulate
The past so vehemently on that point
Of present time, so darkly magnified
The frightful opportunity, that I—
In sooth his beauty stirred me to it first—
Slew—murdered—butchered him, alone, asleep,
Unhelmed, and with his beauty pleading for him
O so eloquently!—caitiff that I was,
No knight, I slew him as I would not slay
A godless Saracen in open field.

Father! his soul passed very easily,—
Like a young child's, who is but born to pay
His debt of death within an hour: so well
He made surrender of his innocence
Unto his Maker, passing from his sleep
Into the sweet tranquillity of death.
I saw him die—O can my guilty soul
Be disencumbered peacefully as his?—
A marvellous gentle passage! there I gazed;
My deed had utterly disarmed my heart.
He rolled once round and buried his pale face
In the soft earth, moaned once, and strove to clasp
His nerveless hands in attitude of prayer;
Then with an effort turned upon his back,
And crossed his hands upon his breast in sign
Of faith which persevered unto the last.
I watched him from behind a cedar trunk:
Whose hand it was that dealt the guilty blow
He never knew.

O father! human words
Here sink beneath the burden of my tale.
That hour—the horror of that hour—but list!
I will relate it as I can. I gazed
Upon my victim, dead, quite stark and dead,
But, save some stains upon his cheek acquired
When he convulsively embraced the earth,
His whole appearance was of one who slept,
His beauty pale, a smile upon his face,
As though, in the most calm solemnity
Of that last passage, there had come to him
A sweet glimpse onwards, an unearthly smile,
The attractive welcome upon dead men's lips
Greeting perchance some fair angelic sight
Then drawing near,—so mystical the smile!

Father ! what I shall say may seem too strange
By one of guileless ways to be believed.
There is a mental surge within the heart
Of one just fresh from some atrocious crime,
Inspiring as sights of stormy sea,
And breeding in the hour of recent guilt,
If not a joy, yet a bewilderment
Not far from joy, wherewith the soul is flown
With sin, as men in search of reckless thought
Are flown with wine, and have some happiness
In mere oblivious stupor of the heart,
Or gaiety insane : and even the sound,
The strife, the passionate tumult of the mind
Can minister relief, and by the time
That the excitement of the sin cools down,
The fact hath grown familiar to our thoughts,
And therefore is less terrible by half.

But I had no such lot : my jealous hate,
Whose sudden impulse drove me to the crime,
Ebb'd out from every harbour of my thoughts,
From every secret fold within my heart,
With force as sudden as the influx was
When I was gazing at him in his sleep.
I had no refuge in excitement, no
Self-justifying passion, no remains
Of sin's original heat : my being was
With an amazing magic dispossessed
Before that beautiful dead face. Good Monk !
I doubt not thou hast known how oft the world
Within the heart of man doth stand rebuked
Before the stately presence of a corpse,
The spiritual magnificence of death :
How it casts out all worldliness, the lust
Of life and animal spirits, and can woo

Unto the surface of our feelings, thoughts,
And acts, whate'er within us may be found
Of goodness; such constraining sanctity
Flows from the tranquil vision of the dead.

I leaned against the cedar trunk, and gazed
On Athelstan: one little purple spot
Upon his bosom, where he had unbraced
His mail, was all the sign of violence.

And, as I gazed, my hatred was expelled
By love, yea, even by actual power of love
Exorcised,—love, not pity; for I glowed
With all the fervour of a living love.

But oh the agony of soul! the fire,
The scorching fire which that love was to me!
The worst enhancing of my wretchedness,
The last extremity of punishment,—
I loved him whom I murdered, and methinks
Cain's very burden were less hard to bear.

O wondrous transmutations of the soul,
Wondrous as sudden, incident to those,
And those alone, who with heroic deeds
Or crimes of giant stature have conversed!
How oft by you have Martyrs at the stake
Been visibly transfigured to the form
And look of Angels, while to me that night
The transformation of my rage to love
So operated as to be the flail
Of some new passion, fiercer than remorse,
Now to its awful function summoned up,
A demon without name, to make a scourge
Of my own damning thoughts, severer far
Than if 'twere braided of the fires of hell,
Wherein the bodily suffering might be—
So seemed it then to my most foolish thoughts—

Faint mitigation of the pangs of soul.

The night that followed—oh! how placidly
The moon rose up above the wilderness,
The bold expanse of sylvan solitude,
While the dead features grew obscure, a spot
Of ghostly whiteness on the dull brown earth!
Upon a point projecting from the hill
Halfway in the descent, I stood; and thence
How beautiful the aspect of the night,
Looking towards Antioch, whose far-gleaming spires
Twinkled, like stars surmounting the pale line
Of the horizon, or about to sink
Beneath! The cedars in steep terraced lines
One o'er the other into contact came,
With foliage shelving like a skilful roof
Of close continuous green all down the slope.
And in and out with dusky-flashing wings
The white owls sallied from the branching eaves,
And, disappointed with the clear midnight,
Screamed, and forthwith immured themselves again
Within the vaults of umbrage: far and wide
Thereon the silver darkness of the moon
With an ethereal paleness overspread
The silent sea of boughs, while at my feet,
Whither with momentary impulse fell
My fascinated eyes, young Athelstan
Lay stiffening in the dew, o'er-canopied
By sable cedars, most funereal trees,
Whose fits of dirgelike music were evoked
By calls of breezy air throughout the night.

Whether by sleep o'erpowered or gradual swoon
I know not, but the chill of dawning day
Aroused me lying by the rigid side
Of the pale corpse; and, slowly gathering thought,

I mustered one by one the horrid facts
Of the past night, till realizing all
I summed it up—I was a murderer,—
And the whole breadth of that tremendous word
Was then disclosed unto my dizzy sense,—
A dark blood-guilty spirit in the eye
Of the sweet sunrise,—on the odorous earth
Exiled from peace, another outcast Cain.
In the keen horror of my soul I shrieked,—
A long, loud, wailing scream of agony.
The unearthly sound, received into the wood,
Reverberated in the dim ravines,
And echoed wildly from the sun-touched crags,
While o'er the cedar tops at once there rose
A miserable murmur of cold wind,
Responsive, as it seemed, to the despair
Within my heart: so awfully it preached
That mercy was not, and all hope forsworn.

I rose and fled; the stricken antelope,
That from the arrow fixed within his side
Flies, as he deems, in blind direction urged
This way and that, scours not in worse dismay
The dewy woodland, or with wilder speed,
Than I now shot among the cedarn glades,
The sunny openings and the darksome groves,
With preternatural strength sustained, and spurred
By those intolerable thoughts which rung,
Like hunter's bugles in the affrighted ear
Of the poor beast, within my conscious soul,
A larum whose dread echo to this day,
By mercy somewhat muffled, vibrates still.
Yet was I destined never to outstrip
That vile intolerable self, from which
I ran: and yet the idle bodily act,

While it illustrated the inward mind,
No less relieved the agony ; I ran,
How long I know not, but until my foot
Was caught amid some snaky roots which rose
In treacherous moss, and to the earth I fell
Senseless ; my forehead dashed against a trunk
With scaly rind as hard as plates of mail,
And by my blood made ruddier than before.

When consciousness returned I found myself
Upon a pallet in an empty cave.
A screen of ancient cedars grew in front,
And pendulous before the entrance hung,—
A pleasant lattice, whose dusk umbrage threw
O'er all the spacious chambers of the rock
A tinted twilight of aerial green,
A gentle semi-lunar atmosphere ;
And then, although the sun had barely set,
Were visible in trimly ordered spires
The enwoven dances of the sparkling flies,
Which there, when day hath hardly died without,
Their nightly feast of lanterns celebrate.
And to the cave, with resonance subdued,
Vanquished with climbing up the woody height,
The muffled thunder of a double fall
Of foamy waters reached, an undersong
Slowly surmounting every other sound
As the night deepened, and the tingling earth
With all her voices into slumber sunk,
All save the jackal's cries, which overhead
Like plaining infants wearied the still air.

Parting the cedar boughs, which at my touch
Swung lightly on one side, I left the cave.
The paradise of Daphne lay around.
In front there was a cirque of emerald lawn,

With cypress fringed, whose motionless black spires
Seemed molten in the scintillating gold
And throbbing saffron of the western sky;
And tortuous paths of ruddy gravel glowed
With a coarse gilding mid the luminous green
Of wide-spread myrtles and old towering bays;
While down below, above the panting falls,
The oily waters glistened mid the boughs,
Like a marsh meteor creeping through the grove.
And on a lower shelf in laurel trees
Embowered, that might from Julian count their years,
Stood the half-ruined shrine of Babybas,
The Decian Martyr who erewhile repelled,
Bold as the Saint of Milan, from the doors
Of Antioch Church, the master of the world;
Whose holy relics in Cremona now
Are honoured by the faithful of the West.

O marvellous it was that night to see
The trickling moonlight sweetly overflow
Those hoary laurels, down from leaf to leaf
Dripping like noiseless rain, ascents and falls
And running tremours of fair light that seemed
Like pictured music, as when we behold
For hours, and wonder what defrauds the ear,
How Saint Cecilia's taper fingers sweep
With flying pressure the white twinkling keys,
Chanting her everlasting, silent psalm!

The loud clear voices of the singing birds
That trilled down every rock and cedar stem,
Before the sunrise, woke me in the cave:
And with a slow return upon my ear,
The water-fall resumed its soothing sound.
I stepped beyond the screen of fanlike boughs;
And for a moment, O how beautiful,

And how divinely calm the place appeared,—
The smile of expectation dimpling there
On leaf and stone, as veins of pearly light,
The out-runners of the morning, blanched the skies.
But swift the recollection of my sin
Rushed like a torrent back upon my thoughts,
And dashed the gentle sense of joy away.
Ah sinful world, and I of sinners worst,
How have ye marred the primal bliss of earth,
Since happiness a mournful-visaged power
Appears, when loveliest; and the winning charm
Of innocence and chastity consists
In unavenging weakness, while the thought
Of wrong, which in our mind accompanies
The vision of a pure and guileless man,
Invests with pitiful pathetic light
That innocence, acknowledged and beheld
Strong as the sunrise in the world above,
As though wrong were the inseparable shade
Of virtue, helpless foreigner on earth!

Now, from a cave hard by, an agèd man
Came forth, and greeted me with blunt address.
Stranger, said he, I saved thy life: thy steed,
Which from the cedar bough had broken loose,
By the west gate of Antioch foaming stood,
There recognized, and while debate was held
Among the guards, the jennet of the man
Thou slew'st came neighing to the self-same gate,
And riderless; the Latin knights who went
Into the forest on a mournful quest,
For so they deemed it, found thy bloody sword,
And knew it thine by graving on the hilt,
Near the cold corpse, dishonourably pierced
Where the cuirass had been unbraced for sleep.

And at this hour in Antioch's dungeons dark
Wouldst thou have been, abiding axe or wheel,
Had I not promptly brought thee to this cave,
Where jealously immured thou must remain
Awhile, though free of this sequestered lawn ;
For a rich price is set upon thy head.

I stood before him silent and dismayed
By those scant words, that bloodless summing up,
That frozen unimpassioned narrative,
With no reproach, no bitterness or scorn
Commingled ; such commingling would have been
Relief, and fortified endurance more.
And by the aspect of the man was I
No less amazed, than by his frigid speech.
His long thin hair was all of silvery white,
His back was bent with age, his lean left hand
Trembled with palsy, like a shivering leaf.
His brow and face were wrinkled o'er and o'er,
Dinted with lines of pain ; his bloodless skin
With a strange olive whiteness was o'erspread,
Like leprosy ; but on his sunken eyes
The power and brilliance of extremest youth
Were throned, in sleepless glances darting forth,
And with a fearful beauty, from their caves,
Deep in the head, o'er-ruling all the age
Of his wan lineaments ; and from his mouth,
Toothless and fallen in, came forth a voice
Tuneful and clear, with intonation firm
Yet flexible, most like the tones of one
Out-growing fast the service of the choir,
And domineering in the boyish chant.

Dreadful it was to gaze upon his face
And hear that voice come forth, so young, so sweet ;
As though a second spirit had possessed

That old and crippled frame, investing it
With double being,—a gaunt half-ruined cell,
From out whose fissures songlike oracles
With ringing clearness were for ever breathed.
And strange it was that those decrepid limbs,
That palsied hand, those numb and tottering feet,
Should have conveyed me thither in my swoon.
More like a dream-engendered shape he was
Than living man of mortal parentage ;
As though we had in some hot starting sleep,
Or stupor by the healing poisons wrought,
Beheld in feverish vision Youth and Age,
Two disembodied spirits, dimly fight
For some pale corpse which they would fain possess,
And each, alternately victorious, fill
The passive thing with cognizable life,
Now young, now old, or old and young at once.

I stood in awe and trembling, silence-bound,
While he, divining all my inward thought,
Answered my questioning eyes ;—I am the Jew,
The Wandering Ancient, through all centuries known,
Reluctant Pilgrim, tarrying on the earth ;
The startling shadow of whose life is cast
Across all generations of mankind ;
And this the witness of my destiny.
So saying, from out his vest of serge he drew
His strong right hand, with roseate flesh of youth
Well furnished, and full veins and agile nerves,
Which ill accorded with his shrunken wrist ;—
And for what cause, said he, my voice and eyes
And this bold hand with such immortal youth
And freshness bloom, I need not now recite ;
Methinks thy first conjecture scarce could fail
To unriddle that wide-blazoned mystery.

I am a wandering planet that might seem,
Save to that all-discerning Eye above,
Without an orbit, free to roam the skies
In desultory pilgrimage, self-willed,—
But that I feel a silent light wells out
For ever from my presence, so that men
Instinctively retreat before me, abashed,
Making my road a transient solitude
In populous cities or the throng of camps.
And thus I know that some mysterious law
Is hung discernibly about my life.
And once in every age my lonesome thoughts
Are by the hateful presence scourged anew
Of Christian fallen into mortal sin,
Who tortures me with Signs that rend my flesh,
Like the hot beaks of vultures, and by woe,
By self-abasement, and repenting tears,
One drop of which were cheaply bought by me
For all the world contains of gold or gems:
And while *my* sufferings are enhanced, *his* soul
Beneath the infliction of my presence wins
A penance I reluctantly accord,
And through a broken spirit meets with grace,
Demas was first, and thou art doomed the twelfth.

Seven years I dwelt, seven years of length untold,
Unspeakable, of life precipitate,
Crowded experience, savage wanderings,
Successions of unnatural toils, compressed
In those few dismal moons,—seven mortal years
Of expiatory sojourn with the Jew.
Solemn it was to see the mystic lot
Of the dark homeless people gathered up
And hung upon that single living type.
Stirring or still, before his sleepless eyes,

Stood the most heavenly Vision of a Face,
Such as doth nightly haunt the troubled dreams,
Or desolate misgivings in the day,
Of the poor Hebrew nation, which even now
Floats like a buoyant wreck that cannot sink
Upon the surface of the awe-struck world,
Paynim or Christian: a dread Vision too,
The Guiltless whom they nailed upon the Cross,
Which they who gaze on, in deep love or hate,
Endure the one affection in their souls
Deathless; as on the Wanderer's eyes it forced
Constrained acceptance of a joyless youth.
And evermore the Personal Vision gained
Vivid similitude the more intense
As years were heaped upon him, till it grew
Like forms conglobed within the lurid heart
Of the black thunder-storm, the brazen orb
Of the red lightnings partly disengaged
From its restraining canopy of cloud.

And, woful curse less tolerable still!
The Monarch of the loathsome Powers of Air,
Darkness, and Evil, seemed unto his eyes
(As unto others it may be, immersed
In long habitual sin, or unto bards
Profanely dreaming over songs instinct
With hatred of the Very Son of God,
Unholy men and reprobate) not foul,
Grossly deformed and hideously grotesque,
Monstrous, mis-shapen, a contorted growth
Of the foul limbs of unclean animals,
From which the Benediction was removed
Through some mysterious trespass, for even thus
The faithful generations of the Saints
And their wise art have taught us—but the Foe,

The Antagonist of Light, of perfect Good,
Of Wisdom, and Supreme Beneficence,
Seemed in the eyes of that accursèd man
A starry Form, a Satan beautiful,
Of visage marred, yet glory beaming through,
Wondrous, if not delectable,—of grand
And regal intellect, and equipage
Of archangelic faculties, still soaring
Up to the sunlight, still to be admired
Of mortal man, though haply recognized
Of lagging wing, celestial now no more:
Bidding the mind of sinners to discern
A majesty where God's own written curse
Hath vilified the Creature evermore,
And stooped to name him with His blessèd Lips,
In love, for our behoof, the Sire of Lies.
O never may the leprosy of song
Like this beguile the sons of God to deem,
That aught of true sublimity consists,
Where truth is not, where hate hath wedded fear,
And ambush is the sole permitted power;
As if there could be Greatness so divorced
From Goodness, Beauty where there was not Love,
Or Wisdom with a Disobedient Spirit!

Now for the first four years our travel ranged
In narrow compass, mid the icy spears
Of Taurus, or of Antilibanus
That looks on moonlit Balbec, or beyond
Amid the quiet and conventual glades,
The pastured slopes and green declivities
Of Carmel, by the soft sea-murmurs filled,
As if by voices of innumerable bees,
And backward to the cedar mountains, where

The sunlit beacon of the Sannin flames
Towards Cyprus, still returning to our cave
From time to time in Daphne's laurel groves.
But ere we entered our fifth spring the Jew
Related that in every seventh year
He had a penal mission to fulfil
Far off amid the Helvetian Alps, a toil
For which he must ordeal journey make
First mid the horrors of the Caucasus,
Which dreadful pilgrimage I now must share.

Good Abbot! there are men alive on earth
With most o'erwhelming functions to perform,
And lives embraced by wizard destinies ;
And solitudes where awful things are wrought,
And voices uttered in the dead of night,
And old weird cities guarded by a curse,
And lakes and oceans, which the moon beholds,
Outside the confines of all natural laws,—
Marvels and apparitions, far and near,
Which men in quiet places reckon not of,
Yet haply touch or see, all unawares.
Father! methinks our fears might worship earth,
And not unduly, for her regions have
Some fearful consecrations : and how small,
How poor a portion of her realms doth man
Inhabit! Yet within his city walls,
No less than o'er the howling wilderness,
What haughty Powers of Evil domineer,
In separate spots, from age to age, allowed
To make their flashing sceptres visible,
A moment visible ; then in the gloom
Is their regalia folded up again,
Sparing the affrighted sense of mortal man.

The earth of maps and charts, of signs and names,
Veils of imaginary curves and spots,
Ill cover that uneasy earth below.

Such was the dread Ordeal of the Jew ;—
Wafted—if such an uncouth errantry
Can mate so soft a word—above his kind,
Above the world of men and visible life,
And in suspension held above all joys,
All loves, and that variety of fears
Which peril life's enjoyment, and through hope
Enhance it tenfold,—and yet diving oft,
By fate constrained, into that nether world,
Which agitates the surface of our own,
And with a viewless interference breaks
The equable procession of its laws.
Thither, as if the ground beneath his feet
At destined times gave way, the Hebrew sinks ;
And, thence emerging, floats above the earth
Once more, like some low-hanging cloud that clings
Above the tree-tops of a wooded plain,
As though it loved the earth, yet might not lie
Upon its household farms and fields, or like
The jealous waters of a virgin stream
Which with its crystal lance may pierce the lake,
And issue from it uncommingled,—so
The Jew, sinking and re-ascending, blends
With our sweet intervenient world no more.

Hear the strange legend which he told me : thou
Better than simple layman wilt discern,
If such a tale have warrant in the faith.

There is a lake upon a western Alp,
A field of fenny waters, not a mere
Of crystal delicately lit by flowers,

That gaze into its mirror, and dilute
Their rainbow shadows in its liquid depths,
Nor by a marge of lucent sward enclosed ;
But a broad swampy place, with toppling crags
Leaning across and barring the blue sky
From imaging itself upon the pool.
And there, imprisoned in the chilly ooze,
Lies the poor spirit of the faltering Judge,
The wicked wavering Pilate, who, consigned
By an itinerant exorcist there,
When he had troubled long the woods and cliffs
And shepherds' walks, doth issue once a year,
And he who meets him on the mountain side
Dies for a surety ere twelve moons have waned.

Goaded by keen remorse that Unjust Judge
Fled from his province to the capital,
But by a constant vision of the Cross
Pursued. If in the morning he would greet
The Cæsar rising with the sun to wait
The adulation of his subjects, there
Pilate beheld a Cross. In dreams by night,
In changing scenes of travel, in the clouds,
The scintillating centre of the sun,
The quiet freckled aspect of the moon,
The white phosphoric fields of summer sea
Heaving against the moles of Baiæ, still
In every time and place he saw the Cross,
The Cross on Calvary, and brooking not
This persecution of the sacred Sign,
He slew himself, as Judas did before.

But earth disdained and loathed his sepulture,
And with an effort panted forth his corpse.
Then, far into the yellow Tyber flung,
The stream was troubled with incessant storm,

Broke down the bridges, swamped the passage boats,
Until there was no ferry left in Rome.
Thence was the body taken, by command
Of Cæsar and the Senate, to a hill
Which overlooks the Rhone hard by Vienne.
There did they dig a monstrous uncouth pit
Upon the peak, and tumbled massive rocks
Upon the turbulent corpse; forthwith the storm
Burst on the mountain-top with fiery bolts,
And fulminated over Dauphiny, and far
To Languedoc, and summits of Auvergne;
Behind, the poor Savoyards heard or saw
The maddened echoes of their native hills
Shake the wild eagles from their thrilling nests,
And with the pulses of fierce beating sound
Unrivet there the rock-bound avalanche.
The body, disinterred once more, now gained
A sepulchre within the fretting Rhone:
Forthwith the waters rose into the streets,
Stood cubits high within the temples, sucked
The statue of old Jove within their waves,
Tore up the mulberry groves, and, foaming, went,
A solid wall of crested waters, down
To Valence, and the swampy flat of Arles,
Spreading a sudden lake from thence to Nismes.
Thus did the river tyrannize from year
To year, until the days of Charlemagne,—
The greatest man of all the modern world,
Who in his day encountered marvellous things,
And, more than mortal, bore the Cross as none
Had borne it yet; he bade them drag the Judge
From out the noble river, and once more
Inter the body on a gloomy Alp
That overlooks a lake, a lucid Cross

(The Apparition constant to its post)
Of sunny waters glittering in the eye
Of that dark mountain, whose wild woods and cliffs,
As I have said, he troubled with his cries,
Until a holy monk, who chanced to pass
Among the wailing people of Lucerne,
Laid him beneath that dull and ruffled mere,
There visited and horribly evoked
In every seventh year by that lone Jew,
Who for the dread encounter doth anneal
His spirit mid the warring elements,
The furnace of mysterious sights and sounds
Within the Caucasus of Astracan.

SIR LANCELOT.



BOOK IX.

THE ABSOLUTION.

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THE ABSOLUTION.

THREE years we wandered, pilgrims, now on foot
And now on horseback, and sometimes we joined
A caravan of traders, but more oft
Were by ourselves, and with infrequent speech
Beguiled the way; companions, not from choice,—
From loathsome fascination on my side,
On his from a desire, as it appeared,
(Much as he said which sounded otherwise,)
To inflict his presence on me, and a joy
At my repugnance, manifested oft
By look and word and gesture of disdain,
Or of impatience rather, for was I
A man who could find aught so far below him
As might appear an object of disdain?
We left our cavern in the cedar grove—
Methinks I see the firefly columns now
Build and unbuild their wizard temples there
On the soft verdant gloom:—we left our cave
Ere spring had breathed upon the sward, or swelled
The bulb of wild flowers, or had studded yet
The cedar boughs with emerald points minute,
The promise of the year, a scanty growth
Of paler green, that looks like powdered dust,
Upon those long-lived trees. A sinuous course
We took, a Cainlike penance which the Jew

With an intolerable waywardness
Determined, unopposed ; for I was fain
Always to recognize the Hand of Heaven
Guiding my punishment, in that self-will
Wherewith the fearful man to right or left
Swerved ever from his purpose oft declared.

First o'er the hills we reached Samosata,
Where old Euphrates elbows to the west,
And thence to Orfa and Mosùl ; northward
Across the Tigris to that lake immense
Of Van, and Urmia in the hills enclosed
Of green Aderbijàn, till from the shore
Of gloomy Astara we saw outspread
The misty Caspian. After sojourn here,
Unto the Steppe of Urgantz we took sail,
And mid the ruined towns and swampy lakes
Of the rude Usbecks wandered wearily,
Sick of the loathsome diet and wild ways
Of that gaunt region. Thence, the Oxus past,
Unto the dreary desolate Karak
By Sihon's triple streams we journeyed on,
Coasting the sea of Aral in and out
By indentations choked with islands lone,
Which the foul seabirds tenant ; and once more
Turned westward o'er the fenny wilderness,
Rounding the head of Caspian o'er the sands
Of Oural unto Astracan, who sits
In her barbarian splendour on the mouths
Of the dark-watered Volga. Thence we roamed
O'er populous Circassia to the steeps
Of dreadful Caucasus, and tarried there
Mid sights and sounds terrific, day and night.

O Father ! were it well, I could reveal
This day appalling mysteries endured

Within the hollow Caucasus, where reign
The elements chaotic as at first,
And shapeless solitudes, and brutes of eld,
And shades deformed, and voices all uncouth !
There day and night keep not nor recognize
Divine partitions, while the storms and beasts,
Outbellowing each other, overwhelm
The heart of man with horror and dismay,
And yet less dreadful than the oppressive calms,
Which with a pregnant silence most enhance
The unearthly character of that wild chain,
By wondering humanity of old
Selected as the theatre whereon
The man, unrighteously benevolent,
His curse, magnificently fabled, bore,
By the contagious voice of poets sung.
Enough that in the cold and heat, both fierce
And direful, of that jagged Caucasus,
And its sepulchral glens of cloud-bleached rock,
I passed with but indifferent success
A hard ordeal ; yet should I have been
More calm but for the presence of the Jew,
Which heightened every horror of the place,
As though it did impersonate the fiend,
Outcast seducer of poor sinning men.

Spirit of Earth ! that, like an empress, keep'st
Thy court amid the labyrinthine dells,
The caverned cloisters and old beetling pines
Of Caucasus ! how didst thou entertain
Us two with savage hospitality,
Terrific splendours, and portentous shows
Of jousting elements ! What wondrous scenes
And wild processions ever meet and mix
Within that spacious hall, where dwell the kings

Of nature, and the bodied elements,
And phantom-flashes of unbodied powers,
Such as the spirit of the cloudless calms,—
All unpartitioned, as loud chaos was,
Unsorted by the musical constraint
Of that old spoken Law, the primal Voice!

Ah! woe is me for that unresting Jew,
With body wrenched and broken on the wheel
Of endless travel, with unbroken pride,
Unbroken hatred of the Blessèd Christ!
I see him, yea, I see him at this hour,
Within the confines of this chapter-house:
In my far-kenning spirit I behold
The Hebrew pacing onward, mid the spasms
Of earthquake, in whose volumes of white dust
The low-hung moon looks red, while scarce on high
The comet shakes its long pale crackling hairs
In terrible proximity to earth.

Round him the whirlwinds bark among the glens,
And cry like bloodhounds on a human track,
Through Dalestàn: and in the sullen dawn
Of those Caucasian depths I see him still.
The dizzy lightnings glare, above, beneath,
Grazing the rocks with horrible rebound,
And flashing in the bright sun's lidless eyes,
While the hot bolts from out the hissing lakes
With momentary plunge heave up on high
Columns of angry foam: I see the veins
Of the old earth beneath the torture start
Of stern volcanoes, in their chambers sunk,
Questioning the greedy hills till they confess
Their riches, and the gold and silver runs
Among the subterranean floors, whose roots
Of livid marble crack with grasping fire,

From the hill tops to those enduring bars
Which Jonas saw beneath the clear green sea.
I see his shadow on the tawny plains,
Freckled with frost-rime of perennial salt,
Of desert Khiva, on the horizon marked
Colossal, half on earth and half in air,
Against the flaming chambers of the west,
Where the wild sky unloads its wains of clouds
Into the setting sun, as one who feeds
A greedy fire, which, blazing up, out-throws,
As the new fuel falls upon the old,
Thick swarms of ruddy sparks, far and wide,
Splashes of flame, as from a fountain, flings,
That reach in falling streaks the backward east :
I see him there, as if about to step
From off earth's rim into the setting sun.
I see him in the strange ethereal calms,
Those intermissions of discordant wind,
When the white-shafted frost goes forth to shoot
The lamp-like globes of the descending dew ;
And thin blue meteors sail along the rims
Of rosy avalanches, shrinking now,
Now touching with a crisp and gentle sound
The icy fringe ; while ever and anon
An old snow-laden cedar softly shakes
Its stiff black hair, and countless whirling stars,
A whispering shower of stealthy parachutes,
Sink to the earth ; and still, and still, far on
Where mist-wreaths, like a crimson-wrinkled sea
At sunset, steal along the quiet glens,
I see the Figure, dimly magnified
By roseate vapours, of the steadfast Jew.

For even thus I wandered with him once
Through Dalestàn, and over Caucasus.

And thence descending, by Telav, we came
To Erivan, and in another week
Beheld the sun set over Ararat.
And there with impious foot the Hebrew strove
To climb the sacred mountain's double cone,
And reach the undecaying Ark which lies,
By Angels guarded, on the dazzling peak.
Once with a bold yet not presumptuous faith,
And an exceeding reverence for the Ship,
The inland Ship which was unto our race
A second Eden—how unlike the first!—
Whence as from out a well the tribes of men
Flowed forth afresh,—once with such venturous faith
A monk essayed to climb the mystic hill
In honour of that Sign, most worshipful
And wondrous of all relics on the earth,
Except the Gracious Wood by Helena
Found, and self-multiplied, and so dispersed
Throughout the compass of the East and West,
Like broken bread, to hearts that hungered for it.
But ever while the monk lay down to sleep,
Wearied by his long toil, with noiseless arms
Angels convey'd him to the mountain foot ;
And he full oft renewed his patient course.
At length in pity for the footsore man
A Spirit monished him to lay aside
His rude emprise, while for his simple heart
Rich guerdon he received, a piece of wood
From off the unreached Ark, a holy prize
At Etschmiadsin by the Primate kept,
Honoured with incense and liturgic song.

I need not tell how that mysterious cone
Baffled the Hebrew with its steep ascent
Seven times repeated. While the convent bells

Summoned Arguri's monks to early Mass,
We left the glittering Ararat behind ;
And thence across the variable charms
Of hill and dale through all the Armenian coasts,
Until by Malazkerd and Erzeroum
We came at length unto the shrubby shores
Of Trebizond, the lover of the joust,
By paynim champions from the soldan's court,
The chivalry of rich Iconium,
Frequented now, with ducal splendour gay
By the Comnenian dynasty adorned.

From Trebizond across the Euxine Sea
We sailed to Feodosia, whence we climbed
The hills to Arabat mid groves of date
And old pomegranate trees, and wound our way
Among the net-work of innumerable lakes
Which pierce that sweet peninsula from east
Almost to Perekop upon the west
Of Taurida ; and through the mulberry plains
Of Dnieper, with mysterious barrows sown,
We journeyed to the cataracts that sound
O'er vacant leagues of sombre treeless steppe,
The chamber of the whirlwind, and descending
We crossed the Cherson pastures, where the grass,
Tall as a waving coppice, in the burst
Of springtide suffocates the wandering flocks
Caught unawares, and in its matted depths,
Muffling the cry of torture, oft entombs
The vainly struggling ram. Then taking ship
In the salt inlets, a tempestuous voyage
Brought our poor bark into the Bosphorus,
And to the quays of Pera. Brief delay
Detained us in the eastern capital,
And thence by Adrianopoli we rode

Unto Belgrade, the junction of the Save
And yellow Danube, and far onward still,
Over the fatal fields and oozy shores
Where the wild Picard, all undaunted, led
His hosts to perish by Hungarian swords,
Unto imperial Passau came at last.

And, thence abruptly turning to the north,
We left the rolling Danube, and passed on
Across Bohemia's dim and singular wolds,
Wave after wave of huge and bulky swells,
Uplands forlorn whose troubled silence moans
With sounds as if of subterraneous winds,
Whose hard-won island spots of yellow corn
Upon the surface of the chilly soil,
And long blue lines of ever-wailing fir,
Enhance the bleak appearance of the land,
Making the scene weigh heavy on the heart.
Ah me! it is a melancholy sight
To see the glory of the setting sun
Squandered upon that bare disconsolate realm,
Crowning with golden light the unwilling hills,
While a wan smile, a momentary thought
Of joy, by force illumines the dismal firs,
And fades, while they redouble their sad sighs!

The man, whose feet the purposes of life
May chance to lead o'er those Bohemian downs,
Should travel when the silent witching moon
Floats up above the gloomy moors, and then
Ruffles with argent light the mournful earth,
Builds castles in the vacant fallow fields,
Or from a miserable ruined grange,—
Disperses to a minster's lordly breadth
The village tower, and wildly magnifies
Each single tree to an umbrageous grove,

Peopling the midnight air behind the firs
With hanging back-ground of voluptuous wood.

Northward we went till, on a nodding rock
Where the cold Moldau makes a lucid curve,
We saw a glistening city perched on high,
And covering half the crescent plain below.
It looked no strong creation of the west,
But in the sunshine fluttering like a dream
Winged from some Asian lake or fairy shore
Of Bosphorus, with sheeny spires o'ertopped,
Turrets and gables, fretted balconies
And grimly figured eaves, thin cupolas,
A glorious bridge with its twin church-like towers,
And palaces with blazing copper roofs,
Where the proud Czeckian nobles keep their courts,
And mid the moving sentries, silent ranks
Of sculptured knights and pontiffs strangely blent,
And starry vanes, a multitudinous show,—
A mirage in the sunset, on those hills
And barren uplands a reflection cast,
So it appeared, by that all-seeing orb
From oriental city viewed far off,
Bagdad, or Tripoli, or Ispahan,
O'er which his slanting beams had lately looked.
The bells rang out, the sun with placid rim
Behind the many-steeped Hradschin sunk,
As we passed through the clanging gates of Prague.
Thence to the right through many a sombre street
We walked until we reached a place of graves,
The Jewish burying ground with elders dank,
Thick as the eastern cypress rows, o'ergrown.
There were the pilgrim-people's sordid tombs,
With native characters engraved; and bands
Of Hebrew children played about the grove,

That melancholy grove which might inspire
Such sadness as befits a Jewish heart.
There lay the sons of Aaron, symbolized
By open palms whose rudely carven thumbs
Rested upon each other; and alone,
Beneath an old fantastic elder-trunk,
A famous doctor slept, and all who passed
Laid a small stone upon his shady tomb,
Or copper coin, if haply they were rich.
With mute obeisance, my companion placed
A stone thereon, and when I followed close,
Like reverence not according, a young boy,
Of swarthy fairness and smooth oval brow,
Stepped forth and with rude gesture seized my hand,
While his black eyes with beautiful anger glowed,
But a word, uttered in their native tongue
By the old Jew, reproved the forward act.

Thence, by a postern half engulfed in earth,
We passed into a gloomy Synagogue,
A domelike vault with nobly sculptured roof,
Which in the uncertain twilight of the place
Seemed on its centre to repose and swing
With artful poise upon the pillared shafts.
It was an ancient pile, and local faith
Throws back its building into those far times,
When on the Laurenzburg, where now the fires
Of that true Martyr are by godly monks
Extolled in rite and song, the idolaters
Worshipped the fierce devouring element.
With such kind wisdom on all dark beliefs
The Church a better honour doth engraft,
And wins the erring to a sweeter faith.
Nay, mounting higher still, traditions tell
Of Jewish worship on the Moldau bank

Before the Almighty by the ensanguined hand
Of Roman Titus tore the temple down
From its tall rock, and marred the chosen Mount.

In each embrasure and around the base
Of the two pillars, lay unsightly heaps
Of dust, which the laborious tide of time
Had drifted there, and now were sacred held.
Nine times the Jewish workmen had essayed
To cleanse the building, and nine times had death
Smitten the foremost of them to the ground.
A gorgeous drapery, damp-stained, hung low
Behind a dull red cresset, which had burned
A hundred years, by wavering breath of air
Still unextinguished, or by act of man.

In this old Synagogue the Wandering Jew
A vigil always keeps, before he goes
To that encounter by the ghastly lake
On the dark out-post of the cloudy Alps.
All night he knelt before the dusky veil,
Which now and then the cold air gently shook ;
And all night long two Jews kept up a chant
In under-tones, monotonous and sad,
From side to side responsive in the dark.
But when the sunrise stole with dismal grey
Through the dim panes, they rose and bowing low
Took from behind the veil a yellow scroll,
An ancient writing of the Decalogue,
And put it to the Wanderer's trembling lips.

That selfsame morn once more across the downs
We passed, and in six days of toilsome march
Hailed the bright Inn at Passau once again,
The glistening Inn, a lucid avenue
With its impetuous waters mountain-born
Meeting the Danube by St. Mary's Church

And thence between the river's wooded shores
In a frail barge of uncompacted planks
We stemmed the current up to Ratisbon.
By this time, father, had a mighty change
Come o'er my spirit: grief had been so long
My fellow, and repentant thought my food,
It pleased our Saviour to ungird the bands
Of deep remorse which had so strangled hope.
And not without some influence too had been
The external world, with whose most rugged sights,
And desperate adventures, I had closed
In necessary combat, nor repined.
And from the surface of the earth went up,
Methought with somewhat of a healing force,
A mist like that which in true Eden once
Silently fertilized the flowery ground.
Nor without virtue had that penance been,—
The torture of the Jew's unresting eye,
Among the cedars hard by Antioch borne,
And by the lakes and Asiatic steppes,
At sunrise on the hills, and at midnight,
Least tolerable then, upon the sea.
Whether it was indeed that heaven relaxed
My penance at this season, or that change
Diverted me with customary power,
Or that the vision of the Christian West
Wrought old associations to a balm,
Fragrant and healing to a wounded heart,—
Whatever lurking causes might concur,
From that day forward did I feel convinced,—
And O with what a sweet constraint it came
And took possession of my willing faith!—
That a new epoch had begun with me,
A glimmering ray which *might* dawn into hope,
But was not hope as yet.

I can recall

With pleased fidelity that evening scene,
When with slow sail we came near Ratisbon.
The banks were flat, and smiling fields outstretched
Sparkling on either side with silvery green
From recent showers, which fled as we advanced.
Before us lay that old historic town
Upon a back-ground of dark thunder-cloud,
Pencilled with streaky spires of thin blue smoke,
Which rose unsteady and dispersed. The towers
Of the low-roofed cathedral in the heart
Of the black cloud stood forth, each with a gleam
Of whitest sunshine gloriously crowned.
And o'er the antique bridge which nobly spans
The hurrying river was a vision seen,
A heavenly sign, a bridge above a bridge,
A vaulted rainbow roof which overhung
That old stone bridge, an arch of braided hues,
Which from the centre of the city rose,
And dropped its bright foundations on the bank
Exactly where the stern portcullis kept
The northern access of the town. Ah me !
Fair, very fair, seemed Ratisbon that night :
The very walls wave-worn, and battlements
Lofty and grim, an air of welcome had,
And on the casements of the Rathaus glanced
The many-twinkling sunshine ; all was sweet,
And grateful to a heartsick wanderer,
And to this hour I think of Ratisbon
As though it were in some true sense my home.
But for the presence of the hateful Jew,
And the cold light of his indifferent gaze,
That evening by the Danube would have been
Even to a wretched sinner like myself

A simple joy, a beauty undefiled.

And not less gratefully does Ratisbon
Rest with a cherished pressure of sweet thought
On my remembrance, for that in its streets
Unconsciously I parted from the Jew,
And saw his face no more. Perchance it was
His work with me was done, and in my heart
Further collision now with such an one
Might have unmanned my penitence. But oft
My thoughts will wander to his awful lot.
The world is evil: yet the worst of men
Disclose unthought-of goodness to the hearts
That know them best and converse with them most.
Even in our enmities we may full soon
Discern the growing truth,—that knowledge feeds,
Not lessens, our respect unto our kind:
But it was not so with that blighted Jew.

Father, it may be he is beating now
Forlorn and footsore on the sleety steppe
Of desolate Urgantz, or clinging fast,
Till the blood oozes from beneath his nails,
Unto a precipice in Caucasus,
While the fierce whirlwind howls along the pass.
O wretched mortal of unnumbered years,
Blown by the breath of fate through heat and cold,
And storm and calm, and by the fourfold curse
Of seasons wrongly alternating scourged,
How horrible thy path, how desolate
The obscurity of ignominious scorn
Which is thy portion, while upon the rack
Of thine unearthly travel thou art whirled
For ever o'er the heads of all thy kind,
In fearful exaltation punished most!
O wretched one, who dwellest in a sphere

Where thou art all alone, who art not man,
Angel, or devil, but art thus enclosed,
In misery a species by thyself,
Without a mate, without a kindred life,
With a dead heart, but with a living soul,
Living through wild excess of blind despair,
If such a thing there could be as excess
In that which neither end nor measure bound !
O silent phantom, that in ghostly youth
And bright-eyed age art borne about the earth,
A momentary preacher, here or there
Beheld and not forgotten, how dost thou
Darken with some half palpable eclipse
The traveller's way, a transitory gloom
Strange as the figured shadows on the plain
Cast in the starlight when no hills or trees
Are nigh, a dusky dappled umbrage thrown
From intermediate veils of grosser air !
O sleepless Hebrew ! journeying evermore,
Who once or twice in every age appear'st,
A spectral admonition of our faith,
Before the quailing eye of Christendom,
Exhausting now, but as an antepast
Of woes severer far and hotter pains,
A temporal eternity of grief,
The agony of weary sleeplessness,
The aching of unrespited fatigue,—
How fearful is thy lot, when I who owe
My life unto thy succour, dare not pray
That thou mightst be unburdened now at length
Of this most lone, most singular destiny !

Then upon his departure there ensued
A season of more tranquil thought, a calm
Of recollection rather than of peace.

The battling tumult of disordered hopes,
The passionate collision of my fears,
Slowly subsided, like the running sea
When the wild storm hath ridden by; and then
From out the turbulent confusion came,
Sinking and reascending turn by turn,
An undistinguishable form that rose
And fell, and on the surface of my thoughts,
Like a wrecked purpose, dimly weltering lay
Far off, yet ever as it floated grew
More palpable, until with formal pomp
The apparition laboured into sight,
Confronting me, a cognizable shape,
Which in the listening silence of my heart
Proclaimed itself a duty, whose behests
Conscience uneasily discerned for law.
It bade me seek the punishment ordained
Of God for him by whom the blood of man
Is shed, and whose exaction hath been laid
A solemn burden, reverently endured,
On human Law, the echo of God's Voice
And Vicar of His Justice.

Dark as seemed
The mated solitude where I had dwelt,
It was a respite from that awful doom,
Which seals the strivings of the penitent.
Not in the wildness of abandoned hope,
Nor goaded by intolerable thoughts,
Nor yet detected by my hideous crime
Loathing the prison of self-consciousness,
And peering through the surface of my speech,—
Nor passively allured, as happens oft,
By those regards, through conscience multiplied,
Wherewith the eye of justice fascinates

The guilty, and with incantation mute
Attracts them to herself,—but in the strength
Of a submissive will and sacred fear,
I journeyed onward to the English shore,
Unshaken, nay, with terrors half appeased,
And in the rectitude of my resolve
Finding even somewhat of a trembling cheer.

There is an awe, a most unsettling awe,
Which yet unnerves not, in a bold resolve,
Raising the animal spirits while it fills
The soul with dim forebodings, half afraid
Of such disclosure of its innate powers
As gleams through one determinate deed of will,
The solemn freedom of a Human Act!
O when we bear in mind both what we are,
And with whose Presence we are all enclosed,
The freedom of the Human Will seems less
A marvel than that we should dare to use
That almost penal gift. A Human Act,
Tied often to unending consequence,
Seemingly self-attached to His decrees
Who is immutable, and with a power
Of making unborn ages mournful heirs
Of its bequests, which may not be declined,—
A Human Act, such as each solar day
Begets in countless numbers,—what a force
Resides therein, which superstitious fear
Might well-nigh worship with its darkest rites!

How strange is that deliberate cheerfulness
Wherewith men act, who yet endure the sense
That they are creatures, vilest property
Of Him so far above them, and their lives
No more their own than any outward thing!
If there is baseness in self-will, no less

Repugnant to self-sacrifice and faith
Is an obedient sullenness, that mood
Of discontented acquiescence bred
In sterile natures by the uneasy thought,
That we may not be masters to ourselves :
And miserably guilty those bad hearts,
Who, in the shade of their bedarkened wills
Sitting their whole lives long, pretend to be
Beneath the umbrage of Divine Decrees,
The only humble of the sons of men !
Father ! such substance hath a Human Act
That I have dreamed the Saints might haply see
The sin of Adam in a bodily shape,
A person, not a mere contagious thing ;
Yet pardon me ! I must not dream to-day.

How blest are they who, through baptismal doors
Entering the Holy Church, can to the yoke
And duty of the Creature superadd
The self-forgetting heart of the Redeemed,
And quiet courage of the Sanctified !
And well may they, who see God can be touched
With spiritual contact in His priests,
Anticipate the Judgment, and rehearse
For that solemnity, and so confess
(Kneeling before the priest who disappears
In faith's keen vision of her Priest on high)
Their Human Acts, retaining undivulged
Such deeds of good as not being wrought alone
Are scarcely human ; by this humbling pain,
As by a holy ritual solemnized,
Deposing all their actions in the light
Of Omnipresence ; seeking, not being sought,
And so reversing that first guilty change
In Adam's fall, his flight before the Voice

Amid lost Eden's unavailing shades !
Shame was the first fruits of the fall, and shame
The matter of the Atonement, and to-day,
To sweet Confession, as a vase, consigned,
Shame is medicinal to us who sin,
A natural reparation, yet divine,
And in itself contains the healing Cross,
Infecting it with supernatural power.
O happy, happy they whom grace hath helped
Unto an honest will, and who have nerved
Themselves to this most salutary shame,
By whom the Judgment hath already been
In part enacted, and who thus have made
The very details of their common lives
A solemn chain of linkèd sacraments !

O can the shame of whispering our disgrace
In the sole audience of a gifted priest
Be other than a sweetest right, far off
Copying that chastest sorrow, the deep shame
Wreaked on the Lord by vile unwashen hands,
When with ineffable shrinking were laid bare
His Virginal Limbs unto the soldiers' gaze ?
And if in such unclothing of our hearts
As monsters we may seem, disgrace hath grown
A cherished thing since Jesus stooped thereto.
Is there no faith, no joy in self-revenge ?
When for the healing of themselves men court
The cleansing discipline at others' hands,
Or to put out the light of haughty eyes,
And from the good opinion of themselves
To be by instantaneous act outlawed,
Prompted by half reluctant lowliness
Call one beneath them, and insist to have
Their face by shameful spittings vilified,

Their looks dishonourably marred, there is
A thrilling sweetness in the indignity
That quickens love of Christ almost to tears !

If each temptation baffled is an act
Above our nature, each desire restrained
A heavenly thing, each bending of the knee
In lowly praise or self-abhorring prayer
A supernatural motion, think, O think
All day and night what supernatural acts
Are being performed upon the face of earth !
O think when darkness deepens solitude,
And when the night-air vibrates with the wings
Of the lost angels, multiplying sin,—
When the wild weather brings a silentness
Of human toils, and thought, thus respited
From the salubrious action of fatigue,
Feeds upon thought, and so engenders crime—
Ponder, O ponder till thou art consoled
The acts, which evil in its strife with good
Is raising above mortal stature then,
And canonizing with reluctant skill !

So did I venture then to estimate
My purpose of surrender, to endure
The death I owed, but from which I had fled ;
And in the presence of my own resolve,
Which was but partially my own, I stood
Most gravely cheered, and with a lightened heart.
And yet, methinks, when first I saw the beams
Of the calm sunset on the hauberks glance
Of those who kept their watch upon the walls
Of Pevensey, whose unillumined front
Faced the grey sea, my purpose somewhat shrunk,
So fair appeared my native land, so sweet
Even the poor residues of outlawed life,

So like a dream the guilty past, as though
An effort of the mind could shake it off,
And leave me pure and happy as a child !
The fishers on the beach, the castle guards,
The traders in the town,—all life appeared
Bound on a wheel of order and content
So peaceably revolving, could it be
The pains of one forgotten criminal
Might yet enhance the welfare of the State ?

Roused from this passing dream, that self-same
night

Beheld me in the forest, with the stars
Spangling the summer skies above my head,
Journeying to Winton, in whose ancient shades
The court then lay : and there at Henry's feet
I made confession of my guilt, and sued
For punishment. My fiefs already gone,—
For services performed in Palestine
My life was rendered me, a woful term,
Yet mercifully granted, to be passed
In penance, from the favour of the Church,
For an uncertain term, and from her keys,
And her appliances of grace, cast forth.

Within the abbey of St. Cross I stood,
Divested of my chains, to hear that doom
With direful ceremonial then pronounced,
And while the ritual darkness o'er my soul
Projected miserable fears, and shades
Of dreadful expectation, I went forth,
Stricken, and set at large. A sudden storm
Fell with thin misty sheets of whirling rain
Upon the breadth of sealike mead outstretched
Between the walls of Winton and St. Cross ;
And now and then white sunbeams pierced the cloud,

And raced each other on the green chalk hills,
Or for a moment blanched the minster tower,
Which scarce o'ertopped the grove of ancient trees.
And the sweet pastoral Itchin, whose full stream
Twinkled with beaded rain-drops, slowly rose,
Fretting the loose earth from its sedgy bank,
And gurgling through the long grass in the fields.

Beneath the gable of the abbey mill
I screened myself within an elder clump,
Rather by habit prompted than annoyed
By the rude beating storm, so calm compared
With that blind wretchedness which ruled within.
So penal seemed that gift of lengthened life,
The life which I had once so longed to keep!
My soul, centering all its thoughts on death,
Grew calm, because its end was near, and now,
That end put further off, lost all the power,
Which steadfast concentration had conferred.
Ah! with what mild encounter did I meet
The placid offices of nature there,
Cradling my heart to peace, to trust, to love!
For even in those unlikely shades she lurked
To minister to all who lingered near,
With love as universal as the grace,
Which wanders through the byeways of the world
Compelling humble souls. There was I soothed
Beyond all hope, and soberly beguiled,
By the calm concourse of familiar sounds,
Which alternated with the cheerless wind
That sighed and sobbed upon the mossy roof:—
The momentary beating of the wheel,
The panting of the stream which, leaping down,
Was dissipated in its breathless fall,
The singing drops upon the black mill-pool,

The winnowing of the elder boughs that caught
The troubled current, or with nodding leaves
Quaked in the ceaseless whirlwind of the wheel.

Beneath the rustling elders there, whose eaves
Of sombre and unsunny foliage hung
Dipping their half-ripe berries in the grass,
And whence the raindrops glanced as from a shield,
My weary spirit, slowly gathering strength
Of self-possession, ventured to look forth
Upon that desert world, that lonely range
Of life now left her; but her wandering thoughts
Sent out, like Noe's raven, came no more
Either to kindle hope, or certify
Fears, best endured when all the worst is known.
The earth, whose gloom was tremulously lit
By flashes from the dread cherubic swords,
To Adam's eye less comfortless might seem
Than to an excommunicated soul
The blissful aspect of wide Christendom,
Peopled with benedictions, rife with grace,
So that its very kingdoms sing for joy!
But woe unto the lost and outcast heart,
For whom the verdict of the mighty Church
Transmutes it all into a foreign land,
A foreign tongue whose accents musical
He cannot catch, a silent wilderness
Coiled like a fatal ring around his feet,
Which he o'erlooks but may not overstep,
Unpopulous, void, vacant, terrible!

Fearful it was in that dread hour to think
Of man, of mortal happiness and hope,
Of cheerful duties and affectionate bonds,
Such as were common as the dust of earth
Within that white-walled city. I was stung

By such sweet thoughts, and since my penance was
So righteously awarded, I was left
Without the bulwark of imagined wrong
To fortify my pride. Upon the grass
And oozy herbs that grew in that dank shade,
I flung myself in bitterness of heart,
And wept with fiery tears; and there the eye
Of all mankind in pitiless regard
And with intelligent dislike appeared
To gaze upon me; and more fearful far,
The dead looked forth from out the dewy earth
With eyes that beamed intolerable love,
Disquieted with grief; and from her peace
Methought my mother fixed on me her glance,
As I had seen it oft in hours of sin,
An apparition haunting me for good;—
Ah! had it beamed with anger or with scorn
It would have been less terrible,—but no,
It wore the old approving smile, the look
Of radiant pleasure and maternal love,
Which seemed to thrust me lower than before
In vileness and degrading shame. I lay
Bowed to the earth beneath my awful curse,
As though my sin was fresh that very hour,
And the intervening years, with what they brought,
Cancelled, annulled as though they had not been.

But never did I less desire to die
Than in that hour; though like a frightened child
Cowering beneath some dull nocturnal fear,
I deemed that death was nigh, and with faint voice
Prayed broken prayers for respite to repent,
And felt my heart to see if it still beat,
And prayed again. O holy monk! it seems
An awful thing, a very awful thing,

To lay our hands upon our hearts, and feel
How slight the separation is of life
From death, a feeble beating motion there,
Scarce audible but in the dead of night,
Or when the causeless fear of death surrounds
And keeps the thoughts at bay, a quivering pulse
Which ever seems upon the point to stop,
Twixt each pulsation halting as in doubt.
And yet no less a bulwark doth dispart
Our living and our dying than the Mind
Of God Most High, nor can that beating stop
Without a solemn act of Will Divine.
Yet when at times Eternity doth sound
With audible faint knocking at our hearts,
Asking its frightened welcome, that our fears
May haply so rehearse the act of death—
As the sea-water gurgles at our ears
When we lie down with but a plank between
Our helpless selves and a most horrible end—
'Tis hard to smile, and say in childlike peace,
That the weak plank is an Almighty Will!

Between two moods thus swayed, now self-possessed

And calm, now into puerile dismay
And trembling fancies broken, and conceits
Of panic mastering all the nerves of will,
I lay for hours within that elder shade,
Musing in trance-like thought upon the world
Of happiness, and grief with others borne,
For others suffered, therefore no such curse
As that which preyed on me. Thus did I muse,
When suddenly before my spirit's eye
There was as if a breaking down of bars,
A swift disparking of obstructed hopes,

Till the whole unimpeded future lay
Open, endurable ; and far within
I heard the thunder which a rapturous thought
Makes in the mind when it reveals itself,
And passes on : the peopled world was lost,
Swept from my vision as the breeze at sea
Breaks up the fading outline of the shore,
And clears the boundless ocean to the eye.
Then rose serene in glorious light profound,
Fairest of images, calm Solitude,
Unpeopled Silentness, where Cain himself,
If humbled he had brooked the godlike Eye
Of Solitude, and bowed before the Voice
Of solemn Silence, might have won repose,
Seeking for mercy through self-chastisement,
That borrows only from the Cross its power,—
The simplest and divinest of all trusts,
And most complete abandonment of self.

Thus, when to me the thought of humankind
Had grown unbearable through that access
Of love, which came upon me in the hour
When I was put forth from them as unclean,
The nakedness of Solitude appeared
A port and shelter, an oasis sunk
Below the horizon of the misty sands,
Where yet sweet grace, which like the desert rains,
From its own plenitude o'erflows the earth
In seeming waste, might fertilize the ground,
And I, so reached, like some poor withered palm,
Might drink the moisture and perchance revive
In the lone air thus bountifully cooled,
Thus mercifully tempered to my needs.

Nay, father, is not that transcending life
Which the Saints live, laid up with Christ in God.

O is it not perpetual Solitude,
Exile from base delights and soiling cares,
With hopes and fears and sympathetic ties
Unearthly, with a Wedlock of its own,
Which through chastised virginity of soul
Is like a fruitful womb unto the Lord
With evangelic travail bearing sons,
And with a civil Conversation which transcends
The offices of human polity,
And, veiled behind the water of a rite,
A most miraculous Sonship, and a Food
In the world's presence eaten, yet unknown,
Unseen by it, but such a wondrous Food
That it were well with all the Angelic Hosts
If unto them that Flesh might be vouchsafed?
Is not that life one endless Solitude
From earthly things, a Kingdom all within,
Yet with a mystic Furniture without,
Where Faith is Regent, and the simplest Laws
Are mysteries and supernatural words,—
A Realm inscrutably concealed, though nigh
To all, with Visitations from above,
Outward Alliances spread far and wide
Into the world of spirit, Succours coming
And Messengers departing every hour,
Burdened with secret liturgies, and tears
Despatched to moisten Incense up in Heaven,
And an Indwelling King, engrossed all day,
Entire in each, yet present in all hearts,
With preparation as of one who calls
His army round him in a hostile land,—
A very holy, peopled Solitude?

Once landed then on that free shore, my chains
Methought would drop from off me by the law

Of nature ; for the very shore it seemed
Of that eternal world where all are bound,
The space of desert littoral, which all
Must penetrate and traverse here or there.
All must be mates of Solitude for once,
In the wide-spreading silence of old age,
Or in the loneliness of dying thought,
Or in that summing up, distinct and strong,
That inward life condensed into a point
Of time, a momentary act, when death
Bears us like lightning o'er the trackless sands.
Where all must pass why should we fear to dwell ?
There are who through exceeding love of God
Have tenanted that region all their lives,
And their chaste anthems murmur on it still ;
Where love hath dwelt is surely fear's best home

I will away then, said I, to that shore
Where our eternal havens are : though void
Of all those shelters for our nameless fears,
That constant harbourage of thought in hours
Of inward sinking, which the grateful sense
Of nearness to our kind affords, even then
When for some cause we shun their company ;
Though void of these, it is a sacred shore
With boundless prospects that enlarge the heart,
And with a freshness better far than mirth,
Than beauty more magnificent, a face
Of bold eternal freshness, like the sea
Rolling its unchained length of silvery green,
Shaking its white-maned breakers in the sun,
And thundering, like a cloud in summer noons,
While winter's slavery binds the household earth,
And wavy tracts of snow and leafless trees,
Black buried farms and cold untrodden ways,

Wither our very liberty of thought,
While we confess the elements our lords.

I will away then, said I, to that shore
And feed upon that freshness, until fear
Begets compunction, and compunction love,
And love her beacon trims by that seaside,
Diffusing there a silent power of light
Whose fanning wings move slowly through the air,
Parting the raven darkness, till they touch
Upon the opposing shore; and he who kneels
In act of prayer may through his hollowed hands,
As through a telescope, discern that bourne,
Which all may reach who set their shattered helms,
And point them truly by that beckoning orb,
The starry signal of the Magdalen.

Then I bethought me of my native hills
And meres profound by winter unenslaved,
True types of solitude, as I have seen
The lakes and mountains on a winter's day,
Pacing the beautiful and silent shores
Of Windermere, unharassed by the sound
Even of my feet upon the snowy beach.
A glossy calm is bound upon the lake
With a dull glistening, like a lucid coat
Of flaky snow, while overhead the sky
Sways like a tottering dome of purple grey.
Above the horizon, all around, a rim
Is left between the sombre clouds and earth,
A hazy tract of thick and turbid white,
Which like a blinded lattice doth emit,
Weakly suffused, a light of troubled red,
As if from flaming furnaces behind,—
The sunset's ineffectual witness there.
And like a visionary region float

The woods, scarce lower than the stooping clouds,
And all untied by aught of visible chain
To the calm earth, with tree-tops, half of black
Silently weeping, and half silvered o'er
Where they have met the greeting of the wind ;
And all the twigs in beautiful array—
Fabrics of summer foliage are less fair—
Glisten like some ingenious work composed
Of ebony and silver, to the west
Bearded with rime, and in a hundred styles
And mutable devices crystallized
With noiseless art, while morning's feeble sun,
Felt though unseen, hath blackened all the boughs
Upon the east ; and groups of spikèd pine
Are set with pearls opaque : and O how still
Appear the swelling mountains in the mist,
While all the impoverished cataracts are heard
Roaring like creatures tamed ; and at my feet,
Half on the wing, half on the water, coots,
Or wild ducks, with their oarlike pinions cleave
Their black cold-gushing wakes upon the mere ;
And from the womb of some cloud-curtained vale
The bellowing of the miner's blast is heard,
Making the air to tingle for awhile,
Waving the ponderous skirts of lowering mist,
And thrilling on the silent snowy shore.

Such and so quiet seemed that land to me,
As is the solitary winter lake,
An unimpeded calm, and restful haven.

Therefore to my hereditary hills
I went, and mid their woods and treeless wolds,
And purple moorlands veined with argent brooks,
With solitude have long consorted now,
Become inured to her strange discipline,

In love with her wild nurture, and have learned
Her written cypher, to the eye or ear
A changeful revelation, and whose lore
Voluminous, profoundly varied, still
Goes on in mazy sweetness year by year
Expounding and illustrating itself
In deep instructive sequence. My wild voyage
Amid the horrors of the Caucasus,
And central lakes of Asia, and grey steppes
O'er which the wind in its tired passage faints,
Was the harsh pupillage wherein I learned
The wisdom of the jealous-featured earth,
The language of her shows, the direful powers,
Which in the tempest and the calm reside
And sounding elements, that terrify
With their collision mortal wanderers cast
Mid those fierce angels in the dreadful seats
Of that mysterious continent, whereon
Alone the Feet of the Most High have stood.
For there the powers of nature have been wont
To bow before no delegated voice,
But suit their goings out and comings in
To His immediate Word, while good and ill
Stirring like pomps of shadow o'er the earth,
Are but the troubled umbrage of the fight,
The actual fight, delivered on those shores,
In those primeval haunts where man first dwelt,
And where the voices of elected seers
Have sung the measures of his destinies,
Which the Creator, clothed in Human Flesh,
Hath sealed in Person on the Blessèd Rood!

Asia, first-born of history wert thou!
O sacred land! through Blood and Tears of God
Instinct with thrills of consecrated life,

Within whose mountainous bosom lies the dust
Of venerable Adam, and the grave
Delved by the Lord for him who led the Church
From the dark Nile-banks, and the odorous earth
Which was the bed of that most sorrowing Maid,
The Virgin-Mother, and whose ancient tombs
Have had one resurrection, by the streets
Of Salem witnessed! Through the ponderous shades,
Which the old empires cast upon thy breast,
Still redly gleams the cloven path of fire,
Whereby the unburied Prophet, caught from earth,
Into the hidden Eden was conveyed,
And those intolerably radiant Steps
Of Him who scaled the ethereal ridges back
With His new nature, His victorious spoils,
To His eternal glory with His Sire!

Methinks the man to whom it hath been given
To set his foot upon that awful soil,
To see the sun on pebbly Jordan glance,
To hear the wind among the cedars sigh
Of terraced Lebanon, or watch the stars
From seaside Carmel, or from Olivet
Bear off the hoary dust upon his shoes,
Nay, walk one hour upon the furthest coast,
And feel that Asia is beneath his feet,—
Methinks the man, to whom it was vouchsafed,
Were sphered some little higher than his kind,
And, with such priesthood vested, might attract
The eye of us far Westerns as he passed
Along our streets,—if Jesus had not said,
The deepest and most wondrous truth that e'er
Fell on the ear of our astonished world,
That he who did His Father's Will in faith,
Though faith there never was which mated hers,

Stood equal with that wondrous Maid of grace,
The Mortal Woman, Mother of our God !—
A written truth, yet haply raised above
Lawful rehearsal by a sinner's lips,
For whom it were sweet privilege enough
To think with far less daring thoughts of her
Who sits above all creatures now assumed.

In that probation of wild travel then
I learned the mystic language of the earth
From her oracular lineaments, composed
In the calm semblance of midnight and noon,
Her scenic writing blazoned evermore
In shifting scrolls, with difficulty learned
And piece by piece, as one who toils and toils
Some foreign tongue to master, a strange task
Which all unlike our other knowledge seems
Rather the work of time than intellect.

The rest thou know'st: within this hilly tract
Nature hath been to me the supplement
Of what the Church withdrew; a partial aid
Indeed it was, and I but hungered more
For what I lost, and yet a real aid,
By her not disavowed, as I believe.
The shape of sin, which in this solitude
Hath haunted me, a word will briefly tell.
It was the loss of balance in my mind:
Either inclining to a hope too high,
Too vigorously winged, for one who fell
As I had fallen, or depending low
To a despondency and flagging faith,
Which did dishonour by its craven doubts
To the sweet love which drew our Lord from Heaven.

Father! the hour draws on when I must die;
My ear is all unmuffled, and I catch

The footfall of that solemn messenger.
Father! I kneel before thee, to the Church
Who speaks in thee, and to my only Lord
Whom she doth represent! O blessèd Church!
Most awful, most affectionate Mother! here
I call the hills to witness, and the sea
And the dark forests and the flooded brooks,
The caves high up, and countless tops of pine
Above whose level I have made my prayers,
If I have uttered one proud word, or paid
Thee aught but benediction for the curse
For my salvation mercifully bound
Upon thine erring child. O Mother Church!
Whom as the Presence of my God I fear,
Forego thy healing wrath; once ere my death
O let my famished spirit feast on song,
And manifold thanksgiving, and the Host
Upon unbloody Altars sacrificed;
That in thy visible bosom here received
I may in hopeful type discern my lot
Hereafter, and may find the peaceful Fires,
Our first safe resting-place beyond the grave,
Fore-opened by thy golden Keys on earth.
Mother of Saints! receive thy sinful son:
I crave thine Absolution ere I die!

Thus spake the Knight; and down the Abbot's
cheeks

The tears flowed fast: the merciful old man
Was moved, and blessing Jesus for the powers
To frailest vessels of poor earth consigned,
He laid his hands upon the Penitent,
And with the Cross untied the icy curse.
It was not age that made them tremulous,
But the sweet Spirit who fulfilled his soul

And shed Himself with every ritual word.
The golden evening gathered gently round,
Throwing the coloured shadows from the panes
With Saints and Martyrs duskily annealed ;
When vespers chimed Sir Lancelot was shrived.

Service is o'er ; with swift and noiseless steps,
And graceful modesty of outward mien,
Which of itself might win a worldling's heart,
The monks have glided from the twilight church,
Save a few kneeling forms that here and there
The morrow's meditation choose, or make
Their scrutiny of conscience, or adore
The Hidden Presence on the shrine reserved,
That Sanctuary, that most Domestic Home
Of gentle nuns and self-renouncing monks.
There too Sir Lancelot knelt: the mountain wind
And the wide ocean could not half so much
Dilate his soul, as those long solemn aisles,
Dim glittering Altars, incense-burdened air,
The recent benediction of the Host,
And mutely preaching symbols of the Faith.
The sudden peace that haply may confront
The unbodied soul, which but a moment since
Was struggling on the death-bed, may afford
No unjust image of the rapturous calm,
Which fell from heaven upon that joyous man
Once more within a Christian church enclosed.
And far off kneeling in the misty nave
Which sunset still imperfectly illumined,
His gladness found an utterance, not in prayer,
But objectless recital to himself
Of what was all around him, growing now
Familiar as it used to be of old,
But with a childish wonder pondered still.

Thus in spontaneous rhythm his words broke forth,
No formal prayer, but happy prayer-like hymn,
As if to reassure his doubting mind
That what he saw was no delusive dream.

THE HYMN.

See, see how evening's sloping shadows grow
Upon the massy nave, and all the stone
Is flecked with little clouds of colour, thrown
From the west window; on the ground they go,
Silently creeping eastward, while the air
Thickens within the choir, and so conceals
The Altar, whose benignant presence there
The slowly rocking lamp alone reveals.
Ah me, how still! Our Lady's Vesper song
Hath died away amid the choral throng;
But the pure-visaged moon, that climbs elate
The throne of day, now strikes with trembling light
The painted lattice, where the livelong night
Saint Mary chants her lone Magnificat.

Hail, Mary, hail! O Maiden-Mother, hail!
In thankfulness I lean upon the thought
Of thy mysterious chastities; unsought
Comes the sweet faith thy prayers can never fail
In that high Heaven where thou hast been assumed;
And with this hope my spirit newly plumed
Strives upward, like a weary dove in sight
Of her lost refuge, steering by the light
Wherewith thy name hath silently illumed
The Church below, cheering the gradual night
The world hath forced upon the primal day

Of our sweet faith; and I, on penance cast
Till patient yearning should retrieve the past,
May bless thee for the succour of thy ray!
The light is vocal, wavering on the glass;—
The jewel midway in the braided hair,
The eyes, the lifted hand, are speaking there,
And o'er the lips the argent quiverings pass.
She sings! she sings! but thirsty silence drinks
The heavenly sound before its burden sinks
Into my listening ear. Hail, Mary, hail!
Hail thou that art the haven of the heart
Accessible in all our moods, a veil
Obscuring not, but gifted to impart
New aspects of the Cross: though sin erase
That Sign from Heaven, before our downcast eyes,
Which fall on thee, its sweet reflection lies
Like a soft shadow in a moonlit place.
Hail, Mary, hail! O Wondrous Mother! pray
To thy dear Son who takes our sins away!

SIR LANCELOT.



BOOK X.

THE COMMUNION.



BOOK X.

THE COMMUNION.

ON the round summit of Black Combe I stand,
While yet the rosy lips of evening seem
To drink the level sea, and Mona's peaks,
Their brief illumination past, retire
Into the invisible distance one by one.
On either side a very realm is spread
Of old conventual lands and Church domain.
Southward the cape of Furness by the hills
And sister gulfs from England seems cut off,
A kingdom for the Abbot, royalties
Of blythest tillage and uncounted wealth
Of ore that stains the brooks and narrow ways,
As though some recent battlefield were nigh.
Northward to Calder Cell and wild St. Bees,
And to the dusky verge of Copeland Chase,
The Church, out-balancing the knightly fiefs
By unity much more than breadth of glebe,
Upon that exquisite sea-border dwelt.

Another face is breathed upon the land,
A mighty change, which on this summit lone
Invokes the past before me, and persuades
My verse to wander from its end awhile
The better to attain that end at last

With more intelligent solemnity ;
And let it be permitted to the bard,
Through the strong habit of monition formed
By pastoral office pleading with the poor
And the hardhearted rich, to buy the right
Of pleading from this sombre mountain-top
With the cold reason of the worldly wise,
And let the earnest will atonement make
For this poetic fault, while I forget
The trespass of suspended action now
Through hope to achieve a practical design :—
Lofty the old tribunal where I stand
A self-called preacher, haply then too high
A strain for me, yet let me be forgiven
If I offend through pure though ill-taught love !

While yet I muse, in pale ethereal folds
The twilight deepens at my feet, and earth
And ocean scarce distinguishable were,
But that a wavy belt of sand emits
A dull uncertain glimmer, to the eye
Less obvious every moment ; while above
The stars encumber with their multitude
The heavenly dome, each sparkling, as it seems,
Through a pure liquid teardrop on its orb.
O desolate, most desolate ! The man
Who in the Thirteenth Age might haply climb
This mountain watch-tower could behold a scene
Which spoke of Christian verities, and love
And homage paid to them by humankind,
A scene which like a monument set forth
The truth, and in an obvious type displayed
Even to gross eyes the splendour of the Faith.
But now—O weep for that transfigured Now—
Let the full heart in thoughtful silence weep !

Yet, great the consolation to be found
In what the Past bequeaths of heavenly ways
And of the *style*, if such presumptuous words
Be lawful here, of Providential Acts
And Dealings with the fallen race of man.
For such the picture of the Church—the eye
Trembles in gazing—through all time displayed ;
The earth hath been the death-bed of the Church
For ever and for ever ; not an age
Hath come and gone when it was not believed
By those, who through the Present's darkling glass
Beheld but fragments of her fortunes then,
She was outworn and at the point to fail,
Unequal to her calling, to her strife,
Her many-sided combat with the world,
And as infallibly, in that her hour
Of weakness, found unto another youth
Even then most near when seeming most to fail.

But hast thou from a mountain-girdled plain,
Or through the vista of a lake-lit dell,
Watched the magnificent gathering of a storm,
The silent muster of the fiery clouds
With such determinate slowness wheeling up,
The swiftness of loose vapours and torn mists
With a wan sunshine on them, and the rents
Opening and closing like huge furnace-doors,
Contrasting so with that immoveable
And pausing centre, till the unwieldy host,
The mighty fabric all complete, begins
Its solid march across the hushed blue sky ?
With what a steadfast course it sweeps along,
And overbears the ineffectual winds,
Which scarce can ruffle its advancing edge !
Then in that preparation, in that pause,

In that on-rolling, in that vocal fire,
In the portentous swervings here and there,
In the disparting, reuniting cloud,
In the deep ever-growing shade it casts,
And in that strong attraction which the storm
Exerts upon thyself—thou hast well read,
In all their various uniformity,
The solemn chronicles of Holy Church!
And doth the storm in its mutations grow
To be less cognizably one? the calms
Which follow its wild speaking, are they less
Terrific than its voice? and is there not
An order, nay, a most undoubted grace,
In its confusions? Such an awful storm—
How often self-transfigured, disarrayed,
Growing, aggressive, gathered, and dispersed,
Yet palpably divine!—is Holy Church,
So utterly the same that she can be
Exceeding mutable; and this last power
May breathe some life into our flagging hopes,
Baffling the craven love of ancient times,
And gloriously repelling, as a shield,
Foul accusations of decay. For she
With sweet spontaneous effort can give forth
New forms of ancient doctrine, fit to mate
New changes and new wants in Christendom,—
Whether in primitive germs long since implied,
And by ascetic men elicited;
Or, on evasive error to lay hold,
Through subtle process distantly inferred;
Nay, sometimes with majestic increment,
Awful enlivening of her hidden strength
To exhilarate her children's drooping hearts,
Varying her ancient catholic harmonies,

Fresh salient truths our Mother superadds,
 And with accumulated youth moves on,—
 A Living Storm, O how much to be feared
 And how much to be loved ! no Written Thing,
 No Literary Puzzle of the past,
 No difficult, discoverable Lore,
 The churlish scholar's sole exclusive prize,—
 But never lost, and therefore needing not
 To be recovered,—open, tangible,
 Belonging to the multitudinous Poor,
 Christ's Presence with the Simple Ones of earth !

Such is the steadfast look, and scenery
 Sublime as an eternal mountain chain,
 In storm involved or transient sunshine keen,
 Of that primeval beauty of the Church,
 Beheld far off by us who can embrace
 Enough of God's broad counsels to discern
 The general aspect of the Christian Past.
 Yet to the warriors mingling in the strife
 With rolling garments, fire, and dust, and blood,
 All seemed confusion o'er the battling earth,
 And nothing clear but Heaven's blue tract above ;
 And unto them the End was ever nigh,
 Not seemingly—but with mysterious truth
 Brought near, as we are touching on it now.

Hereon we build our faith and hope to-day ;
 Not without tokens of an outward sort
 In silent gratitude received, as signs
 Of Love which every morning sees renewed
 And of Compassion lasting as the hills.

There is a time which goes not to the account
 Of past or present, and which cannot be
 Part of the days unborn,—the future's verge,
 A stirring antepast of change to come,

That little space when men can ascertain,
Even in the crowded turmoil of their age,
A pushing root which has not flowered as yet,
Nor had green leaves, but, succoured by their acts,
Protrudes into the surface of their times.
Then earnestness keeps vigil, wrapped in such
Quiescent expectation as mine eye,
Not wholly fancy-free, hath deemed it saw
Upon the bright church steeples on the night
When the last workday of the weary week
Comes with sweet sunlit evenings, so to pay
Preluding homage to the lonely feast
Grudged, if accorded, to the English poor.
The silent faces of those buildings seem
To speak from out the radiant foliage drawn
Around the grassy chamber of the dead,
Even as the future will appear to throw
Discordant meaning and expression strange
Into the countenance of the present days.
Such is the true account of *every* time;—
No time to us is future, present, past,
But such commingling of the three as gives
To men a light and guarantee to act,
With cheering motive summoned from the past,
And urgent call by present needs expressed,
And that forecasting purpose which alone
Can stamp a value on a Human Act,
And wed it to God's Will,—and such an aim
The future is commissioned to supply.
There is no actual Present in the world,
No such free time, to a believing man.

Summon the Past; and let it be that Age
Through which the wayward channel of my song
Wanders, and ask an oracle of it.

Learn from its lips how history may become
A travelling voice of prophecy, that rings
With cumulative echoes, and expounds
The solemn shadows of the Past to be
Forestallings of the Judgment, images,
Successively presented, of the growth,
The strife, the victory, and the doom of sin.
Learn from its lips how then the Church was laid
Beneath the shadow of the Empire dying,
And how before the awe-struck West she lit,
Like a fresh Angel, on the Hills of Rome !

Long, yet most grateful, hath the study been,
And with no vague design by me pursued,
To trace the under-currents of that age,
The secret bearings, which might haply give
A bias to its temper, and might serve
To mould the forms of intellectual life
In such peculiar greatness. Hard it is,
Even for imagination, to beget
The thought of what the life of Christians was
In those past ages, and most hard to shift
The inward habit of our modern thoughts
In such adjustment as to arbitrate
Fairly between the Present and the Past,
Neither too much extolling, nor too much
Condemning, through impatience of research :
For Christ is alway present with His Spouse,
Both when she sits on thrones, and when she weeps
In ashes vile : and where that Presence is,
Dwells truest Greatness, never so much veiled
But that meek faith may see where she must kneel.

Not in the pride of study let us come,
Nor in idolatrous regard of Past
Or Present, nor with an ignoble lust

Of fame, by curious lore to be enhanced ;
But rather with a meditative love
Of these our times, where our sole duties lie,
With meek misgivings anxious to discern
On every cape a lighthouse, by the Past
Beneficently raised to guide and warn :
Or in more hopeful posture still, with prayer
And study locked in mutual embrace,
Disciples, round the opening of a tomb,
Where the dear relics of a Saint repose
Which we to our own Altars would translate,
Upon our knees expectant, so to catch
The perfume of devout Antiquity.

There is a German faith, which may be seen
Grimly depicted on the cottage walls
Of that too hopeful people : in a cave
Within an ancient forest's silent gloom,
Amid a grassless labyrinth of tall pines
Which scarce the song-birds tenant, sleeps a man
With his dropped sword unbroken at his feet,
His huge bowed head, and hands with gauntlets off,
And his long ruddy beard in coils around :
A very fearful warrior, by the serfs
Discovered once, but in his cavern left,
Most awful even in his helpless sleep,
Whose dreams are of a world long past away
And with slow circuit coming back again !
Who hath not heard of that most mighty king
Hight Barbarossa, who once scourged the West,
And how he lost his politic renown
Amid those isolated points of life,
The crowd of old Transalpine commonwealths,
And how he battled with our lord the Pope,
And bruised, as others have before and since,

His crownèd brow against St. Peter's Chair?
Deem him not wholly evil: he was one
Of those perverted grandeurs of the past
Marred and misshaped by Satan, to stand forth
As laughing-stocks for ages; but the world,
Envyng the blissful Church who loseth not
The living intercession of her Saints,
And can approach their far-off rest by prayers,
Fables that *her* past glories too survive,
Simply withdrawn, until their time returns.
So covetous are men of what is great,
So rightly covetous, that faiths, grotesque
As this, have hearts that put their trust therein.
And verily such wholesome legends stand
In front of deep and most inspiring truths,
Bearing the quaint device, whereby the minds
Of untaught men may plainly comprehend
The whole philosophy of that wise awe
And loving reverence due unto the past.
So Barbarossa slumbers in his cave
Where wailing pines make endless lullaby;
So Arthur sleeps in Avalon to-day,
Whose grassy cone all Somerset beholds;
O verily those sleepers will return!

How fearful is the onward flight of Time,
A luminous avenue which guides our eyes
And leaves them fixed upon the Judgment-seat!
And to the scholar, in his lowly search
Amid the shipwrecked pageants of the Past,
It is a grave and yet affectionate thought,
Which many an ancient liturgy supplies,
That Ages are not cold and abstract names,
But spiritual Powers instinct with life
And gifts, and Witnesses intelligent
Of human conduct, Angels deemed of old;

As if each Age, though squaring not perchance
With our material measures, subject were
To its own Guardian Angel thus allowed
His season to administer the Church,
Thereon to impress the signet of his will,
And fashion it in his peculiar grace,
Bending its virtues while he thus constrains
Recoiling ills to take a special course,—
If to those blessed Hosts there be a will
Beyond the Mind of God. And, so it is,
Each Age with after-baptism is surnamed
By the kind Church from its chief mode of good,
While by the worldly from the gross recoil
Of evil on the surface is it called.

And deeper than a pleasant thought may be
The strong imagination, that we hold
Sublime and yet endearing intercourse
With some one of the radiant Host of Heaven,
Cherubic Mind or deep Seraphic Heart,
Or steadfastness of some paternal Throne,
Whene'er we ponder in confiding love
The function of an Age, some special Age
Singled with thoughtful choice.

O then how sweet,
And yet how infinitely solemn, seems
The chamber of the student, oft in prayer
With his mute books around him, while he calls,
With such meek invocation as he may,
The Angels of the Ages to supply
The keys of those old written chronicles;
And purchases his knowledge with a vow,
Morning and eve renewed, abjuring fame,
That he will dedicate to Holy Church
The scanty produce of his patient toils.

So let us study with those Angels round,
The Spirits of the Ages, while we trace
In frequent signature the blessèd Cross
Upon our bosoms, making all our lore
Unworldly, as we gain it, and our thoughts
Dissevering from the taint of self-conceit.

O when we lift the veil from off those days,
With what a sacred beauty is the heart
O'erwhelmed, and by how strange a scene surprised!
We live on earth, and Heaven is far away,
Another world, and by itself insphered
In jealous separation from the spot
Whereon our blindfold spirits feel and act.
This is the instinct of our present age.
But, *then*, with bold magnificence of thought,
Which nothing but a pure simplicity
Of faith and holy living could inspire,
Heaven was invoked to fill the vacant earth,
So that the teeming solitudes ran over
With its bright presence, and material forms
Were clothed with spirit, yea, full oft absorbed
In heavenly splendour, to forgetfulness
Translated of their own original use.
For through its several kingdoms earth to them
With Heaven was all inlaid: its awful touch
On private life, and on the social state
And the grave forms of law, had power to shed
A gracious beauty and imposing mien,
With no reluctant homage then confessed,
When with such sanctions sealed as overbore
By their dread import idle questioning.

In the prerogative of kings men saw
Somewhat of God's Authority transfused,
A show of regency which barely veiled

The gesture of His Attributes behind.
And in the ceremonials of the law
Vengeance with healing discipline was joined,
Which men of darkened conscience at this day
Would fain put from them as a power that bears
Uneasy witness to the unseen world ;
And mercy with mysterious vagueness flowed
From the pure impulse of the sovereign will,
Not seldom by divine suggestion ruled.
And utterly unknown was that vile thought
And base division, which would now degrade
The secular power, and with unblest divorce
Confine it in a barren sphere, apart
From spiritual regards and rights divine
Of Holy Church, the radiant element
Whose exile, happily yet unconfirmed
By the discordant nations, would have left
The sphere of politics a formless world
Without a sun, and daily working back
Into that moral chaos whence it sprung,
When Rome's great Spirit o'er the gloom went out,
And stirred the darkness of that uncouth Past,
And with creative harmony called up,
Like some enchantress verily inspired,
From out the strife of battling principles,
That birth of beauty, Western Christendom.

Nor were the thoughts of men in those great days,
Less sensibly uplifted, or their hearts
With an inspiring wisdom less sustained.
To them the world was sweetly populous
With old ancestral truths and touching faiths
And beautiful surmises, imaging
Upon the face of nature heavenly forms
With something more than bare similitudes.

The qualities of precious stones, the ways
Of the wild tenants of the sylvan chase,
The hidden will which in the growing plant
Fashioned the leaves and coloured the gay flower,—
All were to them as ritual books that taught
A Christian science, and laid bare the veins
Of spiritual Presence that enriched
Their world, and would so aptly reinforce
The languid pulse of our impoverished lives :
A science not yet utterly withdrawn
From us, but in the realm of herbs and flowers
Among our native peasants living still
In moving legends, expositions wild,
And meek acknowledgment of powers unseen;
Which at the roots of our salubrious plants
Give battle to the spirits of misrule
With varying success. And yet methinks,
With some vibrations in the popular heart
Still ascertainable, traditions live
Descended from antiquity, and are
The poetry of shepherds and poor men,
Not without influence on their Christian lives,
Sometimes by local usage canonized,
More oft by lips of hoary ancients taught,
And handed on in shrines of prose or verse.

Beautiful Past ! And yet thou art to me
But a true gage wherewith to take the height
And measure of the Present : or, at most,
The testament of an affectionate sire,
Which, when the wealth bequeathed is through
neglect
Dispersed, or irretrievable mischance,
Hath still a value to the pious heart
For each expression of his wish, and trains

Of monitory thought that flow therefrom.
For surely there is more than weak self-love,
A nobler and more feeling wisdom, couched
In that habitual attitude of mind,
Which would regard the Present as brought near
In such relation to ourselves, our acts
And aspirations, that it should present
A scene of more sublime magnificence,
More stirring interests, more expressive grace,
Than the most gorgeous section of the Past.

Here lie our duties, loves and hopes and fears ;
Here have we tenderest intercourse with those
Our fellow-workers, with the lately dead
Most intimate affections ; here we pray,
And tremble at the plain responses sent
Unto our prayers ; here we retard or aid
The solemn progress of the mighty change,
Which in the bosom of its swift advance
Bears us along, unconscious yet how far
Or on what road we travel, but most wise
When least reluctant, tranquil in our faith,
Our masculine belief as Christian men,
Yea, more than tranquil, with abounding joy,
So long as Conscience ascertain each step,
Chanting a sponsal anthem as we go,
As blind but happy minstrels on the prow
Of gallant change upon discovery bound.

Time hath no havens : in the stress of storm
The world perforce remains upon the sea.
O desolate, O weary-wandering world !
For where can *she* put in, or where refit
Her shattered rigging, or where hope to cast
An anchor, save before the Judgment-seat,
Whose rocky base flings back the languid tide

And the spent waves of time, lest they should quicken
The deep calm pulses of eternity ?

O were it well to breathe so bold a prayer,
Or seek an office which so far transcends
My faculties, it were that I might sing
Through a long course of meditative years
In rapturous flights and loud impassioned verse
The grandeur of the Present Times, the change
Which, like a vast on-coming cloud, bids fair
To eclipse the mighty forms of ancient days
With forms more mighty still ; and not as now,
With querulous sweetness to frequent the woods,
And mate the running streams with lispingsong !

The earth is all awake ; from her long sleep,
Her stagnant slumber when the glory passed
Even from her dreams, she started and awoke,
And battled blindly with her hands as one
Whose brain the mists of slumber still oppress.
But now with troubled dignity she fronts
The dawn of her new duties like a queen.
On every side the aspect of the world
Shifts visibly : gigantic figures rise,
Like clouds at sea, upon the horizon line
Of the close future, and together draw
In heavy preparation, yearly clothed
With more distinct array, and looking out,
A bland and noble destiny, on earth,
Who with a tremour of impatience waits
Such blissful usurpation of her realms.

For keen expectancy doth now project
Into the souls of men an earnestness
And a courageous hope, for long unknown ;
And daring dreamers scattered here and there,
Like prophets, fling the ancient idols down,
And tune the solemn voice of humankind

To a new music, borrowing it may be
Some sweetness from the Past, but most enriched
With wild and novel keys, whereon the hands
Of Time and Chance have never pressed before.
And who so blind that he misreads the signs
Which thicken round him, or mistakes the sound
Of barriers falling in the East and West,
And national distinctions waxing faint,
Worn by the pressure of more ample thoughts,
More ample sympathies, and by the powers
Newly conferred for his new wants on man,—
Congenial energies which hope may hail
As opportune allies,—while all earth's sons
Seem now about to be together thrown
And blended in one single brotherhood?

Who would not too with exultation point
At that large-hearted wisdom which eludes
The measure of all party names, and rends
With a high-souled disdain the vulgar shapes
Of faction, and with wise constructive love,
Goodness accounting man's sole greatness, truth
The world's sole beauty, learns to sympathize,
And with discerning jealousy to walk,
With these in whatsoever places found,
With whatsoever hateful powers allied,
Saving the honour of the blessed Faith?
For thus, if sin mar not the goodly work,
The unconscious world through these capacious hearts
Is edging forward into unity.
And, for that invocation of high Heaven
To come into the bosom of our age,
A psalm for such long centuries unsung,—
Is it not even now begun on earth?
Is it not heard far off and near at once,

Rising from separate hearts, like fragrant curls
Of odour from a hundred censers swung
With even modulation? Doth not earth
Already glow with somewhat of a light
Above her own, beatified in part
As Heaven pervades her kingdoms more and more?

What if the Right Divine hath been withdrawn
From kings and from the mystery of birth,
Revoked for long misuse, and we in them
Now recognize a power on civil law
Dependent, for the sake of God, and not
As God, by us acknowledged and obeyed—
Hath not the heavenly Right been lodged anew
Deep in the bosom of the Christian State,
Buried within the Popular Will, and thus
Magnificently perilled, that the world
A third time with fresh auspices may strive
That holy Right and Presence to retain?
O solemn venture! who would not be cheered
By danger thus sublime? Who would not pray,
Ah with what diffidence of sinful man!
That holy lamp, once stifled in the air
Of ancient Monarchies, may be relumed
Within the shrine of Christian common-wealths;
And thence dispelling that unhappy cloud
Of misbelief, which hath three ages clogged
The better destinies of humankind,
A new and glorious vision may be seen,
A Christendom, more vast than that of old,
In catholic faith and ritual sweetly joined,
Embracing with its beautiful restraints
The Spirit of Democracy, made wise
Through many sufferings, solemn and serene
As earth would fain desire, about to meet

The dawn and day-break of Eternity !

Ah me! and have I ventured to aspire
 Upon the prow of this majestic change
 To sit, and watch the vessel of the world
 Dipping uneasily into the deep,
 And tune my trustful anthems as it heaves,
 Embodying these my burning hopes in song?
 Peace! peace! ambitious heart! for all unmeet
 For thy poor strivings were such glorious task:
 And peace, ye clamorous hopes! which, like a
 brood

Of callow hawks impatient to essay
 The limpid ether round yon hanging cliff,¹
 Project themselves too far beyond the bound
 Of heaven-taught sadness. But if we would gaze
 In studious prayer, as on a crystal lake
 Whose clearness makes its depths more palpable,
 All day upon the Fourfold Countenance
 Of the deep Gospels, we should learn perforce
 This sobering lesson, that the men most nigh
 Unto the Person of the Son of God
 Withheld their yearning lips from hopeful strain
 Of trust in human conduct: zealous James
 Be witness, and the trumpet tongue of Jude,
 Or ready Levi's loud judicial tone,
 Or that vindictive jealousy of him
 Who leaned upon the Saviour's very Heart.
 Let these confront the kind permitted truths,
 Broad hope, and credulous belief of good,
 In ardent Paul, or Luke whose anxious pen,
 Blandest physician of repenting souls,
 In his affectionate Gospel would amass
 All hopeful traits of those who might approach
 Our Lord, all merciful regards by Him

To their weak trust in times of need vouchsafed.

England! dear England! Island of the Saints!
Thy broad blythe champaign, and sheep-spotted
wolds,

Thy ferny forest-lands, and hawthorn glades,
Thy park-like fields, and water-meadows green,
And rushy brooks, lie deep within my heart.

Ah! how I compass with affectionate thought

A thousand sweet localities, whereon

The light of our religious past is blent

With the dark presence of our modern sin!

My boyhood was a year-long pilgrimage

Amassing pleasant sights, which now are turned

To deeper things than wells of poetry.

And at this tearful hour I summon up,

With individual features all distinct,

Thy lifeless abbeys, and monastic homes,

Quickened with but the semblance of a life,

Thy broken crosses, convent-peopled fens,

Disfigured minsters, fountains, woods and hills

With saintly surnames; and I now behold

In accurate vision, thoughtfully composed,

Thy lovely Frame, thy seven and thirty Shires,

Three goodly Palatines, and Islands five,

With Ely's Royal Franchise for a sixth,

And Town that keeps the sea-gates of the Tweed:

And a bright shade upon the vision falls,

Stooping thereon with palpable embrace.

As, when the staff by delegated hands

(How justly figuring England's futile past!)

Laid on his face no sign of life evoked,

Forthwith the Hebrew prophet stretched himself

Upon the Sunamite's sun-stricken child,

Hand touching hand, eye firmly pressing eye,

And living lips upon the dead lips closed,—
Even so methinks her Guardian Angel lies
Incumbent on my native country's breadth,
Limb upon limb at once, and working there
No partial restoration; and the warmth
So secretly is thrilling through her flesh,
So equally pervading all her veins
With tremulous augmentation ascertained,
The earth is barely conscious of a change,
Though with some half-incredulous fear annoyed.
But there lie England and her Angel, shut
From the world's notice, as the prophet was,
Left, with closed doors, upon the lifeless child.
The living Church beyond the seas may pray,
The Saxon Saints will intercede above,
And we, in happy expectation, wait,
Not idle in our measure and degree,
To cry, God speed the silent miracle!

It is St. Peter's Day, the sacred Feast
Which, not from holy Paul's great name disjoined,
Bequeaths a blessing on departing June.
Sweetly the spirit of the morning fills
The abbey yard and hollow meads around.
Those golden beams! how silently they range
Upon the foliage of the hanging woods!
And nature's joy, which is the love of God,
Winds up the brook between the alder-trunks,
Brightening the waters with a breeze-like motion,
Wanders among the meadow flowers, revealed
By silent wakes that crisp the nodding herbs
Parted and fanned aside as if by wings,
And, o'er the elastic mosses hovering up,
Stealing the savoury damp that saturates
The tessellated herbage of the woods,

Freights the warm dew as it returns to heaven
With breaths of incense and the songs of birds.

And in the heart of that sweet sunken dell
The Abbey, like a sentient creature, lies
Couched on the dewy sward: and from the towers,
Gateways and buttresses of ruddy stone,
It breathes a voice into the listening woods.
The upper air is all alive with bells,
While on the undulating waves of sound
Float the dark clamorous fleets of happy daws;
And, down below, the very stones respire
Celestial music from their viewless pores,
While the loud choirs with pealing organs vie,
Chanting the Blessèd Mass; all down the nave
The thrilling torrent of the music rolls,
Like an imprisoned tide, now seems to heave
The mighty roof, and now with reflux stream
Pours its sweet trouble eastward, and escapes,
But for awhile, beneath the transept arch,
Till the dumb stones and lucid windows yield
An outlet to that throbbing sea of sound.
It is the Preface; ah how meet and right
With Angels and Archangels, and the band
Of Apostolic Vicars gathered now
Unto their rest and glory, to adore
The Holy One with ceaseless solemn songs!
That Mixolydian strain! how sweetly sad,
Tutoring dejected hearts in cheerfulness,
Expressive of man's twofold state below
As lost in Adam and redeemed in Christ!
Ah! thus is all the music of the world
Confined within the Cross, whose vocal swells,
Inaudible except to reverent ears,
With glorious surges of heart-music fill

The fertile breast of Christ's most Holy Church ;—
 Yet not without a faint alluring sound
 Breathed on the outer world, to win the souls
 That not in power but weakness linger near,
 While in triumphant elegies the Bride
 Sings, sweetly sings, her Lord's unmated griefs !

Who is yon Kneeler that like one entranced
 Bends o'er the marble step, with both hands crossed
 Upon his bosom, raining holy tears
 From un-uplifted eyes? O is it grief,
 Or the enlarged abundance of his heart,
 Thus weeping from him like a summer shower?
 And is it prayer which parts his quivering lips,
 Or viewless rapture, winged with more than words,
 Escaping from the worn Ascetic's frame,
 Like trembling odours by the solar beam
 Wrung with extatic pain from silent flowers?
 It is Sir Lancelot, the Hermit-Knight,
 The son received into his Mother's arms,
 The Crown of Penance, Triumph of the Cross
 And Victory of Christ's Almighty Love !

Press the loud organs, roll the living psalm
 In jubilant thunders o'er the prostrate crowd ;
 Once more—a loftier strain!—swell, swell the
 hymns,—

Ye choirs, let loose the burning bolts of song ;
 See how they flash and lighten from the roof !
 Hark ! how divinely doth the storm of sound
 Gather in folded harmonies, far off
 And near ;—fill the loud anthems higher still,
 Fill the deep womb of music to the brim,
 Until the soul of every kneeler there,
 Won from the body, mount upon the stream,
 The cloudy stream of music, and ascend

Far above sin and earth, within the sight
And audience of seraphic liturgies!

Down, like descending Angels, see the clouds
Of music, how they fold their quivering wings
Above the Altar, mute and self-absorbed!
Silence! the potent Canon hath begun.

See how it glasses in symbolic acts
And holy gestures, that exalted scene,
Which fell in Patmos on the mind of him,
The Virgin Seer! Behold how it reflects,
Nay, by a dread Illapse brings down to earth,
The heavenly Worship of the Immaculate Lamb,
The Liturgy which never ends above,
Answered by earth's ineffable response
From out the Wonder of the Blessèd Mass!

What thoughts, or rather, in the silent room
Of thought deposed, what blissful Presence filled
Sir Lancelot, when the Altar's Burning Coal,
As with the rapt Isaias, touched his lips,
Not song of minstrel, but the hearts of Saints
With voiceless thrill must utter to themselves.

On Hawcoat Brow in days of old there stood
A deep alcove, a semicirque of stone,
With canopy of sculptured palm-leaves roofed,
From which the mountains of three famous realms,
Laved by the western seas, far off appeared.
Thither the gentle monks of Furness came,
Lonely or paired, what time the setting sun
Flamed o'er the golden sea and purple hills.
Duly each summer evening there they went
To feed the love of nature, whose prime seat
Is aptly fixed upon those modest thrones,—
The hearts of men of meditative ways
And frequent prayer. And to their chastened
thoughts

Haply that landscape witnessed not so much
To God's creative love, as woke the thought
Of all that dread magnificent scene of wealth
By Satan shown from Quaratana's top,
Tempting the rightful Heir, and claiming then—
Ah, how the lordly minsters and sweet rites
Of Holy Church have falsified the claim!—
The beauty of the world to be his own,
Of old conceded to him, and abjured
By angry Heaven.

Such stations, for repose
And contemplation mixed, may yet be seen
By him who from Arezzo climbs the hill,
Whose other side, like some Cyclopean wall,
Rises a hoary rampart from the vale
Of Maldoli, so pleasantly outstretched
With sward and trees beneath the pilgrim's eye :
Or who essays—O not without a thought
Deeper and chaster than the curious mood
Of restless voyager!—to scale the steep,
The pine-clad mountain of the Hermitage,
Whose threshold by the monitory name
Of Antony from mundane thoughts is barred.
There mid the rocks and whispering forests dwell
Saint Romuald's sons, begotten in the faith,
The noble of Ravenna whose high heart
Burned, like a seraph's, with extatic love,
Whose transports glistened through unceasing tears.
Ah! he who by the seven clear water-springs
Shall sit, and overlook the solemn waste
And labyrinth of wild Apennines all round,
And white-stoled figures gliding through the pines,
Noiseless as sunbeams, and shall haply hear

The famous clock which lifts its mighty voice
In admonition of the coming End,
Throughout the savage desert audible,—
He, though his faith were cold as Alpine stone,
Shall feel how deep the simple love of earth
Was fixed in those ascetic brotherhoods,
Who seemed with such a single aim to love
God, that they left no room for love of man :
And in his heart shall carry to his home
This common wisdom, haply new to him,—
He, who would love the world to tears, must first
Renounce for God the love the world returns.

Yet those monastic wilds may not compare
With the broad prospect seen from Hawcoat Brow.
But rather apt resemblance may we find,
By some inferior deemed, in that Monk's Seat
Perched on the old Lactarian hills that rise
By Arola above Sorrento's steep,
A younger-born Camaldoli ; for there
The enchanted eye may wander from the cliffs
Of Capri northward to Miseno's horn,
While far above its giant beeches towers
The snowy summit of the Angel's Mount,
And old Vesuvio, querulously calm,
Sighs forth his azure smoke incessantly ;
Till the tired sight, enraptured, seeks repose
Upon the nodding clouds of umbrage sunk
Beneath it, on the silent chestnut groves
Of Arola, or sees, (and while it sees
Sleeps, cradled on the beautiful expanse,)
The murmuring crescent of Parthenope !

From Hawcoat Hill an unfrequented road
Leads to the beach, and by the tower there stands,
Upon a weedy plot of wayside turf,

A little hut, wherein the kindly monks,
When Mass was said, installed the grateful Knight,
In blissful peace, absolved and reconciled.
Not vain to him was that most wondrous view,—
Sea-girdled Mona, the advancing hills
Beyond the misty Solway caught and lost
In the blue haze, the scattered peaks of Wales
On the south shore like castles in the sea,
The convex of the Furness mountains, pierced
By the bright snaky Duddon, and Black Combe
Unveiling there his shadow-dappled face
With mute expression, to Sir Lancelot known ;
While, like a soft suffusion of fair light,
Calmly pervading many an inlet round,
The summer sea with luminous heaving spread.

And now to him adopted once again
Into the depths of Christian privilege,
His soul was free to wander unrebuked
Through the broad pastures of the ancient Truth
And Faith of catholic ages. To his mind
Two special fields of thought were now disclosed,
Not new, but in surpassing freshness clad,
Transcending far the light of novelty:
Even as the vales behind the mask of spring,
The glory of its verdure, hide themselves,
And while, entangled in the dream, our eyes
The open views of leafless winter seek,
From bush and brake familiar features peer,
Scarce recognized for well-known household forms.
Two Powers lay open to his reverent love,
Waiting the homage of a soul at peace,
In full communion with the Holy Church ;
For such and such alone, (unless it be
The thoughts of children travel in those lands,

And sinning souls are vexed by glimpses sent
Reversed in broken dreams) shall find unbarred
The royal roads of secret intercourse,
Which cross the confines of the Invisible World.
Free was he now in meditative awe
To commune with the Angels and the Dead.

There have been holy men whose spirit's eye,
By outward rite to inward love sublimed,
Hath been so couched, that at the Blessèd Mass
Angelic bands in manifest array
Have in the celebration borne their part,
Aiding the mortal priest: such extasy,
So legends tell, was anciently vouchsafed
To him of Tolentino, seraphlike,
Who from ascetic infancy grew up,
A lovely marvel mid his childish peers,
Unto the giant stature of a Saint.
So by angelic hands upon the side
Of Juliana, who in Florence wore
The Servite Mantle first, a visible seal,
The Sacred Host was once impressed, withdrawn
From out the hand of the astonished priest
Who held it to her bosom; for so wrought
The extatic hunger of the heavenly Food,
What time her feebleness could ill sustain
Common reception: and ascetic love,
Outgrowing, not supplanting, ritual acts,
Might consummate an inward Eucharist.

O Mother Church! who taught thine eye to see
The jealous veil of separation worn
Almost to nothing twixt the world of sight
And brighter world of faith, by those deep thrills
Of joy expecting her mysterious Food?
Who taught thy voice at that sweet point of time,

When feasting souls, all eagle-like, ascend,
And in no self-sustaining rapture burst
On high into the quivering beams of song—
Who taught thy voice in that transcendent hour
Boldly to claim the Angels for thy peers,
And call Archangels fellow-worshippers,
While the expectation of thy kneeling sons
Outstrips the ritual, soars above the earth,
And, hidden among the Angels, finds its home ?

Sweet and tear-moving thoughts now calmly rose
Within Sir Lancelot's mind ; he seemed to dwell
Rather with Angels than his fellow men.
Their everlasting order and deep peace
Such grateful contemplation did afford,
As to the feeble but far-kenning sight
Of saintly men who bow themselves to die,
By thankless labours and rude days outworn.
O beautiful Restraints in early years
From secret sins and negligence in prayer,
That make the darkness reverend, and disclose
The sparkling eye of solitude by day,
How blessèd are your offices to man !
Your presence is an endless ritual,
Whereby the soul makes real to herself
The Omnipresence of the Holy Three,
A truth so high, so infinitely raised
Above the baser moods of our terrestrial life,
We need the Patriarch's Ladder thus to scale
That height of doctrine most ineffable.

And hourly doth the soft constraining sense
Of your companionship and grave regards
Enhance our private acts, and solemnize
What else in our retirèd modesties
Might fail in dignity, until it grows .

A ceremonial, by the humbled pride
And sober fancy not disdained as help
To loftier contemplation, breeding still,—
When we lie down to sleep and when we rise
And for our public life prepare ourselves
With all such comely types of inward things
As God hath made to wait on those vile acts,—
Meekness of corporal attitude and grace
Of outward lowliness, which shall not fail
In time to win a beautiful response
From out the shrines of our interior life.

Such meditation on the thrice three rings
Of blest adoring spirits, which surround
The Enthronèd Presence in the courts above,
In ceaseless Energy, or Servitude
Of an unutterably loving fear,
Contemplating the Attributes Divine,—
Precluded not a special homage paid
To his own Guardian Angel. Woe is me
That any blissful Sprite should be detained
From his more intimate happiness in Heaven,
To be the staff of my irregular steps,
My wayward treading and poor floundering feet,
Along the miry paths of human sin.
O I could pity thee, Angelic Guide!
For thy base office, when I loathe myself
For hourly sins and pusillanimous ways,
Though at such seasons dearest far to thee!
So now the Knight his Guardian Angel sought
With that subordinate worship, which the Church
To all her children studiously suggests,
An aid, if not a need, to sinning souls.
His deep affections did he oft project
Into the invisible world, a local world

Not cast far off, but with its confines stretched
Hard by, yea truly touching on himself.
Oft did he lean upon his unseen Friend
With realized embrace of kindly thoughts
And answered invocation, craving still
To lose that friendship in the holier love
Of God and dearer neighbourhood of Christ,
And therefore supplicating for the hour,
When in the calm and orderly delight
Of resurrection we shall bid farewell,
Farewell unto his office, not his love,
To that sweet Guardian, whose commissioned help
Penance and Grace have prospered, and that day
(O be it so) have brought us satisfied
Unto the wakening likeness of our Lord,
The restful haven where we fain would be!

But greater still—if in such sacred things
Comparison befit our words or thoughts—
Was the sweet ravishment of tranquil joy,
Felt by the Knight in intercourse renewed
With those at rest, the holy suffering Souls
Twixt earth and heaven, to earthly hearts a bond
More sensibly imposed upon our hopes
And pure affections, than the wandering love
Which meets the Angels on its heavenward road.
The peaceful intercession of the Dead,
The privilege of prayer for them, in faith
That knows not what or where their spirits are,
Yet less they miss of aught they might obtain,
Progress or increment or deepened peace,
In that their present state still dares to pray,
And loves her daring ;—such his blameless joys,
Part of the deep Communion of the Saints,
Part, not the Crown ; a higher Union still

Remains which my weak song may not essay,
Nor vileness contemplate except far off.
These were the blameless joys Sir Lancelot felt,
Blameless by man, but O far more than that,
Far more than unblamed sacrifice to Him,
In whose pure Eye the Universal Church,
The myriad Saints already throned in heaven,
The pilgrim Dead still somewhere on their road
Bedewed with peaceful fires, the scattered few
Who live and fight, one only Body are!

But further heights there were for him to climb,
Which common Christians in their low estate
Gaze on from far; and speak with puzzled words,
A cloudy nomenclature, of the stairs
Which lead unto the temple of the Saints,
By science not unmeasured, and to us
A profitable knowledge, if it put
More emulous life into our trivial acts.

Those mystical Ascents Sir Lancelot now
Essayed to climb upon his bended knees,
As pilgrims climb the tear-dropped Stairs at Rome.
And first from Meditation was he led
To Recollection, where his mental powers
Acted less fretfully, the vestibule
Of mystic Contemplation, in whose depths
The passive souls of Saints abide and breathe.
More wonderful that Spiritual Calm
Which follows Recollection, when the heart,
With holy Presences dilated, hangs
In tranquil balance fixed upon one thought,
One special and engrossing Act of Christ,
Or with collected vagueness all diffused,
And lost within a breathless extasy
Of rapturous homage to the Triune God,

And wherein even the body takes its part,
By mortifying practices sublimed,
Not seldom lifted gently from the ground
With slow ascension, and with upraised arms
And garments floating on the radiant air;—
Unearthly favours, yet accompanied
With perfect recognition of the Will
To make all fitting Acts of Faith and Love,
Of Self-oblation and heroic Vows.

A further truth Sir Lancelot had to learn:
That God is jealous of His Own good gifts,
When they are loved in place of God Himself.
And as erewhile within the gloomy Ark
He shut great Noe when the floods were out,
So in a prison, painful, dim, and straight,
Doth He confine the Saints to be prepared,
By keen ablution of the inward man,
For contemplation of His Blessèd Self.
Dryness of Sense there comes to tempt the soul
No more to persevere in bootless prayer;
Dryness of Spirit next, when loving Fast
And cheering Vigil, nay, the Mass itself
Doth but augment the sadness of the heart,
And prompts it kneeling at the Altar-step,
To hate the God who gives His Flesh to us:—
A Penal Light, so theologians call
This piercing grief, as giving to the Saints
Knowledge of previous darkness to enhance
The beauty of the sunrise yet to come.
Such was the Penal Light the Florentine,
Of Pazzi's noble stock, five years endured;
But days were years unto Sir Lancelot's soul
Now that his pilgrimage drew near its close.
For soon to him the half-enlightened dawn

Of Contemplation broke, wherein his eye
Compassed Affirmative Truths, which lay distinct,
In several orders lucidly combined,
And tangible by thought if not by words.
Then finally his soul was introduced
To that Clear Darkness, which the Saints so name
Because the abounding light of Heaven obscures
Our helpless reason, blinds our keenest thoughts,
Buries our faith, and overlays the will,
And through its dim confusing splendour gives
Some joyous cognizance of Things Divine,
Places and Persons, Names and Vocal Sounds,—
Till in her Passive Union with her Lord
The soul, long waiting, years ago betrothed,
Keeping her plighted troth by strictest acts
Of diligent penance and ascetic love,
Finds her sweet Bridal Hour come unawares,
And Heaven begun ere Earth is passed away!

Such were the joys that now engrossed the months
Which followed his forgiveness by the Church,
Joys, which in that forgiveness only found
Their lawful root; and every passing week
Beheld a change come o'er his bodily frame.
We might believe it was the will of Heaven
By its immediate and upholding Hand,
Foregoing usual customs, to confine
The life within his frame, where health and strength
Their strongholds had forsaken and betrayed,
Until the work of grace was now complete,
The penance done, the sinner reconciled,
The individual soul, with travail long
And dark and dubious, born unto the Church
A second time with new baptismal life
From out that cloudy Font, by love reserved

For such as forfeited by mortal sin
The sweet adoption of the Watery Birth,
And facile grace so freely there consigned.

For now without apparent cause of age
Or sickness, as if that sustaining Hand
Had been withdrawn, by some invisible vents
His life ebbed from him gently like a stream.
Prayer and the feeble breathings of his praise,
The weariness of rapture in his heart
Immured, the speechless fervour of his joy,
The very murmurs of the placid sea,
The very tolling of the abbey bells,
The very pulses of the summer day,
The very tingling of the starry nights,
Preyed on his life, and seemed with silent shocks
To disembarrass his impatient soul
Of its half ruined tenement of flesh.
Some portion of his perishable life
Now daily grew eternal : no one hour
Straitened or held the solemn act of death :
But immortality in vases caught
His life as it was spilled, a silent scene
Of mystery : the ocean never ebbed
So silently as did that vital stream.

Towards the close of an October day,
St. Denys' Eve, which seemed for warmth to be
An afterthought of summer, from that Seat
Within the stone alcove Sir Lancelot watched
The bright and early sunset : all around
A soft pathetic brilliance overspread
The autumnal scene, such splendour as befits
The days which through the immediate gates of night
Withdraw, and earth her welcome hour no more
Within the roseate antechamber waits

Surmounted by a coronet of rock,
The shoal of Fouldrey, where the flocking gulls
With mournful cries their nightly councils held,
For human habitation then unclaimed.
There now, its age of pride and glory past,
In slow decay the abbot's mouldering pile
Fights with the winds and waves, the rude allies
Of time, and still their joint assaults resists.
A touching solitude it is, beheld
Through the grey sea-fogs looming, like the wreck
Of some huge ship to those who roam far off
In Furness by the Druid's hoary ring
On Birkrigg, or the groves of Aldingham,
Or heights that guard fair Urswick's reedy pool,
The quiet haunt of silky-feathered coots,
Or those who try the perilous ascent
Of Gleaston's crazy towers;—more mournful still
That isolated ruin will appear,
When in the cold illumination lost
Of sunset, on the line of sandhills poured
And dreary leagues of wet and furrowed beach,
With some poor fishing vessels laid aslant
Among the slimy stones beneath the pile:
Or at full sea more melancholy still,
At dead of night, when on the waves below
The moonbeams through the vacant crennels play
In tremulous agitation, while for hours
Doth ocean, like Penelope of old,
Weave and unweave those threads of silver light,
And at pale dawn upon the watery loom
Where be the signs of that nocturnal toil?
All things around their usual aspect wore,
An exquisite, and yet most common, peace.
But there was something in that evening sky,

A trouble of red light, that would arrest
And overawe the heart whose varying moods
By natural signs through simple love were steered.
Somewhat of pathos was there, intermixed
In that solemnity with which the sun
Went to his setting, something I would call
Portentous, that might tranquillize the mind
Through timorous expectation.

From his chair

Sir Lancelot looked out upon the sea.
The sun was veiled behind a heavy cloud,
Which hung above the water with a space
Of light between the ocean and itself,
That seemed to burn with tongues of shooting flame,
An endless, endless distance to the west;
And sable bars of dusky vapour shot
Athwart the abyss of gold, while up the vale,
The hollow vale of Duddon, in a gloom
Of misty purple shadow far withdrawn,
There ran a single line of sullen light
Where the cold sea an entrance found, and there
Behind the frowning portals of the gorge
Was lost to view; even as the closing grave
Screens from all eyes, save only those of faith,
The track where passing souls prolong their flight:
A melancholy type, not unobserved
By him whose mind for many a month had been
Tinged with the solemn thoughts of death. And yet
There wanted not a truer image far
Of that dread passage, in the glory stretched
Across the infinite illumined sea,
And in the golden mountain-tops that formed
The radiant distance where old Mona lay
Right in the bosom of the setting sun.

He looked until his eyes were dimmed with tears,
Such thoughts that glory stirred; and bodily
strength

Appeared to go forth from him as he gazed,
Drained from his eyes by that surpassing light
Whose sweet compulsion had drawn up those tears.
It seemed as if that natural pomp had been
A silent incantation which had power
To evoke the spirit from its earthly frame,
Worn and decayed by too much fellowship
With the outward elements, and wet and cold
And blinding mists that on high summits dwell:
Though he had stood amongst them like the rock
That fronts the innocuous fury of the waves,
And, to appearance, flung the damps and storms
From off his temperate health as from a shield.
Now with the radiant vision overpowered,
Sir Lancelot leaned, half swooning, on his staff,
Which was an ill-shaped Cross of ruddy yew
By nature framed, through chance or through design,
As men may deem material forms endowed
With spirit, and capricious growths o'er-ruled
To be suggestive to the feeling heart;
And on the staff the knight from Holy Writ,
A Latin legend carved, whose import was—
'We justly bear the Cross because therein
'We bear the harvest of our deeds, but nought
'Was done amiss by Him who bore it first.'

From the sea-shore there wandered at that hour
A poor half-witted boy, with long white hair
And eyes with wild unmeaning lustre bright,
Well known in Furness as the Lucky Guy.
His days, as ever seems to be the wont
Of those in his sad plight, in open air

Among the woods and flowery lanes were passed.
Nor wanted he an office that might yield
To his poor parents some return of gain,
Beyond the dole which at the abbey door
On Fridays he received, when Father Hugh
Gave him his blessing, and with kindly thought,
Long baffled, showed him how to sign the Cross.
Oft in the fields near Hawcoat was he seen
In the close centre of a hollow bush,
With head and hands apparent, and a ring
Of eager sheep that gathered round the spot,
While he flung down the juicy shoots, and peered
From out his nest to watch the greedy strife,
And clapped his hands, and with a shrill delight
Chuckled to see the passions that displaced
The quiet nature of the patient flock.
And many a time did his pleased mother hear
The neighbours round good-naturedly complain
That Guy with covetous diligence was first
To rifle all the summer's tender growth
Upon the trees, and at the halls and towers
From Morecambe Bay to Ulpha, and the Grange
By Waberthwaite, where dwelt St. Michael's clerk,
While flesh of sheep on sprigs of holly fed
More than the fatted buck was prized, the flock
Of Guy's own tending was the most in quest.
And when the vexed Atlantic after storms
Subsided to its heavy swell, a toil
Of different sort was his, upon the shore
To cull the fans of rosy carrageen,
Which from the Irish rocks the fretting tide
Had chafed, and, with a single handful rich,
The booty of a long day's search he then
To Father Jocelyn at the Abbey sold,

Who by his ghostly blessing turned it white,
So Guy believed, and in the holy hands
Of that pure-hearted lover of the herbs
And the cool simples, that poor ocean weed
An angel held and gained a wondrous power,
As Paul of Elliscales could well attest,
Or Cicely of the farm on Goldmire Green,
To banish pining weakness from the limbs
And prop the body up as on a staff.

Next to his mother there was none on earth
Save Father Hugh perchance, whom Guy had loved
More than Sir Lancelot, in the three short months
Of their acquaintance; for the boy discerned
Between the greeting of the rustics pitched
Somewhere 'twixt mirth and kindness, and the voice
And gentle bearing of the well-born Knight;
Who oft would aid him when upon the sand
With painful stoop he gleaned the precious weed,
While to the wonder-stricken youth he spoke
Of the Great God upon that blank sea-side
In ways that bred a pleasurable awe
And inward stirring of his thoughts, which was
Akin to reason, and enough for prayer.

When Guy beheld Sir Lancelot on his staff
In attitude of pain or awkward sleep,
He dropped his bunch of carrageen, and raised
The feeble man against the stone alcove.
Sir Lancelot spoke not, but he smiled his thanks,
And gazed once more upon the setting sun.
The orb now rested on the burnished waves
Alone and disencumbered, not a mote
Of fleecy cloud in transit o'er its face.
And from the sunken vale behind there rose
In bland pulsations on the quiet air

Saint Mary's vesper bell ; toll after toll
In modulated melancholy came,
Borne seaward on the breeze: and simple Guy
Who saw the sinking sun, the dying man,
And heard the plaining bell, not wrongly deemed
All meant alike, all were harmonious parts
Of some most touching pageant, for the love
Of God and Jesus celebrated there.
Still the Knight gazed upon the setting sun :
It seemed as if from out that radiant fount
He quaffed the golden light with thirsty sense,
So earnestly he gazed, till like a tide,
An influx of eternity, it rose
Upon his mortal nature more and more
With placid might, until from every depth
Of his terrestrial being it dislodged
The feeble remnants of his strength, and thence
With bodily thrills of deep adoring love
The spirit from its trammels disengaged:
And while he sank in that poor stripling's arms,
His hands devoutly on his bosom crossed,
'Twas rather immortality than death
Which was the first to win his life. He passed,
A passage painless as the gates of sleep,
A wafture like an Angel's even wing,
What time the vesper summons ceased to toll
And with its last vibration o'er the sea
Ran till it touched the silent thrilling orb,—
Whereat the latest rim of setting sun
Paused—and went down beneath the line of waves,—
And with an after-flash that shot on high
Seemed like an Arm of Light that beckoned him,—
No soul was e'er more gently dispossessed !

How tranquilly the mild sea-murmur comes
This balmy day to try the echoing tones
Of great Black Combe! A tender voice it is,
And with sweet feeling doth accompany
The wind, that wild and wayward organist
Who o'er the huge sonorous hill presides,
And ever plays to yon responsive sea
Low dirgelike music; or with troubled keys
Loud voluntaries, passionately struck,
Ruffle the mane of ocean as the storm
Rolls upward, winding his terrific blast
Which frets the purple plain with snowy spray.
But now, methinks, in tender concert joined,
The shadowy Mountain with its neighbouring Sea
Would fain essay on my behalf a dirge,
A requiem for the lone Sir Lancelot,—
That wandering Presence unforgotten yet
Upon the silent summit of the hill,
Late, at the truthful bidding of my thoughts,
So oft environed by his restless feet,
So often vocal with his prayer or praise.

Spirit! in whose companionship my mind
For days of meditative love hath been,
O with what true compassion have I burned
For thine invented griefs, with what a heart
Of sympathy have I been wrought to tears,
And to hot rising thoughts more sharp than tears,
In musing o'er thy weariness, thy months
Of self-accusing penance, and thy joys,—
The sacred Image granted to thine eye
Of Jesus, and the timorous approach
Of thine affections to the Mother Maid,
The ritual Cross, and depth of sacrament
Laid up unheeded in the common gift

Of speech whereby we name the special Name
Which stirs high Heaven and shakes the bolts of hell,
The Keys of Absolution in thy soul
Revolving sensibly, the vocal Dead
Into sweet contact coming with thy prayers,
The Angelic Ladders which to thy pure eye
Broke forth, obscuring all the solemn types
Of things inanimate, and blossoming
In steplike forms and luminous ascents
From out the apparent poverty of earth!

Witness, ye cornices of mountain rock!
Where I have murmured verses by the hour,
Ye winds! on which my voice hath oft been raised
With tremulous feeling, and, ye waterfalls!
Which interwove your music with my strains;—
Witness, thou quiet-lapsing Nen, and fields
Belted with silent steeples, like a ring
Of citadels to keep low thoughts away,—
Choice haunt of rural silence, undisturbed
Save by the infrequent boatman's song, or plaint,
For let us not misname it noisy mirth,
Of corncrake, its monotonous vespers singing,
In the concealment of the meadow-grass!—
Or those much-cherished colonists, a pair
Of turtle-doves, with their soft woodland notes
Deepening so unaccountably the calm,
The summer-calm of those most pastoral banks!—
Witness, if with unfeeling pains of art,
Or if with idle purpose I have sung
This lofty song, or dared to press the keys
Of spiritual music with an awe
Less deep than that wherewith a serious man
Upon a week-day in an empty Church
Bids the loud organ speak, and calls the stones

To echo worship when the lips of men
Are silent, and, with frequent change of tune,
Oft like hushed breezes sinking self-subdued,
Plays to the Altar and the Angels there !

Spirit ! which I have summoned from the Past,
(Freedom perchance too bold) and singled out
From the great multitude of souls who lie
Deep in the bosom of eternal light,
Not without purpose have I dared to think,
To speak, for those of that departed Age,
Investing them through thee with such a light
As hath to mine own conscience been a lamp,
And might enlarge the hearts of those I love,
If God so further mine unworthy verse.

So have I sung as one who greatly fears
Lest the uncouth aspect of his real wish,
And urgent clamour of bold words, should scare
The hearts he fain would lure unto an end,
A mighty end whose safety and whose strength
He hath to his own conscience ascertained
By inward thought, the test of outward act,
And secret anguish of some dreadful hours
That leaned their weight on one most feeble truth,
Torturing the firmness which they could not break.
And if at times the pressure of a thought,
Rumours of actual conflict, or the wound
Of personal strife, have rent the figured veil,
And from its hidden course the indignant song,
Weary of its disguise, hath broken forth,
With the shrill Present drowning those soft strains
Which came refined by distance from the Past,
The very fault in minstrel-craft but serves
To make the surface of my song reflect,
Even as the unconscious mirror of a lake,

The shadows of the times, when hardy truth,
By poor conventions overlaid, hath dared
To emerge above the impediments, and stand
Before the unwilling presence of the world,
Through deeds which for the moment have appeared
To shift the ancient bounds of right and wrong,—
Times when the strife 'twixt Earnestness and Forms
Hath reached its height, and victory's golden beam
Inclines, but hath not absolutely sunk.

O Hearts of England! loyal, good, and true,
Lovers of home beyond all other men,
Yet without homes for your uncertain souls,—
Forgive me, if from out my happy home
Of faith that hath forgotten how to doubt,
In hopeful love one counsel more I give.
Simplicity is ever nigh to Truth,
And hath a royal road thereto,—a road
Better than long inductions, and the lore
Of coarse disdainful polemics, and steps,
Hardly and separately won, of proofs
And disentangled doubts,—a royal road
Which if ye humbly tread, why should ye fear
Though Conscience with infallible constraints,
Turning your faces homeward, bring your steps
Back to the foot of Peter's Sovran Chair?

THE END.

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