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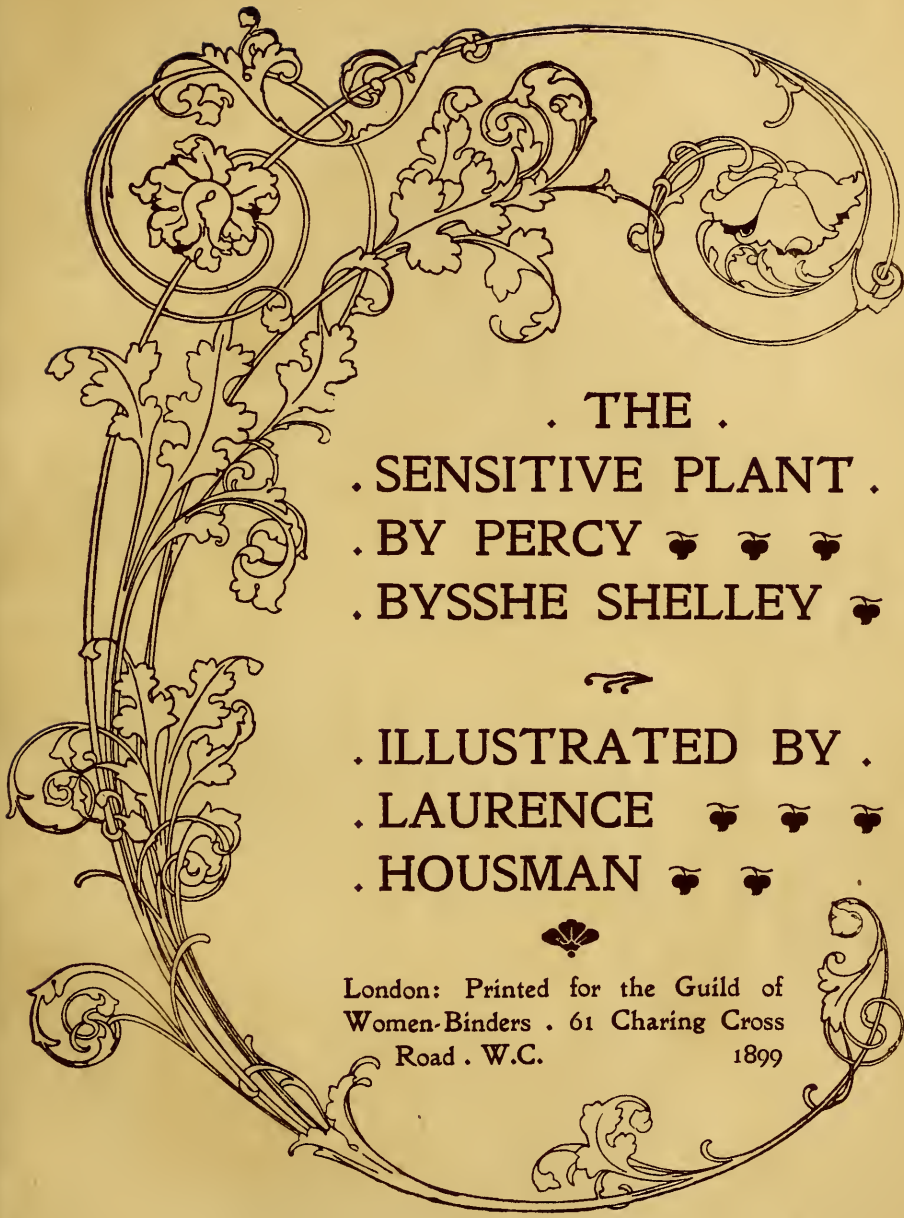


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Of this Special Edition on Japanese
Paper only 50 copies have been
printed for the Guild of Women-
Binders, of which this is No. ³⁵.....





. THE .
. SENSITIVE PLANT .
. BY PERCY ♣ ♣ ♣
. BYSSHE SHELLEY ♣



. ILLUSTRATED BY .
. LAURENCE ♣ ♣ ♣
. HOUSMAN ♣ ♣



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THE SENSITIVE PLANT



WHEN Shelley wrote THE SENSITIVE PLANT he was drawing very near the end of his poetry. It was one of the poems belonging to the days at Pisa, whither the Shelleys had gone late in the January of 1820. In the next winter—a winter of many painful associations for him, and many discouragements and reminders of evil fortune—he wrote this mysterious song of beauty and death. The idea of it appears to have come to him from the flowers which Mrs. Shelley had collected round her in her own room at the house they occupied on the south side of the Arno. Their fragrance, as it exhaled

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on the wintry Italian sunshine, and the sense of their fading loveliness, added to certain graver influences of which we read,—the death of a dearly-loved child, the illness of a dear friend,—contributed, no doubt, to provide that “atmosphere of memorial dejection and very sorrowful delight,” of which an old Italian poet speaks, as being propitious for the working of the imagination. But a miracle is not less miraculous because we know the conditions under which it was worked, and something inexplicable remains about *THE SENSITIVE PLANT* after we have gathered together everything we can of its circumstances and the moods of its poet in the memorable Pisan days when it was written.

All through this period, so far as we can gather, Shelley was extremely discouraged about his poetry and the reception it had attained hitherto. From Medwin and others we learn of the special resentment he felt at the continual hostilities of the powerful quarterly engines of critical opinion. In a letter to

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Ollier, he said, during 1820: "I doubt whether I shall write more. I could be content either with the hell or the paradise of poetry, but the torments of its purgatory vex me without exciting my powers sufficiently to put an end to the vexation." However, when a poet of Shelley's plenary inspiration decides not to write, he is likely to be impelled most strongly by his *dæmon* to new flights. The "Ode to a Skylark," the "Witch of Atlas," the "Ode to Liberty," among other poems, belong to this period; and with them we have the invincible declaration of the poet's rights and inalienable liberties, to be found in his prose "Defence of Poetry." One or two stanzas there are in the "Witch of Atlas," and one or two passages in the "Defence," which strike us as being more intimately connected with the occult imaginative origins of THE SENSITIVE PLANT than anything found elsewhere in his writings. Take the strange, melodious verses in which the radiant creature of the mountains is presented,—the lovely lady garmented in the light of her own beauty, to whom the

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camelopard and the brindled lioness, the herdsmen and the mountain maidens came :

*“ For she was beautiful : her beauty made
The bright world dim, and everything beside
Seemed like the fleeting image of a shade :
No thought of living spirit could abide
(Which to her looks had ever been betrayed)
On any object in the world so wide,
On any hope within the circling skies,
But in her form, and in her inmost eyes.*

* * * * *

*“ The deep recesses of her odorous dwelling
Were stored with magic treasures—sounds of air,
Which had the power all spirits of compelling,
Folded in cells of crystal silence there.”*

* * * * *

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A few stanzas later, and we come to the idea of the strange seed, which was wrapt in mould, and watered all the summer with sweet dew. At length :

*“ The plant grew strong and green—the sunny flower
Fell, and the long and gourd-like fruit began
To turn the light and dew by inward power
To its own substance.”*

This brings us as near, I imagine, to the idea of THE SENSITIVE PLANT as we are likely to find ourselves in any other most Shelleyan region of his poetry. The lines recur persistently to the mind in reading the later poem ; and almost as suggestively is it haunted by one passage at least in the “ Defence,” which speaks with a sort of aerial eloquence of a Poetry whose art it is to arrest “ the vanishing apparitions which haunt the interlunations of life, and veiling them, or in language or in form, sends them

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forth among mankind bearing sweet news of kindred joy to those with whom their sisters abide.”

When one considers the rarity and the half-impalpable conditions of this chosen realm of his poetry, and turns to *THE SENSITIVE PLANT* as one of its most essential expressions, one is at first rendered half-incredulous of the power of a kindred art to interpret effectively such a poem. But, in fact, there is a much more concrete imagery—whether of flowers or weeds, directly presented or definitely symbolised; or of the Lady who haunts among them—than one at all remembers until one takes to conning its stanzas closely with an eye to such effects.

THE SENSITIVE PLANT lends itself more readily to the art of the symbolist, in particular, than any other of Shelley's poems. It would be quite possible for a critic with a turn for metaphysics, and a certain German patience of analytic ingenuity, to read into its exquisite fable of mortality a whole world of significance, which the poet himself had never suspected. But the symbolic

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artist, if he be too, as needs be, a symbolic poet, is saved by his art. The spirit of the poem is likely to obsess him, and compel from him only such an interpretation as is, allowing for the casual differences of kindred arts and sympathetic temperaments, truly and finely accordant with its own essential qualities and terms of expression. The true poets have that power of continuing to enlarge the original issues and influences of their song long after its immediate effect has died away. Shelley commands with a more than usual lyric enchantment a sphere that, like the magic house of Merlin, can go on enlarging itself; until one figures him, not as the sad spirit of the garden in this poem, but as the radiant spirit of his "Hymn of Apollo":

*" All harmony of instrument or verse,
All prophecy, all medicine are mine,
All light of art or nature—to my song
Victory and praise in their own right belong."*

ERNEST RHYS.

A NOTE UPON THE ILLUSTRATIONS



IN one sense a beautiful poem can never be illustrated: being beautiful it is already perfect, and, to intelligent minds, illustrates itself. Everything that it says it says in the best possible way; within the limits of the medium chosen, it is absolute.

If, therefore, illustration is to be an attempt to say over again what the poet has already said perfectly, it is certain to prove itself superfluous, and to be nothing better than a labour of tautology. But there is a quality in all fine work which gives invitation into the charmed circle of its influence to whatever is freshly and

A NOTE UPON

sympathetically touched with the ideas it conveys. Great work tells so differently on different minds ; not by contrary but by kindred ways it speaks freshly perhaps to each individual.

Thus, to express accurately in another medium an appreciation, an individual sense of delight or emotion in work of finished and constructive beauty is the only way of illustration which seems to me profitable. The appreciation may be faulty ; but in so far as it states a personal view of its subject, it has legitimate standing ground.

I have endeavoured to make evident in my drawings the particular way in which this poem has appealed to me. The garden, fine and elaborate, full of artifice, opposing with an infinity of delicate labour the random overgrowth of the wilderness which seeks jealously to encroach on it, has perhaps this to hint concerning all forms of beauty of man's devising,—that, in spite of the pains entailed in their cultivation, the fragile and conditional state of their constitution remains : over all such things at last comes the tread of Pan, effacing, and replacing with his own image and

THE ILLUSTRATIONS

superscription, the parenthetic grace—so spiritual almost in some of its suggestions—of the garden deity.

The lady of the garden, the charming sentimentalist, whom I can only excuse for not killing the slugs and snails by believing that she wore a crinoline and was altogether ignorant of natural laws, harmonises exquisitely for a while with her high-clipped hedges and garden statuary. It is an *ensemble* to gaze into as into a picture: but the shadows of ruin and decay cross it; it is too graceful to last. Pan is stronger than any form of beauty that springs out of modes and fashions.

So, when she dies, she is but the forerunner of the death of the whole garden: when she evaporates the *petite mort* runs through all its bowers and alleys: its apparitions rise and follow her funeral with a sense that their own time of dissolution approaches; and the mode passes through a period of squalor and morbid abandonment back into the hands of the ultimate master of things earthly.

It is an unpopular thing, may be, to assert that man's sense of beauty is so conditional to himself and the uses he makes of it.

THE ILLUSTRATIONS

Yet here we are shown how, with war to the death, unsightly overthrow follows his abandonment of his stolen pleasure-ground, and wipes out his trespassing footprints.

Man's sense of beauty is his own : it is not Nature's. The aim of all art is to restrict Nature, and teach her that her place is not in the high places of men ; and we only admire Nature because in the present strength of our civilisation we are strong enough to pet her. Hannibal was a better judge of the true unsightliness of Alpine scenery than we ourselves.

I should have preferred to add nothing to what I have drawn : but an explanation of my unkind view of the rival claims of Pan and the Garden-god has been wrung from me.

For the present the genius of civilisation, numerating duration into hours and years and centuries for man's convenience, overrides the slow-crawling tortoise of Time : but it will not always be so ; and earth will come at last to be altogether rid of us and that superfluous "sense of beauty" which has so long yoked her back, and hedged her wastes and furrowed her fields.

LAURENCE HOUSMAN.



THE SENSITIVE PLANT

FIRST PART

I



SENSITIVE plant in a garden grew,
And the young winds fed it with silver
dew,

And it opened its fan-like leaves to the light,

And closed them beneath the kisses of night.

II



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

III



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



IV



THE snowdrop, and then the violet,

Arose from the ground with warm

rain wet,

And their breath was mixed with fresh odour, sent

From the turf, like the voice and the instrument.

V



WHEN the pied windflowers and the tulip

tall,

And narcissi, the fairest among them all,

Who gaze on their eyes in the stream's recess,

Till they die of their own dear loveliness ;

VI



AND the Naiad-like lily of the vale,

Whom youth makes so fair and passion

so pale,

That the light of its tremulous bells is seen

Through their pavilions of tender green ;

VII



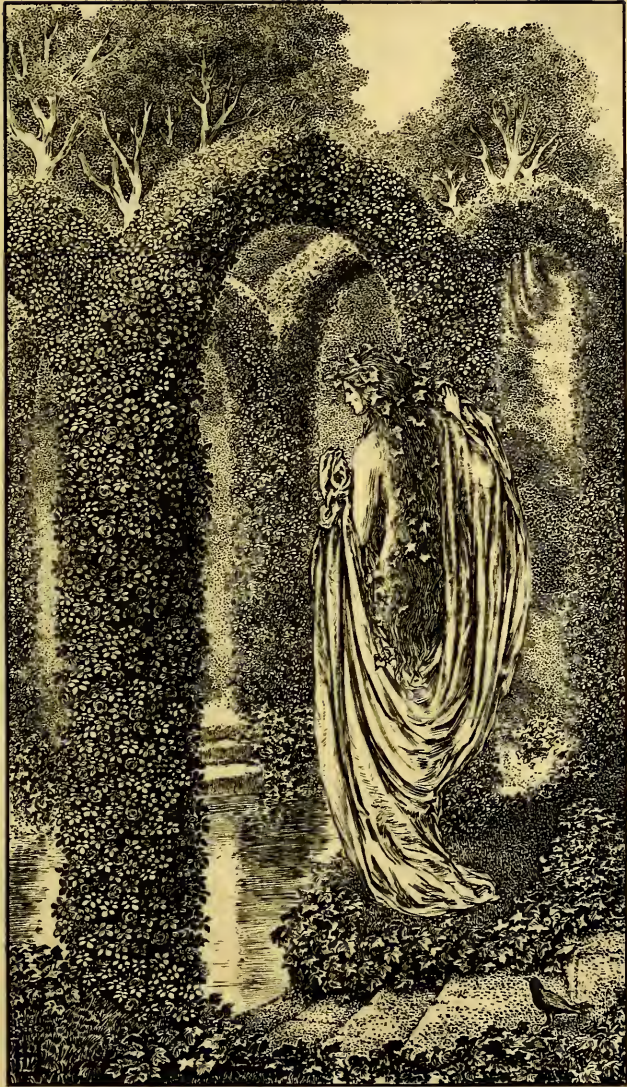
AND the hyacinth purple, and white, and

blue,

Which flung from its bells a sweet peal anew

Of music so delicate, soft, and intense,

It was felt like an odour within the sense ;



VIII



AND the rose like a nymph to the bath
address,

Which unveiled the depth of her glowing breast,
Till, fold after fold, to the fainting air
The soul of her beauty and love lay bare :

IX



AND the wand-like lily, which lifted up,
As a Mænad, its moonlight-coloured
cup,

Till the fiery star, which is its eye,
Gazed through clear dew on the tender sky ;

X



AND the jessamine faint, and the sweet
tuberose,

The sweetest flower for scent that blows ;
And all rare blossoms from every clime
Grew in that garden in perfect prime.

XI



AND on the stream whose inconstant bosom
Was pranked under boughs of embowering
blossom,

With golden and green light, slanting through
Their heaven of many a tangled hue,

XII



BROAD water-lilies lay tremulously,

And starry river-buds glimmered by,

And around them the soft stream did glide and

dance

With a motion of sweet sound and radiance.

XIII



AND the sinuous paths of lawn and moss,

Which led through the garden along

and across,

Some open at once to the sun and the breeze,

Some lost among bowers of blossoming trees,

XIV



ERE all paved with daisies and delicate
bells

As fair as the fabulous asphodels,
And flowrets which drooping as day drooped too,
Fell into pavilions, white, purple, and blue,
To roof the glow-worm from the evening dew.

XV



ND from this undefiled Paradise

The flowers (as an infant's awakening eyes
Smile on its mother, whose singing sweet
Can first lull, and at last must awaken it),



XVI



WHEN Heaven's blithe winds had unfolded
them,

As mine-lamps enkindle a hidden gem,
Shone smiling to Heaven, and every one
Shared joy in the light of the gentle sun ;


XVII



FOR each one was interpenetrated
With the light and the odour its neigh-
bour shed,


Like young lovers whom youth and love make dear
Wrapped and filled by their mutual atmosphere.

XVIII

UT the Sensitive Plant which could give
small fruit

Of the love which it felt from the leaf to the root,
Received more than all, it loved more than ever,
Where none wanted but it, could belong to the giver,

XIX

OR the Sensitive Plant has no bright flower ;
Radiancy and odour are not its dower ;

It loves, even like Love, its deep heart is full,
It desires what it has not, the beautiful !

XX



HE light winds which from unsustaining
wings

Shed the music of many murmurings ;

The beams which dart from many a star

Of the flowers whose hues they bear afar ;

XXI



HE plumèd insects swift and free,

Like golden boats on a sunny sea,

Laden with light and odour, which pass

Over the gleam of the living grass ;

XXII



THE unseen clouds of the dew, which lie

Like fire in the flowers till the sun

rides high,

Then wander like spirits among the spheres,

Each cloud faint with the fragrance it bears ;

XXIII



THE quivering vapours of dim noontide,

Which like a sea o'er the warm earth

glide,

In which every sound, and odour, and beam,

Move, as reeds in a single stream ;



XXIV



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

XXV



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

XXVI



AND the beasts, and the birds, and the
insects were drowned

In an ocean of dreams without a sound ;

Whose waves never mark, though they ever impress

The light sand which paves it, consciousness ;

XXVII



ONLY overhead the sweet nightingale

Ever sang more sweet as the day might
fail,

And snatches of its Elysian chant

Were mixed with the dreams of the Sensitive Plant.

XXVIII



THE Sensitive Plant was the earliest

Up-gathered into the bosom of rest ;


A sweet child weary of its delight,

The feeblest and yet the favourite

Cradled within the embrace of night.

SECOND PART

XXIX

 HERE was a Power in this sweet place,
An Eve in this Eden ; a ruling grace
Which to the flowers, did they waken or dream,
Was as God is to the starry scheme.



XXX



Lady, the wonder of her kind,
Whose form was upborne by a lovely
mind

Which, dilating, had moulded her mien and motion
Like a sea-flower unfolded beneath the ocean,

XXXI



ENDED the garden from morn to even :
And the meteors of that sublunar Heaven,

Like the lamps of the air when night walks forth,
Laughed round her footsteps up from the Earth !

XXXII



HE had no companion of mortal race,

But her tremulous breath and her flushing

face

Told, whilst the morn kissed the sleep from her eyes,

That her dreams were less slumber than Paradise :

XXXIII



S if some bright Spirit for her sweet sake


Had deserted Heaven while the stars were

awake,

As if yet around her he lingering were,

Though the veil of daylight concealed him from her.


XXXIV

ER step seemed to pity the grass it prest ;
You might hear by the heaving of her

breast,

That the coming and going of the wind
Brought pleasure there and left passion behind.

XXXV

ND wherever her airy footstep trod,
Her trailing hair from the grassy sod

Erased its light vestige, with shadowy sweep,
Like a sunny storm o'er the dark green deep.

XXXVI



doubt not the flowers of that garden sweet

Rejoiced in the sound of her gentle feet ;

I doubt not they felt the spirit that came

From her glowing fingers through all their frame.

XXXVII



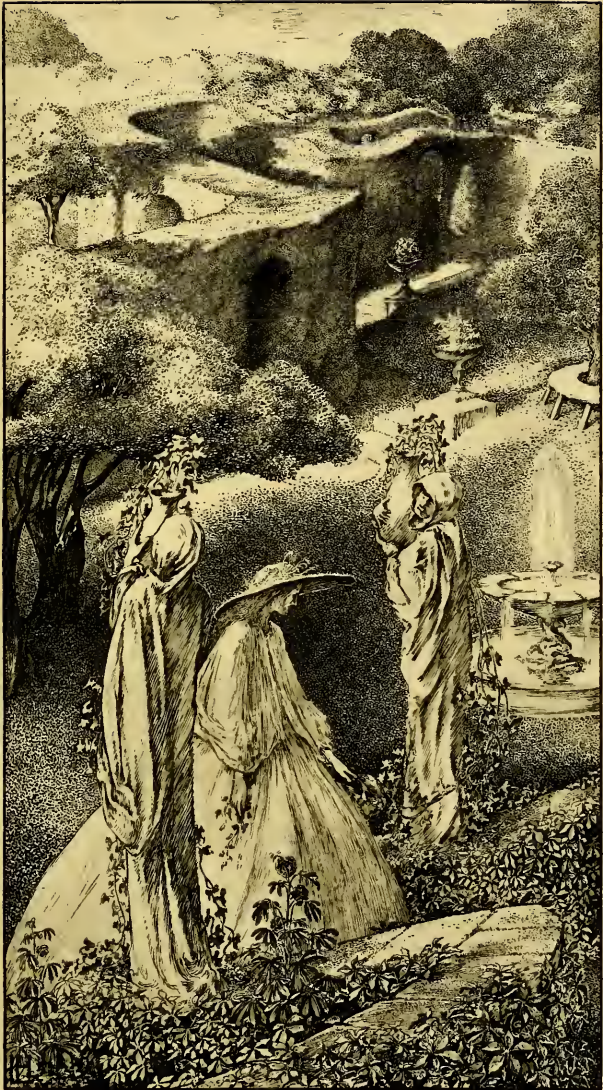
HE sprinkled bright water from the stream

On those that were faint with the sunny

beam ;

And out of the cups of the heavy flowers

She emptied the rain of the thunder showers.



XXXVIII



HE lifted their heads with her tender hands,
And sustained them with rods and osier
bands ;

If the flowers had been her own infants she
Could never have nursed them more tenderly.


XXXIX



AND all killing insects and gnawing worms,
And things of obscene and unlovely
forms,


She bore in a basket of Indian woof,
Into the rough woods far aloof,

XL

 IN a basket, of grasses and wild flowers
full,

The freshest her gentle hands could pull
For the poor banished insects, whose intent,
Although they did ill, was innocent.

XLI

 BUT the bee and the beamlike ephemeris
Whose path is the lightning's, and soft
moths that kiss

The sweet lips of the flowers, and harm not, did she
Make her attendant angels be.



XLII



AND many an antenatal tomb,

Where butterflies dream of the life to

come,

She left clinging round the smooth and dark

Edge of the odorous cedar bark.

XLIII



HIS fairest creature from earliest spring

Thus moved through the garden minis-

tering

All the sweet season of summer tide,

And ere the first leaf looked brown—she died !

THIRD PART

XLIV



HREE days the flowers of the garden fair,

Like stars when the moon is awakened,

were,

Or the waves of Baiæ, ere luminous

She floats up through the smoke of Vesuvius.

XLV



AND on the fourth, the Sensitive Plant

Felt the sound of the funeral chant,

And the steps of the bearers, heavy and slow,

And the sobs of the mourners deep and low ;

XLVI



THE weary sound and the heavy breath,

And the silent motions of passing death,

And the smell, cold, oppressive, and dank,

Sent through the pores of the coffin plank ;

XLVII



THE dark grass, and the flowers among the
grass,

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

XLVIII



THE garden, once fair, became cold and
foul,

Like the corpse of her who had been its soul ;
Which at first was lovely as if in sleep,
Then slowly changed, till it grew a heap
To make men tremble who never weep.

XLIX



SWIFT summer into the autumn flowed,
And frost in the mist of the morning
rode,

Though the noonday sun looked clear and bright,
Mocking the spoil of the secret night.

L



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

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

LI



AND Indian plants, of scent and hue

The sweetest that ever were fed on dew,

Leaf after leaf, day after day,

Were massed into the common clay.

LII



AND the leaves, brown, yellow, and grey,

and red,

And white with the whiteness of what is dead,

Like troops of ghosts on the dry wind past ;

Their whistling noise made the birds aghast.



LIII



AND the gusty winds waked the wingèd
seeds

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

LIV



THE water-blooms under the rivulet
Fell from the stalks on which they were
set ;

And the eddies drove them here and there,
As the winds did those of the upper air.

LV



WHEN the rain came down, and the broken
stalks

Were bent and tangled across the walks ;

And the leafless network of parasite bowers

Massed into ruin ; and all sweet flowers.

LVI



BETWEEN the time of the wind and the
snow,

All loathliest weeds began to grow,

Whose coarse leaves were splashed with many a speck

Like the water-snake's belly and the toad's back.



LVII



AND thistles, and nettles, and darnels rank,

And the dock, and henbane, and hemlock

dank,

Stretched out its long and hollow shank,

And stifled the air till the dead wind stank.

LVIII



AND plants, at whose names the verse feels

loath,

Filled the place with a monstrous undergrowth,

Prickly, and pulpous, and blistering, and blue,

Livid, and starred with a lurid dew.

LIX



AND agarics and fungi, with mildew and
mould

Started like mist from the wet ground cold ;
Pale, fleshy, as if the decaying dead
With a spirit of growth had been animated !

LX



THEIR moss rotted off them, flake by flake,
Till the thick stalk stuck like a murderer's
stake,

Where rags of loose flesh yet tremble on high,
Infecting the winds that wander by.

LXI



PAWN, weeds, and filth, a leprous scum,

Made the running rivulet thick and

dumb,

And at its outlet flags huge as stakes

Dammed it up with roots knotted like water-snakes.

LXII



AND hour by hour, when the air was still,

The vapours arose which have strength

to kill :

At morn they were seen, at noon they were felt,

At night they were darkness no star could melt.

LXIII



AND unctuous meteors from spray to spray

Crept and flitted in broad noonday

Unseen ; every branch on which they alit

By a venomous blight was burned and bit.

LXIV



THE Sensitive Plant, like one forbid,

Wept, and the tears within each lid

Of its folded leaves which together grew

Were changed to a blight of frozen glue.



LXV



OR the leaves soon fell, and the branches
soon

By the heavy axe of the blast were hewn ;
The sap shrank to the root through every pore
As blood to a heart that will beat no more.

LXVI



OR Winter came : the wind was his whip :
One choppy finger was on his lip :

He had torn the cataracts from the hills
And they clanked at his girdle like manacles.

LXVII



IS breath was a chain which without a sound

The earth, and the air, and the water

bound ;

He came, fiercely driven, in his chariot-throne

By the tenfold blasts of the arctic zone.

LXVIII



HEN the weeds which were forms of living

death,

Fled from the frost to the earth beneath :

Their decay and sudden flight from frost

Was but like the vanishing of a ghost !

LXIX



AND under the roots of the Sensitive Plant

The moles and the dormice died for want ;

The birds dropped stiff from the frozen air,

And were caught in the branches naked and bare.

LXX



FIRST there came down a thawing rain,

And its dull drops froze on the boughs

again,

Then there steamed up a freezing dew

Which to the drops of the thaw-rain grew ;

LXXI



AND a northern whirlwind, wandering about

Like a wolf that had smelt a dead child

out,

Shook the boughs thus laden, and heavy and stiff,

And snapped them off with his rigid griff.

LXXII



WHEN winter had gone and spring came back

The Sensitive Plant was a leafless wreck ;

But the mandrakes, and toadstools, and docks, and

darnels,

Rose like the dead from their ruined charnels.


CONCLUSION

LXXIII




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

LXXIV

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

LXXV

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

LXXVI



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

LXXVII



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

LXXVIII



OR love, and beauty, and delight,

There is no death nor change : their

might

Exceeds our organs, which endure

No light, being themselves obscure.

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