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OF

ROBERT W. STERLING

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THE POEMS OF
ROBERT W. STERLING

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THE POEMS
OF
ROBERT W. STERLING

BORN 19TH NOVEMBER, 1893

GLASGOW ACADEMY AND SEDBERGH

SCHOLAR OF PEMBROKE COLLEGE, OXFORD

LIEUTENANT, ROYAL SCOTS FUSILIERS

KILLED IN ACTION, S. GEORGE'S DAY, 1915

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ROBERT STERLING'S career at Oxford was cut short after two years by the outbreak of war. But these two years had sufficed to create an impression of him which will endure. As a poet he was known only to a few till after his Newdigate Poem had been written. One evening, at the urgency of friends, he read this poem to them, and what they now discovered in its author they felt to be the corollary of what they had seen before. Doubtless they understood him better through it, and found therein a new interpretation of him; but because it was so true an expression of himself, they realized that their experience of him was the best interpretation of his poetry.

For this reason more than any other, it may be valuable to say something however brief about his life; and to attempt, imperfectly enough, to communicate the impression, itself fragmentary, which he left upon those who had begun to know and love him.

He came to Oxford from Sedbergh. Here he had spent four years of his school-life; and entering into its various activities with a boy's enthusiasm had grown to be a very part of the place—'He could see and put into words something of what Sedbergh meant to us'. For he never became absorbed in one aspect to the exclusion of others. His bent was literary, and he had a refined classical taste, illustrated especially in his Latin Verses. 'His interest in literature alone', wrote one who shared a study with him, 'was quite enough to keep him busy and happy. Like a true workman he put his whole soul into what he did.' But 'at the same time he enjoyed to the full every part of school-life, especially the various societies, and could always find some common ground for talk with any one. Although a classical man, he would if he wished even discuss chemistry or any other science, and would build up an argument from first principles in a most amazing way.' And, on the other hand, he felt intensely the rapture of the open air, of the fresh wind upon the fells; had learnt the beauty of the fells themselves, and the spirit which for lover's eye they embodied. He understood also, and shared, the strenuous

enjoyment of the football field, as afterwards of the river ; but ‘ perhaps his happiest hours were spent quietly wandering over the Sedbergh hills, now leisurely fishing some lonely beck, now lying on the grass in the sunshine, watching the clouds drift over Winder ’¹.

In 1912 he left for Oxford. ‘ I remember ’, wrote another and older friend, ‘ the delight of his cavalier soul when he found himself King Charles’ scholar at Pembroke.’ Hither the allegiance he had given his school was extended, not transferred. His presence still breathed the freshness of his school-days. This boyishness and simplicity he never lost ; nor did it become, as is sometimes the case, overlaid with a veneer of intellectualism. He had no conceit of knowledge, and this was because whatever he learnt he learnt well, so that it became an intrinsic part of himself. For the same reason it was characteristic of him to be conscious of his own ignorance ;

¹ ‘ Winder ’, which is mentioned more than once in the poems, is the fell nearest to the school, rising some 1,100 feet above it. It is the most conspicuous and characteristic object in the view from the playing-fields, and has always been regarded by Sedberghians as one source of their school’s inspiration. A new boy is not considered initiated till he has climbed Winder.

besides, he realized better than most the infinity of knowledge. And so, while a superficial view might fail to detect peculiar intellectual gifts, those who could see below the surface discovered that he had thought on things. There was no precocity, but rather almost a maturity in the midst of simplicity. He had in fact a clearer vision than most around him: he could see in the things that matter aspects which escaped the common observation. But in this there was more than perception, at least in the ordinary sense of the word: there was an imaginative force which could re clothe past scenes in their romantic dress, create in fancy beauties unexperienced, or dream an ideal future fairer than to-day. He had indeed in him something of the visionary, an indication of which may be seen in the love which, from his school-days, he had for Blake; he used to wish that he could draw, feeling that so only—by artistic as well as literary expression, as in Blake—could he give adequate expression to his ideas. A serenity, and at times a certain dreamy wistfulness, were peculiarly typical of him, and the quiet strength that comes of a firm hold upon a principle of life. Generally he would be the most silent of

a party, and yet on occasions, as when some cherished conviction was challenged, he would burst into an ardour that took his hearers by storm.

For linked indissolubly with this clearness of vision was—what has already been implied—a depth of affection. In everything characteristic of him these two elements, clear vision and deep affection, united and grew intenser in the union. At school they were expressed in that appreciation of natural beauty which bespeaks not love alone but intimacy; at Oxford he found a new world of beauty—Oxford's spirit. Sensitive to her influence, he began to see nature in a wider context: the Beautiful, which hitherto he had found especially in physical nature, he now more than before sought and found in human nature also. Only a nature like his, both affectionate and discerning, could have had both the will and the power to look beyond his friends' shortcomings and to love them no less. For his affection was not due to ignorance of, still less indifference to, their defects. It was because he had a keen enough sympathy to see and believe in what was best in them; and so it was that herein he was not false but faithful to his ideals.

It is hardly surprising that there was a catholicity about his friendships: his rooms in college were a centre where men of very various types would gather; quite simply and generously he grappled them to him. 'He could convey a rare warmth of welcome in one exclamatory syllable; whilst in his mouth the use of a Christian name at some surprise meeting or in farewell was a thing not lightly forgotten.' There was the same glad responsiveness to simple human joy as to the joy of the country, and a tenderness of sympathy with trouble as precious as it is rare.

Just because it was deep, his affection was neither ostentatious nor capricious. He never courted friendships: his friends grew around him; and they learnt that the force which had drawn them to him became stronger with closer contact. 'His personality could always inspire older friendships with a fresh enthusiasm,' wrote one who knew him both at Sedbergh and Oxford. Indeed, inspiration rather than attraction is the true description of his influence. His friendship ennobled, because his nature was less mundane, more spiritual, than that of the ordinary mortal. 'He went about life in the same manner as did

the knight-errant of old, who would give his purse to the first wandering beggar he met, and forget all about it in a moment. Material things were taken as they came ; if they did not come he wasted little time in trying to get them.' This was written of him as known at school, but it is true of his character throughout : those who associated with him realized that here was finer fabric than any dross of earth. Even a casual acquaintance could hardly fail to mark the dignity of character sounding in the clear crisp voice, or writ fair upon the features. Here surely beauty within and without combined into that harmony in which Greeks of old saw the ideal of human life.

With calm clear gaze

He saw and loved the beauty earth can show :
The love was true, as it was young, no phase
That passed, but strengthening with inward glow,
Which woke in others fire. He drew from
Heav'n

What only love can take, a vision whole
Of things sublime. The richer life thus giv'n
Back to his God he gave : his gift—his soul.

What followed after he left Oxford for the Long Vacation of 1914 must be told briefly. Early in August, on the declaration of war, he applied for and received a commission. The same allegiance that he had freely given to his school, his college, and his friends, he now gave to his country at need. The rest of the year he spent training in Scotland. Probably during this time he wrote out fair the poem 'Maran' printed at the end of this volume. It seems that he had begun it in his school-days, working at it afterwards from time to time, and that he was intensely fond of intoning its verses to himself. It was left unfinished, but he evidently wished it preserved in case he did not return, as is suggested by the explanatory note which he prefixed to it.¹

In February 1915 he went out to France.

¹ This note is reproduced in this book immediately before the text of 'Maran'. With certain passages of this poem he associated other poems, which were apparently meant to interpret its meaning. A facsimile of this association is included with the text in the hope that it may serve this object. (Towards its end, 'before him' and 'behind left' reproduce a clearly unintentional transposition, as may be seen by reference to the end of 'Maran', where the associated poems are printed separately.)

‘It was a great relief’, he wrote, ‘to get out here after kicking my heels toy-soldiering at home.’ But he adds, ‘I’ve been longing for some link with the normal universe detached from the storm. It’s funny how trivial incidents sometimes are seized as symbols by the memory; but I did find such a link about three weeks ago. We were in trenches in woody country (just S. E. of Ypres). The Germans were about eighty yards away, and between the trenches lay pitiful heaps of dead friends and foes. Such trees as were left standing were little more than stumps, both behind our lines and the enemy’s. The enemy had just been shelling our reserve trenches, and a Belgian battery behind us had been replying, when there fell a few minutes’ silence; and I, still crouching expectantly in the trench, suddenly saw a pair of thrushes building a nest in a “bare ruin’d choir” of a tree, only about five yards behind our line. At the same time a lark began to sing in the sky above the German trenches. It seemed almost incredible at the time, but now, whenever I think of those nest-builders and that all but “sightless song”, they seem to represent in some degree the very essence of the Normal and Unchangeable Uni-

verse carrying on unhindered and careless amid the corpses and the bullets and the madness. . . . I suppose Kipling meant something when he said that Life runs large on the Long Trail. In the sense I take it, it runs large out here, not only for the reason of which you so eloquently remind me—the inspiration of a Cause, but because Death has become its insistent and intruding neighbour.’ This was written within a week of his own death, and about a month after the death in battle of his own closest friend. This friend and he had gone up together for commissions the August before, but had been assigned them in different regiments, stationed far apart. They went abroad at different times, but once, for one dramatic hour, ten days before the friend’s death, they were granted what had hitherto been denied them: they met unexpectedly. ‘As always, we didn’t know who was going to relieve us, and we were sitting in our quarters—what remained of the shell-shattered lodge of the chateau, playing cards by candle-light, awaiting events, when —— knocked at the door and came in. . . . I walked about with him for about an hour and a half in the chateau grounds, stray bullets from the firing-line

whistling around us, . . . but I had no idea I was afterwards going to treasure every incident as a precious memory all my life.' Those who had learnt something of the power of such a friendship, can best understand the desolation of his grief when his friend was killed. 'I think I should go mad', he wrote, 'if I didn't still cherish some faith in the justice of things, and a vague but confident belief that death cannot end great friendships.' It may be that death came to confirm that faith. He fell one evening after holding his trench throughout the day. It was Saint George's Day.

The latter half of these poems—from 'Oxford, First Vision' to the end—have not been published before. Of the others: 'The Burial of Sophocles' won the Newdigate Prize of 1914; 'Early Poems' (except the first two) and 'To B. W.' appeared in school magazines—one ('Hail') in *The Wasp*, the Evans House magazine, the rest in *The Sedberghian*.

The Sonnet immediately following is printed by kind permission of its author and *The Glasgow Herald*.

SONNET

IN MEMORY OF R. W. STERLING

As if Apollo's self had swept the strings,
From Isis' banks came one clear burst of song,
So sad, so noble, beautiful and strong,
Poised through its flight on such majestic wings,
It might not seem a youth's imaginings,
But to an Attic age might well belong,
Or be the flower of that Miltonian throng
That for dead Lycidas sobs, and sobbing sings.

O brave Boy-Poet, who, at Duty's call,
Laid down thy lyre, thy chaplet cast aside
To don the armour of a sterner day;
Who scorned the lures that held thy heart in
thrall :
Sped down Parnassus with a warrior's pride
To meet thy death in dark Thermopylae !

ROGER QUIN.

THE POEMS OF ROBERT W. STERLING

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THE
BURIAL OF SOPHOCLES

Καὶ ἐπὶ τὸν πατρῶον τάφον ἐτέθη τὸν ἐπὶ τῇ ὁδῷ τῇ κατὰ τὴν Δεκέλειαν φερούσῃ κείμενον πρὸ τοῦ τείχους ἕνδεκα σταδίων. καὶ τοῦτον τὸν τόπον ἐπιτετειχικότων Λακεδαιμονίων κατ' Ἀθηναίων Διόνυσος κατ' ὄναρ ἐπιστὰς Λυσάνδρῳ ἐκέλευσεν ἐπιτρέψαι τεθῆναι τὸν ἄνδρα εἰς τὸν τάφον· ὡς δ' ὠλιγόρησεν ὁ Λύσανδρος, δεύτερον αὐτῷ ἐπέστη ὁ Διόνυσος τὸ αὐτὸ κελεύων. ὁ δὲ Λύσανδρος πυνθανόμενος παρὰ τῶν φυγάδων τίς εἶη ὁ τελευτήσας, καὶ μαθὼν ὅτι Σοφοκλῆς ὑπάρχει, κήρυκα πέμψας ἐδίδον θάπτειν τὸν ἄνδρα.

‘And he was laid in the tomb of his fathers, that is situated eleven furlongs in front of the wall, on the road leading past Decelea. . . . Now Decelea had been taken from the Athenians and fortified against them by the Lacedaemonians; to whose general, Lysander, the god Dionysus appeared in a dream, bidding him give leave for the man to be buried in the tomb. When Lysander made light of it, the God appeared a second time with the same behest. Then Lysander inquired from deserters who the dead man was; and learning that it was Sophocles, sent a herald with permission for the burial.’

THE BURIAL OF SOPHOCLES

SOPHOCLES, *the grandson, speaks at the poet's tomb.*

GREEN hills that wave your olives to the sun,
Who but an hour ago did flaming rise
Over the tombs of hidden Marathon
And gave you back your shining jewelleries
What meaning dear can the dull eyes of grief
Trace in your moving groves and wizard
streams ?—
Have ye a knowledge of our troubled quest,
The lamentation brief,
The grey road and the haunting twilight
dreams,
And the lov'd burden laid this morn to
rest ?

The Burial of Sophocles

Ah ! surely there is wonder and strange stir
Amid Earth's guardian gods, when the last goal
Hath gain'd the crown, and to Earth's sepulchre
We bear the way-worn chariot of the soul !—
And surely here a memory shall last,
In hill and grove and torrent, of this day,
For bards to glean who can : and they shall
sing
How the sweet singer pass'd
Forth to his rest with war about his way
And a dread mask of Ares menacing !

Alas ! poor city, fate-enshowèd,
How powerless all thy pride of piety
To give due service to thy poet dead—
Save by the favour of an enemy !—
A bitter hard-won favour ; for folks say
Lord Dionysus twice in vision came,
Jealous and wroth, to school Lysander's
might,
That, where his fathers lay,
The darling prophet of the god's own flame,
Cradled in calm, should sleep his endless
night.

The Burial of Sophocles

'Twas thus, that, ere the arrows of the dawn
First shot the peaks of clear Pentelicus
With the day's golden promise, we had drawn
Nigh to the house of death and girded us
With the dim livery of the funeral :
A small, sad band, whom love or blood allow'd
To tend the dead ; while vexing the repose
Of stars, who listening all
Peer'd through a shifting curtain of frail
cloud,
Like a wild song the women's wailing rose.

Slowly we brought him forth—can I forget?—
And soft adown the lantern-hemmèd street
Parted the throngs who paid their pious debt
Of patient watching and of reverence meet.
And there were sudden tears and murmurs
faint
And floating cries upon the midnight air,—
Not that they grudg'd him death, nor would
importune
The gods in idle plaint :
But oh ! he went (their burthen of despair)—
Athens' last light—in Athens' darkest fortune !

The Burial of Sophocles

How lingeringly we reached the guarded gate
Of the dear city fate-enshadowèd !—
As if reluctantly she bore the fate
That stole his presence. For of old ('twas said)
The palaces of Kings had sought in vain
To woo him from his Athens, and the long
Proof of the years had found him ever true :
So, like a lover, fain
Would she have held him from this shelter
strong
Once hers, now—gift of a curs'd stranger
crew !

But when we left the wakeful, following crowd
Within the walls, and passed the sentinels,
Pausing we turn'd : and lo ! for us the shroud
Of silent night hid nothing. All the bells
Were set a-chiming in each memory,
And to fond eyes, that knew the outline clear
Of every tower and temple and the whole
Form of her majesty,
Athens, the queenly city, bade appear,
Rob'd in revealing shade, her wondrous
soul.

The Burial of Sophocles

Her wondrous soul, her wondrous, grieving
soul

Captur'd and fill'd us.—Oh, how fevrous then
(When we had forfeited the passing toll
Of tears, that Love itself exacts from men
On such an errand) did we take the road,
And by Cephisus' 'sleepless fountains' bore
On the dead singer of Colonus fair,
Yon kindly last abode
Of the royal Theban martyr, who of yore
Curs'd a false son and dying triumph'd
there.

Ah! Fancy loves to weave at such an hour
A faery web of false resemblances.—
And who hath strength to curb her perilous
power
Of blind divining? Many phantasies
Made riot in our thought and seem'd to bring
The living children of *his* poesy
Winging from out the night to claim a part
In all our sorrowing :
While the lorn gale out of the Northern sky
Sped its far, sullen mutterings to our heart.

The Burial of Sophocles

And then that darkly-riding company!—
What rapid, iron question stabb'd the air ?
Rude force in-bursting on our reverie
With insolence of arms and doubting stare !
But when the whisper flew that this was *he*,
Poet of all the nations, rare bequest
Of Hellas to the treasuries of Time,—
Forgot was enmity,
And, sons of Hellas all, we onward press'd
Hot with one fervour and one care sublime.

And last, the tomb.—One struck the dead man's
lyre
By Death long silenc'd, and our hearkening
ears
Were open'd for one moment of desire
To the pure, perfect music of the spheres ;
As if his Spirit had vouchsaf'd to us
A fragment of eternal harmony
From its new dwelling-place. The player
ceas'd ;
All dumb and tremulous
We smooth'd the coffin, cas'd in greenery
And with our own shorn tresses over-fleec'd.

The Burial of Sophocles

And so we laid him : even so he lies
To be for aye the Muse's pensioner :
Poets unborn shall sing him, centuries
Untold tell of his fealty to her.—
For oh! the service of his life will live
Deathlessly eloquent. But I—— alas!
Left desolate within this teasing world—
What comfort can I give
My comrades ere again those walls we pass
Whose flag of hope for evermore is furl'd ?

O multitudinous music of the day—
Bird-song and breeze and forest-minstrelsy—
You storm this heart and to your chorus gay
Marry its dirge of desolate misery :
Whence a faint song of musing hope is born,—
Hope for Earth's children whom the Master
lov'd,
And for God's justice that he witness'd
e'er,
Hope for his Athens torn
By foe and feud : So be my spirit prov'd
Not all unworthy him whose name I bear.

The Burial of Sophocles

Ah ! Master, when the blast uproots a tree,
Its form lies bedded—but a god beneath
Treasures its leaves and perish'd fragrancy
To pierce anew the pregnant soils of death :
So from thy poetry, thy spirit-tomb,
Shall burgeon wealth of tears and tenderness
And beauty, when forgotten is this pit
And drain'd is Athens' doom——
Come, leave his body, friends, to Earth's
caress.—
Oh, lightly, lightly, Earth, encompass it !

EARLY POEMS

PROLOGUE TO A CHILDREN'S PLAY

SPOKEN BY FAIRY

THE golden deities of legend old
Have passed away. No more the hero bold
Holds free discourse with Gods and Goddesses ;
And Nymph and Satyr 'mid the shady trees
No more do revel in a lonely vale ;
Nor Pan's wild music grace the sylvan tale.
But yet to-day our authoress has made
The fairy brood inhabit still the glade.
The tinkling bells of fairyland do sound
As from a distance, and the country round
Is subject still unto their gentle sway.
My name is Starlight, and in this our play
I am the fairy Good who helps the Weak
Against foul-gotten Strength, 'tis I who seek
To foster Justice and to make the Right
Triumph o'er Evil in the well-fought fight.

Prologue to a Children's Play

This is the very essence of the play
That we present to you, O maidens gay,
And you, O gallant youths, and last of all
(And also least) to you, O puppy small.

1909.

SONNET

ON A PICTURE BY R. MACAULAY
STEVENSON

O GIFTED Hunter, would thy skill were mine !
How could'st thou snare the summer's passing
 voice ?
How could'st thou choose the choicest from the
 choice
Of dulcet summer melodies, combine
And mould them into this—a thing sublime,
Rich in the luxury of loveliness ?
What hallowed musing did thy heart impress ?
Surely the thought was God's, thy brush divine.
Oh ! I could feel those gentle Zephyrs blow
And see thy river mirroring the sun ;
And I could scent the honeyed flowers that grow
Empurpling that meadow every one ;
And somewhere yonder in the fading sky
I gain the secret of Eternity !

1910.

THE RIVER BATHE

WHEN the messenger sunbeam over your bed
 Silently creeps in the morn ;
And the dew-drops glitter on flower and
 tree,
 Like the tears of hope new-born ;
When the clouds race by in the painted sky
 And the wind has a merry tune :
Ah! then for the joy of an early dip
 In the glorious pools of Lune !

Up! up from your bed ! Let the sluggards lie
 In an airy palace of dreams,
Respond to the joyous lapwing's call
 And the song of the burbling streams !
Oh, balmy the air, and wondrous fair
 Are the hills with sunlight crowned,
And all the voices of nature seem
 To mingle in one glad sound.

The River Bathe

Then hurry along, for as light as the heart
Are the feet on a morning in June,
To the banks that are speckled with sunshine
and shade,
'Neath the guardian trees of Lune,
Where the eddies play with the rocks all day
In a whirl of fretful fun,
And the wavelet kisses the pebbly shore
With a mirrored smile from the sun.

A good brave plunge in the crystal cool
Of this grand primeval tub :
Then glowing you stand on the warm dry rocks
By the edge of the foaming Dub.
Then homeward along, like the soul of a song
That has every note in tune ;
And dear will the memory always be
Of the glorious pools of Lune.

November, 1910.

HAIL

CROWN'D is our king to-day,
Bloom on the faded spray,
Dawn and her golden ray
 After sad night ;
Fled be the clouds that loom,
Routed the year-long gloom,
Shade of our Edward's tomb,
 By the new Light!

Waft it, O breeze !
Whisper the Word on thy rustling wing,
Carry it over the leaping seas—
Kissing the dimly glittering sands—
To the lowly homes of far-off lands,
 And the palaces of kings !

Hail

Ah ! welcome the Word ;
Wherever the red flag flutters
And a people's heart is true,
Wherever the olden songs are heard
Commingling with the new ;
Where they think on sea-girt Britain,
And fight the wilful tears ;
And the old home is the dear home
To wistful sojourners.

As when a weary captive lies,
Pale-peering through the bars,
And a noble thought flushes his brain,
And, all oblivious of pain,
His soul soars upward to the skies
And the bright joy-sobbing stars :
So, men on earth, O myriad-minded throng,
Scorning your narrow fetters, upward soar,
And with one voice to the wild air outpour
The thunderous magic of the patriots' song :

Hail

Crown'd is our king (ye say),
Crown'd are our hearts to-day,
One heart and crown for aye,
 One song we sing ;
Nobly his life be spent
For the world's betterment,
Peace, honour, and content :
 Long reign our king!

June, 1911.

IN HENDECASYLLABLES

DYING LILIES

O CHASTE queens of a fairy flow'ry kingdom,
Beauteous progeny of the kindly sunshine
And soft show'rs, ever in my heart the fragrance
From you stealing awakes a dreamy vision
Of things beautiful, olden, and eternal :
Passing beautiful!—harmonies so dulcet
That they give to me viewless happy pinions,
On which soaring up into lofty temples,
I drink Truth in a world of airy fancy.

Once you liv'd in a fairy flow'ry kingdom,
Lov'd, and ruling it, innocently happy ;
Now more beautiful in the hour of old age
You still breathe ev'ry perfume of the woodland,
Drooping gracefully, like the last repining
Of some sage who has help'd the weary people,
And whose message at ending is the sweetest.

In Hendecasyllables

Untaught wisdom ! (in all the fields of Eden
No more lovely an emblem of Creation !)
Your souls, dying, appear to sigh the knowledge,
Heav'n-born, forth to the hearts of all around
you,

Breathing sympathy, calmness, and achievement.

Queens, farewell! In an age when 'all the
laughter's

With pain fraught', when a wrinkled, angry
brow shows

Discontent ev'rywhere among my fellows,
Sure 'tis good to devote a fleeting half-hour,
O'er you musing upon the joys eternal . . .

And I hope in an after age to see you
Still more joyfully grace the Heav'nly Gardens!

June, 1911.

THE TREASURES OF THE SNOW

Love you the sun's gaze on the brow of Winder,
Toning the world to the faery voice of Spring?
Love you the storm-rack riding o'er him ghostly,
While rush the streamlets, madly bickering?
Fairer I ween is the dower of hornèd Winter;
Joy-shafts keener than arrows he can throw;
Lovelier his tresses than all the wealth of
Summer:

Say, have you seen the treasures of the snow?

Silently and softly, tender and caressing,
(Soft as the down that lines the linnet's nest:
Silent as the Music that soothes the ear of
Fancy:

Tender as the wind's love, sighing from the
West!)

Embodied smiles from the white sky falling,
Come the white flakes in airy revelry,
Over the whole earth swiftly, surely weaving
One rare carpet of delight for me.

The Treasures of the Snow

Run, little burn, fast flying from your lover
Strong and importunate to make you his
own:

Rapidly, oh rapidly, else he will detain you,
Grip you, and embrace you, and kiss you all
to stone!

Ah! fantastical glory 'mid the branches:
Frost wed to snowflake: masonry sublime:
Beauty death-dealing, pitiless and lovely,—
Sure, the fair effulgence of an angel's
crime!

So sings the heart, as we glide adown the
valleys,
Borrowing wings from the glittering below,
Careless of all things, save the world around us,—
World of white palaces and kingdoms of the
snow:

Wanton, ye gods, in the cloudy space of
Heaven!

We are as free, and we choir as free a song.
Flying?—*We* fly, as to heights unmeasur'd
soaring:

This is no Earth, that is sweeping us along.

The Treasures of the Snow

Pleasure, says the Bard, is as fleeting as the
snowflake :

Fleeting as pleasure is the glory of the snow :
Fades the fair shroud that has hush'd the earth
to wonder,

Soon, soon evanishing the earth below.
What if the dank rain patters down to ruin,
Printing me the lesson that Beauty may not
last?

Is the snow lost in the wilderness of dead things?
Nay, for I glean'd its treasure as it pass'd.

February, 1912.

THE FAERY BIRTH

A WAND'RING maiden travel-worn,
Scorch'd by the red sun's cruelty,
Espied a little hut forlorn ;
Enter'd and grateful down did lie.

From sweet repose she woke at last,
And 'mid the dirt about the ground,
Lone relic of the silent past,
A candlestick of brass she found.

She pluck'd it from the floor below,
And softly musing to herself
She rubb'd it with her rags of woe ;
Then set it on the lonely shelf.

The Faery Birth

She went. But lo! the fiery King,
Now *kindly smiling* from above,
Shone through the dust upon the thing
Bright burnish'd by the maiden's love:

And from that wedding glance was born
A dream of golden charities,
Which first illum'd the hut forlorn,
Then flitted forth to glad the skies.

March, 1912.

GLEAMS AND GLIMPSES

MORNING—AND EARLY PREP.

O SEDBERGH and the Morning
And the dancing of the air ;
See the crown of Winder glancing
To the sun his welcome rare !—
And we valley-folk are scorning
All the labour and the care :
For heart and feet are dancing
With the dancing of the air !

NIGHT AND DEJECTION

MIRROR'D light the moon doth shed,
And the sun's remembered :
For she promises the gloom
Day arising from her tomb.
Alas! no Hope doth lighten so
The starless midnight of my woe!

Gleams and Glimpses

ON THE WEATHER

TELL me not what again, again
We hear about the Sedbergh rain;
Yes, with a kindly frown,
Full oft on Eden send the skies,
To spangle all her greeneries,
A dower of diamonds down!

ANOTHER ON THE SAME

'STERN nurse of men' and Nature's mother, I:
Homeward to sleep
On my hilly bosom, Thunder and Tempest fly,
And Clouds that weep!

Gleams and Glimpses

RETURNING FROM THE RIVER BATHE

THE morning music
In the heart revels fair :
The river water
Still brightly in the hair
Glistens, glistens.
Then the glad bells to Heaven
And the Mind of Man give birth :
And the song of my heart,
Hush'd music of the Earth,
Listens, oh ! listens.

EVENING FROM THE CRICKET FIELD

THE grey-wing'd Evening flits adown the dale,
And shades dissolve in undetermin'd shade :
The mystic music of the scented gale
Sings the dead day : and all the objects fade,
Making their separate hues one blended whole . . .
Chapel and Church and Field—whatever made
Glorious the day—richly together roll
In single wealth : Sedbergh reveals her soul.

June, 1912.

VALE

WE'VE wander'd by the well-lov'd ways
That burgeon with remembrances
 Of time that 's flown :
Our song is low,—a farewell song,—
But its theme shall linger with us long,
 Loud blown from out thy breezes, Sedbergh,
 To our hearts from out thy breezes blown.

We've seen thee smile and sternly frown ;
Or grief or joy becomes thy crown,
 Shine-, shadow-dress'd :
Our eyes have drain'd the cup to-day,
But the wine shall ever with us stay,
 So press'd from out thy vintage, Sedbergh,
 Unto Time from out thy vintage press'd.

Yon kindly peaks, yon fells have seen
Our pleasure, toil, and striving keen,
 The songs we've sung :
But Time shall spend his treasures
Or ever the wingèd Spirit dies,
 Far flung from out thy bosom, Sedbergh,
 To the world from out thy bosom flung.

Vale

O shrouded in the mystic Word,
Thou queenly Servant of the Lord,
 Accept, nor scorn :
Sung by the lordly trump of fame,
Shall rise the glory of thy Name
 Proud borne upon thy banner, Sedbergh,
 To the stars upon thy banner borne.

July, 1912 (when, besides his elder brother Robert, John Sterling was also leaving Sedbergh—hence the ‘we’. They had come together, and the younger afterwards became an officer in his brother’s regiment, and fell a few months after him before Hulloch, France).

POEMS

1913-1915

To B. W.

(Thirty-seven years master at Sedbergh ; died January, 1913.)

So, kind, unconquered spirit, fare you well.

Sedbergh must onward yet with steadfast
mind,

(For such would be your wish)—nor must we
tell

The world of sorrow that you leave behind.

And yet we feel *Winder* doth surely grieve

His well-loved pilgrim of the happy years.—

Surely the day droops sadly : and at eve

Our Heaven trembles into starry tears!

OXFORD—FIRST VISION

I saw her bow'd by Time's relentless hand,
Calm as cut marble, cold and beautiful,
As if old sighs through the dim night of years,
Like frosted snow-flakes on the silent land,
Had fallen: and old laughter and old tears,
Old tenderness, old passion, spent and dead,
Had moulded her their stony monument:

 While ghostly memory lent
Treasure of form and harmony to drape her
 head.

Proud-stooping statue! still her arm, up-rais'd,
Pointed the sceptre skyward, like a queen
Gleaning bright wonder from the world amaz'd,
Thrilling the firmament with rapturous awe;
Yet blind in giving light—unseeing, seen:
Self-wrapp'd in gloom of wisdom and deep law.

Oxford—First Vision

Oh, could I pluck (methought) from out yon
breast

A share of her rich mystery, and feel

Flushing my soul with new adventurous zeal

The fiery perfume of that flame-born flower

Which grows in man to God: then I might
wrest

Glad secrets from the past,—the golden dower

Of the world's sunrise and young glimmering

East.

OXFORD'S PROMISE

SHE show'd me where the wakeful gardens grow
Bright with the opening blossom of the Spring,
The fairy births that ever burgeon—lo!
Out of the teeming shadowland of thought :
Such new delight, new hope, new life they bring
(Heart cannot feel nor these dull numbers tell)
As all rare poets down the years have sought,
—Gardens of light and Spring perpetual.
She told me how the Traveller in the way
Borrows fair wings from all the flowery pride
Empurpling the hedge-row at his side :
And how, sped onward by each glad delay—
By wayward Fancy, sudden to inspire,
Or Peril calling Valour to the fray,
Or human Love yet hot with Heav'nly fire—
He gains the city gate—past foe and friend—
With full spoil laden at the journey's end.

OXFORD'S DAWN

THERE was a day when valleys laugh'd aloud,
And Joy danc'd on the waters, and the world
With all its treasure, beast and tree and cloud,
Quiver'd with wisdom,—so the Fancy tells.
Not rarely then upon the earth were hurl'd
Sparks from the fountain-furnace of the sky;
But, as the sea yet roars in hollow shells
Forlorn, so clear from God an endless stream
Flow'd wild among his children from on high:
 Who, ever gleefully,
Drank in full flush of innocence that Heav'nly
 beam.

Happy, oh, happy fled the rushing years,
Until alas! the wilful and the blind
Lost the rare glory in a mist of tears,
And the great Father hid his face and mourn'd:
But through the poisonous wrack the light behind
Came palely struggling, and to men return'd.

Oxford's Dawn

For some great souls with swords of true desire
Pierc'd the gross shroud, and gaining fitful gleams
Fashion'd anew the wisdom of the past ;
And scatter'd to their fellows in the mire
The shining fabric of their gather'd dreams.
They grop'd to find the links that couple fast
All things within the Universe. They lit
The lamp of passionate Faith, and tended it
'Mid scorn and strife. They dipp'd the poet's
pen

Into the rainbow, and in simile
Join'd fair to fair. They search'd the mystery
Of that old Eden long denied to men.

And thou, my Oxford, gracious citadel
Of these who follow'd Truth,—thou didst arise,
The hopeful darling of our western skies,
Sung into being by an antique spell:
Or whether, as the dim old fables tell,
Brut and his pilgrims from unhappy Troy
Built thee: or, servant of high destiny,
Fierce Mempric, red with slaughter of his foes
Cover'd dark evil with a deed of joy,
And hearing in the night a troubled cry—
'Dawn! Dawn!'—unknowing to the favour rose.

HISTORIC OXFORD

AN! Time hath loaded thee with memories
Processional. What could these piles unfold
Of war's lost travail, and the wearied cries
Of vexèd warriors, struggling to hold
Their hearth secure against proud Norman arms?
—And yet the while thy quest was not forgot;
'Mid war and waste and perilous alarms
Ever thy purpose stood, and yielded not.
Noble in faith, gallant in chivalry,
Thou flung'st a radiant Word to all the land,
—Pluck'd from the wealth of thy philosophy,
And to the world upon the breezes strewn;—
When, great with loyalty, thou didst withstand
The kingly perjurer in battle brave:
While England's Lady by the Winter's boon
Fled from thy peril o'er the frozen wave.
What need to tell of all thy generous sons?—
The priestly Theobald, and in his train
Master Vacarius, mighty in old law,
And the great multitudes that now remain
But shadows fitting in dim pageantry

Historic Oxford

Across the low-lit stage. In life they saw
Service of toil and striving for thy gain :
The Muse's pensioners in death they lie.
They cherish'd thee through bitter strife and
strain

Faithful. They fought the zealous heretic,
Rapt Wyclif, zealously to guard their Truth. . . .
Nor worthy less were they who serv'd the sick
'Mid hopeless plague, and rifled Nature's store
To bless mankind : nor who for creed or king
Chang'd learning's mantle for the arms of war,
Their lives and treasures surrendering.

Martyrs and saints have dower'd thee: one in
Truth,

Old Faith, new Hope, have died to save or mar
The idols of flown ages; for Truth's sun
Shines glad alike upon all enterprise

That in the Father's eyes
Flatters the fledgling soul till the pure heights
be won.

These golden memories sit round thy throne—
They are all thine; and thou art all my own.

TO PEMBROKE COLLEGE

FULL often, with a cloud about me shed
Of phantoms numberless, I have alone
Wander'd in Ancient Oxford marvelling :
Calling the storied stone to yield its dead :
And I have seen the sunlight richly thrown
On spire and patient turret, conjuring
Old glass to marlèd beauty with its kiss,
And making blossom all the foison sown
Through lapsèd years. I've felt the deeper bliss
Of eve calm-brooding o'er her lovèd care,
And tingeing her one all-embosoming tone.
And I have dream'd on thee, thou college fair,
Dearest to me of all, until I seem'd
Sunk in the very substance that I dream'd.
And oh ! methought that this whole edifice,
Forg'd in the spirit and the fires that burn
Out of that past of splendent histories,
Up-towering yet, fresh potency might learn,
 And to new summits turn,
Vaunting the banner still of what hath been
 and is.

A SONNET

YEA, Oxford, for the glories of one wreath
The wither'd fragrance of all time is fee ;
Trees draw their sacrifice of greenery
From the old charnels that repose beneath ;—
So let me feel the impulse of thy breath,
Like an enchanter's spell, awak'ning me
To thy new treasures of Eternity
Bursting from out the pregnant soils of Death :
And therefore through my lips to all the earth
Adown the ages be thine anthem sung,
Undying Truth's perennial rebirth—
The burthen of the Old and ever Young :
'For me and mine new wealth from old is
 grown :
And sure, who love me, shall be all my own !'

LINES WRITTEN ON LOCH LOMOND

I

LONELY I linger'd when you went,
 Recalling how the days had fled
Each with its mingled treasure pent
 Of shine and shade remembered. . . .
Oh, how I crush'd the grapes divine,
Blending a flood of wakeful wine.

Next look'd I on the well-lov'd scene,
Eager its ready wealth to glean :
 And forg'd therefrom a cup of gold—
Red hills, blue loch, and islands green—
 (Rare alchemy!). So could it hold
That vintage of our joy, and I
Drink deep the draught of memory.

July, 1913.

Lines written on Loch Lomond

II

Love be not sad, but listen
 To the laughter of the wave,
Sweeping ever madly after
 His desire above yon cave :
See the leaping shingle glisten
 With the fire his kisses gave. . . .
Oh, mingle, love, your laughter
 With the laughter of the wave !

July, 1913.

LINES WRITTEN IN THE TRENCHES

I

AH ! Hate like this would freeze our human
tears,
And stab the morning star :
Not it, not it commands and mourns and bears
The storm and bitter glory of red war.

II

To J. H. S. M., killed in action, March 13, 1915.

O BROTHER, I have sung no dirge for thee :
Nor for all time to come
Can song reveal my grief's infinity :
The menace of thy silence made me dumb.

MARAN

[NOTE BY THE AUTHOR]

The fragment *Maran* is valuable, not for its theme or language (which are both in parts immature, uncertain, and childish), but for its rhythm, which reveals a new music, and, properly handled, might afford a contribution to literature and the melody of the world.

The poem is an attempt to recover for the English tongue a lost heritage—that bequeathed by the old Saxon epicists (see Bridges' *Christmas Carol*, 1913).

Stress and alliteration.

Lyrical; stanzas superficially resembling Norman convention. Should be intoned, with emphasis on each stressed word, with special care to mark the structure-rhymes of the even lines. Only one accentuated syllable in each line is unalliterative.

The wínd was wáiling over the lánd wíldly
 Sóng-síghing, and the móon
 Lánguishing, a lóve-lórn máiden
 Pále-péering from a shróud.

1. × ¹— × ²— × × × × ³— ⁴— ×
 2. — ¹— ²— × × × ³—
 3. ¹— × × × ²— ³— ⁴— ×
 4. — ¹— ²— × × × ³—

The number of unaccentuated syllables (×) does not matter. Accentuated syllables (—) must be four and three alternately. Second and fourth lines coincide in structure.

The wind among
The willows seems
To sing a song
Of many pleasures,

Maran.

The moon looks down
Upon the sea.
With smile or frown
Instantly she.

The wind was waiving over the land with
New joyous soft:
Now aching slow:
Tempestuous soft:
Or wild with wa.

For waves reflect
Her as they will,
With foam-floes
Or clear & still.

Sung-sighing; and the moon
Languishing a love-lorn maiden

Pale-hearing from a shroud.

Then friendliest (she fled the forest
Marian, a maid gentle
Striving to save herself from the
Krostin, the King-slayer.

Man's mind is a sea
The moon doth scan;
And a willow tree
Is the mind of man.

Burning ambition, in his blind heart
Hate rankled against the royal
And when the mountain mist had rolled
Crime-covering, he has slain them.

I tiptoed from the palace gate X And straight into a painted sphere
To find the toy (O Peace of the part!) they have departed said I see
The rainbow split So blindly by a blind me led:
In peaceful joy For cruelty have they murdered their
And innocent guilt: things truly
Nor heard the laughter of the Fates. X And all forgot my palace dear

But when the shadows set me free
A memory yet tormented me,
— And O what laughing mockery.

(Ever-lighted lamp of holy Labour,
Land of the singing swain!)
O happy the eyes that glared in
Crest that beheld his theft.

Treasure before him:
Ricks behind left
Treasur'd in toil
To glean.

Startling hushful
wearily hummed and!
Rest to the frow
Tid-stain'd.

MARAN

THE wind was wailing over the land wildly
Song-sighing, and the moon
Languishing, a love-lorn maiden
Pale-peering from a shroud.

Then friendless there fled through the sobbing
forest
Maran, a maid gentle
Striving to save herself from the murderer
Kroston the King-slayer.

Burning ambition ! in his blind heart
Hate rankled against the Royal ones :
And when the mountain mist had rolled to the
meadows
Crime-covering, he had slain them.

Maran

When the sun had sped to the ever-hungry
 shadows,
 Lone in the land, friendless,
Left of the house of Landa now but lived
 Maran the maid gentle.

Then Kroston cried to the other King-slayers,
 ‘Allow we this fledgling to flee us?’
‘The Black Brethren would blush at the triumph
 Of Maran the maiden, O Kroston.’

Panting and panic-pale as a dove
 Doth flutter before the cruel falcon :
So fearful fled the maiden through the forest,
 That sobb'd ever to the wind's wildness.

Blood on her bonnie feet, and bruises :
 Like deer before dread tiger,
So fearful fled the maiden from the fury
 Of Kroston the King-slayer.

Sympathy she sought from the trees sobbing,
 But no sympathy had the twining trees ;
And the wind wail'd as with woe laden,
 Yet all careless of her cruel woe.

Maran

Pity she pleaded from yon pale maiden :
Tears, spangled in the sky,
Fiercely the fond hope freezing,
Dim glitter'd through the gloom.

And in her mind, grief-murky and madden'd,
Memory sparkled sweet :
Brutal as the beam that mocks the blind,
Stinging the sightless eye.

As when lowly a forest lord is laid
In winter by the axe wasted,
Dusty, with arms undrap'd and drooping,
Where melody of old haunted,

Yet sweetest of all the Spring are his scarce
tresses,
Smiling amid Death strangely ;
And the woodman is weeping, of his work peni-
tent,
Sorrowing o'er Might murder'd ;

Maran

As a star that hath shone in the sky-furnace,
Bright-burning through the ages,
Falters and falls on a day fated
(Dread doom to every beauty !) ;

Then flames he brightest with a flare of fury,
Rushing to dark ruin ;
And silent in their spheres are the sons of
morning
Dimm'd by their dead brother :

So 'mid stifling Sorrow did burning Sweet
Wanton in Maran's mind,
Grief gaining a spectre of gladness,
Darkness a demon light.

(O garden of years, golden and glad,
Bright with the blossom Love ;
O ancient home of a happy people :—)
Woe ! 'tis a wither'd dream !

(Ever-lighted lamp of holy labour,
Land of the singing swain :—
Happy my eyes that gloried in that heaven,)
Curst that behold this hell !

Maran

(O ye fields fair with corn and fruits,
Trees breaking 'neath their treasure :—)
O heart of me heavy with the fruits of happiness
Dead,—breaking 'neath the burden.

(O loving father, and lord beloved,
Thou mirror of Landa's light !—)
Ah ! cruelty to murder a king kindly !—
What darkness is mine to-day ?

(O valley singing to the sound of streamlets,—)
Nay, the light is for thee lost :
Shall thy songs not evermore be with sorrow
sounding,
And thy rivers with blood red ?

(O Peace of the Past!) they have depos'd and
sold thee
So blindly by a blind one led :
For cruelly have they murder'd their king kindly,
And darkness is on all to-day.

Maran

So she raving ran with a rage pitying,
Maran the maid gentle,
Striving ever to save herself from the murderer,
Kroston the King-slayer.

But ever pitiless he followed with poor passion
Burning in his blind heart,
Scorning the sacred gods as shadows,
Lusting for the maid's life.

And onward the cruel hunt hasted ;
Nor stay'd the forest his steps :—
Ah! shame on you, shame, ye trees sobbing,
To let him pitiless pass.

Panting and panic-pale his quarry
Still ran the fateful race!
Twice shame on you, ye trees tangling,
To stay her flying steps.

But sudden the wind song-sighing
Hush'd amid the high branches ;
And the leaves murmur'd with a mournful
mystery,
Silenc'd after wild sobbing.

Maran

And the clouds becalm'd, with their vap'rous
cohorts
Commingling in grim mass,
Fraught with unutterable future, floated
Expectant in the vast vault.

And the maiden moon, unshrouded for the
moment,
In her grief gazed awfully,
As if innocence should utter a doom of the ages,
Or a child pale prophecy.

And the forest creatures in fretful fear
Stirr'd within their lairs sleepless:
The lion growl'd as about to lose a lov'd thing,
Dreading an unseen spoiler.

So all nature, nursing a nameless terror,
Listen'd and waiting watch'd:
As, when lightning flashing from the fever'd
firmament
Swoops on the nerveless night,

Maran

Then the shepherds, in lonely silence sitting,
Listen and waiting watch,
In pious prayer to the gods impassion'd,
Fearing the following peal.

Yet ever onward the cruel hunt hasted;
Do they know not of all Nature's watch?
Will fear fly and fury pursue
Till the treasuries of Time be spent?

Nay! . . . for the unknown is near, and Kroston
In his course sudden stopt:
And his men marvell'd at the awful madness
Of his cry woe-wild.

But silent they stood round the king-slayer,
And they felt his fear in their hearts:
And waiting they watch'd for the untellable
wonder
That was coming, coming to pass.

Then forth from his limbs a form of fairness
Sped, like a wan wave
Of living cloud, light-laden,
Seeing and dim seen.

Maran

Oh, agony beyond utterance, and stainèd horror !
He watch'd the wingèd shadow
Fast flitting through the aw'd forest
To Maran the maid gentle.

And she stopt and turn'd, and saw it sailing
Swift and sure in her path ;
And in wondrous wise her fear wan'd !
Dawning day after night !

Her body enfolded it beautifying, emboldening,
Till its light in her eyes did leap,
And there stately she stood like a queen
sorrowing,
And she rais'd to the air her hand.

Then the men of Kroston, amaz'd and madden'd
In taut sorrow shriek'd ;
For releas'd and lost, their bodies leaving,
Each fair phantom pass'd.

And Nature knew of the nameless terror
That carp'd her haunted heart :
And her gaunt bosom, great with grief,
Like swollen ocean, shook.

Maran

Then flash'd her phantoms, tongues of fire,
From earth and sky streaming,
Filling the maiden's form with a fairness
Unknown to mind mortal,

With unending hue empurpling the air
And soft shapes innumerable
(Even drear depths of darkness sent
Their bright burdens glitteringly)—

Lovelier than the light of lonely skies
O'er snow-white wastes,
When for pale mariners in perilous passage
The dance-rays dart—

Purer than the palace of pale heat
In yon throbbing ember on the altar,
Which glows and gives the priest of its glory,
And his soul is nourish'd by its splendour.

Each flower or blossom through the far forest,
Each branch or lowly blade,
Sent forth its soul—or the soul of Something
It felt and lov'd before.

Maran

Then wail'd the wind in bereavement wasted,
Sighing a broken song,
Like a mermaid moaning the drownèd millions
Lost in the sceptred sea.

And the forest sobb'd : and feeble and fainting
The tribes of the teeming earth
Utter'd a lament from the heart's agony :
But vain was their voice of woe.

And the people of mountain and meadow,
miserable,
The anguish'd beasts of the earth,
And the stars of the sky and their sad mistress,
All paid the pitiless toll.

O tears of the land ! what toll terrible !
What lov'd and lost delight !
O land of tears ! so lonely and loveless,—
What trembling tears are thine !

THE wind among
The willows seems
To sing a song
Of many themes :

The moon looks down
Upon the sea ;
With smile or frown
Inconstant she :

Now joyous soft :
Now musing slow :
Tempestuous oft
Or wild with woe.

For waves reflect
Her as they will,—
With storm-foam fleck'd
Or clear and still.

Man's mind is a sea
The moon doth scan,
And a willow tree
Is the mind of man.

I TIP-TOED from the palace gates
To find the toy
The rainbow spilt :
In fearful joy
And innocent guilt ;
Nor heard the laughter of the Fates.

And straight into a painted sphere
Of rainbow mist
I seem'd to rise :
And phantoms kiss'd
Of starry eyes,
And all forgot my palace dear.

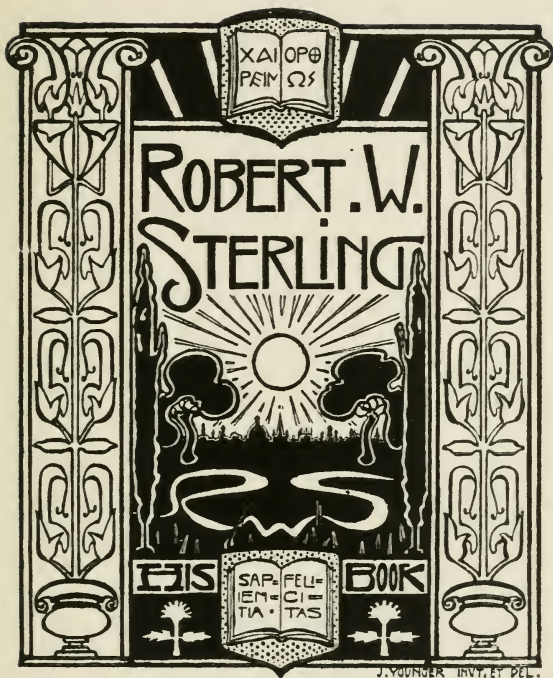
But when the shadows set me free
A memory yet tormenteth me :—
And oh ! that laughing mockery.

THE ROUND

CROWN of the morning
Laid on the toiler :
Joy to the heart
Hope-rich.

Treasure behind left ;
Riches before him,
Treasur'd in toil,
To glean.

Starlit and hushful
Wearily homeward :
Rest to the brow
Toil-stain'd.



J. YOUNGER INV. ET DEL.

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