

MESSALINE.

BENEATH the living cross I lie
And swoon towards eternity:
Prodigious sinewy shapes, and lean
And curving limbs of Messaline.

The deep arched eyes, the floating mane,—
One pierces, one wraps-in my brain.
A crown of thorn, a spear of clean
Cold fire of dying Messaline.

Swart tangles of devouring hair,
The scorpion labyrinth and snare,
Leprous entanglements of sense,
The Imminence of the Immense.
And in the deep hard breath I draw
Kissed from her strangling mouth and maw,
I feel the floating deaths that dwell
About that citadel of hell;
A soft lewd flavour, an obscene
Mysterious self of Messaline.

Or, in the kisses that swoop low
To catch my breath and kill me so,
I feel the ghostliness of this
Unreal shuttle-game—the kiss!
Her moving body sobs above,
And calls its lechery true love.
Out from the flame of heart she plucks
One flower of fiery light, and sucks
Its essence up within her lips,
And flings it into mine, and dips
And bends her body, writhes and swims
To link the velvet of our limbs,
My drouthy passion worn and keen,
And lusty life of Messaline.

The heart's blood in her boiling over
She sucked from many a dying lover :
The purple of her racing veins
Leapt from some soul's despairing pains ;
She drinks up life as from a cup ;
She drains our health and builds it up
Into her body ; takes our breath,
And we—we dream not it is death !
Arm unto arm and eye to eye,
Breast to great breast and thigh to thigh,
We look, and strain, and laugh, and die.
I see the head hovering above
To swoop for cruelty or love ;
I feel the swollen veins below
The knotted throat ; the ebb and flow
Of blood, not milk, in breasts of fire ;
Of deaths, not fluctuants, of desire ;
Of molten lava that abides
Deep in the vast volcanic sides ;
Deep scars where kisses once bit in
Below young mountains that be twin,
Stigmata cruciform of sin,
The diary of Messaline.

The moving mountains crater-crowned ;
The valleys deep and silver-bound ;
The girdle treacherously wound ;
One violet-crest mounded mole,
Some blood-stain filtered from the soul ;
The light and shadow shed between
My soul and God from Messaline.

And even as a dark and hidden
Furnace roars out in woods forbidden,
A sullen tide of molten steel
Runs from deep furrows in the wheel ;
So from afar one central heat
Sends the loud pulse to fever beat ;
So from one crown and heart of fire
Spring the vast phantoms of desire,
Impossible and epicene,

Familiar souls of Messaline.

And as, when thunder broods afar
Imperial destinies of war,
Men see the haze and heat, and feel
The sun's rays like a shaft of steel,
Seeing no sun ; even so the night
Clouds that deep miracle from sight :
Until this destiny be done
Hangs the corona on the sun ;
And I absorbed in those unclean
Ghost-haunted veins of Messaline.