

VESPERS.

THE incense steams before the Christ,
It wraps His feet with grey,
A perfumed melancholy mist,
Tears sacred from the day;
And awe, a holiness, I wist,
More sweet than man may say.

I bend my head to kiss the brow,
Scarred and serene and wide,
The bosom and the loin-cloth now
And where the blood has dried,
The blood whose purple tide doth flow
From out the smitten side.

The fragrance of his skin begets
Desire of holy things ;
Through the dim air a spirit frets
His closely woven wings ;
Like love, upon my brow he sets
The crown of many kings.

(The trembling demons of the sea
Before the poet bend ;

He greets the angels quietly
As one who greets a friend ;
He waiteth, passionless, to be
A witness of the end.)

I chant in low sweet verses still
A mystic song of dread,
As one imposing all his will
Upon the expectant dead ;
And lights dip down, and shadows fill
The dreams that haunt my head.

I sing strange stories of that world
No man may ever see ;
My lips with strong delight are curled
To kiss the sacred knee,
And all my soul is dewed and pearled
With tears of poetry.

The strong mysterious spell is cast
To bind and to release ;
To give the devils hope at last,
To the unburied peace ;
To gladden the reluctant past
With silent harmonies.

The song grows wilder now and strives
All heaven to enchain,
As who should grasp a thousand lives,
And draw their breath again

Into some cavern where he dives,
A hell of grisly pain.

And now behold! the barren Cross
Bursts out in vernal flowers ;
The music weeps, as on the moss
The summer's kissing showers,
And there sweep, as sweeps an albatross,
The happy-hearted hours.

My rapt eyes grow more eager now,
God smites within the host,
White fires illuminate my brow
Lit of the Holy Ghost ;
I see the angel figures bow
On heaven's silent coast.

Eternity, a wheel of light,
And Time, a fleece of snow,
I saw, and deep beyond the night,
The steady mystic glow
Of that lamp's flame unearthly bright
That watches Earth below.

Long avenues of sleepy trees
And bowers arched with love,
And kisses woven for a breeze,
And lips that scarcely move,
Save as long ripples on the seas,
That murmur like a dove.

I saw the burning lips of God
Set fast on Mary's face,
I saw the Christ, with fire shod,
Walk through the holy place,
And the lilies rosier where he trod
Blushed for a little space.

I saw myself, and still I sang
With lips in clearer tune,
Like to the nightingale's that rang
Through all those nights of June ;
Such nights when stars in slumber hang
Beneath the quiet moon.

Still, in those avenues of light,
No maid, with golden zone,
And lily garment that from sight
Half hides the ivory throne,
Lay in my arms the livelong night
To call my soul her own.

The Christ's cold lips my lips did taste
On Time's disastrous tide,
His bruised arms my soul embraced,
My soul twice crucified ;
And always then the thin blood raced
From out the stricken side.

The incense fumes, the chant is low,
Perfume around is shed ;

I am as one of Them who know
The secrets of the dead :
The sorrows that walk to and fro,
The love that hides his head.

O living Head! whose thorns are keen
To bruise and pierce and slay ;
O Christ! whose eyes have always been
Fixed fast upon the way,
Where dim Jerusalem was seen
A city cold and grey!

The flowers of fire that grow beneath
And blossom on the Tree
Are fed from his despair and death
Who sings of land and sea,
And all those mountains where thy breath,
Jehovah, still must be.

The censer swings to slower time,
The darkness falleth deep :
My eyes, so solemn and sublime,
Relent, and close, and weep :
And on the silence, like a chime,
I heard the wings of Sleep.