

Frances Ellen Watkins (Harper)'s *Forest Leaves*

Introduction

Alex W. Black, Brigitte Fielder, and Johanna Ortner

Biography and Publication History

Frances Ellen Watkins, more prominently known by her married name, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, was born free on September 24, 1825, in Baltimore, Maryland. She was one of the most well known African American writers of the nineteenth century. Harper published several collections of poetry, including *Forest Leaves* (ca. 1846), *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (1854), *Moses: A Story of the Nile* (1869), *Poems* (1871), *Sketches of Southern Life* (1872), and *Atlanta Offering: Poems* (1895). Many of those volumes appeared in more than one edition. Harper's poems were also reprinted in periodicals such as *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, *The Liberator*, *The Anglo-African Magazine*, *The Christian Recorder*, *The A.M.E. Church Review*, and *The New National Era*. Harper is credited with writing (what at the time of this publication is believed to be) the first short story published by an African American woman, "The Two Offers," which appeared in *The Anglo-African Magazine* in June and July of 1859.¹ Three of Harper's novels, *Minnie's Sacrifice* (1869), *Sowing and Reaping* (1876-77), and *Trial and Triumph* (1888), were serialized in *The Christian Recorder*, the newspaper of the

¹ The first short story known to have been published by an African American is, at the time of our writing, Victor Séjour's "Le Mulâtre" ("The Mulatto"), published in the Parisian journal *La Revue des Colonies* in 1837. Scholars such as Frances Smith Foster, Jean Lee Cole, and Marlene Daut have also speculated that the anonymously published "Theresa, a Haytien Tale," serialized in *Freedom's Journal* in 1828, was likely written by an African American author.

African Methodist Episcopal Church and another, *Iola Leroy*, was published as a monograph in 1892. Harper's various public speeches were also often published in the abolitionist and black press.

An only child, Harper was orphaned at the age of three and was subsequently raised by her uncle, William Watkins, a minister and a reformer. She studied the Bible and the Classics at his Academy for Negro Youth until she was thirteen years old, when she began to work as a domestic servant. The African American businessman and historian William Still writes that Harper displayed "an ardent thirst for knowledge and a remarkable talent for composition" as early as age fourteen, when she wrote "an article which attracted the attention of the lady in whose family she was employed, and others." The family owned a bookstore, so "her greed for books was satisfied so far as was possible from occasional half-hours of leisure."²

Harper's education and her family's relative class privilege afforded her the opportunity to publish *Forest Leaves* at a relatively young age, and her contemporaries commented on these literary accomplishments. According to African American author William Wells Brown, "What she was deprived of in her younger days in an educational point of view, she made up in after years, and is now considered one of the most scholarly and well-read women of the day. Her poetic genius was early developed, and some of her poems, together with a few prose articles, with the title of 'Forest Leaves,' were published, and attracted considerable attention, even before she became known to the public through her able platform

² William Still, *The Underground Rail Road, A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, &c., Narrating the Hardships, Hair-breadth Escapes and Death Struggles of the Slaves in Their Efforts for Freedom, as Related by Themselves and Others, Or Witnessed by the Author; Together with Sketches of Some of the Largest Stockholders, and Most Liberal Aiders and Advisers of the Road* (Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, 1872), 756.

orations.”³ Harper’s impressive oeuvre of writing would span a variety of genres and print venues, making her one of (if not the) most prolific African American women writers of the nineteenth century. As we work on this recently “recovered” text, we note one problem with the language of “recovery” in the fact that Harper was well known during her lifetime and only later was her writing “forgotten” or dismissed. As Still wrote of Harper in 1872, “We feel, therefore, not only glad of the opportunity to present a sketch not merely of the leading colored poet in the United States, but also one of the most liberal contributors, as well as one of the ablest advocates of the Underground Rail Road and of the slave.”⁴

In 1855, a year after her second book of poems was published, the African American printer and historian William Cooper Nell remarked that Harper had “published a small volume of poems, which certainly are very creditable to her, both in a literary and moral point of view, and indicate the possession of a talent, which, if carefully cultivated, and properly encouraged, cannot fail to secure for herself a poetic reputation, and to deepen the interest already so extensively felt in the liberation and enfranchisement of the entire colored race.”⁵ That reputation was firmly established by 1892, the same year that Harper published her fourth novel, when the African American author and educator Anna Julia Cooper judged that, “Among the pioneers, Frances Watkins Harper could sing with prophetic exaltation in the darkest days, when as yet there was

not a rift in the clouds overhanging her people.”⁶ Although some later critics and scholars would discount Harper’s work or omit her in broader discussions of African American literature, we work here from what we regard as a now dominant trend in the field to recognize Harper’s importance.⁷ Writing on Harper and *Forest Leaves*, Eric Gardner reminds us that “American literature, culture, and ideals stand wounded because America has regularly asserted that some lives and literatures—especially Black lives and literatures—matter less than others.”⁸ As we work on this edition of *Forest Leaves* in the midst of still-bubbling excitement over this text’s recovery, we are aware that we have not yet realized the full import of this volume, which continued scholarship will surely show.

Harper’s literary productions were heavily influenced by her own politics. She was a dedicated political activist and leader and prominently involved in major social reform movements of the 1800s, supporting abolition, women’s rights, and temperance. In 1854, she joined the Abolition movement as a traveling anti-slavery lecturer and was employed by the Maine Anti-Slavery Society and the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society until 1860, when she married Fenton Harper and settled in Ohio. After her husband’s death in 1864 and the end of the Civil War, she moved with her only child, Mary, to Philadelphia. Harper continued

⁶ Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South*. (Xenia, OH: The Aldine Printing House, 1892), 140. Cooper goes on here to quote Harper’s “Ethiopia,” the opening poem of *Forest Leaves*.

⁷ See, for example, Paul Lauter’s discussion of debates around Harper’s value in “Is Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Good Enough To Teach?” *Legacy* 5.1 (Spring 1988): 27-32.

⁸ Eric Gardner, “Leaves, Trees, and Forests: Frances Ellen Watkins’s Forest Leaves and Recovery” Roundtable On the Recovery of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s *Forest Leaves*: Archives, Origins and African American Literature *Common-place* Vol. 16 No. 2 Winter 2016.

³ William Wells Brown, *The Rising Son; or, The Antecedents and Advancements of the Colored Race*. (Boston: A. G. Brown and Company, 1874), 524.

⁴ Still, *The Underground Railroad*, 755.

⁵ William Cooper Nell, *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution, with Sketches of Several Distinguished Colored Persons: To Which is Added a Brief Survey of the Conditions and Prospects of Colored Americans*. (Boston: Robert F. Wallcut, 1855), 212.

her social uplift work, traveling throughout the South to see first-hand the conditions of the newly freed African American population and to lecture on the topic of race and citizenship. Continuing her work for women's rights, Harper co-founded the American Woman Suffrage Association in 1869. Nineteenth-century suffrage debates around the Fifteenth Amendment worked to feed racist ideologies about black people's fitness to vote, with many white women reformers further alienating black women from the cause. Like other black women reformers, Harper emphasized black women's centrality to the social justice work in which she participated. Also a proponent of temperance--a project she linked closely to both racial uplift and women's rights--Harper joined the Women's Christian Temperance Union as the Superintendent for Work among African Americans in the 1870s. In 1896, she co-founded the National Association of Colored Women. Her dedication to black civil rights placed her at the forefront of nineteenth-century black political thought as well as in the early African American literary tradition. Harper passed away in Philadelphia on February 22, 1911, after a literary and political career that spanned over half a century.

***Forest Leaves'* Publication and Recovery**

The one extant edition of Harper's *Forest Leaves*, located at the Maryland Historical Society, bears no date of publication. This fact, and the limitations of available information on the text (some of which we discuss here), makes this collection difficult to date definitively. The Library of Congress notes this uncertainty in its list of "Selected Online Works by Civil War Era African American Women," giving this date as "1840?," suggesting that *Forest Leaves* was published sometime during

this decade.⁹ Most scholars seem to have relied for their dating of this volume on the biographical essay on Harper with which Still, her close friend and coworker to support self-emancipated people, concludes *The Underground Railroad*.¹⁰ Still's mention of the text is, however, vague: "Scarcely had she reached her majority ere she had written a number of prose and poetic pieces which were deemed of sufficient merit to publish in a small volume called 'Forest Leaves.'"¹¹ Most scholars have taken this statement about Harper's "age of majority" to mean that she published this when she was around 20 years old, in 1845.

The printer of *Forest Leaves* was James Young, whose business was located at the corner of Baltimore and Holliday Streets, according to the pamphlet's title page. This gives some corroboration for the text's date. Advertisements and other materials he printed list Young as being located at this address as early as 1840 and as late as 1855.¹² Some sources,

⁹ See <https://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/aacivilwarwomen/bibliography.html>. At this time, the editors have not been able to trace where the Library of Congress' date originated.

¹⁰ Carla L. Peterson discusses Daniel P. Murray's alternative, and uncited, dating of the piece in 1852. See Carla L. Peterson, "Searching for Frances." Roundtable On the Recovery of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Forest Leaves: Archives, Origins and African American Literature Common-place* Vol. 16 No. 2 Winter 2016.

¹¹ William Still, *The Underground Rail Road*, 756.

¹² Examples of publications that confirm this address include Nathaniel Hickman. *The Politician's Register* (Baltimore: James Young, Printer, South West Corner of Baltimore and Holliday streets, 1840) and John Purviance, *Catalogues of the very large and valuable law and miscellaneous library of late judge Purviance of Baltimore* (Baltimore: From James Young's Steam Printing Establishment, corner of Baltimore and Holliday streets, 1855). Meredith McGill discusses James Young's other publications. See Meredith L. McGill, "Presentiments." Roundtable On the Recovery of Frances Ellen

however, indicate a different address for Young during this period, creating some confusion as to whether he'd relocated his printing shop during this time.¹³ The time span of available dates that list Young's "corner of Baltimore and Holliday Streets" address suggests that he did operate there over a period of at least a decade and a half. As Johanna Ortner has suggested previously, since Harper left Baltimore in 1851 to teach at Union Seminary in Wilberforce, Ohio, *Forest Leaves* was likely published before that date. It is therefore possible that the volume was published in 1845, as has been previously assumed by most Harper scholars. At this time, we can say, with the most certainty, that *Forest Leaves* was likely published between 1840 and 1851. We further surmise that the pamphlet probably appeared around the time of what most scholars have regarded as Harper's "age of majority" (age 20 or 21, depending upon how one interprets Still's meaning), in 1845 or 1846.

In Johanna Ortner's essay on her recovery of *Forest Leaves* and the accompanying roundtable of commentary published in *Common-place* in 2016, scholars take note of the occasion of recovering a text that was known to have existed, but believed to have been materially lost to us.¹⁴ Just as the content of Harper's first poetry collection presents

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¹³ For example, an advertisement in the *Baltimore Wholesale Business Directory* for the year 1845 listed James Young's printing press at No. 3 South Gay Street in Baltimore and in 1846, Young printed an almanac published by J. Moore, citing his Gay Street address.

¹⁴ See Johanna Ortner, "Lost no More: Recovering Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Forest Leaves*" and the Roundtable On the Recovery of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Forest Leaves*: Archives, Origins and African American Literature *Common-place* Vol. 16 No. 2 Winter 2016.

opportunities for further scholarship on her writing, the significance of this text's recovery and the uncertainties about it that still remain offer additional material for research and teaching.

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A Note on the Text

We have left the vast majority of the text as it appears in the original, including Harper's alternative spellings of some words, even where those spellings are inconsistent. We recognize that many of these alternative spellings are not errors but represent Harper's poetic language--indeed, many of the variants are made for the sake of rhythm or rhyme. We only amended the text when we felt it was necessary to preserve its meaning. These changes are marked with brackets.

Harper went on to revise and republish several of the poems included in *Forest Leaves* later in her career. In our footnotes, we have noted which poems are known to have been revised and where they appeared.

Further Reading

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Forest Leaves.
By Frances Ellen Watkins

FOREST LEAVES.

ETHIOPIA.¹⁵

Yes, Ethiopia, yet shall stretch
Her bleeding hands abroad,¹⁶
Her cry of agony shall reach
The burning throne of God.

The tyrant's yoke from off her neck,
His fetters from her soul,
The mighty hand of God shall break,
And spurn their vile control.

James Young, Printer,
Corner of Baltimore and Holliday streets

¹⁵ Harper revised this poem for her 1854 *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*. It was reprinted in the August 24, 1855 issue of *Frederick Douglass' Paper*.

¹⁶ Psalm 68:31. In the Old Testament, Ethiopia refers not to the modern kingdom of Ethiopia, but to ancient Nubia, the modern Sudan. In its nineteenth-century usage, the term "Ethiopian" referred more generally to people of African descent, rather than to the region or nation of Ethiopia more specifically. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the use of "Ethiop" to refer to "a black or dark-skinned person; a black African" dates to as early as the fourteenth century. This use was also prominent in other African American writing, as in that of Harper's predecessor, Phillis Wheatley, who refers to herself as "An Ethiop" in "To the University of Cambridge, in New England" (1773).

Redeem'd from dust and freed from chains
 Her sons shall lift their eyes,
 From cloud capt hills and verdant¹⁷ plains
 Shall shouts of triumph rise.

Upon her dark despairing brow
 Shall play a smile of peace,
 For God hath bent unto her woe
 And bade her sorrows cease.

'Neath sheltring vines and stately palms,
 Shall laughing children play,
 And aged sires with joyous psalms,
 Shall gladden every day.

Secure by night, and blest by day
 Shall pass her happy hours,
 Nor human tigers hunt for prey
 Within her peaceful bowers.

Then Ethiopia, stretch, Oh stretch
 Thy bleeding hands abroad,
 Thy cry of agony shall reach
 And find redress from God.

¹⁷ verdant: green with grass, rich vegetation

THE SOUL.¹⁸

Bring forth the balance, let the weights be gold,
 We'd know the worth of a deathless soul;
 Bring rubies and jems from every mine,
 With the wealth of ocean, land and clime.

Bring the joys of the glad green earth,
 Its playful smiles and careless mirth;
 The dews of youth, and flushes of health,
 Bring! Oh bring! the wide world's wealth.

Bring the rich radiant gems of thought
 From the mines and deeps of knowledge brought;
 Bring glowing words and ponderous lore,
 Search heaven and earth's arcana¹⁹ o'er.

Bring the fairest, brightest rolls of fame,
 Unwritten with a deed of guilt or shame;
 Bring honor's guerdon,²⁰ and victory's crown,
 Robes of pride, and laurels of renown.

¹⁸ In his 1891 *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, Daniel A. Payne, the church's sixth bishop and its first historiographer, recalls that two of Harper's poetic "productions of 1853" were published in the *Christian Recorder*: "The Soul" and "The Dying Christian" (301-303). In addition to reproducing revised versions of each poem, Payne notes that Harper contributed essays on "Christianity" and "Women's Rights" to the *Christian Recorder* between 1852 and 1853 (305). "Christianity" may be the essay of the same name that Harper printed in her 1854 *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*.

¹⁹ arcana: secrets or mysteries

²⁰ guerdon: reward

We've brought the wealth of every mine,
We've ransack'd ocean, land clime,
And caught the joyous smiles away
From the prattling babe to the sire grey.

We've brought the names of the noble dead
With those who in their footsteps tread;
Here are wreaths of pride and gems of thought
From the battle field and study brought.

Heap high the gems, pile up the gold,
Heavy's the weight of a deathless soul;
Make room for all the wealth of earth,
Its honors, joys, and careless mirth.

Leave me a niche for the rolls of fame
For precious indeed is a spotless name,
For the wreaths, the robes and gems of thought,
Let an empty place in the scale be sought.

With care we've adjusted balance and scale,
Futile our efforts we've seen them fail;
Lighter than dust is the wealth of earth
Weigh'd in the scales with immortal worth.

Could we drag the sun from its golden car²¹
To lay in this balance with ev'ry star,
T'would darken the day and obscure the night,
But the weight of the balance would still be light.

²¹ car: chariot

"HE KNOWETH NOT THAT THE DEAD ARE THERE."²²

In yonder halls reclining
Are forms surpassing fair,
And brilliant lights are shining,
But, Oh! the dead are there.

There's music, song and dance,
There is banishment of care,
And mirth in every glance,
But still the dead are there.

Like the asp's²³ seductive venom
Hid 'neath flowerets fair,
This charnal house²⁴ concealeth
The dead that slumber there.

'Neath that flow of song and laughter
Runs the current of despair,
But the simple sons of pleasure
Know not the dead are there.

They'll shudder, start and tremble,
They'll weep in wild despair,
When the solemn truth breaks on them
That the dead, the dead are there.

²² Proverbs 9:18. Harper revised this poem for her 1854 *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*, where it is titled "The Revel."

²³ asp: a small, venomous snake from Egypt

²⁴ charnel house: a vault or building where skeletal remains are stored

They who've scoff'd at ev'ry warning,
Who've turn'd from ev'ry prayer,
Shall learn in bitter anguish
That the dead, the dead are there.

"THAT BLESSED HOPE."²⁵

Oh touch it not that hope so blest
Which cheers the fainting heart,
And points it to the coming rest
Where sorrow has no part.

Tear from heart each worldly prop,
Unbind each earthly string;
But to this blest and glorious hope,
Oh let my spirit cling.

It cheer'd amid the days of old
Each holy patriarch's breast,
It was an anchor to their souls,
Upon it let me rest.

When wand'ring in the dens and caves,
In goat and sheep skins drest,
Apeel'd²⁶ and scatter'd people learn'd
To know this hope was blest.

²⁵ Titus 2:13. Watkins revised this poem for her 1854 *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*.

²⁶ peeled: without covering; beggarly, wretched. The line reads "A peel'd" in both editions of *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*.

Help me to love this blessed hope;
My heart's a fragile thing;
Will you not nerve and bear it up
Around this hope to cling.

Help amid this world of strife
To long for Christ to reign,
That when he brings the crown of life
I may that crown obtain.

YEARNINGS FOR HOME.

Oh let me go I'm weary here
And fevers scorch my brain,
I long to feel my native air
Breathe o'er each burning vein.

I long once more to see
My home among the distant hills,
To breathe amid the melody
Of murmuring brooks and rills.²⁷

My home is where eternal snow
Round threat'ning craters sleep,
Where streamlets murmur soft and low
And playful cascades leap.

²⁷ rills: small streams

Tis where glad scenes shall meet
My weary, longing eye;
Where rocks and Alpine forests greet
The bright cerulean²⁸ sky.

Your scenes are bright I know,
But there my mother pray'd,
Her cot is lowly, but I go
To die beneath its shade.

For, Oh I know she'll cling
'Round me her treasur'd long,
My sisters too will sing
Each lov'd familiar song.

They'll soothe my fever'd brow,
As in departed hours,
And spread around my dying couch
The brightest, fairest flowers.

Then let me go I'm weary here
And fevers scorch my brain,
I long to feel my native air,
Breathe o'er each burning vein.

²⁸ cerulean: deep-blue in color

FAREWELL, MY HEART IS BEATING.

Farewell, my heart is beating
With feelings sad and wild,
I've strove to hide its heaving
And 'mid my tears to smile.

This heart the lone and trusting,
Hath twin'd itself to thee;
And now when almost bursting,
Say, must it sever'd be.

When other brows for mine
Were alter'd, cold and strange,
I clasp'd my yearning heart to thine
And never found it chang'd.

This heart when almost breaking
Has leaned upon thy breast,
But when again 'tis aching
On thine it may not rest.

Oh clasp me closely ere we part
But breathe no sad farewell;
We can't be sever'd while thy heart
Retains o'er mine its spell.

HAMAN AND MORDECAI.²⁹

He stood at Persia's Palace gate
And vassal³⁰ round him bow'd,
Upon his brow was written hate
And he heeded not the crowd.

He heeded not the vassal throng
Whose praises rent the air,
His bosom shook with rage and scorn
For Mordecai stood there.

When ev'ry satrap³¹ bow'd
To him of noble blood,
Amid that servile crowd
One form unbending stood.

²⁹ Esther 3:1-7:10. Mordecai is a relative and guardian of Esther, who becomes queen when she marries King Ahasuerus (Xerxes I of Persia). Haman, the grand vizier, is infuriated that Mordecai, a Jew, refuses to bow to do him obeisance on religious grounds. Haman therefore plots not only to have Mordecai killed, but to exterminate all Jews in the Persian empire. Queen Esther, who is herself Jewish, informs the king of Mordecai's service to him and Haman's plot and petitions him to save the lives of her people. Haman throws himself upon Esther's couch to plead with her for his own life, but the king takes this as an assault. Ahasuerus ultimately has Haman hanged on the gallows that Haman had prepared for Mordecai. Mordecai is appointed grand vizier and the king gives the Jews permission to slaughter their enemies. This deliverance of Persian Jews from Haman's plot establishes the Jewish feast of Purim.

³⁰ vassal: person(s) in a subordinate position

³¹ satrap: provincial governor in the ancient Persian empire; a subordinate ruler

And as he gaz'd upon that form,
Dark flash'd his angry eye,
'Twas as the light'ning ere the storm
Hath swept in fury by.

On noble Mordecai alone,
He scorn'd to lay his hand;
But sought an edict from the throne
'Gainst all the captive band.

For full of pride and wrath
To his fell purpose true,
He vow'd that from his path
Should perish ev'ry Jew.

Then woman's voice arose
In deep impassion'd prayer,
Her fragile heart grew strong
'Twas the nervings of despair.

The king in mercy heard
Her pleading and her prayer
His heart with pity stirr'd,
And he resolved to spare.

And Haman met the fate
He'd for Mordecai decreed,
And from his cruel hate
The captive Jews are freed.

LET ME LOVE THEE.

Let me love thee I have known
The agony deception brings,
And tho' my riven heart is lone
It fondly clasps and firmly clings.

Oh! let me love thee, I have seen
Hope's fairest blossoms fail,
Have felt my life a mournful dream
And this world a tearful vale.³²

Oh! let me love thee, I have felt
Deep yearnings for a kindly heart,
When joy would thrill or sorrow melt
Some kindred soul to bear a part.

Let me love thee, yet Oh! yet
Breathe not distrust around my heart,
The lov'd, the cherish may forget
And act a cold and faithless part.

Let me love thee, I have press'd
Sadly my aching heart and brow,
But banish'd ne'er from each recess
The thirst of love that fills them now.

³² vale: valley

Let me love thee, let my breast
Closely round thee entwine,
And hide within its deep recess
True constant love like thine.

RUTH AND NAOMI.³³

Turn my daughters full of woe,
Is my heart so sad and lone,
Leave me, children, I would go
To my lov'd and distant home.

From my bosom death has torn,
Husband, children, all my stay;
Left me not a single one
For my life's declining day.

³³ Naomi moves from Bethlehem to Moab with her husband and sons, one of whom marries Ruth, a Moabite woman. Naomi's husband and sons (including Ruth's husband) die and Naomi prepares to return to Bethlehem. Ruth chooses to remain with her mother-in-law and works to support her, rather than returning to her own people. Ruth's marriage to Mahlon is considered a "mixed" marriage because Ruth is a Moabite and Naomi and her family are Jewish. This makes Ruth's decision to remain with her mother-in-law even more significant (Ruth 1:9-22). Ruth goes on to marry Boaz, a wealthy landowner and relation of Naomi's late husband. King David is one of their descendants (Ruth 2:1-4:22). Watkins revised this poem for the 1857 edition of *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*.

Want and wo surround my way,
Grief and famine where I tread;
In my native land they say
God is giving Jacob bread.

Naomi ceased, her daughters wept,
Their yearning hearts were fill'd,
Falling upon her wither'd neck
Their grief in tears distill'd.

Like rain upon a blighted tree
The tears of Orpah fell,
Kissing the pale and quiv'ring lip,
She breath'd her sad farewell.

But Ruth stood up, on her brow
There lay a heavenly calm,
And from her lips came soft and low
Words like a holy charm.

I will not leave thee, on thy brow
Are lines of sorrow, age and care,
Thy form is bent, thy step is slow,
Thy bosom stricken, lone and sear.

Thy failing lamp is growing dim,
It's flame is flick'ring past,
I will not leave thee withering,
'Neath stern affliction's blast.

When thy heart and home were glad,
I freely shar'd thy joyous lot
And now that heart is lone and sad,
Cease to entreat I'll leave thee not.

Oh if a lofty palace proud
Thy future home shall be,
Where sycophants³⁴ around thee crowd
I'll share that home with thee.

And if on earth the humblest spot
Thy future home shall prove,
I'll bring into thy lowly cot
The wealth of woman's love.

However drear, earth has no lot
My spirit shrinks to share with thee,
Then mother, dear entreat me not
To turn from following after thee.

Go where thou wilt my steps are there,
Our path in life is one,
Thou hast no lot I will not share
Till life itself be done.

³⁴ sycophant: a person who is flattering influential people in order to gain certain advantages

My country and home for thee
I freely, willingly resign;
Thy people shall my people be,
Thy God he shall be mine.

Then mother, dear, entreat me not
To turn from following thee,
My heart is mov'd to share thy lot
What e'er that lot may be.

"BIBLE DEFENCE OF SLAVERY."³⁵

Take sackcloth³⁶ of the darkest dye
And shroud the pulpits round,
Servants of him that cannot lie
Sit mourning on the ground.

Let holy horror blanch each cheek,
Pale ev'ry brow with fears,
And rocks and stones if ye could speak
Ye well might melt to tears.

³⁵ This poem references Josiah Priest's 1851 proslavery work of the same name. Harper revises the poem for the 1854 edition of *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*.

³⁶ sackcloth: a coarse cloth made from various fabric such as goat hair or flax

Let sorrow breathe in ev'ry tone
And grief in ev'ry strain ye raise,
Insult not heaven's majestic throne
With the mockery of praise.

A man whose light should be
The guide of age and youth,
Brings to the shrine of slavery
The sacrifice of truth.

For the fiercest wrongs that ever rose
Since Sodom's³⁷ fearful cry,
The word of life has been unclos'd
To give your God the lie.

An infidel could do no more
To hide his country's guilty blot,
Than spread God's holy record o'er
The loathesome leprous³⁸ spot.

Oh, when ye pray for heathen lands,
And plead for dark benighted shores,
Remember slavery's cruel hands
Make heathens at your doors.

³⁷ In the book of Genesis, God destroys the city of Sodom, along with the city of Gomorrah, with a rain of fire and sulphur because of its sin and immorality. This story becomes a proverbial example of human depravity and God's judgment and punishment. (Genesis 19:1-38).

³⁸ leprous: infected with leprosy

TO A MISSIONARY.

Joy, joy! unto the heathen,
Unfurl each snowy sail,
And waft the breath of prayer
On ev'ry breeze and gale.

Spread, spread your sails with mercy
As you plough the trackless,³⁹
And at your stern and helm
Shall God a vigil keep.

You're freighted with rich blessings,
You've glorious things to tell,
Your tidings are salvation,
Your theme Immanuel.⁴⁰

³⁹ This line seems to be missing a word that would retain the rhyme and meter of the poem's other stanzas. Perhaps "trackless deep" is intended, as many writers of the period used that formulation to refer to the sea. The American poet Lydia H. Sigourney, for example, uses the phrase in *Traits of the Aborigines of America* (1822), "To a Fragment of Cotton" (1841), and "Sorrow as on the Sea" (1854).

⁴⁰ Immanuel, from the Hebrew, meaning "God is with us" or "may God be with us." The prophet Isaiah announces the birth of a child with this name (Isaiah 7:10-17). Christians would later take the name to predict the virgin birth of the Messiah, Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:22).

Heathen minds by sin degraded,
Captives 'neath the tempter's sway,
Shall from their moral vision
Have the darkness chas'd away.

'Neath bamboo hut and palm tree
Shall prayer like incense rise,
An oblation⁴¹ pure and holy
To the God of earth and skies.

He who from the fiery pillar
Guided once a pilgrim train,
Shall protect you by his power
As you sweep across the main.

More faithful than the needle
Pointing constant to the pole,
Shall the God of love be with you
When the darkest tempests roll.

God speed you on your journey,
May his presence and his power
Be your stay in grief and trial
And the joy of every hour.

⁴¹ oblation: making a religious offering to God or a god; a holy gift offered at an altar or shrine

"I THIRST."⁴²

I thirst, but earth cannot allay
The fever coursing thro' my veins,
The healing stream is far away,
It flows thro' Salem's⁴³ glorious plains

The murmers of its crystal flow
Break ever o'er this world of strife,
My heart is weary let me go
To bathe it in the stream of life.

For a worn and weary heart
Hath bath'd in this pure stream,
And felt its griefs and cares depart
Like some forgotten dream.

THE DYING CHRISTIAN.⁴⁴

The light was faintly streaming
Within a darken'd room,
Where a woman, faint and feeble
Was sinking to the tomb.

⁴² This poem is reprinted in the October 9, 1858 issue of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*. Harper revised it for her 1872 *Sketches of Southern Life*.

⁴³ Salem: another name for Jerusalem

⁴⁴ Harper revised this poem for her 1854 *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*.

"The silver cord"⁴⁵ was loosened,
We knew that she must die,
We read the mournful token
In the dimness of her eye.

We read it in the radiance
That lit her pallid cheek,
And the quivering of the feeble lip
Too faint its joys to speak.

We read in the glorious flash
Of strange unearthly light,
That ever and non would dash
The dimness from her sight.

And in the thoughts of living fire
Learn'd from God's encamping band,
Her words seem'd like a holy lyre
Tun'd in the spirit land.

Meet, oh meet me in the kingdom,
Said our lov'd and dying one,
I long to be with Jesus,
I am going, going home.

Like a child oppress'd with slumber
She calmly sank to rest,
With her trust in the Redeemer
And her head upon his breast.

⁴⁵ Ecclesiastes 12:6-7.

She faded from our vision
Like a thing of love and light,
But we feel she lives forever
A spirit pure and bright.

A DREAM.

I had a dream, a varied dream,⁴⁶
A dream of joy and dread;
Before me rose the judgement scene
For God had raised the dead.

Oh for an angel's hand to paint
The glories of that day,
When God did gather home each saint
And wipe their tears away.

Each waiting one lifted his head
Rejoic'd to see him nigh,
And earth cast out her sainted dead
To meet him in the sky.

⁴⁶ This line also opens one of Harper's later poems, "Fishers of Men," which was published in the 1886 edition of *Sketches of Southern Life*.

Before his white and burning throne
A countless throng did stand;
Whilst Christ confess'd his own,
Whose names were on his hand.

I had a dream, a varied dream,
A dream of joy and dread;
Before me rose the judgment scene
For God had rais'd the dead.

Oh for an angel's hand to paint
The terrors of that day,
When God in vengeance for his saints
Girded⁴⁷ himself with wrath to slay.

But, oh the terror, grief, and dread,
Tongue can't describe or pen portray;
When from their graves arose the dead,
Guilty to meet the judgment day.

As sudden as the lightning's flash
Across the sky doth sweep,
Earth's kingdom's were in pieces dash'd,
And waken'd from their guilty sleep.

I heard the agonizing cry,
Ye rocks and mountains on us fall,
And hide us from the Judge's eye,
But rocks and mounts fled from the call.

⁴⁷ girded: to encircle a person or part of a body with a belt

I saw the guilty ruin'd host
Standing before the burning throne,
The ruin'd, lost forever lost,
Whom God in wrath refus'd to own.

THE FELON'S DREAM.

He slept, but oh, it was not calm,
As in the days of infancy;
When sleep is nature's tender balm
To hearts from sorrow free.

He dream'd that fetters bound him fast,
He pin'd for liberty;
It seem'd deliverance came at last
And he from bonds were free.

In thought he journey'd where
Familiar voices rose,
Where not a brow was dim with care,
Or bosom heav'd with woes.

Around him press'd a happy band;
His wife and child drew near;
He felt the pressure of the hand,
And dried each falling tear.

His tender mother cast aside
The tears that dim'd her eye;
His father saw him as the pride
Of brighter days gone by.

He saw his wife around him cling,
He heard her breathe his name;
Oh! woman's love 's a precious thing,
A pure undying flame.

His brethren wept for manly pride,
May bend to woman's tears;
Then welcom'd round their fireside
The playmate of departed years.

His gentle sister fair and mild
Around him closely press'd,
She clasp'd his hand and smil'd
Then wept upon his breast.

All, all were glad around that hearth,
They hop'd his wanderings o'er;
That weary of the strange cold earth
He'd roam from them no more.

'Twas but a dream, 'twas fancy's flight
It mock'd his yearning heart;
It made his bosom feel its blight,
It probed him like a dart.

A prison held his fettered limbs,
 Confinement was his lot,
 No kindred voice rose to cheer,
 He seem'd by friends and all forgot.

A DIALOGUE.⁴⁸

Enquirer.

Who hath a balm that will impart,
 Strength to the fainting heart and brow;
 I've look'd upon earth, and many a heart
 Weary and wasting with woe.

Riches.

I've heaps, I've heaps of shining dust,
 I've gems from every mine;
 Bid the weary spirit learn to trust
 In gold that glitters, and gems that shine.

Enquirer.

Oh! vain were the hopes of that heart,
 Sighing its sorrows should cease,
 That would search mid rubies and gems,
 For the priceless pearl of peace.

⁴⁸ This poem is reprinted in the July 31, 1873 issue of the *Christian Recorder*.

Fame.

I've wreaths, I've w[r]eaths for the fever'd brow,
 They're bright, and my name is fame;
 Will not the heart forget its woe,
 When I write it a deathless name?

Enquirer.

No! your wreaths and laurels rare,
 Would blanche and pale on a brow unblest;
 While the heart, remindful of its care,
 Would ache and throb with the same unrest.

Pleasure.

Oh! I am queen of a laughing train,
 The lightsome,⁴⁹ the gay and glad;
 I've a nectar cup for every pain,
 They drink and forget to be sad.

Enquirer.

But I have seen the cheek all pale,
 When life was fading from the heart;
 'Twas then I saw thy nectar fail,
 I watch'd and saw thy smiles depart.

Religion.

Oh! I am from the land of light,
 My home is the world on high;
 But I with the sons of night,
 And bid their darkness fly.

⁴⁹ lightsome: light-hearted, carefree

I have no heaps of shining dust,
No gems from every mine;
But gifts to beautify the just,
On the brow of the pure to shine.

I have no wreaths of fading fame;
No records of decaying worth;
But God's remembrance and a name,
That can't be written in the earth.

When pleasure's smiles shall all depart,
Her nectar but increase the thirst,
I'll point the fever'd brow and heart,
To crystal founts that freshly burst.

Enquirer.

Thy words do brigh[t]er hopes impart,
Than pleasure, wealth or fame;
Thou hast balm for the wounded heart,
Tell me, kind stranger, thy name.

My name and my nature is love;
God only wise, formed the plan
That mission'd me down from above,
As the guide and the solace of man.

Then I tell the fever'd brow and heart,
Thou'st balm for its wounds, and peace for its strife,
And the guerdon's which thou dost impart,
Are the pearl of peace and the crown of life.

CRUCIFIXION.

The shadows of morning empurpled⁵⁰ with light,
Bent o'er Judea,⁵¹ all lovely and bright;
The zephyr just risen, stole o'er the lea,⁵²
And dimpled the cheeks of river and sea.

On that bright morn, a clamor was heard,
The footsteps of men whose passions were stirred;
The voice of wrath, of tumult and strife,
'Twas the bloodthirsty cry of innocent life.

I gaz'd on their victim, on his pale brow,
'Mid beamings of love, were shadows of woe;
And his eyes, mid reproach and with'ring scorn,
Seemed like a star bending o'er a dark storm.

Tho' pale was his cheek, and ashy his brow,
By sorrow and anguish his spirit bent low;
Yet calm 'mid the fierce and cruel he stood,
Who, like beasts of the forests were eager for blood.

And this was the multitude fickle and vain,
Who hail'd him in triumph, as coming to reign;
Incited by priests, insatiate⁵³ they stood,
Their cry was his life, their clamor his blood.

⁵⁰ empurpled: to tinge or become purple

⁵¹ Judea: ancient region of Southern Palestine, the site of Jesus Christ's ministry and crucifixion.

⁵² lea: pasture, grassy land

⁵³ insatiate: never satisfied

When dying earth drew round her form,
A mantle as dark as the vest of a storm,
Nature grew sad, earth trembled and shrank,
Astonish'd as Jesus the dire cup drank.

AN ACROSTIC.⁵⁴

Angels bright that hover o'er thee,
Deem thee an object of their care;
Ever watchful they surround thee,
Lending aid when danger's near.

May this life, thus guarded, sister,
Always feel thy Saviour near;
Render him thy heart's devotion –
Trust his goodness, seek his care;
In these vales of grief and sorrow,
Nought shall harm while God is near.

⁵⁴ An acrostic is a poem in which certain letters in each line (often the first letters) spell out a word or phrase.

FOR SHE SAID IF I MAY BUT TOUCH OF HIS CLOTHES I
SHALL BE WHOLE.⁵⁵

Life to her no brightness brought,
Pale and sorrow'd was her brow,
Till a bright and joyous thought,
Lit the darkness of her woe.

Long had sickness on her prayed;
Strength from every nerve had gone;
Skill and art could give no aid,
Thus her weary life passed on.

Like a sad and mournful dream,
Daily felt she life depart;
Hourly knew the vital stream,
Left the fountains of her heart.

He who'd lull'd the storm to rest,
Cleans'd the lepers, raised the dead;
Whilst a crowd around him prest
Near that suffering one did tread.

⁵⁵ Matthew 9:21; Mark 5:28. This story of Jesus' healing powers appears in the three synoptic gospels, in which Jesus raises Jairus' daughter from the dead and heals a woman who had suffered for twelve years with a hemorrhage (Matthew 9:18-26; Mark 5:21-43). In the gospel of Luke, the healed woman's words are different than in the other two synoptic gospels (Luke 8:40-56). Harper revised this poem for her 1854 *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*, where it is titled "Saved by Faith."

Nerv'd by blended hope and fear,
Reason'd thus her anxious heart, -
If to touch him I draw near,
All my suffering shall depart.

While the crowd around him stand,
I will touch, the sufferer said, -
Forth she reach'd her timid hand,
As she touch'd, her sickness fled.

"Who hath touch'd me." Jesus cried,
Virtue from my body's gone;
From the crowd a voice replied,
Why inquire, thousands throng.

Faint with fear thro' ev'ry limb,
Yet too grateful to deny;
Tremblingly, she knelt to him,
"Lord," she answered, "It was I."

Kindly, gently, Jesus said,
Words like balm unto her soul,
Peace upon her life be shed,
Child, thy faith has made thee whole.

THE PRESENTIMENT.

There's something strangely thrills my breast,
And fills it with a deep unrest,--
It is not grief, it is not pain,
Nor wish to live the past again.

'Tis something which I scarce can tell,
And yet I know, and feel it well;
Thro' ev'ry vein it seems to run,
And whispers life will soon be done.

It comes in accents soft and low,
Like bright streamlets crystal flow,
It whispers, lingers round my heart,
And tells me I must soon depart.

I felt it when the glow of life
Was warm upon my cheek,
In mornful cadence to my heart,
It solemnly did speak.

I felt it when a fearful strife
Was preying on my heart,
It told me from the cares of life,
I quickly must depart.

I felt it when my cheek grew pale,
By cares I could'nt repress;
It whisper'd to my wearied soul,
This earth is not your rest.