

Passed

By Charlotte M. Mew

“Like souls that meeting pass,
And passing never meet again.”

LET those who have missed a romantic view of London in its poorest quarters—and there will romance be found—wait for a sunset in early winter. They may turn North or South, towards Islington or Westminster, and encounter some fine pictures and more than one aspect of unique beauty. This hour of pink twilight has its monopoly of effects. Some of them may never be reached again.

On such an evening in mid-December, I put down my sewing and left tame glories of fire-light (discoverers of false charm) to welcome, as youth may, the contrast of keen air outdoors to the glow within.

My aim was the perfection of a latent appetite, for I had no mind to content myself with an apology for hunger, consequent on a warmly passive afternoon.

The splendid cold of fierce frost set my spirit dancing. The road rung hard underfoot, and through the lonely squares woke sharp echoes from behind. This stinging air assailed my cheeks with vigorous severity. It stirred my blood grandly, and brought
thought

thought back to me from the warm embers just forsaken, with an immeasurable sense of gain.

But after the first delirium of enchanting motion, destination became a question. The dim trees behind the dingy enclosures were beginning to be succeeded by rows of flaring gas jets, displaying shops of new aspect and evil smell. Then the heavy walls of a partially demolished prison reared themselves darkly against the pale sky.

By this landmark I recalled—alas that it should be possible—a church in the district, newly built by an infallible architect, which I had been directed to seek at leisure. I did so now. A row of cramped houses, with the unpardonable bow window, projecting squalor into prominence, came into view. Robbing these even of light, the portentous walls stood a silent curse before them. I think they were blasting the hopes of the sad dwellers beneath them—if hope they had—to despair. Through spattered panes faces of diseased and dirty children leered into the street. One room, as I passed, seemed full of them. The window was open; their wails and maddening requirements sent out the mother's cry. It was thrown back to her, mingled with her children's screams, from the pitiless prison walls.

These shelters struck my thought as travesties—perhaps they were not—of the grand place called home.

Leaving them I sought the essential of which they were bereft. What withheld from them, as poverty and sin could not, a title to the sacred name?

An answer came, but interpretation was delayed. Theirs was not the desolation of something lost, but of something that had never been. I thrust off speculation gladly here, and fronted Nature free.

Suddenly

Suddenly I emerged from the intolerable shadow of the brickwork, breathing easily once more. Before me lay a roomy space, nearly square, bounded by three-storey dwellings, and transformed, as if by quick mechanism, with colours of sunset. Red and golden spots wavered in the panes of the low scattered houses round the bewildering expanse. Overhead a faint crimson sky was hung with violet clouds, obscured by the smoke and nearing dusk.

In the centre, but towards the left, stood an old stone pump, and some few feet above it irregular lamps looked down. They were planted on a square of paving railed in by broken iron fences, whose paint, now discoloured, had once been white. Narrow streets cut in five directions from the open roadway. Their lines of light sank dimly into distance, mocking the stars' entrance into the fading sky. Everything was transfigured in the illuminated twilight. As I stood, the dying sun caught the rough edges of a girl's uncovered hair, and hung a faint nimbus round her poor desecrated face. The soft circle, as she glanced toward me, lent it the semblance of one of those mystically pictured faces of some mediæval saint.

A stillness stole on, and about the square dim figures hurried along, leaving me stationary in existence (I was thinking fancifully), when my mediæval saint demanded "who I was a-shoving of?" and dismissed me, not unkindly, on my way. Hawkers in a neighbouring alley were calling, and the monotonous ting-ting of the muffin-bell made an audible background to the picture. I left it, and then the glamour was already passing. In a little while darkness possessing it, the place would reassume its aspect of sordid gloom.

There is a street not far from there, bearing a name that quickens life within one, by the vision it summons of a most peaceful

peaceful country, where the broad roads are but pathways through green meadows, and your footstep keeps the time to a gentle music of pure streams. There the scent of roses, and the first pushing buds of spring, mark the seasons, and the birds call out faithfully the time and manner of the day. Here Easter is heralded by the advent in some squalid mart of air-balls on Good Friday; early summer and late may be known by observation of that unromantic yet authentic calendar in which alley-tors, tip-cat, whip- and peg-tops, hoops and suckers, in their courses mark the flight of time.

Perhaps attracted by the incongruity, I took this way. In such a thoroughfare it is remarkable that satisfied as are its public with transient substitutes for literature, they require permanent types (the term is so far misused it may hardly be further outraged) of Art. Pictures, so-called, are the sole departure from necessity and popular finery which the prominent wares display. The window exhibiting these aspirations was scarcely more inviting than the fishmonger's next door, but less odoriferous, and I stopped to see what the ill-reflecting lights would show. There was a typical selection. Prominently, a large chromo of a girl at prayer. Her eyes turned upwards, presumably to heaven, left the gazer in no state to dwell on the elaborately bared breasts below. These might rival, does wax-work attempt such beauties, any similar attraction of Marylebone's extensive show. This personification of pseudo-purity was sensually diverting, and consequently marketable.

My mind seized the ideal of such a picture, and turned from this prostitution of it sickly away. Hurriedly I proceeded, and did not stop again until I had passed the low gateway of the place I sought.

Its forbidding exterior was hidden in the deep twilight and invited

invited no consideration. I entered and swung back the inner door. It was papered with memorial cards, recommending to mercy the unprotesting spirits of the dead. My prayers were requested for the "repose of the soul of the Architect of that church, who passed away in the True Faith—December,—1887." Accepting the assertion, I counted him beyond them, and mentally entrusted mine to the priest for those who were still groping for it in the gloom.

Within the building, darkness again forbade examination. A few lamps hanging before the altar struggled with obscurity.

I tried to identify some ugly details with the great man's complacent eccentricity, and failing, turned toward the street again. Nearly an hour's walk lay between me and my home. This fact and the atmosphere of stuffy sanctity about the place, set me longing for space again, and woke a fine scorn for aught but air and sky. My appetite, too, was now an hour ahead of opportunity. I sent back a final glance into the darkness as my hand prepared to strike the door. There was no motion at the moment, and it was silent; but the magnetism of human presence reached me where I stood. I hesitated, and in a few moments found what sought me on a chair in the far corner, flung face downwards across the seat. The attitude arrested me. I went forward. The lines of the figure spoke unquestionable despair.

Does speech convey intensity of anguish? Its supreme expression is in form. Here was human agony set forth in meagre lines, voiceless, but articulate to the soul. At first the forcible portrayal of it assailed me with the importunate strength of beauty. Then the Thing stretched there in the obdurate darkness grew personal and banished delight. Neither sympathy nor its vulgar substitute, curiosity, induced my action as I drew near. I was eager indeed to be gone. I wanted to ignore the almost indistinguishable

tinguishable being. My will cried: Forsake it!—but I found myself powerless to obey. Perhaps it would have conquered had not the girl swiftly raised herself in quest of me. I stood still. Her eyes met mine. A wildly tossed spirit looked from those ill-lighted windows, beckoning me on. Mine pressed towards it, but whether my limbs actually moved I do not know, for the imperious summons robbed me of any consciousness save that of necessity to comply.

Did she reach me, or was our advance mutual? It cannot be told. I suppose we neither know. But we met, and her hand, grasping mine, imperatively dragged me into the cold and noisy street.

We went rapidly in and out of the flaring booths, hustling little staggering children in our unpitying speed, I listening dreamily to the concert of hoarse yells and haggling whines which struck against the silence of our flight. On and on she took me, breathless and without explanation. We said nothing. I had no care or impulse to ask our goal. The fierce pressure of my hand was not relaxed a breathing space; it would have borne me against resistance could I have offered any, but I was capable of none. The streets seemed to rush past us, peopled with despair.

Weirdly lighted faces sent blank negations to a spirit of question which finally began to stir in me. Here, I thought once vaguely, was the everlasting No!

We must have journeyed thus for more than half an hour and walked far. I did not detect it. In the eternity of supreme moments time is not. Thought, too, fears to be obtrusive and stands aside.

We gained a door at last, down some blind alley out of the deafening thoroughfare. She threw herself against it and pulled me up the unlighted stairs. They shook now and then with the violence

violence of our ascent; with my free hand I tried to help myself up by the broad and greasy balustrade. There was little sound in the house. A light shone under the first door we passed, but all was quietness within.

At the very top, from the dense blackness of the passage, my guide thrust me suddenly into a dazzling room. My eyes rejected its array of brilliant light. On a small chest of drawers three candles were guttering, two more stood flaring in the high window ledge, and a lamp upon a table by the bed rendered these minor illuminations unnecessary by its diffusive glare. There were even some small Christmas candles dropping coloured grease down the wooden mantel-piece, and I noticed a fire had been made, built entirely of wood. There were bits of an inlaid work-box or desk, and a chair-rung, lying half burnt in the grate. Some peremptory demand for light had been, these signs denoted unscrupulously met. A woman lay upon the bed, half clothed, asleep. As the door slammed behind me the flames wavered and my companion released my hand. She stood beside me, shuddering violently, but without utterance.

I looked around. Everywhere proofs of recent energy were visible. The bright panes reflecting back the low burnt candles, the wretched but shining furniture, and some odd bits of painted china, set before the spluttering lights upon the drawers, bore witness to a provincial intolerance of grime. The boards were bare, and marks of extreme poverty distinguished the whole room. The destitution of her surroundings accorded ill with the girl's spotless person and well-tended hands, which were hanging tremulously down.

Subsequently I realised that these deserted beings must have first fronted the world from a sumptuous stage. The details in proof of it I need not cite. It must have been so.

My

My previous apathy gave place to an exaggerated observation. Even some pieces of a torn letter, dropped off the quilt, I noticed, were of fine texture, and inscribed by a man's hand. One fragment bore an elaborate device in colours. It may have been a club crest or coat-of-arms. I was trying to decide which, when the girl at length gave a cry of exhaustion or relief, at the same time falling into a similar attitude to that she had taken in the dim church. Her entire frame became shaken with tearless agony or terror. It was sickening to watch. She began partly to call or moan, begging me, since I was beside her, wildly, and then with heart-breaking weariness, "to stop, to stay." She half rose and claimed me with distracted grace. All her movements were noticeably fine.

I pass no judgment on her features; suffering for the time assumed them, and they made no insistence of individual claim.

I tried to raise her, and kneeling, pulled her reluctantly towards me. The proximity was distasteful. An alien presence has ever repelled me. I should have pitied the girl keenly perhaps a few more feet away. She clung to me with ebbing force. Her heart throbbed painfully close to mine, and when I meet now in the dark streets others who have been robbed, as she has been, of their great possession, I have to remember that.

The magnetism of our meeting was already passing; and, reason asserting itself, I reviewed the incident dispassionately, as she lay like a broken piece of mechanism in my arms. Her dark hair had come unfastened and fell about my shoulder. A faint white streak of it stole through the brown. A gleam of moonlight strays thus through a dusky room. I remember noticing, as it was swept with her involuntary motions across my face, a faint fragrance which kept recurring like a subtle and seductive sprite, hiding itself with fairy cunning in the tangled maze.

The

The poor girl's mind was clearly travelling a devious way. Broken and incoherent exclamations told of a recently wrung promise, made to whom, or of what nature, it was not my business to conjecture or inquire.

I record the passage of a few minutes. At the first opportunity I sought the slumberer on the bed. She slept well: hers was a long rest; there might be no awakening from it, for she was dead. Schooled in one short hour to all surprises, the knowledge made me simply richer by a fact. Nothing about the sternly set face invited horror. It had been, and was yet, a strong and, if beauty be not confined to youth and colour, a beautiful face.

Perhaps this quiet sharer of the convulsively broken silence was thirty years old. Death had set a firmness about the finely controlled features that might have shown her younger. The actual years are of little matter; existence, as we reckon time, must have lasted long. It was not death, but life that had planted the look of disillusion there. And romance being over, all good-byes to youth are said. By the bedside, on a roughly constructed table, was a dearly bought bunch of violets. They were set in a blue bordered tea-cup, and hung over in wistful challenge of their own diviner hue. They were foreign, and their scent probably unnatural, but it stole very sweetly round the room. A book lay face downwards beside them—alas for parochial energies, not of a religious type—and the torn fragments of the destroyed letter had fallen on the black binding.

A passionate movement of the girl's breast against mine directed my glance elsewhere. She was shivering, and her arms about my neck were stiffly cold. The possibility that she was starving missed my mind. It would have found my heart. I wondered if she slept, and dared not stir, though I was by this time cramped and

and chilled. The vehemence of her agitation ended, she breathed gently, and slipped finally to the floor.

I began to face the need of action and recalled the chances of the night. When and how I might get home was a necessary question, and I listened vainly for a friendly step outside. None since we left it had climbed the last flight of stairs. I could hear a momentary vibration of men's voices in the room below. Was it possible to leave these suddenly discovered children of peace and tumult? Was it possible to stay?

This was Saturday, and two days later I was bound for Scotland; a practical recollection of empty trunks was not lost in my survey of the situation. Then how, if I decided not to forsake the poor child, now certainly sleeping in my arms, were my anxious friends to learn my whereabouts, and understand the eccentricity of the scheme? Indisputably, I determined, something must be done for the half-frantic wanderer who was pressing a tiring weight against me. And there should be some kind hand to cover the cold limbs and close the wide eyes of the breathless sleeper, waiting a comrade's sanction to fitting rest.

Conclusion was hastening to impatient thought, when my eyes let fall a fatal glance upon the dead girl's face. I do not think it had changed its first aspect of dignified repose, and yet now it woke in me a sensation of cold dread. The dark eyes unwillingly open reached mine in an insistent stare. One hand lying out upon the coverlid, I could never again mistake for that of temporarily suspended life. My watch ticked loudly, but I dared not examine it, nor could I wrench my sight from the figure on the bed. For the first time the empty shell of being assailed my senses. I watched feverishly, knowing well the madness of the action, for a hint of breathing, almost stopping my own.

To-day, as memory summons it, I cannot dwell without reluctance

reluctance on this hour of my realisation of the thing called Death.

A hundred fancies, clothed in mad intolerable terrors, possessed me, and had not my lips refused it outlet, I should have set free a cry, as the spent child beside me had doubtless longed to do, and failed, ere, desperate, she fled.

My gaze was chained ; it could not get free. As the shapes of monsters of ever varying and increasing dreadfulness flit through one's dreams, the images of those I loved crept round me, with stark yet well-known features, their limbs borrowing death's rigid outline, as they mocked my recognition of them with soundless semblances of mirth. They began to wind their arms about me in fierce embraces of burning and supernatural life. Gradually the contact froze. They bound me in an icy prison. Their hold relaxed. These creatures of my heart were restless. The horribly familiar company began to dance at intervals in and out a ring of white gigantic bedsteads, set on end like tombstones, each of which framed a huge and fearful travesty of the sad set face that was all the while seeking vainly a pitiless stranger's care. They vanished. My heart went home. The dear place was desolate. No echo of its many voices on the threshold or stair. My footsteps made no sound as I went rapidly up to a well-known room. Here I besought the mirror for the reassurance of my own reflection. It denied me human portraiture and threw back cold glare. As I opened mechanically a treasured book, I noticed the leaves were blank, not even blurred by spot or line ; and then I shivered—it was deadly cold. The fire that but an hour or two ago it seemed I had forsaken for the winter twilight, glowed with slow derision at my efforts to rekindle heat. My hands plunged savagely into its red embers, but I drew them out quickly, unscathed and clean. The things by which I had touched life were nothing. Here, as

I called the dearest names, their echoes came back again with the sound of an unlearned language. I did not recognise, and yet I framed them. What was had never been!

My spirit summoned the being who claimed mine. He came, stretching out arms of deathless welcome. As he reached me my heart took flight. I called aloud to it, but my cries were lost in awful laughter that broke to my bewildered fancy from the hideously familiar shapes which had returned and now encircled the grand form of him I loved. But I had never known him. I beat my breast to wake there the wonted pain of tingling joy. I called past experience with unavailing importunity to bear witness the man was wildly dear to me. He was not. He left me with bent head a stranger, whom I would not if I could recall.

For one brief second, reason found me. I struggled to shake off the phantoms of despair. I tried to grasp while it yet lingered the teaching of this never-to-be-forgotten front of death. The homeless house with its indefensible bow window stood out from beneath the prison walls again. What had this to do with it? I questioned. And the answer it had evoked replied, "Not the desolation of something lost, but of something that had never been."

The half-clad girl of the wretched picture-shop came into view with waxen hands and senseless symbolism. I had grown calmer, but her doll-like lips hissed out the same half-meaningless but pregnant words. Then the nights of a short life when I could pray, years back in magical childhood, sought me. They found me past them—without the power

Truly the body had been for me the manifestation of the thing called soul. Here was my embodiment bereft. My face was stiff with drying tears. Sickly I longed to beg of an unknown God
a miracle.

a miracle. Would He but touch the passive body and breathe into it the breath even of transitory life.

I craved but a fleeting proof of its ever possible existence. For to me it was not, would never be, and had never been.

The partially relinquished horror was renewing dominance. Speech of any incoherence or futility would have brought mental power of resistance. My mind was fast losing landmarks amid the continued quiet of the living and the awful stillness of the dead. There was no sound, even of savage guidance, I should not then have welcomed with glad response.

"The realm of Silence," says one of the world's great teachers, "is large enough beyond the grave."

I seemed to have passed life's portal, and my soul's small strength was beating back the noiseless gate. In my extremity, I cried, "O God! for man's most bloody warshout, or Thy whisper!" It was useless. Not one dweller in the crowded tenements broke his slumber or relaxed his labour in answer to the involuntary prayer.

And may the 'Day of Account of Words' take note of this! Then, says the old fable, shall the soul of the departed be weighed against an image of Truth. I tried to construct in imagination the form of the dumb deity who should bear down the balances for me. Soundlessness was turning fear to madness. I could neither quit nor longer bear company the grim Presence in that room. But the supreme moment was very near.

Long since, the four low candles had burned out, and now the lamp was struggling fitfully to keep alight. The flame could last but a few moments. I saw it, and did not face the possibility or darkness. The sleeping girl, I concluded rapidly, had used all available weapons of defiant light.

As yet, since my entrance, I had hardly stirred, steadily supporting

ing the burden on my breast. Now, without remembrance of it, I started up to escape. The violent suddenness of the action woke my companion. She staggered blindly to her feet and confronted me as I gained the door.

Scarcely able to stand, and dashing the dimness from her eyes, she clutched a corner of the drawers behind her for support. Her head thrown back, and her dark hair hanging round it, crowned a grandly tragic form. This was no poor pleader, and I was unarmed for fight. She seized my throbbing arm and cried in a whisper, low and hoarse, but strongly audible :

“For God’s sake, stay here with me.”

My lips moved vainly. I shook my head.

“For God in heaven’s sake”—she repeated, swaying, and turning her burning, reddened eyes on mine—“don’t leave me now.”

I stood irresolute, half stunned. Stepping back, she stooped and began piecing together the dismembered letter on the bed. A mute protest arrested her from a cold sister’s face. She swept the action from her, crying, “No!” and bending forward suddenly, gripped me with fierce force.

“Here! Here!” she prayed, dragging me passionately back into the room.

The piteous need and wild entreaty—no, the vision of dire anguish—was breaking my purpose of flight. A fragrance that was to haunt me stole between us. The poor little violets put in their plea. I moved to stay. Then a smile—the splendour of it may never be reached again—touched her pale lips and broke through them, transforming, with divine radiance, her young and blurred and never-to-be-forgotten face. It wavered, or was it the last uncertain flicker of the lamp that made me fancy it? The exquisite moment was barely over when darkness came.

Then

Then light indeed forsook me. Almost ignorant of my own intention, I resisted the now trembling figure, indistinguishable in the gloom, but it still clung. I thrust it off me with unnatural vigour.

She fell heavily to the ground. Without a pause of thought I stumbled down the horrible unlighted stairs. A few steps before I reached the bottom my foot struck a splint off the thin edge of one of the rotten treads. I slipped, and heard a door above open and then shut. No other sound. At length I was at the door. It was ajar. I opened it and looked out. Since I passed through it first the place had become quite deserted. The inhabitants were, I suppose, all occupied elsewhere at such an hour on their holiday night. The lamps, if there were any, had not been lit. The outlook was dense blackness. Here too the hideous dark pursued me and silence held its sway. Even the children were screaming in more enticing haunts of gaudy squalor. Some, whose good angels perhaps had not forgotten them, had put themselves to sleep. Not many hours ago their shrieks were deafening. Were these too in conspiracy against me? I remembered vaguely hustling some of them with unmeant harshness in my hurried progress from the Church. Dumb the whole place seemed; and it was, but for the dim stars aloft, quite dark. I dared not venture across the threshold, bound by pitiable cowardice to the spot. Alas for the unconscious girl upstairs. A murmur from within the house might have sent me back to her. Certainly it would have sent me, rather than forth into the empty street. The faintest indication of humanity had recalled me. I waited the summons of a sound. It came.

But from the deserted, yet not so shamefully deserted, street. A man staggering home by aid of friendly railings, set up a drunken song. At the first note I rushed towards him, pushing
past

past him in wild departure, and on till I reached the noisome and flaring thoroughfare, a haven where sweet safety smiled. Here I breathed joy, and sped away without memory of the two lifeless beings lying alone in that shrouded chamber of desolation, and with no instinct to return.

My sole impulse was flight; and the way, unmarked in the earlier evening, was unknown. It took me some minutes to find a cab; but the incongruous vehicle, rudely dispersing the haggling traders in the roadway, came at last, and carried me from the distorted crowd of faces and the claims of pity to peace.

I lay back shivering, and the wind crept through the rattling glass in front of me. I did not note the incalculable turnings that took me home.

My account of the night's adventure was abridged and unsensational. I was pressed neither for detail nor comment, but accorded a somewhat humorous welcome which bade me say farewell to dying horror, and even let me mount boldly to the once death-haunted room.

Upon its threshold I stood and looked in, half believing possible the greeting pictured there under the dead girl's influence, and I could not enter. Again I fled, this time to kindly light, and heard my brothers laughing noisily with a friend in the bright hall.

A waltz struck up in the room above as I reached them. I joined the impromptu dance, and whirled the remainder of that evening gladly away.

Physically wearied, I slept. My slumber had no break in it. I woke only to the exquisite joys of morning, and lay watching the early shadows creep into the room. Presently the sun rose. His first smile greeted me from the glass before my bed. I sprang up disdainful of that majestic reflection, and flung the window wide to meet him face to face. His splendour fell too on

one who had trusted me, but I forgot it. Not many days later the same sunlight that turned my life to laughter shone on the saddest scene of mortal ending, and, for one I had forsaken, lit the ways of death. I never dreamed it might. For the next morning the tragedy of the past night was a distant one, no longer intolerable.

At twelve o'clock, conscience suggested a search. I acquiesced, but did not move. At half-past, it insisted on one, and I obeyed. I set forth with a determination of success and no clue to promise it. At four o'clock, I admitted the task hopeless and abandoned it. Duty could ask no more of me, I decided, not wholly dissatisfied that failure forbade more difficult demands. As I passed it on my way home, some dramatic instinct impelled me to re-enter the unsightly church.

I must almost have expected to see the same prostrate figure, for my eyes instantly sought the corner it had occupied. The winter twilight showed it empty. A service was about to begin. One little lad in violet skirt and goffered linen was struggling to light the benediction tapers, and a troop of school children pushed past me as I stood facing the altar and blocking their way. A grey-clad sister of mercy was arresting each tiny figure, bidding it pause beside me, and with two firm hands on either shoulder, compelling a ludicrous curtsy, and at the same time whispering the injunction to each hurried little personage,—“always make a reverence to the altar.” “Ada, come back!” and behold another unwilling bob! Perhaps the good woman saw her Master's face behind the tinsel trappings and flaring lights. But she forgot His words. The saying to these little ones that has rung through centuries commanded liberty and not allegiance. I stood aside till they had shuffled into seats, and finally kneeling stayed till the brief spectacle of the afternoon was over.

Towards

Towards its close I looked away from the mumbling priest, whose attention, divided between inconvenient millinery and the holiest mysteries, was distracting mine.

Two girls holding each other's hands came in and stood in deep shadow behind the farthest rows of high-backed chairs by the door. The younger rolled her head from side to side ; her shifting eyes and ceaseless imbecile grimaces chilled my blood. The other, who stood praying, turned suddenly (the place but for the flaring altar lights was dark) and kissed the dreadful creature by her side. I shuddered, and yet her face wore no look of loathing nor of pity. The expression was a divine one of habitual love.

She wiped the idiot's lips and stroked the shaking hand in hers, to quiet the sad hysterical caresses she would not check. It was a page of gospel which the old man with his back to it might never read. A sublime and ghastly scene.

Up in the little gallery the grey-habited nuns were singing a long Latin hymn of many verses, with the refrain "Oh ! Sacred Heart !" I buried my face till the last vibrating chord of the accompaniment was struck. The organist ventured a plagal cadence. It evoked no "amen." I whispered one, and an accidentally touched note shrieked disapproval. I repeated it. Then I spit upon the bloodless cheek of duty, and renewed my quest. This time it was for the satisfaction of my own tingling soul.

I retook my unknown way. The streets were almost empty and thinly strewn with snow. It was still falling. I shrank from marring the spotless page that seemed outspread to challenge and exhibit the defiling print of man. The quiet of the muffled streets soothed me. The neighbourhood seemed lulled into unwonted rest.

Black little figures lurched out of the white alleys in twos and
threes.

threes. But their childish utterances sounded less shrill than usual, and sooner died away.

Now in desperate earnest I spared neither myself nor the incredulous and dishevelled people whose aid I sought.

Fate deals honestly with all. She will not compromise though she may delay. Hunger and weariness at length sent me home, with an assortment of embellished negatives ringing in my failing ears.

I had almost forgotten my strange experience, when, some months afterwards, in late spring, the wraith of that winter meeting appeared to me. It was past six o'clock, and I had reached, ignorant of the ill-chosen hour, a notorious thoroughfare in the western part of this glorious and guilty city. The place presented to my unfamiliar eyes a remarkable sight. Brilliantly lit windows, exhibiting dazzling wares, threw into prominence the human mart.

This was thronged. I pressed into the crowd. Its steady and opposite progress neither repelled nor sanctioned my admittance. However, I had determined on a purchase, and was not to be balked by the unforeseen. I made it, and stood for a moment at the shop-door preparing to break again through the rapidly thickening throng.

Up and down, decked in frigid allurements, paced the insatiate daughters of an everlasting king. What fair messengers, with streaming eyes and impotently craving arms, did they send afar off ere they thus "increased their perfumes and debased themselves even unto hell"? This was my question. I asked not who forsook them, speaking in farewell the "hideous English of their fate."

I watched coldly, yet not inapprehensive of a certain grandeur in the scene. It was Virtue's very splendid Dance of Death.

A sickening

A sickening confusion of odours assailed my senses; each essence a vile enticement, outraging Nature by a perversion of her own pure spell.

A timidly protesting fragrance stole strangely by. I started at its approach. It summoned a stinging memory. I stepped forward to escape it, but stopped, confronted by the being who had shared, by the flickering lamp-light and in the presence of that silent witness, the poor little violet's prayer.

The man beside her was decorated with a bunch of sister flowers to those which had taken part against him, months ago, in vain. He could have borne no better badge of victory. He was looking at some extravagant trifle in the window next the entry I had just crossed. They spoke, comparing it with a silver case he turned over in his hand. In the centre I noticed a tiny enamelled shield. The detail seemed familiar, but beyond identity. They entered the shop. I stood motionless, challenging memory, till it produced from some dim corner of my brain a hoarded "No."

The device now headed a poor strip of paper on a dead girl's bed. I saw a figure set by death, facing starvation, and with ruin in torn fragments in her hand. But what place in the scene had I? A brief discussion next me made swift answer.

They were once more beside me. The man was speaking: his companion raised her face; I recognised its outline,—its true aspect I shall not know. Four months since it wore the mask of sorrow; it was now but one of the pages of man's immortal book. I was conscious of the matchless motions which in the dim church had first attracted me.

She was clothed, save for a large scarf of vehemently brilliant crimson, entirely in dull vermilion. The two shades might serve as symbols of divine and earthly passion. Yet does one ask the martyr's colour, you name it 'Red' (and briefly thus her garment):

ment) : no distinctive hue. The murderer and the prelate too may wear such robes of office. Both are empowered to bless and ban.

My mood was reckless. I held my hands out, craving mercy. It was my bitter lot to beg. My warring nature became unani- mously suppliant, heedless of the debt this soul might owe me —of the throes to which I left it, and of the discreditable marks of mine it bore. Failure to exact regard I did not entertain. I waited, with exhaustless fortitude, the response to my appeal. Whence it came I know not. The man and woman met my gaze with a void incorporate stare. The two faces were merged into one avenging visage—so it seemed. I was excited. As they turned towards the carriage waiting them, I heard a laugh, mounting to a cry. It rang me to an outraged Temple. Sabbath bells peal sweeter calls, as once this might have done.

I knew my part then in the despoiled body, with its soul's tapers long blown out.

Wheels hastened to assail that sound, but it clanged on. Did it proceed from some defeated angel? or the woman's mouth? or mine? God knows!