

HER DEATH AND AFTER

'Twas a death-bed summons, and forth I went
By the way of the Western Wall, so drear
On that winter night, and sought a gate -
 The home, by Fate,
Of one I had long held dear.

And there, as I paused by her tenement,
And the trees shed on me their rime and hoar,
I thought of the man who had left her lone -
 Him who made her his own
When I loved her, long before.

The rooms within had the piteous shine
That home-things wear when there's aught amiss;
From the stairway floated the rise and fall
 Of an infant's call,
Whose birth had brought her to this.

Her life was the price she would pay for that whine -
For a child by the man she did not love.
"But let that rest for ever," I said,
 And bent my tread

To the chamber up above.

She took my hand in her thin white own,
And smiled her thanks--though nigh too weak -
And made them a sign to leave us there
 Then faltered, ere
She could bring herself to speak.

"'Twas to see you before I go--he'll condone
Such a natural thing now my time's not much--
When Death is so near it hustles hence
 All passioned sense
Between woman and man as such!

"My husband is absent. As heretofore
The City detains him. But, in truth,
He has not been kind . . . I will speak no blame,
 But--the child is lame;
O, I pray she may reach his ruth!

"Forgive past days--I can say no more -
Maybe if we'd wedded you'd now repine! . . .
But I treated you ill. I was punished. Farewell!
 --Truth shall I tell?
Would the child were yours and mine!

"As a wife I was true. But, such my unease
That, could I insert a deed back in Time,
I'd make her yours, to secure your care;
 And the scandal bear,
 And the penalty for the crime!"

- When I had left, and the swinging trees
Rang above me, as lauding her candid say,
Another was I. Her words were enough:
 Came smooth, came rough,
 I felt I could live my day.

Next night she died; and her obsequies
In the Field of Tombs, by the Via renowned,
Had her husband's heed. His tendance spent,
 I often went
 And pondered by her mound.

All that year and the next year whiled,
And I still went thitherward in the gloam;
But the Town forgot her and her nook,
 And her husband took
 Another Love to his home.

And the rumour flew that the lame lone child
Whom she wished for its safety child of mine,

Was treated ill when offspring came
Of the new-made dame,
And marked a more vigorous line.

A smarter grief within me wrought
Than even at loss of her so dear;
Dead the being whose soul my soul suffused,
Her child ill-used,
I helpless to interfere!

One eve as I stood at my spot of thought
In the white-stoned Garth, brooding thus her wrong,
Her husband neared; and to shun his view
By her hallowed mew
I went from the tombs among

To the Cirque of the Gladiators which faced -
That haggard mark of Imperial Rome,
Whose Pagan echoes mock the chime
Of our Christian time:
It was void, and I inward clomb.

Scarce night the sun's gold touch displaced
From the vast Rotund and the neighbouring dead
When her husband followed; bowed; half-passed,
With lip upcast;

Then, halting, sullenly said:

"It is noised that you visit my first wife's tomb.

Now, I gave her an honoured name to bear

While living, when dead. So I've claim to ask

By what right you task

My patience by vigiling there?

"There's decency even in death, I assume;

Preserve it, sir, and keep away;

For the mother of my first-born you

Show mind undue!

--Sir, I've nothing more to say."

A desperate stroke discerned I then -

God pardon--or pardon not--the lie;

She had sighed that she wished (lest the child should pine

Of slights) 'twere mine,

So I said: "But the father I.

"That you thought it yours is the way of men;

But I won her troth long ere your day:

You learnt how, in dying, she summoned me?

'Twas in fealty.

--Sir, I've nothing more to say,

"Save that, if you'll hand me my little maid,
I'll take her, and rear her, and spare you toil.

Think it more than a friendly act none can;

I'm a lonely man,

While you've a large pot to boil.

"If not, and you'll put it to ball or blade -

To-night, to-morrow night, anywhen -

I'll meet you here . . . But think of it,

And in season fit

Let me hear from you again."

- Well, I went away, hoping; but nought I heard

Of my stroke for the child, till there greeted me

A little voice that one day came

To my window-frame

And babbled innocently:

"My father who's not my own, sends word

I'm to stay here, sir, where I belong!"

Next a writing came: "Since the child was the fruit

Of your lawless suit,

Pray take her, to right a wrong."

And I did. And I gave the child my love,

And the child loved me, and estranged us none.

But compunctions loomed; for I'd harmed the dead

By what I'd said

For the good of the living one.

- Yet though, God wot, I am sinner enough,

And unworthy the woman who drew me so,

Perhaps this wrong for her darling's good

She forgives, or would,

If only she could know!