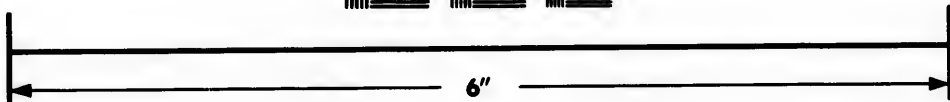
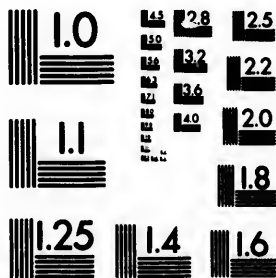


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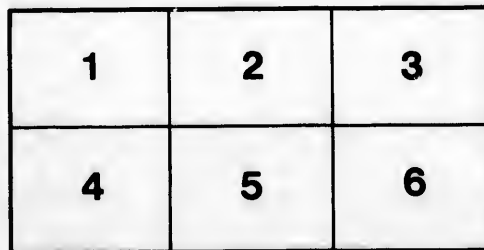
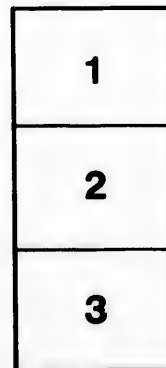
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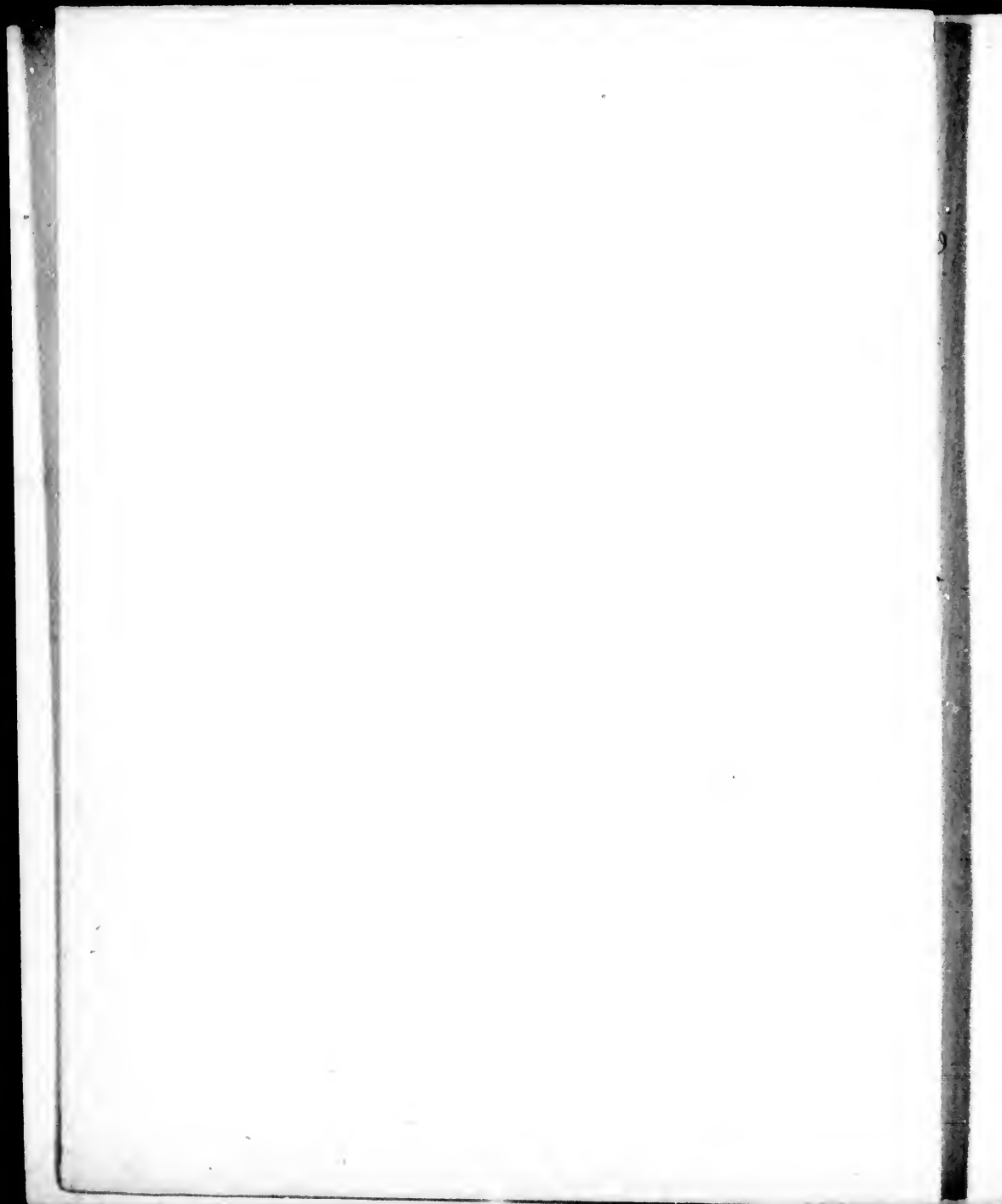
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CANADIANA

FLOWERING THORNS.



# FLOWERING THORNS.

BY

GERTRUDE JERDON,

AUTHOR OF "KEYHOLE COUNTRY," ETC.

" We women have four seasons like the year ;  
Some miss one season—some another ; this  
Shall have them early, and that late ; but yet  
The year wears round with all as best it may."

PHILIP BAILEY.

LONDON :

JAMES NISBET & CO., 21 BERNERS STREET.

MDCCCLXXXVI.



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## FLOWERING THORNS.



I, Lilian Harwood—Lilian Gresham once—  
In turning over reverently the store  
Of papers in a certain much-used desk,  
Left to me by the will of one I loved  
With daughter love who knew no mother care—  
Found this, this poem, hidden 'neath a pile  
Of business notes and parish documents,  
Accounts of soup and medicine for the poor,  
As if the writer merely deemed it worth  
A reference now and then when time had raised  
A mist about the days of long ago.  
But I who read it now, 'mid blinding tears,  
Remembering well the day of which it speaks,  
Resolve to let it live a wider life,  
And be perhaps to some unthinking mind  
Some part of what that day has been to me.

THE spring had come, and every lilac bud  
Was opening to the early breath of May ;  
Laburnums flashed amid the evergreens

Or pale spring foliage, and beneath my feet  
Was spread a wilderness of early flowers.  
I sauntered slow along the leafy lane  
Which skirted here the bounds of Wood-  
leigh Park,  
When, through the murmuring silence  
struck a voice.

“Do spend this evening with us, Lilian”

(Such

The broken colloquy in tones unknown),

“For you can waste your time on any day  
With these absurd old maids. Such stupid  
things

Are best left to themselves. Do come with  
us.”

“No, Lucy,” said a voice I recognised  
As Lilian Gresham’s. “Do not tempt me,  
dear ;

---

My word is pledged to meet my kind old  
friends

At Willow Cottage." Then the two passed  
on.

I scarce had heard so much but that the paths  
Ran by each other here a while. I smiled,  
For I was one of these same "kind old  
friends"

Whom Lilian was to meet at five o'clock—  
An early hour, but we were all old maids.  
Six friends, and six old maids, a sisterhood  
That helped the Vicar with his parish work,  
Held Mothers' Meetings, taught in Sunday-  
School,

And undertook a hundred other things  
Too often left alone for us. We had  
Our friends amid both rich and poor, and oft  
Would wile away the time with pleasant chat

Of their affairs, which converse had one aim,  
That we, by interchange of thought and  
    scheme,  
Might learn how best to aid or comfort those  
In want, or grief, or need of sympathy.

And each of us was full of tender love  
For Lilian Gresham, daughter of the squire  
At Woodleigh Manor. She that love re-  
    turned  
In full to all our quiet sisterhood.  
Two were her aunts, her father's sisters ; one  
Of some far distant kin ; the other two  
Had known her since her baby years ; while I,  
I was her mother's dearest, earliest friend.

And often when the summer days were  
    long

• Would Lilian bring her work into our midst  
To hear our parish talk, and give us news  
Which she had gathered in her morning calls ;  
Or in the winter evenings, long and dark,  
She sat with us around a glowing fire  
And read or sang to us. Oh she was fair,  
And sweet, and lovable, and I was loth  
That she should learn to treat us with the  
scorn

With which, alas ! the world so often treats  
The poor old maid ; and I resolved to-night  
To let her hear the stories of our lives,  
That she might keep a tender heart for age  
Unblest by all that woman holds most dear,  
Like some bare thorn when summer leaves  
are dead,  
Unwreathed with husband's or with chil-  
dren's love

(And so, perhaps, too often thorny sharp),  
A slowly withering autumn time of life,  
With all the glory missing from the days.

The Sisters Gresham lived at Woodleigh  
Lodge,  
A rambling gabled building ; ever green  
With ivy, and in autumn all aglow  
With crimson creepers. It was set in turf  
Of velvet softness, gemmed with beds of  
flowers.  
The gravelled drive was flanked by rows of  
limes,  
Whose branches flung their shade beyond  
the wall  
That barred from vulgar or intrusive gaze  
The sacred haunts of aristocracy.  
It was a lovely and a peaceful home,

---

Well fitted for the sisters of the squire.  
And not far off, where the long village street  
Broke from the country, where each house  
    made two,  
And fronted tiny lawns with garden gates,  
Stood Willow Cottage (halved with Maple  
    Lodge) ;  
And here lived Ursula, who seldom crossed  
Its little threshold, but for weeks would lie  
A patient sufferer on a couch of pain,  
And watch the sun set over Woodleigh  
    Church,  
Or spring's green touch upon the forest trees  
Across the road. And lower down again,  
Just where the village heart beat fastest, o'er  
An unpretentious shop, had Grace two rooms,  
Because the rent was low, and Grace was  
    poor.



And near a mile from this there stood a  
house,  
A large grey mansion with an iron gate,  
O'er which there hung an eye-attracting  
board  
To tell the traveller that it was a home  
For servant girls, where each was taught  
her work,  
And kept when ill, or homeless. At the  
head  
Was Agnes.

In a house which faced the church  
(One meadow only rolled its breadth be-  
tween)  
Had I my lodgings, three bright spacious  
rooms  
Which overlooked a garden sweet with rose

And jessamine, sweet-williams, pinks, and  
all

Old-fashioned flowers ; and in two other  
rooms

The Curate dwelt ; an active, simple man,  
Who brought his sermons to me when the  
house

Was closed, and read them—I must act his  
aunt

When ladies came to tea ; and in my ear  
He poured his tales of fancies, for the youth  
Had never been in love. I liked him well,  
And I was fifty, he was twenty-four.

Now tea was over, and we clustered round  
The latticed cottage window, for the month  
Was May, and still the sun peeped o'er the  
trees,

And only thought of all his crimson robes  
Of parting. Through the open casement  
came

The heavy scent of lilac and of may,  
While now and then a pearly petal fell  
Upon the sill, or on our busy hands.  
A faint far fragrance, as of burning herbs  
From distant garden, filled the evening air,  
Which often trembled to the melody  
Of Woodleigh village bells, for fitfully  
The men were practising the chime to-night

We sat in silence, for the hour was one  
To nourish musing. Low upon the floor  
Sat Lilian, all her golden tresses loose  
And falling to the kitten on her knee,  
Whose gentle purring to her fondling hand  
Lent rest to meditation. Long we sat  
Without a word, and then I spoke :

“ My dear,”

I said to Lilian, “ have you ever thought  
How many lives which meet us in this small  
Green corner of the world’s wide stage  
have parts

Assigned them now, by the Great Manager,  
Which once they little deemed would fall  
to them ?

Each actor has a place in many plays,  
And few may choose their place. From  
tragedy

To comedy they move ; we cannot trace  
One touch of Hamlet in the cruel tones  
Of Shylock, or in Portia’s stately mien  
Discern the weak Ophelia crowned with  
flowers.

So in ‘Earth’s Theatre ;’ we do not  
guess

At past romance, or joy, or agony,  
From parts which only serve to throw the  
    whole  
Up brightly to applause. There is one part  
Which none would choose, and yet which  
    some must play,  
Or life's great drama would be incomplete.  
That part to be 'old maid;' and oh ! how oft  
From some sweet dream or fearful tragedy  
The sudden summons wakens : 'Rise and  
    act,  
The Master Mind which fixed thy part at  
    first  
Has chosen this for thee.' And as we move  
In silence through the uneventful scenes  
Which stretch far onward to the bound of  
    life,  
How few there are to wonder if our past

Was bright for us, or how we came to fill  
Our quiet place! You, child, have never  
heard

The reason of my present lonely life:  
Say, shall I tell you now?

Long years ago,  
Some thirty years perhaps, when I was  
young,  
And gloried in my youth, and felt my grasp  
Upon the world was close, the lovely world  
That never yet had crossed my slightest will;  
On life's bright morning suddenly there  
flashed

A soul more perfect than my fondest dreams  
Had pictured, the ideal of my thoughts  
Made grandly manifest. A man whose life  
Retained no fold, a pure, transparent life,

With deeds, and thoughts, and feelings all  
confessed,

And set to highest strains that filled his  
world

With music. He was one whose lot on  
earth

Was aye to elevate, and draw all souls  
That touched him upwards to the grand  
ideal

Of love and service, by his blameless life.  
This light broke through my days, and I  
was mute,

And every former love and lesser joy  
Sank low beneath one flood of ecstasy,  
As once the Deluge buried out of sight  
Each hill-girt lake and stream. So lay my  
heart,

An ocean boundless, fathomless, beneath

The sunshine of his presence. Well—  
enough,

We met, and meeting loved. Then all the  
days

For many glorious weeks were full of song.

We lost no moments in vain doubts or fears.

We loved so fully, there was left no room

For jealousy; and then at last the day

Was fixed to make us one for evermore.

How shall I tell the rest? But yet there  
stood

One comfort out amid the gloom, for God

Forebore to use the dread machinery

Of human hands or ills to execute

The fatal sentence; so we could not lay

His death to chance or man. 'Twas God

who held

The fearful lightning in His own right Hand



Which was His sudden flashing messenger  
To call my darling home. No parting word  
Was mine, I might not look upon his face  
Nor touch his hand, and all the world grew  
dark.

They err who tell us sorrow grows with age,  
And grief weighs heaviest when all the spring  
And elasticity of youth is past.  
Such loads seem light when short and few  
the years  
To be so burdened. To the young, alas!  
Who see a long blank future stretch away  
Far out of reach, the weight appears to be  
Intolerable. Of the dreary years  
Which followed this I cannot speak. God  
knew,  
And only God, my sufferings.

Thus it is

That I am proud to bear the name 'old  
maid.'

Yes, I am old ; it is some comfort now,  
For every year takes from my pain some  
sting,

And helps to bridge the chasm of my life  
To an eternal future. It is good  
To reckon backwards all the weary years,  
And watch heaven's glory slowly break  
across

My few remaining days. And I am still  
A maid, true to the soul that halved my own,  
The soul that I shall surely, surely claim  
As mine in Paradise. Perhaps you ask,  
Might I have wedded since? Oh yes,  
indeed,

There came to me a man of wealth and mind,

Who truly loved me, only asked my hand,  
Content to wait for love, if love would  
    come ;

If not, he was content to love alone.  
But this I could not do, I could not set  
Another in *his* place, and so forego  
The right to meet him as my own in heaven.  
Thus do I sit beside a lonely hearth  
A true old maid, whose heart could only  
    hold

One love, yet that one love so great  
That it sufficed to fill her life and gild  
The portals of the grave."

    I ceased, and through  
The room there reigned a silence. Lilian  
    stole

Her hand in mine in tender sympathy ;  
And by-and-by spoke Mona Gresham. She

The eldest of the six. Her raven hair  
Was whitened by the silv'ry touch of time,  
And in her eyes the fire of early days  
Was softened, not extinguished by a love  
Which came to her with grief.

“Your tale is sad,”

She said, “yet not so sad as mine ; for you  
The torch of love was lifted up so high  
By mutual hands, that on the twilight years  
Its light still lingers. ‘Memory’s golden  
chain,’

Kept bright by faith and love, still links  
your life

To his. It was far otherwise with me.

Ere I had tasted all the doubtful joys  
Of freedom from restraint, when scarce  
eighteen,

There came one autumn time to Woodleigh  
Mill

An artist, there to lodge, and catch the  
tints

Of bright October on our forest trees,  
And for a season rest his eyes and brain  
With happy country indolence. 'Twas  
mine

To point him out the fairest glades and  
scenes

Most worthy to be made immortal; I  
It was who listened to his artist talk—  
Brief glances at a world beyond my world  
It gave me. Oh my soul was very young,  
And it had formed no image of the man  
That it could worship. So it came, he  
made

At once my great ideal, and my love.

---

Four autumns passed, and every autumn  
found  
My Wilfred at the Mill ; and still I hid  
My secret from all eyes. There was no time  
In those brief weeks for thought, and thought  
it is  
Which brings the blush or shakes the steady  
voice.  
There were long dreary months to feast my  
heart  
Upon October's golden memories,  
And then his name had slipped from common  
talk.  
For him I learned to do a hundred things ;  
I learned to draw and paint, that he might  
touch  
The canvas with a critic's brush. For him  
I learned to sing the quaint old Irish airs ]

That he was ever humming o'er his work ;  
I read the books he liked, that we the more  
Might understand each other, and my time  
Had all some thought of him. Alas ! alas !  
He never loved me.

Came at last a day  
When Woodleigh Mill stood empty, and we  
heard  
That this October,—still his month of rest,—  
Was dedicated to a wedding tour.

Yes, he was married, and my heart grew  
cold,  
And bitter with its pain ; yet no one  
guessed  
My life was withered, when my laugh rang  
clear  
cross the lawn. My will was very strong,

And I resolved to stamp his image out  
From everything which bore it. But my  
love

Had burned it in, and I could only throw  
A veil o'er all my sacred things, all high  
Aspirings, tender feelings, and the love  
Of beauty, nobleness, and piety,  
For each retained the impress of the mind  
That I must now forget. Oh, fond conceit!  
Could I forget myself?

Three times my hand  
Was sought in marriage, and three times  
did he,—

Nay, it was God through him Who warned  
me off,—

Thrice did his image bar the path to all  
We women prize so dearly. First I read



His name—a common name at most—amid  
The news of daily deaths, and to my face  
The crimson tide rushed wildly, then  
    returned,  
And I awoke upon the floor, alone—  
Yes, quite alone; and so I read the news  
Again, and found it was not truly he,  
Perhaps some uncle, who was seventy-six.  
My Wilfred lived, but I was saved that  
    day  
From perjury—a marriage oath is such  
When lip and heart are severed.

Years passed on,  
And still I tried to crush the lonely love  
To that grey evenness of self-respect  
And 'proper feeling' which, 'tis thought,  
    should keep

---

The maiden foot from scaling any height  
Of unrequited love. But I, alas !  
Could be content with plains no more, and  
when

My urgent wishes told me that my heart  
Was empty of the old, and all prepared  
To bid the new love welcome, then I  
dreamed.

And in my dream the wedding-day was  
past,

And I was married to Sir David Moore.

The honeymoon had scarcely sped two weeks  
When Wilfred met us, on the mountain  
shores

Of sweet Lake Lemman. He was dressed in  
black.

His wife was dead. His voice, his look, his  
words

Were reproduced with that exactitude  
We scarcely catch awake, and I was bound,  
And could not stir to greet him. Well it  
was  
The scream with which I tore myself from  
sleep  
Passed all unheard by others in the house.  
I must be free, I felt. How could I wed  
Sir David Moore, and dread another man's  
Low voice, or smile, or very presence?

So

The years went slowly on, eight weary years  
And once again my feet were at the door  
Of marriage. Time had laid a healing hand  
Upon my wound, and somewhat dulled the  
sense  
Of loss and need; and so I faced a change

---

With wavering purpose, one long autumn  
day,  
As I was wandering through the Woodleigh  
lanes.

But Wilfred stopped me! 'Neath the  
spreading elm

Beside the tinkling brook I met him, come  
For one brief day, to show an artist friend  
The scenes immortalised by painters' skill,  
Whose place was now beyond the reach of  
blame.

We met; a few short words were inter-  
changed,

The shadow of the past was raised, and then  
Flung back to its oblivion with a jest,  
Half sad, half merry. What was it to him?  
We asked for common friends, if all were  
well,

And then our fingers clasped, and he was  
gone,  
Gone humming down the lane a favourite  
air,  
While I stood white and still, not quite my-  
self,  
And yet too much myself; and round my  
head  
The brown leaves fluttered to a sudden  
breeze,  
Which bore his echoing footsteps to my ears.  
I was alone for evermore, I knew  
From that dread hour my fate was sealed  
for life."

So Mona ceased, and all the room grew  
hushed ;  
E'en Lilian had no word to break the calm.

The girl had never crossed the path before  
Of one whose love was lonely. Such, she  
thought,  
Were only formed to thrill a modern tale,  
And this had grown beside her all her life !  
No wonder she was silent ; but her awe,  
The awe of novelty, was hardly felt  
By Elice, Mona's sister, and at last  
She spoke.

“ It is not wholly sad,” she said,  
“ For life to yield to love its breadth and  
length,  
For even unrequited love will keep  
A fragrance through a lifetime. She is not  
Unblest who once has learned the heavenly  
art  
Of loving, for its echoes will not die.

With me, alas ! it was not so, for pride,  
Not love, o'erruled my life ; and yet not  
pride

Alone, but ignorance as well. I threw  
My soul into my books from earliest years ;  
My study and my pastime were combined  
In one deep thirst for knowledge. Latin,  
Greek,

Philosophy, the sciences, the arts,  
Alike were grasped, with strong or feeble  
touch,

As women touch such things. Yet had I  
not

Begun to learn to spell my woman's heart ?  
'Twas knowledge for itself that I pursued  
With such quick eagerness ; not for the aid  
That her keen edge might give me to undo  
The knots and tangles of perplexity,

---

Which ever baffle minds to whom her page,  
'Rich with the spoils of Time, is ne'er  
unrolled.'

I did not seek her as some few seek wealth,  
To spread a blessing on their fellow-men ;  
But rather as the many, who for ends  
Most selfish, gather riches. So my quest  
Stopped ere the true end glorified the means.

As time went on I took an active part  
In this world's hurried progress. Wrote a  
book

Which sought to prove that women were as  
strong

As men, and could do equal work, if once  
Allowed to wrestle equally. I stood  
A friend of women, standing up alone  
To fight life's battle ; and I talked of love



As 'sentiment,'—a weak device of men  
To keep us 'neath their tyrant sway,—at  
best

Romantic gilding of a bygone age,—  
The dream of idle women. So I toiled  
To give my sisters work, and raise their  
souls

Above the petty cares, and wants, and ends  
Which mostly crowd their minds, and all  
my days

Were full. I had no time to spare for  
aught

But my great projects, for I surely deemed  
Myself what Princess Ida also thought  
Before her courts she fancied desecrate  
By alien foot. Men fell away from me  
And gazed afar, as we so often gaze  
Afar at what we do not care to touch,

And yet admire. I think they too admired  
The energy with which I strove to reach  
My ends, and yet they dared not come too  
near.

But I was satisfied, in my strong youth  
And pride, the pride which must be ever  
first,  
And self-sufficient.

Years went on. At last  
Across the smoothness of my life there stole  
Some discontent, which broadened to a  
need  
Beyond the measure of my chosen days—  
The need of love, the need of some strong  
heart  
To love me wholly, and that deeper want,  
The need of loving some one wholly. Then

I sought in vain through all my schemes  
and books

To find some aim to fill this bitter void,  
This only seemed to lack. I faced the  
world,

And found that it had registered no debt  
Of love and happiness to me. In vain  
I pleaded with my fate. One mocking cry  
Was echoed to and fro from all around :  
' Too late, too late, she scorned it once, and  
now

The time is past.'

So I am here to-night  
A woman who has never tasted love,  
And so more worth deep pity."

Elice stopped.  
Her face, the saddest face I ever saw,

---

Was stern with that dark shadow which a  
past  
Unwisely used can cast upon a face.

“But, Auntie, dearest, have you not your  
niece,  
Your Lilian, now to love you?” said the girl  
In tender accents. She was scarce surprised  
To hear this tale, for Elice had a way  
Of looking grave when Lilian took her books,  
And sighing: “Child, take care you do not  
miss  
The ends of woman’s life, as I have done.  
Take care.”

She answered now, “I know it, dear,  
I know you love me, Lilian;” that was all.  
Was that enough?

Then from the lowly couch  
A gentle, suffering voice broke through the  
pause :

“ My life, like yours,” said Ursula, “ has  
been  
Unlighted and unscorched by love’s bright  
flame,  
And yet no torch of intellect was there  
To strike across its commonplace a path  
Of lesser brilliance. I had never time  
To give to aught but trivial thoughts and plans  
Which had importance only for ourselves.  
We were eight sons and daughters, and  
my place  
Was first, the eldest of the family ;  
And when my schooldays closed, I took the  
post

---

Of teacher to my sisters, so their play  
And leisure always came apart from me.  
Thus I, who might have been their dearest  
friend,  
Stood for them as the thorny part of life,  
The hours of toil, restraint, and weariness.

So time went on, till Rose and Nellie  
burst  
Their fetters, and 'came out.' But still  
my place  
Was with the others, and our Mother's  
health  
Grew feeble; so I took the household cares  
Upon me, while my sisters flew about  
From flower to flower, which means from  
ball to ball,  
Or rural gathering, dinner party, *fête*,

And such like. 'They were young,' my  
Mother said—

(But so was I)—'besides, society  
Was healthful ; but amid her five, at least  
One daughter might be found to stay at  
home

And tend an ailing Mother.' That was true,  
And so I always stayed. But by-and-by,  
When schoolroom days were ended, still  
my time

Was full, for I was ever called upon  
To do the work, to give the others play.

Then there were those who came to woo  
and win,  
Who ever and anon would fill our house  
With wedding festival ; and one by one  
My sisters left us. No one came for me.

I had no moments I could throw away  
On those first interchanges of idea—  
Those tender nothings underneath the  
moon—

The sweet low prelude to a sweeter tune.  
Yet once I thought, — I fancied, — but  
perhaps

'Twas only fancy, — that young Henry Milne  
Would fain have known me better. He  
could leave

The others when I joined them for a brief  
Five minutes, offering me a chair, or song,  
With 'Do, Miss Ursula, remain with us.'

I was much tempted, for I liked him well—  
I only liked him, mind, I never loved.  
Love needs a leisure which my busy days  
Denied me ever, so at least I think.

But Rose or Nellie, from their pleasant talk,



Oft warned me of the paper to be read  
To Father, or exclaimed the bell had rung  
From Mother's couch. I think they might  
    have gone  
Just now and then, and given me breathing-  
    space  
To tune my heart to some sweet melody.  
They never did, and so my life closed in ;  
And Henry, disappointed, went away.

I do not think I grudged the hours I spent  
In doing work that God had meant for five ;  
Yet sometimes it was hard to see sweet  
    homes  
And nurseries springing up around, to feel  
That no one's heart was needing me to make  
Its sunshine (and I could have loved so  
    well).

---

They never seemed to dream that I might  
want

A home to call my own, and one to call  
My dearest. So they left me in the shade  
To do my duty.

When my Mother died,  
I still had sickness to attend upon ;  
For in our midst that fell disease which  
plucks  
The flowers, and leaves behind the bearded  
grain,  
Had taken root. Long months I watched  
beside  
Our Amy's dying bed ; and then our Rose  
Returned from India with her child, to die.  
So passed the years, till only three of us  
Remained. Then all my former strength  
gave way ;

I sank, from all the vigour of my youth,  
To this low couch of pain and helplessness.

'Tis mine, you know, for ever."

So her tale  
Concluded sadly. It seemed doubly sad  
To me, for I had known the agony  
And ecstasy of love. But though her words  
Seemed bitter sometimes, on her marble  
brow

No furrow of unrest remained, to tell  
Of sacrifice enforced. The waves of life  
Had raised no storm about her, but had  
cast

Her solitary days as far beyond  
The touch of love as if a tempest's rage  
Had stranded her.

---

Lilian's eyes grew grave  
And thoughtful with this homely tragedy  
Unveiled before her so. Then Ursula  
Turned from her own lot unto Grace and  
said,

“And Grace, have you no tale of early days  
To tell us?”

Grace made answer quietly :  
“Such record as I have to give of life  
Bears no impress of love, or intellect ;  
Yet do I now accept my lonely lot  
As from God's Hands, the lot of one too  
weak  
To bear the bliss of love, the weight of  
thought,  
The joy of usefulness. My life was all  
Along the flats of earth, and every day

Repeated yesterday. For we were poor—  
Too poor to mingle with our equals born  
On whom was set the 'guinea stamp of  
rank'

And wealth, and yet not low enough to  
range

With village folk. So was our place  
between.

And thus we got the good of neither, while  
What was not good in both was ours. The  
years

Sped on in loneliness, and yet were they  
Not altogether sad, because our home  
Was very sweet to us, albeit no home  
Grew from it. From the first I surely felt  
It was my only home. I could not dress  
To please the eye, and I had never learned  
The things to fit me for a rich man's wife.

---

I could not play, or paint, or speak a tongue  
Besides my own, though I could bake and  
sew.

But no one wanted that. The men I met  
(And they were very few) could find no  
charm

In me that drew them to me. So my life  
Went round unchangingly, until at last  
My parents died. My brother went away  
To toil in foreign climes, and I was left  
A simple lonely woman, an 'old maid,'  
Not mourning broken hearts, or parted loves,  
But just to live the remnant of my days  
In quietude; the uneventful end  
That well befits an uneventful life."

Grace told her tale as one too used to meet  
The hard side of the world, to see how sad

It rose before the others. All the buds  
Of life had opened for her 'neath a sky  
So sunless, that she scarcely seemed to  
think

There could be sun at all; and her pale  
face

Had caught the grey reflection of her life.

But Lilian took scant interest in the tale,  
It was too wholly cold and dim to fire  
Her sympathy,—the sympathy of youth,  
Which blazes up responsive to the touch  
Of agony or rapture, still untried  
By youth, so leaving space for wildest flights  
Of young imagination to conceive  
The glory and the pain.

So Lilian turned  
To Agnes, whose deep thoughtful eyes  
seemed scarce

To veil some secret, ever-present grief ;  
And looked, what she was half afraid to ask.  
Then Agnes, reading right the mute appeal,  
Turned to us, and in accents low and sad  
Began :

“ Be thankful, O my friends, that  
pain

Alone has fallen to you—not remorse.  
And truly once I thought that our estate  
Was holy from its isolation. God,  
I thought, was chiefly honoured by a prompt  
Renunciation of all earthly ties.  
That virgin souls were precious in His sight  
I found, or thought I found, in His true  
Word.

So in the freshness of my youth I laid  
The gift of all my life before Him. Oft  
The vow of dedication I renewed



When kneeling at His altar rails, and oft  
I planned my future in some sisterhood,  
Where all the work was God's, and all the rest  
Was contemplation of the things of God ;  
And all my days should be entirely His,  
No earthly care or joy to claim the hours.  
And in the rapture of the great resolve,—  
In the first glory of self-sacrifice—  
It seemed a Heaven below.

But ere my fate  
Was sealed for ever, to our parish came  
One who was called to minister to us  
In holy things, whose heart was glowing too  
With zeal and love, and mine would some-  
times catch  
New fire from his, as his would catch from  
mine.  
Our thoughts were equal, and our daily paths

Oft led us to the same sad haunts of sin.  
Or sorrow. In the same small church we  
    knelt ;  
His voice it was that told our wants, and  
    sins,  
And thanks to God ; and all the prayers to  
    me  
Seemed interwoven with his tones ; and yet  
I never dreamed of love, except the love  
That is half reverence we bear to those  
Set o'er our souls.

    With him it was not so.  
And one calm evening when we chanced to  
    meet,  
He told me that he loved me. Could I  
    leave  
The darling visions of my life to be  
His helpmeet ?

I was stunned from all reply,  
Nor spoke until the bell for Evensong  
Rang out its summons. 'Afterwards,' I  
said.

What could I say? It seemed a glorious  
thing

To crown the life of one so good as he.  
But, as he entered, robed, to lead our  
prayers,

It flashed across me,—how I cannot tell,—  
That I, too, loved him, as my very soul!

And God demands a sacrifice of self.  
My life of single piety had turned  
With sudden shudder to a cross; and who  
Was I, then, to refuse to take it up?  
Would God consent to share a throne?

O friends,  
I dare not tell you all I thought of then!

---

I cannot tell you how the die was cast,  
Nor how I smothered both our hopes in one  
Gigantic ignorance of God's intents  
For us. I did not know that human love  
Is sent us to interpret the Divine  
(So he that loves knows God, 'twas written  
once)—

And thus we parted.

Since has passed no day  
I have not rued my choice, for both our lives  
Were spoilt. He for a while fought on,  
Half-hearted, in the war of good with ill;  
But blighted hopes had crushed his soul  
from all  
Its early aims. The promise never bloomed  
Which we had nursed together in the bud.  
He died. No more of that, his death lies  
still

To my account. But what became of me?  
Think not that I have any more fulfilled  
The dream for which I sold reality.

I could not offer unto God by life  
Of virgin consecration to His will  
A soul less spotless (so I wildly thought)  
By this one taint of holy human love.  
My vigour flagged, my zeal burnt low, and  
now

I only live to do the work God meant  
That we should do together."

Agnes rose

And stood beside the window, for her eyes  
Were all too full of tears to meet a look  
However kindly. Nature's evening smile  
Was sweetest for her then, and Ursula,  
With truest kindness left her to herself.

---

Her tale was one that few, perhaps, have  
read

In common life, and yet it stirred to tears  
The sympathies of Lilian. Love that soars  
So high above itself, that it can lay  
Its own best treasures as a sacrifice  
Before some great ideal—false or true—  
Will ever touch the depths of finer minds,  
And such was Lilian's. But her gentle tears  
Fell scarcely noticed. It is good for youth  
To weep some tears over the sins and woes  
Of others, so we sat in silence all.

The evening sky was deepening to the clear  
Dark blue of night, and in the west was yet  
The lingering radiance of a vanished sun.  
The air was very calm, the bells had ceased,  
And scarce a rustle stirred the hawthorn tree

Or shook the bent laburnum's golden tears ;  
We, too, were silent, for our narratives  
Had grown too surely from our hearts to  
bear.

The "common air of speech." No human  
hand  
Could reach to those past years with healing  
touch,  
And no one had the right to soothe our  
griefs  
Or claim our confidence.

But still o'er all  
The level of our lives there lies a soft  
And mellow light, which at the close of day  
May brighten to a glorious sunset, when  
The purple clouds part to the shining feet  
Of God's sweet angels. Then the lonely  
hearts

---

Which never have been satisfied on earth—  
That never have been rounded to the sphere  
Of perfected existence here—shall find  
The full accomplishment of every pain  
Beneath a Father's smile.

If on the earth

We missed the blossoming of Summer-tide,  
And Autumn stretched itself across the void  
To wither up the leaf buds of the Spring,  
Yet is there time and space in Heaven for  
    hearts  
To bloom beneath the sun of Perfect Love ;  
Perhaps their beauty may be more complete,  
Because so long suppressed ; and who can  
    know  
The rest of satisfaction who has felt  
No need of it ?

But even on earth our lot



Is not unlovely, or unblest, for God  
Makes flowering thorns. Though bare, and  
sharp, and lone,  
He wreathes some snowy blossoms round  
our lives  
Of usefulness or love. And—crowning  
thought  
For every quiet reverie—not ours  
The choosing of our parts. The Master  
Mind  
Which guides the world has fixed them.  
So we bow  
Our souls in worship, saying, “Be it so,  
If so it seemeth good to Thee, our God.”

BENEATH the ivy-smothered elm that stands  
Hoar watcher of the graves round Woodleigh  
Church,

There rises from the daisy-sprinkled sod  
A fresh mound, which has not yet clothed itself  
In green, but draws the casual traveller's eye  
By the white wreaths that shroud the unsightly earth  
And tell of grief fresh even as their flowers.  
Here was she laid a few short hours ago  
Who wrote the words I now give to the world—  
Words that have made my sorrow somewhat less,  
Because that in my dreamings of her now  
I do not see her as I saw her here,  
Too obviously alone ; but though I know  
That to be in His Presence Who is Love  
And Satisfaction was her chief desire,  
The one hope of her last weak words, yet I  
With human sympathies and human love  
Strong in me, please myself with the belief

That His first gift unto His ransomed one  
Would be the half soul whose denial here  
Had left her life so shorn of human joy.  
And even now in rapturous soul converse  
They may be glorifying that only now  
They meet ; seeing in God's revealing light  
How, had they known of love's completeness here,  
The things of Heaven perchance had seemed less  
sweet,

And this unutterable spirit-bliss  
Had never been. But now to endless years  
They are together, with their Saviour's smile,  
To make the clouds impossible.



LOVE is not all, in this broad world of ours,  
Not all, though lives lie waste, though hearts may  
break,  
And souls have perished, all for Love's sweet sake.  
But as in gardens there are other flowers  
Than roses, so in life are other powers  
Less passionately perfumed that can take  
Firm hold on lives left bare of love, and make  
The world seem greenly clad through winter hours.  
The sober ivy clasps a ruined wall,  
It keeps it fair, and shields it from decay ;  
And though God's Providence at times deprives  
Our hearts of Love, yet round our broken lives  
He twines some surer good ; and in this way  
He gently teaches us—Love is not all.



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