

THE
MONITIONS OF THE UNSEEN.

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THERE are who give themselves to work for men, —
To raise the lost, to gather orphaned babes
And teach them, pitying of their mean estate,
To feel for misery, and to look on crime
With ruth, till they forget that they themselves
Are of the race, themselves among the crowd
Under the sentence and outside the gate,
And of the family and in the doom.
Cold is the world; they feel how cold it is,
And wish that they could warm it. Hard is life
For some. They would that they could soften it;
And, in the doing of their work, they sigh
As if it was their choice and not their lot;
And, in the raising of their prayer to God,
They crave His kindness for the world He made,
Till they, at last, forget that He, not they,
Is the true lover of man.

Now, in an ancient town, that had sunk low, —
Trade having drifted from it, while there stayed
Too many, that it erst had fed, behind, —
There walked a curate once, at early day.

It was the summer-time; but summer air
Came never, in its sweetness, down that dark
And crowded alley, — never reached the door
Whereat he stopped, — the sordid, shattered door.

He paused, and, looking right and left, beheld
 Dirt and decay, the lowering tenements
 That leaned toward each other; broken panes
 Bulging with rags, and grim with old neglect;
 And reeking hills of formless refuse, heaped
 To fade and fester in a stagnant air.
 But he thought nothing of it: he had learned
 To take all wretchedness for granted, — he,
 Reared in a stainless home, and radiant yet
 With the clear hues of healthful English youth,
 Had learned to kneel by beds forlorn, and stoop
 Under foul lintels. He could touch, with hand
 Unshrinking, fevered fingers; he could hear
 The language of the lost, in haunt and den, —
 So dismal, that the coldest passer-by
 Must needs be sorry for them, and, albeit
 They cursed, would dare to speak no harder words
 Than these, — “God help them!”

Ay! a learned man
 The curate in all woes that plague mankind, —
 Too learned, for he was but young. His heart
 Had yearned till it was overstrained, and now
 He — plunged into a narrow slough unblest,
 Had struggled with its deadly waters, till
 His own head had gone under, and he took
 Small joy in work he could not look to aid
 Its cleansing.

Yet, by one right tender tie,
 Hope held him yet. The fathers coarse and dull,
 Vile mothers hard, and boys and girls profane,
 His soul drew back from. He had worked for
 them, —
 Work without joy: but in his heart of hearts,
 He loved the little children; and, whene'er
 He heard their prattle innocent, and heard
 Their tender voices lisping sacred words

That he had taught them, — in the cleanly calm
 Of decent school, by decent matron held, —
 Then would he say, “I shall have pleasure yet,
 In these.”

But now, when he pushed back that door,
 And mounted up a flight of ruined stairs,
 He said not that. He said, “Oh! once I thought
 The little children would make bright for me
 The crown they wear who have won many souls
 For righteousness; but oh, this evil place!
 Hard lines it gives them, cold and dirt abhorred, —
 Hunger and nakedness, in lieu of love,
 And blows instead of care.

“And so they die,
 The little children that I love, — they die, —
 They turn their wistful faces to the wall,
 And slip away to God.”

With that, his hand
 He laid upon a latch and lifted it,
 Looked in full quietly, and entered straight.
 What saw he there? He saw a three-years child,
 That lay a-dying on a wisp of straw
 Swept up into a corner. O'er its brow
 The damps of death were gathering: all alone,
 Uncared for, save that by its side was set
 A cup, it waited. And the eyes had ceased
 To look on things at hand. He thought they gazed
 In wistful wonder, or some faint surmise
 Of coming change, — as though they saw the gate
 Of that fair land that seems to most of us
 Very far off.

When he beheld the look,
 He said, “I knew, I knew how this would be!
 Another! Ay, and but for drunken blows

And dull forgetfulness of infant need,
 This little one had lived." And thereupon
 The misery of it wrought upon him so,
 That, unaware, he wept. O! then it was
 That, in the bending of his manly head,
 It came between the child and that whereon
 He gazed, and, when the curate glanced again,
 Those dying eyes, drawn back to earth once more,
 Looked up into his own, and smiled.

He drew

More near, and kneeled beside the small frail thing,
 Because the lips were moving; and it raised
 Its baby hand, and stroked away its tears,
 And whispered, "Master! master!" and so died.

Now, in that town there was an ancient church,
 A minister of old days which these had turned
 To parish uses: there the curate served.
 It stood within a quiet swarded Close,
 Sunny and still, and, though it was not far
 From those dark courts where poor humanity
 Struggled and swarmed, it seemed to wear its own
 Still atmosphere about it, and to hold
 That old-world calm within its precincts pure
 And that grave rest which modern life foregoes.

When the sad curate, rising from his knees,
 Looked from the dead to heaven, — as, unaware,
 Men do when they would track departed life, —
 He heard the deep tone of the minster-bell
 Sounding for service, and he turned away
 So heavy at heart, that, when he left behind
 That dismal habitation, and came out
 In the clear sunshine of the minster-yard,
 He never marked it. Up the aisle he moved,
 With his own gloom about him; then came forth,

And read before the folk grand words and calm, —
 Words full of hope; but into his dull heart
 Hope came not. As one talketh in a dream,
 And doth not mark the sense of his own words,
 He read; and, as one walketh in a dream,
 He after walked toward the vestment-room,
 And never marked the way he went by, — no,
 Nor the gray verger that before him stood,
 The great church-keys depending from his hand,
 Ready to follow him out and lock the door.

At length, aroused to present things, but not
 Content to break the sequence of his thought,
 Nor ready for the working day that held
 Its busy course without, he said, "Good friend,
 Leave me the keys: I would remain awhile."
 And, when the verger gave, he moved with him
 Toward the door distraught, then shut him out,
 And locked himself within the church alone.
 The minster-church was like a great brown cave,
 Fluted and fine with pillars, and all dim
 With glorious gloom; but, as the curate turned,
 Suddenly shone the sun, — and roof and walls,
 Also the clustering shafts from end to end,
 Were thickly sown all over, as it were,
 With seedling rainbows. And it went and came
 And went, that sunny beam, and drifted up
 Ethereal bloom to flush the open wings
 And carven cheeks of dimpled cherubim.
 And dropped upon the curate as he passed,
 And covered his white raiment and his hair.

Then did look down upon him from their place,
 High in the upper lights, grave mitred priests,
 And grand old monarchs in their flowered gowns
 And capes of miniver; and therewithal
 (A veiling cloud gone by) the naked sun

Smote with his burning splendor all the pile,
 And in there rushed, through half-translucent panes,
 A sombre glory as of rusted gold,
 Deep ruby stains, and tender blue and green,
 That made the floor a beauty and delight,
 Strewed as with phantom blossoms, sweet enough
 To have been wafted there the day they dropt
 On the flower-beds in heaven.

The curate passed
 Adown the long south aisle, and did not think
 Upon this beauty, nor that he himself —
 Excellent in the strength of youth, and fair
 With all the majesty that noble work
 And stainless manners give — did add his part
 To make it fairer.

In among the knights
 That lay with hands uplifted, by the lute
 And palm of many a saint, — 'neath capitals
 Whereon our fathers had been bold to carve
 With earthly tools their ancient childlike dream
 Concerning heavenly fruit and living bowers,
 And glad full-throated birds that sing up there
 Among the branches of the tree of life, —
 Through all the ordered forest of the shafts,
 Shooting on high to enter into light,
 That swam aloft, — he took his silent way,
 And in the southern transept sat him down,
 Covered his face, and thought.

He said, "No pain,
 No passion, and no aching, heart o' mine,
 Doth stir within thee. Oh! I would there did:
 Thou art so dull, so tired. I have lost
 I know not what. I see the heavens as lead:
 They tend not whither. Ah! the world is bared

Of her enchantment now: she is but earth
 And water. And, though much hath passed away,
 There may be more to go. I may forget
 The joy and fear that have been: there may live
 No more for me the fervency of hope
 Nor the arrest of wonder.

"Once I said,
 'Content will wait on work, though work appear
 Unfruitful.' Now I say, 'Where is the good?
 What is the good?' A lamp when it is lit
 Must needs give light; but I am like a man
 Holding his lamp in some deserted place
 Where no foot passeth. Must I trim my lamp,
 And ever painfully toil to keep it bright,
 When use for it is none? I must; I will.
 Though God withhold my wages, I must work,
 And watch the bringing of my work to naught, —
 Weed in the vineyard through the heat o' the day
 And, overtasked, behold the weedy place
 Grow ranker yet in spite of me.

"Oh! yet
 My meditated words are trodden down
 Like a little wayside grass. Castaway shells,
 Lifted and tossed aside by a plunging wave,
 Have no more force against it than have I
 Against the sweeping, weltering wave of life,
 That, lifting and dislodging me, drives on,
 And notes not mine endeavor."

Afterward,
 He added more words like to these; to wit,
 That it was hard to see the world so sad:
 He would that it were happier. It was hard
 To see the blameless overborne; and hard
 To know that God, who loves the world, should yet
 Let it lie down in sorrow, when a smile

From Him would make it laugh and sing, — a word
 From Him transform it to a heaven. He said,
 Moreover, "When will this be done? My life
 Hath not yet reached the noon, and I am tired;
 And oh! it may be that, uncomforted
 By foolish hope of doing good and vain
 Conceit of being useful, I may live,
 And it may be my duty to go on
 Working for years and years, for years and years."
 But, while the words were uttered, in his heart
 There dawned a vague alarm. He was aware
 That somewhat touched him, and he lifted up
 His face. "I am alone," the curate said, —
 "I think I am alone. What is it, then?
 I am ashamed! My raiment is not clean.
 My lips, — I am afraid they are not clean.
 My heart is darkened and unclean. Ah me,
 To be a man, and yet to tremble so!
 Strange, strange!"

And there was sitting at his feet —
 He could not see it plainly — at his feet
 A very little child. And, while the blood
 Drave to his heart, he set his eye on it,
 Gazing, and, lo! the loveliness from heaven
 Took clearer form and color. He beheld
 The strange, wise sweetness of a dimpled mouth, —
 The deep serene of eyes at home with bliss,
 And perfect in possession. So it spoke,
 "My master!" but he answered not a word;
 And it went on: "I had a name, a name.
 He knew my name; but here they can forget."
 The curate answered: "Nay, I know thee well.
 I love thee. Wherefore art thou come?" it said,
 "They sent me;" and he faltered, "Fold thy hand,
 O most dear little one! for on it gleams
 A gem that is so bright I cannot look

Thereon." It said, "When I did leave this world,
 That was a tear. But that was long ago;
 For I have lived among the happy folk,
 You wot of, ages, ages." Then said he,
 "Do they forget us, while beneath the palms
 They take their infinite leisure?" And, with eyes
 That seemed to muse upon him, looking up
 In peace, the little child made answer, "Nay;"
 And murmured, in the language that he loved,
 "How is it that his hair is not yet white;
 For I and all the others have been long
 Waiting for him to come."

"And was it long?"
 The curate answered, pondering, "Time being done,
 Shall life indeed expand, and give the sense,
 In our to-come, of infinite extension?"
 Then saith the child, "In heaven we children talk
 Of the great matters, and our lips are wise;
 But here I can but talk with thee in words
 That here I knew." And therewithal, arisen,
 It said, "I pray you take me in your arms."
 Then, being afraid but willing, so he did;
 And partly drew about the radiant child,
 For better covering its dread purity,
 The foldings of his gown. And he beheld
 Its beauty, and the tremulous woven light
 That hung upon its hair; withal, the robe,
 'Whiter than fuller of this world can white,'
 That clothed its immortality. And so
 The trembling came again, and he was dumb,
 Repenting his uncleanness: and he lift
 His eyes, and all the holy place was full
 Of living things; and some were faint and dim,
 As if they bore an intermittent life,
 Waxing and waning; and they had no form,
 But drifted on like slowly trailed clouds,

Or moving spots of darkness, with an eye
A piece. And some, in guise of evil birds,
Came by in troops, and stretched their naked necks,
And some were men-like, but their heads hung down;
And he said, "O my God! let me find grace
Not to behold their faces, for I know
They must be wicked and right terrible."

But while he prayed, lo! whispers; and there moved
Two shadows on the wall. He could not see
The forms of them that cast them; he could see
Only the shadows as of two that sat
Upon the floor, where, clad in women's weeds,
They lisped together. And he shuddered much:
There was a rustling near him, and he feared
Lest they should touch him, and he feel their touch.

"It is not great," quoth one, "the work achieved
We do, and we delight to do, our best:
But that is little; for, my dear," quoth she,
"This tower and town have been infested long
With angels." — "Ay," the other made reply,
"I had a little evil one, of late,
That I picked up as it was crawling out
O' the pit, and took and cherished in my breast.
It would divine for me, and oft would moan,
Pray thee, no churches,' and it spake of this.

"But I was harried once, — thou know'st by whom, —
And fled in here; and when he followed me,
I crouching by this pillar, he let down
His hand, — being all too proud to send his eyes
In its wake, — and, plucking forth my tender imp,
Flung it behind him. It went yelping forth;
And, as for me, I never saw it more.
Much is against us, — very much: the times
Are hard." She paused: her fellow took the word,
Plaining on such as preach and them that plead,

"Even such as haunt the yawning mouths of hell,"
Quoth she, "and pluck them back that run thereto."
Then, like a sudden blow, there fell on him
The utterance of his name. "There is no soul
That I loathe more, and oftener curse. Woe's me,
That cursing should be vain! Ay, he will go
Gather the sucking children, that are yet
Too young for us, and watch and shelter them
Till the strong Angels — pitiless and stern,
But to them loving ever — sweep them in,
By armsful, to the unapproachable fold.

"We strew his path with gold: it will not lie.
'Deal softly with him,' was the master's word.
We brought him all delights: his angel came
And stood between them and his eyes. They spend
Much pains upon him, — keep him poor and low
And unbeloved; and thus he gives his mind
To fill the fateful, the impregnable
Child-fold, and sow on earth the seed of stars.

"Oh! hard is serving against love, — the love
Of the unspeakable; for if we soil
The souls, He openeth out a washing-place;
And if we grudge, and snatch away the bread,
Then will He save by poverty, and gain
By early giving up of blameless life;
And if we shed out gold, He even will save
In spite of gold, — of twice refined gold."

With that the curate set his daunted eyes
To look upon the shadows of the fiends.
He was made sure they could not see the child
That nestled in his arms; he also knew
They were unconscious that his mortal ears
Had new intelligence, which gave their speech
Possible entrance through his garb of clay.

He was afraid, yet awful gladness reached
His soul: the testimony of the lost
Upbraided him; but while he trembled yet,
The heavenly child had lifted up its head
And left his arms, and on the marble floor
Stood beckoning.

And, its touch withdrawn, the place
Was silent, empty; all that swarming tribe
Of evil ones concealed behind the veil,
And shut into their separate world, were closed
From his observance. He arose, and paced
After the little child, — as half in fear
That it would leave him, — till they reached a door;
And then said he, — but much distraught he spoke,
Laying his hand across the lock, — “This door
Shuts in the stairs whereby men mount the tower.
Wouldst thou go up, and so withdraw to heaven?”
It answered, “I will mount them.” Then said he,
“And I will follow.” — “So thou shalt do well.”
The radiant thing replied, and it went up,
And he, amazed, went after; for the stairs,
Otherwise dark, were lightened by the rays
Shed out of raiment woven in high heaven,
And hair whereon had smiled the light of God.

With that, they, pacing on, came out at last
Into a dim, weird place, — a chamber formed
Betwixt the roofs: for you shall know that all
The vaulting of the nave, fretted and fine,
Was covered with the dust of ages, laid
Thick with those chips of stone which they had left
Who wrought it; but a high-pitched roof was reared
Above it, and the western gable pierced
With three long narrow lights. Great tie-beams
loomed
Across, and many daws frequented there,

The starling and the sparrow littered it
With straw, and peeped from many a shady nook;
And there was lifting up of wings, and there
Was hasty exit when the curate came.
But sitting on a beam and moving not
For him, he saw two fair gray turtle-doves
Bowing their heads, and cooing; and the child
Put forth a hand to touch his own, but straight
He, startled, drew it back, because, forsooth,
A stirring fancy smote him, and he thought
That language trembled on their innocent tongues,
And floated forth in speech that man could hear.
Then said the child, “Yet touch, my master dear.”
And he let down his hand, and touched again;
And so it was. “But if they had their way,”
One turtle cooed, “how should this world go on?”

Then he looked well upon them as he stood
Upright before them. They were feathered doves,
And sitting close together; and their eyes
Were rounded with the rim that marks their kind.
Their tender crimson feet did pat the beam, —
No phantoms they; and soon the fellow-dove
Made answer, “Nay, they count themselves so wise,
There is no task they shall be set to do
But they will ask God why. What mean they so?
The glory is not in the task, but in
The doing it for Him. What should he think,
Brother, this man that must, forsooth, be set
Such noble work, and suffered to behold
Its fruit, if he knew more of us and ours?”
With that the other leaned, as if attent:
“I am not perfect, brother, in his thought.”
The mystic bird replied, “Brother, he saith,
‘But it is naught: the work is over-hard.’
Whose fault is that? God sets not overwork.”

He saith the world is sorrowful, and he
Is therefore sorrowful. He cannot set
The crooked straight; — but who demands of him,
O brother, that he should? What! thinks he, then,
His work is God's advantage, and his will
More bent to aid the world than its dread Lord's?
Nay, yet there live amongst us legions fair,
Millions on millions, who could do right well
What he must fail in; and 'twas whispered me,
That chiefly for himself the task is given, —
His little daily task." With that he paused.

Then said the other, preening its fair wing,
"Men have discovered all God's islands now,
And given them names; whereof they are as proud,
And deem themselves as great, as if their hands
Had made them. Strange is man, and strange his
pride.

Now, as for us, it matters not to learn
What and from whence we be: How should we tell?
Our world is undiscovered in these skies,
Our names not whispered. Yet, for us and ours,
What joy it is, — permission to come down,
Not souls, as he, to the bosom of their God,
To guide, but to their goal the wingèd fowls,
His lovely lower-fashioned lives to help
To take their forms by legions, fly, and draw
With us the sweet, obedient, flocking things
That ever hear our message reverently, [way,
And follow us far. How should they know their
Forsooth, alone? Men say they fly alone;
Yet some have set on record, and averred,
That they, among the flocks, had duly marked
A leader."

Then his fellow made reply:
"They might divine the Maker's heart. Come forth,

Fair dove, to find the flocks, and guide their wings,
For Him that loveth them."

With that, the child
Withdrew his hand, and all their speech was done.
He moved toward them, but they fluttered forth
And fled into the sunshine.

"I would fain,"
Said he, "have heard some more. And wilt thou
go?"

He added to the child, for this had turned.
"Ay," quoth he, gently, "to the beggar's place;
For I would see the beggar in the porch."

So they went down together to the door,
Which, when the curate opened, lo! without
The beggar sat; and he saluted him:
"Good morrow, master." "Wherefore art thou
here?"

The curate asked: "it is not service time,
And none will enter now to give thee alms."
Then said the beggar, "I have hope at heart
That I shall go to my poor house no more."

"Art thou so sick that thou dost think to die?"
The curate said. With that the beggar laughed,
And under his dim eyelids gathered tears,
And he was all a-tremble with a strange
And moving exaltation. "Ay," quoth he,
And set his face toward high heaven: "I think
The blessing that I wait on must be near."
Then said the curate, "God be good to thee."
And, straight, the little child put forth his hand,
And touched him. "Master, master, hush!
You should not, master, speak so carelessly
In this great presence."

But the touch so wrought,
That, lo! the dazzled curate staggered back,
For dread effulgence from the beggar's eyes
Smote him, and from the crippled limbs shot forth
Terrible lights, as pure long blades of fire.
"Withdraw thy touch! withdraw thy touch!" he
cried,
"Or else I shall be blinded." Then the child
Stood back from him; and he sat down apart,
Recovering of his manhood: and he heard
The beggar and the child discourse of things
Dreadful for glory, till his spirits came
Anew; and, when the beggar looked on him,
He said, "If I offend not, pray you tell
Who and what are you, — I behold a face
Marred with old age, sickness, and poverty, —
A cripple with a staff, who long hath sat
Begging, and oftentimes moaning, in the porch,
For pain and for the wind's inclemency.
What are you?" Then the beggar made reply,
"I was a delegate, a living power;
My work was bliss, for seeds were in my hand
To plant a new-made world. O happy work!
It grew and blossomed; but my dwelling-place
Was far remote from heaven. I have not seen;
I knew no wish to enter there. But, lo!
There went forth rumors, running out like rays,
How some, that were of power like even to mine
Had made request to come and find a place
Within its walls. And these were satisfied
With promises, and sent to this far world
To take the weeds of your mortality,
And minister, and suffer grief and pain,
And die like men. Then they were gathered in.
They saw a face, and were accounted kin
To Whom thou knowest, for He is kin to men.

"Then did I wait; and oft, at work, I sang,
'To minister! oh, joy, to minister!'
And, it being known, a message came to me:
'Whether is best, thou forest-planter wise,
To minister to others, or that they
Should minister to thee?' Then, on my face
Low lying, I made answer: 'It is best,
Most High, to minister;' and thus came back
The answer, — 'Choose not for thyself the best:
Go down, and, lo! my poor shall minister,
Out of their poverty, to thee; shall learn
Compassion by thy frailty; and shall oft
Turn back, when speeding home from work, to help
Thee, weak and crippled, home. My little ones,
Thou shalt importune for their slender mite,
And pray, and move them that they give it up
For love of Me.'"

The curate answered him,
"Art thou content, O great one from afar!
If I may ask, and not offend?" He said,
"I am. Behold! I stand not all alone,
That I should think to do a perfect work.
I may not wish to give; for I have heard
'Tis best for me that I receive. For me,
God is the only giver, and His gift
Is one." With that the little child sighed out,
"O master! master! I am out of heaven
Since noonday, and I hear them calling me,
If you be ready, great one, let us go: —
Hark! hark! they call."

Then did the beggar lift
His face to heaven and utter forth a cry
As of the pangs of death, and every tree
Moved as if shaken by a sudden wind.
He cried again, and there came forth a hand

From some invisible form, which, being laid
A little moment on the curate's eyes,
It dazzled him with light that brake from it,
So that he saw no more.

“What shall I do?”

The curate murmured, when he came again
To himself and looked about him. “This is strange!
My thoughts are all astray; and yet, methinks,
A weight is taken from my heart. Lo! lo!
There lieth at my feet, frail, white, and dead,
The sometime beggar. He is happy now.
There was a child; but he is gone, and he
Is also happy. I am glad to think
I am not bound to make the wrong go right;
But only to discover, and to do,
With cheerful heart, the work that God appoints.”

With that, he did compose, with reverent care,
The dead; continuing, “I will trust in Him,
THAT HE CAN HOLD HIS OWN; and I will take
His will, above the work He sendeth me,
To be my chiefest good.”

Then went he forth,
“I shall die early,” thinking: “I am warned,
By this fair vision, that I have not long
To live.” Yet he lived on to good old age;—
Ay, he lives yet, and he is working still.

It may be there are many in like case;
They give themselves, and are in misery
Because the gift is small, and doth not make
The world by so much better as they fain
Would have it. 'Tis a fault; but, as for us,
Let us not blame them. Maybe, 'tis a fault
More kindly looked on by The Majesty

Than our best virtues are. Why, what are we?
What have we given, and what have we desired
To give, the world?

There must be something wrong.
Look to it: let us mend our ways. Farewell.

A BIRTHDAY WALK.

(WRITTEN FOR A FRIEND'S BIRTHDAY.)

“The days of our life are threescore years and ten.”

A BIRTHDAY:— and now a day that rose
With much of hope, with meaning rife—
A thoughtful day from dawn to close:
The middle day of human life.

In sloping fields on narrow plains,
The sheep were feeding on their knees,
As we went through the winding lanes,
Strewed with red buds of alder-trees.

So warm the day— its influence lent
To flagging thoughts a stronger wing;
So utterly was winter spent,
So sudden was the birth of spring.

Wild crocus flowers in copse and hedge—
In sunlight, clustering thick below,
Sighed for the firwood's shaded ledge,
Where sparkled yet a line of snow.