

Sketches among the Poor, No. I

Elizabeth Gaskell

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In childhood's days, I do remember me
Of one dark house behind an old elm-tree,
By gloomy streets surrounded, where the flower
Brought from the fresher air, scarce for an hour
Retained its fragrant scent; yet men lived there,
Yea, and in happiness; the mind doth clear
In most dense airs its own bright atmosphere.
But in the house of which I spake there dwelt
One by whom all the weight of smoke was felt.
She had o'erstepped the bound 'twixt youth and age
A single, not a lonely, woman, sage
And thoughtful ever, yet most truly kind:
Without the natural ties, she sought to bind
Hearts unto hers, with gentle, useful love,
Prompt at each change in sympathy to move.
And so she gained the affection, which she prized
From every living thing, howe'er despised—
A call upon her tenderness whene'er
The friends around her had a grief to share;
And, if in joy the kind one they forgot,
She still rejoiced, and more was wanted not.

Said I not truly, she was not alone,
Though none at evening shared her clean hearth—stone?
To some she might prosaic seem, but me
She always charmed with daily poesy,
Felt in her every action, never heard,
E'en as the mate of some sweet singing—bird,
That mute and still broods on her treasure—nest,
Her heart's fond hope hid deep within her breast.

In all her quiet duties, one dear thought
Kept ever true and constant sway, not brought
Before the world, but garnered all the more
For being to herself a secret store.
Whene'er she heard of country homes, a smile
Came brightening o'er her serious face the while;
She knew not that it came, yet in her heart
A hope leaped up, of which that smile was part.
She thought the time might come, ere yet the bowl
Were broken at the fountain, when her soul
Might listen to its yearnings, unreprieved

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By thought of failure to the cause she loved;
When she might leave the close and noisy street,
And once again her childhood's home might greet.

It was a pleasant place, that early home!
The brook went singing by, leaving its foam
Among the flags and blue forget-me-not;
And in a nook, above that shelter'd spot,
For ages stood a gnarled hawthorn-tree;
And if you pass'd in spring-time, you might see
The knotted trunk all coronal'd with flowers,
That every breeze shook down in fragrant showers;
The earnest bees in odorous cells did lie,
Hymning their thanks with murmuring melody;
The evening sun shone brightly on the green,
And seem'd to linger on the lonely scene.
And, if to others Mary's early nest
Show'd poor and homely, to her loving breast
A charm lay hidden in the very stains
Which time and weather left; the old dim panes,
The grey rough moss, the house-leek, you might see
Were chronicled in childhood's memory;
And in her dreams she wander'd far and wide
Among the hills, her sister at her side—
That sister slept beneath a grassy tomb
Ere time had robbed her of her first sweet bloom.
O Sleep! thou bringest back our childhood's heart,
Ere yet the dew exhale, the hope depart;
Thou callest up the lost ones, sorrow'd o'er
Till sorrow's self hath lost her tearful power;
Thine is the fairy-land, where shadows dwell,
Evoked in dreams by some strange hidden spell.
But Day and Waking have their dreams, O Sleep,
When Hope and Memory their fond watches keep;
And such o'er Mary held supremest sway,
When kindly labours task'd her hands all day.
Employ'd her hands, her thoughts roam'd far and free,
Till sense call'd down to calm reality.
A few short weeks, and then, unbound the chains
Which held her to another's woes or pains,
Farewell to dusky streets and shrouded skies,
Her treasure'd home should bless her yearning eyes,
And fair as in the days of childish glee
Each grassy nook and wooded haunt should be.

Yet ever, as one sorrow pass'd away,
Another call'd the tender one to stay,
And, where so late she shared the bright glad mirth,
The phantom Grief sat cowering at the hearth.
So days and weeks pass'd on, and grew to years,
Unwept by Mary, save for others' tears.

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As a fond nurse, that from the mother's breast
Lulls the tired infant to its quiet rest,
First stills each sound, then lets the curtain fall
To cast a dim and sleepy light o'er all,
So age drew gently o'er each wearied sense
A deepening shade to smooth the parting hence.
Each cherish'd accent, each familiar tone
Fell from her daily music, one by one;
Still her attentive looks could rightly guess
What moving lips by sound could not express.
O'er each loved face next came a filmy veil,
And shine and shadow from her sight did fail.
And, last of all, the solemn change they saw
Depriving Death of half his regal awe;
The mind sank down to childishness, and they,
Relying on her counsel day by day
(As some lone wanderer, from his home afar,
Takes for his guide some fix'd and well known star,
Till clouds come wafting o'er its trembling light,
And leave him wilder'd in the pathless night),
Sought her changed face with strange uncertain gaze,
Still praying her to lead them through the maze.
They pitied her lone fate, and deemed it sad;
Yet as in early childhood was she glad;
No sense had she of change, or loss of thought,
With those around her no communion sought;
Scarce knew she of her being. Fancy wild
Had placed her in her father's house a child;
It was her mother sang her to her rest;
The lark awoke her, springing from his nest;
The bees sang cheerily the live long day,
Lurking 'mid flowers wherever she did play;
The Sabbath bells rang as in years gone by,
Swelling and falling on the soft wind's sigh;
Her little sisters knelt with her in prayer,
And nightly did her father's blessing share;
So, wrapt in glad imaginings, her life
Stole on with all her sweet young memories rife.

I often think (if by this mortal light
We e'er can read another's lot aright),
That for her loving heart a blessing came,
Unseen by many, clouded by a name;
And all the outward fading from the world
Was like the flower at night, when it has furled
Its golden leaves, and lapped them round its heart,
To nestle closer in its sweetest part.
Yes! angel voices called her childhood back,
Blotting out life with its dim sorrow track;
Her secret wish was ever known in heaven,
And so in mystery was the answer given.

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In sadness many mourned her latter years,
But blessing shone behind that mist of tears,
And, as the child she deemed herself, she lies
In gentle slumber, till the dead shall rise.