

ready to be given back to her (the publishing of poems not being in his line) when she might call for it. She had never called for it; and the poem had been lent to Jarber, at his express request, to read to me.

Before he began, I rang the bell for Trottle; being determined to have him present at the new reading, as a wholesome check on his obstinacy. To my surprise Peggy answered the bell, and told me that Trottle had stepped out, without saying where. I instantly felt the strongest possible conviction that he was at his old tricks: and that his stepping out in the evening, without leave, meant—Philandering.

Controlling myself on my visitor's account, I dismissed Peggy, stifled my indignation, and prepared, as politely as might be, to listen to Jarber.

THREE EVENINGS IN THE HOUSE.

NUMBER ONE.

I.

Yes, it look'd dark and dreary
That long and narrow street:
Only the sound of the rain,
And the tramp of passing feet,
The duller glow of the fire,
And gathering mists of night
To mark how slow and weary
The long day's cheerless flight!

II.

Watching the sullen fire,
Hearing the dreary rain,
Drop after drop, run down
On the darkening window-pane:
Chill was the heart of Bertha,
Chill as that winter day,—
For the star of her life had risen
Only to fade away.

III.

The voice that had been so strong
To bid the snare depart,
The true and earnest will,
And the calm and steadfast heart,
Were now weigh'd down by sorrow,
Were quivering now with pain;
The clear path now seem'd clouded,
And all her grief in vain.

IV.

Duty, Right, Truth, who promised
To help and save their own,
Seem'd spreading wide their pinions
To leave her there alone.
So, turning from the Present
To well-known days of yore,
She call'd on them to strengthen
And guard her soul once more.

V.

She thought how in her girlhood
Her life was given away,
The solemn promise spoken
She kept so well to-day;
How to her brother Herbert
She had been help and guide,
And how his artist-nature
On her calm strength relied.

VI.

How through life's fret and turmoil
The passion and fire of art
In him was soothed and quicken'd
By her true sister heart;
How future hopes had always
Been for his sake alone;
And now, what strange new feeling
Possess'd her as its own?

VII.

Her home; each flower that breathed there;
The wind's sigh, soft and low;
Each trembling spray of ivy;
The river's murmuring flow;
The shadow of the forest;
Sunset, or twilight dim;
Dear as they were, were dearer
By leaving them for him.

VIII.

And each year as it found her
In the dull, feverish town,
Saw self still more forgotten,
And selfish care kept down
By the calm joy of evening
That brought him to her side,
To warn him with wise counsel,
Or praise with tender pride.

IX.

Her heart, her life, her future,
Her genius, only meant
Another thing to give him,
And be therewith content.
To-day, what words had stirr'd her,
Her soul could not forget?
What dream had fill'd her spirit
With strange and wild regret?

X.

To leave him for another:
Could it indeed be so?
Could it have cost such anguish
To bid this vision go?
Was this her faith? Was Herbert
The second in her heart?
Did it need all this struggle
To bid a dream depart?

XI.

And yet, within her spirit
A far-off land was seen;
A home, which might have held her;
A love, which might have been;
And Life: not the mere being
Of daily ebb and flow,
But Life itself had claim'd her,
And she had let it go!

XII.

Within her heart there echo'd
Again the well-known tone
That promised this bright future,
And ask'd her for its own:
Then words of sorrow, broken
By half-reproachful pain;
And then a farewell, spoken
In words of cold disdain.

XIII.

Where now was the stern purpose
That nerved her soul so long?
Whence came the words she utter'd,
So hard, so cold, so strong?

What right had she to banish
A hope that God had given?
Why must she choose earth's portion,
And turn aside from Heaven?

XIV.

To-day! Was it this morning?
If this long, fearful strife
Was but the work of hours,
What would be years of life?
Why did a cruel Heaven
For such great suffering call?
And why—O, still more cruel!—
Must her own words do all?

XV.

Did she repent? O Sorrow!
Why do we linger still
To take thy loving message,
And do thy gentle will?
See, her tears fall more slowly;
The passionate murmurs cease,
And back upon her spirit
Flow strength, and love, and peace.

XVI.

The fire burns more brightly,
The rain has passed away,
Herbert will see no shadow
Upon his home to-day;
Only that Bertha greets him
With doubly tender care,
Kissing a fonder blessing
Down on his golden hair.

NUMBER TWO.

I.

THE studio is deserted,
Palette and brush laid by,
The sketch rests on the easel,
The paint is scarcely dry;
And Silence—who seems always
Within her depths to bear
The next sound that will utter—
Now holds a dumb despair.

II.

So Bertha feels it: listening
With breathless, stony fear,
Waiting the dreadful summons
Each minute brings more near:
When the young life, now ebbing,
Shall fail, and pass away
Into that mighty shadow
Who shrouds the house to-day.

III.

But why—when the sick chamber
Is on the upper floor—
Why dares not Bertha enter
Within the close-shut door?
If he—her all—her Brother,
Lies dying in that gloom,
What strange mysterious power
Has sent her from the room?

IV.

It is not one week's anguish
That can have changed her so;
Joy has not died here lately,
Struck down by one quick blow;

But cruel months have needed
Their long relentless chain,
To teach that shrinking manner
Of helpless, hopeless pain.

V.

The struggle was scarce over
Last Christmas Eve had brought:
The fibres still were quivering
Of the one wounded thought,
When Herbert—who, unconscious,
Had guessed no inward strife—
Bade her, in pride and pleasure,
Welcome his fair young wife.

VI.

Bade her rejoice, and smiling,
Although his eyes were dim,
Thank'd God he thus could pay her
The care she gave to him.
This fresh bright life would bring her
A new and joyous fate—
O Bertha, check the murmur
That cries, Too late! too late!

VII.

Too late! Could she have known it
A few short weeks before,
That his life was completed,
And needing hers no more,
She might— O sad repining!
What "might have been," forget;
"It was not," should suffice us
To stifle vain regret.

VIII.

He needed her no longer,
Each day it grew more plain;
First with a startled wonder,
Then with a wondering pain.
Love: why, his wife best gave it;
Comfort: durst Bertha speak?
Counsel: when quick resentment
Flush'd on the young wife's cheek.

IX.

No more long talks by firelight
Of childish times long past,
And dreams of future greatness
Which he must reach at last;
Dreams, where her purer instinct
With truth unerring told
Where was the worthless gilding,
And where refinèd gold.

X.

Slowly, but surely ever,
Dora's poor jealous pride,
Which she call'd love for Herbert,
Drove Bertha from his side;
And, spite of nervous effort
To share their alter'd life,
She felt a check to Herbert,
A burden to his wife.

XI.

This was the least; for Bertha
Fear'd, dreaded, *knew* at length,
How much his nature owed her
Of truth, and power, and strength;
And watch'd the daily failing
Of all his nobler part:
Low aims, weak purpose, telling
In lower, weaker art.

XII.

And now, when he is dying,
The last words she could hear
Must not be hers, but given
The bride of one short year.
The last care is another's;
The last prayer must not be
The one they learnt together
Beside their mother's knee.

XIII.

Summon'd at last : she kisses
The clay-cold stiffening hand;
And, reading pleading efforts
To make her understand,
Answers, with solemn promise,
In clear but trembling tone,
To Dora's life henceforward
She will devote her own.

XIV.

Now all is over. Bertha
Dares not remain to weep,
But soothes the frightened Dora
Into a sobbing sleep.
The poor weak child will need her :
O, who can dare complain,
When God sends a new Duty
To comfort each new Pain !

NUMBER THREE.

I.

THE House is all deserted
In the dim evening gloom,
Only one figure passes
Slowly from room to room ;
And, pausing at each doorway,
Seems gathering up again
Within her heart the relics
Of bygone joy and pain.

II.

There is an earnest longing
In those who onward gaze,
Looking with weary patience
Towards the coming days.
There is a deeper longing,
More sad, more strong, more keen :
Those know it who look backward,
And yearn for what has been.

III.

At every hearth she pauses,
Touches each well known chair ;
Gazes from every window,
Lingers on every stair.
What have these months brought Bertha
Now one more year is past ?
This Christmas Eve shall tell us,
The third one and the last.

IV.

The wilful, wayward Dora,
In those first weeks of grief,
Could seek and find in Bertha
Strength, soothing, and relief.
And Bertha—last sad comfort
True woman-heart can take—
Had something still to suffer
And do for Herbert's sake.

V.

Spring, with her western breezes,
From Indian islands bore
To Bertha news that Leonard
Would seek his home once more.
What was it—joy, or sorrow ?
What were they—hopes, or fears ?
That flush'd her cheeks with crimson,
And fill'd her eyes with tears ?

VI.

He came. And who so kindly
Could ask and hear her tell
Herbert's last hours ; for Leonard
Had known and loved him well.
Daily he came ; and Bertha
Poor weary heart, at length,
Weigh'd down by other's weakness,
Could rest upon his strength.

VII.

Yet not the voice of Leonard
Could her true care beguile,
That turn'd to watch, rejoicing,
Dora's reviving smile.
So, from that little household
The worst gloom pass'd away,
The one bright hour of evening
Lit up the livelong day.

VIII.

Days passed. The golden summer
In sudden heat bore down
Its blue, bright, glowing sweetness
Upon the scorching town.
And sights and sounds of country
Came in the warm soft tune
Sung by the honey'd breezes
Borne on the wings of June.

IX.

One twilight hour, but earlier
Than usual, Bertha thought
She knew the fresh sweet fragrance
Of flowers that Leonard brought ;
Through open'd doors and windows
It stole up through the gloom,
And with appealing sweetness
Drew Bertha from her room.

X.

Yes, he was there ; and pausing
Just near the open'd door,
To check her heart's quick beating,
She heard—and paused still more—
His low voice—Dora's answers—
His pleading—Yes, she knew
The tone—the words—the accents :
She once had heard them too.

XI.

" Would Bertha blame her ? " Leonard's
Low, tender answer came :
" Bertha was far too noble
To think or dream of blame."
" And was he sure he loved her ? "
" Yes, with the one love given
Once in a lifetime only,
With one soul and one heaven ! "

XII.

Then came a plaintive murmur,—
" Dora had once been told
That he and Bertha"— " Dearest,
Bertha is far too cold

To love; and I, my Dora,
If once I fancied so,
It was a brief delusion,
And over,—long ago."

XIII.

Between the Past and Present,
On that bleak moment's height,
She stood. As some lost traveller
By a quick flash of light
Seeing a gulf before him,
With dizzy, sick despair,
Reels to clutch backward, but to find
A deeper chasm there.

XIV.

The twilight grew still darker,
The fragrant flowers more sweet,
The stars shone out in heaven,
The lamps gleam'd down the street;
And hours pass'd in dreaming
Over their new found fate,
Ere they could think of wondering
Why Bertha was so late.

XV.

She came, and calmly listen'd;
In vain they strove to trace
If Herbert's memory shadow'd
In grief upon her face.
No blame, no wonder show'd there,
No feeling could be told;
Her voice was not less steady,
Her manner not more cold.

XVI.

They could not hear the anguish
That broke in words of pain
Through that calm summer midnight,—
"My Herbert—mine again!"
Yes, they have once been parted,
But this day shall restore
The long lost one: she claims him:
"My Herbert—mine once more!"

XVII.

Now Christmas Eve returning,
Saw Bertha stand beside
The altar, greeting Dora,
Again a smiling bride;
And now the gloomy evening
Sees Bertha pale and worn,
Leaving the house for ever,
To wander out forlorn.

XVIII.

Forlorn—nay, not so. Anguish
Shall do its work at length;
Her soul, pass'd through the fire,
Shall gain still purer strength.
Somewhere there waits for Bertha
An earnest noble part;
And, meanwhile, God is with her,—
God, and her own true heart!

I could warmly and sincerely praise the little poem, when Jarber had done reading it; but I could not say that it tended in any degree towards clearing up the mystery of the empty House.

Whether it was the absence of the irritating influence of Trottle, or whether it was simply fatigue, I cannot say, but Jarber did

not strike me, that evening, as being in his usual spirits. And though he declared that he was not in the least daunted by his want of success thus far, and that he was resolutely determined to make more discoveries, he spoke in a languid absent manner, and shortly afterwards took his leave at rather an early hour.

When Trottle came back, and when I indignantly taxed him with Philandering, he not only denied the imputation, but asserted that he had been employed on my service, and, in consideration of that, boldly asked for leave of absence for two days, and for a morning to himself afterwards, to complete the business, in which he solemnly declared that I was interested. In remembrance of his long and faithful service to me, I did violence to myself, and granted his request. And he, on his side, engaged to explain himself to my satisfaction, in a week's time, on Monday evening the twentieth.

A day or two before, I sent to Jarber's lodgings to ask him to drop in to tea. His landlady sent back an apology for him that made my hair stand on end. His feet were in hot water; his head was in a flannel petticoat; a green shade was over his eyes; the rheumatism was in his legs; and a mustard-poultice was on his chest. He was also a little feverish, and rather distracted in his mind about Manchester Marriages, a Dwarf, and Three Evenings, or Evening Parties—his landlady was not sure which—in an empty House, with the Water Rate unpaid.

Under these distressing circumstances, I was necessarily left alone with Trottle. His promised explanation began, like Jarber's discoveries, with the reading of a written paper. The only difference was that Trottle introduced his manuscript under the name of a Report.

TROTTLER'S REPORT.

THE curious events related in these pages would, many of them, most likely never have happened, if a person named Trottle had not presumed, contrary to his usual custom, to think for himself.

The subject on which the person in question had ventured, for the first time in his life, to form an opinion purely and entirely his own, was one which had already excited the interest of his respected mistress in a very extraordinary degree. Or, to put it in plainer terms still, the subject was no other than the mystery of the empty House.

Feeling no sort of objection to set a success of his own, if possible, side by side, with a failure of Mr. Jarber's, Trottle made up his mind, one Monday evening, to try what he could do, on his own account, towards clearing up the mystery of the empty House. Carefully dismissing from his mind all nonsensical notions of former tenants and their histories, and keeping the