

POEMS

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Poems by Ellen Clementine Howarth

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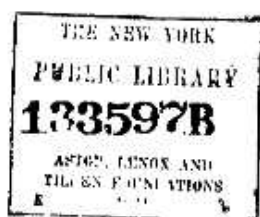
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TO MY FRIEND,

MARY P. VAN DYKE.

MOR 19 FEB 1972

SHE CAME, SINGING A SONG.

GORTON.



ON Bridge street, in Trenton, New-Jersey, a few feet from the track of the Philadelphia and Trenton Railroad, stands a row of plain little frame houses. There is nothing about them to arrest attention. One only is distinguished in any way from its neighbors. It bears the simple announcement,

"CHAIRS CANED HERE,"

painted on a strip of tin and nailed to the weatherboards. The front door opens directly into a small, poorly-furnished apartment. A rag-carpet covers the floor, a couple of tables and several broken chairs are scattered about, books are piled here and there, a few engravings hang on the walls, and a cross leans upon the mantel-shelf. An open door shows a small kitchen adjoining, and beyond, a porch shaded by morning-glories. Five or six noisy children give life to the scene, the central figure of which is the kneeling form of a woman, clad in faded calico, and busily at work caning the seat of a chair. This woman, toiling amid the children, with tired hands striving to win bread for all, is the mother of the humble home—and the author of some of the most tender, graceful, and popular lyrics of the day.

Her face bears unmistakable traces of past mental and physical suffering. But others, too, have suffered. Not alone because of her life of sorrow is the world interested in the history of ELLEN CLEMENTINE HOWARTH. It is because the wonderful God has given her the divine gift of seeing and saying which men call

Poetry; it is because to her, in her lowliness and trouble, has come

"The summons august which the highest reveres,
The greatest that visits the children of men."

Therefore it is that every phase of her experience is invested with peculiar interest. We look eagerly into this sad and humble life, which has found an expression so full, so musical, and so refined.

In the secluded village of Cooperstown, N. Y., "Clementine" was born, on the 17th of May, 1827. Her maiden name was Doran. Her father was Irish, and her mother English. The family did not remain long at Cooperstown, being compelled to move from one manufacturing place to another in New-England and the Middle States, wherever the father could obtain work at his trade of calico-printing. When barely seven years old, little Ellen, amid the din of a factory, began her toilsome career. Her school education was of the most limited character. She says: "I cannot remember when I learned to read. It was, however, all I did learn at school. Through the small libraries in the factory villages, always free for 'the hands,' I generally had plenty of reading, as we never remained long in one place." Among the recollections of her childhood, none is more vivid than that of a little old garret—with its strings of dried apples hanging from the rafters, and its packages of seeds and fragrant herbs—whose rubbish of papers, pamphlets, and yellow-leaved books, left by a former occupant of the house, was her greatest earthly treasure and delight. Here she would hide alone, and, as she sat by the small, low window, poring over some precious volume, the hours flew by unheeded, until the mother's chiding voice recalled the young dreamer to her neglected work.

A strange, lonely girl was she, and an utter mystery to her youthful comrades, who marvelled at her absorbing devotion to books, and mistook her reserve for lack of sympathy. How

could they see, in the timid and retiring factory-girl, the brave-hearted woman—the eloquent poet? Between this Ellen and the girl whose gown touched hers, as they worked together in the factory, there was a gulf of infinite width. The busy, clattering world about her was not the one in which she mainly lived. There was another, where the noise of the machinery became the far-off murmur of the ocean which breaks upon the dreamland shore. Blest and yet desolate, what wonder that her every-day life often was sombre to dreariness! “I had no friends nor acquaintances out of our own family,” she afterward wrote; “never attended any of their merry-makings, cared nothing for dress, seldom went to church—in short, ‘cared for nobody, and nobody cared for me.’ I have always been entirely alone—shut out from all sympathy by my own reserve. If I could write prose, I would like to write a history of my inner life. It would not be tame, insipid sentimentalism, but full of condensed fire and energy.”

Taking the years together, her early life seems to have been singularly unhappy. “Nothing,” she has said, “could be more miserable and dreadful.” A bitter retrospect, indeed, must that have been which could wring from her the confession:

“I never knew, in my sad life,
A childhood’s mirth, a girlhood’s glee.”

At the age of eighteen she married an Englishman named Joseph Howarth, who, like her father, was a calico-printer. The young couple soon settled in Trenton, and there most of their married life has been spent. Modern inventions supplanting the old methods of calico-printing, and causing the usual temporary derangement of labor, Mr. Howarth found himself compelled to seek work in machine-shops. In order to aid in maintaining her growing family, Mrs. Howarth learned the trade of chair-caning, and thus employed all the moments she could snatch from her

household duties. Meanwhile, one by one, five of her children were taken from her in infancy. But there was no time for tears. Turning away with an almost broken heart from their little graves, the mother worked on. The loved ones at her knee must be clothed and fed.

She stood one day at the door, watching her little Mary—a beautiful infant, hardly two years old—playing in the street, when a pair of runaway horses dashed by. In an instant her child was killed before her eyes. She picked up the poor, crushed little body, and, clasping it in her arms, carried it into the house. Yet she has said to a friend of her heart: "I have suffered worse things than this."

About three years ago, Mr. Howarth, while working in a machine-shop, met with an accident which utterly destroyed the sight of one eye, and rendered the other almost useless. Without a word of complaint, without one appeal for assistance, the wife now assumed the task of supporting, by her almost unaided exertions, a family of seven. In a letter to a friend, written at this time, she says: "Excuse me for not answering your kind note sooner. The morning I received it I had made a contract for the caning of a certain number of car-seats, and they were to be done by Tuesday, the 6th—to-day. By working from five in the morning till eleven at night, I have finished in time." Notwithstanding all her efforts, the family were soon reduced to the utmost want. Had it not been for one of the kindest of landlords, they would have been turned into the street. With a delicate regard for her pride of independence, he accepted the payment of rent from his poet-tenant in verses, one poem being regularly paid over every month. Did the muse ever serve poor poet a better turn, or was ever poet blessed with so human-hearted a landlord!

At this period of their greatest destitution, a lady of Trenton visited the little house in Bridge street, and found that there was