"SHE SEEMED A HAUNTING WRAITH OF MISERY, AND HOMELESSNESS, AND DESPAIR.

"AND THIS THE BITTER CONTRAST."

ONE CHRISTMAS EVE.

By JESSIE ETHEL COBB

Christmas Eve!

The day had dived in sombre storm, but neither the night nor the tempest could shut out the myriad of cheerful lights in thousands of happy homes, nor its meaning blot out the merry shouts from happy children encircled by crackling, roaring hearthfires. All the earth, from hundreds of hearts, seemed to know a peace and joy of heaven and to hover a rare contentment, that glowed from illuminated window panes, and was infectious with its gladness, good-humored greetings that throughout the long night echoed.

Surely, the homeless and the poor and the neglected began to count ungrudgingly some of the washed crumbs from the ample tables of the rich, would find a growing, kind and generous pity and prosperity. Perhaps, indeed, it would come, would be the unfortunate who, in doing and suffering and, would abolish the cheerlessness and liberality of happy Christmas, was a very man heart was in his pocket for at least one night in all the year. A nuisance would be he who would stand out for that tramp's paradise, the country, in such a storm; and yet, at that hour when day parted from night, and the storm flapped out wan banes, snow sodden wings the light of moon and stars, a woman could be unwomanly enough to brave the rising tempest, and stagger along a desolate highway, never, not that her fancy cursed her far and wide from the fast-disappearing lights of the city.

Her attire was so miserable and threadbare and bedraggled that it formed a fitting frame to a face that was dark in its utter wretchedness. It had a despairing cry in there was on-looks of purpose as she [illegible] ahead, every an action, a purpose that was cried heed towards execution, for she trod the inexorable road mechanically, slowly, wearily. Her wan features seemed never to relax from the throes of awful, hopeless suffering, her chilled, pinched frame seemed bent to one purpose—to shield, with the thin, ragged shawl across her shoulder, the shivering, wailing infant at her breast.

By her side, clinging to her thin, cold hand, oh, shameful reproach on every careless heart that had passed them by, as I must have read the silent prayer for help in those pathetic faces!), toddled a child whose boyish beauty was angelic. His little hand shielded his snow-driven face with a brave effort to battle the tempest, his tired feet trudged onward, and his uncomplaining lips told that, young as he was, hardship and suffering were more than a part of his daily life. "Only a little farther," were the faint, broken words that were his creed of faith, and the hero soul, that love and courage had made strong, held back the tides of weariness, and the chill of winter, and the craving torture of hunger.

Like phantoms on the distorted landscape, as the hours grew old apace, these three went that dreary road that Will Devereaux's night sentinel, so grim, was the peer of the mother, that she seemed some haunting wraith of misery and homelessness and despair. Even as far to the edge of the horizon a dim, flickering light caught her blurred vision, she quickened her pace, took up the slumbering boy in her arms, and with her double burden leaned on against the battle goddess that ruled by like the waves of an angry sea.

She was chilled, confused, exhausted. Her heart seemed hard in her breast, her feet had no longer a semblance of feeling, her head seemed frozen to the protecting shawl of the babe, yet her pallid lips were firm and resolved, as she cast her eye fixed on the light, and murmured, desperately:

"Only to reach it—only to end the weary tramp where my parents lie dead, and then, like them, to die!"

The word of desolation in her tones was more dreary than the dark picture her thoughts framed. To her of love she had been a better lot. Gran want had tuft her path hour by hour, penury and hopelessness had made her old—old. Every human heart had seemed closed against her, except where some one poor as herself had shared a miserable mess. There was nothing sweet in the great, cruel city except the pity of the poor, and these demanded a [illegible] that was only wearing. At the last great mansion, aglow with warmth and mad with light and plenty, the sick, [illegible] had turned her away with a [illegible] to visit the [illegible] and [illegible] the clock she had sent to the [illegible] little heeding that when the [illegible] reached the others the [illegible] distributors would be enjoying their [illegible] time-tried food [illegible]. Man was [illegible] stable, perhaps, but oh, so [illegible] heedless and selfish and [illegible] of all rights of the least.

So it had come that this wretched woman had turned her back on the city, and with a memory of days agone had asked of heaven only the strength to reach a spot a few miles distant, where a thought of its former glory might lighten the darkness of death. She was gaunt and pale and wrinkled now, yet here she had once been fair and comely and happy. She was homeless now, but here had been the earnest, loving mother and devoted wife and queen of a bright, contented home. Avon! How sweet the name! how fair its memories! At the edge of the quaint, old-fashioned hamlet she paused [illegible].

The baby had nestled close to her bosom, and lay [illegible] on her breast. The little boy, half dazed in a restless, slumberous repose, [illegible] wearily, but smiled with pretty innocence and [illegible] her faces.

"Good mamma, tired—poor mamma, have we come to the trees with the lights, and the people with the warm, good faces?"

A heart-rending moan [illegible] the mother's lips. Her tears fell thickly as she strained the darling child to her breast, and passed into the snowy [illegible] [illegible] to the door, [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]