

Flowers and Ashes

Louise Bryant

1915

The swaying streetcar bulged with human freight,
A gust of sand blew up the narrow street
And caught it as it whirled with giddy gait.
The souls within sighed wearily, the heat
Was so intense it hurt their tired feet,
Their tired eyes, and hands, and tired souls.
It was the hour when the workers pause at last
And seek those murky, fetid, loathsome holes
They call their homes; if thus their lot be cast.
Poor wrecks of lives! Poor ships with broken mast!
A woman sat beside me and her face
Was lined with care and sorrow, as if the years
That she had lived and loved and hept her place
Among the workers, had been a thing of tears;
A tragic life of agonies—and fears.
And in her hand she held some flowers,
Old-fashioned flowers, like our grandames knew.
Their fragrance was so sweet, I minded distant hours.
I touched their dear, soft faces for I knw
I'd think of other flowers wet with dew.
We jogged along street after street and then
The woman spoke, "For my man's grave," she said
And then was silent. When I looked again
On her pale cheek there burned a spot of red
"For twenty years," she mused, "my man's been dead."
"Yes, I raise flowers for his grave. You see
He loved the flowers and the soft green frass
And it is lonely where he sleeps and he...
Must miss me, want me, so I always pass
The little plot at evening...But alas!

Death comes so slow, with lagging steps...that pause...
Before they reach me." "Why," I said, "It would seem
That you could find another love...another cause...
To strive for...Do you have no babes...or dream
No dreams, nor see the future all a gleam—
With promise?" She clutched the flowers, her thin form
Shook with emotion. "Because I had two
When he fell off the painter's Scaffold...and was torn...
Right out of life... I knew not what to do...
I worked, I begged, I stole. And God, he knew,
I was so faint and sick in that foul air,...
My babes were hungry and my life was dust.
...I gave my body for them...They were fair
And young—with trustful eyes—I felt I must
Do all things for them,...even those of lust.
The law came down upon me with a din,...
It took them both away—my babes—it said...
I was a thing of shame and marked with sin
And babes were pure in heart and must be led
In whiter ways than mine,...who was not wed!
And I grow flowers in a little box
High in a window in a dark old street...
Where children never come, to smile at phlox
Or marigold or primrose...There I meet
Only the wretched...still my heart does beat—
For Death must very old have grown, he does not
Knock upon my battered door or lurk
Beside my flowers." We rode on.—Thus have you wrought,
Oh, gloating "*men of God*" who bow and smirk,
...Call you this *white* soul *black*?...
Is this your holy work?

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