

## THE UNREQUITED.

BY MRS SEBA SMITH.

"Few are the hearts whence one sane touch  
Bids the sweet waters flow."—MRS. HEMANS.

A. D. 1665 and '66 were years of peculiar disaster to the great city of London. A world in itself, the fate of empires might be decided in one portion, while the other should feast and revel and slumber in quietude. Well that it is so: for should its whole immense population awake, as by a single impulse, the world might stand aghast at the dread pulsation of myriad hearts beating to one throb.

Yet the hoary city, that had not as yet lost the foot-prints of the Cæsar, vast and ancient as it was even at the period of which we are speaking, was filled with awe and consternation by the presence of the two great scourges of a populous district. First, the pestilence swept its thousands into hurried graves; and then fire came to consume that which, maybe, lacked claimants for ever.

It would be difficult to say which strikes most appallingly upon the ear of the listener—the long, measured peal of the bell telling that a soul has departed, that the disquiet heart has ceased its weary pulsations; or the same sound heard day by day, picturing the lurid atmosphere, glaring upon pale and despairing faces, that reveal want, and exile, and bereavement.

Oh! many, very many, are the sorrows of humanity, and we learn to look placidly upon the still faces of the dead, in that they have ceased from their labours. Woe cometh in every state, and however great may be that in reserve, the present is sure to tax the limits of endurance.

1665. Unhappy London! scarcely at rest from the scourge of civil war; fostering a prodigal and licentious court; this year pestilence—the next conflagration!

Hour by hour the bellman tolled the long heavy peal for the departed. It ceased—no one asked why—but the cart for the dead lumbered onward with one more added to its weight. Silence, dim and oppressive, settled upon the devoted city. Streets were walled up, and the victims left to perish. A gray atmosphere, still and dense, enshrouded all things, and men longed in vain for the free air that might tell of stream and woodland.

Families of wealth and distinction had fled to the country, and the poor were left to die. The artisan toiled at his bench, counting the dead-carts as they passed the door, and anon all is hushed within. Children prattled at night, and in the  
210

morning the hearth is desolate. The poor! alas, they have human hearts!

There was one district as yet untouched by the pestilence. Here were wealth and refinement, space and foliage, and surely these might claim exemption. Love and beauty were there, also; Charles —— had taken to himself a lovely wife, and not many months of their bridal had as yet transpired.

Is love stronger than death? Will it abide the pestilence? Will it watch and pray, weeping and loving, ever the same, though disease and care may mar the divine lineaments? Surely yes, for it is ever young, changeless with time, place, or circumstance.

Yet who shall apply the test? The maiden overflowing with her own innocent emotions, imputes a like degree to her lover, and is deluded by her own affluence. The lover, in the impetuosity of his passion, imagines the reserve of his mistress but maidenly refinement, and thus is self-deceived. Life, life! dread are thy mysteries.

"I am ill, Kate, ill;" and the bridegroom threw himself upon a couch, and reclined his head upon the shoulder of her who had sworn love till death.

Kate shrunk from his side, and looked anxiously in his face. She started to her feet, exclaiming—"Charles, Charles, it is the plague!"

"The plague, dearest!—then let us die thus." And he drew her to his bosom, and impressed a long fervent kiss upon the fair brow.

The wife struggled for releasement, and he opened his arms with a look that told the sickness was at the heart. He staggered to the mirror. Already was the damp gathering upon his brow.

"One kiss, Kate, one last, and then fly—leave me to my fate."

She hesitated—death was in the touch. Yet hers was a woman's heart, and she knelt down and threw her arms around the neck of the doomed man. When she arose, both were ashy pale.

"Farewell, Charles," and she turned to the door, lingered a moment, and was gone.

"My God! she loves me not," he cried, starting from the couch; "I, who would have periled life itself for her. This is death. Death! death—I have passed it even now!" and he buried his face in his hands and shivered convulsively.

Hour after hour passed by—there had been

hurry and departure. Death had entered every threshold, servants fled the tainted dwellings, and the dead and the dying were alone. Silence brooded over the once gay district, and no sound was heard but the slow creak of the dead-cart.

"She loves me not!" Yet Kate did love, as the world goes. Hers were the tender blandishments of her sex, fitted for gay saloon and summer-day dalliance; dreaming never of the severe test of suffering, disease, solitude. She loved as the world love.

Hour after hour passed away. A slender figure had paced in front of the splendid mansion, looking earnestly at the silent windows, and then with drooping head moved onward, only to return and repeat the scrutiny. As the twilight deepened, the girl, for the figure was that of a pale slender woman of little more than twenty, it may be,—the girl stopped, and seemed surprised that no lights appeared.

She approached the door—in the hurry of retreat it had been left ajar—she slowly ascended the spacious halls, and timidly laid her hand upon the latch of a door whence issued faint murmurings of distress. She paused—the sounds were repeated—she gently undid the fastening, and entered.

Instantly the shawl dropped from her shoulders, and a slight but symmetrical form knelt at the couch of the sufferer. She threw her arms about him, and drew the head, damp with suffering, to her bosom. She impressed one kiss of agony upon the pale brow, and then lifted up her head and drew in her breath, as with a sense of suffocation.

She spoke not—but volumes of womanly unutterable tenderness were revealed in the dark eye, over which the brows were now contracted with a sharp expression of agony. The hair was knotted upon the back of the head, leaving the thin but finely chiseled face in strong relief; and as she now sat, with head thrown forward and back, she presented an outline of spiritual beauty rarely equalled.

Gently she bent over the sufferer, and moistened his lip with water from a silver tankard at his side. It revived him, and he talked dreamily.

"Kate, dear Kate, I was sure you wouldn't leave me to die!—to die—what is that? Ah, to sink into darkness—deep, deep unutterable darkness! To become, what?—How I dream! Strange things we, Fred. Pass the glasses—I had a dream just now—a—a—"

Again he sank into silence; and the girl chafed his temples, mute and pale as the sufferer. She poured some elixir from a crystal, and sprinkled his brow.

"Ah, this delicious air, fresh from the hills, how it cools my brain! Laura, have you forgotten the echo between the hills?"

The girl clasped him to her bosom in a passion of tears. The sound of her own name had restored that tenderness of emotion which had been suppressed while the name of another dwelt upon his lips.

All night the lone girl watched by that dread couch. What were solitude and agony, death itself, when shared with the beloved! Wronged, broken-hearted, as she was, her love survived all things. Let the world and its opinions pass. That one emotion, stronger than life, surviving treachery, shame, want, and abasement, was the one ray of heaven not yet extinct in the human soul; the one fibre clinging yet to the good and the true. Angel of mercy! are these things lost upon you? Alas for womanhood!

As the day dawned, the patient sank into a tranquil slumber, and the faint blood stole languidly to the cheek. Laura smiled faintly at the token, and at the same moment a cold shudder passed over her own frame. The devoted girl knew her doom instantly: it was but an exchange of victims. But to die there, even beside the beloved, was it not a blessedness?

A slow heavy tramp along the halls and up the staircase now arrested her attention. The door opened, and two sturdy men approached the couch.

"Not yet, not yet," she whispered, "he will live;" and she pointed to the hue upon the cheek.

The men looked earnestly in the face of the girl, exchanged glances, and retired.

Laura arose, replenished the goblet of water, and smoothed back the masses of dark hair from the brow of the sufferer. A cold sickness shook her frame, and she turned aside as fearful she might re-impart the poison of death.

But her woman's adhesive tenderness returned, and she laid her head upon his bosom and wept freely.

"God bless you, dear, dearest Charles!" she murmured faintly.

Hour after hour passed away, and that stricken head rested upon the heart of the sleeper.

Poor Laura! she would have meekly died at his feet; but she perished there, even on the breast of him who alone had touched the deep fountains of her life.

Again was heard that heavy tramp, tramp, along the corridor. The men approached, and gently raised the head of Laura: the sleeper started wildly up, and clasped the form to his bosom.

"Kate, my own Kate!" Alas, poor Laura! I am glad thou didst not hear it: it would have given the last drop of bitterness to thy overflowing cup. Thou didst die with a sweet illusion gathering about thee, of hearts that change not, and that love not in vain.