



## CHRISTMAS EVE.

My footsteps crisp along the frozen snow,  
 And horses toss out nostrils full of gold;  
 The very stillness seems to reek with cold,  
 While shivering travelers hurry to and fro.  
 Pale stars glance from the violet sky—and slow  
 Comes the vibrating moon, flaming and bold;  
 Christ's holy night sinks downward, fold on fold.  
 I feel the great world's pulses thrill—and oh!  
 Listen! I hear its sad heart beat, beat, beat.  
 Here in this chapel merry children sing:  
 Hearth fires leap red in homes; and glad and sweet,  
 The Christmas bells of earth and heaven ring:  
 "Peace and good cheer" to all—save me alone,  
 Who know no peace because of one lost tone.

The opal is love, and the pure, flaming, unquenchable light that trembles in its heart is passion. Tell me—who is so passionless, so lost to an appreciation of the highest beauty, that he could desire the opal without that pure flame burning in its heart.

I have had a good deal to say in these pages to the young and the frivolous and the vain; and now I shall have my little say—whether they like it or not—to the old and the sad and the melancholy ones of the earth. If you have a grave in your heart, for heaven's sake don't weep over it at Christmas time; or, if you must, then lock yourself in your room where no one may see you. Do not be the death's-head at the feast. This should be a time of peace and good cheer, and because you chance to be old and sorrowful, do not try to lay the black cloak of your grief upon the shoulders of happy people. Once I was at a dinner party where the old and the young were gathered together, and we were merry and light-hearted, indeed, until, suddenly, one old, white-haired man assumed the most God-forsaken expression I ever saw, and said, in a solemn, grave-yard kind of tone: "Dear! dear! I have just had a presentiment that we will never gather together in this way again! I feel that something awful is going to occur." And, indeed, the "awful something" had already occurred—the croaker had opened his horrible mouth and croaked; the death's-head had grinned and the skeleton's bones had rattled at our feast, and all the cheer and jollity had fled, affrighted. What chills of horror danced up and down our backs, and what scared glances flashed from one face to another! Somebody must surely die before another year had rolled round. Which one would it be—the golden-curl'd child at my side, the strong, brave father opposite, the gentle mother, or would it be I? I do not mind confessing that I entertained a wicked, and rather vicious, hope that it would be the croaker himself. Each heart has its own bitterness, and old sorrows, I know, rise up with sadder eyes at Christmas than at any other time; but if, when the bells ring soft and glad on that sacred morn, you can think of nothing but the graves beneath the snow, do not mar the joys of others by letting the shadows of that old grief fall upon them, too. There is beauty even in grief when it is unselfish.

Christmas eve. Outside the night is clear and cold, with a great moon swinging adown the sky and all God's silver eyes watching, watching. The whole day long heaven's white snow blossoms have fallen—sadly and ceaselessly, like the tears of women—and piled themselves into soft banks

over the fields and meadows, across the pasture lands and the fallow places, and against the hedges; they have bent down the boughs of the strongest firs and pines, and nestled around the tree trunks, warming with their very coldness; they have kissed and fallen away from the last roses and chrysanthemums out in the gardens, and they have clung to the drooping branches of the weeping willow over the well; yea, they have covered over—all those sweet snow flowers—every lonely grave that a while ago was green on the hill that slopes to the river. The night is like a great diamond lying on some restless woman's breast, glistening anew with each breath that flutters from her lips; but the night's breath is colder and crueler than was ever the breath of woman, and its heart beats with varied passions, too strong and lion-like to be controlled. Past my window the footsteps go, this way and that way—the footsteps of the countless people who live in my world, and who know the same hopes, ambitions, loves, failures, sins—footsteps of the old and the young, the gay and the lonely, the happy and the sorrowful, the eager and the hopeless. Ah, me! you can read every soul if you only listen to the steps that go past your window. And how they crisp to-night as they press the sparkling snow! And oh! how some of them falter and stumble for the need of a strong hand to guide them—and how often do you and I reach out that hand? I wonder if they haunt you to-night as they go past. They haunt me, for with them are mingled the footsteps of many who are dead, and to whom I might have reached a helping hand. I hear them more plainly than any others. Dead, sorrowful eyes look at me, too, from out the past. Is there not one dead to whom you, also, might have been more kind and tender? Heigho! my room has grown dim and shadowy and the fire is low. The rest of the house is bright and ringing with Christmas cheer; but you and I, love, we will stay here in this quiet place together. Have not all our Christmas eves been so spent, just we two, alone and happy in our great love, heeding not and caring not for the passionate, foolish world about us? Do you remember, dear, how one dull Christmas we were separated, and you wrote me that you leaned out your window in the midnight with the snow falling upon your brow and listened to the glad, soft bells while you thought of me? Come closer, dear heart! Somehow, to-night I seem to want you so—I seem to need you so—my very heart aches to have you closer. It is almost as if I knew you could not come; but you can, love. Come closer—closer yet—



kneel down beside me as you used to do, and lay your cool fingers upon mine and lean your cheek on my breast—it is only so that I understand heaven. Do you remember that your gift to me was always a bunch of white flowers, and how once you could find only one pale rosebud? How I loved you! How I do love you—kind heaven! I have been dreaming, alone in the dark. I have been living again the past, and I had forgot that the snow blossoms are white on your grave, too, this night.