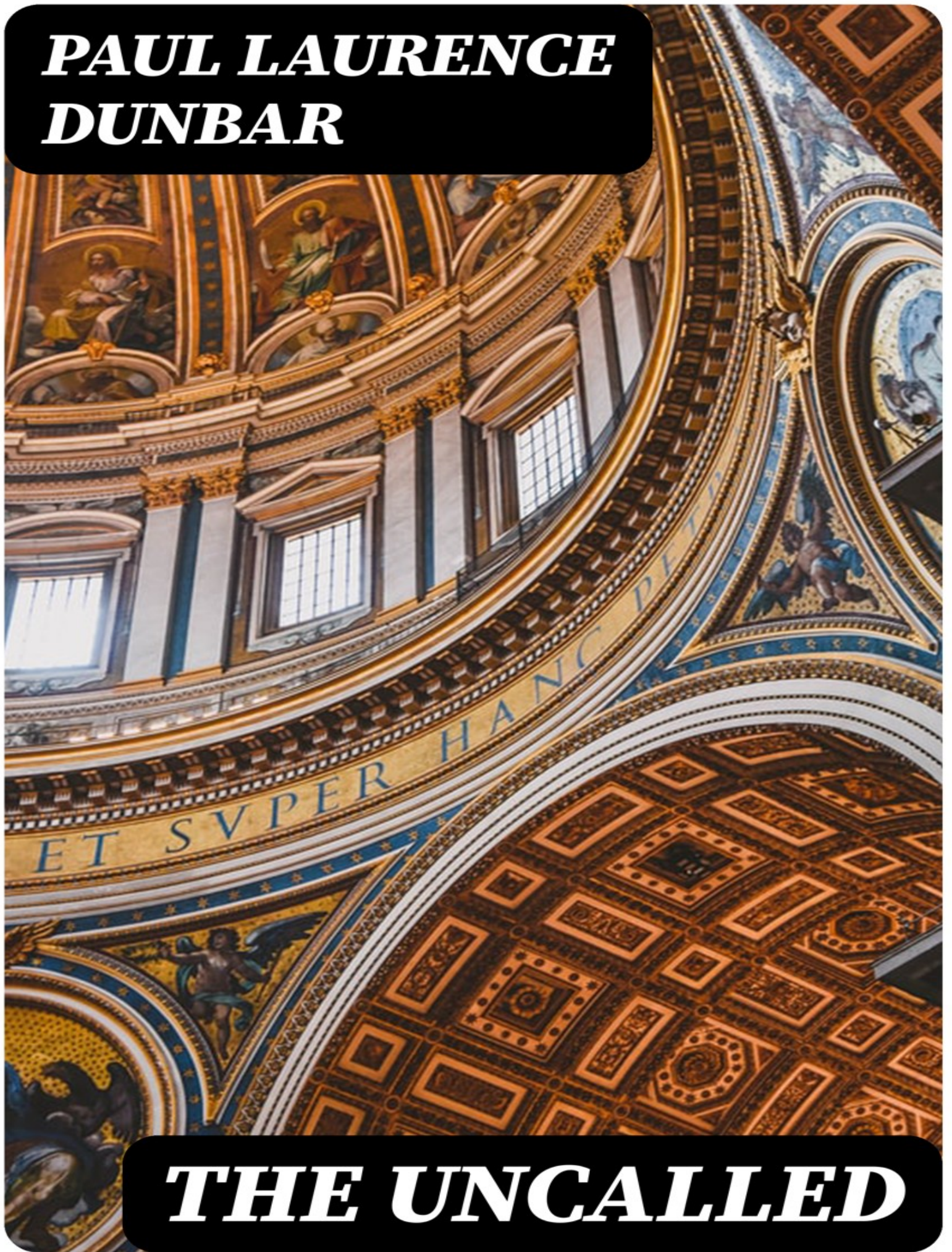


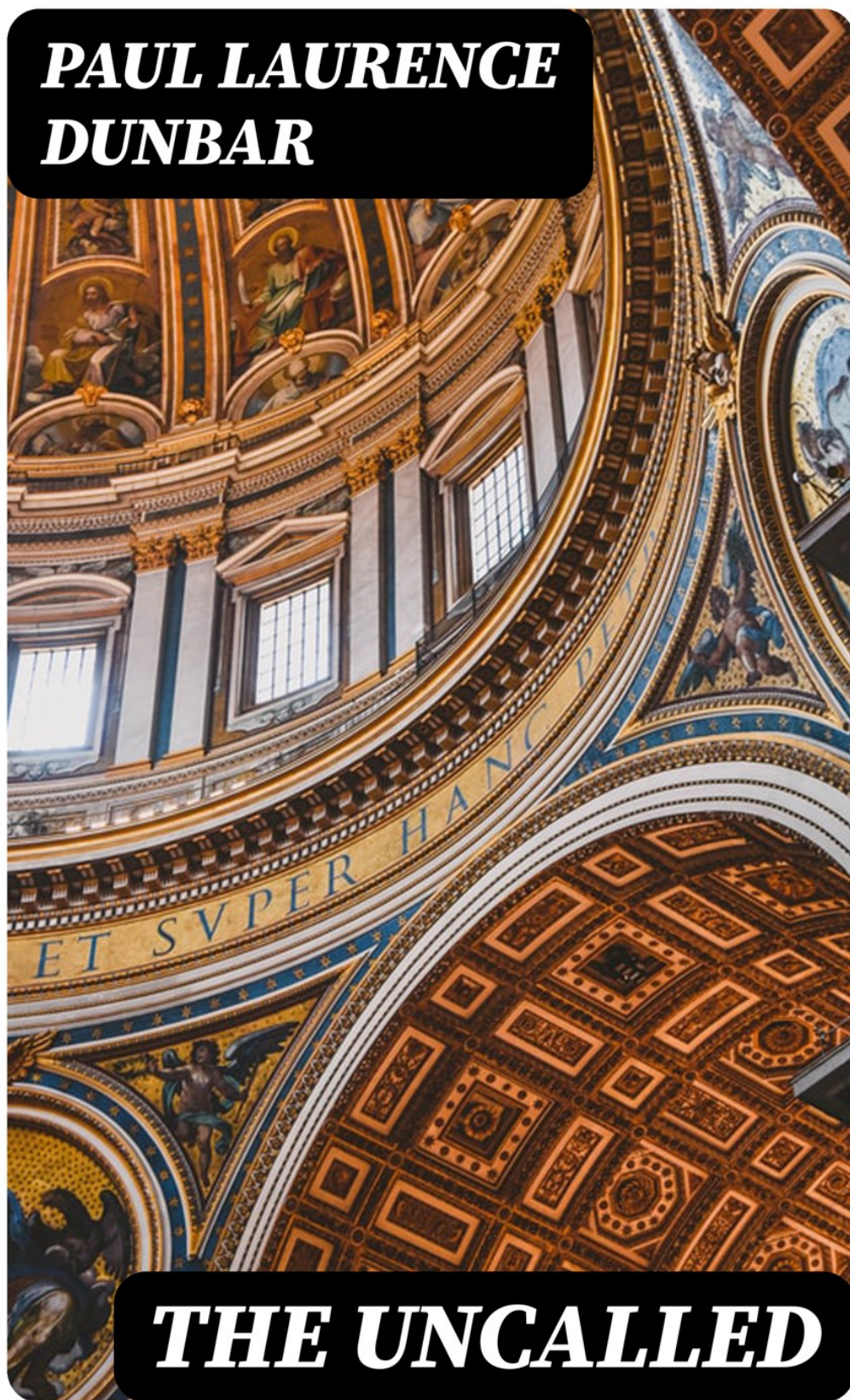
***PAUL LAURENCE  
DUNBAR***



***THE UNCALLED***



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**THE UNCALLED**

**Paul Laurence Dunbar**

# **The Uncalled**

**A Novel**

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

[CHAPTER I](#)

[CHAPTER II](#)

[CHAPTER III](#)

[CHAPTER IV](#)

[CHAPTER V](#)

[CHAPTER VI](#)

[CHAPTER VII](#)

[CHAPTER VIII](#)

[CHAPTER IX](#)

[CHAPTER X](#)

[CHAPTER XI](#)

[CHAPTER XII](#)

[CHAPTER XIII](#)

[CHAPTER XIV](#)

[CHAPTER XV](#)

[CHAPTER XVI](#)

[CHAPTER XVII](#)

# CHAPTER I

## Table of Contents

IT was about six o'clock of a winter's morning. In the eastern sky faint streaks of grey had come and were succeeded by flashes of red, crimson-cloaked heralds of the coming day. It had snowed the day before, but a warm wind had sprung up during the night, and the snow had partially melted, leaving the earth showing through in ugly patches of yellow clay and sooty mud. Half despoiled of their white mantle, though with enough of it left to stand out in bold contrast to the bare places, the houses loomed up, black, dripping, and hideous. Every once in a while the wind caught the water as it trickled from the eaves, and sent it flying abroad in a chill unsparkling spray. The morning came in, cold, damp, and dismal.

At the end of a short, dirty street in the meanest part of the small Ohio town of Dexter stood a house more sagging and dilapidated in appearance than its disreputable fellows. From the foundation the walls converged to the roof, which seemed to hold its place less by virtue of nails and rafters than by faith. The whole aspect of the dwelling, if dwelling it could be called, was as if, conscious of its own meanness, it was shrinking away from its neighbours and into itself. A sickly light gleamed from one of the windows. As the dawn came into the sky, a woman came to the door and looked out. She was a slim woman, and her straggling, dusty-coloured hair hung about an unpleasant sallow face. She shaded her eyes with her hand, as if the faint light could

hurt those cold, steel-grey orbs. "It 's mornin'," she said to those within. "I 'll have to be goin' along to git my man's breakfast: he goes to work at six o'clock, and I 'ain't got a thing cooked in the house fur him. Some o' the rest o' you 'll have to stay an' lay her out." She went back in and closed the door behind her.

"La, Mis' Warren, you ain't a-goin' a'ready? Why, there 's everything to be done here yit: Margar't 's to be laid out, an' this house has to be put into some kind of order before the undertaker comes."

"I should like to know what else I 'm a-goin' to do, Mis' Austin. Charity begins at home. My man 's got to go to work, an' he 's got to have his breakfast: there 's cares fur the livin' as well as fur the dead, I say, an' I don't believe in tryin' to be so good to them that 's gone that you furgit them that 's with you."

Mrs. Austin pinched up her shrivelled face a bit more as she replied, "Well, somebody ought to stay. I know I can't, fur I 've got a ter'ble big washin' waitin' fur me at home, an' it 's been two nights sence I 've had any sleep to speak of, watchin' here. I 'm purty near broke down."

"That 's jest what I 've been a-sayin'," repeated Mrs. Warren. "There 's cares fur the livin' as well as fur the dead; you 'd ought to take care o' yoreself: first thing you know you 'll be flat o' yore own back."

A few other women joined their voices in the general protest against staying. It was for all the world as if they had been anxious to see the poor woman out of the world, and, now that they knew her to be gone, had no further concern

for her. All had something to do, either husbands to get off to work or labours of their own to perform.

A little woman with a weak voice finally changed the current of talk by saying, "Well, I guess I kin stay: there 's some cold things at home that my man kin git, an' the childern 'll git off to school by themselves. They 'll all understand."

"That 's right, Melissy Davis," said a hard-faced woman who had gone on about some work she was doing, without taking any notice of the clamorous deserters, "an' I 'll stay with you. I guess I 've got about as much work to do as any of you," she added, casting a cold glance at the women who were now wrapped up and ready to depart, "an' I was n't so much of a friend of Margar't's as some of you, neither, but on an occasion like this I know what dooty is." And Miss Hester Prime closed her lips in a very decided fashion.

"Oh, well, some folks is so well off in money an' time that they kin afford to be liberal with a pore creature like Margar't, even ef they did n't have nothin' to do with her before she died."

Miss Prime's face grew sterner as she replied, "Margar't Brent was n't my kind durin' life, an' that I make no bones o' sayin' here an' now; but when she got down on the bed of affliction I done what I could fur her along with the best of you; an' you, Mandy Warren, that 's seen me here day in an' day out, ought to be the last one to deny that. Furthermore, I did n't advise her to leave her husband, as some people did, but I did put in a word an' help her to work so 's to try to keep her straight afterwards, though it ain't fur me to be a-

braggin' about what I done, even to offset them that did n't do nothin'."

This parting shot told, and Mrs. Warren flared up like a wax light. "It 's a wonder yore old tracts an' the help you give her did n't keep her sober sometimes."

"Ef I could n't keep her sober, I was n't one o' them that set an' took part with her when she was gittin' drunk."

"'Sh! 'sh!" broke in Mrs. Davis: "ef I was you two I would n't go on that way. Margar't 's dead an' gone now, an' what 's past is past. Pore soul, she had a hard enough time almost to drive her to destruction; but it 's all over now, an' we ought to put her away as peaceful as possible."

The women who had all been in such a hurry had waited at the prospect of an altercation, but, seeing it about to blow over, they bethought themselves of their neglected homes and husbands, and passed out behind the still irate Mrs. Warren, who paused long enough in earshot to say, "I hope that spiteful old maid 'll have her hands full."

The scene within the room which the women had just left was anything but an inviting one. The place was miserably dirty. Margaret had never been a particularly neat housewife, even in her well days. The old rag carpet which disfigured the floor was worn into shreds and blotched with grease, for the chamber was cooking- and dining- as well as sleeping-room. A stove, red with rust, struggled to send forth some heat. The oily black kerosene lamp showed a sickly yellow flame through the grimy chimney.

On a pallet in one corner lay a child sleeping. On the bed, covered with a dingy sheet, lay the stark form out of which the miserable life had so lately passed.



The women opened the blinds, blew out the light, and began performing the necessary duties for the dead.

"Anyhow, let her body go clean before her Maker," said Miss Hester Prime, severely.

"Don't be too hard on the pore soul, Miss Hester," returned Mrs. Davis. "She had a hard time of it. I knowed Margar't when she was n't so low down as in her last days."

"She ought n't never to 'a' left her husband."

"Oh, ef you 'd 'a' knowed him as I did, Miss Hester, you would n't never say that. He was a brute: sich beatin's as he used to give her when he was in liquor you never heerd tell of."

"That was hard, but as long as he was a husband he was a protection to her name."

"True enough. Protection is a good dish, but a beatin's a purty bitter sauce to take with it."

"I wonder what 's ever become of Brent."

"Lord knows. No one 'ain't heerd hide ner hair o' him sence he went away from town. People thought that he was a-hangin' around tryin' to git a chance to kill Mag after she got her divorce from him, but all at once he packed off without sayin' a word to anybody. I guess he's drunk himself to death by this time."

When they had finished with Margaret, the women set to work to clean up the house. The city physician who had attended the dead woman in her last hours had reported the case for county burial, and the undertaker was momentarily expected.

"We 'll have to git the child up an' git his pallet out of the way, so the floor kin be swept."

"A body hates to wake the pore little motherless dear."

"Perhaps, after all, the child is better off without her example."

"Yes, Miss Hester, perhaps; but a mother, after all, is a mother."

"Even sich a one as this?"

"Even sich a one as this."

Mrs. Davis bent over the child, and was about to lift him, when he stirred, opened his eyes, and sat up of his own accord. He appeared about five years of age. He might have been a handsome child, but hardship and poor feeding had taken away his infantile plumpness, and he looked old and haggard, even beneath the grime on his face. The kindly woman lifted him up and began to dress him.

"I want my mamma," said the child.

Neither of the women answered: there was something tugging at their heart-strings that killed speech.

Finally the little woman said, "I don't know ef we did right to let him sleep through it all, but then it was sich a horrible death."

When she had finished dressing the child, she led him to the bed and showed him his mother's face. He touched it with his little grimy finger, and then, as if, young as he was, the realization of his bereavement had fully come to him, he burst into tears.

Miss Hester turned her face away, but Mrs. Davis did not try to conceal her tears. She took the boy up in her arms and comforted him the best she could.

"Don't cry, Freddie," she said; "don't cry; mamma's—restin'. Ef you don't care, Miss Prime, I 'll take him over

home an' give him some breakfast, an' leave him with my oldest girl, Sophy. She kin stay out o' school to-day. I 'll bring you back a cup o' tea, too; that is, ef you ain't afeared—"

"Afeared o' what?" exclaimed Miss Prime, turning on her.

"Well, you know, Miss Hester, bein' left alone—ah—some people air funny about—"

"I 'm no fool, Melissy Davis. Take the child an' go on."

Miss Hester was glad of the chance to be sharp. It covered the weakness to which she had almost given way at sight of the child's grief. She bustled on about her work when Mrs. Davis was gone, but her brow was knit into a wrinkle of deep thought. "A mother is a mother, after all," she mused aloud, "even sich a one."

## CHAPTER II

### [Table of Contents](#)

**F**OR haste, for unadulterated despatch, commend me to the county burying. The body politic is busy and has no time to waste on an inert human body. It does its duty to its own interest and to the pauper dead when the body is dropped with all celerity into the ground. The county is philosophical: it says, "Poor devil, the world was unkind to him: he 'll be glad to get out of it: we 'll be doing him a favour to put him at the earliest moment out of sight and sound and feeling of the things that wounded him. Then, too, the quicker the cheaper, and that will make it easier on the taxpayers." This latter is so comforting! So the order is written, the funeral is rushed through, and the county goes home to its dinner, feeling well satisfied with itself,—so potent are the consolations of philosophy at so many hundreds per year.

To this general order poor Margaret's funeral proved no exception. The morning after her decease she was shrouded and laid in her cheap pine coffin to await those last services which, in a provincial town, are the meed of saint and sinner alike. The room in which she lay was very clean,—unnaturally so,—from the attention of Miss Prime. Clean muslin curtains had been put up at the windows, and the one cracked mirror which the house possessed had been covered with white cloth. The lace-like carpet had been taken off the floor, and the boards had been scrubbed white. The little stove in the corner, now cold, was no longer red with rust. In a tumbler on a little table at Margaret's head



stood the only floral offering that gave a touch of tenderness to the grim scene,—a bunch of home-grown scarlet and white geraniums. Some woman had robbed her wintered room of this bit of brightness for the memory of the dead. The perfume of the flowers mingled heavily with the faint odour which pervades the chamber of death,—an odour that is like the reminiscence of sorrow.

Like a spirit of order, with solemn face and quiet tread, Miss Hester moved about the room, placing one thing here, another there, but ever doing or changing something, all with maidenly neatness. What a childish fancy this is of humanity's, tiptoeing and whispering in the presence of death, as if one by an incautious word or a hasty step might wake the sleeper from such deep repose!

The service had been set for two o'clock in the afternoon. One or two women had already come in to "sit," but by half-past one the general congregation began to arrive and to take their places. They were mostly women. The hour of the day was partially responsible for this; but then men do not go to funerals anyway, if they can help it. They do not revel, like their sisters, in the exquisite pleasure of sorrow. Most of the women had known pain and loss themselves, and came with ready sympathy, willing, nay, anxious to be moved to tears. Some of them came dragging by one hand children, dressed stiffly, uncomfortably, and ludicrously,—a medley of soiled ribbons, big collars, wide bows, and very short knickerbockers. The youngsters were mostly curious and ill-mannered, and ever and anon one had to be slapped by its mother into snivelling decorum. Mrs. Davis came in with one

of her own children and leading the dead woman's boy by the hand. At this a buzz of whispered conversation began.

"Pore little dear," said one, as she settled the bow more securely under her own boy's sailor collar,— "pore little dear, he 's all alone in the world."

"I never did see in all my life sich a young child look so sad," said another.

"H'm!" put in a third; "in this world pore motherless childern has plenty o' reason to look sad, I tell you."

She brushed the tears off the cheek of her little son whom she had slapped a moment before. She was tender now.

One woman bent down and whispered into her child's ear as she pointed with one cotton-gloved finger, "See, Johnny, see little Freddie, there; he 'ain't got no mother no more. Pore little Freddie! ain't you sorry fur him?" The child nodded, and gazed with open-eyed wonder at "little Freddie" as if he were of a new species.

The curtains, stirred by the blast through the loose windows, flapped dismally, and the people drew their wraps about them, for the fireless room was cold. Steadily, insistently, the hive-like drone of conversation murmured on.

"I wonder who 's a-goin' to preach the funeral," asked one.

"Oh, Mr. Simpson, of the Methodist Church, of course: she used to go to that church years ago, you know, before she backslid."

"That 's jest what I 've allus said about people that falls from grace. You know the last state o' that man is worse

than the first."

"Ah, that 's true enough."

"It 's a-puttin' yore hand to the ploughshare an' then turnin' back."

"I wonder what the preacher 'll have to say fur her. It 's a mighty hard case to preach about."

"I 'm wonderin' too what he 'll say, an' where he 'll preach her."

"Well, it 's hard to tell. You know the Methodists believe that there 's 'salvation to be found between the stirrup an' the ground."

"It 's a mighty comfortin' doctern, too."

"An' then they do say that she left some dyin' testimony; though I 'ain't never heerd tell the straight of it."

"He can't preach her into heaven, o' course, after her life. Leastways it don't hardly seem like it would be right an' proper."

"Well, I don't think he kin preach her into hell, neither. After a woman has gone through all that pore Margar't has, it seems to me that the Lord ought to give her some consideration, even if men don't."

"I do declare, Seely Matthews, with yore free thinkin' an' free speakin', you 're put' nigh a infidel."

"No, I ain't no infidel, neither, but I ain't one o' them that sings, 'When all thy mercies, O my God,' and thinks o' the Lord as if He was a great big cruel man."

"Well, I don't neither; but—"

""Sh! 'sh!"

The woman's declaration of principle was cut short by the entrance of the minister, the Rev. Mr. Simpson. He was a

tall, gaunt man, in a coat of rusty black. His hair, of an indeterminate colour, was slightly mixed with grey. A pair of bright grey eyes looked out from underneath bushy eyebrows. His lips were close set. His bony hands were large and ungainly. The Rev. Mr. Simpson had been a carpenter before he was "called." He went immediately to the stand where lay the Bible and hymn-book. He was followed by a man who had entered with him,—a man with soft eyes and a kindly face. He was as tall as the pastor, and slender, but without the other's gauntness. He was evidently a church official of some standing.

With strange inappropriateness, the preacher selected and gave out the hymn:

Sister, thou wast mild and lovely,  
Gentle as the summer's breeze.

With some misgivings, it was carried through in the wavering treble of the women and the straggling bass of the few men: then the kindly-faced man, whom the preacher addressed as "Brother Hodges," knelt and offered prayer. The supplication was very tender and childlike. Even by the light of faith he did not seek to penetrate the veil of divine intention, nor did he throw his javelin of prayer straight against the Deity's armour of eternal reserve. He left all to God, as a child lays its burden at its father's feet, and many eyes were moist as the people rose from their knees.

The sermon was a noisy and rather inconsequential effort. The preacher had little to say, but he roared that little out in a harsh, unmusical voice accompanied by much slapping of his hands and pounding of the table. Towards



the end he lowered his voice and began to play upon the feelings of his willing hearers, and when he had won his meed of sobs and tears, when he had sufficiently probed old wounds and made them bleed afresh, when he had conjured up dead sorrows from the grave, when he had obscured the sun of heavenly hope with the vapours of earthly grief, he sat down, satisfied.

The people went forward, some curiously, some with sympathy, to look their last on the miserable dead. Mrs. Davis led the weeping child forward and held him up for a last gaze on his mother's face. The poor geraniums were wiped and laid by the dead hands, and then the undertaker glided in like a stealthy, black-garmented ghost. He screwed the pine-top down, and the coffin was borne out to the hearse. He clucked to his horses, and, with Brother Hodges and the preacher in front, and Mrs. Davis, Miss Prime, and the motherless boy behind, the little funeral train moved down the street towards the graveyard, a common but pathetic spectacle.

Mrs. Warren had remained behind to attend to the house. She watched the short procession out of sight. "I guess Margar't did n't have no linen worth havin'," she said to herself, "but I 'll jest look." And look she did, but without success. In disappointment and disgust she went out and took the streamer of dusty black and dingy white crape from the door where it had fluttered, and, bringing it in, laid it on the empty trestles, that the undertaker might find it when he came for them. She took the cloth off the mirror, and then, with one searching look around to see that she had

missed nothing worth taking, she went out, closing and locking the door behind her.

"I guess I 'm as much entitled to anything Mag had as any one else," said Mrs. Warren.