

*Louise Bryant*

# Flowers and Ashes

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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