ADA CLARE, QUEEN OF BOHEMIA

By Charles Warren Stoddard

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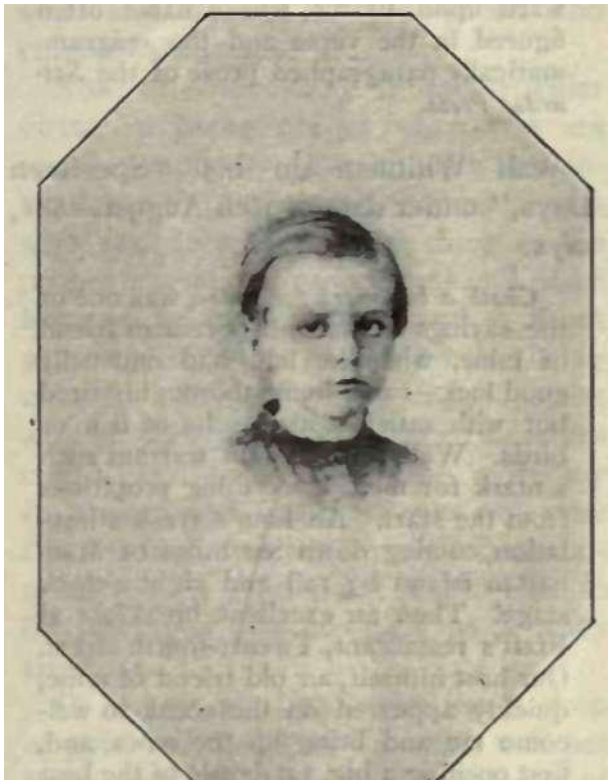

ADA'S LITTLE SON, AUBREY

WORD came to me that a lady was awaiting me in the parlor of the old home in San Francisco. A friend had brought her, a literary friend, and when he presented me I at once recognized her name with a little thrill of pleasure, for she was in my eyes a remarkable woman, and in the eyes of youth remarkable women magnify themselves a thousand fold and are objects of extraordinary interest.

She was of a certain or uncertain age; her complexion of an ivory pallor, untouched by the faintest flush; her eyes were of pansy blue, set wide apart and with almost level brows above them; her hair was short, blonde, wavy, and parted on the side like a boy's, and, like a boy, when the forelock fell too low upon the forehead, she, with an impatient little toss of the head, threw it back into its place. There was an expression of sadness in the eyes and of world weariness in the face that attracted for the pathos in it rather than for any real beauty; the nose was pretty, delicate, "tip-tilted," the right nose for a trim little person with a past.

W. D. Howells, in his "Literary Friends and Acquaintances," the chapter entitled "My Impressions of Literary New York," says:

Apparently Bohemia was not a state that you could well imagine from one encounter, and since my stay in New York was to be very short, I lost no time in acquainting myself with it. That very night I went to the beer cellar, one very far up Broadway, where I was given to know that the bohemian nights were smoked and quaffed away.

It was said, so far west as Ohio, that the Queen of Bohemia sometimes came to Pfaff's — a young girl of a sprightly gift in letters, whose name and pseudonym had made itself pretty well known at that day, and whose fate, pathetic at all times, out-tragedies almost any other in the history of letters. * * *

But this was after her reign had ended, and no such black shadow was cast forward upon Pfaff's, whose name often figured in the verse and the epigrammatically paragraphed prose of the *Saturday Press.*

Walt Whitman in his "Specimen Days," under date of 16th August, 1881, says:

Chalk a big mark for today, was one of the sayings of an old sportsman friend of mine, when he had had unusually good luck—came home thoroughly tired but with satisfactory results of fish or birds. Well, today might warrant such a mark for me. Everything propitious from the start. An hour's fresh stimulation, coming down ten miles of Manhattan island by rail and eight o'clock stage. Then an excellent breakfast at Pfaff's restaurant, Twenty-fourth street. Our host himself, an old friend of mine, quickly appeared on the scene to welcome me and bring up the news, and, first opening a big, fat bottle of the best wine in the cellar, talked about ante-bellum times, '59 and '60, and the jovial suppers at his then Broadway place, near Bleecker street. Oh, the friends and names and frequenters, those times, that place. Most are dead—Ada Clare, Wilkins, Daisy Sheppard, O'Brien, Henry Clapp, Stanley, Mullin, Wood, Brougham, Arnold—all gone. And there Pfaff and I, sitting opposite each other at the little table, gave a remembrance to them in a style they would have themselves fully confirmed, namely, big, brimming, filled up champagne glasses, drained in abstracted silence, very leisurely, to the last drop. Pfaff is a generous German *restauranteur,* silent, stout, jolly and I should say the best selecter of champagne in America.

All gone now, in very truth. Walt Whitman and Pfaff himself and all that was associated with the Bohemia of that day. The queen is dead; but who shall cry "Long live the Queen!" in her stead? Are there no more queens of Bohemia, I wonder, and is the Bohemia of that day a thing of the past, dead and gone forever? Of course it is gone, with all the other goodies, for those who knew it then and have never seen anything like it since and never will to the crack o' doom.

Ada Clare went to California in 1864 and for some time contributed weekly to the columns of the "Golden Era." She was in very good company there Bret Harte's "M'liss" made its first appearance in the "Golden Era"; Mark Twain wrote for it. So did Prentice Mulford, Orpheus C. Kerr, Fitz Hugh Ludlow, Joaquin Miller, and others who were better known later on. She wrote book reviews and dramatic criticisms as well as comments on life and manners in the far West. She wrote with a trained pen, as one having authority, and was not slow to wrath if her sensibilities were wounded. She didn't count the cost, and bye and bye, when she had published a book and made her debut as "Camille," all those whom she had criticised with a free hand turned upon her and rent her limb from limb. This, however, was but one of the varied experiences of which her life was painfully compounded.

Ada Clare, who had come to California in order to share in the trials and triumphs of her friend Adah Isaacs Menken, was now alone, for the Menken had set sail for Europe via Panama and Aspinwall, as Colon was then called. Finding the climate of San Francisco too harsh for her always delicate physique, she resolved to visit Hawaii for a season before returning to the royal realm of Pfaff's. All the members of my family were more or less familiar with the fascinating island kingdom, and Ada Clare had come to ask me where she should put up in Honolulu, and what do from day to day and what wear or not wear.

With the accumulated wisdom of my twenty years I gaily enlightened her, and I think she must have thought me rather amusing than practical or instructive, for she had a keen sense of humor though she was apt to take it rather, seriously.

She sailed away in a bonny barque, for there were no Hawaiian or Australian steamers in those days; and, oddly enough, and quite unexpectedly, too, I followed her in a few weeks. Let me confess at once that I was looking forward with pleasure to a better acquaintance with my distinguished friend, and almost the first question I asked upon being comfortably domiciled in the home of dear old friends, next door to the residence of the minister of foreign relations, His Excellency Robert Crichton Wiley, up Nunanu valley above Honolulu, was as to the whereabouts and howabouts of Miss Ada Clare.

Presto! Every eye was averted, every mouth drawn down. Possibly the little lady upon her arrival had, as was her custom, registered at the only hotel in the metropolis as "Miss Ada Clare and son." There was the son, a bright little fellow of seven or eight, blonde, blue eyed, fragile, frank and forward; and there was she, his mother, as anyone could see with half an eye, and a spinster by her own testimony. Modern miracles are not accepted without question in Hawaii—or were not in those glad days. I was drawn aside by one of the elect of Honolulu and assured, in a low voice, that Ada Clare was, so to speak, an unspeakable person; that I must avoid her as I would the shadow of sin; that she was at that moment on the Island of Hawaii consorting with the goddess Pele who dwelt in the sulphurous depths of the greatest living volcano in the world and that the two were no doubt in their natural element. As for me, I was in no wise to name her or abide her or cause the light of my countenance to shine upon her, for with one accord the self righteous of the kingdom had cast her into outer darkness, and the last end of that woman was a sight to behold !

This, mind you, was in the good old days of royalty and loyalty, before Honolulu had lost its identity and become a kind of tepid Midway Plaisance and a feast of pin wheels and colored lanterns.

Now, of course there is no particular virtue in being proper when you are merely proper by right of birth and inheritance. The naturally proper person says and does the proper thing in the proper way at the proper time and place because he can't help it and is about as worthy of praise as a fish is for being clammy. When an improper person says or does a proper thing he deserves credit, and there should be more joy in heaven and out of it over one case like his than over the nine-hundred-and-ninety-niners who don't know how to be improper and couldn't be if they tried.

Of course any man who has a drop of good red blood in his veins will not listen calmly to the condemnation of a defenceless woman—a stranger in a strange land. It is written, "Judge not that ye be not judged," but you will not find it in the code of the puritanical missionary. On their lips the full hearted national greeting "Aloha!" has no more significance than the every day "Hello" of the telephone girl.

Anybody who knows me knows what I did when Ada Clare returned to Honolulu; I did it then, I would do it now, for I have not changed one particle, and shall not though I were to live a thousand years. I ran and fell upon her neck and kissed her, while the little hills rejoiced on every side, and clapped their hands and skipped like lambs, and the morning stars would have sung together if it hadn't been too late in the day.

There is more of this, but it has been already published and copyrighted, and if you care to read it please look in a little book called "Exits and Entrances," and in the chapter called " In Old Hawaii. "

I could say something of Hawaii right here, had I time and space, of how the old Hawaiians imported a baker's dozen of Puritan missionairies and then laid down their lives in trying to teach these missionaries the significance and the practical application of the Golden Rule and a few other things that our Blessed Lord must have learned from Confucius—though they all seemed to come natural to the children of Hawaii.

Think of a race of savages so exquisitely refined that there is no sibilant in their mother tongue, and all their history was chanted in epic form.

Well. The missionary effort to ostracise Ada Clare failed miserably; those who had at first warned me against her, a little later on begged me to procure her photograph and autograph for them; and she, being charitable and no Christian, forgave them and granted their request in some cases; but let it be borne in mind that not since then, barring the confiscation of Hawaii and the spoliation of the Philippines — America's notorious water cure — has there been anything quite so humiliating in the sight of that Justice who carries her eyes in a sling. Yet why should we repine? He doeth all things well — sometimes.

Ada Clare and I discussed the affairs of the island world together and settled them to our entire satisfaction. We also dreamed of future worlds, of the worlds we should most enjoy. For instance: In my very own island kingdom we shall have revivals for the reviving of blissful ignorance and prayer meetings where we can pray our enemies to death.

My kingdom come!

Ada Clare sailed away from Hawaii with flying colors. His excellency the minister of foreign relations came down to see her off—and I was to be her fortunate fellow voyager. There was a mere handful of us in the cozy cabin of that packet, not more than five or for six, and she was the only lady passenger.

Often the wind blew gloriously and we were all keyed up to concert pitch; but there were days of calm and days of storm and sometimes the hours were dull enough. They would have been infinitely duller were it not for the warm friendship that had sprung up between us. We had the little after cabin, usually reserved for ladies, for a kind of club room, where we could talk our fill of books and authors and plays and players. There also the child, Aubrey, was fond of mingling in the conversation with a pleasing precocity that at times bordered upon the prophetic. He had said to me, in an off-hand way, as if it might or might not interest me, and I could take note of it or not, as I pleased: "When we are traveling together, I don't call my mamma 'Mamma;' I call her 'Ada Clare.'"

"And why do you do that?"

"O, she thinks it better, on the whole. People do not understand us— they do not know who we are!"

One afternoon I had, at his urgent request, fashioned a rude instrument out of a bit of hoop and string and with an improvised bow he was fiddling upon it. I was thinking of infant geniuses and their small beginnings and wondering if the spark divine lay smouldering in that undeveloped brain. On a sudden he said—there had been an unusually long pause in our confidential chat:

"Mamma, I know who my father is."

"Who is your father?"

"O, Gottschalk's my father."

"What makes you think so?"

"O, don't you know that whenever we are in the same city with him he sends me tickets for all his concerts? And then he gave me a suit of soldier's clothes, just because I wanted them, and a sword and a gun and ever so many other things. I'm sure he is my father."

"That is a funny reason, and you are a funny boy," said Ada Clare.

He was a wise child.

When we arrived in San Francisco Ada Clare, much improved in health and spirits, resolved to appear before the footlights. Tom Maguire, known in those days as the Napoleon of Drama on the Pacific coast, had made Ada Clare a good offer to appear on the stage of the old Maguire's Opera House. She had chosen for her debut a role that is the joy and the despair and too often the destruction of the debutant— "Camille." I sat with a little group of friends that night, in a house that was by no means crowded, and shared in sympathy the hysterical wailing with its pulmonary punctuation, and the pitiful stage fright of my poor friend. Frank Mayo was the Armand of the evening, and he played his part with unusual depth of feeling.

Camille herself was a novice, and the requirements of the role were evidently beyond her powers. She was clad in costumes that were not indicative of splendid misery. She was surrounded by players who did little to support her. She had criticised their efforts; now their hour had come and they, I fear, rather enjoyed her discomfiture, which was greatly increased by the cat-calls of a noisy and heartless gallery—perhaps they thought they were not getting their money's worth. I have never forgotten how, when the curtain had descended upon the gaming scene, where Armand scatters his gold and his sarcasm with equal prodigality and great theatrical effect, and Camille on this occasion was lamentably inadequate to the occasion, the gallery sent up a howl of derision that brought Frank Mayo before the curtain. He said nothing, but the scorn and defiance in one glance of his magnificent eyes silenced that brutal mob.

The humiliation of her disastrous failure— even the fraternal press did not spare her— hastened Ada Clare's departure from California; and, of course, being young enough to be ingenuous, I felt as if I must blush for the land of my adoption and the unchivalrous manner in which it had despised and rejected a rather forlorn little woman.

She, thank heaven, soon recovered herself, for she had a deal of common sense and no little philosophy. She returned to her loyal subjects at Pfaff's, took up her pen, and, for a time, gave up her cherished plan of adopting the stage as a profession.

Squibs were fired at her when she was out of reach; the local columns of the dailies and weeklies grew ribald in memory of her theatrical "fiasco." But such is the complexion of the latter day ragtime humorists, whose laborious comedy is gradually eclipsing the gaiety of nations.

That she was a good and true friend, and was happy for a time at least, I think is proven by the following:

LAKELAND, Sept 14th, 1865. Dear Mr. Stoddard: —

Your letter came to hand a day or two later than was necessary owing to the fact of my not being in New York at present. I have hired a lovely furnished cottage on the shores of

a beautiful lake on Long Island, and am here rusticating for the Summer. I have my friends up in turn to visit me and have had a jolly season. The bathing and boating are scarcely a step from my doors and the garden is full of fresh vegetables and fruit. Both Aubrey and I are actually petted to death by our neighbors, who are, with a few exceptions, old fashioned, substantial farmers. They vie with each other to see which can send me the daintiest little articles of cookery, etc. As they put everything at my disposal, their boats, horses, wagons and all the resources of their households, it is easy to see what a pleasant time I have been able to have. I have learned to row a boat well, and in my turn have taught Aubrey to row and to swim. He is the robustest little rascal in the country now, very different from what he was in the poisonous winds and malarious atmosphere of San Francisco. I too am cured of the neuralgia that was indigenous to California. I cannot plead delicacy any more, for I am as strong as an omnibus.

By the way, I wonder if Frank [Bret] Harte will be displeased by my publishing in the *New York 'Review* his name and authorship of the " Condensed Novels." They are very clever, and he has a high order of merit and ought to be better known. I get so many offers of literary work that I don't know what to do with them. I never refuse — by acknowledging the truth that my whole time is occupied — but I charge them such unconscionable prices that they are obliged to say they cannot afford it. I have finished a novel but I do not know if I shall have sufficient confidence in myself to put it in the hands of a publisher.

Send me some of your best short poemsand I will have them published for you. I only wish I could turn over the work I have offered to me, to you; then you could come on to New York and earn name, fame and livelihood. For my part, if things settle up so as to restore properties now considered lost in the South, I shall withdraw from the literary domain, for you know I never loved it, which is probably the reason why I have not failed in it. If you ever think of coming East you must find me out if you only pass through New York. I engage to make the city not seem strange and cheerless to you, at the least. It's a darling old town to my taste. Write to me again and believe me to be always your friend. ADA CLARE.

It will be noted from the nature of her reception in Long Island that the Puritan missionary spirit did not prevail there.

In 1866, Mr. Doolady—ominous name! —published in New York Ada Clare's one novel, her only book so far as I know; it was entitled "Only a Woman's Heart." That of course reminds one of the bawdy Dean of St. Patrick's, Dublin—sometimes called a wit, who wrote on the envelope containing all that was left of the woman whose heart he broke—"Only a Woman's Hair."

On the title page of Ada Clare's novel a celebrated catch phrase is misquoted from "Hamlet," which is the more surprising since she was a lover of Shakespeare and familiar with his works. The quotation pitches the key note of this wail of a woman's heart:—

"If it be now 'tis not to come;
If it be not to come it will be now;
If it be not now, yet it will come — The readiness is all."

The hero of this tale—Victor Doria— is a composite creation, one combining the fickle fascination of Gottschalk, the once idolized pianist and composer, and the art of Edwin Booth. Anyone who remembers the school girl's concert favorite of forty years ago will perhaps see something of him, in his prime, shadowed forth in the following passage :—

The being whose name had been mysteriously announced as beginning with a V, was a young man of partly foreign blood. * * *

His was a listless face, manifestly wanting in color and almost wanting in expression, unless a smile played over it, and then all the languid, apathetic features broke up into sunshine, and the whole face was irradiated as with an inward light. Something tender about the mouth and sorrowful about the eyes might easily have been snares by which a woman's fancy could be caught and perhaps held.

Alas! Yes; many a time and oft.

"Poor Victor loved the society of women, as all fascinating men do," says the author of "Only a Woman's Heart." The heroine of this story is a hoydenish brunette who fell a victim to his wiles.

"An unknown friend to Laura Milsland cautions her against a strange young man with whom she became acquainted last Summer, whose name it will be needless to mention. That young man is possessed of a dangerous fascination, which it would not be wise for an inexperienced young lady to tamper with. Any communication between Miss Milsland and a man of such strong personal magnetism—not always used to a good purpose—would be imprudent in the extreme." Thus ran an anonymous note which was, no doubt, calculated to quicken the spirit of Miss Milsland and put her on her mettle. It is true as has been recorded: "To other girls the first ideal of love is a sweet, seductive one, but to her it was one of fear and trembling;" yet "Laura experienced such a shock when her hardy hand came in contact with his soft, warm palm as might have smitten her had she thrust it into a nest of nettles. It was like that of a thousand stings, all throbbing away to an uneasy numbness. All these sensations ran through the tingling fibers of her flesh in the one or two seconds that elapsed before she snatched it from him and hid it in her pocket."

His conquest was complete, and can you wonder at it when — "looking up she saw Victor, pale and captivating, dressed in the most subdued and exquisite taste, coming through the garden bushes, shaking down upon himself the crimson rose leaves and scented shrubs as he parted them with his slender hands, and smiling like a perfectly ravishing and irresistible Adonis."

At that moment and henceforth and forever—"for her this planet was divided into two parts, one the particular spot where he was!—the other, all the rest where he was not. The latter stretched like a vast void of emptiness before her mind; but the former was alive with all the aspirations, resolves, joys, agonies and passions that can saturate, ravish, torture, purify and elevate a human soul."

Ada Clare idolized and idealized the stage. When, in her story, some haughty and, shall we say narrow minded? person refers scornfully to her hero as an "actor," she exclaims: "Yes, one who lived by the cultivation of grace, tact, eloquence, memory, sentiment and intelligence; one on whose passionate, impressive words thousands have hung enraptured, and who charmed by his delicacy, agitated by his impulse and drew tears by his pathos, from wise and cultivated audiences."

Victor Doria was an actor and a sculptor as well; in his impersonation of Benvenuto Cellini it was his custom to model in clay before the eyes of the audience and produce a startling effect which was the climax of the last act of the drama. When Victor appears upon the stage the Booth part of him is uppermost and the following, I suppose, may be taken as Ada Clare's estimate of Edwin Booth as an actor:

Victor was not fitted by nature for any great physical effects; he had neither the lungs nor the frame adapted to that school of acting, therefore he was weak, he was actually ridiculous in his attempt at *Richard.* Many of his scenes in *Othello* were tame and lifeless; if he had never played anything but *Sbylock,* a just critic would have pronounced him to be a very bad actor. But in parts where tenderness, grief, passionate love and romantic impulsiveness are required, he had no equal on any stage.

There is more of Gottschalk than of Booth in Victor Doria. Having won the heart of Laura, he cast her from him as carelessly as if she had been yesterday's boutonierre. This is the climax of part first. Through part second and third they are whirled about like leaves in a storm. If Laura was the type of girl and woman — for she develops amazingly through 336 pages— that Ada Clare most admired, no one could be more unlike the author; but she has admirably described herself in Agnes, a younger sister of Laura: "Her eyes were of the most immaculate blue, without a tint of gray or violet in the shade; her hair was of the finest gold, with a natural wave in it; her features were all soft and shapely; her skin was of the most healthy but dainty whiteness, and her figure was round, full and well proportioned."

She also drops a word or two of wisdom concerning the male of the species: "To a man of the world, nothing is more impenetrable and more mysterious than entire simplicity in a woman. Well, after all, however fascinating he may be to his objects of pursuit, the male flirt, when compared with the man of determined honor and dignity, is, in the abstract, but a pitiful spectacle."

In Chapter XIV of "Only a Woman's Heart," Laura and Victor, who seem to be fleeing from the World, the Flesh and the Devil, meet as if by chance upon the deck of a southward bound ship. What happens then? "The great Summer moon hung like a censer, breathing out clouds of golden incense through the sky; the soft winds of the tropics streamed by them like invisible caresses; the strident sails leaned forward on the ambient air." Etc., etc.

Into the shadow of those sails they went: — "No explanations were uttered, not one word, not a laboring breath marred the mute intensity with which they were clasped in each other's arms, strained to one another's souls, in an embrace in which passion was but one ingredient, and in which was equally blended sympathy, respect, faithfulness, consonance of temperament, and every sentiment which can endear one human being to another."

In Chapter XV the ship founders and a handful of passengers take to the boats with the captain and crew. In Chapter XVI, the final one, Victor, sheltered under the black tent of Laura's streaming locks, dies of sunstroke. There was a rescue within forty hours, but all too late. Her life speedily followed the flight of his; the two bodies, clasped in a last embrace, were tenderly lifted to the ship's deck and thus in due season were committed to the deep where in death they were not divided.

Not long after the publication of her novel Ada Clare wrote me:

> You must excuse me for writing you so little and so seldom. I have "something on my mind" as they say, which prevents my doing anything as I ought to. I received your letter before the last, almost at the same time with the last, it having arrived when I was traveling and so traveled around after me. One of the New York Sunday papers said a week or two ago: "Mr. Bret Harte, the now well known critic of the *Californian,* pronounces Ada Clare's novel to be a failure."
>
> I have been gradually separating myself from literature all Summer, and now am giving it up entirely for the present, honestly believing that I mistook my vocation when I attempted it. I am going to play a stock engagement —walking ladies —in a popular theater, some distance from New York. I am engaged for eight months and of course will not take up a pen during that time.
>
> Give my regards to Mr. Harte and say I knew he did not write the article in the *Californian* immediately I read it, because I generally can detect his style at a glance. Write to me when you feel like it: I am always delighted to hear from you, though I make such poor returns for your favors.

The critics handled her novel without gloves; some of them were no doubt repaying old scores. After all, how much easier it is to criticise the work of another than to do as well, oneself.

She no doubt felt the non-success of her novel, and was truly glad to lay down her pen and turn her face to the footlights. Happily she found consolation there.

From Memphis, Tennessee, she wrote me:

> Your letter, after being duly received in New York, was forwarded to me here. The last time I wrote you I was here, but enclosed the letter to New York to be mailed to you there. I am down here playing in the stock company of the New Memphis theater. I have some very good parts assigned me and have managed to get through with them. Sometimes I play a boy or a young man, which is not agreeable to me.
>
> I like the profession better and better the more I see of its hardships, but I have little hope of rising above the level myself. Nevertheless it is a profession in which one can earn a tolerable living without the anxiety, vexation of spirit, constant detraction and too frequent mental anguish which the literary one entails. I do not use my own name at all here, being called both on the bills and in private Miss Agnes Stanfield. I knew if the name of Ada Clare appeared it would cause a constant buzz all around the country. It was that fact that gave rise to the rumor about my going to California. I was asked in company about my intention of leaving the city and not wishing to tell where I was going. I said I was going to San Francisco and it instantly got out and went the rounds of the papers.
>
> Ah, you do not know how sick I am of the petty notoriety which is not fame, nor how tired I am of exciting that curiosity which is not interest.

There spoke, or wrote, the world weary woman from her heart of hearts; she of whom Mr. Howells said: "Her fate, pathetic at all times, out-tragedies almost any other in the history of letters."

She was patting the lap dog of a friend, when it flew at her and cruelly mutilated her face. She recovered from the attack and reappeared upon the stage; but later on, returning one night from the theater, she was seized with a violent paroxysm and died in the horrors of hydrophobia.

So perished miserably one whose whole life was made up of futile hopes and disappointed ambitions. Deserted by the one for whom she had sacrificed all a woman holds dearest, she suffered the loss of her son in his early youth; her most ambitious efforts in literature and dramatic art derided, she yet toiled bravely on to the bitterest of bitter ends.

In her novel she had said: "Ah me! Happy are those whose desires, talents and powers to please all flow harmoniously in the same channel. They are the blessed elect, who already possess the earth."

Perhaps the sum total of her earnest but fruitless life may be summed up in this one passage from "Only a Woman's Heart":

> "Ah, poor, fond, idolizing heart! you have yet to learn that no measure of toil will bring you nearer to Love; that it will be blind to your merits, though you should make yourself thrice worthy of it; it will be deaf to you, though you plead to it while your heart drops tears of blood at its feet; though you should come to it in the guise of an angel clad in heavenly robes, it would fly from you, and leave you alone in all your sorrowful splendor. For it comes only like that Holy Spirit, which in the form of a dove descends out of heaven, flutters into the unexpectant heart, and nestling there, folds its wings in trembling joy and hope! "