

The Green Sheaf



THE LAMENT OF A LYCEUM RAT.

“YES,” said the last rat, “they say that rats leave the sinking ship; so they do—another trait in common with humanity. Why? Because both men and rodents must live! For though the necessity for our existence does not seem obvious to men, it is so to a far higher power, and therefore we live and seek the means withal.

“I am the last rat left here. I had hoped to find shelter in the Lyceum to the end, but,” he said abruptly, “I am starving.” He leapt to the edge of the dress circle where I sat gloomily gazing at the deserted stage.

“Ravenous, I roamed over the house just before dawn. All I could find to gnaw was a fragment of hare’s-foot and an old grease rag which some of you people had left on departing. I crept down again cold and weary, when suddenly the old familiar staircase seemed thronged with crowds of men and women and little children all hurrying away. I crouched in fear, but they did not touch me nor heed me in any way.

“Brave men in armour, priests, lovers, fair girls, witches, nuns, dancers—a whole rabble of beings from every page of history and romance—they rushed past me like the eddies of a strong tide, flowing rapidly away and out into the night. Then as they left me, scared and

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trembling, I raced across the stage that was filled with a light subdued but intensely clear, and once more I looked upon Hamlet, Shylock with sweet Portia, Mephistopheles with Margaret and the ill-fated Faust, The Vicar with the Squire and lovely Olivia, incomparable Beatrice and Benedick, the Martyr King with his Queen and Cromwell, Macbeth, Napoleon, the bloodthirsty Louis XI., the tortured Matthias, Robespierre, Richelieu, and countless others. And the old house glowed and breathed

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again in their gracious presence, but where as all that motley rout that had fled away bore in their eyes a look of expectancy, restlessly trying to read the future, these all seemed rapt and calm and full of peace.

“Suddenly the shapes all bowed down, swaying like trees before the autumn winds, and a tall form appeared before them—Dante! They made way, fell back and left him—left him standing alone. Then he spoke: ‘May I not join you, O my comrades?’ And he stretched out his hands toward them in greeting.

“But they bowed again and answered with mournful voices, ‘No, Master, you have fresh fields to fight—fresh victories to gain. Here only memories can live, and like memories we must cling here until your magic hand shall beckon us to life again. You alone can call us back. Go, Master! Hope shall not leave you, but will lead you forth that you may give to the world yet another creation. Bid Dante live at your bidding, even as we lived; human that mankind may love; divine that souls may be lifted nearer to Heaven.’

“Then the Master turned and went, Courage and Hope beside him, though Sorrow fell weeping at his feet. . . . This,” said the last rat, “is the vision I saw last night. I leave my home and its dear memories, for even I must live my life.” A ray of sunshine strayed in and he vanished seeking the darkness, while sadly I wandered out into the light.

Mary Brown.

