

Two Prose Fancies

By Richard Le Gallienne

I—The Silver Girl

SOMETIMES when I have thought that the Sphinx's mouth is cruel, and could not forget its stern line for all her soft eyes, I have reassured myself with the memory of a day when I saw it so soft and tender with heavenly pity that I could have gone down on my knees then and there by the side of the luncheon table, where the champagne was already cooling in the ice-pail, and worshipped her—would have done so had I thought such public worship to her taste. It was no tenderness to me, but that was just why I valued it. Tender she has been to me, and stern anon, as I have merited; but, would you understand the heart of woman, know if it be soft or hard, you will not trust her tenderness (or fear her sternness) to yourself; you will watch, with a prayer in your heart, for her tenderness to others.

She came late to our lunch that day, and explained that she had travelled by omnibus. As she said the word omnibus, for some reason as yet mysterious to me, I saw the northern lights I love playing in the heaven of her face. I wondered why, but did not ask as yet, delaying, that I might watch those fairy fires of emotion, for her face was indeed like a star of which a little child

told me the other day. I think some one must have told him first, for as we looked through the window one starlit night, he communicated very confidentially that whenever any one in the world shed a tear of pure pity, God's angels caught it in lily-cups and carried it right up to heaven, and that when God had thus collected enough of them, he made them into a new star. "So," said the little boy, "there must have been a good deal of kind people in the world to cry all those stars."

It was of that story I thought as I said to the Sphinx :

"What is the matter, dear Madonna? Your face is the Star or Tears."

And then I ventured gently to tease her.

"What can have happened? No sooner did you speak the magic word 'omnibus,' than you were transfigured and taken from my sight in a silver cloud of tears. An omnibus does not usually awaken such tenderness, or call up northern lights to the face as one mentions it, . . . though," I added wistfully, "one has met passengers to and from heaven in its musty corners, travelled life's journey with them a penny stage, and lost them for ever. . . ."

"So," I further ventured, "may you have seemed to some fortunate fellow-passenger, an accidental companion of your wonder, as from your yellow throne by the driver. . . ."

"Oh, do be quiet," she said, with a little flash of steel. "How can you be so flippant," and then, noting the champagne, she exclaimed with fervour: "No wine for me to day! It's heartless, it's brutal. All the world is heartless and brutal . . . how selfish we all are. Poor fellow! . . . I wish you could have seen his face!"

"I sincerely wish I could," I said; "for then I should no doubt have understood why the words 'omnibus' and 'champagne,' not unfamiliar words, should . . . well, make you look so beautiful."

"Oh,

"Oh, forgive me! Haven't I told you?" she said, as absent-mindedly she watched the waiter filling her glass with champagne.

"Well," she continued, "you know the something Arms, where the bus always stops a minute or so on its way from Kensington. I was on top, near the driver, and, while we waited, my neighbour began to peel an orange and throw the pieces of peel down on to the pavement. Suddenly a dreadful, tattered figure of a man sprang out of some corner, and, eagerly picking up the pieces of peel, began ravenously to eat them, looking up hungrily for more. Poor fellow! he had quite a refined, gentle face, and I shouldn't have been surprised to hear him quote Horace, after the manner of Stevenson's gentlemen in distress. I was glad to see that the others noticed him too. Quite a murmur of sympathy sprang up amongst us, and a penny or two rang on the pavement. But it was the driver who did the thing that made me cry. He was one of those prosperous young drivers, with beaver hats and smart overcoats, and he had just lit a most well-to-do cigar. With the rest of us he had looked down on poor Lazarus, and for a moment, but only for a moment, with a certain contempt. Then a wonderful kindness came into his face, and, next minute, he had done a great deed—he had thrown Lazarus his newly-lit cigar."

"Splendid!" I ventured to interject.

"Yes, indeed!" she continued; "and I couldn't help telling him so. . . . But you should have seen the poor fellow's face as he picked it up. Evidently his first thought was that it had fallen by mistake, and he made as if to return it to his patron. It was an impossible dream that it could be for him—a mere rancid cigar-end had been a windfall, but this was practically a complete, unsmoked cigar. But the driver nodded reassuringly, and then
you

you should have seen the poor fellow's joy. There was almost a look of awe, that such fortune should have befallen him, and tears of gratitude sprang into his eyes. Really, I don't exaggerate a bit. I'd have given anything for you to have seen him—though it was heart-breaking, that terrible look of joy, such tragic joy. No look of misery or wretchedness could have touched one like that. Think how utterly, abjectly destitute one must be for a stranger's orange-peel to represent dessert, and an omnibus-driver's cigar set us crying for joy. . . ."

"Gentle heart," I said. "I fear poor Lazarus did not keep his cigar for long. . . ."

"But why? . . ."

"Why? Is it not already among the stars, carried up by those angels who catch the tears of pity, and along with Uncle Toby's 'damn,' and such bric-a-brac, in God's museum of fair deeds? We shall see it shining down on us as the stars come out to-night. Yes! that will be a pretty astronomical theory to exchange with the little boy who told me that the stars are made of tears. Some are made of tears, I shall say, but some are the glowing ends of newly lit cigars, thrown down by good omnibus-drivers to poor, starving fellows who haven't a bed to sleep in, nor a dinner to eat, nor a heart to love them, and not even a single cigar left to put in their silver cigar-cases."

"That driver is sure of heaven, anyhow," said the Sphinx.

"Perhaps, dear, when the time comes for us to arrive there, we will find him driving the station bus—who knows? But it was a pretty story, I must say. That driver deserves to be decorated."

"That's what I thought," said the Sphinx, eagerly.

"Yes! We might start a new society: *The League of Kind Hearts*; a *Society for the Encouragement of Acts of Kindness*. How would that do? Or we might endow a fund to bear the name of your

your 'bus-driver, and to be devoted in perpetuity to supplying destitute smokers with choice cigars."

"Yes," said the Sphinx, musingly, "that driver made me thoroughly ashamed of myself. I wish I was as sure of heaven as he is."

"But you *are* heaven," I whispered ; "and *à propos* of heaven, here is a little song which I wrote for you last night, and with which I propose presently to settle the bill. I call it the Silver Girl :

Whiter than whiteness was her breast,
And softer than new fallen snow,
So pure a peace, so deep a rest,
Yet purer peace below.

Her face was like a moon-white flower
That swayed upon an ivory stem,
Her hair a whispering silver shower,
Each foot a silver gem.

And in a fair white house of dreams,
With hallowed windows all of pearl,
She sat amid the haunted gleams,
That little silver girl ;

Sat singing songs of snowy white,
And watched all day, with soft blue eyes,
Her white doves flying in her sight,
And fed her butterflies.

Then when the long white day was passed,
The white world sleeping in the moon,
White bed, and long white sleep at last—
She will not waken soon.

II—Words Written to Music

IT is one of the many advantages of that simplicity of taste which is ignorance, that an incorrigible capacity for connoisseurship in the sister arts of cookery and music should enable one to be as happy with a bad dinner eaten to the sound of bad music, as others whose palates are attuned to the Neronian nightingales, and whose ears admit no harmonies less refined than the bejewelled harmonies of Chopin.

I have eaten dinners delicate as silverpoints, in rooms of canary-coloured quiet, where the candles burn hushedly in their little silken tents, and the soft voices of lovers rise and fall upon the dreaming ear; but I confess that it was the soothing quiet, the healing tones of light and colour, and the face of the Sphinx irradiated by some dream of halcyon's tongues *à la Persane*, rather than the beautiful food, that inspired my passionate peace. Mere roast lamb, new potatoes and peas of living green had made me just as happy, gastronomically speaking, and I dare not mention what I order sometimes, and even day after day with a love that never tires, when I dine alone. Alone!

. . . the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self;

for even this very night have I dined alone in a great solitude of social faces, low necks, electric lights, and the spirited band that has given me more pleasure than any music in London, always excepting my Bayreuth, the barrel-organ. Yes! strange as it may seem, I had come deliberately to hear this music, and secondarily to eat this dinner. What effect selections from Sullivan and "The Shop Girl," in collaboration with the three-and-sixpenny
table

table d'hôte, would have upon more educated digestions its concerns me not to inquire; on mine they produce a sort of agonised ecstasy of loneliness—and to-night as I sat at our little lonely table in a corner of the great gallery and looked out across the glittering peristyle, ate that dinner and listened to that music, I shuddered with joy at my fearful loneliness.

I might have dined with the Beautiful, or have sent a telegraphic invitation to the Witty, I might have sat at meat with the Wise; but no! I would dine instead with the memories or dinners that were gone, and as the music did Miltonic battle near the ceiling, marched with clashing tread, or danced on myriad silken feet, wailed like the winds of the world, or laughed like the sun, my solitude grew peopled awhile with shapes fair and kind, who sat with me and lifted the glass and gave me their deep eyes, ladies who had intelligence in love, as Dante wrote, ladies of great gentleness and consolation, for whom God be thanked. But always in my ears, whatever the piece that was a-playing, the music came sweeping with dark surge across my fantasy, as though a sudden wind had dashed open a warm window, and let in a black night of homeless seas.

For in truth one I loved was out to-night on dark seas. She fares out across an ocean I have never sailed, to a land of which no man knows; and for her voyage she has only her silver feet, walking the inky waters, and the great light of her holy face to guide her steps. Ah! that I were with her to-night, walking hand in hand those dark waters. Oh, wherefore slip away thus companionless, fearless little voyager? Was it that I was unworthy to voyage those seas with you, that the weight of my mortality would have dragged down your bright immortality—youngest of the immortals. . . . But from that sea which the Divine alone may tread, comes back no answer, nor
light

light of any star ; but there has stolen to my side and kissed my brow, a shape dearer than all the rest, dear beyond dearness, a little earthly-heavenly shape who always comes when the rest have gone, and loves to find me sitting alone. She it is who leans her cheek against mine as I try to read beautiful words out of the dead man's book at my side, she it is who whispers that we shall be too late to find a seat in the pit unless we hurry, and she it is who gaily takes my arm as we trot off together on happy feet. The great commissioner takes no note of her, he thinks I am alone ; besides we seldom go in hansoms, and seldom sit in stalls. . . . Enough, O, music ! be merciful. Be lonely no more, lest you break the heart of the lonely.

"Ah ! you have never seen her !" I whisper to myself as the waiter brings me my coffee—and I look at him again with a certain curiosity as I think that he has never seen her. Never to have seen her !

And then presently, as if in pity, the music will change, perhaps it will play some sustaining song of faith, and strike a sort of glory across one's heart, the haughty heart of sorrow ; or it will be human and gay, and suddenly turn this solitude of diners into a sort of family gathering of humanity, throwing open sad hearts that, like oneself, appear to be doing nothing but dine, and giving one glimpses into dreaming heads, linking all in one great friendship of common joys and sorrows, the one sweet beginning, and the one mysterious end.

In this mood faces one has seen more than once become friends, and I confess that the sight of certain waiters moving in their accustomed places almost moved me to tears. Such is the pathos of familiarity.

So my thoughts took another turn, and I fell to thinking with tenderness of the friends about town that the Sphinx and I had
made

made in our dinings—friends whom it had cost us but a few odd shillings and sixpences to make, yet friends we had fancied we might trust, and even seek in a day of need. If they found me starving some night in the streets, I think they would take me in; and I think I know a coffee-stall man who would give me an early-morning cup of coffee, and add a piece of cake, were I to come to him bare-footed some wintry dawn.

I have heard purists object to the smiles that are bought, as if smiles can or should be had for nothing, and as if it shows a bad nature in a waiter to smile more sweetly upon a shilling than a penny. After all, is he so far wrong in deeming the heart that prompts the shilling better worth a smile than the reluctant hand of copper? Besides, we are never so mean to ourselves as when we are mean to others. A few shillings per annum sown about town will surround the path of the diner with smiles year in and year out. The doors fly open as by magic at his approach, and the cosiest tables in a dozen restaurants are in perpetual reserve for him. I am even persuaded that a consistent generosity to cabmen gets known in due course among the fraternity, and that thus, in process of time, the nicest people may rely on getting the nicest hansoms—though this may be a dream. Certain I am that it brings luck to be kind to a pathetic race of men for whom I have a special tenderness, those amateur footmen, the cab-openers. Have you ever noticed the fine manners of some of them, and their lover-like gentleness with the silk skirts that it is theirs to save from soilure of muddy wheels? A practical head might reflect how much they do towards keeping down your wife's dressmaker's bills. I daresay they save her a dress a year—and yet they are not treated with gratitude as a race. How involuntarily one seems to assume that they will accept nothing over a penny, and how fingers, not penurious on other occasions, automatically

automatically reject silver as they ferret in pence-pockets for suitable alms. No! not alms—payment, and sometimes poor payment, for a courtesy that adds another smile to your illusion or a smiling world.

Among the many lessons I have learnt from the Sphinx is one of the fair wage of the cab-opener. It was the very afternoon she had seen that cigar fall down from heaven, and her mood was thus the more attuned to pity. As we were about to drive away from the place of our lunching, having been ushered to our hansom by a tatterdemalion of distinguished manners, but marred unhappy countenance, I fumbled so long for the regulation twopence, that it seemed likely he should miss his reward or be run over in running after it. But at that moment the Sphinx's hand shot past mine and dropped something into the outstretched palm. The man took it mechanically, and in a second his face flashed surprise. Evidently she had given him something extravagant. She was watching for his look, and telegraphed a smile that she meant it. Then you never saw such a figure of grateful joy as that shabby fellow became. His face fairly shone, and for a few moments he ran by our cabside wildly waving his hat, with an indescribable emotion of affectionate thankfulness.

“What did you give him dear?” I asked.

“Never mind!”

“It wasn't a sovereign?”

“Never mind.”

So I have never known what coin it was that thus transfigured him, but of this I am sure: that when the time of the great Terror has come to London, when the red flags wave on the barricades, and the puddles of red blood beneath the great guillotine in Trafalgar Square luridly catch the setting sun, the Sphinx and I will have a friend in that poor cab-opener.

There

There is another friend to whom we should fly for safety in those days of wrath. He, too, is a cab-opener, but, so to say, of higher rank—for he is the voluntary manager of a thriving cab-rank which we often have occasion to patronise. For some unknown reason he is always addressed as “Cap’n,” and we never omit the courtesy as we salute him. So we have come to know him as *The Captain of the Cab Rank*. He is a short, thick-set, sturdy little man, with an overcoat buttoned straight beneath his chin, hands deep in his pockets, a firm, determined step, and a fiery face. He walks his pavement like a veritable captain on his quarter-deck, and his “Hansom up!” rings out like a stern word of command. At the call a shining door of the tavern opposite is thrown open with a slam, and a wild figure of a driver clatters across in terrified haste, and with his head still wrapped in the warm glow he has just forsaken, he climbs his dark throne, and once more shakes the weary reins. Then, as the little Captain briskly shut us in, with a salute that seems to say that he has thus given us a successful start in life, and it is not his fault if we don’t go on as we’ve begun, he blows a shrill note upon his whistle, half to call up the next cab to its place in the rank, half to signalise our departure, as when sometimes a great boat sets out to sea they fire guns in the harbour, and excited crowds wave weeping handkerchiefs from the pier.

Yes! There are many faces I meet daily, faces I do business with and faces I take down to dinner, faces of the important and the brilliant, that I should miss much less than the little Captain of the Cab Rank. Our intercourse is of the slightest, we have little opportunities of studying each other’s nature, and yet he is strangely vivid in my consciousness, quite a necessary figure in my picture of the world—so stamped is every part of him with that most appealing and attaching of all qualities, that of our
common

common human nature. He has the great gift of character, and however poor and humble his lot, failure is surely no word to describe him, for he is a personality, and to be a personality is to have succeeded in life.

Yes! I often think of the Captain as I think of the famous characters in fiction, or notable figures in history; and I should feel very proud if I could believe he sometimes thought of me.

Well, well. . . . it is late. The bill, waiter, please! Good night! Good-night!