

Two Prose Fancies

By Richard Le Gallienne

I—Sleeping Beauty

“EVERY woman is a sleeping beauty,” I said, sententiously. “Only some need more waking than others?” replied my cynical friend.

“Yes, some will only awaken at the kiss of great love or great genius, which are not far from the same thing,” I replied.

“I see,” said the gay editor with whom I was talking.

Our conversation was of certain authors of our acquaintance, and how they managed their inspiration, of what manner were their muses, and what the methods of their stimulus. Some, we had noted, threw on constancy, to others inconstancy was the lawless law of their being; and so accepted had become these indispensable conditions of their literary activity that the wives had long since ceased to be jealous of the other wives. To a household dependent on poetry, constancy in many cases would mean poverty, and certain good literary wives had been known to rate their husbands with a lazy and unproductive faithfulness. The editor sketched a tragic *ménage* known to him, where the husband, a lyric poet of fame, had become so chronically devoted to his despairing wife that destitution stared them in the face. It was
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in vain that she implored him, with tears in her eyes, to fall in love with some other woman. She, she alone, he said, must be his inspiration ; but as the domesticated muse is too often a muse of exquisite silence, too happy to sing its happiness, this lawful passion, which might otherwise have been turned to account, was unproductive too.

“And such a pretty woman,” said the editor sympathetically. Of another happier case of domestic hallucination, he made the remark : “Says he owes it all to his wife ! and you never saw such a plain woman in your life.”

“How do you know she is plain ?” I asked ; “mayn’t it be that the husband’s sense of beauty is finer than yours ? Do you think all beauty is for all men ? or that the beauty all can see is best worth seeing ?”

And then we spoke the words of wisdom and wit which I have written in ebony on the lintel of this little house of words. He who would write to live must talk to write, and I confess that I took up this point with my friend, and continued to stick to it, no doubt to his surprise, because I had at the moment some stardust on the subject nebulously streaming and circling through my mind, which I was anxious to shape into something of an ordered world. So I talked not to hear myself speak, but to hear myself think, always, I will anticipate the malicious reader in saying, an operation of my mind of delightful unexpectedness.

“Why ! you’re actually thinking,” chuckles one’s brain to itself, “go on. Dance while the music’s playing,” and so the tongue goes dancing with pretty partners of words, till suddenly one’s brain gives a sigh, the wheels begin to slow down, and music and dancing stop together, till some chance influence, a sound, a face, a flower, how or whence we know not, comes to wind it up again.

The more one ponders the mystery of beauty, the more one realises that the profoundest word in the philosophy of æsthetics is that of the simple-subtle old proverb: Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. Beauty, in fact, is a collaboration between the beholder and the beheld. It has no abstract existence, and is visible or invisible as one has eyes to see or not to see it, that is, as one is endowed or not endowed with the sense of beauty, an hieratic sense which, strangely enough, is assumed as common to humanity. Particularly is this assumption made in regard to the beauty of women. Every man, however beauty-blind he may really be, considers himself a judge of women—though he might hesitate to call himself a judge of horses. Far indeed from its being true that the sense of beauty is universal, there can be little doubt that the democracy is for the most part beauty-blind, and that while it has a certain indifferent pleasure in the comeliness that comes of health, and the prettiness that goes with ribbons, it dislikes and fears that finer beauty which is seldom comely, never pretty, and always strange.

National galleries of art are nothing against this truth. Once in a while the nation may rejoice over the purchase of a bad picture it can understand, but for the most part—what to it are all these strange pictures, with their disquieting colours and haunted faces? What recks the nation at large of its Bellinis or its Botticellis? what even of its Titians or its Tintoretos? Was it not the few who bought them, with the money of the many, for the delight of the few?

Well, as no one would dream of art-criticism by *plébiscite*, why should universal conventions of the beauty of women find so large an acceptance merely because they are universal? There are vast multitudes, no doubt, who deem the scented-soap beauties of Bouguereau more beautiful than the strange ladies of Botticelli,
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and, were you to inquire, you would discover that your housemaid wonders to herself, as she dusts your pictures to the sound of music-hall song, what you can see in the plain lean women of Burne-Jones, or the repulsive ugliness of "The Blessed Damosel." She thanks heaven that she was not born with such a face, as she takes a reassuring glance in the mirror at her own regular prettiness, and more marketable bloom. For, you see, this beauty is still asleep for her—as but a few years ago it was asleep for all but the artists who first kissed it awake.

All beauty was once asleep like that, even the very beauty your housemaid understands and perhaps exemplifies. It lay asleep awaiting the eye of the beholder, it lay asleep awaiting the kiss of genius; and, just as one day nothing at all seemed beautiful, so some day all things will come to seem so, if the revelation be not already complete.

For indeed much beauty that was asleep fifty years ago has been passionately awakened and given a sceptre and a kingdom since then: the beauty of lonely neglected faces that no man loved, or loved only by stealth, for fear of the mockery of the blind, the beauty of unconventional contours and unpopular colouring, the beauty of pallor, of the red-haired, and the *fausse maigre*. The fair and the fat are no longer paramount, and the beauty of forty has her day.

Nor have the discoveries of beauty been confined to the faces and forms of women. In Nature too the waste places where no man sketched or golfed have been reclaimed for the kingdom of beauty. The little hills had not really rejoiced us till Wordsworth came, but we had learnt his lesson so well that the beauty of the plain slept for us all the longer, till with Tennyson and Millet, it awakened at last—the beauty of desolate levels, solitary moorlands, and the rich melancholy of the fens.

Wherever

Wherever we turn our eyes, we find the beauty of character supplanting the beauty of form, or if not supplanting, asserting its claim to a place beside the haughty sister who would fain keep Cinderella, red-headed and *retroussée*, in the background—yes! and for many even supplanting! It is only when regularity of form and personal idiosyncrasy and intensity of character are united in a face, that the so-called classical beauty is secure of holding its own with those whose fealty most matters—and that union to any triumphant degree is exceedingly rare. Even when that union has come about there are those, in this war of the classicism and romanticism of faces, who would still choose the face dependent on pure effect for its charm; no mask of unchanging beauty, but a beauty whose very life is change, and whose magic, so to say, is a miraculous accident, elusive and unaccountable.

Miraculous and unaccountable! In a sense all beauty is that, but in the case of the regular, so to say, authorised beauty, it seems considerably less so. For in such faces, the old beauty-masters will tell you, the brow is of such a breadth and shape, the nose so long, the mouth shaped in this way, and the eyes set and coloured in that; and thus, of this happy marriage of proportions, beauty has been born. This they will say in spite of the everyday fact of thousands of faces being thus proportioned and coloured without the miracle taking place, ivory lamps in which no light of beauty burns. And it is this fact that proves the truth of the newer beauty we are considering. Form is thus seen to be dependent on expression, though expression, the new beauty-masters would contend, is independent of form. For the new beauty there are no such rules; it is, so to say, a prose beauty, for which there is no formulated prosody, entirely free and individual in its rhythms, and personal in its effects. Sculpture is

no longer its chosen voice among the arts, but rather music with its myriad meanings, and its infinitely responsive inflections.

You will hear it said of such beauty—that it is striking, individual, charming, fascinating and so on, but not exactly beautiful. This, if you are an initiate of the new beauty, you will resist, and permit no other description but beauty—the only word which accurately expresses the effect made upon you. That such effect is not produced upon others need not depress you; for similarly you might say of the beauty that others applaud that for you it seems attractive, handsome, pretty, dainty and so on, but not exactly beautiful; or admitting its beauty, that it is but one of many types of beauty, the majority of which are neither straight-lined nor regular.

For when it is said that certain faces are not exactly beautiful, what is meant is that they fail to conform to one or other of the straight-lined types; but by what authority has it been settled once and for all that beauty cannot exist outside the straight line and the chubby curve? It matters not what authority one were to bring, for vision is the only authority in this matter, and the more ancient the authority the less is it final, for it has thus been unable to take account of all the types that have come into existence since its day, types spiritual, intellectual and artistic, born of the complex experience of the modern world.

And yet it has not been the modern world alone that has awakened that beauty independent of, and perhaps greater than, the beauty of form and colour; rather it may be said to have reawakened it by study of certain subtle old masters of the Renaissance; and the great beauties who have made the tragedies and love-stories of the world, so far as their faces have been preserved to us, were seldom “beautiful,” as the populace would understand beauty. For perhaps the highest beauty is
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visible only to genius, or that great love which, we have said, is a form of genius. It was only, it will be remembered, at the kiss of a prince that Sleeping Beauty might open her wonderful eyes.

II—A Literary Omnibus

THERE were ten of us travelling life's journey together from Oxford Circus to the Bank, one to fall away early at Tottenham Court Road, leaving his place unfilled till we steamed into Holborn at Mudie's, where, looking up to make room for a new arrival, I perceived, with an unaccustomed sense of being at home in the world, that no less than four of us were reading. It became immediately evident that in the new arrival our reading party had made an acquisition, for he carried three books in a strap, and to the fourth, a dainty blue cloth volume with rough edges, he presently applied a paper-knife with that eager tenderness which there is no mistaking. The man was no mere lending library reader. He was an aristocrat, a poet among readers, a bookman *pur sang*. We were all more or less of the upper crust ourselves, with the exception of a dry and dingy old gentleman in the remote corner who, so far as I could determine, was deep in a digest of statutes. His interest in the new-comer was merely an automatic raising of the head as the bus stopped, and an automatic sinking of it back again as we once more rumbled on. The rest of us, however, were not so poorly satisfied. This fifth reader to our coach had suddenly made us conscious of our freemasonry, and henceforward there was no peace for us till we had, by the politest stratagems of observation, made out the titles of the books from which as from beakers our eyes were silently and strenuously drinking such different thoughts and dreams.

The lady third from the door on the side facing me was reading a book which gave me no little trouble to identify, for she kept it pressed on her lap with tantalising persistence, and the headlines, which I was able to spell out with eyes grown telescopic from curiosity, proved those tiresome headlines which refer to the contents of chapter or page instead of considerably repeating the title of the book. It was not a novel. I could tell that, for there wasn't a scrap of conversation, and it wasn't novelist's type. I watched like a lynx to catch a look at the binding. Suddenly she lifted it up, I cannot help thinking out of sheer kindness, and it proved to be a stately unfamiliar edition of a book I should have known well enough, simply *The French Revolution*. Why will people tease one by reading Carlyle in any other edition but the thin little octavos, with the sticky brown and black bindings of old?

The pretty dark-haired girl next but one on my own side, what was she reading? No! . . . But she was, really!

Need I say that my eyes beat a hasty retreat to my little neighbour, the new-comer, who sat facing me next to the door, one of whose books in the strap I had instantly recognised as *Weir of Hermiston*. Of the other two, one was provokingly turned with the edges only showing, and of the edges I couldn't be quite sure, though I was almost certain they belonged to an interesting new volume of poems I knew of. The third had the look of a German dictionary. But, of course, it was the book he was reading that was the chief attraction, and I rather like to think that probably I was the only one of his fellow travellers who succeeded in detecting the honey-pot from which he was delicately feeding. It took me some little time, though the book, with its ribbed blue cover gravely lined with gold and its crisp rose-yellow paper, struck me with instant familiarity. "Preface to Second Edition," deciphered backwards, was all I

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was able to make out at first, for the paper-knife loitered dreamily among the opening pages, till at last with the turning of a page, the prose suddenly gave place to a page prettily broken up with lines and half-lines of italics, followed by a verse or two—and “Of course,” I exclaimed to myself, with a curious involuntary gratitude, “it is Dr. Wharton’s *Sappho*.”

And so it was. That penny bus was thus carelessly carrying along the most priceless of written words. We were journeying in the same conveyance with

*“ Like the sweet apple which reddens upon the topmost bough,
A-top on the topmost twig—which the pluckers forgot somehow—
Forgot it not, nay, but got it not, for none could get it till now.”*

with

“ I loved thee, Atthis, long ago.”

with

“ The moon has set, and the Pleiades ; it is midnight, the time is going by, and I sleep alone.”

Yes, it was no less a presence than Sappho’s that had stepped in amongst us at the corner of New Oxford Street. Visibly it had been a little black-bearded bookman, rather French in appearance, possibly a hard-worked teacher of languages—but actually it had been Sappho. So strange are the contrasts of the modern world, so strange the fate of beautiful words. Two thousand five hundred years ! So far away from us was the voice that had suddenly called to us, a lovely apparition of sound, as we trundled dustily from Oxford Circus to the Bank.

“ The moon has set, and the Pleiades ; it is midnight, the time is going by, and I sleep alone,” I murmured, as the conductor dropped me at Chancery Lane.