An Immortal

By Sidney Benson Thorp

THE dusky little row comprising No. 79 quivered like a jelly as railway or post-office vans, making a short cut between two principal thoroughfares, roared over the boulders of Wickham Road, N.W.

To the left front shone a public-house, another to the right. Before each an Italian musician had set up his rest (for it was ten o'clock and a fine, warm night), and thence, reckless of unhappy beings at the confluence, in friendly rivalry they teemed forth contradictory tunes. From a neighbouring street floated tepid air charged with the vibrations of inflated brass; the voices of the inhabitants, seeking on their doorsteps comparative cool at the close of a tropical day, fantastically varied the echoes. Linked bands of frolicsome youth patrolled beneath the window of No. 79, shouting a parody of Wagner wedded to words by an imitator of Mr. George R. Sims—the latest success of the halls. Splutters of gurgling laughter betrayed the whereabouts of amorous pairs.

And the man staring from the open window of the first-floor front neither saw nor heard.

Within the room a pale circle of light fell, from beneath the opaque shade of a single candle, directly upon a litter of manuscript and a few odd volumes of standard literature. The feebler rays reflected

reflected thence disclosed the furniture indispensable for man's dual existence : a narrow bed, from beneath which the rim of a bath protruded ; the table, and a couple of chairs. The walls were unadorned, the boards were bare.

The appearance of Henry Longton's volume had been the literary event of a season. The new man had been recognised as standing in a solitude unapproachable by the twittering mob of a prolific generation. A great poet, who chanced to be also himself a great critic, had dared to stake his reputation upon the future of the new Immortal. And so for a while he had lived in a hashish dream of exultation. He knew his achievements to be high ; and as he wandered by day or night through howling thoroughfares, lonely amid the turgid waves of half-evolved humanity, he forgot the cruel side of life, and hugged himself in the warm cloak of flattering memories : the tumult of the traffic sounded drums and trumpets to his song.

Importunate came the hour when he must set forth once more to produce. A royalty on a limited edition may mount to a handsome dole of pocket-money, but it is not a chartered company. Longton's small capital had long since melted away ; and he sat down, therefore, to write immortal verse for the liquidation of his landlady's bill.

The time had been when a mere act of attention sufficed to the erection of jewelled palaces from the piled-up treasures of his brain. Now, to his dismay, the most assiduous research could discover among the remnants nothing but the oft-rejected, the discoloured, and the flawed. The heavy wrath of the gods had fallen upon him, and he was dumb : he must betake himself to the merest hack-work of anonymous journalism ; and the bitterest drop in the cup of this set-back was the reflection that the tide was ebbing for one whom nature had framed unfit to profit by its flood.

flood. A poet and no man is a crushed worm endowed with understanding.

A tinkling hansom drew up at the door, and a moment after a well-dressed man came lightly up the stairs. He welcomed himself with a breezy confidence that suited well with his pleasant voice and handsome face, lighted all the candles he could find in his friend's store-cupboard and, finally, reclined upon the bed; while his host, without any remonstrance against these revolutionary proceedings, hastened to produce a bottle, a couple of tumblers, and a half-empty box of his visitor's own cigars.

The brave shine of seventeen candles (ingeniously fastened to the mantelboard with a drop of their own wax) revealed a notable contrast between the friends, suggesting the not uncommon circumstance of an intimacy cemented by contrasting traits. The new comer was a man of extremely advantageous exterior; his masculine beauty of a type that is familiar among Englishmen, but seldom so perfectly exampled. Longton, on the other side, was contemptibly plain; nor was his barbarous shapelessness of parts redeemed even by such ensign of superior intelligence as he might justly have claimed to distinguish him from the general man. His mean face was dingy with a three days' growth; the opening of his coarse lips disclosed sparse fragments of discoloured teeth; his eyes shone with a distressful expression of diffidential self-esteem; the greasy skin was unpleasantly diversified with patches of unwholesome red. His accustomed bearing was characterised by a deference that was servile without being humble; but among the few with whom he was intimate he betrayed a self-assertive petulance which might not be confounded with courage. That Freddy Beaumont, in spite of these defects, had never ceased to revere and to befriend the solitary creature was the most amiable feature in his otherwise tolerably selfish and purposeless life.

"And

"And what," he presently demanded, "might be the sense of this document?"—producing, as he spoke, a crumpled scrap.

"I wanted particularly to see you," replied the poet, who lisped disagreeably.

"So much I gathered: the appeal is in the name of the Deity."

"It was urgent."

"Very. I expected to find serpents coiling round the chairs and a fat toad squatting on the mantel-piece. It is nothing of that kind?"

"Nothing, nothing," replied the other in a tone of distressful impatience.

"Well?"

The poet strained his eyes helplessly up and around, with difficulty disjoined his sticky lips, wrung his clammy hands together, and at last, in an insecure voice and with a singular hesitancy, asked:

"Are you fond of pictures?"

"No," rejoined Freddy, placidly; "but the first cousin of the wife of our gardener has a tame elephant."

"That is fortunate," answered Longton, suppressing with an effort the irritation which his friend's witticisms rarely failed to stir up. "Putting the elephant aside, however, for the moment—the fact is, I am in a difficulty."

"My dear fellow, why couldn't you say so at once? 'What's the demned total?'"

A van, the property of the Midland Railway Company, had made rapid approach, and the dialogue had risen in proportion on a swift crescendo. At this moment Freddy made as if he were clinging for his life to a bucker. When the turmoil had partially subsided——

"A cheque won't serve," replied the poet, shaking his head sadly.

"Anything in reason, you know, I am always ready to do for you," the other reassured him.

"This is easy," cried the poet, "and it is not unreasonable."

"Just tell me what it is you want," said Beaumont, "and you may depend on its being done."

"I am going to place my happiness in your hands."

"Snakes! What, a woman?"

Exerting himself once more to master his nerves, the other continued:

"Do you know the 'Madonna degli Ansidei'?"

"Never heard of the lady. Where's she on? But really this is very new—very new and unexpected!" And his face shaped itself to an appropriate but displeasing expression of masculine archness.

"The 'Madonna degli Ansidei,'" the other explained with laborious precision, though within the decayed slippers his toes were curled into a knot, "is a picture, painted some years ago by one Raphael Sanzio, an Italian gentleman, and at present housed in a public building which stands (for the greater convenience of exploring Londoners) within a stone's throw of the Alhambra and Empire Theatres. Do you think——"

"Right you are," responded Freddy, cheerily. "I don't know it—the picture—of course; but I suppose one of the official persons would condescend to point it out. What then?"

"You will find it in the third gallery; it faces the entrance; and the name is written beneath. You can read, I think you say?"

"Oh, shut up! Well, what am I to do? Annex the thing?"

"Precisely; if you can bring it away conveniently, without attracting attention."

"My dear chap——"

"Otherwise

"Otherwise I shall be satisfied if you will devote yourself, I won't say to admiring it, but to observing it closely for a quarter of an hour."

"And therewith, as by a miracle, the Philistine shall put off his skin and the barbarian wash away his spots; is that the hope? Now, I take this real kind of you, little boy; and it pains me to have to assure you that I am incorrigible: you'll have to put up with me as I am." And twisting up his lips, he joined his pipe to a passing choir:

> ". . . mahnd 'aow ye ga-ow!
> Nahnteen jolly good boys, all in a ra-ow."

There was a pause.

"From four o'clock to-morrow afternoon till a quarter past," resumed the petitioner, gazing fixedly past his guest.

Freddy's blue eyes opened childishly. "What the devil are you up to?" he demanded curiously.

"I have an engagement," stammered the poet. A flow of blood flushed his face and ebbed.

"You had better keep it, I suggest."

"I can't: don't you see?" he wailed, and threw out his hands with a gesture of despair.

"Why? Who's the party? I haven't a dream what you are driving at, I tell you."

"To meet—to meet—the Madonna," he replied desperately. "And you must represent me."

The excitement of the moment lent an unwonted rigidity to the crazy form, which to the young man's eyes, as he looked at him pitifully, seemed to render it yet more lamentable.

"My dear fellow," he remonstrated, "don't you think—seriously, you know—you had better knock it off for a bit—the absinthe

absinthe or chloral or whatever it is? Now, give it up, there's a dear old chap. Look here," he added, laying a kind hand upon the other's shoulder, "get shaved and into some decent clothes, and come along to my chambers. I'll put you up for to-night, and to-morrow we'll run down to a little place I know on the coast: a week of it will make a new man of you."

The poet started up, a prodigy of wrath.

"Ass!" he exclaimed. "It is life and death, I tell you. You call yourself a friend; will you do this *nothing* for me? I ask you for the last time."

"No." The answer was given in a tone of quiet obstinacy which, seldom heard by Freddy's intimates, never failed to carry conviction. "I will go no such fool's errand," he added, "for any man. And now I must be off. Good-bye. I'll look round again in a day or two, and I hope I shall find a rational creature."

For a moment, while he held the handle, he faltered; the spectacle might have moved commiseration; but hardening his heart—

"It's too damned silly," he muttered, as he descended the steep stairs.

The poet heard him give a direction to the driver and presently the clatter of hoofs, as the hansom turned and tinkled away southwards.

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Quarter after quarter chimed from the church of St. Pancras, and the solitary still sat crouching over the table. Involuntarily from the bitterness of present despair his mind strayed back into the past, and by an almost orderly survey reviewed the tissue of its web; picking out from it the gilded strands that here and there diversified the dun—the day when the long-sought publisher was found, the first handling of the precious volume, the article in

in the *National* of which it furnished the subject. For a space he doted upon the brilliant imagination that had conceived these choice things and brought them forth. Then he was overwhelmed by the sense of present barrenness and of the defects that must in any case for ever link his days with solitude.

He rose and extinguished the candle-flare upon the mantelpiece, then from a worn despatch-box withdrew a faggot of letters. They dated over two years : the last from that very morning. He read each one through ; raised it devoutly for a moment to his quivering mouth ; and held it in the flame till it was consumed. The last ran :

"A strange idea of yours, my Poet—but what you tell me I shall do. To-morrow, then, I am to see the face I have searched a hundred crowds to find : for I should have known it, never doubt, if once chance had brought us near. Faces mirror minds : that never fails : and your mind, how well I know it ! I am not to speak, you say, and that is hard. Yet I am humble and submit. In this, as in all else, I am your glad handmaid."

With glistening eyes he re-read the words ; then, with a groan, held this letter also in the flame. The fire spread along the edge and marched in a tremulous blue curve across the sheet, leaving charred ruin behind. He gently placed the unbroken tinder upon the table and allowed the flame to consume the corner by which he had held it. While he hesitated to mix these ashes with the rest, his eye lit upon the tumbler. He crushed the brittle remnant into the glass, pounding it with his fingers till it was mere dust. Upon this he poured the contents of a phial ; and having filled up the goblet from a carafe, stirred the contents with the end of a quill. He held the glass up towards the candle and watched the ashes circling and sinking in the yellow liquid.

"*I have*

"*I have eaten ashes as it were bread*," he murmured (as if to fulfil the magic), "*and have mingled my drink with weeping.*"

He placed the draught upon the table, and kneeling at the low window-sill, looked out upon the road.

The clamour thence had grown louder as the hour drew near to midnight; the choruses more boisterous and less abject to the conventions of time and tune. Above the din of perpetual harsh chatter, on this side and that, rose shrill voices into the extreme register of denunciation and vituperative challenge, buoyed higher to each response by antiphonal remonstrance in a lower octave. A mingled line of young men and women, in various stages of incipient intoxication, wavered past, and beneath the window of No. 79, attained the honeyed climax of their song:

"She was one of the Early Birds,
And I was one o' the Worms."

The solitary lodger closed and bolted the window, and pulled the blind well down.

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Upon Freddy's mind the last view of the unhappy young man had left an impression which he would gladly have shaken off. It would be too much, indeed, to assert that the memory chased sleep from his pillow, but it was a fact—and he noted it with surprise—that even eight hours of dreamless slumber proved impotent to efface it. By noon, though still resolved that friendship should exact no irrational concession from common sense, he began to be aware that his purpose was less strenuously set than at breakfast-time he had supposed it to be. The attempt to stiffen it ruined his lunch; the last effort to hold out diminished the value of his smoke; and by three o'clock he owned himself vanquished. He presently despatched a telegram to his arbitrary

arbitrary friend and strolled down Piccadilly towards Trafalgar Square.

A little while he wandered, with a sense of reposeful well-being, through the wide rooms; sharing their spaciousness with some half-score of travellers from the Continent or the States; for it was the height of the season, and to lovers of art there was the Academy. Then, having found the Raphael of which he had come in search, with a little grimace he settled himself, as the clock of St. Martin's struck four, full facing it upon a chair.

Determined, now that he had gone so far, to fulfil to the uttermost his friend's eccentric request, he focussed his eyes resolutely upon the masterpiece. "I will absorb culture," he thought; "it is good form." And he proceeded to concentrate his mind.

But, good as was his will, he found it impossible to stir up in himself any poignant interest; nor could he help repining against the wayward taste of his friend, which had selected as the object of his study the inspired incongruities of this mediæval work, rather than a cheerful canvas representing an Epsom crowd, which had laid hold upon his imagination in one of the chambers devoted to the British and Modern Schools. Indeed, such was the tedium of this futile search after occult beauties that five minutes of the fifteen had barely sped before he was pressingly aware of a head in unstable equilibrium. The nod aroused him, and the next moment he was wide-awake.

From the gallery on his right hand as he sat, from behind a screen which masked the opening, fluttered the panting figure of a girl. Her slender shape sloped forward as if the little feet were clogs upon a buoyant soul; her hands were pressed crosswise beneath her throat; cloud fleeces of evening gold pursued one another across her forehead, her cheek, her neck, as she stood gazing with shining eyes upon his face, her dewy lips apart.

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An older women, her companion, emerged and drew her away.

"How sweet!" murmured the student. "Wonder who she can be?" And he arose.

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It was almost midnight when Freddy drove into Wickham Road, swelling with great words, primed with confidences.

About the door of 79 it surprised him to find a loose semi circular crowd, radiating from the sheen of police-buttons. With some difficulty he made his way to the officer, and inquired of him the reason of the assemblage.

The constable eyed him deliberately, and answered with composure:

"Oh, ther's been a bit of a tragedy: lodger's done for 'i'sulf. They'll stop here all night, some of 'em."

And he spat wearily upon the pavement.