

A Lost Masterpiece

A City Mood, Aug. '93

By George Egerton

I REGRET it, but what am I to do? It was not my fault—I can only regret it. It was thus it happened to me.

I had come to town straight from a hillside cottage in a lonely ploughland, with the smell of the turf in my nostrils, and the swish of the scythes in my ears; the scythes that flashed in the meadows where the upland hay, drought-parched, stretched thirstily up to the clouds that mustered upon the mountain-tops, and marched mockingly away, and held no rain.

The desire to mix with the crowd, to lay my ear once more to the heart of the world and listen to its life-throbs, had grown too strong for me; and so I had come back—but the sights and sounds of my late life clung to me—it is singular how the most opposite things often fill one with associative memory.

That *gamin* of the bird-tribe, the Cockney sparrow, recalled the swallows that built in the tumble-down shed; and I could almost see the gleam of their white bellies, as they circled in ever narrowing sweeps and clove the air with forked wings, uttering a shrill note, with a querulous grace-note in front of it.

The

The freshness of the country still lurked in me, unconsciously influencing my attitude towards the city.

One forenoon business drove me citywards, and following an inclination that always impels me to water-ways rather than roadways, I elected to go by river steamer.

I left home in a glad mood, disposed to view the whole world with kindly eyes. I was filled with a happy-go-lucky *insouciance* that made walking the pavements a loafing in Elysian fields. The coarser touches of street-life, the oddities of accent, the idiosyncrasies of that most eccentric of city-dwellers, the Londoner, did not jar as at other times—rather added a zest to enjoyment; impressions crowded in too quickly to admit of analysis, I was simply an interested spectator of a varied panorama.

I was conscious, too, of a peculiar dual action of brain and senses, for, though keenly alive to every unimportant detail of the life about me, I was yet able to follow a process by which delicate inner threads were being spun into a fanciful web that had nothing to do with my outer self.

At Chelsea I boarded a river steamer bound for London Bridge. The river was wrapped in a delicate grey haze with a golden sub-tone, like a beautiful bright thought struggling for utterance through a mist of obscure words. It glowed through the turbid waters under the arches, so that I feared to see a face or a hand wave through its dull amber—for I always think of drowned creatures washing wearily in its murky depths—it lit up the great warehouses, and warmed the brickwork of the monster chimneys in the background. No detail escaped my outer eyes—not the hideous green of the velveteen in the sleeves of the woman on my left, nor the supercilious giggle of the young ladies on my right, who made audible remarks about my personal appearance.

But what cared I? Was I not happy, absurdly happy?—
because

because all the while my inner eyes saw undercurrents of beauty and pathos, quaint contrasts, whimsical details that tickled my sense of humour deliciously. The elf that lurks in some inner cell was very busy, now throwing out tender mimosa-like threads of creative fancy, now recording fleeting impressions with delicate sure brushwork for future use ; touching a hundred vagrant things with the magic of imagination, making a running comment on the scenes we passed.

The warehouses told a tale of an up-to-date Soll und Haben, one of my very own, one that would thrust old Freytag out of the book-mart. The tall chimneys ceased to be giraffic throats belching soot and smoke over the blackening city. They were obelisks rearing granite heads heavenwards ! Joints in the bricks, weather-stains ? You are mistaken ; they were hieroglyphics, setting down for posterity a tragic epic of man the conqueror, and fire his slave ; and how they strangled beauty in the grip of gain. A theme for a Whitman !

And so it talks and I listen with my inner ear—and yet nothing outward escapes me—the slackening of the boat—the stepping on and off of folk—the lowering of the funnel—the name “ Stanley ” on the little tug, with its self-sufficient puff-puff, fussing by with a line of grimy barges in tow ; freight-laden, for the water washes over them—and on the last a woman sits suckling her baby, and a terrier with badly cropped ears yaps at us as we pass. . . .

And as this English river scene flashes by, lines of association form angles in my brain ; and the point of each is a dot of light that expands into a background for forgotten canal scenes, with green-grey water, and leaning balconies, and strange crafts—Canaletti and Guadi seen long ago in picture galleries. . . .

A delicate featured youth with gold-laced cap, scrapes a prelude on
a thin-

a thin-toned violin, and his companion thrums an accompaniment on a harp.

I don't know what they play, some tuneful thing with an under-note of sadness and sentiment running through its commonplace—likely a music-hall ditty ; for a lad with a cheap silk hat, and the hateful expression of knowingness that makes him a type of his kind, grins appreciatively and hums the words.

I turn from him to the harp. It is the wreck of a handsome instrument, its gold is tarnished, its white is smirched, its stucco rose-wreaths sadly battered. It has the air of an antique beauty in dirty ball finery ; and is it fancy, or does not a shamed wail lurk in the tone of its strings ?

The whimsical idea occurs to me that it has once belonged to a lady with drooping ringlets and an embroidered spencer ; and that she touched its chords to the words of a song by Thomas Haynes Baily, and that Miss La Creevy transferred them both to ivory.

The youth played mechanically, without a trace of emotion ; whilst the harpist, whose nose is a study in purples and whose bloodshot eyes have the glassy brightness of drink, felt every touch of beauty in the poor little tune, and drew it tenderly forth.

They added the musical note to my joyous mood ; the poetry of the city dovetailed harmoniously with country scenes too recent to be treated as memories—and I stepped off the boat with the melody vibrating through the city sounds.

I swung from place to place in happy, lightsome mood, glad as a fairy prince in quest of adventures. The air of the city was exhilarating ether—and all mankind my brethren—in fact I felt effusively affectionate.

I smiled at a pretty anæmic city girl, and only remembered that she was a stranger when she flashed back an indignant look of affected affront.

But

But what cared I? Not a jot! I could afford to say pityingly: "Go thy way, little city maid, get thee to thy typing."

And all the while that these outward insignificant things occupied me, I knew that a precious little pearl of a thought was evolving slowly out of the inner chaos.

It was such an unique little gem, with the lustre of a tear, and the light of moonlight and streamlight and love smiles reflected in its pure sheen—and, best of all, it was all my own—a priceless possession, not to be bartered for the Jagersfontein diamond—a city childling with the prepotency of the country working in it—and I revelled in its fresh charm and dainty strength; it seemed original, it was so frankly natural.

And as I dodged through the great waggons laden with wares from outer continents, I listened and watched it forming inside, until my soul became filled with the light of its brightness; and a wild elation possessed me at the thought of this darling brain-child, this offspring of my fancy, this rare little creation, perhaps embryo of genius that was my very own.

I smiled benevolently at the passers-by, with their harassed business faces, and shiny black bags bulging with the weight of common every-day documents, as I thought of the treat I would give them later on; the delicate feast I held in store for them, when I would transfer this dainty elusive birthling of my brain to paper for their benefit.

It would make them dream of moonlit lanes and sweethearting; reveal to them the golden threads in the sober city woof; creep in close and whisper good cheer, and smooth out tired creases in heart and brain; a draught from the fountain of Jouvence could work no greater miracle than the tale I had to unfold.

Aye, they might pass me by now, not even give me the inside

of

of the pavement, I would not blame them for it!—but later on, later on, they would flock to thank me. They just didn't realise, poor money-grubbers! How could they? But later on . . . I grew perfectly radiant at the thought of what I would do for poor humanity, and absurdly self-satisfied as the conviction grew upon me that this would prove a work of genius—no mere glimmer of the spiritual afflatus—but a solid chunk of genius.

Meanwhile I took a 'bus and paid my penny. I leant back and chuckled to myself as each fresh thought-atom added to the precious quality of my pearl. Pearl? Not one any longer—a whole quarrelet of pearls, Oriental pearls of the greatest price! Ah, how happy I was as I fondled my conceit!

It was near Chancery Lane that a foreign element cropped up and disturbed the rich flow of my fancy.

I happened to glance at the side-walk. A woman, a little woman, was hurrying along in a most remarkable way. It annoyed me, for I could not help wondering why she was in such a desperate hurry. Botlier the jade! what business had she to thrust herself on my observation like that, and tangle the threads of a web of genius, undoubted genius?

I closed my eyes to avoid seeing her; I could see her through the lids. She had square shoulders and a high bust, and a white gauze tie, like a snowy feather in the breast of a pouter pigeon.

We stop—I look again—aye, there she is! Her black eyes stare boldly through her kohol-tinted lids, her face has a violet tint. She grips her gloves in one hand, her white-handled umbrella in the other, handle up, like a knobkerrie.

She has great feet, too, in pointed shoes, and the heels are under her insteps; and as we outdistance her I fancy I can hear their decisive tap-tap above the thousand sounds of the street.

I breathe a sigh of relief as I return to my pearl—my pearl
that

that is to bring *me* kudos and make countless thousands rejoice. It is dimmed a little, I must nurse it tenderly.

Jerk, jerk, jangle—stop.—Bother the bell! We pull up to drop some passengers, the idiots! and, as I live, she overtakes us! How the men and women cede her the middle of the pavement! How her figure dominates it, and her great feet emphasise her ridiculous haste! Why should she disturb me? My nerves are quivering pitifully; the sweet inner light is waning, I am in mortal dread of losing my little masterpiece. Thank heaven, we are off again. . . .

“Charing Cross, Army and Navy, V'toria!”—Stop!

Of course, naturally! Here she comes, elbows out, umbrella waning! How the steel in her bonnet glistens! She recalls something, what is it?—what is it? A-ah! I have it!—a strident voice, on the deck of a steamer in the glorious bay of Rio, singing:

“Je suis le vr-r-rai pompier,
Le seul pompier . . .”

and *la mibla* snaps her fingers gaily and trills her *r's*; and the Corcovado is outlined clearly on the purple background as if bending to listen; and the palms and the mosque-like buildings, and the fair islets bathed in the witchery of moonlight, and the star-gems twinned in the lap of the bay, intoxicate as a dream of the East.

“Je suis le vr-r-rai pompier,
Le seul pompier . . .”

What in the world is a *pompier*? What connection has the word with this creature who is murdering, deliberately murdering, a delicate creation of my brain, begotten by the fusion of country and town?

“Je suis le vr-r-rai pompier, . . .”

I am

I am convinced *pompier* expresses her in some subtle way—absurd word! I look back at her, I criticise her, I anathematise her, I *hate* her!

What is she hurrying for? We can't escape her—always we stop and let her overtake us with her elbowing gait, and tight skirt shortened to show her great splay feet—ugh!

My brain is void, all is dark within; the flowers are faded, the music stilled; the lovely illusive little being has flown, and yet she pounds along untiringly.

Is she a feminine presentment of the wandering Jew, a living embodiment of the ghoul-like spirit that haunts the city and murders fancy?

What business had she, I ask, to come and thrust her white-handled umbrella into the delicate network of my nerves and untune their harmony?

Does she realise what she has done? She has trampled a rare little mind-being unto death, destroyed a precious literary gem. Aye, one that, for aught I know, might have worked a revolution in modern thought; added a new human document to the archives of man; been the keystone to psychic investigations; solved problems that lurk in the depths of our natures and tantalise us with elusive gleams of truth; heralded in, perchance, the new era; when such simple problems as Home Rule, Bimetallism, or the Woman Question will be mere themes for schoolboard compositions—who can tell?

Well, it was not my fault.—No one regrets it more, no one—but what could I do?

Blame her, woman of the great feet and dominating gait, and waving umbrella-handle!—blame her! I can only regret it—regret it!