

Rosemary for Remembrance

By Henry Harland

I

I WONDER why I dreamed last night of Zabetta. It is years since she made her brief little transit through my life, and passed out of it utterly. It is years since the very recollection of her—which for years, like an accusing spirit, had haunted me too often—like a spirit was laid. It is long enough, in all conscience, since I have even thought of her, casually, for an instant. And then, last night, after a perfectly usual London day and evening, I went to bed and dreamed of her vividly. What had happened to bring her to my mind? Or is it simply that the god of dreams is a capricious god?

The influence of my dream, at any rate,—the bitter-sweet savour of it,—has pursued me through my waking hours. All day long to-day Zabetta has been my phantom guest. She has walked with me in the streets; she has waited at my elbow while I wrote or talked or read. Now, at tea-time, she is present with me by my study fireside, in the twilight. Her voice sounds faintly, plaintively, in my ears; her eyes gaze at me sadly from a pale reproachful face. . . . She bids me to the theatre of memory, where my youth is rehearsed before me in mimic-show. There was one—

no,

no, there were two little scenes in which Zabetta played the part of leading lady.

II

I do not care to specify the year in which it happened ; it happened a terrible number of years ago ; it happened when I was twenty. I had passed the winter in Naples,—oh, it had been a golden winter !—and now April had come, and my last Neapolitan day. To-morrow I was to take ship for Marseilles, on the way to join my mother in Paris.

It was in the afternoon ; and I was climbing one of those crooked staircase alleys that scale the hillsides behind the town, the Salita—is there, in Naples, a Salita Santa Margherita ? I had lunched (for the last time !) at the Café d'Europe, and had then set forth upon a last haphazard ramble through the streets. It was tremulous spring weather, with blue skies, soft breezes, and a tender sun ; the sort of weather that kindles perilous ardours even in the blood of middle age, and that turns the blood of youth to wildfire.

Women sat combing their hair, and singing, and gossiping, before the doorways of their pink and yellow houses ; children sprawled, and laughed, and quarrelled in the dirt. Pifferari, in sheep-skins and sandles, followed by prowling, gaunt-limbed dogs, droned monotonous nasal melodies from their bagpipes. Priests picked their way gingerly over the muddy cobble stones, sleek, black-a-vised priests, with exaggerated hats, like Don Basilio's in the *Barbier*. Now and then one passed a fat brown monk ; or a soldier ; or a white-robed penitent, whose eyes glimmered uncannily from the peep-holes of the hood that hid his face ; or a comely contadina, in her smart costume, with a pomegranate-blossom flaming

ing behind her ear, and red lips that curved defiantly as she met the covetous glances wildfire-and-twenty no doubt bestowed upon her, —whereat, perhaps, wildfire-and-twenty halted and hesitated for an instant, debating whether to accept the challenge and turn and follow her. A flock of milk-purveying goats jangled their bells a few yards below me. Hawkers screamed their merchandise, fish, and vegetables, and early fruit—apricots, figs, green almonds. Brown-skinned, bare-legged boys shouted at long-suffering donkeys, and whacked their flanks with sticks. And everybody, more or less, importuned you for coppers. “Mossou, mossou! Un piccolo soldo, per l'amor di Dio!” The air was vibrant with southern human noises, and dense with southern human smells—amongst which, here and there, wandered strangely a lost waft of perfume from some neighbouring garden, a scent of jasmine or of orange flowers.

And then, suddenly, the salita took a turn, and broadened into a small piazza. At one hand there was a sheer terrace, dropping to tiled roofs twenty feet below; and hence one got a splendid view, over the town, of the blue bay, with its shipping, and of Capri, all rose and purple in the distance, and of Vesuvius with its silver wreath of smoke. At the other hand loomed a vast, discoloured, pink-stuccoed palace, with grated windows, and a porte-cochère black as the mouth of a cavern; and the upper stories of the palace were in ruins, and out of one corner of their crumbling walls a palm-tree grew. The third side of the piazza was inevitably occupied by a church, a little pearl-grey rococo edifice, with a bell, no deeper-toned than a common dinner-bell, which was now frantically ringing. About the doors of the church countless written notices were pasted, advertising indulgences; beggars clung to the steps, like monster snails; and the greasy leathern portière was constantly being drawn aside, to let someone enter or come out.

It

III

It was here that I met Zabetta.

The heavy portière swung open, and a young girl stepped from the darkness behind it into the sunshine.

I saw a soft face, with bright brown eyes ; a plain black frock, with a little green nosegay stuck in its belt ; and a small round scarlet hat.

A hideous old beggar woman stretched a claw towards this apparition, mumbling something. The apparition smiled, and sought in its pocket, and made the beggar woman the richer by a soldo.

I was twenty, and the April wind was magical. I thought I had never seen so beautiful a smile, a smile so radiant, so tender.

I watched the young girl as she tripped down the church steps, and crossed the piazza, coming towards me. Her smile lingered, fading slowly, slowly, from her face.

As she neared me, her eyes met mine. For a second we looked straight into each other's eyes. . . .

Oh, there was nothing bold, nothing sophisticated or immodest, in the momentary gaze she gave me. It was a natural, spontaneous gaze of perfectly frank, of perfectly innocent and impulsive interest, in exchange for mine of open admiration. But it touched the wildfire in my veins, and made it leap tumultuously.

IV

Happiness often passes close to us without our suspecting it, the proverb says.

The young girl moved on ; and I stood still, feeling dimly that something

something precious had passed close to me. I had not turned back to follow any of the brazenly provocative contadine. But now I could not help it. Something precious had passed within arm's reach of me. I must not let it go, without at least a semblance of pursuing it. If I waited there passive till she was out of sight, my regrets would be embittered by the recollection that I had not even tried.

I followed her eagerly, but vaguely, in a tremor of unformulated hopes and fears. I had no definite intentions, no designs. Presently, doubtless, she would come to her journey's end—she would disappear in a house or shop—and I should have my labour for my pains. Nevertheless, I followed. What would you? She was young, she was pretty, she was neatly dressed. She had big bright brown eyes, and a slender waist, and a little round scarlet hat set jauntily upon a mass of waving soft brown hair. And she walked gracefully, with delicious undulations, as if to music, lifting her skirts up from the pavement, and so disclosing the daintiest of feet, in trim buttoned boots, of glazed leather, with high Italian heels. And her smile was lovely—and I was twenty—and it was April. I must not let her escape me, without at least a semblance of pursuit.

She led me down the salita that I had just ascended. She could scarcely know that she was being followed, for she had not once glanced behind her.

V

At first I followed meekly, unperceived, and contented to remain so.

But little by little a desire for more aggressive measures grew within me. I said, "Why not—instead of following meekly—
why

why not overtake and outdistance her, then turn round, and come face to face with her again? And if again her eyes should meet mine as frankly as they met them in the piazza. . . .”

The mere imagination of their doing so made my heart stop beating.

I quickened my pace. I drew nearer and nearer to her. I came abreast of her—oh, how the wildfire trembled! I pressed on for a bit, and then, true to my resolution, turned back.

Her eyes did meet mine again quite frankly. What was more, they brightened with a little light of surprise, I might almost have fancied a little light of pleasure.

If the mere imagination of the thing had made my heart stop beating, the thing itself set it to pounding, racing, uncontrollably, so that I felt all but suffocated, and had to catch my breath.

She knew now that the young man she had passed in the piazza had followed her of set purpose; and she was surprised, but, seemingly, not displeased. They were wonderfully gentle, wonderfully winning eyes, those eyes she raised so frankly to my desirous ones; and innocent, innocent, with all the unsuspecting innocence of childhood. In years she might be seventeen, older perhaps; but there was a child's fearless unconsciousness of evil in her wide brown eyes. She had not yet been taught (or, anyhow, she clearly didn't believe) that it is dangerous and unbecoming to exchange glances with a stranger in the streets.

She was as good as smiling on me. Might I dare the utmost? Might I venture to speak to her? . . . My heart was throbbing too violently. I could not have found an articulate human word, nor a shred of voice, nor a pennyweight of self-assurance, in my body.

So, thrilling with excitement, quailing in panic, I passed her again.

I passed

I passed her, and kept on up the narrow alley for half a dozen steps, when again I turned.

She was standing where I had left her, looking after me. There was the expression of unabashed disappointment in her dark eyes now ; which, in a minute, melted to an expression of appeal.

“Oh, aren't you going to speak to me, after all?” they pleaded.

Wooed by those soft monitors, I plucked up a sort of desperate courage. Hot coals burned in my cheeks, something fluttered terribly in my breast ; I was literally quaking in every limb. My spirit was exultant, but my flesh was faint. Her eyes drew me, drew me. . . . I fancy myself awkwardly raising my hat ; I hear myself accomplish a half-smothered salutation.

“Buon' giorno, Signorina.”

Her face lit up with that celestial smile of hers ; and in a voice that was like ivory and white velvet, she returned, “Buon' giorno, Signorino.”

VI

And then I don't know how long we stood together in silence.

This would never do, I recognised. I must not stand before her in silence, like a guilty schoolboy. I must feign composure. I must carry off the situation lightly, like a man of the world, a man of experience. I groped anxiously in the confusion of my wits for something that might pass for an apposite remark.

At last I had a flash of inspiration. “What—what fine weather,” I gasped. “Che bel tempo!”

“Oh, molto bello,” she responded. It was like a cadenza on a flute.

“You—you are going into the town?” I questioned.

“Yes,” said she.

“May

"May I—may I have the pleasure——" I faltered.

"But yes," she consented, with an inflection that wondered "What else have you spoken to me for?"

And we set off down the salita, side by side.

VII

She had exquisite little white ears, with little coral earrings, like drops of blood; and a perfect rosebud mouth, a mouth that matched her eyes for innocence and sweetness. Her scarlet hat burned in the sun, and her brown hair shook gently under it. She had plump little soft white hands.

Presently, when I had begun to feel more at my ease, I hazarded a question. "You are a republican, Signorina?"

"No," she assured me, with a puzzled elevation of the brows.

"Ah, well, then you are a cardinal," I concluded.

She gave a silvery trill of laughter, and asked, "Why must I be either a republican or a cardinal?"

"You wear a *bonnet rouge*—a scarlet hat," I explained.

At which she laughed again, crisply, merrily.

"You are French," she said.

"Oh, am I?"

"Aren't you?"

"As you wish, Signorina; but I had never thought so."

And still again she laughed.

"You have come from church," said I.

"Già," she assented; "from confession."

"Really? And did you have a great many wickednesses to confess?"

"Oh, yes; many, many," she answered simply.

"And

"And now have you got a heavy penance to perform?"

"No; only twenty *aves*. And I must turn my tongue seven times in my mouth before I speak, whenever I am angry."

"Ah, then you are given to being angry? You have a bad temper?"

"Oh, dreadful, dreadful," she cried, nodding her head.

It was my turn to laugh now. "Then I must be careful not to vex you."

"Yes. But I will turn my tongue seven times before I speak, if you do," she promised.

"Are you going far?" I asked.

"I am going nowhere. I am taking a walk."

"Shall we go to the Villa Nazionale, and watch the driving?"

"Or to the Toledo, and look at the shop-windows?"

"We can do both. We will begin at the Toledo, and end in the Villa."

"Bene," she acquiesced.

After a little silence, "I am so glad I met you," I informed her, looking into her eyes.

Her eyes softened adorably. "I am so glad too," she said.

"You are lovely, you are sweet," I vowed, with enthusiasm.

"Oh, no!" she protested. "I am as God made me."

"You are lovely, you are sweet. I thought—when I first saw you, above there, in the piazza—when you came out of church, and gave the soldo to the old beggar woman—I thought you had the loveliest smile I had ever seen."

A beautiful blush suffused her face, and her eyes swam in a mist of pleasure. "E vero?" she questioned.

"Oh, vero, vero. That is why I followed you. You don't mind my having followed you?"

"Oh, no; I am glad."

After another interval of silence, "You are not Neapolitan?" I said. "You don't speak like a Neapolitan."

"No; I am Florentine. We live in Naples for my father's health. He is not strong. He cannot endure the cold winters of the North."

I murmured something sympathetic; and she went on, "My father is a violinist. To-day he has gone to Capri, to play at a festival. He will not be back until to-morrow. So I was very lonesome."

"You have no mother?"

"My mother is dead," she said, crossing herself. In a moment she added, with a touch of pride, "During the season my father plays in the orchestra of the San Carlo."

"I am sure I know what your name is," said I.

"Oh? How can you know? What is it?"

"I think your name is Rosabella."

"Ah, then you are wrong. My name is Elisabetta. But in Naples everybody says Zabetta. And yours?"

"Guess."

"Oh, I cannot guess. Not—not Federico?"

"Do I look as if my name were Federico?"

She surveyed me gravely for a minute, then shook her head pensively. "No; I do not think your name is Federico."

And therewith I told her my name, and made her repeat it till she could pronounce it without a struggle. It sounded very pretty, coming from her pretty lips, quite southern and romantic, with its r's tremendously enriched.

"Anyhow, I know your age," said I.

"What is it?"

"You are seventeen."

"No—ever so much older."

"Eighteen

"Eighteen then."

"I shall be nineteen in July."

VIII

Before the brilliant shop-windows of the Toledo we dallied for an hour or more, Zabetta's eyes sparkling with delight as they rested on the bright-hued silks, the tortoise-shell and coral, the gold and silver filagree-work, that were there displayed. But when she admired some one particular object above another, and I besought her to let me buy it for her, she refused austerely. "But no, no, no! It is impossible." Then we went on to the Villa, and strolled by the sea-wall, between the blue-green water and the multicoloured procession of people in carriages. And by and by Zabetta confessed that she was tired, and proposed that we should sit down on one of the benches. "A café would be better fun," submitted her companion. And we placed ourselves at one of the out-of-door tables of the café in the garden, where, after some urging, I prevailed upon Zabetta to drink a cup of chocolate. Meanwhile, with the ready confidence of youth, we had each been desultorily autobiographical; and if our actual acquaintance was only the affair of an afternoon, I doubt if in a year we could have felt that we knew each other better.

"I must go home," Zabetta said at last.

"Oh, not yet, not yet," cried I.

"It will be dinner-time. I must go home to dinner."

"But your father is at Capri. You will have to dine alone."

"Yes."

"Then don't. Come with me instead, and dine at a restaurant."

Her

Her eyes glowed wistfully for an instant; but she replied,
"Oh, no; I cannot."

"Yes, you can. Come."

"Oh, no; impossible."

"Why?"

"Oh, because."

"Because what?"

"There is my cat. She will have nothing to eat."

"Your cook will give her something."

"My cook!" laughed Zabetta. "My cook is here before you."

"Well, you must be a kind mistress. You must give your cook an evening out."

"But my poor cat?"

"Your cat can catch a mouse."

"There are no mice in our house. She has frightened them all away."

"Then she can wait. A little fast will be good for her soul."

Zabetta laughed, and I said, "Andiamo!"

At the restaurant we climbed to the first floor, and they gave us a table near the window, whence we could look out over the villa to the sea beyond. The sun was sinking, and the sky was gay with rainbow tints, like mother-of-pearl.

Zabetta's face shone joyfully. "This is only the second time in my life that I have dined in a restaurant," she told me. "And the other time was very long ago, when I was quite young. And it wasn't nearly so grand a restaurant as this, either."

"And now what would you like to eat?" I asked, picking up the bill of fare.

"May I look?" she said.

I handed her the document, and she studied it at length. I think,

think, indeed, she read it through. In the end she appeared rather bewildered.

"Oh, there is so much. I don't know. Will you choose, please?"

I made a shift at choosing, and the sympathetic waiter flourished kitchenwards with my commands.

"What is that little green nosegay you wear in your belt, Zabetta?" I inquired.

"Oh, this—it is rosemary. Smell it," she said, breaking off a sprig and offering it to me.

"Rosemary—that's for remembrance," quoted I.

"What does that mean? What language is that?" she asked.

I tried to translate it to her. And then I taught her to say it in English. "Rrosemérri—tsat is forr remembrance."

"Will you write it down for me?" she requested. "It is pretty."

And I wrote it for her on the back of one of my cards.

IX

After dinner we crossed the garden again, and again stood by the sea-wall. Over us the soft spring night was like a dark sapphire. Points of red, green, and yellow fire burned from the ships in the bay, and seemed of the same company as the stars above them. A rosy aureole in the sky, to the eastward, marked the smouldering crater of Vesuvius. Away in the Chiaja a man was singing comic songs, to an accompaniment of mandolines and guitars; comic songs that sounded pathetic, as they reached us in the distance.

I asked Zabetta how she wished to finish the evening.

"I don't

"I don't care," said she.

"Would you like to go to the play?"

"If you wish."

"What do *you* wish?"

"I think I should like to stay here a little longer. It is pleasant."

We leaned on the parapet, close to each other. Her face was very pale in the starlight; her eyes were infinitely deep, and dark, and tender. One of her little hands lay on the stone wall, like a white flower. I took it. It was warm and soft. She did not attempt to withdraw it. I bent over it and kissed it. I kissed it many times. Then I kissed her lips. "Zabetta—I love you—I love you," I murmured fervently.—Don't imagine that I didn't mean it. It was April, and I was twenty.

"I love you, Zabetta. Dearest little Zabetta! I love you so."

"E vero?" she questioned, scarcely above her breath.

"Oh, si; é vero, vero, vero," I asseverated. "And you? And you?"

"Yes, I love you," she whispered.

And then I could say no more. The ecstasy that filled my heart was too poignant. We stood there speechless, hand in hand, and breathed the air of heaven.

By and by Zabetta drew her bunch of rosemary from her belt, and divided it into two parts. One part she gave to me, the other she kept. "Rosemary—it is for constancy," she said. I pressed the cool herb to my face for a moment, inhaling its bitter-sweet fragrance; then I fastened it in my buttonhole. On my watchchain I wore—what everybody in Naples used to wear—a little coral hand, a little clenched coral hand, holding a little golden dagger. I detached it now, and made Zabetta take it. "Coral—that is also for constancy," I reminded her; "and besides, it protects one from the Evil Eye."

X

At last Zabetta asked me what time it was ; and when she learned that it was half-past nine, she insisted that she really must go home. "They shut the outer door of the house we live in at ten o'clock, and I have no key."

"You can ring up the porter."

"Oh, there is no porter."

"But if we had gone to the theatre?"

"I should have had to leave you in the middle of the play."

"Ah, well," I consented ; and we left the villa, and took a cab.

"Are you happy, Zabetta?" I asked her, as the cab rattled us towards our parting.

"Oh, so happy, so happy ! I have never been so happy before."

"Dearest Zabetta !"

"You will love me always?"

"Always, always."

"We will see each other every day. We will see each other to-morrow?"

"Oh, to-morrow !" I groaned suddenly, the actualities of life rushing all at once upon my mind.

"What is it? What of to-morrow?"

"Oh, to-morrow, to-morrow !"

"What? What?" Her voice was breathless with suspense, with alarm.

"Oh, I had forgotten. You will think I am a beast."

"What is it? For heaven's sake, tell me."

"You will think I am a beast. You will think I have deceived you. To-morrow—I cannot help it—I am not my own master

—I am

—I am summoned by my parents—to-morrow I am going away—I am leaving Naples.”

“You are leaving Naples?”

“I am going to Paris.”

“To Paris?”

“Yes.”

There was a breathing-space of silence. Then “Oh, Dio!” sobbed Zabetta; and she began to cry as if her heart would break.

I seized her hands; I drew her to me. I tried to comfort her. But she only cried and cried and cried.

“Zabetta . . . Zabetta! . . . Don’t cry. . . . Forgive me. . . . Oh, don’t cry like that.”

“Oh, Dio! Oh, caro Dio!” she sobbed.

“Zabetta—listen to me,” I began. “I have something to say to you. . . .”

“Cosa?” she asked faintly.

“Zabetta—do you really love me?”

“Oh, tanto, tanto!”

“Then, listen, Zabetta. If you really love me—come with me.”

“Come with you. How?”

“Come with me to Paris.”

“To Paris?”

“Yes, to-morrow.”

There was another instant of silence, and then again Zabetta began to cry.

“Will you? Will you? Will you come with me to Paris?” I implored her.

“Oh, I would, I would. But I can’t. I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Oh, I can’t.”

“Why? Why can’t you?”

“Oh,

"Oh, my father—I cannot leave my father."

"Your father? But—if you love me——"

"He is old. He is ill. He has no one but me. I cannot leave him."

"Zabetta!"

"No, no. I cannot leave him. Oh, Dio mio!"

"But Zabetta——"

"No. It would be a sin. Oh, the worst of sins. He is old and ill. I cannot leave him. Don't ask me. It would be dreadful."

"But then? Then what? What shall we do?"

"Oh, I don't know. I wish I were dead."

The cab came to a standstill, and Zabetta said, "Here we are." I helped her to descend. We were before a dark porte-cochère, in some dark back-street, high up the hillside.

"Addio," said Zabetta, holding out her hand.

"You won't come with me?"

"I can't. I can't. Addio."

"Oh, Zabetta! Do you—— Oh, say, say that you forgive me."

"Yes. Addio."

"And, Zabetta, you—you have my address. It is on the card I gave you. If you ever need anything—if you are ever in trouble of any kind—remember you have my address—you will write to me."

"Yes. Addio."

"Addio."

She stood for a second, looking up at me from great brimming eyes, and then she turned away and vanished in the darkness of the porte-cochère. I got into the cab, and was driven to my hotel.

XI

And here, one might have supposed, was an end of the episode ; but no.

I went to Paris, I went to New York, I returned to Paris, I came on to London ; and in this journeying more than a year was lost. In the beginning I had suffered, as much as you could wish me in the way of contrition, in the way of regret too. I blamed myself and pitied myself with almost equal fervour. I had trifled with a gentle human heart ; I had been compelled to let a priceless human treasure slip from my possession. But—I was twenty. And there were other girls in the world. And a year is a long time, when we are twenty. Little by little the image of Zabetta faded, faded. By the year's end, I am afraid it had become very pale indeed. . . .

It was late June, and I was in London, when the post brought me a letter. The letter bore an Italian stamp, and had originally been directed to my old address in Paris. Thence (as the numerous re-directions on the big square foreign envelope attested) it had been forwarded to New York ; thence back again to Paris ; and thence finally to London.

The letter was written in the neatest of tiny copperplates ; and this is a translation of what it said :

“DEAR FRIEND :

“My poor father died last month in the German Hospital, after an illness of twenty-one days. Pray for his soul.

“I am now alone and free, and if you still wish it, can come to you. It was impossible for me to come when you asked me ; but you have not ceased to be my constant thought. I keep your coral hand.

“Your ever faithful

“ZABETTA COLLALUCE.”

Enclosed

Enclosed in the letter there was a sprig of some dried, bitter-sweet-smelling herb; and, in pencil, below the signature,—laboriously traced, as I could guess, from what I had written for her on my visiting-card,—the English phrase: “Rosemary—that’s for remembrance.”

The letter was dated early in May, which made it six weeks old.

What could I do? What answer could I send?

Of course, you know what I did do. I procrastinated and vacillated, and ended by sending no answer at all. I could not write and say “Yes, come to me.” But how could I write and say, “No, do not come?” Besides, would she not have given up hoping for an answer, by this time? It was six weeks since she had written. I tried to think that the worst was over.

But my remorse took a new and a longer and a stronger lease of life. A vision of Zabetta, pale, with anxious eyes, standing at her window, waiting, waiting for a word that never came,—for months I could not chase it from my conscience; it was years before it altogether ceased its accusing visits.

XII

And then, last night, after a perfectly usual London day and evening, I went to bed and dreamed of her vividly; and all day long to-day the fragrance of my dream has clung about me,—a bitter-sweet fragrance, like that of rosemary itself. Where is Zabetta now? What is her life? How have the years treated her? . . . In my dream she was still eighteen. In reality—it is melancholy to think how far from eighteen she has had leisure, since that April afternoon, to drift.

Youth

Youth faces forward, impatient of the present, panting to anticipate the future. But we who have crossed a certain sad meridian, we turn our gaze backwards, and tell the relentless gods what we would sacrifice to recover a little of the past, one of those shining days when to us also it was given to sojourn among the Fortunate Islands. *Ah, si jeunesse savait! . . .*