

## A Seventh-story Heaven

By Richard Le Gallienne

*" Dans son grenier qu'on est bien à vingt ans ! "*

AT one end of the city that I love there is a tall dingy pile of offices that has evidently seen more prosperous fortunes. It is not the aristocratic end. It is remote from the lordly street of the fine shops of the fair women, where in the summer afternoons the gay bank clerks parade arm-in-arm in the wake of the tempestuous petticoat. It lies aside from the great exchange which looks like a scene from *Romeo and Juliet* in the moonlight, from the town-hall from whose clocked and gilded cupola ring sweet chimes at midnight, and whence, throned above the city, a golden Britannia, in the sight of all men, is seen visibly ruling the waves ; while in the square below the death of Nelson is played all day in stone, with a frieze of his noble words about the pedestal—England expects ! What an influence that stirring challenge has yet upon the hearts of men may be seen by any one who will study the faces of the busy, imaginative cotton-brokers, who, in the thronged and humming mornings, sell what they have never seen to a customer they will never see.

In fact, the end I mean is just the very opposite end to that. It is the end where the cotton that everybody sells and nobody buys *is* seen, piled in great white stacks, or swinging in the air from the necks of mighty cranes, that could nip up an elephant with

with as little ado, and set him down on the wharf, with a box on his ugly ears for his cowardly trumpeting. It is the end that smells of tar, the domain of the harbour-masters, where the sailor finds a "home,"—not too sweet, and where the wild sea is tamed in a maze of granite squares and basins ; the end where the riggings and buildings rise side by side, and a clerk might swing himself out upon the yards from his top-floor desk. Here is the Custom House, and the conversation that shines is full of freightage and dock dues ; here are the shops that sell nothing but oilskins, sextants and parrots, and here the taverns do a mighty trade in rum.

It was in this quarter for a brief sweet time that Love and Beauty made their strange home, as though a pair of halcyons should choose to nest in the masthead of a cattleship. Love and Beauty chose this quarter, as alas, Love and Beauty must choose so many things—for its cheapness. Love and Beauty were poor, and office rents in this quarter were exceptionally low. But what should Love and Beauty do with an office ? Love was a poor poet in need of a room for his bed and his rhymes, and Beauty was a little blue-eyed girl who loved him.

It was a shabby forbidding place, gloomy and comfortless as a warehouse on the banks of Styx. No one but Love and Beauty would have dared to choose it for their home. But Love and Beauty have a great confidence in themselves—a confidence curiously supported by history—and they never had a moment's doubt that this place was as good as another for an earthly Paradise. So Love signed an agreement for one great room at the very top, the very masthead of the building, and Beauty made it pretty with muslin curtains, flowers, and dainty makeshifts of furniture, but chiefly with the light of her own heavenly face. A stroke of luck coming one day to the poet, the lovers, with that extravagance which the poor alone have the courage to enjoy,  
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procured a piano on the kind-hearted hire-purchase system, a system specially conceived for lovers. Then, indeed, for many a wonderful night that room was not only on the seventh floor, but in the seventh heaven; and as Beauty would sit at the piano, with her long hair flying loose, and her soul like a whirl of starlight about her brows, a stranger peering in across the soft lamplight, seeing her face, hearing her voice, would deem that the long climb, flight after flight of dreary stair, had been appropriately rewarded by a glimpse of Heaven.

Certainly it must have seemed a strange contrast from the life about and below it. The foot of that infernal stair plunged in the warm rum-and-thick-twist atmosphere of a sailors' tavern—and "The Jolly Shipmates" was a house of entertainment by no means to be despised. Often have I sat there with the poet, drinking the whisky from which Scotland takes its name, among wondering sea-boots and sou'-westers, who could make nothing of that wild hair and that still wilder talk.

From the kingdom of rum and tar, you mounted into a zone of commission agents and ship-brokers, a chill unoccupied region, in which every small office-door bore the names of half-a-dozen different firms, and yet somehow could not contrive to look busy. Finally came an airy echoing landing, a region of empty rooms, which the landlords in vain recommended as studios to a city that loved not art. Here dwelt the keeper and his kind-hearted little wife, and no one besides save Love and Beauty. There was thus a feeling of rarefaction in the atmosphere, as though at this height it was only the Alpine flora of humanity that could find root and breathing. But once along the bare passage and through a certain door, and what a sudden translation it was into a gracious world of books and flowers and the peace they always bring.

Once

Once upon a time, in that enchanted past where dwell all the dreams we love best, precisely—with loving punctuality—at five in the afternoon, a pretty girlish figure, like Persephone escaping from the shades, stole through the rough sailors at the foot of that sordid Jacob's ladder and made her way to the little Heaven at the top.

I shall not describe her, for the good reason that I cannot. Leonardo, ever curious of the beauty that was most strangely exquisite, once in an inspired hour painted such a face, a face wrought of the porcelain of earth with the art of Heaven. But, whoever should paint it, God certainly made it—must have been the comment of any one who caught a glimpse of that little figure vanishing heavenwards up that stair, like an Ascension of Fra Angelico's—that is any one interested in art and angels.

She had not long to wait outside the door she sought, for the poet, who had listened all day for the sound, had ears for the whisper of her skirts as she came down the corridor, and before she had time to knock had already folded her in his arms. The two babes in that thieves' wood of commission agents and ship-brokers stood silent together for a moment, in the deep security of a kiss such as the richest millionaire could never buy—and then they fell to comparing notes of their day's work. The poet had had one of his rare good days. He had made no money, his post had been even more disappointing than usual,—but he had written a poem, the best he had ever written, he said, as he always said of his last new thing. He had been burning to read it to somebody all afternoon—had with difficulty refrained from reading it to the loquacious little keeper's wife as she brought him some coals—so it was not to be expected that he should wait a minute before reading it to her whom indeed it strove to celebrate. With arms round each other's necks, they bent over the table littered with  
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the new-born poem, all blots and dashes like the first draft of a composer's score, and the poet, deftly picking his way among the erasures and interlineations, read aloud the beautiful words—with a full sense of their beauty!—to ears that deemed them more beautiful even than they were. The owners of this now valuable copyright allow me to irradiate my prose with three of the verses.

“Ah! what,” half-chanted, half-crooned the poet—

“Ah! what a garden is your hair!—  
Such treasure as the kings of old,  
In coffers of the beaten gold,  
Laid up on earth—and left it there.”

So tender a reference to hair whose beauty others beside the poet had loved must needs make a tender interruption—the only kind of interruption the poet could have forgiven—and “Who,” he continued—

“Who was the artist of your mouth?  
What master out of old Japan  
Wrought it so dangerous to man . . . .”

And here it was but natural that laughter and kisses should once more interrupt—

“Those strange blue jewels of your eyes,  
Painting the lily of your face,  
What goldsmith set them in their place—  
Forget-me-nots of Paradise.

“And that blest river of your voice,  
Whose merry silver stirs the rest  
Of waterlilies in your breast . . . .”

At last, in spite of more interruptions, the poem came to an  
end

end—whereupon, of course, the poet immediately read it through once more from the beginning, its personal and emotional elements, he felt, having been done more justice on a first reading than its artistic excellencies.

“Why, darling, it is splendid,” was his little sweetheart’s comment; “you know how happy it makes me to think it was written for me, don’t you?” And she took his hands and looked up at him with eyes like the morning sky.

Romance in poetry is almost exclusively associated with very refined ethereal matters, stars and flowers and such like—happily, in actual life it is often associated with much humbler objects. Lovers, like children, can make their paradises out of the quaintest materials. Indeed, our paradises, if we only knew, are always cheap enough; it is our hells that are so expensive. Now these lovers—like, if I mistake not, many other true lovers before and since—when they were particularly happy, when some special piece of good luck had befallen them, could think of no better paradise than a little dinner together in their seventh-story heaven. “Ah! wilderness were Paradise enow!”

To-night was obviously such an occasion. But, alas! where was the money to come from? They didn’t need much—for it is wonderful how happy you can be on five shillings if you only know how. At the same time it is difficult to be happy on nine-pence—which was the entire fortune of the lovers at the moment. Beauty laughingly suggested that her celebrated hair might prove worth the price of their dinner. The poet thought a pawn-broker might surely be found to advance ten shillings on his poem—the original MS. too—else had they nothing to pawn, save a few gold and silver dreams which they couldn’t spare. What was to be done? Sell some books, of course! It made them shudder to think how many poets they had eaten in this fashion.

It

It was sheer cannibalism—but what was to be done! Their slender stock of books had been reduced entirely to poetry. If there had only been a philosopher or a modern novelist, the sacrifice wouldn't have seemed so unnatural. And then Beauty's eyes fell upon a very fat informing-looking volume on the poet's desk.

“Wouldn't this do?” she said.

“Why, of course!” he exclaimed; “the very thing. A new history of socialism just sent me for review. Hang the review; we want our dinner, don't we, little one? And then I've read the preface, and looked through the index—quite enough to make a column of—with a plentiful supply of general principles thrown in! Why, of course, there's our dinner, for certain, dull and indigestible as it looks. It's worth fifty minor poets at old Moser's. Come along. . . .”

So off went the happy pair—ah! how much happier was Beauty than ever so many fine ladies one knows who have only, so to say, to rub their wedding-rings for a banquet to rise out of the ground, with the most distinguished guests around the table, champagne of the best, and conversation of the worst.

Old Moser found histories of socialism profitable, more profitable perhaps than socialism, and he actually gave five-and-sixpence for the volume. With the ninepence already in their pockets, you will see that they were now possessors of quite a small fortune. Six-and-threepence! it wouldn't pay for one's lunch nowadays. Ah! but that is because the poor alone know the art of dining.

You needn't wish to be much happier and merrier than those two lovers, as they gaily hastened to that bright and cosy corner of the town where those lovely ham-and-beef shops make glad the faces of the passers-by. O those hams with their honest shining faces,

faces, polished like mahogany—and the man inside so happy all day slicing them with those wonderful long knives (which, of course, the superior class of reader has never seen) worn away to a veritable thread, a mere wire, but keen as Excalibur. Beauty used to calculate in her quaint way how much steel was worn away with each pound of ham, and how much therefore went to the sandwich. And what an artist was the carver! What a true eye, what a firm flexible wrist—never a shaving of fat too much—he was too great an artist for that. Then there were those dear little cream cheeses and those little brown jugs of yellow cream, come all the way from Devonshire—you could hear the cows lowing across the rich pasture, and hear the milkmaids singing and the milk whizzing into the pail, as you looked at them.

And then those perfectly lovely sausages—I beg the reader's pardon! I forgot that the very mention of the word smacks of vulgarity. Yet, all the same, I venture to think that a secret taste for sausages among the upper classes is more widespread than we have any idea of. I confess that Beauty and her poet were at first ashamed of admitting their vulgar frailty to each other. They needed to know each other very well first. Yet there is nothing, when once confessed, that brings two people so close as—a taste for sausages!

“You darling!” exclaimed Beauty with something like tears in her voice, when her poet first admitted this touch of nature—and then next moment they were in fits of laughter that a common taste for a very “low” food should bring tears to their eyes! But such are the vagaries of love—as you will know, if you know anything about it—“vulgar,” no doubt, though only the vulgar would so describe them—for it is only vulgarity that is always “refined”!

Then



Then there was the florist's to visit. What beautiful trades some people ply! To sell flowers is surely like dealing in fairies. Beautiful must grow the hands that wire them, and sweet the flower-girl's every thought.

There remained but the wine-merchant's, or, had we not better say at once, the grocer's, for our lovers could afford no rarer vintages than Tintara or the golden burgundy of Australia; and it is wonderful to think what a sense of festivity those portly colonial flagons lent to their little dining-table. Sometimes, I may confide, when they wanted to feel very dissipated, and were *very* rich, they would allow themselves a small bottle of Benedictine—and you should have seen Beauty's eyes as she luxuriously sipped at her green little liqueur glass, for, like most innocent people, she enjoyed to the full the delight of feeling occasionally wicked. However, these were rare occasions, and this night was not one of them.

Half a pound of black grapes completed their shopping, and then, with their arms full of their purchases, they made their way home again, the two happiest people in what is, after all, a not unhappy world.

Then came the cooking and the laying of the table. For all her Leonardo face, Beauty was a great cook—like all good women, she was as earthly in some respects as she was heavenly in others, which I hold to be a wise combination—and, indeed, both were excellent cooks; and the poet was unrivalled at “washing up,” which, I may say, is the only skeleton at these Bohemian feasts.

You should have seen the gusto with which Beauty pricked those sausages—I had better explain to the un-Bohemian reader that to attempt to cook a sausage without first pricking it vigorously with a fork, to allow for the expansion of its juicy

gases, is like trying to smoke a cigar without first cutting off the end—and O, to hear again their merry song as they writhed in torment in the hissing pan, like Christian martyrs raising hymns of praise from the very core of Smithfield fires.

Meanwhile, the poet would be surpassing himself in the setting-out of the little table, cutting up the bread reverently as though it were for an altar—as indeed it was—studying the effect of the dish of tomatoes now at this corner, now at that, arranging the flowers with even more care than he arranged the adjectives in his sonnets, and making ever so sumptuous an effect with that half-a-pound of grapes.

And then at last the little feast would begin, with a long grace of eyes meeting and hands clasping ; true eyes that said “how good it is to behold you, to be awake together in this dream of life” ; true hands that said “I will hold you fast for ever—not death even shall pluck you from my hand, shall loose this bond of you and me” ; true eyes, true hands, that had immortal meanings far beyond the speech of mortal words.

And it had all come out of that dull history of socialism, and had cost little more than a crown ! What lovely things can be made out of money ! Strange to think that a little silver coin of no possible use or beauty in itself can be exchanged for so much tangible beautiful pleasure. A piece of money is like a piece of opium, for in it lie locked up the most wonderful dreams—if you have only the brains and hearts to dream them.

When at last the little feast grew near its end, Love and Beauty would smoke their cigarettes together ; and it was a favourite trick of theirs to lower the lamp a moment, so that they might see the stars rush down upon them through the skylight which hung above their table. It gave them a sense of great sentinels, far away out in the lonely universe, standing guard over them,  
that

that seemed to say their love was safe in the tender keeping of great forces. They were poor, but then they had the stars and the flowers and the great poets for their servants and friends—and, best of all, they had each other. Do you call that being poor?

And then, in the corner, stood that magical box with the ivory keys, whose strings waited ready night and day—strange media through which the myriad voices, the inner-sweet thoughts, of the great world-soul found speech, messengers of the stars to the heart, and of the heart to the stars.

Beauty's songs were very simple. She got little practice, for her poet only cared to have her sing over and over again the same sweet songs; and perhaps if you had heard her sing "Ask nothing more of me, sweet," or "Darby and Joan," you would have understood his indifference to variety.

At last the little feast is quite, quite finished. Beauty has gone home; her lover still carries her face in his heart as she waved and waved and waved to him from the rattling lighted tramcar; long he sits and sits thinking of her, gazing up at those lonely ancient stars; the air is still bright with her presence, sweet with her thoughts, warm with her kisses, and as he turns to the shut piano, he can still see her white hands on the keys and her girlish face raised in an ecstasy—Beata Beatrix—above the music.

"O love, my love! if I no more should see  
Thyself, nor on the earth the shadow of thee,  
Nor image of thine eyes in any spring—  
How then should sound upon Life's darkening slope  
The ground-whirl of the perished leaves of Hope,  
The wind of Death's imperishable wing?"

And

And then . . . he would throw himself upon his bed, and burst into tears.

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“And they are gone : ay, ages long ago  
These lovers fled away into the storm.”

That seventh-story heaven once more leads a dull life as the office of a ship-chandler, and harsh voices grate the air where Beauty sang. The books and the flowers and the lovers' faces are gone for ever. I suppose the stars are the same, and perhaps they sometimes look down through that roof-window, and wonder what has become of those two lovers who used to look up at them so fearlessly long ago.

But friends of mine who believe in God say that He has given His angels charge concerning that dingy old seventh-floor heaven, and that, for those who have eyes to see, there is no place where a great dream has been dreamed that is not thus watched over by the guardian angels of memory.

*For M. Le G., a Birthday Present ;  
25 September, 1895.*