

THE CUP OF HAPPINESS.



THE sound rolls through the reddening air, the muffled *thum!* the *dumb!* of a monotonous drum. Lamps flash ruddily on gaudy pictures of the promised piece, The Giant and Maiden. Again 'tis the chart of the human frame flaming by lamp-light, with bright red veins, and liver a beautiful yellow. Shouting clowns hoarsely proclaim the virtues and cures of an elixir, a magic goblet; or lift the curtain to show the careworn princess in her tinsel and spangles. And drums are rolled.

Come in! Come in!

'Tis a trick; a dear old-world trick; and in my quality of clown, I pray you, let me rattle my bells, show my happy cup, or make each weary puppet walk before the crowd, shout, declare the oldness of my piece; for it is a play, and not a medicine after all, my Cup of Happiness; not an elixir, a cure for the liver; it is a farce, an old farce; I vouch to its age, for it was begun by Madam Thalia, when the world was still young, still a delightful green, the beautiful green of a newly-painted cupboard; but the play lasted too long, and has changed considerably since; however, do not hesitate, I vow the play is old, old as Comedy herself.

In a bright garden, near a rail, stands a strange statue, but bitten to death is La Comédie Humaine, and writhes behind her stone-white mask.

The muse laughed on; so did the mask, grimly, growing heavy, too heavy. She danced with mad rapture, laughing shrilly, whilst her nervous hands, convulsed, clutched its grinning cheeks; but the mask of stone laughed the more at this, growing heavy, heavier still. Then her agonized hands could hold it no longer, the mask fell to the ground and broke its nose.

The muse? she vanished in a frenzied hickup, for all the world like the snapping string of a violin.

Since this the white mask has been shown, with its sunken eyes, its broken nose, and its hollow awful eternal laugh, with castagnettes rattled to an ominous tune, with exaggerated tibias.

Schumann, like many, once saw this mask, this fatal mask, and has sung of it, a sob that is sobbed with clenched hands, accompanied by the throbs of a beating heart—Warum.

But this song is older than father Schumann's song; the swelling waves chant the older melody, a Warum more minor, but laugh ironically as they sweep from the beach, trimmed with rippling bubbles, inviting to their liquidness, to the secret of their song, Warum?

How the water splashes and spreads, in grinning circles, if you fling it a stone. Is it a laugh? No,—a sob; for though rimmed with golden sands it is not a cup of happiness after all; frankly, the water is sad.

You see it can think back for a considerable time, and since the breaking of the mask, so many things have changed.

Once the sweet and gracious lady Venus rose from its depths, through trails of these bright chiming bubbles, on dancing foam. The worlds of Gods and men went mad; the stars danced, till they fell like drunken bees—hark! the trees still groan, and the rivers moan!

Oh beautiful Lady Aphrodite Anadyomene! mercifully wring the glittering drops from your flaming mane into my cup, my Cup of Happiness; and for the sake of your beauty, I beseech you do not be dumb, and in plaster, with your eyes fixed afar on desolate Cnydos.

Ah, if my fancy, with exquisite tints, could quicken your limbs into supple life! perhaps—who knows?—you might tell me you are not Venus after all, but Eve, a Jewess; and not wring balm from your splendid tresses.

Friends! you will see all I say is old, an old tune, with orthodox Princess and Prince; even an occasional, and quite accidental, virtue in the story is drawn as an initial. It was on a certain night when that virtue lost her head—but this is not quite true, as the play will show, for all virtues are Byzantine, and cannot bend their limbs.

As clown, I have shouted my talents, vaunted my magic goblet; and if my young fingers pull too nervously and obviously at my puppet strings, know I am only a pleasant amateur, and not a poor devil; let me laughingly rattle my fool's bells, my symbolical bells, shaped like happy cups reversed; for all plays want bells, or the Warum song would continue monotonously throughout, till the veiled god of comedy, like

that mythical old man at the theatre door, puts out the lights one by one, and shrouds most things with dusty covers ; for he is deaf to unlimited Warum songs, deaf even to the song of the crumbling and changing atoms,—so away with narrowing symbolism ! laugh ! and rattle the bells, not hung on a hyacinth sash as a prelude to a mystery—there is no mystery—I have pulled up the curtain.

BY WAY OF PROLOGUE.

The name of my prince is formed of the names of all the Cardinal Virtues, composed into an euphonic whole. The greatest care, the most loving pains, had been lavished on his education ; his bon mots were printed on pink paper by public subscription, trimmed with lace designed by the best artists only—yet he was not happy ! though the welfare of his kingdom could only be gauged by the literary degradation of his foreign neighbours, and public opinion had placed his portrait in the National Gallery as an old master—no, he was not happy.

He tossed, in his troubled sleep, on his orthodox and princely cushions, on a golden and orthodox couch ; he sighed in his painted chamber, the walls politely re-echoing his sighs, for they were painted with virtues each overcoming a dragon, each holding a hall-marked Cup of Happiness in tapering hands, each daintily curving the little finger in so doing.

The Cup of Happiness ! The Cup of Happiness ! groaned the prince, in his attempts to recall gems of modern poetry ; he suffered from insomnia, as should all well-bred and crowned heads, on cushions and couches of gold.

His princely eyes were dizzied with following the allegorical twist of the enamelled and painted dragons, mysterious in the moonlit room. Here glistened a gem, lighted by a gem, twinkling in the gray light that trickled down delicate tracings of incrustated silver, to flash in one vivid spot, where a virtue held an embossed cup beneath her face, wreathed with lingering light gliding round a contour. The faces smiled in the luminous gloom.

How his temples ached, as he clasped them with dissolving hands ! how the obstinate smile of one virtue haunted his brain ! Yea, in his very orthodox cushions.

She lingeringly moved her taper fingers round the rim of the cup, her eyes fixed on his, weaving circles of exquisite sound, distant, faint, but full of passion, like a bar from Lohengrin. ; round and round ; slowly, caressingly ; the web of visible melody floated from the golden rim. She poured a gummy liquid, opalescent at her touch ; it glowed, bubbled, throbbed, and rose passionately towards her ; now incandescent it sweeps through the prince's veins, dancing and seething there ; it bubbles round him, blending his being with its dazzling liquidness. The prince staggered to his feet, the cold floor electrified him ; he flung away his heavy wreath, heavy with a relentless and sickly scent.

The moonlight flowed on the veined pavement.

The breath of endless flowers was tossed towards him as from a censer, sickening him ; sickly was the colour of his royal robes, sickly the pavement reflecting the sinuous yellow folds gliding languidly on the glassy surface of polished steps.

The moonlight flowed on moon-coloured jade, slept in a dreamy haze on steps of jet, in a copper basin it melted among strange dreaming water-plants with fat buds.

The Prince feared he loathed all flowers, as he bathed his head with wetted hands, then flung himself on a grassy bank.

There swarmed small tribes in worlds of mosses, in worlds of lichen on tree trunks ; a moth flew by, brave with its symbols painted on its wings, its rainbows, its blood-coloured hearts.

The Cup of Happiness ! The Cup of Happiness !

The grasses sighed, and rolled, to the night air, full of that passionate murmur, the pulsing of the sap, the yearning lisp of the whispering leaves and rustle of heavy petals.

Something tinkled and trilled, ecstatically kissing soft mosses, and chiming through pebbles, to swim through lush stalks, where pined some melancholy toad, gasping a mournful, monotonous croak that made the drooping poppies swoon on their stalks. A flower hung near, shaped like an amorous mouth, a flower with lips ! He flung his slipper into a fragrant bush, and the rose petals fell in a mass, with the swish of a trailing robe.

The king felt sick, so he left his kingdom.

The orchestra rolls into a despairing wail. The curtain rises 'mid peals of thunder ; twisted trees sway to and fro in agony. In the foreground, filled with trailing thorns, beneath which crawl wicked snakes, croaks a raven. The sun sets lurid in the distance with extended and poetical rays. Now and again a faint flash of lightning shines fitfully at a side wing, near a palm-tree.

PALM-TREE.

Colophium, away ! you are singeing my leaves. I was painted by an Academician. You must strike that conceited Oak ; 'tis your part. I am a symbol of virtue.

LIGHTNING.

I flash where I am told, pitiful canvas. Do you not believe in Providence ? You have made me miss my thunder, which has rolled twice.

THUNDER (behind).

Silence there ! how came you in this scene ? Your place is in the next act. We are in an imaginative landscape.

Snakes hiss approvingly ; carrion birds, flying across the sun, cry, Away ! away ! On the other hand some Oak-trees in the background blame the levity of the Lightning, for a palm-tree is a palm-tree, etc., after all. The Lightning flashes again.

PALM-TREE.

Ugh! it has singed my paint. The world has turned atheist since I was young.

Gnarled roots and brambles writhe and clutch. A bird is caught by thorny branches to be devoured by a snake gliding from a rose-bush on which hangs a spider web with a butterfly wing earnestly painted.

Enter MONSTER

who, fortunately for our story, has spent years in getting a regulation thorn quite thoroughly into his right paw, that a hero or saint passing his way might be the means to higher ends; for he felt himself worthy of higher things, longed to be fed on tipsy-cake, to own a pastrycook's shop, and saw the Cup of Happiness in a mincemeat bowl.

When? whither? where?

Takes out a pocket-book, eagerly notes this down to write verses on, and groans aloud. Trees, Orchestra, Thunder, all groan lugubriously. The Lightning flashes near Palm-tree; this excites universal indignation, and the snakes and thorns shout Away with both of them! Away! Away!

LIGHTNING (to Palm-tree).

We are misunderstood. I did not notice how beautifully you are drawn. Thorns and snakes are a great mistake in nature.

PALM-TREE.

Young friend! you are wise for your years; let us form a society to suppress them—and immodest literature.

MONSTER.

I swirled into Renaissance arabesques unnoticed. The world is without decorative instincts.

The limelight falls on the floor, flashes on the Palm-tree (who feels flattered), and settles itself on right entrance.

Enter PRINCE.

For three days I have wandered in a too uncongenial atmosphere; all strength lacks grace—how true!—all grace, of course, lacks strength—so I was offered a post on a review. There is an incompleteness about most things, if I may be allowed to say so. This spot, however, seems tuned to a nobler key, not so grossly realistic as most; I really think my higher nature will be touched presently, and my ominously swelling cloak makes, I feel, a nobly decorative mass against the setting sun.

Monster introduces himself with frank manliness. The thorn is extracted to the huge appreciation of pit and gallery. The situation is too literary—The Prince and Monster—the latter rubs his claws complacently; gives so full and fruity a sound to "Your Highness," the honest scenery feels quite jealous; quotes a few well-chosen verses on Happiness, and remains in an ecstasy with tearful eyes before a vision of a mincemeat bowl floating through space to slow music.

PALM-TREE (sotto voce).

If you don't flash brightly against me, I'll break up the partnership.

BUTTERFLY-WING.

All is not gold that glitters.

Enter FANTASY.

Her form, sinuous as a willow, is swathed in some light exquisite material, and garlanded with dainty twigs of jessamine, and nodding columbine; her jewelled and braided hair knots

round an opal; above her brow flutters a black butterfly, circled by her nimbus tinted like a dissolved topaz; she holds an iris twined with ivy, and looks at the Prince over her shoulder whilst she holds a red carnation to her parted lips.

Ah! sweet my love! sweet Prince, dear wretch! I love thee! The word lies softer than soft velvet tinged a deepening violet, not softer than my passion. The word is a poor counterfeit, and apes the truth; as a dark shadow, crawling from the sun, is image of the truth that gives it being. The word is loured and gross, I would give sound to it, with a deep cello's note, or sigh of some flossy petal falling with scarce audible sound, on floor of ivory flooded with living sun.

How many, how many have been my lovers! They kissed my eyes, and passionately my neck, for I am, and was, beautiful. But look you on my face, my white face, how many have shed heavy tears; their tears circle my throat; for gently I gathered these, and they became bright pearls to place upon my bosom, my white breasts like to the domes of some fair silvered shrine.

At this she bares her bosom, a pale tea-rose nestles there, the butterfly flutters to her mouth.

List! the frightened birds have chirped themselves to drowsiness; the muffled sound of distant thunder gives but a deepening zest to the mad song of that fond silly bird; that lifts its voice to passion's utterance. Ah! I could love you thus, and trill a sweet linked text, to melt your senses into rapt delight, till dazed by throbbing notes, that dance so swiftly, your heart stops faint within you; and lo! the next notes drown all remembrance of what has passed—in full enjoyment.

PRINCE.

Bright spirit! your name? I do not know you.

FANTASY.

My name, my name? I have many names; men called me after some fair women. I was born of flowers in Adam's brain; the warm wind gave me breath; this I remember me; poor Adam damned!—They called me Lilith. But the blossoms still remember me, mimic the soft veinings of my skin, and glow with hidden passion they had not then confessed. Then angels fell, because that I was sweet to look upon, and brought from sleepy depths quaint coral wreaths that yet blush red with the remembrance. (She sighs.) My presence moved man to lovely song; it echoes still, and ever will resound; great cities grew, piled high like cliffs, fronted in image of my face, painted pink in reverence for my flesh. Soft lyres were turned to curvings of my waist, to tell how I was fed by doves. But that was not so royal, or so glad, as Solomon's idolatry; he kissed my footsteps and my dress, on polished floor of crystal that multiplied my image. Poor king! Poor kings! But no! My love, if death, is life!

She weaves garlands round her wrists; gradually her eyes close; she makes a vague gesture towards her head.

Ah me! list! list! I hear the tread, the growing dread re-echoes in my heart. Tread! tread! and dust in dark clouds as a sign. (She gives a scream.) The violet sea is stained with crow-black sails, and sets a bloody sun. The city is on flames! on flames! and blots with lurid red the circling heaven.

She pauses, dreamily looks for a wound near her bosom, but finds nothing. Slowly she takes a pearl from her throat and sadly drops it. The sound makes her start; but laughingly she loosens her hair; it falls round her in a golden cloud; she holds her face with both hands, and says:

Ah love! I had many, many, lovers, lovers! look at these amethysts and pomegranate blossoms; these opals that hold fallen and still passionate spirits, glowing in cells of milky crystal; faint beryls that have dreamt the dreams of the sea at noon; these sapphires like dying eyes; listen to the song of this splendid ruby, how full of glowing mirth and rich delight; it calls the damask rose sick and sentimental. All these, and much besides, have men found and devised, to my good pleasure.

She kisses her hand to the Prince, who leans against the Palm-tree. She beckons to him.

PALM-TREE (severely).

Madam, I am married!

Enter LIGHTNING

with a pair of spectacles he has borrowed from a satirist.

Madam still possesses her illusions!

FANTASY.

Do you wish to appeal to the gallery? Away, poor fly-blown stage property; or I'll blow you out.

[Exit LIGHTNING.

The whole stage looks shocked, even the limelight blushes.

PALM-TREE.

When I was young, however

But Fantasy escapes from her clothes, and with her hair streaming behind her like a comet dances about the stage naked.

PRINCE and BACK SCENERY.

The play must stop if this goes on!

MONSTER,

though quite a freethinker, is even more shocked than the Palm-tree.

The Cup of Happiness will be compromised!

He pulls out an article on But Fantasy, knotting her white arms behind her head, dissolves into space, leaving behind her only the glimmer of her feet.

[Exeunt.

A SEED.

I swell, I grow, I am growing, I shall be a beautiful tree.

A WORM (pulling at it).

Nonsense! a tree? We are worms! worms!

(*To be continued.*)

C. RICKETTS.