



THE MARRED FACE

MY MOUNTAINS ARE MY OWN
AND I WILL KEEP THEM
TO MYSELF
W. BLAKE

I

BOTH city and suburbs rejoiced. From roof to rooftop swayed the bell-like weight of large lanterns that mimicked the languorous airs of lilies on the nod, yet more duskily, like fruit again become blossom, against a faint pink sky still pale with the lingering trail of sunset; for Chang Tei had laid low that haughty head of his upon Mount Torment, below the prison gates; and with the dawn of even, when a wan moon-crescent beckoned to clustering stars, and mimic lights from the bridges swam with them in the river, a glow from his still burning house put a dull redness in the air, through which, now and again, shot rapidly a light more acute, when a charred wall crumbled in.

This was watched, long after curfew and into the night, for some beggars sat at a town gate. The sound of the patrol's retreating footfalls was echoed by overhanging eaves, with this the tremulous expostulations of some belated tippler hurried away; the night-wind swept past, and the stillness from circling hills sank upon the city.

"Curse me!" quoth beggar Foo, "but Ling must have found a sweetheart." At this the pent hatred of the others clamoured against those limbs, that whole nose of his: "He a sweetheart forsooth!" They glanced hatefully at each other's maimed limbs; as the wind tosses dead tree-branches, so their arms became shaken, for with Ling was their common fund for food. AH! curse him; to hide thus from the patrol since sun-down was not pleasant, for the night became cold when the pre-morning wind, that shudders in the chimneys, adds its shriller coolness to the air.

Their hoarse clamour soon spluttered, and gradually ceased; dull gleams only answered the fixed gleam of hungry eyes; one idea only troubled their shrivelled lips: then with tacit consent the beggars bent towards the place

of Sudden Death, the muffled clank of plodding hand-rests beat a wooden tune to their shadows cast upon the walls they passed.

Some dogs, upon the place of execution, snapped sullenly from right to left, with fangs still clenched in shreds of flesh. Foo was bitten on the hand; at his jarring cry the curs scampered away in a retreat of pattering paws.

About Mount Torment lay what remained, flesh made nameless, then left there by the torturer. One beggar shook from a bamboo stake a head so placed not to be stolen; a silent tussle began for this, in which blows fell upon unelastic shoulders that sounded like bumped wood. In the struggle, this prize had fallen to Foo; his wounded hand still maddened him, and this gave energy to body bent in the effort to propel his little cart; the turning of a few streets soon brought him into security, for the chase had grown slack, a feeble shower of hurled stones ended it.

When he rested to take breath, his hunger had gone, which but now so tormented him. Like an unequal runner, the taste of blood was in his mouth, and he grasped at an oppression near his chest; so he placed the head upon the ground, for it had grown heavy.

Something, as yet but half understood, flashed suddenly upon him, as if an oblique light, full of revelation, had been cast between his eyes and the dead man's eyes; vanishing, it left a partial recollection, or echo, in his brain, vibrant as a splash of white upon a ground of black, but, like it, formless.

When, gradually, colour upon colour, the past, unrolled, swam upon the filmy web, many things came back unbidden, as if, in sleep, he walked some ominous strand girt with the reflux sweep of persistent recollection, repeating—

“Do you remember, do you remember?” the dead man's eyes added, “You left by the wrong gate, I lost you in the garden; I, Chang Tei, have hated her, ever since”—“ever since,” whispered the little memories, “Ever since!”

Now, Foo understood why the night-watch had seized him beyond the gate—as a robber? or conspirator? he had never known; things had been wrenched from him, groaned in excess of anguish, when blinded by torture; things whose purport he had not then understood.

Though no kinsman dared succour him, he had escaped; ten years had passed since the paying of her kisses with his blood.

For hours the silent dialogue continued between the dead man and the maimed.

Dawn tinged a summer pavilion near the royal orchards, when the beggar again reached the terrible Present, with its livid light that streaked the opposite walls, as with the stain of tears.

A lamp-ray shot from a lattice, for a moment opened; the sound of trailed viol strings floated past with the projected glimmer.

Then, he remembered the time and place; taking the head, he hurled it through the unclosed window.

The marred face fell upon the queen's lap; when she rose with suddenly clenched eyelids, she felt its weight bite into her robe.

No one stirred, their terror had not passed; from a word gasped by a servant, her casual lover knew his mistress was the queen; he dared not move whilst her eyes remained shut.

Her teeth clattered, and from the throat came forth a shuddering sound, as of something unwound slowly.

The fatal head merely looked at her; between its eyes and hers, one recollection had grown, at first impalpably, but gradually, with such oppression that she opened them wide and closed her hands convulsed.

“Water! give me wine!”

A great silence fell. She became aware that her lips moved inaudibly.

A sense of void, that yet seemed conscious with a threat and terribly near, hung upon her. Had the world slipped away, out of time's control? and the idea of calling for assistance seemed so absurd.

Of its own accord the head rolled over. Once more she gurgled from the throat, with short, hurt moans, and leant over the dead face, as if dragged there perforce; in rapid succession came the remembered sensation of a jostling palanquin, some women beckoning from a balcony, and a great sense of fear that made her remember his name: but the angle of a villa swam past in moonlight; with it the sensation of a nestling kiss; she remembered the rest, and became conscious.

She feared the attendants heard these certain things, and motioned unsteadily to them to go, to leave the room; and all this had taken but a little while, for the wine still flowed from the gullet of a fallen jar, it ceased with a loud “Sob”; remembering her lover's presence, she saw his face was frightful; with a terrified murmur she said “Go away”!—he turned and left very suddenly.

Birds inaudible by day made the air acute with bleeding sounds, pulsed from red throats unassuaged. Above the lawns, the morning mists hung loose a silvery green which clung about and tinged the lower tree-trunks.

When the queen, with dull, relaxed eyelids, gazed through the window, the summer pavilions without seemed diminutive in the morning light, as if shrunken in the new sense of air, of space; the room was no longer doubly stained by blended dawn and lamp haze, the lamp had gone out.

She felt stunned with all that face had said to her, from the time that a hesitating blueness had been let in with the opening of a shutter, to the Now that filled the walls with a diffused radiance that bleached the lattice; those lips had mumbled all their hatred, explaining, accusing and repeating; then, haggard images faced her on all sides, peopling many mirrors that circled or ceiled the love chamber,—might they not mirror the marred face? This gave her strength to rise, and fold it in her robe; she would take it to the river.—Several times she pushed the head from the shore, for the river there seemed without current; heedless of her efforts, his lips smiled, as if they sketched a kiss in the air and said “why do you try? you cannot do this thing.”

When Summer came, and the days brooded and grew still, beneath a sky that drooped, a glance of his would cling to her, his voice remembered would

seem Time's central voice, heard only at intervals ; sometimes it sobbed, like the river beyond the gardens, whilst the fountains tall beat time without and dreamt they touched the eaves.—“ You did not know that we should meet so soon? but see!”—she even heard this after having locked the head in a box ; and sometimes a mirror remembered his face ; she had this covered up, never returning to that part of the palace. People said these mirrors were covered because the queen was daily losing her beauty ; there was some truth in this ; her dead lover haunted her with unforgiving eyes, only the more implacable when she closed hers to the light ; and, through this terrible obsession, the ghost of another feeling would sometimes steal upon her and make still, for a second only, the unrelenting fierceness with which his eye-balls looked at her ; then she would cry, in pity of herself.

Once his face had looked at her from the burnished gilding of an oratory, where she had gone to complain. Her pride was broken. If, at times, her old haughtiness returned, and, with it, deep gusts of wantonness, she found terror painted upon love's face ; some occasional lovers had even to be executed, for they had talked ; those were such troubled times. Their death seemed to her useless, foolish, but the laws of the country forbade the slandering of the queen.

Slowly, she sank into a torpor, vague, but almost delightful ; she dreamt of shadeful places, deep with boughs, long murmurous grasses,—places where the large flowers seemed mellow sounds,—and that his glance had there grown still. A belief in this would flow through her limbs with a soft, velvety sensation.

Gradually, in these hallucinations, the dead man's voice whispered gently, in tones that till then had been forgotten ; and the newer sound would swell within her, like the long sun-streaks that glow and fade across a stretch of famished grass. Thus, something of the waning summer's pleasantness sank into her life, as it grew more and more unreal and blent with the moods of the sleeping palace, giving moment to the yawn of a curtain gently swayed by the breeze, the shimmer from the floors, their clinging coolness poured beneath the cedar beams that cracked and stretched ; those things that give the sense of the hours as they fall from the hands of time like the beads from a chaplet ; till once, in very sooth his voice did call from the sealed and spiced box in which she had placed this dead face to embalm.

Like one in a trance she rose to go to him.

But the head rolled over with a branding peal of laughter ; exasperated, she struck it passionately, again and again, till her hands were wet with tears—great tears streamed from his eyes ; and her bowels yearned, as thick drops gathered about her lashes, that she could have done this thing ! she kissed him, and they wept together.

Facing the queen was a picture she had often, if but vaguely, noted ; rich with age, as with clinging incense haze, the painted figure was clothed in a violet robe that curved outwardly ; it held a tongueless bell in one hand, the other rose to close its laboured lips ; the eyes were fixed unfathomably into space, they got their strangeness by the rigid distinctness with which

the artist had pencilled them—those eyes seemed to have grown pallid in the effort to forget.

Through her clustering tears she suddenly remembered the picture; the resemblance of its lips to those of her lover broke upon her like a sudden bell-sound heard in the centre of a wood. The painting had been called "Silence"; some said it represented Fate: beneath the queen's kisses Chang Tei very slowly closed his eyes.

Time passed, the summer days returned; legends about the queen took clearer, if still fragmentary form; she was of alien blood, remotely of Tartar origin. During the disturbances the Chang Tei rebellion had left in the larger towns, those voices had grown louder that sing little, forbidden songs, or give vent to exclamations in an amused crowd.

Some things were coarse and cruel, their infamy delightful to those who could best understand it. When a few are gathered together, will not a song give, sometimes, to the singer a flattering sense of nationality?—some originality of feeling steals unawares through a chorus not sung too loud, but to which people nod pleasantly as they go by the half-closed door.

There were other things, however, not to be understood; the queen's poignant passions, this one supreme renunciation seemed only able to assuage—how unaccountable this! She used to terrify her lovers, about this there were many ingenious tales. Now, it was said she would wash this marred face with her tears, wipe, devoutly, with her hair, the precious ointments she poured upon its many wounds, kissing the spiced mouth; she was as one who has listened to much prolonged music, or who half fears the approach of a vision.

And men, with shrill voices, said a curse was upon her for her lewdness; that an iron circle weighed upon her brow from nightrise to sunrise, but that her lover had no cause to fear, being but a face; and people would laugh exceedingly at this; also, was that Face not deeply marred?

Though trouble, ever increasing, raged in the provinces, the queen's life did not change; none but a few servants who had seen the head's coming had access to her.

In long rooms, hung with violet veils, or dark bronze mirrors filled only with a remote radiance, she nightly feasted with him, raising empty goblets to her lips, breaking untasted bread sacramentally;—though a banquet was laid nightly, she tasted but a little rice. When morning came she would motion towards a window and say, "My Lord! the Dawn breaks." Rising, she would bear the head in her hands, devoutly, as a young priest does a relic, through darkened corridors, where the purple shapes seemed absorbed in the recreating of forms half remembered, of colours half effaced; and she would murmur the while quaint foolish songs she had learnt in her youth.

And behold! rebellion stood boldly at the gates of her capital with a rejoicing populace issuing thence with appropriate presents, whilst in the queen's house all was still, as a place the south wind has swept over and left withered.

News reached the palace; the servants issued from lateral gates; they looked sharply about them as if to see if it rained, dropping ostentatiously their long lances, or feathered brooms, if any one chanced to be near; but as yet no crowd circled the many royal buildings. Here and there stood a few men only, who blinked somewhat at the light, and watched, quietly, as birds watch a dying traveller. Some amongst them swung long arms, with hooked hands a little distance from their sides, scarcely knowing what to do with them.

When the sudden crowd came with the Deliverers beating their drums, the imperial peacocks and other birds flew, clamouring, into the air to perch on unaccustomed roof projections and pinnacles. A deaf old servant came out after this noise; crossing the main drawbridge, he held one hand to his ear as if to listen. At this the crowd laughed merrily.

Room after room was crossed, in good order as yet, with a little laughter only when there was no exit, and the same rooms had to be crossed again.

In the halls, the many paintings looked at the crowd; some represented princes battling with waves or waterfalls; ladies among peonies; there were pictures of gentle beasts, precious wrought; portraits of beautiful Empresses,—one had been covered with a dish-clout, for her servants, wishing to conceal the picture, had not dared destroy it, not knowing the town would open all its gates to the insurgents, so many things might have happened. The crowd by this time a little awed again laughed, then moved on.

At last a cry of rage broke from them all; the queen could nowhere be found. Some among the rebels said the carved figures on a roof represented all the sins, that the topmost figure, tulip-shaped, was an image of sterility; at any rate the splendours of this temple roof maddened them,—had it not been built with what might have been in each man's larder? And the prince, of royal Chinese descent, who had headed the crowd, borne in a long litter, made a sign with his hands; his followers knew he wished nothing to remain of this palace, builded by an alien dynasty, and torches became spontaneous in the crowd.

The noise, which had hitherto filled the fantastic palace pavilions, ceased, even without, and an oppressive lull swept heavily through the open doors, and thence into the gardens.

On the lawns the birds had settled again, but once more they twisted their necks and bent their legs as if for flight; the Royal Tigers walked up and down their cages, or, lifting their front paws, they snuffed the air, as cats do at a scented flower they do not think they like; white hares shot from cover to cover and listened. No smoke was as yet visible—but a thin crackling sound disturbed them.

When lithe flames bent from some windows, the alarm scarcely increased; the birds strutted about or took little foolish flights; out of the bamboo stubble came the quaint squeak of the quail, the flutter of partridges.

Upon the walls, large painted spaces retained their surface colour unto the last, between the bursting and licking of the flames. Creeping plants writhed from heated bricks. The clatter of tiles sliding away to where their

fall was no longer heard came, repeatedly, from a portion of the palace now a widening flame.

A flight of peacocks wheeled round and round, as they fell, suffocated, into the fire. The great sullen Behemoth then broke from his tank, in which he loves to wallow in ooze and mire; first among the beasts he had snuffed, but had not moved, he had rolled little red eyes long before the outbursting of the flames. When, indeed, the heat grew terrible, he ran with his snout low down, hurling out of existence beasts that stood in his path, to beat against a part of the palace not yet on fire.

After the garden fountains had ceased, and their water had grown choked and turbid with fallen sparks, all the animals howled with a terrible voice that had a blare as of brass, echoing to the very innermost room, where the queen sat beneath the picture of Silence.

The palace burns, and Behemoth! but in her ears the roar was faint as the booming of a neighbouring sea, as the fall of land down some hill-slope.

Slowly, but very slowly, some smoke drifted between those walls that were covered with burnished bronze.

"Love!" she said, "I think the dawn has come! for there is a redness in the air, love! see, the morning mist is on the floor, filtered to this room." She laughed quietly, remembering it was still day, not even twilight, for no servant had come, and without them she knew not, nor troubled to know, how the spent hours waned.

Then it seemed to her the palace burned, as a little sound like a mouse crept among the hangings that smouldered duskily, near the chink of a bronze door; and the mist was filmy with smoke.

She knew that, owing to the gold upon them and the silver woven in their web, the curtains could scarcely burn; the burnished walls and finished floors were covered with bronze plating; heat only, and suffocation, could overtake her.

"My love," she said, "the palace burns, let us go away." Donning a fastidious robe, entirely radiant with wings outstretched upon its tissue, she nodded to him and sang vaguely, she also unwound her hair and painted her eyes, that he might be proud of her beauty; they would go away, the palace burned, the gods were so envious.

Door after door was crossed and left behind; the muffled rooms burnt noiselessly, each sinking into *A past* as she walked to meet the future. Her dilated eyes caught glimpses of the whiteness of her skin, the morsels of beauty that remained to her; the black mirrors had veiled the ageing of her face.

Some of the insurgents saw her glide above a tall, smooth wall that led to a disused pavilion near the palace orchards, the culminant fire behind her as a frame. The fixity of her gaze was centred on the dead man's eyes.

Some one in the crowd hurled a javelin that stuck into a door before her. But still she kissed her lover's face, as if she inhaled the deep fragrance of a flower. Then, as the pavilion had no outer door, as she could go no further, she reverentially kissed his marred face before them all.

Some say that owing to her great sinfulness she sang a wanton song.