

BERTHA AT THE FAIR



O, dear Madame, it has never greatly interested me to be taken for a poet. And that is one reason why I have for the most part shunned poetical persons : you are the exception, of course, but then you are beautiful, and I forgive you for writing poetry : and have lived as much of my life as I could among the ladies who read penny novelettes. And yet I too have been taken for a poet. Shall I tell you about it, before I tell you about Bertha, who did not know what a poet was ?

It was one midnight, in London, at the corner of a somewhat sordid street. I was standing at the edge of the pavement, looking across at the upper windows of a house opposite. That does not strike you, dear Muse of imaginary cypresses, as a poetical attitude ? Perhaps not ; and indeed I was thinking little enough of poetry at the time. I was thinking only of someone who had quitted me in anger, five minutes before, and whose shadow I seemed to see on the blind, in that lighted upper room of the house opposite. I stood quite motionless on the pavement, and I gazed so intently at the blind, that, as if in response to the urgency of my will, the blind was drawn aside, and she looked out. She saw me, drew back, and seemed to speak to someone inside ; then returned to the window, and pulling down the blind behind her, leant motionless against the glass, watching me intently. In this manner we gazed at one another for some minutes, neither, at the time, realizing that each could be seen so distinctly by the other. As I stood there, unable to move, yet in mortal shame of the futile folly of such an attitude, I realized that my appearance was being discussed by some loungers not many yards distant. And the last, decisive, uncontroverted conjecture was this : "He's a poet !" That point settled, one of them left the group, and came up to me. He was a prize-fighter, quite an amiable person ; I welcomed him, for he talked to me, and so gave me an excuse for lingering ; he was kind enough to borrow a shilling of me, before we parted ; and the action of slipping the coin into his hand gave me the further excuse of turning rapidly away, *without* a last look at the motionless figure watching me from the lighted window. Ah, that was a long

time ago, Madame ; but you see I remember it quite distinctly, not, perhaps, because it was the occasion when I was taken for a poet. Do you mind if I talk now about Bertha? I met Bertha much more recently, but I am not sure that I remember her quite so well.

This was at Brussels. It was in the time of the Kermesse, when, as you know, the good Flemish people are somewhat more boisterously jolly than usual ; when the band plays in the middle of the market-place, and the people walk round and round the band-stand, looking up at the Archangel Michael on the spire of the Hôtel de Ville, to see him turn first pink and then green, as the Bengal lights smoke about his feet ; when there are processions in the streets, music and torches, and everyone sets out for the Fair. You have seen the Gingerbread Fair at Paris? Well, imagine a tiny Gingerbread Fair, but with something quite Flemish in the solid gaiety of its shows and crowds, as solid as the "*bons chevaux de bois*," Verlaine's "*bons chevaux de bois*," that go prancing up and down in their rattling circles. Quite Flemish, too, were the little mysterious booths, which you have certainly not found in Paris, Madame, and which I should certainly not have taken you to see in Brussels. You paid a penny at the door, and, once inside, were scarcely limited in regard to the sum you might easily spend on very little. What did one see? Indeed, very little. There was a lady, perched, for the most part, in an odd little alcove, raised a bed's height above the ground. As a rule, she was not charming, not even young ; and her conversation was almost limited to a phrase in which "*Mon petit bénéfice*" recurred, somewhat tiresomely. No, there was not much to see, after all.

But Bertha was different. I don't know exactly what was the odd fascination of Bertha, but she fascinated us all : the mild Flemish painter, with his golden beard ; our cynical publisher, with his diabolical monocle ; my fantastical friend, the poet ; and, Madame, be sure, myself. She was tall and lissom : she apologized for taking the place of the fat lady usually on exhibition ; she had strange, perverse, shifting eyes, the colour of burnt topazes, and thin painful lips, that smiled frankly, when the eyes began their queer dance under the straight eyebrows. She was scarred on the cheek : a wicked Baron, she told us, had done that, with vitriol ; one of her breasts was singularly mutilated ; she had been shot in the back by an Englishman, when she was keeping a shooting-gallery at Antwerp. And she had the air of a dangerous martyr, who might bewitch one, with some of those sorceries that had turned, somehow, to her own hurt.

We stayed a long time in the booth. I forget most of our conversation.

But I remember that our publisher, holding the monocle preposterously between his lips, announced solemnly: "*Je suis un poète.*" Then he generously shifted the credit upon the two of us who were most anxious to disclaim the name. Bertha was curious, but bewildered. She had no conception of what a poet was. We tried French, Flemish, and English, poem, verse, rhyme, song, everything, in short, and in vain. At last an idea struck her: she understood: we were café-chantant singers. That was the nearest she ever came.

Do but think of it, Madame, for one instant: a woman who does not so much as know what a poet is! But you can have no idea how grateful I was to Bertha, nor how often, since then, I have longed to see her again. Never did any woman so charm me by so celestial an ignorance. The moments I spent with Bertha at the Fair repaid me for I know not how many weary hours in drawing-rooms. Can you understand the sensation, Madame, the infinite relief? And then she was a snake-like creature, with long cool hands.