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VISIONARIES

I

A MASTER OF COBWEBS

I

Alixé Van Kuyp sat in the first-tier box presented to her husband with the accustomed heavy courtesy of the Société Harmonique. She went early to the hall that she might hear the entire music-making of the evening—Van Kuyp's tone-poem, *Sordello*, was on the programme between a Weber overture and a Beethoven symphony, an unusual honour for a young American composer. If she had gone late, it would have seemed an affectation, she reasoned. Her husband kept within doors; she could tell him all. And then, was there not Elvard Rentgen?

She regretted that she had invited the Parisian critic to her box. It happened at a *soirée*, where he showed his savage profile among admiring musical lambs. But he was never punctual at musical affairs. This consoled Alixé. [Pg 2]

Perhaps he would forget her impulsive, foolish speech,— "without him the music would fall upon unheeding ears,— he, who interpreted art for the multitude, the holder of the critical key that unlocked masterpieces." She had felt the banality of her compliment as she uttered it, and she knew the man who listened, his glance incredulous, his mouth smiling, could not be deceived. Rentgen had been too many years in the candy shop to care for sweets. She recalled her mean little blush as he twisted his pointed, piebald beard with long, fat fingers and leisurely traversed—his were the measuring eyes of an architect—her face, her hair, her neck, and finally, stared at her ears until they burned like a child's cheek in frost time.

Alixé Van Kuyp was a large woman, with a conscientious head and gray eyes. As she waited, she realized that it was one of her timid nights, when colour came easily and temper ran at its lowest

ebb. She had begged Van Kuyp to cancel the habit of not listening to his own music except at rehearsal, and, annoyed by his stubbornness, neglected to tell him of the other invitation. The house was quite full when the music began. Uneasiness overtook her as the Oberon slowly stole upon her consciousness. She forgot Rentgen; a more disquieting problem presented itself. Richard's music—how would it sound in the company of the old masters, those masters who were newer than Wagner, newer than Strauss and the "moderns"! [Pg 3] She envisaged her husband—small, slim, with his bushy red hair, big student's head—familiarly locking arms with Weber and Beethoven in the hall of fame. No, the picture did not convince her. She was his severest censor. Not one of the professional critics could put their fingers on Van Kuyp's weak spots—"his sore music," as he jestingly called it—so surely as his wife. She had studied; she had even played the violin in public; but she gave up her virtuosa ambitions for the man she had married during their student years in Germany. Now the old doubts came to life as the chivalric tones of Weber rose to her sharpened senses. Why couldn't Richard—

The door in the anteroom opened, her guest entered. Alixe was not dismayed. She left her seat and, closing the curtains, greeted him.

The overture was ending as Rentgen sat down beside her in the intimate little chamber, lighted by a solitary electric bulb.

"You are always thoughtful," she murmured.

"My dear lady, mine is the honour. And if you do not care, can't we hear the music of your young man—" he smiled, she thought, acidly—"here? If I sit outside, the world will say—we have to be careful of our unsmirched reputations—we poor critics and slave-drivers of the deaf."

She drew her hand gently away. He had held it, playfully tapping it as he slowly delivered himself in short sentences. He was a Dane, but his French and English were with [Pg 4] out trace of accent; certain intonations alone betrayed his Scandinavian origin.

Alixé could not refuse, for the moment he finished speaking she heard a too familiar motive, the ponderous phrase in the brass choir

which Van Kuyp intended as the thematic label for his hero, "Sordello."

"Ah, there's your Browning in tone for you," whispered the critic. She wished him miles away. The draperies were now slightly parted and into the room filtered the grave, languorous accents of the new tone-poem. Her eyes were fixed by Rentgen's. His expression changed; with nostrils dilated like a hunter scenting prey, his rather inert, cold features became transfigured; he was the man who listened, the cruel judge who sentenced. And she hoped, also the kind friend who would consider the youth and inexperience of the culprit. To the morbidly acute hearing of the woman, the music had a ring of hollow sonority after the denser packed phrases of Weber.

She had read Sordello with her husband until she thought its meaning was as clear as high noon. By the critic's advice the subject had been selected for musical treatment. Sordello's overweening spiritual pride—"gate-vein of this heart's blood of Lombardy"—appealed to Van Kuyp. The stress of souls, the welter of cross-purposes which begirt the youthful dreamer, his love for Palma, and his swift death when all the world thrust upon him its joys—here were no [Pg 5] tives, indeed, for any musician of lofty aim and sympathetic imagination.

Alixé recalled the interminable arguments, the snatches of poetry, the hasty rushes to the keyboard; a composer was in travail. At the end of a year, Rentgen professed his satisfaction; Van Kuyp stood on the highroad to fame. Of that there could be no doubt; Elvard Rentgen would say so in print. Alixé had been reassured—

Yet sitting now within the loop of her husband's music it suddenly became insipid, futile, and lacking in those enchantments for which she yearned. Her eyes dropped to the shapely hands meekly folded in her lap, dropped because the bold, interrogative expression on Rentgen's face disturbed her. She knew, as any woman would have known, that he admired her—but was he not Richard's friend? His glance enveloped her with piteous mockery.

The din was tremendous. After passages of dark music, in which the formless ugly reigned, occurred the poetic duel between Sordello and Eglamor at Palma's Court of Love. But why all this stress and fury? On the pianoforte the delicate episode sounded gratefully;

with the thick riotous orchestration came a disillusioning transformation. There was noise without power, there was sensuality that strove to imitate the tenderness of passion; and she had fancied it a cloudy garden of love. Alixe raised an involuntary hand to her ear. [Pg 6]

"Yes," whispered the critic, "I warned him not to use his colours with a trowel. His theme is not big enough to stand it." He lifted thin eyebrows and to her overheated brain was an unexpected Mephisto. Then the music whirled her away to Italy; the love scene of Palma and Sordello. It should have been the apex of the work.

"Sounds too much like Tschaiikowsky's Francesca da Rimini," interrupted Rentgen. She was annoyed.

"Why didn't you tell Van Kuyp before he scored the work?" she demanded, her long gray eyes beginning to blacken.

"I did, my dear lady, I did. But you know what musicians are—" He shrugged a conclusion with his narrow shoulders. Alixe coldly regarded him. There was something new and dangerous in his attitude to her husband's music this evening.

Her heart began to beat heavily. What if her suspicions were but the advance guard of a painful truth! What if this keen analyst of other men's ideas—she dared not finish the thought. With a sluggish movement the music uncoiled itself like a huge boa about to engulf a tiny rabbit. The simile forced itself against her volition; all this monstrous preparation for a—rabbit! In a concert-hall the poetic idea of the tone-poem was petty. And the churning of the orchestra, foaming hysteria of the strings, bellowing of the brass—would they never cease! [Pg 7] Such an insane chase after a rabbit! Yes, she said the word to herself and found her lips carved into a hard smile, which she saw reflected as in a trick mirror upon the face of Elvard Rentgen. *He* understood.

Of little avail Sordello's frantic impotencies. She saw through the rhetorical trickeries of the music, weighed its cheap splendours, realized the mediocrity of this second-rate poet turned symphonist. Image after image pressed upon her brain, each more pessimistic, more depressing than its predecessor. Alixe could have wept. Her companion placed his hand on her arm. His fingers burned; she

moved, but she felt his will controlling her mood. With high relief she heard the music end. There was conventional applause. Alixe restlessly peered into the auditorium. Again she saw opera-glasses turned toward the box. "Our good friends," she rather bitterly thought. Rentgen recognized her mental turmoil.

"Don't worry," he said soothingly. "It will be all right to-morrow morning. What I write will make the fortune of the composition." He did not utter this vaingloriously, but as a man who stated simple truth. She gazed at him, her timidity and nervousness returning in full tide.

"I know I am overwrought. I should be thankful. But—but, isn't it deception—I mean, will it be fair to conceal from Richard the real condition of affairs?" He took her hand. [Pg 8]

"Spoken like a true wife," he gayly exclaimed. "My dear friend, there will be no deception. Only encouragement, a little encouragement. As for deceiving a composer, telling him that he may not be so wonderful as he thinks—that's impossible. I know these star-shouldering souls, these farmers of phantasms who exist in a world by themselves. It would be a pity to let in the cold air of reality—anyhow Van Kuyp has some talent."

Like lifting mists revealing the treacherous borders of a masked pool, she felt this speech with its ironic innuendo. She flushed, her vanity irritated. Rentgen saw her eyes contract.

"Let us go when the symphony begins," she begged, "I can't talk to any one in my present bad humour; and to hear Beethoven would drive me mad—now."

"I don't wonder," remarked her companion, consolingly. Alixe winced.

The silver-cold fire of an undecided moon was abroad in the sky and rumours of spring filled the air. They parted at a fiacre. He told her he would call the next afternoon, and she nodded an unforgiving head. It was her turn to be disagreeable.

In his music room, Van Kuyp read a volume of verse. He did not hear his wife enter. It pained her when she saw his serious face with its undistinguished features and dogged expression. No genius this,

was her hasty ver [Pg 9] dict, as she quickly went to him and put a hand on his head. It was her hand now that was hot. He raised eyes, dolent with dreams.

"Well?" he queried.

"You are a curious man!" she said wonderingly. "Aren't you interested in the news about your symphonic poem?" He smiled the smile of the fatuous elect. "I imagine it went all right," he languidly replied. "I heard it at rehearsal yesterday – I suppose Thelème took the *tempi* too slow!"

She sighed and asked: –

"What are you reading a night like this?" His expression became animated.

"A volume of Celtic poetry – I've found a stunning idea for music. What a tone-poem it will make! Here it is. What colour, what rhythms. It is called The Shadowy Horses. 'I hear the shadowy horses, their long manes a-shake' –"

"Who gave you the poem?"

"Oh, Rentgen, of course. Did you see him to-night?"

"You dear boy! You must be tired to death. Better rest. The critics will get you up early enough."

Through interminable hours the mind of Alixe revolved about a phrase she had picked up from Elvard Rentgen: "Music is a trap for weak souls; for the strong as the spinning of cobwebs...."

[Pg 10]

II

It was pompous July and the Van Kuyps were still in Paris. They lived near Passy—from her windows high in the air Alixe caught the green at dawn as the sun lifted level rays. Richard was writing his new tone-poem, which the Société Harmonique accepted provisionally for the season following. Sordello had set the town agog because of the exhaustive articles by Rentgen it brought in its wake. He was a critic who wrote brilliantly of music in the terms of painting, of plastic arts in the technical phraseology of music, and by him the drama was discussed purely as literature. This deliberate and delicate confusion of æsthetics clouded the public mind. He described Sordello as a vast mural fresco, a Puvis de Chavannes in tone, a symphonic drama wherein agonized the shadowy Æschylean protagonist. Even sculpture was rifled for analogies, and Van Kuyp to his bewilderment found himself called "The Rodin of Music"; at other times, "Richard Strauss II," or a "Tonal Browning"; finally, he was adjured to swerve not from the path he had so wonderfully hewn for himself in the virgin jungle of modern art, and begged to resist the temptations of the music-drama.

Rentgen loathed the music of Wagner. Wagner had abused Meyerbeer for doing what he did himself—writing operas stuffed with spectacular effects. This man of the foot- [Pg 11] lights destroyed all musical imagination with his puppet shows, magic lanterns, Turkish bazaars, where, to the booming of mystic bells, the listener was drugged into opium-fed visions.

Under a tent, as at a fair, he assembled the mangled masterpieces of Bach, Gluck, Beethoven, Weber, Schubert, Schumann, Chopin, and to a gullible public sold the songs of these music-lords—songs that should swim on high like great swan-clouds cleaving skies blue and inaccessible. And his music was operatic, after all, grand opera saccharine with commonplace melodies gorgeously attired—nothing more. Wagner, declared the indignant critic, was not original. He popularized the noble ideas of the masters, vulgarized and debased their dreams. He never conceived a single new melody, but substituted instead, sadly mauled and pinched thematic fragments of Liszt, Berlioz, and Beethoven, combined with exaggerated fairy-

tales, clothed in showy tinsel and theatrical gauds, the illusion being aided by panoramic scenery; scenery that acted in company with toads, dragons, horses, snakes, crazy valkyrs, mermaids, half-mad humans, gods, demons, dwarfs, and giants. What else is all this but old-fashioned Italian opera with a new name? What else but an inartistic mixture of Scribe libretto and Northern mythology? Music-drama—fudge! Making music that one can *see* is a death-blow to a lofty idealization of the art.

Puzzled by the richness of Rentgen's vocabu [Pg 12] lary, by his want of logic, Alixe asked herself many times whether she was wrong and her husband right. She wished to be loyal. His devotion to his work, his inspiration springing as it did from poetic sources, counted for something. Why not? All composers should read the poets. It is a starting-point. Modern music leans heavily on drama and fiction. Richard Strauss embroiders philosophical ideas, so why should not Richard Van Kuyp go to Ireland, to the one land where there is hope of a spiritual, a poetic renaissance? Ireland! The very name evoked dreams!

When Rentgen called at the Van Kuyps' it was near the close of a warm afternoon. The composer would not stir, despite the invitation of the critic or the pleading of his wife. He knew that the angel wings of inspiration had been brushing his brow all the morning, and such visits were too rare to be flouted. He sat at his piano and in a composer's raucous varied voice, imitated the imaginary *timbres* of orchestral instruments. Sent forth, Mrs. Van Kuyp and Rentgen slowly walked into the little Parc of Auteuil, once the joy of the Goncourts.

"Musicians are as selfish as the sea," he asserted, as they sat upon a bench of tepid iron. She did not demur. The weather had exhausted her patience; she was young and fond of the open air—the woods made an irresistible picture this day. The critic watched her changing, dissatisfied face. [Pg 13]

"Shall we ride?" he suddenly asked. Before she could shake a negative head, he quickly uttered the words that had been hovering in her mind for hours.

"Or, shall we go to the Bois?" She started. "What an idea! Go to the Bois without Richard, without my husband?"

"Why not?" he inquired, "it's not far away. Send him a wire asking him to join us; it will do him good after his labours. Come, Madame Van Kuyp, come Alixe, my child." He paused. Her eyes expanded. "I'll go," she quietly announced—"that is, if you grant me a favour."

"A hundred!" he triumphantly cried.

III

To soothe her conscience, which began to ring faint alarm-bells at sundown, Alixe sent several despatches to her husband, and then tried a telephone; but she was not successful. Her mood shifted chilly, and they bored each other immeasurably on the long promenade vibrating with gypsy music and frivolous folk.

It was after seven o'clock as the sun slowly swam down the skyline. Decidedly their little flight from the prison of stone was not offering rich recompense to Alixe Van Kuyp and her elderly companion.

"And now for the favour!" he demanded, his eyes contentedly resting upon the graceful expanse of his guest's figure. [Pg 14]

She moved restlessly: "My dear Rentgen, I am about to ask you a question, only a plain question. *That* is the favour." He bowed incredulously.

"I must know the truth about Richard. It is a serious matter, this composing of his. He neglects his pupils—most of them Americans who come to Paris to study with him. Yet with the reputation he has attained, due to you entirely"—she waved away an interruption—"he refuses to write songs or piano music that will sell. He is an incorrigible idealist and I confess I am discouraged. What can be our future?" She drew the deep breath of one in peril; this plain talk devoid of all sham mortified her exceedingly.

She was thankful that he did not attempt to play the rôle of fatherly adviser. His eyes were quite sincere when he answered her:—

"What you say, Alixe—" the familiarity brought with it no condescending reverberations—"has bothered me more than once. I shall be just as frank on my side. No, your husband has but little talent; original talent, none. He is mediocre—wait!" She started, her cheeks red with the blood that fled her heart when she heard this doleful news. "Wait! There are qualifications. In the first place, what do you expect from an American?"

"But you always write so glowingly of our composers," she interjected.

"And," he went on as if she had not spoken, "Van Kuyp is your typical countryman. He [Pg 15] has studied in Germany. He has muddled his brain with the music of a dozen different nations; if he had had any individuality it would have been submerged. His memory has killed his imagination. He borrows his inspiration from the poets, from Liszt, Wagner, Berlioz, Richard Strauss. Anyhow, like all musicians of his country, he is too painfully self-conscious of his nationality."

"You, alone, are responsible for his present ambitions," retorted the unhappy woman.

"Quite true, my dear friend. I acknowledge it."

"And you say this to my face?"

"Do you wish me to lie?" She did not reply. After a grim pause she burst forth:—

"Oh, why doesn't he compose an opera, and make a popular name?"

"Richard Wagner Number II!" There were implications of sarcasm in this which greatly displeased Mrs. Van Kuyp. They strolled on slowly. It was a melodious summer night; mauve haze screened all but the exquisite large stars. Soothed despite rebellion, Alixe told herself sharply that in every duel with this man she was worsted. He said things that scratched her nerves; yet she forgave. He had not the slightest attraction for her; nevertheless, when he spoke, she listened, when he wrote, she read. He ruled the husband through his music; he ruled her through her husband. And what did he expect? [Pg 16]

They retraced their way. A fantastic bridge spanning the brief marshland, frozen by the moonlight, appealed to them. They crossed. A coachman driving an open carriage hailed confidentially. Alixe entered and with a dexterous play of draperies usurped the back seat. Rentgen made no sign. He had her in full view, the moon streaking her disturbed features with its unflattering pencil.

They started bravely, the horses running for home; but the rapid gait soon subsided into a rhythmic trot. Rentgen spoke. She hardly recognized his voice, so gently monotonous were his phrases.

"Dear Alixe. It is a night for confessions. You care for your husband, you are wrapped up in his art work, you are solicitous of his future, of his fame. It is admirable. You are a model wife for an artist. But tell me frankly, doesn't it bore you to death? Doesn't all this talk of music, themes, orchestration, of the public, critics, musicians, conductors, get on your nerves? Is it any consolation for you to know that Van Kuyp will be famous? What is his fame or his failure to you? Where do you, Alixe Van Kuyp, come in? Why must your charming woman's soul be sacrificed, warped to this stunted tree of another's talent? You are silent. You say he is trying to make me deny Richard! You were never more mistaken. I am interested in you both; interested in you as a noble woman—stop! I mean it. And in [Pg 17] terested in Richard—well—because he is my own creation...."

She watched him now with her heart in her eyes; he frightened her more with these low, purring words, than if he declared open love.

"He is my own handiwork. I have created him. I have fashioned his outlines, have wound up the mechanism that moves him to compose. Did you ever read that terrifying thought of Yeats, the Irish poet? I've forgotten the story, but remember the idea: 'The beautiful arts were sent into the world to overthrow nations, and, finally, life itself, sowing everywhere unlimited desires, like torches thrown into a burning city.' There—'like torches thrown into a burning city!' Richard Van Kuyp is one of my burning torches. In the spectacle of his impuissance I find relief from my own suffering."

The booming of the Tzigane band was no longer heard—only the horses' muffled footfalls and the intermittent chromatic drone of hidden distant tram-cars. She shivered and shaded her face with her fan. There was something remote from humanity in his speech. He continued with increasing vivacity:—

"Music is a burning torch. And music, like ideas, can slay the brain. Wagner borrowed his harmonic fire from the torch of Chopin—" She broke in:—

"Don't talk of Chopin! Tell me more of Van Kuyp. Why do you call him *yours*?" [Pg 18] Her curiosity was become pain. It mastered her prudence.

"In far-away Celtic legends there may be found a lovely belief that our thoughts are independent realities, that they go about in the void seeking creatures to control. They are as bodiless souls. When they descend into a human being they possess his moods, in very existence—"

"And Richard!" she muttered. His words swayed her like strange music; the country through which they were passing was a blank; she could see but two luminous points—the nocturnal eyes of Elvard Rentgen, as he spun his cobwebs in the moonshine. She did not fear him; nothing could frighten her now. One desire held her. If it were unslaked, she felt she would collapse. It was to know the truth, to be told everything! He put restraining fingers on her ungloved hand; they seemed like cold, fat spiders. Yet she was only curious, with a curiosity that murdered the spirit within her.

"To transfuse these shadows, my dear Alixe, has been one of my delights, for I can project my futile desires into another's soul. I am denied the gift of music-making, so this is my revenge on nature for bungling its job. If Richard had genius, my intervention would be superfluous. He has none. He is dull. You must realize it. But since he has known me, has felt my influence, has been subject to my [Pg 19] volition, my sorcery, you may call it,— " his laugh was disagreeably conscious,— "he has developed the shadow of a great man. He will seem a great composer. I shall make him think he is one. I shall make the world believe it, also. It is my fashion of squaring a life I hate. But if I chose to withdraw —"

The road they entered was black and full of the buzzing shadows of hot night, but she was oblivious to everything but his hallucinating voice:—

"And if you withdraw?" Her mouth echoed phrases without the complicity of her brain.

"If I do—ah, these cobweb spinners! Good-by to Richard Van Kuyp and dreams of glory." This note of harsh triumph snapped his weaving words.

"I don't believe you or your boasts," remarked Alixe, in her most conventionally amused manner. "You are trying to scare me, and with this hypnotic joke about Richard you have only hypnotized