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Flower of the Dusk



"Secretly, too, both were ashamed, having come unawares upon knowledge that was not meant for them." – Page 82

From a painting by Clinton Balmer

[1]

I

A Maker of Songs

Sunset

The pines, darkly purple, towered against the sunset. Behind the hills, the splendid tapestry glowed and flamed, sending far messages of light to the grey East, where lay the sea, crooning itself to sleep. Bare boughs dripped rain upon the sodden earth, where the dead leaves had so long been hidden by the snow. The thousand sounds and scents of Spring at last had waked the world.

The man who stood near the edge of the cliff, quite alone, and carefully feeling the ground before him with his cane, had chosen to face the valley and dream of the glory that, perchance, trailed down in living light from some vast loom of God's. His massive head was thrown back, as though he listened, with a secret sense, for music denied to those who see.

Joyful Memories

He took off his hat and stray gleams came through the deepening shadows to rest, like an aureole, upon his silvered hair. Remembered sunsets, from beyond the darkness of more than twenty years, came back to him [2]with divine beauty and diviner joy. Mnemosyne, that guardian angel of the soul, brought from her treasure-house gifts of laughter and tears; the laughter sweet with singing, and the bitterness of the tears eternally lost in the Water of Forgetfulness.

Slowly, the light died. Dusk came upon the valley and crept softly to the hills. Mist drifted in from the sleeping sea, and the hush of night brooded over the river as it murmured through the plain. A single star uplifted its exquisite lamp against the afterglow, near the veiled ivory of the crescent moon.

Sighing, the man turned away. "Perhaps," he thought, whimsically, as he went cautiously down the path, searching out every step of the way, "there was no sunset at all."

The road was clear until he came to a fallen tree, over which he stepped easily. The new softness of the soil had, for him, its own

deep meaning of resurrection. He felt it in the swelling buds of the branches that sometimes swayed before him, and found it in the scent of the cedar as he crushed a bit of it in his hand.

Easily, yet carefully, he went around the base of the hill to the street, where his house was the first upon the right-hand side. The gate creaked on its hinges and he went quickly up the walk, passing the grey tangle of last[3] Summer's garden, where the marigolds had died and the larkspur fallen asleep.

Within the house, two women awaited him, one with anxious eagerness, the other with tenderly watchful love. The older one, who had long been listening, opened the door before he knocked, but it was Barbara who spoke to him first.

"You're late, Father, dear."

"Am I, Barbara? Tell me, was there a sunset to-night?"

"Yes, a glorious one."

Seeing with the Soul

"I thought so, and that accounts for my being late. I saw a beautiful sunset—I saw it with my soul."

"Give me your coat, Ambrose." The older woman stood at his side, longing to do him some small service.

"Thank you, Miriam; you are always kind."

The tiny living-room was filled with relics of past luxury. Fine pictures, in tarnished frames, hung on the dingy walls, and worn rugs covered the floor. The furniture was old mahogany, beautifully cared for, but decrepit, nevertheless, and the ancient square piano, outwardly, at least, showed every year of its age.

Still, the room had "atmosphere," of the indefinable quality that some people impart to a dwelling-place. Entering, one felt refinement, daintiness, and the ability to live above mere [4]externals. Barbara had, very strongly, the house-love which belongs to some rare women. And who shall say that inanimate things do not answer to our love of them, and diffuse, between our four walls, a certain gracious spirit of kindness and welcome?

In the dining-room, where the table was set for supper, there were marked contrasts. A coarse cloth covered the table, but at the head of it was overlaid a remnant of heavy table-damask, the worn places carefully hidden. The china at this place was thin and fine, the silver was solid, and the cup from which Ambrose North drank was Satsuma.

On the coarse cloth were the heavy, cheap dishes and the discouraging knives and forks which were the portion of the others. The five damask napkins remaining from the original stock of linen were used only by the blind man.

A Comforting Deceit

For years the two women had carried on this comforting deceit, and the daily lie they lived, so lovingly, had become a sort of second nature. They had learned to speak, casually, of the difficulty in procuring servants, and to say how much easier it was to do their own small tasks than to watch continually over fine linen and rare china intrusted to incompetent hands. They talked of tapestries, laces, and jewels which had long ago been sold, and Barbara frequently wore a string of beads [5] which, with a lump in her throat, she called "Mother's pearls."

Discovering that the sound of her crutches on the floor distressed him greatly, Barbara had padded the sharp ends with flannel and was careful to move about as little as possible when he was in the house. She had gone, mouse-like, to her own particular chair while Miriam was hanging up his coat and hat and placing his easy chair near the open fire. He sat down and held his slender hands close to the grateful warmth.

"It isn't cold," he said, "and yet I am glad of the fire. To-day is the first day of Spring."

"By the almanac?" laughed Barbara.

"No, according to the almanac, I believe, it has been Spring for ten days. Nature does not move according to man's laws, but she forces him to observe hers—except in almanacs."

Kindly Shadows

The firelight made kindly shadows in the room, softening the unloveliness and lending such beauty as it might. It gave to Ambrose North's fine, strong face the delicacy and dignity of an old miniature. It transfigured Barbara's yellow hair into a crown of gold, and put a new gentleness into Miriam's lined face as she sat in the half-light, one of them in blood, yet singularly alien and apart.

"What are you doing, Barbara?" The [6]sensitive hands strayed to her lap and lifted the sheer bit of linen upon which she was working.

"Making lingerie by hand."

"You have a great deal of it, haven't you?"

"Not as much as you think, perhaps. It takes a long time to do it well."

"It seems to me you are always sewing."

"Girls are very vain these days, Father. We need a great many pretty things."

"Your dear mother used to sew a great deal. She—" His voice broke, for even after many years his grief was keenly alive.

"Is supper ready, Aunt Miriam?" asked Barbara, quickly.

"Yes."

"Then come, let's go in."

Ambrose North took his place at the head of the table, which, purposely, was nearest the door. Barbara and Miriam sat together, at the other end.

"Where were you to-day, Father?"

At the top of the World

"On the summit of the highest hill, almost at the top of the world. I think I heard a robin, but I am not sure. I smelled Spring in the maple branches and the cedar, and felt it in the salt mist that blew up from the sea. The Winter has been so long!"

"Did you make a song?"

Always Make a Song

"Yes—two. I'll tell you about them after[7]ward. Always make a song, Barbara, no matter what comes."

So the two talked, while the other woman watched them furtively. Her face was that of one who has lived much in a short space of time and her dark, burning eyes betrayed tragic depths of feeling. Her black hair, slightly tinged with grey, was brushed straight back from her wrinkled forehead. Her shoulders were stooped and her hands rough from hard work.

She was the older sister of Ambrose North's dead wife—the woman he had so devotedly loved. Ever since her sister's death, she had lived with them, taking care of little lame Barbara, now grown into beautiful womanhood, except for the crutches. After his blindness, Ambrose North had lost his wife, and then, by slow degrees, his fortune. Mercifully, a long illness had made him forget a great deal.

"Never mind, Barbara," said Miriam, in a low tone, as they rose from the table. "It will make your hands too rough for the sewing."

"Shan't I wipe the dishes for you, Aunty? I'd just as soon."

"No—go with him."

The fire had gone down, but the room was warm, so Barbara turned up the light and began again on her endless stitching. Her father's hands sought hers.

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"More sewing?" His voice was tender and appealing.

"Just a little bit, Father, please. I'm so anxious to get this done."

"But why, dear?"

"Because girls are so vain," she answered, with a laugh.

"Is my little girl vain?"

"Awfully. Hasn't she the dearest father in the world and the prettiest"—she swallowed hard here—"the prettiest house and the loveliest clothes? Who wouldn't be vain!"

"I am so glad," said the old man, contentedly, "that I have been able to give you the things you want. I could not bear it if we were poor."

"You told me you had made two songs to-day, Father."

Song of the River

He drew closer to her and laid one hand upon the arm of her chair. Quietly, she moved her crutches beyond his reach. "One is about the river," he began.

"In Winter, a cruel fairy put it to sleep in an enchanted tower, far up in the mountains, and walled up the door with crystal. All the while the river was asleep, it was dreaming of the green fields and the soft, fragrant winds.

"It tossed and murmured in its sleep, and at last it woke, too soon, for the cruel fairy's spell could not have lasted much longer. When it found the door barred, it was very [9]sad. Then it grew rebellious and hurled itself against the door, trying to escape, but the barrier only seemed more unyielding. So, making the best of things, the river began to sing about the dream.

"From its prison-house, it sang of the green fields and fragrant winds, the blue violets that starred the meadow, the strange, singing harps of the marsh grasses, and the wonder of the sea. A good fairy happened to be passing, and she stopped to hear the song. She became so interested that she wanted to see the singer, so she opened the door. The river laughed and ran out, still singing, and carrying the door along. It never stopped until it had taken every bit of the broken crystal far out to sea."

"I made one, too, Father."

"What is it?"

Song of the Flax

"Mine is about the linen. Once there was a little seed put away into the darkness and covered deep with earth. But there was a soul in the seed, and after the darkness grew warm it began to climb up and up, until one day it reached the sunshine. After that, it was so glad that it tossed out tiny, green branches and finally its soul blos-

somed into a blue flower. Then a princess passed, and her hair was flaxen and her eyes were the colour of the flower.

"The flower said, 'Oh, pretty Princess, I want to go with you.'

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"The princess answered, 'You would die, little Flower, if you were picked,' and she went on.

"But one day the Reaper passed and the little blue flower and all its fellows were gathered. After a terrible time of darkness and pain, the flower found itself in a web of sheerest linen. There was much cutting and more pain, and thousands of pricking stitches, then a beautiful gown was made, all embroidered with the flax in palest blue and green. And it was the wedding gown of the pretty princess, because her hair was flaxen and her eyes the colour of the flower."

Barbara

"What colour is your hair, Barbara?" He had asked the question many times.

"The colour of ripe corn, Daddy. Don't you remember my telling you?"

He leaned forward to stroke the shining braids. "And your eyes?"

"Like the larkspur that grows in the garden."

"I know — your dear mother's eyes." He touched her face gently as he spoke. "Your skin is so smooth — is it fair?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"I think you must be beautiful; I have asked Miriam so often, but she will not tell me. She only says you look well enough and something like your mother. Are you beautiful?"

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"Oh, Daddy! Daddy!" laughed Barbara, in confusion. "You mustn't ask such questions! Didn't you say you had made two songs? What is the other one?"

Miriam sat in the dining-room, out of sight but within hearing. Having observed that in her presence they laughed less, she spent her evenings alone unless they urged her to join them. She had a newspaper more than a week old, but, as yet, she had not read it. She sat staring into the shadows, with the light of her one candle flickering upon her face, nervously moving her work-worn hands.

"The other song," reminded Barbara, gently.

Song of the Sunset

"This one was about a sunset," he sighed. "It was such a sunset as was never on sea or land, because two who loved each other saw it together. God and all His angels had hung a marvellous tapestry from the high walls of Heaven, and it reached almost to the mountain-tops, where some of the little clouds sleep.

"The man said, 'Shall we always look for the sunsets together?'

"The woman smiled and answered, 'Yes, always.'

"And," the man continued, 'when one of us goes on the last long journey?'

"Then," answered the woman, 'the other will not be watching alone. For, I think, there in the West is the Golden City with the [12]jasper walls and the jewelled foundations, where the twelve gates are twelve pearls.'"

There was a long silence. "And so—" said Barbara, softly.

Ambrose North lifted his grey head from his hands and rose to his feet unsteadily. "And so," he said, with difficulty, "she leans from the sunset toward him, but he can never see her, because he is blind. Oh, Barbara," he cried, passionately, "last night I dreamed that you could walk and I could see!"

"So we can, Daddy," said Barbara, very gently. "Our souls are neither blind nor lame. Here, I am eyes for you and you are feet for me, so we belong together. And—past the sunset—"

"Past the sunset," repeated the old man, dreamily, "soul and body shall be as one. We must wait—for life is made up of waiting—and make what songs we can."

"I think, Father, that a song should be in poetry, shouldn't it?"