

Chopin Op. 47

By Stanley V. Makower

LATE in the afternoon of the seventeenth of October, eighteen hundred and eighty-nine, the atmosphere in the little private room of the Hotel Saxony was a mixture of cigar smoke and fog.

The crimson shades sank lower and lower over the candles. In one or two places the wire frames had toppled forward with their silk canopies, and the grease was guttering woefully, creeping over the edge of the candle and hurrying into little solid lumps which formed an ever-changing pattern down the side.

On the table were strewn the remains of a luxurious lunch ; a confusion of fruit, flowers, and wine. The party consisted solely of bachelors.

“Oceana,” said the host, rising with his glass in his hand and bending slightly forward to propose the toast, while he appealed with his eyes to those round him. He was a young man, quietly dressed in a suit of a thick, dark material, but a large sapphire pin shone from his black satin tie.

The clear “tink” of glasses sounded as they met across the table.

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Some one began to wave his glass, and to hum *tempo di valse* :

“Sweet Oceana,
I'd give the world to gain her,
She's fair as any flower in the fields to see.”

He hesitated ; trying to recall the words, with a confused look on his face, when another continued :

“I may be a duffer,
The scorn of men I'd suffer,
So long as Oceana won't look down on me.”

The last line was sung as a chorus by the whole party.

The wine had flowed freely, and the utmost conviviality and good humour reigned. They began to talk of Oceana's last appearance at the Ambassadeurs, when her yellow dress had been pronounced a triumph, and the French papers had declared that the long rows of yellow gas lamps had “quivered with sympathy.”

One man alone did not seem to share the enthusiasm of the rest.

He sat a little apart from them, running his shrivelled fingers abstractedly up and down the stem of his glass.

“You look gloomy,” said one.

“I look what I am,” he said, quietly ; “nearly twice as old as most of you here.” And he leaned his bald head heavily on his hand as he looked at the group of faces around him.

A feeble protest was raised by one or two who, without wishing to go into the details of age all round the table, were of opinion that his theory was not to be supported. The host tapped him mysteriously

mysteriously on the shoulder, shook his head at him, and laughed, saying :

“Take some more hock and forget your age,” as from the long-necked bottle he poured the amber-coloured wine into his neighbour’s glass.

But the man only smiled faintly as he pushed an imaginary lock of hair from his forehead, and murmured :

“I feel old ; sometimes it comes over me.”

There was a silence for a few moments, the querulous tone of the speaker having checked the merriment of the company.

One of the red silk shades caught fire and fell burning upon the table. Everybody rose to extinguish it, and sat down again disconsolately. Outside the lights were beginning to spring up along the street.

The next few minutes passed again in silence.

“Let us go,” said some one at last.

The host rose toying with the pin in his tie, which he pulled up slightly and then pushed back into its place.

“Come to my rooms,” he said, indicating a general invitation by a vague look in his eyes. “Suzanne Delisle is coming to play the piano.”

No one dissented ; so they called for their hats and coats and went one behind the other out of the hot room, while a voice quavered out :

“The scorn of men I’d suffer,
So long as Oceana don’t look down”

It stopped suddenly as they stepped into the cold, foggy street. They all shivered a little and then set out briskly. A walk of five minutes brought them to a house.

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The host after standing under the gas lamp outside the front door and fumbling for some time with a bunch of keys, selected one and quickly slipped it into the lock. As he pushed, the door fell back noiselessly, leaving the key in his hand. When the others had trooped past him he shut the door behind him and they were left in darkness. Only the ends of two cigars glowed—tiny circles of fiery red—as the owners puffed at them.

“Two flights, nine steps each,” said the host, “then wait till I get a match.”

They stumbled up until some one said, “Stop.”

The host opened the door and vanished into the room to find a match.

A faint glimmer of green mist made luminous by the gas lamp outside, indicated the position of a window, and over the landing, where the party stood waiting for a light, floated a warmer air loaded with the perfume of flowers which mingled with the heavy smell of the cigars.

The host was some time finding the match-box.

“Ah, here it is,” he said at last, advancing to the door with it in his hand.

The unwieldy figure of the old man passed by him and sank into a large armchair close to the fireplace, in which glowed a small heap of dull red coal. His eyelids were half-closed—for the wine and the fog had made him drowsy, so that he did not see the others as they followed the host in procession across the room. He felt several people brush past him, then he heard a confused babble of voices; that was all.

Lights glimmered, changing the colour that hung before his eyelids, and he began to imagine that he was in the little room of the Saxony, and that, if he were to open his eyes, he would see the table strewn with its confusion of plates and glasses. And the

figure of a man, rising with his glass in his hand and stooping forward to propose a toast swam before him.

Then he thought he heard a noise as of the opening of a piano, which threw him back to his boyhood, and he fancied that he was at home and that his mother was playing to him.

They were in the little sitting-room with its walls crowded with faded photographs of Rome and Pompeii in black frames. His mother sat at the piano with her back to him: her head was slightly turned so that he could see her profile, and her forehead and hair were lit up by the candle-light.

Divinely fair she looked. And as he listened he felt in his hands the touch of that silken hair which he stroked every night before he kissed her and went to bed.

He was sitting at some distance from her, wrapt in wonder, for her music was like magic.

Then it seemed to him that he closed his eyes in an ecstasy.

Now it was early morning in a forest, and he was treading noiselessly across the carpet of damp, decayed leaves, winding his way in and out of the stems of tall trees, whose branches were dashed with dew. And all the vigour of youth was in his limbs as he walked joyously, breathing in the soft, moist air, and shaking his head to toss back the thick lock of hair that fell over his eyes.

Now he had flung himself down at the edge of a wide pool and was gazing on its motionless surface. Reflected in it he saw the image of his own face, young and beautiful.

And he smiled. And a light breeze sent a quiver through the forest making the leaves rustle faintly.

The spirit of youth burned quick within him; and he was filled with vague desire to do some great emprise. On the surface of the pool before him, floated the image of tall, waving trees.

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Then as he looked deep down into the water the mirrored forest melted away to the edge of the pool and before him rose a castle, dark, mysterious, fronted by broad lawns with several towers in dull purple, one taller than the rest.

Long and earnestly he gazed.

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A sunbeam struck one of the mullioned windows, which opened and a woman appeared, leaning forward as if to listen. Then the window was closed again.

Far in the distance the tramp of hoofs, trample of hoofs.

Nearer they come, nearer and nearer.

Lo, a knight clad in shining armour on a white horse with flowing mane. Now he is at the edge of the forest, now on the lawn, now under the tower that is tallest, and his white horse prances and caracoles, prances and caracoles.

And as the sun grows stronger the trappings of his horse flash with bright gems, which scatter their light about him as he moves in ever varying figures swifter and swifter.

The mullioned window is open again.

From below it come the sounds of many people bestirring themselves. Now the full light of day is over the castle.

The knight dances up and down on his shining steed. Behind him dance the shadows of an army of knights on white horses which follow him in every movement. Wilder and wilder he grows—swaying from side to side. And the shadows sway from side to side. All through the day they dance in front of the castle until horse and rider grow weary and jaded, and the knight stands still beneath the tower that is taller than the rest.

And the shadows stand still.

A shower of rose leaves pours from the window of the princess. Rose leaves, rose leaves, rose leaves. As they fall from her white fingers

fingers a breeze blows them about, tossing them into endless patterns, until a cloud of rose leaves is about the knight, and the lawns are strewn with soft petals.

He turns his head to the window, and as he raises his vizor, the twilight that falls upon his armour quickens to points of ruddy gold.

Dimmer and dimmer grow the lights that flash from the jewelled horse, as he rides away followed by the army of shadows, and all is dark.

The sound of the running of innumerable small feet and of muffled laughter comes now from the wood. Elves tear up and down in front of the castle, which is all black save where a light burns in the window of the princess. The laughter grows to shrieks as they come in thousands, leaping and dancing frantically in mimicry of the knight's dance. An elf mounted on a rabbit scampers up and down the lawn, and each time that he passes under the window of the princess, the light flickers.

Suddenly a gust of wind raises the dead leaves in the wood, so that they are whirled aloft higher and higher in front of the castle, rushing and crackling. They hit one another, tossed hither and thither in their passage through the air until the wind drops and they tumble, flying helter-skelter, jostling one another, whispering, fluttering down to the ground.

Far in the distance the tramp of hoofs, trample of hoofs.

Dawn begins to glimmer. As the hoofs come nearer the noise of the elves grows fainter. They scamper off to the wood to bar the knight's way. They pinch and scratch and bite him, they tug at his helmet until it falls from his head, but he presses onward: nearer, nearer, until the sunbeam strikes the window of the princess, from which something

waves

waves in the breeze, and the elves creep away with a faint, droning cry.

The knight prances up on his white steed, at the back of him are the army of shadows. At the window waving a long white scarf the princess stands, and her eyes shine like stars.

A shower of rose leaves falls from her window. Rose leaves, rose leaves, rose leaves.

Now she is seated on a pillion behind the knight, and they ride off in a cloud of rose leaves, and the jewels on the knight's horse flash in the sunlight.

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Was it a horse—a white horse?

How the rose leaves whispered and fluttered.

He rubbed his hand across his face and felt the wrinkles with which it was indented, while in the darkness of his mind he was vaguely conscious of a wide pool, over which the wind had sent a ripple.

How his limbs ached. He half raised his eyelids and then closed them again wearily, waving his hand feebly in front of him as if to put away the reality that was breaking upon his dream.

But in spite of himself his eyes opened.

The fire had gone quite out, and he shivered slightly. Through an arched opening at the end of the room he saw a woman with auburn hair seated at the piano with her back to him. Her head was slightly turned so that he could see her profile, and her hair and forehead were lit up by the candle-light.

She was smiling to a group of men who stood round her.

The man in the armchair groaned a little. By his side was a bowl of roses, the perfume of which filled his nostrils. He shut his eyes for a moment, trying to see the picture of the

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the white horse, but it evaded him and his eyes would not keep closed.

A man-servant entered with a lamp, revealing a room richly furnished with carved oak. The walls were covered with oil pictures in heavy frames. Here and there stood bronze statues by modern French sculptors, and on the table upon which the lamp had been placed, the soft yellow light fell on a number of curious objects: old silver boxes, medallions in jewelled frames, tiny porcelain vases, trays of coins and rings.

Suzanne Delisle rose from the piano and advanced into the room.