

OLD KITTY.

*"Femme qui n'a filé toute sa vie
Tâche à passer bien des choses sans bruit."*—LA FONTAINE.



HE sun's good-will to shine even usually on the place favoured heavenly origin. A hill, too, each red-cheeked dawn perchance found tell-tale; for of it half appeared to have been crushed by three streets piled against the raw side of the remnant—mere one-storey cottages the loftiest gables seemed, seen from the land, while ships, in which many men might pass months not over-cramped, shadowed with sails the doorways, and scrawled with rigging the outlook toward the river.

"But old women's tales stumble beginning; they know the end better," so the folk themselves said, who should have been well-informed; certain it is children pick flowers, and girls even among green fruit find some sweet.

Kitty's crib next beneath the sky was made bright by sun-flowers turned to gaze over the roof; the fronts being so gay that wharf-loungers got cricked necks, unable to take eyes off dancing windows attractive as though a buxom wench were at toilette behind every lattice.

Scattered on several hills, the town showed a general tendency to huddle in the bottoms, leaving grass, pasture for single donkeys and goats, above, where wind bullied butterflies.

Each morning old Kitty clattered down, basket on arm, and took her way through the market; not that she had, but lacked, business: so from morning to night went odd-jobbing for anyone.

There was bustle, as when ant-hills stand base to base, on stone steps, on wooden, through streets which had better have been stairs, of scandal-mongers who spiced jolly lives with small malice. One stood face to face with heaven, as did drunkards and idiots, at street-corners; so many the ups and downs were.

A dwarf innocent started from the wharves at nightfall to climb between the houses, a great labour foredoomed of unsuccess, yet with smiles attempted. "Luck to you" lads shouted, hurrying past to their sweet-hearts; or, with a girl, dawdled, and whispering laughed: she coyly looked pity. Endless steps, on which at length weakly his body found rest: the dew-moist slab inducing dreams, Kitty, benignant as he whom Jacob saw from the foot of a ladder mounting higher still, was revealed.

"I had supper alone last night"—"When none talks in the dark, one counts every turn between cold sheets," mornings and evenings, going or returning, she said to this almost dumb beast, who, adoring through vague years, had grown as faithful as habit. Crude expectancies of bliss, such as, inspired by the lubber's chaff in his vacant head, made song, she, plain of speech as person, fostered; thus beer-begotten the drama grew; rivals appeared—David, a mason, whose Welsh name was made difficult by redundance of consonants beyond a legend's retention (on this simple one he even wished some grafted), who had come to learn what might be from foreign stone-cutters at work on the new St. Mary's church.

Gay fellows, noisy as birds, their jargoning not better understood, like a

colony

colony of over-sea daws, busily they laboured and had nigh filled the building with saints, and covered it in devils. One of them made a second rival; after a fortnight of silent acquaintance-making, they would chat each day, when she passed, for as much as twenty minutes, neither of them repaid save by the outflow.

To work, of all but a loin-cloth he jauntily stripped himself. So much coquetry, however, a dandy never got from a fine suit; such artifice was in a napkin, neither girl nor matron could pass without her eye being drawn thither and thus led to contemplation of splendid nudity.

The chips sprang in the sun; merrily the ring of the chisel on the stone followed the short thud of the mallet; industrious, he never turned but for Kitty and a tavern-wench with flagon, which was perhaps his secret.

David had come, silent man, from mountains. Not caring to ask questions, he put up at a wharf-side lodging: all gay wags knew the house; the riff-raff sneaked thither when honest folk and rooks went home; damp dust stank between slatternly scrubbed boards. Fagged, he sat down (economy lit no candle) and dozed; laughter hung round him drowsily, grew harsher, and broke through his nap; from the next room, up ramshackle hoarding, light climbed in lines to the rafters, blotted out evidently by a huge wardrobe near the door.

Women, who talked loudly to be overheard, using what words! David knew he was fallen among harlots. David was pious; still pious men are tempted. He was; and remembered how much had been forgiven to Solomon and that great king his namesake. They were kings.

No curtain hid the stars. These women might not be clean, so many lewd men as there are in towns. Starting, he discovered they were naked; some leant against the planks, bending them, broadening the chinks, through which they peeped joking of his sleep's soundness. The boards so bulged that light, creeping round, suggested features, hints to discovery; ambiguity of indication lured David, as it used old geographers, through slightness of positive knowledge, to locate in unknown parts mountains, fertile districts, and where rivers ran: sudden fear lest the hoarding give dissipated these studies. Hurriedly, while they, remiss, flagged, he crept tip-toe, lifting his stool to within the blank caused by the press, got up, and began working the nails, which held the top where was the most strain, with strong leathery finger and thumb, till they came out; with the third it would do. Descending he set ajar the door, during a burst of uproar. Just when again his board yearned like a tree about to bring forth a dryad, ready, he gave the last wrench. The dwarf, sleeping, was passed, before, slackening speed, he shook the nail free from his indented thumb, which he put in his mouth. Still with each step a bare arm and leg shot after the leaning plank awkwardly: uncanny; he almost fancied claws. Arrived in the fine summer night, he met a meadow-sweet land-breeze, and saw Kitty awaiting her lover; dazed, from the stars she turned towards him: over his stony-passive self, as, after drought, rains revivify the dusty track of a hill-stream, trust washed; he asked, as of a mother, a bed.

At his open lattice next morning, smiling that his bundle had not been lost in his hurry, he saw her arrive from the well on the second terrace; as she lifted her yoke, firm, beaded shoulders, a contrast to last night's lewd gleam, shone blithely.

He became her lodger, and giant anxiety to the little half-man far below; but returned to his hills and kith, without having once quickened Kitty's pulse.

Still well-conditioned, old rather by familiarity than age, her days, like those of a plant, long ago had, like genet's trot, kept up and down constantly not evenly. The blood has a tricky itch during the teens, which keeps one a-tip-toe; lively as a sea-cave all day long, would she laugh like its echoes.

On the road to a bean-feast once she had found every seat taken. When the going began to jerk, making a confusion of impetus, and balance difficult to be kept, every one offered their knees, of course; nearly all somehow were fellows in that waggon. An uncle who had her in charge sat outside on the rail singing with no savour of tune; good man, he had thought himself equally disgraced not to get drunk on saints' days and like occasions as to be anything but sober the rest of the year. She tried first one then another of the proffered laps, none suiting till at last, lured by gay dark eyes, she settled on knees of a foreign lad; his jacket he had doubled across them, though naturally a plump cushion, the whole made to exactly suit the little romp by his keeping his heels off the ground: so that, in those lie-a-bed times, no queen's carriage had such capital springs; while his gibberish, sparsely sprinkled with recognisable English, kept her in fits. Suddenly the good uncle, still quite sober, was shot from his precarious position into a hedge-bank.

Everybody got down in the roused dust to pick him up, his wrist broken, his neck, wryed by bending above the lasts, only saved by a thick clump of weeds, partly nettles; their revenge distracted his attention from the more serious disaster.

They put him under charge of an ill-grown loon. Then Kitty in tears drew notice; vainly was she assured, he would soon get better, this not being her trouble; now, she must go back. Such innocent fears were soon laid: all vowed to take care of her; the foreign friend repeating "take care" so funnily, she had to laugh.

An hour later those two words, so endearingly protective, kept purring to her ears from amid sleek Gascon. He climbed like a monkey till fear betrayed her, chased damsel-flies, or brought sprigs of bryony, their budded green soft as love-bird down, to enrich her hair; spider-webs, from which shadows withdrew, shone like wide white disks, till she felt unsafely tall and wished to sit down. Noon had stilled her limbs' buoyancy, though beneath saucy strays of hair her eyes continued dancing. All bodily perfections of errant knight and ballad hero—such an upset her young blood, gaining no due expression in skipping feet, put her wits in—got jolted over to his account; every virtue of saint or bible story became part and parcel of this unintelligible boy; neither saint or angel stayed her, but she must

even draft from the blessed Lord himself, none else possessing sufficiency. What wonder she made small objection, when he kissed and they found themselves alone deep in the sunshine; nay, into the wood followed him through mysterious places, which stir has quitted as the tide does caves where a constant drip seems the faint pulse which tells that some one lives? Here no heart beat but their own, passing down shady ways even to the strange land of sleep—birthlike, dawnlit, as baby dreams long obliterated.

Inside the door, just beyond midnight, her mother and a candle first woke her. The hasty run through late twilight for the waggon, drunken roysterer jolted through the night, all far-away: only those cooing unknown words near, beneath a stuffy cloak: even when, parting, a neighbour dragged her wrist, it seemed but some waif rudeness, pitiful in heaven.

“I’m in love, and we’ve slept together in the wood,” then questions, then tears. Noticing the light, the good priest stepped in; taken into confidence, he thought, seeing she loved him so, reporting with such high eulogy, it were best to marry them, and undertook to hunt up the bridegroom, whose name even was not known; but the description was vivid. After visiting two or three inns, he found him heavy with sleep as a winter dormouse, turned the key, and took it away.

In time a new life, from no one knows where, was expected as witness and consummation to this oddly arranged marriage.

A sharp fellow; clever at his craft, wood-carving for the new choir; gaining sufficient to pacify the mother: though often out at nights, drunk—“and worse” neighbours said. Winter drawing to a close, he grew discontented, by no will of his married, mewed up with a girl unable to talk with him; till, returning one night to find mother-in-law and midwife installed, being not more sober than uncle Ben on saint days, there ensued a skirmish; he staggered upstairs into the room that she with a shriek filled: all resulting in the small life’s return to its place.

Seemingly, she lay dead. When his wits came together, he could hear neighbours below called by the infuriated beldames; so let himself out of window and by backways, hunted of accusing cries; scuttled down to the wharves, with fox-like wariness; smuggled himself aboard a vessel which stole silently seaward before dawn; and thenceforth was drifted by unstable elements safely home to the unreflecting shallows of a blithe life.

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