

Old Songs

I.—FAIR ROSAMUND

"HOW did you get in?" said Fair Rosamund indifferently. OLD SONGS
Queen Eleanor held up the skein of silk, with a compassionate smile.

"Ah, yes, I might have known," laughed Fair Rosamund; "all spiders spin silk. . . . Will you be staying long?"

"No; not very long," answered Queen Eleanor regretfully.

"I am very sorry for that," sighed Rosamund; "the sight of you makes me feel ten years younger."

"Never mind," murmured Eleanor comfortingly; "I will stay a little while—long enough to make you much younger than that."

A sharp silence followed.

"Will you not sit down?" cooed Rosamund absently. "O, I forgot; pardon me; this is the only chair that has been given to me, and it holds but one at once."

"Where does he sit?" said Eleanor, looking round aimlessly at the great lime trees overhead.

"On my knee," whispered Rosamund.

Eleanor resumed, "Why should I pardon you? Do not yield me your chair—"

"I had not thought of it," said Rosamund, opening her eyes very widely.

Eleanor continued, not noticing the interruption, "I will sit on the floor at your feet."

"That will be beautiful," said Rosamund; then she went on protectingly, "See, I will give you a little corner of the hem of my skirt to sit upon."

"How good; I shall hide it completely," said Eleanor.

She seated herself, and again a long silence ensued. Then she resumed, "This cannot go on for ever."

"I thought not," said Rosamund sagely.

Eleanor rose and drew from her gown-bosom a narrow thin willowy knife and a vial of green copper. She cut off a short piece from the skein of silk and knotted it about the neck of the vial; with this she hung the vial on the tip of the knife and offered them to Rosamund, saying "Which?"

"Do you mean to kill me?" laughed Rosamund.

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"Eleanor nodded repeatedly and rapidly, with an expression of vanity on her face.

"You are most foolish," said Fair Rosamund in tones of grave reproof; "surely you see that my death by your hands will make him think of me whenever he sees you, so that he will remember how much greater is my beauty than yours; then, too, he will always hate you until he can watch you die, in payment for my death—and that may make it possible even you will die before your time. As for me, he will love me more surely than ever when he has lost me; perchance he will even have me embalmed and will cherish me in a painted chapel with jewelled windows."

"It all depends upon what there is to embalm," lisped Queen Eleanor contentedly. "I fear I can wait no longer; must I choose or will you?"

"O, not the knife . . ." and Rosamund shivered daintily; "the knife will hurt, I know it will; I once stabbed myself when I was yet in the convent—it was purely pretence, you know, so that I might get my own way. I took care that the stylet (it was a stylet) should slip along a rib, but I can feel the glistening pain whenever I think of it. . . ."

"No, not the knife . . ." she added hurriedly.

"Then . . ." and Eleanor held the vial still nearer to her.

Rosamund turned to her embroidery frame, saying calmly: "You must wait a moment, just until I have put this stitch in. There," she went on presently, rolling up her silks, thrusting her needles into them and shutting them into a ball of copper filagree and violet enamel, "give me your nosegay."

She loosened the stopper and smelt the vial's contents; her nostrils curled. "How nasty," she said. Then she rose suddenly, took the Queen's head in her hands and kissed her on the mouth. Having done this she drank the contents of the vial hastily and seated herself again, fearful lest Eleanor should spoil her of her chair. "'Tis good," she mused, "to know that I shall never have anything so nasty again."

She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. Presently, with a slow, thin-lipped smile, she said: "He will neglect you to kiss me often when I am dead; he would rather kiss my cold blue lips than your warm red lips."

"Will he?" asked Eleanor, Queen.

Fair Rosamund laughed shrilly. Suddenly she sat upright, shrieking, her eyes staring. She gripped her body with both hands.

"O . . . O! What can that be? How it did hurt. There it is again. Help me . . . it hurts . . . it hurts . . . it hurts . . . You have given me a corrosive poison; how cruel of you; you might have given me a narcotic poison. . . ."

"Where is she? . . . she has gone. O God! O God! send her back, so that I can die calmly and sweetly in her presence; I can die so, God, if she is here; she will give me strength. But now. . . ."

She gripped her body very tightly with her hands and rolled on the floor.

". . . O, she has given me this eating draught to wring all the beauty out of my face and to distort my limbs as I die, so that he will despise me and think of me with horror . . . there are blue blotches on my hands . . . will it be so all over my body? I will lie long-stretched and hold myself very still, so that I may be seemly for him to look on. . . ."

Her hands clutched her body again; she sat up, then dashed herself on the ground again.

II—PAOLO AND FRANCESCA

"WHERE do you suppose you are?" asked Francesca wonderingly.

"In Hell," faltered Dante between his sobs.

"But why should you think that?" said Francesca in still greater wonderment. "'Tis so plain that we are in Heaven."

Dante's voice seemed to be rilling through tears as he returned: "The dreadful torments I have seen; the darkness and the wailing; the sight of the twain of you driven helplessly down the cold pitiless wind while little eager terrible flames assail you on

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every side—nought save Hell could be thus potent over such mighty lovers as you. . . .”

“Is it too dark for us to see each other?” interrupted Paolo.

“No,” said Dante more sadly than ever.

“Then are we in Heaven,” answered Paolo. “This light is the light of our choice; all lovers love the twilight. We must be in Heaven when we can see each other. Does this wind of which you speak (we cannot feel it, for we are at its heart; it seems cold to you because we need and take all its warmth for ourselves), does it seem to you to sunder us and send each of us adrift all lonely?”

Dante shook his head.

“Then are we in Heaven,” continued Paolo. “We must be in heaven when we are together. Our Heaven is to lie in each other’s arms; and as we do so the wind of our passion drives us whither it will, for it always blows us to happiness. We are quite safe, because we love eternally. The wind of passion is the breath of God. It must be that you carry Hell with you when you can hear our cries of joy and think that we are wailing.”

“But the dreadful torments I have seen?” doubted Dante waveringly.

“We know nothing of them,” laughed Paolo and Francesca together merrily. “Yet torments are purgings everywhere; of evil in Heaven, of good in Hell.”

“But,” triumphed Dante, “my dead lady is not here, so it must be Hell.”

Francesca laughed a long time. At last she sang: “We cannot help that. Heaven is where we are. If your lady is somewhere apart from you she must be in Hell; hasten to rescue her, O swift to speak and laggard to do.”

“Where we are, Heaven is,” chanted Paolo in antiphon.

“O, Paolo,” joyously rippled Francesca, “he is so wicked: see, he wants to put us into Hell that he may save his lady from Hell. We shall never convince him; wicked people can never believe what other people say. The little roses that fall from us as we kiss whirl about us for ever; but they are no use to him; he thinks they are flames of bygone earthly lust that God has saved up to punish us with. Come, my heart’s Paolo, let us gather

up all our little roses—armfuls, Paolo, armfuls—and with them pelt him out of Paradise. . . .”

As Virgil and Dante turned away, Virgil said with a pagan's unintelligence: “Hell is not such a hateful place after all, you see.”

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III—FAUST

“GRETCHEN? Ah, sir, I am inexpressibly weary of that wrinkled-to-shrivelling falsehood. 'Twas a Teuton-calumny, too; but our German mind ever alternated 'tween philosophy and sentimentality, incapable of understanding that a middle way exists—nay, 'tis possible that other things exist also—I know not; I have the German mind.

“Simplicity, simplicity—that is our bane, and we know it; we hide it under mountains of words, but we cannot hide our souls so—we do no more than punctuate the obvious.

“And sentimentality is a hypocrisy that comes of living to a theory; as a nation we are martyred to the family; here it is—positively grown to an instinct—and thus I am subjugated to a round peach-face and two long plaits of yellow hair. Would our poet were not so immortal.

“Your own countryman Marlov (or is it Marlau you call him?) divined me trulier. Some elusive neluctable inscrutable stir o' the animal in us sets every man toward the wenches sooner or later; but he felt I had an ambition like his own, and that if the accident o' birth must drag me from my self's high thoughts of man's divinity, I could yield to no less than the pick o' the ages, the envy of the best-mated fondlers; so he gave me the Lacedæmonian; I warrant he lusted after her himself.

“'St, 'st; nay, sir, softly, one moment; 'tis here that it cuts—I have been made the apex of tragedies, the butt of farces, the occasion for the high-noted one of the opera to after-the-syrup-of-the-newest-Parisian-fashion out-caper his dusty triumphs of the

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day before; but none thinks of my life-work, of what I rough-hewed for the after-time; even your countryman makes me fear Hell i' the end, though he was wiser himself—but he must have a tickling finale for his buskin-grinder, and crashes through my fame to find one. Now, sir, cannot you adjust me with posterity, give me the serious perpetuation which is my right? . . .

“I hear your present patent of immortality is a biography in two volumes with a supplement by an eminent authority. . . . Facts? I do not desire a record of facts, I seek a work of genius. Facts, facts, facts—O, have all these hundreds of years gone by since I lived and strove, and has humanity not yet passed its old stone of stumbling? Sir, I have understood that yours is the age of constructive anatomy; given the bone, you uprear its animal: the age of evolution; given the product, you predicate its source—and do not the traditions of me furnish bones and sources to suffice a mastodon-biography? I require the instinct of the prophet, not the gospel of the disciple; you know the spirit of me and what I must have been—invent, then, your facts accordingly, one cosmic harmony to form. From the boasts I have overheard I imagine your marvellous (he, he, he, . . .) century has accomplished much greater feats of sympathetic interpretation than this I ask of you. Facts—what have I to do with facts? Facts—have I then indeed lived in vain?

“I know what you say—sir, sir, go not yet—I beseech you listen to me one little minute—nay, sir, if you will persist in going you will infallibly make me tear your sleeve—I admit ruefully that a biography may be most dull; but I had liefer beamummythanforgotten. . . .”

IV—JULIET AND ROMEO

NOWADAYS every one knows that only a few short moments (so few, so short) had dropped on the string where Death counted his rosary whose prayers are always granted—only some fleet rose-petal moments had dropped after Romeo had sipped that merciful merciless milk from the breast of the old mother, when Juliet crept to earth again as thoughtlessly as she had done that first time not many—ah, God, not very many—years before.

As she awakened, the chill humid dead-leaf odour of the place where she lay was the first thing she knew; then, as she yet held her eyes lightly closed, this sensation swiftly dropped a chain of thoughts in her mind to bind her to all earth again—but she cared not, for the chain was all gold as she was. In a little space she opened her eyes most gently, as if she was so tired of sleep; they met Romeo's dazzling stare fixed there for the last of earth. "True heart," she murmured.

He never answered her, and his face softened into a shadow of unhoping happiness and long expected wonder which she did not understand, feeling that it was meant for something within her which it was too blind to reach.

"Romeo," said Juliet.

"Juliet," said Romeo.

His courage became winged, "Am I, then, indeed dead?" he went on; "I knew you would be quite near to me, and that your greeting would be in the first light; but you have put off your new glory that you may not humble me; great soul, I know—but may you truly take me with you?"

She thought the vaporous scent of the place had fumed him in dreams. "Nay, we are not dead," she laughed; "but the opiate is spent, and you are come. Haste, make haste, lest one should hear us—nay, but I am a ghost to fright all such—and ghost-cold, truly—Come, there are many heavens we must undergo ere we enter that last one."

"Not dead" thrilled Romeo in a very rapture of forgetfulness. Suddenly he snatched her from the bier and clasped her to a helplessness more stringent than that of a winding sheet, whereupon there slipped utterly out of time a little space of kisses and of words which none will repeat who has whispered such for himself.

But through that chasm in time they both fell into eternity; for presently Romeo, who could not think for joy, caught with the drowner's instinct at a word he seemed to have heard once in an imperfect life. "Opiate," he muttered dazedly; "what of an opiate?"

"Love," cooed Juliet, soothingly, "'twas how I cheated them until you could come to me; was it not all in the monk's letter?"

"I know no letter," he answered slowly, like one waking, "save my sister's of your death." Then he knew, and, in a reeling sweat, moaned, "Ere you lived again, I had opened the door to go to you; O God; O God."

"What is it? How?" she sobbed, clinging to him in terror. "Poison," he said with a dull carelessness, showing her the half empty phial.

Loosening her hold, she answered with a calm smiling gladness, "Is that all? Give me some too, and then it will not matter." She held out her hand.

"Nay," he replied in a deep hushed voice, withdrawing the phial, "there shall be no sin in you; I know we must be together . . . there . . . afterward, so love will set you among the sinners without that; but you shall not suffer—I must have all the suffering to myself—I am greedy for suffering, now that I have learned its delight. . . . Let the burden be mine. . . ."

He put his arm round her neck, and, laying his hand on her brow, drew her head back upon his shoulder; then he loosened her lips with a kiss, and steadily poured the draught into her mouth—she swallowed the poison as he shed the empty phial.

Steadying her with his arm, he led her to the bier, going as gently as though they trod roses.

Lifting her, he laid her on the bier, and stretched himself beside her as softly as a benediction.

While she nestled to him she whispered, "Clasp me in your arms so that I cannot move, and I will grip your feet with mine so that you cannot move. . . ."

After a long time she said very drowsily, "My hands are so cold, Romeo; open your doublet and shirt and put my hands within to your bosom." He did as she asked, dead birds to his heart, although he was almost numb; then he drew her to him again as if he were a saint saving a tangible, visible soul.

The moon had set and it was dark, dark, dark, when she muttered in a palsy: "Romeo was I going to speak . . . ah, Romeo what did I say Romeo. . . . I cannot feel your mouth crush mine. . . . Is your mouth on mine be so sure that your mouth. . . ."

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GORDON BOTTOMLEY.