

## The Crimson Weaver

By R. Murray Gilchrist

MY Master and I had wandered from our track and lost ourselves on the side of a great "edge." It was a two-days' journey from the Valley of the Willow Brakes, and we had roamed aimlessly; eating at hollow-echoing inns where grey-haired hostesses ministered, and sleeping side by side through the dewless midsummer nights on beds of fresh-gathered heather.

Beyond a single-arched wall-less bridge that crossed a brown stream whose waters leaped straight from the upland, we reached the Domain of the Crimson Weaver. No sooner had we reached the keystone when a beldam, wrinkled as a walnut and bald as an egg, crept from a cabin of turf and osier and held out her hands in warning.

"Enter not the Domain of the Crimson Weaver!" she shrieked. "One I loved entered.—I am here to warn men. Behold, I was beautiful once!"

She tore her ragged smock apart and discovered the foulness of her bosom, where the heart pulsed behind a curtain of livid skin. My Master drew money from his wallet and scattered it on the ground.

"She is mad," he said. "The evil she hints cannot exist. There is no fiend."

So

So we passed on, but the bridge-keeper took no heed of the coins. For awhile we heard her bellowed sighs issuing from the openings of her den.

Strangely enough, the tenour of our talk changed from the moment that we left the bridge. He had been telling me of the Platonists, but when our feet pressed the sun-dried grass I was impelled to question him of love. It was the first time I had thought of the matter.

"How does passion first touch a man's life?" I asked, laying my hand on his arm.

His ruddy colour faded, he smiled wryly.

"You divine what passes in my brain," he replied. "I also had begun to meditate. . . . But I may not tell you. . . . In my boyhood—I was scarce older than you at the time—I loved the true paragon. 'Twere sacrilege to speak of the birth of passion. Let it suffice that ere I tasted of wedlock the woman died, and her death sealed for ever the door of that chamber of my heart. . . . Yet, if one might see therein, there is an altar crowned with ever-burning tapers and with wreaths of unwithering asphodels."

By this time we had reached the skirt of a yew-forest, traversed in every direction by narrow paths. The air was moist and heavy, but ever and anon a light wind touched the tree-tops and bowed them, so that the pollen sank in golden veils to the ground.

Everywhere we saw half-ruined fountains, satyrs vomiting senilely, nymphs emptying wine upon the lambent flames of dying phœnixes, creatures that were neither satyrs nor nymphs, nor gryphins, but grotesque adminglings of all, slain by one another, with water gushing from wounds in belly and thigh.

At length the path we had chosen terminated beside an oval mere that was surrounded by a colonnade of moss-grown arches.

arches. Huge pike quivered on the muddy bed, crayfish moved sluggishly amongst the weeds.

There was an island in the middle, where a leaden Diana, more compassionate than a crocodile, caressed Actæon's horns ere delivering him to his hounds. The huntress' head and shoulders were white with the excrement of a crowd of culvers that moved as if entangled in a snare.

Northwards an avenue rose for the space of a mile, to fall abruptly before an azure sky. For many years the yew-mast on the pathway had been undisturbed by human foot; it was covered with a crust of greenish lichen.

My Master pressed my fingers. "There is some evil in the air of this place," he said. "I am strong, but you—you may not endure. We will return."

"'Tis an enchanted country," I made answer, feverishly. "At the end of yonder avenue stands the palace of the sleeping maiden who awaits the kiss. Nay, since we have pierced the country thus far, let us not draw back. You are strong, Master—no evil can touch us."

So we fared to the place where the avenue sank, and then our eyes fell on the wondrous sight of a palace, lying in a concave pleasaunce, all treeless, but so bestarred with fainting flowers, that neither blade of grass nor grain of earth was visible.

Then came a rustling of wings above our heads, and looking skywards I saw flying towards the house a flock of culvers like unto those that had drawn themselves over Diana's head. The hindmost bird dropped its neck, and behold it gazed upon us with the face of a mannikin!

"They are charmed birds, made thus by the whim of the Princess," I said.

As the birds passed through the portals of a columbarry that  
crowned

crowned a western tower, their white wings beat against a silver bell that glistened there, and the whole valley was filled with music.

My Master trembled and crossed himself. "In the name of our Mother," he exclaimed, "let us return. I dare not trust your life here."

But a great door in front of the palace swung open, and a woman with a swaying walk came out to the terrace. She wore a robe of crimson worn into tatters at skirt-hem and shoulders. She had been forewarned of our presence, for her face turned instantly in our direction. She smiled subtly, and her smile died away into a most tempting sadness.

She caught up such remnants of her skirt as trailed behind, and strutted about with the gait of a peacock. As the sun touched the glossy fabric I saw eyes inwrought in deeper hue.

My Master still trembled, but he did not move, for the gaze of the woman was fixed upon him. His brows twisted and his white hair rose and stood erect, as if he viewed some unspeakable horror.

Stooping, with sidelong motions of the head, she approached; bringing with her the smell of such an incense as when amidst Eastern herbs burns the corse. . . . She was perfect of feature as the Diana, but her skin was deathly white and her lips fretted with pain.

She took no heed of me, but knelt at my Master's feet—a Magdalene before an impregnable priest.

"Prince and Lord, Tower of Chastity, hear!" she murmured. "For lack of love I perish. See my robe in tatters!"

He strove to avert his face, but his eyes still dwelt upon her. She half rose and shook nut-brown tresses over his knees.

Youth came back in a flood to my Master. His shrivelled skin

skin filled out ; the dying sunlight turned to gold the whiteness of his hair. He would have raised her had I not caught his hands. The anguish of foreboding made me cry :

“One forces roughly the door of your heart’s chamber. The wreaths wither, the tapers bend and fall.”

He grew old again. The Crimson Weaver turned to me.

“O marplot !” she said laughingly, “think not to vanquish me with folly. I am too powerful. Once that a man enter my domain he is mine.”

But I drew my Master away.

“’Tis I who am strong,” I whispered. “We will go hence at once. Surely we may find our way back to the bridge. The journey is easy.”

The woman, seeing that the remembrance of an old love was strong within him, sighed heavily, and returned to the palace. As she reached the doorway the valves opened, and I saw in a distant chamber beyond the hall an ivory loom with a golden stool.

My Master and I walked again on the track we had made in the yew-mast. But twilight was falling, and ere we could reach the pool of Diana all was in utter darkness ; so at the foot of a tree, where no anthill rose, we lay down and slept.

Dreams came to me—gorgeous visions from the romances of eld. Everywhere I sought vainly for a beloved. There was the Castle of the Ebony Dwarf, where a young queen reposed in the innermost casket of the seventh crystal cabinet ; there was the Chamber of Gloom, where Lenore danced, and where I groped for ages around columns of living flesh ; there was the White Minaret, where twenty-one princesses poised themselves on balls of burnished bronze ; there was Melisandra’s arbour, where the sacred toads crawled over the enchanted cloak.

Unrest fretted me : I woke in spiritual pain. Dawn was breaking—a bright yellow dawn, and the glades were full of vapours.

I turned to the place where my Master had lain. He was not there. I felt with my hands over his bed : it was key-cold. Terror of my loneliness overcame me, and I sat with covered face.

On the ground near my feet lay a broken riband, whercon was strung a heart of chrysolite. It enclosed a knot of ash-coloured hair—hair of the girl my Master had loved.

The mists gathered together and passed sunwards in one long many-cornered veil. When the last shred had been drawn into the great light, I gazed along the avenue, and saw the topmost bartizan of the Crimson Weaver's palace.

It was midday ere I dared start on my search. The culvers beat about my head. I walked in pain, as though giant spiders had woven about my body.

On the terrace strange beasts—dogs and pigs with human limbs, —tore ravenously at something that lay beside the balustrade. At sight of me they paused and lifted their snouts and bayed. Awhile afterwards the culvers rang the silver bell, and the monsters dispersed hurriedly amongst the drooping blossoms of the pleasaunce, and where they had swarmed I saw naught but a steaming sanguine pool.

I approached the house and the door fell open, admitting me to a chamber adorned with embellishments beyond the witchery of art. There I lifted my voice and cried eagerly : “My Master, my Master, where is my Master ?” The alcoves sent out a babble of echoes, blended together like a harp-cord on a dulcimer : “My Master, my Master, where is my Master ? For the love of Christ, where is my Master ?” The echo replied only, “Where is my Master ?”

Above,

Above, swung a globe of topaz, where a hundred suns gambolled. From its centre a convoluted horn, held by a crimson cord, sank lower and lower. It stayed before my lips and I blew therein, and heard the sweet voices of youth chant with one accord.

“Fall open, oh doors: fall open and show the way to the princess!”

Ere the last of the echoes had died a vista opened, and at the end of an alabaster gallery I saw the Crimson Weaver at her loom. She had doffed her tattered robe for one new and lustrous as freshly drawn blood. And marvellous as her beauty had seemed before, its wonder was now increased a hundredfold.

She came towards me with the same stately walk, but there was now a lightness in her demeanour that suggested the growth of wings.

Within arm's length she curtseyed, and curtseying showed me the firmness of her shoulders, the fulness of her breast. The sight brought no pleasure: my cracking tongue appealed in agony:

“My Master, where is my Master?”

She smiled happily. “Nay, do not trouble. He is not here. His soul talks with the culvers in the cote. He has forgotten you. In the night we supped, and I gave him of Nepenthe.”

“Where is my Master? Yesterday he told me of the shrine in his heart—of ever-fresh flowers—of a love dead yet living.”

Her eyebrows curved mirthfully.

“’Tis foolish boys' talk,” she said. “If you sought till the end of time you would never find him—unless I chose. Yet—if you buy of me—myself to name the price.”

I looked around hopelessly at the unimaginable riches of her home. All that I have is this Manor of the Willow Brakes—a moorish park, an ancient house where the thatch gapes and the casements swing loose.

“My

"My possessions are pitiable," I said, "but they are all yours. I give all to save him."

"Fool, fool!" she cried. "I have no need of gear. If I but raise my hand, all the riches of the world fall to me. 'Tis not what I wish for."

Into her eyes came such a glitter as the moon makes on the moist skin of a sleeping snake. The firmness of her lips relaxed; they grew child-like in their softness. The atmosphere became almost tangible: I could scarce breathe.

"What is it? All that I can do, if it be no sin."

"Come with me to my loom," she said, "and if you do the thing I desire you shall see him. There is no evil in't—in past times kings have sighed for the same."

So I followed slowly to the loom, before which she had seated herself, and watched her deftly passing crimson thread over crimson thread.

She was silent for a space, and in that space her beauty fascinated me, so that I was no longer master of myself.

"What you wish for I will give, even if it be life."

The loom ceased. "A kiss of the mouth, and you shall see him who passed in the night."

She clasped her arms about my neck and pressed my lips. For one moment heaven and earth ceased to be; but there was one paradise, where we were sole governours. . . .

Then she moved back and drew aside the web and showed me the head of my Master, and the bleeding heart whence a crimson cord unravelled into many threads.

"I wear men's lives," the woman said. "Life is necessary to me, or even I—who have existed from the beginning—must die. But yesterday I feared the end, and he came. His soul is not dead—'tis truth that it plays with my culvers."

I fell



I fell back.

"Another kiss," she said. "Unless I wish, there is no escape for you. Yet you may return to your home, though my power over you shall never wane. Once more—lip to lip."

I crouched against the wall like a terrified dog. She grew angry ; her eyes darted fire.

"A kiss," she cried, "for the penalty !"

My poor Master's head, ugly and cadaverous, glared from the loom. I could not move.

The Crimson Weaver lifted her skirt, uncovering feet shapen as those of a vulture. I fell prostrate. With her claws she fumbled about the flesh of my breast. Moving away she bade me pass from her sight. . . .

So, half-dead, I lie here at the Manor of the Willow Brakes, watching hour by hour the bloody clew ever unwinding from my heart and passing over the western hills to the Palace of the Siren.