

Spring Pictures

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I

It is raining. Big soft drops splash on the people's hands and cheeks; immense warm drops like melted stars. "Here are roses! Here are lilies! Here are violets!" caws the old hag in the gutter. But the lilies, bunched together in a frill of green, look more like faded cauliflowers. Up and down she drags the creaking barrow. A bad, sickly smell comes from it. Nobody wants to buy. You must walk in the middle of the road, for there is no room on the pavement. Every single shop brims over; every shop shows a tattered frill of soiled lace and dirty ribbon to charm and entice you. There are tables set out with toy cannons and soldiers and Zeppelins and photograph frames complete with ogling beauties. There are immense baskets of yellow straw hats piled up like pyramids of pastry, and strings of coloured boots and shoes so small that nobody could wear them. One shop is full of little squares of mackintosh, blue ones for girls and pink ones for boys with Bébé printed in the middle of each . . .

"Here are lilies! Here are roses! Here are pretty violets!" warbles the old hag, bumping into another barrow. But this barrow is still. It is heaped with lettuces. Its owner, a fat old woman, sprawls across, fast asleep, her nose in the lettuce roots . . . Who is ever going to buy anything here . . .? The sellers are women. They sit on little canvas stools, dreamy and vacant looking. Now and again one of them gets up and takes a feather duster, like a smoky torch, and flicks it over a thing or two and then sits down again. Even the old man in tangerine spectacles with a balloon of a belly, who turns the revolving stand of 'comic' postcards round and round cannot decide . . .

Suddenly, from the empty shop at the corner a piano strikes up, and a violin and flute join in. The windows of the shop are scrawled over — New Songs. First Floor. Entrance Free. But the windows of the first floor being open, nobody bothers to go up. They hang about grinning as the harsh voices float out into the warm rainy air. At the doorway there stands a lean man in a pair of burst carpet slippers. He has stuck a feather through the broken rim of his hat; with what an air he wears it! The feather is magnificent. It is gold epaulettes, frogged coat, white kid gloves, gilded cane. He swaggers under it and the voice rolls off his chest, rich and ample.

“Come up! Come up! Here are the new songs! Each singer is an artiste of European reputation. The orchestra is famous and second to none. You can stay as long as you like. It is the chance of a lifetime, and once missed never to return!” But nobody moves. Why should they? They know all about those girls — those famous artistes. One is dressed in cream cashmere and one in blue. Both have dark crimped hair and a pink rose pinned over the ear . . . They know all about the pianist’s button boots — the left foot — the pedal foot — burst over the bunion on his big toe. The violinist’s bitten nails, the long, far too long cuffs of the flute player — all these things are as old as the new songs.

For a long time the music goes on and the proud voice thunders. Then somebody calls down the stairs and the showman, still with his grand air, disappears. The voices cease. The piano, the violin and the flute dribble into quiet. Only the lace curtain gives a wavy sign of life from the first floor.

It is raining still; it is getting dusky . . . Here are roses! Here are lilies! Who will buy my violets? . . .

II.

Hope! You misery — you sentimental, faded female! Break your last string and have done with it. I shall go mad with your endless thrumming; my heart throbs to it and every little pulse beats in time. It is morning. I lie in the empty bed — the huge bed big as a field and as cold and unsheltered. Through the shutters the sunlight comes up from the river and flows over the ceiling in trembling waves. I hear from outside a hammer tapping, and far below in the house a door swings open and shuts. Is this my room? Are those my clothes folded over an armchair? Under the pillow, sign and symbol of a lonely woman, ticks my watch. The bell jangles. Ah! At last! I leap out of bed and run to the door. Play faster — faster — Hope!

“Your milk, Mademoiselle,” says the concierge, gazing at me severely.

“Ah, thank you,” I cry, gaily swinging the milk bottle. “No letters for me?”

“Nothing, mademoiselle.”

“But the postman — he has called already?”

“A long half-hour ago, mademoiselle.”

Shut the door. Stand in the little passage a moment. Listen — listen for her hated twanging. Coax her — court her — implore her to play just once that charming little thing for one string only. In vain.

III.

Across the river, on the narrow stone path that fringes the bank, a woman is walking. She came down the steps from the Quay, walking slowly, one hand on her hip. It is a beautiful evening; the sky is the colour of lilac and the river of violet leaves. There are big bright trees along the path full of trembling light, and the boats, dancing up and down, send heavy curls of foam rippling almost to her feet. Now she has stopped. Now she has turned suddenly. She is leaning up against a tree, her hands over her face; she is crying. And now she is walking up and down wringing her hands. Again she leans against the tree, her back against it, her head raised and her hands clasped as though she leaned against someone dear. Round her shoulders she wears a little grey shawl; she covers her face with the ends of it and rocks to and fro.

But one cannot cry for ever, so at last she becomes serious and quiet, patting her hair into place, smoothing her apron. She walks a step or two. No, too soon, too soon! Again her arms fly up — she runs back — again she is blotted against the tall tree. Squares of gold light show in the houses; the street lamps gleam through the new leaves; yellow fans of light follow the dancing boats. For a moment she is a blur against the tree, white, grey and black, melting into the stones and the shadows. And then she is gone.

(1915)