

THE COMPLETED BEATRICE.

We were at the New York theatre, sweet Ethel and I, with aunt Queen as chaperon. The orchestra had completed its truly wonderful performance; the curtain had risen and the drama had begun, but I paid no heed to the moving figures upon the stage, not even when Rose Terry joined the actors, for I was absorbed in the contemplation of an odd purple dress in the opposite box. The lady's face was hidden behind the velvet curtain, but I knew she could not be one of the Lathrop young ladies, for they were celebrated for their lack of taste in dress, and the garment I was studying was a marvel in artistic simplicity and grace. The color imparted a sense of luxury as the light and shadow shifted in the folds of the fabric by any slight stir of the wearer. Who could the lady be?

At last she raised the curtain timidly and meek eyes with a smile and recognition. Where had I met her years and years ago, or was she simply the lady of whom I had always dreamed? How familiar was her beautiful face.

"See, Ethel, there is Giovanna," I said suddenly. "And who is Giovanna?" she asked half jealously, half curiously, as she leveled her dainty opera glasses at the point I was watching. I did not answer and she took a long survey. "Why Ralph," she said, "there is positively no one in the Lathrop box." "Impossible," I commenced, but stopped. Perhaps after all Giovanna was visible only at my own angle for there she still sat smiling.

I was vaguely conscious that the actors came and went as in a dream, that Ethel watched me closely and that aunt Queen openly sighed. So intently did I watch my long lost love in her strange old purple dress that all things else in life grew dim and wavered. I was aroused suddenly by the thundering applause of the people, and was astonished to find that the play was over and that the crowd was rapidly melting away beneath the arches. "How strikingly like the Beatrice" I muttered as I picked up my hat. Ethel looked up at me with a cloud on her brow and a question in her eyes but said nothing. As we passed under the last arcade into the moonlit street, I was surprised it should look odd to me. "Doesn't the city look strange tonight?" I asked. "Just see how very wide the streets are and the buildings seem so new and small." There was an anxious silence from my friends but I went on unheeding. "Aunt Queen, was I ever in Venice—old, ancient, musty Venice?" "Ralph," she answered, seriously, "you are studying too hard at your art. You must stop it. What condition must your mind be in to conjure up all these vagaries?" "But you have not answered me. Was I ever in Venice?" "Well then—no."

I reached home in a restless, dissatisfied mood and decided to wander to the summer house and get my paint box and a new canvas which I had neglected to carry into the studio. It was such a delightful night that I gave up all idea of returning to the house and slipped into my hammock which hung temptingly in the mottled light and shade. Scarcely had I composed myself to dream when I caught sight of a figure far down the gravel walk which emitted a purple gleam even at that distance and dim in the moonlight. Breathlessly, I awaited my love as she came nearer. At last she stood before me white and panting. Then with a passionate movement she caught my hands. "Oh Nicoli," she cried, in a quaint old Italian, "I have found you at last," and, with a happy laugh, she nestled closer to me. Then for a moment life stood still and my soul went out to her's in a silent prayer; as, strong and restless, as an ocean tide.

Without a question I stopped and put my arm about her. It occurred to me indistinctly that my name was not Nicoli, that, so far as I know, I had never learned Italian but what of that? At last I was living my natural life, the rest was all a dream.

"Oh Nicoli," she exclaimed, breaking from me, "you must be at work on the portrait." "Yes, I will hurry," I answered in the same quaint Italian. "Take your place Giovanna." I reached for the new canvas which stood face to the wall on the floor and then somewhat to my own surprise began her portrait by the moonlight.

Minute after minute slipped by in perfect silence. I became so absorbed in my work that I did not notice when my model turned her face full upon me with a roguish smile and asked: "Dear heart. Have you forgotten the intermission?" "No" I answered, tossing my palette from me "come and see if I have." I held out my hands to her eagerly, but she laughingly evaded me and slipped behind my bench. "How much and how well you have done" she exclaimed in pleased surprise. "Oh the picture will be finished now." She clasped her hands and drew a deep long breath as though at last her only hope was about to be realized. Then I caught her. "What makes you so cold, Giovanna? Here take the hammock quilt and throw it over your shoulders. You are dressed too lightly." She accepted it with the protest "Why don't you remember I was always cold?" "Yes. How strange that I should forget anything about you. Throw it aside if you wish." And then we drifted far away in thought. Through the long vista of trees I could see in the moonlight a dim colonnade from which broad marble steps descended to the silver water, where gondolas were plying slowly back and forth between the city and its beautiful suburbs. Sometimes we would catch a strain of music from a passing boat—some old love serenade played on the mandolin. There was a rich perfume—unknown to me—borne to us by the soft musical wind whose low monotone we could hear in the great leaves of the palms and magnolias above us. Behind us I could hear the gush and tinkle of a fountain. Far off, by the dim colonnade, a night bird was singing in rapture. And my love and I were together after years of separation. What more could the beautiful world add to my happiness? Soon, however, I was obliged to renew my work, although reluctantly. After two hours work I closed my paint box with a snap—the sitting was over. "Well done Nicoli," she said, gazing intently at the portrait. "Now, I must go. Sleep through the bare, empty days; they have nothing for you. Good night." She paused a moment, then, with a wistful smile, passed down the path alone—for I remember that I was not to go with her and that her gondolier waited for her at the foot of the marble steps and would row her safely home.

And so the strange days passed in sleep's oblivion—the fair nights in life's best happiness. Oh tropical scene, with your myriad stars shining down from the faultless blue depth of the ether; with your whispering winds of ceaseless summer rippling over the face of the river; with your white quivering moonlight sitting through the great leaves of the palm trees which sway to each other and rustle. Oh perfect nights why were you brought to me, to the far northern prosaic New York? Coming only to leave behind you years of ceaseless regret. Oh love in the perfect shape of a woman radiantly beautiful speaking in tones that thrill through the soul with their musical cadence; showing tenderness in a trivial glance or a gesture—oh vanished love, why did you seek me out? Did you think that the joy while it lasted would be worth a long life of despair?