

Poetry.

SUNSET MUSINGS.

BY MRS. ANN S. STEPHENS.

Away from the town with its bustle and heat,
I thoughtfully linger alone in the shade;
Sweet musical murmurs where rivulets meet
Swell up to my ear from the evergreen glade.
I dreamily feel that bright waters are gushing
Through grasses and ferns that droop o'er their bed—
I know where the wild rose is dewily blushing—
For the waves take a tinge from its delicate red.

The meadows are gorgeons and rich with the sheen
Of lily-bells mottled with ruby and gold;
Their broad undulations of tremulous green
Away to the zenith are softly unrolled.
Far, far o'er the slopes where the sunset is shining,
The daisies and buttercups stoop to the breeze,
And wild honeysuckles are softly entwining
Their blossoms and leaves with the tamarisk trees.

The branches are garlanded richly with cherries,
That bend in their leafiness o'er my retreat;
The hazelnut hedges are ruddy with berries,
That ripen and grow where the clover is sweet.
The sunset its last golden lances is throwing
Aslant on the mountains, aslant on the hill;
The west in a deluge of crimson is glowing,
And glimpses of purple float over the rill.

With his plumage all wet with the dewy perfume,
Like a beautiful thought that must perish or burn,
A humming bird floats through the exquisite gloom
And buries himself in the wild trumpet's urn.
With gold on his breast, 'mid the clustering roses,
Forgetting the blossom he kissed in the sun,
The bee, overlaid with honey, reposes,
Nor reck of the mischief his roving has done.

The owl seeketh his hammock-like nest,
Where he dreamily swings in the hush of the hour;
The oxen are sluggishly kneeling at rest,
And the squirrel lies close in his walnut-tree bower.
A luminous glow in the westward is dying,
Like a wail of soft gossamer floating from sight;
On meadow and mountains the crimson is dying,
And stars tremble out on the beautiful night.

'T is darker, still darker,—a silence profound
Is brooding, like sleep, over upland and dale;
The wind is at rest, and I hear not a sound,
Save the whippoorwill plaintively making his wail;
Where the soft willow branches around him are sweeping,
With star-lighted dew on their motionless leaves,
That lonely old night-bird his vigil is keeping,
And tells the pale stars how he suffers and grieves.

'T is a moment for thought, when the fatherless seek
Unseals to the magic of nature in tears,
When springs of deep feeling overflow our control,
And moments concentrate the memory of years;
When sweet inspirations are vividly gushing
In tears to the heart and in thought to the brain,
And all that is good in our nature is rushing
In blessings and prayer back to heaven again.

Select Tale.

[From Mrs. Stephens' Illustrated New Monthly.]

A CARNIVAL ADVENTURE
IN MILAN.

The following story, though imbued with an air of romance which may seem to impart to the character of fiction, is nevertheless (in all its main points), strictly true. The incidents occurred nearly as they are here narrated, and the persons who took part in them lived and moved, and had their being, not many years ago, in the gay circles of continental society. It is, perhaps, scarcely necessary to mention that the names of those persons are not identical with the designation of the individuals who figure in the scenes here described.

It was Carnival time in Milan, evening was approaching, and the noisy gaiety of the day, had given place to a brief interval of comparative quietude. The more humble class of idlers, who had been perambulating the streets since early dawn, were wearily sauntering homeward; whilst the more fashionable votaries of pleasure, were regaling themselves in the *restaurants*, or preparing for the revels of the approaching night.

The Cathedral clock had just struck six, and in the second story of a house in the most elegant quarter of the city, a lady was seated at her toilette. This lady, a beautiful Italian brunette of about four and twenty, was familiarly chatting and laughing with a female attendant. Suddenly her merriment subsided, and she looked thoughtful and serious. Then, after a brief pause, she said, in a somewhat petulant tone:

"But, after all, this is really very annoying—it is most unreasonable to require me to make my *debut* thus unexpectedly to-night. It was fully understood that I should not appear until next Thursday. I am by no means well, and I feel myself getting quite hoarse. I would never have gone to the masquerade last night, had I been aware I was to appear so soon. It strikes me there is some

treachery at work. Possibly an artful design for cancelling my agreement, if I plead the excuse of illness. And here I have been studying my part six hours a day for the last month—it is too bad!"

After this outpouring of complaint, the Signora stopped short; she seemed as if apprehensive of having impaired the energy of her lungs by over-talking; for she presently began to try the power of her voice in a difficult *roulade*. The silence which succeeded this vocal exercise was, in a few minutes, again interrupted, and the lady, breaking into a fit of laughter, said to her maid:

"Zerbina! a droll idea has just crossed my mind. Suppose I were to run away, to leave Milan this instant, and set off to Naples without appearing at La Scala. What an excellent carnival joke that would be, and what a dilemma our poor *impresario* would be thrown into!"

"Signora!" replied the attendant, in a tone of respectful remonstrance, "no doubt the joke would be good enough, if it were practicable; but, unluckily, it is not so. You seem to forget that were you to attempt to leave Milan, the police would immediately be on your track, and you would be brought back again under an escort of *Sbirri*."

"Very true, Zerbina—there is no help for it; so, well or ill, I suppose I must sing *la Mascherata* to-night!"

So saying, the fair cantatrice rose from her chair, and standing before her looking-glass, proceeded to give the finishing touch to the arrangement of her hair. Whilst she was thus engaged, a ring at the bell announced the arrival of a visitor.

"Who can that be?" she exclaimed. "Recollect, Zerbina, I am not at home to any one—except—"

A look of intelligence from the waiting-maid denoted that she perfectly understood to whom the exception referred; so, without staying for further instructions, Zerbina hurried out of the room. She speedily re-appeared, saying:

"Signora, it is a lady—most elegantly dressed. A lady of rank, I am quite sure. I told her you could not see any one; but she will take no denial. She insists on speaking with you for a few moments in private, on a matter of great importance."

"What can she have to say? And at this time! but no matter—you must show her in, if, as you say, she will take no denial."

The stranger entered, and the Signora found herself in the presence of a lady of surpassing beauty, whose manner and deportment, though stamped with the dignity and elegance of high life, were somewhat *outré* and eccentric.

"Have I the honor to address Signora Antonina?" inquired she.

"That is my name, Madame," replied the *prima donna*, with a profound courtesy.

"You are, I believe, the new soprano from Venice, and you are to appear at La Scala to-night, in the opera of *La Mascherata*."

"Alas! yes, Madame," answered Antonina, with a sigh.

"Pardon my curiosity, if I enquire why you reply in so melancholy a tone?"

"Allow me, Madame, in my turn, to enquire to what I am indebted for the honor of exciting so much of your interest?"

"I will," resumed the lady, "briefly explain the object of my visit; and seating herself upon the sofa, she motioned Antonina to take her place beside her. "Signora, I have a strange communication to make, and a singular favour to solicit."

"You, forget, Madame," observed Antonina, reservedly, "that we are utter strangers to each other, and that I have not yet the honor of knowing even your name."

"Pardon me," said the stranger; "if you will grant me your attention for a few seconds, you will perceive my *incognita* is the first condition of the proposal I am about to make."

"*Incognita!*" exclaimed Antonina, surprised and disappointed; but, without heeding the interruption, her visitor thus proceeded:—

"I am a person of fortune and of noble birth; and, though not insensible to the advantages which rank and wealth confer, yet I feel that I should have been far happier in a more humble and totally different position of life. Fate has assigned to you and me our respective parts. You act yours on the mimic scene, and I play mine on the stage of real life. Now, it has occurred to me, that we might perhaps exchange characters, and play each other's part with mutual advantage. Possibly the station I occupy in society might be more adequately filled by you; and it may happen that I am better fitted than yourself for the career of public life which fortune has assigned to you.—You appear to be pre-eminently endowed with self-command, and your countenance indicates that easy pliancy of disposition which readily accommodates itself to circumstances. I, on the contrary, have been throughout life the victim of enthusiastic and ardent feeling. A slight imagination confi-

nally disposed me to break through the barriers of my rank, and to wander into the regions of romance and adventure. My passion for music and for the drama has inspired me with a strong desire to appear on the stage—a course to which my family connections naturally present obstacles.—Now, dear Signora Antonina, it is in your power to assist in gratifying my long-cherished wish, and thereby to confer on me a favour, for which, be assured, you shall not find me ungrateful. All I ask of you is, that you will allow me to play your part in the opera to-night."

"My part in the opera!" repeated Antonina, with amazement. "My part at La Scala! Do I understand you rightly, Madame?"

"Perfectly. My request is, that instead of making your *debut* to-night, you will afford me the opportunity of making mine."

Antonina, almost bewildered with astonishment, stammered out the words:—

"Pardon me, Madame—you are jesting, I presume—but I am at a loss to comprehend your motive."

"I am not jesting," answered the stranger emphatically, and with great excitement of manner.

"I am quite serious; though possibly you cannot understand the whim—the mania, if you choose to call it so—that possesses me. During the last seven years, I have been the reigning queen of fashion, in the gayest cities of Europe, where I have enjoyed every amusement which society can offer, and every triumph which vanity can desire. At length I have become weary alike of the gratifications and annoyances of my much envied position. But there is one pleasure—one triumph—to which my mind is yet a stranger, and for which my spirit yearns. I feel an ungovernable desire to share the excitement and the glory which attend a heroine of the operatic stage. You smile, Signora; but had I been born in a sphere less elevated than that which fate has assigned to me, the profession to which you belong would have been my vocation; and, what is more, I feel within the sort of energy which would have enabled me to subdue triumphantly the countless difficulties which attend such a career."

"Madame," coolly answered Antonina, after a short pause, "I fully understand and appreciate your enthusiasm for the art to which I myself am ardently devoted. But do not be offended if I observe, that enthusiasm, though a most desirable quality, is not the only one requisite to ensure success. In spite of all your earnest feelings, and enthusiastic confidence, I am disposed to think that the realization of your wish is utterly impossible."

"The impossibility rests solely on your refusal," exclaimed the stranger, with increased energy.—"Signora Antonina, if you will accede to my request, there is no sacrifice that I will not readily make to requite you. I declare to you, sincerely, that for two hours of your existence, I would willingly surrender all the advantages of mine."

"I have no inclination to avail myself of any such sacrifice," replied the signora proudly. "I am devoted to my profession, and am quite content to live and die a *prima donna*. But with regard to this evening's performance, to confess the truth, I am not particularly desirous of making my first courtesy to a Milanese audience to-night. I am somewhat indispensed, and my voice is not in such good condition as I could desire on the occasion of a *debut*. In short, I have several good reasons for wishing that some one else could be found to play the part for me."

"Then the point is settled," exclaimed the lady, exultingly rising from her seat.

Antonina smiled at the self-confidence of her visitor, who was, to all appearance, perfectly insensible to the difficulties of the task she was so anxious to undertake. The *prima donna* therefore expected to create no little embarrassment when she asked the stage-struck heroine whether she had bestowed any time on the study of the part she wished to appear in.

Without making any reply, the lady took her seat at the piano, and, after trying some passages in two or three different keys, sang with a clear, powerful voice, faultless intonation, and finished execution, an exceedingly difficult scena from *La Mascherata*.

"*Dio vero!*" exclaimed the astonished Antonina. "What an organ! what flexibility! what style! How did you learn to sing this difficult music in such perfection? For myself, I have been studying the part laboriously for months, and yet I have never succeeded in getting quite smoothly through the passage you have just performed with such perfect ease and accuracy."

"Well, you are now satisfied that I can sing," said the lady, rising from the piano with a self-complacent air; "and I do not hesitate to say that I can go through the whole part, from beginning to end, without a failure. You may rest assured

that the success of the opera will not be marred by my performance."

Antonina was silent, and could almost have persuaded herself that what she had heard was the mere illusion of a dream.

"During the last three weeks," continued the lady, "that is to say, ever since the *Mascherata* has been announced at La Scala, I have practised the principal part several times every day. The object of this unremitting assiduity was to realize my wish of appearing on the stage. In the practice of the trios and concerted pieces, I have been assisted by several of my friends, amateurs like myself. Even the choruses have not been left untried. In short, I have had the most laborious rehearsals under the semblance of musical *soirées*. The result is, I am thoroughly prepared to present myself to the public, if you will give me leave to be your substitute to-night. My scheme has not been arranged without forethought, and I have not chosen La Scala and the *Mascherata* for my *debut* without due consideration. This being my first visit to Milan, I am less known here than in any other capital of Europe, and, the *Mascherata* being a Carnival piece, I shall have the advantage of performing in a *demi-mask*. I shall be required to unmask only for a moment in the last scene; and it will be very extraordinary if, during that short moment, any one should recognize me. However, I will boldly run the risk, for few things are more *improbable* than the chance of my being discovered. As I am obliged to leave Milan in a day or two, I must resign the part to you on the second night of performance; and when we hear it remarked (as doubtless we shall) that Antonina sang much better on the second night than on the first, you and I may laugh in our sleeves at the simplicity of the manager and the public. In personal appearance, it is true, we are in some respects dissimilar; for instance, my hair is much lighter than yours,—I have blue, and you dark eyes; but such little differences are scarcely discernible on the stage. On the other hand, we are as nearly as possible of equal height, and our figures are similar; your dresses will fit me accurately enough, and as to complexion and features, stage illusion will doubtless sufficiently account for them."

Antonina, who was naturally of a playful disposition, and ever ready to enter into a joke, yielded to these arguments, and finally consented to gratify the wish of her eccentric visitor, whom she forthwith assisted to dress for the character.

Next morning nothing was talked of in Milan but the brilliant *debut* of Signora Antonina. Never had so fine a voice been heard within the walls of La Scala; never had so charming an actress trod the stage. Whilst her features were concealed by the mask, every note that flowed from her mellifluous voice elicited admiration and applause; but when, in the last scene, she raised her mask, and the charms of beauty were added to the attractions of talent, the whole audience rose with one accord, and a shower of bouquets descended at the feet of the *prima donna*. As soon as the curtain dropped, a crowd of gentlemen had rushed to her box; but to their great surprise and regret they were informed that she had suddenly quit the theatre. However, this modest withdrawal from public notice had served only to increase the enthusiasm of her admirers. Grenades had been performed beneath her windows until a late hour of the night; and not a few fierce wrangles had taken place in the cafés, among very young gentlemen who had fallen desperately in love at first sight with the new divinity.

Whilst the whole city was agitated by these exciting events, a scene of another kind was taking place in the boudoir of Signora Antonina. She was reclining on a sofa, weeping bitterly, and beside her sat the triumphant *debutante* of the preceding night, vainly endeavoring to console her.

"How inconsiderate was I," exclaimed Antonina, "to consent to this deception—and how cruel in you to tempt me to it! Your vanity and folly have ruined all my future prospects. I cannot now venture to appear in Milan. I should only be laughed at,—perhaps even hissed off the stage. But, wherever I go, the recollection of your triumph will pursue me, and paralyze all my efforts! Alas! what misfortune have I brought upon myself by my folly!"

Whilst she who was undesignedly the cause of all this distress, was vainly endeavoring to assuage it, Zerbina entered the room, having in her hand several letters, which she presented to her mistress. Antonina perused two or three of the missives, which contained declarations of love couched in the most impassioned terms;—then, throwing them into the lap of her companion, she said, in a tone of affected indifference, which ill-disguised her

that the success of the opera will not be marred by my performance."