

Literature, &c.

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THE POTTER'S DAUGHTER OF CORINTH.

Fair was her face as thine, her heart as warm, Whose antique story marks my simple page; Yet luckless youth was hers, and sorrowful old age.

BISHOP HEBER.

It was evening—an evening in one of the fairest cities of all Greece. With the blue sky shining down upon temples and towers whose very ruins breathed forth the poetry of architecture, and spoke dimly to after ages of the simple and classic grandeur of that ancient and time hallowed spot, the stately Corinth! But it is with the history of the human hearts which beat, and struggled, and broke within its marble walls, that we have alone to do; and that is much the same in all countries and ages, a sad and sacred volume scarcely to be read without tears.

In a mean house in the suburbs of the city sat a young girl, apparently lost in thought, but how beautiful! No wonder those Greeks, with such living models before them, should excel, as they have done every other nation in the world. But for the flashing eyes and quivering lip, might have been a profile for some highly finished statue—she was so cold and passionless to look upon, and so faultlessly classical in the unstudied arrangement of her dark hair and flowing garments, which one forgot to notice, were somewhat of the coarsest, and denoted the low caste of the wearer. But woman in her youthful beauty and pride, has an innate nobility which rises superior to the petty distinctions of rank and station. She was a splendid creature, that girl! and young, too. Why, then, that sad and thoughtful look? The beautiful are not always happy. She might have many worshippers, and yet the one be not among them. Alas for her, if it was so!

We have heard and read how by a strange process the master-pieces of Lysippus and Praxiteles actually wore upon their cheeks the warm and glowing tint of life; and in like manner a bright flush passed over the face of that statue-like girl at the sound of approaching footsteps, and its cold and rigid expressions disappeared.

“Father,” said she, rising up to meet him, and her voice was very sweet and gentle, “you are tired?”

“Not more so than usual,” replied the old man, gloomily.

“Nor yet ill?”

“No, no! why tease me with these idle questions, Corinth?”

“Because I know by your countenance that something must have happened to vex you, at least, if it is no worse. Why you have not smiled upon me yet, or called me your child! Father, it is not I who have grieved you, I hope?”

“That were impossible!” replied the old potter. “I ask only to see you happy. Corinth, you are happy?”

“Why should I not be, my father?”

“I know not, indeed, but you are?”

“Yes, always with you! And now you will tell me what you were angry about just now?”

“Nay, it matters not. You have heard the news, I suppose?”

“I—I have been within doors all day.”

“Then it has not reached you. I thought not by your manner;” and again the old man was silent.

“I wonder Myron has not been here to night,” said the girl at length.

“He is better engaged, doubtless, with his betrothed,” replied the potter, bitterly.

“Ah! how beautiful she is!” exclaimed Corinth.

The old man cast a long, eager, and searching look upon her as she said this; and so earnest and protracted was his scrutiny, that she smiled at length and asked playfully of what he could be thinking.

“I have been unjust,” said Dibutades; “but it is all past now, and you must be very kind to Myron if he should come, to make up for my harshness. After all, there was no harm done.”

“And why were you harsh to poor Myron, father?” asked the girl, coaxingly.

“Because—because I thought that you, and not this young Ione, should have been his betrothed; or why for years has he been like your very shadow? And I feared—pardon me my child!—that you might have felt this, too.”

“What, love unasked!” replied the maiden, with a proud smile upon her quivering lips. “Methinks, if it were so, I had deserved to suffer. It is true Myron is very dear to me, as it is only natural he should be, when we have known each other so long, even from our very childhood; but our affection was ever that of brother and sister, nothing more. Father, I should be sorry if you and he were not friends.”

“Fear not; it is sufficient that I have wronged him without cause.”

“And so you really thought,” said Corinth, hanging playfully over him, “that girls’ hearts were as brittle and as easily broken as your pottery?” and her merry laugh rang pleasantly in the old man’s ears, as she withdrew to her household duties.

That night, as he lay between sleeping and waking, the potter fancied he heard a strange wailing sound, as of one weeping and lamenting in bitterness of anguish. But after all it might have been a dream—we do dream strange things sometimes.

Perhaps Myron partly guessed from the manner of Dibutades what he thought, and resented for some days passed away without his making his appearance at that house which had been for years like a second home to him; it may be, however, that his betrothed took up much of his time. When he did come at length he was strangely embarrassed, and unlike himself. Corinth looked up on his entrance with her usual calm smile, and held out her hand.

“You have been absent from us a long time, Myron,” said she; “but I will not chide you, since you have, doubtless, been much more pleasantly engaged. And yet I have a woman’s curiosity to know all about your beautiful Ione.”

The young Greek answered frankly, for he was relieved by her manner, while the girl listened with a smile on her lips. Heaven only knows what wild and bitter thoughts were in her heart.

“And does she love you so very much?”

“I have dared to hope and believe so.”

“She has not confessed it, then. Ah! a maiden should never tell her love!”

“There was no need; it is a language, the signs of which are easily interpreted without the aid of words.”

“When one loves again,” said Corinth, half sadly, “but not else, and it is best so! But you have not told me all, Myron; come, confide in me as of old, and I may soothe, if I cannot help you.”

“Yes, it seems natural to me to tell you everything. Although you were much younger than myself, I remember that, from a child, I always came to you in all my little trials and troubles, and your kind voice never failed to comfort, although it could not always relieve me.”

“Ah! these were happy times!” said the girl. “But you have not yet told me what it is that grieves you?”

“It is an old tale,” answered the Greek; “the father of my gentle Ione is rich, and will not give her to me until I have realized a certain sum which it will require years of toil and industry to effect.”

“But you are young and she will be faithful.”

“It may be so; and yet it is hard to think that, even if all be well in the end, the glorious sunshine of our youth will have passed away never to return! Or, worse still, that, in the interval, death or change may render vain the labor of half a lifetime.”

“Nay, I will have no doubts,” said Corinth; “she will be yours, and sooner, perhaps, than you think for; or, if it be otherwise, hearts never grow old, or change, or, once loving, cease to love one another while life remains. I have no belief in the word faithfulness.”

That Greek girl’s was a sweet creed, although somewhat wild, and savoring slightly of idolatry; with few exceptions, it is that of the young to this day.

“But Ione is not like you,” replied her companion. “She is gentle, and easily persuaded as a child.”

“But the child when she loves becomes a woman! Myron, she will make all the better wife of it, especially to you, who do love your own way a little. I had almost forgot that I am keeping you from her now, but you will come again soon, and tell me how you prosper?”

The Greek promised, and, amidst all his fears for the future, left her with a light heart. Perhaps he had fancied to himself the stately beauty of the young Corinth bowed down by anguish and disappointment, had been haunted by a dim recollection of words spoken years ago, which should have found no utterance had they meant nothing, and feared to meet the passionate reproach of eyes that had, or he merely imagined it, so long sought his in truthful love. Alas! for man’s vanity, if it was thus, there is but one thing more powerful, and that is woman’s pride!

It was a strange caprice, but that night, when she retired to her own apartment, the girl sought the rude casket which contained her little dowry, and smiled as she clasped the bracelets of massive gold upon her slender wrists, and braided her dark hair with gems of no mean value. It might have been at her own radiant beauty, and yet that needed no meretricious ornament to increase its lustre; or she was recalling to mind, perchance, the night when she wore them last, and how many had said that the potter’s daughter of Corinth should have been a queen. And one—but no matter what his words were now, since he too, has forgotten them. Presently, as though the whim had passed away, Corinth unclasped the bracelets from her arms, kissed them passionately, for they were a dead mother’s legacy, and, replacing them in the casket, retired to rest.

The following morning she quitted the house soon after daybreak, and was absent until the evening, when she returned weary and disappointed.

“Six months,” murmured the girl, “it seems a long time to wait; but I cannot manage any better, or I could have wished the trial to be sooner over. It will pass quickly enough to them.”

Yes, half a year is soon over when we are happy; but it is weary work for the wretched to count its leaden-footed hours, and so say, in the morning, “Would to God it were night!” and, at night, “Would to God it were morning again!” No wonder they should deem it an age. But it passes away at length, and, on the very day of its expiration, we return to our legend and its young heroine, the potter’s daughter of Corinth, who sat, as usual, busy with her household tasks, looking a little tired, which well might be, for she had been out ever since the dawn, but with an expression of joy almost divine upon her brow and lip.

Presently the door opened quickly, and a fair, gentle-eyed girl stood lingeringly on the threshold as if half afraid to enter. Corinth turned pale and trembled too, but it was for a moment, and then she came forward smilingly,

and spoke to the young stranger in her kind, sweet voice—

“We should know one [another, I think,” said she. “You are the beloved of Myron, and I the daughter of Dibutades, and his earliest friend.”

“Yes, he often speaks of you; and many an hour have I sat and watched for you to go past, that I might see if you were really as beautiful as he described. But you looked kind and gentle too, and so forgive me if I sought you out in my troubles, having no one else in whom I dared confide.”

“My poor Ione! what troubles can you have, blessed with his affection?”

“Ah! that is the very thing. How I wish that he had loved you instead; he would have been much happier!” and the girl bowed down her head upon her hands and wept.

“This is a fearful jest!” said Corinth, wildly; but the pale face of Ione rebuked her for the thought, and, flinging her arms caressingly around her, they mingled their tears together.

“How kind of you to feel thus for one who is almost a stranger to you,” exclaimed the girl, at length; “but I knew, I was sure it would be so; he always said how good and compassionate you were.”

“But you have not yet told me what brought you here?” interrupted her companion, somewhat impatiently.

“What but my fears for him—for Myron, who is lost, if you aid me not. You alone can save him!”

“I know it,” replied Corinth, and have already done so.

“Ah! and he consents! He will yield me up? The gods be thanked! although I care not now how soon they take me to themselves!”

“What strange mystery is this?” asked her companion, with white and quivering lips. “You, so young, so loved, and yet wish for death?”

“Did I? It was a sinful thought. I knew not what I said. And yet it is better to die than live alone in the world!”

“Far better!” exclaimed Corinth, eagerly.

“But your mind wanders, my poor child! This great joy has been too much for you.”

“Yes, it is joy to know that I have emancipated him from the weary bondage that was consuming his young life hour by hour. That after a time he may be happy—he may even love again. And yet the triumph, after all, was not wholly mine. Last night, when they thought I slept, I stole out of the house and went, guided by the lamp which may be seen of late burning, even until the dawn, to Myron’s workshop. You think, perhaps, it was scarcely maidenly; but was it not for me he toiled thus early and late? And yet I trembled, and half feared to enter. But I took courage, at last, and, wondering that he never raised his head, crept up to him, and pressed my lips timidly to his faded brow. I not dared to do this but that I thought he slept, and how surprised and pleased he would feel to be awakened thus. Surely, Corinth, his untiring devotion deserved this slight reward?”

“Go on,” said her companion, in a low voice. “He did not chide thee, doubtless; neither will I.”

“No, for he was pale and cold as marble, and never stirred; he had fainted away through exhaustion, and, as I hung frantically over him, the whole truth burst at once upon my mind—he was literally dying inch by inch for me. It was a vain hope to think that my father would abate one iota of his demands; ever since I can remember he has made it his proudest boast never to go back of his word. But one way remained by which he might be saved, and, though my own happiness was to be the sacrifice, I did not shrink from it. And yet I was but a bad pleader, for I clung to him, even while I supplicated upon my knees that he would yield me up; and while my lips prayed him to renounce and forget me, my heart drank in with a wild and selfish joy every burning and passionate vow. Perhaps he saw the struggle, for he only smiled, called me a fond, foolish child, who knew not what I asked; and, after seeing me to my home, went back, with his thin, hollow cheeks, and feeble step, to toil again, as he had done for months, until dawn. And then, in my despair, I remembered you, and came hither to ask your aid, for I well know the value he always set upon your advice.”

“And now that all is over, can you still rejoice?”

“Ah, yes! for he will rest to night for the first time for months, and soon be quite well again, for they tell me it is rest only that he wants.”

“But yourself, Ione?”

“No matter for me,” said the girl; “let us think only of him!” And this was woman’s love in those ancient times. It is less pure—less self-sacrificing, even to this day! We think not.

“May I come and see you sometimes?” asked Ione, caressingly, as they parted, at length. “It would be such happiness when we are quite alone if I might talk occasionally of him whom we both love.”

“Ah! who told you that girl?” exclaimed her companion wildly.

“Nay, is it not so? True, he was not your betrothed; but there are many kinds of affection.”

“You are right, my sweet Ione!” said Corinth, kissing her fondly. “My love for Myron is not like yours.”

The young girl turned away with a smile upon her white lips; but she was no heroine, and when she reached home she flung herself down upon the ground, and wept in passionate abandonment of grief, while the daughter of Dibutades returned quietly to her work.

“It is well,” murmured she, “Ione is worthy of him.”

For the first time for many weeks, Myron came that night, as of old. But the potter was still busy in his workshop, and Corinth from home; her return, however, being momentarily expected, he sat down to await it, and, weary, and exhausted, fell fast asleep. Although pale, and worn, and hollow-eyed with much toil, his features, even in slumber, had a bright and happy expression, and once or twice he smiled as if his dreams were pleasant ones. It was long since he had slept thus soundly; even Corinth’s return failed to awaken him, or the burning tears which fell upon his brow as she bent over him. Was she weeping to see how changed he had become? Or did the vision of poor Ione and her lover, in his lonely workshop, come sadly back to her heart?

As the young Greek slumbered thus, his fine and strongly marked profile was distinctly reflected on the wall of the apartment, and Corinth perceiving it, sketched the outline in charcoal with a rapid hand; and then, turning laughingly to her father who had just entered, asked him if it were not an excellent likeness. Myron awoke at the sound of her glad voice.

“One moment,” exclaimed she; “there—have I not caught the curve of that proud lip?”

“It is admirable!” said Dibutades; and even Myron smiled at this rude sketch of himself, for he could smile now. Some unknown friend had sent him the very sum required by the iron-hearted father of his Ione, who had now no longer any excuse for delaying their nuptials, or the girl for concealing her deep and passionate tenderness. Perhaps they were all the happier for the brief cloud which had darkened over the sunshine of their lives, since it had taught them how dear they were to each other.

“And can you form no guess as to whom you are indebted for this great kindness?” asked Dibutades.

“None; I believe it to be the act of the gods themselves, in pity to the prayers and tears of my poor Ione.”

“Such things have been,” replied the old potter, with serious earnestness. But his daughter seemed less superstitious, for she smiled with a sad scorn, and spoke on other topics.

But the young Ione, what pen can hope to do justice to her feelings when she found that the sacrifice would not be demanded of her? That she was free to love him again, and more than all to let him see that she did, and had only to nurse him back to health.—And yet, had need been, she would have died for him without a murmur, nor her fate been a singular one, for it is, with some few rare exceptions, the common doom of womanhood.

In the innocent joy of her heart she went early the following morning to tell the good news to her kind friend Corinth, and ask for an explanation of much that had puzzled her in their last interview; but the door was fastened, and, as her gentle request for admittance failed to elicit any reply, she concluded she must be out. Such, however, was not the case; the daughter of Dibutades was too busy to be disturbed, and would not, perhaps that every one should see the nature of her occupation. She was moulding a figure in clay from the rude sketch before her, and it was wonderful the genius she displayed in that strange employment. She had thus sat ever since day-break; but she put it away when evening came, and the following morning worked at it again, until the statue was finished, she carried it smilingly to her father, who praised her ingenuity, and put it in his furnace to harden.

The wedding passed away as most weddings do even to this day. The bride, in her love, half wondering what she could have done to merit so much happiness, and vowing, in the depths of her young heart, to repay it with a life’s devotion; the bridegroom, proud less of himself than her; the maidens, half envious, half hopeful, that their own turn would come soon; and the aged, living as it were over again their own youthful days, with the loved and lost restored by the tragic power of memory and association. But the fairest and brightest there, aye, even than the bride herself, in all the grace of her winning and child-like beauty, was the potter’s daughter of Corinth. And it was strange, too; for her night black hair was unrelieved by a single ornament, and her white arms rich only in their own faultless symmetry while it was usual on such occasions to display those treasures which were the pride of the maidens of Greece. Dibutades spoke of it to his child.

“Nay, my father,” replied Corinth gently, “have you not often said that you liked me best without them?”

“But at such a time as this you should have dressed yourself like the rest.”

“Ah! I shall never be as other girls,” returned Corinth, half sadly. And then she added in a gayer tone, “You know I was always wilful, and loved to have a little of my own way.”

The father’s heart swelled with a fond pride as she turned away from him, and, with a light step and lighter laughter, went bounding down the dance. It might have been observed that she never wore her ornaments again.

That Greek bridal—it was a scene for young artists to dream of and muse upon, but which they may not hope to realize; a vision from the land of the beautiful that fades before the cold touch of mortal inspiration. What glorious faces there were among these children of toil! What flashing eyes and noble forms, such as we can but fancy now! What twinklings of white feet when they danced! And how sweet were the glad voices which rose up in blessings for the happy pair! The end, however, was much the same as it is to this day, for many, even among those who had seemed the merriest there went home very sad, and dreamt of what might have been!