

PAINTED MUSIC

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A TRIFLE of fifty years ago, in the heart of the continent, a small frontier fort stood lonely at the mouth of a muddy river which emptied into a fresh-water sea. In half a century the settlement so begun has spread and sprawled over many square miles of dead-flat prairie, and grown into a city of three million souls. The name of the city matters not; it has gone forth to the ends of the earth. The easiest way to reach a given point in that city is to travel by an iron road which stalks with mighty clamour above the roofs, and through and across and around the many long, straight streets.

Looking from the car window, as I travel, lightning-drawn, this is what I see.

An unending jumble of gravelled and tarred roofs, violently flung together in all relations of rectilinear design, square, polyhedron, rhomboid, lozenge, parallelogram,—grimy brick wall surfaces beneath—endless successions of three-storey tenements with iron fire-escapes—the back verandahs displaying washing hung on lines to dry or simple domestic scenes—unnumbered factories of gaunt utilitarian plan with chimneys—soot ground into them—harsh angles of ungainly complexes of building,—long fleeting perspectives of uniform streets, the sides meeting at the vanishing point, and, wherever possible, in every backyard, and corner, and alley, litter of dirty paper, dust, rubbish, refuse, defilement.

The general air of squalor is intensified by the torn, defaced rags of posters streaming from countless dead walls, and set off by the glare of fresh painted sign-boards in primary colours shrieking the merits of brands of clothing, or food, or drink, or tobacco.

It is an unlovely, unordered, discoloured world which is revealed from the car window, continually the same, unvaried in its dismal squalor, though flashing every moment upon the eye some new combination of sordidness. Ants and bees know how to build their cities more orderly and more beautiful. Perhaps the fact that it enables three million men, women and children to keep up a frail and feverish being justifies the existence of this splay, spreading wen of a town.

Such offence to the eye had for complement a like offence to the ear,—a clanking, roaring, battering avalanche of dissonance, in which the levin-drawn car moved, as in a moving cloud. For a stricken hour this double purgatory endured, and then I alighted at the Wonder House.

Like the city to which it ministers, this House is huge. In Italy, it would be called a palace. Once past the threshold, pacing the lofty broad corridors, and the countless, spacious rooms, I felt the grateful cessation of all discords like balm upon a fevered wound. Here silence reigned, and order, the handmaids of beauty. Voices were lowered, footfalls were discreet; for chamber after chamber was stored with what is rare, or curious, or lovely in colour and in form. In each apartment are canvasses, or marbles, or bronzes, each fashioned to accord with some craftsman's dream of beauty. Eager minds had seized upon elements existing even in such a sordid chaos as I had just escaped from, and blended them into forms of everduring joy.

A gallery of pictures is like a mountain range. Why try to understand, or even see, them all, when a single example may suffice for the study of a life-time?

After wandering aimlessly for an hour from treasure-chamber to treasure-chamber, dazzled, delighted, but overwhelmed, I sat down, as it was written that I should, at one end of a broad settee in the centre of a large room, with no company but the pictures on the four walls. Sitting quiet, in a wise passiveness, as it was ordained, I noticed a small canvass of the Dutch School hanging on the wall opposite to me and a little to the left. It was placed in exactly the right light. My eye was caught and held by it.

The subject was merely a young Dutch girl at her music lesson. She sits with her double-necked theorbo in position across her knees, and her music spread open on a small reading-stand on the table before her. Her dress is of shimmering yellow silk with greenish shades, and she wears a dark crimson velvet jacket with a broad border of white fur. White fur also edges the short, loose sleeves. Her face seen in profile is virginal, docile, unawakened. Her yellow hair is brushed back from the temples and arranged in tight little curls at the back of the head. Round her neck is a close circlet of pearls, making the firm white flesh more white. She is intent upon her music, her eyes are fixed upon her notes while her deft, slender fingers deal with the many strings. Her lips are slightly parted in the effort to read the music and make her instrument conform to her will.

Standing in the background, like a shadow blending with the

shadows, is the hatted, cravatted, long-haired music master beating time with his fiddle-bow. Curled up blissfully on a velvet chair, the young musician's pet spaniel is sound asleep.

I looked long, getting up from time to time to consider details, and returning to my settee to view the picture as a whole. The thoughts Gerard van Terburg puts into a picture are not soon exhausted.

Once as I returned to my seat, my eye was caught by a large canvass on the opposite wall, depicting the same subject, a young girl playing on a lute. Strangely enough, by keeping my seat, but shifting a little to look over my left shoulder, I discovered that the light was right for this picture also. That was Dutch; this was Italian, the work of one Felice del Riccio, *pictor ignotus*, dating a century earlier and instinct with the freedom and vigour of the Renaissance.

It is a half length portrait of such physical perfection as is seen only on Italian canvasses. The fine linens of the lovely lutanist have rippled to her waist, leaving her superb young torso shining like the dawn, but the huge hollow shell of the lute screens her almost like her robes. Her arms are like white scarves wreathed about her envied instrument. She has come far past the tiro stage, and has attained to mastery. With her head tilted back, face foreshortened, and eyes turned to heaven, like Saint Cecilia, she is pouring out her soul in an ecstasy of song, while, without conscious volition, her fingers deftly ply the strings. Of all save that music she is unconscious. Prudently she has removed her five precious rings, and laid them in precise order on the red velvet stand lest they should trammel even lightly the action of those supple perfect fingers; but of them she is not thinking. Nor is she mindful of the close circlet of orient pearls, clear and cool, which set off the warmth and rondure of her neck. The maid has forgotten her ornaments, her clear disarray, her companions, her surroundings, in the rapture of creative art, at once hearing, producing and enjoying harmony.

She is not alone. Above her left shoulder is a flautist, and, at her right, with her back to the observer, is a woman playing the organ. She has turned her head to the beautiful lute-player in wonder and unspoken praise. At the singer's left, under the neck of the lute is a singing boy, who may be Eros himself. The three heads are subordinated to the fair singer in the centre, and make as it were a living frame for her. And all the beauty of form and colour is but a symbol of the charm of tuneful voices blending in sweet accord with well-played instruments of music.

"Heard melodies are sweet," says the poet, "but those unheard

are sweeter." As I studied these two pictures of music and music-makers, I could almost be persuaded that these melodies *were* heard. The chamber was filling with gray shadow, and also, it seemed, with faint far-away echoes of that painted concert, across the centuries. Italian passion poured from the full throat of the Titian beauty, while her lute-strings trilled their support. The clear treble of young Eros rang true with the silver notes of the woman-singer; the flautist's *obbligato* throbbed around them both, while all were borne smoothly along on the full deep tide of organ melody.

I looked and listened, listened and looked. The eye was not filled with seeing, nor the ear with hearing. That concert had been rehearsed and arranged for me in that place. I had been guided at that hour into that room to enjoy it, and suddenly I knew why.

Last night I heard *Faust* at Ravinia.