

## INCURABLE

MIST hung gray along the river, and upon the fields. From the cottage, little and lonely, shone candlelight, that looked sad to the wanderer without in the autumnal dark: he turned and faced the fields, and the dim river. And the music, the triumphant music, the rich voices of the violin, came sounding down the garden from the cottage. His mood, his mind, were those of the Flemish poet, who murmurs in sighing verse:

*Et je suis dans la nuit. . . . Oh! c'est si bon la nuit!  
Ne rien faire . . . se taire . . . et bercer son ennui,  
Au rythme agonisant de lointaine musique. . . .*

For this was the last evening of his life: he felt sure of that: and, foolish martyr to his own weakness that he was, he fell to meditating upon the sad scenery and circumstance of his death. The gray mist upon river and field, the acrid odours of autumn flowers in the garden, the solitariness of melancholy twilight, these were right and fitting: but there, in the cottage behind him, was his best friend, speaking with him through music, giving him his *Ave atque Vale* upon the violin. A choice incident! And instinctively he began to find phrases for it, plangent, mournful, suitable to the elegiac sonnet. True, his friend was not all that he could have wished: an excellent musician of common sense, well dressed and healthy, with nothing of Chopin about him, nothing of Paganini. But the sonnet need not mention the musician, only his music. So he looked at the dim river and the misty fields, and thought of long, alliterative, melancholy words. Immemorial, irrevocable, visionary, marmoreal. . . .

The *Lyceum* was responsible for this. That classic journal, reviewing his last book of verses, had told him that though he should vivisection his soul in public for evermore, he would find there nothing worth revealing, and nothing to compensate the spectators for their painful and pitying emotions. He had thought it a clumsy sarcasm, ponderous no less than rude: but he could not deny its truth. Tenderly opening his book, he lighted upon these lines:

Ah, day by swift malignant day,  
Life vanishes in vanity:  
Whilst I, life's phantom victim, play  
The music of my misery.  
Draw near, ah dear delaying Death!  
Draw near, and silence my sad breath,

The lines touched him ; yet he could not think them a valuable utterance : nor did he discover much fine gold in his sonnet, which began :

Along each melancholy London street,  
Beneath the heartless stars, the indifferent moon,  
I walk with sorrow, and I know that soon  
Despair and I will walk with friendly feet.

It was good, but Shakespeare and Keats, little as he could comprehend why, had done better. He sat in his Temple chambers, nursing these dreary cogitations, for many hours of an October day, until the musician came to interrupt him : and to the violinist the versifier confessed.

‘I am just thirty,’ he began, ‘and quite useless. I have a good education, and a little money. I must do something : and poetry is what I want to do. I have published three volumes, and they are entirely futile. They are not even bad enough to be interesting. I have not written one verse that any one can remember. I have tried a great many styles, and I cannot write anything really good and fine in any one of them.’ He turned over the leaves with a hasty and irritated hand. ‘There, for instance ! This is an attempt at the sensuous love-lyric : listen !

Sometimes, in very joy of shame,  
Our flesh becomes one living flame :  
And she and I  
Are no more separate, but the same.

Ardour and agony unite ;  
Desire, delirium, delight :  
And I and she  
Faint in the fierce and fevered night.

Her body music is : and ah,  
The accords of lute and viola,  
When she and I  
Play on live limbs love’s opera !

It’s a lie, of course : but even if it were true, could any one care to read it ? Then why should I want to write it ? And why can’t I write better ? I know what imagination is, and poetry, and all the rest of it. I go on contemplating my own emotions, or inventing them, and nothing comes of it but this. And yet I’m not a perfect fool.’ ‘That,’ said the musician, ‘is true, though it is not your fault : but you soon will

will be, if you go on maundering like this by yourself. Come down to my cottage by the river, and invent a new profession.' And they went.

But the country is dangerous to persons of weak mind, who examine much the state of their emotions; they indulge there in delicious luxuries of introspection. The unhappy poet brooded upon his futility, with occasional desperate efforts to write something like the *Ode to Duty* or the *Scholar Gypsy*: dust and ashes! dust and ashes! Suddenly the horror of a long life spent in following the will-o'-the-wisp, or in questing for Sangrails and Eldorados, fell upon him: he refused to become an elderly mooncalf. The river haunted him with its facilities for death, and he regretted that there were no water-lilies on it: still, it was cold and swift and deep, overhung by alders, and edged by whispering reeds. Why not? He was of no use: if he went out to the colonies, or upon the stock exchange, he would continue to write quantities of average and uninteresting verse. It was his destiny: and the word pleased him. There was a certain distinction in having a destiny, and in defeating it by death. He had but a listless care for life, few ties that he would grieve to break, no prospects and ambitions within his reach. Upon this fourth evening, then, he went down to the end of the garden, and looked towards the river.

The sonnet was done at last, and he smiled to find himself admiring it. In all honesty, he fancied that death has inspired him well. He had read, surely he had read, worse sestets.

'I shall not hear what any morrow saith :  
I only hear this my last twilight say  
*Cease thee from sighing and from bitter breath,*  
*For all thy life with autumn mist is gray!*  
Dirged by loud music, down to silent death  
I pass, and on the waters pass away.'

A pity that it should be lost: but to leave it upon the bank would be almost an affectation. Besides, there was pathos in dying with his best verses upon his lips: verses that only he and the twilight should hear. Night fell fast and very gloomy, with scarce a star. Leaning upon the gate, he tried to remember the names of modern poets who have killed themselves: Chatterton, Gérard de Nerval. They, at least, could write poetry, and their failure was not in art. Yet he could live his poetry, as Milton and Carlyle, he thought, had recommended: live it by dying, because he could not write it. 'What Cato did and Addison approved' had its poetical side: and no one without a passion for poetry

would die in despair at failure in it. The violin sent dancing into the night an exhilarating courtly measure of Rameau: 'The Dance of Death!' said the poet, and was promptly ashamed of so obvious and hackneyed a sentiment. At the same time, there was something strange and rare in drowning yourself by night to the dance-music of your unconscious friend.

The bitter smell of aster and chrysanthemum was heavy on the air; 'balms and rich spices for the sad year's death,' as he had once written: and he fancied, though he could not be sure, that he caught a bat's thin cry. The 'pathetic fallacy' was extremely strong upon him, and he pitied himself greatly. To die so futile and so young! A minor Hamlet with Ophelia's death! And at that, his mind turned to Shakespeare, and to a famous modern picture, and to the Lady of Shalott. He imagined himself floating down and down to some mystical mediæval city, its torchlights flashing across his white face. But for that, he should be dressed differently; in something Florentine perhaps: certainly not in a comfortable smoking-coat by a London tailor. And at that, he was reminded that a last cigarette would not be out of place: he lighted one, and presently fell to wondering whether he was mad or no. He thought not: he was sane enough to know that he would never write great poetry, and to die sooner than waste life in the misery of vain efforts. The last wreath of smoke gone upon the night, not without a comparison between the wreath and himself, he opened the garden gate, and walked gently down the little field, at the end of which ran the river. He went through the long grass, heavy with dew, looking up at the starless sky, and into the impenetrable darkness. Of a sudden, with the most vivid surprise of his life, he fell forward, with a flashing sensation of icy water bubbling round his face, blinding and choking him; of being swirled and carried along; of river weeds clinging round his head; of living in a series of glimpses and visions. Mechanically striking out across stream, he reached the bank, steadied and rested himself for an instant by the branch of an overhanging alder, then climbed ashore. There he lay and shivered; then, despite the cold, tingled with shame, and blushed; then laughed; lastly, got up and shouted. The shout rose discordantly above the musician's harmonies, and he heard some one call his name. 'It's that moon-struck poet of mine,' said he, and went down to the gate. 'Is that you?' he cried, 'and where are you?' And out of the darkness beyond came the confused and feeble answer—'I—fell into the river—and I'm—on the wrong side.' The practical man  
wasted

wasted no words, but made for the boathouse, where he kept his punt : and in a few minutes the shivering poet dimly descried his rescuer in mid-stream. The lumbering craft grounded, and the drowned man, with stiff and awkward movement, got himself on board. 'What do you mean,' said the musician, 'by making me play Charon on this ghostly river at such an hour?' 'I was—thinking of things,' said the poet, 'and it was pitch dark—and I fell in.' They landed ; and the dewy field, the autumnal garden, the rich night air, seemed to be mocking him. His teeth chattered, and he shook, and still he mumbled bits of verse. Said the musician, as they entered the little cottage : 'The first thing for you to do is to take off those things, and have hot drinks in bed, like Mr. Pickwick.' Said the doomed man, quaking like an aspen : 'Yes, but I must write out a sonnet first, before I forget it.' He did.

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