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A MIDNIGHT FANTASY

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Thomas Bailey Aldrich

A Midnight Fantasy

I

It was close upon eleven o'clock when I stepped out of the rear vestibule of the Boston Theatre, and, passing through the narrow court that leads to West Street, struck across the Common diagonally. Indeed, as I set foot on the Tremont Street mall, I heard the Old South drowsily sounding the hour.

It was a tranquil June night, with no moon, but clusters of sensitive stars that seemed to shiver with cold as the wind swept by them; for perhaps there was a swift current of air up there in the zenith. However, not a leaf stirred on the Common; the foliage hung black and massive, as if cut in bronze; even the gaslights appeared to be infected by the prevailing calm, burning steadily behind their glass screens and turning the neighboring leaves into the tenderest emerald. Here and there, in the sombre row of houses stretching along Beacon Street, an illuminated window gilded a few square feet of darkness; and now and then a footfall sounded on a distant pavement. The pulse of the city throbbed languidly.

The lights far and near, the fantastic shadows of the elms and maples, the gathering dew, the elusive odor of new grass, and that peculiar hush which belongs only to midnight—as if Time had paused in his flight and were holding his breath—gave to the place, so familiar to me by day, an air of indescribable strangeness and remoteness. The vast, deserted park had lost all its wonted outlines; I walked doubtfully on the flagstones which I had many a time helped to wear smooth; I seemed to be wandering in some lonely unknown garden across the seas—in that old garden in Verona where Shakespeare's ill-starred lovers met and parted. The white granite façade over yonder—the Somerset Club—might well have been the house of Capulet: there was the clambering vine reaching up like a pliant silken ladder; there, near by, was the low-hung balcony, wanting only the slight girlish figure—immortal shape of fire and dew!—to make the illusion perfect.

I do not know what suggested it; perhaps it was something in the play I had just witnessed—it is not always easy to put one's finger on the invisible electric thread that runs from thought to thought—but as I sauntered on I fell to thinking of the ill-assorted marriages I had known. Suddenly there hurried along the gravelled path which crossed mine obliquely a half-indistinguishable throng of pathetic men and women: two by two they filed before me, each becoming startlingly distinct for an instant as they passed—some with tears, some with hollow smiles, and some with firm-set lips, bearing their fetters with them. There was little Alice chained to old Bowlsby; there was Lucille, “a daughter of the gods, divinely tall,” linked forever to the dwarf Perrywinkle; there was my friend Porphyro, the poet, with his delicate genius shrivelled in the glare of the youngest Miss Lucifer's eyes; there they were, Beauty and the Beast, Pride and Humility, Bluebeard and Fatima, Prose and Poetry, Riches and Poverty, Youth and Crabbed Age— Oh, sorrowful procession! All so wretched, when perhaps all might have been so happy if they had only paired differently! I halted a moment to let the weird shapes drift by. As the last of the train melted into the darkness, my vagabond fancy went wandering back to the theatre and the play I had seen—Romeo and Juliet. Taking a lighter tint, but still of the same sober color, my reflections continued.

What a different kind of woman Juliet would have been if she had not fallen in love with Romeo, but had bestowed her affection on some thoughtful and stately signior—on one of the Delia Scalas, for example! What Juliet needed was a firm and gentle hand to tame her high spirit without breaking a pinion. She was a little too—vivacious, you might say—“gushing” would perhaps be the word if you were speaking of a modern maiden with so exuberant a disposition as Juliet's. She was too romantic, too blossomy, too impetuous, too wilful; old Capulet had brought her up injudiciously,

and Lady Capulet was a nonentity. Yet in spite of faults of training and some slight inherent flaws of character, Juliet was a superb creature; there was a fascinating dash in her frankness; her modesty and daring were as happy rhymes as ever touched lips in a love-poem. But her impulses required curbing; her heart made too many beats to the minute. It was an evil destiny that flung in the path of so rich and passionate a nature a fire-brand like Romeo. Even if no family feud had existed, the match would not have been a wise one. As it was, the well-known result was inevitable. What could come of it but clandestine meetings, secret marriage, flight, despair, poison, and the Tomb of the Capulets? I had left the park behind, by this, and had entered a thoroughfare where the street-lamps were closer together; but the gloom of the trees seemed still to be overhanging me. The fact is, the tragedy had laid a black finger on my imagination. I wished that the play had ended a trifle more cheerfully. I wished—possibly because I see enough tragedy all around me without going to the theatre for it, or possibly it was because the lady who enacted the leading part was a remarkably clean-cut little person, with a golden sweep of eyelashes—I wished that Juliet could have had a more comfortable time of it. Instead of a yawning sepulchre, with Romeo and Juliet dying in the middle foreground, and that luckless young Paris stretched out on the left, spitted like a spring-chicken with Montague's rapier, and Friar Laurence, with a dark lantern, groping about under the melancholy yews—in place of all this costly piled-up woe, I would have liked a pretty, mediaeval chapel scene, with illuminated stained-glass windows, and trim acolytes holding lighted candles, and the great green curtain slowly descending to the first few bars of the Wedding March of Mendelssohn.

Of course Shakespeare was true to the life in making them all die miserably. Besides, it was so they died in the novel of Matteo Bandello, from which the poet indirectly took his plot. Under the circumstances no other climax was practicable; and yet it was sad business. There were Mercutio, and Tybalt, and Paris, and Juliet, and Romeo, come to a bloody end in the bloom of their youth and strength and beauty.

The ghosts of these five murdered persons seemed to be on my track as I hurried down Revere Street to West Cedar. I fancied them hovering around the corner opposite the small drug-store, where a meagre apothecary was in the act of shutting up the fan-like jets of gas in his shop-window.

“No, Master Booth,” I muttered in the imagined teeth of the tragedian, throwing an involuntary glance over my shoulder, “you ‘ll not catch me assisting at any more of your Shakespearean revivals. I would rather eat a pair of Welsh rarebits or a segment of mince-pie at midnight than sit through the finest tragedy that was ever writ.”

As I said this I halted at the door of a house in Charles Place, and was fumbling for my latch-key, when a most absurd idea came into my head. I let the key slip back into my pocket, and strode down Charles Place into Cambridge Street, and across the long bridge, and then swiftly forward.

I remember, vaguely, that I paused for a moment on the draw of the bridge, to look at the semi-circular fringe of lights duplicating itself in the smooth Charles in the rear of Beacon Street—as lovely a bit of Venetian effect as you will get outside of Venice; I remember meeting, farther on, near a stiff wooden church in Cambridgeport, a lumbering covered wagon, evidently from Brighton and bound for Quincy Market; and still farther on, somewhere in the vicinity of Harvard Square and the college buildings, I recollect catching a glimpse of a policeman, who, probably observing something suspicious in my demeanor, discreetly walked off in an opposite direction. I recall these trifles indistinctly, for during this preposterous excursion I was at no time sharply conscious of my surroundings; the material world presented itself to me as if through a piece of stained glass. It was only when I had reached a neighborhood where the houses were few and the gardens many, a neighborhood where the closely-knitted town began to fringe out into country, that I came to the end of my dream. And what was the dream? The slightest of tissues, madam; a gossamer, a web of shadows, a thing woven out of starlight. Looking at it by day, I find that its colors are pallid, and its threaded diamonds—they were merely the perishable dews of that June night—have evaporated in the sunshine; but such as it is you shall have it.

II

The young prince Hamlet was not happy at Elsinore. It was not because he missed the gay student-life of Wittenberg, and that the little Danish court was intolerably dull. It was not because the didactic lord chamberlain bored him with long speeches, or that the lord chamberlain's daughter was become a shade wearisome. Hamlet had more serious cues for unhappiness. He had been summoned suddenly from Wittenberg to attend his father's funeral; close upon this, and while his grief was green, his mother had married with his uncle Claudius, whom Hamlet had never liked.

The indecorous haste of these nuptials—they took place within two months after the king's death, the funeral-baked meats, as Hamlet cursorily remarked, furnishing forth the marriage-tables—struck the young prince aghast. He had loved the queen his mother, and had nearly idolized the late king; but now he forgot to lament the death of the one in contemplating the life of the other. The billing and cooing of the newly-married couple filled him with horror. Anger, shame, pity, and despair seized upon him by turns. He fell into a forlorn condition, forsaking his books, eating little save of the chameleon's dish, the air, drinking deep of Rhenish, letting his long, black locks go unkempt, and neglecting his dress—he who had hitherto been “the glass of fashion and the mould of form,” as Ophelia had prettily said of him.

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