

THE THREE WORMS

IN the great vault is a coffin. In the coffin is the corpse of a very beautiful woman. The vault is deep under the ground and very still. Above its bricks is a layer of earth, and if any sound at all percolates into this chamber of death, it is only the delicate tremor and rustle of things growing, of the grass seed pushing its tiny way through the mould, to break at the last into its narrow slip of bright green flame. This, and the weak whisper of trailing rose-roots in whose brown and ugly stems glow such a tender sap and noiseless fervour of exquisite perfume. At intervals, maybe, this dark blue silence is wounded by strange creakings and indescribable tremors: noises that are really the wastings and settlings of decaying bone and flesh, just as if Death were feasting his lips at last with murderous kisses on the flesh of his latest mistress in the secret peace of his terrible bridal chamber. All around the vault are hung great blue-black carpets of shadow, and the floor is damp, and wriggling with the spawn of low life.

Let us look into the coffin of the beautiful dead woman, look into it as we would have strangers look into our own with the child eyes of fancy and imagination, rather than with the cold and scaly eyes of knowledge.

Only to vulgar and brutish eyes is there any horror, for

THE EQUINOX

the sweet process of life is at work in every cell and particle of the dead. Truly, there is no such thing as death. Lips grown tired of speech, and outhonied of the honey of all kisses fade and whisper away into something else. The crude utterances of human language fail them, and they win instead the subtle perfumed conversation of flowers and vegetation. Thus their dust comes to lie about a rose-root, and with the lovely chemistry of earth they tremble back to the surface once more as crinkled and crimson perfume, or a frail flutter of yellow longing. Like flags, like tender waving pennons or messengers of hope and greeting from those beleaguered ones dissolving in the fastnesses of earth.

Every rose, every lily is a message from our dead: a sigh or a smile: something simple like the daisy from a simple heart, something of weird and oppressive beauty from some poet's brain, like the passion flower or the fuchsia.

In the coffin of the beautiful dead woman, there are three worms, sweet, clean, wavy, little maggots that will one day carry all the charm and delight of the dead back into the world again, will quicken and nourish seeds and roots, so that in the pink glamour of an April almond tree, the glory of the dead woman's hair shall be returned again.

One of these creatures is poised over her mouth, which again, to vulgar and unseeing eyes, looks ugly, though it is really more beautiful now than ever it was, for it is quick with frail seeds of countless existences, and is become a very factory and warehouse of Life Itself.

Another worm is coming out of the dead right eye of the woman, coiled, as it were, like a little pink amethyst from the stuff of her brain. And yet another peers from the mysterious

THE THREE WORMS

citadel of her heart, which like a faded and extinguished censer, rusts in the decadence of its scented memories.

The three worms dispose themselves and begin to talk.

The little worm which is issuing from her mouth begins:

“I am her mouth, her beautiful mouth, that sweet frail chalice where her soul delighted to dissolve itself and to lie. That mouth of hers, so nervous, so intimately sensible, that it is pleasant to think of it as the fragile rim of the holy and wonderful amphora of her strange exultant being.

“I am—since I was fed on them—all that litany of kisses which passion flung like a storm of wet rose-leaves on to her mouth—am, am I not?—all those dreams and pale blue shimmering fantasies that love drew like mists out of the hearts of all her lovers to expire in the stained fervour of an instant’s rapture.

“I am—forgive it to me!—all the lies which floated from her lips as sweetly as caresses, all those lies which fled like arrows barbed with gall into the ravished brains of her adorers. One I sent to America, and another to pick out the green glint of Death’s eye in the lustre of a glass of poison. I tore husband from wife with my wingèd scented words, redolent of the very nudity and flesh of love, yellow, crocus-tinted, opalescent, murderously sweet.

“I pricked the souls of little children with the crystal toys of speech that fell from the melting coral of my curvèd lips.

“I was East and West, and North and South, and sun and moon, and shuddering flight of stars to more than one, and it seems to me, as one of her heirs and sons, that she was not a good woman.

THE EQUINOX

“ I fear she was bad, for from me were twisted such devious messages, such various, unlike reports, that yes and no became counters of speech almost indistinguishable to my thinking. Once, I remember, there trickled from me a vagrant little flow of words, so bitter and so inviting, so poisonous and yet so intoxicating, that the soul for whom they were meant held up the silver goblets of hearing for its own destruction with trembling, greedy hands, covetous and anxious, hungry and afraid. Her voice that purred and rippled and sang through me—ah! it was like a kiss caged in her throat, and to hear it made a man a father in longing. There are voices like that, and when men hear them, they live a lifetime in an instant, mate, rear children, are widowed, or have their eyes closed for them for the last time by these women whose souls they thus secretly and inviolately espouse.”

After a little silence the worm which issued from her eyes then spoke:

“ I am her eyes, and she was bad, bad as her mouth says. Some of that mouth’s warm tribute came indeed to me, and I was shut from seeing with the close lips of men beating time to the superb madness of their love music with rhythmic kisses. And I saw—O what I saw!—mountains that bowed to her, and stringed necklaces of stars that flashed in ecstasy on Eternity’s bosom from the very sight of her. Seas over which she passed on a sensuous errand as live and tremulous as the heave of their own great hearts—heaves that are the world’s sighs for the little brood that teases it, and festers the green and waving glory of its skin and hair.

THE THREE WORMS

“Much have I looked upon—I, the now crawling, damp and sightless evidence of her sight.

“I am her eyes.

“Empires shone in me: suns set, moons arose, and were drowned like lovely naiads in the waters of the sky. I knew wild flowers so beautiful, that one dared not touch them lest their beauty start to mere ugly life.

“I am that quiver of fragile and delicious expectation that shone in the virgin eyes of her when . . . O happy hour!

“I am that greediness, that terrible woman’s greediness, fierce as drought, relentless as Death, which devours its own portion in the feast of life.

“And I too, like her mouth, witness to it that she was evil. The senses are the person in so much as they are the sweet janitors to all that come and go. Through our five portals life only flows, and the flavour of its tides is with us always. I sit in judgment on myself—I where the world could gather itself in one, little, humble, focus-point of curiosity and peep into the garden of her soul—I—where seas could be held calm and captive in a little pool of blue—I—who could consume mountains in a flash, and devour the dawn, I who could bid the moon trail her white limbs for my pleasure through the windy bagnios of the sky.

“I sit in judgment and condemn, for often I was a sword when Truth was a little child, and the breasts of my beauty I gave to Worthlessness in the stinking lupanars of Treachery and Deceit.

“Brothers, like the afterlight of day, I the light of her life consort with the shadows of evening, and I say it softly,

THE EQUINOX

gently, even as Spring's flying feet touch with unaccustomed primroses the wood, I say it—She was bad.”

Then the third worm, which came from the woman's heart, turned to the other two, and said:

“I am her heart . . . her beautiful, beautiful heart.

“What do you know of the deeds of the Queen who were never in her council chamber?

“When you were bold, I was perhaps afraid, and when you exulted, there was I know not what trouble of sadness throbbing within me. All that you were I sustained: all your pleasure stirred through me, and you but harvested that which I sowed.

“When you were all aflame, it was I who lit you, and you could not even be sad without me.

“Not less tender than the inviting curl—like a curled and fluffy feather of coral—with which you who were her lips made welcome to some man, was the slow hypnotic wave of my thurible with whose essence I drenched ever cell of her body. I say that she was good, for she was human and she loved, oh! so sweetly, so delicately, so tenderly.

“What you did, you, her lips, her eyes and her other senses, was but to make vain effigies of our interior delight, to shatter in the broken shards of translation the mysterious silent beauty of the vase itself.

“I, the woman's heart of her, was like to a cave were thousands of voices of unborn children cried softly in the dark, where one felt their outstretching hands in pale and piteous appeal, as one may hear the early lilies break through the encompassing earth. In me were the seed of kisses that could only burst to flower in a hundred years to come.

THE THREE WORMS

“I am her heart, her ordinary, commonplace woman’s heart. Commonplace! Ah! nothing is so mysterious as the commonplace, for it is only Subtlety sleeping and holding its hands a little while. A country clod is more interesting than the most awake and magnetic of geniuses, even as the veiled and cloistered odours of Spring with which one knows the earth is tingling in Winter are more delirious and exciting than the naked bosoms of May.

“Will you believe me, that, by I know not what exquisite contradiction, the sweetest kiss was ever a pang to her, and yielding was only less terrible than denial?

“On my small insistent beat have lain heads that were heavy with great dreams: men of action and men of fancy who loved her and were loved, it may be, a little of her too. I have been the couch of treaties and the pillow of financial strifes, and on me much uncoined gold has slept through dreamless transparent nights.

“Once a poet received her favours, and his head, bowed and weighted with its spongy amorphous magic, rested on me like a honeycomb, all giddy and vibrant with perfume and emotion.

“And once an old mother’s head, gray and weary with its long rolling down the years, found on me the unexpected peace and happiness of the old. For the old are so lonely, and no one is their friend. . . . So, my brothers, I give you the key of all her secrets except that secret which she shares with Time and herself.

“I can make all plain except my own mystery, which is the tragedy of everyone, worm, or man, or God.

“Blaspheme no more in such childish, imitative fashion!

THE EQUINOX

You are nearer the world than I, and its weak vanity has stained you. The eye looks at the world, and the world looks at the eye, and though each learns from the other, it is not often an even bargain and exchange. . . .”

Then, as the heart-worm ceased to speak, the other two, the eye-worm and the mouth-worm, drew closer to where during all his talking they had been magnetically moved. And all those years which they had passed unconsciously as the lips or the eyes of a woman became suddenly revealed, most vividly different to them.

They could not speak, the two detractors, for they had learnt the wisdom and merit of sin. They knew that good and evil are the same thing, that in a world of illusion he who has the most illusions is the richest man, that to be wise unto ignorance is the fairest counsel, that they knew nothing and yet all, that . . .

And the heart-worm, whose judgment and reasonings had been so readily accepted by the others, grew in his turn a sceptic, since faith cannot live without doubt, and truth is only co-existent with untruth, as day with night, as life with death, as, O beloved! my heart with thine, as vain and coloured chatterings like this with noble and inviolate silence.

EDWARD STORER.