

APOLLO BESTOWS THE VIOLIN

A STORY FOR THE STAGE

I

THE pastureland reached from the border of the olives and figs that garlanded the village to the upper slopes of the mountain, whose tumbled rocks, fire-scarred, frowned the menace of eternal sterility, the Universe against struggling man.

It was not often the Daphnis led his goats too far toward the crags, for the plain was green and gracious. Only in one spot was the sward broken. There did mosses and flowers, yellow, blue, and white, cover a mound as soft and firm as a maiden's breast.

Daphnis, true child, loved to make believe that this mound was sacred to some nymph. He would never invade the circle, or allow his goats to wander on it. But he would take his flute and invoke the nymph, or express the faint stirrings of manhood in his boyish breast by some such simple song as this:—

"Goats of mine, give ear, give ear!
Shun this mound for food or frolic!
Heaven is open; gods are near
To my musings melancholic.
Spring upon the earth begets
Daffodils and violets.

Here it was maybe that Zeus
With his favourite took his pleasure;
Here maybe the Satyrs use
With the nymphs tread a measure.
Let no wanton foot distress
This encircled loveliness!

Oh, some destined nymph may deign
Through the lilies to come gliding,
Snatch from earth the choral swain,
Hold him in her breast in hiding!
See, they stir. It is the wind:
Of my case they have no mind."

Thus lamenting and complaining the days found him, a monotony pastoral whose cycle was but peace.

But on the day of the summer solstice, as he plained with the old refrain, the lilies stirred more violently; and the day was windless. Also it seemed to him as if a faint mist inhabited their midst. And he sang:

"Mist, is this the fairy veil
Of the bright one that's for me?
Too phantastic, false and frail,
See, it melts to vanity!"

Yet was he eagerly afoot with curiosity, for now the mist rose in fiercer puffs, and little jets of flame spurted and sparkled amid the lilies:—

"Is the earth herself (he sang) that breathes
In the bosom of the flowers?
Is it fatal fire that seethes
From the heart of hateful powers?"

And the tumult of the mound increasing ever, he went forward a step toward the circle; yet again his self-set fear caught him, and he drew back—yet again his eagerness lured him. In the end, reality conquered imagination; he advanced delicately up the knoll.

Like the nipple of a breast, earth protruded, red, puckered, fissured. This Daphnis saw as he broke through the tall lilies. From its centre jetted the dusky, rose-red mist. As he thrust forward his arms to divide the flowers, the breeze caught a curl of smoke and mixed it with his breath.

His head went back: he half choked. Then a strangled cry broke from him, turning to wild laughter. His limbs caught the craze. He leapt and twirled and pirouetted like one stung by a tarantula: and all the while meaningless cries issued from his throat.

The nearer he approached the nipple the more fantastic were his antics, the more strident his laughter.

Now at the foot of the mound appeared a company of merchants and slaves journeying in caravan. All these, attracted from their path by the unwonted sounds, beheld him thus dancing. The whisper went round: "He is possessed of the spirit of some God," and they all fell upon their faces and worshipped.

Then followed the wonder of all; for at high noon was the sun wrapped in blackness of eclipse. In the gathering darkness and the strange shadows Daphnis still leapt and laughed; but as the sun was wholly swallowed by the dragon, he gave one supreme shriek, and fell exhausted.

II

That which had been a mound of flowers was hidden deep beneath a floor of marble, translucent as mother-of-pearl. Along each side four elephants of obsidian, crouching, did homage to the central object of the hall, a slim tripod of silver, and on their backs eight pillars of porphyry were swathed with pythons of gold and black. These supported the dome, which glittered with lapis-lazuli. The shape of the temple was that of a fish or vesica, and nowhere was there any cross or tau to be seen.

Beneath the tripod a circular hole in the marble admitted the dusky vapours which two centuries before had filled Daphnis with enthusiasm.

Beyond and between each elephant stood five priestesses in white robes, their faces wrapped closely even to the eyes, lest the fumes should cause them to fall into trance. Each of these held in her hand a torch filled with oil pressed from the sacred olives that grew in the groves of the temple, and each was blind and deaf from too long continuance in the shrine whose glory was so dazzling and whose music so intense. Each might have been a statue of snow at some antique revery of a Tsar.

Beyond the last of these, where the temple narrowed, was a shrine hidden, for from the roof hung a veil of purple, on which were written in golden letters the names and titles of Apollo.

It was the hour of worship; with uplifted hands a bearded priest in a voluminous robe of azure and gold cried aloud the invocations. He stood beyond the tripod, his face toward the shrine.

"Hail to the Lord of the Sun!
Mystic, magnificent one!
Who shall contend with him? None.
Hail to the Lord of the Sun!
Hail to the Lord of the Bow!
He hath chosen an arrow, and lo!
Shall any avail with him? No!
Hail to the Lord of the Bow!"

And then turning towards the tripod:

"Hail to the Lord of the Lyre!
Diviner of death and desire,
Prophetic of favour and fire,
Hail to the Lord of the Lyre!"

With this he turned again and went up to the veil, prostrating himself seven times. Then again he turned and came to the tripod and sang:—

"Prophetess, pythoness, hear!
Child of Apollo, descend!
Smooth from the soul of the sphere
Of the sun, be upon us, befriend!
In the soothsaying smoke of the hollow
Do thou and thine oracle follow
The word and the will of Apollo!"

So saying, he cast incense upon the opening beneath the tripod, and retired into the shrine. As the smoke cleared, there was found seated upon the tripod a maiden in a close fitting dress of crimson silk brodered with gold. Her masses of black hair, caught at the crown with a fillet of crimson and gold, fell heavily around her. She bore a lyre in her hands. Her eyes were wild and fierce, and she sniffed up the vapours of the cavern with awesome ardour. Feebly at first, afterwards frenetically, she plucked at the strings.

Hardly a minute—a string snapped; the whole music jarred; and the priest ran from the shrine, shrieking Apollo! Apollo! Veil your faces! Apollo hath descended." Himself he flung upon the marble before the tripod. There was a noise as of thunder; the veil was swept open as by a whirlwind, and Apollo, one flame of gold, entered the temple. As he passed, the priestesses fell dead and their torches were extinct. But a ray of glory from above, a monstrance to the God, followed him. Slowly and majestically he moved to the tripod. In his hands he bore an instrument of wood, of unfamiliar shape. Music of triumph and of glory answered his paces.

To the pythoness he advanced, thus dancing. He took the lyre from her hands and broke it. She stared, entranced. He put the strange instrument into her hands and, drawing down her head, pressed his lips to her forehead. Then he breathed lightly on her hands. Darkness fell, and lightnings rent it; thunders answered them. Apollo was gone. After the thunder the temple was filled with rosy radiance. The old priest, still prone, raised and let fall his hands, in mechanical imitation of the signs of invocation. Obedient, the pythoness began to play upon the instrument given of the God, and the temple shuddered at sounds so ethereal, so soul shaking, so divine. A greater music had been given to the world.

She ended. The old priest rose unsteadily to his feet, crying: Apollo! Apollo!" staggered, and fell dead before the tripod.

The light went out.