

ILLUSION D'AMOUREUX

SHE lay, the gilded lily with geranium lips, in the midst of the flower of night. Kindlier than the moon, her body glowed with more than harvest gold. Fierier than the portent of a double Venus, her green eyes shot forth utmost flames. From the golden chalice of love arose a perfume terrible and beautiful, a perfume strong and deadly to overcome the subtler fragrance of her whole being with its dominant, unshamed appeal.

She lay with arms outstretched, as if awaiting the visitation of some god.

Some ghastly god, for sure? For where she lay, the gilded lily with geranium lips, was, as it were, a flower of night.

It was a small square room, black from edge to edge. A dull dead black that gave back no light from the two solemn candlesticks of silver, crowned with long guttering tapers, which gave the only relief in all that world of night.

These stood at the head of her strange couch. It was a huge coffin, lidless, with hinged sides, whereon she lay. She had loosened the girths and lowered the sides, to stretch herself at ease. Six black ropes of silk hung from the ceiling with their hooks, which could be attached to rings on the sides of the coffin, so that at will it might be made to swing slowly to and fro.

A heavy rug of black cats' skin was spread under her, as if her body, gleaming now like moonstone, now like amber, would coax electric sparks from the fur.

Wonderful was the body of the woman; she changed ever as she lay. She outran the gamut of all music and flowers and jewels and soft words; there is nothing beautiful upon the earth that she did not resemble. At the sides of the room stood tall pier-glasses in black frames, cunningly disposed so that from the centre one could see endless avenues of her beauty, reaching out into infinity.

Even the roof was mirror-clad, so that as she lay upon the furs she might look upward, and see herself hanging like a star from the black vault of night.

Beside her in the temple was but one strange image. Carved of that polished black granite of Egypt, which seems, as it were, the very bodily form of the Night of Time, there squatted a god upon his pedestal; an inscrutable god, smiling, ever smiling with a smile that spoke unfathomable lust and cruelty resolved—by what theurgic alchemy?—into a pure and passionless bliss. It was a thing eternal as the stars—nay, before it the very stars might bow as in the reverence of Youth to age! Yet in it stood a strength and beauty as of golden youth.

Its skin was polished and shining, not as if reflecting the guarded light of the electric globes, but as if the very soul of light—a light too essential to be recognised as light by men—did inhabit and inform it.

As she lay, the gilded lily, she moved the passionate lips in some mysterious orison that was subtler and stronger than prayer.

"O beautiful, adorable, wonderful! O soul of wickedness! Supreme abomination, I invoke Thee! I worship Thee! I love Thee! Body and soul, I invoke Thee! Awake! Arise! Move! Manifest thy bliss to me, the soul that hungers for thy wisdom, as my body aches for thy kisses!

"Have I not wooed Thee and awaited Thee? But Thou comest not. By what spell may I conjure Thee? Am I the mock of Thy majesty? Ah, my god, my master, my lover—nay, that Thou art not.

"But I love Thee! I worship Thee!"

With supreme force she cried out upon the God; she tore at her beautiful flesh with her fingers; she writhed upon the fur; words of dreadful passion bubbled at her lips; her mouth was like a raging sea of blasphemy; she moans and struggled, torn by some internal force even as a woman in childbirth; she sank back into black silence, exhausted, numb.

But now the words came back like echoes from the infinite—I love thee! I worship thee!

The lights went out; the black god gathered himself together; his mighty form outran the limits of space. He gathered himself in force and fire; he concentrated himself; as a black cloud he wrapped her

round—body and soul. He ate her up with his first kiss; his arms crushed her into his mouth as a boy might crush some golden grape; the majesty of his passion clove her with white-hot steel; her life rushed headlong down the steeps of annihilation.

Yet in her rose the awful dawn of a new life, vast and magnificent. She became the god, absorbed in His being; her dreadful shriek—the cry of a soul at Heaven's gate smitten by the lightning into the abyss—changed to a marvellous laughter of love as she touched the summit of felicity.

*

*

*

*

*

So much I saw; yet the cloud withdrew itself; the lights redeemed their lustre. There in the midst my love awaited me—me—and I stood, as a diver that hesitates, so that he may enjoy to the full the foretaste of the plunge.

I stood there, very God of very God, in the glittering green of her eyes, that darted flames of exquisite ardour upon me—ay, upon me.

Had I been standing there a moment or an æon?

FRANCIS BENDICK.