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The Pilgrims of the Rhine

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Chapter II.

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CHAPTER II.

THE LOVERS.

I WISH only for such readers as give themselves heart and soul up to me—if they begin to cavil I have done with them; their fancy should put itself entirely under my management; and, after all, ought they not to be too glad to get out of this hackneyed and melancholy world, to be run away with by an author who promises them something new?

From the heights of BRUGES, a mortal and his betrothed gazed upon the scene below. They saw the sun set slowly amongst purple masses of cloud, and the lover turned to his mistress and sighed deeply; for her cheek was delicate in its blended roses, beyond the beauty that belongs to the hues of health; and when he saw the sun sinking from the world, the thought came upon him, that *she* was his sun, and the glory that she shed over his life might soon pass away into the bosom of the "everduring Dark." But against the clouds rose one of the many spires that characterise the town of Bruges; and on that spire, melting into heaven, rested the eyes of Gertrude Vane. The different objects that caught the gaze of each was emblematic both of the different channel of their thoughts, and the different elements of their nature: he thought of the sorrow, she of the consolation; his heart prophesied of the passing away from earth,—hers of the ascension into heaven. The lower part of the landscape was wrapt in shade; but, just where the bank curved round in a mimic bay, the waters caught the sun's parting smile, and rippled against the herbage that clothed the shore, with a scarcely noticeable wave. There were two of the numerous mills which are so picturesque a feature of that country, standing at a distance from each other on the rising banks, their sails perfectly still in the cool silence of the evening, and adding to the rustic tranquillity which breathed around. For to me there is something in the stilled sails of one of those inventions of man's industry peculiarly eloquent of repose; the

rest seems typical of the repose of our own passions—short and uncertain, contrary to their natural ordination; and doubly impressive from the feeling which admonishes us how precarious is the stillness—how utterly dependent on every wind rising at any moment and from any quarter of the heavens! They saw before them no living forms, save of one or two peasants yet lingering by the water side.

Trevylyan drew closer to his Gertrude; for his love was inexpressively tender, and his vigilant anxiety for her made his stern frame feel the first coolness of the evening, even before she felt it herself.

“Dearest, let me draw your mantle closer round you.”

Gertrude smiled her thanks.

“I feel better than I have done for weeks,” said she; and when once we get into the Rhine you will see me grow so strong as to shock all your interest for me.”

“Ah, would to heaven my interest for you may be put to such an ordeal!” said Trevylyan; and they turned slowly to the inn, where Gertrude’s father already awaited them.

Trevylyan was of a wild, a resolute, and an active nature. Thrown on the world at the age of sixteen, he had passed his youth in alternate pleasure, travel, and solitary study. At the age in which manhood is least susceptible to caprice, and most perhaps to passion, he fell in love with the loveliest person that ever dawned upon a poet’s vision. I say this without exaggeration, for Gertrude Vane’s was indeed the beauty, but the perishable beauty, of a dream. It happened most singularly to Trevylyan (but he was a singular man),

that being naturally one whose affections it was very difficult to excite, he should have fallen in love at first sight with a person whose disease, already declared, would have deterred any other heart from risking its treasures on a bark so utterly unfitted for the voyage of life. Consumption, but consumption in its most beautiful shape, had set its seal upon Gertrude Vane, when Trevelyhan first saw her, and at once loved. He knew the danger of the disease; he did not, except at intervals, deceive himself; he wrestled against the new passion; but, stern as his nature was, he could not conquer it. He loved, he confessed his love, and Gertrude returned it.

In a love like this, there is something ineffably beautiful—it is essentially the poetry of passion. Desire grows hallowed by fear, and, scarce permitted to indulge its vent in the common channel of the senses, breaks forth into those vague yearnings—those lofty aspirations, which pine for the Bright—the Far—the Unattained. It is “the desire of the moth for the star”—it is the love of the soul!

Gertrude was advised by the faculty to try a southern climate; but Gertrude was the daughter of a German mother, and her young fancy had been nursed in all the wild legends, and the alluring visions that belong to the children of the Rhine. Her imagination, more romantic than classic, yearned for the vine-clad hills and haunted forests, which are so fertile of their spells to those who have once drunk, even sparingly, of the literature of the north. Her desire strongly expressed, her declared conviction that if any

change of scene could yet arrest the progress of her malady, it would be the shores of the river she had so longed to visit, prevailed with her physicians and her father, and they consented to that pilgrimage along the Rhine, on which Gertrude, her father, and her lover, were now bound.

It was by the green curve of the banks which the lovers saw from the heights of Bruges, that our fairy travellers met. They were reclining on the water side, playing at dominos with eye-bright, and the black specks of the trefoil; viz., Pipalee, Nip, Trip, and the Lord Treasurer, (for that was all the party selected by the Queen for her travelling *cortège*), and waiting for her majesty, who, being a curious little elf, had gone round the town to reconnoitre.

“Bless me!” said the Lord Treasurer, “what a mad freak is this! Crossing that immense pond of water—and was there ever such bad grass as this?—one may see that the fairies thrive ill here.”

“You are always discontented, my lord,” said Pipalee; “but then you are somewhat too old to travel—at least unless you go in your nutshell and four.”

The Lord Treasurer did not like this remark, so he muttered a peevish pshaw, and took a pinch of honeysuckle dust to console himself for being forced to put up with so much frivolity.

At this moment, ere the moon was yet at her middest height, Nymphalin joined her subjects.

“I have just returned,” said she, with a melancholy expression on her countenance, “from a scene, that has

almost renewed in me that sympathy with human beings, which of late years our race has well nigh relinquished.

“ I hurried through the town without noticing much food for adventure. I paused for a moment on a fat citizen’s pillow, and bade him dream of love. He woke in a fright, and ran down to see that his cheeses were safe. I swept with a light wing over a politician’s eyes, and straightway he dreamt of theatres and music. I caught an undertaker in his first nap, and I have left him whirled into a waltz. For what would be sleep if it did not contrast life? Then I came to a solitary chamber, in which a girl, in her tenderest youth, knelt by the bedside in prayer, and I saw that the death-spirit had passed over her, and the blight was on the leaves of the rose. The room was still and hushed—the angel of Purity kept watch there. Her heart was full of love, and yet of holy thoughts, and I bade her dream of the long life denied to her—of a happy home—of the kisses of her young lover—of eternal faith, and unwaning tenderness. Let her at least enjoy in dreams what Fate has refused to Truth!—and, passing from the room, I found her lover stretched in his cloak beside the door; for he reads with a feverish and desperate prophecy the doom that waits her; and so loves he the very air she breathes, the very ground she treads, that when she has left his sight, he creeps silently and unknown to her, to the nearest spot hallowed by her presence, anxious that while yet she is on earth, not an hour, not a moment should be wasted upon other thoughts than those that belong to her; and feeling a security, a fearful

joy, in lessening the distance that *now* only momentarily divides them. And that love seemed to me not as the love of the common world, and I stayed my wings and looked upon it, as a thing that centuries might pass, and bring no parallel to, in its beauty and its melancholy truth. But I kept away the sleep from the lover's eyes, for well I knew that sleep was a tyrant, that shortened the brief time of waking tenderness for the living, yet spared him; and one sad, anxious thought of her was sweeter, in spite of its sorrow, than the brightest of fairy dreams. So I left him awake, and watching there through the long night, and felt that the children of earth have still something that unites them to the spirits of a finer race, so long as they retain amongst them the presence of real love!"

And oh! Is there not a truth also in our fictions of the Unseen World? Are there not yet bright lingerers by the forest and the stream? Do the moon and the soft stars look out on no delicate and winged forms bathing in their light? Are the fairies, and the invisible hosts, but the children of our dreams; and not their inspiration? Is that all a delusion which speaks from the golden page? And is the world only given to harsh and anxious travellers, that walk to and fro in pursuit of no gentle shadows? Are the chimeras of the passions the sole spirits of the universe? No! while my remembrance treasures in its deepest cell, the image of one no more—one who was "not of the earth earthy"—one in whom love was the essence of thoughts divine—one whose shape and mould, whose heart and genius,

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sleep, and

would, had Poesy never before have dreamt it, have called forth the first notion of spirits resembling mortals, but not of them; no, Gertrude, while I remember you, the faith,—the trust in brighter shapes and fairer natures than the world knows of, comes clinging to my heart; and still will I think that Fairies might have watched over your sleep, and Spirits have ministered to your dreams!

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