



THE LOOSENED CORD.

A MIDNIGHT STORY.

THE host was noted for his charming dinners. He had never been known to give them twice alike, and whoever was fortunate enough to be invited to one of his entertainments always had a delightful memory of it—something unusual, some wonder of the table, some setting original and peculiar. His combinations were carefully considered, and many were the stories told of them.

Once it was a delightful dinner in midsummer, where small vessels floated about among miniature icebergs over a sea of cobalt blue, a cool, refreshing, and unique centerpiece.

At another time the centerpiece was a large, circular, shallow vessel of brightly burnished copper, filled with water, and surrounded with small pots of growing verbenas—pink, crimson, purple, white, and variegated, fringing the miniature lake like a beautiful meadow of flowers. On the surface of the water floated delicate, blown-glass balls of various sizes, like bubbles, kept in motion by gold and silver fish swimming about among them; they caught reflections of color from the flowers, and high lights gleamed here and there, thrown from the softly glowing candles above. Now and then a gold or a silver fish would be magnified through a glass ball until it became a golden or silver bubble drifting slowly over the water. Old Russian hammered copper receptacles at the four corners of the table held towering rosebushes in full bloom, so that the lovely guest of the evening sat in a bower of green and roses.

I.

TO-NIGHT every one was wondering what new device, what new treatment of the table,

the host had evolved. The dinner was held in a lofty studio at the top of the house, in early spring. Rare low-toned tapestries adorned the side walls. Here and there gleamed brass and copper plaques of the fifteenth century. Venetian glass glittered in antique carved cabinets. There were old musical instruments, crucifixes, paintings, arms, and bric-à-brac from every quarter of the globe. The night being warm, the great skylight had been thrown open, and above the beautiful studio there could be seen a velvety patch of sky, through which the stars twinkled softly, making a marked contrast to the rich surroundings of the interior.

The host had provided a table marked by the simplicity of its decoration—a few flowers here and there, bits of old repoussé silver of the times of the Georges, dainty glass and china, and that was all. When the company entered the room there was an exclamation, and all eyes were turned toward the chair assigned to the honored guest, for, attached to it by a most delicate silken cord, floated a miniature balloon, swayed by every current of air which passed through the great studio. It was a balloon perfect in all its details, a complete miniature of a real and possible one, not the red ball of the toy-shops. All its ropes and stays were of threads of silk, golden and delicate apple-green, crossing and recrossing one another. Beneath it, instead of the usual car or basket, hung a circular cage of gossamer-like workmanship. In it was a swinging perch on which sat a little bird that sang with the greatest delight as the balloon rocked to and fro, held in place by its single cord of silk.

It was a charming company. There was a wit, a naval officer, a contralto singer, a storyteller—but why enumerate all of that delight-

ful group? The studio and table looked lovely in the soft glow of candle-light, for neither gas nor electric light had any part in the host's entertainment. Later on, when the merriment was at its height, the voices were almost drowned by the notes of the little songster in his gilded cage. Just as the contralto had arisen to sing, the silken cord which held the balloon became loosened in some accidental manner. Hands were eagerly but vainly extended to catch it, and all eyes were turned upward as the balloon rose rapidly higher and higher out of reach. The joyous notes of the bird grew fainter and fainter until balloon and songster disappeared through the open skylight, into the patch of velvety sky studded with stars. The merriment was hushed, and it was minutes before any one spoke, and then the bronzed naval officer suggested that they should go to the roof, and see which way the wind was blowing. They ascended the winding stairs, and the officer held up his handkerchief to catch the breeze.

"The wind is due north," he said, "and by morning the little bird will be well on its way toward the Gulf."

They returned to the studio, but do what they would, the conversation flagged, and it was impossible to revive the merriment. Even the contralto's beautiful song failed to interest them, and nothing seemed to restore the spirits of the guests. Each one was thinking of the little bird; each one seemed to hear its ecstatic notes as it sailed away out of sight under the stars, and a feeling of sympathy and pity for the little prisoner came over them all.

Coffee and cigars were brought, and the ladies disappeared. The party broke up at midnight. Carriages were called, and the host bade his guests good night. He whose dinners had always been a success was forced to acknowledge that to-night's was a dismal failure, and he sat gloomy and silent, thinking of the little balloon sailing away through the blackness of the night, carrying the imprisoned songster he knew not whither.

II.

THE sun is just setting behind a beautiful old French town on the west bank of the southern Mississippi. The streets are filled—flooded with sunlight. The gardens are blooming with oleander-trees. There is the humming of bees, singing of birds, and a fragrance indescribable. The Mississippi stretches away like a great silver serpent between golden meadows and headlands on either side, until it becomes a mere glint of light in the distance. Children are playing in the streets, and dark-eyed French girls in their pure white dresses are sitting in the balconies among the flowers. Many of the

villagers are wending their way to the post-office for the evening mail, and here and there in a doorway is a gossiping group. Suddenly there is an exclamation. The children stop their play, and point to the sky. At the extreme end of the village street is a mere speck floating and swaying in the air as it comes nearer and nearer. Heads are peering out of windows. The villagers have forgotten their mail and their gossip. All is hushed. There in the yellow light something floats in the sky, coming steadily nearer. Music is heard—bird-music. Among those watching are a few brothers of the church, who cross themselves and look wonderingly at the rapidly growing speck. On it comes, larger and larger it grows, and now a miniature balloon is seen sailing slowly, swaying gracefully to and fro, but keeping almost a steady course down the quiet street. The villagers are filled with awe, as floating overhead almost within reach the little balloon passes on and on in the golden light of the dying day, with its feathered passenger sending forth its liquid, almost heavenly song.

At the other end of the village street is a group of people standing about a noble-looking house with a double piazza where flowers are blooming—cactus, crimson roses, and yellow jasmine. The group includes old and young, men, women, and little children, a cripple on crutches, and colored servants; for they are standing about the house of Rose Danian—she who has done sweet deeds of charity throughout the short life which is now slowly ebbing away. All wait in reverent mood; even the children forget their play: for all love her, and remember some kindness,—some unexpected, generous deed,—and the whole town is in mourning. In the room above, which is flooded with soft warm sunlight, stand parents and friends, and the village priest administering the last sacrament to the dying girl. Her luxuriant auburn hair surrounds her head like the aureole of a saint. Her eyes gaze into the distance with a look of rapture.

And now down the village street, through a cloud of golden dust raised by a passing vehicle, there floats gently, gently, before the house of Rose Danian, the little balloon with its half-famished singing prisoner that has made so long and perilous a journey. Caught by a sudden current of air, it drifts lower and lower until it pauses underneath the upper balcony, trembling with a slight quivering motion before the open window, in the tender, soft light of departing day. The last look of the dying girl rests on the little songster as it pours forth again and again its ecstatic song with delight indescribable, then drops from its perch. What curious coincidence causes the balloon suddenly to collapse, and to sink slowly and softly until

it lies on the balcony among the flowers, it, too, like the little bird, with life extinct?

The priest crosses himself. The weeping friends drop on their knees as the last ray of sunlight disappears, gilding here and there a roof, here and there a bit of projecting ornament. The golden light changes to a delicate apple-green; the great river gleams and glows, assuming prismatic hues reflected from the sky above. All is hushed and solemn in the twilight, as the priest says reverently, "A miracle, my children! a miracle!"

In the chapel of the church of Saint Mary, just in front of the altar, to the left of the picture of Mary and the Child, hangs suspended from a curiously wrought brass scroll, or arm, the little balloon. It was the clock-maker of the village, who, with loving care, arranged the ribs of wire which hold it out until it assumes its natural, inflated form. Underneath is the delicate cage, and, done with the tenderest love of the village taxidermist, there sits the little feathered songster on its swinging perch, its head turned upward, its throat expanded, its mouth open, apparently singing its last rapturous song. It is placed there as a token of love to mark the miracle of the dying day of sweet Rose Danian.

Children peer between the wrought-iron bars of the great gates, with their noble family escutcheon, which protect the chapel. Mothers pause, looking lovingly at the balloon with its lifeless songster. The cripple, leaning on his crutch, gazes long and wonderingly, with almost superstitious awe, at this singular token of lov-

ing remembrance. Many are the stories told of beautiful Rose Danian on this, the anniversary day of the miracle, and in the church mass has been celebrated for the repose of her soul. But now vespers are being held; great shafts of colored light are thrown through the stained-glass windows, penetrating the gloom of the darkest recesses, flooding the picture of Mary and the Child, lighting and gilding the little balloon until it looks like a floating glory, or halo. There is an odor of burning incense, the grand chant of the brothers, and the solemn swell of the organ.

Penitents young and old are kneeling in the church, but who, think you, is standing before the altar in the chapel, examining with intense interest the little balloon, while the distant voices of the brothers and the last strains from the organ die away? On whom, think you, does the sweet, pensive smile of Mary rest, and to whom does the Infant Saviour hold out his little hands?

It is the host, whose imagination has been kindled, whose heart has been touched, by the curious story of the miracle which he has heard to-day for the first time. He has found his long-lost device.

As he passes out of the church and down the village street, again the great river gleams and glows, the sunset sky flames and burns with crimson light. And as he leaves the little town behind him, now almost lost in the purple mist of twilight, he murmurs to himself, "How strange a transformation—a thought of beauty has become a miracle of God!"

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