

The Scent of Jasmine.

BY LIVINGSTONE B. MORSE.



HAT odors and music possess, of all appeals to the senses, the greatest power of evoking the past is, I believe, conceded by both poets and physiologists. It is in explaining this fact that the split comes; the poet — and indeed many every-day people — declaring that because they are the least material in their effect, fragrance and melody are most potent over things of the spirit; the physiologist contending that they simply have peculiar power to excite the brain to reproduce former processes.

Up to a certain point either theory seems plausible. That there is a point beyond, where the ways fork, I think the following narrative sufficient testimony.

Some years ago I spent a summer in a border castle. Not the border made famous by Scott, but the lesser known, though today even more romantic boundary between France and Spain, the one-time haunt of the troubadours, where modernity and the middle ages meet.

Of this strange mixture of old and new, of French and Spanish, of the real and the legendary, the *Chateau de l'Astiya*, — literally the Castle of the Witch, — at which I was a visitor, was uniquely typical. In architecture a medley of Gothic, Moorish, and seventeenth century French, the dark chateau, perched on a jutting crag high over the brawling Tech, looked forbidding as any ancient fortress. But a modern rug covered the stone flagging of the dark entrance hall; the sparkle of glass, and silver, and Dresden china added an anachronism to the monster dining table in the tapestry-hung banquet hall; and the latest magazines and art studies brought a note of Paris, and London, and Vienna into those dim, awesome rooms.

Only in the library — in former centuries the house chapel with

its resident priest — the spirit of the past was left undisturbed. Here oaken paneling, and groined Gothic arches, and curiously leaded windows had been changed in no whit from the days when they lent solemnity to the vigils of new-made knights or the hurried mass heard before battle by armored men. From its early estate the room was changed only in one particular. In the niche where once had risen the shining altar was built a grand organ, so close to the southern window that while fingered the keys I could look down the sheer cliff to the Tech, murmuring hoarsely in the depths below, above which the vapor wreaths floated in fantastic shapes. I could even inhale the perfume of the vine that clung about the window — a jasmine vine thick with the starry white blossoms that, above all others, are redolent of romance. And day by day, as I played or dreamed on the organ bench, there seemed to grow up a subtle affinity between my moods and the place, and the sounds, and the odor of jasmine; so that gradually the every-day world of the nineteenth century seemed to recede farther and farther into dreamland, and the world of long ago, mirrored in the ancient chronicles with which the room was lined, to become more and more a potent and living actuality.

It was in this room and beside this window that I first read the legend of Isabella *l'Astiya*, — Isabella the Witch, — from whom the castle gained its name.

Isabella of Roussilon was the only child of Gerard II., and so renowned through the Province for her beauty and goodness that, in accordance with her father's dearest wish and hope, she was sought in marriage by the King of Aragon. This, too, although the Counts of Roussilon belonged to the unpopular sect of the Albigenses. An unforeseen obstacle, however, was the opposition of Isabella herself. Hitherto always obedient and dutiful, neither by threats, nor urging, nor even appeal to her religious training could she be persuaded to the alliance. Indeed, she seemed encouraged in her resolve by certain pious pilgrimages that she made from time to time, attended only by her old nurse, to some distant shrine whereof the count did not know or ask the location. She would be gone some days, and at length her father noticed that upon her return she would seem more gentle and pensive than ever, but still more firmly unyielding; and little

by little he began to distrust the effects of these pilgrimages, and at last forbade them entirely. Perhaps he enforced his authority by bolts and bars. At any rate, from that day Isabella kept to the castle, making no complaint, but so evidently sickening under the restraint that at last her father was constrained to grant his consent to one final pilgrimage.

With great joy and unusual splendor of preparation she set out, attended as before by her nurse. And that was the last ever seen of the beautiful Isabella. It was not till years had gone by that the old nurse, crippled by age and infirmity, crawled back to the castle and told her story, on hearing which the old count died of grief and shame.

It seems that years before Raymond, Count of Toulouse (afterward the famous Raymond VI.), while traveling through the Province of Roussillon had stopped at the court of Gerard, and seeing Isabella, had loved her and been loved by her. Knowing that Gerard would never consent to the union, Raymond had won her to a secret marriage, and had deceived her with a mock priest.

Raymond returned almost immediately to Toulouse ; but they arranged to meet from time to time at his castle in the Pyrenees, upon whose ruins the *Chateau de l'Astiya* was afterwards built, and this was the secret shrine of Isabella's pilgrimages.

Time passed ; again and again Isabella urged Raymond to acknowledge the marriage, but he always put her off with some good excuse. The clamor against the Albigenses was increasing. Already, by refusing to take an active part in the persecution, because of his love for Isabella, he had incurred the censure of the church, and at last was obliged to flee to hiding in his castle among the Pyrenees. It was then that he found Isabella, triumphant in having compassed her escape ; and maddened, perhaps, at the sacrifices he had made for her, he confessed his deceit. What more passed between them is unknown, but only the next day Raymond was stricken down by an unknown illness which baffled the skill of all the physicians. Through this Isabella nursed him devotedly, but apparently without hope.

He seemed on the point of death, when one day the seneschal of the castle, a Basque whose tribe were famous for their arts of healing, proposed a sure cure for the count — namely, the left

hand of a child cut off during sleep, and wrapped about with its own hair as a powerful amulet. This barbarous plan was about to be carried out when Isabella, shocked at the atrocity, interposed and saved the child, at the same time indignantly ordering the Basque to leave the castle. He did as she commanded, but swore to be revenged for the loss of his position. Collecting a number of the count's credulous retainers in a valley near by, he performed certain mystical rites, announcing finally to the awe-struck beholders that he had discovered the illness of the count to be due to witchcraft, and proclaimed that the sorceress, or *Astiya*, as it is in the Basque tongue, who had wrought the spell, was no other than Isabella herself.

Isabella had many enemies who were jealous of her influence, and the news speedily came to the ears of the count. Now whether he believed that Isabella had really cast this spell in revenge for the shame he had brought upon her, or whether, having grown weary of her, he made this an excuse for ridding himself of one whose gentle presence must have been a constant reproach to him, the nurse did not know; but at all events, at the dead of night, while Isabella watched at the bedside of her betrayer, two men stole into the room, and bearing the unfortunate girl to the crags without the castle, they hurled her slight form into the darkness of the gorge. One wild grasp she made in falling, and caught at a vine of flowering jasmine that grew upon the edge of the cliff. Its white star blossoms fell all about her in a shower as she fell down into the rushing Tech, and thus, it is said, she strewed her grave with flowers.

The mountaineers, however, affirm that she still haunts the spot where she loved and died. They believe her to have been a witch, indeed, and point to the wreath of mist that rises at night and floats above the stream, saying that it is the spirit of the *Astiya*, who is forced thus to return as an expiation for her crime.

This legend took a powerful hold upon me. Often, as I reclined beside the window in the library, idly watching the stirring jasmine leaves against the sky, I fell to thinking of the legend, and wondered whether it were possible that, in a spirit of revenge, she could have brought herself to enter into a compact with the powers of Evil; or whether, in perfect innocence, she had been

cruelly put to death. Had her love for her false husband survived her knowledge of his deceit? Had she forgiven him? Thoughts of her drifted through my mind so often as I chanced to be in the library; at first vaguely and fitfully, but with ever-increasing distinctness and power, that was specially marked when of a night—the brilliant moonlight night of Southern France—I would sit at the organ in the dusk and play dreamily to myself, softly running from theme to theme as the mood seized me, and letting my thoughts have free rein.

One evening I had been playing as usual, gliding carelessly from one composition to another,—now the full-toned *Largo* of Handel, now a weird rhapsody of Liszt, when, close beside me, I heard, or thought I heard, a sigh. It might have been the wind, or perhaps it was my fancy; yet so distinct it was, so inexpressibly sad, that I could not shake off the impression of its reality. Only one faint sigh, yet I could not forget it.

A few evenings later I was playing something of St. Saëns; I remember perfectly it was a study in which there occurs a partial ascending scale of E flat. As I reached this passage, and my fingers swept up the scale, I heard close at hand and perfectly distinct, the soft sweeping of light drapery, as though a piece of silk were dragged over the floor, and again the gentle sigh.

I stopped short in my playing and turned about. The moon poured in a flood of light, the air was heavy with the jasmine scent, and, though I could see nothing, I was conscious of some one standing near me. By a sudden impulse I turned back to the organ, and repeated the measure I had just played—E, F, A flat, G, in the scale of E flat, straining my ears meanwhile to their fullest. Again upon the floor I heard the soft sweeping of the silken garment, and the low uttered sigh, continuing while I held the notes. There could be no doubt of it this time—this was no trick of imagination!

Here at least was a discovery. There was undoubtedly a connection between the sounds evoked by my playing and the manifestation of the unseen presence. But what was it? Without having any definite theory to work upon I set myself to discover. I ransacked the library for works on acoustics, and the various properties of sound. I tried all manner of experiments in syn-

chronous vibrations: on plates of glass, on water, and on stretched chords, and these I sought to apply in some way in explanation of the phenomena; but with no success. I felt certain, however, that something was to be revealed to me, something outside the pale of probability; and with interest aroused to the highest pitch, I determined to wait.

I gradually worked out for myself a set of facts or principles in relation to the phenomena. The light must be of a certain brilliancy, the atmosphere perfectly clear; there must be a light breeze from such a quarter that the scent of the jasmines should be wafted directly into the room. Given these conditions, and my mind in a receptive state, I observed that when certain notes were struck upon the organ there would occur the sighs, the sound of sweeping drapery, and I would be conscious of a near-by presence. At such times my faculties were wrought to a high pitch of excitement; the room seemed charged with electricity.

Night after night I sat at the organ waiting for some further revelation. As the moon drew toward the full, and the jasmin vine put forth its most abundant bloom so that the air was very heavy with the scent, I observed that the manifestations became more and more frequent. On two or three occasions I even fancied that a shadowy form hovered for a single instant in the moonlight near the window. Or was it only the mist floating up from the stream below wrought by my excited fancy into the semblance of a figure? It was there but an instant, then gone; and try as I would, by playing the same strain over and over, I could not recall it. The moon was on the wane, and the jasmin was beginning to fade,—half of the blossoms were gone already. I was conscious, I know not why, that it would soon be too late. The sadness was growing upon me. Once in the midst of a nocturne of Chopin's I heard a low wail at my side—so pitiful that the tears started to my eyes. What was this awful sorrow, so near, yet so entirely beyond the reach of my help?

One night, near the end of June, I sat leaning far out of the Gothic window, gazing down into the cavern below; inky black, save where the vapor that rose above the stream floated in white fantastic shapes that drifted, and wreathed, and changed and vanished—slowly—endlessly. The moonlight fell broadly in a

great shaft of light upon the floor of the library. With every puff of the soft air the heavy scent of the jasmines was wafted into the room.

Suddenly the breeze freshened, chilly; at that instant came to me, like a command, an irresistible impulse to play. I rushed to the organ and, throwing wide the stops, began without hesitation the grand Fifth Symphony of Beethoven.

I played as one inspired. Swept on by the current of my mood, I thought of nothing but the perfect harmony in nature, in the music, and in myself.

I finished the *andante*, and reached those wonderful transition chords that precede the repetition of the theme. As I struck the chords, something akin to paralysis held my fingers. At the same moment I beheld, poised in the great flood of moonlight that poured into the room, shadowy, yet perfectly clear in outline, the figure of a woman. The face was marvelously beautiful, the hands stretched out as though in supplication, the hair flowing, the drapery a cloud of silver mist.

While I looked, faintly, as from afar off, borne to my ears upon the heavy jasmine-scented air, came these words: "Raymond, *toi que j'aime*, Raymond!" the voice, low and tender, though heartbreakingly sad, dying in a faint sigh: "Raymond, thou whom I love, Raymond!"

That was all — just while I held the chords; then it melted away into the moonlight, as the mist below on the river fades and vanishes.

I sprang up and leaned far out of the window. There was no one to be seen. The jasmine vine was quite bare of blossoms, the breeze had swept off the last of them, and like a shower of white stars they were gently floating down into the misty chasm below. The presence, whatever it was, had disappeared; and though many times since I have touched the same chords at night by moonlight, it has never shown itself to me again.

But I believe — whatever the physiologists may say — that it was because place, and hour, and mood, and music all combined to put me for a single instant in harmony with the unseen world that I was permitted to see the spirit of poor "*l'Astiya*"; and that at last, after centuries of silence, she had been permitted to assert her innocence.