

## The White Poppy

A riot of scarlet on gold, the red poppy of our native fields tosses heavy tresses with gipsy abandon; her sister of the sea-shore is golden, a yellow blossom that loves the keen salt savour of the spray. Of another hue is the poppy of history, of romance, of the muse. White as the stark death-shroud, pallid as the cheeks of that queen of a silent land whose temples she languorously crowns, ghost-like beside her fuller-blooded kin, she droops dream-laden, *Papaver somniferum*, the poppy of the magic juice of oblivion. In the royal plenitude of summer, the scarlet blooms will sometimes seem but a red cry from earth in memory of the many dews of battle that have drenched these acres in years gone by, for little end but that these same "bubbles of blood" might glow to-day; the yellow flower does but hint of the gold that has dashed a thousand wrecks at her feet around these shores: for happier suggestion we must turn to her of the pallid petals, our white Lady of Consolation. Fitting hue to typify the crowning blessing of forgetfulness! Too often the sable robes of night dissemble sleeplessness, remorse, regret, self-questioning. Let black, then, rather stand for hideous memory: white for blessed blank oblivion, happiest gift of the gods! For who, indeed, can say that the record of his life is not crowded with failure and mistake, stained with its petty cruelties of youth, its meannesses and follies of later years, all which storm and clamour incessantly at the gates of memory, refusing to be shut out? Leave us alone, O gods, to remember our

felicities, our successes: only aid us, ye who recall no gifts, aptly and discreetly to forget.

Discreetly, we say; for it is a tactful forgetfulness that makes for happiness. In the minor matter, for instance, of small money obligations, that shortness of memory which the school of Professors Panurge and Falstaff rashly praises, may often betray into some unfortunate allusion or reference to the subject which shall pain the delicate feelings of the obliger; or, if he be of coarser clay, shall lead him in his anger to express himself with unseemliness, and thereby to do violence to his mental tranquillity, in which alone, as Marcus Aurelius teacheth, lieth the perfection of moral character. This is to be a stumbling-block and an offence against the brethren. It is better to keep just memory enough to avoid such hidden rocks and shoals; in which thing Mr Swiveller is our great exemplar, whose mental map of London was a chart wherein every creditor was carefully ``buoyed."

The wise man prays, we are told, for a good digestion: let us add to the prayer -- and a bad memory. Truly we are sometimes tempted to think that we are the only ones cursed with this corroding canker. Our friends, we can swear, have all, without exception, atrocious memories; why is ours alone so hideously vital? Yet this isolation must be imaginary; for even as we engage in this selfish moan for help in our own petty case, we are moved to add a word for certain others who, meaning no ill, unthinkingly go about to add to humanity's

already heavy load of suffering. How much needless misery is caused in this world by the reckless "recollections" of dramatic and other celebrities? You gods, in lending ear to our prayer, remember too, above all other sorts and conditions of men, these our poor erring brothers and sisters, the sometime sommités of Mummerdom!

Moments there are, it is true, when this traitor spirit tricks you: when some subtle scent, some broken notes of an old song, nay, even some touch of a fresher air on your cheeks at night -- a breath of "le vent qui vient à travers la montagne" -- have power to ravish, to catch you back to the blissful days when you trod the one authentic Paradise. Moments only, alas! Then the evil crowd rushes in again, howls in the sacred grove, tramples down and defiles the happy garden; and once more you cry to Our Lady of Sleep, crowned of the white poppy. And you envy your dog who, for full discharge of a present benefaction having wagged you a hearty, expressive tail, will then pursue it gently round the hearth-rug till, in restful coil, he reaches it at last, and oblivion with it; every one of his half-dozen diurnal sleeps being in truth a royal amnesty.

But whose the hand that shall reach us the herb of healing? Perdita blesses every guest at the shearing with a handful of blossom; but this gift is not to be asked of her whose best wish to her friends is "grace and remembrance." The fair Ophelia, rather: nay, for as a nursling she hugs her grief, and for her the memory of the past is a "sorrow's crown of sorrow." What flowers are these her pale hand

offers? "There's pansies, that's for thoughts!" For me rather, O  
dear Ophelia, the white poppy of forgetfulness.