

matters. When will you get married?"

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed my uncle. "Get married and end this delightful state! You don't think she will want me to marry her, do you? Besides, she told me some time ago that she did not intend to marry again. It was only that encouraged me to suggest an engagement to her. Though she is a wonderful woman, George--a wonderful woman. Still, I think she looks at things very much as I do."

He paused thoughtfully. Then added with fervour, "At least I hope so."

#### LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI

#### A RHAPSODY

I found him in his own apartments, and strangely disordered. He went to and fro, raving--beginning so soon as I entered the room. I noticed a book half out of its cover, flung carelessly into the corner of the room.

"I am enchanted of an impalpable woman, George," he said, "I am in bonds to a spirit of the air. I can neither think nor work nor eat nor sleep because of her. Sometimes I go out suddenly, tramping through

seething streets, through fog and drizzle or dry east wind, mourning for her sake. My life is rapidly becoming one colourless melancholy through her spells and twining sorceries. I sometimes wish that I were dead.

"Yet I have never seen her. Often, indeed, I imagine her, anon as of this shape, and anon of that. I know her only by her victims, those she slays daily, and daily revives to slay. They come to me with their complaints, mutilated, pathetic, terrible. I try to shut my ears to them in vain. I have tried wool, but it made little or no difference.

"The business always begins with the slamming of a door and a healthy footfall across the room. The piano is opened. Then some occasional noises--the falling of a piece of music behind the piano, perhaps, and its extraction by means of the tongs--I know it is tongs she uses by the clang. Then the music-stool creaks, and La Belle Dame is ready to play. She puts both her hands upon the key-board, and the treble shrieks apprehensively, and the bass roars like a city in revolt. After that this hush. Just this interval.

"Yet I sometimes think this hush is really the worst of it all. It is a voluminous apprehension, a towering impendency. You don't understand, George. You can't. The poor devil in Poe's 'Pit and the Pendulum' must have had a taste of my sensations. A first victim is being chosen. I have a vision of the spirits of composers small and great--standing up like suspects awaiting identification, while her eye

ranges over them. Chopin tries to edge behind Wagner, a difficult and forbidding person, and Gounod seeks eclipse of Mendelssohn, who suddenly drops and crawls on all fours between Gounod's legs; Sullivan cowers, and even Piccolomini's iron-framed nerves desert him. She extends her hand. There is a frantic rush to escape. Have you ever seen a little boy picking dormice out of a cage? I always see this same nightmare during that dreadful pause, a vision of a writhing heap of kicking, struggling, maddened composers, and of a ghoulish piano grinning expectant, jaw raised--lid I mean--and showing all its black and yellow keys. ... A melancholy shriek. Do you hear, George? Tito Mattel is captured. A song.

"Pum--So long the way--Pum--so dark the day--Pum--DEAR HEART! before you come.' So Tito Mattel comes pumming through the wall into my presence. I don't pity him. Indeed it is a positive relief that it is only Tito Mattel. The man's no deity at the best, and a little pulling out, and pulling crooked, and general patching together of limbs in the wrong place scarcely matters so far as he and my taste are concerned. Yet I always leave my work, George, when that begins, and walk about the room. I try to persuade myself that I need fresh air, but the autumnal day, the damp shiny street, has all the uninviting harshness of truth--I admit I do not. Tito flops about, is riddled with dropped notes and racked with hesitations, and presently becomes still. The murder is over.

"What next? That Study of Chopin's! This time the thing is more

inspiring. Once upon a time it was a favourite of mine. Now it is a favourite of the unseen lady's. She plays it with spirit, and conjures up strange fancies in my brain. The noises that come through the wall now, quicker, thicker, louder, are full of a tale of weltering confusion, marine disaster, a ship in sore labour; there is a steady beating like the sound of pumps, and a trickle of treble notes. There are black silences, like thunderclouds, that burst into flashes of music. Now the poor melody swings up into the air--then comes one of those terrible pauses, and now down into the abyss. A crash, an ineffectual beating, a spasmodic rush. I seem to hear the pumps again, distant, remote, ineffectual. But that is not so; the struggle is over. Chopin's Study has been battered to pieces; only disarticulated fragments toss amidst the froth. High up the confusion of the stormy sky she drives in a sieve dropping notes--the witch of the storm. La Belle Dame Sans Merci.

"But the third piece in her repertory has begun--Rubinstein. This, at any rate, is familiar. She plays with the confidence born of long unpunished misdoing. That Rubinstein must indeed be sorry, and unless their elysium is like the library of the Linnæan Society, and fitted with double windows, all the great departed musicians must be sorry too, that he ever wrote a Melody in F. Daily from the altars of a thousand, of ten thousand, school pianos that melody cries to heaven. From the empire of the music master, upon which the sun never sets, day and night, week in week out, from year to year, Rubinstein's Melody in F streams up for ever. These school pieces are like the Latin ritual

before the Reformation, they link all Christendom by a common use. As the earth spins, and the sunlight sweeps ever westward, that melody passes with the day. Now it is tinkling in a grey Moravian school, now it dawns upon the Adige and begins in Alsace, now it has reached Madrid, Paris, London. Then a devotee in some Connemara Establishment for Young Ladies sets to. Presently tall ships upon the silent main resound with it, and they are at it in the Azores and in Iceland, and then--one solitary tinkling, doubling, reduplicating, manifolding into an innumerable multitude--New York takes up the wondrous tale. On then with the dawn to desolate cattle ranches, the tablelands of Mexico, the level plains of Illinois and Michigan. So the great tide that started in Rubinstein's cranium proceeds upon its destiny. Always somewhere between the hours of eleven and two it comes back to me here, poor hunted composition, running its eternal world gauntlet, pursuing its Wandering Jew pilgrimage, and I curse and pity it as it goes by.... It has gone. The 'Maiden's Prayer' is next usually. Then one of the 'Lieder ohne Worte,' then the 'Dead March'--all of them but the meagre and mutilated skeletons of themselves; things of gaps and tatters, like gibbet trophies. They are as knocked about as a fleet coming out of action, they are as twisted and garbled as a Chinese war telegram; it is like an hospital for congenitally diseased compositions taking the air. And they have to hobble along sharply too; there is a certain cruel decision in the way the notes are struck, a Nurse Gillespie touch about this Invisible Lady. Or it may be the callousness of old habit, a certain sense of a duty overdone, a certain impatience at the long delay. You will hear.

"Listen!--Tum Tum Ti-ti-tum--No!--tum. Slight pause. Tum tum twiddle--vigorous crescendo--TUM. This is unusual! A stranger? A new piece for La Belle Dame Sans Merci? Her wonted reckless dash deserts her. She is, as it were, exploring a new region, and advances with mischievous coyness, with an affectation of a faltering heart, with hesitating steps. My imagination is stimulated by these dripping notes. I see her, as it were, on an uneven pavement; here the flags are set on end, there fungi have tilted them, a sharp turning of the page may reveal heaven knows what horrors; presently comes a black gap with a vault of dusty silence below. A pause, an incoherency, a repetition! She has encountered some difficulty, some slumbering coil of sharps and flats, and it raises its bristling front in her way.... She has fled back to the opening again. I begin to wonder what unhappy musician lies hidden in this new ruin, behind the bars of this melancholy confusion. There is something familiar but elusive, like a face that one has known and loved and lost and met again after the cruel changes of intervening years. It conjures up oddly enough a vision of a long room in the twilight, and an acacia in silhouette against the pale gold of the western sky. Ah! now I know!

"That of all pieces!

"I must have my walk, George. I cannot bear to hear that old-familiar music so evilly entreated. But, all the same, the memory it has touched will vibrate and smart; to-day and to-morrow, and I know not

for how many days, it will re-echo in my brain. All the old cloudy remorse that has subsided will be set astir again. I shall hear again a light touch upon the keys, see again the shadowy face against the sunset, try to recall the sound of a voice.... What evil spirit has put this mockery into the head of La Belle Dame? Surely without this----"

He made a dive at the folding doors and presently reappeared in his coat. It was the only intimation I ever had that my dear little uncle had such a thing as a Past.