

A BROKEN IDOL.

BY NED P. MAH.

Twin stars were her eyes; and her voice
Clear and sweet as the nightingale's song.
When we met how my heart would rejoice!
But its jubilee lasted not long.

For I thought the pure sheen of her eye—
The music my senses that stole—
Were the proofs of a nature divine
The signs of an innocent soul.

I thought that the glamour of wealth—
Empty honors of birth or of name—
Were to her less than youth, love and health,
And a brow that was quill-like of shame.

Alas! From my dream I awaken—
From my vision the phantom I blot,
An image of clay I have taken
For the beauty that perisheth not.

For ebony locks may whiten,
And roses may wither and die;
But the beauty of soul will brighten
And make fair its frail temple for aye.

My heart! Should we meet such, the serried
Fair, world-gladdened cohorts among—
Then awaken, O love, slain and buried,
Resurrect thee! Arise and be strong!

THE TRANSACTIONS OF THE CATO CLUB.

I.

An old-fashioned London street, somewhat gaunt and gloomy of aspect, ill-paved and badly lighted. As yet oil lamps have not given place to gas; the century is still in its teens; the Prince Regent fills the throne, whence mental infirmity has driven his revered sire George le Bien aimé.

"Twelve o'clock, and a frosty night." So proclaims a watchman of advanced age, clad in a many-caped coat, carrying a lantern and a rattle. He repeats the announcement at intervals, as he passes along. His slowly-moving form is soon merged and lost in the darkness; but his voice, echoing and re-echoing about the deserted streets, long continues audible.

A hackney-coach stops; two gentlemen alight. They pay the driver liberally, and dismiss him. They pause for a moment irresolutely.

"This is our way," says one to the other. "We are late; it is already midnight. Let us quicken our steps."

They draw their long cloaks closely around them, for they are meeting a bitter cold wind. As they pass beneath the feeble gleam of a projecting lamp it can be seen that the one man is some years older than the other, of taller figure and larger frame.

"This pernicious weather," observes the younger of the two, in rather peevish tones.

"What is the weather to us, in our mood and with what we have before us?" asks the other scornfully.

"The weather is a trifle; that may be admitted—what then? Life is made up of trifles. Misery is compounded of many ingredients. The sum may be important; but of what small figures it consists!"

They pause before the carved portico of a red brick house. Much ornate iron-work flourishes about the entrance, with extinguishers for the use of the bearers of links.

"One moment, Vane," says the elder man, with a certain solemnity of manner. "It is not yet too late; if your mind is not yet wholly made up, or if you have found reason to abandon opinions perhaps too hastily adopted—"

"My mind is quite made up," interrupts the other.

"You are really determined?"

"Most determined."

"Think yet a moment. You are young; life may yet have happiness in store for you."

"I have thought, and I have decided."

"You understand, Vane? Who enters here, leaves Hope behind."

"I understand, Feverell. Though it were the Cave of the Giant Despair I should enter."

"It is the Home of Despair, for that matter. You will allow that I have warned you?"

"Without doubt. Believe me, I am fully sensible of the kindness and consideration you have shown me in the matter."

"And it is to be?"

"It must be. It shall be."

"We will enter, then."

And he taps lightly at the door. It is silently opened by a powdered footman in dark livery. They deliver to him their cloaks, and appear in the most rigorous evening dress of the time. Their coats and small-clothes are of the finest black kerseymere, their broad stiff cravats are tied accurately round very erect sharp-edged collars; their open waistcoats display profusely frilled shirt-fronts; their wrists are daintily ruffled; they wear knee and shoe buckles, and black silk stockings; they carry dress swords by their sides, and cocked hats crushed beneath their arms.

They mount a broad but dimly lighted staircase, and enter presently a spacious and handsome chamber upon the first floor.

II.

A hum of low-voiced conversation. Groups of gentlemen, all in strict full dress, occupy the room. There is little laughter; but no air of gloom oppresses the company. The tone of refined society prevails: all is calmness, sobriety, undemonstrativeness.

"Who is the nobleman with the star and the blue ribbon?"—Mr. Vane whispers in the ear of Mr. Feverell.

"That is Lord Melgrave. He is for the time our president in right both of his age and of his rank. He is not really so old as he looks; but it is understood that he is ruined alike in health and in fortune. Altogether, he has suffered severely. He may well sigh for relief and release. No word of repining ever escapes him however. He bears himself always gallantly and gracefully; a most engaging, amiable, and accomplished nobleman; a very delightful companion and steadfast friend. The world will miss him seriously. But see, he advances to greet us."

Mr. Feverell presents his friend Mr. Vane to Lord Melgrave.

"A new member?" says Lord Melgrave. "I bid you welcome, sir, to the Cato Club. I am pleased to see you. You will pardon me if I say that you are young to desire to enter our ranks. But youth feels all things acutely, even that *tedium vite* perhaps which might seem to be the peculiar possession of age. I am old and ailing. I have undergone much; it need surprise no one that I am here. I should have escaped my troubles long since had such a way of escape seemed open to me. I looked and found none. The fault was mine, without a doubt. There is always a way open if we will but take it; and it needs no great wit to discover it. For you—we do not seek to be informed of your motives in joining us. We abstain from inquiry on that head: that is the etiquette of our society. It is sufficient for us that you are here. Mr. Feverell has of course explained to you the nature of our constitution, the objects of our association? Rules and regulations we can scarcely be said to possess. No oath or solemn compact binds us together. We do not affect the forms and ceremonies, the vulgar mummeries and juggleries of so-called secret tribunals and fraternities. We are simply an assembly of gentlemen. Our word of honor is pledged in the matter. What more is necessary? We are agreed not to betray confidence, to be true to the club and to each other until death. Surely it is sufficient that an honorable understanding in that respect exists amongst us! After all, it is but for a little while we are here. Time soon releases us from our obligations."

His lordship spoke in calmly-measured tones, with much graceful courtesy of manner. As he talked, he toyed with a superb snuff-box decked with diamonds, tapping its lid with his thin white fingers, and daintily lifting a pinch of its contents to his nose now and then. He owned a very lined and pallid face, his eyes wore a curious glassy look, he was of an attenuated figure, and his limbs trembled somewhat as he moved about the room. With a bow he quitted the two gentlemen and addressed himself to other members of the society.

Mr. Vane, behind his cocked hat, whispered to Mr. Feverell: "I fear his lordship is not long for this world."

"Who is?" demanded Mr. Feverell quickly. "And why should you fear it? There can be no doubt upon the subject, seeing where we are. But you spoke, of course, without thinking."

They approached the fireplace. Upon the massive chimney-piece of black marble stood a large bronze clock, supporting a statuette of classical design: a draped figure of a man, noble of pose, severe of expression, with large grandly-shaped features.

Mr. Feverell explained to his friend: "This represents, after the best authorities, the statesman and philosopher we view as in some measure the patron, if not the absolute founder, of our society, and whose name we have thought it not unbecoming in us to assume—Marcus Portius Cato, surnamed Uticensis from the place of his death."

"I have seen Mr. Kemble play the part," said Mr. Vane simply. "I was much impressed by his performance. Addison's tragedy is, I think, a very noble production."

"I need hardly say the work is held in esteem by this society."

"The scene of Cato's death is very powerful in representation."

"True. He does not stab himself *coram populo*, you remember. He respects too much the prescriptions of the classic theatre. Behind the scenes he inflicts upon himself his death wound, and then, reclining in his chair, he is brought on to die. We owe much to Cato and to the example he has left us, although here, perhaps, we bear in mind less the Cato of Plutarch and of Fact than the Cato of Addison and the Drama: the Cato who discovered that the Bane and Antidote were both before him; the Bane being Life, the Antidote Death. But I think supper is about to be served. You will understand that we are not absolute Stoics. We condescend to eat and drink, and recognise that the table offers certain pleasures, albeit to-morrow we die."

"What is the number of the company?" inquired Mr. Vane in a low tone.

"We usually contrive that it shall be thirteen."

"An ominous number."

"Say rather an appropriate number."

III.

Folding doors were thrown open. Lord Melgrave led the way into an adjoining chamber, where a liberal entertainment was provided. The table, lighted with many wax candles, gleamed with plate. In the centre stood a

gilded vase of antique pattern, filled with flowers, which but half concealed a singular object rising from their midst—a human skull, its surface so white and polished that it bore the look of ivory. Two bronze vases of minor size also ornamented the table, but these were empty.

"A death's head at a feast!" murmured Mr. Vane.

"We scarcely need that *memento mori*," said Mr. Feverell. "It is not in the best taste, perhaps, but the club rarely errs in such matters; and it is viewed as a sort of symbol of the society."

The chair was taken by Lord Melgrave, who remained standing, however, until all had found seats. An elegant supper was then served. Few ate with much appetite, albeit the dishes were of the most dainty and tempting sort. Of the wines and liquors, handed round with frequency by the liveried attendants, there was considerable consumption. Gradually the conversation quickened and gained in tone. Constraint was wearing away; the spirits of the company steadily rose. It cannot be said, however, that anything like merriment or sprightliness prevailed.

"May I know who is at the table?" asked Mr. Vane.

"I do not know all," replied his friend, looking round him. "I note one or two strange faces. They are probably, like yourself, new members. In a society like this there is, of course, constant change. The old members depart as the new enter. No man can count upon long continuance in the club, though there have been curious instances of longevity amongst us. That is entirely a matter of chance. The gentleman with the weak eyes immediately opposite to you is a poet of some fame; he maintains his last epic to be quite the noblest of his works. That is not a general opinion. He has come to the conclusion, therefore, that life is a vain and a wearisome, really an insufferable thing. Lower down sits a man with a bronzed face. He is a great traveller. He has travelled until he can travel no more. There is nowhere left for him to travel to. He has exhausted worlds, and cannot create new. He cannot rest in life—he seeks rest out of it, therefore, in that undiscovered country from which travellers do not usually return. Beside him there is a gallant soldier who has been brought face to face with death very often, and yet is not content. He would better the acquaintance. Need I describe others? The songs may differ, but their burthen is the same. We have amongst us a lover, a gambler, a priest, a physician, and a dandy who believes Wertherism is a fashion and that he is bound to be in it. And then there is the eminent advocate—I may even mention his name—Mr. Sergeant Fell—the distinguished prosecutor of so many wretched criminals; he, it seems, is seeking the end to which he has been wont to hurry others. Let us have another glass of wine."

"And you, Feverell, why are you here? May I ask so much?"

"I am poor and I am proud—I owe more than I can ever pay. Are you answered? I cannot dig; to beg I am ashamed. I inherited a noble name, and have done nothing worthy of it. If I live, I shall but dishonor it. That is my story in the fewest possible words. A glass of wine I say."

"Your health, Feverell."

"Hush! are you mad? We don't drink healths here. And now confidence for confidence. You have not told me clearly why you wished to join the Cato Club."

"Because I am a coward," said Vane abruptly.

"We are all cowards for that matter," muttered Feverell.

"The woman I loved—whom I still love—has been grossly and cruelly insulted. I have not dared to challenge the offender. He goes unpunished, proud of his infamy."

"What is the explanation?"

"He is my own father. She knows nothing of our relationship. How can I tell her of it? I must hold my tongue. She believes me a miserable poltroon, and drives me from her presence. It is more than I can bear. If I lived, I should kill him. It is better for me to be here."

"I have done you some injustice, Vane. There is more reason on your side than I believed possible. But, after all, to bring a man here, reason is not really required. Weak motives often urge men to act strongly. But—hush! our President is speaking. He is proposing a toast. We propose toasts, though we do not drink healths."

IV.

Lord Melgrave, his face of a ghastly pallor, had risen from his chair. His white lips were seen to move, but for the moment no sound escaped them.

"The wine is telling upon him," whispered Mr. Vane. The wine, indeed, had circulated very freely.

"It is not that," said Mr. Feverell, in a subdued tone. "His lordship is known to be a Hedonist. He is experienced in the pleasures and the penalties of opium-eating. He has employed the curative properties of the drug in relation to the cruel derangements and distresses of his health, both mental and physical. He has sought opium as an anodyne, a narcotic, a stimulant. I am amazed that he has not yet resorted to it as a poison. But of course that may come. Hush!"

"Gentlemen," his lordship was heard to say,

"I submit to you one of our well-known toasts: 'The Dagger and the Bowl.'"

Certain of the wax candles were extinguished. A flaming bowl of punch was brought into the room. The flaring and the flickering threw grotesque patches of light and shadow upon the faces of the company. The effect was weird and grim enough.

"Gentlemen," said his lordship, as he rose again presently, "I will ask you to charge your glasses that we may drink to the memory of our departed members."

Some little confusion here arose at the end of the table. One of the company seemed anxious to deliver some remarks upon the occasion. It was with difficulty he was restrained by those about him, who convinced him at last, however, that a more convenient opportunity for speech would be afforded him at a later period. The toast was received and drank not silently nor solemnly, but with a festive air, gaily and merrily, although the manner of the company was now rather feverish and unhealthy. A buzz of conversation ensued, to be hurriedly silenced, however, when it was perceived that Lord Melgrave was again about to speak.

He looked about him with dim, dreamy eyes, and there was something of drowsiness in his tones, as he said slowly and with effort, "Gentlemen, we now approach the most important business of the evening: the very object, indeed, that has brought us together. I could wish that the post I hold was more worthily filled. I am only too conscious of my own incompetence. An institution of this importance well deserves a more capable and qualified, a more eloquent president than I can pretend to be." (Here arose murmurs of "No! No!")

"I make you my excuses; I tender you my regrets. I am old; I am ill; I feel that I have not long to live—but in that respect, of course, my case is not singular." (He said this with an air of suddenly recollecting himself.) "You will understand, however, that to the best of my ability I desire—I am most anxious—to serve you. The rank which is mine by inheritance constitutes, I am well aware, my only claim to occupy this chair; for in this England of ours the custom prevails of choosing presidents from the peerage. I am your chairman, then, simply because of the name I bear, the accident of my birth, my title, and social position; otherwise, I see at this table men who could far more becomingly and efficiently preside over your meetings. I will trouble you with but a few more words. In the centre of the table stands the symbol of our society and its aims: Mortality, with attendant conditions of Beauty, Grace and Elegance. This is the Emblem of the Club: Death with Flowers. To that goal we would in turn hasten; not content to journey thitherward with the miserable tardiness, the dreary sluggishness which are the ordinary obligations and penalties of life. We would advance with alert action and quick step, not drag our limbs after us as though unwillingly we were urged along a dreaded path. We differ, I may point out, from other clubs. They ballot for entrance; we ballot for exit. We shall determine presently by lot the member who is privileged to depart from among us, and whose face, after this night, we shall not again look upon in life. He will go from us, I need hardly say, accompanied by our heartiest congratulations, our best wishes. It is understood that we do not oppress him with rules and formulas. The exact manner of his abandonment of the burden of existence we leave to him to select. The club is composed, I need not remind you, of men of honor, refinement and taste. We can unquestionably trust ourselves and each other; we need not be troubled with doubts and misgivings on that head. I propose that we proceed in the usual way. In one of the empty bronze vases upon the table will be deposited cards inscribed with the names of the members who are present; in the other vase will be placed tickets numbered 1 to 13. The youngest member present will officiate with one hand he will draw a name, with the other a number. No. 13 is the winning number. This method of proceeding is authorized by the unwritten laws of the club, and has been found satisfactory in practice."

"And he who draws No. 13?" asked Mr. Vane, in a whisper, of his friend.

"No. 13 will depart from amongst us, as his lordship has expressed it. No. 13 will set forth promptly upon his journey from this world to the next."

While arrangements were in progress for the casting of lots as described by Lord Melgrave, the gentleman sitting at the further end of the table, who had before attempted to speak, now found his opportunity, and addressed the assembly:

"I desire, with the permission of our noble chairman, to bring a matter of some importance—pertinent, I think, to the proceedings before us—under the notice of the club. I will for the present refrain from the mention of names. But at our last meeting, I may remind the club, it was decided in the customary manner that a certain member of our body should—in point of fact—if I may avail myself of the language of our great poet—who had given much study to the subject" (cries of "hear! hear!")—"shuffle off this mortal coil. Now, I don't desire to bring an absolute charge of breach of faith against any one. I may add, that I am the last man in the world to urge undue haste in the matters with which—in point of fact—the club is chiefly concerned. I think it right to mention, however, that the member in question has certainly not hurried himself. He can