

LA SONNAMBULA.

I.

The people of our large cities cannot boast of much knowledge of Italian opera. The little that they have heard is of an inferior cast—worn voices, broken stage machinery, and weak orchestration. Lovers of music, however,—and they are found everywhere,—do not fail to throng the scene, whenever occasion is furnished of hearing the works of the masters. They overlook the flaws of detail, for the sake of having a taste of the whole, and spending a few hours under the spell of such geniuses as Rossini, Donizetti, or Bellini.

Some years ago a company appeared in the town of my birth, with rather more than the ordinary titles to success. In their repertory there was *La Sonnambula*, in which the part of Amina was uncommonly well done by a young actress from Naples.

Bellini's masterpiece had already been given twice, but the public insisted on a third rehearsal, for the benefit of the young singer who personified the heroine. That night the theatre was crowded from pit to dome. I had bought a box to myself, having a fancy to be alone, on such occasions, for the better enjoyment of the music. I was not destined, however, to have this selfish satisfaction that evening, for, a little before the curtain rose, my friend, Harry Wills, knocked at the door and informed me that Janet Dalton, with her father and mother, had got as far as the lobby, but could not secure seats anywhere. Under ordinary circumstances, I should not have budged from my seat for anybody, but, on this occasion, I arose at once and offered my whole box to the Daltons. My reasons were that Harry was a particular friend of mine; that Janet was my own cousin, and the most charming of my rather many fair cousins, and, further, that Harry and Janet were dead in love with one another. I made Harry take a seat beside his sweetheart, while I retreated to the background of the box, where I enjoyed something of my coveted solitude.

There is no need to enter in a summary of *La Sonnambula*. It must be heard, and heard under favourable conditions, to be rightly appreciated. It bears the same relation to Bellini's *Norma* that Tasso's *Aminata* does to his immortal *Gierusalemme Liberata*. It is a delicious idyl, redolent of spring-time and the dawn, resonant with the song of birds and the joy of happy nature, palpitating with the freshness, the simplicity, the purity of pastoral love.

As I said before, the performance was remarkably good. The beautiful part of Amina was specially well done by the young Neapolitan. Her voice was not of vast power or range, but it was rich in the lower notes, and very sweet in the upper scales. Though I had heard the opera before, in Europe, and by the best artists, I was completely absorbed in the present representation, discovering new beauties therein which I had not hitherto noticed. Indeed, my mind was so fastened on the stage, that I took no heed of my companions in the box, nor of the crowd in the pit and galleries. I did not even feel any weariness on standing upright for nearly three hours.

The last and chief act came on. The young Neapolitan appeared on the thatched roof of her straw hut, and walked down thence across the slender bridge over the mill dam, where the water-wheel boomed and flashed. Her eyes were shut; her hair was fallen; she was clad in her white night-dress, and, in that sorry plight, the sleep-walker traversed the dangerous footpath over the dashing waters—dreaming of love. She had a nosegay of wild flowers in her hand, which she plucked, leaf by leaf, and threw into the flood, while her pale lips whispered the ravishing song:

Ah! non credea mirarti
Si presto estinto, o fiore!

A pin might have been heard to drop in the vast building. Why, I cannot tell, but just then I happened to glance at my friends before me, and noticed that Janet was a prey to the most violent emotion. Neither her old parents nor Harry had

knowledge of it. She was sobbing silently, and, from the convulsive movements of her shoulders, I could see that she was making vain efforts to withhold herself. My attention was, however, soon withdrawn from her, by the orchestra working itself up for the great conclusion, which I would not have missed for the world. Yes! There it was again, that delightful *rondo*, so full of love, of sweetness and of sorrow. The artist seemed to excel herself in singing it. I, too, wept when I heard:

Ah! non giunge uman pensiero!

The last note had been played, the curtain had already fallen, and still the audience were under the spell of the somnambulist's apparition. Suddenly a cry and acclamation arose, demanding the favourite back before the footlights. In the noise and confusion that ensued, I noticed that the Daltons precipitately left the box, passing before me without a word.

"What is the matter?" I asked of Harry.

"Janet is quite ill," he replied.

I followed them to the main door and called their carriage. Harry offered to accompany them home, but old Uncle Dalton sternly refused.

It was not the first time he had tried the patience of the young man, being opposed to a match between his daughter and Harry, although why, no one could tell. Harry's family was in everyway worth that of the girl. He was of the same wealthy and respectable station in life, and they had loved each other for years.

Harry was deeply stung by the roughness of the old man that night, and said, in a rush of discouragement and disgust, that he was tempted to leave the city for ever and at once. I tried to comfort him, and we walked about the streets a long time, talking about all sorts of things that I brought up to distract him. At length I prevailed on him to put up at my rooms for the rest of the night.

"To-morrow morning," I said, "I shall call on Uncle Dalton myself and argue this matter with him seriously. If he won't listen to me, I am sure my aunt will, for she is my mother's sister, a Talon and a Creole, and a kind, sensible woman, like all Creoles."

With this assurance, we threw away our cigars, and went up to my bachelor's quarters, which were situated nearly opposite the palatial dwelling of the Daltons, on Olive street.

II.

Janet was a pale, delicate girl, whose health was always bordering on the first stages of consumption. Medical art had kept her aloof from it so far, but any slight mishap—physical, mental or moral—would be enough to cast her into it, without help. Her father loved her well, but he was a self-willed man, who took upon himself to guide her, according to his own whims, at that critical period of a girl's life—her first love. Janet was a dutiful, good girl, who tried hard to do her father's bidding, but she could not uproot her love, and the very effort to do so harmed her health. It was her misfortune, too, to be very nervous in temperament. The least exciting circumstance set her whole frame going, and even her artistic tastes were often the occasion of keen pain, that marred her otherwise thorough enjoyment of poetry and music.

No one—not even myself—had gloated on the beauties of Bellini's opera as she had. Being a confirmed bachelor, I had no objective love to which I could adapt the situations of *La Sonnambula*, whereas Janet, living wholly and singly in Harry, made him the Count Rodolfo of Bellini's creation, and recognized her own yearnings in those of Amina. The consequence was that while every note of the immortal score sank deep into my heart, soothing and softening the same, it proved for Janet a new language of passionate love, which unstrung her delicate nerves, and plunged her into a storm of feeling that she had neither the physical nor moral strength to withhold. Hence, it was no wonder that, at the end of the performance, she should be very ill.

Not more than three hours had elapsed since we left the theatre, when I fancied I heard some-

one pulling at my night bell. Harry was fast asleep in the next room, and I had most likely slept too, so that I was not quite sure whether there had been ringing or not. A second pull at the wire, however, left me in no doubt. I ran to the window and asked who was there.

"'Tis me, Mas'r Laclede."

I recognized the voice of old Dada, Aunt Dalton's fat cook.

"Massa an' missus wants you to come over right away, Lal."

Remembering Janet's illness, and fearing that something was wrong, I hastily slipped on my clothes, and darted down the stairs. Nancy was already gone, and I crossed the street at once. On coming to the front door, it was opened by the cook, who exclaimed, breathlessly:

"Run into the garden, Lal, dear; run!"

I rushed in the direction pointed out, and, in a moment, reached the scene of consternation. In the vast garden there was a long bower built for the propping of vines, which my uncle was very fond of raising. This bower was terminated by a pavilion, some fourteen feet high, in a yet unfinished state. This he meant for a summer house, and, with that view, was setting up stone tables and seats in it. On my coming up, what was my amazement to find that Janet had climbed to the top of the pavilion, and was slowly walking along its edge. She had a bunch of flowers in her hand, the same that I had seen Harry give her at the opera. Her eyes were shut; she was barefoot, and had her night-clothes on.

"Somnambulism!" I whispered to my uncle and aunt.

"Yes, and all on account of that confounded opera," muttered the old man.

"Never mind the cause!" exclaimed the anxious mother. "Laclede, my boy, you must help us to rescue our child from her perilous position. I am almost paralyzed with fear."

The position was indeed dangerous. Janet had already been called by name, but had given no answer. To call her too gruffly or loudly might startle her and cause her to lose her footing. To apply a ladder to the framework of the pavilion was out of the question, as it hardly held together. It swayed and cracked even under Janet's gentle, measured tread. If she awoke suddenly, she would certainly fall; if she awoke gradually, she could not possibly find her way down with safety. In either case, she would inevitably be precipitated on the fragments of stone and marble below, and, from such a height, the fall would be deadly. The only hope of rescue was to have her come down in her sleep-walking state. She would thus come down as safely, although unaccountably, as she had gone up. But how was this to be carried out? I imparted my notion to the father and mother, who approved it, but were equally at a loss how to put it through. At last, a bright thought struck me.

"Will you let me do just what I want?" I asked them.

"Oh, yes, yes!" they both exclaimed, "but be quick. Save our child and we shall be for ever grateful to you."

III.

Without saying more, I rushed out of the garden, through the house, and across the street to my rooms. I pulled Harry out of bed and, in a few short words, laid the matter before him.

"There is your providential opportunity, my boy," I said. "Take my guitar from the wall there and come along."

In five minutes we were back into the garden. I pushed Harry behind a huge catalpa, and then walked up to the pavilion.

"Well?" said my uncle and aunt together.

"All right!" I answered.

Just then the sweet sounds of the guitar were heard, preluding an air of *La Sonnambula*.

My uncle and aunt looked at me.

"Pst!" I whispered, putting my finger on my lips.

Then, in a soft, mellow voice—Harry had a very fair tenor—was repeated the following:

Ah! non giunge