

Three Little Poems In Prose

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The Clock

The Chinese can tell the time by looking in the eyes of a cat.

One day a missionary, while walking in the suburbs of Nankin, found that he had forgotten his watch, and asked a little boy what the time was. The gutter-snipe of the Flowery Kingdom hesitated at first, then, recollecting himself, he replied, "I will find out for you." A minute later he reappeared, holding in his arms a fine big cat, and looking, as the saying is, in the white of its eyes, he unhesitatingly affirmed, "It is just a little before noon" This turned out to be the case.

As to me, if I bend over towards my beautiful Feline, so well named, who is at once the glory of her sex, the pride of my heart, and the incense of my spirit, whether it be night, or whether it be day, in broad daylight or thick darkness, in the abyss of her adorable eyes I always read the hour most clearly. This hour is always the same; vast, solemn, wide as space, without division into minutes or seconds; a motionless hour which is not marked on clocks, and yet is light as a sigh, swift as a glance. And if some importunate person were to come and disturb me while my gaze rests on this delicious dial, if some false and intolerant spirit, some demon of unlucky accident, were to come and say to me, "What are you looking at with such intensity? What do you seek in the eyes of this being? Do you see there the time? Ah, spendthrift and do-nothing mortal!" I should reply unhesitatingly "Yes, I see the time; it is eternity."

Now, Madam, is not that a really meritorious madrigal, and as pompous as yourself? In good sooth, I have taken so much pleasure in embroidering this pretentious piece of gallantry that I shall ask you for nothing in return.



The Temptations; or, Love, Riches and Glory

Two superb Satans and a She-Devil not less remarkable than they, last night climbed the mysterious staircase by which Hell emerges to assault the weakness of a sleeping man, and secretly communicates with him. In their glory they came as it were erect upon a platform and stood in front of me. A sulfurous splendor emanated from these three mighty Beings, cutting them from the thick darkness of the night. So proud and so masterful was their manner that at first I took them to be indeed gods.

The face of the first Satan was epicene, and he had also in every line of his body the softness of old Bacchus. Lovely were his eyes, and languishing, of a shadowy and undecided color, resembling violets still wetted with the heavy tears of the storm, and his half-opened lips seemed like warm caskets of perfume, whence he exhaled a subtle scent, and every time he sighed, musk-scented butterflies gat light, on their winged way, from the ardor of his breath.

Around his purple tunic was twisted as a belt a gleaming serpent, who, with raised head, turned languorously toward him eyes that were like glowing coals. From this living girdle were suspended alternately phials full of deadly liquids, shining knives and surgical instruments. In his right hand he held another phial, filled with a luminous red liquid, and which bore these strange words: "Drink, this is my blood, the perfect cordial." In the left hand he bore a violin, which he used,

no doubt, to sing his pleasures and his sorrows, and to spread the contagion of his folly on the nights of the Witches' Sabbath.

From his delicate ankles dragged some rings of a broken chain of gold, and when the constraint which this occasioned him made him lower his eyes to the ground, he contemplated vaingloriously the nails of his feet, brilliant and polished like well-worked stones.

With his inconsolably sad eyes he looked upon me, with his eyes whence flowed an insidious intoxication. And he intoned these words: "If thou wilt, if thou wilt, I will make thee the Lord of Souls, and thou shalt be the master of living matter, more so than the sculptor can be of his clay, and thou shalt know the pleasure, ceaselessly reborn, of leaving thyself to forget thyself in another, and to draw other souls until thou dost confound them with thine own."

And I answered him, "Thank you for nothing. What should I do with this parcel of beings, who doubtless are worth no more than my poor self? Though I have sometimes shame in remembering, I wish to forget nothing. And even if I did not know you, old monster, your mysterious cutlery, you ambiguous phials, the chains with which your feet are cumbered are symbols which explain clearly enough the inconveniences of your friendship. Keep your presents to yourself!"

The second Satan had not that air at the same time tragic and smiling, nor those insinuating manners, nor that delicate and scented beauty. It was a hulk of a man, with coarse, eyeless face, whose heavy paunch hung over his thighs, and all whose skin was gilded and as if tattooed with the images of a crowd of little moving figures to represent the innumerable forms of universal wretchedness. There were little lank men who had hung themselves from a nail; there were little misshapen gnomes, exceeding thin, whose pleading eyes demanded alms even more than did their trembling hands, and then there were old mothers carrying abortions

slung at their wasted breasts, and many another was there.

The great Satan knocked with his fist on his enormous belly, whence came a long, resounding clangor of metal, which ended in a vague groan as of many human voices, and he laughed, showing shamelessly his decayed teeth in an enormous and imbecile guffaw, just as do certain men in every country when they have dined too well.

And he said to me: "I can give thee that which obtains all, that which is worth all, that which replaces all"; and he beat upon his monstrous belly, whose sonorous echo made the commentary on his coarse utterance.

I turned aside with disgust, and answered him: "In order to enjoy myself, I have no need of the wretchedness of anyone, and I refuse a wealth saddened like a soiled tapestry with all the misfortunes represented on your skin."

As to the great She-Devil, I should lie if I did not admit that at the first sight I found a bizarre charm in her. To define this charm, I know nothing better to compare it to than to that of very beautiful women who, though in their decadence, no longer grow older, and whose beauty has the penetrating magic of ruins. Her air was at once imperious and loose; and her eyes, although heavily ringed, were full of the force of fascination. What struck me most was the mystery of her voice, at whose sound I recalled both the most delicious contralto singers, and also a little of that hoarseness which characterizes the throats of very old drunkards.

"Wilt thou know my power?" cried the false goddess with her charming and paradoxical voice; "Listen!" and she put to her mouth a gigantic trumpet covered with ribands like the reed-pipe, on which were written the titles of all the newspapers in the world, and through this trumpet she cried my name, which thus rolled across space with the noise of a hundred thousand thunders, and came back to me on the echo of the most distant of the planets.

"The Devil!" cried I, half conquered, "there is a precious thing!" But, in examining more closely the seductive Amazon, it seemed to me vaguely that I remembered having seen her drinking with some fools of my acquaintance, and the raucous sound of the brass bore to my ears I know not what remembrance of a venal trumpet.

So I replied with all my scorn: "Be off with you; I am not the man to marry the mistress of certain persons whom I will not mention."

Certainly, of so courageous a self-denial I had every right to be proud; but unfortunately I awoke, and all my strength deserted me. "Indeed," said I to myself, "I must have been very soundly asleep to show such scruples. Ah, if they could return now that I am awake I should not play the prude."

And I called aloud upon them, beseeching them to pardon me; offering to give up my honor as often as must be to deserve their favor; but I had doubtless bitterly offended them, for they have never returned.



The Polite Gunner

As the carriage rolled through the wood, he stopped it in the neighborhood of a shooting gallery, saying it would be agreeable to him to fire a few shots to kill time. To kill that monster is surely the most ordinary and legitimate occupation of all of us, is it not?

And he offered politely his hand to his beloved, delicious, execrable wife, to the mysterious woman to whom he owes so many pleasures, so many sorrows, and perhaps also a great part of his genius.

Several balls struck far from the hull's-eye; one of them even buried itself in the ceiling. And as the charming creature laughed wildly, in mockery of her husband's bad shooting, he turned sharply towards her and said,

"You see that doll down there on the right with its nose in the air and so haughty an expression?—Well, my dear angel, I imagine to myself that it is you," and he shut his eyes and pulled the trigger. The doll was cleanly beheaded.

Then, bending towards his beloved, his delicious, his execrable wife, his inevitable and pitiless muse, he kissed her hand respectfully, and added, "Ah, dear angel, how I thank you for my skill!"