

Xelucha

by M. P. Shiel, 1865-1947

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„He goeth after her...and knoweth not...“
(From a diary)

THREE days ago! by heaven, it seems an age. But I am shaken—my reason is debauched. A while since, I fell into a momentary coma precisely resembling an attack of petit mal. „Tombs, and worms, and epitaphs“—that is my dream. At my age, with my physique, to walk staggery, like a man stricken! But all that will pass: I must collect myself—my reason is debauched. Three days ago! it seems an age! I sat on the floor before an old cista full of letters. I lighted upon a packet of Cosmo's. Why, I had forgotten them! they are turning sere! Truly, I can no more call myself a young man. I sat reading, listlessly, rapt back by memory. To muse is to be lost! of that evil habit I must wring the neck, or look to perish. Once more I threaded the mazy sphere-harmony of the minuet, reeled in the waltz, long pomps of candelabra, the noonday of the bacchanal, about me.

Cosmo was the very tsar and maharajah of the Sybarites! the Priap of the détraqués! In every unexpected alcove of the Roman Villa was a couch, raised

high, with necessary foot-stool, flanked and canopied with mirrors of clarified gold. Consumption fastened upon him; reclining at last at table, he could, till warmed, scarce lift the wine! his eyes were like two fat glow-worms, coiled together! they seemed haloed with vaporous emanations of phosphorus! Desperate, one could see, was the secret struggle with the Devourer. But to the end the princely smile persisted calm; to the end—to the last day—he continued among that comic crew unchallenged choragus of all the rites, I will not say of Paphos, but of Chemos! and Baal-Peor! Warmed, he did not refuse the revel, the dance, the darkened chamber. It was utterly black, rayless; approached by a secret passage; in shape circular; the air hot, haunted always by odours of balms, bdellium, hints of dulcimer and flute; and radiated round with a hundred thick-strewn ottomans of Morocco.

Here Lucy Hill stabbed to the heart Caccofogo, mistaking the scar of his back for the scar of Soriac. In a bath of malachite the Princess Eglá, waking late one morning, found Cosmo lying stiffly dead, the water covering him wholly.

„But in God's name, Mérimée!“ (so he wrote), „to think of Xélucha dead! Xélucha! Can a moon-beam, then, perish of suppurations? Can the rainbow be eaten by worms? Ha! ha! ha! laugh with me, my friend: elle dérangera l'Enfer! She will introduce the pas de tarantule into Tophet! Xélucha, the feminine Xélucha recalling the splendid harlots of history! Weep with me—manat rara meas lacrima per genas! expert as Thargelia; cultured as Aspatia; purple as Semiramis. She comprehended the human tabernacle, my friend, its secret springs and tempers, more intimately than any savant of Salamanca who breathes. Tarare—but Xélucha is not dead!

Vitality is not mortal; you cannot wrap flame in a shroud. Xélucha! where then is she? Translated, perhaps—rapt to a constellation like the daughter of Leda. She journeyed to Hindostan, accompanied by the train and appurtenance of a Begum, threatening descent upon the Emperor of Tartary. I spoke of the desolation of the West; she kissed me, and promised return.

Mentioned you, too, Mérimée—her Conqueror—Mérimée, Destroyer of Woman. A breath from the conservatory rioted among the ambery whiffs of her forelocks, sending it singly a-wave over that thulite tint you know. Costumed cap-à-pie, she had, my friend, the dainty little completeness of a daisy mirrored bright in the eye of the browsing ox. A simile of Milton had for years, she said, inflamed the lust of her Eye: (The barren plains of Sericana, where Chinese drive with sails and wind their cany wagons light.) I, and the Sabæans, she assured me, wrongly considered Flame the whole of being; the other half of things being Aristotle's quintessential light. In the Ourania Hierarchia and the Faust-book you meet a completeness: burning Seraph, Cherûb full of eyes. Xélucha combined them. She would reconquer the Orient for Dionysius, and return. I heard of her blazing at Delhi; drawn in a chariot by lions. Then this rumour—probably false. Indeed, it comes from a source somewhat turgid. Like Odin, Arthur, and the rest, Xélucha—will reappear.

Soon subsequently, Cosmo lay down in his balneum of malachite, and slept, having drawn over him the water as a coverlet. I, in England, heard little of Xélucha: first that she was alive, then dead, then alighted at old Tadmor in the Wilderness, Palmyra now. Nor did I greatly care, Xélucha having long since turned to apples of Sodom in my mouth. Till I sat by the cista of letters and re-read Cosmo, she had for some years passed from my active memories.

The habit is now confirmed in me of spending the greater part of the day in sleep, while by night I wander far and wide through the city under the sedative influence of a tincture which has become necessary to my life. Such an existence of shadow is not without charm; nor, I think, could many minds be steadily subjected to its conditions without elevation, deepened awe. To travel alone with the Primordial cannot but be solemn. The moon is of the hue of the glow-worm; and Night of the sepulchre. Nux bore not less Thanatos than Hupuos, and the bitter tears of Isis redundate to a flood. At three, if a cab rolls by, the sound has the augustness of thunder. Once, at two, near a corner, I came upon a priest, seated, dead, leering, his legs bent. One arm, supported on a knee, pointed with rigid accusing forefinger obliquely upward. By exact observation, I found that he indicated Betelgeux, the star „a“ which shoulders the wet sword of Orion. He was hideously swollen, having perished of dropsy. Thus in all Supremes is a grotesquerie; and one of the sons of Night is—Buffo.

In a London square deserted, I should imagine, even in the day, I was aware of the metallic, silvery-clinking approach of little shoes. It was three in a heavy morning of winter, a day after my rediscovery of Cosmo. I had stood by the railing, regarding the clouds sail as under the sea-legged pilotage of a moon wrapped in cloaks of inclemency. Turning, I saw a little lady, very gloriously dressed. She had walked straight to me. Her head was bare, and crisped with the amber stream which rolled lax to a globe, kneaded thick with jewels, at her nape. In the redundance of her décolleté development, she resembled Parvati, mound-hipped love-goddess of the luscious fancy of the Brahmin.

She addressed to me the question:

„What are you doing there, darling?“

Her loveliness stirred me, and Night is bon camarade. I replied:

„Sunning myself by means of the moon.“

„All that is borrowed lustre,“ she returned, „you have got it from old Drummond’s Flowers of Sion.“

Looking back, I cannot remember that this reply astonished me, though it should—of course—have done so. I said:

„On my soul, no; but you?“

„You might guess whence I come!“

„You are dazzling. You come from Paz.“

„Oh, farther than that, my son! Say a subscription ball in Soho.“

„Yes?...and alone? in the cold? on foot...?“

„Why, I am old, and a philosopher. I can pick you out riding Andromeda yonder from the ridden Ram. They are in error, M’sieur, who suppose an atmosphere on the broad side of the moon. I have reason to believe that on Mars dwells a race whose lids are transparent like glass; so that the eyes are visible during sleep; and every varying dream moves imaged forth to the beholder in tiny panorama on the limpid iris. You cannot imagine me a mere fille! To be escorted is to admit yourself a woman, and that is improper in Nowhere. Young Eos drives an équipage à quatre, but Artemis ‘walks’ alone. Get out of my borrowed light in the name of Diogenes! I am going home.“

„Near Piccadilly.“

„But a cab?“

„No cabs for me, thank you. The distance is a mere nothing. Come.“

We walked forward. My companion at once put an interval between us, quoting from the Spanish Curate that the open is an enemy to love. The

Talmudists, she twice insisted, rightly held the hand the sacreddest part of the person, and at that point also contact was for the moment interdict. Her walk was extremely rapid. I followed. Not a cat was anywhere visible. We reached at length the door of a mansion in St. James's. There was no light. It seemed tenantless, the windows all uncurtained, pasted across, some of them, with the words, To Let. My companion, however, flitted up the steps, and, beckoning, passed inward. I, following, slammed the door, and was in darkness. I heard her ascend, and presently a region of glimmer above revealed a stairway of marble, curving broadly up. On the floor where I stood was no carpet, nor furniture: the dust was very thick. I had begun to mount when, to my surprise, she stood by my side, returned; and whispered:

„To the very top, darling.“

She soared nimbly up, anticipating me. Higher, I could no longer doubt that the house was empty but for us. All was a vacuum full of dust and echoes. But at the top, light streamed from a door, and I entered a good-sized oval saloon, at about the centre of the house. I was completely dazzled by the sudden resplendence of the apartment. In the midst was a spread table, square, opulent with gold plate, fruit dishes; three ponderous chandeliers of electric light above; and I noticed also (what was very bizarre) one little candlestick of common tin containing an old soiled curve of tallow, on the table. The impression of the whole chamber was one of gorgeousness not less than Assyrian. An ivory couch at the far end was made sun-like by a head-piece of chalcedony forming a sea for the sport of emerald ichthyotauri. Copper hangings, panelled with mirrors in iasperated crystal, corresponded with a dome of flame and copper; yet this latter, I now remember, produced upon my glance an impression of actual grime. My companion reclined on a small Sigma couch, raised high to the table-level in the Semitic manner, visible to her saffron slippers of satin. She pointed me a seat opposite. The incongruity of its presence in the middle of this arrogance of pomp so tickled me, that no power could have kept me from a smile: it was a grimy chair, mean, all wood, nor was I long in discovering one leg somewhat shorter than its fellows.

She indicated wine in a black glass bottle, and a tumbler, but herself made no pretence of drinking or eating. She lay on hip and elbow, petite, resplendent, and looked gravely upward. I, however, drank.

„You are tired,“ I said, „one sees that.“

„It is precious little than you see!“ she returned, dreamy, hardly glancing.

„How! your mood is changed, then? You are morose.“

„You never, I think, saw a Norse passage-grave?“

„And abrupt.“

„Never?“

„A passage-grave? No.“

„It is worth a journey! They are circular or oblong chambers of stone, covered by great earthmounds, with a passage of slabs connecting them with the outer air. All round the chamber the dead sit with head resting upon the bent knees, and consult together in silence.“

„Drink wine with me, and be less Tartarean.“

„You certainly seem to be a fool,“ she replied with perfect sardonic iciness. „Is it not, then, highly romantic? They belong, you know, to the Neolithic age. As the teeth fall, one by one, from the lipless mouths—they are caught by the lap.

When the lap thins—they roll to the floor of stone. Thereafter, every tooth that drops all round the chamber sharply breaks the silence.“

„Ha! ha! ha!“

„Yes. It is like a century-slow, circularly-successive dripping of slime in some cavern of the far subterrene.“

„Ha! ha! This wine seems heady! They express themselves in a dialect largely dental.“

„The Ape, on the other hand, in a language wholly guttural.“

A town-clock tolled four. Our talk was holed with silences, and heavy-paced. The wine's yeasty exhalation reached my brain. I saw her through mist, dilating large, uncertain, shrinking again to dainty compactness. But amorousness had died within me.

„Do you know,“ she asked, „what has been discovered in one of the Danish Kjökkenmöddings by a little boy? It was ghastly. The skeleton of a huge fish with human—“

„You are most unhappy.“

„Be silent.“

„You are full of care.“

„I think you a great fool.“

„You are racked with misery.“

„You are a child. You have not even an instinct of the meaning of the word.“

„How! Am I not a man? I, too, miserable, careful?“

„You are not, really, anything—until you can create.“

„Create what?“

„Matter.“

„That is foppish. Matter cannot be created, nor destroyed.“

„Truly, then, you must be a creature of unusually weak intellect. I see that now. Matter does not exist, then, there is no such thing, really—it is an appearance, a spectrum—every writer not imbecile from Plato to Fichte has, voluntary or involuntary, proved that for good. To create it is to produce an impression of its reality upon the senses of others; to destroy it is to wipe a wet rag across a scribbled slate.“

„Perhaps. I do not care. Since no one can do it.“

„No one? You are mere embryo—“

„Who then?“

„Anyone, whose power of Will is equivalent to the gravitating force of a star of the First Magnitude.“

„Ha! ha! ha! By heaven, you choose to be facetious. Are there then wills of such equivalence?“

„There have been three, the founders of religions. There was a fourth: a cobbler of Herculaneum, whose mere volition induced the cataclysm of Vesuvius in '79 in direct opposition to the gravity of Sirius. There are more fames than you have ever sung, you know.“

„The greater number of disembodied spirits, too, I feel certain—“

„By heaven, I cannot but think you full of sorrow! Poor wight! come, drink with me. The wine is thick and boon. Is it not Setian? It makes you sway and swell before me, I swear, like a purple cloud of evening—“

„But you are mere clayey ponderance!—I did not know that!—you are no companion! your little interest revolves round the lowest centres.“

„Come—forget your agonies—“

„What, think you, is the portion of the buried body first sought by the worm?“

„The eyes! the eyes!“

„You are hideously wrong—you are so utterly at sea—“

„My God!“

She had bent forward with such rage of contradiction as to approach me closely. A loose gown of amber silk, wide-sleeved, had replaced her ball attire, though at what opportunity I could not guess; wondering, I noticed it as she now placed her palms far forth upon the table. A sudden wafture as of spice and orange-flowers, mingled with the abhorrent faint odour of mortality over-ready for the tomb, greeted my sense. A chill crept upon my flesh.

„You are so hopelessly at fault—“

„For God's sake—“

„You are so miserably deluded! Not the eyes at all!“

„Then, in heaven's name, what?“

Five tolled from a clock.

„The Uvula! the soft drop of mucous flesh, you know, suspended from the palate above the glottis. They eat through the face-cloth and cheek, or crawl by the lips through a broken tooth, filling the mouth. They make straight for it. It is the deliciæ of the vault.“

At her horror of interest I grew sick, at her odour, and her words. Some unspeakable sense of insignificance, of debility, held me dumb.

„You say I am full of sorrows. You say I am racked with woe; that I gnash with anguish. Well, you are a mere child in intellect. You use words without realization of meaning like those minds in what Leibnitz calls ›symbolical consciousness‹. But suppose it were so—“

„It is so.“

„You know nothing.“

„I see you twist and grind. Your eyes are very pale. I thought they were hazel. They are of the faint bluishness of phosphorus shimmerings seen in darkness.“

„That proves nothing.“

„But the ›white‹ of the sclerotic is dyed to yellow. And you look inward. Why do you look so palely inward, so woe-worn, upon your soul? Why can you speak of nothing but the sepulchre, and its rottenness? Your eyes seem to me wan with centuries of vigil, with mysteries and millenniums of pain.“

„Pain! but you know so little of it! you are wind and words! of its philosophy and rationale nothing!“

„Who knows?“

„I will give you a hint. It is the sub-consciousness in conscious creatures of Eternity, and of eternal loss. The least prick of a pin not Pæan and Æsculapius and the powers of heaven and hell can utterly heal. Of an everlasting loss of pristine wholeness the conscious body is sub-conscious, and ›pain‹ is its sigh at the tragedy. So with all pain—greater, the greater the loss. The hugest of losses is, of course, the loss of Time. If you lose that, any of it, you plunge at once into the transcendentalisms, the infinitudes, of Loss; if you lose all of it—“

„But you so wildly exaggerate! Ha! ha! You rant, I tell you, of commonplaces with the woe—“

„Hell is where a clear, untrammelled Spirit is sub-conscious of lost Time; where it boils and writhes with envy of the living world; hating it for ever, and all the sons of Life!“

„But curb yourself! Drink—I implore—I implore—for God’s sake—but once—“

„To hasten to the snare—that is woe! to drive your ship upon the lighthouse rock—that is Marah! To wake, and feel it irrevocably true that you went after her—and the dead were there---and her guests were in the depths of hell—and you did not know it!---though you might have.

„Look out upon the houses of the city this dawning day: not one, I tell you, but in it haunts some soul—walking up and down the old theatre of its little Day—goaded imagination by a thousand childish tricks, vraisemblances—elaborately duping itself into the momentary fantasy that it still lives, that the chance of life is not for ever and for ever lost—yet riving all the time with under-memories of the wasted Summer, the lapsed brief light between the two eternal glooms—riving I say and shriek to you!—riving, Mérimée, you destroying fiend—“

She had sprung—tall now, she seemed to me—between couch and table.

„Mérimée!“ I screamed, „—my name, harlot, in your maniac mouth! By God, woman, you terrify me to death!“

I too sprang, the hairs of my head catching stiff horror from my fancies.

„Your name? Can you imagine me ignorant of your name, or anything concerning you? Mérimée! Why, did you not sit yesterday and read of me in a letter of Cosmo’s?“

„Ah-h...“ hysteria bursting high in sob and laughter from my arid lips—„Ah! ha! ha!“

„Xélucha! My memory grows palsied and grey, Xélucha! pity me—my walk is in the very valley of shadow!—senile and sere!—observe my hair, Xélucha, its grizzled growth—trepidant, Xélucha, clouded—I am not the man you knew, Xélucha, in the palaces—of Cosmo! You are Xélucha!“

„You rave, poor worm!“ she cried, her face contorted by a species of malicious contempt.

„Xélucha died of cholera ten years ago at Antioch. I wiped the froth from her lips. Her nose underwent a green decay before burial. So far sunken into the brain was the left eye—“

„You are—you are Xélucha!“ I shrieked; „voices now of thunder howl it within my consciousness—and by the holy God, Xélucha, though you blight me with the breath of the hell you are, I shall clasp you, living or damned—“

I rushed toward her. The word „Madman!“ hissed as by the tongues of ten thousand serpents through the chamber, I heard; a belch of pestilent corruption puffed poisonous upon the putrid air; for a moment to my wildered eyes there seemed to rear itself, swelling high to the roof, a formless tower of ragged cloud, and before my projected arms had closed upon the very emptiness of insanity, I was tossed by the operation of some Behemoth potency far-circling backward to the utmost circumference of the oval, where, my head colliding, I fell, shocked, into insensibility.

When the sun was low toward night, I lay awake, and listlessly observed the grimy roof, and the sordid chair, and the candlestick of tin, and the bottle of which I had drunk. The table was small, filthy, of common deal, uncovered. All bore the appearance of having stood there for years. But for them, the room was void, the vision of luxury thinned to air. Sudden memory flashed upon me. I scrambled to my feet, and plunged and tottered, bawling, through the twilight into the street.

