

Carnival time at Geneva

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CARNIVAL TIME AT GENEVA.

The spirit of Carnival was everywhere: on the quai and among the happy crowd scattered about the edge of the lake. Its influence was like wine penetrating into the deepest recesses of the minds and bodies of those ecstatically celebrating the occasion of the "Fête des Fleurs."

Geneva the proud little city, where ambassadors and learned men from all parts gather to discuss the world as seriously and sincerely as possible, had thrown aside its robe of politics to don the multi-coloured costume of Harlequin. The "Fête des Fleurs" was the day upon which the natives of Geneva were all to show off their gaiety and carefree character to foreigners.

To-day Sunday, the long trail of decorated carts with thousands of various flowers had begun its third round from one end of the quai Wilson along the quai Mt. Blanc, then back again. The flowers were dying already and the charmingly dressed girls were using these drooping flower-heads as ammunition towards all attractive strangers anticipating this gesture that replaced a formal introduction.

The shot of a cannon filled the crowd with delight. Everyone knew what the joyous meaning of this stood for: the doing-away with barriers; laughter, youth, wine sipped with some newly found acquaintances, the opening of new wonderful lands inhabited by joy.

The whole town seemed to have squeezed itself in that small area near the lake. One small spot where all within were happy; where there existed no thought of the past, no apprehension of the future, only the knowledge of the present, rich and poor mixed together in this honey-pot. On all sides the laughter grew and the spirit of Carnival spread. The town laughed, the lake laughed and the sun joined them.

A mixture of streamers, confetti and flowers whirled in the air to instantly cover the ground. The cafés and the improvised ice-cream stalls were overwhelmed with people. Several band-stands had been erected and a strange medley of tunes greeted the crowd.

So many things were happening but all had one common link: happiness!

On the morrow this populace would be going about its daily work as though nothing had disturbed the serenity but now they were all intoxicated by this splendid wine: Carnival!

Monsieur Marchand, a simple bourgeois, had even forgotten his former irritability caused by his wife's insistence on a clean collar, his best suit, on having had to shave, whilst he sat enjoying his beer with his wife and family.

Madame Marchand was beaming. She was hot and her new hat had jerked itself at an incongruous angle making her appear hotter still. Little did Madame Marchand care for fashion at that moment when with a plump reddish hand she slapped Monsieur's knee and between mouthfuls of beer and gâteau boisterously exclaimed: "Eh bien mon vieux, we're having a good time!"

Her husband agreed and spluttered as someone threw a handful of confetti into his drink. His younger son upset his ice-cream over his best white trousers; his daughter smeared jam and cream on his waistcoat — yet he seemed not to mind.

Sober and quite respectable corners are to be found even among the maddest, and such was the case of a trio seated on the terrace of an hotel overlooking the quai at the spot where the crowd was at its thickest.

This trio consisted of an elderly lady, a middle-aged man and a young man of about twenty-four. The latter seemed somewhat mournful and envious of the happiness down below.

The woman raised her eyeglass and said: "It is rather amusing to watch the lower class at their play."

No answering comment was passed by either of her companions; it would have been futile. She continued:

"I really can't understand their mentality, one would think that the weather made one quite warm enough without willingly carrying out such strenuous play. — she paused — why there are those two young Americans who dine next to us."

The young couple glanced up at that moment and seeing the discontented young man hallo to him to join them. Madame was just about to remark on the lowliness of such an action on the part of her nephew Gaston, when the older man drew her attention to something else, and taking the advantage of this opportunity Gaston hastened from the terrace.

When he reached the street, his American friends were not to be found and he stood wondering where to turn. A group of passing young men hailed him to join in with them.

"Come on old man —
It is la Fête you know —
Why so sad? —
Have you lost her? —
We will find you another pretty girl —
Come on, we'll fix you up."

No-one in Gaston's frame of mind could have refused such friendly invitations and he was soon enjoying himself with these newly-made comrades. But, from his friends, after a while, he found himself dragged away by the rush of the crowd and stranded again.

Feeling rather fagged he sat down on a nearby seat. After some little time, he noticed that the other occupant of the seat was a pretty fair-haired girl of about the same age as he. She has lovely eyes — he thought — a blue that matches her frock exquisitely. The girl, who had also been studying this serious young man spoke:

"Mon dieu, is it hot!"

Then she continued, as one comrade to another.

"I have just been in a confetti fight and have lost my hat."

At once Gaston broke in with the request:
"May I go and look for it?"

not remembering for a moment that it was Carnival and such a thing would be an impossibility. Then eager to continue their talk he asked her whether she would like a drink.

"Very well" — she replied, — "You can treat me to an ice."

They soon found an ice-cream stall and as the waitress was busy Gaston went up to the counter to fetch the ices, after having seated the girl at one of the small rounded tables, he returned almost immediately. Although she was not really interested, the girl asked him the usual question:—

"What is your name?"

"Gaston Vaillant."

"And mine's Simone Perres. How d'y do?"

Solemnly they stood up and shook hands, after which she happily continued.

"All is well, now we are friends! Shall we go and see what is going on? It is better than sitting here eating ices, besides, only lazy people come and sit. Come, I am so happy, aren't you happy too?"

The last question might have been addressed to all around her, but Gaston took it for himself alone. He took her arm and they ran into the crowd. Armed with bags of confetti they entered into the midst of the Carnival. They jumped on cars, received and gave flowers, joined groups, danced round policemen and did all the childish mad things done at celebrations. No word was spoken of the morrow, no question asked of their respective homes and lives, everyone was accepted as a person who was enjoying herself or himself to the utmost of their power.

Exhausted, Simone and Gaston sank into two chairs of a café. A little tired but still as happy; happier even, especially Gaston, he spoke first:

"Simone, lets go and have something to eat and come back in time for the fireworks."

She hesitated to answer; he saw this and smiled.

"Now Simone, remember to-day you must forget, forget conventionality. There is no evil in anything to-day. There is no need to mistrust any-one. Evil exists only in peoples minds, therefore if you don't think of evil you won't find it." — enthusiastically he continued — "to-day, I have seen what I have never really seen before. I have seen happy people, happy in every sense," — then most unexpected, — "would it surprise you Simone if I should say that I've fallen in love with you?"

"No" — the girl replied, — "to-day everyone falls in love, why should you or even we be the exception?"

"But I don't mean like anyone else — I really have..." the boy said.

Simone smiled in what she called her knowing way, yet the expression of her eyes betrayed her wish to believe her companion very much.

Everyone was wishing that night would come, waiting for darkness as it meant the lighting up of the various coloured electric bulbs hanging in the plane trees, it meant fireworks.

At last it came. Glorious and dark; and the quai was alive again with new life. The lake was awakening and boats big and small were being pushed out to the middle of the lake. A lake is always beautiful at night and the Léman was no exception. To-night it was like a superbly decorated debutante and the dark water contrasted strangely with the heights around.

Bang! The sound of the cannon announced the opening of the firework display.

Simone and Gaston had taken a small rowing boat out. Jestingly Simone remarked:

"Don't you think the lake looks jealous to-night? jealous of the quai?" she put her hand to the cold water, stared at the dark flow and said as though speaking to herself — "Yes it looks positively vicious and sulky, bah, méchant enfant!"

"Simone, Simone, you are so beautiful — the boy's voice was almost a whisper — Simone shall we meet again to-morrow."

This was the first mentioning of the morrow, of the outer world, the old and rather dreary world, the world wherein people questioned and weighed everything meticulously, the world of make-believe, not a careless debonaire make-believe as this Carnival world, but one when the make-believe itself was artificial. It was frightening this sudden awareness that on the morrow all would regain its pompous and ape like seriousness.

"No," — Simone's voice was very small — "don't speak of to-morrow Gaston," this time it was fear — "I don't want to return."

"Return?" the boy questioned.

"Yes return to to-morrow, I couldn't bear it."

On the quai the crowd stood and watched the sky; they gasped, they exclaimed and marvelled at the sight of man's creation — fireworks — against God's creation — the sky. Fireworks whizzed through the warm air and the eyes of the crowd seemed hypnotized by those dazzling and elusive flames descending to die in the lake.

Then something happened. Very quickly and without warning. How it began, no one quite knew, but in the centre of the lake flames rose from a boat. It may have been a passing firework.

It was the boat of Simone and Gaston.

Few people were really aware of the tragedy out there on the lake, most of them believed it to be the effect of a super firework and they grew excited at this outburst of flames. They even admired it.

They were happy and grew happier still. It was Carnival.

K.E.D.

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