THE SCENE PAINTER

BY ELOISE GAGNON

THE scene painter, Kostovski, was in the habit of consuming large quantities of liquors at a time the most unsuitable.

On the present occasion a scene was about to be mounted, the success of which depended absolutely upon the splendor of the portrayal.

The first production of a new play was about to take place; the last preparations were completed, and the entire cast, each one according to his own part, lent himself with enthusiasm, when all of a sudden burst the catastrophe which the manager dreaded above all—Kostovski was abominably intoxicated.

These excesses always happened at the precise moment when his services were most urgently needed. One would almost think that a demon guided and pushed him irresistibly toward the forbidden liquid. At these times Kostovski attained sudden climaxes of perversity—a longing to do contrary things. He had no control over himself; he belonged to the devil. The most violent sensations became then a necessity for his impetuous and generally disordered nature, and he found himself obliged to increase his intoxication. These days were filled with innumerable encounters and adventures which seemed to happen to no one but himself. On the other hand, once sober, he went back to work in a frenzy.

He was not dismissed because he was a most admirable painter, incomparable in his specialty. Yet he compromised the good reputation of the company by the scandal which he caused as well as by the negligence, even slovenliness, of his appearance and plebeian exterior. From his brush Kostovski produced scenes so beautiful and of such astonishingly artistic merit that the public would bring him before the curtain with their applause. But the people of the theatre held him at a distance, no one remembered having seen him before; the chorus people also drank, but they considered themselves as personages very superior to this scene painter, and they shunned his company with care. As to the ballet dancers, they also shunned him with repugnance. On his side, he did not interest himself in them. However, one pleased him—Julie, a very young ballet dancer. He thought of her only as an artist and he watched her dancing on the stage, illuminated by the electric rays of the reflector which he manipulated.

Certain inclinations of the pretty little head, certan attitudes enchanted him, and he caused numerous rays more brilliant than the others to shine upon her, rendering her more conspicuous in the midst of the other dancers. Away from the theatre he did not speak to her, and she, on her part, affected not to see him. Behind the scenes he did not speak to her, and she on her side affected not to notice him. Living in the midst of a strange solitude, without love, without friends or anyone who cared for him, artist and machinist indispensable, but in whom no one interested himself, he felt the sense of a vague and latent insult, and each time that these feelings got beyond him he felt the desire for drink take possession of him. And this is what came to pass at the precise moment when he was most indispensable. After the rehearsal the manager remained on the scene at the request of the director of the company. The large and fat face of the manager expressed preoccupation, inquietude and anger which he could hardly contain.

"But tell me," he repeated, almost with tears in his voice, "what are we going to do now?" And crossing his large hands on his enormous stomach he looked at the other with increasing anger.

"Where is he now? Can anyone put a hand on him?" asked he.

"He is here, the tub of alcohol," answered the director. "After having looked for him on all sides he was at last found in a little hut, talking to some workmen, and having been brought here like a package, he has a black and blue eye."

"Have him come here, the rascal!" said the manager.

The director rapidly crossed the stage and disappeared behind the scenery. In the stillness they heard his voice calling: "Kostovski! Kostovski!" Almost instantly he rejoined the manager, winking his eye as if to say, "The comedy is about to begin."

"He will be here immediately," said the director. "He is ashamed; he has no desire to show himself."

Slowly approaching steps were heard, and before them appeared the man for whom the sea had no desire.

He was a man of medium height, solidly built, muscular, a little bit stooped. Kostovski wore a blue shirt, spotted all over with paint and oil, and a large leather belt at his waist. His wrinkled trousers were hidden in high boots. Taken as a whole he gave one the impression of a common and unknown workman. His hands were long and nervous like a gorilla; his face was homely and vulgar enough but full of character; his cheek bones were prominent, and with his long mustache, which drooped downward, he gave one the impression of a terrible force, but one from which thought emanated; from under his large scowling eyebrows his hyper eyes cast a look at the same time austere and gentle. Another peculiarity about his features was the expression of passion and extraordinary energy. Under the left eye a large blue spot showed itself, evidence of a rude blow. Above the forehead there was a mop of tangled hair, and from the entire person of Kostovski one got the impression of a corroded nature, tumultous and ungovernable.

He saluted humbly and at the same time with dignity, without giving his hand.

"What are you doing, Kostovski?" asked the manager. "The first production is for tomorrow and here we are forced to postpone it. Why do you cause me so much trouble, tell me? Is it honorable on your part? Why do you get drunk? And this decoration you are carrying under your eye—are you proud of it?"

Kostovski drew back, plunged his five fingers in the mop of hair and, as if taking fire, in a passionate voice said:

"Marc Loukitch, I have been drinking, but I have finished! I will do all that is necessary to do! Today is Saturday and consequently no immediate production; I will not move from here until tomorrow! I will work all night! I—I—Oh, my God!"

Kostovski threw both hands in the air and seemed possessed with a savage feeling of energy. He wished to work as an expiation.

"Do you know what is to be done?" asked the manager. "The scene in question must be the size of the stage and must be all that is beautiful! Do you understand? All that is beautiful."

"I will do it! I will do it!" cried Kostovski, becoming animated and running the fingers of both hands through his hair. Forgetting himself, he commenced to hurriedly walk about on the stage. Stopping before the manager he asked:

"Tell me what must be the subject of the scene? For what is it to be used?"

"This is it," said the manager. "It is for the second act; the two men have strayed into the vast prairie during the night. The place must be absolutely wild and deserted. They become afraid. Terrible things are to be accomplished here. You must therefore represent this vast steppe with all the accessories of distance, fog, and clouds in a manner so real that in advance the public will shiver with fear in beholding."

"Enough," interrupted Kostvoski; "I will paint the wilderness—the vast plains; I will work all night on the scene itself by the light of the lamps. All is well prepared?"

"Oh, yes. But work, only work!" answered the director.

Kostovski already felt the torments of his artistic genius. He turned from his chiefs. He saw them no more; he heard them not; he forgot them. He placed himself in the middle of the stage and called in a loud, commanding voice: "Hi! Paul! Jean! Come here! Quickly! Hurry up, you children of the devil, Kostovski is going to work!"

Paul, the workman attached to the theatre, and Jean, his assistant, went to work, laid out the immense canvas, brought brushes and pots of colors.

"Oh, well," said the director to the manager, "thank God he has gone to work again. It will not be necessary to countermand the production. Let us go to dinner; we must not disturb him now."

The stage was lighted all night. The empty theatre was silent as a tomb. One heard but the footsteps of Kostovski, who, armed with long brushes, moved to and fro about the canvas. All around him were pails and pots of paint.

The work advanced. Kostovski, his bruised eye, his face all smeared with paint, his hair and mustache bristling, his eyes shining, his body burning under the inspiration.

At 11 o'clock the next morning the entire company collected for the last rehearsal, grouped itself before the painting—artists, choristers and ballet dancers—and contemplated the enormous painting, now from the stage and again from the auditorium, and expressed their admiration in loud voices.

The nearest view showed a vast plain overgrown with high grasses, burdocks and gypsum weeds; a little further, a deserted town, all covered with mosses, and further again, the gloomy hills, mournful and sinister—nothing but an infinite stretch, menacing and fantastic—a vast plain of the heroic and legendary time where no road could be traced, where no living being ever was. It seemed that at that moment Ella Maurowitz (a legendary heroine) would land, crying in a loud voice:

"Does any one live in this vast wilderness?"

But the sombre steppe kept its silence, a terrifying silence. On the horizon separating itself from the graves of the dead, and above the aspect of the clouds appearing fantastic and malevolent. And these clouds and those sepulchres seemed to multiply without end. The whole landscape gave one the impression of funeral fatality; it oppressed the heart; it seemed something terrible must necessarily happen there, and the multitude of these hillocks and the covering of clouds took to themselves symbolical meaning—they appeared to live a life tragically supernatural.

Close to it, one distinguished only a conglomeration of daubs of all colors in convulsive zigzags, as if put on under the frenzy of a drunken brush.

But at a distance, the obsession of the immense steppe which the creator genius had made live, showed up more despotically. The more one looked the more one felt a feeling of oppression dominate him.

Everybody heaped praise on the artist.

"Oh, this Kotovski!" they cried. "Brava! What talent! What sorcery!"

"Oh, well, what matters it?" answered he naively.

"We are only workmen, and we must work, and if we can amuse ourselves, we amuse ourselves. We are born that way!"

All praised him; they talked of him all day, because of a truth, never before had he distinguished himself to such a degree.

As for Kostovski, he went back to his labor with a desire to do greater things. He came and went in his studio more disordered and dirtier than ever. He painted in the ecstacy of the creation. His whole being deranged by a sleepless night, expressed exalted force and energy; his pale face with the blue mark under the eye, the disordered mass of hair, the flame in his eyes which threw out rays of light, all these manifested the spirit and industry of this proud creature.

He was thus completely absorbed when he heard light footsteps and smelt a delicate perfume. He turned around; Julie was before him. She still wore her dancing costume. She was a charming little brunette, in a pink bodice, white shoes, with short skirt of mousseline. Her firm throat rose regularly and peacefully, her fresh face with its olive tints smiled; her almond-shaped eyes, black and humid, regarded Kostovski tenderly and seemed to promise him everything. She seemed a fairy of some story. It would be difficult to imagine a little being more dissimilar from the painter; she, all beauty and charm, and he, timid, with his awkward gestures, stood before her without knowing what to say and regarding her with admiration.

Kostovski thought no more of his work and the long brush which he held in his hand slipped from his fingers and fell at the fairy's feet. She burst into silvery laughter, which uncovered her brilliant and tiny teeth. Coming near to him lightly and gracefully, she gave him her little hand and boldly said:

"How do you do, Kostovski!"

Several months had passed by; the public filled the amphitheatre. Behind the curtain they worked with fervor. Through the curtain one heard the noise of the crowd, at the same time the orchestra began the overture with majestic harmonies.

The workmen hurried to place the scenery; the audience cried out; in the darkness of the semi-circle descended the large scene on which was the palace, the towers, the forest and the vagueness of the sea.

All the mechanical appliances were controlled by Kostovski. He was unrecognizable, his face seemed to be rejuvenated, illuminated; his blue eyes shone with happiness, his shoes were elegantly polished, he wore a velvet coat, and his untidy hair was combed.

"Lower the sea scene!" cried he in a ringing voice, and a gigantic curtain came down representing the bottom of the sea. The painter withdrew and regarded it with affection. It was his newest work.

"Listen, Paul!" exclaimed he, "when the sirens begin to swim, manage it so that Julie is lying on the bottom."

The scene shifter saw that everything was in place. "Ho, the angels, the devil take you," he exclaimed in a hoarse voice, "the sirens! in your place, the sirens!"

At last all was ready for the sirens to go swimming to the bottom of the sea.

Kostovski was already at his post in command of all. The bottom of the sea is impregnated with soft light.

The silvery green reflection seems to traverse the bottom of the waters from the living light of day above, while at the bottom, all seemed to be in a perpetual twilight.

At the further end of the view appeared a rock of coral, around which grew strange plants which seemed life-like, and which supported the gelatinous seaweeds. In the center of the primeval world suddenly appeared a feminine being wonderfully beautiful, with flowing hair and naked shoulders. Her body appeared in the shape of a fish under a brilliant armor of silver scales. She moved with the ease of a fish, causing her dress of scales to shine. A swarm of other sirens followed her. Bathed in the rays of the reflector through the will of Kostovski, she seemed to acquire all the beauty of the supernatural. In the sea she caught the eye of the strange lights which beautified her; caressing aurora lights enveloped all her body with a magnificent charm and made her eyes shine like two stars. She seemed petrified with a perpetually changing light, which made her the queen of the sea.

She did not appear unmindful of what enchanter had favored her with this dazzling splendor, enchanting the spectators, and when she passed near the painter she kissed him and disappeared behind the scene.

Their love was no secret from anyone in the company. Julie never left the theatre but she was accompanied by Kostovski. He lived in the adoration of the beauty who permitted him to make love to her. He followed her like a faithful dog; he waited faithfully for her at the door of her dressing-room while she changed her costume.

But one night he was obiged to wait a long time as sentinel at the foot of the stairway to the dressing rooms. Women descended singly and in groups. The dressing rooms were by this time all empty and she did not appear. Kostovski became sad and thoughtful, without paying atention to anything but the door which only opened at rare intervals, as all the girls had gone, when the chorus girl Rose appeared, who was noted in the company for her boldness.

"Why are you waiting here?" she asked, raising her eyebrows with a malicious expression. "I am the last one; no other remains. As to Julie, she has been gone a long time."

"How! Gone!" answered Kostovski, his face showing disappointment.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Rose with a gay laugh. "She left before the end of the performance with her admirer! And she has never been true to you, my poor friend!"

The painter took a few steps and grabbed her hair.

"It is not true!" he said hoarsely.

"But it is," she answered, "and it is your fault. She only wanted to make herself more prominent, and you reflected the rays of light upon her so well that all the orchestra is crazy over her. Oh! She will get along now. She has no need of you now." And the chorus girl ran donwstairs laughing.

Kostovski remained motionless in the same place, and in the silence of the empty theatre he felt in his heart an unknown pain.

When he knocked at the door of Julie's room she received him coldly. Her eyes appeared indifferent and cold under her heavy, black brows. From her hair, negligently combed, two curls fell on her cheeks. Seated on a couch, she read a book. A flowing Japanese gown enveloped her.

"Julie"—stammered Kostovski, with which the emotions choked him.

"Enough, you!" said she in a dry voice, and feigning not to notice his trouble. "I really have other things to occupy myself with besides you."

"Julie"—he answered.

But, rearranging herself on the couch, she plunged again into her book, as if nothing ought to interfere with her. This taciturn and frivolous nature of the woman irritated him. Why this insulting indifference when it was so easy to frankly explain?

"Julie, you talk to me as if to a visitor of whom you wished to get rid. What do these ceremonies mean?"

"There are no ceremonies," answered she. "It is simplicity itself, just as are our relations. Each one is at liberty to do what he wishes to. Is it not so? I am reading. You also do something. If you are bored, go home."

"Listen," answered he boldly; "I must speak to you, and I will wait until you have finished your book."

She did not answer him and remained seated on the couch considering her open book. A heavy silence reigned. Kostovski was seated near the door. Slightly reclining on pillows, she took the graceful pose of a cat and busied herself with hiding her small feet under her gown. This provoked Kostovski. But through the anger which was growing in his heart he felt the desire to seize her and embrace her. He turned away his eyes. On a portmanteau lay her coat and her hood. He contemplated with irritation this coat and this hood. He remembered with what tenderness it protected her, caressing her thick hair.

She threw the book furiously and jumped off the couch.

"We have nothing to say to each other!" cried she, red with rage. "All is already said. It is time to finish with this sentimental comedy."

Kostovski, trembling, stood up.

"Sentimental comedy," answered he bitterly. "Julie! What has come between us?"

"Nothing could have come between us," answered she. "We are entirely different, one from the other. There is nothing in common between us, and it is necessary to break off our relations."

She moved her chair and sat herself in an obscure corner and fixed her large black eyes on him.

To Kostovski he still seemed to see an expression in her limpid eyes which held him, at the same time she repulsed him.

"I see," answered he, seating himself near her. "You wish me to leave you. They say that you have another admirer, one of the first rank. Oh, well, let us part; but why this deceit and this quarrel? I don't wish that all should end thus. I wish that we keep a good remembrance for the future. But, Julie, try to understand that those of the first rank only trifle with you, while I—I love you—may the devil take you!"

He had seized her and shook her with his enormous arms.

"Oh! You are brutal! You hurt me! Leave me! You will break my arms!"

She was looking for a pretext to quarrel. He on his part felt his anger boiling within him. A desire burned within him to beat her and to throw her out of the door. He pressed her to him tigher yet. His eyes grew larger, he ground his teeth and the muscles of his face contracted.

"Oh!" said she. But he was already on his knees.

"Dearest, adored one, my treasure, my happiness! You are everything to me! All my feelings, my thoughts, all are for you! Yes, I am a brute, but I love you! I do not wish to live without you! If you repulse me, I will become gloomy again. Listen, dearest! I ask pardon: I kiss your hand, your dress; I cry pardon!"

Kneeling before her, this large and robust man took the hands of this frail creature, pouring kisses and tears on them.

When he raised his head he encountered her strangely contradictory expression. Those large, humid black eyes expressed neither love nor compassion nor contempt nor scorn, but something horribly humiliating, resembling curiosity, but more unpitying. The curiosity of the naturalist when he experiments with his instruments on the living rabbit, or of an insect collector when he has fastened them living with pins through them.

Kostovski understood this woman now; he read her with his spontaneous and marvelous perception. Kostovski saw as an inspiration the bottom of Julie's heart. He understood. He understood that Julie could not love him; that she was a being of an entirely different world; that they were wholly strange, one to the other. All words died in his throat. He said nothing. He took his hat, and, without even looking back, ran from the house.

Without knowing how he got there, he found himself in a low cafe frequented by cab drivers. For a long time he had not drank. But at this moment he felt that the cafe was indispensable to him; he needed the noise of the voices around him, the smell of the alcohol. He sat down at an isolated table in a corner. He ordered a bottle of brandy. The table cloth was stained with beer; the light of the lamps hardly lit up the cafe filled with drunken persons. The waiters with pale faces hurried to serve the drinks, and in an adjoining room was heard the billiard balls. One of the musicians sang the chorus of a comic song:

"Que je marche ou que sans but j'erre,
Toujours a ma Julie, je pense.'

"Oh, demon!" exclaimed Kostovski, pouring out a second glass of liquor which he swallowed in one gulp. He grew angry, even here in this saloon she came to torment him. He decided to forget her; he execrated her; he held her in contempt and wished no more to remember her. Little by little his thoughts wandered from the tavern and again she took possession of him. He saw her in the costume of the siren. Her body was enveloped like a fish, covered with silvery scales lighted by rays of all colors and so wonderfully beautiful! Her irresistible smile called him while she swam down into the great depths of the sea; and the man in love with the siren knew that he was lost. That never again would he recover his carelessness and a heart free from wounds. He remembered what his life was before having known the kisses of the siren. He drank, yes, but the heart had been filled with gaiety and movement.

"Ah, devil!" roared he, emptying the bottle of liquor and trying to cast off the nightmare which had taken possession of him; but she tormented him unpityingly. She appeared first as a fairy, then as a shepherd girl, then again she approached draped in a vast flowing robe and her brown curls fell on her rosy cheeks; she was surrounded by inundating rays of light.

In the billiard room the same songs were to be heard. Little by little the room filled with a sort of fog which hardly allowed the light to penetrate through it. The noise of the drinkers seemed farther away and was heard only at intervals as an echo.

The siren appeared in the midst of all these shadows, laughing and making signs to Kostovski. At times he raised his head and, seeing the bottle, he continued to drink. The fog became denser, whirling before his eyes, but through it he always found the dear and poetic image.

After many days of searching in all the low taverns they found Kostovski.

After they had sobered him he again directed the maneuvers at the bottom of the sea and of the sirens. He had again taken to his former appearance, dirty, neglected, more silent than ever, and his hair more matted and disordered than before. He placed himself behind the scenes, near the light to illuminate the scene. His hpart seemed plunged in the cold and the night; rage devoured him. This time he resolutely evaded all of the company; he hated even himself in his isolation.

The sirens were swimming at the bottom of the sea; he threw the light on them. Only it was no more the poetical light. It was foggy and greenish, and sad and the sirens appeared through it, suffering, and without life, and resembling skeletons.

And when Julie, in turn, crossed the scene in swimming in the depths, as usual, the mournful rays enveloped her; the siren resembled a spectre, a ghost, her face had grown blue, livid, horrible, with black lips, black holes in place of eyes and her fishlike body became something horrible and diabolical.

As the painter slowly turned the reflector he contemplated the funereal effects which he created.

He felt the infatuation within him effacing itself. He saw that the woman whom he had adored as a beauty had not been beautiful; that he had restored her finally to her reality.

She had been beautiful only when made so by the illuminating rays of his love.

A TIMELY WORD

By Andrew Carnegie.

THERE is one encouraging indication of progress within our race as showing, it is to be hoped, the influence of education upon the masses in evolving clearer ideas of responsibility for their actions.

The attention of the British parliament was some time ago called to the difficulty of obtaining recruits for the army. The shortage of officers in the auxiliary forces (volunteers and militia) is no less than 25 per cent—one fourth of the whole. The militia has 32,000 men less than before. The regular army lacks 242 officers and the British army for India is short 12,000 British recruits.

The British government pronounces this "the most serious problem which confronts the military authorities." Some of the highest military authorities see the final remedy in conscription.

I rejoice in the knowledge that we in America have on hand the same problem for our navy. Our army, being so small, is not yet affected. All of our warships cannot be manned—3,500 men, I believe, are lacking.

From this shortage of recruits we are justified in concluding that there is no longer a general desire in our race to enter the services. This is specially significant, as we are informed that increase of pay would not greatly increase recruiting, as recruits are obtained chiefly from a certain class.

We hear of a like trouble in another profession, a scarcity of young, educated, conscientious men desirous of entering the ministry, thought to be owing to the theological tenets to which they are required to subscribe.

Eminent soldiers have given the most discouraging accounts of their profession. Napoleon declared it "the trade of barbarians." Wellington writes Lord Shaftesbury: "War is a most detestable thing. If you had seen but one day of war, you would pray God you would never see another."

General Grant, offered a military review by the Duke of Cambridge, declined, saying he never wished to look upon a regiment of soldiers again.

General Sherman wrote he was "tired and sick of the war. Its glory is all moonshine. It is only those who have neither fired a shot nor heard the shrieks and groans of the wounded who cry aloud for more blood, more vengeance, more desolation. War is hell."

The professional soldier is primarily required for purposes of aggression, it being clear that if there were none to attack none to defend would be needed. The volunteer who arms only to be better able to defend his home and country occupies a very different position from the recruit who enlists unconditionally and binds himself to go forth and slay his fellows as directed.

The defense of home and country may possibly become necessary, although no man living in Britain or America has ever seen invasion or is at all likely to see it.

That it is every man's duty to defend home and country goes without saying. We should never forget, however, that which makes it a holy duty to defend one's home and country also makes it a holy duty not to invade the country of others, a truth which has hitherto not been kept in mind.

Whenever an international dispute arises, no matter what party is in power, we should demand at once from our government that it offer to refer it to arbitration, and, if necessary, we must break with our party. Peace is above party.

Should the adversary have forestalled our government in offering arbitration, which for the sake of our race I trust will never happen, we must insist upon its acceptance and listen to nothing until it is accepted.

We should drop all public questions, concentrate our efforts upon the one question which carries in its bosom the issue of peace or war. We must lay aside our politics until this war issue is settled. This is the time to be effective.

Refusal to arbitrate makes war, even in a good cause, unholy; an offer to arbitrate lends dignity and importance to a poor one.

Afraid of a Comet.

Muskogee Correspondence Kansas City Star.

The ignorant negroes throughout Indian Territory are greatly excited by the reported approach of a destructive comet. In many places they have quit work and are assembling nightly in churches and holding religious services.

It is reported at Fort Gibson and at many other points along the Arkansas river where there are large negro settlements that the comet is the only thing talked about and the negroes believe that the world is coming to an end. This condition has reached such proportions that the Times-Democrat, a local newspaper, telegraphed Prof. P. J. J. See of Mare Island, asking his opinion about the comet. His reply was:

"The comet is a ghost of the air. It is going from the earth instead of toward it. There is no danger of contact."

A great many Indians have also become alarmed over the agitation. At Westville it is reported that meetings are being held nightly and prayers offered. These reports come from the smaller towns and rural communities.