CHOPIN



DAYS WITH THE GREAT COMPOSERS

Heada Owen

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VARIATIONS ON "LA CI DAREM LA MANO."

"One perceives new light appearing on the old subject,—the high-born roué and the peasant maiden reveal themselves."



A·DAY·WITH FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN

BY M.C. GILLINGTON

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BIBLIOTEKA INSTYTUT FRYDERYKA CHOPINA-NARODOWY

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A DAY WITH FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN.

PERIOD, the year 1837: scene, Chaussée d'Antin, Paris: time, about 9 a.m. one April morning. A thin, under-sized, slightly-built man, of delicate, almost effeminate physique, was trifling somewhat fastidiously with his coffee and roll, and devoting considerable attention to the flowers which adorned his table. His clear blue eyes were riveted on these flowers, as if to drink in their very soul and essence: and indeed he himself had been compared to a convolvulus balancing its heaven-coloured cup upon an incredibly slight stem. There was, undoubtedly, something flower-like about Frédéric Chopin: a refinement of exquisite grace in body and mind, a tenderness and sweetness of thought, coupled with a potentiality of passionate feeling corresponding with the passionate scents of his beloved blossoms. And even those who laid a want of moral and intellectual manliness to his charge, and alleged

this want as a limitation of his province in music, could not but confess the extraordinary compensations with which Nature had endowed a form so fragile, a health so feeble, and a musical genius of such narrow restrictions. For the fame of Frédéric Chopin, his perfect artistry, and peculiar individuality as a pianist and a composer, were, and are, unique. "The Shelley of music," pale, Ariel-like, impassioned, he stands alone, unparalleled, for ever. And the very difficulties and temptations which might have ruined robuster temperaments, were transformed, for Chopin, into special dispensations of Providence. His pecuniary means were never abundant, ("from first to last," it has been said, "his artistic career was singularly free from any taint of money worship.") He would not even dispose of any composition which did not satisfy his exigent standard of self-criticism; but then, "I am a revolutionary and don't care for money," he declared, at the very outset. And the infirmities of his health created, so to speak, a special haven of seclusion for him in the midst of gay, noisy, laughter-loving Paris. He dwelt in an atmosphere of quietude: he had succeeded, so far as might be, in simplifying

his life to the uttermost: and yet it was a full and a laborious life.

Although the most fashionable musician of the day, both as pianist, teacher, and composer, Chopin preserved intact his child-like simplicity, his aristocratic serenity; his own feelings, his own impressions, were the only events to which he was at all susceptible. The steady upward sweep of his career had neither dizzied nor dazzled him: and the creator of Ballades, Nocturnes, Polonaises, Sonatas, pianoforte works innumerable, was the same modest, unassuming young man whom Schumann had welcomed with "Hats off, gentlemen! a genius!" Yet only six years had passed since those memorable words were spoken: since his timid *Opus 2* was ushered into the world without any preliminary advertisement or encomium,—"*La ci darem la mano,* varié pour le piano par Frédéric Chopin." "It seems to me," wrote Schumann in his generous and enthusiastic review, "that every composer presents a different character of note-forms to the eye. . . . But here it seemed as if eyes, strange to me, were glaring up at me,—flower-eyes, basilisk eyes, peacock's eyes,

maiden's eyes; in many places it looked yet brighter—I thought I saw Mozart's *La ci darem la mano* sound through a thousand chords; Leporello seemed to wink at me, and Don Juan hurried past in his white mantle. . . ." One cannot, at first thoughts, discern any analogy between the Mozart and the Chopin standpoint: for Chopin, as has been said, considers different subjects, but his views in considering them are always the same. Still, as has been the case with all great musicians, Mozart was, in his eyes, the ideal type,—*the* tone-poet *par excellence*,—the more so that Mozart, of all composers, least seldom deigned to descend the steps which lead from the beautiful to the banal. And presently one perceives new light appearing on the old subject,—the high-born roué and the peasant maiden reveal themselves in a flood of flashing iridescence. And in the gossamer fabric of those variations, "filled with moonshine and fairy magic, we feel," again to quote Schumann, "that we have beheld a heavenly vision."

The composer, withdrawing his gaze from the flowers with which he had held a silent

conversation, moved across to his pianoforte; it was a Pleyel, a make which he particularly liked on account of its "slightly veiled, yet silvery sonorousness," as Liszt has described it, "and its easy touch, permitting him to elicit tones which one might think proceeded from one of those harmonicas which were so ingeniously constructed by the ancient masters, by the union of crystal and water."

This pianoforte was at once the throne and the kingdom of Chopin. He had deliberately elected to confine himself to what might be considered the straitened area of pianoforte works: and yet he had evoked, from a soil which one could suppose almost exhausted, a fertility of fresh and luxuriant efflorescence. To us, habituated to the radiant outcome of Chopin's exclusiveness in this respect, no such immediate revelation of surprise and novelty is possible, as broke upon the musical world of 1831-7: yet it is as well to realise with what conviction, what intuition he had refused to "scatter each light spray of melody over a hundred orchestral desks," and had concentrated the resources of his art into

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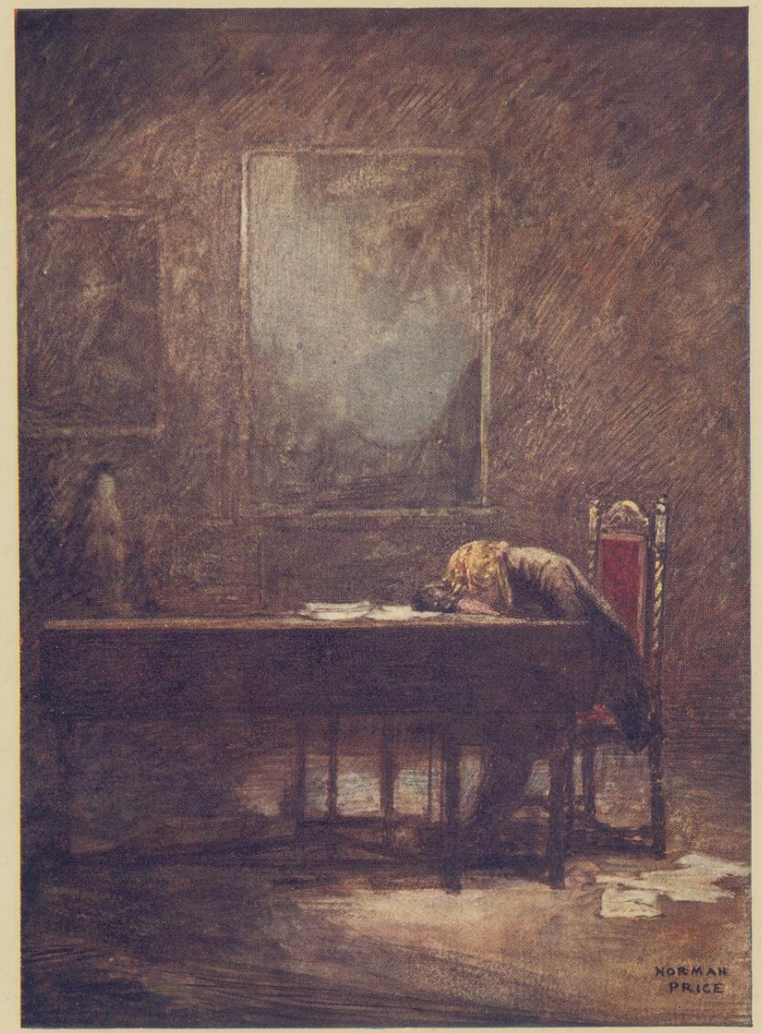
"a sphere more limited, indeed, but far more idealised!" That a composer could turn his back deliberately upon the "big bow-wow style," could forego opera, oratorio, symphony, all the colour and splendour of choral and orchestral work, in favour of the few octaves of ivory on the keyboard,—could recognise his own deficient strength to deal with large masses of sound,—this was a fact so startling to the connoisseurs of the early nineteenth century, that perhaps no lesser man could have reconciled them to it. But the magic of Chopin,—as a personality, as an executant, as a creative power,—lay heavy upon all who came into contact with him. And he not only inaugurated a new régime in art,—one, indeed, so exclusively his own that he has had no successor: but he evolved a treatment of pianoforte music, "which, considered as a pure expression of technical intelligence, is almost without rival in the history of the art." "It is to him we owe the extension of chords, struck together in arpeggio, or *en batterie:* the chromatic sinuosities of which his pages offer such striking examples; the little groups of superadded notes, falling like light drops of pearly dew upon the melodic figure. This species of adornment had

ÉTUDE IN C MINOR.
CHOPIN AT THE PIANO.

"As with velvety touch his fingers ran through his Étude in C Minor, 'one of the truest and saddest utterances of despairing patriotism to which he had ever given a voice,' Chopin bowed down his head over the pianoforte, and a wave of sorrow swept over his soul."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hitherto been modelled only upon the *fioriture* of the great old school of Italian song; the embellishments for the voice had been servilely copied by the piano, although become stereotyped and monotonous. He imparted to them such charms of novelty, surprise, and variety as were unsuited for the vocalist but in perfect keeping with the character of the instrument." (*Liszt*).

Yet, all being said and done, it was not in his technical perfection that the charm of Chopin dwelt; it was in the "core of flame," the magical tenderness, the deep and melancholy fervour of patriotism which inspired him. He had "arrived as *the* Romantic in the midst of the renaissance of Romance," and from out all his works, "cannons buried in flowers," as Schumann found them, there exhaled

"Eternal Passion,
Eternal Pain!"

And now, as with velvety touch his fingers ran through his *Étude* in C-minor, "one of the truest and saddest utterances of despairing patriotism" to which he had ever given a voice, Chopin bowed down his head over the pianoforte, and

a wave of sorrow swept across his soul. Fêted, caressed, idolised by the Parisians he might be: his thoughts were still in exile. To his own poor compatriots his heart went out, and his hands in unceasing beneficence,—to the noble sufferings of Poland he was acutely responsive. "Fate," it has been written, "rendered Chopin still more individual and interesting in endowing him with an original, pronounced nationality. . . . and because this nationality wanders in mourning robes, in the thoughtful artist it deeply attracts us." A tinge of this "sharp nationality,"—although expressed in different degrees, and a thousand ways modified and varied,—is perceptible in all that Chopin wrote, in his longest as well as his shortest compositions. But it is especially evidenced in the Polonaises and Mazurkas.

The Polonaises, according to Liszt, have been less studied than they deserve, on account of the executive difficulties they present: yet they rank among Chopin's highest inspirations. In the Polonaise (originally a stately dance for men only), the noblest traditions of ancient Poland

are embodied, the firm resolve and indomitable daring of its bygone warriors. "We can almost catch the resolute, heavy tread of men facing all the bitter injustice which the most cruel and relentless destiny can offer, with the manly pride of unfaltering courage. . . The progress of the music suggests to our imagination such magnificent groups as were designed by Paul Veronese, robed in the rich costume of days long past; we see, passing at intervals before us, brocades of gold, velvets, damasked satins, silvery-soft and flexible sables, hanging sleeves gracefully thrown back upon the shoulders, embossed sabres, boots yellow as gold or red with trampled blood, sashes with long and undulating fringes. . . From the faded background of times long passed, these vivid groups start forth; gorgeous carpets from Persia lie at their feet, filigreed furniture from Constantinople stands around; all is marked by the sumptuous prodigality of the Magnates who drew, in ruby goblets embossed with medallions, wine from the fountains of Tokay, and shod their fleet Arabian steeds with silver." (*Liszt.*)

The Mazurkas of Chopin, on the other hand, are feminine through and through. To

comprehend them fully, one should have known the Polish women. "A subtle vapour of love floats like an ambient fluid around them," they reveal rich glimpses of amber-beaded shoes, gloves perfumed with Turkish rose-attar, "head-dresses glittering with rubies or leafy with emeralds, stomachers embroidered with pearls." Here and there, spurs jingle, and an under-current of impending calamity makes itself audible through the joyous rhythm of the dance, as though it were the eve of battle, and a certain bravado of suppressed sobs intermingled with the smiling whispers of the partners.

But perhaps, of all his most poignantly patriotic achievements, the greatest and most heart-rending is the Funeral March from the first Sonata. No one who has ever heard these thrilling accents, with all the added effect of a military band and muffled drums, can forget the emotions they arouse. The Funeral March has been likened to "all that the funeral train of an entire nation, accepting its own ruin and death, can be imagined to feel,"— as, in desolating woe and majestic sorrow, it "accompanies the mighty

escort on its way to the city of the Dead. . . . The intensity of mystic hope: the devout appeal to infinite mercy, . . . the noble endurance of many disasters, . . . quavers and trembles there with irresistible vibrations."—"And these pages," said one of Chopin's fellow-countrymen, "could only have been written by a Pole."

Chopin now roused himself from his mournful reverie, for he heard strange footsteps at the door, and knew that his day's work had begun. Inwardly a dreamer of dreams, he was outwardly as industrious, as assiduous, as methodical a man as ever justified his existence by steady routine of unremitting tasks. Not that every day could contribute an equal quota of work: the master's health, which so largely influenced his spirits, also affected his artistic output in no small degree. And whereas on his better days he could be buoyant with a very extravagance of gaiety, "playing fantastic tricks at the pianoforte, or mimicking his rivals with inimitable skill and good-natured satire," at other times this "tricksy sprite" forsook him, and he was peevish, fretful, almost morbid in his sensitiveness.

At the present moment, however, with one of those curious revulsions of feeling peculiar to the artistic temperament, Chopin ascended from the abysses of melancholy to the heights of a charming, unpremeditated cheerfulness. He greeted, with his most expressive gestures, with the "innate grace of a Polish welcome," the pupils who now entered for their daily lessons. They were by no means novices,—they had been under the tuition of such fashionable and successful pianists as Moscheles, Herz, and Kalkbrenner: but had forsaken these notabilities to bow before the shrine of Frédéric Chopin. "Really," he murmured to himself, "if I were a little sillier than I already am, I might imagine myself a genius: but I feel daily how much I have still to learn. . . . As for Paris,—I don't think there is a city upon earth where there are more pianists to be found, or—more donkeys. I am only one among many!"

Chopin, unlike most musicians, thoroughly enjoyed giving lessons in his art. He was a delightful teacher, gentle, tactful, kindly. "Put your whole soul into it," was his favourite advice

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to a pupil: and it was one which he carried out to the full himself. He was alert and attentive throughout,—he gave of his very best. He would protract a lesson hours beyond its limit, and sometimes reward the pupil with an improvisation of his own. The qualities which he regarded as paramount were delicacy of touch, intelligence of conception, purity of feeling; "the worst of sins, in his estimation, was a dull, correct, mechanical dexterity"—and this aroused his ire more evidently than a whole series of the most flagrant mistakes. But even then, "his anger was nothing but a cry of physical pain, and he softened at once if the culprit showed any signs of distress."

Every pupil had to begin at the beginning, with Clementi's time-honoured *Gradus*, and to plod steadily through the whole course of technical exercises and studies, until perhaps by happy chance he arrived at those *Études* of Chopin's own, which, "avowedly classed as exercises of dexterity, stand to those of other writers as pictures to freehand drawings." Yet who could adequately perform these *Études*

except himself? For Chopin was never able to transmit to any of his pupils the personal equation which was the root and essence of his playing. He had studied execution, "not as his highest aim, but as the painter studies colour and colour-grouping": he stood nearest as a pianist to Liszt, in the especial qualities of magical grace and tenderness: and he fulfilled, in himself, the *dictum* of Schumann, "The playing of an instrument must be one with itself: he who cannot play *with* it, cannot play it at all." Therefore, now, when he slid lightly, almost imperceptibly, into his pupil's place upon the music-stool, and his delicate feminine fingers became one with the flashing keys, the students understood, with a mingling of despair and ecstasy, the impossibility of attaining his "incommunicable style."—"It was not so much a method as a manner: something too intimate and personal to be expressed: the concrete language of principle and formula." "Imagine," one enthusiastic hearer has said, "that an Æolian harp possessed all the scales, and that an artist's hand struck them with all kinds of fantastic, elegant embellishments, ever rendering audible a deep fundamental tone, and a softly-flowing

upper voice,—and you will have some idea of his playing. . . . When the *Étude* was ended, we felt as though we had seen a lovely form in a dream, and, half-awake, we strove to seize it again,—but such things cannot be described, still less can they be fitly praised."

Yet even Chopin's method of fingering, "entirely original and unorthodox," was not one which could be imparted to his pupils,—much less "that fascination so ineffably poetic," as Liszt puts it, "that charm subtle and penetrating as the delicate perfume of verbena." —"Four-and-twenty black slaves, four-and-twenty white," served this magician as their master: and were responsive to his utmost bidding.

Throughout the whole of his playing, Chopin employed a certain *rocking* movement, with the most enchanting effect. Not the rocking of the performer's body, but the undulation of the melody, "like a skiff upon the bosom of tossing waves." This peculiar style of execution was, so to speak, his idiosyncrasy, his sign-manual; it set the seal upon all his compositions, in which

it is indicated by the term *tempo rubato*. But, to quote Moscheles, "the *rubato*, which, with his interpreters, degenerates into disregard of time, was with him only a charming originality of manner,"—a flexible, fluctuating, languorous movement, a measured, rhythmic balance and sway. To his own countrymen and countrywomen alone was this characteristic comprehensible: they alone were able in some degree to attain it. "An innate, intuitive understanding of his meaning aided them in following all the fluctuations of his depths of aerial and spiritual blue."

But the morning had gone by all too quickly, under the spell of Chopin's personality. The pupils must needs depart,—yet they implored the master for one more kindness before they should tear themselves away. An improvisation is what they clamoured for,—and Chopin was a born *improvisatore*. He smiled with benevolent sweetness upon their pleadings, and, letting his fingers glide into an entrancing rhythm, he poured forth what should some day be known to the world as his 6th Valse (in D-flat, Op. 69, No.

VALSE IN D FLAT, No. VI.
THE SWALLOWS.

"We hear the swallows twittering above the autumn garden, making ready for their flight to southern skies, while a vision of youth and beauty stands among the September flowers and bids good-bye to them."

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1)—the "one-minute Valse," it has been termed, from the extreme rapidity of the *tempo*,—that exquisite commingling of sight and sound, in which we hear the swallows twittering above the autumn garden, making ready for their flight to southern skies, while a vision of youth and beauty stands among the September flowers, and bids good-bye to them. The swallows are all in a fever of happy excitement and expectation—*molto vivace,* like the Valse : and a delicate thrill of responsive joy is wakened in the maiden's face. This music is built of very gossamer threads, such stuff as dreams are made of,—yet, while its ethereal echoes still floated across the room, the composer had passed into another phase. A hand had reached and claimed him from the past,—and the starry eyes of Constance Gladkowska, his first love, gazed at him across a world of shifting memories. He drifted, with a perceptible slackening of *tempo,* and a definite change of thought, into the wistful strains of the Valse in D-flat (Op. 70, No. 3.) which he afterwards avowed to have been inspired by that sweet remembrance, who "wore a white dress," he mused, "and had roses in her hair, and was charmingly beautiful." Vague, elusive, phan-

tasmal, she had always been for him, even in reality. She had sung for him at a concert,—she had given him a ring when he left Warsaw for Paris : she had lived on, "calm, but sad," standing aloof from him and his success, earnest and tender-looking "like the Madonnas of Luini." And the D-flat Valse is a sketch of her, from memory : in whose grave and pensive beauty one may still trace the features of Constance Gladkowska.

Chopin suddenly aroused himself, as a seer might do from visions. In accordance with his habit at the close of every piece, he struck the keys up and down with one finger, as though to tear himself forcibly away, to drag himself back into "the light of common day." With the friendliest of smiles he dismissed his students for the day ; and set to work with renewed vigour upon a task more intimately congenial,—the evolution, the clothing with substantial form, of his filmy dreams, his spontaneous and sensuous imaginings.

To the mind of Chopin, melodies arrived with the most facile ease sometimes almost with

"fatal fluency." He had, as it were, a troop of lovely attendant spirits waiting around him,—the slightest lifting of his wand could summon one to his side. It was subsequently that his real work began,—in anxious elaboration, in hesitating selection, in the most sedulous care as to how a passage should eventually present itself to the world. "He would spend weeks writing and re-writing a single page." It may be questioned whether such power of improvisation as Chopin possessed does not eventually weaken a man's capacity for inflexible and inexorable choice,—does not lower the pressure of the selective faculty, and induce a certain vacillation in the quest of some elusive best-of-all. Be that as it may, never did any composer expend more time and trouble upon the shaping of his beautiful fantasies. "Often a whole round of changes was rung, only that the passage might return, after all, to its original form. . . Perfection of form was Chopin's ostensible ideal. . . Every effect was studied with deliberate purpose, and wrought to the highest degree of finish that it would bear ; . . tried by every test, and confronted with every alternative which a scrupulous ingenuity could propose."

His method, in short, comprised the extraordinary paradox of a creative power which produced without conscious effort, and a self-critical power which spared no effort. The result was an elaboration of exquisite filigree work, a perfection of symmetrical form, which no one has ever attempted to parallel.

Chopin, indeed, as we have already pointed out, always occupied a solitary niche in the temple of Music: he stands isolate and unapproached,—one cannot ascribe his art to any known source, and its characteristics have never been transmitted. All that he wrote can be contained in a few thin volumes; his harvest was that of quality, not quantity. He had a reverential worship for his art and for its great exponents, notably Mozart, Hummel, Schubert, and Beethoven: but even in the *chefs-d'œuvre* of these masters he only sought that which was in affinity with his own ideals. "All savage wildness was repulsive to him;" all that savoured of rude strength or fierce passion offended his fastidious taste with a sense of vulgarity: his poetic conceptions were of a

fragile, mysterious, evasive nature; and his mind was a sensitive plant, unable to bear the rough winds that blow through certain giant forests of Beethoven. The saying—"*Le style, c'est l'homme*" was never better verified than in his case: and in the "felicitous perfection of style" of Chopin the musician, we trace the delicate lineaments, mental and physical, the plastic and melodious being of Chopin the man.

Having set down, with clarity and precision, the two Valses which he had improvised that morning,—having bestowed abundant labour upon the polishing of every jewelled phrase,—the composer allowed himself to rest, for the nonce, content; and proceeded, with a little shrug of distaste, to overhaul the proofs which, received some days ago, still littered his piano. And here he pursued a diametrically opposite plan to his patient craftsmanship of the last hour. Correcting proofs was to him, above all, a detestable if necessary evil. He had spent so much work and worry over the MSS. that he positively revolted against the printed page. Once his compositions were "set up," he apparently

considered his responsibility at an end. Good or bad, right or wrong, there they were, for people to make the best of; and "no composer, without exception, has allowed so many misprints to pass unnoticed." After a brief perfunctory survey of these obnoxious proofs, Chopin hastily fastened them up again; and endeavoured to wipe them off his mind by a few minutes' brilliant pianoforte practice, a flow of rounded pearls and glittering diamonds.

He then, after a light and hasty lunch, devoted himself a while to that regular correspondence which he kept up with the members of his family—and with them only. For he wrote letters to no others: it might almost have been thought, as Liszt says, that he was under a vow never to address a stranger by letter. "It was curious enough to see how he resorted to all kinds of expedients, to escape the necessity of tracing the most insignificant note," insomuch that he would often traverse Paris from end to end, to decline, *vivà-voce*, an invitation to dinner, or to impart some trivial piece

of information, rather than put his pen to a few lines on paper. Indeed, to the majority of his friends, Chopin's very handwriting was unknown; and the only people who possessed specimens of it, were one or two of his beautiful country-women who treasured little *billets* written in Polish. Possibly this was due to his dislike of the French language (which he spoke like a native, but considered cold and wanting in sonority) and his love of his own expressive and emotional mother-tongue. But, generous, courteous, and amiable as Chopin's friends found him, the real warmth of his affection was reserved for his own people in Poland. He never wearied of procuring pleasant little surprises to send them, pretty little novelties and graceful gifts; and his letters were almost invariably accompanied by these presents; while he, on the other hand, attached the greatest preciousness and importance to every little mark of remembrance which he received from home. If any trifling souvenir arrived from Warsaw, that day was a red-letter day for Chopin; and indeed, so precious to him were those little tokens of love, that he could hardly bear them to be touched by strangers, and

evinced a visible uneasiness did anyone finger them but himself.

He now made up, with deft fingers, a little parcel of charming *bagatelles* to despatch along with his homeward letters; and having paced around his apartment, inspecting with looks of pleasure the various little *objets de luxe* and flowers which beautified it, and chiefly those dear evidences of his homeland of which, as we have said, he was so pardonably jealous,—Chopin reluctantly dragged himself away from his own peaceful privacy, and went out into the brightness of the afternoon. The master, lingering here and there before some gay shop-window filled with alluring *bijouterie*, or luxuriant with massed colour of blooms, bent his steps towards the house of Prince Csartoryski, where he was an intimate and welcome guest, and was assured of a reunion with some of his dearest compatriots,—Prince Lubomirski, the Countess Platen, Madame de Komar, and the Countess Delphine Potocka,—that indescribably lovely woman, the incarnation of *spirituelle* grace and beauty, who queened it over the choicest

Parisian society. By her, Chopin's second Concerto had been inspired: to her indefinable fascination, her enchanting voice, he yielded the devoutest homage. There was much akin between the peculiar character of her charm, and the traits of his own compositions,—an ineffable wistful sweetness, with a strain of vehement, passionate patriotism perceptible throughout. And it has been truly observed that Chopin could only understand that which closely resembled himself, in some point or other —everything else "only existed for him as a sort of annoying dream." For him, always plunged in reveries, realities were too hard,—he struck against them unwittingly, and was pained. As a child, he could never handle a sharp instrument without hurting himself: as a man, he never found himself face to face with a being of different calibre, without being wounded by a sense of latent contradiction and antagonism. But he had an almost miraculous power of remaining deaf and blind to anything disagreeable to him: and those whose predilections were patently the reverse of his own, passed as mere phantoms before his senses: his polished aristocracy of bearing concealing any hint of

his real feelings, and his superb courtesy disarming all suspicion. His prepossessing person, his delicate constitution, rendered him interesting in the eyes of women: and the originality of his highly-cultured mind won him the regard of the most enlightened men. He made no attempt to maintain an equal standard of luxury in living with that of his friends, whether nobles or celebrities: in manners, in habits, in dress, he preserved an instinctive refinement, an exquisite rightness: and without doubt, few musicians, of obscure origin and slender means, have enjoyed in their life-time the friendship, fame, and affection which were showered upon Chopin—without spoiling him in the least.

In the salons of the exiled Polish aristocracy, Chopin was, and felt himself, at home,—an honoured guest, an acclaimed maestro, a friend by right of birth: and here, to a select and chosen audience, he could give of his very best in the way of performance: for Chopin's pianoforte style, like that of his bent in creative work, was fundamentally opposed to any idea

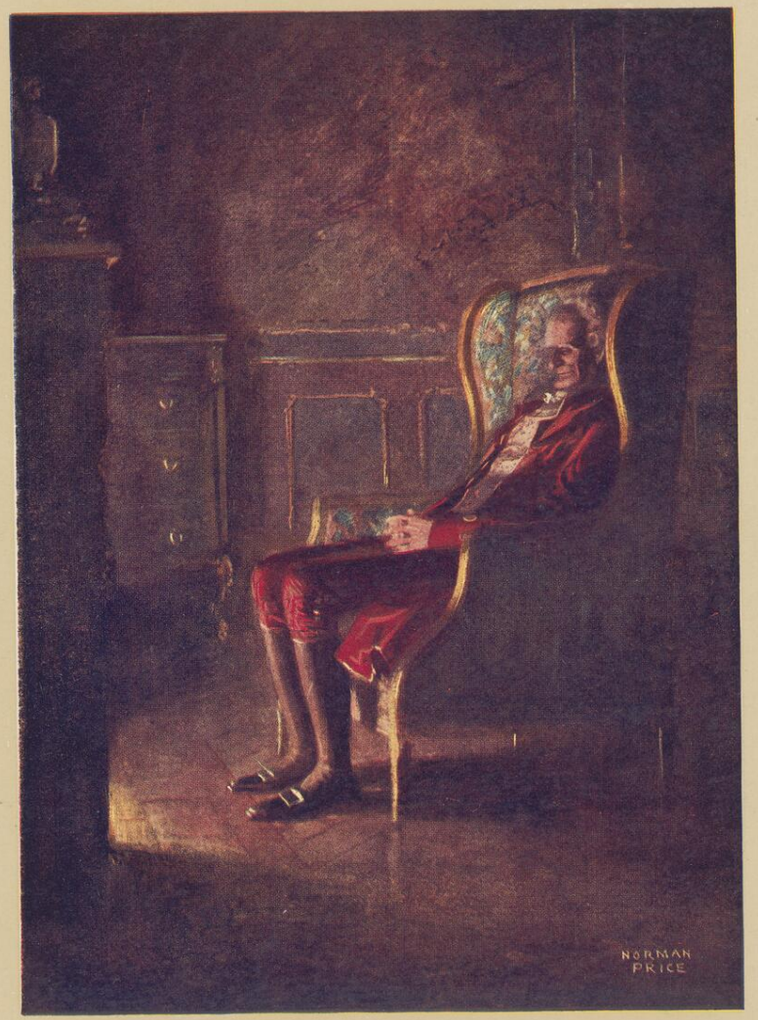
of large spaces, crowded hearers, and a sense of playing to the gallery. His instinctively timid and seclusive nature retired into itself at the rough touch of publicity: and it may be said that none knew Chopin's real gifts as an executant, his true mastery and magic, save such as had the privilege to hear in private the man who had been declared by all the greatest contemporary judges of music,—Berlioz, Moscheles, Mendelssohn, — as "the most interesting and original pianist of the day." The man, therefore, who could do himself such scant justice on the concert platform was in his element among his Polish friends, people whose hearts were, in blood, in tradition, in sympathy, attuned to his own: and as Prince Lubomirski, or the young, impetuous Orda, or the spirit-like Countess Potocka, were held hushed and spellbound by his enchanting strains, they endorsed with enthusiasm the words of Henrietta Voigt, in Leipzig,—"The sensitiveness of his imagination, style, and character communicates itself immediately to the sensitive hearer. I held my breath while I listened. Wonderful is the airy grace with which his fingers glide, almost fly, over the keyboard, producing a tone

like velvet. . . . . And I was also especially delighted with his childlike, natural demeanour when he played."

One delicate and fantastic piece of embroidery succeeded another,—the *Andante Spianato* passed almost imperceptibly into the F-minor *Fantasia,*—melodies falling out of "faery lands forlorn,"—or some "body-and-soul-inspiring valse" veiled the hearers in "its soft dark flood," such as that plaintive reverie, the valse in A-flat (Op. 69, No. 1), instinct with ashes of roses and tender memories of the past. In these reluctant, lingering, deeply-pathetic phrases, one seems to see an old man, brooding before the fire upon the days of his youth long past. A spark of the ancient vigour revives in him,—his soul responds, *con anima,* to some gallant inspiring summons: the gracious phantasmal form of the Well-Beloved lays cooling hands upon his brow. . . *Et puis, bon soir.* The shadows of age and night descend around him, the fluctuating, flickering light sinks down again. . . . Dead cinders fall with infinitesimal

VALSE IN A FLAT, No. IX.
THE REVERIE OF AGE.

"Instinct with ashes of roses and tender memories of the past. In these reluctant, lingering, deeply-pathetic phrases, one seems to see an old man, brooding before the fire upon the days of his youth long past."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sounds, like footsteps retreating in the distance. . . . . The dream is done. . . .

The afternoon was closing into dusk, when Chopin, rejecting all the allurements of evening Paris, hurried home to his own apartments in the Chaussée d'Antin. He had promised himself an evening *chez lui,* far more precious in his eyes than the receipt of flatteries and adulations which awaited him without. He had invited a few choice friends to bear him company, artistic temperaments with which he was thoroughly *en rapport;* and in a short while these had arrived with eager expectation, for to be received into the intimacy of Chopin's private life was an honour to which few could lay claim.

It was not without a struggle, without a touch of misanthropic repugnance, as Liszt puts it, that the composer had been induced to open his doors and his piano, even to his most faithful friends. But, once he had overcome his tendency to refuse himself, a visit to Chopin was a pleasure inestimable: he knew how to

receive his visitors with the most charming ease and grace, placing everything that was his at their disposal with an almost Oriental humility.

And now, as darkness invaded the large flower-scented room, a mental atmosphere elusive and indefinite stole in and suffused the night with sweetness. The corners of the room were dark ; all sense of space was obliterated. Here and there some tall piece of furniture revealed its shadowy outlines. The light which was concentrated at the pianoforte, mingled softly with the fitful firelight : and a single portrait caught these blended gleams. In the "luminous zone" around the Pleyel sat a number of men, whose natures had singularly fitted them to be recipients of those confidences which Chopin poured forth to his piano. Heller was there, worshipping at the shrine of his fellow-musician ; and Adolphe Nourrit, that "noble artist at once ascetic and passionate," his constitution already "undermined by a melancholy passion for the Beautiful." Heine, seated nearest to Chopin, conversed with him in

mysterious whispers over the twinkling keys ; and Chopin translated his answers into fairy arabesques of sound. Between these two kindred spirits, a glance, a word, a tone sufficed for mutual understanding : and they spoke, in a sort of delicious humorous nonsense to which the rest had no clue, of the mysterious dreamland which they both had visited, and gave each other news from that ethereal region. . . "Do the roses always glow there with so triumphant a flame ? do the trees at midnight sing always so harmoniously ?". . . .

Meyerbeer,—a great name his in those days,—sat next to Heine, and marvelled at the coruscations of a genius so totally unlike his own. Eugène Delacroix, the master-painter, sat silent and absorbed, revolving splendid schemes. The venerable Niemcevicz was listening with enrapt attention to the Polish songs which Chopin translated into wordless music : while the greater poet, Mickiewicz, "the Dante of the North," remained brooding and apart, in a vision of his country's wrongs. Last but not least, aloof from the others, seated with her arms before

her on the table, was that "large-brained woman and large-hearted man, self-styled George Sand," drinking in the ceaseless current of sound with all the fervour of a strong and ardent nature. Rarely did her deep sympathetic contralto vibrate upon the magnetic air of that dusky room: her dark eyes veiled their thrilling gaze beneath the nebulous dimness of the night. Only that perfume of violets which she loved, softly exhaling from her dress, revealed the presence of a woman, "whose every thought is fragrant," as Heine said. For this "great soul, simple, affectionate, without vanity, without pedantry, humane, equitable, patient, kind," in Matthew Arnold's words,—this powerful personality, was prepared to obliterate herself at a moment's notice in honour of the frail, feeble, woman-like, fastidious bundle of nerves called Chopin: and she who was "never weary,—never despondent,—never out of humour," could bear with all his little petulances and caprices, as a mother with a sick child. Yet, it may be, she was of too strong intellectual capacity to exist as the bosom-friend of such a man. Her genius was too electrical, her physique too energetic: and the admiration which she had inspired in

the delicate organisation of Chopin was consuming him, "as a wine too spirituous shatters the fragile vase."

"And now, my dears," said their host, turning round upon the music-stool, "I have played myself out,—very nearly. I do not often confess to fatigue—yet it is hardly a malady to be ashamed of. Before I rise from the piano, however, I will play two or three short *morceaux*,—and what they shall be, I leave to the decision of the three most silent people here: I address you, Delacroix,—you, Mickiewicz,— and you, Madame Sand."

"For this hour, and this half-light," said Delacroix, with gratitude, "I will suggest a Nocturne,—your No. 6 in G-minor. For in that divine composition the outlines of a noble picture were revealed to me,—a young novice leaning at her window on a night of stars, while her lover beseeches her vainly from below, and the solemn tones of the organ inspire her to repudiate all earthly love."

A DAY WITH FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN.

"And for me," said Mickiewicz, arousing himself, "I choose your F-minor Nocturne,—the fifteenth, is it not?—where the melancholy valour of young warriors, marching to a forlorn hope, echoes with a desperate gaiety through the snowy forest."

"But I," said Madame Sand,—her warm, rich tones, like those of a violoncello, falling with singular effect across the shadows,—"I will implore our Frédéric for that loveliest, to my mind, of all his Nocturnes—the fourth, in F-major. The very breath of midsummer distils from it: it is all a wafting of roses and hay and syringa, the passionate scents of a June garden. And in that garden I see two lovers whispering in the twilight: whose vows shall never be broken, nor the rapture of their first love fade. For they are enshrined in this immortal melody. . . .—Don't you remember, my friends, how the night-wind arises with vehemence, and rustles excitedly in the leaves awhile—and then it dies down into pulsing sighs, while that *chant d'amour* recommences?"

NOCTURNE IN F MAJOR, No. IV.

"And in that garden I see two lovers—in the twilight; whose vows shall never be broken, nor the rapture of their first love fade, for they are enshrined in this immortal melody."


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A DAY WITH FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN.

"I am at your bidding," answered Chopin: and he played the three Nocturnes as he was desired.

When all his guests were gone, and, coughing wearily, he sought his bed,—to lie down, but not to repose,— the night-wind, of which George Sand had spoken, came rustling to him from gardens far away—gardens a thousand miles remote from Paris,—and it spoke to him, in Polish accents, of days which he had long forgotten. . .

"Joy and woe are woven fair,
A garment for the soul to wear;
Under every grief and pine
Runs a joy with silken twine."

William Blake's words, in their touching truth and simplicity, might well have wandered through the unrestful dreams of Frédéric Chopin.

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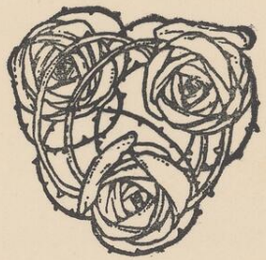

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BY M.C. GILLINGTON

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