THE SPIRIT OF THE FOUNTAIN.

AN OLD ENGLISH LEGEND.

BY J. S. COYNE.

"She sang of Love—and o'er her lyre
The rosy rays of evening fell."

In the warm light of an autumnal sunset, streaming through the thick foliage of a broad-leaved clematis that festooned the open window of a room overlooking one of those richly varied landscapes which England only can boast, sat two children of earth—beautiful as the first-born pair, and like them alone in the midst of the world, for they lived but for each other; and the smile that wreathed the lips of one was reflected in the eyes of his partner. They were lovers, not in the common acceptation of the word, but in the all-absorbing influence of a passion that had become a portion of their existence.

Teresa, for that was the maiden's name, occasionally struck with playful gaiety a few chords upon a lute which hung upon her arm, at times accompanying its music with the sweet melody of her voice. Arthur, her betrothed, reclined on a cushion at her feet.

"Teresa," whispered the youth, gazing passionately upwards into that beautiful face which bent so closely towards his, as almost to mingle her silken tresses with the thick curls which shadowed his brow; "Teresa, that sweet strain which you sang me last night haunts my imagination, its mournful cadences still dwell upon my ear; will you sing it once more?"

"Tis but the fragment of an old ballad, Arthur, but if your fancy be pleased with such sad music, you shall hear it again. It is called 'The Spirit's Song.'"

Preluding the strain with a simple symphony, she commenced.

SONG.

Come back—come back—I am fleeting far
To my distant home in a cold bright star;
I am wasting away—like the moon in the wane;
Like mist from the fountain,
Like snow from the mountain;
I am going—and hither I come not again.

I go—I go—like the trackless wind,
To-morrow you seek me, but shall not find ;
I am looking my last on the scenes I lov'd best,
But hadst thou not slighted
The flame thou hadst lighted,
This night a fond bosom to thine should be prest.

"What a strange indescribable feeling that old lay always awakens in my mind," said Arthur, after the song had been concluded; "To what circumstance could those wild verses have related?"

"There is a romantic legend attached to them, which I remember having heard many years ago from an old retainer of my family," replied Teresa.

"A legend! Dear Teresa, you know my passion for legendary lore. Can you recal it to memory?"

"I doubt not but I can; and as the moral it contains may afford a useful lesson to your inconstant sex, I will repeat it for you."

A half reproachful smile from Arthur was his only defence against this sportively aimed shaft.

LEGEND.

"It was (began Teresa,) in those days of chivalric gallantry when ladies' smiles were won amidst breaking lances, and when cleft hearts and helmets were quite the *ton*, that a brave and accomplished English knight, Sir Edred Walthen, the heir of large and fruitful domains, returned to his paternal castle crowned with laurels reaped in the conquered plains of France under the victorious banner of our third Edward. The youthful warrior had accompanied the king on his return from France to the English capital; and, amidst the gallant train of courtiers that composed the royal retinue on that occasion, none was more distinguished than Sir Edred, by the gifts which nature and fortune had showered on him with a liberal hand. Brave, rich, and handsome, honoured by the favour of his Sovereign and assailed by the bewildering glances of high-born beauties, he had yet sufficient strength of mind to resist the allurements of love and ambition, and to follow the dictates of his free fancy, which led him to indulge in the manly sports of the chase in his native forests, rather than waste his youth and health in the meretricious pleasures of a peaceful court.

"It was, therefore, with feelings of ill-suppressed chagrin that many a proud fair one, who had contemplated bringing the young knight into her silken bondage, beheld him spurring his fiery charger beneath the royal balcony, and waving a graceful but careless adieu to the courtly dames who graced it with their presence.

"'Methinks Sir Edred Walthen lacks somewhat of his

knightly courtesy in quitting the palace so abruptly;' observed the haughty Matilda de Vere to her cousin Adela Norham, as, leaning over the balustrades of the balcony, she watched with a bitter smile and heightened blush the white plume of the heart-free knight till it was lost beneath the gloomy portals of the castle.

"'I'll wager my carcanet against your ruby ring, cousin—that this Sir Edred Walthen would never dream of forsaking the pleasures of the court if he had not some strong inducement to draw him away. It is not of the old towers and gloomy halls of his castle that he is enamoured.'

"'What then can his object be in quitting us so suddenly?'—eagerly inquired Matilda.

"'Some base-born rustic has I doubt not captivated him; how could he otherwise have escaped the snares you laid to entrap his heart?'—replied Adela, with spiteful triumph.

"'*I* lay snares for his heart! No, cousin—I despise him—hate him!' With these words, accompanied by a disdainful toss of her beautiful head, Matilda quitted the balcony, inly resolving to leave no means untried to make Sir Edred a captive to her charms, whenever an opportunity might again offer for doing so.

"Sir Edred, as he pursued his journey with a light heart, heard not, nor, if he had, would he have heeded, these feminine reproaches; his heart had never felt the influence of love, nor had his lips ever spoken its language. War had heretofore been his sole mistress; and now, pursuing with avidity the delights of a forester's life, love had found no opportunity to aim one well-directed shaft at his heart.

"Each morning, surrounded by his vassals and retainers, he might be heard making the haunts of the wood-deities echo to the clear recheat of his bugle-horn—and each evening beheld, girt with the companions of his sports, seated at the head of the great oaken table in his ancient hall, draining the wassail-bowl and making the old roof respond to many a joyous carol and merry roundelay.

"For several months Sir Edred continued to pursue his careless habit of life; until one evening, after a severe and protracted chase, during which the knight became separated from his followers, he found himself in a remote and to him unknown part of the forest. In vain he blew the summoning call for his retainers; the blast died away unanswered save by melancholy echoes from the forest's leafy depths.

"'The spot whereon he stood was a small circular glade or open space, encompassed by dark ancestral trees, that, like shadowy shapes worked by a sorcerer's spell, seemed crowding round the magic boundary, yet afraid to encroach on its limits. One solitary sycamore, like the magician of the scene, waved its tall

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form in the centre of the enclosure, and shadowed with its spreading branches a small fountain that sparkled at its root. The rising moon shone with unusual brilliancy, and, pouring a flood of light through the motionless leaves of the sheltering tree, gave to the mirror-like bason beneath the appearance of a splendid chequer-work in ebony and silver. Sir Edred, faint and exhausted with the toils of the day, beheld with mingled feelings of surprise and joy a refreshing draught thus opportunely presented to his lips. He immediately dismounted, and approaching the spring, was at point of kneeling down on its flowery margin to slake his thirst in the cool waters, when he became suddenly rooted to the earth by the apparition of a young female clad in white sitting on the opposite brink of the fountain, looking intently into the water, and rocking herself to and fro with slow and mournful regularity.

"Sir Edred, whose courage had never failed him in the hour of peril on the battle-field, now stood irresolute and awe struck. The sudden encounter of an armed enemy would have hardly caused his pulse to beat with quicker motion; but there was in the strange appearance of that defenceless girl amid the untrodden depths of a wild forest something so mysterious, that an indefinable sense of fear held him for some moments motionless. At length, perceiving she did not speak, nor appear to notice him, he summoned sufficient resolution to address her.

"'Lady' said he, 'what seek you in this lone place—unmeet for gentle damsel? If there be aught in which the sword of Sir Edred Walthen can serve thee, name it, and by my vow of knighthood I will see thee righted!'

"The figure replied not; but raising her head from its drooping attitude, smiled mournfully upon the knight. Sir Edred thought he had never beheld a face so ineffably beautiful; she was pale as the opening snowdrop, but her dark blue eye shone with more than mortal splendour, and her taper fingers, as she removed the dark tresses from her lofty brow, seemed like shafts of moonlight breaking through the darkness of a dungeon. His heart thrilled with a new and pleasurable sensation as he gazed upon the mysterious being; and again, after eagerly demanding how he might assist her, he intreated her to inform him who she was.

"'I am,' said the figure, with a voice whose tones fell in delicious melody upon his ear, 'the guardian spirit of this spring; for ages numberless have I sat on its margin looking into its clear waters, and waiting with anxious hope the fulfilment of my destiny.'

"'And what may be thy destiny, fair spirit?' inquired the knight.

"'To watch by this fountain until a youth shall for twelve months continue to love me with unchanging constancy.'

" 'Can it be possible that no man could be found to preserve his vow of love unbroken for that time?' asked Sir Edred.

" 'Mortal steps have never approached my retreat until this night,' replied the spirit.

" 'What if *one* should woo thee who would keep his faith for a year?'"

" 'I should then become mortal as he is; and his fate should be united to mine,' answered the Guardian of the fountain.

" '*Mine* be that enviable lot, sweet spirit,' cried the enamoured knight. 'Here by thine own pure fountain let me swear ——'

" 'Stay, generous mortal,' interrupted the spirit, 'you know not the consequence if you fail in your oath; my faint spark of hope will be extinguished the moment *you* forget your pledge, and the remainder of my miserable existence must be with those sad shades who wander with the distant stars in the dreary realms of space through a long eternity, without hold on earth, or hope of heaven.'

" 'I am still resolved. Let me swear!' exclaimed Sir Edred. 'May shame and dishonour light on my crest, when a thought of mine shall wander from thee.'

"The spirit's beautiful countenance beamed with tender delight as she replied: 'Be it so, Sir Knight. Freely do I bestow on thee the full confidence thou seekest; on thy fidelity my future misery or happiness must now depend. Hear the conditions of my love. At this hour, and beside this fountain, on each returning full moon for the next twelve months, you must meet me, without change of heart or mind. Do you promise this?'

" 'I do, by my trust in heaven!'

" 'Tis well;—and this shall be the token of your truth,' said the spirit, plucking a white water-lily that grew in the fountain, and presenting it to the knight. 'This flower, while your faith remains unbroken, shall retain its beauty and freshness; but if, lured by the love of woman, you forget your vow to the Spirit of the Fountain, it shall instantly become withered, and the unfortunate giver lost to you for ever.'

" Sir Edred took the proffered flower, and pressing it fervently to his lips, was about to reiterate his protestations of love to the fair spirit; but when he turned to address her, she was gone, and he stood alone beneath the broad sycamore tree beside the fountain.

" Musing on the strange events of the evening, the knight remounted his steed, and taking a path through the forest which he judged would lead to his castle, he arrived safely there about midnight.

" After his adventure at the fountain, Sir Edred became an altered man; the sports of the chase, which had formerly so

engrossed his time, were suddenly abandoned; he shunned the social board with the strictness of an anchorite, and appeared to receive no enjoyment but in wandering through the solitary depths of the forest. He continued to wear the lily the spirit had given him in his bosom, which, instead of fading, appeared each day to grow more fresh and lovely.

"At length the evening of the first full moon since his interview with his mysterious betrothed arrived, and Sir Edred, who had watched for it with the impatience of an ardent lover, flew to the appointed spot, breathless with expectation; and there, seated beside the spring, he again discovered the mysterious guardian of its waters. A smile of delight played upon the beautiful features of the spirit as the knight approached, who, kneeling by the fountain side, drew the lily from his bosom, fresh as the moment it was plucked.

"'The token is still unfaded,' said she, 'but you have not yet passed the ordeal of temptation; if your constancy then hold firm, we shall be happy.'

"The knight again repeated his vows of unalterable love to the gentle spirit, who listened until the declining moonbeams no longer glistened on the still waters of the fountain—and then Sir Edred was alone.

"During ten succeeding moons the young knight, faithful to his vow, repaired on the appointed evening to the fountain in the forest: up to this period his heart had never strayed from its allegiance to his mistress, and the eloquent smiles of the spirit at each meeting spoke her love and gratitude to the arbiter of her fate.

"On the night of the eleventh full moon, the last but one which was to have completed the term of his vow, he flew on the wings of passion to meet his beloved spirit. She was sitting where he had first beheld her, but a gradual change had taken place in her appearance since that time; her eyes were not now bent in intense sadness upon the waters of the fountain, but sparkled with love and hope; her form, which then seemed almost as impalpable as a wreath of mist, had assumed a more tangible but not less lovely appearance; and the eloquent blood had begun, like the herald clouds of morning, to tinge her pure cheek with a vermeil tint. In short, it was evident to Sir Edred that the beautiful creature for whose love he had languished was on the verge of quitting the land of spirits, and that the vesture of mortality was about to clothe the bright form he idolized. Another tedious month would, however, intervene before he could clasp her to his bosom as his chosen bride.

"A few days after this last meeting of the lovers, while Sir Edred's whole mind was engrossed with his approaching felicity, a courier from the king announced to him that his majesty, now

on an excursion of pleasure through the kingdom, purposed, for the recreation of himself and his court, to spend a few days hunting in Sir Edred's noble forests, and during that time to honour his castle with his presence. The young knight would willingly have dispensed with this unseasonable interruption to his secluded pleasures; but as he could not with safety evade the royal visit, he returned a suitable reply, expressive of the high gratification he felt at this mark of his sovereign's favour. Accordingly, in a few days after, the old halls and chambers of Walthen Castle were filled with the proud, giddy, and lazy followers of the court. In the rude fashion of the times, feasting and hunting by day, and wine and wassail by night, filled up the hours so merrily, that old Time seemed to have plunged into the vortex, and to have forgotten to chronicle the fleeting minutes.

"Amongst those high-born beauties who glittered in the royal train, none blazed with such resistless lustre as the young and fascinating Matilda De Vere. She it was who, piqued at the coldness of Sir Edred during his sojourn at the royal court, had so pettishly censured the knight's courtesy on his departure from the palace, as has been already related; and who now, with the true spirit of mortified pride, determined to subjugate a heart that had despised her power. To effect this, to her, paramount object, she armed herself with all the resistless arts of her sex, and spared none of those seductive wiles which so successfully entangle men, to bring the stubborn Sir Edred to her feet. For some days her nets were spread in vain; but the constant presence of a beautiful girl, whose preference for him was too undisguised to be mistaken, flattered his vanity and led him almost unconsciously from one little act of gallantry to another; and though he soothed his scruples with the consciousness that he still really loved only his own sweet Spirit of the Fountain, he suffered himself to become the close attendant of Matilda De Vere in the chase, and her sole companion in her evening rambles through the romantic scenery by which they were surrounded.

"'Man's a strange animal,' says a modern poet, and the strangeness of his nature was never more strongly exhibited than in the easy infatuation with which Sir Edred resigned himself to his new passion;—each day his struggles with the tempter became less resolute, until at length his virtue and honour sank in the conflict, and his vow was all but forgotten. Still he hesitated to consummate his infidelity by making an avowal of his passion to Matilda De Vere, and the twelfth full moon of his probation rose upon the earth without witnessing his total perjury.

"An entertainment of extraordinary magnificence had been held on that day in Sir Edred's castle, followed by a revel at which all the dames and gallants of the court shone with redoubled brilliancy. The hall had been cleared for a dance, and the musicians in the gallery had struck up an inspirating measure, when Sir Edred, approaching a bevy of beauties who occupied a distinguished place at the top of the hall, bowed gracefully to the fair Matilda, and taking her hand led her forth as the chosen mistress of the revel.

"A hum of admiration ran round the circle, as the noble pair moved through the mazes of the dance with inimitable ease and dignity; and while the audible praises of the courtiers heightened the bright blush that mantled on the cheek of the triumphant beauty, she bent on her partner such passionate glances, that the last feeble defences of his resolution gave way before their enchantment.

"After the dance had concluded, Sir Edred and his new mistress retired from the throng to enjoy the refreshing coolness of the night air, in an alcove formed by the embrasure of one of the hall windows; there, screened from observation, the false knight pressed Matilda's hands to his lips and to his heart, and besought her to listen to his passion.

"'Hold, sir knight!' she exclaimed; 'would you persuade me that my poor charms could wean you from the sports of the field or the glory of the camp—you who have hitherto spurned love's slavery?'

"'Alas! I am now love's captive, fair Matilda, and it is your smiles alone can make my bondage endurable.'

"'Mine!' cried she, with an air of well feigned embarrassment; 'No, no! it cannot be; I must not permit myself to indulge—' She felt she had said too much, and turned away to conceal her blushes.

"Sir Edred clasped the unresisting maid to his breast—his plighted love was forgotten, and in the ecstasy of the moment he sealed his apostate vows upon her lips without bestowing a single thought upon the confiding being whom he had consigned to undying misery by his fickle heartlessness.

"Matilda turned upon him a glance full of tenderness, and observing the lily which he wore in his breast, she attempted to snatch it, saying, 'This then, shall be the emblem of your love, and I shall be the lady of the lily.'

"Recalled to a remembrance of his perfidy by these words, he turned his eyes upon the flower; its beautiful petals hung bruised and withering upon the stem. He knew that the measure of his crime was complete, and that he had for ever lost her whose bright hopes, like that flower, had been crushed by the hand

that should have cherished them. A suppressed groan burst from his lips; he flew precipitately from the presence of his destroyer, and taking the well-remembered forest path, reached the fountain, breathless with shame and exertion.

"The last rays of the moon just silvered the topmost branches of the tall sycamore, but the fountain lay in lonely darkness beneath.

"Sir Edred gasped with agony when he perceived that the spirit no longer watched by its waters. He called on her by a thousand endearing epithets—the deep echoes of the forest were his only reply. He besought her to return but for one moment—to let him behold her beauty once more—to implore her forgiveness—and to tell her he still loved her as mortal never loved before. A soft low sigh seemed to breathe in his ear, and the figure of the spirit floated over the fountain, but so dimly visible that, but for the mournful brightness of her eyes, the knight could scarcely believe it to be the form of her he loved. Thus she continued, gazing with sad regard upon her faithless lover, till her faint shadow faded into air; and then a low sweet melody came upon the midnight wind—it was the lay of the parting spirit mourning her dark doom—the sad record of woman's love and man's inconstancy. This was the song which I sang for you."

"A sad tale, indeed, dear Teresa,---and Sir Edred, what was the fate of that unfortunate?" inquired the fair narrator's interested auditor.

"Tradition says he was discovered by his vassals the following morning, stretched beside the fountain, the withered lily crushed between his clasped hands. He lived, but his name and sorrows descended with him to the tomb in a few brief years. What became of the proud Matilda De Vere I know not, for the legend is silent on that point; but it is not improbable that she sought in the conquest of other hearts a consolation for the loss of Sir Edred's."

"Teresa, think you that a female heart would have better resisted temptation than the ill-fated Edred's?" asked Arthur, thoughtfully.

"In faith, Arthur, I will not presume any thing of the kind; but since my legend has cast such a sombrous shade over your countenance, I must in mere charity charm it away by a merry lay: listen!"—and the laughing girl commenced a playful French *chanson*, which soon had the effect of restoring sunshine to her lover's brow.