

The Three Palaces

By Richard Garnett

Three pairs of young people, each a youth with his bride, came together along a road to the point where it divided to the right and left. On one side was inscribed, "To the Palace of Truth," and on the other, "To the Palace of Illusion."

"This way, my beauty!" cried one of the youths, drawing his companion in the direction of the Palace of Truth. "To the place where and where alone thy perfections may be beheld as they are!"

"And my imperfections!" whispered the young spouse, but her tone was airy and confident.

"Well," said the second youth, "does the choice beseem you upon whom the moon of your nuptials is beaming still. My beloved and I are riper in Hymen's lore by not less, I ween, than one fortnight. Prudence impels us towards the Palace of Illusion."

"Thy will is mine, Alonso," said his lady.

"I," said the third youth, "will seek neither; for I would not be wise over-much, while of what I deem myself to know I would be well assured. Happy am I, and bless my lot, yet have I beheld a red mouse in closer contiguity to my beloved than I could bring myself to approve it, albeit it leapt not from her mouth as they do sometimes. Yet do I know it for a red mouse and nothing worse; had I inhabited the Palace of Illusion haply I had deemed it a rat. And, it being a red mouse as it indubitably was, to what end fancy it a tawny-throated nightingale?"

While, therefore, the other pairs proceeded on the paths they had respectively chosen, this sage youth and his bride settled themselves at the parting of the ways, built their cot, tended their garden, tilled their field and raised fruits around them, including children.

The preparation of a cheerful repast was one day well advanced, when, lifting up their eyes, the pair beheld a haggard and emaciated couple tottering along the road that led from the Palace of Illusion.

"Heavens!" exclaimed they simultaneously, "no! yes! 'tis surely they! O friends! whence this forlorn semblance? Whence this osseous condition?"

"Of them anon," replied the attenuated youth, "but before all things, dinner!"

The restorative was speedily administered, and the pilgrim commenced his narration.

"Guarded," he said, "though the Palace of Illusion was by every species of hippogriffic chimaera, my bride and I experienced no difficulty in penetrating inside its precincts. The giants lifted us in their arms, the dragons carried us on their backs, fairy bridges spanned the moats, golden ladders inclined against the ramparts, we scaled the towers and trod the courts securely, though constructed to all seeming of dissolving cloud. Delicate fare loaded every dish; smiling companions invited to every festivity; perfumes caressed our nostrils; music enwrapped our ears.

"But while all else charmed and allured, one fact intruded of which we could not pretend unconsciousness, the intensity of our aversion for each other. Never could I behold my Imogene without marvelling whatever could have induced me to wed her, and she has acknowledged that she laboured under the like perplexity. On the other hand, our good opinion of ourselves had grown prodigiously. The other's dislike appeared to each an insane delusion, and we seriously questioned whether it could be right to mate longer with a being so destitute of true æsthetic feeling. We confided these scruples to each other, with the result of a most tempestuous altercation.

“As this was attaining its climax, one of the inmates of the Palace, a pert forward boy, resembling a page out of livery, passed by, and ironically, as I thought, congratulated us on the strength of our mutual attachment. ‘Never,’ exclaimed he, ‘have I beheld the like here before, and I am the oldest inhabitant.’

“As this felicitation was proffered at the precise moment when I was engaged in staunching a rent in my cheek with a handful of my wife’s hair, I was constrained to regard it as unseasonable, and expressed myself to that effect.

“ ‘What!’ exclaimed he, with equal surprise, ‘know ye not that this is the Palace of Illusion, where everything is inverted and appears the reverse of itself? Intense indeed must be the affection which can thus drive you to fisticuffs! Had I beheld you billing and cooing, truly I had counselled a judicial separation!’

“My wife and I looked at each other, and by a common impulse made at our utmost speed for the gate of the Palace of Illusion.

“Alas! it is one thing to enter and another to quit that domain of enchantment. The golden clouds enwrap us still, cakes and dainties tempted us as of old, the most bewitching strains detained us spellbound. The giant and dragon warders, indeed, offered no violent resistance, they simply turned into open portals which appeared to yield us egress, but proved entrances to interminable labyrinthine mazes. At last we escaped by resolutely following the exact opposite track to that which we observed to be taken by a poet, who was chasing a phantom of Fame with a scroll of unintelligible and inharmonious verse.

“The moment that we emerged from the enchanted castle we knew ourselves and each other for what we were, and fell weeping into each other’s arms. So feeble were we that we could hardly move, nevertheless we have made a shift to crawl hither, trusting to your hospitality to recruit us from the sawdust and ditch-water which we vehemently suspect to have been our diet during the whole of our residence.”

“Eat and drink without stint and without ceremony,” rejoined their host, “provided only that somewhat remain for the guests whom I see approaching.”

And in a few moments the fugitives from the Palace of Illusion were reinforced by travellers from the Palace of Truth, whose backs were most determinately turned to that august edifice.

“My friends,” said the youth last arrived, when the first greetings were over, “Truth’s Palace might be a not ineligible residence were not the inmates necessitated not merely to know the truth but to speak it, and did not all innocent embellishments of her majestic person become entirely inefficient and absolutely nugatory. For example, the number of my wife’s grey hairs speedily confounded me; and how should it be otherwise, when the excellent dye she had brought with her had completely lost its virtues? She on her part found herself continually obliged to acquaint me with the manifold defects she was daily discovering in my mind and person, which I was unable to deny, frequently as I opened my mouth for that purpose. It is true that I had the satisfaction of pointing out equal defects in herself; but this could not be considered a great satisfaction, seeing that every such discovery impugned my taste and judgment, and impaired the worth of my most cherished possession. At length we resolved that Truth and we were not made for each other, and, having verified the accuracy of this conclusion by uttering it unrebuked in Truth’s own palace, quitted the unblest spot with all possible expedition. No sooner were we outside than our tenderness revived, and, the rites of reconciliation duly performed, my wife found nothing more urgent than to try whether her dye had recovered its natural properties, which, as ye may perceive, proved to be the case. We are now bound for the Palace of Illusion.”

“Nay,” said he who had escaped thence, “if my experience suffices not to deter you, learn that they who have known Truth can never taste of Illusion. Illusion is for life’s golden prime, its fanes and pavilions may be reared but by the magic wand of Youth. The maturity that would recreate them builds not for Illusion but for Deceit. Yet, lest mortality should despair, there exists, as I have learned, yet another palace, founded midway between that of Illusion and that of Truth, open to those who are too soft for the one and too hard for the other. Thither, indeed, the majority of mankind in this age resort, and there appear to find themselves comfortable.”

“And this palace is?” inquired Truth’s runaways simultaneously.

“The Palace of Convention,” replied the youth.