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Author: Thomas Bailey Aldrich

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A MIDNIGHT FANTASY ***

A MIDNIGHT FANTASY

By Thomas Bailey Aldrich

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I.

It was close upon eleven o'clock when I stepped out of the rear vestibule of the Boston Theatre, and, passing through the narrow court that leads to West Street, struck across the Common diagonally. Indeed, as I set foot on the Tremont Street mall, I heard the Old South drowsily sounding the hour.

It was a tranquil June night, with no moon, but clusters of sensitive stars that seemed to shiver with cold as the wind swept by them; for perhaps there was a swift current of air up there in the zenith. However, not a leaf stirred on the Common; the foliage hung black and massive, as if cut in bronze; even the gaslights appeared to be infected by the prevailing calm, burning steadily behind their glass screens and turning the neighboring leaves into the tenderest emerald. Here and there, in the sombre row of houses stretching along Beacon Street, an illuminated window gilded a few square feet of darkness; and now and then a footfall sounded on a distant pavement. The pulse of the city throbbed languidly.

The lights far and near, the fantastic shadows of the elms and maples, the gathering dew, the elusive odor of new grass, and that peculiar hush which belongs only to midnight—as if Time had paused in his flight and were holding his breath—gave to the place, so familiar to me by day, an air of indescribable strangeness and remoteness. The vast, deserted park had lost all its wonted outlines; I walked doubtfully on the flagstones

which I had many a time helped to wear smooth; I seemed to be wandering in some lonely unknown garden across the seas—in that old garden in Verona where Shakespeare's ill-starred lovers met and parted. The white granite façade over yonder—the Somerset Club—might well have been the house of Capulet: there was the clambering vine reaching up like a pliant silken ladder; there, near by, was the low-hung balcony, wanting only the slight girlish figure—immortal shape of fire and dew!—to make the illusion perfect.

I do not know what suggested it; perhaps it was something in the play I had just witnessed—it is not always easy to put one's finger on the invisible electric thread that runs from thought to thought—but as I sauntered on I fell to thinking of the ill-assorted marriages I had known. Suddenly there hurried along the gravelled path which crossed mine obliquely a half-indistinguishable throng of pathetic men and women: two by two they filed before me, each becoming startlingly distinct for an instant as they passed—some with tears, some with hollow smiles, and some with firm-set lips, bearing their fetters with them. There was little Alice chained to old Bowsby; there was Lucille, “a daughter of the gods, divinely tall,” linked forever to the dwarf Perrywinkle; there was my friend Porphyro, the poet, with his delicate genius shrivelled in the glare of the youngest Miss Lucifer's eyes; there they were, Beauty and the Beast, Pride and Humility, Bluebeard and Fatima, Prose and Poetry, Riches and Poverty, Youth and Crabbed Age— Oh, sorrowful procession! All so wretched, when perhaps all might have been so happy if they had only paired differently! I halted a moment to let the weird shapes drift by. As the last of the train melted into the darkness, my vagabond fancy went wandering back to the theatre and the play I had seen—Romeo and Juliet. Taking a lighter tint, but still of the same sober color, my reflections continued.

What a different kind of woman Juliet would have been if she had not fallen in love with Romeo, but had bestowed her affection on some thoughtful and stately signior—on one of the Delia Scalas, for example! What Juliet needed was a firm and gentle hand to tame her high spirit without breaking a pinion. She was a little too—vivacious, you might say—“gushing” would perhaps be the word if you were speaking of a modern maiden with so exuberant a disposition as Juliet's. She was too romantic, too blossomy, too impetuous, too wilful; old Capulet had brought her up injudiciously, and Lady Capulet was a nonentity. Yet in spite of faults of training and some slight inherent flaws of character, Juliet was a superb creature; there was a fascinating dash in her frankness; her modesty and daring were as happy rhymes as ever touched lips in a love-poem. But her impulses required curbing; her heart made too many beats to the minute. It was an evil destiny that flung in the path of so rich and passionate a nature a fire-brand like Romeo. Even if no family feud had existed, the match would not have been a wise one. As it was, the well-known result was inevitable. What could come of it but clandestine meetings, secret marriage, flight, despair, poison, and the Tomb of the Capulets? I had left the park behind, by this, and had entered a thoroughfare where the street-lamps were closer together; but the gloom of the trees seemed still to be overhanging me. The fact is, the tragedy had laid a black finger on my imagination. I wished that the play had ended a trifle more cheerfully. I wished—possibly because I see enough tragedy all around me without going to the theatre for it, or possibly it was because the lady who enacted the leading part was a remarkably clean-cut little person, with a golden sweep of eyelashes—I wished that Juliet could have had a more comfortable time of it. Instead of a yawning sepulchre, with Romeo and Juliet dying in the middle foreground, and that luckless young Paris stretched out on the left, spitted like a spring-chicken with Montague's rapier, and Friar Laurence, with a dark lantern, groping about under the melancholy yews—in place of all this costly piled-up woe, I would have liked a pretty, mediaeval chapel scene, with illuminated stained-glass windows, and trim acolytes holding lighted candles, and the great green curtain slowly descending to the first few bars of the Wedding March of Mendelssohn.

Of course Shakespeare was true to the life in making them all die miserably. Besides, it was so they died in the novel of Matteo Bandello, from which the poet indirectly took his plot. Under the circumstances no other climax was practicable; and yet it was sad business. There were Mercutio, and Tybalt, and Paris, and Juliet, and Romeo, come to a bloody end in the bloom of their youth and strength and beauty.

The ghosts of these five murdered persons seemed to be on my track as I hurried down Revere Street to West Cedar. I fancied them hovering around the corner opposite the small drug-store, where a meagre apothecary was in the act of shutting up the fan-like jets of gas in his shop-window.

“No, Master Booth,” I muttered in the imagined teeth of the tragedian, throwing an involuntary glance over my shoulder, “you 'll not catch me assisting at any more of your Shakespearean revivals. I would rather eat a pair of Welsh rarebits or a segment of mince-pie at midnight than sit through the finest tragedy that was ever writ.”

As I said this I halted at the door of a house in Charles Place, and was fumbling for my latch-key, when a most absurd idea came into my head. I let the key slip back into my pocket, and strode down Charles Place into Cambridge Street, and across the long bridge, and then swiftly forward.

I remember, vaguely, that I paused for a moment on the draw of the bridge, to look at the semi-circular fringe of lights duplicating itself in the smooth Charles in the rear of Beacon Street—as lovely a bit of Venetian effect as you will get outside of Venice; I remember meeting, farther on, near a stiff wooden church in Cambridgeport, a lumbering covered wagon, evidently from Brighton and bound for Quincy Market; and still farther on, somewhere in the vicinity of Harvard Square and the college buildings, I recollect catching a glimpse of a policeman, who, probably observing something suspicious in my demeanor, discreetly walked off in an opposite direction. I recall these trifles indistinctly, for during this preposterous excursion I was at no time sharply conscious of my surroundings; the material world presented itself to me as if through a piece of stained glass. It was only when I had reached a neighborhood where the houses were few and the gardens many, a neighborhood where the closely-knitted town began to fringe out into country, that I came to the end of my dream. And what was the dream? The slightest of tissues, madam; a gossamer, a web of shadows, a thing woven out of starlight. Looking at it by day, I find that its colors are pallid, and its threaded diamonds—they were merely the perishable dews of that June night—have evaporated in the sunshine; but such as it is you shall have it.

II.

The young prince Hamlet was not happy at Elsinore. It was not because he missed the gay student-life of Wittenberg, and that the little Danish court was intolerably dull. It was not because the didactic lord chamberlain bored him with long speeches, or that the lord chamberlain's daughter was become a shade wearisome. Hamlet had more serious cues for unhappiness. He had been summoned suddenly from Wittenberg to attend his father's funeral; close upon this, and while his grief was green, his mother had married with his uncle Claudius, whom Hamlet had never liked.

The indecorous haste of these nuptials—they took place within two months after the king's death, the funeral-baked meats, as Hamlet cursorily remarked, furnishing forth the marriage-tables—struck the young prince aghast. He had loved the queen his mother, and had nearly idolized the late king; but now he forgot to lament the death of the one in contemplating the life of the other. The billing and cooing of the newly-married couple filled him with horror. Anger, shame, pity, and despair seized upon him by turns. He fell into a forlorn condition, forsaking his books, eating little save of the chameleon's dish, the air, drinking deep of Rhenish, letting his long, black locks go unkempt, and neglecting his dress—he who had hitherto been “the glass of fashion and the mould of form,” as Ophelia had prettily said of him.

Often for half the night he would wander along the ramparts of the castle, at the imminent risk of tumbling off, gazing seaward and muttering strangely to himself, and evolving frightful spectres out of the shadows cast by the turrets. Sometimes he lapsed into a gentle melancholy; but not seldom his mood was ferocious, and at such times the conversational Polonius, with a discretion that did him credit, steered clear of my lord Hamlet.

He turned no more graceful compliments for Ophelia. The thought of marrying her, if he had ever seriously thought of it, was gone now. He rather ruthlessly advised her to go into a nunnery. His mother had sickened him of women. It was of her he spoke the notable words, “Frailty, thy name is woman!” which, some time afterwards, an amiable French gentleman had neatly engraved on the head-stone of his wife, who had long been an invalid. Even the king and queen did not escape Hamlet in his distempered moments. Passing his mother in a corridor or on a staircase of the palace, he would suddenly plant a verbal dagger in her heart; and frequently, in full court, he would deal the king such a cutting reply as caused him to blanch, and gnaw his lip. If the spectacle of Gertrude and Claudius was hateful to Hamlet, the presence of

Hamlet, on the other hand, was scarcely a comfort to the royal lovers. At first his uncle had called him “our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son,” trying to smooth over matters; but Hamlet would have none of it. Therefore, one day, when the young prince abruptly announced his intention to go abroad, neither the king nor the queen placed impediments in his way, though, some months previously, they had both protested strongly against his returning to Wittenberg.

The small-fry of the court knew nothing of Prince Hamlet's determination until he had sailed from Elsinore; their knowledge then was confined to the fact of his departure. It was only to Horatio, his fellow-student and friend, that Hamlet confided the real cause of his self-imposed exile, though perhaps Ophelia half suspected it.

Polonius had dropped an early hint to his daughter concerning Hamlet's intent. She knew that everything was over between them, and the night before he embarked Ophelia placed in the prince's hand the few letters and trinkets he had given her, repeating, as she did so, a certain distich which somehow haunted Hamlet's memory for several days after he was on shipboard:

*“Take these again; for to the noble mind
Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind.”*

“These could never have waxed poor,” said Hamlet softly to himself, as he leaned over the taffrail, the third day out, spreading the trinkets in his palm, “being originally of but little worth. I fancy that that allusion to ‘rich gifts’ was a trifle malicious on the part of the fair Ophelia;” and he quietly dropped them into the sea.

It was as a Danish gentleman voyaging for pleasure, and for mental profit also, if that should happen, that Hamlet set forth on his travels. Settled destination he had none, his sole plan being to get clear of Denmark as speedily as possible, and then to drift whither his fancy took him. His fancy naturally took him southward, as it would have taken him northward if he had been a Southron. Many a time while climbing the bleak crags around Elsinore he had thought of the land of the citron and the palm; lying on his couch at night, and listening to the wind as it howled along the machicolated battlements of the castle, his dreams had turned from the cold, blonde ladies of his father's court to the warmer beauties that ripen under sunny skies. He was free now to test the visions of his boyhood.

So it chanced, after various wanderings, all tending imperceptibly in one direction, that Hamlet bent his steps towards Italy.

In those rude days one did not accomplish a long journey without having wonderful adventures befall, or encountering divers perils by the way. It was a period when a stout blade on the thigh was a most excellent travelling companion. Hamlet, though of a philosophical complexion, was not slower than another man to scent an affront; he excelled at feats of arms, and no doubt his skill, caught of the old fencing-master at Elsinore, stood him in good stead more than once when his wit would not have saved him. Certainly, he had hair-breadth escapes while toiling through the wilds of Prussia and Bavaria and Switzerland. At all events, he counted himself fortunate the night he arrived at Verona with nothing more serious than a two-inch scratch on his sword arm.

There he lodged himself, as became a gentleman of fortune, in a suite of chambers in a comfortable palace overlooking the swift-flowing Adige—a riotous yellow stream that cut the town into two parts, and was spanned here and there by rough-hewn stone bridges, which it sometimes sportively washed away. It was a brave old town that had stood sieges and plagues, and was full of mouldy, picturesque buildings and a gayety

that has since grown somewhat mouldy. A goodly place to rest in for the wayworn pilgrim! He dimly recollected that he had letters to one or two illustrious families; but he cared not to deliver them at once. It was pleasant to stroll about the city, unknown. There were sights to see: the Roman amphitheatre, and the churches with their sculptured sarcophagi and saintly relics—interesting joints and saddles of martyrs, and enough fragments of the true cross to build a ship. The life in the *piazze* and on the streets, the crowds in the shops, the pageants, the lights, the stir, the color, all mightily took the eye of the young Dane. He was in a mood to be amused. Everything diverted him—the faint pulsing of a guitar-string in an adjacent garden at midnight, or the sharp clash of gleaming sword blades under his window, when the Montecchi and the Cappelletti chanced to encounter each other in the narrow footway.

Meanwhile, Hamlet brushed up his Italian. He was well versed in the literature of the language, particularly in its dramatic literature, and had long meditated penning a gloss to “The Murther of Gonzago,” a play which Hamlet held in deservedly high estimation.

He made acquaintances, too. In the same palace where he sojourned lived a very valiant soldier and wit, a kinsman to Prince Escalus, one Mercutio by name, with whom Hamlet exchanged civilities on the staircase at first, and then fell into companionship.

A number of Verona's noble youths, poets and light-hearted men-about-town, frequented Mercutio's chambers, and with these Hamlet soon became on terms.

Among the rest were an agreeable gentleman, with hazel eyes, named Benvolio, and a gallant young fellow called Romeo, whom Mercutio bantered pitilessly and loved heartily. This Romeo, who belonged to one of the first families, was a very susceptible spark, which the slightest breath of a pretty woman was sufficient to blow into flame. To change the metaphor, he fell from one love affair into another as easily and logically as a ripe pomegranate drops from a bough. He was generally unlucky in these matters, curiously enough, for he was a handsome youth in his saffron satin doublet slashed with black, and his jaunty velvet bonnet with its trailing plume of ostrich feather.

At the time of Hamlet's coming to Verona, Romeo was in a great despair of love in consequence of an unrequited passion for a certain lady of the city, between whose family and his own a deadly feud had existed for centuries. Somebody had stepped on somebody else's lap-dog in the far ages, and the two families had been slashing and hacking at each other ever since. It appeared that Romeo had scaled a garden wall, one night, and broken upon the meditations of his innamorata, who, as chance would have it, was sitting on her balcony enjoying the moonrise. No lady could be insensible to such devotion, for it would have been death to Romeo if any of her kinsmen had found him in that particular locality. Some tender phrases passed between them, perhaps; but the lady was flurried, taken unawares, and afterwards, it seemed, altered her mind, and would have no further commerce with the Montague. This business furnished Mercutio's quiver with innumerable sly shafts, which Romeo received for the most part in good humor.

With these three gentlemen—Mercutio, Benvolio, and Romeo—Hamlet saw life in Verona, as young men will see life wherever they happen to be. Many a time the nightingale ceased singing and the lark began before they were abed; but perhaps it is not wise to inquire too closely into this. A month had slipped away since Hamlet's arrival; the hyacinths were opening in the gardens, and it was spring.

One morning, as he and Mercutio were lounging arm in arm on a bridge near their lodgings, they met a knave in livery puzzling over a parchment which he was plainly unable to decipher.

“Read it aloud, friend!” cried Mercutio, who always had a word to throw away.

“I would I could read it at all. I pray, sir, can you read?”

“With ease—if it is not my tailor's score;” and Mercutio took the parchment, which ran as follows:—

“Signior Martino, and his wife and daughters; County Ansdmo, and his beauteous sisters; the lady widow Vitrumo; Signior Placentio, and his lovely nieces; Mercutio, and his brother Valentine; mine uncle Capulet, his wife and daughters; my fair niece Rosaline; Livia; Signior Valentio, and his cousin Tybalt; Lucio, and the lively Helena.”

“A very select company, with the exception of that rogue Mercutio,” said the soldier, laughing. “What does it mean?”

“My master, the Signior Capulet, gives a ball and supper to-night; these the guests; I am his man Peter, and if you be not one of the house of Montague, I pray come and crush a cup of wine with us. Rest you merry;” and the knave, having got his billet deciphered for him, made off.

“One must needs go, being asked by both man and master; but since I am asked doubly, I 'll not go singly; I 'll bring you with me, Hamlet. It is a masquerade; I have had wind of it. The flower of the city will be there—all the high-bosomed roses and low-necked lilies.”

Hamlet had seen nothing of society in Verona, properly speaking, and did not require much urging to assent to Mercutio's proposal, far from foreseeing that so slight a freak would have a fateful sequence.

It was late in the night when they presented themselves, in mask and domino, at the Capulet mansion. The music was at its sweetest and the torches were at their brightest, as the pair entered the dancing-hall. They had scarcely crossed the threshold when Hamlet's eyes rested upon a lady clad in a white silk robe, who held to her features, as she moved through the figure of the dance, a white satin mask, on each side of which was disclosed so much of the rosy oval of her face as made one long to look upon the rest. The ornaments this lady wore were pearls; her fan and slippers, like the robe and mask, were white—nothing but white. Her eyes shone almost black contrasted with the braids of warm gold hair that glistened through a misty veil of Venetian stuff, which floated about her from time to time and enveloped her, as the blossoms do a tree. Hamlet could think of nothing but the almond-tree that stood in full bloom in the little *cortile* near his lodging. She seemed to him the incarnation of that exquisite spring-time which had touched and awakened all the leaves and buds in the sleepy old gardens around Verona.

“Mercutio! who is that lady?”

“The daughter of old Capulet, by her stature.”

“And he that dances with her?”

"Paris, a kinsman to Can Grande della Scala."

"Her lover?"

"One of them."

"She has others?"

"Enough to make a squadron; only the blind and aged are exempt."

Here the music ceased and the dancers dispersed. Hamlet followed the lady with his eyes, and, seeing her left alone a moment, approached her. She received him graciously, as a mask receives a mask, and the two fell to talking, as people do who—have nothing to say to each other and possess the art of saying it. Presently something in his voice struck on her ear, a new note, an intonation sweet and strange, that made her curious. Who was it? It could not be Valentine, nor Anselmo; he was too tall for Signior Placentio, not stout enough for Lucio; it was not her cousin Tybalt. Could it be that rash Montague who—Would he dare? Here, on the very points of their swords? The stream of maskers ebbed and flowed and surged around them, and the music began again, and Juliet listened and listened.

"Who are you, sir," she cried, at last, "that speak our tongue with feigned accent?"

"A stranger; an idler in Verona, though not a gay one—a black butterfly."

"Our Italian sun will gild your wings for you. Black edged with gilt goes gay."

"I am already not so sad-colored as I was."

"I would fain see your face, sir; if it match your voice, it needs must be a kindly one."

"I would we could change faces."

"So we shall at supper!"

"And hearts, too?"

"Nay, I would not give a merry heart for a sorrowful one; but I will quit my mask, and you yours; yet," and she spoke under her breath, "if you are, as I think, a gentleman of Verona—a Montague—do not unmask."

"I am not of Verona, lady; no one knows me here;" and Hamlet threw back the hood of his domino. Juliet held her mask aside for a moment, and the two stood looking into each other's eyes.

"Lady, we have in faith changed faces, at least as I shall carry yours forever in my memory."

"And I yours, sir," said Juliet, softly, "wishing it looked not so pale and melancholy."

"Hamlet," whispered Mercutio, plucking at his friend's skirt, "the fellow there, talking with old Capulet—his wife's nephew, Tybalt, a quarrelsome dog—suspects we are Montagues. Let us get out of this peaceably, like soldiers who are too much gentlemen to cause a brawl under a host's roof."

With this Mercutio pushed Hamlet to the door, where they were joined by Benvolio.

Juliet, with her eyes fixed upon the retreating maskers, stretched out her hand and grasped the arm of an ancient serving-woman who happened to be passing.

"Quick, good Nurse! go ask his name of yonder gentleman. Nay, not the one in green, dear! but he that hath the black domino and purple mask. What, did I touch your poor rheumatic arm? Ah, go now, sweet Nurse!"

As the Nurse hobbled off querulously on her errand, Juliet murmured to herself an old rhyme she knew:—

*"If he be married,
My grave is like to be my wedding bed!"*

When Hamlet got back to his own chambers he sat on the edge of his couch in a brown study. The silvery moonlight, struggling through the swaying branches of a tree outside the window, drifted doubtfully into the room, and made a parody of that fleecy veil which erewhile had floated about the lissome form of the lovely Capulet. That he loved her, and must tell her that he loved her, was a foregone conclusion; but how should he contrive to see Juliet again? No one knew him in Verona; he had carefully preserved his incognito; even Mercutio regarded him as simply a young gentleman from Denmark, taking his ease in a foreign city. Presented, by Mercutio, as a rich Danish tourist, the Capulets would receive him courteously, of course; as a visitor, but not as a suitor. It was in another character that he must be presented—his own.

He was pondering what steps he could take to establish his identity, when he remembered the two or three letters which he had stuffed into his wallet on quitting Elsinore. He lighted a taper, and began examining the papers. Among them were the half dozen billet-doux which Ophelia had returned to him the night before his departure. They were, neatly tied together by a length of black ribbon, to which was attached a sprig of rosemary.

"That was just like Ophelia!" muttered the young man, tossing the package into the wallet again; "she was always having cheerful ideas like that."

How long ago seemed the night she had handed him these love-letters, in her demure little way! How misty and remote seemed everything connected with the old life at Elsinore! His father's death, his mother's marriage, his anguish and isolation—they were like things that had befallen somebody else. There was something incredible, too, in his present situation. Was he dreaming? Was he really in Italy, and in love?

He hastily bent forward and picked up a square folded paper lying half concealed under the others.

"How could I have forgotten it!" he exclaimed.

It was a missive addressed, in Horatio's angular hand, to the Signior Capulet of Verona, containing a few lines of introduction from Horatio, whose father had dealings with some of the rich Lombardy merchants and knew many of the leading families in the city. With this and several epistles, preserved by chance, written to him by Queen Gertrude while he was at the university, Hamlet saw that he would have no difficulty in proving to the Capulets that he was the Prince of Denmark.

At an unseemly hour the next morning Mercutio was roused from his slumbers by Hamlet, who counted every minute a hundred years until he saw Juliet. Mercutio did not take this interruption too patiently, for the

honest humorist was very serious as a sleeper; but his equilibrium was quickly restored by Hamlet's revelation.

The friends were long closeted together, and at the proper, ceremonious hour for visitors they repaired to the house of Capulet, who did not hide his sense of the honor done him by the prince. With scarcely any prelude Hamlet unfolded the motive of his visit, and was listened to with rapt attention by old Capulet, who inwardly blessed his stars that he had not given his daughter's hand to the County Paris, as he was on the point of doing. The ladies were not visible on this occasion; the fatigues of the ball overnight, etc.; but that same evening Hamlet was accorded an interview with Juliet and Lady Capulet, and a few days subsequently all Verona was talking of nothing but the new engagement.

The destructive Tybalt scowled at first, and twirled his fierce mustache, and young Paris took to writing dejected poetry; but they both soon recovered their serenity, seeing that nobody minded them, and went together arm in arm to pay their respects to Hamlet.

A new life began now for Hamlet—he shed his inky cloak, and came out in a doublet of insolent splendor, looking like a dagger-handle newly gilt. With his funereal gear he appeared to have thrown off something of his sepulchral gloom. It was impossible to be gloomy with Juliet, in whom each day developed some sunny charm un-guessed before. Her freshness and coquettish candor were constant surprises. She had had many lovers, and she confessed them to Hamlet in the prettiest way. “Perhaps, my dear,” she said to him one evening, with an ineffable smile, “I might have liked young Romeo very well, but the family were so opposed to it from the very first. And then he was so—so demonstrative, don't you know?”

Hamlet had known of Romeo's futile passion, but he had not been aware until then that his betrothed was the heroine of the balcony adventure. On leaving Juliet he went to look up the Montague; not for the purpose of crossing rapiers with him, as another man might have done, but to compliment him on his unexceptionable taste in admiring so rare a lady.

But Romeo had disappeared in a most unaccountable manner, and his family were in great tribulation concerning him. It was thought that perhaps the unrelenting Rosaline (who had been Juliet's frigid predecessor) had relented, and Montague's man Abram was dispatched to seek Romeo at her residence; but the Lady Rosaline, who was embroidering on her piazza, placidly denied all knowledge of him. It was then feared that he had fallen in one of the customary encounters; but there had been no fight, and nobody had been killed on either side for nearly twelve hours. Nevertheless, his exit had the appearance of being final. When Hamlet questioned Mercutio, the honest soldier laughed and stroked his blonde mustache.

“The boy has gone off in a heat, I don't know where—to the icy ends of the earth, I believe, to cool himself.”

Hamlet regretted that Romeo should have had any feeling in the matter; but regret was a bitter weed that did not thrive well in the atmosphere in which the fortunate lover was moving. He saw Juliet every day, and there was not a fleck upon his happiness, unless it was the garrulous Nurse, against whom Hamlet had taken a singular prejudice. He considered her a tiresome old person, not too decent in her discourse at times, and advised Juliet to get rid of her; but the ancient serving-woman had been in the family for years, and it was not quite expedient to discharge her at that late day.

With the subtle penetration of old age the Nurse instantly detected Hamlet's dislike, and returned it heartily.

“Ah, ladybird,” she cried one night, “ah, well-a-day! you know not how to choose a man. An I could choose for you, Jule! By God's lady, there's Signior Mercutio, a brave gentleman, a merry gentleman, and a virtuous, I warrant ye, whose little finger-joint is worth all the body of this blackbird prince, dropping down from Lord knows where to fly off with the sweetest bit of flesh in Verona. Marry, come up!”

But this was only a ripple on the stream that flowed so smoothly. Now and then, indeed, Hamlet felt called upon playfully to chide Juliet for her extravagance of language, as when, for instance, she prayed that when he died he might be cut out in little stars to deck the face of night. Hamlet objected, under any circumstances, to being cut out in little stars for any illuminating purposes whatsoever. Once she suggested to her lover that he should come to the garden after the family retired, and she would speak with him a moment from the balcony. Now, as there was no obstacle to their seeing each other whenever they pleased, and as Hamlet was of a nice sense of honor, and since his engagement a most exquisite practicer of propriety, he did not encourage Juliet in her thoughtlessness.

“What!” he cried, lifting his finger at her reprovingly, “romantic again!”

This was their nearest approach to a lovers' quarrel. The next day Hamlet brought her, as peace-offering, a slender gold flask curiously wrought in niello, which he had had filled with a costly odor at an apothecary's as he came along.

“I never saw so lean a thing as that same culler of simples,” said Hamlet, laughing; “a matter of ribs and shanks, a mere skeleton painted black. It is a rare essence, though. He told me its barbaric botanical name, but it escapes me.”

“That which we call a rose,” said Juliet, holding the perfumery to her nostrils and inclining herself prettily towards him, “would smell as sweet by any other name.”

O Youth and Love! O fortunate Time!

There was a banquet almost every night at the Capulets', and the Montagues, up the street, kept their blinds drawn down, and Lady Montague, who had four marriageable, tawny daughters on her hands, was livid with envy at her neighbor's success. She would rather have had two or three Montagues prodded through the body than that the prince should have gone to the rival house.

Happy Prince!

If Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Laertes, and the rest of the dismal people at Elsinore, could have seen him now, they would not have known him. Where were his wan looks and biting speeches? His eyes were no longer filled with mournful speculation. He went in glad apparel, and took the sunshine as his natural inheritance. If he ever fell into moodiness—it was partly constitutional with him—the shadow fled away at the first approach of that “loveliest weight on lightest foot.” The sweet Veronese had nestled in his empty heart,

and filled it with music. The ghosts and visions that used to haunt him were laid forever by Juliet's magic.

Happy Juliet!

Her beauty had taken a new gloss. The bud had grown into a flower, redeeming the promises of the bud. If her heart beat less wildly, it throbbed more strongly. If she had given Hamlet of her superabundance of spirits, he had given her of his wisdom and discretion. She had always been a great favorite in society; but Verona thought her ravishing now. The mantua-makers cut their dresses by her patterns, and when she wore turquoise, garnets went out of style. Instead of the groans and tears, and all those distressing events which might possibly have happened if Juliet had persisted in loving Romeo—listen to her laugh and behold her merry eyes!

Every morning either Peter or Gregory might have been seen going up Hamlet's staircase with a note from Juliet—she had ceased to send the Nurse on discovering her lover's antipathy to that person—and some minutes later either Gregory or Peter might have been observed coming down the staircase with a missive from Hamlet. Juliet had detected his gift for verse, and insisted, rather capriciously, on having all his replies in that shape. Hamlet humored her, though he was often hard put to it; for the Muse is a coy immortal, and will not always come when she is wanted. Sometimes he was forced to fall back upon previous efforts, as when he translated these lines into very choice Italian:—

*"Doubt thou the stars are fire,
Doubt that the sun doth move;
Doubt Truth to be a Liar,
But never doubt I love."*

To be sure, he had originally composed this quatrain for Ophelia; but what would you have? He had scarcely meant it then; he meant it now; besides, a felicitous rhyme never goes out of fashion. It always fits.

While transcribing the verse his thoughts naturally reverted to Ophelia, for the little poesy was full of a faint scent of the past, like a pressed flower. His conscience did not prick him at all. How fortunate for him and for her that matters had gone no further between them? Predisposed to melancholy, and inheriting a not very strong mind from her father, Ophelia was a lady who needed cheering up, if ever poor lady did. He, Hamlet, was the last man on the globe with whom she should have had any tender affiliation. If they had wed, they would have caught each other's despondency, and died, like a pair of sick ravens, within a fortnight. What had become of her? Had she gone into a nunnery? He would make her abbess, if he ever returned to Elsinore.

After a month or two of courtship, there being no earthly reason to prolong it, Hamlet and Juliet were privately married in the Franciscan Chapel, Friar Laurence officiating; but there was a grand banquet that night at the Capulets', to which all Verona went. At Hamlet's intercession, the Montagues were courteously asked to this festival. To the amazement of every one the Montagues accepted the invitation and came, and were treated royally, and the long, lamentable feud—it would have sorely puzzled either house to explain what it was all about—was at an end. The adherents of the Capulets and the Montagues were forbidden on the spot to bite any more thumbs at each other.

"It will detract from the general gayety of the town," Mercutio remarked. "Signior Tybalt, my friend, I shall never have the pleasure of running you through the diaphragm; a cup of wine with you!"

The guests were still at supper in the great pavilion erected in the garden, which was as light as day with the glare of innumerable flambeaux set among the shrubbery. Hamlet and Juliet, with several others, had withdrawn from the tables, and were standing in the doorway of the pavilion, when Hamlet's glance fell upon the familiar form of a young man who stood with one foot on the lower step, holding his plumed bonnet in his hand. His hose and doublet were travel-worn, but his honest face was as fresh as daybreak.

"What! Horatio?"

"The same, my lord, and your poor servant ever."

"Sir, my good friend: I'll change that name with you. What brings you to Verona?"

"I fetch you news, my lord."

"Good news? Then the king is dead."

"The king lives, but Ophelia is no more."

"Ophelia dead!"

"Not so, my lord; she 's married."

"I pray thee, do not mock me, fellow-student."

"As I do live, my honored lord, 't is true."

"Married, say you?"

"Married to him that sent me hither—a gentleman of winning ways and a most choice conceit, the scion of a noble house here in Verona—one Romeo."

The oddest little expression flitted over Juliet's face. There was never woman yet, even on her bridal day, could forgive a jilted lover marrying.

"Ophelia wed!" murmured the bridegroom.

"Do you know the lady, dear?"

"Excellent well," replied Hamlet, turning to Juliet; "a most estimable young person, the daughter of my father's chamberlain. She is rather given to singing ballads of an elegiac nature," added the prince, reflectingly, "but our madcap Romeo will cure her of that. Methinks I see them now"—

"Oh, where, my lord?"

"In my mind's eye, Horatio, surrounded by their little ones—noble youths and graceful maidens, in whom the impetuosity of the fiery Romeo is tempered by the pensiveness of the fair Ophelia. I shall take it most unkindly of them, love," toying with Juliet's fingers, "if they do not name their first boy Hamlet."

It was just as my lord Hamlet finished speaking that the last horse-car for Boston—providentially belated between Water-town and Mount Auburn—swept round the curve of the track on which I was walking. The amber glow of the car-lantern lighted up my figure in the gloom, the driver gave a quick turn on the brake, and the conductor, making a sudden dexterous clutch at the strap over his head, sounded the death-knell of my fantasy as I stepped upon the rear platform.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A MIDNIGHT FANTASY ***

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