

A Thing Of Beauty

By Elias Lieberman

From *The American Hebrew*

Simonoff told it to me over the coffee cups. It was the twilight hour on Second avenue and we were enjoying a late afternoon chat. The gates of the human dam, shut all day long, had been opened and the rushing, swirling stream of men and women beat past us relentlessly--past the door of the Café Cosmos open to the sights and sounds of the street.

Every person in that human torrent seemed eager to reach a haven of rest. Not that their faces looked tired or haggard. But each gave the impression that something had been worn off in a subtle, persistent process--a certain newness, freshness, gloss, call it what you will. Shadows of men and women they were in the twilight as they scurried past. And yet the rhythm of their footsteps beat upon the ear as steadily as the roar of many waters.

"The ghosts are having a holiday," said Simonoff.

His voice was barely audible in the hum of conversation. Simonoff was one of those rare teachers on the lower East Side who neither taught night school nor practised law after his daily duties were over. His passion was to understand his fellow men--to help them, if possible--although, for a reformer, he was given entirely too much to dreaming. His café bills for a year, when added together, made a surprisingly large total. But then Simonoff never bothered with useless mathematics.

A hand organ outside was droning the "Miserere." Children of the tenements, like moths drawn to globes of brilliant light on midsummer nights, hovered about the organ and danced. There was a capricious

abandon about their movements which fascinated Simonoff. He had a way of running his slender fingers through his wavy, brown hair, when he was emotionally stirred.

"The dancing maidens of Trebizond were not more graceful than these," he sighed as his eyes followed the sinuous movements of two ragged little tots. "They outgrow it after a while."

"Never," I protested. "The Grand street halls----"

"I mean the search for beauty," drawled Simonoff. "This is the dance of Greek maidens at the sacrificial rites to Demeter. The Grand street thing is a contortion before the obese complacency of the great god Jazz. And Jazz has no soul."

Through the ever-gathering darkness the electric lights began to twinkle like blue-white diamonds against purple velvet. The lights in the café too were turned on by a pottering waiter whose flat-footed shuffle had become familiar to us through many years of observation.

A bedraggled looking person entered the café, clutching awkwardly a dozen or more cut roses. He passed from table to table and offered them for sale. The price was ridiculously small.

It seemed strange to me that Simonoff's face should turn so white. His manner suggested great agitation. When the peddler reached him, Simonoff purchased the entire stock and gave him in payment far in excess of the amount asked. The happy vender directed one searching glance at him, then went out whistling.

"What will you do with all those roses?" I asked.

"Give them away," he answered, "to the dirtiest, most woebegone, most forlorn little children I can find. I shall do this in memory of John Keats."

I looked my astonishment.

"A thing of beauty is a joy forever," Simonoff intoned dreamily. "But there's a story connected with it."

"I suspected it," I said quietly. "When a school teacher consents to part with a perfectly good dollar for a dozen wilted roses, there must be an esoteric reason."

"Materialist," he laughed.

The dancing and the scurry of pattering feet had both ceased. The sounds of the night were now more soothing, more harmoniously blended. The earliest arrivals of the theatre crowd were besieging the sidewalk ticket office of the burlesque house opposite. Simonoff launched into his narrative.

* * *

I was sitting here one evening all alone. The day had been particularly trying. I had been visited by my district superintendent, a perfect paragon of stupidity. He had squatted in my class room until I wished him and his bulk on the other side of the Styx. When it was all over I came here, glad to shake off the chalk dust and the pompous inconsequence of my official superior. Suddenly I was startled out of my brooding.

"You are unhappy," I heard a voice murmur ever so softly. It seemed like the sighing of a night wind through the tree tops.

I looked up. Before me stood a young man with deep blue eyes, blond hair, exquisite daintiness of feature and unnaturally pale complexion. He was dressed in soft gray tweeds. In the crook of his left elbow he

carried roses. Their fragrance permeated the café and, for once, the odor of stale tobacco was not dominant.

"You are unhappy," he repeated mildly as if it were the most natural thing in the world for him to say.

"I am," I answered frankly. "The world is a stupid place to live in."

"You must not say that," he reproached quietly. "It is we who are stupid. The world is beautiful. Won't you accept a rose?" Like a prince in a fairy story he bowed grandly and offered me an American Beauty still moist with the mock dews of the florist.

"But why do you honor me thus?" I asked, taking the flower and inhaling its fragrance.

He looked a bit put out as if I were asking the obvious thing. "You were sad, of course, and a thing of beauty----"

"Is a joy forever," I concluded.

He flushed with pleasure.

"I am so glad you have read my *Endymion*," he exclaimed delightedly. "Suppose we walk out together and preach the gospel of beauty to those who like yourself forget the eternal in the trivial. I have some powerful sermons here." He caressed his roses as a mother would stroke the head of a child.

Along the avenue we were followed by hordes of little girls with starved eyes. My good samaritan picked the poorest and the most wistful for his largesse of roses. And to each one as he handed the flower he repeated the famous line from the work of the great romantic poet.

"A thing of beauty is a joy forever."

Soon there were only two left. These my friend was inclined to withhold from the clamoring tots who assailed us.

"After all they are young," he said. "Their sad moments vanish like the mists. But the sorrows of the years of discretion are not thrown off so easily. They persist like scars long after the original bruise has healed."

We entered a hallway to escape our little friends. From a door ajar on the first story a man's voice floated down to us. It was high pitched and strident, as if a relentless lawyer were arraigning a criminal.

"My friends," we heard, "how long are you going to remain blind to your condition? The interests of capital and labor are diametrically opposed to each other. You are the producers of the world's wealth and yet you submit to exploitation by the class of parasites who fatten upon your ignorance and your unwillingness to unite. Workingmen of the world, you have nothing to lose but your chains."

"Slavinsky, the great agitator, probably rehearsing his speech for the party rally at Cooper Union tomorrow," I explained.

"Agitator?" questioned the apostle of beauty. "He is agitated, indeed, and unhappy. I shall give him a rose."

Slavinsky sputtered with amazement when the rose was offered to him.

"A joy forever!" he mocked. "It isn't such a joy to work for starvation wages, to be bled by profiteers, to be flayed alive by plutes. I tell you, Mister--"

"You are addressing Keats, John Keats."

"I tell you, Mister Keats, there ain't no beauty when you're up against it. I tell you--"

"Won't you accept this rose?"

"I'll take it," growled Slavinsky with unnecessary fierceness. "It ain't Nature's fault. She don't go in for profiteering." The agitator's conversational style was more colloquial though no less vehement than his platform manner.

"Did you note the omission?" Keats inquired when we were again on the avenue.

"It isn't impoliteness," I replied. "Men of his class are too stirred by cosmic problems to say 'Thank you.'"

"It is a beautiful thing to say, nevertheless, and the world needs it." I thought the eyes of John Keats--a fitting name for such a fantastic personality--were filling with tears.

My companion held his rose before him as if it were a charm against the sordidness about him. He had a way of peering at the people we passed as if he were looking for someone he had lost in the crowd. At Sixteenth Street we turned into the small park at the right of the avenue, which with its neighbor on the left keeps alive the memory of green and growing things among the dwellers of the tenements.

It was at the fountain that he first saw her. John Keats had an abrupt manner, for all his gentleness, of proceeding along the path of his desires.

"At last I have found you," he said to the tall girl who was watching a group of youngsters at play near the gushing waters. In the darkness I

could see only a pair of flashing eyes under a broad-brimmed straw and a cape of soft blue hanging gracefully from her shoulders.

She scrutinized both of us with the intuitive glance of one who has learned to tread warily amid dangerous surroundings. Apparently her preliminary examination was satisfactory. She put us into the non-poisonous class. Keats had flattened the palm of his right hand against his breast and was offering the last rose to her with the other. His manner was of the stage but not offensively so.

"At last I have found you," repeated my curious acquaintance. "For all your laughter you are unhappy. You are consumed with yearning, even as I am. Pray accept a rose."

With a murmured repetition of his formula he gave her his last flower.

His manner was earnest and the girl had immediately rejected the assumption that we were mocking her.

"This is a mistake," she explained, hesitating about the rose. "I don't think you know who I am."

"A lady of high degree, I am sure," responded Keats gallantly. There was a peculiar quaintness about his English, which like his name, took me back to the early nineteenth century. The coincidence of his name did not strike me as unusual, because the telephone directory is full of such parallels.

"No high degree about me," laughed the girl. "I'm a saleslady at Marmelstein's, that's all. What you said about being unhappy is true sometimes. When you came up I was just thinking."

Her voice with its overtone of sadness sounded in the semi-darkness like the faint tremolo of mandolins serenading in the distance.

"But there need be no unhappiness," contended Keats. "We must shut out from our sight everything but beauty, pure beauty. At this moment I am supremely happy."

He looked at her. There was an unreality about him for which I could not account. Like a mirage of the park he seemed. In a twinkle of the incandescents, I thought, he might vanish. The girl from Marmelstein's looked at him as if fascinated. Romance had come and touched her heart with a magic wand. She sniffed at the rose pensively.

"I couldn't just tell you why I was feeling queer. Marmelstein's is a nice place, honest. You see all sorts of people during the day and it's interesting to work there. But there's something missing--I don't know what."

"Beauty, my lady, beauty," declared Keats.

Out of the shadows a fourth form had materialized, a thickset man who approached us with a firm stride. He patted my friend gently on the shoulder.

"You're a bad boy, John," he reproached, "giving me the slip that way. I had the time of my life looking for you. The moment my back was turned you vamoosed from the waiting room. That wasn't kind. If I hadn't a known how fond you wuz of roses, I would a been stumped, stumped for good. I trailed you by them roses."

The girl sensed that there was something wrong.

"Lady, farewell," said Keats.

With a little moan she saw him being led off.

"What's wrong?" I asked the intruder.

"Bugs on beauty, that's all. Thinks he's a guy named John Keats who wrote poems. Harmless case. Wouldn't hurt a fly. I was bringing him over to see his mother when he give me the slip. Gee, but I can breathe easy now."

"A thing of beauty is a joy forever," declared the spirit of Keats.

"Sure, sure," said the attendant, lighting a cigar.

When I turned to leave the park the girl from Marmelstein's came up to me.

"What happened?" she inquired. Her fists were clenched and she was breathing heavily.

I explained.

"He was such a gentleman," she sobbed softly.