

Freshwater - a comedy

ACT ONE

A Garden. Mary Magdalene is engaged in washing Mr. Cameron's head.

Mr. C.

The sixth time in eight months! Whenever we start for India, Julia insists (*Mary tugs his hair*) Ah! Ah! Ah! Julia insists that I must have my head washed. Yet we never do start for India – I sometimes think we never shall start for India. At the last moment something happens – something always happens. And so we stay on and on, living this life of poetry, of photography, of frivolity, and I shall never see the land of my spiritual youth. I shall never learn the true nature of virtue from the fasting philosophers of Baluchistan. I shall never solve the great problem, or answer the Eternal Question. I am a captive in the hands of Circumstance – (*Mary tugs his beard*) Ah! Oh! Oh!

Mary

Mr. Cameron, dear darling Mr. Cameron, do let me wash your beard. It's the most beautiful beard. Mrs. Cameron will never let you go to India –

Enter Mrs. Cameron. She stops dead and raises her hand.

Mrs. C.

What a picture! What a composition! Truth sipping at the fount of inspiration! The soul taking flight from the body! Upward, girl, look upward! Fling your arms round his neck and look upward! Sit still Charles! Sit still! Soap in your eyes? Nonsense. Water down your back? Tush! Surely you can put up with a little discomfort in the cause of art!

Mr. C

The sixth time in eight months! The sixth time in eight months! I sometimes think we never shall start for India.

Mrs. C.

Nonsense, Charles, Control yourself, Charles. Remember what Alfred Lord Tennyson said of you: A philosopher with his beard dipped in moonlight. A chimney sweep with his beard dipped in soot.

Mr. C

Ah, if we could but go to India. There is no washing in India. There beards are white, for the moon for ever shines, on youth, on truth, in India. And here we dally, frittering away our miserable lives in the withered grasp of –

Enter Lord Tennyson.

Lord T.

The son of man has nowhere to lay his head!

Mr. C.

Washing day at Farringford too, Alfred?

Lord T.

Twenty earnest youths from Clerkenwell are in the shrubbery; six American professors are in the summerhouse; the bathroom is occupied by the Ladies Poetry Circle from Ohio. The son of man has nowhere to lay his head.

Mr. C.

Loose your mind from the affairs of the present. Seek truth where truth lies hidden. Follow the everlasting will o' the wisp. Oh Magdalene, don't tug my beard! (*Mary releases him.*) Cast away your vain fineries. Let us be free like birds of the air. Heaven be praised! At two thirty we start for India.

Lord T.

You don't say you're really going? Emily told me. Julia Cameron has ordered the coffins, she said, and at two thirty they start for India.

Mrs. C.

Yes, Alfred. At two thirty we start for India – that's to say if the coffins have come. Julia Cameron has ordered the coffins but the coffins have not come. This is the sixth time I have ordered the coffins and the coffins have not come. But without her coffins Julia Cameron will not start for India. Take the sponge, girl; now go and see if the coffins have come.

Mary

If the coffins have come! Why, it's the Earl of Dudley who's come. He's waiting for me in the kitchen. He's not much to look at but he's a deal sight better than coffins any day. (*Exits*)

Mrs. C.

For, Alfred (*she stands before him, fixing him with her eyes*), when we lie dead under the Southern Cross, my head will be raised upon a copy of *In Memoriam*. *Maud* lies upon my heart. All is over, Alfred. All is ready. It is a deep Southern night. Orion glitters in the firmament. The scent of the tulip trees is wafted through the open window. The silence is only broken by the sobs of my faithful friends and the occasional howl of a solitary tiger. And then – what is this? What infamy is this? (*She plucks at her wrist, picks something off it, and holds it towards Lord Tennyson.*) An Ant! A White Ant! They are advancing in hordes from the jungle, Alfred. I hear the crepitation of their myriad feet. They will be upon me before dawn. They will eat the flesh off my bones Alfred, they will devour *Maud*.

Lord T.

God bless my soul! The woman's right. Devour *Maud*! It's too disgusting! It must be stopped. Devour *Maud* indeed! My darling *Maud*! (*He presses the book beneath his arm*) But what an awful fate! What a hideous prospect! Here are my two honored old friends, setting sail, in less than three hours, for an unknown land where, whatever else may happen, they can never by any possible chance hear me read *Maud* again. But (*he looks at his watch*) what is the time? We have still two hours and twenty minutes. I have read it in less. Let us begin (*Lord Tennyson sits down and begins to read aloud.*)

I hate the dreadful hollow beneath the little wood,
Its lips in the field above are dabbled with blood-red heath,
The red-ribb'd ledges drip with a silent horror of blood,
And Echo there, wherever is aske'd her, answers "Death."

Mrs. C. (*interrupting him*)

Alfred, Alfred, I seek Sir Galahad. Where shall I find a Galahad? Is there no gardener, no footman, no pantry boy at Farringford with calves – he must have calves. Hallam alas has grown too stout. A Galahad! A Galahad! (*She goes out wringing her hands and crying "A Galahad!" Lord Tennyson goes on reading steadily.*)

Lord T.

For there in the ghastly pit long since a body was found,
His who had given me life – O father! O God! Was it well? –
Mangled, and flatten'd, and crush'd, and dinted into the ground;
There yet lies the rock that fell with him when he fell.

(Lord Tennyson becomes absorbed in his reading. Mr. Cameron falls asleep and snores gently. Lord Tennyson goes on reading. Ellen Terry comes in, dressed in white veils which are wrapped about her arms, head, etc. Lord Tennyson reads on to himself in rather a low voice, without noticing her. Mr. Cameron snores very quietly.)

Ellen *(looking from one to the other)*

O how usual it all is. Nothing ever changes in this house. Somebody always asleep. Lord Tennyson is always reading *Maud*. The cook is always being photographed. The Camerons are always starting for India. I'm always sitting to Signor. I'm Modesty today – Modesty crouching at the feet of Mammon. If it weren't for Mammon, I should be there still. But Mammon's big toe is out of drawing. Of course Signor with all his high ideals couldn't pass that. So I slipped down and escaped. If I only *could* escape. *(She wrings her hands in desperation.)* For I never thought when I married Mr. Watts that it was going to be like this. I thought artists were such jolly people – always dressing up and hiring coaches and going for picnics and drinking champagne and eating oysters and kissing each other and – well, behaving like the Rossettis. As it is, Signor can't eat anything except the gristle of beef minced very fine and passed through the kitchen chopper twice. He drinks a glass of hot water at nine and goes to bed in woolen socks at nine thirty sharp. Instead of kissing me he gives me a white rose every morning. Every morning he says the same thing – "The Utmost for the Highest, Ellen! The Utmost for the Highest!" And so of course I have to sit to him all day long. Everybody says how proud I must be to hang for ever and ever in the Tate Gallery as Modesty crouching beneath the feet of Mammon. But I'm an abandoned wretch, I suppose. I have much awful thoughts. Sometimes I actually want to go up on the stage and be an actress. What would Signor say if he knew? And then, when I'm dressed like this, all in white and crouching there under Mammon's big toe, it suddenly comes into my head that I should like somebody to fall in love with me. And, what's much worse – oh, it's so unspeakable that I can't think how I've the fact to go on crouching any longer – somebody *has* fallen in love with me. At least I think so. It happened like this. Signor and I were picking primroses in Maiden's Lane. Suddenly I heard the sound of galloping hoofs, and a horse and rider sprang right over our heads. Luckily, the lane was very deep, or we should have been killed. Luckily, Signor is very deaf and he heard nothing. But I had just time to see a beautiful, sun burnt whiskered face and to catch this. *(She takes out a piece of paper and reads.)*

Come into the garden, Nell,
I'm here at the gate alone.

Tuesday, Midday, Craig.

Tuesday! Midday! Craig! It is Tuesday. It is just half past eleven. But who's Craig?

Lord T. (*bursting out in great agitation*)

Colvin has the temerity to say that my lyrics are better than my narrative. Gosse has the audacity to affirm that my narrative is better than my lyrics. That is the kind of criticism I have to endure. That is my daily portion of insult and injustice. If I weren't the most stoical man in the world, the very skin on my wrists would rise and blossom in purple and red at the innumerable bites of the poisoned bugs and pismires of the Press! (*He shoots out his hand and looks at it.*) That's a wonderful hand now. The skin is like a crumpled rose leaf. Young woman (*beckoning to Ellen*), have you ever seen a poet's skin? – a great poet's skin? Ah, you should see me in my bath! I have thighs like alabaster.

Ellen

It's a very beautiful skin, Lord Tennyson.

Lord T.

And you're a very beautiful wench. Get on my knee.

Ellen

I sometimes think you're the most sensible of them all, Lord Tennyson.

Lord T. (*kissing her*)

I am sensible to beauty in all its shapes. That is my function as Poet Laureate.

Ellen

Tell me, Lord Tennyson, have *you* – ever picked primroses?

Lord T.

Millions and millions of times.

Ellen

And did Lady Tennyson ever jump over your head on a horse?

Lord T.

Jump! Emily jump! She has lain on her sofa for fifty years. She took to it on her honeymoon, and I should be surprised, indeed I should be shocked, if she ever got up again.

Ellen

Then I suppose you were never in love. You were never in the devil of a mess. Nobody ever painted you in your chemise. Nobody ever gave you a white rose. Nobody ever threw a note into your hand and galloped away.

Lord T.

No. My life has been singularly free from amorous excitement of the kind you describe. Tell me more.

Ellen

If you were quite young and you saw somebody you wanted to marry and she was married already to an old, old man, would you throw everything to the winds – your name, your fame, your house, your books, your servants, your wife – and elope with her?

Lord T. (*in great agitation*)

I should! I should!

Ellen

Thank you, Lord Tennyson. You're a very great poet!
(*She kisses him, slips off his knee and runs out.*)

Mr. C. (*opening his eyes slowly*)

Alfred, Alfred!

Lord T. (*much startled*)

I thought you were asleep!

Mr. C.

It is when your eyes are shut that we see most!

Lord T.

But there is no need to mention it to Emily.

Mr. C. (*dreamily*)

I slept, and had a vision. I thought I was looking into the future. I saw a yellow omnibus advancing down the glades of Farringford. I saw girls with red lips kissing young men without shame. I saw innumerable pictures of innumerable apples. Girls played games. Great men were no longer respected. Purity had fled from the hearth. The double bed had shrunk to a single. Yet as I wandered, lost, bewildered, utterly confounded, through the halls of Alfred Tennyson's home, I felt my youth return. My eyes cleared, my hair turned black, my powers revived. And (*trembling and stretching his arms out*) there was a damsel – an exquisite but not altogether ethereal nymph. Her name was Lydia. She was a dancer. She came from Muscovy. She had danced before the Tsar. She snatched me by the waist and whirled me through the currant bushes. Oh Alfred, Alfred, tell me, was it but a dream?

Enter George Frederick Watts carrying a palette.

Watts

Where is Ellen? Has anybody seen Ellen? She must have slipped from the room without my noticing it. (*Turning to the audience and speaking in rapturous tones.*) Praise be to the Almighty Architect! The toe of Mammon is now, speaking under Providence, in drawing. Ah, my dear old friends, that toe has meant months of work – months of hard work. I have allowed myself no relaxation. I have sustained my body on the gristle of beef passed through the kitchen chopper twice, and my soul by the repetition of one prayer – The Utmost for the Highest! The Utmost for the Highest. At last my prayer has been heard; my request granted. The toe, the big toe, is now in drawing. (*He sits down.*)

Lord T.

It sometimes seems to me that the toe is not the most important part of the human body, Watts.

Watts (*starting up*)

There speaks the voice of the true artist. You are right, Alfred. You have recalled me from my exaltation; upwards, you point upwards. You remind me that even if I have succeeded, humanly speaking, with the toe, I have not solved the problem of the drapery. That, indeed, is a profoundly difficult problem. For by my treatment of the drapery I wish to express two distinct and utterly contradictory ideas. In the first place it should convey to the onlooker the idea that Modesty is always veiled; in the second, that Modesty is absolutely naked. For a long time I have pondered at a loss. At last I have solved the problem. I am wrapping her form in a fine white substance, which has the appearance of a veil but, if you

examine it closely, is seen to consist of innumerable stars. It is, in short, the Milky Way. For the Mythology of Ancient Egypt the Milky Way was held to symbolize – let me see, what did it symbolize? – (*He searches in his pockets and takes out a large book.*)

Enter Mrs. Cameron with her camera.

Mrs. C.

What is the use of a policeman if he has no calves? There you have the tragedy of my life. That is Julia Margaret Cameron's message to her age! (*She sits down facing the audience.*) All my sisters were beautiful, but I had genius (*touching her forehead*). They were the brides of men, but I am the bride of Art. I have sought the beautiful in the most unlikely places. I have searched the police force at Freshwater, and not a man have I found with calves worthy of Sir Galahad. But, as I said to the Chief Constable, "Without beauty, constable, what is order? Without life, what is law?" Why should I continue to have my silver protected by a race of men whose legs are aesthetically abhorrent to me? If a burglar came and he were beautiful, I should say to him: Take my fish knives! Take my cruets, my bread baskets and my soup tureens. What you take is nothing to what you give, your calves, your beautiful calves. I have sought beauty in public houses and found her playing the concertina in the street. My cook was a mendicant. I have transformed her into a Queen. My housemaid sold bootlaces at Charing Cross; she is now engaged to the Early of Dudley. My bootboy stole eggs and was in prison. He now waits at table in the guise of Cupid.

Watts (*crying out in agony*)

Horror! Horror! I have been cruelly misled – utterly deceived. (*He reads aloud.*) "The Milky Way among the Ancient Egyptians was the universal token of fertility. It symbolized the spawn of fish, the innumerable progeny of the sea, and the harvest of the fields. It typified the fertility of the marriage bed, and its blessings were called down upon brides at the altar." Horror! Horror! I who have always lived for the Utmost for the Highest have made Modesty symbolize the fertility of fish! My picture is ruined! I must start afresh. It will cost me months of work, but it must be done. It shall never be said that George Frederick Watts painted a single hair that did not tend directly – or indirectly – to the spiritual and moral elevation of the British Public. Where is Ellen? There is not a moment to be lost. The Utmost for the Highest! The Utmost for the Highest!

Mr. C.

Where is Ellen, Alfred?

Lord T.
Where is Lydia, Charles?

Mrs. C.
Who is Lydia?

Lord T.
Who is Lydia, what is she that all our swains adore her?

Mr. C.
She is a Muscovite. She danced before the Tsar.

Mrs. C.
The very person I want! A housemaid who can dance!

Watts
I have been visited by a most marvelous inspiration. Why should I not transform Modesty into Maternity? I see no treachery to the British Public in that. Mammon trampling upon Maternity. The sound is certainly excellent; but what about the sense?

Lord T.
Take care of the sound and the sense will take care of itself.

Watts (*fumbling in his pocket and producing several papers*)
I must make sure of my facts this time. I have here a letter from Rosalind, Countess of Carlisle, a very noble and high-minded lady whom I am even now painting as Boadicea or Godiva – I forget which – but here it is. She is profoundly interested in the suppression of the sale of spirituous liquors – a movement which has my fullest sympathy; but hitherto, owing partly to the pressure of other subjects, I have not devised any means of treating a glass of hot water allegorically. (*He reads.*) "Dearest Signor, great painter of all time, brother of Michael Angelo, son of Titian, nephew of Tintoret, you who wear the white flower of a blameless Art, will scarcely credit the fact that the Working Classes of Great Britain spend upon beer in one year a sum sufficient to maintain and equip twenty battleships or two million horse marines." No; that had never struck me. Never! But there is my picture! Lady Carlisle has given me my picture! Mammon typifies British love of beer. Maternity, two million horse marines. The Milky Way symbolizing the spawn of fish and the fertility of the marriage bed may be held,

without impropriety, to be highly symbolical of two million horse marines. Thus the picture will serve I hope a very high and holy purpose. I shall call it Mammon trampling upon Maternity, or the Prosperity of the British Empire being endangered –

Lord T. (*interrupting*)

- by the fertility of the Horse Marines.

Watts

No, no, no Alfred. You mistake my meaning entirely. I shall call it Mammon trampling upon Maternity or the Prosperity of the British Empire being endangered by the addiction of the Working Classes to the Consumption of Spirituous Liquors –

Lord T. (*shrieking and clasping his head*)

Oh, oh, oh – twelve s'es in ten lines – twelve s'es in ten lines! The prosssperity of the Britissh – the ssspawn of the Horse Marines – consssumption of ssspirituous fisses – Oh, oh, oh, I feel faint! (*He sinks onto the table.*)

Mrs. C. (*planting her tripod*)

"The Passing of Arthur!"

Watts (*going up to Tennyson and patting him on the shoulder*)

Cheer up, my dear old friend; cheer up. I will be guided entirely by your wishes. I will call it merely "Mammon trampling upon Maternity." Unless I mistake – and I have made some very terrible mistakes today – there is not a single letter s in the line.

Lord T.

The moan of doves in immemorial elms. The murmuring of innumerable bees. Myriads of rivulets hurrying through the lawns. Forgive my weakness. It is years since I encountered the letter s in such profusion. Hallam eradicates them from the *Times* with a penknife every morning. Even so, the Siege of Sevastopol was almost the death of me. If I had not been engaged in writing Maud at the time, I doubt that I could have survived. Living at Farringford there is constant danger from flocks of geese. So I carry a copy of my own works wherever I go and fortify myself by repeating the mellow ouzel fluting on the lawn, the moan of doves in immemorial elms. Maud, Maud, Maud, they are crying and calling. Maud, Maud, Maud. (*He sits down and begins to read.*)

Mrs. C. (*fluttering her fingers*)

"Inspiration – or the poet's dream." Look at the outline of the nose against the ivy! Look at the hair tumbling like Atlantic billows on a stormy night! And the eyes – look up, Alfred, look up – they are like pools of living light in which thoughts play like dolphins among groves of coral. The legs are a trifle short, but legs, thank God, can always be covered. (She covers his legs with an embroidered table cloth.) Charles, rouse yourself. Signor, lean against the window frame. Cook! Louisa! Mary Magdalene! James! Lord Tennyson is about to read *Maud*.

Everyone gathers and forms a tableau around Lord Tennyson.

Mrs. C. (*to the audience*)

"Alfred, Lord Tennyson reading *Maud* to Julia Margaret Cameron for the last time."

Lord T.

Come into the garden, Nell,
(*The clock begins striking twelve as he reads.*)
I am here at the gate alone;
And the woodbine spices are wafted abroad,
And the musk of the rose is blown.

She is coming, my own, my dear;
Were it ever so airy a tread,
My heart would hear her and beat,
Were it earth in an earthy bed;
My dust would hear her and beat,
Had I lain for a century dead;
Would start and tremble under her feet,
And blossom in purple and red.

Mrs. C. (*in great excitement, pointing*)
Sir Galahad!

All
Sir Galahad?

Mrs. C.
There among the raspberry canes – kissing; no, being kissed. Wait, young man. Wait! (*She dashes out.*)

Mr. C.

I slept, and had a vision in my sleep. I saw a yellow omnibus advancing down the glade. I saw Lydia among the raspberry canes.

Watts

Your music, Alfred, has tuned my mind to its highest pitch, and I now feel inspired to approach the most awful problems of my art in a spirit of devout devotion. But where is Ellen? I must find Ellen. Where is Ellen?

ACT TWO

The Needles. Ellen Terry and John Craig are sitting in bathing dresses on the Needles.

John

Well, here we are!

Nell

Oh, how lovely it is to sit on a rock in the middle of the sea!

John

In the middle of the sea?

Nell

Yes, it's a sea. Are you the young man who jumped over the lane on a red horse?

John

I am. Are you the young woman who was picking primroses in the lane?

Nell

I am.

John

Lor'! What a lark!

Nell

Oh you mustn't let Signor hear you say that – or if you do, please pronounce the final *d*.

John

D – be damned! Who's Signor?

Nell

Who's Signor? Oh he's the modern Titian.

John

Titian?

Nell

Yes. Titian. Titian. Titian.

John

Sneezing? I hope you haven't caught cold!

Nell

No. I feel heavenly. As warm as toast – sitting in the sun here. You can't think how cold it is sitting for Modesty in a veil.

John

Sitting for Modesty in a veil? What the dickens d'you mean?

Nell

Well, I'm married to a great artist. And if you're married to a great artist, you do sit for Modesty in a veil.

John

Married? You're a married woman? You? Was that old gentleman with a white beard your husband?

Nell

Oh everybody's got a white beard at Dimbola. But if you mean, am I married to the old gentleman with a white beard in the lane, yes, of course I am. Here's my wedding ring. (She pulls it off.) With this ring I three wed. With this body I thee worship. Aren't you married too?

John

I married? Why I'm only twenty-two. I'm a lieutenant in the Royal Navy. That's my ship over there. Can't you see it?

(*Nell looks.*)

Nell

That? That's a real ship. That's not the kind of ship that sinks with all we love below the verge.

John

My dear girl. I don't know what you're talking about. Of course it's a real ship. The *Iron Duke*. Thirty-two guns. Captain Andrew Hatch. My name's Craig. Lieutenant John Craig of Her Majesty's Navy.

Nell

And my name is Mrs. George Frederick Watts.

John

But haven't you got another?

Nell

Oh plenty! Sometimes I'm Modesty. Sometimes I'm Poetry. Sometimes I'm Chastity. Sometimes, generally before breakfast, I'm merely Nell.

John

I like Nell best.

Nell

Well that's unlucky, because today I'm Modesty. Modesty crouching at the feet of Mammon. Only Mammon's great toe was out of drawing and so I got down; and then I heard a whistle. Dear me, I suppose I'm an abandoned wretch. Everybody says how proud I ought to be. Think of hanging in the Tate Gallery forever and every – what an honor for a young woman like me! Only – isn't it awful – I like swimming.

John

And sitting on a rock, Nell?

Nell

Well it's better than that awful model's throne. Mrs. Cameron killed the turkey today. The Muse has to have wings, you see. But you can't think how they tickle.

John

What the dickens are you talking about? Who's Mrs. Cameron?

Nell

Mrs. Cameron is the photographer; and Mr. Cameron is the philosopher; and Mr. Tennyson is the poet; and Signor is the artist. And beauty is truth; truth beauty that is all I know and all we ought to ask. Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever. Oh, and the utmost for the highest, I was forgetting that.

John

It's worse than shooting the sun with a sextant. Is this the Isle of Wight? Or is it the Isle of Dogs – the Isle where the mad dogs go?

Nell

The apple trees bloom all the year here; the nightingales sing all the night.

John

Look here, Nell. Let's talk sense for a minute. Have you ever been in love?

Nell

In love? Aren't I married?

John

Oh but like this. (*He kisses her.*)

Nell

Not quite like that. (*He kisses her again.*) But I rather like it. Of course, it must be wrong.

John

Wrong? (*He kisses her.*) What's wrong about that?

Nell

It makes me think such dreadful thoughts. I don't think I could really dare to tell you. You see, it makes me think of – beef steaks; beer; standing under an umbrella in the rain; waiting to go into a theatre; crowds of people; hot chestnuts; omnibuses – all the things I've always dreamt about. And then, Signor snores.

And I get up and go to the casement. And the moon's shining. And the bees on the thorn. And the dews on the lawn. And the nightingales forlorn.

John

'Struth! God bless my soul! I've been in the tropics, but I've seen nothing like this. Now look here, Nell. I've got something to say to you – something very sensible. I'm not the sort of man who makes up his mind in a hurry. I took a good look at you as I jumped over that lane. And I said to myself as I landed in the turnip field, that's the girl for me. And I'm not the sort of man who does things in a hurry. Look here. (*He takes out a watch.*) Let's be married at half past two.

Nell

Married? Where shall we live?

John

In Bloomsbury.

Nell

Are there any apple trees there?

John

Not one.

Nell

Any nightingales?

John

Never heard a nightingale in Bloomsbury, on my honor as an officer.

Nell

What about painting? D'you ever paint?

John

Only the bath. Red, white and blue. With Aspinalls enamel.

Nell

But what shall we live on?

John

Well, bread and butter. Sausages and kippers.

Nell

No bees. No apple trees. No nightingales. Sausages and kippers. John, this is Heaven!

John

That's fixed then. Two thirty sharp.

Nell

Oh but what about this? *(She takes her wedding ring off.)*

John

Did the old gentleman with a white beard really give you that?

Nell

Yes. It was dug out of a tomb. Beatrice's. No, Laura's! Lady Raven Mount Temple gave it to him on the top of the Acropolis at dawn. It symbolizes – let me see, what does this wedding ring symbolize? With this ring I thee wed; with this brush I thee worship - It symbolizes Signor's marriage to his art.

John

He's committed bigamy. I thought so! There's something fishy about that old boy, I said to myself, as I jumped over the lane; and I'm not the sort of chap to make up his mind in a hurry.

Nell

Fishy? About Mr. Watts?

John

Very fishy; yes.

(A loud sound is heard.)

Nell *(looking around)*

I thought I heard somebody sighing.

John *(looking around)*

I thought I saw somebody spying.

Nell

That's only one of those dreadful reporters. The beach is always full of them. They hide behind the rocks, you know, in the case of the Poet Laureate may be listening to the scream of the maddened beach dragged backward by the waves. (*The porpoise appears in the foreground*) Look. Look. What's that?

John

It looks to me like a porpoise.

Nell

A porpoise? A real porpoise?

John

What else should a porpoise be?

Nell

Oh I don't know. But as nightingales are widows, I thought the porpoise might be a widower. He sounds so sad. Listen. (*The porpoise gulps.*) Oh, poor porpoise, how sad you sound! I'm sure he's hungry. Look how his mouth opens! Haven't we anything we could give him?

John

I don't go about with my bathing drawers full of sprats.

Nell

And I've got nothing – or only a ring. There, porpoise – take that! (*She throws him her wedding ring.*)

John

Lord, Nell! Now you've gone and done it! The porpoise has swallowed your wedding ring! What'll Lady Mount Temple say to that?

Nell

Now you're married to Mr. Watts, porpoise! The utmost for the highest, porpoise. Look upwards, porpoise! And keep perfectly still! I suppose it was a female porpoise, John?

John

That don't matter a damn to Mr. Watts, Nell. (*He kisses her.*)

ACT THREE

Tennyson reading Maud aloud. He reads aloud for some time. Watts enters, hiding his head in his hands. He staggers distractedly.

Lord T.

“The Fault was mine, the fault was mine” –
Why am I sitting here so stunn’d and still,
Plucking the harmless wild-flower on the hill? –
It is this guilty hand! –
And there rises ever a passionate cry –

Watts

Ellen! Ellen! My wife – my wife – dead, dead, dead!

Lord T.

My God, Watts. You don’t mean to say Ellen’s dead?

Mrs. C.

Drowned? That’s what comes of going bathing.

Watts

She is dead – drowned – to me. I was behind a rock on the beach. I saw her – drown.

Mr. C.

Happy Ellen! Gone to Paradise.

Mrs. C.

Oh but this is awful! The girl’s dead and where am I to get another model for the Muse? Are you sure, Signor, that she’s quite dead? Not a spark of life left in her? Couldn’t something be done to revive her? Brandy – where’s the brandy?

Watts

No brandy will bring Ellen to life. She is dead – stone dead – to me.

Mr. C.

Happy Ellen; lucky Ellen. They don't wear braces in Heaven; they don't wear trousers in Heaven. Would that I were where Ellen lies.

Lord T.

Yes. There is something highly pleasing about the death of a young woman in the pride of life. Rolled round in earth's diurnal course with sticks and stones and trees. That's Wordsworth. I've said it too. 'Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. Wearing the white flower of a blameless life. Hm, ha, yes let me see. Give me a pencil. Now a sheet of paper. Alexandrines? Iambics? Sapphics? Which shall it be?

(He begins to write. Watts goes to his canvas and begins painting out the picture.)

Watts

Modesty forsooth! Chastity! Alas, I painted better than I knew. The Ancient Egyptians were right. This veil did symbolize the fertility of fish. *(He strikes his brush across it.)* What symbol can I find now?

(Enter Ellen. Everybody turns around in astonishment.)

Mr. C.

But you're in Heaven!

Lord T.

Found drowned.

Mrs. C.

Brandy's no use.

Ellen

Is this a madhouse?

Mr. C.

Are you a fact?

Ellen

I'm Ellen Terry.

Watts *(advancing brandishing his brush)*

Yes Ma'am. There you speak the truth. You are no longer the wife of George Frederick Watts. I saw you –

Ellen

Oh you did, did you?

Watts

I was on the beach, behind a rock. And I saw you – yes, abandoned wretch, I saw you, sitting on the Needles with a man; sitting on the Needles with your arms round a man. This is the end, Ellen. Our marriage is dissolved – in the sea.

Lord T.

The unplumb'd salt, estranging sea. Matthew Arnold.

Ellen

I'm very sorry, Signor. Indeed I am. But he looked so very hungry, Signor; I couldn't help it. *She* looked so very hungry, I should say; I'm almost sure it was a female.

Watts

A female! Don't attempt to lie to me, Ellen.

Ellen

Well, John thought it was a female. And John ought to know. John's in the Navy. He's often eaten porpoises on desert islands. Fried in oil, you know, for breakfast.

Watts

John has eaten porpoises fried in oil for breakfast. I thought as much. Go to your lover, girl; live on porpoises fried in oil on desert islands; but leave me – to my art. (*He turns to his picture.*)

Ellen

Oh well, Signor, if you will take it like that – I was only trying to cheer you up. I'm very sorry, I'm sure, to have upset you all. But I can't help it. I'm alive! I never felt more alive in all my life. But I'm awfully sorry, I'm sure –

Lord T.

Don't apologize, Ellen. What does it matter? An immortal poem destroyed – that's all. (*He tears up his poem.*)

Ellen

But couldn't you find a rhyme for porpoise, Mr. Tennyson?

Lord T.

Impossible.

Ellen

Well then, what about Craig?

Lord T.

Browning could find a rhyme for Craig.

Mrs. C.

Ah, but in my art rhymes don't matter. Only truth and the sun. Sit down again, Ellen. There – on that stool. Hide your head in your hands. Sob. Penitence on the stool of –

Ellen (*standing at bay*)

No, I can't, Mrs. Cameron. No, I can't. First I'm Modesty; then I'm the Muse. But Penitence on a Monument – no that I will not be.

Mary Magdalene enters.

Mary

The coffins have come, Ma'am. The coffins, I say. And you couldn't find a nicer pair outside of Kensal Green. As I was saying to his lordship just now, it do seem a pity to take them all the way to India. Why can't you plant 'em here with a weeping angel on top?

Mrs. C.

At last, at last the coffins have come.

Mr. C.

The coffins have come.

Mrs. C.

Let us pack our coffins and go.

Mr. C.

To the land of perpetual moon shine –

Mrs. C.

To the land where the sun never sets.

Mr. C.

I shan't want trousers in India –

Mrs. C.

No that's true. But I shall want wet plates –

(Tennyson, who had left for a moment, returns with something between his fingers.)

Lord T.

It's all right, Julia. Look. I have bored a hole with my penknife. Solid oak. Hearts of oak are our ships. Hearts of oak are our men. We'll fight 'em and beat 'em again and again! No ant can eat through that. You can take *Maud* with you. Well there's still time; where did I leave off? *(He sits down and begins to read Maud.)*

She is coming, my own, my sweet;
Were it ever so airy a tread,
My heart would hear her and beat,
Were it earth in an earthy bed;
My dust would hear her and beat,
Had I lain for a century dead;
Would start and tremble –

Mr. C. *(who is looking out)*

Ahem! I think that's a fact in the raspberry canes.

Lord T.

Facts? Damn facts. Facts are the death of poetry.

Mr. C.

Damn facts. That's what I have always said. Plato has said it. Radakrishna has said it. Spinoza has said it. Confucius has said it. And Charles Hay Cameron says it too. All the same, that was a fact in the raspberry canes. I slept, and had a vision in my sleep. I saw a yellow omnibus advancing down the glade. I saw Lydia among the raspberry canes. Lydia! *(Runs out.)*

(An interlude. Enter Craig.)

Lord T.

Are you a fact, young man?

Craig

My name's Craig. John Craig of the Royal Navy. Sorry to interrupt. Afraid I've come at an inconvenient hour. I've called to fetch Ellen by appointment.

Mrs. C.

Ellen?

Craig

Yes. Chastity, Patience, the Muse, what d'you call her. Ah here she is.

Ellen

John.

Lord T.

Queen Rose of the rosebud garden of girls.

Watts

Ellen, Ellen, painted, powdered. Miserable girl. I could have forgiven you much. I had forgiven you all. But now that I see you as you are – painted, powdered – unveiled –

Lord T.

Remember, Watts; the ancient Egyptians said that the veil had something to do with –

Watts

Don't bother about the ancient Egyptians now, Alfred. Now that I see you as you are, painted, powdered, I cannot do it. Vanish with your lover. Eat porpoises on desert islands.

Craig

Hang it all, Sir. I've a large house in Gordon Square.

Watts

Go then to Gordon Square. Found a society in which the sanctity of the marriage vow is no longer respected –

Ellen

O, I was forgetting. (*She pulls off her veil to reveal that she is dressed as a young man.*)

Watts

Where veils are rent and trousers – check trousers –

Ellen

Here's your veil. I intend to wear trousers in the future. I never could understand wearing veils in a climate like this.

Watts

Unhappy maiden. You have no ideals. No imagination. No religion. No sense of the symbolical in art. The veil which you cast asunder symbolizes purity, modesty, chastity –

Lord T.

- and the fertility of fish. Don't forget that Watts.

Ellen (*to Craig*)

I don't understand a word they're saying. But then I never did. Can't we escape to some place where people talk sense?

Watts

Go to Bloomsbury. In that polluted atmosphere spread your doctrines, propagate your race, wear your trousers. But there will come a day (*he raises his eyes and clasps his hands*) when the voice of purity, of conscience, of high-mindedness, of nobility, and truth, will again be heard in the land.

(*Enter Mary pulling a coffin with her*)

Mary

The coffins are on the fly, Ma'am

Mrs. C.

The coffins are on the fly – it is time to say good-bye.

Mary

There's no room for the turkey's wings, Ma'am.

Mrs. C.

Give them here. I will put them in my reticule.

Mary

Gorblime! What a set! What a set! Coffins in the kitchen. Wet plates on the mantelpiece. And when you go to pick up a duster, it's a marmoset. I'm sick of parlour work. I'll marry the earl and live like a respectable gurl in a Castle.

Mrs. C., John and Ellen (*all together*)

The coffins are on the fly. It's time to say good-bye.

Mrs. C.

We start for India. We go to seek a land less corrupted by hypocrisy, where nature prevails. A land where the sun always shines. Where philosophers speak the truth. Where men are naked. Where women are beautiful. Where damsels dance among the currant bushes – It is time – It is time. We go; we go.

Ellen and John

And we go too. We go to a land –

Ellen

Oh I've had enough of this style of talking! The fact is we're going to Bloomsbury – number forty-six Gordon Square. W.C. 1. There won't be no veils there. Not if I know it!

Mrs. C

We are going to the land of the sun.
We are going to the land of the moon.

John

We're going to W.C. 1.

Ellen

Thank God we're going soon.

Mrs. C

Good-bye, good-bye, the coffins are on the fly.

Farewell to Dimbola; Freshwater, farewell.

John

I say, Nell, I want a rhyme to fly.

Ellen

Heavens, John, I can only think of fly.

Mrs. C.

And my message to my age is
When you want to take a picture
Be careful to fix your
Lens out of focus.

But what's a rhyme to focus?

Hocus pocus, hocus pocus,
That's the rhyme to focus.

John and Ellen

They're all cracked – quite cracked –

And our message to our age is,
If you want to paint a veil,
Never fail,
To look in the raspberry canes for a fact.

Ellen

To look in the raspberry canes for a fact!

Mrs. C.

Wait, wait. I have left my camera behind. (*She takes it and holds it towards Ellen Terry*) It is my wedding gift, Ellen. Take my lens. I bequeath it to my descendents. See that it is always slightly out of focus.

(Exeunt all but Watts and Tennyson. A noise of shouting is heard, which dies away and then grows again)

Lord T.

They have left us, Watts.

