Orpheus in Mayfair and Other Stories

by

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Heraclius Themistocles Margaritis was a professional musician. He was a singer and a composer of songs; he wrote poetry in Romaic, and composed tunes to suit rhymes. But it was not thus that he earned his daily bread, and he was poor, very poor. To earn his livelihood he gave lessons, music lessons during the day, and in the evening lessons in Greek, ancient and modern, to such people (and these were rare) who wished to learn these languages. He was a young man, only twenty-four, and he had married, before he came of age, an Italian girl called Tina. They had come to England in order to make their fortune. They lived in apartments in the Hereford Road, Bayswater.

They had two children, a little girl and a little boy; they were very much in love with each other, as happy as birds, and as poor as church mice. For Heraclius Themistocles got but few pupils, and although he had sung in public at one or two concerts, and had not been received unfavourably, he failed to obtain engagements to sing in private houses, which was his ambition. He hoped by this means to become well known, and then to be able to give recitals of his own where he would reveal to the world those tunes in which he knew the spirit of Hellas breathed. The whole desire of his life was to bring back and to give to the world the forgotten but undying Song of Greece. In spite of this, the modest advertisement which was to be found at concert agencies announcing that Mr. Heraclius Themistocles Margaritis was willing to attend evening parties and to give an exhibition of Greek music, ancient and modern, had as yet met with no response. After he had been a year in England the only steps towards making a fortune were two public performances at charity matinees, one or two pupils in pianoforte playing, and an occasional but rare engagement for stray pupils at a school of modern languages.

It was in the middle of the second summer after his arrival that an incident occurred which proved to be the turning point of his career. A London hostess was giving a party in honour of a foreign Personage. It had been intimated that some kind of music would be expected. The hostess had neither the means nor the desire to secure for her entertainment stars of the first magnitude, but she gathered together some lesser lights--a violinist, a pianist, and a singer of French drawing-room melodies. On the morning of the day on which her concert was to be given, the hostess received a telegram from the singer of French drawing-room melodies to say that she had got a bad cold, and could not possibly sing that night. The hostess was in despair, but a musical friend of hers came to the rescue, and promised to obtain for her an excellent substitute, a man who sang Greek songs.

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When Margaritis received the telegram from Arkwright's Agency that he was to sing that night at A---- House, he was overjoyed, and could scarcely believe his eyes. He at once communicated the news to Tina, and they spent hours in discussing what songs he should sing, who the good fairy could have been who recommended him, and in building castles in the air with regard to the result of this engagement. He would become famous; they would have enough money to

go to Italy for a holiday; he would give concerts; he would reveal to the modern world the music of Hellas.

About half-past four in the afternoon Margaritis went out to buy himself some respectable evening studs from a large emporium in the neighbourhood. When he returned, singing and whistling on the stairs for joy, he was met by Tina, who to his astonishment was quite pale, and he saw at a glance that something had happened.

"They've put me off!" he said. "Or it was a mistake. I knew it was too good to be true."

"It's not that," said Tina, "it's Carlo!" Carlo was their little boy, who was nearly four years old.

"What?" said Margaritis.

Tina dragged him into their little sitting-room. "He is ill," she said, "very ill, and I don't know what's the matter with him."

Margaritis turned pale. "Let me see him," he said. "We must get a doctor."

"The doctor is coming: I went for him at once," she said. And then they walked on tiptoe into the bedroom where Carlo was lying in his cot, tossing about, and evidently in a raging fever. Half an hour later the doctor came. Margaritis and Tina waited, silent and trembling with anxiety, while he examined the child. At last he came from the bedroom with a grave face. He said that the child was very seriously ill, but that if he got through the night he would very probably recover.

"I must send a telegram," said Margaritis to Tina. "I cannot possibly go." Tina squeezed his hand, and then with a brave smile she went back to the sick-room.

Margaritis took a telegraph form out of a shabby leather portfolio, sat down before the dining-table on which the cloth had been laid for tea (for the sitting-room was the dining-room also), and wrote out the telegram. And as he wrote his tears fell on the writing and smudged it. His grief overcame him, and he buried his face in his hands and sobbed. "What the Fates give with one hand," he thought to himself, "they take away with another!" Then he heard himself, he knew not why, invoking the gods of Greece, the ancient gods of Olympus, to help him. And at that moment the whole room seemed to be filled with a strange light, and he saw the wonderful figure of a man with a shining face and eyes that seemed infinitely sad and at the same time infinitely luminous. The figure held a lyre, and said to him in Greek:--

"It is well. All will be well. I will take your place at the concert!"

When the vision had vanished, the half written telegram on his table had disappeared also.

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The party at A---- House that night was brilliant rather than large. In one of the drawing-rooms there was a piano, in front of which were six or seven rows of gilt chairs. The other rooms were filled with shifting groups of beautiful women, and men wearing orders and medals. There was a continuous buzz of conversation, except in the room where the music was going on; and even there in the background there was a subdued whispering. The violinist was playing some elaborate nothings, and displaying astounding facility, but the audience did not

seem to be much interested, for when he stopped, after some faint applause, conversation broke loose like a torrent.
"I do hope," said some one to the lady next him, "that the music will be over soon. One gets wedged in here, one doesn't dare move, and one had to put up with having one's conversation spoilt and interrupted."
"It's an extraordinary thing," answered the lady, "that nobody dares give a party in London without some kind of entertainment. It *is* such a mistake!"
At that moment the fourth and last item on the programme began, which was called "Greek Songs by Heraclius Themistocles Margaritis."
"He certainly looks like a Greek," said the lady who had been talking; "in fact if his hair was cut he would be quite good-looking."
"It's not my idea of a Greek," whispered her neighbour. "He is too fair. I thought Greeks were dark."
"Hush!" said the lady, and the first song began. It was a strange thread of sound that came upon the ears of the listeners, rather high and piercing, and the accompaniment (Margaritis accompanied himself) was twanging and monotonous like the sound of an Indian tom-tom. The same phrase was repeated two or three times over, the melody seemed to consist of only a very few notes, and to come over and over again with extraordinary persistence. Then the music rose into a high shrill call and ended abruptly.
"What has happened?" asked the lady. "Has he forgotten the words?"
"I think the song is over," said the man. "That's one comfort at any rate. I hate songs which I can't understand."
But their comments were stopped by the beginning of another song. The second song was soft and very low, and seemed to be almost entirely on one note. It was still shorter than the first one, and ended still more abruptly.
"I don't believe he's a Greek at all," said the man. "His songs are just like the noise of bagpipes."
"I daresay he's a Scotch," said the lady. "Scotchmen are very clever. But I must say his songs are short."
An indignant "Hush!" from a musician with long hair who was sitting not far off heralded the beginning of the third song. It began on a high note, clear and loud, so that the audience was startled, and for a moment or two there was not a whisper to be heard in the drawing- room. Then it died away in a piteous wail like the scream of a sea- bird, and the high insistent note came back once more, and this process seemed to be repeated several times till the sad scream prevailed, and stopped suddenly. A little desultory clapping was heard, but it was instantly suppressed when the audience became aware that the song was not over.
"He's going on again," whispered the man. A low, long note was heard like the drone of a bee, which went on, sometimes rising and sometimes getting lower, like a strange throbbing sob; and then once more it ceased. The audience hesitated a moment, being not quite certain whether the music was really finished or not. Then when they saw Margaritis rise from the piano, some meagre well-bred applause was heard, and an immense sigh of relief. The people streamed into the other rooms, and the conversation became loud and general.

The lady who had talked went quickly into the next room to find out what was the right thing to say about the music, and if possible to get the opinion of a musician.

Sir Anthony Holdsworth, who had translated Pindar, was talking to Ralph Enderby, who had written a book on "Modern Greek Folk Lore."

"It hurts me," said Sir Anthony, "to hear ancient Greek pronounced like that. It is impossible to distinguish the words; besides which its wrong to pronounce ancient Greek like modern Greek. Did you understand it?"

"No," said Ralph Enderby, "I did not. If it is modern Greek it was certainly wrongly pronounced. I think the man must be singing some kind of Asiatic dialect--unless he's a fraud."

Hard by there was another group discussing the music: Blythe, the musical critic, and Lawson, who had the reputation of being a great connoisseur.

"He's distinctly clever," Blythe was saying; "the songs are amusing 'pastiches' of Eastern folk song."

"Yes, I think he's clever," said Lawson, "but there's nothing original in it, and besides, as I expect you noticed, two of the songs were gross plagiarisms of De Bussy."

"Clever, but not original," said the lady to herself. "That's it." And two hostesses who had overheard this conversation made up their minds to get Margaritis for their parties, for they scented the fact that he would ultimately be talked about. But most of the people did not discuss the music at all.

As soon as the music had stopped, James Reddaway, who was a Member of Parliament, left the house and went home. He was engrossed in politics, and had little time at his disposal for anything else. As soon as he got home he went up to his wife's bedroom; she had not been able to go to the party owing to a sudden attack of neuralgia. She asked him to tell her all about it.

"Well," he said, "there were the usual people there, and there was some music: some violin and piano playing, to which I didn't listen. After that a man sang some Greek songs, and a curious thing happened to me. When it began I felt my head swimming, and then I entirely lost account of my surroundings. I forgot the party, the drawing-room and the people, and I seemed to be sitting on the rocks of a cliff near a small bay; in front of me was the sea: it was a kind of blue green, but far more blue or at least of quite a different kind of blue than any I have seen. It was transparent, and the sky above it was like a turquoise. Behind me the cliff merged into a hill which was covered with red and white flowers, as bright as a Persian carpet. On the beach in front, a tall man was standing, wading in the water, little bright waves sparkling round his feet. He was tall and dark, and he was spearing a lot of little silver fish which were lying on the sand with a small wooden trident; and somewhere behind me a voice was singing. I could not see where it came from, but it was wonderfully soft and delicious, and a lot of wild bees came swarming over the flowers, and a green lizard came right up close to me, and the air was burning hot, and there was a smell of thyme and mint in it. And then the song stopped, and I came to myself, and I was back again in the drawing-room. Then when the man began to sing again, I again lost consciousness, and I seemed to be in a dark orchard on a breathless summer

night. And somewhere near me there was a low white house with an opening which might have been a window, shrouded by creepers and growing things. And in it there was a faint light. And from the house came the sound of a sad love-song; and although I had never heard the song before I understood it, and it was about the moon and the Pleiads having set, and the hour passing, and the voice sang, 'But I sleep alone!' And this was repeated over and over again, and it was the saddest and most beautiful thing I had ever heard. And again it stopped, and I was back again in the drawing-room. Then when the singer began his third song I felt cold all over, and at the same time half suffocated, as people say they feel when they are nearly drowning. I realised that I was in a huge, dark, empty space, and round me and far off in front of me were vague shadowy forms; and in the distance there was something which looked like two tall thrones, pillared and dim. And on one of the thrones there was the dark form of a man, and on the other a woman like a queen, pale as marble, and unreal as a ghost, with great grey eyes that shone like moons. In front of them was another form, and he was singing a song, and the song was so sad and so beautiful that tears rolled down the shadowy cheeks of the ghosts in front of me. And all at once the singer gave a great cry of joy, and something white and blinding flashed past me and disappeared, and he with it. But I remained in the same place with the dark ghosts far off in front of me. And I seemed to be there an eternity till I heard a cry of desperate pain and anguish, and the white form flashed past me once more, and vanished, and with it the whole thing, and I was back again in the drawing-room, and I felt faint and giddy, and could not stay there any longer."

The Cricket Match

An Incident At A Private School
To Winston Churchill

It was a Saturday afternoon in June. St. James's School was playing a cricket match against Chippenfield's. The whole school, which consisted of forty boys, with the exception of the eleven who were playing in the match, were gathered together near the pavilion on the steep, grassy bank which faced the cricket ground. It was a swelteringly hot day. One of the masters was scoring in the pavilion; two of the boys sat under the post and board where the score was recorded in big white figures painted on the black squares. Most of the boys were sitting on the grass in front of the pavilion.

St. James's won the toss and went in first. After scoring 5 for the first wicket they collapsed; in an hour and five minutes their last wicket fell. They had only made 27 runs. Fortune was against St. James's that day. Hitchens, their captain, in whom the school confidently trusted, was caught out in his first over. And Wormald and Bell minor, their two best men, both failed to score.

Then Chippenfield's went in. St. James's fast bowlers, Blundell and Anderson minor, seemed unable to do anything against the Chippenfield's batsmen. The first wicket went down at 70.

The boys who were looking on grew listless: three of them, Gordon, Smith, and Hart minor, wandered off from the pavilion further up the slope of the hill, where there was a kind of wooden scaffolding raised for letting off fireworks on the 5th of November. The headmaster, who was a fanatical Conservative, used to burn on that anniversary effigies of Liberal politicians such as Mr. Gladstone and Mr. Chamberlain, who was at that time a Radical; while the boys whose politics were Conservative, and who formed the vast majority, cheered, and kicked the Liberals, of whom there were only eight.

Smith, Gordon, and Hart minor, three little boys aged about eleven, were in the third division of the school. They were not in the eleven, nor had they any hopes of ever attaining that glory, which conferred the privilege of wearing white flannel instead of grey flannel trousers, and a white flannel cap with a red Maltese cross on it. To tell the truth, the spectacle of this seemingly endless game, in which they did not have even the satisfaction of seeing their own side victorious, began to weigh on their spirits.

They climbed up on to the wooden scaffolding and organised a game of their own, an utterly childish game, which consisted of one boy throwing some dried horse chestnuts from the top of the scaffolding into the mouth of the boy at the bottom. They soon became engrossed in their occupation, and were thoroughly enjoying themselves, when one of the masters, Mr. Whitehead by name, came towards them with a face like thunder, biting his knuckles, a thing which he did when he was very angry.

"Go indoors at once," he said. "Go up to the third division school- room and do two hours' work. You can copy out the Greek irregular verbs."

The boys, taken completely by surprise, but accepting this decree as they accepted everything else, because it never occurred to them it could be otherwise, trotted off, not very disconsolate, to the school- room. It was very hot out of doors; it was cool in the third division school-room.

They got out their steel pens, their double-lined copy books, and began mechanically copying out the Greek irregular verbs, with which they were so superficially familiar, and from which they were so fundamentally divorced.

"Whitey," said Gordon, "was in an awful wax!"

"I don't care," said Smith. "I'd just as soon sit here as look on at that beastly match."

"But why," said Hart, "have we got to do two hours' work?"

"Oh," said Gordon, "he's just in a wax, that's all."

And the matter was not further discussed. At six o'clock the boys had tea. The cricket match had, of course, resulted in a crushing and overwhelming defeat for St. James's. The rival eleven had been asked to tea; there were cherries for tea in their honour.

When Gordon, Smith, and Hart minor entered the dining-room they at once perceived that an atmosphere of gloom and menacing storm was overhanging the school. Their spirits had hitherto been unflagging; they sat next to each other at the tea-table, but no sooner had they sat down than they were seized by that terrible, uncomfortable feeling so familiar to schoolboys, that something unpleasant was impending, some crime, some accusation; some doom, the nature of which they could not guess, was lying in ambush. This was written on the headmaster's face. The headmaster sat at a square table in the centre of the dining-room. The boys sat round on the further side of three tables which formed the three sides of the square room.

The meal passed in gloomy silence. Gordon, Smith and Hart began a fitful conversation, but a message was immediately passed up to them from Mr. Whitehead, who sat at the bottom of one of the tables, to stop talking. At the end of tea the guests filed out of the room.

The headmaster stood up and rapped on his table with a knife.

"The whole school," he said, "will come to the library in ten minutes' time."

The boys left the dining-room. They began to whisper to one another with bated breath. "What's the matter?" And the boys of the second division shook their heads ominously, and pointing to Gordon, Smith, and Hart, said: "You're in for it this time!" The boys of the first division were too important to take any notice of the rest of the school, and retired to the first division school-room in dignified silence.

Ten minutes later the whole school was assembled in the library, from which one flight of stairs led to the upper storeys. The staircase was shrouded from view by a dark curtain hanging from a Gothic arch; it was through this curtain that the headmaster used dramatically to appear on important occasions, and it was up this staircase that boys guilty of cardinal offences were led off to corporal punishment.

The boys waited in breathless silence. Acute suspense was felt by the whole school, but by none so keenly as by Gordon, Smith, and Hart minor. These three

little boys felt perfectly sick with fear of the unknown and the terror of having in some unknown way made themselves responsible for the calamity which would perhaps vitally affect the whole school.

Presently a rustle was heard, and the headmaster swept down the staircase and through the curtain, robed in the black silk gown of an LL.D. He stood at a high desk which was placed opposite the staircase in front of the boys, who sat, in the order of their divisions, on rows of chairs. The three assistant masters walked in from a side door, also in their gowns, and took seats to the right and left of the headmaster's desk. There was a breathless silence.

The headmaster began to speak in grave and icily cold tones; his face was contracted by a permanent frown.

"I had thought," he said, "that there were in this school some boys who had a notion of gentlemanly behaviour, manly conduct, and common decency. I see that I was mistaken. The behaviour of certain of you to-day--I will not mention them because of their exceeding shame, but you will all know whom I mean. . . ."

At this moment all the boys turned round and looked hard at Gordon, Smith, and Hart minor, who blushed scarlet, and whose eyes filled with tears. . . . "The less said about the matter the better," continued the headmaster, "but I confess that it is difficult for me to understand how any one, however young, can be so hardened and so wanton as to behave in the callous and indecent way in which certain of you--I need not mention who--have behaved to-day. You have disgraced the school in the eyes of strangers; you have violated the laws of hospitality and courtesy; you have shown that in St. James's there is not a gleam of patriotism, not a spark of interest in the school, not a touch of that ordinary common English manliness, that sense for the interests of the school and the community which makes Englishmen what they are. The boys who have been most guilty in this matter have already been punished, and I do not propose to punish them further; but I had intended to take the whole school for an expedition to the New Forest next week. That expedition will be put off: in fact it will never take place. Only the eleven shall go, and I trust that another time the miserable idlers and loafers who have brought this shame, this disgrace on the school, who have no self-respect and no self-control, who do not know how to behave like gentlemen, who are idle, vulgar and depraved, will learn by this lesson to mend their ways and to behave better in the future. But I am sorry to say that it is not only the chief offenders, who, as I have already said, have been punished, who are guilty in the matter. Many of the other boys, although they did not descend to the depths of vulgar behaviour reached by the culprits I have mentioned, showed a considerable lack of patriotism by their apathy and their lack of attention while the cricket match was proceeding this afternoon. I can only hope this may be a lesson to you all; but while I trust the chief offenders will feel specially uncomfortable, I wish to impress upon you that you are all, with the exception of the eleven, in a sense guilty."

With these words the headmaster swept out of the room.

The boys dispersed in whispering groups. Gordon, Smith, and Hart minor, when they attempted to speak, were met with stony silence; they were boycotted and cut by the remaining boys.