CLASSICS TO GO

THE POOR MAN

STELLA BENSON

The Poor Man

Stella Benson

KWAN-YIN, GODDESS OF MERCY

TEMPLE OF KWAN-YIN. A wide altar occupies the whole of the back of the stage; a long fringe of strips of yellow brocade hangs from the ceiling to within three feet of the floor at either end of the altar. In the centre of the altar the seated figure of the goddess is vaguely visible in the dimness; only the face is definitely seen—a golden face; the expression is passionless and aloof. A long table about 12 inches lower than the altar stands in front of it, right across the stage. On the table, before the feet of Kwan-yin, is her carved tablet with her names in golden characters on a red lacquer ground. In front of the tablet is a large brass bowl full of joss-sticks, the smoke of which wavers in the air and occasionally obscures the face of Kwan-yin. There are several plates of waxen-looking fruit and cakes on the table and two horn lanterns; these are the only light on the scene. On either side of Kwan-yin, between the table and the altar, there is a pillar with a gilded wooden dragon twisted round it, head downward. To the left, forward, is a large barrel-shaped drum slung on a carved blackwood stand.

Four priests and two acolytes are seen like shadows before this palely lit background. One acolyte to the right of the table beats a little hoarse bell. This he does during the course of the whole scene, in the following rhythm:—7—8—20—7—8—20. He should reach the 105th beat at the end of the second hymn to Kwan-yin. The other acolyte stands by the drum and beats it softly at irregular intervals. The acolytes are little boys in long blue coats. The four priests stand at the table with their faces toward Kwan-yin; their robes are pale pink silk with a length of deeper apricot pink draped about the shoulders.

The priests kneel and kow-tow to Kwan-yin. The acolytes sing:

The voice of pain is weak and thin
And yet it never dies.
Kwan-yin—Kwan-yin
Has tears in her eyes.
Be comforted ... be comforted ...
Be comforted, my dear....
Never a heart too dead
For Kwan-yin to hear.

A pony with a ragged skin
Falls beneath a load;
Kwan-yin—Kwan-yin
Runs down the road.
A comforter ... a comforter ...
A comforter shall come....
No pain too mean for her,
No grief too dumb.

Man's deserts and man's sin
She shall not discover.
Kwan-yin—Kwan-yin
Is the world's lover.
Ah, thief of pain ... thou thief of pain ...
Thou thief of pain, come in.
Never a cry in vain,
Kwan-yin—Kwan-yin....

First priest, chants:

Is she then a warrior against sin?
On what field does she plant her banner?
Bears she a sword?

Second and third priests:

The world is very full of battle;
The speared and plumed forests in their ranks besiege
the mountains;
The flooded fields like scimitars lie between the breasts
of the mountains;
The mists ride on bugling winds down the mountains;
Shall not Kwan-yin bear a sword?

Fourth priest:

Kwan-yin is no warrior.
Kwan-yin bears no sword.
Even against sin
Kwan-yin has no battle.
This is her banner—a new day, a forgetting hour.
Her hands are empty of weapons and outstretched to
the world.
Her feet are set on lotus flowers,
The lotus flowers are set on a pale lake,
And the lake is filled with the tears of the world.
Kwan-yin is still; she is very still; she listens always.
Kwan-yin lives remembering tears.

At this point the smoke of the joss-sticks veils the face of Kwan-yin. A woman's voice sings:

Wherefore remember tears?
Shall tears be dried by remembrance?

This voice is apparently not heard by the priests and acolytes.

Second and third priests:

Ah, Kwan-yin, mother of love,
Remember
Those in pain,
Those who are held fast in pain of their own or another's
seeking;
Those for whom the world is too difficult
And too beautiful to bear,

All:

Kwan-yin, remember, remember.

Second and third priests:

Those who are blind, who shall never read the writing
upon the fierce rivers,
Who shall never see the slow flowing of stars from
mountain to mountain;
Those who are deaf, whom music and the fellowship of
words have forsaken.

All:

Kwan-yin, remember, remember.

Second and third priests:

Those whose love is buried and broken;
All those under the sun who lack the thing that they
love
And under the moon cry out because of their lack.

All:

Kwan-yin, remember.

First priest:

Oh, thou taker away of pain,
Thou taker away of tears.

The smoke quivers across Kwan-yin's face again and the same woman's voice sings:

Wherefore remember pain?
Is there a road of escape out of the unending wilderness
of pain?
Can Kwan-yin find a way where there is no way?

Still the voice is unheard by the worshippers. Fourth priest sings, and while he sings the acolyte beats the drum softly at quick irregular intervals:

Kwan-yin shall come, shall come,
Surely she shall come,
To bring content and a new day to the desolate,
To bring the touch of hands and the song of birds
To those who walk terribly alone.
To part the russet earth and the fingers of the leaves in
the spring
That they may give up their treasure
To those who faint for lack of such treasure.
To listen to the long complaining of the old and the
unwanted.
To bring lover to lover across the world,
Thrusting the stars aside and cleaving the seas and the
mountains.
To hold up the high paths beneath the feet of travellers.
To keep the persuading roar of waters from the ears of
the broken-hearted.

To bring a smile to the narrow lips of death,
To make beautiful the eyes of death.

The woman’s voice again sings, unheeded, from behind the veil of smoke:

Wherefore plead with death?
Who shall soften the terrible heart of death?

All, in urgent but slow unison:

Kwan-yin.
Kwan-yin.
Kwan-yin.
Kwan-yin.

The golden face of Kwan-yin above the altar changes suddenly and terribly and becomes like a mass of fear. The lanterns flare spasmodically. The voice can now be identified as Kwan-yin’s, but still the priests stand unhearing with their heads bowed and still the passionless bell rings.

Kwan-yin, in a screaming voice:

Ah, be still, be still....
I am Kwan-yin.
I am Mercy.
Mercy is defeated.
Mercy, who battled not, is defeated.
She is a captive bound to the chariot of pain.
Sorrow has set his foot upon her neck.
Sin has mocked her.
Turn away thine eyes from Mercy,
From poor Mercy.
Woo her no more.
Cry upon her no more.

There is an abrupt moment of silence as the light becomes dim again and Kwan-yin’s face is frozen into serenity. Then the fourth priest sings:

What then are Mercy’s gifts? The rose-red slopes
Of hills ... the secret twisted hands of trees?
Shall not the moon and the stars redeem lost hopes?
What fairer gifts shall Mercy bring than these?

For, in the end, when our beseeching clamor
Dies with our bells; when fear devours our words;
Lo, she shall come and hold the night with glamor,
Lo, she shall come and sow the dawn with birds.

Ah, thou irrelevant saviour, ah, thou bringer
Of treasure from the empty sky, ah, thou
Who answerest death with song, shall such a singer
Be silent now? Shalt thou be silent now?

The 105th beat of the bell is now reached and there is a pause in the ringing.

All:

KWAN-YIN.

The bell is rung slowly three times. Then there is absolute silence. There is now a tenseness in the attitudes of all the worshippers; they lean forward and look with suspense into Kwan-yin’s quite impassive golden face.

The lights go out suddenly.

CHAPTER ONE

Edward R. Williams was not listening. He was studying a tailor's advertisement in the *Saturday Evening Post* showing a group of high-colored, high-bosomed young men discussing a dog whose skin had obviously been bought from the same tailor as the young men's clothes. Edward Williams turned to a story which showed how a good young clerk served one millionaire by overreaching another and in the end became a millionaire himself, thus winning the affections of "the Right Girl."

Edward Williams felt intelligent and contemptuous—a rare feeling for him. "Makes one thank God one's English," he thought and then, because he was in the habit of refuting morbidly every statement he himself made, he thought of certain guides to British taste in periodical literature and his mind fell sheepishly silent. He looked out of the window.

I do not know how many hills lift up the dramatic city of San Francisco from the level of her sea and her bay. To the precipitous shoulder of one of these hills clung the house in which Edward sat. It was night-time and the great California stars hung out of a thick dark sky. Perhaps the stars gave the waters of the bay and of the Golden Gate their luminous look, as if there were light set in the floor of the world, a great light overlaid by fathoms of dark vivid water. Lights were spread like a veil over the hills on the near side of the bay and, on the far side, the mountains stood ankle deep in stars.

The music began again in the room. Music to Edward Williams had no connection with words or rules or understanding. He could not have been at all musical, for he never thought of saying: "You know Scriabine is clean, my

dear, clean like a scrubbed olive," or, "It has been wittily said that Moussorgski is the spiritual son of Ouida and Charlemagne," or any of the things sounding rather like that, that we expect to hear from musical people as the Victrola falls silent. Edward Williams was a person of no facts at all; probably he was the only person in the world so afflicted, or at any rate the only man. Music to him was always anticipation even when it was over. Now, listening, he thought vaguely, "If the treble echoes the bass the way I hope it will, that will be too good to bear—indeed it will be as good as I expected, and that, of course, is impossible...." The treble did that very thing and Edward was blind with delight for several seconds; he breathed in pleasure; there was a sense of actual contraction in the roots of his hair.

The music paled like a candle and went out, and Edward said, "What was that?" for he was anxious to pursue that pursuing theme again across a world of scant opportunity. He would not have remembered the name even had he been told it, but at any rate nobody heard him. In America this often happened to Edward Williams.

A woman's sharp voice said, "Well say listen, what was that? It was a dandy piece." And Edward heard the man with a cocktail shaker between his knees reply, "That was the song of the twelve eagles after the emeralds of the South Sea lost their fragrance." Someone added, "They were crushed the day the love-tinker died on a hill of violets in Vienna." Edward Williams was pleased with this conversation, although, of course, he knew that it had not taken place. He knew well that he was more than half deaf and in many moods he welcomed the insight that his infirmity gave him into matters that did not exist. His two friends had been telling each other facts that both knew and that Edward did not wish to know. Neither would, of course, dream of mentioning emeralds or hills of violets except when it was really necessary and helpful to do so. Edward

did not care. He felt that his mind’s eye had acquired one picture the more without the trouble of acquiring a fact.

Some music that did not interest Edward began and Edward thought, “I wish I were really musical, but if I wear this grave half-shut expression everybody will think I am very musical indeed.” Nobody looked at him, but he persisted in his selected expression.

Miss Rhoda Romero’s pictures hung all round the room. Of these Edward thought, “If I am asked I will look at them in silence with a chin-down, eye-up sort of look, as if the sun were in my eyes and then say ‘A-ha’ once slowly. Then people will think I know how good they are—if they are good.” But he never had had a chance to do this, because nobody had ever formally introduced him to the pictures. Rhoda Romero never asked people what they thought of her pictures. She thought she knew. They were mostly studies of assorted fruits in magenta and mustard-colour running violently down steep slopes into the sea. They were all called still life, curiously enough. Rhoda Romero also, I need hardly say, wrote poetry. It was, of course, unrhymed and so delicately scanned that often there was not room in a line for a word unless it were spelt in the newest American manner; the poems were usually about dirt or disease, and were believed in Chicago to have an international reputation.

Rhoda Romero herself was insolent, handsome, and contented. Almost the only thing that she regretted about herself was that she had a great deal of money. Her grandfather, a Mexican forty-niner, had been so wise as to buy land all round one of those cities of California whose motto—“Watch us Grow”—had not been an idle boast. Many of these cities have so far clamored for an audience under false pretenses, and now try to justify themselves by hanging signboards—“Drive Slowly, Congested Business

District”—on every gum-tree in the vicinity of the lonely real-estate office. Rhoda Romero’s city could have paved her studio with gold, and this, she felt, was a blot upon an artist’s reputation. She thought that an artist ought to be “Of the People” and, though she had been to a very ladylike school in Virginia and had later graduated from a still more ladylike college in Pennsylvania, she used what she called “the speech of the people” whenever she remembered to do so. For much the same reason she shared a flat with Mr. Avery Bird, a transformed Russian Jew with high upward hair. They had once married in a moment of inconsistency but had since divorced each other in order that they might live together with a quiet conscience.

Mrs. Melsie Stone Ponting, tired of music, had suddenly started an argument about Art and Sex. You could tell it was an argument because now and then a little hole in the close-knit fabric of her voice occurred which was presumably filled up by some man’s voice. In the United States you become used to hearing only women. Men speak guiltily in small suffocated voices. Yet arguments often seem just as spirited as though the opponent were audible. Before each clause of Mrs. Ponting’s argument she opened her mouth for several seconds very widely, showing the whole of her tongue. Sometimes Mr. Avery Bird rudely took advantage of this necessity to give voice to an epigram of his own which nobody could follow.

The argument provided cover for Miss Romero to say to her friend, Mr. Banner Hope, who was trying to make his empty cocktail glass look as conspicuously wistful as possible:

“Say, listen, Banner, I want to talk to you about You Know Whom. We’ll mention no names....”

Mr. Hope looked doubtfully at Edward Williams, who was about ten feet away.

“He’s good and deaf,” said Miss Romero; “he can’t hear.” And indeed, beyond a preliminary impression that Rhoda had begun a dramatic but elusive conversation about Steel Men in the Flames, Edward Williams did not hear. His protesting ears were filled with the voice of Mrs. Ponting.

“Well, say, listen, Banner, have you heard the latest?” continued Miss Romero.

Mr. Hope would have liked to be known as the wickedest man in San Francisco. He therefore could not possibly admit in so many words that he did not know the latest—(the latest sounds too wicked to miss)—so he moved his head ambiguously with a wise groan.

“Of course, I’d be the last to pick on anyone for being Bolshevik,” said Miss Romero. “Bolshevism, as I said to the ‘What is Liberty’ Association only the other day, is the only encouraging sane reaction to a crazy world. But, you know, Our Friend here can’t approach even Bolshevism sanely....”

“He drinks,” said Mr. Hope thirstily.

“There was a most discouraging scene in Alcatraz Prison last visitors’ day. He and I went together to try and say a few encouraging words to Bisley, the C. O. Edward wouldn’t speak to Bisley when he got there—he said there were too many Christians banked up around him; and surely there was a considerable crowd of rather discouraging dames telling Bisley that Christ was coming—he’s a religious objector, classed as Lunatic, so he has to suffer for his reputation. But I stayed in the group by way of comic relief, and Edward went glooming and snooping around. Next I saw of him he was sitting interlocked with Smith, the man who got twelve years for writing *If Abraham Lincoln Returned*. Poor Smith had a nerve-storm, you know, after he got beaten up in prison for the third time; he spends most of his time in solitary now—so discouraging. Anyway I looked

around and saw Smith and Edward fairly clamped together. I forgot about them for a while until I heard a hell of an uproar, and I told Bisley, Fur Goodness sake—where's that darned Britisher?—my dear, it surely was a presentiment. For there was Edward crying—believe me, Banner, crying—that kid's got no more poise than a snake's got hips—all het up and trying to pull the hair off the prison officer in charge of the gate—one of the warders was holding both his arms."

"Why, why, why, what d'you know about that. He was stoo-ed, I guess," said Mr. Banner Hope, profoundly; but his heart was not in the matter. He began moving his empty glass about so as to catch the light, hoping, with this bait, to catch in addition his hostess's eye.

"Stoo-ed, you said it. He was crazy drunk. My dear, believe me, it took me down thirty dollars to get them to O.K. that lad's exit from the prison. I told them how he was only a Britisher and had gotten himself shell shocked in the service of the Allies."

"Did he so?" asked Mr. Hope with a certain sympathy, for, before he had met Miss Romero, grown a beard, and thrown in his lot with the 'advance-guard of a freer America,' he too had risked his life for his country in the course of a month in a training camp in Texas. "Shellshock? What d'you know about that?"

"Air-raids, my dear," said Miss Romero intensely. "Edward R. Williams survived three air-raids in his home-city—London. I'll say he's no stranger to War...."

Mr. Hope occasionally felt that he could make a more genuinely wicked impression if he could think of something to say. "What d'you know about that?" he said, a little doubtfully.

"Well, say, listen, Banner," continued Miss Romero, becoming now aware of the empty cocktail glass as her rival

for his attention. “Although, of course, personally I’m just crazy about Edward Williams, what with one thing and another it looks like it’s up to me to get busy moving him some place else. I’ll say the Bay Cities’ll get discouraged with him soon. Avery and me are through with him. I talked to him about him drinking so much and it seemed he’d gotten around to thinking himself an interesting rebellious kinda guy, but I’ll say all his stunts look just maudlin to me; he most always cries, and he always quits before he can put over the interesting rebellious thing he wants to say. Say listen Banner——”

Mr. Hope started to attention.

“I’m planning to send Edward Williams to China.”

“China.... Why, why, why?...”

“No, but listen, Banner, do you remember Mr. Leung—Leung Tok Ngo—who was so encouraging about the future of American art in the Orient? He said the Chinese just didn’t begin to appreciate the occidental artistic ideals of today; the man in the street in the Orient, he said, would gape at you if you talked of Cezanne or Pizarro. Of course he took back Benstead’s Portrait of a Naked Broker to his home in Shanghai; but that’s only one, my dear, to a population of four hundred million. Now listen, Banner, I kinda think I’ll make a genuine United States drummer out of this Britisher ... a drummer of ideals, if you get me. Edward Williams is so darn glum—he surely must be an idealist. No real artist that I know has anything on Edward for real bad manners, and bad manners always gets the dilettante. I’m going to send Edward to China with two or three dozen of those studies of mine that didn’t sell at the Rebel’s Show. Leung is in Shanghai and can help him. I tell you I’m through with him. The Orient’s gotter take its turn at him now. I’ll give him expenses one way and commission, and then I quit.... Not

that, as I say, I’m not just crazy about Edward Williams personally.”

She was very direct. She left Banner Hope and approached Edward. He sat slackly on an arm-chair, arms forward, palms up, as though asking for something.

“Say, listen, Edward, what’s your opinion of my pictures?”

This much too general opening left no room for the convention of appreciation that the careful Edward had prepared. After some thought he therefore answered, “I think they’re very nice.”

Miss Romero shrieked, “Very nice! Oh, Edward, you’re so discouragingly British.” She proceeded to convey to him the politer aspects of his banishment to China. The illusion of usefulness and a certain silliness about the plan attracted Edward, who would have refused an offer of solid travelling employment with a fixed salary. Even before he heard of the commission he said, “Right you are, Rhoda. There’s nothing in the world to stop me going whenever you say.”

Emily came in. She had made friends with Avery Bird without introduction at an Italian eating-house. Mr. Bird’s lively yet—if the truth must be told—quite innocent friendships with women were part of the game he and Rhoda were playing. Rhoda offset them by discussing passion with all the men who came to the studio.

In picking up Emily Mr. Bird felt that he was unusually well justified. She was, of course, English, but, on the other hand, she was beautiful.

Emily had fierce, almost agonised, eyes under up-slanting brows. She had brushed her dark hair rather flatly to a smoothly wrought Chinese puzzle at the back of her head and, in the middle of her brow, her hair grew down to a little point which was consistent with the fact that every line in her face was rather keen and curious and very definite.

When Edward Williams saw Emily he thought at once, “What a miracle,” and as his heart went to his throat the cocktail that he was drinking met it, so that he choked without reserve or dignity. When he recovered he found with delight that he could hear every word she said. But after his third cocktail he could always hear well. He thought, “I wish I had reminded Rhoda that I wish to be called Reynald in future instead of Edward. Rhoda always forgets the things I want. That girl would surely look round at me if she heard somebody call out Reynald.”

One of the guests had already asked Emily for a summary of British opinion on the subject of British atrocities in Ireland, Egypt and India. Emily said “You may well ask, you may well ask ...” with great energy. She was only three days old in Californian ways, but the newcomer in the Western States becomes at once almost pathetically precocious. Yet nothing—not even self-restraint—can save him from reproach. Speech may be only silver in America, but silence is not in currency at all.

“Yes, indeed; yes, indeed....” said Emily, looking round nervously. Her audience noticed with displeasure that she had not yet said anything to suggest that she disliked being British. To be satisfied with an alien status implies—in the United States—criticism of the Constitution or George Washington or something. The word criticism is of course synonymous with insult. Aliens have to be very careful.

Everyone looked at Emily and looked forward to telling anecdotes later about the superciliousness of the British. But after all she had only just come into the room. Mr. Bird felt that his triumph was going wrong. “Emily is here as secretary to a very eminent Englishman, travelling with his wife to study conditions in the United States. You all know the French philosopher Moriband de Morthomme on the

subject of totems and barbarians, and you'll agree with me that it applies here."

That may not have been quite the name he mentioned. It does not matter. Everyone in the room was accustomed to not knowing what Avery Bird was talking about.

"I am secretary to a saint," said Emily. She was rather vehement because she was afraid.

"Indeed," said Miss Romero with a characteristic swing of her hair, which was like a frilled red ballet-skirt round her head. "What an encouraging job. What kind of saint? There are saints and saints."

"Yes," said Emily. "Mine is both." She added after a pause, "I don't use the word in the ordinary sense which would just mean—a man I am in love with. I mean a real saint who works miracles."

"Why, how interesting," said Miss Romero. "Tell me, is he recognised by the Authorities?"

"I believe they have definitely made his reservation in the flaming chariot," said Emily. "And—oh, I do hope his cloak will fall on me."

"A bit chilly ... flying...." Edward was suddenly understood to murmur into his cocktail glass.

"Explain yourself, Edward," said Rhoda Romero maternally.

Edward had just finished his fourth cocktail on an empty stomach. The blaze of Emily's eyes seemed like searchlights on his lips. "Ou, I dunno...." he said, delighted, "I often used to think ... Elijah must have regretted dropping his coat like that.... Probably quite inadvertent.... Of course ... central heating in the machine and all that.... Still...."

“Aeronauts say there’s nothing so warm as leather,” said Mrs. Melsie Stone Ponting. “An old beau of mine....”

But Emily still looked kindly at Edward. He had rarely been so fortunate. Everything in the room seemed to him to be brightly outlined and, though his hearing and his wit seemed to him happily alert, he could not remember from one moment to another the subject of the remarks he heard. Mr. Banner Hope was laughing almost continuously. His laughter was like something running helplessly down a slope, stumbling at every breath. Emily’s saint was spoken of in the same breath as mushrooms. A miracle in connection with mushrooms at once seemed to Edward quite inevitable. Mushrooms were not logical; in fact they were made by fairies. Fairies were little saints.

“I mayn’t be able to say much,” thought Edward. “But I do have beautiful thoughts.”

But it appeared that Emily was now talking about ducks. How enchantingly confusing.

“It was caught in the break of the waves,” said Emily. “We saw it crash on the sand and struggle. They are, after a storm. So awful to have your own world turn against you like that. Usen’t you to have nightmares that your mother had turned into a lion and bit you when you ran to her? I was far behind, finding out how much alike the edges of all seas are —if you pat the wet sand with your bare foot at Clacton-on-Sea or at Monte Carlo or at Bombay, it turns into a sort of trembling junket and here it was the same in the wake of a Pacific roller. Anyway when I caught up with Tam he was sitting by a broken duck. He had made it a little pillow of sand. He was holding its poor throbbing web in his hand. We waited till it died. You would never have thought a duck’s beak could have assumed an expression of such utter peace.”

“Say, listen,” said Mrs. Ponting, “are all these tales true?”

“Not particularly,” replied Emily. She added after a moment, “Well, to change the subject, what do you think of the Haiti question, the negro question, and the question of the Philippines?” There was no immediate answer to her question, so she went on rather hastily, “Well, well, fiction is much more fun than truth, isn’t it? Atrocities are delicious to make up. And everyone with a great enthusiasm or a grievance lies. I met a negro called Erle Takka, who said that United States Marines strip the houses of Haitian widows and orphans and then, while they starve, stand around and prick them with bayonets to make them dance. Too frightful, don’t you think, and too interesting, but—at least to a prosaic European ear—hardly likely. Up to now not a single deputation to Washington on the subject of Haiti has crossed my lips. Perhaps all this is rather superfluous....”

“It is rather,” said Rhoda.

“It is very,” said Mrs. Ponting. “I never heard such talk. Haiti indeed.... Whoever heard of atrocities in Haiti?”

Emily was standing now and, with a feeling of desolation, Edward Williams watched her putting on a hat rather like Napoleon’s. She was nervously arranging her clothes. She felt that she had been talking too much. She had a curious lapse into humility and talked in a little frightened undertone to herself. “I expect my hair needs tidying awfully ... it’s a tragedy that all lockets hang face downward ... my bag ... her name is Esther.”

It had been a silly party. Everybody felt that—even Edward, though the party had left him a changed man. No room could be anything but dramatic to him after seven cocktails, but he realised now that the party had been silly, and that a pillar of thin air against a background of Rhoda’s pictures was an inadequate substitute for Emily. For Emily