

Stella, to Elysium Fly

Stella.

Stella.

So, are you happy? Are you famous? Rich? Dear child. Is your name up there on the hoardings in brightly-flashing flickering lights, Stella, mute when it comes to words, yet so eloquent in movement and elastic in motion, as, sequined, gilded and sculptedly austere, you stand *arabesque en point* on the loftiest wire, rise on tiptoe there on a bicycle bar a breath from the dome, and execute a pirouette that causes children to gape and grown-ups to gasp, high, high, high up there, – while I, far, far, far below pray for you, my Stella, pray for you, my Alceste, pray that you should fall – yes, that you should fall – that I may, in turn, from the folds of the tent run forward to catch you in your flight and hold you and console you, and, in that moment, in that instant of saved, delivered, salvaged life, gift more precious than any other I have thus far given you – ear-ring, bracelet, necklace, pendant or friendship ring –, yes, in that moment have you know, have you recognise, flesh against flesh, palpitation against palpitation, that there is something boundless and profound and beyond quelling in its intensity, that seeks, that yearns to possess you; not as Asmodeus has since possessed you, but as Columbine's Pierrot might possess, or Pyramus, or Tristan, or Daphnis his Chloe, no words needing passage between us, you, in any case, innocent of speech, and I, in my harlequin way, confessing truths more pure in felicity with the merest quiver of an eyebrow than with the silver-tongued disgorgement of a million words that

are the generous endowment of circus-owners, ring-masters, managers, entrepreneurs, talent-scouts and impresarios, all of them men of the world, men of the world to be sure, but outside our own, more precious, world of art and feeling and soul.

Stella.

I ask again.

Are you happy? Are you famous? Rich? Are you up there on the hoardings, your name in brightly-flashing flickering white and brilliant lights?

To me did he come first, that agent Asmodeus.

'Carlo, I like your style,' he said. 'The way you hold your audience in thrall, with just a flicker of a lip, a twitch of the nose, a shudder of a chin. The people, they love you, every woman, man and child out there. But why do you waste yourself on this narrow circuit, with this meagre troupe tramping the districts when . . . when if you trusted to me, I could have you take Paris in one night, and Madrid and Prague, and Rio and New York. You are rare. Take a million and you would still be only one. Trust to me, Carlo, and into your palm I shall put the very stars.'

There was but one star I wanted in my palm.

Stella, my radiance, my light.

Unmoving, I hardened my gaze upon him.

'No,' I said. 'I will not leave. This is my place. I love the work here. I love this troupe. Take me away from it and you would kill me, you would tear my very heart away.'

'I have watched you,' he persisted. 'At rehearsals. In performances. There is magic in you. Its source is beyond knowing, but it is there, in every gesture, every nuance, even in immobility itself. Give it to the world. It needs it, craves for it.'

I twitched a cheek, raised a finger to my lips in mock contemplation. Still in motley was I, just returned from performance.

'Outside,' he went on, describing a flamboyant arc with an

arm, 'outside, there is evil. Masses of it; mountains of it; and rivers, seas, oceans of evil. It is nothing for people to slander one another, and to hurt and maim and to kill. But at a circus, Carlo, all that becomes forgotten, it becomes remote, it becomes unreal. The public is then so pure, so cleansed, uplifted, and so virginal in innocence, as if to beatitude baptised, of every touch of calumny and vileness purged; while there is laughter instead and exaltation and Elysium blessed, and it is in you, in your gift, your magic, your genius to bring it all to them. In you is it; yes, in you. Can you so deny the world? Can you deny the world at large, the world out there such laughter, such rapture, thrall, even redemption that through exhilaration, galvanisation and transport to ecstasy sublime you alone can bring?'

Could I deny the world?

Stella.

Could I deny? Thwart that tongue of silver and deny? . . .

I denied.

Because I clowned with you as you clowned with me, familiarity permitting all, did you therefore take my awkward, my adolescently-uttered truth, too, for jest? In the language of your fingers, you called me not Carlo, but Punch, you called me PUNCHINELLO, and PANTALOOON, and PANTALEONE; you tweaked my nose, hid my grease-paint and chalk before a show; and how you laughed when, having mustered courage over a week of days, I dared finally with the frail and fragile language of my own unlettered tongue to say I loved you, as though mimes, jesters, clowns were not meant to love, nor be granted to know such love requited, but who, electing to give joy to others, had ever to appear joyful themselves, and who, elected to bring laughter to others had always to be ready to laugh themselves, even when laughter, once a gift beautiful, precious and inviolable, became a thing by experience dashed. – Yet I stayed; I thwarted the temptation of Asmodeus, denied the world out there my magic, and stayed: and continued to worship, Stella, to worship, O Star of Eve, and to cleave, and to

pant, and to dote, and thirst and burn, I who before the galleries was so eloquent in my every wordless gesture, intimation and sign, and yet with you was so insufferably bungling, inarticulate, Arcadian.

I stayed.

He approached Truffaldino, too, our Asmodeus. Do you remember the juggler Truffaldino? And the Brothers Triton, Hercule and Atlas, and our midget Thumbkin, and Hero Leonard, the stuntman, as he sprinkled talcum on his palms, and Virginia Virago ever occupied with trimming her beard? But they, too, they stayed, none, not one leaving, not one going the way you went, up there on the high-wire one evening, bowing when returned to ground to applause exquisitely generous and deserved, and throwing kisses, one hand first, then the other, then both, without words making it clear you wanted the audience back again, not for the merest blinking letting on that by the time Leo Leondas rose at dawn to feed his cubs Cheshire and Calico, you would be gone, and Asmodeus, too, Lord knew heading for which airport, which dock, which railway-station, in your possession those trinkets I gave you, that jewellery, those gifts all of tinsel, which no matter how beautiful, was all of it bauble, which however exorbitant, was all of it junk, junk, Stella, yes Stella, all junk, all junk, all junk against the grandeur and the richness and the amplitude and the prodigality of the ready, willing offering of self and spirit and soul that, in your leaving, you left so bruised, so lacerated, so crushingly, achingly, cruelly pulped.

You did see Paris, I grant you, even as Asmodeus promised me I should see it. You even performed there. And if in my information I can trust, you also stopped awhile in Madrid and Lisbon, and in Frankfurt and Rome. There was fun in that, wasn't there, and adventure, exhilaration, and expectation? No more of the provinces for you, no more of the makeshift, or the improvised, the ephemerality that was our legacy here; but heir-apparent were you now to the Fratellinis no less, and to the Schumanns and Renz and Colleans, and Cordona and Lilian Laitzel, not to mention the Hagenbachs,

the Althoffs and the Wirths. O laughter and magic were you to take out into the world – such was the promise made to you too by Asmodeus –, and purity, and beatitude to all who would of vileness be purged – sing Gloria in Exelcis Deo! –; but Stella, Stella, Stella, as silence is to an artist above a million words, and muteness a safeguard against duplicity and deceiving, does not the actual, does not the real, however humble in the hand it may seem, transcend that which is only among the constellations, that which is the unattainable stuff of addled vision, and the melting floss of diabolically-kindled fantasy? Hm?

But tell me now, Stella – I don't know about such things. Tell me about the fun, the adventure, the exhilaration, the expectation. Was it fun, for instance, to fall pregnant in Florence?; or adventure to be aborted in Vienna?; or exhilaration in Copenhagen to be abandoned?; or expectation in a gas-filled room to be resuscitated in The Hague? – Oh Stella!, were it but in me to kil, most assuredly would I have killed that Asmodeus! But though one of the Pagliacci am I, yet Pagliaccio himself am I not. Not for me the mantle of Calvero. Even a mime must live, even though it be that the very thing for which he most truly lives – has lived! – roams adrift in nebulae, galaxies, vaults beyond all reaching.

And so I chose to live, and in the course of things began to look at Diana, or, more truthfully, she at me – you remember Diana who in her acrobatics ever remained earthbound –; and where there was hurt, she brought balm and where there still lingered futile hankering, she did bring to me a here-and-now sensibleness of a kind. Mime was for the public, so did I learn, while pretence, fantasy, make believe, those were for enactment under lights. For the house, however, and for the street, and for the hours before a show and for the hours after, normal speech was there to be, a-b-c-d-language, verbal, oral, articulated, parlance easy and as ordinary as air; as also in the church, as also before the altar, where no theatricals were there to be, nor any charades, but solemnity alone and only solemnity in the exchange of rings, in the response to 'I do'

with another 'I do,' the subsequent nuptials to be followed by a week on the coast, and then a return to work – yes, Stella, to work, not to art, but to work –, with money to be counted and money to be saved and money to be put aside to be expended in time on a cot, a pram, on schooling, the mastery of a trade.

If that was to be vision, that vision too I, in time, adopted. It was safe. It was securely berthed. I had learned the wisdom about the dependability of the actual, the reliability of the real, the benefits of that which lay in the hand, against the perfidy unscrupulous, treacherous, and crushing, of delusion.

And yet.

And yet.

Stella.

When you appeared again tonight, a Eurydice out of Hades . . .

I was ready the very sharpness and faultlessness of my eyesight to deny, as also my every sense, my every sensibility.

Not you was it – was it? – up there, up high, descending from the gods? No, surely, Stella, Alceste, Celeste, no, not you. What I saw could surely have been nothing more than the mere play of an over-wrought, over-ripe emotion to a fever brought at the end of a performance; surely, the capricious flight of memory suddenly gone wild must it have been; the most simple of things was it – was it not?, an identity mistaken, a look-alike, another Stella, though not my Stella; rather a Jane, perhaps, an Amelia, a Mary or a Josephine with the hundreds come, like those hundreds come every day to see a show and laugh and applaud and titillate and marvel at Hercule and Atlas, and giggle at Virginia Virago, and rise with a thrill in their crotch at every vault and leap and mid-air somersault of Hero Leotard, up there, high up there, high, high, a whisker from the dome where, once, you, Stella, you, so full with glory, so naturally belonged. Surely . . .

But no.

No!

Though I deal in illusions, an illusion, Stella, that it was not. Thinner were you – are you! – and more drawn, a jot more severe perhaps, experience the sculpting chisel, and so out of place there, up there, that when I glimpsed you during the troupe's final bows, you were the only one, I swear, who, while I remember you in no other garb but that of laughter, you were the only one up there who did not for the merest blinking as much as smile. – So, if not to laugh, Stella, and if not at least to smile, Stella, what was it then that brought you? The call to relive the days of your triumph, perhaps, however modest the company that afforded them to you? To revisit, if only from a distance, your past but now-long-abandoned friends? Or, dare I believe, Stella, dare I, if only for the duration of a breath, that it was to me you thought to return, even to me, once that bumbling tongue-tied Punch, Punchinello, Pantaloon, Pantaleone who dredged up from his soul the dare-or-be-damned audacity to confide, confess his love, only to have his nose tweaked again, his cap pulled over his eyes, his grease-paint and chalk smudged by finger-tips seeking play and even as those lips, yours, Stella, yours, across which no word ever passed, made ready to laugh?

Stella? Dare I believe? Dare I?

Hm?

If, through Diana, so totally tellurian, so wholly earth-bound, house-and-home-and-child-aspiring Diana, I had finally learnt the untrammelled use of daily speech, in that instant of obeisance to the gods, I became there the knock-kneed adolescent again, became an adenoidal stammerer rooted in indecision once more, ready nonetheless to scale all barriers towards you, but held in place by propriety's bonds; impelled, too, was I to obliterate every past thought, past recrimination, and past reproach attendant upon your flight, even while reason dictated that you, instead, should I from all memory have obliterated; But tossed – my very soul from devil to devil tossed, a plaything for each of Satan's spawn become, Sheol itself opening before me and Lucifer laughing whether or not

across the barriers of propriety I took the leap —, tossed, I paused, I turned away, I turned back, turned away again, yet turned back once more.

A blur were all the others now, the women, the children, the men who had come to be titillated and to laugh. Colour merged into colour as down the steps they descended, shadow melted into shadow, form into form, while breath was there consumed by breath, and scent by scent, and voice by voice. Only you did I truly see; and could you but speak, only you would I have heard; while, at that moment, your own breath, your own scent, your own form, and, more than these, the black you wore transcended all. But why black? At a circus: why black? Were you in mourning? For yourself? For the child that might have been and now was not? For the life you here orphaned through your leaving?

Stella?

If, in that moment, it was consolation that you sought, I was ready to console; if acceptance, I was ready to accept; while if to return was your intent, to welcome your return would have been both Jupiter's and this simple humble Harlequin's chiefest joy. Stella. Columbine Columbine so sad. Spent Columbine. Instead of leaving, why didn't you put your Pierrot to the test? Hm?

And, Stella, why didn't you pause when, following your steps, I ran after you? Didn't you see me? Didn't you hear me? I did call, I did call out.

'Stella!', I called.

And 'Stella!', again, and yet again.

But through the gates you flew, across the lawns, aboard a bus, within a crush, within a tide enclosed. And through that crush I weaved my way, and faster than the tide itself did I press on. Sweat gathered on my grease-paint; paste clung to my brow, curdling the chalk that had been there; my blouse in growing dampness in turn clung to my back; while close behind, the breaths of Diana and of the Brothers Triton and of the midget Thumbkin lapped hot, lapped worriedly, lapped mystified down my neck.

'Carlo!' I heard Diana cry. 'What the devil has possessed you?!

'Carlo!' Hercule and Atlas shouted after her, 'He's gone mad, he has! Stark mad!'

And 'Carlo!' echoed Thumbkin, trying to keep pace on his miniature legs. 'What's the matter? Lost a fortune or something?'

Still after you did I hurtle, Stella, tripping over feet, over groundposts, over ropes.

'Stella!' I called yet again, trying to reach you once more. 'Pull the cord, my star! Stop the bus, my radiance! For me, let it pause, my light! For me, for what might yet be us, let it wait!'

Night's wind carried my voice. The trees shook with it, the scarves of children fluttered and flapped; the great tent itself, as if in a cyclone, ballooned and palpitated and pitched. But you might as well not have heard. Your bus drew away, receded, dissolved into blackness, your face an after-image in the night after which I ran and for which I reached out and lunged and plunged, that, as in times past, I might catch and grasp and be permitted yet once again to hold; but only upon the blackness itself did my fingers close as also upon the mist, upon illusion, upon unvanquishable void.

And then they caught up with me and led me away. Diana held my arm, the Tritons my shoulders, Thumbkin the hem of my blouse. And back at the tent, they all gathered about, Virginia Virago, too, who laid a hand upon my brow, and Hero Leotard who poured me a brandy, and Leo Leondas who forced some other rank and foul concoction between my lips, saying, 'If this doesn't restore him to normal, nothing will.'

But, normal again, Stella, I cannot be. For, knowing that you are back, I am damned, and for wanting you again, I am doubly damned. For I shall wait for you, Stella. I shall wait; I shall at each performance play to the gods and scour the rows; I shall flit from entrance to entrance, and, even in the arena, mime as only a mime can mime for your eventual return. And though in bondage am I now, yet shall I seek from it to be

liberated to enter yet another, far more willing, far more splendid, far more beautiful; the bondage of duty shall I exchange with the highest exultation for the bondage of love; the bondage of words for the bondage transcending words; and the bondage of the earth-bound for that which would rise, would spiral, would soar, mightily, headily, exquisitely unto the heights.

I shall wait, then, Stella, I shall wait. But you, Stella, the last laugh on Asmodeus, will you return and dare once more to fly? Will you dare, dare yet again to scale the loftiest wire, there where in sequin and in gold your happiness and your fulfilment, your riches and your fame most surely ride, and on that tightrope dare yet again to execute your pirouettes and arabesques, as before causing children to gape and grown-ups to gasp, rendering them pure, rendering them cleansed, rendering them uplifted and of every calumny purged, myself not down below this time praying for you to fall – oh no, not any more –, but up there, up there with you, a whisper from the dome, from Elysium a breath, up there, up high, close to the stars and the galaxies and the constellations, there where the treachery of words is a transgression unknown, where muteness is a blessing and the silence of a mime a treasure sanctified, and where all is attainment and all is exaltation, and all is perfection and beatitude and light.

Stella.

Will you return?

Return and, through me, be redeemed?

And dare once more to climb?

And dare to rise?

And dare towards the arms that would offer redemption, offer love, would offer ecstasy and sanctity, to fly?

Dare you? Stella?

Dare you?

Stella?

Stella?

Hm?