TO MY MOTHER.

SLEEPING BEAUTY

A CANTATA

IN A PROLOGUE AND FOUR SCENES

POEM BY

FRANCIS HUEFFER

MUSIC BY

FREDERIC H. COWEN.

Composed expressly for the Birmingham Festival, August, 1885.

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SLEEPING BEAUTY.

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

THE	PRINCES	3	•••	•••	•••	•••	•••	Soprano.
THE	Wicked	Fay	•••	•••	•••	•••	•••	Contralto.
THE	PRINCE	•••	•••	•••	•••	•••	•••	Tenor.
THE	King	•••	•••	•••	•••	•••	•••	Baritone.

CHORUS OF FAYS, COURTIERS, &c.

PROLOGUE.

Chorus.

A mighty king there lived in days of yore, Childless for many a year, until at last, When hope of heir or heiress long seemed past His queen to him a queenly daughter bore. Great is his joy, he calls a gay carouse, The guests are gathered and the torches lighted, And to the christening chamber are invited Twelve fays, the guardians of his ancient house. Silent and slim, into the hall they glide, A spinning-wheel with golden flax they bring; Each breath is held, as by the cradle's side They weave their thread, and thus alternate sing:

The Fays.

"Draw the thread, and weave the woof, For the little child's behoof: Future, dark to human eyes, Openly before us lies; As we will and as we give, Happy shall the maiden live; Draw the thread and weave the woof, For the little child's behoof.

[Severally.]
We give thee beauty, we give thee power,
And maiden honour—a richer dower;
And happy years, and that happiest hour
When to a tender, loving heart,
Another love beats counterpart."

Chorus (Male).

But suddenly a tremor shakes the hall
As with an earthquake; open flies the door,
And clad in sable garment, on the floor
A woman's form is seen, majestic, tall.
She parts the throng, she stands among the
fays,
As the eclipsed moon amidst the stars,
Then drawing nigh, where nought her steps

The Wicked Fay.

And bending o'er the cradle side, she says-

To the feast I come unbidden,
Blessings I have none to tell;
For my gift, I bring a warning,
Infant maiden, heed it well.
From the gold of the flaxen reel
Threads of bliss have been spun to thee,
By the whirl of the spinning wheel,
Cruel grief shall be done to thee,
Thy fate I descry;
"Ere the buds of thy youth are blown,
Ere a score of thy years have flown
Thou shalt prick thy hand, thou shalt die."

Chorus (Male).

Our curse on thee, malignant fay! Oh presage Of boding ill—who can assist, who give Us hope of rescue?

The Fays.

Peace! We bear a message
Of joy. One gift remains, the maid shall live!
Though the spell and its potent sway
Close her eyes, and in slumber enshroud her,
Yet shall there dawn a day
When a young voice, stronger and louder
Than spell of witchcraft, rings through the silent
years,

When she wakes, when she hears.

TRIO (Soprano, Tenor, and Bass) & CHORUS. Thus sing the fays: and as the autumn wind Sways to and fro the trees it passes o'er, They quit the chamber and are seen no more, Leaving a throb of anxious hearts behind.

TENOR SOLO, AND ORCHESTRAL INTERLUDE.

[Maidenhood and dreams of Love.]

But she, around whose cradle thus the Fates Warring with divers aim, defiant stood, From childhood ripens into maidenhood, Unconscious of the peril that awaits Her onward footsteps; thus the budding rose Stands fearless of the autumn wind that blows, And dreams of spring and love, and reddening glows.

SCENE I.

A Hall in the King's Palace. A gay throng of ladies, lords and knights, some dancing, others looking on.

Chorus.

At dawn of day,
On the first of May,
Ere the heat of noon has scorched the wakening flowers,

Here a festive throng,
With dance and song,
Are we met to while away the morning hours.

Chorus.

[Enter King and Princess.

Fairest Princess,

Let our song acclaim thee!

Daughter of our King,

Beauty's Queen we name thee.

The King.

Vassals and lieges, lords and ladies all,
Forsake the dance, and to our royal word
Now lend your ear. The cloud that overshadowed

For twenty years the path of our fair child, Has vanished in the sundawn of this day.

The Princess.

A cloud? What cloud, dear father? Nay, my life

Has been a path of ceaseless light, illumined By love as strong as your own strength, as tender

As that bequeathed me by the mother whom, Alas! I knew not.

The King.

Child, ask me no more,
Whate'er the danger has been, it is past;
Ere night the fatal limit of its sway
Will be completed. That brief interval
Be spent in festive mirth. Ho, music, sound!
Ye lieges, join your voices with your king's:
Long live the Princess! to the Princess hail!

Chorus.

Long live the daughter of our king! Hail! hail!

The King.

[To Princess.]
Pure as thy heart, bright as the sky above,
As thine own budding beauty fair to see,
Guarded and guided by the hand of love,
Such he thy life, such hast thou been to mc.

Chorus.

Pure as thy heart, bright as the sky above, As thine own budding beauty fair to see, Guarded and guided by the hand of love, Such was thy past, such shall thy future bc.

The dance is resumed. During the following, the Princess wanders dreamily from the banqueting-hall, and enters a large gallery at the further end of which is a flight of narrow steps. The sound of the dance-music grows fainter.

The Princess.

My heart is full to overflowing; hope
Of bliss untold, the shadow of a danger
Long threatening, though averted, wield
within me
Alternate sway. I fain would be alone.

The Princess.

[Alone.

Whither away my heart?
Tell me, whither thou leadest,
What does thy throbbing impart;
Is it hopeful or fearful thou art,
Is it promise, or warning thou heedest?

Hidden the future lies:
But see! from the clouds among,
Fantastic forms seem to rise,
And the lustre of luminous eyes,
And the distant voice of a song.

Let us listen, my heart, to that voice, Let us float on its musical tide, Whether bidden to mourn or rejoice We ask not, we have no choice; Let us follow, my heart, let us glide.

[She passes quickly along the gallery and ascends the staircase; the dance music growing more and more distant as she proceeds.

SCENE II.

A turret chamber. The wicked Fay, disguised as an ancient crone, is seated at a spinning wheel. To her enter the Princess; as she shuts the door behind her, the dance music dies away altogether.

The Princess.

[Hesitatingly.

Forgive me, mother, for disturbing thus
Your quiet refuge; how I came, and why,
I cannot tell. I thought I was obeying
A voice which seemed to draw me to this
chamber
Whither my feet had never strayed.

The Wicked Fay.

Be welcome Fair Princess, to my solitude. Sit near me, And watch me while I turn my wheel.

The Princess.

What wheel

Is this? I never saw its like.

The Wicked Fay.

It is

A spinning wheel. Your father loves it not, And has forbid its use; and yet that use Is manifold. Hush! listen while I sing.

As I sit at my spinning wheel,
Strange dreams come to me; and I feel
That the air with visions is rife,
And the folds of time are unfurled,
And the rolling wheel is the world,
And each single thread is a life.
Then alas! for the maid at whose birth
A jealous fay stood by.
"Ere the buds of her youth are blown,
Ere a score of her years have flown,
She must wither and droop on the earth;
She must die!"

For lo! Fate sits at the wheel,
And she draws the skein from the reel,
And she sings with bated breath.
She tangles the threads of the past,
And unravels and tears them at last;
And the touch of her hand is death.
Then alas! for the maid, &c.

The Princess.

[Dreamily repeating the burden of the song.
"Ere the buds of her youth are blown,
Ere a score of her years have flown,
She must wither and droop on the earth;
She must die!"

[Recovering herself with sudden impulse. Am I that maid, and must I die? Your words Seem full of evil boding. You say my father Forbade the use of that ill-omened wheel. Let me obey his wise behest, let me Begone.

[She rushes to the door; as she opens it, the dance music is heard again.

The Wicked Fay.

[Drawing her to the wheel; in a gentle voice.

Fear nothing, fairest maid; the wheel
Can give no hurt. See, you may touch the flax
Thus with your finger-tip. It is as soft
As any wool.

The Princess.

I tremble as I yield.

[As the Princess stretches out her hand, the Fay gives a sudden twist to the wheel; the spindle pricks the finger of the Princess, who falls back in a swoon. At the same moment the dance music stops. Long silence.

The Wicked Fay.

At last! at last! Thus have I wrought my vengeance.

INCANTATION.

The Wicked Fay and Chorus (Male).

[She lifts her arms and describes magic circles in the air.

Spring from the earth red roses, Grow to a mighty wall, Circle round bower and hall, And gardens and blossoming closes. If a mortal your thickets would part, Point your harsh thorns at his heart, Let his life-blood flow. Let him die! Guard, my sleepers, ye roses! Helpless here shall they lie Till the folds of time are unfurled, And the latter days of the world Are engulfed by eternity.

Chorus-(Male).

"Ere the buds of her youth are blown, Ere a score of her years have flown, She must wither and droop on the earth; She must die!"

CHORAL INTERLUDE.

Sleep, sleep, sleep!
Sleep in bower and hall,
Only that on the wall
The spider draws her fantastic web,
Weaving strange shapes, as the years go by,
Slowly, drowsily,
And the tide of life is at ebb.

Sleep, sleep, sleep!
Who would his vigil keep,
When the king reclines on his throne,
And the lady sleeps in her bower,
And the lover dreams of the hour
Which the clock has forgotten to sound;
When the tender nightingale's moan
Is hushed in the flowerful closes,
And the heavy odour of roses
Lies like a mist on all around.

Fitful in long-drawn sighs
The west wind sweeps through the hall,
Fanning the sleepers there,
Or lifting a lock of hair,
And the spider's web on the wall;
Then faints on the somnolent air,
And dies.

The spells of witchcraft which enthrall Each sleeper in that desolate hall, Who can break them? Say, who can lift the deathly blight That covers king, and lord and knight, To give them back to life and light, And awake them?

[As if in answer to the last question, a horn signal is heard, at first from a distance, but growing louder and louder.

SCENE III.

Hall of the castle as in the opening scene. The King and his courtiers asleep. Enter the Prince, with drawn sword.

The Prince.

Light, light at last! the victory is won!
Through bush and briar, through a wall of roses,

Towering heaven high, this trusty blade has cut

Its arduous way and mine. This is the castle,

This the enchanted hall, of which on winter

Our country folk tell many a tale—and here I see the King reclining on his throne,

With sleeping courtiers round him. Wake, ye sleepers!

Arise! The day of your deliverance is
At hand. They stir not. Let them lie. What is
To me their sleep or waking? I must

Onward to reach that ultimate goal of love Prefigured in my dreams—away! away!

[He leaves by the door opening into the gallery, and his horn signal grows fainter and fainter as he proceeds towards the turret chamber.

SCENE IV.

A turret chamber as in Scene II. On a couch, strewn with rose leaves, lies the Princess askep.

The Prince.

Where am I? Whose this chamber dimly lighted,

Which at its threshold strikes me with a tremor

As if my foot trod holy ground? Behold The goddess of this sanctuary, a maid—and dead?

Ah, no! she lives, she dreams. Dare I disturb

That heaven of dreams by earthly sound;

The goddess of this place, the Sleeping Beauty? Nay, rather let me worship at her shrine.

Kneeling before thee, worshipping wholly,
All that my dreams had foreshadowed of
thee

Stands revealed to my sense, and thy lowly Chamber is as a temple to me.

And through the gloom of the curtained twilight Lo! a flame sheds its tremulous sheen,

And my soul divines it is thy light,

Light of thine eyes which mine eyes have not seen;

Never have seen, but they now shall behold it,

Bask in its splendour with measureless bliss;

Yield thy form to my arms that enfold it, Yield thy mouth to my life-giving kiss.

[As he kisses her, the dance-music begins again at the bar where it had left off in Scene I.

The Princess.

[Half awake.

I hear your call, I haste to join the dance— But where am I? and who are you, fair stranger, Who, bidden to my birthday feast, have found

Alone, asleep?

The Prince.

Lady, your sleep has been
The work of witchcraft. Here, in magic
slumber,

You lay a hundred years; until this sword Opened a passage through a wall of thorns And blooming briars of roses; until these lips

In longing quest of love's fair guerdon, lit Upon that reddest rose, your mouth.

The Princess.

Art thou

The champion for whose coming, in my dreams,

I longed and waited? Hail to thee, my

Hail my deliverer. Say, what can I give, What service tender to requite such prowess, Such conquering faith.

The Prince.

It was to win love's prize, Thy love's, fair Princess, that I came and conquered, Leaving my father's realm.

The Princess.

To thee my heart Was bound ere ever I beheld thy face, By thee recalled to being, I am thine!

Both.

Through dangers surrounding our path in threatening array,

Through doubt and through fear, Great love has guided our steps, has lighted our way,

It lives, it is here.

The Princess.

In these eyes which illumine mine eyes with a mirage of bliss,

The Prince.

In these hands, on these tremulous lips which I grasp, which I kiss.

The Princess.

Its flame has enkindled our hearts with unquenchable fire,

The Prince.

Its call is as voices of wind, and its breath is desire.

Both.

It beckons, it leads to a haven of infinite rest, To a goal, to a home;

We ask not whither; we follow its potent behest,

We hasten, we come.

Chorus (as in Scens I.).

At dawn of day, On the first of May,

Ere the heat of noon has scorched the wakening flowers,

Here a festive throng, With dance and song,

Are we met to while away the morning hours.

THE END.

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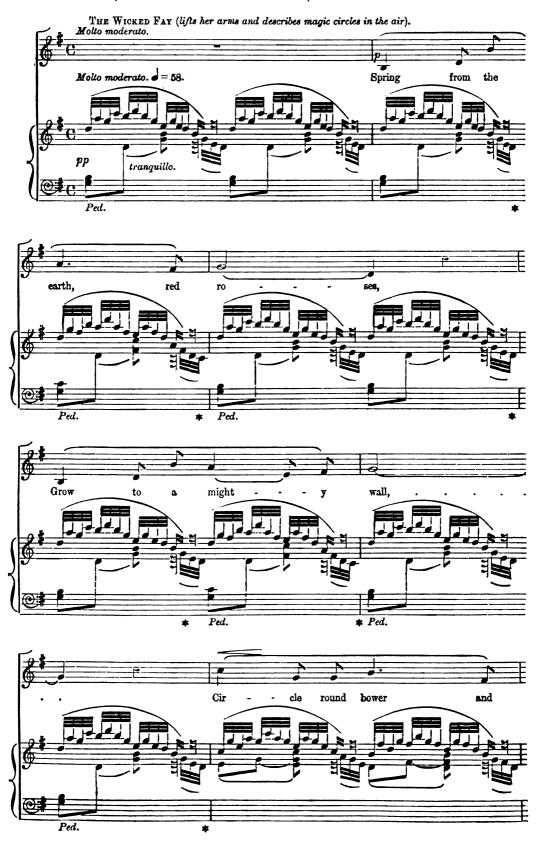




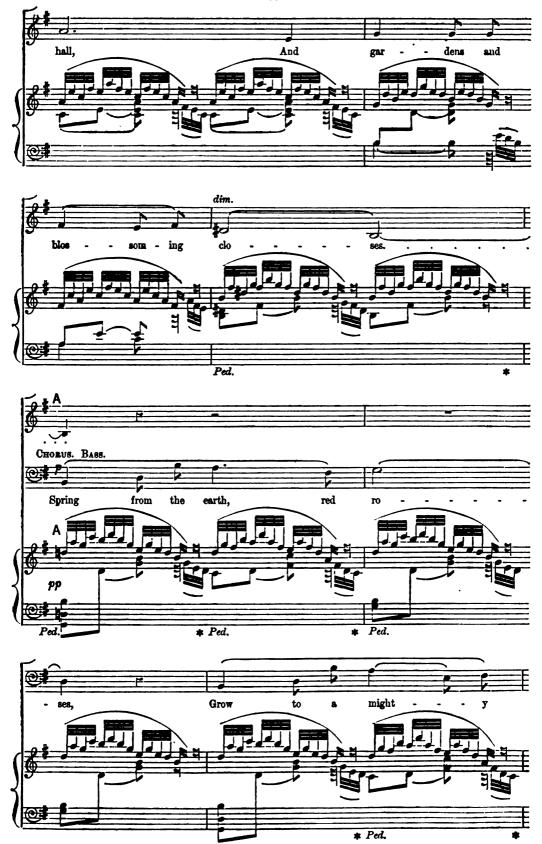
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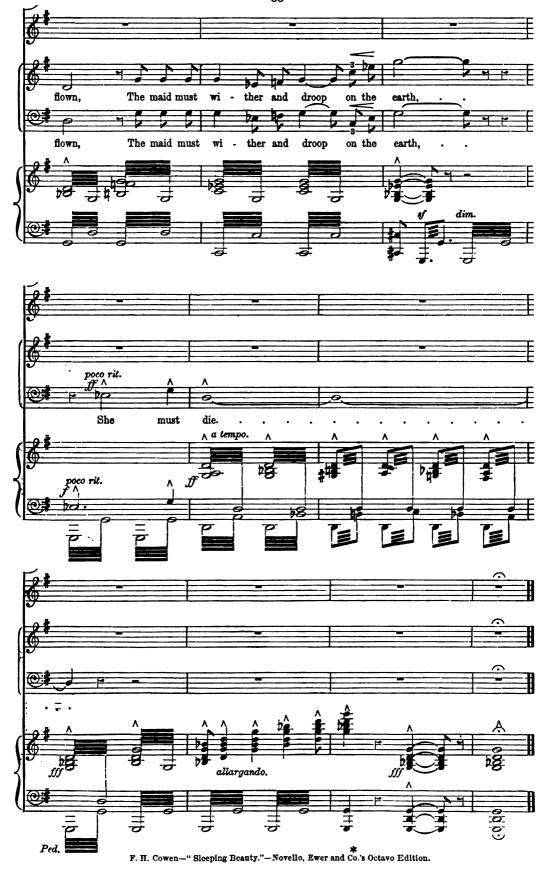
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No. 9. Scena (The Prince).—"LIGHT, LIGHT AT LAST."





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SCENE IV .- A Turret-chamber as in Scene II. On a couch strewn with rose leaves, lies the Princess asleep.



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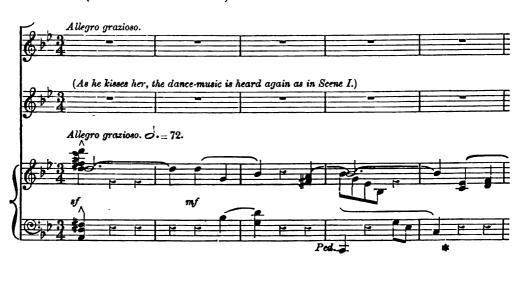
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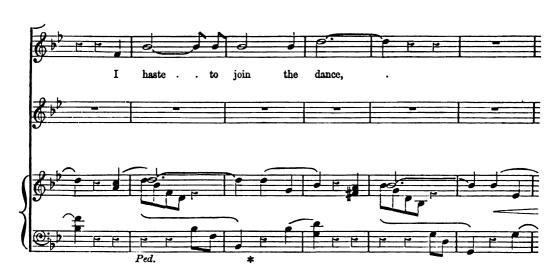
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