

William Plomer (1903-73)

7 *The Naiad of Ostend: or, a Fatal Passion*

[In vol. I, chap. xiv, of *What I Remember* (1887), by Thomas Adolphus Trollope, the brother of the novelist, there is an account of life at Ostend during the bathing season of 1835. He records some of the gossip and scandals and mentions some of the more conspicuous characters—Captain Smithett, for example, who commanded a Channel boat called the *Arrow*, was dashing, handsome and an immense favourite with the smart set at Ostend. Smithett showed him one day an anonymous billet-doux which he had received, together with a latchkey. The letter had been written by the very pretty wife of a Belgian banker, and began: ‘*O toi, qui commandes la Flèche, tu peux aussi commander les cœurs.*’

The season, says Trollope, was a very amusing one, and he had found himself in what he calls ‘a queer and not very edifying society, exceedingly strange, and somewhat bewildering to a young man fresh from Oxford who was making his first acquaintance with Continental ways and manners. All the married couples seemed to be continually dancing the figure of *chassée-croisez.*’

Into this evidently lively little world there came a mother and daughter, and this is how Trollope describes them: ‘We made acquaintance at Paris with a Mrs Mackintosh and her daughter, very charming Scottish people. Mrs Mackintosh was a widow, and Margaret was her only child. She was an extremely handsome girl, nineteen years of age, and as magnificent a specimen of young womanhood as can be conceived. “More than common tall”, she showed in her whole person the development of a Juno, enchanced by the vigour, elasticity and blooming health of a Diana. She and her mother came to Ostend for the bathing season. Margaret was a great swimmer; and her delight was to pass nearly the whole of these hot July days in the water. Twice, or even thrice, every day she would return to her favourite element. And soon she began to complain of lassitude, and to lose her appetite and the splendour of her complexion. Oh! it was the heat, which really only the constant stimulus of her bathe and swim could render tolerable. She was warned that excess in bathing, especially in salt water, may sometimes be as dangerous as any other excess, but the young naiad, who had never in her life needed to pay heed to any medical word or warning, would not believe, or would not heed. And before the September was over we followed poor Margaret Mackintosh to the little Ostend cemetery, killed by over-bathing as if she had held her head under water! This sad tragedy brought to a gloomy end a season which had been, if not a very profitable, a very amusing one.’

It is on this passage that the following ballad is based.]

1. *The Arrival*

Ostend, eighteen thirty-five—
Don't you know the reason
For the crowds along the front?
It's the bathing season!

Kursaal windows flashing bright, 5
Bands and fountains busy,
Pigeon-shooting, valsing, loo—
Enough to turn you dizzy.

Such a press of elegance,
Fribbles, belles and smarties, 10
Feathered heads and painted fans,
Balls and picnic parties.

Such a flash of carriage-wheels,
Seas of light to swim in,
Sparkling water, sparkling wine, 15
Sparkling eyes of women.

Nightly, nightly now the moon
Lights the dreaming ocean,
And at noon towards it flows
The muslin tide of fashion. 20

Into this amusing world
By the dancing-water
Enter Mrs Mackintosh
And Margaret, her daughter.

Fresh from Paris, full of charm, 25
The widow sports a bonnet
Envied for the tartan bows
And ears of corn upon it.

Margaret is just nineteen,
Tall as any goddess— 30
Dian in that springy step,
Juno in that bodice.

Belgians marvel at her bloom,

Flâneurs at her figure—
Highland mists for rosy cheeks, 35
Breakfast oats for vigour.

‘Mother, mother, may I bathe?’
‘Yes, my darling daughter!
See the gaily striped machines
Drawn up to the water.’ 40

‘Mother, mother, may I bathe?’
‘*Again*, my darling daughter?’
‘Ostend is so very hot,
It’s heaven in the water.’

‘Mother, mother, may I bathe?’ 45
‘Meg, my darling daughter,
I can’t think where you get it from,
This passion for the water.’

2. *The Comment*

‘Your daughter seems to adore
Above all things the sea— 50
She *shuns* the land, Madame.’
‘Monsieur, you’re telling me!’

‘Three times a day she bathes,
She finds Ostend so hot.’
‘Madame, a dip is good; 55
Excess, I fear, is not.’

‘Indeed, I sometimes fear
Some secret strange allure,
And yet I know the sea
Is above all things pure; 60

‘The sea’s her element,
She loves to feel aloof.’
‘Ah, but a Mackintosh
Should be more waterproof.’

3. *Social Evenings*

- Fashionables delight in
 Evenings at the Fauches',
Pleasant English visitors
 Attentive on the couches; 65
- Madame B., in yellow silk,
 Fingering the spinet, 70
Mary Fauche, the Consul's wife,
 Singing like a linnet.
- Here and there an *œillade*,
 A look of *carpe diem*—
'Taste these sweets, they're tempting,
 Just to please me, try 'em!' 75
- Ripe and burning August moon
 Over midnight ocean—
Neptune's manly bosom heaves
 With a deep emotion. 80
- 'Mother, mother, may I swim?'
 'What, *at night*, my daughter?
The bathing-women have gone home,
 There's *no one* in the water!'
- Now the nights are dry and warm, 85
 And the moon grows bigger,
All the married couples dance
 The *chassée-croisez* figure.
- Madame L., the banker's wife,
 Writes to Captain Smithett, 90
Sending him a *billet-doux*
 And a latchkey with it—
- '*Toi qui commandes la Flèche*
 Peux commander les cœurs— '

History will not relate
How he answers her. 95

Colonel Dickson likes to give
Dinner parties often;
When he looks at Margaret
His martial features soften. 100

Baron Melfort makes himself
Sweet as sugar candy,
But she never turns a glance
On that randy dandy.

Margaret turns her head away, 105
Feeling bored and pestered,
Turns her lovely sea-green eyes
Outward, seaward, westward.

4. *The Reproach*

'Margaret, I wish to find
A husband for my daughter, 110
But ever since we came you seem
Quite wedded to the water.

'The Baron with his quizzing-glass
And wealthy Colonel Dickson
Must think you not a naiad but 115
Some kind of water-vixen;

'Each is looking for a wife,
But neither man has got a
Wish to join his fortunes with
A two-legged female otter. 120

'Come out, my girl, and dry yourself,
And let them see your figure,
Come out before your skin gets burnt
As black as any nigger!'

'Mother, mother, I must bathe! 125
Your own unruly daughter
Has found the truest, truest bliss
Awaits her in the water.'

5. *Ecstasy*

Neptune loves the breast-stroke
As Margaret loves the sea, 130
And now it is his best joke
To keep her from her tea;

While mother bakes in dudgeon
Beneath the hot sea-wall,
And sees her do the trudgen, 135
And sees her do the crawl,

Neptune smoothes each contour,
Each long elastic leg,
With not a soul *à l'entour*
Embraces blooming Meg; 140

As supple as a porpoise
She welcomes his advances—
Ah, Neptune, *habeas corpus* !
The gods have all the chances.

6. *The Decline*

August grows older, 145
Thunder in the air,
The pace grows slower
In this gay Ostend,
And tarnished summer
Seems to declare 150
That light abandon
Meets a heavy end.

Parasols are folded,

Awnings fade,
Fans still flutter 155
In the afternoon shade,
They're eating ices
In the Royal Arcade,
Soon it will be time for
Bills to be paid. 160

*'Madame! et comment
Se porte-t-elle
Meess Marguerite?
D'une taille si belle!'*

'Thank you, she's not 165
Herself, I'm afraid-
Even upon her
This heat must tell;
She has eaten nothing
Since Saturday night, 170
And seems so languid-
It can't be right-
I'm quite alarmed-
Uncommon pallor-
I do protest she 175
Looks quite yaller.'

7. *The End*

'Mother, mother, one more bathe!
'Is it wise, my daughter?
I vow you owe this lassitude
To long hours in the water. 180

'That is what the doctor thinks;
Now wouldn't it be wiser
To listen to the counsel of
Your medical adviser?

'You say the sea alone can cool 185
This low and wasting fever,

But truly, truly Neptune is
Like all men, a deceiver.'

Margaret gave her mother then
A look that might appal, 190
And with a last low moan she turned
Her face toward the wall-
And that was all.

8. *The Epitaph*

Here lies the Naiad of Ostend
Who swam to an untimely end, 195
But now with her the Cherubim
Delight in Seas of Grace to swim;
O happy Mackintosh, to share
That everlasting *bain de mer!*

(From *Collected Poems*. London, 1960)