



SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

Description of the Darley home in Connemara, which contained the famous Velasquez; of Sybil Darley and her mother, who owned the picture suggesting the personality of her husband whom she supposed to be dead; of young Hugh and the storm; arrival of the storm-beaten hunter, the Earl of Sternholt, connoisseur in pictures; interested in the Velasquez, he offers to send for a famous Italian expert, Pallacio, who at first pronounced the picture a copy.

The picture suddenly disappears. Pallacio, on his way back, is arrested, but innocent. Mrs. Darley, overcome with grief, tells Sybil the story of her husband's life, how the picture came, and how he disappeared. Hugh Limner leaves Connemara. He goes to London to study medicine. In an old art shop he buys cheap a Max Weenix canvas. He views an operation on a man's heart and is repelled by the dissecting room. His mother decides that he cannot study medicine.

Hugh enters as assistant in the shop of Pallacio and is sent up country to buy bargain pictures at an auction. In a pawnshop of a little town he stumbles across what he recognizes as an early Gainsborough, which he buys for ten pounds. Pallacio refuses to take it. Hugh pays him a hundred and leaves his employ. The picture is sent to Christie's in Bond Street and sold by auction for 6,650 guineas. Hugh's fortune and reputation as a dealer are made. He becomes an expert. In a book of Turner's poems he finds a letter from Turner to Ruskin concerning a Turner masterpiece since lost to the world. He determines to find the Turner.

He rents the cottage in which Turner painted the masterpiece and discovers the painting secreted under the floor. Sybil arrives. Also Pallacio.

CHAPTER XIII.

Plot and Counterplot.

HUGH'S reverie was disturbed by a sharp knock at the door. Before he could cry "come in," the door was flung open in a hurry, and he heard a quick step—a step he thought he knew—cross the room. His face was to the picture, and the high back of his chair to the door. It was plain that he was not seen by his visitor, who stopped short just behind his chair, and growled a kind of reluctant admiration for the Turner. Hugh knew who spoke, but he kept quite still.

"Yes," the deep voice said, apostrophising the dead painter, "you beat us all into fits, old and new. Nobody but God Himself could paint a better landscape. Yet there are fools who say any of the second-class old Italian fogies could do better work than you. They'll buy any old rubbish that's a couple of hundred years old, and let the painters of their day, who will be the old masters later on, die of starvation."

Hugh shifted his chair half-way round and faced the newcomer. A stout, well-built young fellow, with a shock of tousled fair hair and blue eyes, wonderfully bright and keen.

"Halloa, Browne," he cried, "grumbling again."

In no way surprised or abashed Browne stretched out a strong capable hand, with that quick, warm clasp which is about the best test of an honest man.

"Why shouldn't I grumble if I want to?" he asked, with a grin. "The man who can paint and cannot sell is entitled at least to growl."

"Well, grumble away, old man, I'll listen."

"No, I don't want to grumble any more. I came to see you about something particular." The big bluff man suddenly abashed as a schoolboy caught in some scrape, blushing and stammering. "I say, Limner," he went on, abruptly, "you've been very good to me, you're the only one who has given me a helping hand or word. If it weren't for you I would have gone right under. Now you won't be angry if I ask you as man to man a

blunt question. I don't mean to be rude."

"Fire away," said Limner.

"Are you in love with Ella Pallacio?"

"Great heavens! man, certainly not."

"Is she in love with you?"

"Most certainly not. Look here, old chap, I won't pretend I don't know what you are driving at. Ella and I have been old friends and good friends. We are still. I'll be quite frank with you. There may have been now and again between us a spice of mock love-making, which, I suppose, every fellow is tempted to do with a handsome woman when he gets the chance. But she knew it was play-acting as well as I did. I admire her beauty, of course. What man with eyes in his head could fail to do that? But there was never any thought of love between us."

Browne drew a deep breath of relief, like a man who hears good news he hardly expected to hear, and again shook Limner's hand warmly.

"That's a load off my mind," he said, with a quick shrug of his broad shoulders, as if he were casting off a burden. "Ella is the one and only girl in the world for me. Where's the tobacco? I must smoke or I'll have to break something."

For five minutes they puffed in silence. But there was companionship in the puffs—Browne's fast and eager; Hugh's slow and meditative.

It was Limner who spoke first. "I don't think the old man will like it, Browne. He fancies he is not long for this world, and wants money for his daughter. I don't half blame him."

"Nor I," agreed Browne. "Ella should marry an emperor and a Croesus combined, but all the same I want her to marry a poor devil of an unappreciated painter. I wish I could come by a little money, Limner. I'd go on the high roads in the old days."

"I have more than I know what to do with," Limner answered, tentatively. "It seems a bit hard that the man who only knows a good picture should make money, and the man who can paint a good picture should want it. Your turn will come, old chap, I've often told you that. Meanwhile, if you will let me be your banker."

BROWNE laid a sudden grip on his arm. "Don't, old chap, you know I cannot stand it. A loan which there is no chance of paying is an alms. You have bought my pictures, which no one else would look at."

"A good speculation, old boy," said Hugh. "All in the way of my trade."

"I don't know about that."

"You do know about that, you know that the pictures are worth more than I paid for them. Mock modesty doesn't suit you. You know as well as I that you can paint."

"What's the good of painting when I cannot sell?"

"Why not?"

"I don't know 'why,' but the fact is there. I'm not in the fashion, I suppose, neither very old nor very new. I don't paint a landscape with a brown tree in the middle foreground. I don't paint a sweetly pretty picture with a small child and a big dog and a bundle of flowers. I want to take my own line, and dealers won't have it. The successful painter has to walk on the paths and keep off the grass."

"Cheer up, your turn will come."

Every man gets jostled that tries to shove through the crowd. Painters, like poets, must wait their time."

"Chatterton, for example," growled Browne. "His fate was not particularly encouraging."

LIMNER looked at him for a moment with a vacant stare, like a man whose mind a sudden thought had captured. Then, much to Browne's surprise, he relaxed into a hearty laugh.

"You're wrong," he said, at last, "quite wrong. Chatterton's career is particularly encouraging to you. If you look at it from a little distance like an impressionist picture and don't go into details. I think I've hit on a plan. You have Chatterton's queer gift for mimicking the masters."

"I don't call it mimicry."

"Call it what you like; you need not be so touchy. I trust your manner will improve with prosperity. Now listen to my plan, if you please."

They talked eagerly for a while. Hugh suggesting, Browne protesting and considering.

"Can I do it?" Browne asked, at length. "You know my work and my capabilities better than I do myself. Can I do it?"

"I believe you can."

"Then I'll try."

"And succeed. Good-bye. Be off with you to Paris and get to work at once. The sooner the thing is done the better. It will be a lesson to the dealers and painters. A lesson they want badly."

Browne left the room as he entered it—in a rush.

Hugh's despondency melted away as he lay back in his chair, "well pleased with his own ingenuity," to puzzle out his plan. "If it works," he thought, "and I believe it will work, there is one difficulty smoothed out of the way. Old Pallacio will be satisfied and Sybil will understand."

But he was not so well pleased with himself when he called next day to see Sybil at her new house and was told she had a visitor and did not wish to be disturbed. The visitor's name, he learned, was Ambrose Pallacio.

He would have been less pleased still if he could have broken suddenly in on their talk.

"I don't believe it," Sybil cried, passionately, "and I don't know why you come to tell those things to me."

"I am the girl's father," said Pallacio. The deep underlying affection in his voice gave dignity to his words. "I am old and dying. She is very beautiful, and beauty provokes robbers sooner than thieves. I had hoped to have seen her happily married before I died, but you have come between her and her chance of happiness."

"Did she send you to tell me this?" The petulant words were hardly spoken before she was sorry. "No, no. Forgive me. I did not mean that," she began eagerly, when the anger in the old man's eyes silenced her.

He struggled fiercely with his rage before he could speak.

"She send me!" he growled out, at last. "Send me to ask pity from you who are not fit to tie her shoelace. If the man came crawling back to her on his knees she wouldn't take him now. I come in kindness to warn you, and you won't be warned. So be it. Marry

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