

THE PEARL

DEVOTED TO POLITE LITERATURE, SCIENCE, AND RELIGION.

Vol. I.

HALIFAX, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 23, 1897.

No. 29

From the Forget-me-not.

THE OLD GENTLEMAN'S PENCIL.

BY T. E. WILKS, ESQ.

THE day that witnessed the arrival of Ernest Hartmann in the gay and magnificent city of Florence was as bright without as his bosom was dark within. Ernest was a German by birth, a traveller by habit, and an artist by profession. His master, when he dismissed his pupil, told him that he drew superbly, and coloured better: he quite agreed with the worthy old man, and imagined himself a Claude in landscape, a Salvator Rosa in grouping and imagination, a Vandyke in portraits. Certain it is, that, having with immense labour and trouble painted an altar-piece, representing St. Michael destroying the serpent of evil, which he could not dispose of, it was with infinite grace presented to the pastor of his native village, and forthwith decorated the walls of its time-worn church. This had hitherto been his greatest exploit in painting, but it was with anticipations of complete success, his fertile imagination teeming with visions of present wealth and enjoyment, of evergreen laurels, to great fame, and certain immortality, that he rushed to Italy, to cope with her favoured sons. How amazingly commerce with the world represses the warm imaginings of youth!—it is like the art of the Musselman, who cools his sherbet with snow. Ernest soon found that he was mistaken; that self-conceit did not always betoken real talent: that his best efforts, albeit admired in an obscure German village, were far, very far inferior to the worst of those which he had so vainly imagined he should rival; and that, did he wish to remain in Italy, he must either commence the toilsome task of renewing the study of his profession from its earliest stages, and with all its drudgery, or at once relinquish his beloved art, and seek some other means of procuring a subsistence. After a lengthened consideration, he determined for a brief period to do neither the one nor the other: with palette at his back, he travelled through great part of the country of the vine and the orange: he visited Naples, wondered at Vesuvius, gazed with rapture upon the spreading Bay, and longed to enter into the pleasures of the city without being able to do so. He rambled to Milan, thence to Venice, and lastly, as we have seen, to Florence, where he arrived with a purse exhausted to the drags, a head aching with disappointment and fatigue, a sun blazing like some huge furnace above him, a scene like fairy land around him, and a prospect of having nothing to eat before him.

Ernest was fain to procure a very obscure lodging in a very wretched part of the suburbs, and here he vegetated rather than lived for several days, until something very much akin to despair visited his bosom, and lurked in his right but downcast eye. Ernest was sitting one morning in deep meditation on a three-legged-stool, contemplating an unfinished picture on his easel, when the door of his chamber suddenly opened, and a respectable looking old gentleman entered. This personage was dressed in black, and he carried in his hand an ebony stick; but, while the wrinkles on his brow told of age, his piercing eye convinced those who gazed on him that, though his body might be weakened by the great conqueror, his mind retained its pristine vigour. Ernest started from his seat, and, having looked with some surprise, begged to know what were his commands.

"Signor Ernest," he began, "I have long watched you struggling towards rank and eminence, and have long regretted the slowness of your progress. Ernest bowed. "I come to congratulate you on the near approach you have at last made to the object of your wishes." Ernest

bowed still lower, and cast an inquisitive glance around the wretched apartment, as though seeking to discover tokens of the good fortune upon which he had been congratulated: nothing, however met his inquiring glance but proofs irrefragable of poverty and neglect. The old gentleman resumed. "I have long been employed in framing a gift worthy of your acceptance, and have at length succeeded. I pray you take this pencil," and he drew from under his cloak an instrument formed of cedar wood, in shape not unlike a common ruler, save that, at one end sharpened to a point, it formed a drawing pencil, and at the other, a small portion of camel's hair constituted a painting brush. "With this inestimable treasure in your possession, it is a task easy of performance to surpass every painter that ever breathed or breathes. Sketch with the pointed end, paint with the other; the design, the execution, the colouring, all will proceed spontaneously, and, guided by your wishes, unrivalled will be your productions, while you, inheriting the fame, and reaping the profit, will merely be the actor of a mechanical motion."

Ernest listened with great astonishment, but still more incredulity, to this strange address, and when it was finished laughed aloud. The old gentleman seemed rather offended. "If you doubt me, if you question the efficacy of the pencil put at once to the test: there is canvass ready on your easel."

"Signor, I thank you," replied Ernest, still smiling; "but, do you think me so silly as to suppose that, did this strangely-formed instrument really possess the qualities you describe, you would so readily give it away?"

"Never heed what my motives may be," answered the old gentleman; "I have told you that I merely desire to witness your advancement; that is a very polite reason to assign, surely, and with it you should be satisfied. I have only one condition to require from you, and that is, that you will never either sell it or give it away. Promise me this, and the pencil is yours."

"Am I awake, or dreaming?" queried Ernest. No, it was not a dream: there sat the old gentleman, his white locks overshadowing a countenance full of some indescribable expression: there lay the means whereby to procure the dearest wishes of his heart—ay, and of every other heart—wealth, and fame, and honours—and around him were the broken walls of a chamber which he might, if he wished, now change for a palace. "It is not a dream," concluded Ernest, "but a very singular reality." He was not long in deciding what to do. "I am in honour bound," he considered, "not to part with this gift, to say nothing of self-interest in retaining it. The only request, therefore, that the donor makes, is one which demands no sacrifice in the compliance." There are very few who would not so have argued—nevertheless, the natural question, "Who is this old gentleman?" suggested itself, and spoke openly in the ensuing remark.

"But, are there no other conditions?" "None, whatever," answered his visitor; "a careful fulfilment of the one I have named is all that I require. Come, Signor Ernest, say at once whether you will accept my gift. I have other business which calls me away; and, remember that this is a matter regarding only your own interest."

"I do accept it, then," cried Ernest eagerly, "and for it return a thousand thanks." He could not say less than a thousand under the circumstances.

"Then, farewell, Signor," said the stranger, rising from the stool, whereon he had without heeding formal rules quietly seated himself. "I wish you every happiness, and doubt not that on some future occasion we shall meet again."

"I heartily trust so, Signor," Ernest replied: he could not say less under the circumstances; nevertheless, it was a great falsehood. However, it pleased the old gentleman perhaps all the better for being a falsehood. Making a polite bow, the latter took his leave, and Ernest, darting to his unfinished painting, eagerly tried the powers of his new acquisition. It was indeed every thing that had been described; figures, foreground, perspective, sky, all sprang from the magic instrument: in less time than it required for his imagination to conceive a single figure, all was completed, the colours dry, the design and effect brilliant and unrivalled.

Imagine a poor briefless barrister, dining on a chop with no wine, suddenly created and gazetted as Lord Chancellor; or an unfortunate Welsh curate, with a small stipend of thirty pounds a year, and a large family of half as many children, suddenly called upon to take possession of that choice piece of church preferment, yept the bishopric of Durham: or picture to yourself a wretched creature of a midshipman, who has seen himself described as such until he begins to doubt whether promotion to him is not an "airy nothing," suddenly called upon to carry "the red flag at the fore;" or suppose any other change equally sudden and equally great, and you will discover something like the feelings of Ernest Hartmann.

Habits and manners may be dissimilar, garments may be differently formed and differently worn, complexions may be unlike, and features may vary; but, in all cases, in all nations, and under all circumstances, the human heart remains similarly constituted. The inhabitants of Florence, like those of London, are guided solely by omnipotent Fashion. Fashion is the sun of poets and painters: when the one writes of Fortune, or the other portrays her, they ought to represent her with a silly expression of countenance, and place in her hand a rattle, for Fashion to all the rest of the world is Fortune to them. Fashion, wonderful dame! it is that makes or mars them; talent is of secondary importance: Fashion possesses power as extensive as it is arbitrary. Fashion caught hold of the hand of Ernest Hartmann, and carried him with her to rank and eminence.

Had the wonderful paintings which Ernest sent forth to the world been merely the productions of his own genius, it is five hundred chances to one that he would have remained in wretched poverty and gloomy obscurity during life, and been immortalized after death like—how many? but with him the case was different: the magic pencil wrought wonders, not merely on canvass, but on the inhabitants of Florence. The Grand Duke visited the atelier of Ernest Hartmann; the Grand Duke, with vast taste, admired a superb painting of the Madonna, and, as the Grand Duke did not offer to buy it, Ernest humbly begged his acceptance of the "trifle" which he had been pleased to honour with his approval. The Grand Duke graciously deigned to accept as a gift that which he was too poor to purchase, and the next day Ernest received a patent of nobility, and became Italianized under the title of Count Aldini. What a fine world we live in! merit is always rewarded!

A year and a day after his first visit, the old gentleman called again upon Ernest Hartmann, but, during that period, his gift, as indeed all his gifts do—had worked a strange alteration. Count Ernest Aldini was the envy and admiration of all Florence. All the artists envied him, for his paintings surpassed their's as much as the president's "last" surpasses the daub before a village alehouse—and where there is superiority there must be envy—let the flatterers of human nature call it emulation or whatever else they please. The ancient noblesse envied him, be-