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tures was unmistakable, these unpretentious little sketches, glimpses of mountain, wood or lakes, gleaming with light and colour, were free and bold, careless even and full of faults, but they told of the artistic vision, the love of beauty for beauty's sake.

"The young lady has a streak of genius," the earl said when he had examined the sketches closely. "A true eye, a bold hand. Who taught her?"

"No one. She and I have read books and talked about pictures together, that's all."

"YOU are too modest, young man. The girl has training, wherever she got it, and I fancy you are her trainer. You seem to have a natural twist for this kind of thing."

"I should like above all things to live my life among pictures," said Hugh eagerly.

"Well, perhaps you may, who knows?" said the earl carelessly. "If ever you come to London I must show you my collection; perhaps I should say my brother's, for most of it was his collecting. The late Lord Sternholt, you may have heard, was killed in a railway accident some years ago. I shall be glad to have your opinion if you will be good enough to give it to me."

There was a note of good-humoured mockery in his voice that made the sensitive boy flush scarlet. The other did not appear to notice his confusion. "Hadden't we better go to the ladies?" he said; "perhaps they will give us some music."

At the first asking Sybil sang for him with untutored taste, making no disguise of her own delight in the plaintive Irish melody, and while she sang the earl's eyes were on her face with the same puzzled look that asked in vain where he had seen her before. From her his gaze turned to the portrait over the mantelpiece as if still perplexed by a vague remembrance.

All the evening the picture seemed to have a strange fascination for him. Just before he left he again examined it closely.

"It must be a copy, of course," he said; "but it is a marvellously good copy. An artist painted it. You won't be offended, Mrs. Darley, by my saying that if you wished to sell the picture I should like to be the purchaser. Even as a copy it is value for at least one hundred guineas."

"I should not care to sell it," the widow answered, her pale face colouring a little. "It was my husband's last present to me. He thought it was original. He said it would be a fortune for our little girl if ever she needed one."

The man laughed good-humouredly. "He is so far right," he said, "that if the picture is genuine it is priceless." His keen eyes turned on Hugh, whom his mocking words in the dining-room had silenced effectually. "I see our young art critic agrees with your husband, though he does not say so. His eyes are more eloquent than his tongue. I am the only skeptic. Will you pardon me, Mrs. Darley, if I suggest the matter is worth testing. Ambrose Pallacio, the great picture expert, one of the most skilled in the world, is in Dublin at present examining a picture for me. A wire would bring him down here if you did not mind him having a peep at your Velasquez."

"I should be very glad," said Mrs. Darley, "to have the opinion of such a judge."

"Is he the Pallacio who found the lost Cottarro Vandyke in a farmhouse?" asked Hugh, not unwilling to show he had heard of the famous expert.

"The same," answered the earl pleasantly. "It is clear that there is nothing concerning pictures that escapes you, young man. That Vandyke is at present in my collection. I gave Pallacio a thousand guineas for it; it is worth ten. You shall see it when you come to London."

There was no mockery in his voice now. It was plain that Mrs. Darley's consent to have the portrait inspected by Pallacio sent him home in high good humour.

Two days later the famous expert called at the cottage with the earl.



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