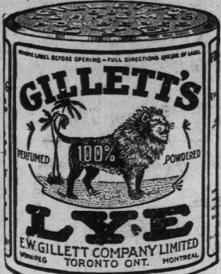


GILLETT'S LYE EATS DIRT



"ECHOES of the Past;

OR, The Recompense of Love!"

CHAPTER XI.

"The business can wait," said Clive, smiling at the thought of the futile and wearisome committee on which he ought to have sat.

She sighed contentedly, and looked round her.

"What a beautiful place! And it is so cool. It reminds me of 'I Dreamt That I Dwelt in Marble Halls!'"

He laughed. "Why, of course!" he assented. "How quick you are. Do you see the sculptures?"

"Yes," she said, but with no great interest; "but they are cold and dead-looking. Oh, here are the pictures. Oh, beautiful, beautiful!" she murmured, as if she were a little awed.

"You are too tired to go round? All right," he said, and he moved at her side, nearly in silence but now and again pointing out the salient point in a picture and explaining its meaning, in no didactic fashion, but as if he were refreshing his own memory. She gazed and listened with eyes through which her delight shone plainly; she seemed radiant with happiness; all her nervousness and shyness slipped from her; and she was just a natural girl, joyous, yet quiet and subdued in a rapt, absorbed fashion, which, in its turn, stirred Clive with a delight as keen as her own.

They went through two of the rooms, then Clive got her to sit down in one of the centre ottomans, but in a moment or two she was up again, as if drawn by the pictures; and Clive sat still and watched her, thinking that there was no more beautiful face on the canvases, that none of the painted women were more graceful, more sweet than the sweet face, the supple, graceful figure, of the girl who gazed at them, all unconscious of the gaze which followed her with an admiration and a subtle sense of happiness strangely flecked with pain, for though he had kept his promise in the letter, was he not breaking it in the spirit? He felt guilty, but he stifled his conscience while he pleaded with it. Surely he could not have listened to her story and met her naive anxiety on his account with "Thanks. Good day!" Besides, what harm was being done? And then her evident happiness, the ecstasy of pleasure which shone in her eyes, quivered on her lips!

And she was so innocent, so pure of spirit; no doubt she regarded him as a young girl regards a man much older than herself, a man to whom she was grateful for a passing kindness. Yes; it was gratitude that had made her anxious on his account; just gratitude.

And he? He thrust aside the question his heart was asking; why was he so happy, why did the sight of her, her nearness, move him as he had never before been moved?

She came back presently, and sat down beside him with a little sigh, as if her heart were too full for words. Her face was pale, but her eyes were like stars, and she closed them for a moment and brushed the dark hair from her forehead.

"And one man gave all these," she said at last in a low, reflective voice. "It is wonderful. Why are there so few persons here? Do many come?"

"At times; but not nearly so many as one would expect," he replied. "She was silent for a moment. 'It is quite free?'"

"Quite, and nearly always open, I think," he said. "What good men there are in the world," she mused. "Men who do things for the poor. You, too," she added, a little shyly. "Oh, I heard you last night. I have never heard any one speak like that. It was—it made me forget everything, the crush, the heat, everything. And you are always doing good and helping the poor, the working people. You must be very happy!"

She raised her eyes to his in a kind of wistful wonder that such men as he should exist.

"I am very happy at this moment, at any rate, Mima," he said almost involuntarily.

Her gaze did not falter; and she nodded as if she understood.

"Yes; it is so quiet here, and the pictures are so beautiful. I like it better than the National Gallery or the one at the Guildhall. I should like to come again, I suppose I may?"

"Oh, yes," he replied. "Many ladies come alone."

She did not understand. She went, nearly everywhere alone.

"There are some more rooms," he said. "But I am thirsty. Do you mind coming with me to the refreshment-room?"

She rose promptly; but when he ordered a glass of milk for her she shook her head.

"No?" he said gently. "Drink a little drop to keep me company."

She took a sip or two—he noticed that she held the glass to her lips gracefully, as—as—well, as Lady Edith might have done—then she set it down and looked up at him with a smile.

"I'm too happy to eat or drink," she said naively. Then she caught sight of the clock and stared at it with dismay. "Is that the time? Have we been so long!" she cried softly. "I am so sorry!"

"Why?" he said reassuringly. "On my account? There is no need. I, too, have been happy. Do you want to go?"

She looked round wistfully. "No—not want to go, but—but it is later than I thought, and—"

"You have not seen anything like all the pictures."

"I can come again," she said. "I must not keep you."

"Let me see," he said casually, but with a certain hesitation. "Will you the day after to-morrow—in the morning?"

She shook her head. "Not in the morning," she replied simply. "I practice in the morning. No; I shall come in the afternoon."

"About three," he said easily. "I will come, too, and we will be able to see some of the other pictures."

Her face grew radiant, and her eyes glowed.

"Oh, how kind of you!" she breathed; then her face grew grave, though her eyes still met his unflatteringly. "But can you spare the time, I mean?"

"Yes, really," he answered, with a smile. "I am about as fond of pictures as you are, and I shall enjoy seeing them again. You won't drink any more milk?" he went on quickly to check any further remonstrance on her part.

"No, thank you; and I must go, indeed, I must. They would wonder what had become of me if I were not home to dinner; they would think I was lost," she said, with a happy laugh.

In an instant he pictured her walking alone in the cruel streets, and his face clouded.

"You don't go out, alone at night—ah, yes, but you do," he said in a low voice, and stifling a sigh.

She looked at him with surprise. "Yes; why not?" she asked open-eyed. He did not answer and they passed out.

"Let me walk to the King's Road with you," he said.

"Thank you," she said gratefully; and they walked on in silence until she stopped and said:

"I turn off here."

"Then it is good-by till Thursday afternoon?"

She nodded and smiled brightly at him.

"Thank you for being so kind to me," she said simply. "Good-by."

He did not offer to shake hands; but gave her good-by almost curtly and turned at once.

As he did so, a hansom came down the street and a woman with a dusky face and with big gold rings in her ears leaned forward suddenly over the apron and stared with glittering eyes from him to the retreating figure of the girl. For a moment Sara gripped the edge of the doors, her lips strained apart, her white teeth gleaming; that she dropped back and, thrusting open the trap door, said fiercely:

"That girl—the one who has just passed—quick! Follow her! You see her—fool—man! Follow her—not too close! I want to see where she goes."

The cabman looked up the street.

"I see her. Right you are, madam," he said, and he checked the horse into a walk and followed on Mina's track, Sara almost crouching in a corner of the cab, with her eyes, like those of a wild beast, fixed on the slight girlish figure as it went quickly and with girlish grace, along the pavement.

CHAPTER XII.

The following day was a long one for Clive; but as he went about his parliamentary work he was conscious of something, a memory that haunted him; he knew that he was not looking back to the hours he had spent with Mina at the Tate Gallery, but looking forward to their meeting on the next day.

On committee, in the House, he caught himself recalling the girlish figure, the beautiful face with its soft gaze at the pictures; and every time she rose before his mental vision his heart grew warm; but he strove against the distracting, absorbing recollection, and tried to forget her, to drown in the business in hand the low sweet voice, the soft laugh, the smile that glowed in her eyes. Strove also to silence the conscience which whispered rebukingly.

He was coming out of the House when he ran against Lord Standon; and that genial gentleman button-holed him at once.

"Hello, Harvey!" he said. "Well, how are things going? Still pegging away? I hear that the government is going to take the Housing of the poor question in hand, going to bring in a bill. They'll mess it, of course, they always do."

"I'm afraid they will," said Clive. "What they propose is only a half-measure. But half a loaf is better than none."

"And you'll come to terms and accept that, eh?"

Clive nodded. "Yes, with the hope that we can get the whole loaf when we come in."

"That's it. Compromise; life's made up of compromises." His eyes scanned Clive's face with kindly interest. "You're looking rather pale and tired," he remarked sympathetically. "Doing too much, I expect. What?"

Clive laughed. "I'm all right," he said. "The weather has been rather hot."

"And you're working hard," said Lord Standon. "Youth, youth! It

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