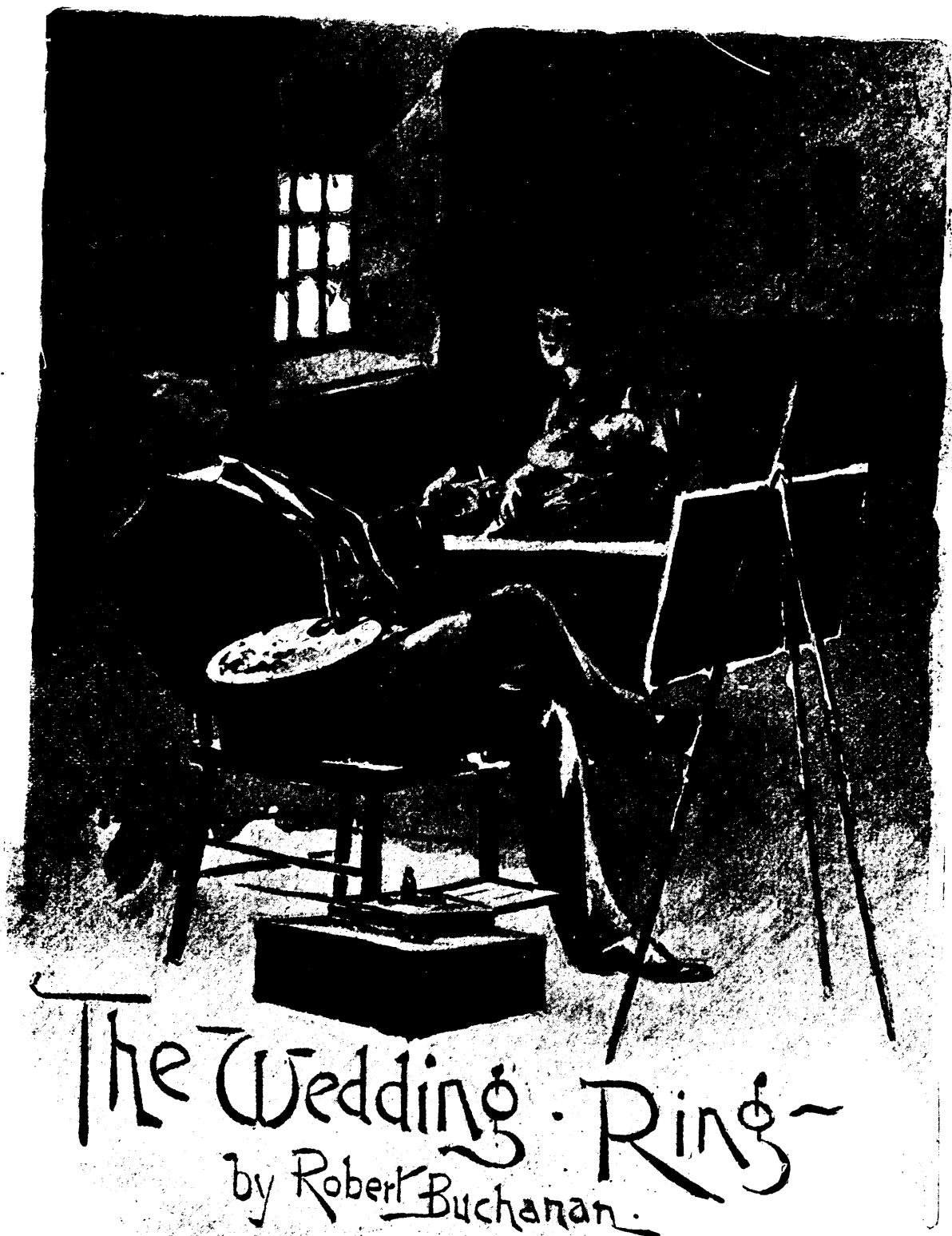




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And what's to me a ring o' gold,
That proves the written law?
A ring of air's around my heart
That sadly breaks in twa!

—Old Ballad.

CHAPTER I.

IN PETER'S STREET, WESTMINSTER.

On a chilly spring morning a young woman sat at an uncovered deal table near the third floor window of a house in Peter's Street, Westminster, with a little pile of gilt-edged cards and a water-colour box before her. A child was lying in her lap, a wee thing of a year old, with a white face and large eyes of more than oriental gravity, and small fists curled tight upon her breast. She did not distract her mother's attention from the work on which she was occupied by any of the kickings and the cooings usual to healthy infancy, but lay as still as if she understood the necessity of quiet to the artistic labourer, and with precocious self-denial subdued the high spirits proper to her age. The young woman was tall and finely built, and her face, which was very sad and gentle, needed only a touch of colour and a little more fulness of outline to be beautiful. There was about her an

aspect of sorrow grown patient, which was pitiful to see in the face of one so young, for she had hardly passed girlhood in years.

As she worked, her foot beat on the floor in a gentle rhythmic measure, and her voice crooned a tuneless song to the child upon her knee.

It was a large, low-ceilinged room, occupying the whole width of the house, and sparsely and shabbily furnished. A bed stood in one corner with a cradle at its foot. A chest of drawers, with half its knobs missing, a couple of old-fashioned rush-bottomed chairs, a square table of deal with red legs, a wash-stand bearing a cracked jug and basin, a battered sofa, covered in faded chintz, and a strip of dogs-eared carpet whose originally gaudy pattern had faded to a uniform dirty gray, completed its articles of necessary furniture.

A few scraps of clothing, male and female, hung from pegs behind the door.

Near the window an old field easel, with an invalid leg repaired with a bamboo walking cane, supported an almost finished landscape, and a broken *porte couleur*, with a score of half empty tubes of colour and a handful of ragged brushes, lay on the floor beside it.

On the mantel-piece above the fireless grate was a tobacco jar, a brandy bottle, a tumbler and a couple of wooden pipes, flanked at either end by a photograph.

One of these photographs no one would have any difficulty in identifying as a portrait of the young woman painting near the window, though the expression had nothing in common with that of the original at the moment we make her acquaintance. It represented a blooming, laughing lass of nineteen, clad in light summer frock, with white flowers in her hair and at the bosom of her dress. Beneath it was written, in a frank female hand, "To Philip," a date being added. The other was that of a young man with a straw hat perched on at the back of his head, a cigarette in his mouth, a flaming tie loosely knotted under the collar of a silk shirt, and a velvet jacket. A handsome face, quite alive to its own charm. Under it was written, "To Gillian," and a repetition of the date borne by the companion photograph.

The room was scrupulously neat.

The girl worked on briskly with swift fingers, and crooned to the child. It was yet early, though