

THE PRODIGAL BROTHER

"Miss Desborough, I've a present for you."

The speaker was Arnold Wilson, tenant of No. 8 Beccles Studios—a "canvas merchant" of considerable ability. The person spoken to was Helen Desborough, the tenant of No. 12. She had been away in Wales since July, it being then mid-November.

"A present? What is it?"

Wilson produced a large envelope, and handed it to her with a flourish. "From Robert Lee, R.A., and the rest with his compliments. He asked me to give it you."

Miss Desborough inspected the contents and blushed slightly. The inclosure was a pen and ink portrait of herself, one for which she had given a jesting sitting the day before her departure.

"I—I don't understand."

Wilson had long suspected a tenderness between the two. After poking fun at her and tantalizing her with delay, he descended to particulars.

"Lee has left us. When just after that picture of his came back, in August, from the Academy. Case of money, I fancy—he reckoned on selling it."

"And he didn't sell it? What a shame!"

Miss Desborough's eyes brightened. "Trusted with Wilson's flippancy."

"Yes, it's a pretty good thing. Ought to have gone, but it didn't. By-the-by, would you like another look at it?"

Miss Desborough's eyes brightened. "Where is it? Is it here?"

Wilson jerked his head lazily toward the open door of his studio. "I have it in there. Lee left it with me—for me to dispose of."

Miss Desborough didn't quite comprehend.

"He's no good, you know, himself, on the commercial side. Can't bargain worth a cent. So I offered to auction it for him."

"And you haven't sold it yet?"

Wilson betrayed a tinge of shame. "Fact is, I—I overlooked it. I was thinking, though, of taking it to Roger's either to-day or to-morrow."

Roger was a buyer of cheap dabs, much patronized by Wilson and one or two fellow craftsmen.

Helen Desborough's face assumed an astonished and indignant expression.

"To Roger's? That? Surely not!"

Wilson's shame was more pronounced. "Well, you know, Miss Desborough, I must get rid of it somehow. I don't think Roger would give much for it, but—"

"Let me see it, please."

Helen was well acquainted with Lee's production, which was called "Arcady," and deserved the name. She had seen it while in progress; seen the crude sketch grow into a harmonious and well balanced picture. She had also inspected it on the walls of Room 4 in the Academy where its fairytale coloring was killed by the haunting yellows of an "up-to-date" picture on the left. "Charming, charming!" she held her breath, almost. The picture had never looked so delicately lovely as now—when threatened with exile to Roger's. This was a fate it ought to, and must, be rescued from.

It came out that Robert's departure had been sudden. He said nothing about going until the actual day. Then he arranged with Wilson to hand Miss Desborough her envelope, and half as the result of a jesting offer, left "Arcady" in the same hands to sell.

Helen turned peremptorily to Wilson. "This must not go to Roger's. It's a deal too good for that."

Wilson hung his head guiltily. "I don't know anyone else—who'd be sure to buy it."

"It mustn't go to Roger's, anyway. Keep it a day or two and let me think."

The upshot of the conversation was that, on the following Monday, the picture was transferred to 26 Stratford Gardens, where Helen Desborough lived. There, in a room appropriated for her use—half painting room, half boudoir—it was placed to the best of advantage.

Arnold Wilson, under the accusing gleam of Miss Desborough's eyes, felt that he lay open to the charge of neglecting Lee's interests. He had regarded him as a dreamer, a negligible quantity; and not the kind of man whose good will one must needs cultivate. Robert, however, when backed up by the adorable Miss Desborough, was a different matter.

When handing over the picture, Wilson explained how Lee might be communicated with. A letter sent to 28 Cottenham Road, Hammersmith (his late abode), would be forwarded. Where Robert had gone to, he didn't know.

"Gone to Jerico, I'm inclined to think," he confided to another, a fellow patron of Roger's.

"Who are his people? And what are they?" This, loftily, the questioner was great on points of caste.

Wilson was not free from the falling. "He made a grimace. Dunno. Provincial tradespeople—something like that."

That settled the matter. The two blue-blooded ones grinned in unison. "Arcady" might be a fine picture—said Anderson, R.A. (that curious compound of genius and waywardness), had called it so; "Arcady" might be a fine production, but if its creator were merely the offspring of small tradespeople—well, really, what could you do?

Robert Lee was much to the fore about this particular time. Besides being discussed in Beccles Studios, his character was also canvassed in the living room, behind the shop, at 227 Aston Road, Blackwich, in the County of Stafford, William Bamber (baker) and Polly, his wife, were present, as also Mrs. Kelly and Mr. Isaac Podmore, visitors.

Mrs. Kelly had just learned some astonishing news of Robert's doings; and was in process of digesting it.

"Well," she said, raising her hands helplessly. "Well! I couldn't have believed it. And you say his money's all gone—every bit?"

"E-very pen-ny," said Polly, viciously. "He was thirty shillin' or more in our debt when he left."

"Goodness gracious! But how—how has it gone? What can he have done with it?"

Polly Bamber jerked her head angrily. "Don't ask me. I haven't noticed. If you speak to him he'll tell you he's been learning painting on—and I don't know what."

What's the likes of him to do with painting?"

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Isaac Podmore screwed up his lips sagaciously. He was a man of local influence, churchwarden, member of a parish council and a strong teetotaler.

"Does—does he drink—do you know?"

"No—I can't say as he drinks. In fact—"

"No," put in William Bamber, Robert's half-brother. "No; he doesn't care for it."

Isaac Podmore broke in again. He had digested the fact that Robert didn't drink, and propounded another problem. "Does he gamble, do you know?"

The question was wide of the mark and elicited, but the curtest of negatives.

"Has—a—has he tried to get work, then, as a draughtsman?"

Mrs. Bamber made a grimace of contempt.

Her husband grinned amusedly. "He has tried so I believe. But nobody seems to want him."

"Oh! How—"

"You see, he's been out now over two years. He'd a character from that London place, but it's not down to date. And employers look shy at a man like that."

"He doesn't want a place—that's my belief," struck in Polly, viciously. "What he does want is to go on loafing. As for real, honest work—"

It was a sad case—evidently! The whole four shook their heads: Robert was written down a "wastrel."

Certain facts connected with the young man's departure, glossed over at first, came out later. He had been more than "requested" to leave. It was a choice between going and being "thrown into the street."

"We had to do something," said Polly, in eloquent self-justification. "If we hadn't, he'd have stayed on goodness knows how long. I told him plainly, on the Tuesday, if he wasn't off by the following Friday he'd be banded out neck and crop!"

"Dear me!"

"Don't you see, we have the children to consider. It's not as if we were made of money. We have to work hard, and very hard, for our bit. We can't afford to keep a grown-up man hulking about and doing nothing."

"Of course not, of course not," Mrs. Kelly balanced her sorrow for Robert by sympathy with the family on whom he had preyed. "Well—and on the Friday?"

"Oh, he found money from somewhere. I didn't ask where, and he didn't tell. Anyway, he got some, and packed up, and left. And we've neither seen nor heard of him since."

Mrs. Kelly seemed sad, but Isaac Podmore only wagged his head. It must be drink—that, or gambling; a man who kept free of those two could never have behaved so wickedly.

Helen Desborough was an orphan and lived with her uncle. Though it was not known at Beccles Studios, she was also an heiress. And what is more to the purpose, she was a person with a remarkable strong will.

Having made up her mind that "Arcady" was too good for Roger, it became necessary to find some dealer of a better stamp, or some private buyer, who would purchase it. Where was Mr. Vinter, her uncle's friend—Vinter of the Haymarket; he was the man. He occasionally came to dine, and was promptly entrapped into an engagement.

"Mr. Vinter, I want to show you a picture." This she said when dinner and several glasses of Pomeroy had put the guest into an amiable mood.

"There! What do you think of that?"

Vinter was plainly interested. "It's not yours, is it?"

Helen shook her head delightedly. "I wish it was. I wish I could paint like that."

"I've seen it before, somewhere. Ah yes! In the Academy. H'm! It's queer. I didn't notice there how good it was. It is, really, a fine canvass."

Miss Desborough was a business woman, and quickly made known that the picture was for sale. And Vinter, partly to please her, but chiefly because of the picture's merits, said he'd see what he could do.

The canvass was transferred to his shop in the Haymarket, and a week later gave rise to the following letter:

"Dear Miss Desborough,—I have sold 'Arcady' for £40 to whom do you think? To Lord Bridgforth, the owner of the finest private collection in England. Lord B. is interested in Mr. Lee, and would like to look at further work. If your friend uses this introduction sensibly his fortune is made. Tell him so from me. I am, etc.,

"W. J. VINTER."

Miss Desborough could have written to Robert, but she didn't. Instead she went to 28 Cottenham Road, Hammersmith, to inquire.

It was a small, two-story house, and in it Robert had occupied a single room. The landlady was unused to callers of Miss Desborough's stamp and seemed a trifle flustered.

"Oh, yes, I have Mr. Lee's address. He's in the country now. But he said I was not to give it to anybody."

After a short confabulation Helen was able to satisfy the good woman that she required the address for no ill purpose. A small coin changed hands—bribery and corruption!—and Miss Desborough left in possession of the requisite particulars.

"I can't be far from Birmingham. I'll get Mrs. Lyttleton to spy out the land."

Mrs. Lyttleton's report was not encouraging. Aston Road, Blackwich, was a step lower in the social scale than Cottenham Road, Hammersmith. It was a long, dismal thoroughfare, and the part where 227 stood was its most sordid portion.

"No. 227 is a common little baker's shop," wrote Mrs. Lyttleton. "And when I went by—I drove slowly past—a sharp-faced, vixenish woman was at the door, gossiping with two or three slatterns. I can't believe Mr. Lee lives there. If he does it's a case of 'can any good thing, etc., with a vengeance."

Miss Desborough had never credited Robert with being well off. He was plainly otherwise—careful, economical. But it came on her as a revelation that his home surroundings should be such as she had discovered. The facts didn't dampen her belief in him. In this she showed the rareness of her metal. They raised, rather, a plying wonder that, with so little to stimulate his artistic sense, he had yet developed it so remarkably.

Miss Desborough was a frank person—frank with herself. "I, a painter!" she said once in reply to a fulsome compliment. "Dear, no! I can't draw a triangle. But I know good work when I see it—and I also know bad." Moreover, besides her regard for wealth, she had a quite commendable contempt for the shibboleths of caste.

"I'm going to Birmingham," she announced one morning, "to spend a day with Mrs. Lyttleton."

"Why, you saw her on your way back from Wales?"

"True, but I want to see her again."

It was no use arguing with Helen. Her aunt knew that, so didn't try. Still, the third week in December, the week before Christmas, was a queer time to pay a flying visit.

The drive to Blackwich was repeated, but this time Mrs. Lyttleton was accompanied by Miss Desborough. And the carriage, instead of proceeding slowly by, stopped in front of the shop, whereupon all the slatterns of the neighborhood swarmed to the doorways.

Miss Desborough needed her whole self possession for the conversation that ensued.

"I want to see Mr. Robert Lee. I understand that he is living here."

Polly Bamber was a trifle cowed, but still waspish.

"He did live here, but he's gone."

The animus in her tone was plainly marked.

"Is he well? Do you know where he is?"

"Yes, I do—he's in Birmingham. And for anything I've heard, he's well enough."

Miss Desborough was staggered. To find that her protegee had belonged to such a place was bad; but to find that, even here his credit—Oh, was "badder." Poor Robert!

She got the address, and as quickly as possible the carriage was put into motion.

"What a dreadful woman," she remarked. "She spoke of Robert as if he were a toad. Ugh!"

Robert Lee's Birmingham place of residence was No. 31 Kharlow Rd. Without giving her resolution time to cool, Miss Desborough made her way—still accompanied by Mrs. Lyttleton—to this address.

The house was small, but clean, not unlike his Hammersmith abode. Mrs. Blakey, who opened the door, was obviously the wife of an artisan.

"Mr. Lee's out just now."

The woman's tone was civil, and it soon appeared that her lodger was a favorite. Miss Desborough engaged her in conversation. Robert, she said, was hard at work painting—did it in a little room over the kitchen. She didn't think he made much but anyway he kept going, and he was "as nice, quiet, orderly a gentleman as one could wish."

"Do let me see—his painting room. We're old friends—I used to know him in London."

Mrs. Blakey complied. The room was bare of furniture. An easel stood near the window, and a full half of the apartment was taken up with odds and ends of lumber.

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Miss Desborough smiled gayly at Mrs. Lyttleton. "Curious studio, isn't it?" she whispered.

A picture, partly finished, was on the easel. Even as it stood, the harmony of the coloring was equal to that of "Arcady," while the general scheme betrayed an added strength. His dip back into sordidness—into greater sordidness—had done Robert good.

"Thank Heaven!" muttered Helen, fervently. "And this is the man who—who almost failed!"

With the license of old friendship, she flattered round the studio, examining the drawings and sketches which decorated the walls.

"Mr. Lee's a main clever person," observed Mrs. Blakey. "He do turn out some nice pictures. But he works dreadfully slow. He takes a week or more on one single picture."

She went on to say that, in his bedroom Robert had a canvass which, in merit, far transcended the one before them. It was small—and fetch it, and before they could object she was back.

"Helen!" ejaculated Mrs. Lyttleton, in astonishment.

Helen's cheeks flushed. The picture was a portrait of herself. A remarkably well finished portrait, too.

"He didn't do this here," Mrs. Blakey remarked, observing nothing. "He brought it with him."

A key sounded in the lock. Mrs. Blakey peeped out. "Why, there he is."

"Don't—don't tell him we're here," entreated Miss Desborough. The self-possession which had carried her through up to this point threatened to desert her.

A moment later, Lee, in boisterous health, entered the room. He stopped dead—amazed—on seeing his visitors.

"Miss Desborough? Mrs. Lyttleton? This is good of you. But why—why how did you find me?"

Robert was greatly improved. At Beccles Studios he had been too quiet—melancholy, in truth; had seemed to suffer from depression. Now, he was in bounding spirits—satisfied with the world and himself—and wholesome minded as a sandboy. Miss Desborough sank at once from preceptress to pupil.

She told him the news, with an effort. Lord Bridgforth had taken him up—well, was ready to do so, and Mr. Vinter would view his future work with indulgence. His troubles were over—money and position were his—the hall was at his feet. And as Robert listened to her his eyes spoke his gladness.

All this time Miss Desborough forgetfully had held the portrait in her hand. Robert's glance fell on it. To confusion, recalled to the fact, she hid it behind her skirt.

A momentary hesitation on Robert's part checked to a broad smile. "Mrs. Blakey's been telling tales, I see. I must apologize, Miss Desborough, for—"

Mrs. Lyttleton, with great tact, bundled Mrs. Blakey out of the room. There was something in the kitchen she wanted to see—and when she came back twenty minutes later, the two were still busy prattling; exchanging—well—reminders. In some respects clever folks are not unlike the stupid.

"Mr. Lee's coming back to London," Helen, announced with a transparent assumption of sanctifroid which wouldn't have deceived a child. "Isn't it lucky his old studio's just been given up?"—Rivington Pyke in The Lady's Pictorial.

ROB

"It is unbearable!" declared Mr. Manson. Then he threw down his paper and remarked to Mrs. Manson that she must be devoid of nerves. "If you think for one minute," she declared, "that I enjoy being tortured all day long and most of the evening by that dreadful looting, you're entirely mistaken, Archibald. The Chicago 'News' gives some further account of Manson's experiences."

"Somebody ought to stop it," Manson said, gruffly.

"You have said before," Mrs. Manson remarked, sweetly.

The perpetual, maddening, amateurish playing of a peculiarly shrill fife was destroying domestic harmony not only in the Manson flat, but in every house in the block. It began early in the morning. The scales were an accompaniment to the breakfast coffee, from which the men of a

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dozen families fled, leaving their wives to be tormented by a separator that wavered through "Saw-toe River" to "Yankee Doodle."

Nobody was quite sure from which house the fife shrilled forth, but by calling in the aid of the distracted servants and comparing notes, the neighborhood finally settled down on the Grahams' as the fatal spot.

"They have a ten-year-old nephew living with them now," a feminine detective triumphantly announced. "He must do it."

"Chloroform him," promptly said all the husbands, especially Manson. The fife was most annoying on hot days. On a certain broiling Saturday afternoon Manson's nerves gave way.

"Any human being," he said, "who will deliberately torture, or allow any one to torture, the rest of the world with such outrageous, ear-splitting racket, ought to be driven off the street. I can't see why some of you women don't complain about it to Mrs. Graham. You could lead up to it gracefully, you know."

"Has it ever occurred to you," asked his wife, crisply, "that some of you men might speak to Mr. Graham? I don't even know his wife by sight. If I did I might be tempted to say something."

"Maybe the boy will swallow the fife," suggested Manson, hopefully. "Possibly both Graham and his wife are deaf, and that's the reason they don't mind it themselves. People with as little consideration for other folks' feelings ought to have a few good plain truths hammered into them. If I ever get a chance, I'll do it. You watch!"

Then there came an evening when Manson was met on his return by an excited wife.

"What do you think!" she cried. "Mrs. Graham called to-day, and she is the dearest old lady you ever saw. She spoke so sweetly of her nephew, Bob, and said he was such a comfort to them! His parents are dead. She said he just loved music—"

"Music!" snorted Manson. "Just loved music," went on Mrs. Manson, hastily, "and nearly broke his heart till they got him the fife. She—she wanted to know—she said she hoped it did not annoy us."

Manson breathed hard.

"What did you say?" he asked. "If you think for one minute, she—"

"I just couldn't, Archibald," Mrs. Manson confessed. "She was so pleased and had such a sweet way—and—"

"You had the chance and let it go by," said Manson, with cold dignity. "It was three nights later—seventy-two hours, thirty-six of which had been endured by the shrilling of the fife—that Mr. and Mrs. Graham, and the demon Bob himself passed by and stopped on the Manson's doorstep. Manson looked at Bob curiously. He was a singularly prepossessing child. There was a fascination in merely gazing at him. He approached Manson confidently, and his dark eyes were very winning.

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"Do you like music?" he asked. "I do. I have a fife, and I practice lots. Maybe you've heard me. Don't you think it's pretty?"

Mrs. Manson gripped her chair-arms and waited for the worst.

There was a silence, during which Manson gazed into the sager, appealing face of the author of his daily torture. His duty was plain, but he had not counted on the boy's eyes. At last he spoke.

"Yes, indeed, it's great!" he said.