

A BROKEN VOW.

A STORY.

(Written for The Register by Teresa.)

It was a magnificent portrait painter, or, if everyone, even his bitterest enemies, admitted.

In the Salon his pictures always had a place on the line, and were surrounded by admiring crowds.

There was, however, one peculiarity about him, a peculiarity differing essentially from the usual eccentricity of genius, and one which caused widespread comment; he would never paint the portrait of a woman.

He painted only men, even his genre pieces dealt with incidents in which men alone figured, no woman had ever been limited by his brush, and, report whispered, no woman had ever crossed the threshold of his studio, with the solitary exception of old Jeannette, who did perfunctory cleaning whenever she thought the establishment looked rather dingier than usual.

Stern, morose and cynical, Henri Mauban repelled even his intimates, not one of whom ever had courage enough to enquire the cause of his mysterious antipathy to woman-kind. Plenty of conjectures there were, however, the chief one being that he had been disappointed in a love affair, and took this singular method of wreaking his vengeance upon the whole feminine world.

With the usual perversity of the sex, no sooner was a thing declared unattainable, than, straightway, every woman wanted it, and there was not a single fair member of the beau monde in the whole of Paris who would not have given her ears to have her portrait painted by De Mauban.

But, entreaties, blandishments, promises of fabulous sums, were alike useless; the painter entertained sentiments of profound respect for Madame, according to Jeannette, he was desolated at having to refuse, but, what would you? There was his vow, uttered by all the saints, and, in short, Jeannette's voluble exaggerations tapered down at last to the curt and peremptory refusal, which De Mauban had commissioned her to give, caring not one jot whether she uttered it in all its naked abruptness, or softened by expressions of exaggerated regret.

One morning, in early autumn, Jeannette ushered a visitor into the studio.

He was a man apparently well past the prime of life, pleasant looking, but not handsome, and with a decided stoop, which rendered his spare and angular figure still more awkward.

De Mauban bowed, and waited for his visitor to explain his business.

"I am the Marquis De Galincourt," said the newcomer courteously.

The painter gave a sudden start, and looked at him searchingly, while a half defiant expression settled into his eyes.

"To what am I indebted for the honor of this visit, M. le Marquis?" he asked coldly, motioning his visitor to a seat.

"I have heard of your fame as a portrait painter, Monsieur, and have called to commission you to paint the portrait of my wife," replied the Marquis, with the ease of a man who never dreams of his request being refused.

"It is against my rule," said the painter, "I am sorry to have refused the commission, but I decline utterly to paint the portrait of Madame la Marquise."

"Pardon me, Monsieur, I do not comprehend the reason for such an extraordinary refusal," said the Marquis, somewhat nettled by the cool manner of the other.

"Is M. le Marquis not aware, then, that I never paint women?"

The Marquis started, if such an expression may be used of so polished a gentleman, until his eyes nearly bulged out.

"I certainly was not aware that you made such an extraordinary exception, Monsieur; I have been residing abroad for many years, and only returned to Paris yesterday, for the express purpose of securing your services. Madame la Marquise earnestly desires to have her portrait painted by your hand, surely you will make an exception in favor of a lady so justly celebrated for her beauty. Name your own terms, I will pay them willingly."

"If you offered me your title and estates, M. le Marquis, it would make no difference. I absolutely decline to paint the portrait of Madame la Marquis on any terms whatever," was the cold rejoinder.

"Monsieur, may I ask the reason of so insulting a refusal?" demanded the Marquis, pale with anger.

"M. le Marquis may ask what questions he pleases, but I reserve the right of refusing to gratify his curiosity; if by refusal sends insulting, I cannot help it. I did not intend it to be so."

"The two men regarded each other steadily for some moments."

"Is this final, Monsieur?"

The painter bowed.

"The Marquis tried another tack."

"Perhaps if the Marquise were to come in person, her persuasions—"

"Pardon me, M. le Marquis, my rules are strict, she would not be admitted."

The Marquis diplomatically choked down his wrath, and, with a haughty

bow, which was still more haughtily returned, strode to the door and disappeared.

Left to himself De Mauban walked to a picture that was standing at one side of the room with its face to the wall, and placed his hand upon it as though to turn it round.

"No," he muttered suddenly. "What good would it do? Why should I revive an agony that has been dormant for thirty years? Thirty years, mon Dieu! and the memory? Not dead yet, shall I never forget that face? No, beautiful, soulless and alluring, it will haunt me to my death."

Voices were audible down in the vestibule, but he did not hear them, not a few minutes later, did he hear the soft tread of a woman and opening of the door.

"I thought I had buried it," he muttered, between his clenched teeth. "Buried it with the slowly revolving years, with the ashes of the past, and with my broken heart and now—now, in a single instant everything returns as clearly as though it happened yesterday; I see her as she stood that fatal day, and—"

"Monsieur!" said a woman's voice, low, sweet and penetrating.

He did not start, he did not turn round, he stood as though turned to stone, his hands clenched till the nails were buried in the flesh.

"I beg a thousand pardons, Monsieur, entering thus, but I knocked, and you did not hear me," continued the soft voice, the owner of which advanced into the room as she spoke.

De Mauban roused himself from the stupor into which the sound of her voice had thrown him, and answered coldly and without apparent effort.

"Jeannette was to blame for neglecting to inform Madame that I do not receive ladies."

"But, Monsieur surely makes exception in favor of old friends."

"Madame la Marquise is mistaken if she thinks I number any friends among her sex," replied the painter, with a bitter emphasis on the word "friends."

"So," she exclaimed quickly, and with a slight laugh, "Monsieur knows me, though he has not done me the honor to look at my face," and she raised her veil.

De Mauban bit his lip, but made no reply, nor did he turn round as the lady expected him to do. She changed her tactics.

"Very well, Monsieur," she observed, haughtily, "I will retire since you appear to wish it, and since I am not accustomed to talk with gentlemen who deliberately turn their backs upon me."

Suddenly conscious that he had been guilty of unpardonable rudeness, De Mauban faced round, and their eyes met.

He saw a woman past the prime of life, upon whose once beautiful features time's ravages had begun to show all too plainly. In spite of paint, powder and cosmetics, the hollow cheeks, the dark rings under the eyes, and the carefully hidden but still partly visible lines, told all too plainly of a vanished beauty.

As the painter gazed upon the haggard features of the woman before him, a sudden resolve entered his mind.

"Pardon me, Madame," he said, in a cold, hard matter of fact voice. "It is long since I held conversation with a lady, and I fear I forget the courtesies due to your sex, I beg that you will state to the object of your visit."

"It is to ask that you will paint my portrait, Monsieur," she said in a childishly eager and pleading manner, which, in a young girl, would have been charming, but which contrasted oddly with powder and rouge, half hidden wrinkles, and the dull, greenish yellow of her dye-tinted hair.

Something in her manner grated upon the artist, he turned abruptly from her, and began arranging paints and brushes upon a low table beside the easel; she watched him with a half eager, half triumphant look. At length he spoke.

"It is against both my will and my rules, Madame, as I informed M. le Marquis; I can see no valid reason for infringing them in Madame's case."

She approached him suddenly, and laying one white, jeweled hand upon his arm, said in a soft voice, in which there was more than a suspicion of tenderness.

"For the sake of old times, Monsieur, is not that gesture enough?"

With a quick gesture she dropped her arm, so that her hand fell away, and answered coldly, "Is Madame prepared to give me a sitting at once?"

"At once, Monsieur," she said eagerly, and began to remove her wraps.

He arranged a canvas upon the easel, and drawing forward a chair, which stood upon a sort of platform, folded a sea-blue drapery upon it, and motioned her to be seated.

She hesitated for a moment, and then said, falteringly, "The drapery, Monsieur—" and stopped. He waited silently.

"It—it will not harmonize with my complexion," she stammered at last, in a kind of desperation.

He shot a swift, contemptuous glance at her and answered curtly: "Madame must be guided by me, or I shall decline to paint her."

Alarmed at the threat, she sank into the chair with a shudder, con-

triving at the same time to give it an almost imperceptible lurch, which had the effect of placing her partly in shadow, and somewhat neutralizing the effect of the obnoxious drapery.

He saw the ruse, however, and was unerring.

"Turn to the light, Madame," he commanded. She did so, about a quarter of an inch. He came forward and arranged the chair in the desired position, bringing her within the full focus of light.

She submitted, helplessly, fearful lest a protest should lose her the victory she had already gained. Having arranged her to his satisfaction, his swift pencil was soon at work, tracing the outline of her features upon the canvas. Once or twice she addressed him, but his monosyllabic replies discouraged conversation, and she relapsed into silence, watching him intently. Occasionally their eyes met, but as if by mutual consent, were immediately averted.

She noted everything, the shaft of sunlight falling through the oriel window facing her, the unfinished canvases, the person of the artist, the youthfulness of whose slim, lithe figure contrasted strangely, with his iron grey hair, and the lines upon his handsome face, and lastly the picture turned towards the wall. Upon the latter her eyes rested with an indefinable expression, as though by the intensity of her gaze she could pierce the retreating shadows at the back, and behold the subject of the painting.

After about an hour's work, De Mauban laid down his brush and with a courteous inclination of the head signified that the sitting was at an end. He assisted her with her wraps in silence, and rang for Jeannette.

"To-morrow, at the same hour, Madame?" he said coldly.

She bowed, "if it suits you, Monsieur."

Jeannette appeared, in a state of wonderment impossible to describe, she had been waiting below, expecting every moment to hear the bell ring; the Marquis had gone away, leaving the carriage for Madame, who had been closeted with the master more than an hour, and there, Jeannette could not believe her eyes, there were the outlines of a woman upon the canvas!

Well, she shrugged her shoulders, wonders would never cease.

"Show Madame to her carriage," Madame darted a swift, half-piqued look at him.

"Good day, Monsieur," she said, softly.

"Good day, Madame he replied, without looking round, and she left the room, wearing the same half-angry look.

To-morrow, and the next day, and the next, the work progressed, till, at last the first tints were being laid upon the portrait.

Madame De Galincourt could not see the picture from where she sat, for some unexplained reason, the artist had placed it in such a position as to be entirely beyond the range of her vision, and he always covered it at the end of each sitting.

Once she had begged to see it, but he replied that he preferred her not seeing it till it was finished.

On this particular morning an unaccountable restlessness possessed her, a wish to start up and go and look over the painter's shoulder, to turn to the right that irritating painting, which so persistently baffled her efforts to discover its subject. She tried to talk, but De Mauban answered in his usual monosyllabic fashion.

The moments dragged on, she could bear it no longer, she felt half stifled, she must get up and move about. Taking advantage of a moment when De Mauban seemed concentrating his attention upon some delicate touches, she rose and with a swift, silent motion, glided to his side.

A sudden violent start as her eyes fell upon the portrait, caused him to look round and meet her dilated glance of horror and despair. A strange gleam, was it triumph? passed over his face, leaving it as before, cold and inscrutable.

"Madame has disobeyed my injunctions to keep still," he said, sternly "I must request her to remain seated, the muse is spoilt if the sitter moves."

Still she said nothing only stood, staring at the painted, smirking creature on the canvas. Merciful heaven! looking woman with the rouged and hollow cheeks, dull greenish yellow hair, crows feet, and wrinkles, to go down to posterity as the lovely Marquise Marie De Galincourt!

She gasped and put her hand to her throat, she felt choking almost ill health, and middle age has shrunk the once firm, rounded flesh, and thrown up the bones to almost ghastly prominence, and, worst of all, every detail was there in the portrait in all its glaring hideousness!

De Mauban repeated his request that she should return to her seat, conscious, from the sound of his voice, that he was speaking, but no more comprehending him than if he had spoken Greek, she turned a face full of misery and supplication upon him.

"What is the matter, Madame?" he demanded.

"Monsieur,—the portrait—"

"Well?"

"That surely cannot be mine?" she said in a hoarse, husky voice.

"But certainly, it is, if Madame will look in the mirror she will see that I have omitted no details necessary

to an exact reproduction of her features."

She did not need to look in the mirror to see that, she knew it only too well!

"Monsieur is making me look very old," she said, gently, and the still soft and lustrous eyes were full of tears.

He saw them, but was unmoved. "Madame must blame her age, I am not responsible."

"But, Monsieur, I— is it not usual and permissible to to tone down a little, to flatter, especially ladies?"

"If Madame wished a flattering, and, therefore, untruthful portrait, there are many artists who would gladly gratified her. I prefer to be true to—" he was going to say "Nature," but substituted "the original."

She winced at the sarcasm implied in the obvious pause. She knew in any he, alone of all painters, could paint her portrait as she wished it done, as she half expected him to paint it, but that—that thing, it was horrible, she could not, would not have it handed down as her portrait. She must have time to think, appeal she knew were useless: the cold calm glance of his eyes, bent critically upon her told her that.

She would sit no more that day, she felt indispensed, she said and he acquiesced in his usual cold indifferent fashion.

She did not come at the usual hour next day, and De Mauban was conscious of a vague feeling of captiveness, a want of something, he knew not what. He struggled angrily against it, and applied himself assiduously to work, glancing every now and then at the clock. At length the time showed so much past the hour at which she always came, that it was useless to expect her at all that day, and throwing down his brush he walked over to the easel on which stood the unfinished portrait, and, drawing off the cover he contemplated the picture with a bitter smile.

"It is a splendid likeness," he muttered, half to himself and half as though addressing the painting.

"Madame thought to over-reach me, she thought that love and memory were stronger than hate. Bah! you painted Jezebel, you would make of Henri De Mauban a tool to gratify your vanity. No other man could paint you as he could do, you knew it, and came, with your velvet hands and tender glances thinking in one brief moment to undo the past. But love is in ashes, and your power is dead!"

The last gleam of sunlight were falling through the oriel window, the studio darkened slightly as the golden shaft grew fainter. Was it the effect of the half light, or had the eyes of the portrait taken a softer touch? He approached nearer, no it was an illusion, and yet those splendid eyes, almost the last relics of departing beauty, they shone with the same soft and limpid light that he remembered too well! Try as he might he could not take the softness out of them and make them hard and stony; they were the eyes of a girl of eighteen in the face of a woman of forty-five.

"They are out of place," he muttered, and seizing the brush he had thrown down, he again approached the portrait. The eyes stopped him. He stood as though fascinated, the door opened softly, but he did not heed it.

"So," he said with a slight laugh, "Time has spared Madame's eyes, well, I will not grudge her that one beauty; the brush holds up the brush as though meaning the portrait—" has told enough, and yet, how easily it could undo what it has done! A few slight touches and—"

"Henri!"

He started violently, but instantly recovered himself, and faced her.

She looked even more haggard than when she had left the day before, and there were wide rings under her eyes as though she had been weeping. The rouge upon her cheeks but accentuated the ghastly pallor which powder could not hide. He noted everything, and without warning a great cry surged up into his heart. Suddenly she held out her hands, and said once more in a beseeching voice:

"Henri!"

He controlled himself by a mighty effort, and with a cold glance, affected not to see her outstretched hands.

"Madame is late," he said in a hard voice.

Her hands dropped to her side.

"I was indisposed, Monsieur," she said wearily, and he thought he could detect a note of disappointment in her voice, and exulted, inwardly.

"If Madame wishes to give a sitting to-day it would be as well to commence at once, the light is fading."

She removed her wraps, and he saw that the dress she wore was somewhat higher in the neck than any she had yet appeared in, and he smiled grimly to himself. The ruse should not serve her.

She took her seat, and De Mauban commenced painting. Madame De Galincourt did not speak but once or twice she moved uneasily, as though suffering some physical or mental discomfort. At length she rose, and the artist heard the soft rustle of her silken skirts as she stepped across the small space that separated them, and stood behind his chair. He continued painting almost mechanically, the portrait was nearly finished and the position of the subject was immaterial.

"Shall I tell Monsieur a story?" said a soft voice at his elbow.

"I should much prefer Madame's remaining still," was the cold reply. "her movements distract me."

"I am tired, Monsieur, I so tired, it hurts me to walk about a little. I will look at some of the pictures, may I see that one, yonder, with its face to the wall?"

"It would not be worth its face to the wall if I wished it seen, therefore Madame must excuse it."

She sighed, and walking over to the chair upon which she had thrown her long mantle, she took the latter up, and fumbling about with it for a moment, came back with something in her hand.

"Can you paint this in, Monsieur?" she asked.

He looked at it, and gave a half suppressed start. It was a little grey squirrel tail boa.

"I wore it many years ago, Monsieur, and I thought that—if you could paint it in around my neck, it would soften the—" she hesitated and stopped.

De Mauban did not answer, a flood of memories had rushed in upon him at sight of that tiny furry thing. When had he seen it last? Around the neck of a lovely, laughing girl, whose eyes, those eyes that now looked at him from the portrait, were raised to his with love shining in their rapid depths. Almost mechanically he projected some paint, and taking a fresh brush, placed a few touches around the eyes, taking out some of the crow's feet and wrinkles, and arching the gracefully curved eyebrows a trifle more.

Almost holding her breath, she watched the slender hand, would be so more?

But he returned to his task of finishing, and the hideous thin neck, the hollow cheeks, and wrinkled forehead remained as before.

"Will Monsieur paint the fur in, for me?" she asked again.

"It will spoil the appearance of the portrait, Madame," was the reply. "It will not harmonize with the rest of the costume."

"I do not mind that," she said eagerly.

"See I will place it upon this chair, where you can see it, Monsieur, paint it for me please." Like one whose actions were not of his own volition, he began to paint the boa around the neck of the portrait. She saw that he placed it very low down, too low, in fact, to hide what she wished hidden, but it was a slight concession and she was content.

She stood, and watched him, he seemed to have forgotten her existence.

She spoke again. "Shall I tell Monsieur a story?"

A slight pause and then he answered with an apparent effort, as though struggling against some hidden power. "If Madame pleases."

She drew back a few paces, and paused, suddenly she bent over the back of his chair.

"Henri," she said softly. "The chestnuts are falling in the forest of Marly!"

He almost dropped the brush he held, but did not answer, and she continued:

"Monsieur knows the forest of Marly?"

"On the forest of Marly, a young girl lived on the outskirts of the forest. She was simple and uneducated, a mere country girl if you will, but she was pretty; some of the tourists who came to the forest called her beautiful. There was one, a young artist—"

She stopped abruptly, De Mauban had made a violent gesture, and splashed some paint upon the neck of the picture. He proceeded to remove it, and she saw with a sudden exultation that he had painted out some of the hideous wrinkles, and made the throat more rounded.

She continued, "The girl knew nothing of the great world, save what she had heard, and though she sometimes wished to go to Paris and see something of its wonders, yet she was content in her forest home. The young artist—his name was Henri, Monsieur—fell deeply in love with her, and she—"

"Deceived and fooled him," uttered De Mauban.

"What did you say Monsieur?" said she softly.

"Nothing," was the curt reply, but even while he uttered it, the painter put a few touches on the cheeks of the portrait, and they filled out, and grew round and peachy, with a bloom as utterly unlike that of the rouged original as could be conceived.

"They used to take long walks to gether," continued the soft voice, "and once, when the chestnuts were falling, as they are doing now—"

The painter suddenly started up, the brush and palette falling to the ground with a clatter, and seizing her hands cried, in a voice hoarse with emotion:

"Marie, why do you tell me this? It is to torture me?"

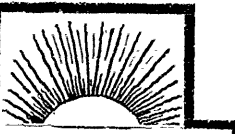
"It is—because—" she turned away from him.

"Tell me," he cried, "Did you do you care?"

She hesitated an instant "Finish the portrait, Henri, and I will tell you."

He sat down again, and taking up the brush began touching up the neck of the portrait.

Beneath those magic touches, the scragginess disappeared and gave place to a rounded softness; he mixed some



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flush tints and began to paint them in. She watched, breathlessly, the wonderful brush was transforming the hideous wrinkled, middle aged face upon the canvas to the features of a young girl of surpassing loveliness.

Only the hair remained, more colour: were blond, and rapidly the horrible greenish yellow gave place to a lovely gold, in which seemed to be imprisoned some rays of the rapidly departing sunlight.

The bright scarlet drapery was gradually toned down to a tint that threw up the lovely face and sun gilded hair in magnificent relief. It was done, never did a more exquisite face look out from painted canvas.

She drew a deep, quivering breath, once more, he arose and faced her. What was that in her eyes that sent the blood rushing back upon his heart in one wild torrent, leaving him cold and numb as with the chill of death?

"Monsieur has done even better than I expected," said a cold, metallic voice, utterly unlike the soft tones she had used before, "I think he must have had something more than a memory to assist him. Stay, perhaps this will solve the riddle," and walking rapidly to the hidden picture she turned it to the light. It was the portrait of a lovely girl, standing in a glade surrounded by forest trees, through which the sunlight filtered, falling upon and lighting up her gleaming hair.

The likeness was exact, the two portraits were one and the same, even the little grey boa. She laughed slightly, a hard, metallic laugh, with no mirthfulness in it.

"My power was dead," she said, regarding him triumphantly. "But I know, and Monsieur has learnt, that a woman's power never dies; if the lesson has been a hard one, I am sorry."

With a low cry he sprang towards her, but with an imperious gesture she put out her jeweled hands and stopped him.

"No," she said, "Come no nearer—Louise," she called, raising her voice slightly; her maid appeared at the door.

"Give Monsieur this envelope," The maid took it and advanced towards De Mauban, who, taking no notice of her outstretched hand, she placed the envelope upon the table.

"Now," said the Marquise, "take my portrait down to the carriage, be careful, it is wet, place it upon the seat facing me."

De Mauban still stood motionless, and as the maid retired, the woman who had twice deceived him, turned and looked at the painter with a cruel gleam in her eyes.

"Monsieur had better examine the contents of the envelope," she said, in a voice whose softness contrasted strangely with the hard glitter of her eyes. "It may explain to him why Marie Baudrey preferred to become the wife of the Marquis De Galincourt instead of linking herself with the unnamed fortunes of Henri De Mauban."

Suddenly rousing himself, De Mauban took the envelope the maid had placed upon the table and broke the seal, a cheque for two thousand francs fell out and fluttered to the floor.

"Is Monsieur satisfied, does he understand?" said the soft voice.

But the man made no reply, and the woman who had cruelly wronged him for the sake of wealth and rank gazed at the bowed grey head for a moment unmoved, then, with the same cold, hard gleam in her eyes, she turned and went from the room and from the house.

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