

petition for this rare collection Hugh took no part, for after the first year he bought no picture on commission, and the collection did not appeal to him.

But towards the close of the sale a few outside pictures were sold. Amongst them was a small canvas, on which, through the grime, could be distinguished some trees and a fountain, and the distant turrets of a chateau. In the foreground were some vague figures of shepherdesses in tight stays and hoops and shepherds in powdered wigs and kneebreeches. The picture was entered as a Lancet on the catalogue, but without the authenticating initials. There had been a fine example of Lancet sold earlier in the day. The connoisseurs were shy of this dirty canvas. Hugh made a careless bid of ten pounds, and the picture was about to be knocked down to him when one of the dealers, who made a point of following his lead, raised the price to fifteen. Then, amid a good deal of amusement amongst the knowing ones, the price was gradually pushed up, five pounds at a time, to a hundred and twenty, at which point Hugh's opponent dropped off and he secured the prize.

His friends and rivals crowded round, laughing and chaffing him on his purchase. It was seldom they got the chance to laugh at Hugh Limner, and they made the most of it.

"Wonders will never cease," cried one. "Who would have thought that you, Limner, of all men living, would have been taken in by so transparent a fraud. Surely you don't think that that is a Lancet?"

"Of course not," said Hugh. He paused and there was the silence of surprise amongst the group at his frank confession. "But," he added quietly, "I know it is a Watteau, and I am willing to have a picture of the master instead of the pupil."

CHAPTER XI.

The Hidden Turner.

IN those days Hugh was an indefatigable reader. He made all art his subject, and wandered, with scarcely less delight, through the adjoining domain of poetry. Ruskin was one of his chief favourites. The great idealist's knowledge and sympathy, the charm of his exquisite style, charming even when it failed to convince, had an indescribable fascination for the picture lover.

Second-hand bookshops drew and held him as the magnet holds iron. One morning, turning over rubbish on a stall in one of the narrow streets off the Strand, he came on a curious find. A shabby little brown volume entitled "Turner's Poems, Printed for private circulation," lay hidden under a pile of year old magazines. In the fly leaf was an inscription to Ruskin.

Hugh had often longed for a sight of those quaint poems of which a stanza is so often found under the name of the great painter's masterpieces in the catalogue of the Academy exhibitions.

The bookseller noted the eagerness in his voice as he asked the price. Drawing his bow at random he demanded half a sovereign, and was surprised and disappointed when Hugh paid the money without a murmur and walked off exultingly with his prize.

The book, when he came to read it that evening by his own fireside, justified his exultation. There was much in the curious volume that excuses Whistler's audacious mot that Turner was a poet not a painter. As he read Hugh was tempted to believe him both.

Many of the verses were indeed mere wild rhodomontade without form or meaning. But through it all, like the vein of gold in the quartz, ran a thin streak of genuine poetry. The margin of the volume was pencilled with the pithy comments of Ruskin, sarcastic or pitying for the most part. But here and there, by a single note of admiration standing at the end of a line, the critic confessed the poet.

Almost at the end of the book Hugh came on a wonderful treasure trove—a letter to Ruskin in the unmistakable handwriting of Turner. The paper fluttered out from the pages of

the book into the grate and narrowly escaped the fire. Hugh picked it up lazily, and for a moment could hardly believe his good fortune. Yes, it was unmistakable. The thin sheet of paper had been used for a bookmark and forgotten in the volume. Until that moment, in all possibility, no eye save Turner's and Ruskin's had ever seen it. Hugh's interest grew to excitement as he read. "Thornton Cottage, outside Salisbury," was the address.

"My dear Ruskin," the letter began. "If you have a few days to spare come down to see me. It has been glorious weather since I came—an artist's summer. Clouds and sunshine, and such sunsets and sunrises as drive a painter to despair. You owe me a visit. Come and see my work. For once I have taken your advice. How often have you reproached me for the use of fugitive colours. Well, heretofore, I have painted for my own delight and chose the colours that gave the most splendid effects, regardless of the future. But this one picture I paint wholly for posterity—and you. I will take precautions that it shall not fade. Once finished it will never see the light till the painter is dead. I will tell you no more except that it is a sunrise with Salisbury Cathedral in the background. Come soon if you care to see my picture, for it is almost complete."

Hugh read no more. Closing the letter again in the pages of the book, he lay back in his deep armchair, lit a fresh cigar from the stump of the old one, and cudgelled his brain to find a clue to the meaning of the letter. One thing was clear. This great picture which the master himself esteemed his masterpiece had vanished. There was no tradition of it left.

Turner himself was plainly delighted with his work, and eager to submit to the judgment of the most discriminating of critics. But Ruskin had never seen it. If he had, some mention of it, praise or blame, would have found place in his writings. The picture was lost to posterity for whom the great painter meant it as his crowning legacy. No eyes but his own had even looked on the master's masterpiece. Concealed or destroyed? that was the question. If concealed, what chance was there of finding it, what hope after all these years that the masterpiece had been preserved unimpaired?

A third time Hugh read the letter, and took courage from the reading. Turner's pride in the picture was its protection, and Hugh was stung to the resolve that if it still existed in the world he would find it. One clue at least he had. The date and the address "Thornton" on the top of the letter to Ruskin. The next morning, neglecting all other engagements and appointments, he ran down by an early train to Salisbury.

FORTUNE favoured him. At the second house-agent's office that he visited he found the name "Thornton" on the books.

"Old fashioned and picturesque," the agent said, "yet we have had trouble finding a tenant for it. You see, it's neither a farmhouse nor a mansion, just a compromise between the two. Practically no ground goes with the mansion, merely a garden and an apple orchard. But it commands the most beautiful view in the country, and with a small expenditure it could be made a delightful retreat for a Londoner. Would you care to see it, sir?"

Yes, Hugh would care to see it. Indeed, he had already almost made up his mind to buy it. Even at the worst, if the great picture was irrevocably lost, it would be pleasant to own the house where it was painted. All doubt vanished when he saw the place the next day in the glow of a rich sunset.

(To be continued.)

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