

AT THE CONVENT GATE.

Wistaria blossoms trail and fall
Above the length of barrier wall;
And softly, now and then,
The shy, staid-breasted doves will flit
From roof to gateway top, and sit
And watch the ways of men.

The gate's ajar. If one might peep!
Ah, what a haunt of rest and sleep!
The shadowy garden seems!
And note how dimly to and fro,
The grave, gray-hooded Sisters go,
Like figures seen in dreams.

Look, there is one that tells her beads;
And yonder one apart that reads
A tiny missal's page;
And see, beside the well, the two
That, kneeling, strive to lure anew
The magpie to its cage!

Not beautiful—not all! But each
With that mild grace, outlying speech,
Which comes of even blood;
The veil unseen that women wear
With heart-whole thought, and quiet care,
And hope of higher good.

"A placid life—a peaceful life!
What need to these the name of Wife?
What gentler task," I said—
"What worthier—e'en your arts among—
That tend the sick, and teach the young,
And give the hungry bread!"

"No worthier task!" re-echoes she,
Who, cloister clinging, turns to me
To face the road again:
And yet, in that warm heart of hers,
She means the doves, for she prefers
To watch the ways of men."

A VICTIM OF FOLLY.

When Alfred Standish was in Rome he acted pretty much as English people generally do when visiting the immortal city. And yet it might be better to say that he "did" the sights in an American spirit, very thoroughly, but rather with an idea that they must be done, because it is the proper thing for a traveller to see everything in order to be able to talk about it afterwards, than from any more exalted motive.

Setting his appearance aside—for he was remarkably handsome—Alfred was an average specimen of humanity, who might have turned out superior to the ordinary run if in his career he had met with any of those checks and crosses which are thought to be so essential for the strengthening and development of human character. It had never been his fate to want anything, to really long for the possession of something impossible, unattainable; and it is a well-known fact that having every little wish or whim gratified, if not anticipated, has proved the ruin of many and many a disposition.

"That boy will be utterly spoiled," were words often spoken during the placid sunny childhood of Alfred Standish. But natural amiability saved him from growing selfish, palpably selfish; no opportunities occurred for the exercise of self-denial; and so, as he grew from boy to youth, from the age of puppydom to that of manhood, the world declared it to be a marvellous thing that he was not spoiled, and assigned to him a place amongst the foremost of society's demi-gods and darlings.

For beyond the fact of his being to a certain extent clever and accomplished, and handsome as a hero of ancient ballad or Prince of fairy lore, Alfred was the possessor of a noble old country seat, a beautiful yacht, and money enough to indulge in a thousand extravagances, for which, however, his friends considered he had not any inclination. Before he was twenty-five it so happened that all his near relations were dead, those who would have been dear to him having gone while he was too young to feel their loss. He was singularly without encumbrances or responsibilities, free from embarrassments as to his own fortune, thoroughly and, as "match-making mothers lamented, much too hopelessly master of himself.

"Of course he will marry; such an excellent young man is sure to settle early," had been prophesied since the time he was still at Oxford. But year after year passed on, and Alfred's name had never yet been coupled with that of any of the ladies who would so cheerfully have resigned their liberty in exchange for his affections.

"But he only thinks of sport and art and travelling," said Clara, with some chagrin—Clara, who rode across country, and was the only lady who had ever mounted the paragon's favourite hunter. And Maria, who had been on a cruise, and even braved the perils of a storm in his yacht, was obliged to own that he lacked the virtue of susceptibility.

"How animated Mr. Standish looks talking about pictures with Laura's mamma might think at dinner-time, watching her darling gushing about art; "what a mistake it is to say that men only care for dolly creatures with no ideas beyond gossip and flirtation!" Alas for that fond parent's dream of Alfred's being won by Laura's knowledge of foreign galleries! Mr. Standish's attention in the evening would be as fully taken up by Julia's song as by Laura's conversation, and does Julia hope when her *bravura* is ended that she has completely cut out Laura? So she is destined also to disappointment. Mr. Standish is swooped upon by a little nonentity of a married woman, who tells him about her children, who have just got through measles, and he listens to her and sympathizes, without even a shade of boredom on his face. He is an unusually and unaccountably invulnerable young man.

It may appear that the opening sentence of this story was utterly irrelevant; but such is not the case, and having digressed long enough

we will return to the subject of Alfred's visit to Rome.

He had only been there once, and often thought he really must go again when he had time, although he remembered the place perfectly. He liked Rome exceedingly, had not been in the least disappointed, and the additional weight and experience of years were in favour of a second visit proving even more enjoyable than the first. Also he regretted that he had not purchased any pictures when going the round of the studios, his dread of overburdening himself with luggage having probably lost him the chance of acquiring much that he would like to possess. By degrees he became conscious of a feeling, whenever Rome was mentioned, that he had wasted some opportunity—he could scarcely realise what it was—and at last he got into a habit of saying that he should "go to Rome next year." Several winters, however, passed away, and something or other had always prevented his determination from being carried out.

It has been said that he could talk well about the places he had visited, but when he had to undergo an examination respecting his recollections of different galleries or studios he had seen abroad, despite an intelligent fluency of talk, he was inwardly aware that hardly any of the celebrated pictures or statues left such an impression on his memory as did one particular face that he had seen produced and reproduced in the pictures of a then nameless unknown artist, to whose studio he had been taken by some *dilettante* acquaintance. It was a little girl, with a Greuze type of face, and the same countenance had been portrayed in many different phases and stages of completion. The most finished and perfect painting was merely that of the little face distorted by a frown, the small full mouth pouting, and tears of anger standing in the large blue eyes. This the artist had named "La Ragaz-zuccia." The face was so pretty, such a living piece of flesh and blood, the rough curly hair tumbling into the eyes, so like that of a naughty child, that it had taken Alfred's fancy immensely, and he would have bought it had it been for sale. But the artist had not seemed anxious to part with any of his pictures. He was at Rome, he said, almost as an amateur, and although subsequently many of his paintings were exhibited in London, and Alfred from time to time criticised and admired them, the rising R.A. was never associated in his mind with the reserved young artist of the Via Margutta. In reply to his questions concerning the little girl, whose features had been bestowed upon various subjects—a cherub, fairy, nun, in slumber, and even death—Alfred had only been able to elicit the fact that she was not a professional model. He wished the artist would not be so uncommunicative, but appeased his curiosity by the consolatory reflection that the original was in all probability very much glorified in her likenesses, and although he frequently saw the young girl's face in imagination, it was always as represented on the canvas, and a thought of ever seeing her in person never once entered his head.

How he did eventually meet her, and came to understand what it is to feel an all-absorbing interest in anything, is the subject of this story, the prologue whereof being told, we will proceed at once to the opening scene.

Bond street on a rainy day. Far on in the month of March, and four o'clock in the afternoon; consequently a great number of people about, notwithstanding the weather. Mr. Alfred Standish, emerging from Truefit's shop, finds a trifling difficulty in putting up a new umbrella before proceeding on his way.

If he had been stepped in debt, possessed only of an income so small that every farthing for the next few years belonged by rights to his creditors, he would in all probability have hailed a cab and been driven to Brook street, where he was going to pay a call. It is said, "Heaven tempers the wind to the shorn lamb;" what power is it, then, that bestows extravagant and luxurious tastes upon those least able to gratify them? Simply because he was rich, driving so short a distance did not occur to Alfred. He walked well, and his trousers were turned up; he also had on an overcoat; so that he would not bring mud or an atmosphere of damp into his friend's drawing-room.

Having mastered the new umbrella, he was debating whether to cross the road at once, or walk on a little way. There was a great concourse of vehicles in the road just at that moment; so he decided not to attempt the crossing, and turning abruptly to the right, his umbrella came in contact with that of another person coming the contrary way.

"Beg your pardon, sir," said a good-natured female voice; then, as he politely said something about its being his fault, his eyes fell upon a beautiful little face with a shocked and rather pettish expression, and as the umbrella proceeded, with two girls sheltering beneath it, he heard a half cross and yet laughing exclamation of,

"Jane, that's the *ninth* you've knocked against!"

Alfred remained for a moment looking at the retreating figures. "A young lady out with her maid," he concluded, and the maid was not tall enough to carry the umbrella comfortably over her mistress's head.

"What a pretty face!" he thought as he went on; and he wondered who the girl was, whether he knew any of her elder sisters, or whether she was nobody; then she passed out of his mind.

But only to be brought back to it in less than an hour's time. After he had paid his visit, and was returning down Bond street on his way to

his club, an acquaintance met him, and they stopped to speak. The pretty girl and her attendant, tearing themselves reluctantly from a fascinating shop window, were again approaching Alfred. Jane had evidently become tired of knocking up against people, for the offending umbrella was furled, and the drizzling rain fell upon their unprotected bonnets.

Whilst they were still a couple of yards distant from him, Alfred saw the childish cheeks of the pretty girl become suffused with the deepest, loveliest carmine, as some one in a cab passed, and took off his hat to her.

How he could notice so much in an instant of time, was a subject of wonderment afterwards; but Alfred was as positive that the man in the cab was "bad form," "a cad," and a thousand other things, as he was conscious of feeling vexed at the girl's blush of evident delight at his salutation.

Possibly he might have forgotten both his glimpses of the lovely face, had it not been for the sudden sensation of jealousy that arose within him. Not that he reasoned thus with himself, for a man does not own to such trivial weakness as this unaccountable susceptibility to an attack of the green-eyed monster. He was, however, sensible of a great longing to know who this little *fleur-de-lis* could be, to meet her again, become acquainted with her, and find her voice, her mind, and manner equal to her form and features.

And why, he even went so far as to ask himself,—why did he now, for the first time in his life, think like this? Was it that his friends in Brook street, a happy bride and groom, had told him that his life was incomplete; that his chief duty towards himself, his name, and society in general, was to fall in love and marry?

Of course he had given the subject of matrimony a passing thought occasionally, and he looked forward—a very long way—to a time when he should be calmly settled with a wife and family.

The Marias and Julias of his acquaintance would have dressed and sang and talked at him with double zest about this time had they known that Alfred Standish was at last beginning to find his life of passionless liberty and pleasure monotonous, unless they learned also that the hero was vaguely looking for one Greuze-like countenance, beheld only for a few moments one rainy afternoon, as he believed, and yet as strangely familiar to him as if for years and years he had gazed at it incessantly in his dreams.

The object of Alfred's admiration and her companion walked slowly up Bond street, but the young lady's interest in the shops was considerably lessened after that salute from the cavalier in the hansom cab. They crossed Oxford street, and then with a quickened pace soon arrived at their destination, a dismal-looking house in Welbeck street.

"I'm very much obliged to you, Jane, for taking me for this pleasant walk. I should certainly have lost myself, and been obliged to take a cab, if I had gone out alone," spoke the rosy little mouth, as its owner tripped up the steps and scraped the mud from her boots. "O, are you going to open the door?" she continued, as Jane produced a latch-key.

The maid explained that "being the only one kept," by which she meant that she was the sole domestic of the lodging-house, "and missus being stout and objecting to stairs," it saved trouble for her to possess the means of independent ingress; though, when gentlemen had the apartments, they liked to have the use of the key; so then, as there was not a second, Jane had to ring if she was sent out on an errand, and poor Mrs. Jones had the trouble of coming upstairs.

Fortunately no one had been at the door during their absence to give the landlady occasion to repent having spared Jane to walk out with her young lodger, who went up-stairs and quietly entered the sitting-room occupied by her widowed stepmother.

A plaintive, rather captious voice, that evidently of an invalid, greeted her with "How long you have been, Rita! You must be very tired. Are your feet wet? Now do make haste and change your dress. Don't come near me, love; I do so hate the smell of damp clothes."

Margherita ran up to the floor above, and effected a thorough change in her attire, which occupied about ten minutes. On her return to the drawing-room she found a visitor with her stepmother, whom she was delighted to see.

"Giorgina! how enchanting!" she cried.

"How kind of you to come on such a wet day!" "Madame Bertani is most good-natured always," said Rita's stepmother. "But, my dear," she continued, addressing the visitor, "I wish I could make you feel as I do about the child, until her relations pay her the attention due to her father's daughter—"

"You would make her lead the life of a recluse, and that is too bad of you, Mrs. Courtland!" the visitor broke in. "Why not put her in a convent at once? I declare the dullness of England is destroying her—she looks thin and pale. And, after all, supposing your fine Courtlands should refuse to acknowledge her, then she will only have wasted so much time, when she ought to be making the best use of her beauty. She might make a splendid match, if seen at once, before—"

"Excuse my English, and consequently stupid ideas," said Mrs. Courtland; "but if I do not enter into your views it is because—"

"Because you are so proud, mamma," said Rita impatiently. "I wish you were not. Giorgina, I will tell you what it is—"

"Ahi!" cried Giorgina suddenly, stooping to arrange her tidy shoe-strings. "This rosette is loose, and I wish to walk back if the rain holds up. Rita, you must sew it on for me. Mrs. Courtland, do you think it bad for the feet to wear high heels? You must own that a lifetime of unnatural *chaussure* has not spoiled my ankles."

"Faultless, my dear," replied Mrs. Courtland, smiling.

Rita did not perceive the tactics of their crafty visitor, and while her stepmother was giving Madame Bertani credit for good taste in desisting, the child only thought Giorgina might have made more effort to gain her point. The reason she had called that day, as Rita knew, was to try and obtain permission for her young friend to accompany her to a large fancy ball which was to take place in a few days at the house of an old artistic acquaintance of Rita's father.

Two or three words about the Courtlands may be desirable to explain precisely the situation of the heroine of this little sketch.

Years ago Frederick Courtland, the younger son of a North-country baronet, had grown weary of society, his native land, and family; and without any quarrel, or the supposition of having gone to the bad, he merely disappeared, and was in time almost forgotten. He married a beautiful Italian actress, who died a few years after the birth of little Margherita, when the child was just old enough to share and sympathise in the wandering tastes and habits of her father.

Rita had been allowed to grow up pretty much as chance determined; and always being in an artistic atmosphere, never stagnating in one place for any length of time, she somehow managed to pick up an amount of knowledge, experience, and common sense that served instead of a regular education, and being bright and sweet-tempered, as well as very lovely, la Signorina Courtland, even at the early age of fourteen, had inspired a hopeless passion in the breasts of several ardent southern swains, and, dowerless as she was known to be, Frederick had been asked for his daughter's hand as soon as she should be old enough to marry.

At the time when he was beginning to realise that the little girl was growing up, and likely to prove more of a responsibility, Frederick had a severe attack of fever, from which he never completely recovered. The thought of being taken away from his child, and the ineligibility of those whose desire it was to gain possession of her, determined him to make a second marriage. The lady he chose was a countrywoman of his own, possessed of no very special attractions, for she was no longer young, had hardly any money, and was in bad health. But she had been kind to Rita before Rita's father made her acquaintance, and the child did not in the least dislike her, though she was unlike most of the people she cared for, particularly different from her dearest friend Giorgina, who was the only Englishwoman Rita was intimate with. For Madame Bertani, be it said, was English born and bred, and had been called Georgy Thomson before she ran away from school at Brighton with the Italian singing-muster.

After Frederick Courtland's death, his widow, though sincerely grieved at his loss, was able to interest herself in laying schemes for making her stepdaughter acquainted with her father's relations. She wrote to the present Baronet, informing him of his brother's death and the existence of Margherita; but months and months elapsed, and no sign of recognition arrived. Then Mrs. Courtland decided upon coming to England to urge Rita's claims upon the notice of the family, feeling that she was becoming every week less fitted for the responsibility her husband had bequeathed her, and they had arrived about a fortnight before that rainy afternoon when Rita attracted the admiration of Mr. Standish. Their only acquaintance in London was Madame Bertani, at whose house Rita found plenty of amusement, somewhat to Mrs. Courtland's chagrin, as she considered the wife of an opera singer scarcely the right sort of chaperon for her stepdaughter. But Giorgina was a good-natured, well-meaning woman, and it would have been too hard to forbid the companionless girl to associate with her old acquaintance, even if Mrs. Courtland had been less inclined to like her than was the case. The invalid was really rather fascinated by Madame Bertani. This Rita knew, and although the matter had been previously discussed, and Mrs. Courtland had shown herself more positive than usual in asserting her authority or influence, she had hoped that her stepmother's objections would be overruled, and that she would be allowed to exhibit herself at a certain ball in the bewitching fancy costume she had danced in so happily at the last carnival before her father's death.

She felt that her friend was very heartless when, after a few minutes' talk upon indifferent subjects, Madame Bertani rose to take leave, saying airily,

"Ebbene, Rita mia! When your grand relations acknowledge you, you must make them give a fancy ball for you. Meanwhile, as you are not to be there, I don't care whether the Moretons' is a success or not."

"Don't you want the bow fastened on your shoe?" said Rita, with a lump in her throat and a misty look in her blue eyes.

"I think it will last till I get home, thanks," said Madame Bertani. "I hope I haven't tired you, dear Mrs. Courtland. Good-bye."

Rita followed the visitor from the room, in order to accompany her to the door. "I'm afraid you will have a wet walk; I suppose you have a cloak and umbrella," she said rather