

From the Forget-me-not.

THE OLD GENTLEMAN'S PENCIL.

BY T. E. WILKS, ESQ.

Concluded from our last.

Arrived at the palazzo, the Count Aldini was ushered into a splendidly furnished saloon, where the Marchese, a man of haughty bearing, rose to receive his distinguished guest. Talent in Italy is a sure admission to the circles of rank and fashion; it was honour to be known to the painter Ernest, and the Marchese greeted his presence with respect. Servitors brought in chocolate, and the Marchese proposed to while away an hour in play. Ernest willingly consented, and, in a few moments, the magic dice were substituted for those produced. Well performed they the work marked out for them! Swiftly passed the ruddy gold from the agitated Marchese to his fortunate antagonist, and at length the sum he had lost became frightfully large.

"Sir Count, you are lucky; that last stake was of some magnitude—let us double it and try again," and a faint, sickly, smile played over his features; he intended the smile to be of mirth—it was of agony.

"Agreed."

The nobleman rattled the dice and threw: the painter won.

"Confusion!"

"Will your excellenza try once more?"

"No, Sir Ernest; we will settle accounts."

"As your excellenza pleases."

The Marchese paced the room hurriedly for a few moments and then returned to Ernest.

"I know not by what means it is, Count, that I have thus lost my usual good fortune: surely I owe you a sum, the extent of which renders present payment impossible."

Had the Marchese been stretched upon the rack, he could scarcely have suffered more than he did at that moment from wounded pride. Ernest, who was not made for a villain, hardly suffered less; he hastened to reply.

"My noble patron, say not another word"—he paused then—"there is one condition on which I swear never again to mention this hateful subject, never to demand the sum which chance"—he shuddered—"has won for me!"

"A condition?" said the Florentine; "name it."

"Give me your daughter for a bride—~~sooner than fair and honest~~—as lady to become the Countess Aldini."

"How! Sir painter, are you mad?"

"No, Marchese, nor ask I any unreasonable condition. I shall not be the first whose talents"—he shuddered again—"have procured him a noble bride. What say ye?"

The Marchese resumed his hurried walk to and fro for a short period, then turned and grasped the hand of Ernest.

"She is thine!" He left the room.

"Joy! Joy!" exclaimed the artist; "she will be mine!—she will obey her father's behest, and the dread crime of murder will be spared me."

A half stifled laugh reached his wondering ear—he hastily turned, and there, close at his elbow, stood—the old gentleman!

"What a whistry!" said the latter, in his calm, unmoved voice. "If necessary, you have resolved to commit this deed; but if you find you can accomplish your purpose without doing so, why then you felicitate yourself on its non-performance, and I suppose deem yourself as innocent as though you had never dreamed of the crime. This is a sophistry of my own peculiar invention, and I can assure you it is much encouraged and admired by some of my pupils, to whom I recommend it as sound logic; you it is unnecessary to deceive in that way, and I will tell you why." The old gentleman paused and refreshed himself, after this long speech, with a very ample pinch of snuff. Then he resumed thus:

"The fact is, that in this case you are too early with your self-justifications; the deed, as I told you, must be done. Aloysia will apparently consent to marry you, but it will be more outward seeming; she has agreed to elope this very night from Florence with Antonio. As I passed

through the garden just now, I heard the proposal made and agreed to."

"You heard it made?"

"Yes; in fact, to speak truth, I told Antonio to propose it."

"You and is this your friendship for me?"

"Friendship!" said the old gentleman; and then he smiled, "when he took another pinch of snuff—"recollect I must attend to my own interest."

I suspect that there are a great many in the world, like the old gentleman, very willing to befriend another as long as it agrees with their own interest or gratifies their innate love of ostentation, but equally willing to sacrifice their friendship the moment that his welfare interferes with their own self desires.

"Do as I bid you," said Ernest's elderly acquaintance; "in a few minutes Antonio will be here. Remember, the entire success of our wishes depends upon his drinking the contents of this phial."

The old gentleman walked away, and Ernest felt relieved by his advice.

"It must be so," murmured Ernest mentally; "I never can live to her the bride of another."

The folding door flew back, and the Marchese re-entered, leading by the hand the fair cause of our painter's solicitude and crime. She indeed very beautiful, but the fiend, Care, had already throned himself on her marble forehead. I wonder whether there is a single brow in the world entirely destitute of care.

"Count Aldini," said the Marchese, "my daughter accepts your proffered alliance."

"Signora," eagerly exclaimed Ernest, "accept my warmest thanks for your kind approval—my future life shall show—"

"Hold, Signor!" interrupted the lady—and although her increasing paleness proved her deep agitation, her voice faltered not in the interjection. "It is but just I should inform you that though become your wife to shield my father from dishonour—Signor, I know all—" Ernest blushed for very shame my heart is in the keeping of—of—another."

The heart of Ernest stole him; but the sensation quickly subsided, for the gentleman whispered in his ear, "She but deceives and has resolved to fly this night with Antonio." Ernest smiled inwardly, advanced, and took her hand.

"Fair Signora, I fear not that my constant love will eventually win for me in return that precious boon—thine own."

He seated himself on a sofa by the side of the Signora, and servitors brought wine whilst in ill digested and hurried words he sought to vince the fair one of his love. Little, however, needed he his disjointed sentences or honeyed language; her thoughts were evidently away from him; her eyes were fixed on the door which led to the gardens of the palazzo. Suddenly her cheek flushed and paled again. Ernest stole her glance—her lover, the young Antonio, had entered the saloon.

"The opportunity is at hand—see you miss it not; 'twill secure the girl: Antonio goes, you will possess the love she now gives to him," whispered the gentleman with the black rappee and velvet Scotch.

The Marchese rose from the couch on which he had been reclining, and advanced towards Antonio with the air of a man who has some pleasant duty to perform, somewhat to enact of which he would willingly rid himself, yet knows not how. There was a moment's pause, and then he spoke.

"Antonio, you are well aware that I have long destined my daughter to become your bride—I have been compelled, however unwillingly, to rescind that determination; I have given her to Count Aldini. You are agitated. I do not expect you to be so great and so sudden a privation unmoved; but least exhibit that degree of command over your feelings which belongs to man. Here is no other alternative—look upon her already as his bride, for to-morrow he takes her such."—Ernest felt his cheeks glow with rapture—"this I have

promised; he, in return, resigns a mighty power over me which chance"—he shuddered at the recollection, Ernest did the same at the same thing—"had bestowed upon him."

"Now, now," murmured the painter's elbow-councillor, "bid him drink with you." Ernest rose.

"Signor Antonio," he said, "I cannot disguise from myself that you rather than I would have been the choice of the Signora Aloysia; still I cannot consent to resign her and thus compromise my own happiness, but, when once united to the lady of my love, I will spare nothing to make thee amends. Let us, in token of our amity, drink from each other's goblets!" The fatal draught he had already mingled with the sparkling wine—and now his intended victim, coldly bowing, received it from his hand.

"Capital! capital!" muttered his invisible monitor and Ernest heard him tap the lid of his snuff-box with evident glee.

"Drink, drink to your rival," cried the Marchese. "'Tis vain to murmur, Antonio, the decree is gone forth, and we have nought to do but to submit. Yet oh! remember, Antonio, 'twas necessity, not choice, which bade me act as I have done. Were I to wed my child to thee, poverty would be her portion—dishonour, mine."

"Marchese," gasped Antonio, "you have conquered. From earliest youth you have been my friend—my patron—and I will not now deceive you; Aloysia and myself had planned to elope this night together. Take this confession as it is meant: I now abandon the design; I crave your pardon for once entertaining it; it was a suggestion, solely, from the Evil One." Ernest shuddered, and mentally agreed with him. "No, Marchese, I would not purchase my soul's idol at the price of her father's dishonour."

"Antonio," said Aloysia, firmly, "you have acted well, but I am as incapable of deceit as yourself, and when I gave my consent to become the Count Aldini's bride, I confessed and abandoned our hasty project."

"The moment of triumph approaches," whispered the old gentleman. "I need not stay any longer, I can see, so good bye—and when the warm and passionate kisses of your beautiful bride excite your soul to rapture, remember with gratitude the donor of the pencil." A slight rustling noise reached the ear of Ernest, and then he felt as though a weight was removed from his brain and from his heart, and the scene enacting before him engrossed his mind.

"How nobly have these people acted!" he mentally muttered—"how paltry a part have I played! and see—see—the old Marchese has grasped the hand of Antonio; and now he blesses him, while Aloysia mutely stands prepared to sacrifice herself to save her parent! And is it I—Ernest Hartmann—is it I, indeed, who am the cause of all this misery? Am I a demon? Does this pencil render those who possess it fiends? Ha! there is murder doing—he takes the poisoned cup—he bows around—he raises it to his lips—one moment and I am lost, or, perhaps saved! He is it too late! bold! drink not! you must not drink!" he shouted. He rushed forward—he sought to snatch the goblet from the hands of Antonio; and then exhausted with the mental struggle, half sank upon a couch. All was astonishment!

"How, Signor? sternly inquired the Marchese, "what does this strange conduct mean? What, I charge thee tell me, what is in the cup?"

"Have we assassins here?" cried Antonio.

"Assassins!" said Ernest, as he rose feebly, and remembered the necessity of warding off suspicion. "No, no—'twas but a sudden phantasy that oppressed me."

"A weak subterfuge! Now I remember me, this is thy cup; prove thy innocence, which now we question, by drinking its contents thyself;" and, as he spoke, Antonio tendered the goblet.

"So, so," muttered the old gentleman, "you have made a clever piece of business of this during my momentary absence. You must now drink yourself to escape suspicion, nay, even to avoid an ignominious