

THE LOVER'S QUEST.

Stood they where the night dews falling,
Spread like silver o'er the sea;
Sparkling 'neath the smiling goddess
Sailing o'er them placidly,
With her shimmering rays o'er spreading
Tranquil lake and changing sea.

Lit she up those earnest faces,
Interchanging looks of love,
Each replete with nameless graces,
As each voice for mastery strove,
Breathing ardent vows, and solemn,
By that lover's lamp above.

Sad his longing glance, but tender,
As he tore himself away;
Sweet the maiden's smile, bewitching,
While the moonbeams o'er her play
False, Oh! false, the heart coquette's
That within her bosom lay.

Morning sun with beaming glances
Gilds the old ancestral grove,
And a messenger advances
To the votary of love,
And his tidings, like a dagger,
In that trusting heart he drove.

"Wedded I say you, fatal herald!
That she should be false and live!"
"Stay, my lord, and sheathe thy weapon,
Death is not for thee to give,
For afar her chosen bridegroom
Bears the lovely fugitive."

Down he fell, as though the tidings
Had indeed his death-stroke been;
When he rose, how wild his glances,
And how altered was his mien;
Reason, though not yet departed,
Tottered on her throne, 'twas seen.

Now from anxious friends he wanders,
Lost in foreign lands afar,
On his lip a strain melodious,
In his hand his loved guitar;
Seeking one whose face still pierces
Clouded memory, like a star.

Little know the crowds who listen
That a princely name he bore,
Or that feet, now well high shodless,
Once had trod a marble floor;
And they, wondering, hear repeated
Still the same sad measure o'er.

'Twas a song that oft had echoed
To the clear Italian sky;
'Twas a song that oft had summoned
Tear-drops to his lady's eye;
'Tis the song he hopes will call her
To receive his parting sigh.

Near the crowded hall of fashion,
Watching each departing guest;
Near each haunt of wealth and beauty,
Still of one faint hope possessed,
That his eyes may rest upon her—
Thus endures the lover's quest.

Montreal.

M. J. WELLS.

A PICTURE DEALER'S ROMANCE.

I.

I, John Gildern, was confidential clerk to Messrs. Copal & Sons, picture dealers, near Oxford street, London, long ago, when these events happened; and the firm of Gildern & Co., that now passes pictures worth thousands through its hands, was not then even a dream of mine.

I thread my way back through the maze and confusion of a busy life to those unforgotten days, and one picture rises before me, real, living—all but substantial in my memory—the one picture that has haunted me through all these years, and that all the gold that ever was coined could not purchase, nor all the power of man give back again to my bodily sight. A young English girl, not tall or queenly; not lofty in looks, but straight and graceful and very fair; a face with clear-cut features, wearing yet the looks of a child; blue eyes, looking upward, with their dark fringes raised; eyes of the softest grayish blue, not bright, unskilled in any artfulness of glance, not fine with any artistic correctness of form, but eyes that were supremely beautiful in that rapt, upward look, because they told of a child's unconscious simplicity, of a true heart's open candor, of a pure soul that in every-day life, and among every day things, was bright enough to make its presence known. This is the picture in my mind. Marian standing on the doorstep of a manor house watching the floating clouds in the autumn sky. It was a picture of ordinary things with an inner depth of beauty. The accessories were commonplace enough. There was a white pavement before this side door, some ivy on the wall, and all within was dark. The fair figure thus framed was dressed in some poor cotton stuff of pale blue and white lines that ran into one soft color. The dusky brown hair, with only a few golden threads where it sprang straight upward from the forehead, was plaited and hung in braids, as was the custom once before in those old days; and the hat, with ivy leaves thrust under its band of pale blue, was pushed back, and cast no shadow on the never-to-be-forgotten face.

I, plain John Gildern, was in the most non-romantic of moods, when, turning out of the path from the side gate by which I had entered, I came upon this sight. I presented the appearance of the most ordinary man of thirty, such as may be seen any day in London banks or offices in scores. I had come to the house merely on business, with no introduction to the family; but I carried a carpetbag—a necessary appurtenance of the traveller in those days—and I was invited to stay in the house until my business was done, for it was expected to be troublesome and lengthy work—the drawing up of an accurate catalogue of the names of a gallery of pictures, which the master of

this place desired to sell to our firm. At my approach the girl stepped out of the doorway into the garden, and I saw no more of her that day.

An old gentleman, careworn and, as it seemed to me, not too amiable in appearance or manner, received me in a room full of books and papers. When the servant, a shabby-looking individual with threadbare livery, ushered me into his presence, he was bending over the table looking at some stones and colored earth through a glass that he held in a thin, palsied hand. He drew a newspaper hurriedly over his treasures, and without asking me to be seated, made his inquiries in a proud, slow voice. Was I from Messrs. Copal & Sons? I was. Had I come to examine the pictures as their agent? Yes, I had come to do that service. Then, he said, holding himself straight all the time, and with a pitiable artifice of display, smoothing back his thin gray hair with the shaking hand, whereon glittered a great diamond—then I would find my room made ready; and I was free to stay at Elmsmere as long as my work lasted, for Messrs. Copal had given him to understand that it was sometimes a tedious operation to catalogue and do justice to so many pictures of all degrees and merit. He explained that he was a lover not of art but of study—waving his hand toward the book shelves. He never went near the picture gallery, and, desiring retirement, he chose to ask but few to his house; so he was anxious to clear off the whole art collection—"all," he said, "every one of them;" and with a sudden betrayal of anxiety despite his proud demeanor. "I am sure, sir, Messrs. Copal have sent a competent agent who will do my property justice. You can have them all, every one, mind; and I know such a house as yours gives a good price. Now, sir, the servants will attend to your wants."

With that he bowed me out; and the shabby serving man went before me along the passage, with slippers down at heel and stooping gait, a living satire upon the last order of the poor broken-down gentleman. Such indeed, was his master! I knew it as well as if he had shown me his mortgage papers and the blank credit side of the accounts of Elmsmere. His diamond ring, his cold ceremony and his erect port, braving fortune, did not deceive me; but I must say for the credit of me, John Gildern, the clerk, that I quitted his presence as I would have quitted that of a millionaire; for respect was commanded by this remnant of a grand family struggling against ill-fortune, and being, as the phrase goes, "out of luck."

My work began, and was not easily ended. There were but few paintings of value, though there were many having traditions of great names attached to them, which a close examination proved to be groundless; for these were generally but copies, or works "in the manner of" Van Eyck or De Wint, as the case might be. There were, however, some really good Dutch pictures, a beautiful but ill-preserved Madonna of the Tuscan school, and a Rubens that sorely puzzled me, but which, as the event proved, turned out to be genuine. The main bulk of the collection was family portraits, worth little more than their frames. It was clear from the names of these that the family was related to a knightly one; but this branch bore no title. There was a veritable Stuart court lady by Lely among the rubbish; and there were two pretty children with unkempt hair, great brown eyes and pointed chins, purporting to be from the pencil of Sir Joshua Reynolds. There is no need to describe, nor can I at this day remember, all the pictures of that miscellaneous collection. But among these hundreds of bright or old and discolored canvases there was one that attracted my attention, and it was only a little thing, no more than eighteen or twenty inches in size. This was the portrait of a fair young woman among vine leaves at a window. She was dressed in white silk, adorned with jewels, and with strings of large pearls round her neck. Her hands were raised and clasped as if in some enraptured gesture, her blue eyes cast upward. And though the dress was as different, and the attitude of the hands was tragic and what we commonly call "stagey," I had no difficulty in detecting a striking likeness between those fair, refined, spiritual features and the girl I had seen standing at the door. In the corner of the picture there was an awkward smear of paint. "That conceals the artist's name," I thought, and I soon carefully removed it. But beneath there was only scratched in small white letters, "My Juliet"—two words which cast no light upon my business but awakened my curiosity to a painful degree. On the back was a date twenty years before.

My work soon put the discovery out of my head. I saw no one all day except the slipshod serving man; and, after a lonely evening, he came with a guttering candle to light me up stairs to a large bare room, filled with the smoke of an unwanted fire. It was a room with faded hangings, seedy pictures, a tiled hearth-place and shadowy half-lit walls. Any one nervously inclined would have imagined not one but half a dozen ghosts there. I was haunted by nothing but the memory of the girl at the door, and the mystery of the portrait with its obliterated name, "My Juliet."

II.

All next day I worked alone, the rain pattering against the high narrow windows of the

gallery. Many of the family portraits I omitted from my last list as not saleable, and various other pictures I set down as "doubtful," no being able, without consultation, to settle the question of their authenticity; but the little painting of the girl in white silk at the window was so exquisite in feeling, in color, and in minute finish, that I had no hesitation about placing it in my list. It was about sunset when the light in the gallery was strong and clear in a dry hour after the rain, that as I knelt deciphering some artist's marks on a little Dutch sea piece hung badly near the floor, I heard a light footfall, and looking up I beheld a slight girlish figure treading with little slippers on the bark oak floor. I rose and bowed. It was the girl of whom I had wished vainly all day and all last evening to catch another glimpse. I rightly guessed that she was my host's granddaughter, and I was not free from an embarrassing flutter of heart when she came to speak to me; but I supposed it would be some message from the old man, nothing more.

The girl drew near and began to speak, with eyes not downcast, but like a child's eyes, raised steadily to mine, with a look that was at once the soul of innocence and maidenly gentleness. "I want to ask you," she said, "is that picture to be sold among the rest?" The picture she pointed to was that which had roused my curiosity the evening before.

Yes, I said; it was on my list. The instructions received were to the effect that all were to be sold; and though there were some of the larger portraits that I could not take, this picture was of value.

Never shall I forget the effect of these words—the nervous trembling of the girl's lid and liquid look in the blue eyes. "Sir," she said, addressing me in that way because she knew nothing of latter day customs, and was making an earnest appeal, "Sir, it is my mother's portrait. Grandfather does not care for it; but oh! I do. It is no use for me to ask it of him, he thought so little of her. But will you ask him and have it kept for me?"

"Most assuredly I will," said I, looking down at the earnest face, which it would have taken a harder and more uncharitable heart than John Gildern's to refuse. "I am certain there will be no difficulty having it left out of the list."

"I am not so sure of that," she said, smiling and shaking her head. "Grandfather has such strange ideas sometimes, and he keeps so to whatever he once says."

"Other people do that, too," I replied, assuringly. "I shall keep to what I have said, and see that the picture remains here."

With her sweet voice she thanked me and went away, leaving poor John Gildern standing still, note-book in hand, calling to mind every word that had passed, like any romantic swain of twenty, wondering if he would see her again, and, through sheer anxiety, fancying every word of his own had been awkwardly and stupidly uttered.

When the servant summoned me to my solitary dinner, and took his place behind my chair in the deserted dining-room, full of faded grandeur, I could no longer resist the temptation to find out something about the family, or rather—need I conceal it!—about my charming little maid.

"It is rather tedious work for me here," I said as a beginning, my pre-occupation causing me to make such sputtering failures in remembering a duck that I know the shabby-coated old man was grinning behind my shoulder. "Family portraits are such useless things unless they are by a man of note, and there are some of the pictures that I know nothing about. For instance, there is a little thing of a lady in white silk at a window, and there is something interesting about it, but it has not even an artist's name." I knew I was not wasting my words. This servant had evidently grown gray in the family; most likely there was not an inch of the house unknown to him.

"Ah! yes—ah, yes, yes!" he said, speaking in low, husky tones, and clearly making a bad copy of his master's air of importance, "There's a secret about that picture; 'taint no common affair, not it."

"Well," I said, "if you can assist me in any way that is valuable in my business, I shall, of course, consider your services." All is fair in love and war, they say, and I could not resist the desire to satisfy my curiosity.

"Much obliged to you, sir," said the husky old man, with a bow of great dignity, as he forthwith proceeded to relate the history of the mysterious picture.

The facts I afterward put together were these: There had long ago been a coldness, almost a feud, between the owner of Elmsmere and his only son. The cause of this was the attachment existing between the son and a beautiful and virtuous girl who was then on the boards of a provincial theatre. The delay to this marriage was caused by the father's threats of disinheriting the offender. But at last that difficulty was surmounted; a consent was wrested from the old man; the marriage took place, and the bride bidding farewell to the stage, was brought home to Elmsmere. Her husband, the heir of the mansion, had dabbled in art. He painted his wife as Juliet, the part in which he had first seen her; and he insisted on hanging the portrait with the rest in the gallery. He met with a fearful accident not long after the marriage; and the father, for love of his willful son, let the small portrait hang where he had placed it, but with his own hand blotted out the words in the corner—"My Juliet." The

young wife did not long outlive her sudden loss; and the old man was never reconciled to her, although as the servant said, "she was the gentlest, most heavenliest being, sir, that ever drew breath." But when, in dying, she left an infant daughter, the father's heart warmed to the child, and for his son's sake she became to him the one dear thing on earth. This was the whole story—a sad one enough. My interest in it only made the servant more communicative.

"Master will want to see you, to-night, sir, as the business is done," he said; "and don't you mind, sir, if you find him nervous a bit—or hot as I may say. It's his way, sir. The world's gone askew with him this long time back; and there's always a mine or some such nonsense just again' for to be found on the estate, and not bein' found after all, and edging his temper, poor gentleman."

The old man was evidently glad of some one to talk to, but when he verged on his master's present affairs I stopped him, and dinner being finished, sent him with a message to my host to ask if he was at leisure to see me. He sent back word that he was engaged on most important business, but would see me in half an hour. When the summons to the library came at last it was easy enough to see that the "most important business" had something to do with plans on the table, which were stained by late contact with clay or dusty stones. This much I could not help observing, as the plans lay on the table, and the old man held something in his hand, which dropped reddish earth on the floor when he stretched it toward me with an impatient gesture. I gave him a rough estimate of the value of his pictures, subject to changes, for better or worse, which might be made in it by my employers. I offered him his option of doing business in this way or of having the whole collection disposed of on his own account for what it would bring at our sales rooms. He said he preferred ready money transactions, with the firm for the purchaser, but the figure I named was much too low. He went over the list with me, and waxed, as the servant had predicted, rather hot on seeing some of the prices, and hotter still at my inability even to take into consideration the purchase of the portraits. He was only pacified, when he was absolutely losing his self-command, by my assurance that this catalogue was only a first estimate; that in order to avoid disappointment I had set down what I myself thought the lowest figure, and that I had to leave out some works which examination might prove to be of great value, in which case our house would deal with him liberally. He had risen to his feet; but he sank again into his arm-chair on hearing this explanation, saying: "Certainly, certainly; we cannot yet decide on the exact figure; and after all—with a trampling voice and his loftiest air—"a few pounds one way or the other matter but little to me; but a man does not like to part with any of his property below what he himself believes to be its actual worth."

This I judged a favourable moment for the commission I had received from my fair suppliant in the morning. I hastened to explain that a young lady, whom I judged to be his daughter—unlucky me, driven to use such flattery!—"No," he said; "his granddaughter," I bowed, and went on. The young lady had requested me not to include in my list a small family portrait of some value.

"I know the thing," he said impatiently. "She has been talking to me about it. Let it go. It is only a fancy, sir, which does not concern your business here. I want the gallery cleared, and I am only sorry so many of those vapid daisies of our ancestors have to remain there."

His severe tone and cold looks were almost too much for me; but I was not outmastered yet. I replied in a firm but respectful manner, sorry for the artifice I was resorting to against his gray-haired ruined pride: "You say, sir, it does not matter to you whether the picture bring a few pounds more or less. The price of the one is no value to you, and the portrait itself is of value to the young lady so much for whom I speak that she herself made it be my business and my concern to mention it." This was the homethrust.

"Of course I don't care about the paltry price," he said. "If she really wants the thing so much strike it out of your list." After that hurried speech he bowed my dismissal as he had done at the last interview, only remarking that he supposed I would carry the result of my work to London in the morning, and there would be no further delay. When I had gone to the foot of the staircase, in the dusk of the spacious flagged hall, I saw his granddaughter coming hastily from a doorway, where no doubt she had waited anxiously for my step on the stairs.

"Have you asked grandfather?" she whispered.

"I have. He will do as you wish about the portrait. I have struck it off my list."

"I am so glad!" she said, still in a low voice. "I would not part with it for the world!" And she seemed surprised at her good fortune, while I knew but too well that the secret of it lay in my allusion to money affairs, a subject on which the poor man would not have a stranger's suspicion aroused.

"You have been very kind," she said—"very good to me." And with some sudden impulse of gratitude, she stretched out her hand, which I was but too proud to press for a moment in token of friendship.