



SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

Description of the Darley home in Connemara, which contained the famous Velasquez; of Sybil Darley and her mother, who owned the picture suggesting the personality of her husband whom she supposed to be dead; of young Hugh and the storm; arrival of the storm-beaten hunter, the Earl of Sternholt, connoisseur in pictures; interested in the Velasquez, he offers to send for a famous Italian expert, Pallacio, who at first pronounced the picture a copy.

The picture suddenly disappears. Pallacio, on his way back, is arrested, but innocent. Mrs. Darley, overcome with grief, tells Sybil the story of her husband's life, how the picture came, and how he disappeared. Hugh Limner leaves Connemara. He goes to London to study medicine. In an old art shop he buys cheap a Max Weenix canvas. He views an operation on a man's heart and is repelled by the dissecting room. His mother decides that he cannot study medicine.

Hugh enters as assistant in the shop of Pallacio and is sent up country to buy bargain pictures at an auction. In a pawnshop of a little town he stumbles across what he recognizes as an early Gainsborough, which he buys for ten pounds. Pallacio refuses to take it. Hugh pays him a hundred and leaves his employ. The picture is sent to Christie's in Bond Street and sold by auction for 6,650 guineas. Hugh's fortune and reputation as a dealer are made. He becomes an expert. In a book of Turner's poems he finds a letter from Turner to Ruskin concerning a Turner masterpiece since lost to the world. He determines to find the Turner.

He rents the cottage in which Turner painted the masterpiece and discovers the painting secreted under the floor. Sybil arrives. Also Pallacio.

Pallacio and Lord Sternholt combine to keep Hugh and Sybil apart. Sternholt shows Pallacio the Velasquez, which is secreted in his country house. Sternholt outbids Hugh at Christie's for a supposed Manet. The picture is proved to be by Stephen Browne, whose place as a master is assured. Pallacio takes Sybil to Hugh's studio, where he shows her a picture which makes out Hugh to be a thief.

CHAPTER XVIII.—(Continued.)

"YOU are a bold man, Mr. Limner, to keep up the farce to my face.

I suppose I have no legal redress against you or the rogue Pallacio. You generously refused a fee for your services. You acted as my friend. Besides, you will swear, no doubt, that you honestly exercised your very excellent judgment on my behalf."

Every word his lordship spoke, every tone of his voice, was an insult. It seemed as if he were determined to force a quarrel on the other, and he almost succeeded.

Hugh's right hand clenched as for a blow, and Lord Sternholt noted the movement and was ready. But even as the two men stood, with muscles strained ready to fly at each other's throats, a sudden thought came to Hugh which swept away his rage. His fists unclosed and his lips twitched in a smile, and there was no trace of anger in his voice as he spoke.

"Lord Sternholt," he said, "if you had treated me with common courtesy I would have given you an explanation."

"A truly valuable commodity, no doubt," sneered his lordship.

"A satisfactory explanation," Hugh went on, calmly. "Now, I will offer none. Instead, I will take the picture off your hands at the price you paid Pallacio for it."

"When?" demanded Lord Sternholt. He could hardly believe the offer was seriously made.

"Here and now. I will give you my cheque for a thousand pounds, and carry away the picture in my carriage at the door. But it is only fair to warn your lordship that I will have the best of the bargain."

"I am glad you think so," retorted Lord Sternholt. "I suppose you think your reputation worth the price you are ready to pay with this ingenious forgery thrown into the bargain."

Well, I'm willing to accept a thousand pounds hush-money."

For answer Hugh drew a cheque for a thousand pounds and threw it on the table. Lord Sternholt took it up, looked at it, nodded approval, and put it in his pocket-book. Then he pressed the button of his electric bell and his converted Indian noiselessly appeared.

"Put this picture into Mr. Limner's carriage," commanded Lord Sternholt, curtly. "Good day, Mr. Limner, this interview has closed more pleasantly than I anticipated—for me, at least."

"And for me, my lord," retorted Hugh, as he followed the Indian from the room. "Your lordship has been clever enough to make a hard bargain with Pallacio, and foolish enough to forfeit it."

CHAPTER XIX.

Good for Evil.

HUGH found Pallacio and his daughter at home together when he called again, the day following his interview with Lord Sternholt. Pallacio looked even worse than when he had last seen him. Though the air of the sitting-room was close and heavy, the old man was crouched at the fire warming his large bony hands at the blaze which showed pink through the fleshless palm and fingers. Ella was reading Ruskin to him, apparently as oblivious as himself of the stifling heat of the room.

"I have brought your picture back to you, Pallacio," Hugh said, when he had shaken hands with both of them. "Lord Sternholt has convinced himself that it is not a Rubens."

The next moment he was sorry he spoke, for the old man started to his feet in a frenzy of fear and fury. "It's a lie," he cried, "he wants to cheat me of my picture and my money. The bargain he drove was not hard enough. You know the picture was a Rubens, you said so in the presence of my daughter. Has Lord Sternholt bribed you? Have you been whispering lies to him? I might have guessed you would be my enemy."

A sudden fit of coughing choked his voice and shook his whole body with violence. When he paused at last there was a blood-stained foam on his pallid lips which Ella softly wiped away, while her eyes appealed to Hugh for patience with her father.

The appeal was not needed. Hugh felt no anger at the flickering wrath of the old man. He felt angry with himself that he had told his tale so awkwardly.

"I'm sorry to have vexed you, Pallacio, it was good news I had for you, not bad. As his lordship would listen to no explanation I gave him back his thousand pounds and carried the picture away with me."

"Then the picture is yours?" said Pallacio. "I don't care which of you has it so long as I have the cheque."

"No, no, the picture is not mine. Now, don't flare up again, there is no need for it. The picture is not mine until I have paid something like a fair price for it, and you know as well as I, Pallacio, that a thousand pounds is not a fair price."

"A bargain is a bargain," said Pallacio. And there was a gleam of suspicion still in his dark eyes. He was not quite satisfied that Hugh was not playing some trick upon him.

"Lord Sternholt has gone back on his bargain, and you have made none with me. If you sell the picture to

me you must have a fairer price for it. I have paid a thousand to Lord Sternholt. I will draw you a cheque for another five thousand, if you choose, and think I have made a most excellent bargain."

"Don't take the money, father, don't take it!" Ella broke in impulsively.

"Be quiet, miss," Hugh cried, shaking his finger at her. "You are not in this deal. I would not sell the picture myself for twice the sum. If I am to buy it at all, in common honesty I cannot give less than six thousand."

He sat down at a table, and drew a cheque with his fountain pen and passed it to Pallacio, who drew back as if at once attracted and repelled by the figure.

"I cannot take it," he stammered out. "I cannot take it, not from you."

"Nonsense, man," Hugh cried, laughing. "Why not from me as well as another? I think I am entitled to the preference. For Ella's sake," he added, in a lower tone, as he laid the cheque down beside him.

"No, no," persisted Pallacio, but the resistance was gone out of his voice. He stretched his hand out to Hugh and drew it back impulsively before their fingers touched. "I cannot, I cannot," he whimpered, like one in pain. Then, in a sudden frenzy, he shouted, "By God, I will tell you everything. I don't care what happens afterwards. Listen, Mr. Limner, the Velasquez that was stolen—" Again his excitement was too much for him, and a violent fit of coughing took him by the throat and almost strangled him.

At a look from Ella, Hugh took up his hat. "Good-bye, Mr. Pallacio. You are not fit for more talking just now. To-morrow or next day I will look in and listen as long as you like to anything you have to say to me."

Pallacio, laying back exhausted in his chair, looked relieved by the respite. Ella followed Hugh to the door. "I wish you would say a good word about Stephen," she said, "if you get the chance. I tried, but my heart failed me. He is so weak I'm afraid to excite him. But a good word from you about Stephen's painting and prospects would help. You have no idea how father values your judgment."

"I'll do my best," Hugh said, "but I fear I will not be able to call again for a few days."

But the very next day he came, for Ella fetched him, not to be denied.

About noon she called for him in a taxi. When the servant came to the door she refused to cross the threshold.

"Give Mr. Limner this," she said, "and tell him I have a taxi waiting. Tell him it is a matter of life or death. There is not a moment to lose."

ON the crumpled bit of paper which the footman handed to Hugh, in Pallacio's large handwriting, but so feeble and shaky as to be almost unrecognizable, were the words, "Come to me at once. I am dying."

Hugh ran down the stairs, snatched his hat from the hall stand, and jumped into the taxi beside Ella.

The driver had his instructions, for Hugh had hardly found his seat when the cab burst into motion, gathering speed as it went.

"Is it true?" Hugh whispered to the pale-faced, tearless girl at his side.

"Quite true. The doctor says he



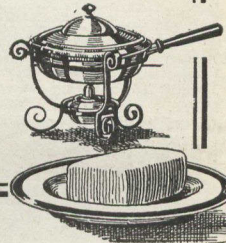
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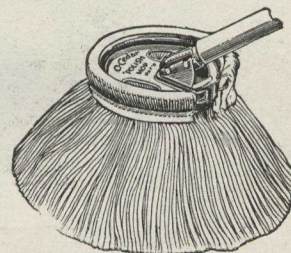
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