

A Financial Proposition

A STORY SHOWING THAT WHERE THERE'S A CLEVER WOMAN THERE'S A WAY

By ARTHUR RANSOME

ARTISTS are queer things, things with temperaments, and moods, and whims, and little out of the way conceits, that none but they would think of having. There was one who would have lost his life sooner than a piebald lock of hair upon his forehead. There was another who prided himself so greatly on being a recluse that he used to go to a dinner party every night in order to tell people about it. Yes, they are a curious lot. They are easily deceived by others, and nearly always deceived by themselves. They are the hardest people in the world to drive, and the easiest to lead. They are so clever and so stupid. As Lettie Leblond put it, "They have such stupendous intellects, and so little common sense."

Lettie knew them well, and loved one of them. Indeed, in my opinion, Lettie is the first authority in Europe on the artistic temperament. When you have heard my tale you will agree with me.

Everybody called Linton Maul "Poor Linton." That was just because he was Linton Maul. Because he smiled gravely as he went about, with his coat worn through in the elbows, and very little food inside him. Because he would paint a picture out of which any sensible person would have made fifty pounds, and then, when it was done, say calmly that he was not quite satisfied with it, and hide it away in a cellar, in order that "in two or three years' time I can come at it with fresh eyes." Because he made a practice of going out to buy food, and then, passing a paint shop, buy paints instead, and never think of dinner until he had spent all his money. Because he was always giving away good ideas to other people, who painted them, and made money and reputations out of them. Because, as I said at the beginning, just simply and only because he was Linton Maul and nobody else. And because he was so hopelessly in love with Lettie Leblond. He would not have admitted this. But that was because he was an artist, and poor, and Lettie was passably rich. All artists are proud. But a poor artist is prouder and more sensitive than any other kind of man.

Artists live odd turncoat lives. One afternoon you may meet them in the tidiest possible frock coats, looking as if gold grew in their pockets, enlivening the tea-parties of the wealthy. The next afternoon you call upon them in their studios, and find them, ragged, coatless, and dinnerless, painting with chilled fingers, in big bare rooms. The frock coats have been folded carefully away, and the artists are themselves again. Yes, and they go on being themselves until something happens. The something may be a success, or it may be a crash.

With Linton Maul it was obviously likely to be a crash. Lettie Leblond saw that it was likely to be a crash, and Lettie was rich. She had studied art just as a pastime, at the same school as Linton, and they had been very friendly, he openly poor, and she, like many others, pretending to be poor just for the romance of the thing. We mad young people have a feeling that it is fine to be struggling, to have a heart full of hopes, and a pocket without any pennies in it.

Now she had

put the relics of her dream of art in gilt frames round the walls of her bedroom, where no one could see them, and she was nothing more romantic than just Lettie Leblond, twenty-three, with a pretty face, a neat figure, a tempestuous heart, and several hundred a year more than she could spend.

Everybody came to Lettie's weekly tea-parties, Linton among the rest. Hers was the only house where he still visited. For, though he was painting better and better, he was earning less and less. The less he earned, the harder he worked, and the less he ate, so that, though he still smiled, Lettie, and perhaps others, noticed that his face was thinner. It was a struggle for him to keep up the frock coat. He did it somehow or other, and every Friday found him sitting in a corner of Lettie's drawing room, with an empty stomach, but too happy even to eat.

And Lettie knew she was strangely content to see him there. She would have been hurt if he had missed a Friday. Among all the friends who crowded to her rooms, there was not one whom she so liked to see.

But all the time poor Linton (I call him "poor Linton" myself, though I do not know why) was getting poorer and poorer. At last there came a Friday afternoon, when Lettie's guests had nearly all left her, and Linton rose to go. Usually he said "Good night," in his quiet, abstracted manner that she liked, though she could not understand. To-day he held her hand a moment longer than usual, said "Good-bye," and turned away a little abruptly.

Lettie (I tell you plainly that she knows the artistic temperament) guessed that something was the matter, and said hurriedly:—

"Linton, I had almost forgotten. Are you busy this evening? Could you spare me a little time? There is something I want to talk to you about."

Linton smiled just as gravely as usual, and, though he could not speak, sat down again, and then got up, and walked to the window, and peeped out of the blinds, into the violet dusk of the gardens beneath the flats.

Presently the others left, and Lettie made him bring two chairs and set them by the fire. They sat down, and Linton, very nervous, made a show of warming his hands over the flames. Lettie saw with a startled pain that they were very thin. She was nervous, too, in spite of her knowledge of artists.

"Linton," she said, "before we talk, tell me what is the matter with you."

"Nothing is the matter," said Linton. "Only now that I know how to paint a little I haven't any money to paint with. It's mainly my own fault. I am going away, and I do not think I shall be able to come here again."

"Painting costs money," said Lettie, trying to gain time for herself.

"It does. I shouldn't mind if only I had not learnt to paint. It is rather upsetting, to have found out the way, and then to have to go and do something else. But what was it you wanted to tell me about?"

Lettie felt an odd little choke in her throat. She had not guessed that she cared for Linton like that. She knew he cared



"She consulted the paper on which she had been scribbling."