

An Old Master

By Gertrude Pitt

THEY had met in the first instance at Lavigne's studio in Maida Vale. Francesca (she had been christened Frances, and the additional letters were a concession to art)—Francesca had about as much talent for painting as an aborigine, but several of her friends worked at Lavigne's and she found it an entertaining relief from the tedium of home. Besides, she was blonde and petite, and, with her hair becomingly disordered, and attired in a pinafore of green linen, she looked exceedingly picturesque—and was quite aware of that pleasing fact.

Bernard had serious views about art in those days, and often alluded to his "Career" (with a capital "C"). Nevertheless, he found time to observe that Francesca was quite the prettiest girl in the studio. He cast many appreciative glances in the direction of the fair head and the green pinafore, and often discovered that he was walking in her direction when the day's work was over.

Sometimes he found her copying in the National Gallery; sometimes she came across him dallying with the sculptures in the British Museum. They danced together at the students' balls, they went to numerous concerts, and feasted gaily, if frugally, at many bun shops. In short, after a decent interval of philandering, they married, and set up house-keeping in St. John's Wood.

Having secured a husband in the paths of art, Francesca wisely gave up painting and devoted her energies to domestic matters and to the care of Bernard junior, when that small but important person made his appearance. Bernard senior still alluded to his "Career," talked gloomily sometimes of thwarted ideals, and made spasmodic attacks at a huge canvas which was to bring him fame in the future. Meanwhile, however, he made a tolerable income at teaching and black-and-white work.

Of necessity, their way of life was somewhat cramped—like their "modern villa-residence." They had a goodly number of friends, impetuous artists, intermittent journalists, many people of the class which has laid claim to the ancient kingdom of Bohemia on insufficient grounds, but which, nevertheless, has its charms. Sometimes Francesca gave "at homes," when the tiny drawing room was inconveniently crowded, and the refreshments were somewhat meagre; sometimes Bernard took her to a theatre, or they spent a day in the country. Also they "collected," although after the affair of the Pellegrino their enthusiasm for this form of amusement was somewhat weakened.

It was a bleak evening in the autumn and Bernard was gazing into a shop window in the Bayswater Road. It was a secondhand shop, and the window was

filled with an incongruous collection of dingy furniture, old-fashioned prints, many dusty books, and other articles too numerous to mention. But in the place of honor was a solitary oil painting, with a gaudy plush curtain draped around its frame, as if to show off its manifold beauties. The picture represented a particularly ugly woman, whose complexion indicated a grave case of yellow jaundice. She was holding a still uglier child, with his head at a painful and impossible angle. The label on the frame read "Madonna and Child, by Pellegrino (1340-1419)."

Bernard gazed at the picture with the admiration which greater men are apt to accord to anything that is at once ugly, expensive, and un-English. Possibly he would have admired and walked on, but at that moment the proprietor of the shop was standing at his door, and at once seized the opportunity.

"Ah!" he said, waving a dirty hand towards the masterpiece, "There's something you won't get a chance of seeing every day. That"—and his voice sank to an awe-inspiring whisper—"that, sir, is a real, genuine Pellegrino." Bernard was not absolutely stunned. For one reason, the name was plainly printed on the label; for another, he had never previously heard of Pellegrino.

"Indeed?" he said. "Is it valuable?" "Well, there's no need for me to tell you that it isn't often a genuine Pellegrino comes into the market. Of course, I won't deny it's a bit dirty, but cleaned up by one who knows the business, and put in a nice, gilt frame—there's an ornament for any gentleman's dining-room, and an ornament that's worth its weight in gold."

"What do you want for it?" said Bernard, as if he bought a Pellegrino every day of his life.

"If I had a shop in Pall Mall, I'd say a hundred, and get it, too. But there isn't much sale for such things hereabouts. I only bought it because I took a fancy to it, as you might say," and he gazed affectionately at the dingy canvas.

"How much?" asked Bernard, growing somewhat impatient.

"Fifty pounds, though it's a great sacrifice."

"I'm afraid you'll have to wait some time. Good afternoon," and Bernard turned, though he did not walk away. The dealer came a few steps nearer, and dropped his voice to a persuasive undertone.

"Well, say forty, though it's like giving it away."

Bernard shook his head decisively, but he still kept his eyes on the picture.

"Thirty-five, then. I'm robbing myself, but you shall have it for thirty-five. Think of it. A genuine Pellegrino for thirty-five pounds!"

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