

will teach her yourself, and get anyone you like to help."

"When you are away," I began, and he understood before I said it.

"You must have the girlie to keep you company. Would you like to have me always with you, Magsie?"

"I could not answer. It was all I could do to keep from crying, with joy, this time, at the mere thought of it."

"Well, perhaps you will some day, soon," he said, taking my head between his hands and looking into my eyes. Then he kissed me again and went out, turning to look back at the door. Next day he went off to London, and when he returned he brought the picture back with him.

"A peace offering, Magsie," he said, "for you and the little one." He stooped and patted your curly head as he spoke. You were sitting on the floor nursing your doll."

"I FANCY I can remember," said Sybil softly, "that he was always very good to me."

"He was good to everyone, Sybil. I remember he stood away to let me have a good look at the picture. 'Is it your own, Paul?' I asked. The face was so like his."

"No, darling, though it will help you to remember me when I am away. The picture was painted hundreds of years before I came from nowhere into the world, and will be prized for hundreds of years after I have gone out of the world back to nowhere again."

"Don't talk like that, Paul," I said, "it makes me shiver."

"Well, I won't, little woman, it's not fair. You will keep the picture always, Magsie, as a reminder of me."

"I want no reminder."

"Let it take my place and look after you and the little one when I am away. If you ever want money the picture will find it for you."

"Is it very valuable, Paul?"

"Very valuable, darling," he said. "It is Velasquez's greatest picture. But," he added with a smile, "the frame is even more valuable than the picture."

"I thought he was jesting. 'You surely don't mean that?'"

"But I do," he answered quite seriously. "I must soon tell you a secret that is known only to myself and that old-fashioned picture frame."

"Not now, Paul, I feel too excited, too frightened."

"To-morrow, then. It is necessary you should know it, for Sybil's sake and your own. It may make a great difference in our lives, Magsie," he went on; "but I promise you beforehand that the future shall be as you wish it."

"I was frightened, Sybil, he spoke so seriously. 'Your choice shall be mine, Paul, now and always.' 'I wish the picture wasn't so valuable,' I said later in the evening, 'it may be stolen.' Wasn't it strange, Sybil, that I should have said that; but he only laughed at my foolish fancy."

"There is no fear," he said, "no one here knows its value, and no one here knows how to steal, even if they wanted to, which they don't."

"Next day, as he was reading the paper after breakfast, he jumped up suddenly, looking very excited. 'I must go to London,' he said, 'but I will be back in a few days.' He never came. I never saw him again. I have waited and hoped all those years, but have never had a word from him. He is surely dead. If he were alive he would come or send to me."

Her voice died away in silent weeping, and Sybil, as she took her mother's thin, cold hand in both of hers and pressed it warmly, could find no words to comfort her, so fell to weeping for company. There was a long silence, then the mother spoke again.

"I never knew the secret of the picture, but I have always loved it, because he was so proud of it, because it was his first gift to me. It used to look down on me with his eyes and his smile. I never really felt he was dead till I lost it. I fear it will never be found, Sybil. I would give anything to get it back if I could only find who stole it."

A sharp knock at the door cut the sentence short.

The Earl of Sternholt came into

the room. His eyes as he entered fell on the vacant space over the mantelpiece, and turned to meet Sybil's gaze with genuine sympathy.

"You will pardon me," he said softly. "I leave to-day. I could not go without saying good-bye, without telling you once again how sorry I am for your loss, how much I feel I am myself to blame."

He spoke to the mother, but his eyes were on the daughter's face as he spoke, as if something he saw there troubled him. The kindness of his voice moved them both, and the elder woman answered eagerly—

"Indeed, you are not to blame, Lord Sternholt; you have done all you could to help us."

"I should never have brought that man here," he answered.

"You still think he stole the picture?" asked Sybil quickly.

"I don't know what to think. He seems to have cleared himself of all suspicion, and yet—who else was there who knew its value?"

"What matters who took it, since it is gone?" said Mrs. Darley despondently.

"I don't believe it is gone for ever," cried Sybil. "I have a feeling it will be found some day and the thief exposed."

Lord Sternholt's bold eyes applauded her.

"You are right," he answered, with a sudden smile that lighted up his face. "Always hope for the best. Hope helps on its own fulfilment. I, too, have a strong feeling that I will see the picture again, and soon."

CHAPTER IV.

Before and After.

THE widow was not alone in her sorrow for the stolen picture.

Sybil and Hugh missed it almost as much as she did, though in quite a different way. She had loved it because her husband had given it to her, because it was so like him. Its artistic beauty made very little appeal to her. But to the boy and girl, to the boy even more than the girl, it had been a source of endless delight.

It is a curious thing this artistic temperament that is so much talked about and so little understood. Most people are music-deaf and colour-blind. People may find pleasure in the song of a bird or the lilt of a tune, but the mysterious rapture of music, rapture beyond the reach of words, is only for the chosen few. Even so to the artist's eye alone is the beauty of nature, the radiance of light and the glory of colour, freely revealed. The many are not conscious of what they lose. Pictures please them, no doubt, by their subject, but they cannot distinguish between the masterpiece and the daub. The rapture of an artist in a great picture they neither share nor understand.

Hugh Limmer from his boyhood saw beauty with the artist's eye, and loved it with the artist's soul. Earth, sea, and sky, all ministered to his delight. The changing light and shade on the bosom of the mountain, the soft clear curve of the high hills, the wide expanse of the sea, flecked with foam or smooth as a mirror or flaming gloriously at sunrise and at sunset; the green radiance of a summer wood when the mossy floor is slashed with gold; the network of light that sways and dances on the bottom of a pebbly stream with the play of the swiftly running waters; even the delicate outline of a leaf, the soft pure tints of a flower intoxicated him with delight as a lover is intoxicated by the infinite charms of his mistress.

With the love of nature was inseparably blended the love and keen appreciation of art. It was to him a labour of love to study the writings of great critics, and the works of the great painters in the art library and portfolios which its vanished master had collected at Clonard, till he had learned all they had to teach him.

Above all and beyond all he had been fascinated with the matchless Velasquez, revelling in its truth and in the genius that had revealed its treasures of beauty to appreciative eyes. From one picture as from one book the true will learn more than the common herd from a library or



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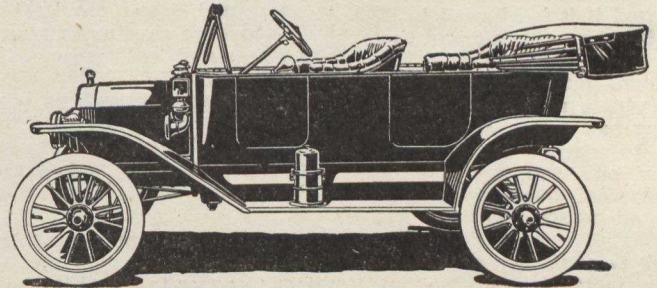
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