

MY ACADEMY PICTURE

"As we stood in the cornfield the gold in the west died to grey."

I HARDLY know how Jock crept in and began to dominate my picture. But he did. It seemed to

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Drawing by Frank Johnston.

me that there was some sort of compulsion about it, as though some unseen power took me by the wrist and made my brush-strokes come other than I myself willed. No, I am neither superstitious nor fanciful. In fact I pride myself on being rather practical, even if I am an artist. I can bake bread, pickle walnuts, or make an omelette with anybody. Do not imagine for a moment that I am a "Burne-Jones girl," who looks as if she would slip out of her frock if she didn't clutch it pretty tight, even if my hair has a tinge of bronze in it. Nevertheless, I believe that some things have got to be communicated, and that some favoured being's hand or eye or brain is made the channel of things beyond our ken.

Do you know how Tennyson, Wordsworth and Blake wrote their lyrics? Well, if you do, you know more than they did. They just *came*—and that's all about it. One day they were not; and the next day they were! Nothing that grips the soul with two hands ever came by effort. It came by inspiration. So you may laugh at me if you like, but I shall still maintain that I could do no other than put myself and Jock Tremloe into my picture.

I had been painting at it for weeks before Jock came into it. You know that exquisite serenity which lasts about seven minutes after the sun has sunk out of sight below the rim of the earth? There is nothing to match it this side of heaven. It is unique. Up, up, up, into the zenith go the gold-tipped cloudlets; they float in shimmering green ether which transforms every stick and stone it touches into a thing of unearthly beauty. It was that light I set out to paint.

I BEGAN the picture in the cornfield just when it was beginning to turn to gold at the Midas touch of autumn. I knew when I commenced the picture that by the time I reached the corn-painting stage it would be just perfectly ripe. And it was. I set my easel just below the crest of the earth wave over which the cornfield rolled, and I presently prided myself that I had caught and transferred to my canvas the exquisite effect of the low, corn-clad ridge—a field of the cloth of gold—against the serene glow of the sun's "last good night." I had originally intended to stop at that, and send my picture, under some such title as "At Eventide," to the winter exhibition at Longworth, where I knew it was sure of a hearty welcome and a place "on the line," but I changed my mind and concluded to make it a sort of lover's idyll of the cornfield.

I know what you are going to say again: "Association of ideas, one of the commonest sources of mental and spiritual suggestion." But tell me this: why did I put Jock into it when my aunt's jobbing gardener—as much like Jock as I am like a hazel nut—posed—quite unconsciously as far as he was concerned—for the man? Yet, when the figure was sketched in, there stood Jock, in the path between the growing corn, with the shadowy unfinished form of a girl strained to his heart, and he looking down into her face, all radiant with the ethereal light of the sunset, with such a look of rapt love as surely never man exceeded. Was not that wonderful? And that girl was *me*! I know I ought to say "I," but you can't be grammatical over these matters. They are too vital for syntax.

I repeat, that girl was *me*. That is not so much a matter for wonder, because I was so accustomed to using myself as a model for lack of a better one. I believe my aunt, dear non-artistic soul, thought I kept a couple of mirrors in my studio—which was in the loft, by the way, and reached by a ladder—for reasons of personal vanity, for she never by any chance came to watch me at work or took any interest in my pictures when they were finished, and so had no idea that they were to enable me to see and paint my own features. Of one thing I am quite sure; she would have thought me much better occupied darning an old stocking or knitting a new one. However, even had she been a grumbling sort, which emphatically she was *not*, I disarmed her by attending both to my artistic

pleasures and my useful duties.

Personally I hold that a woman ought to be a house-

wife whatever else she may be, even if she be debarred from being any other kind of wife to her life's end. Moreover, I believe in the young helping and, if necessary, keeping the old ones. There is a frightful amount of ingratitude in the world. There seems to be a disposition nowadays on the part of the rising generation to take all they can and defer repayment until the Greek calends. That is just where Jock and I differed. I would have gone to the Argentine with him like a shot, if I had had only myself to think about. But you can't play fast and loose with your duty to God and man in that style.

Yet, though he didn't know it—I took good care he shouldn't—it nearly broke my heart to let Jock go without me. He was greatly set on going to the Argentine. He had got it into his head that there was money to be made there, and even if I would not go out with him and help him in the process of making it he would go all the same.

THOUGH his uncompromising attitude and some of the things he said nearly broke my heart, I could have done the Tragedy Queen to perfection and have told him to his face that I was a thousand times too good for him. He was a trifle my senior in years, but I was much more mature. I knew things that he had never dreamed of. He had not begun to understand life's best meanings. Bless you! Some men never do begin—but Jock was not a dolt—not a mere clay image of a man—not a human vegetable, a sort of bifurcated carrot!—he had the stuff in him out of which men are made, but it was a bit inchoate as yet.

As we walked homeward one autumn evening—could it be five years ago?—with our backs to the setting sun, he reasoned with me in his downright style, as though with main strength he would push every obstacle aside. And there are obstacles which it is the proud prerogative of a man's muscle and brawn and dominating to deal with. But this was not one such, I remember, some years ago, hearing of, and seeing pictures of a little woman who, by some secret of "stance," as the golfers say, was able to defy the strength of the strongest man to move her. Some women have that secret on the moral side, but it takes some men longer than others to find it out. Jock was one of the slow ones. He thought that he could over-persuade me. He strove for his will during that walk, and when we came to the top of the cornfield he realised for the first and last time that I was immovable, and he lost his temper very badly and then and there went out of my life.

Oh, gold of the sunset, gold of the corn, how much better are you than the gold men strive for and which so often crushes all the golden dreams of high purpose, yea, and the golden treasure of love, too, out of their lives! But I am an artist, not a poet, and I must not rhapsodise. Let me to my plain tale. I do not want to particularise too much with regard to the cause of our final parting. Aunt thought we had quarrelled, but it takes two to make a quarrel, and there was only one in this—and that one was Jock. I would have married him with a glad heart if he would have stayed at home. Or even if he had gone away I could have waited for him for years—but he never mentioned that; he was too angry and sore at my refusal to leave my aunt.

"What is your aunt to you?" he said. "Will you put her before me? If that is all the love you have for me it is not much." Oh, yes, he was angry and said bitter, bitter things. But I knew what my aunt was to me better than he did. I knew how she had taken me, an orphan girl, ten years before, and had been mother and father in one to me. So I was adamant and, as we stood in the cornfield, the gold of the west died to grey—and we parted.

I DID not send my picture to the winter show at Longworth. For one thing it was not ready in time, and for another, I had a feeling that it was too good for Longworth. Every stroke

of the brush seemed a fresh inspiration. As it grew under my hand it sometimes affected me to tears. I put more of myself into that picture than I had put into any dozen of my earlier canvases. It seemed part and parcel of myself. I could not seem to satisfy myself that it was finished, and I painted at it every day—or nearly every day—all through the winter; then, in the spring it was a thing of beauty. Self praise? All right! So be it! But it was, all the same.

I had known for three weeks where I would send it—to the Royal Academy, and nowhere else! I had heard and read of the Selection Committee of the Royal Academy having so many pictures to examine that they had to accept or reject them at the rate of one a minute. But I did not fear. I looked at myself in the picture—myself glorified, mind you, and not with "the light of setting suns" only, but with the inward light of a great passion; and I looked at Jock—Jock the same and yet not the same, Jock spiritualised, idealised, but a man every inch of him—and I knew they could not reject it. I knew, indeed, that Jock had never held me so tight as that, and—ah me!—had never looked down into my eyes with such a look of unutterable love, and I knew, too, that never had I looked, nor could look so lovely and worth the winning—but—these things were in the picture, however they came there—and those half-dozen big-wigs at Burlington House could not say no to it.

I knew that Aunt Eliza was no more interested in my new picture than she would have been in a new novel by Thomas Hardy, so I took the opportunity of her absence for a few days from The Croft to get the village carpenter to pack it, and I superintended its departure on its travels to London, and said nothing about it to her on her return. I dare say she wondered why I was so like a cow that has lost her calf during the next few days. I could settle to nothing and my studio became a place of horror to me. Moreover, to add to my unrest and gloom I was just as sure now that I could no longer see the picture, that it would be rejected as I had been aforesaid that it would be accepted. I made up my mind, when I should have notice of its rejection, to waylay the carrier, and, having carefully provided myself with a hammer and an axe, get him to dump down the hateful thing on the common three miles from The Croft, and when he should have passed on, smash the whole thing to chips!

I SUPPOSE better counsels would have eventually prevailed, but I was spared the choice of evils by the receipt of the formal acceptance of my picture. Then how I longed for some kindred soul who would take me by the hands and play ring-o'-roses with me round some tree in our orchard, or join me in the doing of any other mad thing just to give vent to my delirious joy.

But I had only Aunt Eliza to tell, and she, dear soul, said "Just fancy that now!" Nevertheless, the early days of May were one long "chortle." I arranged with a press-cutting bureau to send the notices, and the catalogue, and the sight of the title of my picture, with my name opposite to it, in the latter, was pure delight to me. It read like this:

THE KISS

Margaret Shiel.

As thro' the land at eve we went
And pluck'd the ripened ears,
We fell out, my love and I,
O we fell out, I know not why,
And kiss'd again with tears.

Tennyson.

Then the notices came tumbling in, and though some of them were evidently written by those superior persons who love to call cabbages roses and roses cabbages, and can see no merit in a picture which tells a story, yet the majority were laudatory and a few mildly enthusiastic.

How I longed to go up to that great London and see my picture upon the walls of the great exhibition and to stand, unknown and unobserved, watching the people gaze upon it and listening to their remarks. But three hundred miles was such a long way, and I had no one to chaperon me, and Aunt Eliza would have had a fit if I had even hinted at going alone—nay, at going at all for that matter.

The summer flew on, and the excitement had died out of my life. I had tasted the sweets of fame, and yet I seemed to be much where I was a year ago. If the picture had sold it would have been some satisfaction, but it had not. There had not been a single offer for it so far.

But pictures and painting and everything but misery were presently banished from my mind by a terrible calamity. It dropped upon us like a thunder-bolt. I had never known much about my aunt's means. She had always been reticent about