

A STUDENT'S REVERIE.

[Written for the Canadian Illustrated News.]

I may wander at will through one silent domain
Stretching back through the wastes of the long-vanished years;
I may call from their yew-shaded pillows again
The forms that would rise at the love-spell of tears.
But this is my birth-night, and phantom of woe
Must pause at the threshold,—it may not profane
The Memory-Temple, where fit to and fro,
The boyhood-time's joy-bringer, Hope, in their train.

One form I will summon. O fairest, draw nigh!
The spell is upon me as 'twas on that day
When we stood by the brook, while the smile of the sky
Conjured welcoming flowers through the mantle of May.
But where is the Heart-Flower which grew pale and glowed
At the tale that was told with that truth which o'erpowers?
While the stream o'er its willow-harp songfully flowed
As it rippled a musical march for the hours.

There is much that is pleasant in times that are new,
But much that is sacred in times that are old;
Still, to-night I will wear not the wreath of the yew,
Whilst the lustrous laburnum yields chaplet of gold.
Sweet soul, regnant Queen of the East, thou'rt mine own,
A treasure Time yields unto Memory's claim,
O beam down from heaven with those eyes that erst shone
When I followed the fleet-footed phantom of Fame.

S. J. W.

WHO PAINTED THE GREAT MURILLO
DE LA MERCED?

(From Blackwood's Magazine.)

CHAPTER I.—Continued.

I could not help being somewhat astounded by the threatening and impertinent way in which I was spoken to, but greatly more by the disclosure of the one lady's rank through the inadvertent wrath of the other. I hastened to humble myself and explain. Fortunately, the duenna was as placable as she was easily excited. And the Princess, in self-possessed dignity, appearing quite unconscious of anything disagreeable passing, I set my palette afresh and began work. Long and late, my whole soul engrossed in the beauty of my subject and the rapture of my art, I wrought. My limbs trembled from exhaustion, but still more through emotion. Singular! during all those hours, calm, still as a statue, gaining relief at long intervals by merely shifting from one small foot to the other—the old distressful expression always predominant on her perfect features—silent, watchful, her deep earnest looks continually on mine, the Princess stood, untiringly, as no model I ever knew could stand. In the ardour of my occupation I totally forgot a proper consideration for her. By no gesture, no impatient breath even, did she suggest weariness. It was only when I felt my own fatigue that it flashed upon me how much more she required relief and rest than I did. It was to express this, with regret for my thoughtlessness, that, as I laid aside palette and brushes, I bowed to her repentantly and low. By heaven! she understood me, for she smiled and blushed—such a blush! such a smile! It was the first time—it was the only time for many a year that I saw them; but for many a year that smile and that blush were as spells upon my destiny.

It is needless, as it would be tedious recapitulation, to describe the days which followed this, the first of my adventure. None of them was marked by variety, or any circumstance of interest enough to require particular notice, irrelevantly to the great mystery that enveloped all. I finished the Baptist's head, and the mortal model disappeared. Then, morning, noon, and night, I worked on in the light of the lustrous Princess; but ever also in the shadow of her black-veiled duenna, or whatever she was; and she at the conclusion of every day's work regularly praised my performance. My work was rapidly approaching completeness. Together with the beauty of its mysterious subject, it exercised upon me a power of fascination which subjugated all my other feelings. Doubt, suspicion, alarm, even inquisitiveness, became dormant under its influence. I knew I was in a dream—a dream not indeed without pain; but that pain was, for the present, so interwoven with delight, that I dreaded to awaken from it into ordinary life; for then, I knew, not the warp alone, but the woof too with it, must be destroyed.

In all the many days I never heard another voice than the duenna's. She never addressed the Princess, and the Princess, it appeared to me, was disdainfully silent to her. Was she disdainful as well to me? could she be, while hour after hour out of her wondrous eyes she poured her intense soul into mine? Yet she took no notice of my labours. I could not but be conscious that this effort of mine surpassed all my previous efforts—that I was working under inspiration. But the Princess never once glanced at her image on my canvass—not a gesture, not a play of feature, ever showed that she took the slightest interest in it. Feeling that my art was the only possible means by which I could ever hope to approach her, except for a rather sophistical suggestion of, I suppose, my vanity, that the dignity of her rank prescribed a severe self-restraint, an abnegation of any such vulgar emotion as curiosity—and, above all, a most consolatory idea of her taking opportunity, when I was absent, to inspect my work, as I frequently found my easel displaced from the position in which I had left it—I think her indifference would have broken my heart.

In how many ways has the old story been told! I mean not to tell it once more in mine—suffice it, the old irrepressible story revived itself in me. Could I have helped it? No, and no again! I had as much power to save myself as a wretch tied hand and foot in mid-rapid of a cataract has; once launched, the rest belonged to fate. As it was, confinement, labour, the tension upon my nerves, and overwrought feelings, were all more or less telling upon me. My glass showed me again the haggard cheeks with hectic spots set in ghastly white, which three years before had required as a specific Italy. Every day I ate less; but, parched and burning, I drank more. Every night was more restless than the last. All night, and then all day, growing, broadening, heavy—heavier, dark-darker, a feeling like despair—like—it was despair sank down upon my heart. But I finished my work.

"You hafe doon?—you hafe doon mit es, alle-zugedder?" the duenna asked, as, fainting, I let palette and brushes fall, and sank into a chair.

"Altogether, madam. I should do harm by doing more."
"Von-derfool! Es ist pe-u-tifool, as I tells you pefore. Nefer meint dat now. You feels not vell—you ist ill?" she inquired in a tone of great concern and kindness.

"I am ashamed to say," I answered, "that I feel very faint."

"A-ah! den I shust gife you a lee dle something as doos you

mo'osh goot—ferry mo'osh goot." I was too sunk in lassitude to observe what she did, but passively swallowed the contents of a liqueur-glass which she brought me.

I remember a delicious feeling, like sudden relief from great pain, following immediately after taking the dose—whatever it was. I have another, but subsequent, recollection of a state of exquisite repose, during which, like the fitful creations of a dream, unknown people came, moved about me, and spoke in whispers without conveying to my understanding anything intelligible, or, with one exception, producing surprise at their appearance. The exception was a person whom I seemed distinctly to recognise as a gentleman who had been in the habit of frequently coming to watch me at work while I was studying in the Alcazar at Seville, but with whom I had never exchanged a word. The dull astonishment with which I regarded him for being there grew duller every minute, until I became incapable of thinking about it—of thinking about anything;—I—only rest!

I came to myself as awakening from a sleep of many confused dreams. I was at my Newman Street apartments, lying in bed. I took for granted it was night; for a dull light, whose source was carefully screened from my eyes, just enabled one to distinguish objects and recognise the place. A hand with its fingers upon my wrist, had hold of one of mine, and, peering anxiously at me, was the kind face of my dear friend Morris Blake, M.R.C.S.

"O blessed Moses, and ten times ten!" I heard him whisper softly to himself.

"Hollo, Morris!—is this you?"

"O Philliloo! So you're come up out o' that, eh? An' you know me—do you, Charley?"

"Know you, Morris!—why not?"

"Ah, why not?—that's it. Never mind now, though. Only be still and quiet—that's a good little man. Here's a dhrink for you."

I was parched with thirst, and tried to rise to take the effervescing draught he was mixing—I could not lift my head from the pillow.

It would be to no purpose describing my condition. Thanks to Blake's skill, under the Almighty's favour, I was past the crisis of brain-fever. Still the greatest care, with quiet above all things, was necessary for my safety and restoration. Blake was to take me into the country as soon as I was strong enough to bear the journey. Meanwhile he resolutely refused to answer any of my inquiries, as well as permission for me to speak a word, except about common and immediate things.

"Be good, now, Charley, my man," he said, in his way. "Byen-by we'll want discourse over our liquor an' dhudeens, when I exhibit 'bacca and punch for tonics. You may fire away thin like a debatin' society."

We had been together nearly a month at the foot of Box Hill, in the pleasant vale of Dorking, before Blake, while "exhibiting" the above tonics for his own behoof, but rigidly forbidding them to me, thought proper to remove all restrictions from our perfect freedom of conversation.

"After puttin' out o' sight, in twelve hours, three pounds o' mutton-chops, an' seven imperial pints o' bitter beer, Charley—you gourmong; besides flinging twice up to the top o' the hill like a shammy kid with a flea in his ear, I think I may take you Co. in any agreeable sort o' discourse we likes now. What was the dhrink you'd been havin' the night you was home?"

It was only by an effort that I could recall the circumstances. "Drink, Morris!" I replied; "I took nothing but a little claret-and-water."

"Don't you call to mind gettin' dhrunk?"

"I!—drunk?"

"Dhrunk."

"No," I indignantly protested; "Drunk, indeed! I was very ill, but drank nothing—Oh, I remember now—"

"Ha, ha! What, Charley?"

"Only a liqueur-glass of something that was given me when I was fainting."

"I'd just like to know what company you was kapin'—wid your black females and princesses—for they hocussed you, Charley."

"Good heavens, Blake! What do you mean?"

"Just that. The men that brought you home, an' tucked you away in your crib, said you'd brought on a fit o' blinking at dinner, by lookin' too hard at the decanters—the bla-guards! Was you robbed?"

"Robbed—nonsense!"

"You wasn't? I thought, though, we'd find you cleaned out o' every scurrick, till we seen you'd got money an' your watch upon you. Here's a parcel they left. I'd have give it you before, only there's something so mighty mysterious on it, that if you hadn't had a brain-fever it ought to give you one anyhow, sure!"

Blake produced a small weighty parcel covered with strong brown paper, and firmly bound round with pack-thread; but before handing it to me, he read from a label pasted across one side—the characters Roman, in red ink,—

"REMEMBER YOUR WORD—HONOUR. FORGET EVERYTHING—SILENCE."

"It's mighty like one of the scrawls they hould up to the audience at Astley's," he added, reflectively. "'He dies at sunrise.' I've seen that same myself."

Meanwhile, in considerable agitation, I cut open the parcel. It contained two rouleaux, with seventy-five bright new sovereigns in each. I could not help muttering, as I remembered my black-veiled patroness, "You finds as vee vont pe vorsser as our pargains."

"Oh, thin, by jabers!" exclaimed Morris, "there must be a real royal princess in it to the fore, after all."

His astonishment surpassed mine. Naturally enough, he grew intensely inquisitive. In the wanderings of delirium I had revealed so much, that to tell him from first to last the whole story, was but to put in order the incidents, with every one of which he was already well acquainted. In his discretion, as well as in the soundness of his judgment, I could put the firmest reliance. Moreover, his keen insight into the characters of men, and his large acquaintance with the world, together with his affectionate friendship for myself, expressly calculated him to be my adviser, now I so urgently wanted counsel. For the mystery of the dead man's head had recurred to, and lay like a crime upon, my conscience—only the heavier for remembrance of my word pledged to secrecy, when by no possibility could I have anticipated that it was given to conceal a fact so horribly suspicious. My mind was soon made up, and I recounted to him all my adventure. He listened without once interrupting me; but I knew by the fierce way he pulled at his pipe, that he was not a little excited.

"And now, Morris," I asked, when my tale was done, "what does it behove me to do?"

"Nothing," he answered, emphatically; "Beca'se, Charley, in the first place, as that respectable black female Trojan could you, 'it's no business of yours,' and, in the second, it would be of no use to try."

CHAPTER II.

I AM in Rome, and between what I have told and am about to tell there is an interval of ten years. During that time, step by step, slowly at first, then rapidly, I had gone up the hill of public favour, and was now, for an artist, a rich man. Outwardly my fate appeared all prosperity and content; but my inner life was one of hopeless dreary pining, for no blood-boltered spectre of his victim ever haunted the slayer more persistently than all those years the form of the fair creature I had painted in her marvelous beauty—her impossible attainment haunted my imagination—my heart.

I had not, however, reposed all that time in quiescent indifference; but had set in motion, again and again, all the means I could devise and command to penetrate the mystery in which I had been involved; but none had proved effective—all had failed—not the film of a clue could be discovered. It was well for me that I had the irrepressible instinct for art and art-work. I think—I know it saved me. It was a shelter from scorching passion, a defence against deadly despair; a motive and a solace for which I was content to live on—without which I had been more than content to die.

A more than usually severe attack of my old nervous debility made at the season of '32, a residence, for the ensuing winter, in a more genial climate, a necessity to my restoration. I spent some months in the south of France and at Nice; and in the spring of the following year, just before Lent, came to Rome.

It was not the first, by several, of my visits to the Eternal City. Here, besides my never-ending delight in its great works of art, I had the pleasure of renewing old and congenial friendships. On all previous occasions I had come to Rome to work; now I was purposely idle, at least as far as brain or hand production went, for it was the only holiday I had ever given myself. The genial climates of France and Italy—the changes of scene—the repose from labour—the subdued excitement, without reaction, of contemplating the noble creations of art—the view of majestic, if ruined edifices, of religious ceremonies—varied by calm, almost melancholy, meditation in solemn churches, chapels, and the tranquil galleries of ancient palaces, rich not alone in the accumulated outpourings of genius, but with recollections, as well, of great men and greater events,—were influences that stirred to its depths the dead sea of sluggish grief, in which I had suffered all the germs of delight in my heart to lie sunken and buried; which aided my convalescence, and revived in my being capacities of happiness to which I had been insensible since the time of my strange adventure.

One of the alternative effects which the old morbid state had produced in my character was a shrinking and aversion from new acquaintances; above all, a dislike to be one in any promiscuous company. Lately I had so nearly succeeded in vanquishing both of these unreasonable feelings that I became a frequent visitor at the Greco,* and never refused nor hesitated now to use the introductions I had brought, or such as were proffered to me by any resident brother artists and friends. It was another and a new delight to me wandering among the studios, as well as through the churches and galleries. Although it was not very obvious to myself then I can well understand now, how great a change was, with unconscious rapidity, taking place in me. My mind was recovering elasticity enough to rebound against the tyranny of imagination, and often to assert the long-abandoned right of choosing her own subject of thought or fancy.

During a former visit to Rome, when once by chance at the Café Greco, I had become interested, at first through his appearance, and subsequently more deeply on obtaining a sketch of his character and history, in a Swiss, a painter, whom I saw there. He looked what he was, "a man weary with disaster, tugged with fortune;" one who at the beginning of his life had mistaken his vocation, and fallen into the fatal error of believing that inclination and aspiration were power and genius. Possessed in no small degree of intellect, perseverance, and many talents, he had not a spark of the divine fire which fuses these noble elements into forms that make their creator's name a living word upon the tongue of fame. When I first became acquainted with him he was old, and seemed like one who, having come forth out of the battle of life all scarred and worn, was resigned to dare the strife no more—to embrace content rather than wrestle with ambition—to play with cheerfulness instead of struggling to retain hope.

We had lately become close friends. I had got to love the man, and I think he liked me. One of the results of our friendship was an invitation to visit his studio in an old palazzo, which was a regular burrow of artists, in the Piazza del Popolo. There was no difficulty in finding his atelier; for above it, at the sides, and beneath, were others occupied by men I knew, and the most part of whom I had visited. It was on the first morning after my return from an excursion of a few days among the Alban hills that I made my promised call. To my surprise, my knock elicited no reply from within; but instead, at the door of the adjoining "shop" appeared its tenant, my friend Conway Charters.

"Hollo! you! How goes it!" he said, while shaking my hand in the British manner. "You've been up to Adrian's villa, they tell me. Glorious among the hills at this time of year, isn't it? Want Stapfer?"

"Yes; he has asked me to see his paintings."

"He's gone off hurry-skurry to Zurich—he comes from Zurich, you know. There's some news—bad or good, we can't make out which from his manner, poor fellow!—there's some news from his sister."

"Well, I hope then it's good. How are you?"

"Oh, I'm all right, thanks! I've got Stapfer's key here; if you like to go in and look at his lot, I'll come to you in half an hour—my model's time's up soon."

There is no law more absolute than the one which decrees that he who upon no business interrupts an artist engaged with his model, is guilty of impertinence; so, taking the key, I let myself into Stapfer's place. The history of his art-life might be read upon the walls at a glance. Abundant passages were written there, in his work, containing clear evidence of

*The Café del Greco—the tavern in Rome where artists "most do congregate."