

THE ARTIST'S PRIZE.

The last rays of the setting sun penetrated the heavily draped windows of a large and spacious apartment and fell aslant the half exposed canvas upon which was pictured in fresh and glowing colors a newly finished Madonna and child. Before the easel sat the painter Rubens—an old man of some fifty-five summers—with his eyes fixed intently upon the warmly-tinted picture his arms folded complacently across his breast, and his whole soul, as it were, revelling in the flood of golden light which seemed to invest the heads of both mother and son with a soft and heavenly luster. The shadows of evening were already deepening into twilight, when a faint tap at the door aroused the artist from the long and abstracted reverie into which he had fallen. Rubens started, and in a low voice said:

"Come in."

The door opened, and a tall and graceful youth, who had numbered some twenty years, entered, bearing in his hand a portfolio and sketch book. With a modest mien and faltering step the young man advanced towards the artist, who had risen from his seat and stood quietly surveying the intruder. For a moment silence was preserved by both parties, at last the former ventured to speak:

"I have come in to request the great favor of becoming a pupil of the illustrious and world-renowned Rubens."

"May I ask by what means you have become so well acquainted with my labors in the field of painting, that thus you eulogize and extol me?" said the old man, calmly.

"Sir," replied the youth with enthusiasm, "are not the galleries of Brussels freighted with the rich productions of your skillful pencil?"

"You have been in Brussels then?" said Rubens, with an inquiring glance.

"Yes I have sojourned there for the past ten years of my life. My history is a short one, and if I am not encroaching upon your patience, I will give it you at once," said the young man, with a sorrowful glance.

"I pray you do relate it. My ears are most attentive listeners," said the old man, becoming momentarily more and more interested in the strange youth before him.

The two being seated, the younger one commenced the recital of his tale.

"My earliest recollections of home were in Rome, that glorious city of the past. My father, Alexandre del Sarto, was an artist, professing ever a strong love and attachment for his favorite and chosen profession. But in Rome his efforts were but slightly appreciated, and the trivial sum received by him for the sale of his pictures was quite insufficient for the daily support of his family. Discouraged and vexed at his want of success, my father conceived the somewhat rash idea of visiting Brussels to try once again his luck in painting. Accompanied by his wife and two children, he embarked for Brussels, with many hopes and visions of future success. Arriving there safely our little family had hardly established themselves, before my little and only sister was seized with a terrible fever. The day which dawned upon her burial witnessed, also the complete prostration of my father; and ere two weeks had flown, the inanimate body of my loved father was laid beside that of my sister."

At this point of his life's sad history the young man paused, while tears coursed slowly down his cheeks.

"And your father's property?" said Rubens, his heart's deep sympathies fairly aroused.

"Alas! the only inheritance left to his orphan child was a natural taste and inclination for that same profession in the pursuance of which fortune had only tempted but to frown upon him."

I will not further detail the particulars of that long and protracted meeting between the great master and the poor strange youth in whom he had become so suddenly yet deeply interested. Suffice to say, that the next morning after their interview found Andrea del Sarto an inmate of the studio of the painter Rubens, notwithstanding the latter had long since openly avowed his determination to receive no more pupils in his profession as an artist.

Months passed by, and the young student had made rapid progress in his studies. Rubens himself was fairly delighted with the fertile genius and wondrous talents of his protege. Al ready had he entrusted Andrea del Sarto with the execution of many family portraits, for which he had received orders, and although such pictures were supposed by the public to be the genuine productions of Rubens's skillful pencil, it was sufficient compensation in the eyes of Andrea to know that his style was so near the counterpart of his master's as scarcely distinguishable from that artist's works except by the most fastidious and critical eye.

On entering his studio one morning, Rubens found his pupil apparently so much absorbed in the contemplation of a miniature which he held in his hand as to be entirely unconscious of the existence of all outward circumstances. Perceiving that his entrance had been unnoticed by the youth, the old master advanced noiselessly behind the chair of the young man and glanced at the miniature before him, which was one of great female loveliness. It was executed upon ivory, and was a work of rare merit. But as the old man's gaze rested a second time upon it, he started back and uttered an exclamation of surprise, which caused Andrea to turn quickly around to ascertain the cause of such a sudden and unlooked-for intrusion. For a moment, Andrea stood dismayed and overwhelmed with confusion, as his eyes encountered the stern gaze of his master. The latter, however, instantly recovered himself, and said:

"You will doubtless wonder at the emotion betrayed by me when my eye fell upon the miniature with whose great beauty you seemed lost and rapt in admiration. It was the striking resemblance which the picture bore to the face of my only daughter, which arrested my attention and surprise; for never before have these eyes so accustomed to look upon the human face in its greatest variety, behind a face so ethereal in its perfect loveliness as is that of Clara Rubens." A smile passed over the face of the old man, as turning to his companion he quickly added: "I trust you will pardon an old father's vanity in having thus frankly spoken of the beauty of his child."

"Most assuredly, sir," said Andrea, respectfully, "it would give me much pleasure to know the daughter of my honored and beloved master. In regard to the original of the miniature which you found me examining," said the youth, slightly coloring, "I must tell you that I know almost as little concerning her as yourself, the miniature having come into my possession under very peculiar circumstances."

"Indeed! Perchance it is some ideal creation of the painter's fancy," said Rubens, good naturedly.

"O, no! You are mistaken," said Andrea, quickly; "for it was from the hands of the original that I received it, some three years since."

"Some lost friend, perhaps?" queried Rubens.

"Listen, and I will tell you the circumstances which made me its happy possessor," replied the young artist.

"It was early one summer evening, some three years since, that, heated and fatigued by the extreme sultriness of the day, I strolled into the country for the purpose of recruiting my enfeebled and weakened energies preparatory to the labors of the following day. Indifferent to both time and

distance, I wandered on, scarce known where I went, until I found myself in the midst of a large tract of woods, some three or four miles distant from the city. I was just on the point of retracing my steps homeward when a loud shriek rang through the woods. At first, I supposed it to be the scream of some night bird, making still more desolate the usual solitude of the place. I paused. Again that cry of distress fell upon my ear. Half breathless, I hastened forward toward the spot which the sound proceeded from. But all around me was darkness and gloom, while a gentle breeze sighed through the thick and overspreading foliage. The ground beneath my feet was cold and damp, and a chilling sensation began to creep through my veins. But still I hastened on, while the sounds, which I now supposed to proceed from some human voice, seemed growing fainter and fainter. Suddenly a dim light, as from a lantern, attracted my attention. The feeble light served as a beacon to guide me onward in the path of duty. With increased velocity I sprang forward, and ere many moments elapsed I had reached the spot of action. As I neared the thicket I heard the pawing of hoofs upon the ground, as of a steed impatient to be gone. At this moment, a stream of light issuing from the lantern revealed to my sight the slight form of a female figure, apparently a girl of some fifteen summers, struggling in the embraces of a large and swarthy looking man. I could bear no longer. Seizing a broken bough which lay near by, I cautiously advanced from behind a tree and aimed a blow at the head of the monster before me. With a muttered curse upon the author of his injury, the villain fell senseless to the ground. It was but the work of an instant for me to spring forward and release the horse which had been tied to a neighboring tree; then lifting the fainting form of the girl from the ground, I sprang into the saddle, and we were soon out of reach of all human harm. I had not rode far before my companion began slowly to revive, the heavy night dew acting as a restorative to her senses; and from her trembling lips I learned the particulars of that fearful adventure from which, stripling as I was, I had rescued her."

"A stranger in Brussels, she had ridden forth, towards sunset, into the country; but being suddenly overtaken by night, she had lost her way. Passing through the woods, her passage was arrested by the strong and powerful arm of a man, who seized the reins of her horse and in a loud voice demanded her purse. The young girl, terrified with fear, obeyed; but even that did not satisfy the heart of the ruffian, and tearing the weak and powerless girl from the saddle, he began to strip her person of the few jewels which she wore. Having succeeded in gaining all but a small diamond cross, it was in her struggle for the keeping of that precious relic that Providence appointed me her deliverer. The next day I received a note from the fair unknown, expressive of her heart's deep gratitude, and urging my acceptance of this little miniature likeness of herself until time could better reward me for the service rendered her."

"And have you never seen the lady since that eventful night?" said Rubens, as Andrea concluded his narrative.

"No; as she steadily refused disclosing her name, and was not a resident of Brussels, it was in vain that I sought to find her out; and though three years have passed, thus far success has baffled all my efforts to obtain a clue to her whereabouts."

"A strange bit of romance, truly," said Rubens, rubbing his hands smartly together, and taking his hat to leave.

It was not many weeks after the above conversation before the youthful

artist was called away from the scene of his labors to attend the bedside of his dying mother. With mingled feelings of sorrow and regret, Andrea del Sarto bade adieu to one who, out of the boundless charities of his heart, had done so much towards shaping the future career of the young artist. Rubens, with tears in his eyes and a prayer upon his lips for the success and prosperity of the untiring student, witnessed the departure of Andrea for Brussels.

One month from the time of his return home the old master received a letter from his protege announcing the death of his only surviving relative. Impressed by the bitter loneliness of his situation, now that all who were dear to his heart had been taken from him, he was determined to seek his fortune in some distant quarter of the globe, when, God grant, him success, he would return to Antwerp, there to lay his hard-earned laurels at the feet of his respected patron and master, and in his charming society spend the remaining years of his life. Such was the bright picture of the future which the young enthusiast beheld in his day dreams. Would to God that the reality were always as beautiful and truthful as the ideal!

In a luxurious apartment of one of the most beautiful hotels situated upon the Rue de la Francie, behold the lovely and accomplished daughter of the artist Rubens. The somewhat slight, yet fully developed form, the rose-tinted complexion, the pale and lofty brow, over which a shower of golden ringlets cluster in rich profusion, the deep and azure blue of her eyes, together with the sweet and radiant smile which ever illumines her countenance, combine to make Clara Rubens a vision of almost angelic loveliness.

Four years have past since the opening of our story, and as the youthful bud of promise has gradually developed into the full-blown rose, the old father has watched with tender solicitude the daily expansion of the charms of both soul and body of his idolized child. Yes, Clara Rubens was fair to look upon. All Antwerp rendered her homage. Sonnets were indited to her, musical ballads were dedicated to her, while her fairy-like portrait graced not only the walls of the gallery of fine arts but was found embodied in many a sculptor's group in the various and numerous studios of Antwerp.

The daughter of Rubens was in the twenty-second year of her age; and though she had never failed for lack of admirers and suitors for her hand in marriage, yet up to that time the fair girl had courteously declined all proposals. Her father, conscious of the decay of nature and his declining years, was anxious to see his only child the established wife and partner of some person worthy her position in life. Having communicated this desire to his child one morning, to his great surprise he found that Clara, who had ever been set and immovable on that point, now yielded a ready assent to his wishes. The following plan, by which to make choice of a husband, was conceived and proposed to his daughter, which having met with her acceptance, ran as follows.

As Clara Rubens, besides possessing wondrous beauty, was also a reputed heiress, she would doubtless receive numberless offers from both the wealthy and matrimonial speculator. To prevent any ambitious and unworthy motives on the part of the lovers of his daughter, it was publicly announced in journals of the day that to him who should be artist enough to cut from a solid piece of iron an elaborate and beautiful wreath of roses only by the aid of the hammer and chisel, in an allotted space of time, should be given the hand of the daughter of Rubens in marriage.

As the list for competitors to the prize was open to both old and young,