

Choice Literature.

ZELIA MONTBAZON.

BY THOMAS DUNN ENGLISH

Standing as I do on the threshold of the unknown world, there is no motive why I should tell my story untruthfully, and yet the plain facts are so marvellous that I dislike to face incredulity by telling it all. There is, however, an impulse within me that I cannot resist. That it may be well understood I must begin at the beginning, and obtrude as much of my own history as may be needed for a comprehension of the whole.

I do not think that I lack energy or decision when such qualities are suddenly called for; though, if I did, the defect would be a thing of inheritance; for my father, Ralph Wardington, was somewhat of a sluggard, and given to letting affairs drift as they would. There were nearly four hundred acres of fertile soil in the Wardington Farm; with industry and judgment it would have been a large garden; but my father had no surplus at the end of the year, and barely managed to escape getting into debt. Beyond a few acres in fruit, and an acre which grew vegetables for the home use, the place had no cultivation at all. Its revenue came from its nature. It was a body of ground resting upon limestone rock, which lay in a natural depression among sandstone ridges. One of these last was cleft at a point, and through this a stream from a large and perpetual spring on the farm found its way below. The farms around were fertile enough, and took kindly to maize and vegetables; the peach flourished on them, but they could not grow grass. On ours, the richest blue grass grew spontaneously and luxuriantly wherever the woody growth was removed. The place was one vast pasture-field, and in great request in the neighbourhood for fattening bees. The rent thus derived from surrounding cattle-owners made up my father's moderate but steady income. He had but few expenses, for he was a widower, who had only to maintain himself, his only son, one hired man, and a maid of all work; and he spent nothing on the place beyond keeping fences in repair, and top-dressing the grass about once in two years. I grew up on the farm equally untended, having my own sweet way very much, and found myself at twenty-one, a tall strapping—they said I was handsome then—a skilful horseman, with very little learning except in woodcraft, and with no settled purpose in life.

Our farm, in a county where the homesteads generally ran from thirty to a hundred acres, was considered to be large; but neither in its extent nor appurtenances was it to be compared to Fane Manor, which adjoined it on the south and west. That contained three thousand six hundred acres of land, partly arable and partly forest, including a small village of about ninety houses, and all beyond the hamlet was enclosed by a stone wall. It had, very near the centre, what had been a spacious and noble mansion, with all the necessary outbuildings, and there were ten tenant houses for farmers and labourers scattered over the place. But the mansion which, with its library and furniture, had been left to the care of my father, who collected the village rents and sent them to Europe, where the owner resided, was out of repair. There were gaps at places in the stone wall around the manor, the sward of the park of three hundred acres surrounding it was filled with low growth; weeds and briars choked the garden; the stable-rooms were leaky at places where the slates had fallen off; the grape-tries and palm-houses were ruins; and the place had a desolate look. The owner had resided abroad since the death of his wife and never intended to return. The place was offered for sale or lease. But those who came to see it with a view to rent or purchase, only shrugged their shoulders at inspection and went away. It was all familiar to me. As a boy I used to go there once a week to open the house and air the antique furniture and books, and continued to do so as I grew up. The great grove of hickories which stood not very far from the park was my favourite nutting-ground in autumn. I grew to feel a proprietary interest in the manor, and dreamed in daylight of what changes I would make in the place when it fell to me.

There was one painting in the house that subjected me to a strange fascination. It hung over the mantel-piece in the library, inclosed in a massive frame, half rotted and worm eaten, with the gilding worn off in patches. But the picture itself looked as fresh and vivid in its colouring as though it had been recently painted. It was a full length portrait of a young woman, and the figure was of life size. She appeared to be eighteen or thereabout. The form was perfect in pose and curve; the face so faultless in every feature that it looked as though the artist had mingled the points of several models; and the drapery was so admirably done that you could discern the texture of the silk and velvet, and the pattern of the lace. But the wonder of it all was the eyes. They were at times blue or grey, according to the light that fell upon them; but, whatever hue they assumed, they had a peculiar, steely lustre that held the gazer spell-bound. I called the portrait "The Blue Beauty," because of the colour of the dress, which harmonized so well with the eyes, and with the profuse golden hair that grew down over the forehead in waving locks, like that of the bust of Clytie. It formed my ideal of female loveliness, in spite of those cruel, steely eyes, and I vowed I would never marry but with its counterpart. I used to stand before it, for hours at a time, drinking in its splendid beauty.

But my dreams were at an end when there came a letter from Colonel Fane informing us that the manor and the contents of the mansion, together with the village of Montbazon, had been sold to Obed Marley, to whom my father was to give possession. The village had been named after the lady of the picture. She had been a Zelia Montbazon, who had married with the grandfather of Colonel Fane, after the death of his first wife, her sister. Tradition assigned to her a cold and wicked nature; and there were vague rumors that she had hastened her sister's end.

Obed Marley! I first pictured the new proprietor as a lean, smooth-faced and acute member of the Society of Friends, with all the strict Quaker notions of *meum* and *tuum*, and having boards displayed on the place requesting strangers not to trespass—the civil wording implying that the full penalty of the law would be meted out to interlopers. Then again I fancied him to be some rotund and vulgar person who had made a fortune by calico or candles, and who would display his pride of purse offensively. Neither would be apt, I reflected, to have the large sum to buy the manor, or the desire

to have a large country seat; and I concluded it was some stock gambler who had managed a profitable corner, or a vulgar silver king. But no matter which it might be my old privileges on Fane Manor would have to give way to the right of ownership.

Speedily there came an architect, with a train of carpenters, masons and labourers, and these soon changed the looks of the place. The mansion and outbuildings were thoroughly repaired, the gaps in the walls around the manor filled up, the park and garden cleared of all rubbish, the drives macadamized, and hired men and their families installed in the tenant houses. Then came boxes in abundance, and vans filled with rich and costly furniture, replacing a part of that already in the house. I thought it at first would be a small household, as there were but three sets of fine chamber furniture, and those already there were dilapidated, and that the owner intended to entertain but few guests. But presently I counted twelve cheaper bedroom suites, which were evidently for the servants, and would fill the upper rooms in both main building and wings. With the last instalment came a small army of servants, and I found it was to be a polyglot household. The butler was a German, the cook French, the gardener Scottish, the coachman and groom English, the footman a Mulatto, whose accent proclaimed him from Virginia, the housekeeper evidently an American, and the head chambermaid an Italian. They had all been referred to us, and I showed to them the various offices. Before I had got through with them the new proprietor came, attended by an English body servant, and a Scottish deer-hound—the valet, short, ugly and robust, and the dog, tall, handsome and slender. These came in a dog-cart, the master driving. The coach and several horses had come the day before with the coachman, groom and stable helpers.

I was agreeably disappointed. The newcomer was tall, with light hair and blue eyes, the hair worn long, and giving him a leonine look. He was courteous and courtly, every inch a gentleman. He spoke English with a slight peculiarity of accent, and that extreme precision which proclaimed him to be a foreigner, though of what country I could not determine. He was a linguist for he spoke to the servants each in his own tongue. I stepped forward and introduced myself, stating that as we had had charge of the property so long I was fully familiar with its merits and capabilities, some of which he might not perceive at first, and that my knowledge, should he require it, was at his service. He gazed at me searchingly at first, then smiled, and said he would be pleased to avail himself of my kind offer in the near future. We both bowed, and I returned home.

The neighbouring farmers, my father among the rest, made formal calls on the new-comer during the following week, after the custom of the neighbourhood. Mr. Marley sent his card to each in return; but, though he had been courteous to all at their visit, paid none in return, except to my father. This frigid negative to intercourse made him unpopular at once. But in his visit to us he was genial and pleasant, chatted with my father about grazing, gave some reminiscences of his visit to the South American pampas, where he had seen great herds of cattle, and now and then addressed his remarks to me. As he rose to depart, he said to my father: "Mr. Wardington, this son of yours is a bright, manly young gentleman, a little indolent, I fancy, and he has rusted so long here that he is quite ignorant of many things it would be pleasant to know. I am without kin, and shall live a rather solitary life; but I need some little companionship at home. I have taken a liking to your son. If he can endure my society at times, I would take it as a favour should he make himself free of my house. I have made some additions to the library that may interest or amuse him. As he has hunted, fished and made himself free of the manor all his life, he must consider that all his privileges remain intact." The he bowed himself out, and howled away in his dog-cart, which, with his valet, was in waiting.

"Philip," said my father, when our visitor had gone, "I advise you to accept that offer. Intercourse with such a man will afford you the polish you lack. He is undoubtedly well bred and finely cultured, and his society will be in every way to your advantage. Besides, did you observe what he said about having no kin? I would not have you stoop for possible fortune, but he must be very rich, and may desire to choose an heir."

Soon called at the manor; for I was fascinated by this courtly stranger, though I had an impression he was not bearing his proper name. His welcome was genial; and when he had ushered me into his library, he said: "You know the house well enough. Come and go when you like." I noted that there were a number of new books on the shelves, though most of them were in old bindings, and some in parchment covers. But what struck me most was that a thick curtain was hung over the picture above the mantel. He detected my astonishment by my glances.

"I have covered that portrait," he said. "My eyes do not like to rest on it. It is a fine work of art; the face has the rarest beauty, and the pose of the figure is full of grace; but face and figure are those of a being without a soul. It is not sensual—it would be a relief if it were, for then it were at least human; but those metallic and cruel eyes are almost demoniac in their expression."

He drew apart the curtain as he spoke.

"Mr. Marley," I said, "the picture does not strike all alike. To me it seems that had the picture life, those eyes, so inconsistent with the rest of the features, would soften under the influence of love. It is a woman with soul, but whose heart has never been touched. To me it seems to be the perfection of womanly beauty. I have not had much view of women, but nothing like that has ever met my view. Possibly I am wrong; but I have been so used from my earliest years to admire that picture; it has grown so into my conception of a woman, that could I find a woman just like it, if she would have me, I would marry her at an hour's notice. To be her husband a year I would yield half the years of my life."

My host looked at me keenly.

"It might not be impossible to find the original of that picture in life. To obtain her at a cost of half a life would be to pay a high price, for such a woman has no soul, and no wooing would ever waken in her the passion of love."

He closed the curtains over the picture, and then began to point out to me some very old and rare volumes, one of them a curious work in Arabic characters, which he told me was a treatise on astrology.

Mr. Marley and I soon became intimate. He treated me from the very beginning with a courtesy that went into kind-

ness, and was more like an elder brother than a stranger. He came frequently into the library when I was there, and not only took an interest in my course of reading, but, as he said, "by way of passing time," offered to instruct me in French and German. "The latter of these," he said, with a sarcastic smile, "my butler tells me I speak like a native." His instruction was oral; and he would not suffer me to touch either French or German books until I was able to talk with some fluency in both languages. I was an apt and willing pupil, though I wondered not a little as to his motive, if he had any besides amusement, for taking so much trouble. He added instruction in Latin, which he said was an admirable help in acquiring the Spanish and Italian. I found these last no trouble. The pronunciation was readily acquired, and after that my verbal memory carried me on. The German was the most difficult, more than French, and I have not mastered it yet.

Nor did my self-created tutor stop with tuition in languages. Accomplished in science, he led me in that direction; and no hired instructor could have taken half the pains that he did, and none could have evinced more delight at my progress. He was a profound chemist and fond of analysis; he had a laboratory fitted up in one of the wings of the mansion, and a complete set of electrical and galvanic batteries of the most approved construction. It was said by the servants that the light in that room burned at all hours of the night. Of the nature and object of his researches he said nothing at first; but as I advanced in knowledge he let me know that he was engaged in perfecting what the alchemists of old attempted, not to transmute the baser into the more precious metals, but to resolve the latter into their real elements and from the perfect analysis to build up a synthesis. He held not only gold to be compound, but all the so-called elements; and believed it was the combination of two elementary forms of matter, in varying proportions, from which all things sprang. As he explained it to me, alchemy was not a wild notion, but something which, through the aid of chemistry and electricity, would assume the dignity of a science.

There was something very attractive in these speculations, and I followed Marley in his experiments with great earnestness. But during all this time—and two years soon rolled by—the fascination of the picture in the library never ceased. Whenever I had the opportunity I would draw aside the curtain and drink in the beauty of that wonderful face and figure. Both were perfect in outline, and the tints inimitable. I used to talk to it at times. It almost seemed to be alive; and the eyes, with their steely gaze, followed me as I passed from one part of the apartment to the other. At times I felt Marley to be half right. The eyes had no warmth in them. They lacked soul. They grew more icy than steely at last, and at times I shuddered as I admired.

I soon noticed one singular peculiarity in Marley. He was ordinarily calm and self-possessed, remarkably so; but let a horse be heard galloping toward the house and he would tremble, turn pale, and listen with a mixture of apprehension and effort at courage, for which I could not account. When the sound died out he would gradually recover, draw a long sigh of relief, wipe the perspiration from his forehead and resume his work, or the conversation that the sound had interrupted. His air toward me was kind, and almost affectionate, but at times he would gaze upon me with an expression of half contempt, almost a sneer. It would come like a flash over his face, and then as suddenly disappear.

The neighbours, to whom Marley and his marvellous resources of money were mysteries, gossiped about the man and their ill-natured remarks sometimes came to his ears; but he paid no attention to it, and they soon ceased to trouble themselves about him. I was his only friend, and I shared with him the popular mistrust and dislike. So things drifted on until I was twenty-three years old.

(To be continued.)

THE VALUE OF A PICTURE.

The attention of the public is now and then called to the state of Art in Canada. This is done in the most practical manner by exhibitions of the work of our Canadian artists. Only a very small part of the people, however, have been brought face to face with Canadian art. This state of affairs is very much to be regretted. The newspapers have given generous aid, but there has been little or no instructive criticism. Some individuals, of course, are very forward in saying that the work of our Canadian painters is not of such a quality and quantity as to awaken general enthusiasm. Others complain of the neglect of figure-painting. This, however, is hardly a just complaint, for landscape painting seems the proper development of art in a young country like Canada, with its mountains and prairies, its rivers and lakes, and its oceans. Yet there is no doubt that figure-painting is more intelligible to the laity; for landscape painting is somewhat vague in its expression of emotion. Our artists, on the other hand, complain of the public indifference to art, of the lack of encouragement given them in their work. This public indifference is due to our ignorance of the nature and value of Fine Art. But to what extent this ignorance is culpable in our country, every one must decide for himself. Whatever our opinion may be, time must be liberally allowed for both the laity and the profession to improve.

Every year, however, must bring with it a larger number of persons interested in Art. Many a one must have asked himself, What is the value of a painting to me anyway? This is a question worth answering, however briefly. No one can set himself honestly to answer it without bettering himself. But first we must understand what is to be the character of the painting. If it is to be a landscape painting, it must not be a mere copy of certain objects of nature, however minutely and skilfully it may be done. It must express "man's delight in the work of God." It must record the rich experience of one who is thrilled with the beauty of some mountain, lake or forest scene in wide nature. Or, if our painting is to be an historical one, it must not simply represent the physical features and dress of some man living in some country and