

THE ACADEMY OF INTENTIONS.

AN ARTIST'S STORY.



It was an upright canvas, 9 feet by 5, and Gerald Kent was labouring upon it on a remarkable saffron creation sprawling in a corner of his sky, in appearance something between the setting sun and a cherub by Sir Joshua. So engrossed was he in the work that an intermittent series of kicks battering the studio door quite failed to attract his notice; then the sound ceased, the handle turned, and a man, tall and dressed with extreme care, lounged in.

'Well, Gerald,' he said; 'why, how now?' catching sight of the picture. 'What is it? Bird, beast or fish?'

'It's an allegorical subject; splendid idea, if I can only carry it out,' Gerald replied, waving his brush over his head, and suddenly, under a new inspiration, scraping out the past half-hour's work; 'quite fanciful, you know; a Watts sort of thing—masses of gold in a blue sky. The very title's an inspiration, "The Morning Stars shouted for Joy." What do you think of it?'

'Hoist her up, and let me see the foundation.' Gerald turned the easel crank, and 'The Morning Stars' slowly rose above the horizon. His friend stared at the work for some time without speaking; then he placed a chair so that its back stood parallel to the canvas, and leisurely seated himself.

'You don't mind my attitude to your last, do you, old chap? Give me some tea.' He sipped, and shuddered. 'Look here, Gerald, you must chuck it.'

'Chuck what?'

'Art.'

There was silence for the space of a minute, broken only by the sound of a man singing in the next studio.

Gerald had thrown himself on a couch with his hands clasped over his eyes. 'Go on, explain,' he said, the syllables falling evenly and without emphasis from his lips. 'Tell me the worst; it's the cruel only to be kind business you're on, I know. Drive ahead.'

'Well, first I'll catalogue your virtues. You know, old fellow, I never doubted your talents, but they're not the kind for this business. Verse, literature, play-writing; either would have suited you better than picture-making. You're bursting with ideas, but your imagination runs away with you. She's a notorious jade. Live to a hundred, and you won't harness her. Yes! yes! I know you stick to it. There's not a man in Chelsea works half as hard. How many hours have you been on it to-day?'

'I began at nine.'

'Hum! Now it's four. Eaten anything?'

'I didn't stop to lunch.'

'And no breakfast, I suppose; couldn't get up an appetite, and so on. What an aw you are?'

Again a pause, the candid friend biting his lip and striving to look unconcerned. When he resumed, it was only to repeat his advice, but with greater emphasis.

'You must chuck it, Gerald, that's what it amounts to. You lack the great thing needed—craftsmanship, command of your material, call it what you like—and you'll never acquire it. You lack the genius of patience. 'Tisn't in you; and without it all your brilliant fancies are just naught. Moreover, you can't draw; you see colour like a litho-printer; your modelling don't convince a stonemason, and your composition would have disgraced Maclise. No, don't talk of Rossetti. It's had to generalise from exceptions. Look at your sky. A sky should be the brightest part of a picture. Yours is about as gay as a London statue.'

'I've had a great deal of trouble with the sky,' Gerald confessed, humbly.

'So it seems. Why don't you try journalism? Why ain't you a poet?'

'And give up all this!' said Gerald below his breath.

'Yes, give it all up! Look here, old chap, it'll be a hard tussle, I know, but promise never to touch a brush again and I'll see you on your way in the other thing. Five hundred pounds will do to start. Oh, it isn't all generosity. Oaken gave me two hundred guineas for his portrait last week. Take it as a loan, and pay back when you've made your fortune!'

With a delicacy of feeling that he would have been the last to confess, the portrait painter rose from his seat as he made the offer, and stared hard at a reproduction of the Lille tinted bust on the studio table. He was still gazing on that sorrowful 'nameless maid' when a hand trembled upon his shoulder; wheeling round, he was horrified to see the boy in tears.

'It's awfully good of you,' Gerald whispered, speaking in rapid, hysterical tones, 'but it isn't that—I don't a bit mind being hungry and not getting on and all that—really I'm always perfectly happy when I'm at work, but—I'm not well—my heart's wrong. Early this morning, he went on in a frightened, confidential way, 'when I awoke I thought there was an animal in the bed. My heart was galloping about in my body. I'm frightened, Charles!'

'Nonsense! Heart wrong, indeed—why, you're as sound as a bell. Palpitations, my dear fellow, following on indigestion—that's all. Most common thing. Everybody has that fight once in his life. Eat regularly and sparsely and you'll laugh at your fears. Now look here, you come out and dine with me—leisurely as Christians should, and you'll be as right as Sandow to-morrow!'

'But my father and my grandfather both died of—'

'Oh, hush! Come along.' Gerald's further protestations were cut short by the portrait painter, who forcibly drove him from the studio. As they walked down the passage to the street door, he remarked unconcernedly, 'I've often seen Miss Brooke, now?'

'Yes, I saw her last Sunday,' Gerald replied.

'Amusing little person,' the portrait painter added, and he continued to enlarge upon Miss Freda Brooke's personality till they arrived at his club, when she was driven

from his mind by the difficulty of procuring dinner at an early an hour. It was something of a scratch meal when it did arrive, but the courses put Gerald into better spirits, and at the end he left his friend, promising that he would not spend the evening moping in his studio, but amuse himself in a rational way. He bought a paper, and stepping into a lighted doorway, persuaded himself into believing that he was interested in the entertainment bills. Having decided to see Beerbohm Tree, he found himself, at the hour the Haymarket doors open, outside Miss Brooke's house. Freda was alone. As Gerald gazed at her from his chair, all his finer emotions touched by the light of the fire playing on her hair and little wondering face, she rose and said, 'I'm going to say something so nice, Mr Kent, I was just hoping you would call.'

Gerald slept without discomfort that night, and rose the next morning with a lightness of heart that had been foreign to him for many a long day. So hopeful did he feel about his work, so confident of the fine thing he would make of 'The Morning Stars,' that he laughed outright at the recollection of his friend's dispiriting advice of the night before. Why, the picture complete to the smallest detail, was dancing before his eyes; it only remained to create the scene in paint. But as the morning wore on the difficulties of the task built themselves like a stone wall before him, and his vanities stole away one by one. 'The Morning Stars,' glorious as they were to his imagination, refused to be conjured upon the canvas, and by mid day disappointment was again his mate. 'It eludes me,' he muttered, despondently, 'oh, it eludes me.' As Gerald gazed, sad at heart, upon the huge picture, he observed, with some astonishment, that in the rapt face of the first morning star on which he had wrought for so many hours, he had unconsciously suggested a certain look, evanescent as the mist in a Scottish landscape, that he had sometimes observed in Freda's face. He fell to thinking of her, and as he thought he grew altogether out of conceit with the morning stars and their joy.

Her personality swept over and through him; away soared his imagination through ever-widening circles of ecstasy. He forgot the pain catching in his side, he forgot the dizziness that always crept into his brain when he was alone; he forgot the limitations of his skill—these were all non-essentials. Gradually his fancies became circumscribed, till in the end they were concentrated to a single longing—to paint Freda as the cynosure of some unique historical incident, some scene beyond compare. How should he interpret her? Beatrice, Cleopatra, Helen, Raphael's tinted lady, he considered them all, and dismissed them before even the idea had taken shape. Then he thought—Gerald trembled. Yet, why not? Other painters had given to the mother of God the features of the woman they loved. Why should not he?

To stand for the studio he paced, forgetful of time, recalling and rejecting the few scenes in the life of the Virgin, till, all in a moment, the picture he would paint came to him, came to him fresh, palpitating with young life, a little incident that had only found a place in the parlours of history. It happened some centuries ago, at evening, in the church of St. Mary, Oxford, when teachers and students had gone from the aisles all except one—a boy, afterwards to be known as St. Edmund. That moment was the supreme moment of his life. For it is not written that pausing before an image of the Virgin he placed a ring of gold upon her finger, thus taking her for his bride, and Mary, so it is said, accepted the betrothal by closing her finger on the ring.

For weeks Gerald worked at 'The Betrothal of St. Edmund,' and, even when it was finished, he could hardly bring himself to confess that he had put the best that was in him into the picture. He had changed the expression of her face again and again; he had wrought like a pre-Raphaelite on the figure of her robe, and sending in day caught him with an inclination, fast developing into action, to paint out the figure of St. Edmund altogether. But the cart was waiting at the door, so away went the picture to the Academy, leaving him alone with his regrets and the unfinished 'Morning Stars.'

Gerald had spoken to Freda of 'The Betrothal of St. Edmund,' but as she had evinced no particular interest in its existence he had not offered to show it to her. If it were accepted he could very well wait for her approval till the private view.

As time went on and he received no notice from Burlington House to withdraw 'The Betrothal of St. Edmund' from competition, Gerald's spirits rose. One anxiety only remained to him, would Freda like it? Her critical faculties were so immature that he had no fear she would notice the weak drawing or the feeble technique of his picture, but would she like 'St. Edmund' as a picture? Would she approve? Would she understand?

Freda did approve. It was her way to be satisfactory. Like the young widow in Maupassant's story she knew life by instinct as free animals do. But Gerald had a bad time of it in the early hours of the private view, for 'St. Edmund' was kicked in the Newlyn Room, just above an aniline picture of Capri, which killed the delicate olive-green robe that clothed his Virgin. And then that pain in his heart had been very cruel of late. As he pushed his way through the crowd he could hear its thud, thud, above the hum of conversation, till he thought the walls of his chest must be beaten down.

Four o'clock and Freda had not appeared. His eyes ached with searching for her, and when he passed the same knot of people again and again, self-consciousness sent the colour to his cheeks to think they understood and pitied his fruitless quest. Then all at once, in a sudden flash, he caught sight of her talking to an A. R. A., almost hidden behind the broad back of a sandy-whiskered man, who was jotting down the names of the notabilities for an evening paper.

It was nice of Freda to break off in the middle of her conversation and hasten toward him. 'It's a beautiful picture,

Mr Kent,' she said, 'and I have told a very great Art critic to look at it immediately.'

'Then you think it is a little like——' he stammered. The thud suddenly broke into a double.

'Oh, that was what I wanted to ask you. Who was your model—tea already, mother? Yes, I'll come. I'm dying of thirst. Will you keep my catalogue for me till I come back, Mr Kent? Mark all the nice pictures, and don't, don't, don't look so sad.'

With that Freda whisked away and Gerald turned on his heel to swallow the lump that jumped into his throat. He felt very tired and was more than inclined to go straightway home and tumble into bed, but as he passed through the vestibule he actually heard somebody asking the price of 'The Betrothal of St. Edmund.' Though the unknown client, an elderly cleric, left the table without further comment, the incident encouraged Gerald to prolong his stay. 'Besides,' he muttered, 'how can I go away when she's still here?'

He made his way to that asylum of the weary—the architectural room. It was cool and empty, and with a sigh of relief he sank upon the couch, stretched his legs, and let his head fall comfortably on the cushioned back of the seat.

The rooms had thinned when he awoke, and the first object his eyes rested upon was Freda at the far end of the vista of rooms, the centre of a merry group. 'No, I'm not wanted,' he thought, and again closed his eyes. But in that moment between sleeping and waking she was still present to him. He could not have given the reason for that vagary of his memory, but suddenly he recalled and went over from the beginning to end a conversation they had had a few days before, relative to the re-appearance of the dead in the material world.

Freda, being eighteen and imaginative, believed in spooks, and she had cited to Gerald, with a brave show of conviction, the mythical case of the two old bachelors, who had agreed over their port that whoever died first should appear to the other immediately after release. 'And the one who died first did appear to the other,' Freda had added with conviction. Gerald recalled his patronising answer.

'Listen,' he had said; 'since the beginning of history the most horribly unjust things have happened to men and women—they have been butchered, and nailed to the cross, and torn to death by beasts, and the world has been full of the cries of children in pain, and these things have been suffered for what they called their faith. They accepted death joyfully, yet with no single proof that the dream for which they died was worth that' (Gerald snapped his finger and thumb). 'For God is not a God of signs. And since he let them pass without a word of approval, is it probable that He stooped to satisfy the whim of a couple of old fogies over their walnut and wine? Pah! Gerald tried to recall Freda's answer to his diatribe, but his memory would not be spurred to the effort, and in a few minutes he was fast asleep again.

When he awoke it was quite dark, save for the moon shining through the skylight. His long rest had not refreshed him; he felt too ill to move, or even to wonder why he should still be in the Academy hours after the private viewers had gone home. 'They've overlooked me,' he thought. 'What a joke! Is it a joke though? Tchach! how dull I feel!'

This dullness made Gerald unhappy, for in other days, when the hills of the flesh were heaviest had often been the hour of his most magnificent thoughts. And now—dull, dull was that part of him that once had been so victorious. 'Perhaps I'm dying,' he thought, and thereupon longed for companionship. Just at that moment something seemed to stab him in the left breast, not once, but many times. His hand fell for his side and his head fell forward. Then a heavy robe seemed to be poised over his head; it fell. He wriggled as the folds wound relentlessly round him, and just when the pain was too acute to bear—consciousness passed.

In another moment his agony seemed ages away. He was on his feet, walking from the architectural room, conscious of an indescribable gaiety. Though Gerald knew it must be near midnight he could see as plainly as at mid day, yet he felt no curiosity about the phenomenon. The mere joy of existence at that moment was so intense as to brush aside the claims of reason and analysis. Neither was he surprised at not finding himself alone; many men and a few women passed him, and even when he reached the wall where 'The Betrothal of St. Edmund' hung—in that crowding moment—his feelings were feelings of deep satisfaction rather than of astonishment. Yet how changed was 'The Betrothal!' The nigged face on which he had wrought so patiently and so ineffectually, the face into which he had striven to express all he saw, and all he thought he saw in those other features—there it all was, even as he had dreamed. Mary smiled at Gerald, and the riddle of her smile was pity for mortal things. A certain thought came into his mind as he gazed, a fragment of a thought, far off from him, which he could not quite put away. It was that Freda could have seen this 'Betrothal of St. Edmund.'

'You are so newly come among us,' said a quiet voice at his elbow, 'that these things trouble you a little. They will soon cease to trouble. You are hardly full grown yet. I will stay with you till then.'

Gerald turned quickly round, and saw a man, young, dark, with a large white brow, and rough black hair, who linked his arm into Gerald's and led him away from the picture. 'Please the said in a low, unobtrusive tone, as if the explanation were intrusive. 'Perhaps I had better introduce myself. My name was Hugh, Hugh Robinson, I died in 1790, of consumption. Artists don't read or you might have seen an article about me in one of the English magazines a few years ago. "I filled Robinson" it was called. The writer said some very nice things. Some of my pictures are here now, at least the pictures I meant to paint,' he explained, with a smile, 'I should like you to see them. Really they are not bad, individual rather, less Gainsboroughy than my former things. We are given this privilege, you know, of sometimes seeing the ideals we strove to reach. It is one of the many little vanities we are allowed to indulge. Neither are our old bodies absolutely denied to us. You think it strange, perhaps, that dead people should have vanities; well—you will find many things to surprise you. See, there's Gainsborough. Dear master!'

Gerald followed his companion's gaze, which rested on a man rather slight in figure, advancing into the gallery where they stood. The oval face, with the well marked features, indicated a strength of character belied by the weak mouth. He smiled when he saw Gerald's companion, and thrust out his left hand.