THE CONNOISSEUR.

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SYNOPSIS.

whom great things have been expected, and who is accredited with a wide knowledge of art and its history, and who has also dabbled in music and architecture, returns to London, still purposeless in life, to find that he has been forgotten in a somewhat long absence. He meets a former friend, a landscape artist, Laurence Mole by name, who is just leaving London for an extended trip. Mole advises Passy to take the studio that he himself is giving up, and that definite work and aims in life will come to Passy. Passy does so, and takes possession one stormy November night. Just as he is comfortably settled he hears a noise at the front door. He opens it, and the figure of a person comes violently in with the wind and enters the studio.

PART TWO.

The form of a small woman, wrapped to the eyes in a drenched cloak of some black stuff, stood between him and the fire. It appeared to be facing him; but it was motionless and silent. Some random, jocose remark of Mole's about models came at once to his mind; they could never quite believe, he had said, that a landscape painter would go on forever without needing them; they always came round, in the childlike faith that eventually he would think better of it.

A genial notion of holding professional converse with a real model took swift possession of his will. Dinner time was still a long way off. Ample space intervened for a pleasant little diversion. If he was not recognized, he would pretend to be Mole.

"Won't you come to the fire?" he said, with effort keeping the sprightliness down in his voice. "It is a dreadful night. You must be perishing with the wet and cold. Put aside your cloak, and take a mouthful of this sloe-gin. It is warming and—and—"

He had touched the bottle, as he spoke, but with his eyes had followed the movements of his guest, as she glided toward the fire, and in its ruddy moving light began to disembarrass herself of her wrappings. His tongue faltered and his speech broke off in sheer astonishment as he beheld what the final gesture revealed—a lady of notable distinction in apparel and carriage, and with a face of exceeding beauty and refinement of line.

She stood erect and quite at her ease, and he noted that she was not so small as he had thought. The hat she wore was so tiny and close-fitting that he looked twice to make sure she was not bareheaded. She was of his generation, if anything his junior; in self-possession she could teach him lessons. He furtively withdrew his hand from the bottle, and bowed low toward the firelight which framed her in a ruby haze.

"It is the merest accident that we are not acquainted"—she was speaking now in a curiously measured voice. The cadence and quaint suggestion familiar to his ears—"but I have been much abroad, and now that I am here in this absurd London, an equally absurd mischance sends me to be blown in the middle of your studio, without even so much as a letter of introduction about me. Yet I will not apologize for bursting in upon you thus unceremoniously, since I perceive that you have recovered from your original distress of mind."

HIS SPEECH BROKE OFF IN SHEER ASTONISHMENT.

"Passy had indeed regained his equanimity. Moving forward to a point where the firelight helped him, he made a discovery as well.

"I hasten to share with you my relief," he answered, reflecting the tone of banter which lurked vaguely beneath the surface of her speech. "We are not such hopelessly complete strangers after all. Indeed, we have spoken at length together, have walked side by side, have even whispered to each other. Would you be surprised to learn that I possess a portrait of you—that I was examining it only this afternoon?"

The smile on his face was met now with a look of blank astonishment. The lady in turn stepped back and bent her head to get a better light upon Passy's countenance. "Oh-h!" she said, wonderingly, after a moment's inspection, "was it you? At—what's the place—where every old rosebush is? were you the one? Oh, yes, I recognize you now. How curiously small the world is!"

"It was much too large just then," he rejoined, courageously, "for I lost you almost immediately."

Upon reflection she did not resent the remark, and even laughed a little—a restrained small laugh, with an afternote of incredulity. As if to soften the edge of this, she seated herself in the big chair and looked up at him. The warm light upon her throat and chin transferred itself in his mind's eye to a picture he was reconstructing in thought.

"For every memory you have of Hildesheim," he said, lingeringly, "I could produce a hundred. You could not credit it if I told you—how it all engraved itself upon my brain—and I should hardly dare make the attempt."

"Oh, you must not assume that I failed to appreciate Hildesheim—up to the limit, of course, of my primitive feminine capacity. At the time, indeed, I confess that I imagined myself more interested in the place than you were."

"How easy it would be to explain that!" Passy smiled down upon her and softened his voice. "I remember," he went on, lifting a forefinger to plead against interruption, "it was in the front of old Bernward's iron doors—"

"Dear me, I thought they were brass."

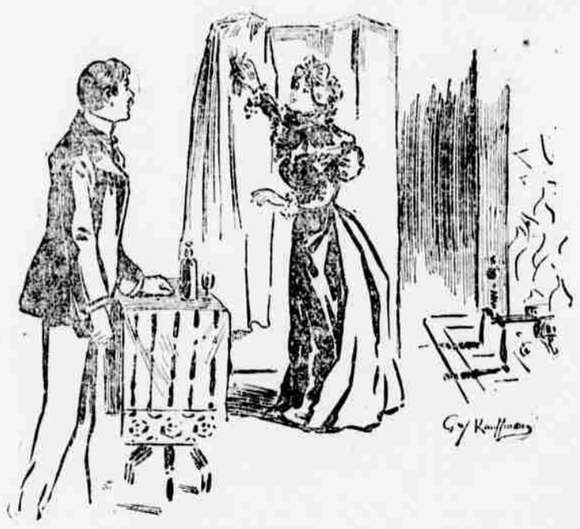
"Brass, iron, tin—whatever you like. I talked about them learnedly, fluently enough at the time, as I remember it, but I was thinking of something else. There was where I first saw you, just by those doors, and the gentleman who headed your party made some remark to me, and that was my opportunity, and I seized it with both hands. I talked for dear life to keep my place in the company. I delivered a lecture under the candelabrum so long that I expected it would fall on us. I harangued you and your friends on Byzantine art in the cathedral treasury; I reviewed the whole literature of German market-place Rolands and the entire system of mediæval guilds while we walked about in the square. We stood very close to each other when we were looking at the famous rosebush—and next year I went again and bribed the sacristan to give me a blossom, and I have it still—and do you remember the little church where vespers were being sung when we went in? And there I was even closer to you—it was in the dim light, and the air was full of incense—and we whispered together."

He finished in a murmur surcharged with invitation to sentiment, but she shook her head abruptly, as if conversing with herself, and gave a little laugh of plainly artificial hardness. "Dear me, this is very encouraging," she cried. "To think how extremely young I was, only two years ago!"

She rose as she spoke, and looked hard at the wet cloak, steaming where it hung over the corner of the screen.

"Of course I had an errand when I came here," she said, almost brusquely, all at once.

"I only know that you came—that is enough," he replied, holding at once defiantly and pleadingly to the emotional murmur. "The brave, good, clement wind lifted you, and held you, and brought you here—and what an ingrate should I be to demand explanations! Hark, how it shouts and sings about us! I was in love with its voice an hour ago, though I knew not a word of what it was saying—but now that I have caught its language—now—"



HE HALTED WITH A SIGH.

He halted with a sigh, and looked at the gloved hand she had put upon the cloak.

"It is still very wet," he urged, vacuously.

She laughed outright, and he could not tell if amusement or petulant vexation was uppermost in the sound.

"So you are unable to interest yourself, then?" she went on, coldly, and with averted eyes, "in the question why I came here. It awakens no curiosity in your mind—this extraordinary appearance at your studio, unattended and in the dark, with a hurricane and sheets of rain outside, of a lady whose name you are ignorant of—"

"Oh, no; I learned your name. I found the hotel you had been stopping at," he interposed.

"Well, then," she continued, in the same chilled tone, "of a lady who at least was unaware that she had ever seen you. Possibly studio life is so crowded with activity—and—color—that such an incident seems not at all unusual—attracts not the slightest attention, but I confess—"

Her fluency deserted her, and she turned her face away. Passy guessed from the line of the profile that she was biting her lip, and certainly he caught the nervous tap of a little sole on the hearthstone.

"No, no," he entreated her. "Don't think any of these things. I am wholly in your hands. The surprise and joy of seeing you—I truly hunted for weeks through German towns to trace you—you must have known I would—we lived a long, long time together in just those two hours or three—that is the way when two people rightly meet each other—who—who comprehend each other—and I know in my heart—"

"I think it was not your heart that we were speaking of," she interrupted him. "Yet, in a sense, it is what—what is conventionally called—an affair of hearts which brings me here. You can hardly be prepared for what I am going to tell you—but I am Mary's sister—her elder sister!"

Passy accepted the tidings with an unmoved face. "Yes? he said, wonderingly.

"It is very simple," she went on, in a sharper voice. "I came to England three days ago, but three hours was enough to show me that something was amiss with Mary. I won't say that she has been what might be called expansively frank with me, but I know enough of how matters stand to feel warranted—that is, to have felt warranted, in interfering. The tiff between you was really all moonshine, and she knows it perfectly, and she is in a mood to be reasonable, and so it was my idea to ask you to dine with me this evening—I have a flat in Victoria street—and she would be there—and—well, that's all."

Passy had been studying her face as she spoke, with strenuous intentness. His puzzlement at the outset was obvious, but now he gave a long, low, little whistle of surprised compulsion, and began moving about, rubbing his hands together softly, and smiling to himself. He swayed his slender shoulders as he walked; the impulse to dance was in his knees.

He stopped before her, and was not unnerved by the vexed and flushed countenance she reluctantly turned to him.

"As you have said," he began, with painstaking deliberation, "the situation is not commonplace. But are we in complete agreement as to its character? Will you pardon me the question—ought I still to address you as Miss Savage?"

She bowed assent, and he altered his voice to a whimsical affectation of wistfulness; "I never knew your first name!"

"It is immaterial—surely," she replied, with brevity.

"At all events we have a definite Miss Savage—and she seems entitled to the information that I don't know Mary, that I have never even heard of Mary, and that I am not Lawrence Mole."

The lady preserved a tranquil face, but her gaze with which she held Passy deepened and hardened. "This doesn't impress me altogether nice, you know," she remarked, between tightened lips.

The courage vanished from Passy's posture. He held out his hands imploringly, and bent forward as if to kneel. "I swear to you," he urged "that until a minute ago—when you spoke of your sister—it never crossed my mind that you were mistaken about me!—how could it?—nothing led to it?—we talked about our meeting—it was all so natural—"

"And you are really not Mr. Mole?" she interrupted him, with omens of placation in her tone. "It might be more regular if you told me who you were."

"My name is Passy," he said, dolefully—"Tyndall Passy."

She nodded almost amiably. "I have heard the name. You are the connoisseur—the gentleman who knows all about art and artists. Then you would probably know, among other things, where Mr. Mole is?"

"On his way to Malaga. I have his address there—I am forwarding letters. I can send a telegram to meet him."

"And you"—she left the subject of Mole with a drawing smile—"I used to hear of you from the Cheshams—have you finally made up your mind to do something in particular? The good souls, they used to be greatly worried about your indefiniteness."

"Oh, Mole settled it all for me," he rejoined cheerfully. "His advice was magnificent. He said I had only to get a studio, and the rest would come."

She took her cloak upon her arm. "Did your kodak picture of me really come out well?" she asked, inconsequently—"and what was it you said?—or didn't you say?—what is it you have decided to do?"

"I have decided to ask if I may really come to dinner this evening—to meet Mary, you know?"

THE END.