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FIRES OF FATE.

The great moment in the lives of Guy Allenby and his chum, Paul Panting, was at hand, and both men were looking more than usually pale as they stood facing each other in the studio which they rented. Both were artists, and both had made a hard struggle to find Fame, and with it Fortune. So far, however, neither had had any appreciable success.

But the next five minutes would decide which of them Fortune was to favour.

Side by side at one end of the studio stood two easels, and upon each a newly finished picture. The subject of the two paintings was the same—a three-quarter study of a young and very beautiful girl.

These two pictures represented the best efforts of the two artists, and in five minutes' time the studies were to be critically examined by Harvey Levine, the millionaire collector, whose knowledge of art was generally agreed to be the soundest in the world.

He owned some of the greatest art treasures, and had presented to the nation some of the world's famous paintings.

Under these circumstances it was scarcely to be wondered at that the two artists were feeling acutely nervous as they waited the coming of the millionaire, for his verdict, whichever way it went, would mean the making of the man whose painting was decided to be the best.

The portrait was that of the millionaire's daughter, Patricia Levine, and in both cases the likeness was striking.

It was because Harvey Levine realised the wonderful beauty of his child that he had caused her to be the subject of the picture, knowing that her features would give exceptional opportunities to a clever artist and bring out the best in him.

He had seen a little of the work of both men, and, believing they showed promise had invited them to paint his daughter's picture. He had stated that when they were ready he would judge both.

For the picture which he thought the better he was to pay five thousand pounds while to the unsuccessful artist he had promised a hundred pounds for his labour.

His decision naturally meant a great deal to the man whose picture was selected, for, apart from the prize money, the artist would be made for life. Backed by Harvey Levine, a totally unknown man would become famous in a day.

Guy Allenby cast a strange, lingering glance at his picture, and then, turning to his friend, gripped his hand.

"We both hope to win, of course, Paul, old man," he said; "and the decision means even more to me than to you. But whichever way it is, it shall make no difference to our friendship."

"Of course not," he said, a little uncomfortably. "But at the same time, I don't see that the business means any more to you than to me. After all, it would only be fair if I won, because you have already won a prize. Patricia loves you, and I would have sacrificed everything else if that could have been my fate."

"It is because she loves me that I want to make a name for myself, Paul," returned Guy. "As a poor, struggling artist, existing on a few pounds a year, I could not and, of course, would not, ask her to marry me. I—"

He stopped suddenly at the sound of a motor car outside the house.

"Mr Levine," he said. "Good luck, Paul, old man!"

Two minutes later Harvey Levine entered the studio. He greeted both men cordially, and smiled as he noticed their nervous agitation. He knew well enough what his verdict of the next few minutes meant to them.

He followed the two artists over to the end of the studio, and a moment later forgot all about them as he submitted the two pictures to a most critical examination.

He missed no point, and while he continued his silent criticism the young men waited breathless.

At last he turned away from the two canvases.

"I am pleased with the efforts of both of you," he announced, "but it has not been so difficult to make my choice as I imagined it might be. Actually there is no comparison between the two works. As a portrait one is excellent, but the other is a work of a master of his craft. One of you, of course, was foredoomed to dis-

appointment, but so it must always be in competitions of this sort."

So far he had given no hint as to which of the two men had won his praise, and their hearts seemed to cease their beating as they waited for him to say the word which would make one of them and mar the other.

The millionaire looked again at the two pictures and then, coming forward, he placed his hand upon Guy Allenby's shoulder.

"Mr Allenby, I have no hesitation whatever in awarding my decision to you. Your picture of my daughter is beyond my wildest anticipations, and I do not know, even amongst our famous men, one capable of such a work of artistic genius. I congratulate you, my lad. From this moment you may consider yourself a made man!"

Guy Allenby could scarcely believe his good fortune, whilst Paul Panting staggered back as though he had been struck in the face. Every vestige of blood drained from his countenance, and his lips trembled under the stress of great emotion.

Harvey Levine was quick to notice the effect which his decision had had upon the disappointed man, and he lost no time in doing his best to console him.

"I am sorry for you, Panting," he said in a kindly tone. "It is the fortune of war, and there is no reason why you should be discouraged. Your picture is excellent, but Allenby's is so obviously the work of a master that yours is overshadowed by it."

Paul Panting did not reply, for he could not at the moment trust himself to speak. The great art critic seemed to understand this, and, moving away, took up his hat.

"At eleven o'clock to-morrow morning I want you to bring both pictures to me," he told the two artists. "I will then hand over the cheques. And Panting, as you have done so well, I will increase the consolation prize to three hundred pounds, to compensate you for the time which you have spent on the work."

And without another word he passed from the studio.

For some moments after he had gone neither of the two artists spoke, and the silence was broken at last by Guy Allenby, who moved towards his chum with outstretched hand.

"I—I am sorry we could not share the honours, Paul," he said earnestly. "I know how disappointed you must be, for we have both built all our hopes on this. Shake hands, old man!"

With some reluctance Paul Panting returned the grip.

"I suppose old Levine's opinion counts for something," he said grudgingly, "but I'm hanged if I can see such a difference in the two portraits. As far as the likeness is concerned, mine is every bit as good as yours, and there are probably many who would consider the execution better. Still, the luck is yours instead of mine, and I shall have to put up with it."

"You will get over the disappointment, Paul," said Guy soothingly, "and in any case, it must not make any difference to our friendship. After all, if I do succeed in becoming known, I shall be able to help to bring you to notice also. In the end we shall both emerge from obscurity, and you will get the success which you deserve."

It was a generous, manly speech, but it was lost upon Paul Panting, who received it in sullen silence.

"Now cheer up," advised Guy. "We'll go out to dinner together and do a show afterwards, if you feel up to it. I am sure that we both deserve a little recreation after our hard work of the past weeks, and the nervous strain of the day."

Panting did not receive the suggestion with great enthusiasm, but after further pressure, agreed to accompany his friend.

"I think I'll pack up the picture before I go," announced Guy, when both men had changed and were on the point of leaving the studio. "and I advise you to do the same. It is not wise to leave them in a lock-up studio all night, and if we get the mready, we can call for them on our way home."

To this proposal Paul Panting agreed, and the two men proceeded to wrap up their ready, we can call for them on our packages were placed against the wall together, and a little later the two men went from the studio.

II.

Guy Allenby and Paul Panting dined at the Celestial Restaurant, but the dinner proved a more or less dismal affair. Panting could not overcome his gloom, and Guy did not care to show unduly high spirits in view of the disappointment which his friend had suffered.

But he did his best to cheer him up, a task which was not rewarded with any success.

When the time came for them to leave the restaurant and proceed to the theatre at which Allenby had booked seats, Panting made his excuses.

"I think you'll have to let me off to-night, Guy," he said. "I can't help feeling down in the dumps, and I think I'd better be off at home."

"Just as you like," agreed his friend. "I don't want to press you to come out against your will, and perhaps after all you are right."

Outside the restaurant they parted. "Good-night," said Allenby. "I will see you to-morrow morning at Mr Levine's!"

Panting nodded, and then set off in the direction of the studio, intending to call there for his picture, and to take it to his lodgings with him.

And as he walked, his mind was filled with many strange thoughts, thoughts which grew upon him as he went upon his way.

So deeply thinking was he that he did not go straight to his destination, and it was more than an hour later when he at last reached the studio and let himself in with a key.

He switched on the light, and, dropping into a wicker chair, stared at the two wrapped up canvases standing against the wall.

"Curse him!" he muttered savagely. "He is destined to have all the luck. It was bad enough that the girl should fall in love with him, without winning the prize as well. By Heaven, I don't think it would be possible for any man to hate another as I hate Allenby to-night."

He rose from his seat and paced the studio.

"If anything were to happen to his picture, he would never be able to paint it again. Such a piece of work cannot be done twice, and then, if I did not receive the five thousand pounds, my picture would gain more prominence, and old Levine would probably pay me well for it. I wonder?"

The idea obsessed him, and he knew that he would carry it out. But how?

To cut Allenby's canvas, or to disfigure it in any other way would be too apparent, and suspicion would be certain to fall upon him. Was there no other way?

"Ah!" The exclamation burst from his lips as the solution came to him. "If the studio is destroyed by fire, it will seem to be an accident, and no one will ever know."

With his mind fixed upon his evil plan, Paul Panting crossed to some papers piled up in a further corner of the room, and, striking a match, he deliberately lighted them.

We watched only to see that the pile was well alight, then, crossing to where the two pictures stood, took up his own and left the studio, locking the door behind him.

Thus it was, when Guy Allenby arrived at the studio that night to collect his picture, he found the firemen still fighting the flames, which had completely gutted out the entire building.

He watched only to see that the pile man who had lost something more precious than life itself.

III.

With a large, flat packet held under his arm, Paul Panting mounted the steps of the Park Lane mansion of Harvey Levine.

He was looking very pale, but he mastered his emotions skilfully. The success of his evil scheme filled him with gratification, and he felt quite ready for the ordeal which was now before him.

When the door was opened, he was ushered into Levine's library, where three people were already waiting. One was the millionaire, another his daughter, whilst the last was Guy Allenby, who was standing upright against the desk, his pale face bearing evident traces of the blow which he had suffered.

Paul Panting set his picture down, and walked straight to where Guy stood.

"Guy, old chap, how can I tell you how sorry I am!" he began, appearing to be deeply affected. "I only read of the business in the paper this morning, and I could scarcely credit it. I would not have believed that Fate could be so bitterly cruel to any man."

Guy Allenby took his proffered hand readily.

"Thank you, Paul," he said unsteadily. "I knew that I should have your sympathy, and I am grateful to you for it."

"It is a bad business!" commented Harvey Levine with a thoughtful frown. "The loss can never be replaced, for I am sure

that we shall never see the like of that picture again."

A low sob broke from the lips of Patricia Levine.

"Oh, it is too terrible," she said, "and I cannot believe that it was an accident. I don't know why, but some intuition seems to tell me that this has been done by somebody who has a grudge against Mr Allenby."

Levine turned upon his daughter impatiently.

"Nonsense!" he said. "Get such silly ideas out of your young head. We are all naturally upset, but the thing is sheer bad luck. It can't be helped now, and if I have not misjudged him, Allenby will bear it like a man. The pity of it all is, that the picture would have made his reputation and the shock he has received will probably make it impossible to do anything so good again."

He paused, and turned to Paul Panting. "However, Allenby's misfortune is your good luck!" he said. "I must have a portrait of my daughter, and, since I cannot have the one, I will have the other. I will not, of course, pay you for your work, but I will be quite fair. I suggest a thousand pounds."

It required a great effort on the part of Paul Panting to conceal the elation which the other man's words had caused him.

His cowardly scheme had succeeded even better than he had dared to hope. However, he considered it in good taste to make a protest.

"I could not accept so generous an offer, sir," he said heroically. "Allenby is my chum, and I do not wish to profit by his loss."

His words had the desired effect upon the old man.

"It is very splendid of you to take that, Panting," he said, "and I shall thank you for it. But I shall insist upon your sum. I have mentioned, and, in addition, I give you my word that I will endeavour, as far as lies in my power, to compensate Allenby."

"Thank you, sir," said Panting quietly. "Now let us see the picture," went on the old man. "I am sure that my daughter would like to give her opinion on the finished painting."

The fingers of Paul Panting trembled slightly as he unfasted the packet. Very slowly he drew it from the wrapper and placed it upon an easel which was waiting to receive it.

Harvey Levine took his daughter's arm, and advanced towards the picture.

"Look, child!" he said. "You will find that the likeness is very striking."

He stopped suddenly and stared at the painting.

The other three also stood looking at it in blank amazement.

It was the picture of Patricia Levine, but Paul Panting staggered back in horror at the sight of it—for it was not the portrait which he had painted!

It bore the signature of Guy Allenby!

Stricken dumb with rage and mortification, he stared at the beautiful face with starting eyes.

A tense silence was broken suddenly by the voice of Guy Allenby.

"Great powers, this is my picture, old man!" he cried. "You must have taken it away in mistake for your own last night, Paul!"

Paul Panting turned upon him with a snarl. His passion was quite beyond control now, and his eyes blazed with venomous hate.

Upon the desk within reach lay a heavy paper-knife of Eastern pattern.

Panting caught sight of it, and his mad fury got the better of him. He snatched it up, and, with a fierce oath, rushed forward and aimed one savage blow at the canvas.

Patricia Levine was the first to realise his intention.

With a cry she sprang forward, and, with all her strength, caught at his arm to stay its downward course. The next moment Harvey Levine had snatched the knife from Panting's grip.

The hate-maddened wretch quailed before the millionaire's gaze.

"Your action has made everything quite clear," said the old man, in a cold, deliberate voice. "I am getting on in years, but I find it hard to prevent myself from giving you the horse-whipping you deserve. Disappointed because your friend had beaten you in fair contest you thought to destroy his work by setting fire to the studio. Fate, however, played you a strange trick, and you succeeded only in destroying your own."

Cowering before this cold recital of his perfidy, Paul Panting, all the fire now gone out of his nature, could only mutter incoherently.

"There is the door!" went on the millionaire. "If you are wise, you will pass out through it within five seconds. After that period of grace, I will have you flung out; and I warn you that, for your own sake, it will be better that you should never let me see or hear of you again."

Paul Panting took the first alternative.