

light sometimes pierces and brightens the night of sorrow. Fortunately, Raymond had attracted the notice and been admitted to the friendship of Emile Lorizier, the famous young painter, who was much interested in the decorative arts, and had contributed by his original and daring talent to the creation of some of the most popular modern styles. Thanks to the advice of Lorizier, Raymond gradually abandoned his larger ideas for a new line of work. He began to take up panels, friezes, and other artistic decoration. He had found his metier, and thenceforward labored with enthusiasm and excellent results. His work had been admired at the exposition of decorative art; he began to receive outside orders; hope was born anew in the breast of mother and son.

That morning, while they were seated at breakfast, Raymond had received from Lorizier a telegram which made his heart beat high.

'It is about M. Martinette, the great tapestry manufacturer, who wishes me to enter his employment as a designer,' Raymond had said. 'I am to meet him this morning at ten o'clock, at Lorizier's. If we can come to terms, I will send you word at noon.'

The word had come, freighted with joy. Eight thousand francs a year, with increase of salary annually, provided his work continued to show variety and originality of design. Ah, it must be a dream! It could hardly be true. And yet why not? He had talent, he was a genius; she had always known it. Now he could renounce the petty economies that had made life so hard, so narrow; now he could dress well, mingle with his equals, have the amusements so natural to his age, of which hitherto he had been deprived. Not a thought of herself—not a single thought!

She started, looking at the clock. This was no time for dreaming, for reminiscences. Raymond might be here any moment now. Later they could talk over everything: the past, the future, the joy that lay before them, the freedom from care, the sweet content—later, as they sat together at their dainty meal, before the little round table decorated with violets.

II.

Mother and son had finished their dinner. It had been a joyous meal. She had never seen him so gay, so full of life, as he related the particulars of his interview with the manufacturer.

And now, as he had fallen a little into silence, it was the mother's turn to speak.

'When I got your note to-day I felt so happy! Eight thousand francs a year! First, we shall change our apartments. These are too small and inconvenient. Besides, they are too far from your studio. And, now that you can travel, you can make that journey to Rome to which you have always looked forward. We must repair our house at Threuil, so that we may spend the vacation there. O my darling boy, how happy we shall be!'

Raymond did not reply. His countenance, so joyful a few moments before, had suddenly become serious. He got up from the table and went to the fire. His elbow resting on the mantelpiece, he seemed lost in contemplation of the dying coals.

'How grave you look!' his mother said at length, as she paused from time to time to watch him in her work of taking away the dishes and rearranging the table. 'Come, my boy,' she continued, seating herself in her favorite chair—'come, sit beside me, and tell me what you are thinking of.'

The young man buried his face in his hands, as though to collect his thoughts. For some time there was no sound in the room save the ticking of the clock, the purring of the cat, and the falling of the coals on the hearth.

'Mother,' he said at last, in a voice that trembled with emotion—'mother, I do not know how to tell you.'

Madame Lestrade had taken up her knitting; the long needles flew mechanically through her fingers. She replied anxiously:

'Quick, quick, Raymond! What have you to tell me?'

'Mother,' he said, and the words came very slowly, 'you cannot guess, of course, why I am so happy to-night. Security for the future, a little money, the prospect even of being able to make life more comfortable and happy, would not make me as joyful as I am, nor flood my soul with the delightful anticipations that have filled it since morning. I am happy for other reasons. I am happy, mother, because these gratifying prospects, these new circumstances will permit me to realise my dream—to marry the woman I love.'

The clickin of the needles came to an end. Madame Lestrade became pale as death, and pressed her heart silently under the little gray shawl. It seemed to her that it would burst. But her voice was quite even and controlled as she replied:

'You have never spoken of it to me, my son.'

'I made a vow to myself not to speak of it to any one until the proper time came—if it ever did come. Why should I have told you? It would only have made you unhappy to see me unhappy—unable to remove the obstacle to the attainment of my heart's dearest wish. How could I marry a poor girl when I myself was so poor? I had only to wait, patiently as I could. And that you did not even suspect it, mother, is proof that I have been patient; is it not? But it has been a long, long waiting.'

'This young girl? You say she is poor. There was a time when you were wont to say that you would marry a rich wife or not at all.'

'That is true. In those days I thought of furthering my ambition. One may do that who does not love; but when one does—dear mother, one does—'

'But who is it, Raymond? I have heard of all the girls we know at Fontaine-Vielle—Laroche perhaps, or Louise Lambert—'

'Jeanne Laroche or Louise Lambert? No, no, little convent-bred things, timid and commonplace mother; I would never look for a girl of Fontaine-Vielle. You do not know—the one I have chosen—though I have known her. Perhaps she may not please you, the good little girls down there. She is different in manner, appearance, and character from Lorizier's sister-in-law, Mlle. Artemise Dorel.'

'She is not a young girl, Raymond.'

'She is twenty-seven. I am twenty-nine. I am not like those young girls of eighteen who plan marriage as they would with a doll. She has already suffered with the sorrows of life. She has suffered. She is a woman—a true woman. Hers is a nature as noble as it is proud. I have said that she had no fortune. For two years she has worked incessantly, aided by the advice of her brother-in-law. Already she is becoming known as a water-colorist. She equals her masters: she will soon surpass them.'

'I would have preferred a different wife for you, my son—one less self-sustaining, more domestic. Those proud, fiery natures are not usually really affectionate. Passion is not love, it is not true affection. Devotion and tenderness are what a man needs in a wife. With great talents a woman is apt to become vain.'

'Mlle. Le Clercq has not a bit of vanity in her soul, mother. She is too fine for that. And if you could see her caressing her little nephews, helping her sister, with a smile for everyone, you would understand that she has what you crave for me—a most affectionate heart.'

'Is she pretty?'

'No, she is not what might be called really pretty. Her forehead is too high for beauty, her lips too thin, her chin too pointed. But the fine pallor of her complexion, the fire of her eyes, the opulence of her black hair, her magnificent carriage, her ease of manner, the grace of her every gesture—is that not beauty?'

The needles again resumed their quick, monotonous march. Raymond went on:

'She is intelligent and ambitious,' he said. 'Together we will fight, we two, with all the strength of our being, to achieve fame, to acquire fortune. She is as aggressive as I am. We will join forces. When one loves the battle of life, when one is not dismayed by it, one is bound to conquer. Oh, to have near me always that delightful personality, that supreme charm of hers! Fancy, I have loved her two years—two long years—two centuries!'

'And I,' thought the mother—but she did not speak, for her words would have ended in a sob—'I have loved you for thirty years—even before you came into the world. Alas! a mother's love, what is it? Nothing. It matters naught to their sons, that devotion of theirs. Poor mothers!'

(To be concluded next week.)

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