

## CHAPTER II

### THE ARTIST

To most people the great rambling mansion at Elmhurst, with its ample grounds and profusion of flowers and shrubbery, would afford endless delight. But Kenneth Forbes, the youthful proprietor, was at times dreadfully bored by the loneliness of it all, though no one could better have appreciated the beauties of his fine estate.

The town, an insignificant village, was five miles distant, and surrounding the mansion were many broad acres which rather isolated it from its neighbors. Moreover, Elmhurst was the one important estate in the county, and the simple, hard-working farmers in its vicinity considered, justly enough, that the owner was wholly out of their class.

This was not the owner's fault, and Kenneth had brooded upon the matter until he had come to regard it as a distinct misfortune. For it isolated him and deprived him of any social intercourse with his neighbors.

The boy had come to live at Elmhurst when he was a mere child, but only as a dependent upon the charities of Aunt Jane, who had accepted the charge of the orphan because he was a nephew of her dead lover, who had bequeathed her his estate of Elmhurst. Aunt Jane was Kenneth's aunt merely in name, since she had never even married the uncle to whom she

had been betrothed, and who had been killed in an accident before the boy was born.

She was an irritable old woman, as Kenneth knew her, and had never shown him any love or consideration. He grew up in a secluded corner of the great house, tended merely by servants and suffered to play in those quarters of the ample grounds which Aunt Jane did not herself visit. The neglect which Kenneth had suffered and his lonely life had influenced the youth's temperament, and he was far from being an agreeable companion at the time Aunt Jane summoned her three nieces to Elmhurst in order to choose one of them as her heiress. These girls, bright, cheery and wholesome as they were, penetrated the boy's reserve and drew him out of his misanthropic moods. They discovered that he had remarkable talent as an artist, and encouraged him to draw and paint, something he had long loved to do in secret.

Then came the great surprise of the boy's life, which changed his condition from one of dependency into affluence. Aunt Jane died and it was discovered that she had no right to transfer the estate to one of her nieces, because by the terms of his uncle's deed to her the property reverted on her death to Kenneth himself. Louise Merrick, Beth DeGraf and Patsy Doyle, the three nieces, were really glad that the boy inherited Elmhurst, and returned to their eastern homes with the most cordial friendship existing between them all.

Kenneth was left the master of Elmhurst and possessor of considerable

wealth besides, and at first he could scarcely realize his good fortune or decide how to take advantage of it. He had one good and helpful friend, an old lawyer named Watson, who had not only been a friend of his uncle, and the confidant of Aunt Jane for years, but had taken an interest in the lonely boy and had done his best to make his life brighter and happier.

When Kenneth became a landed proprietor Mr. Watson was appointed his guardian, and the genial old lawyer abandoned the practice of law and henceforth devoted himself to his ward's welfare and service.

They made a trip to Europe together, where Kenneth studied the pictures of the old masters and obtained instruction from some of the foremost living artists of the old world.

It was while they were abroad, a year before the time of this story, that the boy met Aunt Jane's three nieces again. They were "doing" Europe in company with a wealthy bachelor uncle, John Merrick, a generous, kind-hearted and simple-minded old gentleman who had taken the girls "under his wing," as he expressed it, and had really provided for their worldly welfare better than Aunt Jane, his sister, could have done.

This "Uncle John" was indeed a whimsical character, as the reader will presently perceive. Becoming a millionaire "against his will," as he declared, he had learned to know his nieces late in life, and found in

their society so much to enjoy that he was now wholly devoted to their interests. His one friend was Major Doyle, Patsy's father, a dignified but agreeable old Irish gentleman who amused Uncle John nearly as much as the girls delighted him. The Major managed John Merrick's financial affairs, leaving the old millionaire free to do as he pleased.

So he took the girls to Europe, and the four had a fine, adventurous trip, as may be imagined. Kenneth and Mr. Watson met them in Sicily, and afterward in the Italian cities, and the friendship already existing between the young people was more firmly cemented than before.

In the spring Kenneth returned with his guardian to Elmhurst, where he devoted himself largely to painting from the sketches he had made abroad, while Mr. Watson sat beside him comfortably smoking his pipe and reading his favorite authors. The elder man was contented enough in his condition, but the boy grew restless and impatient, and longed for social intercourse. His nature was moody and he had a tendency to brood if left much to himself.

Uncle John had carried his nieces to a farm at Millville, in the Adirondack region, for the summer, so that Kenneth heard but seldom from his friends.

Such was the disposition of the characters when our story opens.

Kenneth Forbes, although I have called him a boy, had attained his

majority on the fifteenth day of May. At this time Mr. Watson rendered his accounts and turned over the estate to its owner. He would then have retired, but Kenneth would not let him go. Twenty-one years of age sounds mature, but the owner of Elmhurst was as boyish and inexperienced as it is possible for one twenty-one years old to be. He had grown accustomed, moreover, to depend much on Mr. Watson's legal acumen in the management of his affairs, and would have been embarrassed and bewildered if obliged to shoulder the burden all at once.

The lawyer, who had always had an affection for the young man, perceived this clearly; so an arrangement was made that he should remain with his young friend indefinitely and strive to teach him such elements of business as would enable him in time to attend to his extensive interests understandingly and wisely.

The country around Elmhurst is thickly settled with agriculturists, for the farms are rich and productive in that part of the state. But it is not a flat country, and Nature has given it many pretty woodland glades and rocky glens to add to its charm.

From the hill country at the west came several rushing streams which tumbled along rocky paths to the river nine miles below Elmhurst, and there are scenes along these routes that might well delight the eye of an artist. Kenneth had often wandered into these out-of-the-way places when a half-forgotten, neglected lad, but had not visited them for years. Now, however, with the spirit of loneliness upon him, he suddenly

thought of a glen that would make an interesting study for a picture; so one morning he mounted his horse and rode away to pay the place a preliminary visit.

The farmers along the road nodded at the young fellow good-naturedly as he passed them. Everyone knew him well by sight, yet Kenneth could not have named many of his neighbors, having held little intercourse with them. It struck him, this morning, that they had little cause to be interested in him. He had been an unsociable lad, and since he had become master of Elmhurst had done little to cultivate acquaintance with the people who lived around him.

One reason for this was that they held little in common with him. The neighboring farmers were honest, thrifty souls, and among them were many both shrewd and thoughtful; but they naturally would not force themselves upon the society of the one really rich man in their community, especially as that man had shown no desire to know them.

Kenneth was the subject of much speculation among them, and opinions widely differed concerning his character. Some called him a "prig" and declared that he was "stuck up" and conceited. Others said he was a "namby-pamby" without brains or wit. But there were a few who had occasionally talked with the boy, who understood him better, and hinted that he might develop into "quite a man" in time.

Kenneth surprised himself this morning by greeting several of his

neighbors with unusual cordiality. He even stopped a man who was driving along the highway to inquire about his horse, which he perceived was very lame. The boy knew something about horses and suggested a method of treatment that he thought would help the nag; a suggestion the farmer received with real gratitude.

This simple incident cheered Kenneth more than you might suppose, and he was actually whistling as he rode through the glen, where the country road wound its way beside the noisy, rushing stream.

Pausing in front of the picturesque "table rock" that he had come to inspect, the boy uttered an exclamation of chagrin and disappointment. Painted broadly upon the face of the rock, in great white letters, was the advertisement of a patent medicine. The beauty of the scene was ruined--only the glaring advertisement caught and held the eye of the observer.

At first Kenneth's mind held only a feeling of disgust that such a desecration of Nature's gifts to humanity should be allowed. Then he remembered another place further along the glen which was almost as pretty as this had been before the defiling brush of the advertiser had ruined it. So he spurred his horse and rode up the winding way to the spot. There a red-lettered announcement of "Simpson's Soap" stared him in the face.

This was too much for his temper, and his disappointment quickly turned

to resentment. While he sat on his mare, considering the matter, the man with the lame horse, whom he had passed, overtook him.

"Can you tell me," Kenneth asked, "who owns this property?"

"Why, I do," replied the man, reining up.

"And you permitted these vile signs to be painted on the rocks?" demanded the boy angrily.

"O' course," replied the man, with a grin of amusement. "I can't farm the rocks, can I? An' these 'ere signs pays me ten dollars a year, each."

Kenneth groaned.

"I'll give you fifteen dollars a year each if you'll let me wash off the letters and restore the scene to its original beauty," he declared.

"I'm willin'," was the response. "But ye see they're contracted. I'd git into trouble with the sign-painter."

"Who is he?"

"Lives in Cleveland. I've got his name up t' th' house, if you'll come along. He comes up here every spring and paints fences an' rocks, payin'



spot cash fer th' privilege."

"Oh, I see."

"Then he contracts with the soap man an' the medicine man to paint up their ads. You're the young 'un from Elmhurst, ain't ye?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'd like to earn that extra five, well enough. My name's Parsons. I've got three signs let on my property in the glen. Ef ye'll jest ride up t' the house I'll giv' ye the feller's name."

"All right. Come along," said Kenneth, with sudden resolve.

The farmer rode a time in silent thought. He could not go fast, for the beast was very lame. Finally he remarked:

"Ef ye buy up the sign painters, so's ye can wash off the letters, like enough ye'll hev to pay him fer th' paint an' paintin', too."

"I don't mind," was the response.

The farmer chuckled. Here was an interesting adventure, for a fact. What on earth could possess the "young 'un" from Elmhurst to object to signs, and be willing to pay for having them erased?

"Like enough ye'll hev to pay back the money the soap an' medicine men  
guv th' painter, too," he hazarded.

"Like enough," said Kenneth, grimly.

One of his stubborn moods had seized him. At all hazards he was resolved  
to eliminate those ugly signs.

He got the name of the sign painter, accepted a glass of buttermilk at  
the farm house, and then rode slowly home by another route, so that he  
might not have to face the signs again.

But on this route he saw even more. They were painted on the fences and  
barns as he passed along. He scowled at each one, but they did not  
appear to him quite so inharmonious as those which marred the more  
picturesque and retired spots which were his favorite haunts.