

CHAPTER V.

HE led the way into the street as he spoke. I felt the irresistible force of his logic. I sympathized with the ardent philanthropy of his motives. I burned with a noble ambition to extend the sphere of the Old Masters. In short, I took the tide at the flood, and followed Dick.

We plunged into some by-streets, struck off sharp into a court, and entered a house by a back door. A little old gentleman in a black velvet dressing-gown met us in the passage. Dick instantly presented me: "Mr. Frank Softly--Mr. Ishmael Pickup." The little old gentleman stared at me distrustfully. I bowed to him with that inexorable politeness which I first learned under the instructive fist of Gentleman Jones, and which no force of adverse circumstances has ever availed to mitigate in after life. Mr. Ishmael Pickup followed my lead. There is not the least need to describe him--he was a Jew.

"Go into the front show-room, and look at the pictures, while I speak to Mr. Pickup," said Dick, familiarly throwing open a door, and pushing me into a kind of gallery beyond. I found myself quite alone, surrounded by modern-antique pictures of all schools and sizes, of all degrees of dirt and dullness, with all the names of all the famous Old Masters, from Titian to Teniers, inscribed on their frames. A "pearly little gem," by Claude, with a ticket marked "Sold" stuck into the frame, particularly attracted my attention. It was Dick's last ten-pound job; and it did credit to the youthful master's abilities as a workman-like maker of

Claudes.

I have been informed that, since the time of which I am writing, the business of gentlemen of Mr. Pickup's class has rather fallen off, and that there are dealers in pictures, nowadays, who are as just and honorable men as can be found in any profession or calling, anywhere under the sun. This change, which I report with sincerity and reflect on with amazement, is, as I suspect, mainly the result of certain wholesale modern improvements in the position of contemporary Art, which have necessitated improvements and alterations in the business of picture-dealing.

In my time, the encouragers of modern painting were limited in number to a few noblemen and gentlemen of ancient lineage, who, in matters of taste, at least, never presumed to think for themselves. They either inherited or bought a gallery more or less full of old pictures. It was as much a part of their education to put their faith in these on hearsay evidence, as to put their faith in King, Lords and Commons. It was an article of their creed to believe that the dead painters were the great men, and that the more the living painters imitated the dead, the better was their chance of becoming at some future day, and in a minor degree, great also. At certain times and seasons, these noblemen and gentlemen self-distrustfully strayed into the painting-room of a modern artist, self-distrustfully allowed themselves to be rather attracted by his pictures, self-distrustfully bought one or two of them at prices which would appear so incredibly low, in these days, that I really cannot

venture to quote them. The picture was sent home; the nobleman or gentleman (almost always an amiable and a hospitable man) would ask the artist to his house and introduce him to the distinguished individuals who frequented it; but would never admit his picture, on terms of equality, into the society even of the second-rate Old Masters. His work was hung up in any out-of-the-way corner of the gallery that could be found; it had been bought under protest; it was admitted by sufferance; its freshness and brightness damaged it terribly by contrast with the dirtiness and the dinginess of its elderly predecessors; and its only points selected for praise were those in which it most nearly resembled the peculiar mannerism of some Old Master, not those in which it resembled the characteristics of the old mistress--Nature.

The unfortunate artist had no court of appeal that he could turn to. Nobody beneath the nobleman, or the gentleman of ancient lineage, so much as thought of buying a modern picture. Nobody dared to whisper that the Art of painting had in anywise been improved or worthily enlarged in its sphere by any modern professors. For one nobleman who was ready to buy one genuine modern picture at a small price, there were twenty noblemen ready to buy twenty more than doubtful old pictures at great prices. The consequence was, that some of the most famous artists of the English school, whose pictures are now bought at auction sales for fabulous sums, were then hardly able to make an income. They were a scrupulously patient and conscientious body of men, who would as soon have thought of breaking into a house, or equalizing the distribution of wealth, on the highway, by the simple machinery of a horse and pistol,

as of making Old Masters to order. They sat resignedly in their lonely studios, surrounded by unsold pictures which have since been covered again and again with gold and bank-notes by eager buyers at auctions and show-rooms, whose money has gone into other than the painter's pockets---who have never dreamed that the painter had the smallest moral right to a farthing of it. Year after year, these martyrs of the brush stood, palette in hand, fighting the old battle of individual merit against contemporary dullness--fighting bravely, patiently, independently; and leaving to Mr. Pickup and his pupils a complete monopoly of all the profit which could be extracted, in their line of business, from the feebly-buttoned pocket of the patron, and the inexhaustible credulity of the connoisseur.

Now all this is changed. Traders and makers of all kinds of commodities have effected a revolution in the picture-world, never dreamed of by the noblemen and gentlemen of ancient lineage, and consistently protested against to this day by the very few of them who still remain alive.

The daring innovators started with the new notion of buying a picture which they themselves could admire and appreciate, and for the genuineness of which the artist was still living to vouch. These rough and ready customers were not to be led by rules or frightened by precedents; they were not to be easily imposed upon, for the article they wanted was not to be easily counterfeited. Sturdily holding to their own opinions, they thought incessant repetitions of Saints, Martyrs, and Holy Families, monotonous and uninteresting--and said so.

They thought little pictures of ugly Dutch women scouring pots, and drunken Dutchmen playing cards, dirty and dear at the price--and said so. They saw that trees were green in nature, and brown in the Old Masters, and they thought the latter color not an improvement on the former--and said so. They wanted interesting subjects; variety, resemblance to nature; genuineness of the article, and fresh paint; they had no ancestors whose feelings, as founders of galleries, it was necessary to consult; no critical gentlemen and writers of valuable works to snub them when they were in spirits; nothing to lead them by the nose but their own shrewdness, their own interests, and their own tastes--so they turned their backs valiantly on the Old Masters, and marched off in a body to the living men.

From that time good modern pictures have risen in the scale. Even as articles of commerce and safe investments for money, they have now (as some disinterested collectors who dine at certain annual dinners I know of, can testify) distanced the old pictures in the race. The modern painters who have survived the brunt of the battle, have lived to see pictures for which they once asked hundreds, selling for thousands, and the young generation making incomes by the brush in one year, which it would have cost the old heroes of the easel ten to accumulate. The posterity of Mr. Pickup still do a tolerable stroke of business (making bright modern masters for the market which is glutted with the dingy old material), and will, probably, continue to thrive and multiply in the future: the one venerable institution of this world which we can safely count upon as likely to last, being the institution of human folly.

Nevertheless, if a wise man of the reformed taste wants a modern picture, there are places for him to go to now where he may be sure of getting it genuine; where, if the artist is not alive to vouch for his work, the facts at any rate have not had time to die which vouch for the dealer who sells it. In my time matters were rather different. The painters we throw by had died long enough ago for pedigrees to get confused, and identities disputable; and if I had been desirous of really purchasing a genuine Old Master for myself--speaking as a practical man--I don't know where I should have gone to ask for one, or whose judgment I could have safely relied on to guard me from being cheated, before I bought it.

We are stopping a long time in the picture-gallery, you will say. I am very sorry--but we must stay a little longer, for the sake of a living picture, the gem of the collection.

I was still admiring Mr. Pickup's Old Masters, when a dirty little boy opened the door of the gallery, and introduced a young lady.

My heart--fancy my having a heart!--gave one great bound in me. I recognized the charming person whom I had followed in the street.

Her veil was not down this time. All the beauty of her large, soft, melancholy, brown eyes beamed on me. Her delicate complexion became

suddenly suffused with a lovely rosy flush. Her glorious black hair--no! I will make an effort, I will suppress my ecstasies. Let me only say that she evidently recognized me. Will you believe it?--I felt myself coloring as I bowed to her. I never blushed before in my life. What a very curious sensation it is!

The horrid boy claimed her attention with a grin.

"Master's engaged," he said. "Please to wait here."

"I don't wish to disturb Mr. Pickup," she answered.

What a voice! No! I am drifting back into ecstasies: her voice was worthy of her--I say no more.

"If you will be so kind as to show him this," she proceeded; "he knows what it is. And please say, my father is very ill and very anxious. It will be quite enough if Mr. Pickup will only send me word by you--Yes or No."

She gave the boy an oblong slip of stamped paper. Evidently a promissory note. An angel on earth, sent by an inhuman father, to ask a Jew for discount! Monstrous!

The boy disappeared with the message.

I seized my opportunity of speaking to her. Don't ask me what I said! Never before (or since) have I talked such utter nonsense, with such intense earnestness of purpose and such immeasurable depth of feeling. Do pray remember what you said yourself, the first time you had the chance of opening your heart to your young lady. The boy returned before I had half done, and gave her back the odious document.

"Mr. Pickup's very sorry, miss. The answer is, No."

She lost all her lovely color, and sighed, and turned away. As she pulled down her veil, I saw the tears in her eyes. Did that piteous spectacle partially deprive me of my senses? I actually entreated her to let me be of some use--as if I had been an old friend, with money enough in my pocket to discount the note myself. She brought me back to my senses with the utmost gentleness.

"I am afraid you forget, sir, that we are strangers. Good-morning."

I followed her to the door. I asked leave to call on her father, and satisfy him about myself and my family connections. She only answered that her father was too ill to see visitors. I went out with her on to the landing. She turned on me sharply for the first time.

"You can see for yourself, sir, that I am in great distress. I appeal to you, as a gentleman, to spare me."

If you still doubt whether I was really in love, let the facts speak for themselves. I hung my head, and let her go.

When I returned alone to the picture-gallery--when I remembered that I had not even had the wit to improve my opportunity by discovering her name and address--I did really and seriously ask myself if these were the first symptoms of softening of the brain. I got up, and sat down again. I, the most audacious man of my age in London, had behaved like a bashful boy! Once more I had lost her--and this time, also, I had nobody but myself to blame for it.

These melancholy meditations were interrupted by the appearance of my friend, the artist, in the picture-gallery. He approached me confidentially, and spoke in a mysterious whisper.

"Pickup is suspicious," he said; "and I have had all the difficulty in the world to pave your way smoothly for you at the outset. However, if you can contrive to make a small Rembrandt, as a specimen, you may consider yourself employed here until further notice. I am obliged to particularize Rembrandt, because he is the only Old Master disengaged at present. The professional gentleman who used to do him died the other day in the Fleet--he had a turn for Rembrandts, and can't be easily replaced. Do you think you could step into his shoes? It's a peculiar gift, like an ear for music, or a turn for mathematics. Of course you will be put up to the simple elementary rules, and will have the professional gentleman's last Rembrandt as a guide; the rest depends,

my dear friend, on your powers of imitation. Don't be discouraged by failures, but try again and again; and mind you are dirty and dark enough. You have heard a great deal about the light and shade of Rembrandt--Remember always that, in your case, light means dusky yellow, and shade dense black; remember that, and--"

"No pay," said the voice of Mr. Pickup behind me; "no pay, my dear, unless your Rembrandt ish good enough to take me in--even me, Ishmael, who dealsh in pictersh and knowsh what'sh what."

What did I care about Rembrandt at that moment? I was thinking of my lost young lady; and I should probably have taken no notice of Mr. Pickup, if it had not occurred to me that the old wretch must know her father's name and address. I at once put the question. The Jew grinned, and shook his grisly head. "Her father'sh in difficultiesh, and mum's the word, my dear." To that answer he adhered, in spite of all that I could say to him.

With equal obstinacy I determined, sooner or later, to get my information.

I took service under Mr. Pickup, purposing to make myself essential to his prosperity, in a commercial sense--and then to threaten him with offering my services to a rival manufacturer of Old Masters, unless he trusted me with the secret of the name and address. My plan looked promising enough at the time. But, as some wise person has said, Man

is the sport of circumstances. Mr. Pickup and I parted company unexpectedly, on compulsion. And, of all the people in the world, my grandmother, Lady Malkinshaw, was the unconscious first cause of the events which brought me and the beloved object together again, for the third time!