

NOW FIRST PUBLISHED.

THE WEDDING RING,

A TALE OF TO-DAY,

BY ROBERT BUCHANAN,

Author of "The Shadow of the Sword," "God and the Man," "Stormy Waters," &c.

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And what's to me a ring o' gold
That proves the written law?
A ring of air's around my heart
That sadly breaks in twain.
Old Ballad.

CHAPTER I.—IN PETER'S STREET, WESTMINSTER.

ON a chilly spring morning a young woman sat at an uncovered deal table near the third floor window of a house in Peter's street, Westminster, with a little pile of gilt-edged cards and a water-colour box before her. A child was lying in her lap, a wee thing of a year old, with a white face and large eyes of more than oriental gravity, and small fists curled tight upon her breast. She did not distract her mother's attention from the work on which she was occupied by any of the kickings and the coolings usual to healthy infancy, but lay as still as if she understood the necessity of quiet to the artistic labourer, and with preconscious self-denial subdued the high spirits proper to her age.

The young woman was tall and finely built, and her face, which was very sad and gentle, needed only a touch of colour and a little more fullness of outline to be beautiful. There was about her an aspect of sorrow grown patient, which was pitiful to see in the face of one so young, for she had hardly passed girlhood in years.

As she worked, her foot beat on the floor in a gentle, rhythmic measure, and her voice crooned a tuneless song to the child upon her knee.

It was a large, low-ceilinged room, occupying the whole width of the house, and sparsely and shabbily furnished. A bed stood in one corner with a cradle at its foot. A chest of drawers, with half its knobs missing, a couple of old-fashioned rush-bottomed chairs, a square table of deal with red legs, a washstand bearing a cracked jug and basin, a battered sofa, covered in torn and faded chintz, and a strip of dog-eared carpet whose originally gaudy pattern had faded to a uniform dirty grey, completed its articles of necessary furniture.

A few scraps of clothing, male and female, hung from pegs behind the door.

Near the window an old field easel, with an invalid leg repaired with a bamboo walking cane, supported an almost finished landscape, and a broken *porte cochere*, with a score of half-empty tubes of colour and a handful of ragged brushes, lay on the floor beside it.

On the mantelpiece above the fireless grate was a tobacco jar, a brandy bottle, a tumbler, and a couple of wooden pipes, flanked at either end by a photograph.

One of these photographs no observer would have had any difficulty in identifying as a portrait of the young woman painting near the window, though the expression of the photograph had nothing in common with that of the original at the moment we make her acquaintance. It represented a blooming, laughing lass of nineteen, clad in a light summer frock, with wild flowers in her hair and at the bosom of her dress. Beneath it was written, in a frank female hand, "To Philip," a date being added. The other was that of a young man with a straw hat perched at the back of his head, a cigarette in his mouth, a flaming tie loosely knotted under the collar of a silk shirt, and a velvet jacket. A handsome face, quite alive to its own charm. Under it was written, "To Gillian," and a repetition of the date borne by the companion photograph.

The room was scrupulously neat. The girl worked on briskly with swift fingers, and crooned to the child. It was yet early, though the sounds of traffic in the streets below were louder than they would be for two hours to come in more fashionable thoroughfares. Presently she paused for a moment with the suspended brush in her uplifted fingers, and after a moment's listening, resumed her work.

A step sounded on the stairs. The door opened and a man entered the room.

He, too, would have been easily recognisable by anyone who had seen the second photograph upon the mantelpiece. He had the look of one who is just beginning to repent of too jolly an overnight. His face was flushed, his eyes were bleared. The girl did not even look at him, and received his entrance in silence, a silence as eloquent as any reproach could have been. For when a husband comes home imperfectly sober in the early morning and his wife finds nothing to say, it shows that the circumstance must have been so often repeated that she has got past tears and entreaties, and takes it as a thing of course.

As has been suggested, Philip O'Mara was by no means a bad-looking fellow; yet he had a certain undefinable air of being handsomer than he was. The photograph, taken some five years ago, flattered his actual appearance, because no man can pass five years in selfish indulgence without grave detriment to any beauty he may originally have started with.

As with the man, so with the clothes he wore. Contrasted with the almost squalid shabbiness of the room and of his wife's dress, they looked for a moment as if they would have passed muster in any society. Then one saw that his coat was not of velvet, but of coarse velveteen, which led to a doubt as to the genuineness of the jewelled ring on his finger, and a wonder as to whether anything more valuable than a latch key was attached to the chain which glittered across his waistcoat. Mr O'Mara's sartorial splendours, like their wearer, were rather of the shabby swell order, and did not come off well from close examination.

"Dear Gillian!" he began, "industrious girl! 'Pon my soul you make me blush for myself."

The blush was purely internal, for no signs of it were visible without. He took up one of the cards she had finished.

"Delightful, my dear Gillian; delightful. Your powers of imagination are really extraordinary, and your technique improves every day."

Nobody could have told for certain whether he was speaking in mockery or exaggerated compliment.

"You are doing those on commission?"

"No," replied Gillian.

"A pity. But still, work so delightful is certain to sell."

He returned the card to the table.

"Ah, apropos of sale—how inexpressibly revolting it is, by the way, my dear Gillian, that even the creation of beauty, which should be the delightful satisfaction of a divine instinct, should be degraded to the sordid level of the manufacture of articles of vulgar necessity. Talking of sale, have you any money?"

"I have no money," she replied.

It was noticeable that while the husband interlarded his address to her with endearing epithets, and expressed in the longest polysyllables the most beautiful sentiments, Gillian avoided speaking one unnecessary word.

"My own finances," he said, after a search in his pockets, "amount to—yes—one and sixpence halfpenny. Not a large amount, but still, judiciously expended, it may do something to mitigate the discomforts I already experience, and which threaten to become even more pronounced. There is some brandy left."

He examined the bottle on the mantelpiece.

"Would you, my dear Gillian, get me a couple of bottles of soda water and a packet of Peachblossom cigarettes?"

She took the money from the table where he laid it, and for the first time since his entrance raised her eyes to his face.

"Mr Bream was bore last night," she said. "He tells me that Dora is really ill, and must have attention, better food, and change of air. He wrote a prescription for her, but I had not the money to get it made up."

"My dear Gillian!" said O'Mara, "you really distress yourself about the child to a quite unbecoming degree. You are always raising false alarms about her. Six months ago, she was going to die, I remember. Mr Bream is no doubt a very estimable person, as a clergyman, but he is not omniscient. What can he possibly know about Dora's health?"

"He studied as a doctor before he took orders," answered Gillian.

"Quite a Crichton," said O'Mara, "I have no doubt. Still, I would prefer the verdict of a medical man in practice."

"I shall spend this money," said Gillian, "or at least as much of it as will be required, in getting the medicine Mr Bream prescribed for Dora. With the rest I will buy soda water or cigarettes, just as you please."

"I am sure," said O'Mara, "that you will do nothing of the kind, my dear Gillian. You, who are

a model of all the virtues, know that it is a wife's first duty to obey her husband."

"I shall get the medicine for Dora," repeated Gillian.

"Then," said O'Mara, seizing her wrist with a sudden sharp wrench which made her wince and drop the money on the table, "I shall have to do my marketing myself, or find another messenger."

Quite untroubled by this little incident, O'Mara left the room. She heard his voice upon the stair calling to the girl in the basement, and a minute after he reentered.

"A mistake in your tactics, my dear," he remarked, as he kicked off his shoes and lay down upon the bed. "It would have been wiser to have bought the medicine and said nothing of your intention—wiser, though less honest, and not more dutiful. You will know better next time."

She heard him in silence, finding no reply. With the despairing patience which years of such brutalities had taught her, she again took up her brush, and bent over her work. O'Mara turned upon the bed, seeking an easy posture, and had fallen asleep before the girl came in with her purchases.

It was past noon when he awoke, and finding the soda water on the mantelpiece beside the brandy, mixed himself a copious draught, which he drank to his great apparent refreshment. He sluiced his face and head liberally with cold water, and having replaced his coat and waistcoat, arranged the easel beside the window and seated himself before it.

"There were once, my dear Gillian," he began, lighting a cigarette, and regarding the picture through the smoke with an eye at once critical and approving, "There were once—you will see the application of the story directly—two travellers who had, through infinite difficulties and dangers travelled across a desert, and arrived within an hour's walk of the confines of civilisation. One of them at that point succumbed to his fatigue. He could go no further. They had between them one dose of brandy. 'If,' said the sick man to his companion, 'you will give me that brandy, I think I could manage the rest of the distance.' His companion, instead of giving it to him, drank it himself. 'What detestable selfishness!' you will remark, precisely as I did myself when I first read this instructive legend. But I was mistaken, for his object in drinking the brandy was to recuperate his force sufficiently to enable him to carry his friend the rest of the distance. Thus we may learn, my dear Gillian, not to judge our neighbours on insufficient evidence. You see the application of the fable? I am the robust traveller, you—or rather our darling Dora—is the feeble one. Without that brandy and soda I could not possibly have finished this picture, and unless I finished the picture there would be no dinner for us to-day."

Gillian listened in her accustomed silence, and O'Mara, having set his palate, attacked his work. He painted rapidly and dexterously, and after a couple of hours of work punctuated by the drinking of more brandy and soda and the lighting of fresh cigarettes, pushed his chair back and rose.

"That should do, I think. I must invent a title for it—something touching and poetical. There is much virtue in a name. Our good British public have not yet risen so high in artistic appreciation as to separate art and literature. To me, its creator, that picture needs no title. To any soul in kinship with my own it would need none. The average Philistine will ask, 'What is it?' It is not enough that it is beautiful, a touch of celestial harmony in adorable contrast with the hideousness of daily life. He sighed, as if the stupidity of the world was hard to bear. "I should be glad of your opinion, Gillian."

"What do you think you will get for it, Philip?" she asked, gravely.

"My darling!" he remonstrated, with a quick indrawing of the breath between his teeth, as if the question hurt him. "You should really discourage this—this extreme practicality of mind. It is growing on you."

"I must have money, Philip; you must bring me some to-day."

"My dear, you shall have money. But surely, after so many years' knowledge of my temperament, you might have more feeling for my peculiarities than to ask me, happy as I am in the contemplation of a thing of beauty fresh from my hands, what—what I shall get for it. Get for it! Is it not enough to know that I must part with it, the last sweet child of my fancy, the Benjamin, so to speak, of what poor artistic faculty I possess? Still, you are right. The vulgar necessities of life are paramount. Facts must be faced."

"You will let me have some money to-night?" she pleaded. "There is rent due, Philip, and there is nothing in the house to eat. And, oh Philip! I shouldn't mind for myself, but Dora! She is really ill. See how pale she is, and all day long she has never made a movement. She lies for hours, and she used to be so bright and lively."

"Well, well!" he answered fretfully, perhaps a little touched through his hidebound selfishness for the moment, "I will see what I can get for the picture."

CHAPTER II.—THE ROAD TO RUIN.

IT was manifestly impossible for a gentleman of O'Mara's high breeding and fastidious tastes to be seen trudging on foot with a picture under his arm, like any work-a-day canvas spoiler who habitually painted, not for the divine instinct which prompts to the creation of beauty, but with the sordid aim of money making. Accordingly he took a hansom, and drove comfortably to the shop of a picture dealer in Wardour street, with whom he had done business a score of times.

"Hum!" said the dealer, looking at the picture with his mouth critically screwed on one side, "really, I don't know as I want it. Pictures are a fearful drug in the market. Trade's so bad, everything flat. 'Taint so good as that last one of yours, you know."

"Naturally," said O'Mara. "The first I ever offered you was no good, and I have been steadily deteriorating ever since. But you bought them!"

O'Mara had the knack of suiting his conversation to his company, and did not waste flowers of speech on this artistic middleman.

"Where is it?" asked the dealer.

"A little corner of my uncle's place—Sir Charles Vandeleur, in Surrey. I've been staying down there for the last month."

"Ah!" The title, carelessly dropped, had its effect upon the worthy tradesman. "What are you going to call it?"

"Really, I don't know. 'Crepuscule,' would that do?"

"Don't believe in foreign titles; people don't understand 'em. What's it mean?"

"It means 'Twilight.'"

"That'd do," said the dealer, "if it hadn't been used so much. Tell you what, call it 'In the Gloaming.' There's a tune called that, very popular on the organ."

O'Mara's eyes were raised to the ceiling in a speechless pang of aesthetic agony.

"That'd do," said the dealer, and repeated the title with the relish of a man who feels that he has satisfactorily solved a problem. "In the Gloaming." Could you get a couple of figgers in just here, say a boy and girl spooning? 'Uman interest, that's what the public likes in a picture."

"My dear sir," said O'Mara, with the air of one who unbends to make his meaning plain to an inferior intelligence which must needs be conciliated, "it is the absence of human interest which makes the preciousness of art. The intrusion of a boy and girl 'spooning' (he seemed to speak the word under protest, and proceeded to clear his palate of its slangy offensiveness by a mouthful of polysyllables) would annihilate the aesthetic value of the composition. The interview of anything so vulgar on that majestic solitude of nature would be an outrage, my dear sir—a positive outrage."

"Don't see it," said the dealer, shortly.

O'Mara had spoken with less than his ordinary tact. Nobody likes to be told that a suggestion which he thinks clever is an outrage. Sincerity was not O'Mara's strong point, but if he had any touch of it in his nature, it was on questions in which art was concerned. He had his own conception of what pictures should be, and had patented this one in accordance with it. It was hard to receive lessons from a vulgarian who talked about "uman interest," and in his artistic heat O'Mara temporarily forgot that the vulgarian, though artistically contemptible, was financially worthy of respect.

"You work in them two figgers," said the dealer, with the air of a man who speaks his last word, "and I'll call it 'In the Gloaming,' and give you a tanner for it."

Had this been put a little more in the form of a request and a little less directly as an order, O'Mara might have yielded. As it was, he felt compelled to resent the outrage on art and on his own superior social status. He was an aristocratic amateur who contended to sell, not a boggary dauber who kept the pot boiling with the labour of his hands.

"I am afraid that, even when improved by the figures 'spooning'—that I think was your expression—my humble effort would hardly be worth your offer for it. I wish you good morning."

"Morning," said the man of business, rattling his money in his pockets, and permitting the nephew of Sir Charles Vandeleur to open the door for himself. He drove to two or three other places, with no

better luck. He had to avoid most of the dealers he knew, being in their debt. The rebuffs dashed his courage, and he was sensible that after each his manner was less easy and engaging, and he did not drop in the name of his titled relatives in Surrey quite so naturally as he could have wished.

The lack of human interest was so strongly insisted on that at last he suggested to a dealer who seemed inclined to buy that he should work in the "spooning" couple. He also suggested, as a happy thought which had just struck him, that the picture should be christened "In the Gloaming," and dwelt on the popularity of the air of that name. The dealer assented, and promised to give him ten pounds for the picture, so altered.

O'Mara bade his cabman drive him to the Temple, where he had an acquaintance named Seyton, who dabbled in the arts, and who placed his tools at his disposal, and posed for the masculine member of the interpolated group, pressing the laundress into his service to represent his innamorata.

Seyton was a light-hearted youth, and did not greatly sympathise with O'Mara in his mournings over this degradation of art, seeming to see the humorous side of the situation more clearly. His impromptu fellow model, it may be observed, was younger and comelier than most of her kind.

The early spring evening was beginning to fall when O'Mara had completed his task. He had eaten nothing all day, and, when Seyton proposed that they should dine together, readily assented. He took the picture to the dealer, received his ten pounds, and discharged his cabman, whose fare had been accumulating all this time.

At the restaurant to which they repaired for dinner Seyton found two of his acquaintances, and an hour passed rapidly enough at table. O'Mara dined with what he felt to be a commendable modesty for a man with over nine pounds in his pocket; a little clear soup, a bit of fish, a bottle of Beauvaise, a cup of coffee, and a liqueur, are not unjustifiable extravagances for a man so famished?

Dinner over, Seyton proposed an adjournment to his rooms for a quiet round at nap, if that patient figure of his wife sitting at home with their sick child upon her knee had troubled O'Mara much during the day, the genial influences of the dinner and the society of his confreres had quite expelled the vision from his mind.

They went to the Temple together, and Seyton hospitably produced liquors and cigars, of which he and his two acquaintances liberally partook, with a proportionate access of geniality. They were all three younger in the ways of the world than they would like to have been thought, or they would have noticed that though O'Mara was as free in talk and laughter as they, he was by far the soberest member of the party, and though his glass went as often to his lips as the best of good fellowship required, it required filling much more seldom than theirs.

He won steadily for half an hour, and as they were playing a ready money game had pretty nearly doubled his capital in that time. Then one of his companions began to get restive.

"I say, Mr O'Mara," he asked, "isn't it a bit odd that when you deal you're the only man who ever gets an ace?"

A question of that kind would disconcert most people, but O'Mara showed no sign of understanding its obvious meaning.

"Is that so?" he asked; "I had not noticed it."

"Jimmy always gets rusty if the luck goes against him," remarked Seyton.

"Very natural," said O'Mara, with good-natured forbearance. "Nobody likes losing. I don't, I know."

As Jimmy happened to get a fairly good hand next time O'Mara dealt, he made no remark for a time. But his next was even more startling than his first.

"You low cad!" he exclaimed, "you've got the ace of hearts and the ace of clubs between your knees and the table!"

He dragged the table away, and the cards fell to the ground.

O'Mara raised his hand to dash the pack in his face, but Seyton caught his arm.

"None of that!" he said, sternly but quietly. "I think you'd better go, O'Mara. I beg your pardon, you fellows."

O'Mara, white as death, took up his hat and stick, and left the room, the others making way for him. The flush of rage which had followed Jimmy's denunciation of him had passed, and he felt sick and shaken. Seyton's tone of quiet scorn rang in his ears, the apology he had made for intruding upon his friends the society of a detected cardsharpener was bitter to remember.

He had reached the Strand before he remembered that in the shame and confusion of his detection he had left Seyton's rooms not only without the money he had won, which he certainly would not have been allowed to take, but without the bulk of his own money.

For a moment the discovery had stripped him of the icy veneer of affectation which long use had made second nature to him, and he stood still in the street, shaking his fist and sputtering curses until the passers-by paused and stared at him.

He walked on, drunk and blind with rage.

The idea crossed his mind that he might go back to the Temple and claim his money, but even his cynicism quailed at the thought of facing those who had so recently expelled him from their society as a convicted swindler. The figure of Jimmy, who was muscular and obviously had a nasty temper, finally appeared in his mind's eye to put the idea to flight.

He passed under a gas lamp and counted the coins remaining to him. They amounted in all to a few shillings.

"Was ever such damnable luck!" he groaned. "To be defeated by a pack of boobies like that. I can never show my face again. I must get out of this. London is played out for me. I'll go home and work for a day or two, make a little money, and go. Gillian and the child must shift for themselves."

He steadied his shaking nerves with a glass of brandy at a bar near Charing Cross, and doggedly started for home. It was raining, and before he arrived in Peter's street he was wet to the skin.

He let himself in with his latchkey, and mounted the stairs.

The door of his room was ajar, and he heard voices within—his wife's, and the deeper tones of a man. He crept softly up the final flight, and listened.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

THE LEEDS DISASTER.

MORE VICTIMS.

ON Monday two more of the girls who were burned in the accident at a Christmas party at Wortley, died at Leeds Infirmary. Their names are—Elizabeth Tingle, aged 12, and Harriet Kiley, aged 14. These, with Florie Brook, aged 10, whose death occurred on Sunday night, brings the total number of victims to nine.

The funeral of Clarissa Roberts, one of the victims, took place at Wortley on Monday afternoon, and was witnessed by a large crowd.

It has just transpired that two exciting scenes were witnessed in the street on the night of the disaster, when two of the little ones, both of whom are now dead, ran out of the schoolroom towards their homes. The first was little Carrie Steel, who, when she was on fire, ran shrieking through the schoolroom and down the road to the house of her grandmother, Mrs Watson, who resides in Oldfield lane, distant about 500 yards from the school. Her hands were so terribly burned that she could not open the latch of the door, and stood there shrieking in her agony. "Oh, grandma, grandma!" Mrs Watson, on opening the door, was horrified to find her little grandchild in flames. Carrie was taken in, and her burns attended to; meanwhile a cab was procured, and she was sent to the infirmary, where she died on Saturday morning. A similar occurrence is reported in the case of Maggie Kitchen, who resided at Soarborough villa, Whingate, Armley. She escaped from the schoolroom and ran down the road; then she turned up Upper Wortley road, and ran all the way to her home, which is considerably over half a mile from the scene of the fire, and thus apprised her parents of the dreadful occurrence. The poor child was frightfully burned, and succumbed at the infirmary on Saturday morning.

Mrs Roberts, whose daughter Clarissa is one of the dead, says her daughter did not belong to the school. She was a member of the Silvery Road Wesleyan Chapel, but she was so clever at entertainments that she was earnestly requested to take part in that one. Mrs Roberts was very unwilling to let her daughter go, nor did the latter appear particularly eager; but so anxious were the promoters of the entertainment that the girl should assist, that the mother at last yielded. "And this is the consequence," added the bereaved mother, as she sat in her chair by the fire, sobbing as if her heart would break. "I saw her in the infirmary before she died," continued the mother, and she said, "Oh, mamma! the girl whose lamp was alight threw it on to me and burned me." At other times she would call out "They're smothering me," referring to the efforts of the rescuers when they wrapped the children in rugs and blankets to quench the flames." On Saturday morning the brother of Sarah Ellen Kitchen was sitting by his sister's bedside in the infirmary when George Dixon, the sexton, entered the ward. Kitchen beckoned to him to come and see his sister, who had been inquiring about him. Dixon complied, and on his inquiring, "Is she awake?" the little sufferer opened her eyes, and, looking gratefully at him, said, "Ay; I've just been talking about you—you got me out, didn't you?"

From St. Petersburg the death is announced of Admiral Kern, hero of Sinope and Sebastopol.