Leaf the Twenty-Fifth

The Artist's Story

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by John B. Williams, M.D.

After a long residence in the country, I returned to New York. The exhibition of the Academy of Arts was then open, and being very fond of paintings, I hastened to visit it. On the very threshold of the door I met my friend George Herbert, one of our most charming landscape painters. After shaking hands we entered together.

I asked Herbert if he had anything on exhibition, and on his replying in the affirmative, I begged of him first of all to show me his pictures. But modest as usual he led me to some of the best paintings, and pointed out to me beauties of detail not usually appreciated by the mass of visitors. He thus passed in review the works of his friends, rivals and enemies, and was equally just with them all. It was not until an hour had elapsed that he placed me opposite one of his own pictures, which was surrounded by a considerable number of ladies.

"I can make no remark on this picture," said he, "look and judge for yourself."

The moment I cast my eyes on it, I could not suppress an exclamation of surprise and joy, which made all the persons looking at it turn round their heads. One only remained motionless. She was a lady elegantly dressed in black, and who with her elbow leaning on the balustrade, appeared to be entirely absorbed in the contemplation of my friend's picture. I profited by the departure of several of the spectators to approach closer myself, in order to explain if possible the impression the first glance at this picture had made on me.

Nothing could be more simple than the subject of the painting. It represented a white house, festooned all over with green vines; in front of it two beautiful children were playing together.

Seated on a green bank at the entrance of a long avenue of old trees was a lady, watching the children with a tender and loving glance, while a piece of embroidery just fallen from her hands showed her distraction. In the foreground a young man was pushing off a boat which was half hidden by a bed of roses. His eyes were fixed on the house, the children and the lady, and from the expression of his face they appeared to sum up his whole happiness. The work was executed with marvelous detail, and simple though it appeared, it was really a remarkable *chef d'œuvre.*

I turned to my friend to express the sympathy and admiration with which his picture had inspired me. He cut my praises short by pretending that he had forgotten to show me an important painting, and drew me away for that purpose. But when, after another walk through the galleries, we passed through the apartment in which Herbert's picture was placed, I cast another look at it, I was a little surprised to find the lady in black still gazing on it.

"That lady's admiration," said I to Herbert, "is very flattering to you, if her face only corresponds with the elegance of her shape and toilet."

“Phaw! what matters it to me?” he replied, in a tone of utter indifference.

“It matters to me, though,” said I, laughing, “I like to see that my friends are appreciated by those whose good opinion is worth having.”

And letting go his arm I advanced towards the unknown. She was at that moment referring to her catalogue, doubtless for the purpose of discovering the painter’s name. But at the moment I leaned forward for the purpose of catching a glimpse of her face, she uttered a cry, and fell fainting into my arms.

Scarcely noticing her marvellous beauty, I had just untied her bonnet strings, when I heard another cry which appeared to be an echo of the first one behind me. I turned quickly round, and saw Herbert reel forward and catch hold of the balustrade for support. Leaving the strange lady in the hands of her friends, I ran to him.

His eyes were half closed, and he was frightfully pale. He could not articulate a single word. When he had somewhat recovered, his first glance was directed to the spot where the lady had stood. Not perceiving her, Herbert’s first impulse appeared to be a determination to follow her; but reflecting a moment he stopped, and I heard him murmur:

“What woe would it be? It is well she did not see me.”

This scene, which no one understood, drew a concourse of people around us. I drew Herbert into another gallery, and after a little time proposed that we should leave the place. He followed me without making any reply. At the door we got into a hackney-coach, and I ordered the coachman to drive us to Herbert’s residence. During our progress there he did not utter a single word.

“You are suffering, Herbert,” said I, when he pointed with a mute gesture to a bunch of cigars on the mantle-piece of his studio.

“No, it is nothing,” said he, shaking his head, as if to chase away a painful thought. “I thought at first I should have died, but I feel much better now.”

“You know that lady?” I asked, after a moment’s silence.

“And you are always on the alert for stories, even if they are about your own friends,” he replied, with a resigned smile. “Well, so be it. You, at least, are not ‘*bete*’ enough to laugh at a love affair.”

And handing me a cigar, Herbert sat down by my side on the sofa, and related to me the following history:

During my last visit to the little estate owned by my mother near Albany, I met my uncle, Major C—, of the United States army, many times. He was home on leave of absence, and resided near

my mother's property. He told me marvellous stories of his campaign in Mexico, and with the Indians, and as I was a good listener, I speedily ingratiated myself in his favor. His leave of absence expired about the same time that I proposed to return to New York. We had to proceed twenty miles by carriage before we could reach the boat that was to convey us to New York, and the major proposed that I should accompany him. Of course I could not refuse, although to tell you the truth, his society somewhat bored me. The day before our intended departure I called upon him to know the exact time that he would start. I found him fuming and fretting as only a military man can fume and fret.

"The deuce take all women!" he cried, the moment he saw me, crushing up in his hand a note that he had just read.

"That is not a very gallant speech, uncle," I returned, offering him my hand.

The major looked at me a moment without speaking, and then pushed away my hand.

"I suppose you are a gallant man," he replied. "If so, to-morrow you will have a chance of showing off your gallantry to the greatest perfection."

"How is that? Do we not start to-morrow?"

"Yes, and that is precisely the reason I am out temper. Would you believe it, that I, who will not take the trouble to look after my baggage when traveling, have been requested to take charge of a young boarding-school miss, who is returning to her mother?"

"You appear to me to be a very proper escort."

"Thunder and lightning! I wonder if they take me for a nurse?"

"How old is your charge, Major?"

"Seventeen."

"In that case, if she be not too ugly, I will relieve you of your duties."

"On the contrary, she is represented to be charming."

"You have not seen her, then?"

"I suppose I may have seen her at her uncle's, who is one of my old friends, although it is not very amiable of him to impose this task on me."

"What is her name?"

"How should I know? I believe it is Miss Vane."

“A pretty name.”

“Yes, a pretty name and a pretty face; but not a cent of fortune,” returned my uncle, with a sneer. “Do you like girls without fortunes?”

“That depends on circumstances. I know many heiresses who would not suit me, even to mix my colors.”

“I tell you what it is, Mr. Artist, with such ideas as you have you will ultimately die of hunger. But take your own course, marry this girl, if you like. But, come, we will pass the day together, and you shall go with me to take an answer to this cursed letter, for I am expected there to dinner, and you can be introduced to your future dulcinea.”

“Thank you,” I returned, smiling, “I am not in such a hurry to run after my chains. It will be time enough to-morrow, if you are really determined to yield your right to me.”

“Go to the deuce, then,” said the major, taking up his hat and approaching the door; “but remember, if I do not see you again to-day, we leave to-morrow at eight o’clock. Confound all women, I say!”

So saying, my worthy uncle disappeared, leaving me to my own reflections. I returned home, and having finished packing my trunks, and made a few farewell calls, I was somewhat embarrassed to know how to spend the remainder of the day. I determined at last that I would pass it amidst the green fields, and take a last view of the face of nature, for I was well aware that I should be exiled from it for many months in New York. I took my sketch-book and pencil and soon reached the fields.

It was towards the close of September. These last days of summer possess a serene splendor which, to my taste, more powerfully affects the mind than the beauties of spring. Never did I perceive their glory so much as on that day. I strode on, forgetting that I was a painter, and so much captivated by the charms surrounding me that I lost all idea of reproducing them. I was awakened from my ecstacy by the rustling of a dress on the other side of a rustic hedge, after a walk of several hours. A single glance convinced me that this hedge enclosed a park, in the midst of which stood a large mansion. Another glance revealed to me a young girl walking slowly along an avenue of gigantic oak trees. She approached the spot where I was concealed by the thick bushes. She had her eyes fixed on a letter which she held in her hand, so that I could not see her face. But at last she finished reading the letter, and let it fall in her lap; it was then I beheld for the first time her glorious beauty, and I could scarcely restrain an exclamation of surprise.

But why was her charming face bathed in tears? They were not furtive tears, but bitter and burning tears, which rend the heart and redden the eyes. What could that letter contain which appeared to have provoked them? Was it the death of a relative? She would not have isolated herself in this manner to weep. Was it the treason of a lover? She was too young and too beautiful to have been deceived. What could it be, then?

She was sitting on a grassy bank facing me, and as I have before said, the letter had escaped from her hands. Her eyes were fixed on the ground, her breast heaved with sobs, and she seemed to be oblivious to everything around her. Sometimes her lips moved as if she would speak, but a stifled sob prevented her uttering a sound. There was something dreadful in this poor young creature's despair. My first impulse was to run to her, and I should probably have done so had not the sound of voices, evidently approaching, reached my ears. The young girl also heard them, for she hurriedly picked up the letter, concealed it in her bosom, and re-entered the avenue. If I moved I should betray my presence, and the young lady would know that she had been watched. From motives of delicacy, therefore, I determined to remain where I was. My mysterious heroine joined a group which had already advanced within a few yards of where I was concealed.

The group consisted of a middle-aged gentleman, a lady, who was doubtless his wife, and a young girl, decidedly plain. The young lady whom I had seen a minute before plunged into such violent grief, took the arm of the latter and walked by her side, and listened to the conversation of the middle-aged gentleman, who spoke with much animation. I could easily understand what a violent effort she must have made over herself to effect such a complete transformation, for all trace of sorrow had disappeared from her face. Calm, and if not gay, at least tranquil, she smiled at some observation addressed to her in the course of conversation, which I could now hear distinctly.

"He is playing at billiards," said the gentleman, doubtless in reply to a question I had not heard; "but the essential point is that he accepts, and we are thus saved great embarrassment, and yet had it not been for your mother I should on account of this young man have waited for another opportunity."

"But why?" said the elderly lady. "This young man is of a good family, and I do not see what inconvenience can arise—"

"What inconvenience, madam!" replied the gentleman, somewhat tartly. "Have I not already told you that he is an artist, who, instead of following his father's lucrative business, must needs settle in New York under the pretext of art, and waste his means, heaven only knows how?"

"But, uncle," said my heroine, in a voice so clear and musical that it almost made me start, "I think I have heard that this young man possesses a great deal of talent."

"And where will his talent lead him?" said the old gentleman, with bitterness. "Most likely to die in the hospital. I tell you these artists are a curse. Their morals are bad, and they bring trouble into the bosom of our families."

"Take care of yourself, Laura," said the daughter, addressing my unknown.

"O, I fear nothing," she replied, with a sad smile, in which I saw traces of the grief she had so promptly suppressed.

“Come, let us go to dinner,” cried the enemy to artists, hearing the sound of a bell from the direction of the house. And they all left the spot, leaving me at liberty to emerge from my concealment.

“Laura!” said I to myself, as I continued to walk along the hedge which skirted the park. “Her name is Laura. What a charming name, and what an adorable girl! But why the deuce did that frightful old man rail so against artists? Could he be referring to me, and yet that is scarcely possible, for I never saw him before in my life. Why did she weep so much, and why conceal it when her friends approached? Her grief must have a secret cause. Could it be love?”

This last supposition was by no means an agreeable one to me, but I was ashamed to confess to myself the interest with which this young girl had inspired me. The continued ringing of the dinner bell at the house made me remember that I had taken nothing since morning, and yet I hated to leave the spot where my fair unknown lived. After considerable hesitation I decided to seek for a farm house in the neighborhood, where I could appease my hunger, and then return to the garden of Eden where my Eve lived.

I immediately began the search. But whether it was that I took the wrong direction, or that there were no farmhouses in the neighborhood, I discovered none. Night came on during my fruitless walk, and I was very glad at last to meet with a countryman who directed me to my uncle’s residence, that being the nearest, I reached it, harassed and famished, at eleven o’clock at night.

The major had returned an hour before, and while they were preparing supper for me I entered his chamber. He suddenly awoke, but scarcely recognized me, and when I asked him if he knew a young lady named Laura living in the neighborhood, he uttered an exclamation, doubtless not very parliamentary, but so energetic as to forbid all hope of getting any information from him.

I passed a very uneasy night. The image of the young girl under the tree appeared unceasingly before me, and I felt that I must penetrate the secret of her tears. It was daylight before I fell asleep, and I must have slept but a very I short time, when a servant came to inform me that the carriage was waiting at the door. I dressed hurriedly, and went down stairs with the firm intention of telling the major that I had changed my mind, and could not be his travelling companion.

He was already in the carriage. I advanced to the door, and had already commenced to make my excuses when I caught sight of a beautiful face. I was immediately silent, and asked myself if I were not dreaming. But the driver, who had become impatient, pushed me in and closed the door. The carriage drove off, and I found myself sitting by the side of my fair unknown of the previous evening, Miss Laura Vane.

Surprise doubtless imparted to my face a singular expression, for the young girl could not help smiling, while the major reproached me for my want of punctuality. I sought to excuse myself, not for delay, but for my bewilderment, which must have appeared incomprehensible, so after I had been introduced to the beautiful girl, I exclaimed:

“Your presence here, Miss Vane, explains to me many things which were complete enigmas yesterday.”

“What enigmas do you refer to, George?” said my uncle.

“O, they are much too complicated for you, major,” I replied glancing at Miss Vane.

“Pshaw!” he replied, with indifference.

Perceiving that I made no reply to his attacks, he ensconced himself in a corner and closed his eyes. I profited by this opportunity to examine more attentively the beautiful girl whom chance had thrown in my company at the very moment when I thought I should never behold her again. Her beauty was increased by being viewed closely. Her eyes were large and pensive, of that deep blue which the summer sky could only rival; her hair was a golden auburn and shaded a forehead as white as alabaster. When she smiled she revealed teeth so white and regular that they might have been cut out of a solid piece of ivory, and they could not have been excelled. Her form and figure were perfect. One of her little hands was ungloved, and I had an opportunity of observing how beautifully it was formed. Her toilet, though simple, showed exquisite taste. Whilst I was making this examination, she was looking out of the carriage window as if for the purpose of viewing the surrounding country; but a few furtive glances cast towards me convinced me that she knew she was being observed.

The major, Heaven forgive him! commenced to snore. Perceiving that silence, if more prolonged would become more and more embarrassing, I determined to break it. I commenced with some commonplace remark, and we were soon on terms of frank intimacy. After conversing on different subjects for some time, I suddenly remembered that I had certain mysteries to clear up, I resolved to introduce less general subjects.

“Are you fond of paintings, Miss Vane?” I asked, abruptly.

The young lady doubtless thought that this was a very vulgar way to commence a conversation on art, and looked at me with surprise. But I renewed my question. Perceiving that I was determined to have an answer, she replied with a smile:

“I am compelled to make you a humiliating confession, Mr. Herbert, and that is, having been brought up in the country, I have never been able to obtain the necessary knowledge to judge of art.”

“What matter, if you are able to feel its beauties, and that I am sure you are?”

“What gives you that certainty? Very flattering for me, I must confess, but I am afraid quite unmerited.”

“Probably the desire I have to consult some one on the subject of a picture which has teased me since yesterday, and I thought that perhaps you would be that some one.”

“Very willingly. Let me hear your idea, and I will give you my opinion of it, which you can accept for what it is worth.”

“This is it, then: Under the trees of a park, a charming young girl—”

“Of course,” interrupted Miss Vane, with a smile.

“Is surprised by a group of persons advancing to the spot where she is seated,” I continued, without heeding the interruption; “at the moment she is reading a letter, her eyes being filled with tears. The instant she hears the footsteps she hides the letter in her bosom, and chasing away her grief advances to meet the approaching group.”

On hearing me describe a scene in which she had been the principal, or rather sole actress, Miss Vane showed great emotion. She regarded me with a sort of fright, and appeared to ask me by her looks by what right I had mixed myself up with her secret. But the affected indifference of my attitude doubtless re-assured her, for she asked me, hesitatingly:

“Is it since yesterday that you have entertained the idea of this picture?”

“Yes,” I returned, “it was a scene of which chance made me a spectator some time ago; but it came back to my memory last night, and I thought that that beautiful girl, surprised at the moment she was reading a love-letter, would make a good subject for a painting.”

“Why a love-letter, Mr. Herbert— how can you tell it was that?” asked Miss Vane, quickly, who, a little re-assured by the first part of my last speech, in all probability felt herself attacked in the latter portion.

“Why, Miss Vane, how could a young girl conceal herself in a secluded spot, and weep so violently when reading a letter, if that letter did not speak of 1ove? That was my impression, as it would be that of everybody else.”

“Everybody else, like you, often judge wrong,” replied Miss Vane, in a tone so serious that her sincerity could not be doubted. “Is not the real cause of the tears of those who weep in secret sufficient for them, without having them interpreted according to the fancy of the first indiscreet person who may chance to surprise them in their grief?”

A cloud settled on the young girl’s face as if these last words recalled some painful reminiscence to her mind. My curiosity as to the cause of my travelling companion’s secret grief, although far from being completely allayed, was in some measure satisfied by the discovery that it was not love that had caused her tears to flow, and I was so overjoyed by this fact that I determined she should pardon the indiscretion of which I had been guilty. I so far succeeded as to restore to Miss Vane’s countenance its accustomed calm and serious look.

We were conversing very gaily when the major awoke. He first glanced ahead of us, and then actually greeted us with a smile, and even deigned to address a few words to Miss Vane. I was

very much surprised at this great change from his usual surly demeanor; but it was explained when I saw that we had already reached Albany.

We drove immediately to the wharf, where we landed and had to wait some little time until the "World" should start. The major shrugged his shoulders when he saw me offer my arm to Miss Vane, and pointed significantly to a cigar which he had just lighted, and then disappeared in a bar-room. Miss Vane and I took two or three turns up and down the wharf, when she said with some hesitation, doubtless having remarked the major's significant gesture:

"I do not like to see you, on my account, deprive yourself of the pleasure of smoking a cigar."

My first impulse was to state the truth, and that was, that all the cigars in the world were not worth the gentle pressure of her hand on my arm, and the proud satisfaction in having such a beautiful creature by my side; but I was afraid of frightening her, so I determined to make myself a victim, and replied, with a shade of bitterness in my tone:

"Is that a polite way to rid yourself of my company, Miss Vane? Have I been too presumptuous in hoping that you would accept my services?"

"How could I entertain such an idea?" she replied, with a graceful gesture of impatience.

"You know artists have such a bad reputation."

"Which is, perhaps, undeserved."

"Allow me to thank you, Miss Vane, in their name and mine, for the flattering opinions which I know you entertain of them."

"And how do you know that?" she exclaimed, with an uneasy look.

"I guessed it."

"Nay, you heard me express myself so."

"I confess that chance made me hear you speak in their favor."

"Then," she replied, "that picture of which you spoke to me just now, was taken from a scene in real life?"

"I cannot deny it."

"You are acting unfairly. Was it not enough to have committed an indiscretion—involuntarily, I fully believe—without aggravating it by endeavoring to penetrate the secret of a grief which has never been confided to you?"

"I am satisfied to know that that grief was not caused by love."

“And what interest can it be to you to know whether the first girl you meet loves or not?”

“What interest? Is not a woman who loves, a precious flower under a glass shade?—a rare bird in a cage?—a ripe fruit in an inaccessible garden? All these things possess only sweetness, perfume and harmony for those who possess them. Is it not natural one should prefer the wild flower of the woods, the bird of the heavens, and the fruit of the hedges which belong to the hand bold enough to take them?”

In spite of the sadness which had fallen on Miss Vane, she could not help smiling at my comparisons. Although I did not then comprehend the secret bitterness which she had in her raillery, she replied:

“Yes; but the fruit of the hedges sometimes grows beyond reach, the wild flower sometimes blooms on inaccessible rocks, and the bird of the heavens does not allow itself to be caught.”

“Ah, Miss Vane,” I replied, “you want to intimidate me, and I must not show myself less courageous than you are.”

“How am I courageous?” returned the young girl in a tone of unaffected surprise.

“Did not some one say to you yesterday, ‘Take care of yourself?’ And did you not reply, ‘I fear nothing?’”

The young girl became quite serious, and made no reply. She bent her head down, and I felt her hand tremble on my arm. She appeared for the moment to be overpowered by some painful reminiscence, which I had before remarked had several times excited its influence over her. At last she raised her pure eyes to my face, and said, gravely:

“No, Mr. Herbert, I fear nothing, because I possess a talisman which I trust will never fail me.”

“And what is that talisman?” I asked, with an ironical smile.

“It is duty!” she returned, with a proud glance. “And now I beg that we cease this conversation, which doubtless has no more interest for you than for me.”

So saying she hurried on board the steamer, which had just come up to the wharf. I followed her, and took my seat by her side after a little delay in procuring tickets. Her head was perched over the railing, and she appeared to be watching the water through which we were now gliding. But in spite of all her efforts to hide it, I detected a furtive tear stealing down her cheek. This touched me to the heart. What had this poor girl done to me that I should harass her thus?

“Have I offended you, Miss Vane?” I asked, in a whisper. “If so, I beg that you will forgive me, for I assure you it was unintentional.”

“Let us say no more about it,” she replied, her countenance becoming serene again. “I am exceedingly sensitive, and perhaps it is good for me to be subjected to ridicule.”

I was about to reply, when the major made his appearance. He did not stay with us long, however, but meeting a fellow-officer on board, they moved to another part of the vessel, and began to fight their battles over again. Miss Vane and myself were again left alone, or rather isolated in the midst of half a dozen passengers. Among the latter I noticed a lady very elegantly dressed and quite young. She was accompanied by an old man, who appeared to overwhelm her with his attentions, which she tolerated rather than received. This lady displeased me very much, even more than the little dog which she carried in her lap, and which annoyed us all by its continual barking. She went into ecstacy about the beauty of the scenery, and by pretentious exclamations uttered in a loud voice appeared to wish that everybody should hear her. While I was annoyed at this lady’s remarks, I could not help admiring the beauties of the panorama spread before us. The steamer was between two hills covered with verdure, relieved here and there by white cottages which gleamed through the trees. It was most beautiful; every mile we made offered to us some new delight. Now it was a rustic village, descending to the very edge of the water, now it was green sloping banks, with the spires of country churches peeping out from a mass of foliage, now the giant Catskills looming up to the very heavens.

Everything appeared so calm and beautiful that I felt its serene influence over my spirits, and had it not been for the noisy demonstrations on the part of the lady I have referred to, I should have been perfectly happy. I cast my eyes on Miss Vane, and found that she was completely absorbed by the beauty of the scenery. I gently touched her shoulder.

“Is it not beautiful?” said she, without turning round. “There is no necessity for one to travel in foreign countries to find the true poetry of nature.”

I perceived at that moment a white cottage hidden like a nest among leaves. The river at this point was somewhat inland, forming a miniature bay in front of the dwelling. The front of the house was covered all over with a grape vine, while a carefully kept flower-garden extended around it. An avenue of beech trees skirted one side of the cottage. At the entrance of this avenue a lady was seated on a grassy bank employing herself with embroidery, at the same time watching two handsome children who were playing in the garden. A boat was fastened to the bank in front of the dwelling. All seemed so fresh and so pure that I could not restrain an exclamation of pleasure. Miss Vane had also noticed it, and appreciated its beauties, for she pointed to it and exclaimed:

“That is the place for one to live in?”

“Not alone?” said I, intentionally.

“O, no,” she replied, without thinking what she was saying; “but—” she stopped and blushed.

“With a companion, then,” said I, quickly, without allowing her time to be frightened at the sense my words might convey. “Yes, it would be very pleasant to be awakened in the morning by the singing of birds, and to walk into the garden while yet wet with dew—”

“And gather flowers for the breakfast table,” said Miss Vane, interrupting me.

“Yes, and after breakfast, work, for a little work would be necessary. During the hot hours of the day—”

“Read under the shade of the avenue.”

“And dine in that pretty arbor—”

“After dinner row in that boat to yonder green hill.”

“And in the evening have music in the drawing-room, with the windows open, and, with no other light than that given by the moon, sing—”

“Norma.”

“You like Norma?” I cried, happy to find in her preferences a new point of contact with mine.

But this question appeared to dissipate the dream in which she had indulged. She cast down her eyes with some embarrassment, and a bitter smile replaced the look of serene gaiety which had before animated her face.

“Are you already tired of your pretty cottage on the Hudson?” I asked.

“No,” said she, with her eyes filled with tears; “but it is dangerous to indulge in castles in the air.”

“Why should it be a castle in the air, when a single word can make it a reality?”

Was it a flash of joy or anger which for a moment illuminated Miss Vane’s countenance? I cannot tell; but whatever it was, it immediately faded away, and was replaced by that look of grief and discouragement which I had often seen before. She silently moved away, and walked to the other end of the boat. I dared not break in on her reverie, but sat still and indulged in my reflections.

My thoughts, of course, were fixed on but one subject. I had never met in any woman the irresistible charm which had attracted me towards this ravishing creature. What, then, could be the cause of her secret grief? Evidently it was of recent origin, for her expansive nature repulsed it energetically, only allowing it at certain times to obtain an influence over her. I interrogated my own heart. I asked myself, supposing that she were free, could I in justice to her, offer her marriage? This young girl had no fortune, and I in pursuit of my studies had expended the modest patrimony left me by my father. It is true I was beginning to find a resource in my talents; but this was still so uncertain that I was often obliged to have recourse to my mother’s small income. Could I expose this young girl to the hardships of an artist’s life, and without

making her happy, compromise my future by domestic troubles? But, then again, was it nothing to find in a devoted and faithful heart a refuge in the hours of doubt and discouragement? Was it not worth trusting something to chance? Does not faith in destiny often make our destiny?

While making these reflections I directed my eyes towards my traveling companion. She was still contemplating our white cottage in the woods, which was fast fading from view. In another moment a turn in the river hid it altogether. Miss Vane turned round, and her look met mine.

Had she thought of me as I had thought of her? Had our souls met and revealed themselves to each other while we were apparently separated? Who can say? But no human language could more clearly have expressed what our looks said during the eternal minute they were confounded together. Intoxicated, I advanced towards her, and I should perhaps have kneeled at her feet, and have offered her my life, had she not repulsed me with a gesture which had more despair in it than fright. She then put her hands to her face, and appeared scarcely able to stifle a sob.

But I only saw in this emotion the modesty which makes a woman blush at the avowal, the knowledge of which makes her happy in secret. I wished to allow Laura time to forgive me for the happiness she had bestowed upon me. I glanced around me without fixing my eyes on any particular object. I saw the green banks, the gliding water, the fleecy clouds, and birds, singing in the heavens. Everything appeared to smile, and I heard a voice which spoke to my soul, and which said, “Love!” Not wishing to disturb Miss Vane, I lit a cigar and joined a group of passengers, who were evidently farmers.

“Look,” said one of these, pointing to the old man who accompanied the lady who was so loud in her praises of the scenery of the river, “see how attentive the old fool is to his young wife.”

“Wife!” said I, in amazement. “You must be mistaken. You mean grandfather?”

“No, indeed, I mean wife. I come from the same town that they do. He is very rich, and that is why she married him.”

I left them, and turned back. As I passed before the loud-talking lady, avoiding to look at her, she uttered a cry and her umbrella fell close at my feet. I picked it up and returned it to her, bowing to the old man, and casting a disdainful look on the woman.

“What have you done to that lady?” asked Miss Vane, whom I had rejoined, and who had seen this little scene.

“Nothing,” I replied, smiling; “she let her umbrella fall, and I returned it to her.”

“From the look you gave her, one would say that you hated her.”

“No, indeed. I am only of the opinion that when a woman has courage enough to sell herself, she should at least have the honesty to keep to her bargain.”

Miss Vane uttered a cry of suffering which I could have understood if the words had been addressed personally to her. She then gazed on the woman and then on me, and her eyes evinced so much pity for her, and so much reproach for me, that I felt myself blush, and could not utter a word.

By-and-by we conversed on general subjects, and continued to do so until we reached New York. When the time came for me to leave this beautiful girl, without the hope of seeing her again, I felt how much I was attached to her, and how the bonds so easy to bend were so hard to break. I approached her, and in a low tone of voice which emotion made to tremble, said:

"May I hope to see you again?"

Miss Vane was silent for a moment or two—her head fell on her heaving bosom—there was evidently a struggle going on, and I anxiously awaited her answer. At last a shiver ran through her frame, and raising her humid eyes to mine, she murmured, in a voice which she in vain endeavored to make firm, "No!"

I was about to protest against the decision, when Laura cried out with a feverish joy, mingled with terror:

"Henry! Henry!"

A young lad fifteen or sixteen years of age, approached, accompanied by my uncle, and having first embraced Miss Vane, turned towards the major and myself, and said:

"My mother, gentlemen, not being able to come to meet my sister, begged me to thank you in her name, and to beg that you will call on her and receive her thanks in person."

He then left us to see after his sister's baggage; the major accompanied him. I was transported with the invitation which had been given me, but I did not long remain so.

"Mr. Herbert," said Miss Vane, "you have been very good to me, full of kindness and indulgence; you can still, however, acquire a new claim on my gratitude."

"O, speak, Miss Vane—what must I do?"

"Do not mention my name during your residence in New York, and above all, do not accept the invitation which my brother has given you."

"But that would be very impolite," I returned.

"I will make your apologies. Do this for me, Mr. Herbert." Then seeing her brother and the major returning, she pressed my arm and whispered in my ear, "I beseech you, for my sake!"

The pressure of her hand on my arm, her breath in my hair, and above all her tender words, almost overcame me. When I recovered myself, Laura and her brother had already disappeared. I

rushed to the side of the boat to catch a last glimpse of her. They were already on the pier. Laura turned her head and fixed a look of gratitude on me, and then the sweet vision vanished from my sight.

"I am much obliged to you for relieving me of a disagreeable duty," said the major, when they were gone. "What do you think of her, nephew?"

"I don't know," I replied.

Should I yield to Miss Vane's desire, and was she really sincere when she made it? Such were my thoughts when walking the next day down Broadway. At that moment I saw Miss Vane, accompanied by her brother, within a few steps of me. The young man recognized me, and made a movement as if he would stop and speak to me, but his sister prevented him, and they rapidly passed me, as if they had not seen me.

This determination to avoid me wounded my vanity, and made me feel quite angry, and I at once determined to respond to the invitation sent me by her mother. The same evening I directed my steps to Mrs. Vane's residence.

She resided in the upper part of the city, almost in the country. The house was quite large, with a garden which was kept with great care, extending in front of it. The iron gate was open and I entered. The windows of the front room were open, and I heard the notes of a piano. It was evidently played by a practiced hand. Suddenly I heard the sweet prayer of Norma, "*Casta diva che inargenti*," etc. I had arrived there angry, but this plaintive and sad melody found an echo in my heart, and love only spoke in me. I fancied I again heard the prayer that Miss Vane had addressed to me, and perhaps I should have retired, had not a suppressed cry interrupted the song, and if Laura herself had not suddenly appeared at the entrance. She advanced toward me, and said, with a sad smile:

"You here? I hoped too much from you, then."

"Why are you without pity?" I replied. "And why cannot you understand that if I come here in spite of you, in spite of myself, it is because I love you—"

"O, utter not those words," she cried, hiding her face with her hands.

She trembled, and her face became so pale, and betrayed so much suffering and fear, that she frightened me. I rushed forward to support her, but suddenly, by an energetic effort of will recovering herself, she said to me, calmly:

"Enter since you will have it so. I will go and inform my mother."

And pointing out the door of the drawing-room to me, she left me. I entered—the apartment was full of her presence—a vague perfume of flowers freshly gathered greeted my senses. I saw the book she had lately been reading, the open piano, and the piece from Norma still open, placed

before it. I perceived on the table a little glove which belonged to her. I seized it and carried it to my lips, but the sound of approaching steps and voices made me conceal my modest treasure.

Three persons entered the drawing-room—Miss Vane, who appeared very serious, and with a dignity about her which was almost solemn; her mother, a woman still handsome, and an old man, on whose arm Mrs. Vane leaned familiarly. Whilst I inclined my head, Laura, after having murmured my name, introduced me to those two personages.

"My mother, Mr. Herbert," said she, and then raising her limpid eyes to my face, with a look which seemed to ask for pity, she added, in a more feeble voice, hesitating between each word, "Mr. Emory, my affianced husband!"

These words struck me like an electric shock. So many confused sentiments burned in my heart at the same time that I could find no expression for a single one of them, and I remained overwhelmed with dismay. Whilst Mr. Emory surveyed me from head to foot, and whilst Mrs. Vane was thanking me for the attention I had paid her daughter, Laura, as if she had spent all her strength in pronouncing her own sentence, reeled rather than walked to the door. Before leaving the room, her supplicating eye sought mine. Whether it was my look revealed ironical disdain and cold contempt, I cannot say; but she appeared to be entirely overcome, and it was with great difficulty that she dragged herself away.

I do not know what the lookers-on thought of this scene; I do not know what I said during the few cruel moments I remained in the room. At last I got away with suffering, rage and hatred in my soul. While crossing the garden, my hand came in contact with the glove I had taken. A few minutes before it had made me tremble with happiness, now it burned me. I threw it from me in disgust. I heard a stifled cry behind me, and turning round, I thought I saw the vague form of a woman standing against the window. But without stopping to heed it, I hurried on, and reached my own lodging, and passed an agonizing night.

The next morning a letter was handed me. It was a woman's handwriting.

After a moment's hesitation I broke the seal. I burnt this letter long ago, but every expression of it remains so deeply engraved on my heart that I can repeat it word for word. It was as follows:

"Alas! yes, I also have had the courage to sell myself, but I shall keep to my bargain, for I shall never forget my duty. I wished that our rapid journey should remain for you as it will always for me—a pleasant reminiscence; but you did not understand me. But if I must lose your love, if I myself entreat you to look upon it only as a dream, I do not wish that you should blush at having confessed it. It is for that reason that I write to you. I also have dreamed a sweet poem of an obscure life, in which labor was compensated by love; I also have upbraided those women who believe, or feign to believe, that riches alone are necessary, and who stifle their hearts under their vanity, and the expiation of my error is come—I only feel contempt when, perhaps, I ought to have felt pity. Who should have said then that I should have bent my head under the same reprobation that I bestowed on others? O, why did you come to the house? I should have so loved to remain to you one of those dreams which, if they have no morrow, at least have no regret. Could you not understand by my sadness that I had no happiness to bestow? What have

you gained by your obstinacy? Instead of a fugitive vision of love, you entertain only contempt for me. But the burden is already sufficiently heavy, and I am not resigned enough to bear more. You may forget me, pity me, perhaps; but your contempt is more than I can endure. God forgive me, if I do wrong, but you must know the truth. In seeing me here, surrounded, if not with luxury, at least with comforts, you doubtless thought it was only ambition that caused me to give myself to an old man. Alas! my only ambition is to secure an asylum for those I love, for in a year misery would enter our home, perhaps in a few months. My poor mother, by her imprudent tenderness, gave us an education suitable to our birth, instead of preparing us for labor, which the state of our fortune at my father's death should have destined us. I have taken the step for my mother's sake, for my brother's, that noble boy whom you know, and for my young sister's, whom necessity, perhaps, in a few years would have compelled to pursue a similar course to mine. It was this thought, especially, that one of us was fatally predestined, that gave me strength enough to he resigned to it. If a sacrifice is necessary, it is for me, who am the eldest and strongest, to make it. I know the task is a hard one, and I sometimes fear my own weakness; but I hope, in seeing my mother without care for the future, my brother launched in an honorable career, and my sister free, through me, to choose for herself, that I shall find in the sentiment of duty accomplished that resignation and calmness which is all that I can aspire to. Adieu! Do not visit me again: I trust you will not seek to take from me the strength of which I stand so much in need to tread my sad path. May you be happy! May you become famous! And if you ever think of me, pray to God that he will give me oblivion and repose!

"LAURA."

My first impulse on reading this letter was to visit Laura again. But reflection soon came to obscure the charming mirage which the certainty of her love had for the moment caused to pass before my eyes and my heart. It was then, that I could not succumb to the temptation which assailed me to pursue my love even at the price of Laura's repose, that I determined to travel. I visited Europe. But while sailing on the calm or agitated waters of the Adriatic, or of the Ganges, whether in the palaces of Venice or Calcutta, my dream everywhere was that little white cottage on the borders of the Hudson, with it vines, its flower-garden, avenue, and the young wife, who with tender glances watched her two children playing on the grass; and this young wife always assumed to me the lovely and elegant form, the blue eyes, and the resigned smile of Laura Vane.

Two months after Herbert had told me this history, a lady of my acquaintance informed me that Mr. Emory had received a few days before a package containing a picture, without any indication where it came from. From the description she gave me of this painting I recognized it as my friend's work.

"The most singular thing about it," she continued, "is that when Mrs. Emory saw the picture she was seized with an emotion which she in vain endeavored to dissimulate."

The next day I called on Herbert. The moment I entered, he handed me a letter to read. It contained only these words, "I thank you!"

Leaves from the Note-Book of a New York Detective: The Private Record of J.B. Ed. John B. Williams, M.D. New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1865