

Two Women

By Philo.

THE MAN was not rich. He was an artist, persevering, hardworking and ambitious.

The WOMAN? Of course there was a woman. She was rich and had her ambition too. But while his was a determined persistence to make his way in the world of art, her's was to make him acknowledge that money was no barrier to a man asking a woman richer than himself to marry him. She knew his views on the subject by heart. She had reasoned the matter over with him so often, but he never lessened his condemnation of a man who would offer himself to a woman who was his superior in position.

"What difference does it make?" she asked him one day when they had been discussing the marriage of a mutual friend under the circumstances he so condemned. "Especially when they both know the truth?"

"Don't let us discuss it any more," he replied, and turned the subject to the latest picture in the Academy. She sighed sadly as he left her, he was so unreasonable she thought, yet right perhaps in one way of looking at it.

It was just an every day story to those that read, but not to those whom it concerned. He was from one of the old English families, who had sought their homes in a new country long ago, and had lost nothing of the pride characteristic of his people. She was a good true woman, an educated woman and a woman of brains, yet between them stretched a bridge which the world and its censure forbid him to cross, and she must perforce wait patiently until such time as she could beckon him to come to her. For she loved him with the whole of her soul and being but the world's "must not" separated them utterly. Then came the unexpected, It was after a long day of varied pleasures and looking up she saw him standing there in the warm, sweet glow which pervaded the room. He spoke in a low, almost reverential tone and said simply :

"I have come to say good bye."

"Good bye?" she questioned. "Where are you going?"

"To England to perfect my work. To be an artist in every sense of the word."

"God speed you," she made answer. "And may you meet with success." Would she have had it otherwise? she asked herself. But her heart made no reply. She saw only the winsome manliness of the man she loved, and what woman rich or poor ever sees anything else when he is before her? His protectfulness his broad shoulders and towering height, his deep earnest eyes soul searching and true, his faithfulness to his ideals and his strong true self. Why had she not won him when she could have made his path so easy and had so much to bestow? All this flashed through her mind as she said the few words of farewell, and he in no waste of language simply said:

"And if I meet with success I will I have a question to ask you when I come back. Will you be free to answer, and if you are what do you think you will reply?"

Her eyes shone with a light that illumined them as she replied firmly:

"As will be best for us both I trust. But let it be you just as you stand before me now with life's greatest possibilities as yet untried, with all life's best of life yet to be lived, who will ask the question. No jaded man tired of life's pleasures, no satiated one with the gold of life tarnished and dulled; but just you with your hope, your ambition and yourself unchanged and unaltered except by the maturity, purification, and ennoblement of the experience which life shall have brought you."

She paused more from the swift hurried palpitation of her heart than from want of words, and he looked down at her, the warm soft breathing essence of all that he loved, and longed to gather her close to his heart in a never ending embrace, or bind her by promises that he knew she would not break. But he did neither. Instead, with a pressure of the white hand held out to him and with a repression of himself which cost him a mighty effort he said:

"You will be free then? You infer as much?"

"Her head was bowed and a tide of color was sweeping over her face, but she did not answer. She raised her eyes for an instant and he read in them an assurance of love and trust and hope, passing from them as from the words of a benediction out into the world of work, of ambition and hope.

It was a "Farewell At Home" in Charlie Sherman's studio in London and any At Home there meant an afternoon of

exquisite artistic enjoyment. This last one meant more. It meant a parting from a man who had earned a name for himself in the great world of art, one who would leave behind him in London works which ranked nobly with those of the great masters, and a man whom every one who knew him liked and would miss, not only for his exquisite work but for himself.

It was a luxuriously furnished and light flooded room, one which had been pronounced times without number to have no equal among the studios in London. A thorough artist's room, but one vastly different from that which he had taken six years previous. Then he was a struggling artist, now he was a successful one. Then he had hopes and ambitions and was poor. Now his hopes had reached fruition, his ambitions had been reached and he was poor no longer. 'His hopes' meant all that could be his in London, what remained were on the other side of the water, and very soon he would be there to learn for himself how she would answer the question he had told her he would ask, when the time came to do so.

Among the many lovely women, and men of musical, literary and artistic fame who thronged his studio on this his farewell day, one woman seemed to be all alone. She was a beautiful woman, too beautiful to be easily approachable but it was with a beauty that told of a mastery of self. Her clear cut lips set with a sternness that a little more intensified would have marred their contour; her eyes looked past and over the eager onlookers about the pictures, and her perfectly moulded form lithe, svelte and supple moved languidly, as if weary in the midst of life's luxuries as if seeking rest and not finding it. Yet the sternness of her face was softened by light waving hair brushed loosely back from her forehead and falling in close coils on her perfectly moulded neck. Her dress was perfect, but attractive and all as she was she made no response to the overtures of the men about her, and whom she regarded half contemptuously from under her long lashes.

"She is doing it all for effect," said one woman.

"Of course," agreed another. "But it is only amusing, for every one knows she seeks admiration while she professes to disregard it."

Her husband, Reginald Van Buren, had long since commissioned Charlie Sherman to paint her portrait but no one knew if the commission was ever filled. Van Buren was proud of his beautiful wife, even if any love he had ever had for her had long since died a natural death in the counter attractions of

many other women, some of them beautiful enough—and all willing to pity Van for the mistake he had made in marrying such a perfectly nonunderstandable wife. She had known Sherman for some time and puzzled him in many ways. She was always present at his At Homes and always perfectly at her ease with him. No breath of scandal had ever attached to her name she gave society its due, faultlessly, irreproachably for she had unlimited wealth at her command; and she dressed elegantly, while she surrounded herself with all the celebrities in the world of music and art and letters. Her salon was the entree to all that was select, but she did not identify herself with quixotic charities or try in any way to make herself out a martyr. Neither did she try to make herself popular by parading her domestic troubles, and this was evidently the unforgivable sin she had committed, for she gave no one any opportunity to discuss her affairs and thus make matters worse than they really were. She preferred remaining the mystery she was now considered, regardless of the gossip that reached her from time to time of her husband's "affaires de coeur."

"Utterly indifferent," the world said. "And utterly heartless too," it added. Elsie Van Buren was an enigma to Sherman as well as to everyone else for a long while; but gradually he understood her better and pitied her from his heart for the lesson he could see she had so thoroughly learned in bearing her burden alone. More than once he wondered if he read aright the unspoken thoughts that passed through the mind veiled by those long lashed eyes of deepest blue that looked so indifferently at the world and yet gave no sign of knowing what that world said.

That afternoon she moved from one picture to another until at length she stopped before one she had not seen. Was it the law of contrast that held her spell bound before a picture of the "Madonna?" Or was it the yearning of her woman's heart for the happiness of the woman pictured, her face radiant with mother love, such a sweet youthful face with the child's clasped close to it. But she stood before it while others said their farewells, until the clatter of the cups and saucers of the afternoon tea drinkers had ceased, until the hum of voices had died away and she was left alone, fascinated as it were by the work of a master hand. The picture of a mother and child! The subject artists have portrayed since the world first knew of the Holy Mother and Babe, those types of the Holiest Motherhood and Childhood the world will ever know. The woman in

the picture gazed down at the living, breathing woman who stood before her ; the one with all the light and love of earth and Heaven telling forcibly of the fruition of life ; the other with youth beauty, wealth, but with longing inexpressible looking back into the pictured face.

"Do you like it?" asked the man whose brush had laid on the colors. He repeated the question but to be asked another.

"Who is she?" she queried. Such a simple little question but the answer meant so much to her. A new tone had crept into her voice and he knew intuitively that it was the moment in their lives when through something which appealed to each, the companionship and sympathy which had deepened into such close friendship between them would be made stronger or forever ended. There was a searching look in her eyes too, one he thought meant that she read for herself the story of the sweet face pressed close to the child's, a story she had never suspected and he had refrained from telling her of, yet which dawned upon her now with a suddenness that pained her.

"Sit down," he said, "and I will tell you."

He motioned her to a divan in a nook sheltered from the flood of light and she sank down among the cushions as if glad of the peace and quiet. Neither spoke for a moment, he was content to look at the beautiful face before him, to drink in its exquisite loveliness illumined as it were by that penetrating look in the wondrous eyes, and his own were fixed on her face.

"Perhaps my story will not interest you?"

"I think it will," she said slowly. She made no attempt to force the conversation ; she knew the man beside her and she was anxious to know if the story he had to tell would correspond with the one she read from the pictured face.

"How do you know that is a portrait?" he at length asked.

"Because such a face as that can be no fancy. It is that of a woman who has waited long for a deferred happiness and has become glorified by the waiting." She drew off her gloves as she spoke and laid aside her furs, then continued :

"And you love her, there is no need to tell me that."

"Then there is no need to tell you anything else."

"Then you have had a wife all this time and never told me so. Why did you not ?"

"You make a mistake, she is not my wife"

Another man's then. The likeness between the child and her is unmistakeable."

"Nor yet another man's, the child is but an artist's fancy. No woman looks so truly a woman as with a child in her arms, and no man thinks of the woman he loves as his wife without coupling her with the thought of her being the mother of his children. And the 'portrait has been painted from memory only.'"

"Then it is a future you prophesy, not a present you depict? Do you think it will ever be?"

"I hope so." She moved restlessly among the cushions, then she spoke again.

"How you must love her to picture her face from memory like that."

He was silent.

"And she has waited for you all those years. God! How many women wait but their waiting never ends." Again he did not answer, then she said:

"Tell me all about her. It is the last time we will ever be together, and you will trust me with the story?"

"There is not much more to tell you, but what there is I will gladly trust you with. I cannot expect to make it very interesting to you, or that you will find any charm in the hearing of it, but you may learn that a man can be faithful and that a woman can wait."

Then followed the story of the years that preceded his coming to London, of his struggle with small means and of his meeting with the woman who had been the guiding star of his life. Of his temptation to ask her to marry him despite what the world would impute as his motive, and of their parting. Then he spoke of what he could bring her now and of time that went so slowly until he would be on his way to her again. He concluded with:

"I have never heard from her, but of her. And I know that she has refused many men of wealth and position. So I am going back to ask her that question and I think I know what her answer will be."

The woman at whose request he had told the story leaned forward for an instant, her eyes dim with tears, but he did not see them. His thoughts had followed his words far over the sea, and his heart was throbbing with the knowledge that his time of probation was over, and that his heart hunger was almost ended. His look wandered to the pictured face on the canvas, while the woman near him fixed her eyes on him, such hungry sorrowful eyes that the man could have read her secret

had he looked at her just then. Then she rose turning to bid farewell to the pictured woman who had all life's best to live yet, and then with a sound that was almost a sob held out her hand to Sherman.

"Good bye," she said. "God bless you and her. And when you see her contrast her life with mine. And some time ask her if she ever grew tired of the waiting. Ask her if her heart ever ached so much at a glimpse of your face that she thought it would break. And tell her you know of another woman who is waiting, waiting, waiting, but with no hope that the future will ever bring the light to her eyes that you have given her face in the picture. A lonely, childless, misunderstood woman whose term of probation will never end here, but must reach out, yes, even to the shores of Eternity."

He heard the door close and she was gone. He stood where she had said her farewell words and repeated them over reverently as if they were a prayer. Then he said reflectively :

"And she is waiting for some one too ! No wonder my story touched her heart. I wonder who he is."

Two weeks later he landed in New York which holding the woman he loved was the only place in the world for him just then. He had been all that she had asked him to be when he had left her. He had lived in the world of pleasure as well as work but he had been faithful to her in word and deed. But even as he made his way to her home the remembrance of Elsie Van Buren as she had stood before him in his studio that last day came to him so forcibly that he fancied he could see her there, her eyes beaming. Yet he hurried on and a few moments later the woman he had crossed the sea to ask a question of, stood before him, a warm welcome on her lips and her hands outstretched in greeting.

"At last," she said as he folded her close to him even as he would fain have done that night six years before.

"Am I what you wanted me to be ? he asked her later.

"You are more, far more," she answered softly. "You have lived and you have learned of other lives, your face tells me that. And you have learned to sympathize, have mingled with others' joys and sorrows and I would not recall the years of separation if it were in my power to do so."

"And the question I have come so far to ask ? Need I put it into words ?"

"Your eyes asked it sweetheart when you took me into your arms and held me close to your dear heart."

"And your answer?"

"My heart's best, beloved, you knew what it would be before you came. Both of us have profited by the separation. You have learned that there are other women, yet have come back to me. I have learned that there are many good, brave men yet have waited for you. Have we not both done what is best for us?"

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The next spring the Art Gallery in London exhibited two pictures of Sherman's, one being a "A Madonna," and the other the portrait of Mrs Van Buren, which he had painted the year before. Many and varied were the comments on it. Men read a story in the beautiful face, read but could not understand. Women said he must have been in love with her to have given her the expression the canvas portrayed, but one more observing than the rest, or else one who was a sister in suffering, said:

"The other way about I fancy. She is in love herself and could look that way only at the man she loved."

Then they passed to the other picture and wondered why he had taken so old a subject for a theme. So much for the world! One picture told a woman's secret silently but forcibly yet only one out of thousands read it aright. The other wherein the very soul of a man guided the brush was an "old subject" and worthy of but scant admiration.

The fame of both pictures was wafted across the water, and when the woman who had been the inspiration of "A Madonna" and who now bore his name asked Sherman about them he only said:

"One is your own face my darling, I pictured it from memory. The other is a portrait of a very beautiful woman, the most beautiful woman I have ever seen; and I only did her scant justice."

Then he told her of that last scene in the studio and of the strangely impassioned words that had followed her farewell. There were very visible tears in his wife's eyes as he finished the story and she asked softly:

"I wonder if the man she loved, loved her?"

But her husband made no reply.