The Graven Image

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Published by ELT Press

Hornung, E. W. and Peter Rowland.
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CHAPTER I

A False Prophet

David Auburn—a young man who had made some false starts in life, but seemed to have found the right groove at last—stood poring over the fairest work his hand had yet put forth. This was a portrait which stood upon his easel.

The room was spacious, lofty, and bare: also it was cold: a Russian stove stood at one end and aired it a little, but that was all. The month was November, and a floe of pale, dense mist lay heavily upon the skylight, which leaked, and let in much of it. At the moment, certainly, it was a dim and dispiriting place, for one’s studio; Mr Auburn was either too used to the atmospheric conditions to feel them keenly, or reverie had put half his senses to sleep; for minutes glided by and he never stirred, never lifted his eyes from the picture before him.

It was the portrait of a grave young girl, with thoughtful eyes, hair like corn—with the sun upon it—and a throat of snow. The face was a little pale, and very delicately tinted,
and—as the common complement of this colouring—the sweet earnest eyes were blue. That is to say they were rather more blue than grey. There is another attribute about as common to this slightly ethereal class of looks: a dreamy, indolent, indeterminate effect which suggests, if it does not betray, some want of individuality and will. This may be a highly desirable and maidenly want, yet it was not conspicuous here—not in the picture, at all events. The colours were soft and faint but the lines were separate, definite and bold. The firm small mouth, the clear-cut curve from ear to chin—the depth of this, and the fearless alert pose of the head, all argued strength, independence, will. And then there was thought, purpose, gravity in the eyes—too great [a] gravity, perhaps, for so fresh and fragrant a setting. Still, if the hand had caught what the eye had seen, there was at large somewhere a young lady whose personal good looks had not yet eaten up her soul—a charming thought. And the artist fancied his hand had caught everything and left out nothing. Yet he did not stand there gloating over his work. He stood there in a dream. He was not conscious that it was his work. It did not strike him, just then, as a man’s work at all. It was the living girl that gazed upon him through the thin white mist—contemplatively, steadily, out of those calm, thinking eyes of hers. He returned her gaze with his face aglow; yet with a sad, strained, supplicating expression—as though the firm red mouth on the canvas was opening to pronounce his doom.
As for him, he was a tall young fellow, with broad—but stooping—shoulders, limbs long and strong, and a thatch of hair intensely black. This was just a little luxuriant and wavy, but not to the point of affectation: nor was there anything aggressively artistic about the man’s clothes. His face was swarthy, and shaved clean; his eyes of that slightly satanic kind which mixes up pupil and iris in one round blot. They were eyes that flashed swiftly from gloom to radiance, from fixity to unrest; they were a little lacking in mildness and patience and tranquillity, as a result; but now, fastened upon the calm sweet face on the canvas, they too were calm, though pained and apprehensive. For still he hung upon her lips, as though they were not painted lips; still they seemed warm and red to him; and as the feeble light grew feebler, and the mist thickened, the illusion became even stronger: the edges of the canvas—which was unframed—melted into the haze and dusk: and She leant over the easel ledge, a presence and a reality.

Thus this infatuated young man was still standing, and gazing, and imagining, when the spell was happily snapped. A slight noise came from the door. Auburn stopped, and faced about. The door swung inwards, and there stood a man—in the miserable light—on the threshold.

“Hattersley?” asked the painter, doubtfully; he was straining his eyes; the picture had dimmed them a little; and through the doorway the passage was even darker than the studio.
Hattersley stepped into the room, gravely touching his hat—without removing it—and then shutting the door behind him. He was tall and thin, and no longer young; and he examined life through a gold *pince-nez*. He went straight to the stove, and planted himself with his back to it, and his hands behind his back.

“I had to come into town, on business; so I thought I’d look you up. How are you? Any news? I see you’ve something on the stocks—is it ready? It’s too dark to see from here.”

“News?” said Auburn, absently; his mind but slowly disengaged itself from the picture, though he had walked away from it the moment the man came in. “By Jove, yes! I *have* news!” he cried out suddenly. “Congratulate me: I have a commission at last. The Mayor of Illingborough—who has been in office just a fortnight, let me remind you—has been here this afternoon, arranging for a full length portrait in official robes; and though he was extremely offensive, and vulgar to the last degree, the bargain is struck. I am to go up and stay there—in his house, he said; but I got out of that—and do the job in as near three weeks as possible; and he’s going to give me a hundred guineas—a hundred guineas, sir! His particular ambition is to hang in the Academy, and if we achieve that there is to be an additional cheque. I told him that, arguing from the popularity of the subject there, we *might* manage that; so he has gone away jubilant; and the whole thing is settled; and, as for me, I seem to see the land
in sight at last! But oh, Hattersley, I wish I could give you a notion of the vulgar insolence of the fellow!"

Auburn ran his fingers through his hair and paced the room impatiently.

"You know Illingborough?" he continued. "It’s where I was born and bred, and it’s where the Burtrands live—in my old home!—when not in town. So this brute—who sells cheese there, and leases the music-hall, and has been sent to me, I suppose, by somebody down there—must needs chuck pity as well as patronage into the bargain. Damn his insolence! I nearly kicked him out once—when he talked about my poor father as an ‘old particular’ of his! But there: it’s over; and the bargain’s struck: only it did make me feel that, rather than endure much humiliation of this sort, I’d go back to South America and keep sheep again!"

Auburn’s black eyes were blazing through the haze. At such moments it was good to have Hattersley at hand. He took off his hat, polished it minutely with the sleeve of his overcoat, and put it on again—all with judicious deliberation. Then he spoke.

"You wouldn’t really, you know. Of course it was gall- ing for you; but the business beginnings in art—in any art—where trade first fingers and taints your work, always are galling. It’s a singular thing, but you won’t feel this when you get a thousand guineas for a picture—even if it’s another civic one, in robes. All things considered, you have made
a great bargain. I congratulate you. Personally, I could have wished you had stuck a little longer to the apprenticeship—that school of yours—those days at St Ives, just practising—and so on. But since you have gone for money—well, you’ve made a fine beginning, and I congratulate you again.”

Hattersley’s manner was paternal; but then his moustache was turning grey. He made one mistake, though: it was not as an artist that Auburn had been galled by his first customer, but as a man—as an Illingborough man—as the son of his father. But this mistake was characteristic of Hattersley, whose reverence for art was exalted to a morbid degree. He himself was a writer. He wrote unsuccessful novels, into which he put his soul, and highly successful articles—which he never thought twice about. Perhaps if he had tackled his other work with the same careless dash, the books would have gained something—and with equal advantage lost something too. But the point is that Hattersley had sacrificed much to his art, with small results, and would have others do the same—particularly this young painter.

“You congratulate me! I knew you would,” cried Auburn joyously. “I knew you’d be glad—”

“I didn’t say I was glad; I said I wished you’d stuck longer to the mere apprenticeship; and so I do.”

“But you are glad, I know you are. Think how much nearer this brings me to my goal. Everything seems nearer now—everything!”
“Sir,” said Hattersley with serio-comic solemnity, “you should know no goal but your art!”

“I am afraid I do, though,” laughed Auburn impenitently.

“I know you do.” Hattersley looked grim.

Auburn’s laugh grew louder—in another moment he was grave—he was given to such transitions, on all scales. In the new mood he took Hattersley by the arm. “Come,” he said; “you’re the most unsympathetic man in the world, and you don’t deserve to know anything at all about it; but come—you shall see my goal!”

Hattersley, with a rather comic look, suffered himself to be led to the easel under the skylight; and bent down to look at the picture. A tremor of amazement ran through his frame; he removed his pince-nez and wiped the lenses, but did not otherwise stir. And now there were two men regarding raptly, through the dismal dark and fog, the portrait of this fair, delicate, yet masterful-looking girl. But whereas one saw only a piece of work of exceptional excellence, which appealed to him as such, but as such alone—the other saw once again no work at all: but only—the girl he loved.

At length Hattersley drew himself upright. “Auburn,” he said seriously, “this is the best thing you’ve done; you may be taking the right course; I didn’t look for stuff like this from you for years to come! Of course you showed it to your Mayor?”
"My good Hattersley! This is Jeanette! Do you suppose I could have dragged her into a business transaction?"

The young fellow’s deep eyes shot shafts of scorn at the harmless Hattersley, then went back, as on a pivot, to his picture. The novelist felt guilty of acute profanity. He cast a queer side-glance at Auburn; protracted it with graver eyes; then peered once more at the portrait. The thought just crossed his mind that the girl’s face, for all its pale colouring, had in it—if this was a true and not an idealised picture—a firmer purpose and a stronger will than that of the man who loved her so passionately!

“So I suppose,” he said presently, in his grim way, “it’s a case of either empyrean heights or the bottomless pit, on this girl’s account—eh?”

“What?” asked Auburn, lifting his soul from her face.

“I suppose you’re going either to heaven or hell for her?” said Hattersley, chastening his style.

“Ay! To heaven or to hell!” said Auburn fervently. With the words loud in his ears Hattersley suddenly found himself alone. There had been a double-knock at the hall door, and Auburn had vanished.

He did not immediately return. Hattersley took upon himself to light a cigarette—of Auburn’s—and then the gas.

His relations with Auburn were sufficiently intimate, though not of old standing. The friendship had sprung
from an accidental acquaintance. Chance had rattled the two men together when the youngster was newly home from abroad—a rather outlandish “abroad”; before he had serious thoughts of adopting art professionally; while he was still quite uncertain as to what he could do, and quite ignorant as to where he should begin—supposing he made up his mind to begin at all. It was Hattersley who made up his mind for him; Hattersley who took him by the wrist and put his hand to the plough; Hattersley who first believed in him—or rather in his ability—and made him believe in himself. Hattersley, moreover, set the fellow on the rails in other respects. He had been just a bit of a scamp, one is afraid; and Hattersley turned him into a steady, enthusiastic citizen. He had good points by the dozen. Hattersley found them for him, and made a man of him. And then—the fellow fell in love!

Hattersley’s good influence was a little curious. He had never tried to influence any man before, and he amazed himself. He was an interesting rather than an influencing man. He was an author; and a blasphemer once divided authors into two classes, those who are more pleasing than their books and those whose books are more pleasing than they; and Hattersley was one of the former. Intellectually he was a little more than clever—and the little more was fatal to him. It is often the way: a little genius is a mental drag. Hattersley conceived demigods and brought forth dolls. But he was too true to his artistic ideal to aim low, where
a sort of success was certain; too robust and independent in spirit to shrink from repeated falls in his efforts to grasp the crag which was just beyond his reach. It was this spirit that Auburn honoured in him: this spirit that he tried to infuse into Auburn. He tried in vain. When Auburn became a lover he ceased to be an artist—to Hattersley’s idea. And the friends fell slightly out of touch; for Hattersley seemed to make himself studiously unsympathetic in what was now the other’s only joy.

But this afternoon the older man had undergone a slight revulsion of feeling in the matter. The picture—her portrait—had been a revelation to him, in more ways than one. Moreover Auburn’s rapt look when he had seen him first, from the door—and Auburn’s words and manner while showing him the picture afterwards—had gone far to convince him of what he had always been inclined to doubt: that this was no case of the self-humbug to which warmer and plastic temperaments are addicted: that the young fellow was as fiercely infatuated in fact as in his own mind. And Hattersley could feel antipathetic no longer.

Still he was sorry. He was sorry because he believed that this engagement had injured, at a critical time, the art of a really promising man; and what he knew of the circumstances of the engagement made him sorrier still. He understood that it was not quite popular with the girl’s people; and he could believe it—indeed, from their point of view, he sympathised with the people. They were rich, they had
everything; the girl—with her fortune and her face—might have made a good match, an enviable match, a brilliant match; and look at Auburn! He had no prospects (outside his art) worth more than joking about; and only one dear relative: who was near in too many senses to serve as the peg for a prospect.¹ He had nothing but his art, and we all know the kind of asset that represents, to persons who are rich and have everything. Now Hattersley, who was a man of the world in most things but his novels, felt quite sure that he would have disapproved of Auburn himself, in the place of that girl’s father—whose consent puzzled him. But this afternoon he was forced to feel for Auburn too, in whose eyes he had seen, in whose voice he had heard, a depth of passion which he had never met with before—but only written about.

There was no longer any doubt about the depth and sincerity of passion on this side; still, a few minutes ago, in the thick dusk, he had seemed cheerful enough under it; but now, when he returned to the gaslit room, it was obvious at a glance that he was nothing of the kind. He seemed to be drooping under severe depression. For a moment Hattersley stared. Then he remembered the double-knock: and there was a letter in Auburn’s hand to explain all. Upon the sight, Hattersley asked him bluntly if he had received bad news. But no: he had not: this letter was a note from nobody, about nothing: he tossed it aside as he said so; and paced the room miserably, chin on chest.
“Yet something is the matter!” said Hattersley. “What is it?”

Auburn made no answer for a little; when he did, it was rapped out sharply.

“I expected a letter. It didn’t come.”

Hattersley smiled. “You expected a letter and it didn’t come! May I ask how many deliveries you have had, in the day? I suppose a dozen, more or less. You may get your letter by the next, or the next, or the next after that. What’s the trouble?”

“The letter that didn’t come.”

“But now you can look forward—“

“You have hit it! That’s my trouble—the looking forward,” said Auburn, in such a bitter, miserable, wavering voice that Hattersley’s manner changed instantly.

“Has anything gone wrong—radically?”

Auburn came up to him, and gazed into his face. The lustre had left the young man’s eyes. For some moments he was mute. He seemed to be searching, in the eyes of the other, for a guarantee of sympathy, before opening his own heart.

“Hattersley!” he exclaimed at last, in a low, intense tone. “Did you ever feel, as a child, that your heart was broken? Do you remember the feeling? Do you remember the first slow escape from it, in sleep; the first slow return to it on waking? I do: once: when my mother died. I was a very
little chap, but I remember—all. When I awoke in the morn-
ing the birds were singing, the sun was on the blind, and
I couldn’t for the life of me think why they hadn’t drawn
the blind! There was no one in the room to tell me. I had to
think until I could tell myself! I shall never forget those few
minutes: I have never known any pain half so poignant, nor
can I now. But all that day was full of such moments, only a
little less sharp. I kept forgetting it outside in the garden; but
I couldn’t raise my head without the drawn blinds stabbing
it home again, though my eyes. Late in the day I had a rare
slice of luck—a present, I think, from a sympathising neigh-
bour. I didn’t see then why he had sent it me; I only saw the
present, and it took me off my feet. I rushed up with it to her
room—very gently, as I had been allowed to all through her
illness. But the door was locked. I had forgotten again!”

His speech trembled.

“That was the worst day of my life,” he continued, brac-
ing himself together. “But today has been something like
it; less bad because the worst hasn’t happened yet, and for
the same reason or worse; this suspense; but like it in things
that make me nearly forget—chiefly my great slice of luck.
You asked me if something had gone wrong; something
has; perhaps everything. It happened last night—mark you,
by my own hand—and now I’m waiting to know the end.
And I have been forgetting it and remembering it all day,
as when a child. I forgot it over the joy and surprise of that
commission: I was thinking of it when you came in: and then
it passed from me—I mean the realisation of what is now between us, of what is hanging over me—until the postman knocked. And now I have to wait two more hours before I can know!”

He strode suddenly to the easel, looked hard again at the portrait, then took and placed it on the floor, leaning face to the wall. He returned to the stove and to Hattersley with a manner forcibly lighter.

“It is only a very commonplace difference between two people who love—or have loved—each other. But now you have started me, Hattersley, you must hear me through. It would be a relief to tell anyone, almost; but you may be able to help me, to throw light where I am in the dark. It is your business to read the hearts of men and women!”

He forced a smile—of a sort.

“Go on,” said Hattersley, who was filling a pipe, but listening attentively. “I expect it is not so bad as it seems. It never is: that’s my experience, if it’s any comfort to you.”

“I would not have told you before today; I would not admit it to myself before last night; but this trouble has been brewing ever since the Burtrands came back to town,” said Auburn. “As for the origin, I can scarcely tell it you; it sounds so mean, so vulgar, baldly stated; yet I suppose it is the ancient origin: a girl and two men. All such quarrels must begin so—or with two girls and one man.”
“That’s so,” said Hattersley, professionally. “You must have the triangle. Your love-story is impossible without it.”

“In this case,” said Auburn grimly, “there’s a second man. He is as near a next-door neighbour of the Burtrands as one can be in the country; they saw a lot of him there this year (they had never seen him before, for he has been in India); and he has been constantly at their house since they returned to town. At all events I have constantly met him there. I have nothing against the fellow; I used just to know him as a boy, and he was always a gentleman; we are frightfully polite to each other. But I do not like the footing he seems to stand on there. He is not downright attentive to Jeanette when I am there: I say he is a gentleman: but I feel sure he is receiving secret encouragement from some quarter. I do not say from Jeanette, I do not think from Jeanette; if she has encouraged him it has been done unconsciously. To me I own she has never seemed more than friendly towards the fellow; only last night I thought she was friendly at my expense. I was at the house. He was there too. There were little things that I felt acutely! They were so little in themselves, I should be ashamed to tell you them, Hattersley; but how I felt them, God knows!”

He flung out his arm towards the empty easel, with a quick spasmodic movement. The pain of his hurt came out in puckers on his face.
“Think of it!” he cried. “I had been finishing *that*. I did it from little rough sketches of her, Hattersley; but she seemed to come and stand before me in this room, and so the picture grew under my hand almost without my knowledge. I seemed always to see her here; and the picture painted itself. So I had been with her all day, putting a touch here and a touch there—with hours between each—hours of dreaming. But I had been so happy! She had been gazing at me so sweetly, so kindly, so tenderly out of those brave honest eyes of hers. Just think of it! Just think of the reality on top of that! I found her everything that I had not painted her—cold, frivolous, unkind! I was moody, I suppose; but could I help it, when the evening was so different from the day, the reality from my fancy? Anyway I bored her, and she let me know it. So I hurt her; and was glad at the time that I did! But it only made her colder, more exasperating. She maddened me. I came home with my madness hot in my head—and wrote her a letter!”

Hattersley’s face fell. “You wrote last night?”

“Yes,” said Auburn; and hung his head in sudden reaction.

“You ought not to have written last night!”

“Yes, I know that now. But I could not rest until I had written my heart out, and taken the letter out to the pillar [box], and posted it.”

“It was the act of a madman to do that just then.”
"I was one!"

"Well! What did you say? What kind of things?"

Auburn rehearsed the gist of his letter, with a shamed face, but yet with a faint effort at self-justification. It sounded neither wise nor temperate nor particularly generous; but Hattersley guessed that the letter had been wild with love and heartfelt anguish, rather than with vulgar jealousy; and he guessed right.

"Well?" asked the culprit, raising his eyes at last. "What do you think?"

Hattersley looked grave. "Well, you must never do this sort of thing again."

"I shall never get the chance! Do you mean to say you think there's hope?"

"I mean to say you are possibly making yourself wretched without sufficient cause, as to no purpose, and that you are to put on your hat and come to the club with me."

"But the letter—her letter that must be on its way—I must wait for it! Hattersley, you cannot understand—you cannot know what it all means to me! This little girl has altered my life. You know what I was once; but even you don't know what I was out there in South America. But with her love I could conquer myself—and would too, I could shift the mountains. With her hand in mine I would be pure as she is pure, strong as she is strong, good as she is good—very
nearly! Of myself I am nothing; of myself, I tell you, to my shame, I am weak, and worse than weak; but for her I could be everything. In her are my only chance of nobility and my only hope of heaven! If she gave me up now—" he was gasping, his face like death, his eyes like those of madness—"if the letter came now, giving me up, saying she would have no more of me—Hattersley, it would be the kindest thing to strike me dead! You would save a soul from hell!"

"You are beside yourself," said Hattersley, calmly. "You are talking like a lunatic. Put on your hat; I'll neither leave you nor stay with you here. No, first answer a couple of questions: have you any reason to think she cares a farthing for this other person, save as a friendly acquaintance?"

"No—no, I have not."

"Have you honestly believed—in your calmest and coolest hours—that she cared a great many farthings for you?"

"I have."

"Then shall I tell you what will happen? You will get your letter. It will make you thoroughly ashamed of yourself; you will go to her and tell her that you are ashamed of yourself; and you will never, never, write another reproachful or fault-finding word to this young lady without carrying it in your hand for at least twenty-four hours. Stop, I'll give you a hint in another direction. After this you must try to be a little more masterful with her. Mastery is what these strong-willed women require; and the face you have paint-
ed—which is all I have to go by—is full of strength, love—happily it does nothing to make one masterful; but try this. And shall I tell you something else—another thing that will happen?”

“God bless you Hattersley! This is the first ray!”

“She will like you all the better for what has passed!” said Hattersley, the reader of men and women. “Put on your hat and coat, and out you come!”

*       *       *       *       *       *

It was nearly midnight when David Auburn let himself in with his latch-key. The house was in darkness. Auburn felt for his candle on the hall-table, and lit it; and a letter addressed to him lay beside the candle-stick. He carried the candle and the letter into his studio. There, in that great cold room, while the candle lasted, he read it—over and over again. Through the dark hours that followed he sat without stirring; but when the sky-light became a leaden square overhead, and the lead turned to silver, he read it again, and again, and again.

Hattersley, the reader of men and women, was wrong. But then nobody read his books: nor did he know Jeanette.