

# A Hand Bereft of Soul



By  
**Edward Clark Marsh.**

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**P**oor fellow!" said McCorney after the funeral. "Ruined by his devotion to a mere woman—and a dead woman at that!"

But McCorney was a pessimist; and a pessimist, like an optimist, is a man of narrow vision.

Olaf Jansen was as Norse as his name. He had come from one of the northwestern States, the son of an emigrant who had become a prosperous farmer. He came to New York young, and remained for years in the art schools. With all his skill—he had a certainty of touch, a directness of execution, that were little short of marvelous—he had acquired not the slightest trace of style. "Jansen's work," one of his fellow-students is reported to have said, "is as sure and as impersonal as death and taxes." At this time he could paint "still-life" admirably, and copy beautifully. His ambition, of course, was to paint portraits; such grotesque associations of desire and capacity seem to be a special delight of nature. His fellow-students looked up to him with a certain awe—the awe the beginner always feels for the one who has mastered the craft; yet even the most indulgent of his friends laughed at an ambition so out of keeping with the nature of his talent.

But there was one who encouraged his hopes. She was a little, quiet, rather pale and neutral-tinted girl. Her New England ancestry had stamped itself on her frail physique and written her destiny in her deep, dark eyes. Her name was Esther West. She couldn't paint—so ran the verdict of those most intolerant and implacable critics, the students.

She conceived the most extravagant shy admiration for Olaf Jansen's easy mastery of line and color, and he fell in love with her.

After the marriage Olaf set up a studio in Washington Square, then the center of the artist world. The paternal exchequer enabled him to wait in comfort for patrons. Meanwhile he painted industriously, and to some purpose. It was only a short time, as such affairs are measured, before he had sent to an exhibition a picture that opened the eyes of the scoffers. There were qualities in it that they had not guessed possible in Olaf Jansen's

too dull to understand, vicious though it may be, has its allurement as a pastime for the sternest of us. I confess that I was more or less swayed by it even before I met Olaf Jansen, which came to pass about this time. I had held for a year one of those semi-official positions, the chief duty and honor of which appear only at the time when the distinction is to be relinquished. My portrait was to be painted and hung beside those of my predecessors in office, and Olaf Jansen was designated as the one to whom I should sit. Mingled with the trepidation I felt at the prospect of facing so redoubtable a searcher of the hearts of men, was the anticipation of satisfying some of the curiosity that had been bred in me of the studio gossip I had heard.

With some such prepossession I went for the first time, by appointment, to his studio. I was greeted with an unaffected, awkward cordiality that immediately disposed me to like him. At this time he was still a mere boy in spite of his thirty years—a fair-haired, rather clumsy boy, with a big body, square shoulders, large, well-formed hands and a smooth, bland face; plainly a creature of unshakable nerves, dogged will and genuine vital force. What I missed in him was the sign of experience, the record of the tidal wave of life that must have swept over him to have so opened his eyes to the lives of others. One would guess this an inland soul, set high and secure against breakers and stormy seas.

Furthermore, and somewhat to my chagrin, my amateur psychologizing detected in Olaf no heroic outpouring of an absorbing passion for his wife. She was present while I remained. Insignificant she was, almost, and unobtrusive quite. What made her more than a negligible quantity was her own devoted admiration.

"I hate doing these official portraits, but when General Landon asked me to do you I couldn't very well refuse," he remarked. Churlish as the words sounded, they were entirely devoid of intentional offense. But Esther hurried to anticipate my possible misunderstanding of her husband.

"Oh, but this will be something more than merely 'official,'" she reassured me. "Won't it, Olaf?"

I smiled my disregard of Olaf's unintentional

for he calmly and unconsciously appropriated the suggestion as if it were his own idea.

Such trifling incidents as this, attending my further acquaintance with the happy and absorbed couple, constantly whetted my interest in the problem they presented. In my zeal for studying the painter I almost forgot the portrait—which, by the way, when completed, was pronounced notably successful. I had, as I say, watched its growth rather carelessly; yet I had observed that subtle changes came on it from one sitting to another. Slight as these changes were, they were unmistakable often startling, although I set them down in large part to my own fancy. Olaf's offhand statement that when he was painting a portrait he was completely in the grip of the subject, that he worked and studied over it incessantly, in the absence as well as in the presence of the model, actually left something still to be accounted for. Nevertheless I accepted it for the time, for I was blind, ignorant as I was, and am, of the mysteries of the painter's art.

I had opportunity to observe more closely the workings of this "method" when, soon after, I attended to the studio a relative whose portrait Olaf, thanks to his success with my own features, was to paint. My aunt was a woman of vigorous intellect, of great decision under a gentle demeanor. I fancied at first that Olaf was misled by her mild manner as to her character; and she in turn frankly confessed that she found him devoid of ideas and rather complacently stupid. Indeed, she pronounced the colorless little wife a more interesting companion—but that might have been accounted for by the fact that Esther Jansen developed, under my aunt's encouragement, a palpable admiration for the older woman. In the intervals of the periods actually devoted to the object of her presence my aunt held Esther in subdued, intimate talk, while I engaged Olaf in conversation or studied his work. And as I attended thus closely to the growth of the portrait I noted more plainly the evidences of the painter's activity in the absence of his subject. Watching thus the progress of the work from the first "sketching in" of the outlines, the first rough indications of the "values" to the finished canvas, I saw come into the hind face the almost imperceptible lines and shadows that told so well to one who knew her the story of my aunt's gentle firmness. But not once did I surprise the brush stroke that gave the life-touch to the inert figure; I saw these creative, vitalizing additions not at the end but at the beginning of each sitting.

Gradually the pose had undergone subtle changes; the background and decorative ideas were not the same; above all, the entire composure had been transposed to another "key," in the painter's phrase. The result showed no uncertainty or lack of harmony; everything was as bold, as sure and masterful as any work he had ever done. Even my aunt, with her clear-eyed vision of men, was won to concede a tardy recognition of a quality of perception—perhaps of intuition—in Olaf which her first judgment had denied him.

Moreover, she more than once told me that the neutral little New England woman was a rare fine creature—too fine and rare for the understanding of us coarser beings with our rough measuring tools. On this point I felt myself competent to carry on an investigation, an opportunity for which I should have welcomed; but it was placed beyond my reach just then by the departure of Olaf and his wife for their summer holiday. The condition of Esther's health had for some time been a cause of anxiety, and it was with a view to its improvement and the arresting of certain alarming symptoms that they had gone to some place in the far West.

Although I knew this, I was nevertheless totally unprepared for the brief despatch which I received from Olaf about two months later, announcing the death of his wife. I learned in time that she had faded away quietly, painlessly, swiftly, as is so often the case with the remnants of these older New England families, in which stamina has been sacrificed to the over-refining of the race. She was the last of her family.

Still, after the momentary shock I had felt at learning of Olaf's bereavement, I reflected that after all it was not an irreparable calamity. He had been fond of her, no doubt, but a man of his age always recovers from such sorrows.

At last one day, in prowling about the studio, I discovered the only canvas he had brought back with him from the West. It was a half-finished portrait of Esther. He met my eye with some confusion, I thought, as I looked at him inquiringly.

"She wanted me to do it," he said, "when she knew she couldn't get well. I didn't have time to finish it."

His indifferent tone annoyed me. "Of course you must complete it now." I spoke rather sharply. "The drawing is so far along that you can surely do it superbly from memory. That should be her monument."

"Oh, yes, I'll finish it sometime," was his answer. "Not now, though; I'm too busy. Did I tell you I had a commission to 'do' the Honorable Martin Flaherty, Tammany boss of the Ninth?"

I said no more, convinced at last that this indifference must be feigned—that the great outspoken boy had learned to wear a mask. And I was really glad to know that instead of wasting his days in regrets and memories he was bent on the wiser course of finding forgetfulness in work. That way lay sanity and ultimate recovery.

I never saw the portrait of the Honorable Martin Flaherty, though it was finished early that winter and exhibited. I was away from New York at the time. As soon as I returned I received a note from Olaf Jansen begging me to come to his studio, for he needed my moral support.

"For God's sake come!" it ran. "I've got to see someone, and you're the only one I dare talk to." The note was wretchedly scrawled.

I found him alone, sitting at a table with a big bottle of whiskey and a glass before him. In all my association with him I had never seen him drink. He had the look of a beaten man. I have never seen such utter dejection, such hopeless misery, in any face. So startled was I that I essayed an inane cheerful tone.

"Well, what's wrong, Olaf?" I said when we had shaken hands and he had relapsed again into his shrunken attitude in the chair. "Let me hear about your latest successes. Don't tell me you've fallen on any ill luck."

He gave me so little attention that I was not sure he heard. "Then you haven't seen what the papers said about the portrait?" he began. "Perkins and McCorney were the only ones who praised it; and they're two fools who know nothing whatever about painting. All the others roasted it. They were right."

"Nonsense, man," I cried, amazed that he should have taken so comparatively trivial a matter so much to heart. "That's nothing to pull a long face over. Suppose this one picture isn't quite up to your high mark; suppose even that it's a rank failure; it's only one, and you've a failure coming after all your successes. Is this all it takes to drive you to drink?"

"Stop!" He almost sat up for a moment, and then dropped back again. "What do I care about Flaherty's portrait? You're right—that's nothing. It's worse than that. I'll never paint another portrait."

"Olaf," I said, for his extraordinary manner made me uneasy, "you're not yourself. What in the world do you mean?"

Then, still sitting sunk in his chair, he began to tell me.

"When we were married—that was nearly four years ago—I was sure she loved me. I thought I loved her because she appreciated—yes, because she appreciated me. She was the first critic I ever had who thought I could do the only thing I cared to do. You know what I mean. From the very first she encouraged me. I did her over and over—she always destroyed the canvasses. But she liked better for me to work from other subjects, so that she could watch every stroke and talk it all over with me. In her quiet way she was always making suggestions, and though some of them sounded a little crazy to me, when I adopted them they usually came out all right."

"Little by little I began to see that I really was doing better work. I said to myself that her appreciation had given me confidence to go ahead and do things in my own way—though the Lord knows I never wanted confidence. I was so sure of myself that I didn't even mind when she took the brushes out of my hand, as she did occasionally, to touch a spot here and there, just to show what she meant. You know she had studied, and she knew more about it than they used to give her credit for. Twice, when I had been out and returned unexpectedly, I found her before my easel with my palette and brushes. But she just made a joke of that—said she was trying to imagine herself a painter."

"I never suspected anything until we were out there in the mountains. Then, when the doctor told her she couldn't last six months, the only thing she seemed to think of was of the time I was losing. She fairly compelled me to begin her portrait."

"Then, when we were almost done, one day she couldn't leave her bed at all. All that day she would talk to me until her strength gave out utterly, and she had to lie and wait for breath. She made me promise to finish the portrait, but very carefully, doing as little to it as possible. She tried to tell me just how she wanted it—tried to tell me the very brush strokes. There are some things that can't be told."

"I don't remember much what she said. That day I think I was mad. To talk about art, about my work, when she lay there dying before my eyes! You see, I hadn't really loved her at first, but now—"

"Well, she died—it was only three days after that. For a time after I came back I didn't do any work. There was something in my mind—a suspicion of something I couldn't place—that

He pointed with his foot to a canvas that stood facing the wall. I reached out my hand and turned it round. I thought again that the man was mad, for at first I did not believe it was the same canvas I had seen before. That had been, even in its unfinished state, a wonderful revelation of the shy, quiet, brave soul my aunt had seen in Esther. It was no more than a sketch, but it had the beauty of all simplicity and absolute truthfulness. This picture before me was a completely finished product—hard, brilliant, perfect in line and color, and absolutely, unaccountably, lifeless.

I suppose I allowed my astonishment to escape me in an exclamation, for Olaf noticed slowly two or three times.

"I know now," he began again. "Even I could see that this thing isn't a portrait—that it isn't she. Last night I sat down and thought it all out. I tried to recall every word she ever spoke to me. I remembered everything she ever did to my paintings, all her suggestions and criticisms, and then all the other people said. I remember how I used to go out and when I came back find some little changes in the canvas I had left that I couldn't quite understand. I used to think it was all in me; that difficulties straightened themselves out when I left them alone. I know now how they straightened themselves out."

"Olaf, you must steady yourself," I said, while the suspicion of his meaning formed itself in my brain. "What are you saying? Do you imply—"

"I'm saying," he interrupted me, "that she painted every one of those portraits. It's true as God's word. She used me for her tool. All the brains, all the soul—the insight and subtlety and knowledge of character that you fellows have prated of—were hers. That—" he indicated the portrait with a world of contempt—"that's the sort of work I do, left to myself. She saw the possibilities in me—yes, she saw that I could handle a brush, that I could mix colors, that I could draw lines, that I had the steadiest nerves and the best trained hands in New York. She made them hers—she used me—she made the pictures that I thought I had painted myself—Ah!"

He brought it all out as suddenly, as brutally as I have set it down. I was dazed; the only idea I could summon was that he must be turned from his brooding on the truth that had overwhelmed him.

"Olaf, don't think of it now," I pleaded. "Try to think instead how she must have loved you—"

"You're a liar!" he cried. "I haven't told you everything. That day I told you about, towards night, she said something. I didn't understand then—she was a little out of her head, I think. She said: 'I wasn't quite through with you, Olaf;'"



SUNK IN HIS CHAIR HE BEGAN TO TELL ME.

work. The more open-minded even conceded that he might in time become a portrait painter after all. The lingering doubt expressed in this concession was dissipated the next year, when he took the Webster prize with his "Portrait of an Actress." That picture was the most brilliant success of his year.

This and other pictures that soon followed fairly launched the painter on what promised to be a brilliant career. And his old friends marveled at the gift that seemed to have fallen on him from the gods. Then someone, to account for it, advanced a theory so obvious, so plainly dovetailed with the facts, that it was quickly accepted as conclusive in the little circle where these affairs are discussed and settled. Olaf Jansen had fallen in love, had married. That climatic change, material and spiritual, had been coincident with the accession of new powers. The special object of Olaf's worship mattered less than the worship was devout: it was enough to have entered the temple to receive the god's benison!

Such sentimentalizing over truths that we are

ungraciousness in my delight at having, as I believed, so quickly seized the situation. It was indeed as far as I was to get that day. We talked, while Esther sat quietly by, of unimportant things, discussing and arranging the time for my sittings. At the first of these I made the further discovery that Esther Jansen was dumb only so long as her husband's art was in abeyance. At a word touching the portrait the look of anxious responsibility settled in her eyes, and her voice was an index to point the world's homage to its proper object. There was a passing question of the pose I was to assume. Instantly she was attention.

"Yes, I think that is right—Isn't it, Olaf?" she pronounced. "There, the hand a little further to the right, and the face turned more so that the shadow of the hair falls free of the eyes. That's it."

It did not escape me that in spite of her pretense of approval and agreement with the painter her suggestion was directly contrary to what he had proposed. Olaf himself seemed not to realize this,



THERE WAS ONE WHO ENCOURAGED HIS HOPES.

scared me. Then I got the commission, and I took it because I was afraid I was getting morbid. I thought it would be an easy portrait to do.

"When it was done I couldn't tell anything about it. Of course it was very bad—worse than you can imagine. Everybody tried to let me down easy, but I knew something was wrong. I made up my mind to find out what it was. Yesterday morning I got out the unfinished portrait—of her, you know—and worked at it all day. I finished it. There it is."

you've beaten me.' And then: 'But what use are the hands when the brain is dead?'"

He paused, and then went on in a quiet, hopeless tone. "You see, she didn't even love me. She loved art, and because she hadn't the things I have, she used me. She didn't even love me—but I loved her, and now she's gone I'm nothing but a useless pair of hands."

He no longer saw me. I watched him for a time, but as he did not move, I went out of the room quietly and left him alone.