SHORT STORY OF THE DAY

THE FORTUNE TELLER'S CAVE.

Jean Middlemass, in Lloyd's Weekly.

"Well, children, would you like to go to-night to the Salon Blanc?"

"Yes, yes, papa; how delightful!" shouted a chorus of merry voices.

"And you, Claudine, will you come?" And the father of the family turned to his eldest daughter, a bright looking brunette of 18 who had been crossed in love.

"I should like very much to go to the Salon Blanc," much to his surprise. And then she ran upstairs after the others to wrap up.

Claudine was only 18, thus alacrity about a fete ought not to have surprised any one; but she was what is called "crossed in love," and for the last three months had taken no interest in her surroundings.

M. Bertel, who was a retired lawyer, and very well off, objected to a young man called Louis Gavron to whom Claudine had given her heart, simply because he had artistic proclivities.

Snow had fallen all over Belgium, but in Brussels for two days the air had been clear and frosty; the snow in the park having come quite hard, a snow fete for the poor had been organized. A fete at night, too, and in the open air.

"Claudine, I am glad we came," he cried. "Yes, children, of course you can go on the ice; no fear of falling in. Ha! ha! Only leave us in peace to look at the groups. Ah, you are looking at the cave with the fortune-teller, Claudine, and the young beauty coming to learn her fate. Excellent, most excellent! I declare it is the best of all."

"The sculptor who is responsible for that cave has received the gold medal," announced a voice just behind them.

M. Bertel looked around and saw one of his most intimate friends.

"Well, he deserves it. Who is he? I should like to make his acquaintance," he said.

"Louis Gavron," replied the other, briefly.

"Impossible! That young fool who—no, I can not believe it. And the medal, too? No, no; you are playing a practical joke on me, Devoost."

"Not I. Young Gavron has an immense amount of talent if you would only believe it."

"Louis Gavron—the gold medal!" repeated M. Bertel. It was the gold medal that overcame him. He turned to see what Claudine thought of the matter, but Claudine had disappeared.

"She is talking to my wife—at least she was a second or two ago," said Devoost.

And then he inveigled M. Bertel into an animated discussion on the politics of the country.

Louis Gavron was his cousin, and Mme. Devoost's companion, when she met Claudine, was Louis Gavron himself. He had stood carefully in shadow so as not to be recognized by M. Bertel. Meantime, not a word of the old man's eulogies on his work had escaped him. Dearly as Louis Gavron prized the gold medal, he prized those words of praise from Claudine's father ten times more.

"Ma cherie, my beautiful one," he murmured; "did you hear what your father said about my work?"

"I am so glad you have that gold medal, Louis. Father will think so much of it. It will almost make him—well, I dare scarcely hope, and yet I do. Oh, blessed Salon Blanc, not only will it benefit the poor, but the poor in heart, like ourselves, will be rejoiced."

"Dearest!"

They walked along for a few seconds. Then Louis Gavron whispered:

"My cousin, Devoost, has promised to put in a good word for me with your father."

At this moment they came upon the family party. M. Bertel's brow contracted when he saw by whom his daughter was accompanied, but he said a little stiffly:

"I must congratulate you, M. Gavron, on your success. The medal you have gained is, I hope, only the first of a long series of art triumphs."

Louis Gavron bowed and thanked him, and then the Bertels went home, never a word more being said about Louis Gavron or their meeting with him.

About 10 o'clock the next day Devoost arrived.

"Hurrah for the Salon Blanc!" he shouted; "may they have one every winter if it brings about such good results."

"Why, Devoost, what has happened?" inquired M. Bertel. "Have the poor got a bigger sum than you expected?"

"Confound the poor—no, I didn't mean that, but Louis Gavron's fortune is made. Two orders, mon cher, and big ones, too, all owing to the fortune teller's cave. Look here, Bertel, don't you be the only blindfolded individual in Belgium."

"What can I do? I am not rich enough to order a statue."

M. Bertel knew quite well what was expected of him, but to pretend to do so would be to give in without a struggle. He gave up the fight, however, when Claudine threw herself on his neck and kissed him as she whispered:

"Father, now you have seen he can work you will no longer refuse your consent?"

"Of course he won't," cried Devoost. "Come and kiss me, too, Claudine, and receive my congratulations."

An hour or two later, when Claudine was alone, there was a very different expression on her face to the sorrowful one that had lingered there of late.

Even while she was thinking of this there was a light footfall on the stair.

"Louis! You here? How did you know that you might come?"

He laughed.

"Good news flies swiftly, you see. M. Devoost said that you had something to tell me."

"M. Devoost is a dear. If it had not been for M. Devoost I doubt if even the fortune teller's cave would have done any good."

"He is a true friend as well as a relative," said Louis. "It is through his influence that I have got two important orders, and he told me only this morning that as he had no children of his own, he looks on me as a son, and will meet M. Bertel's views in the matter of an allowance."

"Oh, Louis!"

And so overcome by emotion was happy Claudine that she looked as if she were going to faint. This, of course, necessitated that Louis should take her in his arms, and there she was when the door unexpectedly opened and her father came into the room.

"So, so, this is the way you behave when I am absent. 'When the cat's away,' etc."

But though he tried to speak sternly there was a break in his voice. He, too, had seen Devoost that morning, and they had come to terms on the subject of ways and means. It amused him, then, rather than angered him to see the frightened, shy manner in which the lovers rushed away from each other, looking imploringly at him the while, as though to beg for forgiveness.

The ordeal did not last long, for Claudine noticed a glimmering twinkle in his eye and instantly took advantage of it to kiss him and tell him that he had promised her to accept Louis for his son-in-law.

And so, even the contretemps of daring to make love before M. Bertel's formal consent had been given was at last overcome, and among all the people who visited the Salon Blanc on that crisp January night there was not a happier couple than brown eyed Claudine and Louis.

AN OPTIMIST.

—Fliegende Blaetter.

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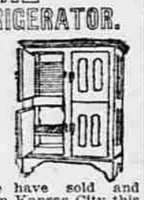

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