

## OUR STORY.

### I.

I BECAME acquainted with Miss Bessie Vancouver at a reception given by an eminent literary gentleman in New York. The circumstances were a little peculiar. Miss Vancouver and I had each written and recently published a book, and we were introduced to each other as young authors whose works had made us known to the public, and who, consequently, should know each other. The peculiarity of the situation lay in the fact that I had not read Miss Vancouver's book, nor had she read mine. Consequently, although each felt bound to speak of the work of the other, neither of us could do it except in the most general and cautious way. I was quite sure that her book was a novel, but that was all that I knew about it, except that I had heard it well spoken of; but she supposed my book was of a scientific character, whereas, in reality, it also was a novel, although its title did not indicate the fact. There was therefore an air of restraint and stiffness about our first interview which it might not have had if we had frankly acknowledged our shortcomings. But, as the general conversation led her to believe that she was the only person in the room who had not read my book, and me to believe that I was the only one who had not read hers, we were naturally loath to confess the truth to each other.

I next met Miss Vancouver in Paris, at the house of a lady whose parlors are the frequent rendezvous of Americans, especially those given to art or literature. This time we met on different ground. I had read her book and she mine; and as soon as we had shaken hands we began to talk of each other's work, not as if it had been the beginning of a new conversation, but rather as the continuation of one broken off. Each liked the book of the other extremely, and we were free to say so.

"But I am not satisfied with my novel," said Miss Vancouver. "There is too much oneness about it; by which I mean that it is not diversified enough. It is all, or nearly all, about two people, who, of course, have but one object in life, and it seems to me now that their story might have been finished a great deal sooner; though, of course, in that case it would not have been long enough to make a book."

To this I politely answered that I did not agree with her, for the story was interesting

to the very end; but, of course, if she had put more characters into it, and they had been as good in their way as those she already had, the book would have been that much the better. "As for me," I continued, "my trouble is entirely the other way. I have no oneness whatever. My tendency is much more to fifteen or twenty-ness. I carry a story a little way in one direction, and then I stop and go off in another. It is sometimes difficult to make it understood why a character should have been brought into the story at all; and I have had a good deal of trouble in making some of them do something toward the end to show that they are connected with the general plot."

She said she had noticed that there was a wideness of scope in my book; but what she would have said further I do not know, for our hostess now came down upon us and carried off Miss Vancouver to introduce her to an old lady who had successfully steered about fifty barques across that sea on which Miss Vancouver had just set out.

Our next meeting was in a town on the Mediterranean, in the south of France. I had secured board at a large *pension* there, and was delighted to find that Miss Bessie Vancouver and her mother were already inmates of the house. As soon as I had the opportunity, I broached to her an idea which had frequently possessed my mind since our conversation in Paris. I proposed that we should write a story together, something like Erckmann-Chatrian, or Mark Twain and Mr. Warner in "The Gilded Age." Since she had too much unity of purpose and traveled in too narrow a path, and I branched off too much, and had too great a tendency to variety, our styles, if properly blended, would possess all the qualities needed in a good story; and there was no reason why we should not, writing thus together, achieve a success greater, perhaps, than either of us could expect writing alone. I had thought so much on this subject that I was able to say a great deal, and to say it pretty well, too, so far as I could judge. Miss Vancouver listened with great attention, and the more I said, the more the idea pleased her. She said she would take the afternoon to consider the matter, and in the evening she told me in the parlor that she had made up her mind, if I still thought well of the plan, to assist me in writing a story,—this being the polite way in which she

chose to put it,—but that she thought it would be better for us to begin with a short story, and not with a book, for in this way we could sooner see how we would be likely to succeed. Of course I agreed to this proposition, and we arranged that we should meet the next morning in the garden and lay out a plan for our story.

The garden attached to the house in which we lived was a very quaint and pleasant one. It had been made a hundred years ago or more by an Italian nobleman, whose mansion, now greatly altered, had become our present *pension*. The garden was laid out in a series of terraces on the side of a hill, and abounded in walks shaded by orange and lemon trees, arbors, and vine-covered trellises; fountains, half concealed by overhanging ivy; and suddenly discovered stair-ways, wide and shadowy, leading up into regions of greater quaintness and seclusion. Flowers were here, and palm-trees, and great cactus-bushes, with their red fruit half hollowed out by the nibbling birds. From the upper terraces we could see the blue Mediterranean spreading far away on one side, while the snow-covered tops of the Maritime Alps stood bright against the sky. The garden was little frequented, and altogether it was a good place in which to plan a story.

We consulted together for several days before we actually began to work. At first, we sat in an arbor on one of the lower terraces, where there were a little iron table and some chairs; but now and then a person would come there for a morning stroll, and so we moved up higher to a seat under a palm-tree, and the next day to another terrace, where there was a secluded corner overshadowed by huge cacti. But the place which suited us best of all was the top of an old tower at one end of the garden. This tower had been built many, many hundred years before the garden was thought of, and its broad, flat roof was level with one of the higher terraces. Here we could work and consult in quiet, with little fear of being disturbed.

Not finding it easy to plan out the whole story at once, we determined to begin by preparing backgrounds. We concluded that as this was to be a short story, it would be sufficient to have descriptions of two natural scenes in which the two principal incidents should occur; and as we wished to do all our work from natural models, we thought it best to describe the scene which lay around us, than which nothing could be more beautiful or more suitable. One scene was to be on the sea-shore, with a mellow light upon the rippling waves, and the sails of fishing-vessels

in the distance. This Miss Vancouver was to do, while I was to take a scene among the hills and mountains at the back of the town. I walked over there one afternoon when Miss Vancouver had gone out with her mother. I got on a high point, and worked up a very satisfactory description of the frowning mountains behind me, the old monasteries on the hills, and the town stretching out below, with a little river rushing along between two rows of picturesque washerwomen to the sea.

We read our backgrounds to each other, and were both very well satisfied. Our styles were as different as the scenes we described. Hers was clear and smooth, and mine forcible and somewhat abrupt, and thus the strong points of each scene were better brought out; but, in order that our styles might be unified, so to speak, by being judiciously blended, I suggested some strong and effective points to be introduced into her description, while she toned down some of my phrases and added a word here and there which gave a color and beauty to the description which it had not possessed before.

Our backgrounds being thus satisfactory, — and it took a good deal of consultation to make them so,—our next work was to provide characters for the story. These were to be drawn from life, for it would be perfectly ridiculous to create imaginary characters when there were so many original and interesting personages around us. We soon agreed upon an individual who would serve as a model for our hero; I forget whether it was I or Miss Vancouver who first suggested him. He was a young man, but not so very young either, who lived in the house with us, and about whom there was a mystery. Nobody knew exactly who he was, or where he came from, or why he was here. It was evident he did not come for society, for he kept very much to himself; and the attractions of the town could not have brought him here, for he seemed to care very little about them. We seldom saw him except at the table and occasionally in the garden. When we met him in the latter place, he always seemed anxious to avoid observation; and as we did not wish to hurt his feelings by letting him suppose that he was an object of curiosity to us, we endeavored, as far as possible, to make it apparent that we were not looking at him or thinking of him. But still, whenever we had a good chance, we studied him. Of course we could not make out his mystery, but that was not necessary, nor did we, indeed, think it would be proper. We could draw him as we saw him, and then make the mystery what we pleased; its character depending a good deal upon the plot we devised.

Miss Vancouver undertook to draw the hero, and she went to work upon him immediately. In personal appearance, she altered the model a good deal. She darkened his hair, and took off his whiskers, leaving him only a mustache. She thought, too, that he ought to be a little taller, and asked me my height, which is five feet nine. She considered that a very good height, and brought the hero up to it. She also made him some years younger, but endeavored, as far as seemed suitable to the story, to draw him exactly as he was.

I was to do the heroine, but found it very hard to choose a model. As I said before, we determined to draw all our characters from life, but I could think of no one, in the somewhat extensive company by which we were surrounded, who would answer my purpose. Nor could I fix my mind upon any person in other parts of the world, whom I knew or had known, who resembled the idea I had formed of our heroine. After thinking this matter over a good deal, I told Miss Vancouver that I believed the best thing I could do would be to take her for my model. I was with her a good deal, and thus could study out and work up certain points as I wrote, which would be a great advantage. She objected to this, because, as she said, the author of a story should not be drawn as its heroine. But I asserted that this would not be the case. She would merely suggest the heroine to me, and I would so do my work that the heroine would not suggest her to anybody else. This, I thought, was the way in which a model ought to be used. After we had talked the subject over a good deal, she agreed to my plan, and I went to work with much satisfaction. I gave no definite description of the lady, but endeavored to indicate the impression which her person and character produced upon me. As such impressions are seldom the same in any two cases, there was no danger that my description could be referred back to her.

When I read to her the sketch I had written, she objected to parts of it as not being correct; but as I asserted that it was not intended as an exact copy of the model, she could not say it was not a true picture; and so, with some slight modifications, we let it stand. I thought myself that it was a very good piece of work. To me it seemed very life-like and piquant, and I believed that other people would think it so.

We were now ready for the incidents and the plot, but at this point we were somewhat interrupted by Mrs. Vancouver. She came to me one morning, when I was waiting to go with her daughter to our study in the garden,

and told me that she was very sorry to notice that Miss Vancouver and I had attracted attention to ourselves by being so much together; and, while she understood the nature of the literary labor on which we were engaged, she did not wish her daughter to become the object of general attention and remark in a foreign *pension*. I was very angry when I heard that people had been directing upon us their impertinent curiosity, and I discoursed warmly upon the subject.

"Where is the good," I said, "of a person or persons devoting himself or themselves, with enthusiasm and earnestness, to his or their life-work, if he or they are to be interfered with by the impertinent babble of the multitude?"

Mrs. Vancouver was not prepared to give an exact answer to this question, but she considered the babble of the multitude a very serious thing. She had been talking to her daughter on the subject, and thought it right to speak to me.

That morning we worked separately in our rooms, but we accomplished little or nothing. It was, of course, impossible to do anything of importance in a work of this kind without consultation and coöperation. The next day, however, I devised a plan which would enable us, I thought, to pursue our labors without attracting attention; and Mrs. Vancouver, who was a kind-hearted woman, and took a great interest in her daughter's literary career, told me if I could successfully carry out anything of the kind, I might do so. She did not inquire into particulars, nor did I explain them to Miss Bessie; but I told the latter that we would not go out together into the garden, but I would go first, and she should join me about ten minutes afterward on the tower; but she was not to come if she saw any one about.

Near the top of the hill, above the garden, once stood an ancient mansion, of which nothing now remained but the remnants of some massive masonry. A court-yard, however, of this old edifice was still surrounded by a high wall, which formed the upper boundary of our garden. From a point near the tower a flight of twisting stone steps, flanked by blank walls, which turned themselves in various directions to suit the angles of the stair-way, led to a green door in this wall. Through this door Miss Vancouver and myself, and doubtless many other persons, had often wished to pass; but it was locked, and, on inquiry, we found that there was no key to be had. The day previous, however, when wandering by myself, I had examined this door, and found that it was fastened merely by a snap-lock which had no handle,

but was opened by a key. I had a knife with a long, strong blade, and pushing this into the hasp, I easily forced back the bolt. I then opened the door and walked into the old court-yard.

When Miss Vancouver appeared on the tower, I was standing at the top of the stone steps just mentioned, with the green door slightly ajar. Calling to her in a low tone, she ran up the steps, and, to her amazement, I ushered her into the court-yard and closed the door behind us.

"There," I exultingly exclaimed, "is our study, where we can write our story without interruption. We will come and go away separately; the people of the *pension* will not know that we are here or have been here, and there will be no occasion for that impertinent attention to which your mother so properly objects."

Miss Vancouver was delighted, and we walked about and surveyed the court-yard with much satisfaction. I had already selected the spot for our work. It was in the shade of an olive-tree, the only tree in the inclosure, beneath which there was a rude seat. I spread a rug upon the grass, and Miss Bessie sat upon the seat, and put her feet upon the rug, leaving room for me to sit thereon. We now took out our little blank-books and our stylograph pens and were ready for work. I explained that I had done nothing the day before; and Miss Vancouver said that had also been the case with her. She had not wished to do anything important without consultation; but supposing that, of course, the hero was to fall in love with the heroine, she thought she might as well make him begin, but she found she could not do it as she wished. She wanted him to indicate to the lady that he was in love with her without exactly saying so. Could I not suggest some good form for giving expression to this state of things? After a little reflection, I thought I could.

"I will speak," said I, "as if I were the hero, and then you can see how it will suit."

"Yes," said she, "but you must not forget that what you say should be very gradual."

I tried to be as gradual as I could, and to indicate by slow degrees the state of mind in which we wished our hero to be. As the indication became stronger and stronger, I thought it right to take Miss Vancouver's hand; but to this she objected, because, as she said, it was more than indication, and besides, it prevented her from writing down what I said. We argued this point a little while without altering our position, and I asserted that the hand-holding only gave point and earnestness to the hero's remarks, which otherwise would not be so natural and true to life; and if she

wanted to use her right hand, her left hand would do to hold. We made this change, and I proceeded with the hero's remarks.

There was in our *pension* a young German girl named Margarita. She was a handsome, plump maiden, and spoke English very well. There was another young lady, also a German, named Gretzel. She was a little creature and the fast friend of Margarita. These two had a companion whose name I did not know. She was a little older than the others, and was, I think, a Pole. She also understood English. As I was warming up toward the peroration of our hero's indication, I raised my eyes, and saw, on the brow of the hill, not a stone's throw from us, these three girls. They were talking earnestly and walking directly toward us. The place where they were was used as a public pleasure-ground, and was separated from the old court-yard by a pale-fence. Although the girls could not come to us, there was nothing to prevent their seeing us if they chose to look our way, for they were on ground which was higher than the top of the fence.

When I saw these girls, I was horror-stricken, and my knees, on which I rested, trembled beneath me. I did not dare to rise, nor to change my position, for fear the motion should attract attention; nor did I cease my remarks, for had I suddenly done so, my companion would have looked around to see what was the matter, and would certainly have jumped up, or have done something which would have brought the eyes of those girls upon us; but my voice dropped very low, and I wondered if there was any way of my gently rolling out of sight.

But at this moment our young man with a mystery suddenly appeared on the other side of the fence, walking rapidly toward the girls. There was something on the ocean, probably a ship, to which he directed their attention, and then he actually led them off, pointing, as it appeared, to a spot from which the distant object could be more plainly seen. They all walked away and disappeared behind the brow of the hill. With a great feeling of relief, I arose and recounted what had happened. Miss Vancouver sprang to her feet, shut up her blank-book, and put the stopper on her stylograph.

"This place will not do at all to work in," she said. "I will not have those girls staring at us."

I was obliged to admit that this particular spot would not do. I had not thought of any one walking in the grounds immediately above us, especially in the morning, which was our working time.

"They may return," she said, "and we must go away immediately and separately."

But I could not agree thus to give up our new-found study. The inclosure was quite extensive, with ruins at the other end, near which we might find some spot entirely protected from observation. So I went to look for such a place, leaving Miss Vancouver under the olive-tree, where, if she were seen alone, it would not matter. I found a spot which might answer, and, returning to the tree, sent her to look at it. While we were thus engaged, we heard the report of the noon cannon. This startled us both. The hour for *déjeuner à la fourchette* at the *pension* was twelve o'clock, and people were generally very prompt at that meal. It would not do for us to be late. Snatching up our effects, we hurried to the green door, but when I tried to open it as before, I found it impossible—a projecting strip of wood on the inside of the door-way preventing my reaching the bolt with my knife-blade. I tried to tear away the strip, but it was too firmly fastened. We both became very nervous and troubled. It was impossible to get out of the inclosure except through that door, for the wall was quite high and the top covered with broken glass imbedded in the mortar. The party on the hill had had time to go down and around through the town to the *pension*. Our places at the table would be the only ones empty. What could attract more attention than this? And what would Mrs. Vancouver think and say? At this moment, we heard some one working at the lock on the other side. The door opened, and there stood our hero.

"I heard some one at this door," he said, "and supposing it had been accidentally closed, I came up and opened it."

"Thank you; thank you very much!" cried Miss Vancouver.

And away she ran to the house. If only I were late, it did not matter at all. I followed with our hero, and endeavored to make some explanation of the predicament of myself and the young lady. He took it all as a matter of course, as if the old court-yard were a place of general resort.

"When persons stroll through that door," he said, "they should put a piece of stick or of stone against the jamb, so that if the door is blown shut by the wind the latch may not catch."

And then he called my attention to a beautiful plant of the aloe kind which had just begun to blossom.

Miss Vancouver reached the breakfast-table in good time, but she told me afterward she would work in the old court-yard no more. The perils were too many.

For some days after this our story made little progress, for opportunities for consulta-

tion did not occur. I was particularly sorry for this, because I wanted very much to know how Miss Vancouver liked my indicative speech and what she had made of it. Early one afternoon about this time our hero, between whom and myself a slight acquaintance had sprung up, came to me and said:

"The sea is so perfectly smooth and quiet to-day that I thought it would be pleasant to take a row, and I have hired a boat. How would you like to go with me?"

I was pleased with his friendly proposition, and I am very fond of rowing; but yet I hesitated about accepting the invitation, for I hoped that afternoon to find some opportunity for consultation in regard to the work on which I was engaged.

"The boat is rather large for two persons," he remarked. "Have you any friends you would like to ask to go with us?"

This put a different phase upon affairs. I instantly said that I thought a row would be charming that afternoon, and suggested that Mrs. Vancouver and her daughter might like to take advantage of the opportunity.

The ladies were quite willing to go, and in twenty minutes we set off, two fishermen in red liberty caps pushing us from the pebbly beach. Our hero took one oar and I another, and we pulled together very well. The ladies sat in the stern and enjoyed the smooth sea and the lovely day. We rowed across the little bay and around a high promontory, where there was a larger bay with a small town in the distance. The hero suggested that we should land here, as we could get some good views from the rocks. To this we all agreed; and when we had climbed up a little distance, Mrs. Vancouver found some wild flowers which interested her very much. She was, in a certain way, a floraphobist, and took an especial delight in finding in foreign countries blossoms which were the same as or similar to flowers she was familiar with in New England. Our hero had also a fancy for wild flowers, and it was not long before he showed Mrs. Vancouver a little blossom which she was very sure she had seen either at East Gresham or Milton Center. Leaving these two to their floral researches, Miss Vancouver and I climbed higher up the rocks, where the view would be better. We found a pleasant ledge, and, although we could not see what was going on below us, and the view was quite cut off in the direction of the town, we had an admirable outlook over the sea, on which, in the far distance, we could see the sails of a little vessel.

"This will be an admirable place to do a little work on our story," I said. "I have brought my blank-book and stylograph."

"And so have I," said she.

I then told her that I had been thinking over the matter a good deal, and that I believed in a short story two long speeches would be enough for the hero to make, and proposed that we should now go on with the second one. She thought well of that, and took a seat upon a rocky projection, while I sat upon another quite near.

"This second speech," said I, "ought to be more than indicative, and should express the definite purpose of the hero's sentiments; and I think there should be corresponding expressions from the heroine, and would be glad to have you suggest such as you think she would make." I then began to say what I thought a hero ought to say under the circumstances. I soon warmed up to my task wonderfully, and expressed with much earnestness and ardor the sentiments I thought proper for the occasion. I first held one of Miss Vancouver's hands, and then both of them, she trusting to her memory in regard to memoranda. Her remarks in the character of the heroine were, however, much briefer than mine, but they were enough. If necessary, they could be worked up and amplified. I think we had said all or nearly all there was to say when we heard a shout from below. It was our hero calling us. We could not see him, but I knew his voice. He shouted again, and then I arose from the rock on which Bessie was sitting and answered him. He now made his appearance some distance below us, and said that Mrs. Vancouver did not care to come up any higher to get the views, and that she thought it would be better to reach home before the sun should set.

That evening, in the *salon*, Bessie spoke to me apart. "Our hero," she said, "is more

than a hero; he is a guardian angel. You must fathom his mystery. I am sure that it is far better than anything we can invent for him."

I set myself to work to discover, if possible, not only the mystery which had first interested us in our hero, but also the reason and purpose of his guardian-angelship. He was an American, and now that I had come to know him better, I found him a very agreeable talker.

## II.

OUR hero was the first person whom I told of my engagement to Bessie. Mrs. Vancouver was very particular that this state of affairs should be made known. "If you are engaged," she said, "of course you can be together as much as you please. It is the custom in America, and nobody need make any remarks."

In talking to our hero, I told him of a good many little things that had happened at various times, and endeavored by these friendly confidences to make him speak of his own affairs. It must not be supposed that I was actuated by prying curiosity, but certainly I had a right to know something of a person to whom I had told so much; but he always seemed a great deal more interested in us than in himself, and I took so much interest in his interest, which was very kindly expressed, that his affairs never came into our conversation.

But just as he was going away,—he left the little town a few days before we did,—he told me that he was a writer, and that for some time past he had been engaged upon a story.

Our story was never finished. His was. This is it.

*Frank R. Stockton.*

---

## DEATH'S FIRST LESSON.

THREE sad, strange things already death hath shown  
 To me who lived but yesterday. My love,  
 Who loved to kiss my hands and lips above  
 All other joys,—whose heart upon my own  
 So oft has throbb'd,—fears me, now life has flown,  
 And shuddering turns away. The friend who strove  
 My trust to win, and all my faith did prove,  
 Sees, in my pale, still form, a bar o'erthrown  
 To some most dear desire. While one who spake  
 No fond and flattering word of love or praise,  
 Who only cold and stern reproof would give  
 To all my foolish, unconsidered ways—  
 This one would glad have died that I might live,  
 This heart alone lies broken for my sake.

*Susan Marr Spalding.*