

Literature, &c.

THE MYSTERIOUS PICTURE.

Translated from the French.

The following extraordinary story is declared by the authoress, Mademoiselle Vauhove, to be strictly true in its leading incidents.—[*Pearl.*]

MADAME DORIVAL was the widow of a distinguished French officer, who had died in the service of his country. Finding it difficult, without the closest economy, to support her family genteely on the pension allowed her by government, and being anxious to secure an independence for her children, in case of her death, she was induced to open a boarding-school in the vicinity of Paris. The assistance of her two highly accomplished daughters, Lucilla and Julia, made the employment of female teachers unnecessary; but she engaged the best masters for music, dancing, drawing and painting, and the fashionable foreign languages. Her establishment was conducted on a most liberal scale, and each of the twenty young ladies who became her pupils had a separate apartment.

Among these young ladies, was Josephine Vericour, who took lessons in miniature painting, with the view of exercising the branch of the art as a profession; the circumstances of her family being such that it was necessary to educate her, in the prospect of turning her talents to a profitable account.

Her imagination being deeply impressed with this object, she thought of it nearly all day, and dreamed of it at night. That she had much natural talents for drawing, was unquestionable; but she was only fifteen, she was not a prodigy, and in every thing she had as yet produced was to be found a due portion of errors and defects. With an ardent ambition to excel, Josephine was a victim of a painful and unconquerable timidity, and an entire want of confidence in herself. She had attempted likenesses of all her school-mates, one after another, and was disheartened and discouraged because none of them were perfect, and was overwhelmed with mortification when she heard them criticised. The remarks of the gentlemen who instructed her, though very judicious, were often so severe, that she was frequently almost tempted to throw away her pencil in despair, and she never painted worse than when under the eye of her master.

One morning in the garden, she was struck with the graceful and picturesque attitude in which two of her companions had unconsciously thrown themselves. One of them, having put her arms round the waist of the other, was pointing out to her notice a beautiful butterfly that had just settled on a rose. Josephine begged of the girls to remain in that position while she sketched them on the blank leaf of her book. Afterwards she made a separate drawing of each of their faces, and then transferred the whole to a large sheet of ivory, intending to make a picture of it in the miniature style. But she determined to work at it in her own chamber, at leisure hours, and not allow it to be seen till it was entirely finished. In six weeks there was to be a private examination, at which premiums were to be awarded to those who excelled in the different branches taught at Madame Dorival's school. Seven of the young ladies were taking lessons in miniature-painting, all of whom, in the eyes of the diffident Josephine, possessed far more talent than herself. Still, she knew that industry, application, and an ardent desire to succeed, had often effected wonders; and she was extremely anxious to gratify her parents by obtaining the prize, if possible.

In the retirement of her own room she painted with unremitting solicitude, but, as she thought, with very indifferent success; and one afternoon, more dissatisfied than usual with the result of her work, she hastily took the ivory from her little easel, and put it into the drawer of her colour-box, which she consigned to its usual place in the drawer of her table.

Next morning, what was the surprise of Josephine, to find her picture standing against the easel on the table, and much farther advanced than when she had quitted it the preceding evening, and the faults which had then discouraged her, entirely rectified. She tried to recollect if she had really put away the picture, and her memory recalled every circumstance of her shutting it up in the drawer. But she had no recollection of having

previously corrected any of the errors; indeed, she knew that she had not, and the only way in which she could attempt to solve the mystery, was to suppose that some one, with the intention of exciting a laugh at her expense, had come into her room during the night, taken out the picture, and re-touched it.

She mentioned it to no one; but the next night, to guard against a recurrence of the same trick, she arranged every thing in the neatest order, locked up her picture in the secret drawer at the bottom of her colour-box, and placed it under her bolster.

But her astonishment was redoubled, when awaking at an early hour next morning, she put her hand under the bolster to feel for her box and found it gone! She ran to the table, and saw there the colour box lying beside the picture, which, as before, was leaning against the easel, and evidently much improved. She thought that it now began to look beautifully, and she could not withdraw her delighted eyes from contemplating it.

Still she felt persuaded that it was all a trick, for which she should pay dearly when an explanation took place. She was afraid to touch it again, lest her own inferior pencil should destroy some of its beauties; though at the same time she remarked a few trifling defects, which she had not been conscious of, when painting at it the day before. But rather than run the risk of spoiling the whole, she preferred leaving these little imperfections as they were. Sometimes she thought of showing it to her governess and to her master; but the time of the examination approached, and the temptation of keeping the secret was very great.

However, she could not resolve to paint at the picture that day herself. Before she went to bed, she took the precaution of placing a chair against her door, which had the bolt on the outside only, the young ladies not being permitted to fasten themselves up in their rooms.

She lay awake for a long time listening, but heard not the slightest sound, and after a while she fell into a profound sleep. When she awoke in the morning, the door was still closed, and the chair standing just as she had placed it; the picture was again on the table; some mysterious hand had again been engaged on it, and all the faults had disappeared, or been altered into beauties.

Josephine stood motionless with amazement. When her bewildered thoughts settled themselves into a distinct form, regret was her predominant feeling. "What shall I do?" said she to herself. "I fear this mystery, if I allow it to go on, will end in something very vexatious; and yet it may be only motives of kindness that some unknown person steals into my room at night, and works at my picture with a skill far surpassing my own. Since I did not mention it at first, were I now to relate this strange story, I should lose my character for veracity, as no one, I am sure, would believe me."

She painted no more at the picture, but put it away as usual. That night she placed her washing-stand against the door, lying her soap on the edge, so that if moved, it would fall, and having gone to bed very sleepy, she soon closed her eyes in her usual deep slumber. In the morning, the washing stand was still against the door, the soap had not fallen, the picture was once more on the easel, and—it was finished!

At the breakfast-table she stole enquiring glances at the countenances of her schoolmates, but none of them looked particularly at her, and none of them averted their eyes from her gaze. All seemed to think only of the examination.

When she returned to her room, she dressed herself for the occasion, and wrapping her picture in her pocket-handkerchief, she joined her companions, who walked in procession to the principal school-room, according to their rank in class. All the instructors were assembled. After being examined in several other branches, the drawings and miniature paintings were produced. When it came to the turn of Josephine, she blushed as she presented her beautiful picture.

Every one was astonished; it was so far superior to any thing she had done before, particularly the finishing. The young ladies from whom she had sketched the figures, being present, every one was struck with the fidelity of the likenesses, painted, as they were, chiefly from memory; and great praise was given, not

only to the grace of the attitudes, but to the easy and natural folds of the drapery, and the clearness and beauty of the colouring. There was also the novelty of two figures on the same ivory.

The superiority of this little picture was so manifest, that there was no hesitation in awarding the first prize, which was a small silver palette, to Josephine Vericour. But to the surprise of every one, Josephine showed no indignation of joy at this signal triumph. She looked round on all her companions, seeking to discover the one who had painted the best part of her picture for her in the night while she slept. She fixed her eyes steadfastly on Julia, the youngest daughter of Madame Dorival, who possessed in a high degree the charming talent of miniature painting.

Josephine, who had heard Julia commending her picture, said to her, "Miss Julia, you may well admire your own work. I have not merited the prize, and I will not accept of praises which belong only to you, to your skill in miniature painting, and to the kindness of your heart."

Julia protested that this language was unintelligible to her, and begged Josephine to explain herself. She did so, and the enigma seemed still more incomprehensible. Julia positively denied ever having seen the picture before Josephine produced it in the examination. In vain did Josephine detail all the circumstances of its mysterious progress.—Her statement could not be reconciled to the rules of possibility, and they began to think that her mind was effected by intense application to her picture. The prize, however, was decreed to her, in spite of her reluctance to accept it; and when the examination was over, the young ladies got together in groups, and talked with much feeling of the symptoms of mental derangement which had manifested themselves in the unfortunate Josephine.

For a few weeks after the examination, Josephine allowed her paint-box to remain with those of her companions in one of the school-room closets and painted only under the direction of her master, and during the time of her regular lessons; but though there were marks of daily improvement, the miniatures she now attempted were inferior to the mysterious picture.

Being anxious to try again how she could succeed in the solitude of her own apartment, she there commenced a miniature of herself, which, if successful she intended as a present to her mother. By the assistance of the large looking glass that hung over the table, she sketched the outlines of her features with great exactness, and after she had put in the dead colouring, (as the first tints are called,) she put away her work for that day, and went to Julia whom she told of the new picture, that she had just begun, and of her anxiety to know whether her nocturnal visitor would again assist her in completing it.

"Dear Miss Julia," said poor Josephine, "let me intreat you to have compassion and tell me the whole truth. If you have any private reasons for not wishing it to be generally known, I solemnly promise to disclose it to no one. Tell me how you always contrived to enter my chamber in the night without disturbing my sleep, and how you have been able to paint so well by candle light?"

"Miss Vericour," said Julia, "you surprise me extremely by seeming to persist in the strange belief that I am the unknown person who painted in secret on your picture. This mystery must be solved; and if you find it so difficult to believe my word, you must assist me in discovering the truth. Place nothing to-night against your door; do not even latch it. Put away your painting apparatus as usual, and go to bed, and to sleep if you can. I have thought of a way of detecting the intruder, who, I suppose, must of course be one of the young ladies. When she is discovered, she will be reprimanded, and made to give up her part in this strange drama, so that your perplexity will be at an end."

Josephine acquiesced with joy, and minutely followed the direction of Julia. All the young ladies went to bed at nine o'clock, but on this night it was long after ten before Josephine could compose herself to sleep.—When every one in the house had gone to bed and all was quiet, Julia Dorival placed a taper in a small dark lantern, and proceeded with it to the passage into which Josephine's chamber opened. There, seating herself on a chair outside of the door, she remained