

## THE CONNOISSEUR.

Sir Giles Ommamey, of Ommamey Hall, Hertfordshire, Bart., J. P. and D. L., for the county of Hertford, and representative of one of the oldest titled families in Great Britain, was as blind as a bat. Nay—to be more accurate—his eyesight was entirely gone; and the misfortune was greatly to be regretted, since he had acquired a reputation as a connoisseur in art, and was the most infallible judge of an "old master" in all the European countries put together.

For twenty years of his life (it was said) he had pinched and saved and had impoverished his estates; firstly, to build a magnificent picture gallery at Ommamey Hall, and secondly to fill it with the finest specimens of the work of the great masters; the finest, that is to say, that pains, judgment and money could bring together under a private roof.

Sir Giles was well on in years at the time of this story; and, since the failure of his sight, he had grown very feeble and helpless. Gout and rheumatism made a wreck of a man who had lived not "wisely but too well."

He was incessantly, faithfully, and patiently attended upon, administered to, and borne with, by his valet Luigi, a swarthy Neapolitan, who had been some years in his service, and whose fidelity to his master's interests (as his fidelity to those of the rest of the world) had promoted him to the level of a trusted steward and inseparable companion.

Sir Giles was rarely seen by anyone but Luigi now. The unhappy old gentleman possessed a horror of every kind of visitor. His natural reasons were two-fold; his first reason appeared to be only an obstinate fancy. He objected to the world in general, because it caused him to realize what a pitiful old fool he had become; and he detested friends and strangers alike, because they all wanted to see the pictures which he himself could no longer enjoy. His second reason—an absurd idea which Luigi unaccountably shared—was that everybody desired to enter the gallery for the express purpose of injuring or making away with the masterpieces hung upon its walls.

So, for a long time, the magnificent saloon at Ommamey Hall remained closed. No one knew anything whatsoever about the master's reasons save Luigi, to whom alone from time to time was entrusted the task of dusting the pictures. Excepting on these occasions, the key of the saloon remained hidden in a corner of the baronet's Russia-leather despatch box.

But although Sir Giles Ommamey's tenement of clay was perennially racked with pain and disease, and his eyes saw nothing, yet a flash of the old spirit of the connoisseur would now and again testify to the fact that the mind was not quite so paralyzed as the body.

"Luigi," he would sometimes say, rubbing his shrivelled hands together as he lay huddled up in his armchair, "I would like to have a look at my pictures to-day. I can't see them with my eyes, but I can see them just as well in my mind—every bit as well, Luigi."

"Your excellency speaks the truth," the Italian would say in return.

"Remember, Luigi," the old man liked to add, "remember that no one, except me and you, must ever enter the gallery again so long as I live. My gems are too precious to be touched by wanton hands, or even to be gazed upon by vulgar eyes. You have heard, Luigi, of the Barberini vase at the British Museum—oh! it makes my flesh creep to think of it; the inestimably priceless glass urn, Luigi, smashed to a thousand pieces by a mad mad! Oh, horrible! horrible! We will not allow anyone to enter the gallery, Luigi. He might cut my pictures! Ah! I would rather he thrust a knife into me!"

"Your excellency need not fear. No one else shall ever enter the saloon."

With these words, the crippled master would be lifted in Luigi's arms, and placed tenderly on the seat of a bath chair, to be wheeled away like a child in a perambulator, to the enjoyment of his toys.

"Ah! now I call this real enjoyment," Sir Giles would begin chuckling. "Enumerate, Luigi. Enumerate. Point you to each picture in turn and tell me what it is. Not that I don't know, bless your heart; but it will make me feel that they are there, and no mistake. Enumerate, I say."

One day Luigi had been reading off as usual from each frame in turn the inscription recording the name of the picture and of the artist who painted it, and had been throwing in a gratuitous comment here and there.

"Numero 43, your excellency: 'Head of the Holy Virgin,' 'Albrecht' (the deuce root out these Germans and their linguas), pardon, your excellency, 'Albrecht Durer,' I had as soon speak my own tongue with a fishbone in my throat. 'Numero 44, The Alehouse, Adrian Van Ostade.' How you traveller in the background sleeps! we can hear him snore, almost. Next, from the ridiculous to the sublime, 'Numero 45, Europa, Paolo Veronese,' Santa Maria! behold the beauty of a goddess, your excellency—it makes me the water to the mouth."

"He—he—he!" joined in Sir Giles. "It does it does, Luigi, make your mouth water. I can see every inch of canvas in my mind's eye."

"That is well, your excellency. You need the painting itself no more."

"Eh? what! Are you mad, Luigi? I would not sell that Verones for three thousand pounds. What do you mean?"

"Pardon, your excellency," explained Luigi. "It is my imperfect English. I desired to say that you see even better with your mind than with your eyes."

"I do, I do," muttered the baronet, better pleased, and quite ignoring that the compliment was two edged and doubtful.

"Numero 46," Luigi continued, "Zincali in Seville, John Phillip, R. A. Unfinished." May I venture to ask your excellency the reason for including a half painted group of Zingari in a collection of priceless masterpieces?"

"He—he—he!" chuckled Sir Giles. "The half-painted picture is itself priceless, my good Luigi. That is why it is included in my collection."

"But, your excellency!" exclaimed the Italian. "The canvas is but partly covered with color. If an artist were to finish it now, it would be worth untold—"

"Untold nothing!" interrupted Sir Giles. "Take down this 'Phillip,' and give it to me here, Luigi. Well—well, don't you hear me? Which picture? The

'Phillip,' I say the 'Phillip,' the 'Phillip,' the 'Phillip!'"

The valet hesitated for a moment, and then complied. Sir Giles handled the frame with care, and passed his hand lovingly over the surface of the picture.

"My dear Luigi, the value of this incomplete gem lies in this, that we see here the technique of the great masters in actual operation. These figures which are only roughly outlined with the brush (I can feel them with my forefinger) teach us more than the whole finished group could do. Do you see?"

Luigi looked at the picture and then at his master. "I never thought of that before your excellency. It seemed to be worth nothing."

"Worth nothing!" cried Sir Giles indignantly. "All the gold in Europe could not buy another like it!"

The "Zincali" were presently restored to the walls and Luigi continued his enumeration.

"Numero 47," and Luigi paused.

"Well?" said his master, interrogatively, and with the mischievous air of one who already knows the answer to his own question.

"Numero 47," repeated Luigi, slowly.

"See there, now?" remarked the baronet aloud; but as it addressed himself. "Finding no inscription on the frame, my good Luigi cannot remember the title of the picture and the name of the artist."

"Your excellency will excuse me. My memory is not so good as it used to be. If your excellency can help me—"

Help you, of course I can. Don't I know them all by heart? Can't I see them all in my mind's eye?"

"I am well satisfied, your excellency, that it is so."

"And I, too—ha—ha!—much more pleased even than you, my friend."

"Assuredly," assented Luigi.

Sir Giles felt sometimes that there existed an ambiguity about Luigi's complacent attitude towards his master's blindness. But the suspicion was always thrust quickly aside.

"Well, well—let us return to the point, my friend. That is a picture which I value more than all the rest put together."

"Why? I discovered it myself. I may even claim to have painted a part of it, and I have certainly made it what it is."

"Will your excellency explain?"

"Explain? Why not? Listen. It shall be a secret, Luigi—a dead secret between you and me."

Sir Giles reached out his hand and drew the valet nearer to him. Then he said, in a half-whisper:

"That 'Madonna' is by Raphael—nothing less! How do I know? Ah! I know! Look at the grace, purity of expression, and human feeling; mark the beauty of line, the glow of color, and the skill displayed in the handling of light and shade. You face is that of Raphael's fair flower-girl—idealized, spiritualized, rendered almost divine. When it first came into view I thought it was a Perugino; but as it unfolded itself before my eyes, I recognized the hand of the world's greatest master, in the delicacy and freedom and elaboration combined there. Do you perceive all this, my good Luigi?"

"Not quite all, your excellency. My eyes are untrained to see so cleverly. I am no connoisseur."

"Humph!" commented Sir Giles, "you will soon be a fair judge of pictures if you listen to me."

"I am all attention. But your excellency spoke of this canvas 'unfolding itself before your eyes.' I do not understand."

"You shall then," responded his master.

The bent figure in the bath-chair straightened itself for a moment with something of a long-lost energy. The dull eyes of the invalid—though now of no more use than darkened windows—shone again over his wizened cheeks with a flash of the old spirit. Sir Giles was almost himself again.

"It was in this way, Luigi," he began.

"Twenty years ago, at a sale—I should not like to say where they put up a picture that made everybody laugh. It was so astounding a daub that it haunted me for nights afterwards. Of course no one bought it. The badness of the coloring seemed incredible; it was so bad that I became positively interested. Now, some times in this world we meet a man who in mind and body appears to be a mere ill-constructed specimen of creation; but though repellent in features and manner, he may be so very unlike anything we have ever before seen or admired, that we are fascinated by him. In course of time, and upon nearer acquaintance, we find that there is some real good in him—nay, much real good in him we learn, perhaps that some old history is attached to him; perhaps a magnificent energy has been diverted from its proper course, a genius broken out of its natural bent, or a heart broken by its weight of disappointment. All shame upon his enemies."

"Well, Luigi, I said to myself, 'perhaps that poor deformity of a picture has a history.' And the more the thing haunted me, the more I regretted not having looked at it closely."

"Months afterwards, I saw and recognized this 'ugly duckling' again, in a show-room. As before, I was strangely fascinated. I examined the thing at my leisure. What an incomprehensible daub it was. Now, when the face of a picture does not reveal what I desire to know, I look at the back. I turned the 'ugly duckling' over, and looked at its back. 'Humph,' I reflected, 'this grubby old canvas is too good for the painting.' I offered the dealer seven shillings and sixpence down for the despised work of art. He accepted it. He even laughed as I left the shop, canvas in hand. He thought he had got the better of me. And so he had, as far as it concerned him. In his hands the picture's kinetic value (if I may use the phrase)—and I am not going to define its meaning)—the picture's kinetic value was not tenpence. In my hands its potential value proved to be more like ten thousand pounds."

"Santa Maria!" cried the Italian. "Ten thousand pounds for a little square yard of painted cloth!"

"At the very least my good Luigi."

The swarthy Neapolitan continued to express his astonishment by exclamations in his own language. "Your excellency turns dross into pure gold. Is your excellency an alchemist?"

"No, no, I am no alchemist, only an enthusiast. The pursuit was one into which I threw my whole heart. I lived for my pictures. I would die to save them from sacrilegious hands."

"Take up my card to your master, and

For some moments Sir Giles appeared to be in a dream. His mind had gone back to the past. He was recalling the excitements of the auction room, the triumph of securing the rich prize or another, the pleasure of examining some gem under the magnifying-glass, the pains taken to hang it well, and the delight of visiting it twenty times a day in order to find in it beauties that had hitherto escaped his eyes.

"No doubt," suggested Luigi, awakening his master, "no doubt your excellency took the 'ugly duckling' to a picture-restorer."

"Good heavens! no. What an idea! I knew better what to do to it than any tinkering scoundrel. I took it home. I stood it on a chair in my study and locked the door. First of all, I took a good look at the surface through a magnifying glass. I noticed—wherever the paint was thin—that the groundwork was inconsistent with the color on the surface. As I had expected from the first, the daub was painted over an older piece of work. As I took the picture out of its frame—phew—the dust nearly choked me. I scraped off some of the dirt with my penknife. That dirt was hundreds of years old. I wiped the edges as clean as I could, and perceived at once that the canvas at some time or other had been restretched, and the size of the picture slightly reduced. Over the edge of the stretcher I could see, to my delight, brush strokes laid on by the artist who originally worked on the canvas, a very different hand from that which subsequently contrived the daub."

"Wonderful! your excellency, wonderful!"

"Ah, Luigi! that was but the commencement of the true character of the original painting. Rubbing gently and perpetually with the sensitive skin of my fingers, I revealed this veil of varnish to an impalpable powder, which I blew away as I worked. At last, after infinite labor, I reached a portion of the true painting. Then, bit by bit—here Sir Giles pointed to the place on the wall where he knew the priceless 'Madonna' to be hanging—'bit by bit' that pathetic face came into view; those eyes with the soft and dreamy lids, that brow of pearly, smooth and opalescent texture, those lips expressive of sadness for man's sins, mingled with love and tenderness for all who seek pity."

As this flood of enthusiasm was poured out, Luigi stared eagerly—not at the picture, but at the blind man's face. But he said nothing.

"At last, Luigi, my reward came. My own brush remedied skilfully some few flaws and injuries to the canvas. I have restored a masterpiece of immense value to the world. Value, did I say? Yes, by the memory of Raphael, the world will value his chef d'œuvre at ten thousand pounds! But, Luigi—comes nearer—let me whisper in your ear, Luigi; I would have given fifty thousand for it."

Luigi started back.

"And for this fifty thousand pounds' worth your excellency paid but seven shillings and sixpence!"

"Precisely."

"Your excellency spared not the man who gave you a fortune for a couple of silver coins."

"Not a bit of it, Luigi, not a bit of it! The man knew no more than I. He had learnt any better to this day. He will never know that he had lost anything. He is ignorant, stupid, blind."

"Blind, your excellency?"

"Yes, blind; not as I am, but as a fool is. It is surely no crime to take advantage of a fool, when the fool never knows his folly, eh, Luigi, is it not so? Dear me! why the deuce do you suggest that I did not act honorably? It is nonsense. All's fair in love and picture-dealing. Wheel me back, Luigi—wheel me back to my own room, and thank your stars that you are twice as wise as when you entered this door."

"I thank your excellency for the lesson."

"Years had gone by since Sir Giles Ommamey's first access of blindness. His strength had failed gradually but surely. He had grown feebler, and feebler, more and more hopelessly incapable of stopping the downhill progress of disease, and more and more conscious of the certain approach of death."

The old man, however, still clung to life. He had really little or nothing to live for, and by rights he ought to have succumbed gracefully long ago; yet he lived on.

Still once or twice a year he would make a pathetic pilgrimage to the picture-gallery 'to see for himself,' as he expressed it, "how his beloved canvases were doing."

On all such occasions Luigi, and none other, performed the part of guide and attendant, and recounted the titles and particulars of every picture in turn as he wheeled the pain-racked invalid to and fro before the walls of the saloon.

At all other times and to all other people the sacred treasure-room was closed. The public had, at last, learnt the utility of applying to be "admitted to view." Indeed, as years rolled by, the existence of the collection of pictures at Ommamey Hall began to be forgotten altogether, even by the neighbors, who had always been inclined to regard Sir Giles as little better than a madman, and his private picture-gallery as scarcely more substantial than a castle in the air.

A great commotion, therefore, was caused among the local gossips one fine morning by a report which was spread about to the effect that a stranger had arrived at the village inn and declared his intention of calling at Ommamey Hall.

The statement was perfectly well founded for the same afternoon a visitor presented himself at the door of the mansion and deliberately rang the bell. He asked for Sir Giles in the usual form, and refused to accept the answer "not at home" given to him by the footman.

"Take up my card to your master, and

ask if he will see me," ordered the stranger.

In a far and trembling for the wiggling he expected to receive, the footman complied with the request.

"Dr. Bartholomew" was the name Luigi read out from the card which the irrepressible visitor had sent in.

"Bartholomew, Bartholomew," muttered Sir Giles feebly. "Who on earth is Dr. Bartholomew?" I don't know anybody of the name of Bartholomew, do I? Stay. I remember, he is the oculist I consulted at Aix some years ago. But what on earth does he want here, Luigi?"

"There can be no doubt, your excellency, that he is an inquisitive person who wishes to see your collection of pictures."

"Wishes to see my pictures, does he? He shall not. He shall not, I say. I won't allow him on any account—not him, nor any one else. No one shall see my pictures except me and you, so long as there's a gasp in this dilapidated old body of mine, eh, Luigi?"

"Your excellency is quite right. Mistrust is the mother of safety. It is best to adhere to your fixed intention. You little know what damage this signor might try to do in the saloon. If he takes a fancy to some of your pictures he will doubtless importune you to sell them."

"Sell—sell—I—sell my pictures!" gasped Sir Giles, trembling with rage.

"Angels forbid!" replied Luigi, devoutly.

Dr. Bartholomew was therefore repulsed for that day. It was not long, however, before he returned to the charge. The very next morning, as shamelessly as before, he presented himself at the door of Ommamey Hall, and insisted that he should see Sir Giles. In vain the embarrassed man-servant repeated the formula refusing admission. Dr. Bartholomew would take no denial. Finally, Luigi was appealed to, and the stranger was asked to state the object of his visit. This he refused to do to any one but Sir Giles himself.

On learning that the doctor had no designs whatever upon the picture-gallery—indeed, was not even aware of its existence—the Italian consented to take in his card once more.

Within a few hours Dr. Bartholomew was recalled. More than that, he was received with open arms by Sir Giles, who all the prognostications and warnings of Luigi notwithstanding, agreed to submit to any operation, and any treatment, which the specialist might forthwith decide upon. But Luigi's troubles did not come alone. The following day another reflection (he deemed it) was cast upon his competence and trustworthiness; namely, by the arrival at Ommamey Hall of a trained hospital nurse, to whom the care of the master was wholly entrusted. Sir Giles banished Luigi temporarily down the back stairs, and the new-comer reigned supreme in his stead.

The operation of which Dr. Bartholomew had spoken was performed without further delay. The operator ventured to declare immediately afterward that it would prove quite successful. Some weeks, however, would elapse before the bandages could be removed from the patient's eyes, and there was nothing more to be done for the time but to nurse him carefully and wait in patience.

Meantime Luigi's health suffered to a surprising degree under suspense and anxiety. He grew nervous and irritable, pale and thin. He begged incessantly of Dr. Bartholomew to be allowed to attend on his master—a request which was persistently refused for reasons best known to the doctor.

At last the time came for the preliminary test of the success of the operation. Dr. Bartholomew decided that the bandage should now for the first time be removed from his patient's eyes. The experiment was therefore made in the darkened chamber to which Sir Giles had been confined since the operation. It revealed the fact that the old man's sight was at least partially restored. It was evident, however, that the eyes were not yet strong enough to be used freely, and that great care must be taken to prevent a relapse to the former state of blindness.

All this delay was borne by Sir Giles Ommamey with angelic patience. He com-

plied with the doctor's wishes in every particular; he did not grumble at the slow-ness of the cure, and he never attempted to forestall the proper occasion for dispensing with the bandages over his eyes. He only exacted a promise that the final test of recovery should be made in the picture-gallery, so that the first objects he beheld might be his beloved collection of paintings.

"There cannot be the least objection to that," agreed Dr. Bartholomew readily. "It will enable me to enjoy a peep at this magnificent gallery of yours, Sir Giles."

"No, no, no!" exclaimed the baronet pettishly. "You must not come into my gallery on any account. I have a prejudice against anyone, except myself and Luigi going there until I am dead, and then—why, then the whole accumulation may be burnt, for all I care."

"You don't seem to consider the feeling of posterity, Sir Giles."

"Not a rap. I didn't collect for a gaping public, but for the pure art of the thing."

"Well, if you promise not to excite yourself too much, I will give you a first look tomorrow afternoon."

"To-morrow!"

"Ah! Bless you, doctor! I can be wheeled to the gallery blindfold, and in my bath-chair by Luigi. I will remove these bandages myself. No one shall be present or accompany us. Neither you or anyone else shall ask or try to enter the gallery during my lifetime. I wish it."

"Very well, Sir Giles. I will help to enforce your conditions as far as it lies in my power to do so."

The clock went slowly around for the next twenty-four hours. To the impatient old baronet the one day seemed a whole month.

When the long-looked-for moment arrived, Luigi was not to be found.

Dr. Bartholomew, foreseeing the irritation this circumstance would cause his patient, felt greatly annoyed with the absent valet. Sir Giles became furious on hearing that no Luigi was forthcoming.

"Confound him!" he cried, "Didn't I give him the most careful and exact instructions? What the devil does he mean by it?"

"Dr. Bartholomew thereupon instituted inquiries among the servants, and presently learnt that Luigi had complained of illness about an hour before, and had hurried into the neighboring town to consult a physician."

"How very unnecessary!" commented Dr. Bartholomew. "Why did he not consult me?"

At first Sir Giles proposed to wait until Luigi's return. A few hours' delay, he said, were of no consequence. But as the afternoon wore on, and no Luigi appeared on the scene, the baronet lost all patience.

Dr. Bartholomew, fearing that the annoyance might affect the success of Sir Giles' restoration to sight, now offered himself to wheel the old gentleman into the picture-gallery, agreeing at the same time to wear a large green shade over his eyes so that the sacred treasures might not be exposed to his common gaze. To this alternative, after some further delay, and still with reluctance, Sir Giles consented.

Thereupon the doctor, having donned a large green shade that shut out all things from his view except the very floor he trod, wheeled the bath-chair to the door of the short corridor leading to the gallery. Sir Giles sat with bandaged eyes, and trembled with expectation and joy.

The physician then took the key offered him by Sir Giles; opened the outer folding-doors of the corridor, and closed and locked them behind him. Then he pushed the wheeled chair down the corridor and into the very centre of the picture-gallery. He wished to remain beside his patient to observe the result of his labors, but Sir Giles objected.

"Excuse me, Dr. Bartholomew, but my terms are final. I must enjoy my whim to the utmost. Wait without in the corridor until I call."

"Very well, Sir Giles."

Dr. Bartholomew faithfully kept his part of the agreement. He walked from the room with his eyes loyally bent on the floor. Closing the inner doors behind him,

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