

A VISIT

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I CREEP slowly up the rickety stairs, and tap gently on the little door. Somebody says "Come in", and I enter the studio,—that old familiar studio, with its low ceiling speckled with starfish and crabshells, and festooned with fishnets falling to pieces with age.

On my left is a large side-light, the lower half of which is covered by a curtain. In front of me is a small dormer window through which, far away, I see the snow-covered hills and a square patch of leaden grey water framed by the dusky buildings and the farther shore of the harbour. The walls are covered with faded tapestries and framed studies yellow with age, and the floor is a medley of Persian rugs and rag-mats. Curious pipes, swords, old-fashioned firearms, candlesticks and innumerable odds and ends lumber up the tables and shelves, or hang suspended from the walls. A Japanese warrior in black armour can be seen looming mysteriously in the fading light from the dark corner by the book-shelf. A thin layer of dust covers all. Wreaths of tobacco-smoke make fantastic shapes as they drift slowly toward the window in long streams of blue. Far away a hurdy-gurdy tinkles when not drowned by the hum of a street-car, but all the customary noises of the street are muffled and subdued by the heavy fall of snow.

He does not look up as I enter, but mumbles a welcome and goes on with his work; so I steal quietly into a corner under the eaves, pull out a torn and dusty portfolio from behind a heap of canvasses and, sitting down cross-legged on the floor, turn over the leaves. Here is a sketch made on some dimly remembered hunting trip, another made on board a coasting schooner in which he had embarked with a friend for adventure. Here are many from the Adirondacks; rambling farm-buildings and rows of bee-hives. Here is one of a beautiful young girl, perhaps some early sweetheart, who knows? I like to think so, anyhow. What marvels of delicacy and restraint, based on intimate knowledge of form! The swift-moving hand carries me through scene after scene without an apparent effort, each line living and purposeful, inimitable, as I know to my sorrow.

But the shadows are gathering quickly, and I have seen them all many times; so I will stop to look at my favourites. A little country town seen from a distance. There has just been a fall of snow, which covers everything except the little squares and triangles of walls and gables. I have seen the effect a thousand times. How does he get so much poetry into a simple little sketch? Alas! These things are at once my delight and my despair. It is too dark to see any more, so I sit and dream to the sound of the cuckoo-clock, which ticks with commendable perseverance, but always points to a quarter to eight. He winds it as regularly as he arrives in the morning, and calls it his wife.

How many years of happy industry these sketches represent,—long summers spent basking in the sunlight of some mountain hamlet or wandering along the sea shore to the sound of the booming surf; long winters dreaming and painting in the snug studio, while the snowflakes trace patterns on the window and the cold winds sigh under the eaves or rumble in the chimney.

Now he is finished and ready for our twilight talk. As usual, he begins with the present. He speaks of his picture. He is having trouble with it. It dries in; the canvas is not good. I am sympathetic, but far too bashful in the presence of superior knowledge to suggest the remedies which occur to me. But he never dwells in the present for long, and the abrupt transition to New York of the early nineties seems perfectly natural. He talks as he draws, never labouring a description or using a superfluous word, but, by suggestion and implication, forming vivid little sketches of men dead and events long past. I do not talk, but listen and dream of the life before me. Now we are in Venice, and I see the palaces glittering in the sunlight, St. Mark's, the winged lions and graceful gondolas. The central figure is a small man with a shock of black hair who struts along the Rialto, monocle in eye, swinging a gold-topped cane. We meet him again in Paris and in London, where his biting sarcasm and destructive wit create consternation in respectable academic circles.

But my mentor chooses to wander still further into the past, so real to him and becoming so to me. Now we are back in Munich an incredible number of years ago. I see the rambling old streets, with the houses leaning over until their gables almost meet, and the taverns where the students meet to drink beer and sing strange songs. I greet as old and valued friends the brilliant band of students of whom he was one, and their big shy professor who was a great artist but hated to hear about it. Youthful follies, dismal failures or happy successes follow one another with ever-sustained

interest, until the well of reminiscence runs dry for the moment and he falls into silent thought. He sits silhouetted against the twilight sky, his features half-obliterated looking to my youthful eyes like a shade of the past. His voice is stilled, but a calm and beautiful spirit whispers to me from every murky corner, telling me that dreams do come true and that this way of life may be mine if I have the courage to take it. "Life is short, then live while ye may", says the spirit. "Let us go", says the shade. I awake with a thrill and walk slowly to the door while he pulls on his coat.

We pass out into the winter night, leaving the Japanese warrior to his gloomy vigil, guarding the precious relics of a life well lived. Our cheeks tingle from contact with the icy cold. Sleigh bells jingle, and footsteps are scarcely audible although the streets are crowded. Merry voices ring clear and sharp on the cold still air, but I do not hear them. Christmas shoppers laden with bundles jostle me at every corner, but I do not see them. I am walking alone among the stars.