

The Sweet o' the Year

By Ella Hepworth Dixon

I^NDOORS, in the austere northern light of the studio, one hardly realised that the trees on the boulevard were all a-flutter in their pale green garments, that outside, all over Paris, the fairy-tale of spring was being told. The only vernal sound which the painter could hear as he worked, was the monotonous cooing of a pair of ring-doves, whose cage hung at the end of the passage, at an open door which gave on a strip of sun-flooded court. Intermittently, he could hear, too, the shuffling of a pair of feet—feet which pattered about in the aimless way of the old and tired. The familiar sound brought up a vision of Virginie, the woman who swept out the studio, kept the models from the door, and made him an excellent *tisane* when he was out of sorts. Yes, Virginie certainly had her uses, although she was old, and shrivelled and unsightly. The young man hummed a love-song of Chaminade's as he stepped away from his picture, screwing up his eyes the better to judge of the values. Poor, bent old Virginie, with the failing memory, the parchment skin, and the formless lips! He was sorry for women—even for old women. Being a Frenchman, he had an innately tender regard for the sex.

“The world is made for men,” he said to himself, “*tiens*, I am glad I was born a man.”

And

And all the while Virginie, busy among her pots and pans at the end of the passage, was thinking about her master. She was proud of his talent, of his success, above all, of his youth and good looks. She rejoiced that, although M. Georges was barely thirty, he was already *hors concours* at the Salon, that he could afford so big a studio. The young men made more money nowadays. . . . Why, it was a finer atelier than *he* used to have—the greatest painter of his day in France, the famous Jean Vaillant.

The stove had not yet been lighted, and, in spite of the sunshine outside, it was chilly in the kitchen, where Virginie was scouring the pans. At seventy, after a lifetime of anxiety and of toil; of rising at the dawn, of scrubbing, cleaning, cooking, washing: at seventy, one has no longer much warmth in one's veins. And then the blond, spring sunshine only made her feel dizzy; she had a cough which troubled her, and queer pains in her bones. . . . "Maybe," she nodded to herself, "that it is not for long that I am here. Poor M. Georges."

An imperious ring at the outer bell made her hurry to the door. Her face fell as she encountered a fantastic hat loaded with lilac, a fresh spring toilet, a pair of handsome eyes, and a triumphant smile. She began to grumble.

"M. Georges was at home, yes. But he was busy. He was hard at work on a picture. The back-ground of a portrait which must be finished this week. Could not Mademoiselle call again?"

"Ah, but he will see me," declared the Lilac Hat, pushing by, and leaving a pungent odour of chypre behind her as she passed, with her rustling silk linings and her overpowering air of femininity. Virginie shuffled after her to the studio door.

"Mlle. Rose," she announced.

The young man threw down his palette and brushes, and turned, his face alight.

As Virginie went back alone down the narrow passage, there was a curious silence in the atelier, broken, at last, by the murmur of soft, happy voices.

"Tas de saletés," grumbled Virginie, "she'll not let him do any more work to-day." A strange spasm of jealousy seized her. The little incident—though she had often witnessed it before—seemed somehow to accentuate to-day her own senility, her failing powers, her rapid detachment from life. It reminded her, too, of things that had occurred half a century ago. . . . Well, she would like to show M. Georges that she, too. . . . At any rate, she had the letters still; she would give them to him this afternoon—when Mlle. Rose had gone, before he went out. After all, who should have them except M. Georges? He, at least, would keep them if anything happened to her. . . . Suddenly the old woman felt a lump at her throat, a curious, choking sensation. She stepped to the window, and pushed it open.

Outside, a light easterly wind was shaking an almond-tree in full blossom, making a fluttering pink cloud against the clear April sky. The ring-doves in their wicker cage were cooing in an amorous ecstasy. . . .

Presently, with her heavy step, she turned into the cupboard which served her for a bed-room. In one corner stood a locked box, dusty with disuse, at which she fumbled nervously with a rusty key. Then, with palsied, trembling fingers, she drew out an ancient packet of letters, tied with a ribbon which had perhaps once been rose-coloured.

By and bye, when the light had lessened, Virginie knocked timidly at the studio-door. Mlle. Rose had been gone some time now, yet there still hung about the room a faint odour of chypre.

"Mais entrez donc, ma vieille!" called out the young painter,
kindly,

kindly, glancing over his shoulder as he stood at his easel. "What is it that you want?"

"Nothing, M. Georges. It is something that I thought you might like to have. You collect such things—letters, autographs. And you, too, are an artist. One day—who knows—you may be as great as him?"

He came forward, surprised, and took the bundle of letters from her shaking fingers—dingy, folded sheets of paper, which had once been fastened by wafers, and which bore the dates of April and May, 1846. Running his eye across some of the yellow pages, covered with faded ink, he glanced at the signatures. "Why, they are priceless!" he cried. "Love-letters from Jean Vaillant? Where, in Heaven's name, did you get them, Virginie?"

"But they are mine! Yes, yes, M. Jean wrote them to me. Ah, but I did not always sweep studios and open doors. . . . I was pretty once, M. Georges. I was a model. He chose me for his *Baigneuse*. It is in the Luxembourg now; they say it will be in the Louvre. . . . M. Jean was very fond of me. . . . *Dame!* that is all nearly fifty years ago, now," she muttered, stooping, with the patient humility of the poor, to pick up some of the yellow sheets which had fallen to the ground.

He knelt down, too, and helped to collect the letters.

"But read them, M. Georges!" A rosy flush of belated feminine pride had crept over her shrunken cheeks. He began to read aloud the letter he held in his hand. It was an intimate revelation of the heart of him whom the younger generation spoke of always as the Master.

"*I want to tell you again how your eyes haunt me, and how I delight in your beauty. . . .*"

She stood there timidly, as he read aloud, with her seamed face, and her little, faded eyes fixed on her master. A white cap was

tied

tied beneath her shrivelled chin; a loose camisole covered her shrunken chest, a meagre petticoat revealed her bony ankles.

"Your beauty, which is so strangely complex, for it has not only a child's sweetness, but a woman's seduction. Ah, you are indeed an exquisite creature. . . ."

He raised his eyes and looked at the familiar figure of Virginie. . . . All at once the bent, unsightly form seemed invested with the sweetness, the purity, the dignity of the young girl; round her head, with its sparse white hair, there rested, for an instant, the aureole of the woman who is beloved.

"Whether you wish it or no, you will be for ever my inspiration, my dream, my reward. I was like a man asleep, and you, Virginie, have awoken me."

A feeble smile of satisfied vanity flickered over the old woman's face. She nodded her head as he went on reading, her knotted hands twisted nervously together. Time, with his corroding finger, had seared and branded her out of all semblance of a woman. She represented nothing but the long, the inexorable degradation of life.

"Nothing will ever make me forget the unearthly beauty of your face, nor the hours we have passed together. . . ."

Gently the young man laid the letter down. His eyes had filled with tears; he could no longer see the words. And then, reverently, he folded it with the rest, and, opening the drawer of an antique cabinet, he locked his new-found treasures up.

"Sapristi! Mais ce n'est pas amusant—la vie," he muttered, watching the bent figure of the old woman as she passed, presently, mumbling and nodding, out of the studio, to be swallowed up in the vague shadows of the passage. Suddenly it felt cold and dismal in the great room.

"Non, ce n'est pas gaie, la vie," he repeated; "at least, not when

when we live too long. Well, let us make haste to amuse ourselves while we are young."

Rapidly he cleaned up his palette, and put on another coat. Rose had promised to wait for him for dinner, he remembered, and there had even been talk of a ball in the Quartier.

Virginie was patching an old skirt as he passed out by the little kitchen. It had turned much colder, and she had drawn up a chair near the stove.

Gently, deferentially, he took her withered hand and kissed it.

"Hommage à la maîtresse de Jean Vaillant," he murmured gaily. "Has she any commission for her humble servant?"

The old woman's eyes lit up. Outside, there was already something of the cold serenity of evening in the still, primrose-coloured sky. The ring-doves were silent now, huddled together in their wicker cage, their beaks tucked beneath their wings.

"If monsieur," she said humbly, "would give himself the trouble to bring me a small bottle of some cordial? *Dame!* In the spring one feels chilly, M. Georges. . . . Yes, the old feel chilly in the spring."