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THE MINOR POET.

ARTHUR MANNINGHAM was a minor poet. But that was forty years ago; and in those younger days the minor poet had not yet become a public nuisance, as at our end of the century. Besides, he enjoyed the friendship of the Great Poet. The Great Poet was fond of him. He recognized in his friend, as he often remarked, the rare secondary gift of high critical appreciativeness. Whenever the Great Poet produced a noble work, Arthur Manningham was always the first man in England to whose eye he submitted the unprinted copy. It was Arthur who made those admirable suggestions in red pencil so familiar to collectors of the Great Poet's manuscripts; and the curious, who have compared these manuscripts with the final published forms of the Siegfried poems, are equally familiar with the further fact that Arthur Manningham's corrections almost always commended themselves to his distinguished companion. It was delightful to see the two out on the moors together; the great man laying down the law, as was his wont, in his double-bass voice, and Arthur, by his side, bending forward to listen rapt to the deep music that fell from the master's lips with all a disciple's ardour.

And Arthur, too, was a poet. Not great, but true; a minor poet. For ten years he worked hard at some few dozen lyrics, which he polished and repolished in his intervals of leisure with Horatian assiduity. One or two of them he rejected in time as unworthy the world's ear, for he was fastidious of his own work as of the work of others; the rest he perfected till, for trifles that they were, they had almost reached his own high standard of perfection. Almost, not quite, for no work of his own ever absolutely satisfied him. Tremulously and timidly, at last he published. He distrusted his powers even then. "But, perhaps," he said to himself with a timorous smile, "if there's anything in them the Great Poet's friendship may avail me somewhat!"

When, in the fulness of time, his thin volume appeared, clad in the grass-green binding that then overgrew all Parnassus, he sent the very first copy of his timid-winged fledgeling to the Great Poet. And, after that, he waited.

The Great Poet did not desert his friend. By the very next post came a letter in the well-known hand—broad, black-dashed, vigorous. The Great Poet's strong virility pervaded even his handwriting. Arthur Manningham tore it open with eager hands. What judgment had the Bard to pass on the work of the minor singer?

"My dear Arthur," the letter began, "I have just now received your delightful-looking volume, 'Phyllis's Garden.' I didn't till this moment know you too were among the Immortals. I look forward to reading it with the greatest pleasure, and shall hazard my opinion of your sister Muse when I next have the happiness of seeing you amongst us. But why make her anonymous? Surely your name, so well known at the clubs, would have carried due weight with our captious critics!"

That was all. No more. Arthur waited with deep suspense for the Great Poet's final opinion. He knew the Bard could make or mar any man. A week passed—two weeks—three—four—and yet no letter. At last, one morning, an envelope bearing the Savernake post-mark! (The Great Poet, you recollect, lived for years at Savernake.) It was in his wife's hand; but—yes—that's well!—'twas an invitation to go down there. Arthur went, all trembling. To-day should decide his poor Muse's fate; to-day he should know if he were poet or poetaster!

The Bard received him open-armed; talked of his own new tragedy. All afternoon they paced the forest together; the Great Poet talked on—but never of Arthur's verses. He spoke kindly to his friend; inquired after his health; suspected, as usual, he'd been overworking himself. This daily journalism, you know, is so very exacting! Not a word of "Phyllis's Garden." "He's waiting," thought Arthur, "to discuss it after dinner."

And after dinner, in effect, the Great Poet button-holed him confidentially into the library. "I've something special I want to talk over with you," he said, looking interested.

Arthur's heart gave a thump. "Ha! He likes my verses!"

The Great Poet sat down—and produced his own tragedy!

'Twas a tragedy for Arthur, too. He could hardly contain himself. The Bard had never known his friend's criticism so

weak, so vacillating, so pointless. He didn't seem to listen, that was really the fact; he was evidently preoccupied. "Well, well," the Great Poet thought, in his tolerant way, "men are all so petty! They're often so engrossed with their own small affairs that they have no time to bestow on the biggest and most important affairs of others!"

And from that day forth Arthur Manningham never heard another word, by mouth or pen, from the Great Poet, of his poor little lyrics. He had but one guess to make; his friend had read them, found the verse poor stuff, and, wishing to spare his sensitive feelings, avoided speaking to him of his utter failure.

The press, that dispenser of modern laurels, dismissed him in half a dozen frigid lines—"Very tolerable rhyme," "Fair minor poetry."

Forty years passed. It took Arthur Manningham just forty years of his life to get through them. He wrote no more. He had given the world his best, and the world rejected it. He knew he could never do better than he had done. Why seek to multiply suspense and failure?

He lived meanwhile—or starved—on daily journalism. He never married; who could marry on that pittance? There had been a Phyllis once: she accepted an attorney. His love died down; but he had still the Great Poet's friendship to console him.

One day when the broken soul was over seventy, and weak, and ill, and wearied out, and dying, a letter came in a crested envelope from the Great Poet, now rich and mighty, and the refuser of a baronetcy.

"MY DEAR ARTHUR," it said, just as friendly as ever, "I send you herewith a charming wee volume of fugitive verse by a forgotten author—middle of the century—name unknown, but inspiration undeniable—which our friend the Critic, ransacking the bookstalls, quite lately unearthed for me. I'm sure you'll like it, for the verse has that ring and all those delicate qualities which I know you appreciate more than any man living. They're true little gems. I'm simply charmed with them. Pray read and treasure.

"Yours ever,
"THE POET."

With trembling fingers of presentiment, the worn old man untied the knotted string, and stared hard at the volume. He knew it at a glance. It was "*Phyllis's Garden*"!

Weak and ill as he was, he took the first train that would bring him down to the Great Poet's great new house at Crowborough. With a burning heart he dragged himself to the door; who was *he* that he should ride? and a fly three shillings! The Bard was at home. Arthur Manningham staggered in. Without one spoken word, he seized his friend's arm, and pulled him on to the library. There, in a well-known corner, he selected from a specially dusty shelf a well-known book, whose place he had often noted in his mind before, but which never till that day had he ventured to take down. He took it down now, and handed it—all uncut as it was—to the Great Poet. The Bard opened the page wondering. On the fly-leaf he read in Arthur Manningham's hand these few short words, "To the Prince of Poets, from his affectionate and confiding friend, the Author."

"You promised you'd read it," Arthur Manningham faltered out; "and now, I see, you've kept your promise!"

He died that night in the Great Poet's arms. And the world has taken six editions since of "*Phyllis's Garden*."

Transcriber's Note

This text has been preserved as in the original, including archaic and inconsistent spelling, punctuation and grammar, except that obvious printer's errors have been silently corrected.

[The end of *The Minor Poet* by Grant Allen]