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## *THE POT-BOILER.*

ERNEST GREY WAS an inspired painter. Therefore he was employed to paint portraits of insipid little girls in black-silk stockings, and to produce uninteresting domestic groups, of which a fat and smiling baby of British respectability formed the central figure.

He didn't like it, of course. Pegasus never does like being harnessed to the paternal go-cart. But being a philosopher in his way, and having a wife and child to keep, he dragged it none the less, with as good a grace as could reasonably be expected from such celestial mettle. The wife, in fact, formed the familiar model for the British mother in his Academy pictures, while little Joan (with bare legs) sat placidly for the perennial and annual baby. Each year, as observant critics might have noticed, that baby grew steadily a twelvemonth older. But there were no observant critics for Ernest Grey's pictures: the craft were all too busy inspecting the canvas of made reputations to find time on hand for spying out merit in the struggling work of unknown beginners. It's an exploded fallacy of the past to suppose that insight and initiative are the true critic's hallmark. Why go out of your way to see good points in unknown men, when you can earn your three guineas so much more surely and simply by sticking to the good points that everybody recognizes? The way to gain a reputation for critical power nowadays is, to say in charming and pellucid language what everybody regards as the proper thing to say about established favourites. You voice the popular taste in the very best English.

But Ernest Grey had ideals, for all that. How poor a creature the artist must be who doesn't teem with unrealized and unrealizable ideals! All the while that he painted the insipid little girls in the impeccable stockings, very neatly gartered, he was feeding his soul with a tacit undercurrent of divine fancy. He had another world than this of ours, in which he lived by turns—a strange world of pure art, where all was profound, mysterious, magical, beautiful. Idyls of Celtic fancy floated visible on the air before his mind's eye. Great palaces reared themselves like exhalations on the waste ground by Bedford Park. Fair white maidens moved slow, with measured tread, across his imagined canvas. What pictures he might paint—if only somebody would pay him for painting them! He revelled in designing these impossible works. His scenery should all lie in the Lost Land of Lyonesse. A spell as of Merlin should brood, half-seen, over his dreamy cloisters. The carved capitals of his pilasters should point to something deeper than mere handicraftsman's workmanship; his brocades and his fringes should breathe and live; his arabesques and his fretwork, his tracery and his moulding, should be instinct with soul and with indefinite yearning. The light that never was on sea or land should flood his landscape. In the pictures he had never painted, perhaps never would paint, ornament and decoration were lavished in abundance; design ran riot; onyx and lapis lazuli, chrysolite and chalcedony, beryl and jacinth, studded his jewelled bowls and his quaintly-wrought scabbards; but all to enrich and enforce one fair central idea, to add noble attire and noble array to that which was itself already noble and beautiful. No frippery should intrude. All this wealth of detail should be subservient in due place to some glorious thought, some ray of that divine sadness that touches nearest the deep heart of man.

So he said to himself in his day-dreams. But life is not day-dream. Life, alas! is very solid reality. While Ernest Grey nourished his secret soul with such visions of beauty, he employed his deft fingers in painting spindle legs, ever fresh in number, yet ever the same in kind, and unanimously clad in immaculate spun-silk stockings. No hosier was better up in all the varieties of spun silk than that inspired painter. 'Tis the way of the world, you know—our industrial world of supply and demand—to harness its blood-horses to London hansoms.

After all, he was working for Baby Joan and Bertha. (Bertha was the sort of name most specially in vogue when his wife was a girl; it had got to Joan and Joyce by the date of the baby.) They lived together in a very small house at Bedford Park—so small, Bertha said, that when a visitor dropped in they bulged out at the windows.

But Ernest Grey had a friend better off than himself—a man whose future was already assured him—a long-haired proprietor who wrote minor verse which the world was one day to wake up and find famous. He was tall and thin, and loosely knit, and looked as if he'd been run up by contract. His name was Bernard Hume; he claimed indirect descent from the philosopher who demolished everything. Unlike his collateral ancestor, however, Bernard Hume had faith, a great deal of faith—first of all in himself, and after that in every one else who shared the honour of his acquaintance. This was an amiable trait on Bernard's part, for, as a rule, men who believe in themselves complete their simple creed

with that solitary article. With Bernard Hume, on the contrary, egotism took a more expanded and expansive form—it spread itself thin over the entire *entourage*. He thought there was always a great deal in any one who happened to inspire him with a personal fancy. “I like this man,” he said to himself virtually, “therefore he must be a very superior soul, else how could he have succeeded in attracting the attention of so sound a critic and judge of human nature?”

Of all Bernard Hume’s friends, however, there was not one in whom he believed more profoundly than the inspired painter. “Ernest Grey,” he used to say, “if only he’d retire from the stocking-trade and give free play to his fancy, would bring the sweat, I tell you, into that brow of Burne-Jones’s. (You think the phrase vulgar? Settle the question by all means, then, with Browning, who invented it!) He’s a born idealist, is Grey—a direct descendant of Lippi and Botticelli, pitchforked, by circumstances over which he has no control, into the modern hosiery business. If only he could *paint* those lovely things he draws so beautifully! Why, he showed me some sketches the other day for unrealized pictures, first studies for dreams of pure form and colour—fair virgins that flit, white-armed, through spacious halls—plaintive, melancholy, passionate, mystical. One of them was superb. An Arthurian uncertainty enveloped the scene. The touch of a wizard had made all things in it suffer a beautiful change. It was life with the halo on—life as the boy in Wordsworth’s “Ode on Immortality” must surely have seen it—life in the glow of a poet’s day-dream. A world of pure phantasy, lighted up from above with glancing colour. A world whose exact date is *once upon a time*. A world whose precise place is in the left-hand corner of the land of fairy-tales. If only Ernest Grey would paint like that, he might fail for to-day; he might fail for to-morrow; his wife and child might starve and die; he might fall himself exhausted in the gutter—but his place hereafter would be among the immortals.”

Ernest heard him talk so at times—and went on with the detail of the left stocking. It’s easy enough to let some other divine genius’s wife and child starve to death for the sake of posterity; but when it comes to your own, *pardi!* it’s by no means so simple. Posterity then becomes a very small affair, bar one component member. But Bernard Hume was a bachelor.

One afternoon Ernest was smoking his meditative pipe in the bare, small studio—he allowed himself a pipe; ’twas his one slight luxury—when Bernard Hume, all fiery-eyed, strolled in unexpectedly. Bernard Hume was a frequent and a welcome visitor. ’Tis not in human nature not to like deft flattery, especially on the points you believe to be your strongest. You may be ever so modest a man in the abstract, and under normal conditions of opposition and failure; but when a friend begins to praise your work to your face, and to find in it the qualities you like the best yourself, why, hang it all! you stand back a bit, and gaze at it with your head just a trifle on one side, and say to your own soul in an unuttered aside, “Well, after all, I’m a diffident sort of a fellow, and I distrust my own products, but it’s quite true what he says—there *is* a deal of fine feeling and fine painting in the reflection of those nude limbs in that limpid water; and what could be more exquisite, though I did it myself, than the gracious curl of those lithe festoons of living honeysuckle?”

So Bernard was a favourite at the little house in Bedford Park. Even Bertha liked him, and was proud of his opinion of Ernest’s genius, though she wished he didn’t try to distract dear Ernest so much from serious work to mere speculative fancies.

On this particular afternoon, however, Bernard had dropped in of malice prepense, and in pursuance of a deep-laid scheme against Bertha’s happiness. The fact is, he had been reading Browning’s “Andrea del Sarto” the night before, and, much impressed by that vigorous diatribe against all forms of pot-boiling, he had come round to put out poor Bertha’s smouldering kitchen-fire for ever. He knew the moment had now arrived when Ernest should be goaded on into letting his wife and child starve for the benefit of humanity; and he felt like a missionary sent out on purpose, by some Society for the Propagation of the *Æsthetic Gospel*, to convert the poor benighted pot-boiler from the whole base cult of the scullery pipkin.

He came, indeed, at a propitious moment. Ernest had just dismissed the model who sat for the elder daughter in his new Academy picture of “Papa’s Return,” and was then engaged in adding a few leisurely touches haphazard to little Joan’s arms as the crowing baby. (Papa himself stood outside the frame; not even the worship of the simmering saucepan itself could induce Ernest Grey to include in his canvas the jocund figure of the regressive stockbroker.) Bernard Hume sat down, and after the usual interchange of meteorological opinion, drew forth from his pocket a small brown-covered volume. Bertha trembled in her chair; she knew well what was in store for them: ’twas the “Selections from Browning,”—homœopathic dose for the general public. *Habitués* absorb him whole in fifteen volumes.

“I was reading a piece of Browning’s last night,” Bernard began tentatively; “his ‘Andrea del Sarto’—do you know it, Mrs. Grey?—it impresses me immensely. I was so struck with it, indeed, that I wanted to come round and read it over to Ernest this afternoon. I thought it might be—well, suggestive to him in his work, don’t you know.” And he glanced askance at that hostile Bertha. So very unreasonable of a genius’s wife not to wish to starve, with her baby in her arms, for the sake of high art, and her husband, and posterity!

Bertha nodded a grudging assent; and Bernard, drawing breath, settled down in a chair and began to read that famous poem, which was to act, he hoped, as a goad to Ernest Grey’s seared artistic conscience.

Once or twice, to be sure, Bernard winced not a little at the words he had to read—they were so *very* personal:—

“Some women do so. Had the mouth there urged,  
‘God and the glory: never care for gain!  
The present by the future, what is that?  
Live for fame, side by side with Agnolo!  
Rafael is waiting: up to God all three!’  
I might have done it for you. So it seems.  
Perhaps not. All is as God overrules.  
Besides, incentives come from the soul’s self;  
The rest avail not. Why do I need you?  
What wife had Rafael or has Agnolo?  
In this world, who can do a thing will not;  
And who would do it cannot, I perceive.”

That was tolerably plain—almost rude, he felt, now he came to read it with Bertha actually by his side. Yet still he persisted through all that magnificent special pleading of the case for posterity and high art against wife and children—persisted to the bitter end, in spite of everything. He never flinched one moment. He read it all out—all, all—every word of it—“We might have risen to Rafael, you and I,” and all the rest of it. His voice quivered a little—only a little—as he poured forth those last few lines:—

“Four great walls in the New Jerusalem,  
Meted on each side by the angel’s reed,  
For Leonard, Rafael, Agnolo, and me  
To cover—the three first without a wife,  
While I have mine. So—still they overcome,  
Because there’s still Lucrezia,—as I choose.”

But he read it out for all that, with eyes glancing askance (at the commas) on Bertha’s fiery face, and lips that trembled with the solemnity of the occasion.

The pot-boiler’s heart was touched. For, mind you, it’s easy to touch every artist’s artistic conscience. You only ask him to do the thing he best loves doing.

When Bernard Hume ceased there was a pause for a few minutes—a terrible pause. Then Bertha rose slowly, and went over to her husband. In spite of Bernard’s presence, she kissed him twice on the forehead. Then she burst into tears, and rushed from the room wildly.

All that night she hardly slept. Next morning she rose, determined, whatever she did, never for one moment to interfere with Ernest’s individuality.

Throughout the day she avoided the studio studiously. At eleven the model who sat for the elder sister in “Papa’s Return” came in as usual. She was very much surprised to find Ernest Grey engaged on a large drawing which had been lying about the studio for months unfinished. It represented, as she remarked to herself, among a crowd of other figures, a male model in armour pushing his way through a dense wood towards a floating female model in insufficient drapery. But Ernest himself called it “The Quest of the Ideal.”

She stood for a minute irresolute. Ernest Grey meanwhile surveyed her critically. Yes, he thought so—she would do. No more the elder sister in “Papa’s Return,” but the Elusive herself in “The Quest of the Ideal.”

The model looked at him in surprise. She was a beautiful girl, with a face of refined and spiritual beauty. “Why, Mr. Grey,” she cried, taken aback, “you don’t mean to say you’re not goin’ on with your Academy picture?”

“This *is* my Academy picture,” Ernest Grey answered gravely. “I’ve discarded the other one. It never was really mine. I’m giving up the hosiery business.”

The model looked aghast. “And it *was* so lovely!” she cried, all regrets. “That dear, sweet baby! and her so pleased, too, at her pa coming ’ome again!”

Ernest answered only by bringing out a piece of thin, creamy-white drapery. “I shall want you to wear this,” he said; “just so, as in the sketch. I think you’ll do admirably for the central figure.”

The model demurred a little—the undress was rather more than she had yet been used to. She sat for head and shoulders or draped figure only. “I think,” she said with decision, “you’d better get another lady.”

But Ernest insisted. He was hot for high art now; and after a short hesitation, the model consented. It was no more, he pointed out, than evening-dress permits the most modest maiden. All on fire with his new departure, Ernest began a study of her head and shoulders then and there—the head and shoulders of the Eternal Elusive.

He wrought at it with a will. He was inspired and eager. To be sure, it was an awkward moment to begin an experiment, with the rent just due and no cash in hand to pay it, while the baker was clamouring hard for his last month’s money. “But things like that, you know, must be *Before* a famous victory!” Nothing venture, nothing have. There would still be just time to complete the study, at least, before Sending-in Day; and if somebody took a fancy to his very first attempt at a serious picture, why—farewell for ever to the spun-silk stocking trade!

For a week he worked away by himself in the studio. Bertha never came near the room, though she shuddered to herself to think what Ernest was doing. But she had made up her mind, once for all, after hearing Bernard Hume read Browning’s “Andrea,” never again to interfere with her husband’s individuality. As for the model, her grief was simple and unaffected. She couldn’t think how Mr. Grey, and him so clever, too, could ever desert that dear, sweet baby in “Papa’s Return” for all them dreadful gashly men and un’olesome women. He was making such a fright of her for his figger of the Eloosive as she’d be ashamed to acknowledge to any of her friends it was her that sat to him for it. A pretty girl don’t like to be painted into a fright like that, with her ’air all streamin’ loose like a patient at Colney ’Atch, and her clothes fallin’ off, quite casual-like, be’ind her!

About Friday Bernard Hume called in. The model expected him to disapprove most violently. But when he saw the drawing, and still more the study, as far as it had gone—for Ernest, knowing exactly what effect he meant to produce, had worked at the head and arms with surprising rapidity—he was in visible raptures. He stood long and gazed at it. “Why, Grey,” he cried, standing back a little, and shading his eyes with his hand, “it’s simply and solely the incarnate spirit of the nineteenth century. The nineteenth century in its higher and purer avatar; deep-questioning, mystic, uncertain, rudderless. Faith gone; humanity left; heaven lost; earth realized as man’s true home and sole hope for the future! Those sad eyes of your wan maidens gaze forth straight upon the infinite. Those bronzed faces of your mailed knights have confronted strange doubts and closed hard with nameless terrors. There’s a pathos in it all—a—what shall I call it?—a something inexpressible; a pessimism, a meliorism, an obstinate questioning of invisible things, that no age but this age of ours could possibly have compassed. Who, save you, could have put so much intense spirituality into the broidery of a robe, could have touched with such sacred and indefinable sadness the frayed fringe of a knightly doublet?”

As he spoke, Ernest gazed at his own work, in love with it. The criticism charmed him. It was just the very thing he’d have said of it himself, if it had been somebody else’s; only he couldn’t have put it in such glowing language. It’s delightful to hear your work so justly appraised by a sympathetic soul; it makes a modest man think a great deal better than he could ever otherwise think of his own poor little performances. But most modest men, alas! have no Bernard Hume at hand to applaud their efforts. The Bernard Humes of this world are all busily engaged in booming the noisy, successful self-advertisers.

The model looked up with a dissatisfied air. "I don't like it," she said, grumbling internally. "It makes me look as if I wanted a blue-pill. It ain't 'arf so pretty as 'Papa's Return,' and it's my belief it ain't 'arf so sellin' either."

"Pretty!" Bernard Hume responded with profound contempt. "Well, the sole object of art is not, I should say, to be merely pretty. And as for selling—well, no, I dare say it won't *sell*. But what does that matter? It's a beautiful work, and it does full justice to Mr. Grey's imaginative faculty. There's not another man in England to-day who could possibly paint it."

The model said nothing, but she thought the more. She thought, among other things, that to her it *did* matter; for, in the first place, a painter who doesn't sell isn't likely to be able to pay his models; and, in the second place, no self-respecting girl cares to sit very long for unsaleable pictures. It interferes, of course, with her market value. Who's going to employ an unsuccessful man's model?

For a week Ernest toiled on almost without stopping, but it was easy toil compared to the stocking trade. The study grew apace under his eager fingers; the model declared confidentially to her family he was ruining her prospects. "I'm as yellow as a guinea," she said; "and as for expression, why, you'd think I was goin' to die in about three weeks in a gallopin' consumption." Not such the elder sister in "Papa's Return"—that rosy-cheeked, round-faced, English middle-class girl whom Ernest had elaborated by his Protean art out of the features and form of the self-same model.

At the end of the week he was working hard in his studio one evening to save the last ray of departing sunlight, when Bertha burst in suddenly with a very scared face. "Oh, Ernest!" she cried, "do come up and look at Joan. She seems so ill. I can't think what's the matter with her."

Ernest flung down his brush, and forgot in a moment, as a father will, all about the Elusive. It eluded him instantly. He followed Bertha to the little room at the top of the house that served as nursery. ("Keep your child always," he used to say, "as near as you can to heaven.") Little Joan, just three years old at that time, lay listless and glassy-eyed in the nurse's arms. Ernest looked at her with a vague foreboding of evil. He saw at once she was very ill. "This is serious," he said in a low voice. "I must go for the doctor."

When the doctor came, discreetly uncertain, he shook his head and looked wise, and declined to commit himself. He was rather of opinion, though, it might turn out to be scarlet fever.

Scarlet fever! Bertha's heart stood still in her bosom, and so did Ernest's. For the next ten days the model had holiday; the Elusive was permitted to elude unchased; the studio was forsaken day and night for the nursery. It was a very bad case, and they fought it all along the line, inch by inch, unflinchingly. Poor little Joan was very ill indeed. It made Ernest's heart bleed to see her chubby small face grow so thin and yet so fiery. Night after night they sat up and watched. What did Ernest care now for art or the ideal? That one little atomy of solid round flesh was more to him than all the greatest pictures in Christendom. "Rafael did this, Andrea painted that!" Ah, God! what did it matter, with little Joan's life hanging poised in the balance between life and death, and little Joan's unseeing eyes turned upward, white between the eyelids, toward the great blank ceiling? If Joan were to die, what would be art or posterity? The sun in the heavens might shine on as before, but the sun in Ernest and Bertha's life would have faded out utterly.

At last the crisis came. "If she gets through to-night," the doctor said in his calm way, as though he were talking of somebody else's baby, "the danger's practically over. All my patients in the present epidemic who've passed this stage have recovered without difficulty."

They watched and waited through that livelong night in breathless suspense and terror and agony. You who are parents know well what it means. Why try to tell others? *They* could never understand; and if they could, why, heaven forbid we should harrow them as we ourselves have been harrowed.

At last, towards morning, little Joan dropped asleep. A sweet, deep sleep. Her breathing was regular. Father and mother fell mute into one another's arms. Their tears mingled. They dared not utter one word, but they cried long and silently.

From that moment, as the doctor had predicted, little Joan grew rapidly stronger and better. In a week she was able to go out for a drive—in a hansom, of course—no carriages for the struggling! Exchequer, much depleted by expenses of illness, felt even that hansom a distinct strain upon it.

Next morning Ernest had heart enough to begin work again. He sent word round accordingly to the model.

In the course of the day Bernard Hume dropped in. He was anxious to see how the Ideal and the Elusive got on after the crisis. He surprised Ernest at his easel. "Hullo!" he cried with a little start, straightening his long spine, "what does all this mean, Grey? You don't mean to say you're back at 'Papa's Return'? Have you yielded once more to Gath and Askelon?"

"No," Ernest answered firmly, looking him back in the face, "I've yielded to Duty. You can go now, Miss Baker. I've done about as much as I'm good for to-day. My hand's too shaky. And now, Hume, I'll speak out to you. All these days and nights while little Joan's been ill I've thought it all over and realized to myself which is the truest heroism. It's very specious and very fine to talk in deep bass about the talents that God has bestowed upon one in trust for humanity. I can talk all that stuff any day with the best of you. But I've married Bertha, and I've helped to put little Joan into the world, and I'm responsible to them for their daily bread, their life and happiness. It may be heroic to despise comfort and fame and wealth and security for the sake of high art and the best that's in one. I dare say it is; but I'm sure it's a long way more heroic still to do work one doesn't want to do for wife and children. It's easy enough to follow one's own natural bent: I was perfectly happy—serenely happy—those seven days I painted away at the Elusive. But it's very hard indeed to give all that up for the sake of duty. What you came to preach to me was only a peculiarly seductive form of self-indulgence—the indulgence of one's highest and truest self, but still self-indulgence. If I'd followed you, everybody would have praised and admired my single-hearted devotion to the cause of art; but Joan and Bertha would have paid for it. No man can make a public for anything new and personal in any art whatever without waiting and educating his public for years. If he's rich, he can afford to wait and educate it, as your own friend Browning did. If he's a bachelor, rich or poor, he can still afford to do it, because nobody but himself need suffer for it with him. But if he's poor and married—ah, then it's quite different. He has given hostages to fortune; he has no right to think first of anything at all but the claims of his wife and children upon him. I call it more heroic, then, to work at any such honest craft as will ensure their livelihood, than to go astray after the Ashtaroth of specious ideals such as you set before me."

Bernard Hume's lip curled. This was what the Church knows as Invincible Ignorance. He had done his best for the man, and the old Adam had conquered. "And what are you going to do," he asked with a contemptuous smile, "about 'The Quest of the Ideal'?"

Ernest laid down his palette, and thrust his hand silently into his trousers pocket. He drew forth a knife, and opened it deliberately. Then, without a single word, he walked across the floor to the Study of the Elusive. With one ruthless cut he slashed the canvas across from corner to corner. Then he slashed the two cut pieces again transversely. After that he took down the drawing of the design from the smaller easel, and solemnly thrust it into the studio fire. It burnt by slow degrees, for the cardboard was thick. His heart beat hard. As long as it smouldered he watched it intently. As the last of the mailed knights disappeared in white smoke up the studio chimney he drew a long breath. "Good-bye," he said in a choking voice; "Good-bye to the Ideal."

"And good-bye to *you*," Bernard Hume made answer, "for I call it desecration."

Bernard Hume is now of opinion that he used once vastly to overrate Ernest Grey's capabilities. The man had talent, perhaps—some grain of mere talent—but never genius. As for Ernest, he has toiled on ever since, more or less contentedly (probably less), at the hosiery business, and makes quite a decent living now out of his portraits of children and his domestic figure-pieces. The model considers them all really charming.

It's everybody's case, of course; but still—it's a tragedy.

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#### 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 Pot-Boiler* by Grant Allen]