

Whom the Gods Love

Virna Sheard

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WHOM THE GODS LOVE

By VIRNA SHEARD



Mary Ellen was painting out in the sun with her model before her on what was supposedly the sidewalk of the street. The street was in the bottom of the cup of the city, and into it had sunk the dregs of the human brew.

It did not worry Mary Ellen that she was a dreg—not in the least. She painted in the sun, and when she painted it was with an intensity of concentration, a soul-warming delight, an indifference to discomfort and discouraging limitations as regarded the implements of her art, that might have put many a Royal Academician to the blush.

True, there were traces of recent tears upon her face—of a storm that was past—and at intervals a fluttering sigh would shake her small frame. Yet she had apparently risen above her woes; for now she sat on the loose muddy boards, her back against the house and with what served her for a canvas propped up on her lap against the rigidity of two thin little knees, and the joy of her work cast other things in oblivion.

The kit was scattered around her for convenience sake, and consisted of a scant half box of blacking, a mason's pencil, three sardine-boxes holding

different primary colors, three lumps of yellow chalk, a ball of blueing, and a brush that she had made laboriously and painfully—laboriously for her, because it had taken time, patience, and strategy to extract the proper hairs from Stubbs, the victimized dog; and painfully for Stubbs, as the hairs were of a deeply rooted variety. If Mary Ellen had not felt that life without that brush was useless she probably would not have made it, for she was of a tender heart.

Her subject this morning being stationary and appealing, the moments flew. To be let alone, therefore, was all she asked—to be saved from her friends. She was of a mettle to deal with her enemies herself—but her friends! They were all the otherwise friendless things in the neighborhood,—the undergrown children, the battered dogs, the bony cats, the bow-legged babies, the old and forlorn, the unlovely and neglected. All these she usually welcomed with avidity; but when she was busy as at present they bothered, and tact failed in making them understand.

For once the street was almost empty. Mrs. Mulloy's smallest-sized child, Mary Ellen's ordinary burden, slept. No smudgy-faced toddler had so far discovered the bonanza of paint in the sardine-boxes. No predatory boy bore down upon the yellow chalk.

Only Bruno Cariola, the organ-grinder who roomed across the way, took the trouble to notice what she was doing, and he came over and stood beside her quite a long time, a queer smile flashing over his old tanned face and a look of wonderment growing in his eyes.

A small care-burdened monkey, seemingly old enough to have been young in the days of the Pharaohs, sat upon the organ arrayed in a coat like to Joseph's, and the box of tunes swung from the Italian's shoulder. Mary Ellen smiled up at Bruno Cariola, tossed the monkey a peanut that she extracted from an invisible pocket, and then paid no further attention to them.

She had used the mason's pencil to her satisfaction, and now was consumed with desire to put the right color in the right place; for, though she had not heard it stated, she knew, with Millais, that this and this only is painting.

Her eyes, wonderful things of gray that was green and green that was blue, black-fringed and luminous, grew dark as she wielded the absurd brush. Her red lips puckered themselves up, two pink spots grew on her face, her yellow-white little fingers quivered.

A man who was passing glanced at the group, went on, slowed up, came back and watched Mary Ellen too.

Neither she nor Cariola noticed him. The monkey jerked off its red-feathered hat as was its custom of salutation to the unfrayed residents of the upper town, and held out a shrivelled hand suggestively towards one it had reason to think would respond. Its appeal being unrecognized, it turned with world-weary air to other things.

The picture progressed. Presently the Italian broke into rapid speech and gesticulation. "You painta him well, Mariellen!" he said, making music of the commonplace little name. "O Carina mia! you painta him well! There is ze roll eye!—Yes!—ze stiff bended paw,—ze rough fur, where ze stick hit,—ze blood—! It maka me ill to look!—Soma day you paint ze Monk for me on ze organ—so?—Eh? You be great paint some-a-day, Mariellen. Good-a-bye, so a long!"

The child looked up, but half hearing.

"Yes, I'll paint the monkey some day, Bruno," she answered. "So long!"

The man from the upper town drew a little nearer.

"Won't you please let me see?" he asked. "I like pictures."

"Sure," answered Mary Ellen, putting her work down to dry and gathering the kit into an empty peach-basket.

A woman came to a near-by window, thrust her head out, and called in a high-pitched voice. She was a pretty, frowzle-headed woman, untidy to the verge of indecency.

She called again, angrily this time: "Mary Ellen, I want you to go to Gillen's."

Mary Ellen made no response, and the gentleman beside her raised his eyes questioningly.

"I fancy she means you," he remarked.

"Yes," said the child, stowing the sardine-box with the red paint beneath the blacking, "she means me."

"Mary Ellen! Mary Ellen!" came the voice. "Say, if you don't drop that an' come—"

"I ain't goin' to Gillen's again to-day," Mary Ellen answered, calmly.

“Oh yes you are,” called the woman, leaning farther out. “You’ll come when I call you, an’ get what I tell you, an’ do it quick, or—”

Into the gray-green eyes looking up came a sudden fire, and the scarlet lips went straight.

The child pulled up her sleeves and uncovered some purplish marks that ran from elbow to shoulder in a zigzag fashion. She glanced at them ruefully, meditatively; then replied, in a soft, disconcertingly decided little way:

“It don’t matter about being hurt. That won’t make me. I’ll come in an’ take baby if he’s awake. I won’t go to Gillen’s—not again to-day.”

The man seemed distressed, yet lingered. The picture held him. His curiosity held him. The child interested him, and he had outlived so much curiosity and interest!

“Is it anything very dreadful she wants you to get?” he asked, gently. “Wouldn’t it be rather better to—”

Mary Ellen flashed a look at him as one fathoming the depths of his ignorance.

“It’s beer,” she answered, shortly.

“Oh!” he returned, feeling his inability to cope with the subject and searching his mind for the right thing to say.

Again the voice overhead came stridently:

“Just you wait, that’s all! No, you needn’t a-come an’ take the baby. Don’t you lay a finger on him after you playin’ round the street with dead cats! He can cry hisself hoarse for you first.”

Mary Ellen looked up, a white scorn on her peaked face.

“I’ve been painting it,” she said. “I haven’t played with it. You don’t play with what’s dead. It’s in the very spot where it laid down and kicked when Tom Griggs lit it. It’s not dirty—not dirtier than anything else. It was washing its face with its little paw out here in the sun this morning and purring, all fluffed up and pretty—” The words ended uncertainly.

“Well, I won’t bother with you any more,” called the woman. “Bart. Winne, can take you back to sea when he comest or send you to a home. You ain’t mine, an’ I ain’t goin’ to bother with no such obstinate kid no longer.” The window slammed.

Mary Ellen took the brush and touched lightly the yellow spots on the gray-striped body she had painted. She appeared to have dismissed any unpleasantness from her mind.

The man watched her still, and on his face was the same expression of wonderment that had been on Bruno Cariola's. He was a tall man, gray about the temples, and with the look of one who had looked far but failed to find what he wanted.

"Where did you learn?" he asked at last, pointing to the picture. "Who showed you how? Somebody must have, you know."

Mary Ellen gave a little laugh. It was the youngest thing about her.

"Nobody didn't, though," she said, sobering. "There wasn't anybody who could. Nobody showed me nothing; nobody gave me nothing but Bruno Cariola. He gave me the red and green paint. He got it for painting his organ, and he gave me the paper, too. It's the real drawing kind." Then she told him the history of the brush, remarked on the usefulness of the yellow chalk, and explained the process by which she turned the blacking into gray.

The man listened well. "But," he began again, "how do you do it—really—Mary Ellen? That's your name, isn't it?"

He bent over the picture and glanced from it to the stiffening figure of the street kitten; for it had not quite reached its full growth. There was a baby look in the furry face with its wild, frightened eyes and half open pink mouth, a soft downiness in the gray fur, a glistening newness on the sharp teeth and claws.

Mary Ellen, he saw, had not missed any of the points. With few lines and little paint she had pictured a kitten just as dead as the real one. The curve of the body expressed the same agony; the eyes, the same fear.

He puzzled as to where she had learned to paint fur.

Suddenly the child held the picture out to him.

"Here," she cried, with quivering lips, "take it if you want it. I don't. Take it, or I'll tear it up. I don't want ever to see it or that poor little kitten again!"

Dropping to the sidewalk she put her head on her arms and gave herself up to an abandonment of woe such as the man had seldom seen. Holding the picture, he patted her on one shaking shoulder.

“Come! Come!” he said. “It’s only a kitten, you know, and there must be lots of others. See now, tell me how you did it—got the effect—that fur now. You must have been taught somewhere. And then I would like to see your other pictures. You have made others, haven’t you?”

She winked the tears away.

“You may see them,” she said, catching her breath, “only they are jest rough like this one; not framed or pretty or anything. Nobody but old Bruno looks at them. I haven’t any one but Dad, and he’s most always on his ship—he’s a sailor, you know, and she—”

“She?”

“Yes, Mrs. Mulloy. Dad leaves me with her. Well, she makes fun of them. Yes, she does—but,” with a quick clenching of the color-besmeared fingers, “I’m goin’ to paint! I’m goin’ to!”

“Of course,” the other returned, absently. “Why, of course, you are going to, Mary Ellen. I should say that was the original intention regarding you, you understand; or perhaps you don’t, but it seems so to me. So you just see things and draw them, eh?”

The child shook her dark wavy hair back and looked up with a little puzzled frown.

“Oh no!” she said. “No. I just see things an’ feel them, an’ then draw them.”

“What sort of things?” he asked. “What sort of things usually, Mary Ellen?”

“I draw Mother Foily sometimes—just black and white, no colors. She lives over there; an’ Jim Foily, that’s all the son she’s got. He tramps all summer, an’ she nearly always thinks he won’t come home any more, so when he does you ought to see her face. That’s when I draw her. An’ I draw Bruno Cariola when he smiles an’ his teeth flash white in his brown face. Once he came in all soaking wet and cold, one winter day, an’ he cried because he wanted to go back to Italy. Then I painted him that way.”

“Oh!” said the man.

“Yes!” she answered. “An’ you can see the pictures if you ever come back, those very ones; but they ain’t framed, remember. I hear the baby, so I’m goin’ in, for she’ll let me take him, though she said she wouldn’t.”

With nods and smiles they parted—the child with her battered peach-basket; the man with the strange picture, daubed at the edges, half soiled, made of unbelievably crude materials, but yet with the indelible finger-mark of genius upon it, the priceless, haunting thing that is the gift of the gods, and that they bestow as it pleases their fancy. Holding it, he swung along the street. It was his own work, the work of the pigments and the brush.

“The brush!” He smiled as he thought of Mary Ellen. Presently he turned in to his own studio and touched the button that switched on the lights.

Slowly he went from one easel to another, from one wall to the next. There was beauty of color, beauty of form, perfection of detail—and yet—and yet.

His eyes went back to the thing in his hand. Something was missing from all his painstaking work that he felt lived in the picture of Mary Ellen.

His work was as the opal without its heart of fire; his paintings, masses of dead color, beautiful failures, as little like the things they claimed to show forth as the wax figures in a museum are like the people they are modelled after.

The man sat down heavily and stared ahead. The easels and walls melted into many shades and tones, as a garden will when one turns back to look at it from the gate.

“What she sees—and feels,” he said, half aloud. “And feels—and how she feels! What a woman she would make in ten years. She must be thirteen now. What a study! Her eyes are like the sea. She has that slenderness that turns to grace. Her skin will be creamy and her lips scarlet. That type develops those colors—besides, she will have the gift.”

Suddenly a thought came to him, and he started to his feet, pacing up and down, up and down, and talking as though to the picture-hung walls.

“Why not?” he exclaimed. “In Heaven’s name, why not? Who wants her? A sailor who is always at sea, who leaves her to be neglected? That wretched shrew? I will take her from them if there’s a way, and have her taught. What I have not done she shall do. I will bring her away from the squalor and reek, the horrors of sight and sound, the brutality. She shall wear purple and fine linen, little Mary Ellen.” He smiled at the name, then walked the floor up and down again.

At noontide of the next morning he went up the street toward the house where Mary Ellen lived.

It swarmed with people to-day, he thought. They seemed excited, horribly noisy. The squalor on every hand was unbearable.

There was a knot of men and women around the door he sought. They, in contrast to the others on the street, were oppressively still. There was something about their faces that made his own go white.

He touched one of them, an old, bent woman, but his voice did not answer his bidding. Then he heard it as though from far off.

“What is wrong?” he said. “What has happened? These people, are they waiting for anything?”

“It’s Mary Ellen,” she returned, quaveringly, “little Mary Ellen, God rest her. She went a message for Mrs. Mulloy an’ got struck by something swift at the crossin’—one of them autos, belike, or mebby ’t was only a bike. Sure, it’s all one now. The child fell wid her head agin the curb.”

Listening, the man loosened the tie at his throat. Then he pushed his way through the people and into the house.

An Italian, old and weather-beaten, and holding a small monkey on his shoulder, was standing beside a sofa. The woman with the frowzled hair stood beside him, her roughened prettiness blanched by fear. A baby played on the floor contentedly, and Mary Ellen lay on the sofa.

She, with the little dead kitten, would never know any more of the trouble of this tear-stained world.

The man who was a stranger stood looking down for longer than he knew, but neither the frowzled woman nor Bruno Cariola appeared to notice.

The monkey chattered low in its wrinkled throat, monotonously, knowingly, as one who had seen many things.

The man raised one small hand gently from where it had slipped over the edge of the sofa. There were flecks of gray and yellow, he noticed, on one of the fingers. His lips moved, and he spoke as half to Mary Ellen, half to himself, though he may not have known he was speaking:

“And each,” he said,
“And each, in his separate star,
Shall draw the thing as he sees it
For the God of things as they are.”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Whom the Gods Love* by Virna Sheard]