

# PAINTED FROM LIFE

MARION ELLIOT\*

WE had come to live by a mountain, a mountain that lived by a sea. Passing the village grocery, I saw an advertisement of a Lobster Supper. Heading the announcement was a colorful and cleverly-made pastel of rugged shore-line, sketched upon a piece of cardboard. The skill with which the rough water at the foot of the crag had been made to contrast with sunset reflections in a sheltered pool challenged immediate attention. I spoke to the shop-keeper.

"That? Oh that was done by a woman of seventy-odd years. She has lame hands. She lives over the mountain, and although she has had no training she loves to sketch the view from her door. No doubt she dashed this off in a few minutes, together with the half-dozen others she has sent with these notices to the other villages round about."

"But this is cleverly done. She has talent. When the supper is over, do you think she would sell the picture to me?"

"Sell it? No, indeed; she would be so tickled that anyone took notice she would give it to you gladly."

However, I *did* buy it, through the grocer, for the magnificent price of twenty-five cents and wrote the artist what I thought of her work.

The reply was pathetic in its humble gratitude. She had always wanted to paint but had had the care of sisters and brothers from childhood, with no time or means for art lessons. She had married a farmer-fisherman living remotely on the shore, which had increased her labours and lessened her leisure. She could indulge her love of wielding a brush, to the extent of painting the house and white-washing the barn! Yet, high up on a ladder "doing the peak of the barn", she had seen such beauty of sea and shore as to make her fairly tremble.

Her husband was generous with house-paint . . . but as for the silly little stuff that came in boxes, . . . No! If she wanted to rave about the power of the racing tides or the beauty of gulls in the glow of sunset, she might rave all she wished . . . while milking the cow and cleaning the stable! As for him, what he got for his fish and potatoes went into his pocket. He'd be off at the crack o'dawn, and she'd kindly see that there was plenty of apple pie on hand when he returned!

\*Mrs. Marion Elliot, of Wolfville, N. S.

However, school crayons were only five cents a box, and with Bossy milked, the other animals cared for, the barn cleaned, the wash on the line, the hall-stove set up, the house in order and three pies on the shelf, the crayons might emerge from their box! Later, what she would consent to take for the sketch bought her a box of water colors; her brushes she made by combining her own white locks with hairs from the cow's tail!

I suggested she paint Christmas cards for me. Her enthusiasm knew no bounds. She wrote—on wrapping paper in a cleverly hand-made envelope—that I had actually saved her sanity. Easter was early that year. One morning the mail brought me a sweet and well-balanced poem of Easter thoughts written beside a melting and willow-trimmed brook. It had come from over the mountain. Soon after, there came a large parcel from the same source. This contained four original lap-trays for the serving of afternoon tea. I learned their history later.

The bases had been a large sign of heavy cardboard that she had found advertising cigarettes at the tiny local grocery. This she immediately recognized as just what she wanted, had somehow acquired it, and carried it triumphantly home. Cut into four pieces, behold the bases for the proposed trays! With brown house-paint she covered the brilliant advertising and then remembered that somewhere in the closet stood a bundle of reeds, from which she had long ago intended to make baskets. Having already seen what those lame hands had achieved with cheap paints and the cow's tail, in depicting sunsets over Fundy, I should have known better than to wonder how tray-railing could be fashioned from those stiff reeds. But the barn tools furnished an awl, and with this she laboriously pierced holes at inch intervals round all four sides of the trays. The soaked reeds were inserted and woven into inch-high rails, firm, efficient, and beautifully done. When dried and shellacked the bases were ready for further attention. Considering that, when not in use at tea-time, the trays would make excellent containers for fruit, our artist decided on a fruit picture for each. Native apples were far too common to suit her ambition. Only grapes and luscious peaches would do. Brilliantly colored seed catalogs yielded the exotic "studies" desired. These, carefully cut out and pinned to the wall, were painted on the bases of the trays. All four were for me with my artist's grateful love. They have been widely admired and are still in use.



Through the years this wide-awake woman had picked up a few standard classics, and from these she loved to quote in her letters, which at one time arrived almost daily. Somewhere, too, she had "begged, borrowed or otherwise acquired" a copy of the Koran. This gave her great delight. To begin a sentence with, "As Mahomet says . . ." doubtless made her feel like a veritable bluestocking as she copied out the sometimes amazing words!

The few requests that these letters contained were revealing. She wanted a picture of a swinging censer to copy. If I had odds and ends of ribbons or tasseled cords to spare, she could use them to tie the note and recipe books she made from samples of wall paper. These were her standard gifts. (One could write on the *backs* of the samples, of course!) She was sure the mailman would bring her a bottle of my tomato juice, and these fruits simply would not grow down there on her bit of shore. However, the most urgent request was that all payment for her card-painting be made in the form of one-cent postage stamps. This I gathered, was because her husband was very jealous of her tiny earnings. With no actual cash on hand, it could not be "borrowed"!

It was impossible to give an outright present to Mrs. R. Almost before it had well arrived, a picture would be forthcoming in return, nearly always of her beloved north shore. A notable exception depicted the arrival of the Wise Men. Light streaming from the Manger door was of so soft, brilliant and unusual a nature that I enquired about it. Somewhere in an old bureau drawer there had long ago been laid away a folded paper containing the golden powder used by her grandmother in the production of wax flowers for the parlor. A drooping Easter lily, for example, would naturally shed its pollen on any flower beneath. With her quick flair for utilizing and glorifying everything that came to her hand, my gifted friend had seen possibilities in this rare dust and had lavished it to produce Manger light.

From a neighbour I learned that Mrs. R. had a burning desire to play the violin. Could a modern Stradivarius possibly have been evolved from barn shingles and the sinews of cattle, Mrs. R. would have made, and played, her own.

At one time she collected historical data and legends about her neighbourhood. She asked me to revise and type the little book. The local School Board found it so thrilling, they ordered it added to the history course.

During her early married life, her own flock of sheep had been a joy as well as a care. From wool shorn, washed, carded, spun and dyed by her own hands, she made me a pair of marvellous mittens. The dyes she manufactured according to her own recipes. What were the ingredients, I can not imagine; and she did not tell.

Only once did I see this remarkable woman. She grew more lame with the passing days, but one afternoon when her desire to see me coincided with a "chance" over the mountain with the mail-man, she arrived. The pretty print dress she was wearing she had "made that morning." It had "felt so fast and workable after a new barn uniform she had designed and sewed from potato bags."

Letters became fewer as hands became lame. Then her husband died, and I heard she had moved from the old home. I, too, moved, but wherever I go I intend to carry her gifts: not only to brighten my surroundings but to refresh my belief in the courage and inspiration of character which can touch earth's common things with artistry and

give to airy nothing

A local habitation and a name.

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