

## A Little Holiday

By Oswald Sickert

Roy had twice stayed with us in London during the vacation ; but since our days at Cambridge most of his time had been spent in Paris, and I had never been to his home till that spring.

I had eagerly looked forward to the visit, for not only should I enjoy Roy's company uninterruptedly for eight whole days, but I should at last meet his sister. And looking forward with curiosity and excitement to the sunny prospect, I had only seen on the clear horizon one little cloud—a certain fear I had of Roy's uncle. This uncle had lived with them even before the father's death, and had since acted as guardian to the two children, for their mother, his sister, was an invalid. He used to come up to Cambridge to see Roy, so I had met him frequently. I took a great fancy to him from the first, and he had my unbounded respect ; he was the ideal of steadfastness and honour and clear judgment. But I always experienced in his presence the same feeling—a feeling which no difference of age could explain. I was before him a person of no weight, of no principles, a butterfly character—he would have passed me on one side if I had not been Roy's friend. I felt just the same when I saw him after an interval of three years, although in between he had warmly praised my verses and had gone out of his way to write me from  
time

time to time matters of encouragement. I was flattered that he should choose to keep up an unflagging correspondence—for though our letters did not pass at frequent intervals, they gave me a pleasant impression of continuity, showing that the silence of a month or two in no way weakened the thread of interest that had been spun between us. Our letters sometimes touched upon certain points in the working of the department which I had entered; but they were chiefly concerned with the writing of verses, and on the evening of my arrival I was emboldened, in the hope of assuring the ground beneath my feet, to ask him whether he did not think my last disquisition priggish, conceited, over-ignorant, slight. No, he did not think so at all; in fact, he had waited for my arrival in order to discuss the question more fully. And all the while I was talking of my own subject—something I could do and he couldn't, something he thought worth doing, my work, hard work—I yet felt a humbug. I felt so with a few other men, one or two even of my own age; but I did not like any of them so much as Roy's uncle. He was not sixty, a small man with one shoulder bigger than the other, almost a hump-back, and his red hair was turning grey.

I wondered whether he approved of Roy's great affection for me; I used even to think sometimes that he looked upon me as an adventurer, and then, in no spirit, I am sure, of pitting myself against my dear Roy, I would argue the point. Roy, it was true, was of an old family; he was rich (I had no idea they were so well off—it was a beautiful house). But there was nothing I could gain from him, and, as far as a career went, I was a good way ahead of him, for he had only just finished three years of study in a Paris studio.

Even if my uncomfortable sensation were pure fancy, even if he did really think there was a firm foundation in me, still I  
thought

thought there must be some reason for my imagination to play me such tricks, and I could not discover it. Moreover, I was sure he liked me; he was more than polite, he made much of me; and every now and then we came very close to each other. He must have seen, too, how sincerely I revered him.

Roy's sister was enchanting—not quite so pretty as Roy. She was just seventeen. Roy told me she had a deep admiration for me, not only because I was his friend, but because she had heard I was very clever. For the first day or two this admiration stood in our way. Conversation with me was an honour which made her proud, a privilege not to be abused. The eight years which divided us were to her the whole difference between a grown man in the world and a child. She had been educated at home, and had seen very few people. But after a time our intercourse grew easier. No attempt of mine could have shaken the faith she had in my opinions. I was a genius: that was the point from which she started. Under the light she shed upon me, I was scrupulously careful of everything I said, everything I thought; I never felt so tender of any one. The touching faith and respect of the girl cast a spell over my stay with Roy, a penetrating softness.

Insincerity would have been impossible, as well as immoral, in the face of so much enthusiasm and trust, so I was most happy when we talked of men I wholly admired. I was safe when we were capping each other's praises of Shelley or Jane Austen; I was safe when I tried to make her share my love of Wordsworth. But it was more difficult when she started an admiration in which I could not join. She had learned from her uncle to love Ruskin, and one day, when we were walking up and down the garden alone, she asked me about him. I answered that I did not think I understood him properly—at least, I did not see his teaching as  
a whole;

a whole ; in the end he might well turn out to be right, but just now I did not see him quite. She was swerving round already, and when she wanted me to explain why I did not like him, I suggested we should talk about him in the evening when her uncle was with us ; he knew much more about Ruskin than I did—he was sure to be right. But this modesty on my part only made her look upon my objections to Ruskin, whatever they might be, as certainly superior to any other opinions that could be held of him. I was peculiarly careful, when the time came, not to put my case, if I could help it, but to make the discussion as much as possible an exposition of Ruskin by her uncle. This was difficult, because he always deferred to me on questions of art, and Roy, who entirely agreed with me, let me do all the talking. And during our conversation that evening I experienced more acutely than ever the uneasy sensation of unworthiness, and all the time I was asking myself why I should feel a humbug. Were not plenty of men, men who knew, who knew better than Roy's uncle, convinced that Ruskin was mistaken about the points we were discussing ? And was not I speaking as little as possible, softening everything down, and agreeing with humility wherever he let me ? And I had read a great deal of Ruskin at one time, and my objections were of respectably long standing. I felt, too, all the more uncomfortable, because here I sat, extremely against my wish, helplessly seducing the niece he loved so from her pious opinions, the opinions she had learnt from him. I could not help it ; she was quite on my side, although I had tried not to take a side, and she disliked Ruskin more than I did.

I can hardly explain how much our conversations about Mill meant to me ; they were the best of all. When she first mentioned him I did little more than respect her sacred admiration, so natural to a girl of her age ; but gradually I was caught too. We

talked of him a great deal, more than of any one; with Shelley he was her chief hero. Mill had been one of the keenest admirations of my boyhood, and boyhood's opinions are far off at twenty-five. The men of my age were inclined to be condescending to Mill: our idea of a State had outgrown the limits of *Liberty*; his political economy—the whole science, indeed—was rather in disgrace, his *Logic* was perhaps amusing to read, but the style was stilted, and we had got far beyond his essays on religion, in fact, we were coming round the other side; and as I had no occasion to re-read any of his books, I acquiesced. I certainly should have shrunk from the notion of putting such a man in my thoughts near Flaubert or Tolstoy, for instance. But when we began to talk of his autobiography, I saw once more in its entirety the enthralling power the man had in my boyhood, the honesty that was almost lyrical, the sane and delicate intelligence, the peculiar love of truth, which would make him in all times, however far the world might progress, an ideal and adorable figure. I loved him once more, and it was heaven to follow her lead, and get back in all sincerity with the girl to this old enthusiasm, forgotten, slighted, while I was following in the train of superior art.

Once when we two were talking of Shelley—Mill's poet—Roy interrupted after a remark of hers:

“Why, Beatrice, I never knew you were so fond of reading.”

“What else is there to be fond of?” she answered; and I too could think of nothing else at the moment.

On the second Sunday we had tea in the summer-house, and we meant to enjoy ourselves especially, because it was my last day. Beatrice had brought out paper and pencils, and we were going to write verses, or play on paper in any way we liked. At first we all played together, her jolly brother, my good friend, sitting opposite his sister and me. We fooled with writing in  
various

various pretty ways suited to the pretty girl, the summer-house, our high spirits. The more we wrote, the higher our spirits rose, till at last we were floating in a summery ether of butterflies and flowers and breezes, high above everyday prose, in a charmed world of fancy. I had never known the pen a magician's rod of this power. We made verses together, writing each a line and passing the paper round. Beatrice appeared in a light which plainly surprised her brother. Her imagination, her spirituality, burst into radiant life. Her strokes were by far the most brilliant, some of her lines were beautiful. A half-realised thought came into my head that of her own self such brilliant fancies would never have been called to her mind and her fingers, that it was our presence which made it possible for her—nay, that it was her neighbour; and so in the delicious atmosphere I felt that her inventions, though they often outstripped mine, were yet mine too.

We had made many such verses, and, as an empty sheet lay before me, a new idea struck me, and asking, "Who is this by?" I began to make up a line; but at the fifth word she had guessed. When it came to Roy's turn, and he was just writing the first word very large, that we might read it upside down, she stretched out her hand across the table and laid it on his paper, and, fearing lest she should not guess sooner than I, said without looking at me:

"But you must write very slowly and stop after each word!"

And that made me feel still happier in my neighbour; happy, too, that she only withdrew her hand a little way in her unfair rivalry, half-conscious surely that it would divide the attention of my eyes. At the third round she wrote two lines to make us laugh, not for the guessing, for the Chaucer could not be hid even in the first two words of her couplet; and laugh we did to see

Chaucer

Chaucer writing of that "Jewe abhominable" (Roy had dared a Heine verse, and we had talked of Heine in the morning, but Beatrice knew nothing of him herself). Roy cried out on "potence," it was not a Chaucer word. And that correction was the first sign of a change; for soon it came that he had slipped out of our game and only laughed with us, and then he pushed back his chair and began to draw us, and he almost faded from my mind, and the game lay between us two.

She followed where I led, and I started prose, beginning recklessly anyhow, without sense, not even imitating any one, but for the pleasure of the pompous words:

"Beneath him lay the valley of content, seawards bared by the salt wind, its few shorn trees scorched and bent inland, but upstream increasing in fulness until they thickened to the joyous orchard"—any large-mouthed nonsense that came into my head, And she followed, for now we had a whole sheet before us and two pencils, and she wrote on her side and I on mine. The thing began aimlessly, but sense came into it as we went on, and such an idyll grew up as has never been written, so full and free. At first there was much joking and many grotesque digressions compelling laughter; here and there, like notes passed by boys in class, there would come expostulations, enclosed in brackets—on her side.

"(A moment ago we were standing on the old mill bridge, watching the red cider-apples circling in the eddies and trying to break away down stream. How did we get to the top of this hill from which you see the minarets of the Golden City glittering in the morning sky?)"

"(Not the Golden City. I was thinking of the Crystal Palace from Campden Hill, where I went to school; but we'll come down again.)"

But

But soon the laughter passed out. Our two wits, sharpened to the keenest edge by the strange rivalry, were yet by this rivalry converging to meet. Only at the points where the love story grew too intense, the one of us whose turn it was would rest, prolonging the joy, putting off the inevitable meaning with some sentence of wayward description; but even these interludes, and especially such as she wrote, bore a treasonable reflection of things which were around us; and into the valley of our fancy there grew the lilacs which looked in at the summer-house, the wooden paling in front of the orchard, the sheep on the distant Surrey Hills.

She wrote the girl and I the man, and we kept to our proper spheres, until, as the love scene came to rapture, at the height of daring, the man said to the girl:

“And would you love me if I were a beggar?” For though we were writing of to-day, the man had still upon him something of the heroic glory in an old tale. We were beyond all bounds, and had been caught up to a perilous height; we were alone, and she had loved to make the man a wonder of manhood in her maiden’s eyes. But, even as I set down the question, I felt somewhere that it was a final madness to come to so close an inversion; it was leaping with eyes wilfully shut from a dizzy precipice. On her column she wrote:

“The girl raised her eyes to her fairy prince, that he might read there that she gave him what no riches can buy.”

She turned her fearless eyes to me, and the first glance from them swept me down horribly to the world. What had I been doing? how could anything so irrevocable have happened? Deadness came over me and dragged me down, down. I never felt so completely on the earth, so immovably, hopelessly everyday. What would else have been a discomfort, or frightening even, was  
now

now almost a relief—or at any rate I had reached the bottom—her uncle stood between us, and his presence did not surprise me. We had not heard his coming. His face was expressionless, his eyes were fixed on the paper before us. My hand almost moved forward to cover it ; but she made no attempt at hiding, so I too kept still. Roy laughed in his jolly fashion, and cried out from his sudden proximity :

“Stop there, uncle, I’ll put you in too !”

The sheet was laden with love, I knew, and as my once more greyly critical eye caught a hateful sentence here and there, I would have hidden it from him, if only for vanity. However I did not fancy he was paying much attention to what was written, but was thinking : here is the adventurer doing what I feared most ; winning the love of my little Beatrice, hardly past her childhood, the heiress—and under pretence of art. I was so hideously aware that I had never meant that, that I did not love her, or want to pretend I did, that I was not so base as he must think, and he stood so long without moving, that I murmured :

“We were only joking,” conscious, when the words had passed my lips, that they were despicable and the very bottom of cowardice, without knowing why. He had put his arm on his niece’s shoulder, and I knew she was leaning her head on his coat. He left us, he had not noticed me, and went over to Roy and looked at his drawing ; I felt that his going to Roy and looking at the sketch had some connection with the reproachful disaster. I began :

“Surely your uncle is not really angry with us——” and then I went to the end of what I had started to say—“he must have seen we were only joking,” as if I were repeating words learned by rote ; for when our eyes met once more, I saw she had not realised ; and she did not know why I should be repeating the  
meaningless

meaningless excuse I had given her uncle. And then—and then—Oh, I had not yet reached the worst, for she smiled and put out her hand as if to lay it on my arm, to comfort me in my evident distress ; it was her first impulse, it was all she thought of. I appealed to myself in dull agony, how was it possible I could resist that movement, why couldn't I at any rate pretend to love such a person, and leave it to time to make the pretence a reality ? Or rather, what did I matter here at all ? But I was lead. She rose from the table, and just then Roy came up to us and showed us his drawings, and we walked back to the house, her brother talking between us. She was silent and oppressed, her thoughts were turned inwards : the puzzle now began to weigh on her, she had started to question and solve it. She advanced us by a few steps as we neared the house, and I could think of nothing, only my spirit was straining forward to the girl's figure in front. I was dragging after her on my knees through the abject dust, and in my head the despairing excuse, a nightmare repetition, "we were only joking, we were only joking."

Roy was the sole cheerful one at dinner, and he and his uncle talked much as usual. Every now and again I felt Beatrice's eyes fixed on me. After dinner she went up to see her mother. Roy and I sat on, talking, and two hours later the door opened and let in a flood of light from the hall into our dark room, and Beatrice stood there. She did not come in, but said good-night, and hesitated a moment in the light, with one hand still resting on the door post and the other holding the handle ; and then she turned, and the door closed us into darkness again. Then another thing was revealed to me : I knew that even when she realised fully, no shadow of blame for me would cross her mind.

Next morning Roy and I carried out the cherished plan we  
had

had made with so much pleasure long ago. We were to be at Mr. Gow's soon after sunrise, to breakfast there and feel the "nec requies" as the farm bestirred itself for another week's work, and thus warmed and elated ramble some six or seven miles to a railway station. I talked and simulated sympathy while my head was full of something else, and so these last morning hours of my visit served chiefly to assure me that my closest friend was now to be counted among those with whom I could not deal simply. It was still unwontedly early when I reached London and the office.