

# The Palladium's Short Story Page

## Raphael Macaroni's Masterpiece

By Nini Belmaine

**R**APHAEL MACARONI was an artist; he was also hard up.

The little studio at the top of Excelsior Mansions, Maida Vale, was seldom visited by a sitter with exterior motives and a purse. Then the brilliant idea of advertising in the *Morning Post* occurred to him. He knew one of the numerous ladies who contribute puffs and society paragraphs to the paper. A really nice little notice appeared one day about Raphael Macaroni, stating, among other things, that he was a genius. So he was, to think of advertising.

Mrs. Saponatus-Smith read the advertisement and the corollary encomium in another column. A vision of the Royal Academy lit up her cunning, small brown eyes. She would have her daughter, Hildegarde, painted by this fashionable artist, and fill her friends in Snobville with envy, malice and consummate uncharitableness.

The girl had the fashion-plate come-ness and lack of individuality common to her class. Her round, pink-and-white face was without intellectual charm and void of any distinguishing feature.

Mrs. Saponatus-Smith was a portly person addicted to cheap perfumes, and had a desire for smart society, in which she did not shine. She told Hildegarde of her plan for improving Burlington House. Then they thoroughly overdescended themselves and set out for Maida Vale.

Raphael Macaroni was defying pessimism with a flask of Chianti and a tube of Teutonized meat, when the studio bell rang as if all the readers of the *Morning Post* were making calls on him. His heart bounded with hope when Mrs. Saponatus-Smith swept in, and, cackling some incoherent apology, settled herself on a chair like a gigantic hen. Hildegarde tripped in after her with a confused smile, and bowed timidly in response to the courtly obeisance of Raphael Macaroni.

"You must excuse me," said the elder lady, fighting for breath, "but four flights of stairs take it out of me."

"Ah, yes, I am much delighted," said he, beaming impartially on both.

"I can't bear lifts. I always feel they'll drop me when I'm going up, and I have a horrible sinking sensation when I go down. The men who work them appear to have no nerves;

they just press a button here and there, and all the time I feel that there is only a piece of cocoanut matting between me and eternity."

"Oh, mamma!" Hildegarde exclaimed in a shocked voice.

"I understand you perfectly, Madame," said Macaroni gallantly.

"The lift gives me also sensations as and the task before him was extremely easy, for the girl's simple face refuted You see?"—and he smiled like a all psychological problems. The round seraph with a new set of teeth.

"That's exactly it, Mr. Macaroni; you put it beautifully."

"Ah, yes, I know," and he gave a picturesque shudder to indicate his dire dread of lifts.

Hildegarde whispered to her mother to call him Signor Macaroni.

"I want you to paint my daughter's portrait, Signor. She is my only child."

"I will give me very great pleasure to paint the young lady."

"If it is a good likeness I will give you permission to hang it in the Royal Academy," she said graciously, believing that the subject had more to do with influencing the judges than the ability of the artist.

An Englishman would have enlightened her on the lottery method peculiar to Piccadilly; but Raphael Macaroni was a courtier, and made his visitor feel that she was conferring a priceless favor. "I ought to paint the best picture of my life;" and he bowed to Hildegarde, who smiled feebly and took the compliment as if it had been a caramel.

"When can you begin the portrait?"

"Any time that is convenient to you, Madame."

"What day shall we say, Hildegarde?"

"Any day you like, mamma," she replied, languidly inspecting a picture of Poseidon spearing dolphins. The girl congratulated herself on a high school education, which enabled her to see that the canvas was an allegory of Father Thames, in the years when his pebbled stream kept its sediment in its bed instead of caring on its surface, as at present.

"In what costume do you wish Miss Smith to be painted?"

"Oh, in the latest style of evening dress."

"Ah, yes; that will be charming for me," said Macaroni, with guileless enthusiasm.

"I am coming with her," she said, eyeing him keenly, and adding to nobody in particular, "Evening gowns are rather decollete just now."

"I shall be so pleased if you will come always, Madame. You shall have tea, coffee, chocolate, or anything you like."

"Is it to be a full-length portrait, mamma? You have not told Signor Macaroni."

"I want Hildegarde to pose standing straight up—just as if she could am not a fashionable portrait painter

walk out of the frame, you know," yet. I cannot claim five thousand st. said, laughing heartily, and rising guineas," and he laughed.

"Good gracious!" she replied, bridling one of his ecstasy smiles; of me."

"No," he said in that musical voice

and they went home enraptured.

Hildegarde observed to her mother that nothing had been said to Signor Macaroni about the price of the portrait.

A crafty smile trickled down the large face of Mrs. Saponatus-Smith.

"I thought of that, my dear. We will wait till we see the painting. It may not be a good portrait. If it isn't, he will have to do it all over again. He will be glad enough to take my price in cash. A young artist ought to be proud to have such a chance of making a name."

"He seems a very nice man, mamma; don't you think so?"

"Yes, I was quite taken with him. I shall enjoy going with you. Of course, I could not let you go there alone."

"No, mamma," the girl replied meekly.

The question of costume gave their faculties considerable exercise, and entailed various visits to the large millinery establishments beloved of Suburbia. The result of these expeditions was a gaudy confection that would have made a bird of Paradise delirious. If they had descended to consult Raphael Macaroni, he would, in all probability, have suggested a simple arrangement in black with pearls, or cream with flowers. But Mrs. Saponatus-Smith knew her own class; they would look for something sumptuous and brilliant. Simplicity is synonymous with poverty in Snobville. The main idea in her mind was to instigate by sartorial magnificence that Hildegarde moved in swell society.

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"That will do very well, indeed," and he instructed Hildegarde how to hold it.

"I will accept one hundred guineas from you, Madame."

"One hundred guineas!" she gasped in amazement.

"Had no idea of what an artist is entitled to charge for a portrait?" he asked, somewhat nettled.

"We have treated him shabbily, and he is a gentleman as well as an artist. Besides, you can well afford it, ma."

"He knows that. I simply won't charge you, on principle."

"Oh," she quavered, "what will you pay, on principle?"

"I can't see any principle in being mean."

"Don't you see that he will give us girl, more mystified than ever.

"Mamma, whatever is the matter?"

"Don't talk to me, Miss. Change your dress at once; Perkins is packing a small bag. I want you to catch the 5 o'clock express for Parkstone."

"But what for, mamma?" asked the mother truculently.

"Don't you see that he will give us girl, more mystified than ever.

"Don't cross-question me, Miss, but do as you are told. Your uncle will meet you at the station, and you will stay at the Rectory till I have settled matters elsewhere."

The girl was quite bewildered, but of such an obedient disposition that

"I thought twenty, or thirty, or fifty pounds at the outside."

"My dear Madame, the man who would work for such prices could not paint at all."

"I think you ought to have given me some hint of your high charges. I simply won't pay it, Signor."

"If you don't, I shall consider—"

"Now, for goodness' sake, don't put me out of temper; I'm all of a tremble already."

"I am sorry," he replied courteously; "you had better write to me. I, too, do not like scenes. It is a pity we did not have an understanding at first."

"I fear I am to blame."

"Well, that is kind of you. I will give you fifty guineas, you are so nice."

"No," he said, throwing up his hands, "it is useless. I am an artist. I cannot take less."

"I am not going to throw my money away simply because you are an artist," she retorted tartly.

He shrugged his shoulders in a way she took for a menace. "The picture is nearly finished. Miss Smith need not trouble to pose any more."

"It is a nuisance that you are so proud," she said, taking a last look at the portrait, which was a splendid likeness. "Do be sensible, and I'll post a cheque to-night."

"I regret, Madame, that I cannot accept less than the reduced fee I have mentioned."

When they returned home Hildegarde was given a graphic account of the affair, and, to her mother's intense mortification, she said she would be ashamed to go to the studio again.

"Why, may I ask?" blustered the mother truculently.

"It is a nuisance that you are so proud," she said, taking a last look at the portrait, which was a splendid likeness. "Do be sensible, and I'll post a cheque to-night."

"I am not going to ask you for so much," he said, taking in the situation.

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The girl was quite bewildered, but of such an obedient disposition that

she did as she was bid; and constant slightly, just to make it look sweetly attendance on a domineering mother said, you know. I painted out the blue made any change welcome. She dress and got a professional model to

smiled blandly to that irate person pose in a white muslin frock reaching nearly to the ankles. I placed a crown of violets on the head instead of a tiara, and now the picture represents

my indignation boil over.

"I never thought it was in her," she said to herself as she revengefully interrupting him; "it is beautiful—all but the bare feet. The people in our set would be horrified if they knew it was my daughter."

"Ah, yes, I have heard that they have rather prudish notions about art."

"I don't know about being prudish," she snapped; "they draw the line at posing for April, anyway."

"It has made my fortune—see," and he produced a book of press cuttings and several letters containing commissions.

"I will give you the two hundred pounds," she said reluctantly, "and then you can paint shoes and stockings on her and make her look happy."

He smiled and shook his head. "No, Madam, it is already sold to a patron in Italy."

"Thank goodness it is not going to stay in England. I am sorry for misjudging you, Signor."

"Do not mention that, Madam; I shall always have the pleasantest recollections of you and your charming daughter." He saw her into her car, and they parted most amicably.

Raphael Macaroni was savage at first, then a mixture of humor and disgust made him silent. She looked so ludicrous, glaring at him through her wet eyes, that he could hardly control his features. He managed, however, to indicate by raising his eyebrows and shrugging his shoulders that he was intensely surprised at her sudden eruption.

"If it wasn't for the exposure in the Sunday papers I would put you in prison," she blubbered.

He was dumfounded, and looked guilty of anything.

"You have been seeing my daughter clandestinely, and now you have disgraced her."

Raphael thrust his long white fingers through his abundant hair and shouted: "Tell me what it is you think I have done, Madam."

"Think, indeed!" she snorted. "I have had the evidence of my own eyes. My daughter has been here without my knowledge."

"I have not seen Miss Hildegarde since she came with you."

"Please don't lie to me, Signor."

"I won't, if you will be good enough to explain what it is you have in your mind."

"Well, I declare! You are as cool as she is; but you won't see her again in a hurry. I packed her off this afternoon to my brother, who is a clergyman in Dorset."

"Ah, that will be nice for Miss Smith; the country is so beautiful in May."

"Look here, Signor Macaroni, I have been to the Royal Academy. Now do you understand how ashamed I feel as a mother? My daughter has been to see you, and, what is worse, she took off her shoes and stockings here."

Raphael Macaroni stared hard at the heavy scarlet face before him, and then burst into peal after peal of laughter.

"You excuse me? I am most sorry to laugh," he jerked out hysterically, and went off again.

"Perhaps there is some mistake," she said, in a mollified tone, "but you must know everything. Be perfectly frank with me, and I'll give you a hundred pounds for the picture called 'April,' and then I'll burn it."

"Burn it, Madame? It is my masterpiece. I have already an offer of double that sum for it."

"What possessed you to paint my daughter as April, of all things?" she

had been chosen to remove a blot from the escutcheon of our fair city."

"What is an escutcheon?" asked the retired merchant.

"I'll be hanged if I know, but there was a blot on it, and I was tagged to wipe it out. Of course I consented to run."

"The announcement that I would run

was made in the morning paper, and it seemed that everybody in town was

readying to my support."

"People stood on the street to