PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE.

[illegible]

—J. R. [illegible]

FIRST LOVE.

How old could I have been at that time?

I am quite sure I was only about twelve or thirteen years old. Or I might have been fourteen. Surely, I was old enough to fall desperately in love.

If I cannot recollect when, I can at least remember how the tender passion commenced. As soon as my aunt would leave the house to repair to church for her evening devotions, I was very fond of stealing into her room and ransacking her bureau drawers, which she always kept in admirable order. Those drawers were like a museum to me, for I always found some rare, quaint object there, and a subtle eastern perfume emanated from them. There were [illegible] by age, [illegible] away in [illegible], small pictures of saints, sewing materials, a reticule of blue velvet, embroidered with beads, and a silver and amber rosary.

All of these things and more were to be found in the different nooks and corners. I would examine them curiously and afterward put them back in their places.

But one day—how well I remember it! just as plainly as though it were today—I saw a gilt object gleaming in the midst of some old lace collars. I involuntarily thrust in my hands for it, crumpling the laces, and drew out a miniature painted on ivory, about three inches long and inclosed in a gold case.

I was perfectly enraptured as I gazed upon it. A ray of sunlight flickered through the window pane, lighting up this charming likeness, which seemed as though longing to leave its dark prison house and come toward me. It was the picture of a most beautiful creature, such as I had never beheld before, excepting in my youthful dreams. The fair lady might be about twenty years old. She was not a young maiden, not a tender bud just about to open, but a woman in the full radiancy of her beauty. Her face was oval, but not very long, her lips were full and parted in a smile, while her eyes drooped languidly, and she had a dimple in her chin, which seemed imprinted there by Cupid's playful touch.

Her hair was dressed in a singular and graceful style. It was gathered in a knot, while a pyramid of puffs surmounted her temples, and there was a basket of braids on top of her head. This old fashioned coiffure, ending at the nape of her neck, revealed all of its rounded lines and also another dimple, still more tiny and soft than the one in her chin.

As for her dress, it was of some light, gauzy material. A necklace of pearls rested upon her snowy bosom and upon the smooth surface of her low cut bodice.

Her arms, which were worthy of Juno, were fully bared. Their taper extremities were fit models for a sculptor. But I am not exact in saying "extremities," for only one of her hands was visible. It held a rare lace handkerchief.

As I think now of my feelings at that time I am amazed at the striking effect which the contemplation of that miniature produced upon me. Indeed I was so carried away by my feelings that I held my breath, while I fairly devoured the picture with my eyes.

I had seen portraits of beautiful women in the illustrated papers, in the shop windows, and also in the mythological pictures in my father's dining room. A beautiful curve, a harmonious and elegant outline, would always captivate my gaze, which was prematurely artistic; but the portrait which I had found in my aunt's drawer, aside from its great beauty, seemed to be animated by a subtle vitality. One could see that it was not an artist's ideal, but the likeness of a real person of flesh and blood. The luxuriant tone of coloring seemed to reveal, under the pearly flesh tints, the rich, mantling blood, while the lips appeared about to display the pearly teeth. To complete the illusion there was a lock of real, silky, chestnut hair braided around the frame—hair which had once undoubtedly surmounted that snowy brow.

As I have said before, the portrait seemed more like flesh and blood, from which only a glass case separated me, than a copy of the original.

I touched it with my hand; I warmed it with my breath. It even appeared to me that the warmth of that mysterious divinity communicated itself to my lips and circulated through my veins.

I was engaged in this occupation one Sunday when I heard footsteps in the hall. They were those of my aunt, returning from her devotions. I heard her well known cough and her slow, gentle footsteps. I had barely time to replace the picture in its case, close it and station myself at the window before my aunt entered. I assumed an easy and indifferent attitude. As she came in she [illegible] vigorously, for the church had been chilly and she had taken a slight cold [illegible].

When she saw me her little red [illegible] eyes twinkled merrily. Kissing me on the head with her [illegible] hand, she inquired whether I had been waiting for her [illegible] while she had been gone. [illegible] she added:

"Wait, sonny! I am going to give you something to make your mouth water."

So saying, she brought out from the depths of her pocket two or three flattened gumdrops, stuck together in such a manner as to be anything but tempting. My aunt's appearance was not appetizing enough to cause me to open his mouth and devour such sweets.

Her great age, her ugly teeth, her bleary eyes, her [illegible] beneath the parting of her hair, which was three inches broad, the scanty gray locks dancing around her temples, her neck, so flabby and red as an excited rooster's crest—faugh!

Of course I could not manage to swallow the gumdrops.

A feeling of indignation, of manly protest, caused me to say energetically:

"I don't want them! I don't want them, I tell you!"

"You don't want them! How singular!—you who are so fond of good things as a piece [illegible]."

"I am not a child!" I cried, swelling with pride and stretching myself on tiptoe. "I don't want candy."

My aunt looked at me with an expression half ironical and half kindly. Finally, yielding to the feeling of merriment which I caused her, she lost all restraint and burst out laughing, thereby revealing the cavernous depths of her mouth.

From that moment onward I could not get the miniature out of my thoughts.

Whenever my aunt went out I would slip up into her room, open the case, take out the picture and become absorbed in looking at it. After I had gazed long upon it it was easy to fancy that the drooping eyes of my idol, glancing through their thick shade of lashes, fixed themselves on mine and that her bosom heaved with quickened feeling. I was even ashamed to kiss her, fearing that my audacity might displease her, so I only pressed her to my heart or placed my cheek close to hers. All of my thoughts and acts bore some relation to the fair dame hidden in the golden case.

I often felt singular scruples in regard to her, and before I would enter my aunt's room to look at the coveted miniature I would dress myself in my very best, as I observed that young men did when they went to see their sweethearts. I often met boys of my age who had sweethearts and would eagerly display their love letters, pictures and tokens to me, asking me at the same why I did not find some one like them with whom I might correspond. An inexplicable feeling of delicacy tied my tongue, but when they asked my opinion about their lady loves I would shrug my shoulders and characterize them as ugly Duffies.

One day I went to see some cousins of mine who were very pretty little girls. The oldest was not yet fifteen. We were looking at a stereoscope, when suddenly the youngest girl, about twelve years old, slyly seized hold of my hand. Turning as red as a peony, she whispered in my ear, "Take this."

At the same time I felt something soft and cool in my hand, and saw that it was a rosebud with green leaves. The little maid went off running, but looking back at me out of the corner of her eye. With a cry [illegible], equal to the shade [illegible] I cried in turn, "Take this!" at the same time throwing the rosebud in her face. In consequence of this slight she would not look at me again, and spent the whole afternoon weeping. Even now, though she is married and has three children, she has not forgiven me.

As the time which I found to look at the miniature seemed far too short, I resolved to keep it in my pocket. Then all day long I went around, hiding myself from people as though I had committed a theft. I fancied that the picture, shut up in its case, would see all of my movements. If I felt like scratching myself, or had to tie up my stocking or do anything not in keeping with the exquisite delicacy of my ideal love, I would take out the miniature first, deposit it in a safe place and would then feel free to do whatever I wanted to.

In fact, after I had stolen it I was beside myself with joy. I would hide it under my pillow at night and would go to sleep ready to defend it. I would turn the picture to the wall, and would myself fear remorse [illegible] times during the night with a wild fear in my heart that somebody might snatch my treasure from me. At last I took it out from under my pillow and slipped it in my breast, and on the following day the imprints of the embossed frame could still be seen on my flesh.

The contact of that cherished miniature produced the most delightful dreams. The fair dame, not her effigy, but her own dear self, would come forward to carry me off in a chariot to her palace. With a sweet, commanding air she would bid me sit on a cushion at her feet, and would pass her fair hand caressingly over my brow and my tumbled hair. I would read to her in a large missal, or would play on the harp, while she would deign to smile and thank me for the pleasure my reading and singing afforded her. In fact there entirely [illegible] completely filled my brain and I was ready to [illegible] either a page or a troubadour for the sake of my beloved.

With the working of my disordered fancy I grew thin. My father and my aunt observed my emaciation with great anxiety.

"At this critical and dangerous stage of development everything is alarming," said my father, who would read medical works, and then anxiously study the dark circles under my eyes, my pallid lips and, above all, my total lack of appetite.

"Go and play, my boy," he would say to me, while I would answer despondently, "I don't feel like it."

They began to invent amusements for me, and offered to take me to the theatre. They made me lay aside my studies and gave me foamy milk to drink fresh from the cow. Then they drenched me in cold shower baths to strengthen my nerves, and I noticed that whenever I went to my father's room to bid him good morning he would look at me fixedly, while he would feel me all over to see whether my muscles were strong. I would lower my eyes, determined to die rather than confess what ailed me.

As soon as I could free myself from my family's watchful care I would hasten off alone again with my beloved. At last, in order to get nearer to her, I took off the cold glass which covered the ivory. I hesitated as I was about to do so, but love was stronger than the vague fear that the desecration caused me.

While I pressed my lips to the painting, and perceived the soft fragrance of the lock of hair, I fancied, even still more than before, that it was a living person over whom my trembling hands passed. [illegible]. Overcome by my feelings I sank on the sofa insensible, pressing the miniature to my heart.

When I came to myself I saw my father, mother and aunt all anxiously bending over me. Amazement and fright were depicted on their faces. My father felt my pulse and shook his head while he murmured, "His pulse beats very feebly and seems about to stop."

My aunt, with her hooked fingers, was trying to get the picture away from me, while I mechanically endeavored to hide and keep it from her.

"But, my lad, let go of it," she exclaimed. "Don't you see that you are spoiling it? I shall have to scold you. Be a good boy and I'll show it to you as many times as you want to see it, but don't spoil it! Let go of it, I say, for you are injuring it."

"Let him have it," said my mother. "The poor child is sick."

"Well, that's cool," replied the good old maid. "Let him have it. And who will paint another one like it, pray? Who will ever behold me again as I used to be then? Nobody paints miniatures nowadays. That is all ended, and I am ended, too, for I am no longer what I used to be."

My eyes were starting from their sockets in amazement. My hands let fall the miniature. I hardly know how I managed to murmur: "Yours! Is the miniature yours?"

"Don't I look as handsome as that, as you, my boy? Ah, silly youth makes a vast difference in one's looks—though I don't remember exactly how long ago it was, for I have not kept track of time—but anyway, nobody can take those years away from me."

My head fell forward on my breast and I fainted again. My father took me up in his arms, put me in my bed and afterward made me take several spoonfuls of port wine.

I soon became convalescent, but my passion for the portrait had disappeared. I never cared to enter my aunt's room again.—Translated from the Spanish of Emilia Pardo for Romance by Mary Springer.

The Amethyst Among the Romans.

The amethyst, so called from the Greek amethustos, meaning "not drunk," was a favorite stone during the Roman ladies. Its principal virtue was to drive away the vapors of inebriety from the brain. It also drove away evil thoughts and attracted to its possessor the favors of princes.—Paris Figaro.

[illegible]

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