

# The Plagiarist

BY GEORGIA WOOD PANGBORN

THE studio window had been dark with frost all day, but now at four o'clock, so far as painting-light went, it might as well have been midnight. The sun was so low that he was no more than the last red coal in burned-out ashes, and the moon, slipping into view, stood boldly right in the middle of the pale sunset.

The Plagiarist knew that the moon and the sunset were there, because the last time she stamped her silver dollar into the white plush of the frosty pane she had first held it against the stove until it was so hot that in holding it she had to protect her fingers with the hem of her skirt, and then at the top of the window where the frost was thinnest (the bottom was covered by an impenetrable glacier two inches thick that overflowed the frame and extended upon the sill) she had deftly made a hole which reached clear to the glass and thus gave access to the entire west side of outdoors. Here she watched, occasionally touching her tongue to the rough frost under the pretext that it was ice-cream, until the little star that always goes with the new moon came out. Then she yawned, snuffled, and looked back at her father sitting in his overcoat by the big box stove. The only light came from the stove's single red eye, a disk three inches in diameter, and this uncertain illumination mischievously represented the friendly father as a crouching, melancholy monster, possibly dangerous. But to be afraid of one's father is too absurd a notion to entertain for a moment, so the Plagiarist briskly joined him, burrowed under the overcoat, and thence thrust forth her head to relish the other shadows. Chief of these was the lay figure, nothing but wood and a delightful doll by day, but at twilight a creature with sinister possibilities of life—or, if not life, exactly, with a suggestion of eyes behind the helmet which it generally wore.

The three large ladies upon Father's large canvas were pleasant enough—Guinevere, Elaine, and Vivien were their names—but they had ceased to have mystery long ago. So far as the Plagiarist knew, they were as old as her father and mother. Certainly they had been there ever since she could remember, and as she was nearly five, she could remember back four years at least. They had been there the first time she was carried up to the studio in somebody's arms. She had supposed them people then, and later learned her mistake. Sometimes one of the ladies lost an arm, sometimes a head, sometimes was obliterated altogether, but she always came back, and always the canvas stood on the easel, unchangeable in the main like the sky, the trees, and the mountains.

Her eyes travelled beyond the painted three to the window where her accumulation of frosty wealth showed dimly—dollars and dollars in neat rows, and reading backwards, "In God We Trust," which sounded dignified and solemn.

"If those were all truly dollars," inquired the Plagiarist, suddenly, "what could we buy?"

The artist's eye computed the frosty wealth.

"A silk gown for the Plagiarist," he estimated, "a cord of wood, and—and a frame for Respected Parent's picture," he concluded, with a sigh.

"Is that all?" The Plagiarist seemed disappointed. "I thought there was enough for six or eleven dolls and a pink party dress for mamma. Now, tell me about Gareth and Lynette."

The Respected Parent first opened the door of the big box stove, so that it was as good as a real fireplace, and inserted a log of wood which had lain all day in the studio without melting its casing of ice. Even now it melted but grudgingly, spluttering on the coals, and turning many of them black before it consented

to take on any of their genial red. But it yielded at length and became mountainous country and wilderness behind Camelot—Camelot being the collection of shining coals in front. And Gareth and Lynette set out from Camelot and passed torrents of bubbling sap and melted ice among those hills, and with great difficulty, and a variety of adventures not elsewhere set down, went to seek the Lady Lyonors, who must certainly be rescued before tea time or there was no telling what might happen. This evening Gareth was to marry Lyonors—Lyonors and Lynette shared him that way because it says in the poem:

And he that told the tale in olden times  
Says that Sir Gareth wedded Lyonors,  
But he that told it later, says Lynette.

On this evening the Plagiarist seemed drowsy and even a little inattentive, until they came to the banquet scene and left Lynette sitting alone and haughty by the peacock.

"Do peacocks taste good?" she asked, plaintively.

"Pretty fair, I fancy, but tougher than chicken."

"We had chicken last Thanksgiving. I remember," said the Plagiarist, and suddenly, out of a clear sky, came tears.

"Why, Plagiarist!" Her father turned up the small wrinkled face by the chin. "Why, Plagiarist?"

"I don't want pork gravy for supper, and I want butter that will melt on my bread. I'd rather you'd use my dollar to buy some new kind of butter. . . . I don't care about playing with it any more—"

"Well, I'll be— Eva, warm her butter to-night, will you?" said the artist to his wife, who, hearing the sound of grief, had come up-stairs to see about it, instead of calling up the announcement of supper from the hall below.

"You've been letting her play by the window again," she said, impatiently, feeling the little hands; and the Plagiarist, pretending to be a smaller girl than she was, whimpered,

"My froat's sore."

Ordinarily she would not have admitted such a thing, knowing that it was sure to get her father into trouble, but to-night the throat really was pretty sore, and the idea of roast peacock had roused

an appetite which could never, she knew, be appeased. Moreover, she resented something, she did not know exactly what. Perhaps it was the dawn of dissatisfaction with an environment which heretofore she had accepted without question as the most enviable of all environments. She did not know of any other child with a father who could make paper dolls. *There* was distinction! And yet—she knew a girl whose parents had cake and real creamy milk every day.

In the dining-room the walls were wet from the steam that had come in from the kitchen—wet as a glass of ice-water in a warm room, and trickling great drops. The window was darkened not only by frost, but by a mighty snow-drift which had curled up outside, making itself into the semblance of a white head and neck—for the Plagiarist had been outside to see. It was exactly like a polar bear trying to look into the window.

The Plagiarist knew right well she had scared her parents with her untimely tears and sore throat, so she took her supper sitting on her father's lap and smiled angelically when he faintly toasted the sour bread over the lamp and then melted her frozen butter in a tablespoon in the same manner. Besides the bread and butter there were boiled salt codfish, and some tea that had been made and remade with the same grounds until it had lost whatever flavor it had once possessed and would have made very good spinach.

"I don't wonder she cried about the peacock," muttered the artist, sadly.

Mrs. Artist was wearing an air of strained excitement which the Plagiarist's sore throat hardly justified. One cheek was red and the other pale, and her eyes, hard and bright, were so fastened upon the Plagiarist's little face that she was inattentive to her food, and dropped a morsel of it. Even when she drank her tea her eyes still stared queerly over the rim of the cup and her teeth chattered against it. The Plagiarist laughed at this, though not very heartily, and forgot her sore throat long enough to chatter her teeth on her cup in her mother's manner. It was this imitative faculty that had earned her the ill-sounding name

she bore—that, and the way she was always caricaturing her father's designs (though she did not mean to caricature) and trying to pass them off as original ideas of her own. For example, the house was always flooded with strange replicas of his "Guinevere among her Maidens," done on all sorts of paper in her wax crayons, Guinevere in the centre, Elaine at her back, and Vivien sitting at the Queen's feet—and all of them with large eyes from which the lashes radiated like sun rays in the almanac. She thought she did eyes better than her father.

This was the picture which was to take the Morley prize some day. Each year it had been thought it would surely be ready to go, but always something could be better—sometimes a whole figure must be done over. It was a trial that Mother had to pose for all three figures, when he so needed different types. When the Plagiarist suggested, out of pure good nature, that when she grew up she could pose for one of them herself, there was a hollow sound in the laughter of her parents—and they had been on bad terms for a long time, hardly speaking except to ask each other to "pass the butter, please"; but then one day she had come upon her mother in the trailing robes of Guinevere, crying into her father's velveteen shoulder. "I didn't mean," she was saying, "that I didn't believe in your ultimate success. Only, it's so long—so awfully long—and I can't bear getting into debt, and that child needs so many things."

The Plagiarist stole away and meditated pleasantly. It was a good thing that they realized she needed things. "So many." She ran over the list: dolls—oh, any number—and a china tea set, and a doll's baby-carriage, and a rocking-horse. She had always wanted a rocking-horse, and it seemed an inadequate reason for refusing it on the ground that it wasn't a little girl's toy. She had run over the list later with her father, who considered it seriously and jotted down the items, and with her mother, who had said, "Oh, hush!" and kissed her very hard, and left a wet spot on her cheek (which the Plagiarist had calmly mopped off, not knowing it to be tragedy)—but nothing had come of it. "That child" had gone right on needing the "so many things," and

that was last summer when things were comfortable. Now it was winter and they were not.

"You had a letter," said Mrs. Artist, "from Smith, Barton and Company this morning."

"Oh yes. I'd almost forgotten. Barton can't get it through his head that when I left commercial work I dropped it for good and all. Of course he can't realize what 'death in the soul' it is. His sort never do. About once a year he writes as if it were something wonderful and desirable, that the position is there if I want it, that my work has—or had—so much individuality and so on, and so forth—that no successor is possible. He even raised the ante this time and offered me three thousand instead of twenty-five hundred. He doesn't know any other standard of value than the dollar."

Mrs. Artist drew a deep breath. With the handle of her fork she had been drawing aimless patterns on the tablecloth; now the design took shape—" \$3000—\$3000," traced the fork almost as many times as the Plagiarist had stamped her dollar on the window-pane.

"And—you said—?"

"Said? Oh, I haven't written yet. I shall when I get time, of course. Barton's an awfully good fellow and means well. Are you sorry you didn't marry him?"

This was a family joke of long standing, always asked with the twinkling smile that made the artist's face most attractive, and answered with a laugh by the artist's wife. But this time she only kept on with her fork pattern on the cloth—\$3000 . . . \$3000. At last she said it aloud: "Three thousand—dollars!"

"At stone-breaking. Making lots of joyful little girls dancing in circles around a box of Ohowiwanta Breakfast Crackers . . . drawing Twinkling Tommies in every attitude of rejoicing over the Ball-bearing Match Safe Razor . . . doing it day after day, and hearing it called Art . . . when you know you have the real thing in you."

"Yes—but—"

"We talked it over at the first, you know, dear," the artist gravely reminded

her, "and you thought it would be worth it, for a few years, to bear hardships."

"Yes—but—oh, *I'm* willing! I'd live at the north pole or on the equator and eat nothing but salt codfish and oatmeal . . . But . . . Don't you think we might take a few boarders? You see, living so near the High School— The principal was speaking to me about it yesterday. So many girls and boys come in from the country. They would go home every Friday night and they'd be at school all day and wouldn't interfere with your work."

The artist leaned back in his chair with an expression of distaste.

"I thought we'd decided that, too. Can't you wait a little longer for me? I thought I had such a *Griselda*."

"I said I'd wait," she answered, with dry lips, "but there wasn't any Plagiartist then."

"Why,"—the artist looked down at the Plagiartist as she lay in calm half-sleep against his breast,—"that's true; but seems to me the Plagiartist is doing very well."

"Oh, you *Man!*" she cried out, dropped her head upon her arms among the doleful tea-things and wept. The Plagiartist lifted her keen voice in sympathy and the artist stared dumbly, patting the child's shoulder with a mechanical hand.

"Are you asking me . . . to give it up . . . after all?"

"I am asking nothing." She lifted her head from her arms. "And I'll keep my promise . . . but . . . I had a letter, too, this morning, from—from your sister Helen. She offers a position to . . . to . . . the Plagiartist . . . and if you don't accept Barton's offer, then the Plagiartist must accept this."

"What?"

"I've been thinking it over for a long time. The other children aren't nice to her because I can't dress her properly, and the time is coming when she ought to be in school. And she can't keep warm in this house. You know those holes in the kitchen floor where the plumbing was ripped out the last time it froze? Her pet occupation now, when she isn't making dollars on the windows, is fishing through those holes into the cellar, and I'm so busy, what with the washing and scrubbing and trying to think up new ways of cooking corn meal and pork, that

I can't keep her away from such things . . . and . . . it would be easier to let your sister have her than . . . than to lose her in some other way."

The Plagiartist was quite asleep now. The hand which held the dollar was tightly shut, the other lying limply against his neck. He looked at her in sudden fright.

"You don't think she's ill?"

"She's underfed, and that, in this climate . . . Oh, I can't talk of it. . . ."

"Would you really give up the Plagiartist?" asked the artist, sternly.

"Yes," she answered, in a voice of great weariness. "I would."

"And to Helen—whom you don't like. Neither do I, for that matter, though she is my sister."

"She has a big warm house and plenty to eat, and no babies of her own, and nothing to do but please herself. Plagiartist would have more dolls than she could count, and—ice-cream every day, probably, and pretty clothes. We'd have to give her up entirely, you know. Helen stipulates that. We could never see her, and she'd have to take their name. There's the letter."

She flung it across the table.

The artist looked at it as if it were something unclean and dangerous; then, leaning over, carefully, not to disturb the Plagiartist, he held it over the flame of the lamp while it curled and blackened and burst into flame.

"Helen," he said—"Helen dared—"

"Why not? She might not be kind, but Plagiartist could at least have a chance to grow up."

"Do you really think," he asked, speaking slowly, as one does when confronted with something terrible and gigantic—Giant Despair or Apollyon—"that it's as bad as that?"

She crossed over quickly, and kneeling down, bared the sleeping Plagiartist's arm, rolling up the clumsy sleeve and under-sleeve to show how it was the same size all the way up except where the bones bulged at the elbow, and indicating with a trembling forefinger where the thimble-top was prominent, like a berry. She spread out the long, thin fingers, that he might read the signs there also, and see, as he had so often seen before with pride, how the small hand was a copy

of his own in every line and embryonic muscle.

"And look here—" she pointed to a bluish mark about the eyes. "And see how big the top of her head looks. It wouldn't be out of proportion except that her cheeks are so thin. She's getting precocious and weak. Even if these winters don't—if they don't—she will be stunted. And you know what a lovely healthy baby she was. . . . Helen could give her plenty to eat. We—we really haven't any right to keep her, just because we'd rather. We must look ahead, you know."

"That's what I've been doing. I thought—one wants to do one's best, and that takes time. Nothing worth while is done in a hurry. I'm just getting nicely into the swing of these snow pictures—and Guinevere and her Maidens—of course it takes time to grow. When you've started out to be one of those self-taught chaps, why, you don't hurry, you know—"

"Yes. The Plagiarist has waited five years."

The artist was silent for a long time, his elbow on the table, and shading his face with his hand as he looked down at the Plagiarist. At last he sighed—but not sadly—more like one waking out of a sleep.

She waited, her burning eyes fixed on that hand so like the Plagiarist's, that hid his expression from her. Finally he removed it and looked up with a kind of smile.

"Why, then—if that's the case—"

The Plagiarist was aware that she was asleep, technically at least, inasmuch as she was limp and sandy-eyed, and wondered why she was still being carried around in people's arms instead of being tucked into bed with a hot brick at her feet, and the head of her very ragged only doll companionably pressing the same pillow. However, she had no criticism for the arrangement—indeed, as often as she roused enough to be sure where she was, her instinct of self-protection made her at once simulate the slumber that prevented a very interesting sensation from being turned into other channels.

"A flat is so convenient," her mother purred. "And I really think we could

afford a piano. I could give Plagiarist lessons. It would all come back, I'm sure."

"It will be nice to have you singing again," said her father. "I've missed it more than I realized."

"And we can put by—oh, ever so much! so she can go to college, if she wants to, or, if she doesn't, can go on with her music. She has a good ear, you know."

"Yes."

"I can make *all* our dresses. I haven't been working so hard trying to make something out of nothing all this time, to be unable to make something out of something when I get it."

The sand got thicker in the Plagiarist's eyes, then cleared into a dream that showed how all her frosty dollars had turned, not into silver only but gold—ah, that explained it, she thought, as she again stood before the window and observed how solid and yellow they shone, so that the whole window was of gold. How nice that she had thus stumbled on the art of making money! She would now give her parents all they needed; she would do that first, *of course*, being a dutiful child; and then go at once to the store and get the dolls she had noticed there—all of them—there must be twenty; maybe even sixteen; but that was none too many for her avaricious maternal instinct. And then she would spend her time making more money, and buy more, and more, and *more*. The excitement of it woke her quite up; the disappointment at not finding the dollars real made her whimper, but she stopped short—what was this? A roaring fire in the studio stove and no word of economy about it, so that it was warm—warm as summer! A glance at the window showed a big melted black spot in the white frost, and right in the middle of it a little star. And was that Mother, with her pretty hair all loose, although she wasn't posing for the three ladies? For she sat on the floor looking into the fire and her eyes were laughing. She looked up at her father's face, but it was too much in shadow to be sure of its expression. However, when she put up her hand to make sure how the mouth corners went, she felt the cheek wrinkle and bulge into a smile, so *that* was all right, and she smiled too.

"Well, old girl," said her father, "did you have a pleasant journey?"

He considered a moment, then looked thoughtfully over his shoulder at the three shadowy ladies in the Great Picture—the ladies who, like the Plagiarist, were five years old.

"The last of the wood's gone," said Mother, but she did not add, as she had done so often, "I don't know what we're going to do"; instead she yawned and made as if to go down-stairs after more, but Father stopped her.

"Here, Plagiarist, I've thought of a new game." He dropped her into her mother's lap, and going to the easel, removed the big canvas and returned to the fire, holding the shears in his hand.

"Want to do something symbolical?" he inquired of the baby.

"Something 'bolical?" she repeated.

He cut the canvas from the stretcher, though his wife vehemently protested, twisted the joints of the stretcher apart, and then broke the sticks across his knee.

"There," he said. "Now we'll have a fire!"

And they did.

"And now, Plagiarist, here are the

mustn't-touch scissors; you take 'em, and cut right up through the middle lady."

"Can I cut out her eyes?" inquired the thoroughly awakened Plagiarist, joyfully.

"Yep. Eyes, nose, mouth, anything you like, and put 'em in the fire and watch 'em sizzle."

And she did so. But it took so long that by the time the task was completed the dreams were again closing over her head. She seemed to hear mother singing a lullaby,—but that was improbable, because it hadn't happened so for years and years; not since she had grown up and became a little girl instead of a baby:

*"Sail, Baby, sail. . ."*

Odd, how real the voice was!

*"Out upon the sea;  
Only don't forget to sail  
Back again to me."*

Mother's voice went queer and wrong on the last words. There was a dream of Mother's hair closing in soft and tingly around her face, and a dream of warm wet drops smearing her cheeks. . . . Then the beautiful dream of the dollars came back.