WILLIAM ('THE KID') Nicholson, my father-in-law, could never rid himself of the Victorian superstition that a thousand guineas were a thousand guineas; income tax seemed to him a barbarous joke which did not, and should not, apply to people like myself. He had a large family to support, and as a fashionable portrait painter was bound to keep up appearances which would justify his asking the same prices for a full length as his friends William Orpen and Philip de Laszlo. He excelled in still-lifes and, though complaining that flowers were restless sitters, would have liked to paint nothing else all day except an occasional landscape. But full-length commissions were what he needed. 'Portraits seldom bounce,' he told me.

When I asked him to explain, he said: 'I have been painting and selling, and painting and selling for so many years now that my early buyers are beginning to die off or go bankrupt. Forgotten W.N. masterpieces keep coming up for auction, and have to be bought in at an unfair price, five times as much as they originally earned, just to keep the W.N. market steady. Some of them are charming and make me wonder how I ever painted so well; but others plead to have their faces turned to the wall quick. Such as those!'

It had come to a crisis in Appletree Yard. The Inland Revenue people, he told me, had sent him a three-line whip to attend a financial debate; also, an inexpert collector of his early work had died suddenly and left no heirs, so that his agent had to buy in three or four paintings which should never have been sold. 'Be sure your sin will find you out,' the Kid muttered despondently. 'What I need now is no less than two thousand guineas in ready cash. Pray for a miracle, my boy!'

I prayed, and hardly two hours had elapsed, before a ring came at the studio door and in walked Mrs Mucklehose-Kerr escorted by one Fulton, a butler, both wearing deep mourning. The Kid had not even known of her existence hitherto, but she seemed solid enough and the name Mucklehose-Kerr was synonymous with Glenlivet Whisky; so he was by no means discourteous.

The introductions over, Mrs Mucklehose-Kerr pressed the Kid's hand fervently, and said: 'Mr Nicholson, I know you will not fail me: you and you alone are destined to paint my daughter Alison.'

'Well,' said the Kid, blinking cautiously, 'I am pretty busy at this season, you know, Mrs Mucklehose-Kerr. And I've promised to take my family to Cannes in about three weeks' time. Still, if you make a point of it, perhaps the sittings can be fitted in before

I leave Town.'

'There will be no sittings, Mr Nicholson. There can be no sittings.' She dabbed her eyes with a black-lace handkerchief. 'My daughter passed over last week.'

It took the Kid a little while to digest this, but he mumbled condolences, and said gently: 'Then I fear that I shall have to work from photographs.'

Mrs Mucklehose-Kerr answered in broken tones: 'Alas, there are no photographs. Alison was so camera-shy. She used to say: "Mother, why do you want photographs? You will always have me to look at -- me myself, not silly old photographs!" And now she has passed over, and not left me so much as a snapshot. On my brother's advice I went to Mr Orpen first and asked him what I am now asking you; but he answered that the task was beyond him. He said that you were the only painter in London who could help me, because you have a sixth sense.'

Orpen was right in a way. The Kid had one queer parlour trick. He would suddenly ask a casual acquaintance: 'How do you sign your name?' and when he answered: 'Herbert B. Banbury' (or whatever it was), would startle him by writing it down in his own unmistakable handwriting.

'Look, here is her signature; this is the cover of her history exercise book.'

As he hesitated, his eye caught sight of the bounced canvases, leaning against the table on which lay the Income Tax demand. 'It is a difficult commission, Mrs Mucklehose-Kerr,' he said.

'I am willing to pay two thousand guineas,' she answered, 'for a full length.'

'It is not the money...' he protested.

'But Fulton will tell you all about dear Alison,' pleaded Mrs Mucklehose-Kerr, weeping unrestrainedly. 'Miss Alison was a beautiful girl, Fulton, was she not?'

'Sweetly pretty,' Fulton agreed with fervour. 'Pretty as a picture, madam.'

'I know you will consent, Mr Nicholson, and of course I will choose one of her own dresses for her to wear. The one I liked best.'

There was nothing for it but to consent.

The Kid took Fulton to the Café Royal that evening and plied him with whisky and questions.

'Blue eyes?' -- 'Bluish, sir, and a bit watery. But sweetly pretty.'

'Hair?' -- 'Mousy, sir, like her nature, and worn in a bun.'

'Figure?' -- 'So, so, Mr Nicholson, so, so! But she was a very sweet young lady, was Miss Alison.'

'Any physical peculiarities?' -- 'None, sir, that leaped to the eye. But I fear I am not a good hand at descriptions.'

'Had she no friends who could sketch her from memory?' -- 'None, Mr Nicholson. She lived a most retired life.'

So the Kid drew a blank with Fulton, and his parlour trick did not help at all because he lacked the complementary faculty (with which Mrs Mucklehose-Kerr credited him, but which, in his own phrase, was a different pair of socks altogether) of conjuring up a person from a signature. The next day, in despair, he consulted his brother-in-law, the painter James Pryde. 'Jimmy, what on earth am I to do now?'

Jimmy thought awhile and then, being a practical Scot, answered: 'Why not find out from Fulton whether the girl ever went to a dentist?'

Sir Rockaway Timms happened to be a fellow-member of the Savile, and the Kid hurried to Wimpole Street to consult him.

'Rocks, old boy, I'm in a fearful hole.'

'Not for the first time, Kid.'

'It's about a girl of eighteen called Alison Mucklehose-Kerr, one of your patients.'

'You should leave 'em alone until they reach the age of discretion. Oh, you artists!'

'I never set eyes on her. And now, it seems, she's dead.'

'Bad, bad! By her own hand?'

'I want to know what you know about her.'

'I can only show you the map of her mouth, if that's any morbid satisfaction to you. I have it in this cabinet. Wait a moment. M... Mu... Muck... Here you are! Crowded incisors; one heavily and clumsily stopped rear molar; one ditto lightly and neatly stopped by me; malformed canines; wisdom teeth not yet through.'

'For Heaven's sake, Rocks, what did she look like? It's life or death to me.'

Sir Rockaway glanced at the Kid quizzically. 'What do I get out of this?' he asked.

'An enormous box of liqueur chocolates swathed in pink ribbon.'

'Accepted, on behalf of Edith. Well, this Alison whom you betrayed in the dark forest was a sallow, lumpish, frightened Scots lassie with a slight cast in the off eye -- but, for all that, the spitting image of Lillian Gish!'

The Kid wrung Sir Rockaway's hand as violently as Mrs Mucklehose-Kerr had wrung his own at parting. Then he rushed out to his waiting taxi.

'Driver,' he shouted. 'The Birth of a Nation, wherever it's showing, as fast as your wheels will carry us!'

Mrs Mucklehose-Kerr, summoned to Appletree Yard a week later, uttered a moan of delight the moment she entered the studio. 'It is Alison, it is my Alison to the life, Mr Nicholson!' she babbled. 'I knew your genius would not fail me. But oh! how well and happy she is looking since she passed over!... Fulton, Fulton, tell Mr Nicholson how wonderful he is!'

'You have caught Miss Alison's expression, sir, to the dot!' pronounced Fulton, visibly impressed.

Mrs Mucklehose-Kerr insisted on buying two of the bounced and unworthy early Nicholsons which happened to be lying face-up on the floor. The Kid had been on the point of painting them over; and his obvious reluctance to sell made her offer twelve hundred guineas for the pair.

He weakly accepted; forgetting what a terrible retribution the Inland Revenue people would visit on him next year.