

WILL SHE ? - Mary Ellen Edwards (1838 or 39 – 1910)



The gardener has interrupted his toiling to woo the pretty girl sitting coquettishly on his wheelbarrow.

Mary Ellen Edwards was born in a family of artists. She studied drawing and worked as a copyist in the National Gallery. In 1862 she sent her first exhibit to the Royal Academy. She became one of the most celebrated illustrators of the Victorian era, under her maiden name Edwards, her first husband's name Freer, or Staples after her second marriage. [See the remarkable site www.meadowfamilytree.net]

On the fan leaf a striking feature immediately catches the eye: the gardener has turned into a gentleman. The male figure is no longer a country boy with short hair, plain white shirt and heavy black shoes resting his hands on his spade but an elegant man with ruffled shirt, embroidered waistcoat and fine pumps carrying a light walking stick under his arm.



As usual when a noteworthy change appears on a fan leaf the question arises of who/when/why was the change made. Is Lauronce responsible for the 'gentrification' of the male figure ? Did he reproduce an already altered copy ? Did he want to add an extra touch of elegance to his design ? It seems unlikely, considering the vast amount of fan leaves showing peasant figures, which anyway are so idealized as to have no rusticity left about them.

These remarks will join the long list of unanswered questions about Lauronce. As for the gardener he seems to have found the answer to his question 'Will she? ' Here is another one of Mary Ellen's paintings, with the same figures, the same wheelbarrow and garden setting. The title ? 'The answer'....


