

PROLOGUE TO THE THIRD STORY.

It was a sad day for me when Mr. Lanfray, of Rockleigh Place, discovering that his youngest daughter's health required a warm climate, removed from his English establishment to the South of France. Roving from place to place, as I am obliged to do, though I make many acquaintances, I keep but few friends. The nature of my calling is, I am quite aware, mainly answerable for this. People cannot be blamed for forgetting a man who, on leaving their houses, never can tell them for certain when he is likely to be in their neighborhood again.

Mr. Lanfray was one of the few exceptional persons who always remembered me. I have proofs of his friendly interest in my welfare in the shape of letters which I treasure with grateful care. The last of these is an invitation to his house in the South of France. There is little chance at present of my being able to profit by his kindness; but I like to read his invitation from time to time, for it makes me fancy, in my happier moments, that I may one day really be able to accept it.

My introduction to this gentleman, in my capacity of portrait-painter, did not promise much for me in a professional point of view. I was invited to Rockleigh--or to "The Place," as it was more frequently called among the people of the county--to take a likeness in water-colors, on a small scale, of the French governess who lived with Mr. Lanfray's daughters. My first idea on hearing of this was, that the governess was about to leave her situation, and that her pupils wished to have a memorial of her in the shape of a portrait. Subsequent inquiry, however, informed me that I was in error. It was the eldest of Mr. Lanfray's daughters, who was on the point of leaving the house to accompany her husband to India; and it was for her that the portrait had been ordered as a home remembrance of her best and dearest friend. Besides these particulars, I discovered that the governess, though still called "mademoiselle," was an old lady; that Mr. Lanfray had been introduced to her many years since in France, after the death of his wife; that she was absolute mistress in the house; and that her three pupils had always looked up to her as a second mother, from the time when their father first placed them under her charge.

These scraps of information made me rather anxious to see Mademoiselle Clairfait, the governess.

On the day appointed for my attendance at the comfortable country house of

Rockleigh, I was detained on the road, and did not arrive at my destination until late in the evening. The welcome accorded to me by Mr. Lanfray gave an earnest of the unvarying kindness that I was to experience at his hands in after-life. I was received at once on equal terms, as if I had been a friend of the family, and was presented the same evening to my host's daughters. They were not merely three elegant and attractive young women, but--what means much more than that--three admirable subjects for pictures, the bride particularly. Her young husband did not strike me much at first sight; he seemed rather shy and silent. After I had been introduced to him, I looked round for Mademoiselle Clairfait, but she was not present; and I was soon afterward informed by Mr. Lanfray that she always spent the latter part of the evening in her own room.

At the breakfast-table the next morning, I again looked for my sitter, and once more in vain. "Mamma, as we call her," said one of the ladies, "is dressing expressly for her picture, Mr. Kerby. I hope you are not above painting silk, lace, and jewelry. The dear old lady, who is perfection in everything else, is perfection also in dress, and is bent on being painted in all her splendor."

This explanation prepared me for something extraordinary; but I found that my anticipations had fallen far below the reality when Mademoiselle Clairfait at last made her appearance, and announced that she was ready to sit for her portrait.

Never before or since have I seen such perfect dressing and such active old age in combination. "Mademoiselle" was short and thin; her face was perfectly white all over, the skin being puckered up in an infinite variety of the smallest possible wrinkles. Her bright black eyes were perfect marvels of youthfulness and vivacity. They sparkled, and beamed, and ogled, and moved about over everybody and everything at such a rate, that the plain gray hair above them looked unnaturally venerable, and the wrinkles below an artful piece of masquerade to represent old age. As for her dress, I remember few harder pieces of work than the painting of it. She wore a silver-gray silk gown that seemed always flashing out into some new light whenever she moved. It was as stiff as a board, and rustled like the wind. Her head, neck, and bosom were enveloped in clouds of the airiest-looking lace I ever saw, disposed about each part of her with the most exquisite grace and propriety, and glistening at all sorts of unexpected places with little fairy-like toys in gold and precious stones. On her right wrist she wore three small bracelets, with the hair of her three pupils worked into them; and on her left, one large bracelet with a miniature let in over the clasp. She had a dark crimson and gold scarf thrown coquettishly over her shoulders,

and held a lovely little feather-fan in her hand. When she first presented herself before me in this costume, with a brisk courtesy and a bright smile, filling the room with perfume, and gracefully flirting the feather-fan, I lost all confidence in my powers as a portrait-painter immediately. The brightest colors in my box looked dowdy and dim, and I myself felt like an unwashed, unbrushed, unpresentable sloven.

"Tell me, my angels," said mademoiselle, apostrophizing her pupils in the prettiest foreign English, "am I the cream of all creams this morning? Do I carry my sixty years resplendently? Will the savages in India, when my own love exhibits my picture among them, say, 'Ah! smart! smart! this was a great dandy?' And the gentleman, the skillful artist, whom it is even more an honor than a happiness to meet, does he approve of me for a model? Does he find me pretty and paintable from top to toe?" Here she dropped me another brisk courtesy, placed herself in a languishing position in the sitter's chair, and asked us all if she looked like a shepherdess in Dresden china.

The young ladies burst out laughing, and mademoiselle, as gay as any of them and a great deal shriller, joined in the merriment. Never before had I contended with any sitter half as restless as that wonderful old lady. No sooner had I begun than she jumped out of the chair, and exclaiming, "Grand Dieu! I have forgotten to embrace my angels this morning," ran up to her pupils, raised herself on tiptoe before them in quick succession, put the two first fingers of each hand under their ears, kissed them lightly on both cheeks, and was back again in the chair before an English governess could have said, "Good-morning, my dears, I hope you all slept well last night."

I began again. Up jumped mademoiselle for the second time, and tripped across the room to a cheval-glass. "No!" I heard her say to herself, "I have not discomposed my head in kissing my angels. I may come back and pose for my picture."

Back she came. I worked from her for five minutes at the most. "Stop!" cries mademoiselle, jumping up for the third time; "I must see how this skillful artist is getting on. Grand Dieu! why he has done nothing!"

For the fourth time I began, and for the fourth time the old lady started out of her chair. "Now I must repose myself," said mademoiselle, walking lightly from end to end of the room, and humming a French air, by way of taking a rest.

I was at my wit's end, and the young ladies saw it. They all surrounded my

unmanageable sitter, and appealed to her compassion for me. "Certainly!" said mademoiselle, expressing astonishment by flinging up both her hands with all the fingers spread out in the air. "But why apostrophize me thus? I am here, I am ready, I am at the service of this skillful artist. Why apostrophize me?"

A fortunate chance question of mine steadied her for some time. I inquired if I was expected to draw the whole of my sitter's figure as well as her face. Mademoiselle replied by a comic scream of indignation. If I was the brave and gifted man for whom she took me, I ought to be ready to perish rather than leave out an inch of her anywhere. Dress was her passion, and it would be an outrage on her sentiments if I did not do full justice to everything she had on--to her robe, to her lace, to her scarf, to her fan, to her rings, her jewels, and, above all, to her bracelets. I groaned in spirit at the task before me, but made my best bow of acquiescence. Mademoiselle was not to be satisfied by a mere bow; she desired the pleasure of specially directing my attention, if I would be so amiable as to get up and approach her, to one of her bracelets in particular--the bracelet with the miniature, on her left wrist. It had been the gift of the dearest friend she ever had, and the miniature represented that friend's beloved and beautiful face. Could I make a tiny, tiny copy of that likeness in my drawing! Would I only be so obliging as to approach for one little moment, and see if such a thing were possible?

I obeyed unwillingly enough, expecting, from mademoiselle's expression, to see a commonplace portrait of some unfortunate admirer whom she had treated with unmerited severity in the days of her youth. To my astonishment, I found that the miniature, which was very beautifully painted, represented a woman's face--a young woman with kind, sad eyes, pale, delicate cheeks, light hair, and such a pure, tender, lovely expressions that I thought of Raphael's Madonnas the moment I looked at her portrait.

The old lady observed the impression which the miniature produced on me, and nodded her head in silence. "What a beautiful, innocent, pure face!" I said.

Mademoiselle Clairfait gently brushed a particle of dust from the miniature with her handkerchief, and kissed it. "I have three angels still left," she said, looking at her pupils. "They console me for the fourth, who has gone to heaven."

She patted the face on the miniature gently with her little, withered, white fingers, as if it had been a living thing. "Sister Rose!" she sighed to herself; then, looking up again at me, said, "I should like it put into my portrait, sir,

because I have always worn it since I was a young woman, for 'Sister Rose's' sake."

The sudden change in her manner, from the extreme of flighty gayety to the extreme of quiet sadness, would have looked theatrical in a woman of any other nation. It seemed, however, perfectly natural and appropriate in her. I went back to my drawing, rather perplexed. Who was "Sister Rose"? Not one of the Lanfray family, apparently. The composure of the young ladies when the name was mentioned showed plainly enough that the original of the miniature had been no relation of theirs.

I tried to stifle my curiosity on the subject of Sister Rose, by giving myself entirely to my work. For a full half-hour, Mademoiselle Clairfait sat quietly before me, with her hands crossed on her lap, and her eyes fixed on the bracelet. This happy alteration enabled me to do something toward completing the outline of her face and figure. I might even, under fortunate circumstances, have vanquished the preliminary difficulties of my task at one effort; but the fates were against me that day. While I was still working rapidly and to my satisfaction, a servant knocked at the door to announce luncheon, and mademoiselle lightly roused herself from her serious reflection and her quiet position in a moment.

"Ah me!" she said, turning the miniature round on her wrist till it was out of sight. "What animals we are, after all! The spiritual part of us is at the mercy of the stomach. My heart is absorbed by tender thoughts, yet I am not the less ready for luncheon! Come, my children and fellow-mortals. Allons cultiver notre jardin!"

With this quotation from "Candide," plaintively delivered, the old lady led the way out of the room, and was followed by her younger pupils. The eldest sister remained behind for a moment, and reminded me that the lunch was ready.

"I am afraid you have found the dear old soul rather an unruly sitter," she said, noticing the look of dissatisfaction with which I was regarding my drawing. "But she will improve as you go on. She has done better already for the last half-hour, has she not?"

"Much better," I answered. "My admiration of the miniature on the bracelet seemed--I suppose, by calling up some old associations--to have a strangely soothing effect on Mademoiselle Clairfait."

"Ah yes! only remind her of the original of that portrait, and you change her

directly, whatever she may have been saying or doing the moment before. Sometimes she talks of Sister Rose, and of all that she went through in the time of the French Revolution, by the hour together. It is wonderfully interesting--at least we all think so."

"I presume that the lady described as 'Sister Rose' was a relation of Mademoiselle Clairfait's?"

"No, only a very dear friend. Mademoiselle Clairfait is the daughter of a silk-mercer, once established at Chalons-sur-Marne. Her father happened to give an asylum in his office to a lonely old man, to whom 'Sister Rose' and her brother had been greatly indebted in the revolutionary time; and out of a train of circumstances connected with that, the first acquaintance between mademoiselle and the friend whose portrait she wears, arose. After the time of her father's bankruptcy, and for many years before we were placed under her charge, our good old governess lived entirely with 'Sister Rose' and her brother. She must then have heard all the interesting things that she has since often repeated to my sisters and myself."

"Might I suggest," said I, after an instant's consideration, "that the best way to give me a fair chance of studying Mademoiselle Clairfait's face at the next sitting, would be to lead her thoughts again to that quieting subject of the miniature, and to the events which the portrait recalls? It is really the only plan, after what I have observed this morning, that I can think of for enabling me to do myself and my sitter justice."

"I am delighted to hear you say so," replied the lady; "for the execution of your plan, by me or by my sisters, will be the easiest thing in the world. A word from us at any time will set mademoiselle thinking, and talking too, of the friend of her youthful days. Depend on our assistance so far. And now let me show you the way to the luncheon-table."

Two good results followed the ready rendering of the help I had asked from my host's daughters. I succeeded with my portrait of Mademoiselle Clairfait, and I heard the story which occupies the following pages.

In the case of the preceding narratives, I have repeated what was related to me, as nearly as possible in the very words of my sitters. In the case of this third story, it is impossible for me to proceed upon the same plan. The circumstances of "Sister Rose's" eventful history were narrated to me at different times, and in the most fragmentary and discursive manner. Mademoiselle Clairfait characteristically mixed up with the direct interest of her story, not only references to places and people which had no

recognizable connection with it, but outbursts of passionate political declamation, on the extreme liberal side--to say nothing of little tender apostrophes to her beloved friend, which sounded very prettily as she spoke them, but which would lose their effect altogether by being transferred to paper. Under these circumstances, I have thought it best to tell the story in my own way--rigidly adhering to the events of it exactly as they were related; and never interfering on my own responsibility except to keep order in the march of the incidents, and to present them, to the best of my ability, variously as well as interestingly to the reader.