

PROLOGUE TO THE FIFTH STORY.

The next piece of work which occupied my attention after taking leave of Mr. Garthwaite, offered the strongest possible contrast to the task which had last engaged me. Fresh from painting a bull at a farmhouse, I set forth to copy a Holy Family, by Correggio, at a convent of nuns. People who go to the Royal Academy Exhibition, and see pictures by famous artists, painted year after year in the same marked style which first made them celebrated, would be amazed indeed if they knew what a Jack-of-all-trades a poor painter must become before he can gain his daily bread.

The picture by Correggio which I was now commissioned to copy had been lent to the nuns by a Catholic gentleman of fortune, who prized it as the gem of his collection, and who had never before trusted it out of his own hands. My copy, when completed, was to be placed over the high altar of the convent chapel; and my work throughout its progress was to be pursued entirely in the parlor of the nunnery, and always in the watchful presence of one or other of the inmates of the house. It was only on such conditions that the owner of the Correggio was willing to trust his treasure out of his own hands, and to suffer it to be copied by a stranger. The restrictions he imposed, which I thought sufficiently absurd, and perhaps offensively suspicious as well, were communicated to me politely enough before I was allowed to undertake the commission. Unless I was inclined to submit to precautionary regulations which would affect any other artist exactly as they affected me, I was told not to think of offering to make the copy; and the nuns would then address themselves to some other person in my profession. After a day's consideration, I submitted to the restrictions, by my wife's advice, and saved the nuns the trouble of making application for a copier of Correggio in any other quarter.

I found the convent was charmingly situated in a quiet little valley in the West of England. The parlor in which I was to paint was a large, well-lighted apartment; and the village inn, about half a mile off, afforded me cheap and excellent quarters for the night. Thus far, therefore, there was nothing to complain of. As for the picture, which was the next object of interest to me, I was surprised to find that the copying of it would be by no means so difficult a task as I had anticipated. I am rather of a revolutionary spirit in matters of art, and am bold enough to think that the old masters have their faults as well as their beauties. I can give my opinion, therefore, on the Correggio at the convent independently at least. Looked at technically, the picture was a fine specimen of coloring and execution; but looked at for the higher merits

of delicacy, elevation, and feeling for the subject, it deserved copying as little as the most commonplace work that any unlucky modern artist ever produced. The faces of the Holy Family not only failed to display the right purity and tenderness of expression, but absolutely failed to present any expression at all. It is flat heresy to say so, but the valuable Correggio was nevertheless emphatically, and, in so many words, a very uninteresting picture.

So much for the convent and the work that I was to do in it. My next anxiety was to see how the restrictions imposed on me were to be carried out. The first day, the Mother Superior herself mounted guard in the parlor--a stern, silent, fanatical-looking woman, who seemed determined to awe me and make me uncomfortable, and who succeeded thoroughly in the execution of her purpose. The second day she was relieved by the officiating priest of the convent--a mild, melancholy, gentleman-like man, with whom I got on tolerably well. The third day, I had for overlooker the portress of the house--a dirty, dismal, deaf, old woman, who did nothing but knit stockings and chew orris-root. The fourth day, a middle-aged nun, whom I heard addressed as Mother Martha, occupied the post of guardian to the precious Correggio; and with her the number of my overlookers terminated. She, and the portress, and the priest, and the Mother Superior, relieved each other with military regularity, until I had put the last touch to my copy. I found them ready for me every morning on entering the parlor, and I left them in the chair of observation every evening on quitting it. As for any young and beautiful nuns who might have been in the building, I never so much as set eyes on the ends of their veils. From the door to the parlor, and from the parlor to the door, comprised the whole of my experience of the inside of the convent.

The only one of my superintending companions with whom I established anything like a familiar acquaintance was Mother Martha. She had no outward attractions to recommend her; but she was simple, good-humored, ready to gossip, and inquisitive to a perfectly incredible degree. Her whole life had been passed in the nunnery; she was thoroughly accustomed to her seclusion, thoroughly content with the monotonous round of her occupations; not at all anxious to see the world for herself; but, on the other hand, insatiably curious to know all about it from others. There was no question connected with myself, my wife, my children, my friends, my profession, my income, my travels, my favorite amusements, and even my favorite sins, which a woman could ask a man, that Mother Martha did not, in the smallest and softest of voices, ask of me. Though an intelligent, well-informed person in all that related to her own special vocation, she was a perfect child in everything else. I constantly caught myself talking to her,

just as I should have talked at home to one of my own little girls.

I hope no one will think that, in expressing myself thus, I am writing disparagingly of the poor nun. On two accounts, I shall always feel compassionately and gratefully toward Mother Martha. She was the only person in the convent who seemed sincerely anxious to make her presence in the parlor as agreeable to me as possible; and she good-humoredly told me the story which it is my object in these pages to introduce to the reader. In both ways I am deeply indebted to her; and I hope always to remember the obligation.

The circumstances under which the story came to be related to me may be told in very few words.

The interior of a convent parlor being a complete novelty to me, I looked around with some interest on first entering my painting-room at the nunnery. There was but little in it to excite the curiosity of any one. The floor was covered with common matting, and the ceiling with plain whitewash. The furniture was of the simplest kind; a low chair with a praying-desk fixed to the back, and a finely carved oak book-case, studded all over with brass crosses, being the only useful objects that I could discern which had any conventional character about them. As for the ornaments of the room, they were entirely beyond my appreciation. I could feel no interest in the colored prints of saints, with gold platters at the backs of their heads, that hung on the wall; and I could see nothing particularly impressive in the two plain little alabaster pots for holy water, fastened, one near the door, the other over the chimney-piece. The only object, indeed, in the whole room which in the slightest degree attracted my curiosity was an old worm-eaten wooden cross, made in the rudest manner, hanging by itself on a slip of wall between two windows. It was so strangely rough and misshapen a thing to exhibit prominently in a neat room, that I suspected some history must be attached to it, and resolved to speak to my friend the nun about it at the earliest opportunity.

"Mother Martha," said I, taking advantage of the first pause in the succession of quaintly innocent questions which she was as usual addressing to me, "I have been looking at that rough old cross hanging between the windows, and fancying that it must surely be some curiosity--"

"Hush! hush!" exclaimed the nun, "you must not speak of that as a 'curiosity'; the Mother Superior calls it a Relic."

"I beg your pardon," said I; "I ought to have chosen my expressions more

carefully--"

"Not," interposed Mother Martha, nodding to show me that my apology need not be finished--"not that it is exactly a relic in the strict Catholic sense of the word; but there were circumstances in the life of the person who made it--" Here she stopped, and looked at me doubtfully.

"Circumstances, perhaps, which it is not considered advisable to communicate to strangers," I suggested.

"Oh, no!" answered the nun, "I never heard that they were to be kept a secret. They were not told as a secret to me."

"Then you know all about them?" I asked.

"Certainly. I could tell you the whole history of the wooden cross; but it is all about Catholics, and you are a Protestant."

"That, Mother Martha, does not make it at all less interesting to me."

"Does it not, indeed?" exclaimed the nun, innocently. "What a strange man you are! and what a remarkable religion yours must be! What do your priests say about ours? Are they learned men, your priests?"

I felt that my chance of hearing Mother Martha's story would be a poor one indeed, if I allowed her to begin a fresh string of questions. Accordingly, I dismissed the inquiries about the clergy of the Established Church with the most irreverent briefness, and recalled her attention forthwith to the subject of the wooden cross.

"Yes, yes," said the good-natured nun; "surely you shall hear all I can tell you about it; but--" she hesitated timidly, "but I must ask the Mother Superior's leave first."

Saying these words, she summoned the portress, to my great amusement, to keep guard over the inestimable Correggio in her absence, and left the room. In less than five minutes she came back, looking quite happy and important in her innocent way.

"The Mother Superior," she said, "has given me leave to tell all I know about the wooden cross. She says it may do you good, and improve your Protestant opinion of us Catholics."

I expressed myself as being both willing and anxious to profit by what I heard; and the nun began her narrative immediately.

She related it in her own simple, earnest, minute way; dwelling as long on small particulars as on important incidents; and making moral reflections for my benefit at every place where it was possible to introduce them. In spite, however, of these drawbacks in the telling of it, the story interested and impressed me in no ordinary degree; and I now purpose putting the events of it together as skillfully and strikingly as I can, in the hope that this written version of the narrative may appeal as strongly to the reader's sympathies as the spoken version did to mine.