

PROLOGUE TO THE SIXTH STORY.

On the last occasion when I made a lengthened stay in London, my wife and I were surprised and amused one morning by the receipt of the following note, addressed to me in a small, crabbed, foreign-looking handwriting.

"Professor Tizzi presents amiable compliments to Mr. Kerby, the artist, and is desirous of having his portrait done, to be engraved from, and placed at the beginning of the voluminous work on 'The Vital Principle; or, Invisible Essence of Life,' which the Professor is now preparing for the press--and posterity.

"The Professor will give five pounds; and will look upon his face with satisfaction, as an object perpetuated for public contemplation at a reasonable rate, if Mr. Kerby will accept the sum just mentioned.

"In regard to the Professor's ability to pay five pounds, as well as to offer them, if Mr. Kerby should, from ignorance, entertain injurious doubts, he is requested to apply to the Professor's honorable friend, Mr. Lanfray, of Rockleigh Place."

But for the reference at the end of this strange note, I should certainly have considered it as a mere trap set to make a fool of me by some mischievous friend. As it was, I rather doubted the propriety of taking any serious notice of Professor Tizzi's offer; and I might probably have ended by putting the letter in the fire without further thought about it, but for the arrival by the next post of a note from Mr. Lanfray, which solved all my doubts, and sent me away at once to make the acquaintance of the learned discoverer of the Essence of Life.

"Do not be surprised" (Mr. Lanfray wrote) "if you get a strange note from a very eccentric Italian, one Professor Tizzi, formerly of the University of Padua. I have known him for some years. Scientific inquiry is his monomania, and vanity his ruling passion. He has written a book on the principle of life, which nobody but himself will ever read; but which he is determined to publish, with his own portrait for frontispiece. If it is worth your while to accept the little he can offer you, take it by all means, for he is a character worth knowing. He was exiled, I should tell you, years ago, for some absurd political reason, and has lived in England ever since. All the money he inherits from his father, who was a mail contractor in the north of Italy, goes in books and experiments; but I think I can answer for his

solvency, at any rate, for the large sum of five pounds. If you are not very much occupied just now, go and see him. He is sure to amuse you."

Professor Tizzi lived in the northern suburb of London. On approaching his house, I found it, so far as outward appearance went, excessively dirty and neglected, but in no other respect different from the "villas" in its neighborhood. The front garden door, after I had rang twice, was opened by a yellow-faced, suspicious old foreigner, dressed in worn-out clothes, and completely and consistently dirty all over, from top to toe. On mentioning my name and business, this old man led me across a weedy, neglected garden, and admitted me into the house. At the first step into the passage, I was surrounded by books. Closely packed in plain wooden shelves, they ran all along the wall on either side to the back of the house; and when I looked up at the carpetless staircase, I saw nothing but books again, running all the way up the wall, as far as my eye could reach. "Here is the Artist Painter!" cried the old servant, throwing open one of the parlor doors, before I had half done looking at the books, and signing impatiently to me to walk into the room.

Books again! all round the walls, and all over the floor--among them a plain deal table, with leaves of manuscript piled high on every part of it--among the leaves a head of long, elfish white hair covered with a black skull-cap, and bent down over a book--above the head a sallow, withered hand shaking itself at me as a sign that I must not venture to speak just at that moment--on the tops of the bookcases glass vases full of spirits of some kind, with horrible objects floating in the liquid--dirt on the window panes, cobwebs hanging from the ceiling, dust springing up in clouds under my intruding feet. These were the things I observed on first entering the study of Professor Tizzi.

After I had waited for a minute or so, the shaking hand stopped, descended with a smack on the nearest pile of manuscript, seized the book that the head had been bending over, and flung it contemptuously to the other end of the room. "I've refuted you, at any rate!" said Professor Tizzi, looking with extreme complacency at the cloud of dust raised by the fall of the rejected volume.

He turned next to me. What a grand face it was! What a broad, white forehead--what fiercely brilliant black eyes--what perfect regularity and refinement in the other features; with the long, venerable hair, framing them in, as it were, on either side! Poor as I was, I felt that I could have painted his portrait for nothing. Titian, Vandyke, Valasquez--any of the three would have paid him to sit to them!

"Accept my humblest excuses, sir," said the old man, speaking English with a singularly pure accent for a foreigner. "That absurd book plunged me so deep down in the quagmires of sophistry and error, Mr. Kerby, that I really could not get to the surface at once when you came into the room. So you are willing to draw my likeness for such a small sum as five pounds?" he continued, rising, and showing me that he wore a long black velvet gown, instead of the paltry and senseless costume of modern times.

I informed him that five pounds was as much as I generally got for a drawing.

"It seems little," said the professor; "but if you want fame, I can make it up to you in that way. There is my great work" (he pointed to the piles of manuscript), "the portrait of my mind and the mirror of my learning; put a likeness of my face on the first page, and posterity will then be thoroughly acquainted with me, outside and in. Your portrait will be engraved, Mr. Kerby, and your name shall be inscribed under the print. You shall be associated, sir, in that way, with a work which will form an epoch in the history of human science. The Vital Principle--or, in other words, the essence of that mysterious Something which we call Life, and which extends down from Man to the feeblest insect and the smallest plant--has been an unguessed riddle from the beginning of the world to the present time. I alone have found the answer; and here it is!" He fixed his dazzling eyes on me in triumph, and smacked the piles of manuscript fiercely with both his sallow hands.

I saw that he was waiting for me to say something; so I asked if his great work had not cost a vast expenditure of time and pains.

"I am seventy, sir," said the Professor; "and I began preparing myself for that book at twenty. After mature consideration, I have written it in English (having three other foreign languages at my fingers' ends), as a substantial proof of my gratitude to the nation that has given me an asylum. Perhaps you think the work looks rather long in its manuscript state? It will occupy twelve volumes, sir, and it is not half long enough, even then, for the subject. I take two volumes (and no man could do it in less) to examine the theories of all the philosophers in the world, ancient and modern, on the Vital Principle. I take two more (and little enough) to scatter every one of the theories, seriatim, to the winds. I take two more (at the risk, for brevity's sake, of doing things by halves) to explain the exact stuff, or vital compound, of which the first man and woman in the world were made--calling them Adam and Eve, out of deference to popular prejudices. I take two more--but

you are standing all this time, Mr. Kerby; and I am talking instead of sitting for my portrait. Pray take any books you want, anywhere off the floor, and make a seat of any height you please. Furniture would only be in my way here, so I don't trouble myself with anything of the kind."

I obediently followed the Professor's directions, and had just heaped up a pile of grimy quartos, when the old servant entered the room with a shabby little tray in his hand. In the middle of the tray I saw a crust of bread and a bit of garlic, encircled by a glass of water, a knife, salt, pepper, a bottle of vinegar, and a flask of oil.

"With your permission, I am going to breakfast," said Professor Tizzi, as the tray was set down before him on the part of his great work relating to the vital compound of Adam and Eve. As he spoke, he took up the piece of bread, and rubbed the crusty part of it with the bit of garlic, till it looked as polished as a new dining-table. That done, he turned the bread, crumb uppermost, and saturated it with oil, added a few drops of vinegar, sprinkled with pepper and salt, and, with a gleam of something very like greediness in his bright eyes, took up the knife to cut himself a first mouthful of the horrible mess that he had just concocted. "The best of breakfasts," said the Professor, seeing me look amazed. "Not a cannibal meal of chicken-life in embryo (vulgarly called an egg); not a dog's gorge of a dead animal's flesh, blood and bones, warmed with fire (popularly known as a chop); not a breakfast, sir, that lions, tigers, Caribbees, and costermongers could all partake of alike; but an innocent, nutritive, simple, vegetable meal; a philosopher's refection, a breakfast that a prize-fighter would turn from in disgust, and that a Plato would share with relish."

I have no doubt that he was right, and that I was prejudiced; but as I saw the first oily, vinegary, garlicky morsel slide noiselessly into his mouth, I began to feel rather sick. My hands were dirty with moving the books, and I asked if I could wash them before beginning to work at the likeness, as a good excuse for getting out of the room, while Professor Tizzi was unctuously disposing of his simple vegetable meal.

The philosopher looked a little astonished at my request, as if the washing of hands at irregular times and seasons offered a comparatively new subject of contemplation to him; but he rang a hand-bell on his table immediately, and told the old servant to take me up into his bedroom.

The interior of the parlor had astonished me; but a sight of the bedroom was a new sensation--not of the most agreeable kind. The couch on which the philosopher sought repose after his labors was a truckle-bed that would not

have fetched half a crown at a sale. On one side of it dangled from the ceiling a complete male skeleton, looking like all that was left of a man who might have hung himself about a century ago, and who had never been disturbed since the moment of his suicide. On the other side of the bed stood a long press, in which I observed hideous colored preparations of the muscular system, and bottles with curious, twining, thread-like substances inside them, which might have been remarkable worms or dissections of nerves, scattered amicably side by side with the Professor's hair-brush (three parts worn out), with remnants of his beard on bits of shaving-paper, with a broken shoe-horn, and with a traveling looking-glass of the sort usually sold at sixpence apiece. Repetitions of the litter of books in the parlor lay all about over the floor; colored anatomical prints were nailed anyhow against the walls; rolled-up towels were scattered here, there, and everywhere in the wildest confusion, as if the room had been bombarded with them; and last, but by no means least remarkable among the other extraordinary objects in the bed-chamber, the stuffed figure of a large unshaven poodle-dog, stood on an old card-table, keeping perpetual watch over a pair of the philosopher's black breeches twisted round his forepaws.

I had started, on entering the room, at the skeleton, and I started once more at the dog. The old servant noticed me each time with a sardonic grin. "Don't be afraid," he said; "one is as dead as the other." With these words, he left me to wash my hands.

Finding little more than a pint of water at my disposal, and failing altogether to discover where the soap was kept, I was not long in performing my ablutions. Before leaving the room, I looked again at the stuffed poodle. On the board to which he was fixed, I saw painted in faded letters the word "Scaramuccia," evidently the comic Italian name to which he had answered in his lifetime. There was no other inscription; but I made up my mind that the dog must have been the Professor's pet, and that he kept the animal stuffed in his bedroom as a remembrance of past times. "Who would have suspected so great a philosopher of having so much heart!" thought I, leaving the bedroom to go downstairs again.

The Professor had done his breakfast, and was anxious to begin the sitting; so I took out my chinks and paper, and set to work at once--I seated on one pile of books and he on another.

"Fine anatomical preparations in my room, are there not, Mr. Kerby?" said the old gentleman. "Did you notice a very interesting and perfect arrangement of the intestinal ganglia? They form the subject of an important chapter in my great work."

"I am afraid you will think me very ignorant," I replied. "But I really do not know the intestinal ganglia when I see them. The object I noticed with most curiosity in your room was something more on a level with my own small capacity."

"And what was that?" asked the Professor.

"The figure of the stuffed poodle. I suppose he was a favorite of yours?"

"Of mine? No, no; a young woman's favorite, sir, before I was born; and a very remarkable dog, too. The vital principle in that poodle, Mr. Kerby, must have been singularly intensified. He lived to a fabulous old age, and he was clever enough to play an important part of his own in what you English call a Romance of Real Life! If I could only have dissected that poodle, I would have put him into my book; he should have headed my chapter on the Vital Principle of Beasts."

"Here is a story in prospect," thought I, "if I can only keep his attention up to the subject."

"He should have figured in my great work, sir," the Professor went on.

"Scaramuccia should have taken his place among the examples that prove my new theory; but unfortunately he died before I was born. His mistress gave him, stuffed, as you see upstairs, to my father to take care of for her, and he has descended as an heirloom to me. Talking of dogs, Mr. Kerby, I have ascertained, beyond the possibility of doubt, that the brachial plexus in people who die of hydrophobia--but stop! I had better show you how it is--the preparation is upstairs under my wash-hand stand."

He left his seat as he spoke. In another minute he would have sent the servant to fetch the "preparation," and I should have lost the story. At the risk of his taking offense, I begged him not to move just then, unless he wished me to spoil his likeness. This alarmed, but fortunately did not irritate him. He returned to his seat, and I resumed the subject of the stuffed poodle, asking him boldly to tell me the story with which the dog was connected. The demand seemed to impress him with no very favorable opinion of my intellectual tastes; but he complied with it, and related, not without many a wearisome digression to the subject of his great work, the narrative which I propose calling by the name of "The Yellow Mask." After the slight specimens that I have given of his character and style of conversation, it will be almost unnecessary for me to premise that I tell this story as I have told the last, and "Sister Rose," in my own language, and

according to my own plan in the disposition of the incidents--adding nothing, of course, to the facts, but keeping them within the limits which my disposable space prescribes to me.

I may perhaps be allowed to add in this place, that I have not yet seen or heard of my portrait in an engraved state. Professor Tizzi is still alive; but I look in vain through the publishers' lists for an announcement of his learned work on the Vital Principle. Possibly he may be adding a volume or two to the twelve already completed, by way of increasing the debt which a deeply obliged posterity is, sooner or later, sure of owing to him.