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THE UNKNOWN PAINTER.

One beautiful summer morning, about the year 1630, several youths of Seville approached the dwelling of the celebrated painter Murillo, where they arrived nearly at the same time. After the usual salutations, they entered the studio. Murillo was not yet there, and each of the pupils walked up quickly to his easel to examine if the paint had dried, or perhaps to admire his work of the previous evening.

"Pray, gentlemen," exclaimed Isturitz angrily, "which of you remained behind in the studio last night?"

"What an absurd question!" replied Cordova; "don't you recollect that we all came away together?"

"This is a foolish jest, gentlemen," answered Isturitz; "last evening I cleaned my palette with the greatest care, and now it is as dirty as if some one had used it all night."

"Look!" exclaimed Carlos, "here is a small figure in the corner of my canvass, and it is not badly done. I should like to know who it is that amuses himself every morning with sketching figures sometimes on my canvass, sometimes on the walls. There was one yesterday on your easel, Ferdinand."

"It must be Isturitz," said Ferdinand. "Gentlemen," replied Isturitz, "I protest——" "You need not protest," replied Carlos; "we all know you are not capable of sketching such a figure as that."

"At least," answered Isturitz, "I have never made a sketch as bad as that of yours; one would think that you had done it in a feat."

"And my pencils are quite wet," said Gonzalo in his turn. "Truly strange things go on here during the night."

"Do you not think, like the negro Gomez, that it is the Zombi who comes and plays all these tricks?" said Isturitz.

"Truly," said Mendez, who had not yet spoken, being absorbed in admiration of the various figures which were sketched with the hand of a master in different parts of the studio, "if the Zombi of the negroes draws in this manner, he would make a beautiful head of the Virgin in my Descent from the Cross."

With these words, Mendez, with a careless air, approached his easel, when an exclamation of astonishment escaped him, and he gazed in mute surprise on his canvass, on which was roughly sketched a most beautiful head of the Virgin; but the expression was so admirable, the lines so clear, the contour so graceful, that, compared with the figures by which it was encircled, it seemed as if some heavenly visitant had descended among them.

"Ah, what is the matter?" said a rough voice. The pupils turned at the sound, and all made a respectful obeisance to the great master.

"Look, Senor Murillo, look!" exclaimed, the youths, as they pointed to the easel of Mendez.

"Who has painted this—who has painted this head, gentlemen?" asked Murillo, eagerly. "Speak, tell me. He who has sketched this Virgin will one day be the master of us all. Murillo wishes he had done it. What a touch! what delicacy! what skill! Mendez, my dear pupil, was it you?"

"No, senor," replied Mendez, in a sorrowful tone.

"Was it you then, Isturitz, or Ferdinand, or Carlos?" But they all gave the same reply as Mendez. "It could not, however, come here without hands," said Murillo, impatiently.

"I think, sir," said Cordova, the youngest of the pupils, "that these strange pictures are very alarming; indeed this is not the first unaccountable event which has happened in your studio. To tell the truth, such wonderful things have happened here, one scarcely knows what to believe."

"What are they?" asked Murillo, still lost in admiration of the head of the Virgin by the unknown artist.

"According to your orders, senior," answered Ferdinand, "we never leave the studio without putting every thing in order, cleaning our palettes, washing our brushes, and arranging our easels; but when we return in the morning, not only is every thing in confusion, our brushes filled with paint, our palettes dirtied, but here and there are sketches (beautiful sketches to be sure they are), sometimes of the head of an angel, sometimes of a demon, then again the profile of a young girl, or the figure of an old man, but all admirable, as you have seen yourself, senior."

"This is certainly a curious affair, gentlemen," observed Murillo, "but we shall soon learn who is this nightly visitant. Sebastian," he continued, addressing a little mulatto boy about fourteen years old, who appeared at his call, "did I not desire you to sleep here every night?"

"Yes, master," said the boy with timidity.

"And have you done so?"

"Yes, master."

"Speak, then: who was here last night and this morning before these gentlemen came? Speak, slave, or I shall make you acquainted with my dungeon," said Murillo angrily to the boy, who continued to twist the band of his trousers without replying.

"Ah, you don't choose to answer," said Murillo, pulling his ear.

"No one, master, no one," replied the trembling Sebastian with eagerness.

"That is false," exclaimed Murillo.

"No one but me, I swear to you, master," cried the mulatto, throwing himself on his knees in the middle of the studio, and holding out his little hands in supplication before his master.

"Listen to me," pursued Murillo. "I wish to know who was sketching this head of the Virgin, and all the figures which my pupils find every morning here on coming to the studio. This night, in place of going to bed, you shall keep watch; and if by to-morrow you do not discover who the culprit is, you shall have twenty-five strokes from the lash. You hear—I have said it; now go and grind the colours; and you, gentlemen, to work."

From the commencement till the termination of the hour of instruction, Murillo was too much absorbed with his pencil to allow a word to be spoken but what regarded their occupation, but the moment he disappeared, the pupils made ample amends for this restraint; and as the unknown painter occupied all their thoughts, the conversation naturally turned to that subject.

"Beware, Sebastian, of the lash," said Mendez, "and watch well for the culprit; but give me the Naples yellow."

"You do not need it, Senor Mendez; you have made it yellow enough already; and as to the culprit, I have already told you that it is the Zombi."

"Are these negroes fools or asses with their Zombi?" said Gonzalo laughing; "pray, what is a Zombi?"

"Oh, an imaginary being, of course. But take care, Senor Gonzalo," continued Sebastian with a mischievous glance at his easel, "for it must be the Zombi who has stretched the left arm of your St. John to such a length, that, if the right resembles it, he will be able to untie his shoe-strings without stooping."

"Do you know, gentlemen," said Isturitz, as he glanced at the painting, "that the remarks of Sebastian are extremely just, and much to the point."

"Oh, they say that negroes have the face of an ape and the tongue of a parrot," rejoined Gonzalo, in a tone of indifference.

"With this distinction," observed Ferdinand, "that the parrot repeats by rote, while Sebastian has judgment in his remarks."

"Like the parrot, by chance," retorted Gonzalo.

"Who knows," said Mendez, who had not digested the Naples yellow, "that, from grinding the colours, he may one day astonish us by showing he knows one from another?"

"To know one colour from another, and to know how to use them, are two very different things," replied Sebastian, whom the liberty of the studio allowed to join in the conversation of the pupils; and truth obliges us to confess that his taste was so exquisite, his eyes so correct, that many of them did not disdain to follow the advice he frequently gave them respecting their paintings. Although they sometimes amused themselves by teasing the little mulatto, he was a great favourite with them all; and this evening, on quitting the studio, each, giving him a friendly tap on the shoulder, counselled him to keep a strict watch, and catch the Zombi for fear of the lash.

It was night, and the studio of Murillo, the most celebrated painter in Seville—this studio, which during the day was so cheerful and animated—was now silent as the grave. A single lamp burned upon a marble table, and a young boy, whose sable hue harmonised with the surrounding darkness, but whose eyes sparkled like diamonds at midnight, leant against an easel. Immovable and still, he was so deeply absorbed in his meditations, that the door of the studio was opened by one who several times called him by name, and who, on receiving no answer, approached and touched him. Sebastian raised his eyes, which rested on a tall and handsome negro.

"Why do you come here, father?" said he, in a melancholy tone.

"To keep you company, Sebastian."

"There is no need, father; I can watch alone."

"But what if the Zombi should come?"

"I do not fear him," replied the boy, with a pensive smile.

"He may carry you away, my son, and then the poor negro Gomez will have no one to console him in his slavery."

"Oh, how sad!—how dreadful it is to be a slave!" exclaimed the boy weeping bitterly.

"It is the will of God," replied the negro, with an air of resignation.

"God!" ejaculated Sebastian, as he raised his eyes to the dome of the studio, through which the stars glittered; "God! I pray constantly to him, my father, (and he will one day listen to me,) that we may no longer be slaves. But go to bed, father, go, go, and I shall go to mine there in that corner, and I shall soon fall asleep. Good night, father, good night."

"Are you really not afraid of the Zombi, Sebastian?"

"My father, that is a superstition of our country. Father Engenio has assured me that God does not permit supernatural beings to appear on earth."

"Why, then, when the pupils asked you who sketched the figures they find here every morning, did you say it was the Zombi?"

"To amuse myself, father, and to make them laugh; that was all."

"Then, good night, my son;" and, having kissed the boy the negro retired.

The moment Sebastian found himself alone, he uttered an exclamation of joy. Then suddenly checking himself, he said, "Twenty-five lashes to-morrow if I do not tell who sketched these figures, and perhaps more if I do. Oh, my God, come to my aid!" and the little mulatto threw himself upon the mat which served him for a bed, where he soon fell fast asleep.

Sebastian awoke at daybreak; it was only three o'clock; any other boy would probably have gone to sleep again; not so Sebastian, who had but three hours he could call his own.

"Courage, courage, Sebastian," he exclaimed, as he shook himself awake; "three hours are thine—only three hours; then profit by them; the rest belong to thy master—slave. Let me at least be my own master for three short hours. To begin, these figures must be effaced," and, seizing a brush, he approached the Virgin, which, viewed by the soft light of the morning dawn, appeared more beautiful than ever.

"Efface this!" he exclaimed, "efface this! No; I will die first. Efface this—they dare not—neither dare I. No—that head—she breathes—she speaks—it seems as if her blood would flow if I should offer to efface it, and that I should be her murderer. No, no, no, rather let me finish it."

Scarcely had he uttered these words, when, seizing a palette, he seated himself at the easel, and was soon totally absorbed in his occupation. Hour after hour passed unheeded by Sebastian, who was too much engrossed by the beautiful creation of his pencil, which seemed bursting into life, to mark the flight of time. "Another touch," he exclaimed; "a soft shade here—now the mouth. Yes, there! it opens those eyes—they pierce me through!—what a forehead!—what delicacy. Oh, my beautiful——" and Sebastian forgot the hour, forgot he was a slave, forgot his dreaded punishment—all, all was obliterated from the soul of the youthful artist, who thought of nothing, saw nothing, but his beautiful picture.

But who can describe the horror and consternation of the unhappy slave, when, on suddenly turning round, he beheld the whole pupils, with his master at their head, standing beside him!

Sebastian never once dreamt of justifying himself, and, with his palette in one hand, and his brushes in the other, he hung down his head, awaiting in silence the punishment he believed he justly merited. For some moments a dead silence prevailed; for if Sebastian was confounded at being caught in the commission of such a flagrant crime, Murillo and his pupils were not less astonished at the discovery they had made.

Murillo having, with a gesture of the hand, imposed silence on his pupils, who could hardly restrain themselves from giving way to their admiration, approached Sebastian, and, concealing his emotion, said in a cold and severe tone, while he looked alternately from the beautiful head of the Virgin to the terrified slave, who stood like a statue before him,

"Who is your master, Sebastian?"

"You," replied the boy, in a voice scarcely audible.

"I mean your drawing-master," said Murillo.

"You, senor," again replied the trembling slave.

"It cannot be; I never gave you lessons," said the astonished painter.