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THE STORY OF A PIN.

VIII.—THE PICTURE GALLERY.

George found himself in the office of Monsieur Wolff, after a long and serious business conversation.

'Enough of business for to-day,' said the banker. 'Tell me George: I was listening to you the other day in the salon; you pretend to know something about painting.'

'Not the least pretension,' replied George; 'but I have seen many pictures, and they, like all beautiful things, give me pleasure. In former times, with my excellent father, I used to pass many happy days in the galleries of the Louvre. Ah! sir, we enjoyed ourselves with a luxury of joy. We sometimes resolved to look at but three pictures, but then there was so much to see in these three! Then we would advance cautiously, with bowed heads, following the long lines of the polished, inlaid floor, and measuring our way by the pedestals of the columns. Here we are,' my father would say, and then we would raise our eyes before a Correggio, a Raphael, a Leonardo da Vinci. Our ever fresh interest would be directed to the merits of these incomparable masterpieces. Seated in this palace, upon a large divan, in contemplation before these excellent works, my father would explain to me, as an artist, a connoisseur, and a man fully acquainted with the subject of which he was speaking, the distinctions which characterise the different schools, and would relate the curious anecdotes which are told concerning celebrated painters, whose lives have become, like the lives of the saints, a golden legend. Those happy times! Those pleasant days will never return.'

'And why?' 'Because,' said George, 'the time of pleasure is past. Misfortune, which is always sure to come, has come in good season for me. I am obliged to make the sacrifice of my tastes, and I assure you that I will find a pleasure in this sacrifice; for my labor with you, Monsieur, who have received a stranger with an indulgence so paternal, is very agreeable, and very salutary to me.'

'Ah, well, to-day,' said Monsieur Wolff, 'since you are so submissive to my wishes, Monsieur the publisher, it pleases me that instead of returning to your business, we will study art.—The day is a splendid one. Follow me, and study, if you will, the lines of the polished, inlaid floor, since that is the way you prefer to look at picture galleries.'

He then conducted George through several salons, and opening, with a certain significance, a folding-door, and the heavy hangings which were behind it:

'What do you say to this, Monsieur the connoisseur?'

It should be said that the collection of Baron Wolff was celebrated, and known among all the amateurs of Europe. George found himself in a long gallery, which was severe, yet pleasing in style, and judiciously and agreeably lighted by a window in the roof. There nothing commonplace, nothing questionable, nothing superfluous, was found. There were specimens of each school founded by the different masters, and of each master a single picture, a chef-d'œuvre. The pictures did not touch each other—were not squeezed together, like travellers, side by side, in an over-crowded omnibus. A large space was preserved between each painting, which was occupied by a green ground; and in these intervals were placed marble statues, some transported from Italy, others due to our pleasing and teeming French school. George was at first dazzled. The authenticity of each painting was as evident as if the painter was still there to subscribe to it. There is no need to tell that the Italian school reigned chief in this palace. The romantic school was conspicuous for idealism; the school of Florence for purity; the school of Venice for brilliancy of coloring. A Murillo, that the sovereigns of the world would have ried with each other to obtain in the excitement of an auction, and a Velasquez, represented Spain. Teniers, Rubens, and Van Dyke transported the spectator to the finest period of the Flemish school. As for the Dutch, what a choice selection from those amusing and varied masters, whom one cannot help admiring. An Interior by Gerard Dow, a Landscape by Ruysdaell, a Bouquet of Flowers by Van Huysum; nothing was lacking.

For the French school, the fortunate owner of this gallery had not neglected to introduce the most admired masters; that is to say that Claude Lorraine, Greuze, Proudhon, shone, surrounded by satellites of that bright and fruitful constellation which is called the French school.

George was distracted and thoughtful. He had perceived in a corner a little picture which had greatly affected him; but he would not let his emotion become evident.

'You say nothing,' remarked Monsieur Wolff; 'this collection appears then unworthy the interest of an amateur?'

'It is all grand,' replied George. 'I see'

nothing to change; a better choice could not be made. I could tell the name of each painter, while making the circle of this gallery; they are all real. One could pass his life in this paradise, to admire the nature here poetized by art, to implore the blessing of these virgin saints. How fine a thing is fortune, if only to permit to one the possession of these treasures. I could wish to be rich!'

'Behold,' exclaimed Monsieur Wolff, 'my philosophy already at fault. Do you not see, Monsieur the envious, that a diamond is missing from the crown? Search, then, for the great master of Parma, the regenerator of art. I must have a Correggio.'

'You shall have one. But I, who can only look at three, have seen so many beautiful things,' said George with a smile, 'that I feel greatly fatigued, and can scarcely see or speak. I am unworthy to remain here long; however, I shall be very happy if I am allowed to come again.'

Monsieur Wolff was delighted at having a connoisseur within his reach.

'Not only shall you come again,' he replied, 'but it shall be your duty to come here to perform some work. I have sought this means of drawing you from your other occupations, to which you apply yourself too closely. Will you be the custodian of my gallery? If you know how to enjoy these things without possessing them; if, for an artist like you, seeing is having, these pictures will belong to us both. Monsieur the custodian, your wages will be two thousand francs. You will be in correspondence with artists, picture dealers, and amateurs. The first work which I demand of you is an accurate catalogue of my collection. I have long desired it, and the time is passing away. I give you full authority.'

What a good piece of fortune for our George! He was by nature an artist; all his instincts pushed him in that direction; reason and necessity had brought him back to more sure occupations. He had struggled, and he was resigned; but in art were his most agreeable remembrances. He had drawn much, and with success; nothing could be more to his taste than such a proposition.

He entered immediately upon his duties, and brought into this new labor the spirit of order and method which animated him in all things.—The pictures were arranged almost at random, or rather, as the size and effect of each canvas required. In his catalogue he classed them by schools, gave their precise dimensions, wrote a short notice upon each painter, and an exact description of the picture; avoiding the exaggerated expressions usually found in catalogues, but bearing upon the peculiarities which attested to the authenticity of the work. When his task was finished, reviewed with scrupulous care, and copied with that precision which was so pleasing to Monsieur Wolff, he laid it upon the desk in his office.

Monsieur Wolff ran through the list with curiosity, and expressed his approbation. However, he added:

'Monsieur, the Jack of all Trades, I find you in error: 'Allegri,' called Correggio; 'Unhappiness,' a female head? You have read the signature wrongly, and made a mistake. It is a charming study by Allori. I certainly believe that I told you that a Correggio was among my most to be regretted desiderata.'

'I believe also that I replied,' said George, 'that you should have a Correggio.'

'How did you understand me, sir? Do you believe that I will countenance these interpretations? Know, then, my young friend, that all which is in that temple of art is as pure as the purest gold, and that fraud shall never enter there.'

'The thought of fraud is farthest from me!' replied George. 'I have not, I confess, closely examined the signature, but I dare to affirm that it is a delightful Correggio. Have the goodness to read the few lines which follow the title of the picture.'

'Let us see, then,' said Monsieur Wolff.

And he read:

'Antonio Allegri, called Correggio; Unhappiness, a female head.'

'Do you sincerely believe it, George?'

'Read,' said the latter.

'A young girl in the attitude of meditation, is drawing over her uncovered breast a thin black drapery; a pale star glitters upon her forehead. The ideal expression of the head, the faultless execution of the hands, force us to recognize the master. The harmonious tone of the sombre drapery adds to the whiteness of the shoulder, the light blue veins upon which one can imagine to be flowing with life. A fine copy of this picture is preserved in this Munich gallery. The precious original, of which we have just given the description, formed part of the celebrated Dusseldorf gallery, and was admired there under the title of 'Unhappiness,' which we have preserved in remembrance of the misfortunes of the master.'

'Is it indeed possible, my son?' asked Monsieur Wolff; 'but it must be proved. Come, come!'

And he dragged George away to the gallery with passionate impetuosity.

In contrast to his ardor, the beautiful poetic figure of 'Unhappiness' showed that divine calmness, that inspiration of genius which survives centuries. The hand which had created this charming work was chilled, and had become dust which the wind had scattered; and the thought still lived. Monsieur Wolff took down the picture carefully.

'Allegri!' he exclaimed, deciphering the nearly effaced name.

George examined the other side of the picture, which was painted upon an old wooden panel still seeking for some indication in support of his assertion.

He read, nearly upon the edge: 'Parma, 1525.'

'Allegri, Parma!' exclaimed Monsieur Wolff. 'George, I am too happy! Embrace me, my son!'

And he threw himself into the arms of George, after he had replaced his picture with the greatest care.

'An old Jew of Frankford sold it to me, twenty years ago, for five hundred florins, as an Allori. I did not haggle about the price, finding it a delightful picture. I would not part with it to day for ten times that amount. But what a humiliation! I have possessed such a treasure for so long a time without knowing its value, and a child must come and open my eyes. There is some witchcraft about it, George; I have concluded to believe in your talisman.'

'The story is the simplest in the world,' replied George. 'You perceived my emotion upon entering your gallery. This pretty head is well known to me, and I was greatly surprised to find it here still more beautiful. It is the companion of my days and my nights.'

And opening his pocket-book, he showed the astonished banker a very fine sketch of this painting.

Beneath it was written: 'After Correggio, May, 18—'

IX.—THE APPARITION.

There was no questioning in the salon, concerning the reality of the discovery of Monsieur Wolff, and of the good fortune of Monsieur Wolff in possessing the 'Unhappiness' of Correggio. There was no chance for doubt; the proofs were too certain.

George related how his uncle, a merchant in Germany, had sent him travelling on commercial affairs; how his taste for the fine arts had always attracted him into the galleries, where he had gathered interesting notes, at Dresden, Vienna, and Munich. In the latter city, the city of the arts, he had received the news of the death of his father. He was overwhelmed with deep affliction, and became a victim to a depression which he was unable to conquer. However, a sense of duty towards his family, and the remembrance of the task which now devolved upon him, sustained him, and he attempted to resume the studies which were his only means of distraction.

It was in this state of mind that he was seated one day in one of the splendid halls of the gallery at Munich. But he could look at nothing yet. His thoughts were carried back to that good father, who had given evidence of so sweet and unvaried an affection. He reproached himself for all the days passed so far from him. If he could but have heard his last words, have received his final adieu, have felt that venerated hand resting once more upon his head, before entering into eternal rest.

After having been absorbed in these reflections, he raised his eyes with indifference; an apparition stood before him, but half revealed in the imperfect light. It was a young girl whose expression was more beautiful than beauty itself.—A bitter sorrow had passed over her brow, but that brow had remained pure; and her look, clear and penetrating, seemed to defy suffering, as the virgin martyr entering the arena defied Caesar, saying, in a ringing voice, 'I am a Christian!'

This beautiful figure, drawing, with simplicity and modesty, a black drapery over her uncovered bosom, seemed to speak to him with the voice of a beloved sister, and to say: 'George, have I not suffered? Have I not lost that which was most dear to me? Am I not without support, alone in the world? I have trust, notwithstanding; I will live in my memories. But you, George, you have more than memories; you have duties. You have a mother that waits for you to wipe away her tears; sisters whose support you must be; friends who will console you.'

All this she said, the benevolent fairy, and many other things.

He arose to hear still more, but the illusion disappeared. He awoke from his semi slumber to find himself before the 'Unhappiness' of Correggio.

He frequently returned to seat himself before

this confidante of his sorrows. He had found the expression which most resembled his grief.—All conversation was painful; these silent interviews with 'Unhappiness' comforted him. He could not leave it. He got permission to make a sketch from this painting, which was only an admirable copy, executed by a German painter, in the seventeenth century. He brought it away thus, and always carried upon his heart this image which responded to his inmost thoughts.—And it was thus that he had been enabled to make known to Monsieur Wolff the full value of the treasure which he had so long possessed.

X.—THE WAGER.

Are not some women of the world, some beautiful and great ladies, most unmerciful? Inaction, weariness of pleasure, and curiosity, give them some strange fancies. In order to pass the time between the trying on of a new dress and the first visit; between the return from the park and the late dinner hour; between the concert and the ball; it becomes necessary to have recourse to inventions, to improvise adventures, to lay wagers. These fine ladies are surrounded with dandies, idlers, flatterers and mischief-makers; but they become weary of them; they endure and despise them. They are most frivolous persons, indeed, who concur in the frivolity of their sovereigns. Who could better tell them the news of the turf, the petty scandals of the day, the hazardous adventure behind the scenes at the theatres, or at the masked ball; and most serious and important of all, the current events of the day, and the rate of exchange? How fine a thing to make captive these people, who hold fast to nothing, who trail their insignificance after the towing of a petticoat.

But then, if they encounter a serious man, one who is really a stranger to the thousand fancies and uselessness which make up the life of the privileged, it is that one which they will attempt to lure aside, to challenge; and whose attention and homage they are resolved to attain at any price. He must be subdued and conquered, that they may afterwards laugh at the enchained slave.

These reflections, which apply only to a small number (God keep us from making the exception the rule), these reflections are indulged in on the occasion of a frivolous conversation which took place in the little circle of intimate ladies in the boudoir of Madame Wolff.

'My dear,' said a fair visitor, 'your favorite, your Monsieur George, is a veritable savage.—He is here among us in person, which is exceedingly presentable, it must be confessed, but his mind is elsewhere, and his heart I know not where. Do you remark with what coldness he listens to us? He is extremely polite, but under this faultless politeness there is an indomitable pride. And if, at one side of the salon, there is a company of pretty women, and at the other some sober talkers, he quickly forgets us, in going over to join the black coats. Ah, well, under an appearance of simplicity, there is a touch of pedantry, which is not the least flattering to you.'

'And what say you,' said another good soul, 'of this mystification of the magic pin; of this affectation of wearing in his sleeve this precious talisman, twenty-five like which can be bought for a sou? Did you notice with what a magisterial air he explained to us, the other day, at table, the merits of his pin?'

'Ah, my dear,' said a young lady, 'do you not know that this pin is a fairy, and that it leads him towards the beautiful and the good, as surely as the magnetic needle points towards the pole? It is fortunate for me that he possesses such a compass.'

Madame Wolff had listened to these opinions with a certain disdain. She was stretched upon a divan with all the freedom of intimacy, and she said, in a querulous voice, with a half smile—

'George will do here like all the rest of the world. He will do what I shall desire; and if I wish it he will give me his pin, and he will listen it with his own hand in his little ribbon.'

'Yet this pin is his whole fortune,' said a credulous English lady. 'In Scotland we also have many talismans which accomplish wonders. Do you, then, believe that without the assistance of this second sight, Monsieur George would have made the discovery in your gallery of a painting of Correggio, which would bring a thousand guineas in England? I indeed defy you to take away his livelihood.'

'Ah, well,' said Madame Wolff, 'if I wished to meddle with it, I would have it this evening, and it would be so certainly that pin, that you would never see another upon the sleeve of this writing master.'

They found this railery exceeding pleasant and genteel.

'What will you wager that he will not have his pin this evening?'

'Ten louis that you will not have it,' said the English lady.

'Twenty louis that I will have it,' said Madame Wolff, arising with vivacity.

'I would really like to know,' said a young lady, whose fingers had been carelessly running over the keys of the piano, turning on the piano stool, 'what this poor young man has done to you. Either he will not retain his pin, and then the fine conquest! or he may really wish to keep it as a souvenir; and in that case it is really too bad to conspire against him. You complain that this had reasons rightly, and never speaks except in his turn. Have you not had enough of blunders, who cannot reason at all, who know nothing, and who put in their word at every turn? I warn you that I take him under my protection.'

'You can shelter him under your white wing, like a guardian angel,' said Madame Wolff; 'but then take good care, for the sums are staked, and I shall strive for the wager.'

The amiable person who had undertaken the defence of the absent, was, as may have been guessed, the same lady who found in him so obliging a partner at the piano. She was of Italian origin, and her name was Mademoiselle Borgheese. She was very good, less frivolous than her companions, because she knew how to occupy herself. She was passionately fond of music, and excelled in it; she was therefore greatly in demand and warmly welcomed at the house of Baron Wolff. Unlike the rest, she had no pretensions to beauty; the independence of her artistic character had delayed her marriage. She had the tone and manner which, in society, gave her the appellation *bon enfant*, and her fortune allowed her the privilege of frankness in speech.

They separated with the promise of meeting again in the evening, in order to learn the result of the wager.

XI.—ANTHOPE.

Mademoiselle Borgheese passed a portion of her time in this splendid and hospitable mansion. She had an apartment there, and was familiar with every portion of the house, and all its ways.

For example, she knew perfectly well that after having passed the morning with Monsieur Wolff, George would repair to the picture gallery to proceed in the work with which he was entrusted.

A winter garden communicated with this gallery by two arcades, and it was marvellous to see thus united and coupled the wonders of art and of nature. This beautiful, protected garden, descended by a gentle declivity, and by a thousand windings and undulations of the ground, from the picture gallery to the great garden of the palace. The finest plants were to be found there; flowers of orange, myrtle and olive trees, camelia and rhododendron bushes hid the silvery thread of a swift brook which merrily fell into a basin of rosy tinted marble, and splashed its white foam over the fair arum flowers, which seemed like vases of unwrought silver filled with sparkling champagne.

It was a delightful place, where everything invited to delicious repose and reverie. Mademoiselle Borgheese was well aware that it was at no other hour and in no other place that the baroness would be enabled to find her victim.—Therefore she hastened to repair to the winter garden. She stationed herself, with a book, in a thick magnolia bush, under which some benches had been placed, and there she waited.

George was already in the gallery, giving orders to some workmen, who presently after departed.

The treacherous baroness was long in making her appearance, for she had to prepare herself for the part she was about to play. She finally entered by a low door, stripped off some rose-leaves in her way, and, following the winding paths which led to the open door of the gallery, passed very near Mademoiselle Borgheese without perceiving her, and appeared, after some hesitation on the threshold of the gallery.

Poor George! thou who art so artless and simple, in the presence of so much cunning and roguery, do not let thyself be taken in the net! If I could but prevent thee! Alas! I am only a little pin; but if thou canst not keep me, misfortune will overtake thee!

The siren had carefully selected her attire, in accordance with the scene she was about to carry out. Her hair, of that fair shade loved by the Venetian masters, was raised in thick bandeaux, and formed a heavy knot at the back of her head. She wore a simple white cape, and upon her breast a knot of ribbons was arranged with a careless grace. And the daughter of Eve recommended in her miniature paradise the ever-renewed scene of the temptation.

She coughed slightly to attract George's attention. He arose, saluted her respectfully, and appeared disposed to resume his labor.

'O, pardon me, Monsieur George,' said she; 'I thought myself alone. But will you not tell me, if it is not disturbing you too much, what is the name of that singular plant which trembles when I touch it, and which seems to be afraid of'