

"THE LAST SUPPER."

THE LEGEND OF THE PAINTING.

BY ELLEN ELISABETH ARMES.

LASARI, in his "Lives of the Painters," tells this legend of the "Last Supper," by Leonardo.

Having failed to fulfill several commissions given him by the duke, and having gained the enmity of the prior of the convent, Santa-Maria-delle-Grazie, the former, at the instigation of the latter, commanded him to paint the "Last Supper" on the walls of the refectory of the convent, giving him one year in which to finish it. The petty annoyances of the prior so exasperated Leonardo, that he painted him as Judas, and then found himself unable to paint the Christ. On the evening of Holy Thursday, the evening before the picture was to be publicly unveiled, it was still unfinished. In his grief and despair, and fearful of some terrible punishment from the duke, the painter knelt at midnight and besought his dead master, Andreas, to come to his aid. On the next day at noon, he crept into the hall with the throng who had been invited, knowing, or believing that the fingers of all Milan would point to him in scorn, and dreading the judgment sure to follow. What was his surprise and joy to behold the picture complete, the lineaments of Christ grand even beyond his conception. Andreas had indeed painted them in "hues of heaven:"

From the suffocating heat of the ducal palace,
Went forth, into the refreshing cool of the evening
Where he felt his courage revive for the solemn task,
The painter, Da Vinci, and wandered through the gardens
Of Milan, wholly unmindful of time and of place,
Till he found himself before the Dominican convent.

Out on the air was borne the organ peal, and the chant
Of the monks, from the chapel, at evening devotions;
And, as the solemn strains of music fell on his ear,
There stole over his spirit, a sweet peace as from heaven.
Through the convent hall to the refectory passed he
With slow, timid footsteps, and knelt on the threshold:—

"O Thou, who takest away e'en the sins of the world,
How can I paint Thee in Thy hour of greatest glory?
Guide Thou my pencil lest I faint and fail, even though
Within my heart burns deep devotion, holiest love!"

Raising his eyes slowly, he started in amaze—
A scene, glorious as of opened heaven, met his gaze;
His Lord sat before him at the refectory table,
And around Him were the twelve disciples whom He loved.
The head of the blessed Jesus was encircled by
A halo, which the sunset glow in the western sky
Flung softly through the oriel window at His back;
Nor anger nor reproach was in those eyes of love,
But a thrilling, unutterable sadness, as if
The dreadful shadow of the cross was hovering near.
Then fell the painter senseless to the stony pavement,
And when the monks, devotions o'er, came in, they found him,
And brought him back to life.

The plan within his mind was formed to paint the vision
As he beheld it on that Maundy-Thursday eve;
But when his task was hardly yet begun, the prior
Of the convent, with his cunning and malignant hate,
Forbidden to look upon his work, sought to watch him
When he passed; his face might tell of failure or success.
At first Leonardo neither saw nor thought of him,
But when his hateful presence and satanic smile
Came ever in his way as he passed through the convent halls,

His anger burst all bonds, and in contempt and rage he cried—
"Wait but a little while, and I will seal thy fate,
O prior, as thou canst not even dream nor guess."

The eleven finished, Judas waited, and for him
The painter caught the prior's cunning smile and look of hate—
This done, his fury and revenge were satisfied,
And he sought to paint the glorious majesty of Christ;
But how could he unite his work of wrath and dream of love?
Day after day, with trembling hand and aching heart he wrought—
Alas! those tender, loving eyes were turned from him,
And in his haggard, grief-worn face the prior read the truth.

Again 'twas Maundy-Thursday eve—
At midnight in his anguish Leonardo knelt,
"My work is ended, I have failed, and now must meet my doom;
O Andreas, save me in my greatest earthly need!"
And there were those who, passing the convent at that hour,
Told of a light of strange, unearthly brilliancy
Shining through the windows of the refectory hall,
And of shadows moving to and fro, as if they wrought

The morning sun stole in upon the curtained wall;
But o'er the floor no footsteps passed, for such the duke's command,
Until the hour of noon, when doors were open thrown to the great throng—
Then, by the duke's own hand the curtain swung aside, and there,
In all its wondrous beauty, the picture stood revealed—
The matchless glory of the Christ—painted in "hues of heaven,"
Before whose glorious presence all hearts in homage bent.

A death-like stillness, and then a tumult of applause
Louder and louder swelled that Maundy-Thursday noon,
Till all the waiting city caught the glad, exultant cry.

But look where stands the prior, the Judas close beside,
And mark the stolen glances, and list the whispered words,
Till every eye was turned to him, and hands were raised in scorn;
Then 'mid the smothered curses, the laughter and the jeers,
He passed, alone and silent, out from his convent halls.

Both duke and prior were long since forgot;
But Leonardo lives in fame, and still, though dimmed by time,
The picture on the convent wall breathes of the "Love Divine."

