

## THE FACE OF CHRIST

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ALL of us have heard the story of the artist who sold his soul to the devil for the power of painting to the life whatever subject he chose; but not all of us know the whole story of the bargain—how it was broken and what happened thereafter, as it is told herein.

His name was Camillo, and there were scenes in his life which he did not care to remember, and which, consequently, he painted over with others even less comforting. At the age of fifty his memory was a charnel-house of dead recollections; his wife had left, his children quarreled with him; most of his friends he had wronged or been wronged by; and he had made a large fortune and a great name for himself. It was not strange, therefore, that at this very period he should be notified by the devil of the termination of their contract, and the consequent immediate foreclosure of the mortgage upon his soul.

The mere idea of such a thing brought out the sweat upon Camillo's forehead; but, having a month allowed him to settle his worldly affairs, he spent one night in tossing sleeplessly between his silken sheets, or restlessly pacing the floors of his luxurious chamber, and another in still wider wanderings over the hills around his villa; the third morning he sent for Padre Antonio, the curé of his native village.

The father had now grown to be an old, old man; but he came at once at the summons of Camillo. The counsel which he gave is a part of the old well-known legend: that the artist should use the skill his contract still insured to him, in painting the Face of Christ.

It was perhaps in virtue of his trained æsthetic sense, perhaps of his ambition, that Camillo decided to paint, not the dying or sorrowful Saviour, which so many artists have attempted and failed, but something still more difficult—the Christ of every-day life. By his contract with the devil he was able to reproduce his subject to the very life. It was a wonderful picture. Just what form the features wore, or the color of the hair and beard, I am not able to describe, for, in

fact, no one who saw it could ever remember any of these particulars. What they did see, and could never forget, was the face of a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief cast off by those whom he loved; despised, poor, and rejected; yet with a wondrous glad lightsomeness in every line, as of one who had come to do the perfect will of God. The lips were parted in a half-smile; the eyes were wonderful—full of light, too pure to behold iniquity, searching to the very ground of the heart, tender with infinite tenderness.

Camillo could not stand before those eyes; he cast himself on his face upon the floor, weeping bitterly, and thus he lay when the devil came to claim him. But the painter knew not even that the fated hour had struck; he heard nothing of the clamor raised by the fiend, who saw that his prey had escaped him.

When at last, too blind with weeping even to read the hour upon his horologe, the artist rose to his feet, there on the floor lay the hellish contract, signed with his own blood, and he knew himself delivered.

For an hour he was in an ecstasy; then he bethought him of his custom, upon the completion of each picture, of giving a supper to his artist friends, reading their envy in their faces, and receiving their congratulations. On this occasion there could be no wild orgies such as had been known to occur at other times; but a sober and decorous banquet?—Camillo could see no reason against it. The picture was surely the best he had ever painted.

The guests were curious and amused at their host's altered mood, but followed his lead with well-bred readiness until the cloth had been removed and wine set on the table. Then Camillo arose and took away the veil from the Face of Christ.

There was, for a moment, a wondrous silence.

Then, with a great cry, a woman painted and decked with jewels, the gifts of many lovers, a woman who had sat beside the host and been sorely vexed—or professed to be—by the decorum of the feast—this woman sprang to her feet, and, with blanched face and wild white arms beating the air, fought her way blindly towards the door.

"Let me go," she cried, "ere it slay me! Let me away before his eyes burn me to ashes!"

Another guest, a young man with the wine-cup at his very lips, flung aside the ruby poison, fell on his knees, and sobbed; others fainted; one drew even his sword upon the artist, calling him a devil who could so torment them; one by one all departed from the banquet hall, and Camillo was left alone.

He was very pale, and his hand trembled as he again let fall the veil over the Face of Christ.

With the earliest dawn of the next day, Camillo was on horseback and away to visit Padre Antonio, for he did not on this occasion send for the father to come to him.

Arrived at the priest's house, he made a general confession of all his sins that he could remember.

"You cannot doubt, my father, that I am sincerely penitent," said the artist; "is there any compulsion upon me to make this confession?"

"None," said Padre Antonio; "none, unless it be the Face of Christ."

"Aye!" returned Camillo, "I am a free agent; and as such, in gratitude to the God who has broken my bargain with Satan, I vow henceforth to forsake my ill ways and evil companions, and to live righteously from this day forward."

"The Lord give thee grace so to do!" said Father Antonio.

"But at the same time, my father," pursued the painter, "you must admit that there are some excuses for me. I inherited evil tendencies; I was badly brought up; my friends have betrayed me, mine own wife was false to me, and my children are rebellious and undutiful."

"That is most true," said Padre Antonio.

"But I forgive them, I forgive them all freely," said Camillo. "I cannot, of course, take them back to my heart and home, for they are undeserving; but I have no hard thoughts of them, father."

"I trust not, my son, Camillo," replied the father.

"And in truth, though I am a grievous sinner, other men have done worse," continued the artist. "See what I have made of myself. You remember me when I was a ragged little artist's model; look at me now! And I have never—though under a compact with Satan—committed aught that

men call crime. I have lived a life of pleasure, but have I harmed any man?"

"Thou shouldst know," said the holy man.

"I *do* know," returned Camillo. "Well, give me my penance, absolution, and thy blessing, father, and let me return home with a clean heart and a quiet conscience."

"There is a veil upon the face of thy picture?" asked the father.

The artist assented, with a troubled glance.

"Then be thy penance this," said Father Antonio; "to place the picture in the room of thine house thou dost most frequent, and to *remove the veil*. And when those eyes have read so deeply in thine heart that thou seest thyself as they see thee, then come hither—if thou wilt—for absolution and the blessing of peace. Now God be with thee; farewell."

Camillo went his way homeward with a heavy heart.

"And but now I was so happy and so blest," quoth he to himself. "Was it well done of the father to disturb my peace?" he asked. Yet did he not neglect to perform his penance.

A week later he sought the priest once more.

"My father," said he, "I am a far worse man than I dreamed. How dared I ask for absolution? For when I had hung in my studio the picture you wot of, lo! I looked around the walls, and—ask me not, I cannot tell thee. Alas that I should have wrought evil to so many souls! Think you that I can ever atone?"

"Thou shouldst know," said the priest. "Return, and look once more on the Face of Christ."

So Camillo returned.

And the next day he rose early and went his way to the house of that woman who had risen up and fled from the face of his picture.

"Thou and I," said the artist, "have done much evil together; shall we now do much good?"

And the woman agreed. So she sold her jewels and her fine raiment and what precious things she had, and Camillo did the like; and they found other women known to them both, and gathered them into one house, and persuaded them to live a godly and virtuous life. Then Camillo went away to

his own house, expecting to look without fear into the Face of Christ. For, indeed, there was nothing frightful there, but looks of tender love and eyes of searching purity.

But the next morning he went to the chief picture-dealer in the city, and ordered him to go here and there and buy up again every inch of canvas which bore the name of Camillo. Now Camillo was, as has been said, a great painter, and the surface of his pictures might have been covered with gold coins without reaching their price; so when this had been done there was left of all his fortune only a tiny cottage, into which he moved with his one sole treasure, the only relic of his great fame—the Face of Christ. For all those evil and lewd pictures had been burned with fire.

“Now do I indeed repent; now may I be absolved,” quoth Camillo; and with a happy and peaceful heart he went his way to the home of Padre Antonio.

“God give you peace, my son; you have done well,” said the priest. “Thou hast a poor home but a wealthy heart; where is she who should be partner of both?”

“My wife?” cried Camillo, springing to his feet; “why, Padre, thou knowest she was false to me!”

“And thou?” said Father Antonio.

Camillo went his way back to the city. “It was ill done of the padre to disturb my peace,” he said. “Alas! I was just now so happy!”

But he did not forget his penance, and the next day he sought the father again.

“Father Antonio,” he said, “thou hast been faithful to my poor soul. Help me to find my wife.”

So the priest aided him gladly, and they found the wife of Camillo, sunk in such misery and degradation that for many days she escaped their search.

“But should I not forgive her, who have been myself forgiven?” said the artist, tenderly; and he took her home, and pleaded with her to live a better life, and dealt kindly with her.

And the Face of Christ hung on the wall unveiled.

Then, after a day or two, came Camillo again to the priest, and there were tears in his eyes.

“Father Antonio,” he said, “the Lord has shown me myself. I have been a bad son to old Marietta, my grand-

mother, a bad husband to my wife, a bad father to my children. My sins caused their error; the poison of my life corrupted them. Help me to atone."

So Father Antonio helped him, and they sought out old Marietta, whom he had neglected many years, and Camillo's sons and daughters; and before them all the artist humbled himself, and they fell upon his neck with tears, and forgave and were forgiven. Only Marietta, who had forgotten by this time the sins of his boyhood, and remembered only his glory and great name, maintained that she had nothing to forgive.

So Camillo took her home, and his children dwelt near by in houses of their own, and all were happy and at peace among themselves. And the Face of Christ shone down upon them from the wall. But they had few friends in the city who cared to enter their humble dwelling; for it was a fearful thing carelessly to meet those pictured eyes.

Now, when they had so dwelt for many days, Camillo came again to Father Antonio, and said, "Father, may I yet be absolved?"

But Padre Antonio did not answer.

"What!" cried the painter, "is there yet more to do?"

"Thou shouldst know," said Father Antonio.

"I know *not*," said Camillo, sorrowfully. "I have done all that can be done; even the slightest tie of friendship that hath bound my soul in former days have I sought to reunite; and if the friend had been wronged, I have besought forgiveness."

"Hath it been always granted?" asked the priest.

"Nay," said Camillo, "for to some the wrong hath been that my poison hath so tainted their souls that they have wronged me; and that wrong is hard to pardon. But the others have forgiven."

"It is well," said Padre Antonio.

"Yet you tell me there is more," said the artist.

"I tell thee? nay," said the priest. "Thou shouldst know. What does the Face of Christ tell thee? My son, when thou hast won his absolution thou wilt not ask mine."

Then Camillo went home very sorrowful, and yet happy, for he felt that he could now look calmly and fearlessly into the eyes of the Christ: yet also he would have liked well the priest's absolution.

So when night had fallen and he was left alone with his masterpiece, he knelt down before his canvas, and, folding his hands like the hands of a little child at prayer, he looked upward into the pictured eyes.

And the Face of Christ shone down upon his soul. The eyes were very searching, yet, oh! so loving and tender; the parted lips seemed to smile like the lips of a mother over her naughty child as she says, "But, darling, you grieve mamma."

Then Camillo fell upon his face with a great cry.

And in the morning he went back to Father Antonio.

"Ah, my father! how dared I ask for absolution? I, who knew not the smallest fraction of my sin! What are all my offenses against my fellow-man to my sins against Him?"

"Ah! what indeed!" said Padre Antonio.

"I allied myself with His foes, I rejected His love, I cast Him out of my heart, I caused those to sin for whom He died."

"And I also," said Padre Antonio.

"And yet He forgives; He has always forgiven; *that* crushes me," said Camillo. "There is no effort in it with Him—He forgives freely. There is no little by little in it; I have come back to Him step by step, but He has carried me always in His heart. *Padre Antonio, what shall I do to be saved?*"

"Go back," said the priest, "and look once more on the Face of Christ."

So Camillo went back, and knelt all night long before his masterpiece, and the eyes of the Christ shone down into his soul. And a great sorrow came upon him, and also a great joy; a great anguish and a great peace; because the love without him was greater than the love within, and for the first moment in his half-century of years he felt all its weight.

Therefore, between the joy and the anguish, his heart broke, and his soul was drawn up into the ocean of love, eternal and illimitable.

And in the morning they found him lying dead beneath the eyes of Christ, with the peace of heaven upon his pallid features.

"The Lord Christ hath absolved him," said Padre Antonio.