

The Christ of Toro

By Mrs. Cunninghame Graham

I

The Prediction

VERY many centuries ago, when monastic life was as much a life of the people as any other life, a man resolved to enter a certain monastery in a small town of Castille. He had in his time been many things. The son of a wealthy merchant, he had spent much of his youth in Flanders, where he went at his father's bidding to purchase merchandise and to sell it. Instead of devoting himself to the mysteries of trade, he learnt those of painting from the most famous masters of the Low Countries. His father dead, his father's fame as one of the greatest merchants of the day kept his credit going for some time, but at last he fell into difficulties. Menaced with ruin, he became a soldier, and fought under Ferdinand and Isabella before the walls of Granada. His bravery procured him no reward, and he retired from the wars and married. For a few years he was happy—at least he knew he had been so when he knelt for the last time beside his wife's bier. And then he bethought himself of this monastery that he had once seen casually on a summer's day. There he might

might find rest; there end the turmoil of an unlucky and disappointed life. He saw the quiet cloisters flooded with sunlight looking out into the greenery of the monastery garden. He heard the splashing of the drops from the fountain fall peacefully on the hot silence. Nay, he even smelt the powerful scent of the great myrtle bushes whose shadows fell blue and cool athwart the burning alleys.

His servants' tears fell fast as he distributed amongst them the last fragments of his once immense fortune; they fell faster when they saw the solitary figure disappearing over the ridge of the sandy path, for, although they knew not of his resolution, they felt that they should see his face no more.

But we cannot escape from ourselves, even in the cloister. There he felt the fires of an ambition that untoward circumstances had chilled in his youth. The longing to leave some tangible record of a life that he knew had been useless, fell upon him and consumed him. He opened his mind to the prior. The prior was a man of the world (there have always been such in the cloister), and knew the workings of the human heart.

The monks began to whisper to each other that Brother Sebastian was changed. Sometimes, at vespers, one or other would look at him and note that his eyes had lost their melancholy, and were as bright as stars. Then it got rumoured about amongst them that he was painting a picture.

The monastery is, and especially a mediæval one, full of schisms and cabals. In it the rigour of the ultra-pietists who stormed heaven by fire and sword, and whose hearts were shut to all kindliness and charity, was to be found side by side with mild and gentle spirits, who, through the gift of tears and ecstatic reverie, caught sight of the mystic and universal Bond of Love, which, linked together in one common union, Nature, animal,
and

and sinner. To them all things palpitated in a Divine Mist of Benignity and Tenderness—the terrorist and the rigorist on the one hand ; on the other, serenity, charity, and compassion.

Now there was a certain Brother Matthias in this convent—the hardest, bitterest zealot in the community, whom even his own partisans looked at with dread. Of his birth little was known, for all are equal in Religion, but the knotted joints of his hairy hands, the hair which bristled black against his low furrowed brow, were those of a peasant. No arm so strong or merciless as his to wield the discipline on recalcitrant shoulders (neither, it is fair to state, did he spare his own). The more Blood the more Religion ; the more Blood the more Heaven. He practised austerely all the theological virtues as far as his lights and his mental capacity permitted, and it was as hard and as stubborn as the clods which he had ploughed in his youth. He did not despise, but bitterly loathed, all books or learning as the works and lures of Satan. If he had had his will he would have burnt the convent library long ago in the big cloister, all except the Breviary and the offices therein contained. The liberal Arts, and those who practised or had any skill in them, he would fain have banished from the convent. The flowers even that grew in the friars' garden he neither smelt nor looked at. They were beautiful, and Sin lurked in the heart of the rose, and all the pleasures of the senses, and all the harmonies of sound. It was a small, black, narrow world that mind of his, heaped up with the impenetrable shadows of Ignorance, Intolerance, Contempt, and Fear.

“ Better he went and dug in the vineyard,” he would mutter sourly, when he saw some studious Brother absorbed in a black-letter Tome of Latinity in the monastery library. Once when Fray Blas the sculptor had finished one of his elaborate crucifixes
of

or ivory, he had watched his opportunity and, seizing it unperceived in his brawny hand, waited until nightfall and threw it into the convent well with the words, "*Vade Retro! Satanas!*"

One day, as he passed through the corridor into which opened Sebastian's cell, his steps were arrested by the murmur or voices which floated through the half-open door. He leaned against the Gothic bay of the marble pillars that looked into the cloister below, uncertain whether to go or stay. The hot sunlight filled the dusky corridor with a drowsy sense of sleep and stillness. The swallows flitted about the eaves, chirping as they wheeled hither and thither with a throbbing murmur of content. The roses climbed into the bay, lighting up the dusky corridors with sprays of crimson; they brushed against his habit. He beat them off contemptuously. The eavesdropper could see nothing, hear nothing, but what was framed in, or came through, that half-open door.

Suddenly the two friars, the Prior and Fray Sebastian, were startled by a tall figure framed suddenly in the doorway. Blocking the light, it loomed on them like the gigantic and menacing image of Elijah on the painted retablo of the High Altar. Its face was livid. From underneath the black bushy brows the eyes burned like coals of fire. The figure shook and the hands twitched for a moment of speechless, unutterable indignation. In that moment Sebastian turned, and placed the canvas, which stood in the middle of the cell, with its face against the wall, and the two men quietly faced their antagonist.

Fray Matthias strode forward, as if to strike them.

"By Him that cursed the money-changers in the temple," he thundered, "what abomination is this ye have brewing in the House of the Lord? What new-fangled devilries are here? *This*
is

is fasting, *this* is discipline, *this* is the prayer without ceasing ye came here to perform. One holy monk daubing colours on a bit of rag, and this reverend father, who should be the pattern and exemplar of his community, aiding and abetting him !”

“Silence !” the Prior said. The one word was not ungently spoken, but it was that of a man accustomed to command and to be obeyed, and imposed on the coarse-grained peasant before him ; nay, even left his burst of prophetic ire trembling on his tongue unspoken. The Prior had drawn his slender figure up to its full height ; a spot of red tinged his cheeks, as with quiet composure he faced his aggressor. Never before had Matthias seen him as he was now, for he had always despised him for a timid, delicate, effeminate soul, scarce fit to rule the turbulent world of the convent. For a brief moment the Prior of Toro became again that Count of Treviño who had led the troops of his noble house to victory on more than one occasion, and whose gallant doings even then were not quite forgotten in the court and world of Spain. The habitual respect of the lowly-born for a man of higher station and finer fibre asserted itself. He stood before his Prior pale and downcast, like a frightened hound.

“Listen,” the prior continued. “Oh you, my brother, of little charity. What *you* call zeal, *I* call malice. To *you* has been given your talent. It led you to these convent walls. Develop it. To this, my brother, and *your* brother, although you seem to know it not, has been entrusted another talent. Who are you, to declaim against the gifts of God ? There are talents, ay ! and even virtues, that neither fructify to the owner nor to the world. Will *you* have saved other men from sin or helped the sinner by your flagellations and *your* fastings ? He who has so little kindness in his heart, *I* fear me, would do neither. Yea, he would scarce save them if he could. Nay, brother,” he added softly, “I doubt me
if

if ye would have done what He did." Moving swiftly to the wall, he turned the picture full on the gaze of the astounded brother. "Behold Love!"

It was a marvellous picture, fresh and living from the brain of its creator. Every speck of colour had been placed on with a hand sure of its power. Christ nailed to the cross; His hands and feet seemed to palpitate as if still imbued with some mysterious vestiges of life. The drops of blood which fell slowly down might have been blood indeed. But it was in the face—not in the vivid realism of the final scene of the tremendous drama—that the beauty lay. One doubted if it did not retain some strange element of life, some hidden vitality, rather felt than actually perceived, under the pallid flesh. As the light flickered over them, one would have said that the eyelids had not yet lost their power of contractability, as if at any moment one would find them wide open under the shadow of the brow; the mouth seemed still fresh with ghostly pleadings.

"Go, brother," said the Prior, "and meditate, and when you have learnt to do even such as this for your brethren, then turn the money-changers from the hallowed temple. I tell you"—and his face grew like one inspired—"I tell you this picture shall yet save a soul, unbind the ropes of sin, and lead a tortured one to heaven. Perhaps when we who stand here are gone," he added musingly. "Go, brother, and meditate."

When the picture was finished and its frame ready, the sculptured wood dazzling in its fresh gold and silver, on the day of St. Christopher, borne high amidst a procession of the monks, it was taken and hung up before the high altar.

Whether Brother Sebastian painted any more pictures ; whether Brother Matthais learnt love and charity when they and the Prior passed from the generations of men, the old chronicles which tell the story omit to state, or whether they left any further record of their lives in the convent beyond this scene which has been kept alive by a monkish chronicler's hand.

It is even a matter of doubt what cloister slab covers the dust of the Count of Treviño, Prior of the Augustinian monastery of Toro, or of Sebastian Gomez, the painter, or of Fray Matthias, the peasant's son.

But now comes the strange part of the relation, for the picture, the miracle-working picture, is still to be seen in the monastery of Toro. The Prior, the painter, the peasant died, but the picture lived. For a century at least after their death it listened from its station above the high altar to all the sounds of the monastery church. Vespers trembled in the air before it and the roll of midnight complines. It felt the priest's voice strike against its surface when he sanctified the sacrifice ; the shuffle of the monks' feet as they took their places in the choir above, the echo of their coughs, the slamming of the doors were the familiar records of its life. In the redness of the morning, when the friars slept after their orisons, and the birds began to sing in the first light of dawn, it looked on the pavement of the church suffused with the wavering reflections of the painted windows, and watched the thin stains advance, as the day lengthened, and then recede in the weird pallor of the dying day. In the gloaming it watched the mysterious grey-ness sweep towards it and envelop it as in a shroud. All night long, as from a mirror, it gave back the red flame of the lamps that swung before it, and yet the words of the Prior seemed no nearer their fulfilment. *And the picture mourned.*

Then

Then it fell from its high estate to make place for some gilt stucco monstrosity placed there by a blundering prior, and was hung amidst the cobwebs of the duskiest corner of the monastery gateway.

II

The Fulfilment

Now there lived in Toro, in the reign of Philip II., a certain hidalgo—Don Juan Perez. Besides his possessions in the neighbouring country, he had amassed a large fortune as oidor of his native town. He and his wife had one son. They would that they had none—or more! On this son they lavished all their love, and all their riches. None so handsome, none with so fine an air as he in Toro. When he came back to them, a young man of twenty fresh from the schools of Salamanca, the old people trembled with joy at the sight of him. It was true that they had paid his debts at cards, that they had condoned a thousand scandals, but they had put it down to the hot blood of youth—youth was ever thus—blood which would calm down and yet do honour to its honourable ancestry. The lad's conduct soon dispelled any such hopes. In a short time, it seemed to them as if he was possessed by a very devil. All Toro rang with his misdeeds—his midnight brawls, his drunken frolics. Don Juan and his wife looked at each other in anguish as one story after another reached their ears of dishonour and disgrace, of maidens seduced, and duels after some low tavern squabble over wine and cards. Each wondered which would succumb the first to the sorrow that was bringing them to the grave, and yet neither of them confessed to the other the cause. Their happiness fled. A shadow fell
over

over the house, which seemed to have been stricken by some appalling calamity. One day the son suddenly disappeared—none knew whither, except that he had fled—oh! sacrilege of sacrilege!—with a professed nun, from the convent of the Clarisas. His gambling debts had well-nigh exhausted his father's coffers, but this time he had broken open his father's money chest, and made away with all of value he could find. This time, too, he had broken his mother's heart, and yet she died, tortured with an unextinguishable desire to see her scapegrace son once more. If a mother cannot condone her children's crimes, whatever they may be, who else shall do so? When the old *hidalgo* looked on the dead face of the wife of his youth, stamped with so lasting an expression of pain that death itself was powerless to efface it—his soul burnt with a resentment almost as deep as the grief which bowed him to the earth.

When at the end of a few months, a ragged, travel-stained wayfarer reappeared at his father's house, the latter said nothing. Without a word, without a gesture, he accepted his son's presence at the board, as if he had never been away. A deep gulf yawned between the two which nothing could bridge. The son was too cynical to promise an amendment which he did not intend. When he had appeased his hunger, and exchanged his dirty raiments for those of a gentleman of his rank, he began his old course of dissipation and wickedness. The old *hidalgo* looked on and said nothing. He knew remonstrance was useless, but on his death-bed he called to him his son. They were the first words that had passed between them since the mother's death, and they were the last.

"I have," he said, "the misfortune to call you my son. Had your mother not been so holy as she was, I should have thought you had been devil's spawn. To all that you have left me, you
are

are heir. In that chest in the corner are my ready money, my bonds, mortgages and jewels. By my calculations they will last you just six months. It matters little to me whether you spend it all in one day or not, that is your business, not mine. I make myself no illusions. You broke your mother's heart, you have killed your father. I attempt no remonstrance, for, I know, it would take *another Christ to come down from the Cross to save such as you*. Still I gave you, when you were born, an old and honourable name and a proud lineage. To save these at all hazards from being tarnished further than they have already been, I give and bequeath to you this oak box. Swear to me that you will not open it until you are in the extremest necessity, until there is no help left to you from any living man. Nay, hardened as you are, false to the marrow of your bones as you are, you dare not break an oath sworn by the Body and Blood of Christ. Swear!" said the old man, "as you hope to be saved!"

"I neither wish nor hope to be saved," said the son, "but I will swear, and moreover, I will keep my oath. I will not open the box until there is no hope to me in Life but Death!"

The storm swept over mediæval Toro. The narrow street imprisoned amidst the stern grey houses, whose shadows had shut it in for centuries with their menacing presence and the mysterious records of their lives and crimes, was now a yellow turbulent torrent, washing against the palatial gateways. The wind howled and moaned with the sound of creaking woodwork, and eddied in gusts through the hollow gully, rather than a street, which separated the great, gaunt buildings. Through the thin rift, left by the almost meeting eaves, scarce a hand-breadth across, a flash of lightning, every now and then, broke through the lurid sky, and zigzagged for a moment across streaming façade and running water ;

water; followed by a gigantic and terrific peal or thunder which shook and rolled against the heavy masonry and then died away in faint repercussions in the distance. Then all was still except for the battering and tearing of the rain against the walls, as if it sought to gain an entry by force and permeate the very stones. In heavy sullen drops it dripped from knightly helmet and escutcheon with the monotony of a pendulum, or soaked into the soft films of moss and tufts of grass which filled the time-worn hollows of the sculptured granite.

The city was as one of the dead. It was no day for a Christian to be abroad. The beggars even had sought the shelter of a roof, and the very dogs—the half-starved curs that haunted the gutters for garbage all day long—lay cowering and silent in the shadow of some deep-mouthed gateway.

And on this unholy day, from one of the frowning palaces, a man emerged, his soul riven by a tempest as deep as that which raged around him. The great gates shut to with a clang that shook the street, and dominated for a moment the strife of the rain and the groaning wind. He might have been himself the spirit of the storm, this black figure, cloaked to the eyes, which brushed furtively against the houses, as if afraid to face the light of day. He turned back once to take a last look at the house he had left. That house which only a few hours before had been his until on the stroke of midnight he had played his last stake and lost. Even now he heard the slow clanging of the bells as they woke the silence of the street, the knell to him of ruin. He lived through every detail of the last hateful hours. One hope had remained to him. His father's box; that box he had sworn never to open until no remedy was left in life but death. The time had come. It could not be otherwise, but that the old man, foreseeing this final crisis, had saved for him the means to repair his
his

his fortunes, and stored up in that little chest shut in by its triple locks of iron which bore the gilt escutcheon of his family, jewels, bonds, censos of great value, which might save him even now. As his footsteps resounded through the empty streets, and his sword, clinking against the pavement, roused hollow echoes, he had made plans for the future. He would amend his ways. He would marry. He would eschew gambling, drink, and women. He would have the masses said for his father's soul in the Monastery of Sto Tomé, even as the old man had charged him to have done in his will. He would dower a poor maiden in the Convent of the Clarisas. Let him have one more chance!

He knew that in that small chest lay the sentence of his Life or Death. Yet he opened it boldly, nor did his fingers tremble as they struggled with the intricacies of the triple lock, nor yet did any added pallor blanch his face when he threw back the lid and saw a rope, a new rope coiled neatly within the small compass of the box and tied into a noose, adjusted to the exact size of a man's neck!

The moonbeams trembled in at the narrow window. The lamp burnt red in the shadow of the vast space of the empty chamber. He wondered vaguely why the moon should be as bright and the lamp as red as yesterday. The old housekeeper was startled by his peals of laughter. He called for wine and she brought it. He held it up to the light, watched the moonbeams die in the bubbles and he thought it glistened like blood. He wondered if she saw the resemblance, and holding up the cup high above his head, he waved it in the air:

“To the memory of my father and of his most excellent jest,” and then forced her to drink the toast. That was only a few hours ago.

Now he was hurrying headlong through the beating of the
tempest

tempest, and he pressed his arm against the rope lying nestled at his side as if to assure himself that it was still there. It was the last friend he had left; his only friend! With it he would seek——

“Hell!” a voice seemed to ring through his brain. Juan Perez, brave as he was, felt a sudden chill.

The rain had penetrated the thick folds of his cloak and soaked into his doublet, and still he urged on, pursued by Fate. Whither? That he knew not. Let Chance, the gambler's God, decide that. What he had got to do was to obey his father. The time had come, and no man can struggle against Fate, especially the Fate he himself has made. After all it was only an unlucky throw of the dice. He was even happy as he strode on, the gale singing in his ears; happier he thought than he had been for years. He knew not—cared not where the deed was done. All he knew was that before night closed over Toro, there would be a dead body hanging somewhere that had once been a man. It was the simplest and best solution—the only one possible.

As he turned a corner, a gateway standing open arrested his attention. He entered and shook the raindrops from his hat. He had an excellent idea, almost as good, he thought, as his father's. He recognised the place as the locutory of the Augustinian Friars where he had often come with his mother as a boy—never since.

“Strange that the old fools should leave the gates open on such a day as this!” he muttered.

He looked around. All was still. He smiled quietly. “Why not here? What a pleasure for the saintly hypocrites to-morrow morning to find a dead man's body hanging from their holy walls. Oh, my father! you have been an excellent jester, but your son is almost as good.”

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He looked for, and found, a nail in the whitewashed wall. He tried it. It was firm and strong, quite able to bear the weight of a man's body. He carefully attached the rope, and then examined the space below with a faint smile of irony, as if he sought to fix in his memory for ever the slightest detail of the breadth of line which would soon be covered by himself. Now that this matter was settled, there was no hurry, and he sat him down on the rough bench that lined the locutory—the bench made for beggars and suppliants and ruined men such as he. One thought gave him intense delight. "If my father was a good jester, I am as good!"

He sat himself down on the bench with his head between his hands pondering over many things. It would seem that all he had ever done, all the places he had ever seen, the faces he had kissed, those whom he had ruined or fought with and wounded, one or two he had killed, had joined together as if he must behold them—see them—be tortured by them in this moment. The oath of the man he had run his sword through rang through his brain. Tremulous hands seemed to clutch at him from space. The wind as it entered seemed to bring sighings, wailings, reproaches. He saw his mother's race, and he wondered how it was he had forgotten to visit her grave. Then he laughed inwardly at the scandal of the town to-morrow—he should not hear it—it would be no morrow to him, and at the clatter of tongues his death would arouse amongst the gossips of Toro. Death! Well, there hung Death! that rope dangling across the wall. A rope and a gurgle in the throat, that was Death. Nothing so terrible, after all, except to fools—not to men like him of blood and valour, who had faced and defied it every day for the last fifteen years of his life.

Then he rose, and with bended brows leant against the gate-post.

post. In vain the torrential storm swept over the cornfields and vineyards of Toro, obscuring them in mist. He had no need of eyes, for he knew every league of the country ; every undulation of the plain framed in the narrow space of the gate-posts was burnt on his brain. He could see them without eyes, and remember every familiar feature. He had ridden them in the hot sun, he had paced every weary step of them. He could have sworn that he still smelt the dust of it in his nostrils, and saw the magpie which had flown across the track when he returned to Toro after his mother's death. The innate egotism that lies in us all, making each one think himself the pivot of the world, arose within him in an intense revolt. That the sun should rise on the morrow and sparkle on the yellow cornfields, or that the morrow should again waken over them soaked in rain, as if he had never been, seemed to him unnatural, monstrous, incredible.

The pattering of the rain on the flagstones of the locutory, the moaning of the wind, formed a sort of symphony to his shapeless meditations. He turned from the door, and in the vacancy of his mood scanned the whitewashed walls. A few old pictures of saints—he recognised them as old acquaintances from the time he had come there with his mother ; they burnt themselves into his brain now. If there was some remembering faculty in man that lived after the extinction of the body, he felt that he should know them again through all Eternity. There was one picture, half hidden in a dusky corner almost under the beams, that roused his curiosity. It must have been placed there since—life still presented problems to solve. He rose and stood before it, shading his eyes. "A fine picture," he muttered ; "how in God's name has it got stranded here," and he looked again—looked intensely. There was something in it that touched him as he had never been touched

touched since he was a boy. Why? Because he, too, was to suffer presently, by his own Free Will, something of the same torture which still writhed in the pale limbs, still seemed to quiver in the eyelids of the man before him. Something in the image fascinated and subdued him, seized, held him, bound him so that his feet were as if they had been riveted to the floor with lead. A great pity, a supreme tenderness for the other man who had also suffered, not as he was about to do, for his own sins, but for the sins of the world, thrilled through his soul with a spasm of pain. His mother's eyes seemed to shine down on him from the canvas, swept away the next moment as if by a swift river. She too had suffered for his sins. She had thought of him, the son who had killed her, even in her death throes. Perhaps if she had been alive, his death, if not his life, might have been different.

And then happened what no words, colours, or sounds can translate, for it seemed to him (it is the Chronicler who speaks) that the dusky corner grew full of a soft radiance which suffused itself out of and about the picture. It seemed to him too that he heard strains of melody, now faint, now louder, which must have come from the harps and psalteries of the angels, so far away, so strangely sweet it floated in the atmosphere about him. It seemed too as if the locutory was full of motion, as if invisible figures were passing to and fro in a glad joyousness. It was as if a gentle flapping, a noiseless beating of wings that fanned his brow and stirred his hair, accompanied that marvellous music. And as he still looked confounded, and as it translated, the figure in the picture became distinct and more distinct, grew larger and still larger until he could see neither frame nor picture, but only the gigantic figure of the crucified looming from a celestial light—and in the excessive radiance that enveloped him, he saw the

eyelids stir, the mouth open, and He, the Son of God, with outstretched arms was gazing on him with an ineffable smile.

For what Juan Perez had taken in his frenzy to be a lifeless picture was a living thing—with breath and motion! A living thing—a living man, but a man clothed with glory! A living man who, how he knew not, had left the Cross and was even then moving towards him with arms extended as if he would clasp him to his heart. Was he dreaming? Nay, he was not dreaming. For a touch as soft and noiseless as a flake of snow had fallen upon his shoulder—lingered there wistfully. Eyes looked into his that confounded his senses and bewildered his brain with their sweetness.

And he, Juan Perez, the lawless gambler returned their compassionate gaze, and as he did so, his soul melted.

He often wondered afterwards whether he had heard it in a dream, or if it was only the sighing of the wind, or a voice borne from Eternity, so faint, so diaphanous that uttered no sound, woke no responsive echo in his brain. It might have been the breath of the wind. It might have been the very breath of the Holy Ghost. "Juan," it seemed to say—and it might have been the breath of the wind—"Juan Perez, thou hast sinned greatly, but much shall be forgiven thee. Great is my love, deeper than a mother's. Be your sins scarlet, yet they shall be whiter than snow! Sin no more but live, even for My sake! I have waited for you—waited for years—for a century. You have come. Go! and sin no more!"

Fray Juan de la Misericordia de Dios is still remembered in the annals of the Monastery of Toro. Thrice was he prior, and when the Bishop of Salamanca preached his funeral sermon, he described him as a man sent from God, so great the consolation
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he had administered to souls, so boundless his compassion for the poor. It was in his time that the miracle-working picture was restored once more to its old place over the High Altar, and in any great and poignant distress, the inhabitants of Toro to this day betake themselves to the Good Christ of Fray Juan de la Misericordia de Dios.