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THE MADONNA
OF THE
FUTURE

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The Madonna of the Future

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The Madonna of the Future:

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Henry James

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We had been talking about the masters who had achieved but a single masterpiece—the artists and poets who but once in their lives had known the divine afflatus and touched the high level of perfection. Our host had been showing us a charming little cabinet picture by a painter whose name we had never heard, and who, after this single spasmodic bid for fame, had apparently relapsed into obscurity and mediocrity. There was some discussion as to the frequency of this phenomenon; during which, I observed, H— sat silent, finishing his cigar with a meditative air, and looking at the picture which was being handed round the table. “I don’t know how common a case it is,” he said at last, “but I have seen it. I have known a poor fellow who painted his one masterpiece, and”—he added with a smile—“he didn’t even paint that. He made his bid for fame and missed it.” We all knew H— for a clever man who had seen much of men and manners, and had a great stock of reminiscences. Some one immediately questioned him further, and while I

was engrossed with the raptures of my neighbour over the little picture, he was induced to tell his tale. If I were to doubt whether it would bear repeating, I should only have to remember how that charming woman, our hostess, who had left the table, ventured back in rustling rose-colour to pronounce our lingering a want of gallantry, and, finding us a listening circle, sank into her chair in spite of our cigars, and heard the story out so graciously that, when the catastrophe was reached, she glanced across at me and showed me a tear in each of her beautiful eyes.

* * * * *

It relates to my youth, and to Italy: two fine things! (H— began). I had arrived late in the evening at Florence, and while I finished my bottle of wine at supper, had fancied that, tired traveller though I was, I might pay the city a finer compliment than by going vulgarly to bed. A narrow passage wandered darkly away out of the little square before my hotel, and looked as if it bored into the heart of Florence. I followed it, and at the end of ten minutes emerged upon a great piazza, filled only with the mild autumn moonlight. Opposite rose the Palazzo Vecchio, like some huge civic fortress, with the great bell-tower springing from its embattled verge as a mountain-pine from the edge of a cliff. At its base, in its projected shadow, gleamed certain dim sculptures which I wonderingly approached. One of the images, on the left of the palace door, was a magnificent

colossus, shining through the dusky air like a sentinel who has taken the alarm. In a moment I recognised him as Michael Angelo's *David*. I turned with a certain relief from his sinister strength to a slender figure in bronze, stationed beneath the high light loggia, which opposes the free and elegant span of its arches to the dead masonry of the palace; a figure supremely shapely and graceful; gentle, almost, in spite of his holding out with his light nervous arm the snaky head of the slaughtered Gorgon. His name is Perseus, and you may read his story, not in the Greek mythology, but in the memoirs of Benvenuto Cellini. Glancing from one of these fine fellows to the other, I probably uttered some irrepressible commonplace of praise, for, as if provoked by my voice, a man rose from the steps of the loggia, where he had been sitting in the shadow, and addressed me in good English—a small, slim personage, clad in a sort of black velvet tunic (as it seemed), and with a mass of auburn hair, which gleamed in the moonlight, escaping from a little mediæval birretta. In a tone of the most insinuating deference he asked me for my “impressions.” He seemed picturesque, fantastic, slightly unreal.

Hovering there in this consecrated neighbourhood, he might have passed for the genius of æsthetic hospitality—if the genius of æsthetic hospitality were not commonly some shabby little custode, flourishing a calico pocket-handkerchief and openly resentful of the divided franc. This analogy was made none the less complete by the brilliant tirade with which he greeted my embarrassed silence.

“I have known Florence long, sir, but I have never known her so lovely as tonight. It’s as if the ghosts of her past were abroad in the empty streets. The present is sleeping; the past hovers about us like a dream made visible. Fancy the old Florentines strolling up in couples to pass judgment on the last performance of Michael, of Benvenuto! We should come in for a precious lesson if we might overhear what they say. The plainest burgher of them, in his cap and gown, had a taste in the matter! That was the prime of art, sir. The sun stood high in heaven, and his broad and equal blaze made the darkest places bright and the dullest eyes clear. We live in the evening of time! We grope in the gray dusk, carrying each our poor little taper of selfish and painful wisdom, holding it up to the great models and to the dim idea, and seeing nothing but overwhelming greatness and dimness. The days of illumination are gone! But do you know I fancy—I fancy”—and he grew suddenly almost familiar in this visionary fervour—“I fancy the light of that time rests upon us here for an hour! I have never seen the David so grand, the Perseus so fair! Even the inferior productions of John of Bologna and of Baccio Bandinelli seem to realise the artist’s dream. I feel as if the moonlit air were charged with the secrets of the masters, and as if, standing here in religious attention, we might—we might witness a revelation!” Perceiving at this moment, I suppose, my halting comprehension reflected in my puzzled face, this interesting rhapsodist paused and blushed. Then with a melancholy smile, “You think me a moonstruck charlatan, I

suppose. It's not my habit to bang about the piazza and pounce upon innocent tourists. But tonight, I confess, I am under the charm. And then, somehow, I fancied you too were an artist!"

"I am not an artist, I am sorry to say, as you must understand the term. But pray make no apologies. I am also under the charm; your eloquent remarks have only deepened it."

"If you are not an artist you are worthy to be one!" he rejoined, with an expressive smile. "A young man who arrives at Florence late in the evening, and, instead of going prosaically to bed, or hanging over the traveller's book at his hotel, walks forth without loss of time to pay his devoirs to the beautiful, is a young man after my own heart!"

The mystery was suddenly solved; my friend was an American! He must have been, to take the picturesque so prodigiously to heart. "None the less so, I trust," I answered, "if the young man is a sordid New Yorker."

"New Yorkers have been munificent patrons of art!" he answered, urbanely.

For a moment I was alarmed. Was this midnight reverie mere Yankee enterprise, and was he simply a desperate brother of the brush who had posted himself here to extort an "order" from a sauntering tourist? But I was not called to defend myself.

A great brazen note broke suddenly from the far-off summit of the bell-tower above us, and sounded the first stroke of midnight. My companion started, apologised for detaining me, and prepared to retire. But he seemed to offer so lively a promise

of further entertainment that I was indisposed to part with him, and suggested that we should stroll homeward together. He cordially assented; so we turned out of the Piazza, passed down before the stuated arcade of the Uffizi, and came out upon the Arno. What course we took I hardly remember, but we roamed slowly about for an hour, my companion delivering by snatches a sort of moon-touched æsthetic lecture. I listened in puzzled fascination, and wondered who the deuce he was. He confessed with a melancholy but all-respectful head-shake to his American origin.

“We are the disinherited of Art!” he cried. “We are condemned to be superficial! We are excluded from the magic circle. The soil of American perception is a poor little barren artificial deposit. Yes! we are wedded to imperfection. An American, to excel, has just ten times as much to learn as a European. We lack the deeper sense. We have neither taste, nor tact, nor power. How should we have them? Our crude and garish climate, our silent past, our deafening present, the constant pressure about us of unlovely circumstance, are as void of all that nourishes and prompts and inspires the artist, as my sad heart is void of bitterness in saying so! We poor aspirants must live in perpetual exile.”

“You seem fairly at home in exile,” I answered, “and Florence seems to me a very pretty Siberia. But do you know my own thought? Nothing is so idle as to talk about our want of a nutritive soil, of opportunity, of inspiration, and all the rest of it. The

worthy part is to do something fine! There is no law in our glorious Constitution against that. Invent, create, achieve! No matter if you have to study fifty times as much as one of these!

What else are you an artist for? Be you our Moses,” I added, laughing, and laying my hand on his shoulder, “and lead us out of the house of bondage!”

“Golden words—golden words, young man!” he cried, with a tender smile. “Invent, create, achieve! Yes, that’s our business; I know it well. Don’t take me, in Heaven’s name, for one of your barren complainers—impotent cynics who have neither talent nor faith! I am at work!”—and he glanced about him and lowered his voice as if this were a quite peculiar secret—“I’m at work night and day. I have undertaken a *creation*! I am no Moses; I am only a poor patient artist; but it would be a fine thing if I were to cause some slender stream of beauty to flow in our thirsty land! Don’t think me a monster of conceit,” he went on, as he saw me smile at the avidity with which he adopted my illustration; “I confess that I am in one of those moods when great things seem possible! This is one of my nervous nights—I dream waking! When the south wind blows over Florence at midnight it seems to coax the soul from all the fair things locked away in her churches and galleries; it comes into my own little studio with the moonlight, and sets my heart beating too deeply for rest. You see I am always adding a thought to my conception!

This evening I felt that I couldn’t sleep unless I had communed with the genius of Buonarotti!”

He seemed deeply versed in local history and tradition, and he expatiated *con amore* on the charms of Florence. I gathered that he was an old resident, and that he had taken the lovely city into his heart. "I owe her everything," he declared. "It's only since I came here that I have really lived, intellectually. One by one, all profane desires, all mere worldly aims, have dropped away from me, and left me nothing but my pencil, my little note-book" (and he tapped his breast-pocket), "and the worship of the pure masters—those who were pure because they were innocent, and those who were pure because they were strong!"

"And have you been very productive all this time?" I asked sympathetically.

He was silent a while before replying. "Not in the vulgar sense!" he said at last. "I have chosen never to manifest myself by imperfection. The good in every performance I have re-absorbed into the generative force of new creations; the bad—there is always plenty of that—I have religiously destroyed. I may say, with some satisfaction, that I have not added a mite to the rubbish of the world. As a proof of my conscientiousness"—and he stopped short, and eyed me with extraordinary candour, as if the proof were to be overwhelming—"I have never sold a picture!

'At least no merchant traffics in my heart!' Do you remember that divine line in Browning? My little studio has never been profaned by superficial, feverish, mercenary work. It's a temple of labour, but of leisure! Art is long. If we work for ourselves, of course we must hurry. If we work for her, we must often pause.

She can wait!"

This had brought us to my hotel door, somewhat to my relief, I confess, for I had begun to feel unequal to the society of a genius of this heroic strain. I left him, however, not without expressing a friendly hope that we should meet again. The next morning my curiosity had not abated; I was anxious to see him by common daylight. I counted upon meeting him in one of the many pictorial haunts of Florence, and I was gratified without delay. I found him in the course of the morning in the Tribune of the Uffizi—that little treasure-chamber of world-famous things.

He had turned his back on the Venus de' Medici, and with his arms resting on the rail-mug which protects the pictures, and his head buried in his hands, he was lost in the contemplation of that superb triptych of Andrea Mantegna—a work which has neither the material splendour nor the commanding force of some of its neighbours, but which, glowing there with the loveliness of patient labour, suits possibly a more constant need of the soul. I looked at the picture for some time over his shoulder; at last, with a heavy sigh, he turned away and our eyes met. As he recognised me a deep blush rose to his face; he fancied, perhaps, that he had made a fool of himself overnight. But I offered him my hand with a friendliness which assured him I was not a scoffer. I knew him by his ardent *chevelure*; otherwise he was much altered. His midnight mood was over, and he looked as haggard as an actor by daylight. He was far older than I had supposed, and he had less bravery of costume and gesture. He seemed the quiet, poor,

patient artist he had proclaimed himself, and the fact that he had never sold a picture was more obvious than glorious. His velvet coat was threadbare, and his short slouched hat, of an antique pattern, revealed a rustiness which marked it an "original," and not one of the picturesque reproductions which brethren of his craft affect. His eye was mild and heavy, and his expression singularly gentle and acquiescent; the more so for a certain pallid leanness of visage, which I hardly knew whether to refer to the consuming fire of genius or to a meagre diet. A very little talk, however, cleared his brow and brought back his eloquence.

"And this is your first visit to these enchanted halls?" he cried. "Happy, thrice happy youth!" And taking me by the arm, he prepared to lead me to each of the pre-eminent works in turn and show me the cream of the gallery. But before we left the Mantegna he pressed my arm and gave it a loving look.

"*He* was not in a hurry," he murmured. "He knew nothing of 'raw Haste, half-sister to Delay!'" How sound a critic my friend was I am unable to say, but he was an extremely amusing one; overflowing with opinions, theories, and sympathies, with disquisition and gossip and anecdote. He was a shade too sentimental for my own sympathies, and I fancied he was rather too fond of superfine discriminations and of discovering subtle intentions in shallow places. At moments, too, he plunged into the sea of metaphysics, and floundered a while in waters too deep for intellectual security. But his abounding knowledge and happy judgment told a touching story of long attentive hours in

this worshipful company; there was a reproach to my wasteful saunterings in so devoted a culture of opportunity. "There are two moods," I remember his saying, "in which we may walk through galleries—the critical and the ideal. They seize us at their pleasure, and we can never tell which is to take its turn.

The critical mood, oddly, is the genial one, the friendly, the condescending. It relishes the pretty trivialities of art, its vulgar cleverness, its conscious graces. It has a kindly greeting for anything which looks as if, according to his light, the painter had enjoyed doing it—for the little Dutch cabbages and kettles, for the taper fingers and breezy mantles of late-coming Madonnas, for the little blue-hilled, pastoral, sceptical Italian landscapes.

Then there are the days of fierce, fastidious longing—solemn church feasts of the intellect—when all vulgar effort and all petty success is a weariness, and everything but the best—the best of the best—disgusts. In these hours we are relentless aristocrats of taste. We will not take Michael Angelo for granted, we will not swallow Raphael whole!"

The gallery of the Uffizi is not only rich in its possessions, but peculiarly fortunate in that fine architectural accident, as one may call it, which unites it—with the breadth of river and city between them—to those princely chambers of the Pitti Palace.

The Louvre and the Vatican hardly give you such a sense of sustained inclosure as those long passages projected over street and stream to establish a sort of inviolate transition between the two palaces of art. We passed along the gallery in which

those precious drawings by eminent hands hang chaste and gray above the swirl and murmur of the yellow Arno, and reached the ducal saloons of the Pitti. Ducal as they are, it must be confessed that they are imperfect as show-rooms, and that, with their deep-set windows and their massive mouldings, it is rather a broken light that reaches the pictured walls. But here the masterpieces hang thick, and you seem to see them in a luminous atmosphere of their own. And the great saloons, with their superb dim ceilings, their outer wall in splendid shadow, and the sombre opposite glow of mellow canvas and dusky gilding, make, themselves, almost as fine a picture as the Titians and Raphaels they imperfectly reveal. We lingered briefly before many a Raphael and Titian; but I saw my friend was impatient, and I suffered him at last to lead me directly to the goal of our journey—the most tenderly fair of Raphael's virgins, the Madonna in the Chair. Of all the fine pictures of the world, it seemed to me this is the one with which criticism has least to do. None betrays less effort, less of the mechanism of success and of the irrepressible discord between conception and result, which shows dimly in so many consummate works. Graceful, human, near to our sympathies as it is, it has nothing of manner, of method, nothing, almost, of style; it blooms there in rounded softness, as instinct with harmony as if it were an immediate exhalation of genius. The figure melts away the spectator's mind into a sort of passionate tenderness which he knows not whether he has given to heavenly purity or to earthly charm. He is intoxicated with

the fragrance of the tenderest blossom of maternity that ever bloomed on earth.

“That’s what I call a fine picture,” said my companion, after we had gazed a while in silence. “I have a right to say so, for I have copied it so often and so carefully that I could repeat it now with my eyes shut. Other works are of Raphael: this *is* Raphael himself. Others you can praise, you can qualify, you can measure, explain, account for: this you can only love and admire.

I don’t know in what seeming he walked among men while this divine mood was upon him; but after it, surely, he could do nothing but die; this world had nothing more to teach him. Think of it a while, my friend, and you will admit that I am not raving.

Think of his seeing that spotless image, not for a moment, for a day, in a happy dream, or a restless fever-fit; not as a poet in a five minutes’ frenzy—time to snatch his phrase and scribble his immortal stanza; but for days together, while the slow labour of the brush went on, while the foul vapours of life interposed, and the fancy ached with tension, fixed, radiant, distinct, as we see it now! What a master, certainly! But ah! what a seer!”

“Don’t you imagine,” I answered, “that he had a model, and that some pretty young woman—”

“As pretty a young woman as you please! It doesn’t diminish the miracle! He took his hint, of course, and the young woman, possibly, sat smiling before his canvas. But, meanwhile, the painter’s idea had taken wings. No lovely human outline could charm it to vulgar fact. He saw the fair form made perfect;

he rose to the vision without tremor, without effort of wing; he communed with it face to face, and resolved into finer and lovelier truth the purity which completes it as the fragrance completes the rose. That's what they call idealism; the word's vastly abused, but the thing is good. It's my own creed, at any rate. Lovely Madonna, model at once and muse, I call you to witness that I too am an idealist!"

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