

# The Temptation of Harringay

H. G. Wells

It is quite impossible to say whether this thing really happened. It depends entirely on the word of R.M. Harringay, who is an artist.

Following his version of the affair, the narrative deposes that Harringay went into his studio about ten o'clock to see what he could make of the head, that he had been working at the day before. The head in question was that of an Italian organ-grinder, and Harringay thought—but was not quite sure—that the title would be the “Vigil.” So far he is frank, and his narrative bears the stamp of truth. He had seen the man expectant for pennies, and with a promptness that suggested genius, had, had him in at once.

“Kneel. Look up at that bracket,” said Harringay. “As if you expected pennies.

“Don’t grin!” said Harringay. “I don’t want to paint your gums. Look as though you were unhappy.”

Now, after a night’s rest, the picture proved decidedly unsatisfactory. “It’s good work,” said Harringay. “That little bit in the neck...But.”

He walked about the studio and looked at the thing from this point and from that. Then he said a wicked word. In the original the word is given.

“Painting,” he says he said. “Just a painting of an organ-grinder—a mere portrait. If it was a live organ-grinder I wouldn’t mind. But somehow I never make things alive. I wonder if my imagination is wrong.” This, too, has a truthful air. His imagination is wrong.

“That creative touch! To take canvas and pigment and make a man—as Adam was made of red ochre! But this thing! If you met it walking about the streets you would know it was only a studio production. The little boys would tell it to ‘Garnome and git frimed.’ Some little touch...Well—it won’t do as it is.”

He went to the blinds and began to pull them down. They were made of blue holland with the rollers at the bottom of the window, so that you pull them down to get more light. He gathered his palette, brushes, and mahl stick from his table. Then he turned to the picture and put a speck of brown in the corner of the mouth; and shifted his attention thence to the pupil of the eye. Then he decided that the chin was a trifle too impassive for a vigil.

Presently he put down his impedimenta, and lighting a pipe surveyed the progress of his work.

“I’m hanged if the thing isn’t sneering at me,” said Harringay, and he still believes it sneered.

The animation of the figure had certainly increased, but scarcely in the direction he wished. There was no mistake about the sneer. “Vigil of the Unbeliever,” said Harringay. “Rather subtle and clever that! But the left eyebrow isn’t cynical enough.”

He went and dabbed at the eyebrow, and added a little to the lobe of the ear to suggest materialism. Further consideration ensued. “Vigil’s off, I’m afraid,” said Harringay. “Why not Mephistopheles? But that’s a bit too common. ‘A Friend of the Doge—’ not so seedy. The armour won’t do, though. Too Camelot. How about a scarlet robe and call him ‘One of the Sacred College’? Humour in that, and an appreciation of Middle Italian History.

“There’s always Benvenuto Cellini,” said Harringay; “with a clever suggestion of a gold cup in one corner. But that would scarcely suit the complexion.”

He describes himself as babbling in this way in order to keep down an unaccountably unpleasant sensation of fear. The thing was certainly acquiring anything but a pleasing expression. Yet it was as certainly becoming far more of a living thing than it had been—if a sinister one—far more alive than anything he had ever painted before. “Call it ‘Portrait of a Gentleman,’ ” said Harringay; “ ‘A Certain Gentleman.’ ”

“Won’t do,” said Harringay, still keeping up his courage. “Kind of thing they call Bad Taste. That sneer will have to come out. That gone, and a little more fire in the eye—never noticed how warm his eye was before—and he might do for—? What price Passionate Pilgrim? But that devilish face won’t do—this, side of the Channel.

“Some little inaccuracy does it,” he said; “eyebrows probably too oblique—” therewith pulling the blind lower to get a better light, and resuming palette and brushes.

The face on the canvas seemed animated by a spirit of its own. Where the expression of diablerie came in he found impossible to discover. Experiment was necessary. The eyebrows—it could scarcely be the eyebrows? But he altered them. No, that was no better; in fact, if anything, a trifle more satanic. The corner of the mouth? Pah! More than ever a leer—and now, retouched, it was ominously grim. The eye, then? Catastrophe! He had filled his brush with vermilion instead of brown, and yet he had felt sure it was brown! The eye seemed now to have rolled in its socket, and was glaring at him an eye of fire. In a flash of passion, possibly with something of the courage of panic, he struck the brush full of bright red, athwart the picture; and then a very curious thing, a very strange thing indeed, occurred—if it did occur.

The diabolified Italian before him shut both his eyes, pursed his mouth, and wiped the colour off his face with his hand.

Then the red eye opened again, with a sound like the opening of lips, and the face smiled. "That was rather hasty of you," said the picture.

Harringay states that, now that the worst had happened, his self-possession returned. He had a saving persuasion that devils were reasonable creatures.

"Why do you keep moving about then," he said, "making faces and all that—sneering and squinting, while I am painting you?"

"I don't," said the picture.

"You do," said Harringay.

"It's yourself," said the picture.

"It's not myself," said Harringay.

"It is yourself," said the picture. "No! Don't go hitting me with paint again, because it's true. You have been trying to fluke an expression on my face all the morning. Really, you haven't an idea what your picture ought to look like."

"I have," said Harringay.

"You have not," said the picture: "You never have with your pictures. You always start with the vaguest presentiment of what you are going to do; it is to be something beautiful—you are sure of that—and devout, perhaps, or tragic; but beyond that it is all experiment and chance. My dear fellow! You don't think you can paint a picture like that?"

Now it must be remembered that for what follows we have only Harringay's word.

"I shall paint a picture exactly as I like," said Harringay, calmly.

This seemed to disconcert the picture a little. "You can't paint a picture without an inspiration," it remarked.

"But I had an inspiration—for this."

"Inspiration!" sneered the sardonic figure; "A fancy that came from your seeing an organ-grinder looking up at a window! Vigil! Ha, ha! You just started painting on the chance of something coming—that's what you did. And when I saw you at it I came. I want a talk with you!"

“Art, with you,” said the picture—, “it’s a poor business. You potter. I don’t know how it is, but you don’t seem able to throw your soul into it. You know too much. It hampers you. In the midst of your enthusiasms you ask yourself whether something like this has not been done before. And...”

“Look here,” said Harringay, who had expected something better than criticism from the devil. “Are you going to talk studio to me?” He filled his number twelve hoghair with red paint.

“The true artist,” said the picture, “is always an ignorant man. An artist who theorises about his work is no longer artist but critic. Wagner...I say—! What’s that red paint for?”

“I’m going to paint you out,” said Harringay. “I don’t want to hear all that Tommy Rot. If you think just because I’m an artist by trade I’m going to talk studio to you, you make a precious mistake.”

“One minute,” said the picture, evidently alarmed. “I want to make you an offer—a genuine offer. It’s right what I’m saying. You lack inspirations. Well. No doubt you’ve heard of the Cathedral of Cologne, and the Devil’s Bridge, and—”

“Rubbish,” said Harringay. “Do you think I want to go to perdition simply for the pleasure of painting a good picture, and getting it slated. Take that.”

His blood was up. His danger only nerved him to action, so he says. So he planted a dab of vermilion in his creature’s mouth. The Italian spluttered and tried to wipe it off—evidently horribly surprised. And then—according to Harringay—there began a very remarkable struggle, Harringay splashing away with the red paint, and the picture wriggling about and wiping it off as fast as he put it on. “Two masterpieces,” said the demon. “Two indubitable masterpieces for a Chelsea artist’s soul. It’s a bargain?” Harringay replied with the paint brush.

For a few minutes nothing could be heard but the brush going and the spluttering and ejaculations of the Italian. A lot of the strokes he caught on his arm and hand, though Harringay got over his guard often enough. Presently the paint on the palette gave out and the two antagonists stood breathless, regarding each other. The picture was so smeared with red that it looked as if it had been rolling about a slaughterhouse, and it was painfully out of breath and very uncomfortable with the wet paint trickling down its neck. Still, the first round was in its favour on the whole. “Think,” it said, sticking pluckily to its point, “two supreme masterpieces—in different styles. Each equivalent to the Cathedral...”

“I know,” said Harringay, and rushed out of the studio and along the passage towards his

wife's boudoir.

In another minute he was back with a large tin of enamel—Hedge Sparrow's Egg Tint, it was, and a brush. At the sight of that the artistic devil with the red eye began to scream. "Three masterpieces—culminating masterpieces."

Harringay delivered cut two across the demon, and followed with a thrust in the eye. There was an indistinct rumbling. "Four masterpieces," and a spitting sound.

But Harringay had the upper hand now and meant to keep it. With rapid, bold strokes he continued to paint over the writhing canvas, until at last it was a uniform field of shining Hedge Sparrow tint. Once the mouth reappeared and got as far as "Five master—" before he filled it with enamel; and near the end the red eye opened and glared at him indignantly. But at last nothing remained save a gleaming panel of drying enamel. For a little while a faint stirring beneath the surface puckered it slightly here and there, but presently even that died away and the thing was perfectly still.

Then Harringay—according to Harringay's account—lit his pipe and sat down and stared at the enamelled canvas, and tried to make out clearly what had happened. Then he walked round behind it, to see if the back of it was at all remarkable. Then it was he began to regret he had not photographed the Devil before he painted him out.

This is Harringay's story—not mine. He supports it by a small canvas (24 by 20) enamelled a pale green, and by violent asseverations. It is also true that he never has produced a masterpiece, and in the opinion of his intimate friends probably never will.

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