



THE

PORTRAIT OF MARY IN HEAVEN.

---

THE following Correspondence took place, about the end of the sixteenth century, between a youthful Lady Abbess and an eminent Painter.

*The Abbess to the Painter.*

St. Mary's Abbey, August 15th, 1564.

My Brother,

For *brother* I must now call you, as I have been appointed Lady Superior of this convent. I have, without much regret bid adieu to the world, though I will allow that I still often feel the want of some of those innocent indulgences, which would enable me more cheerfully to endure this life of seclusion. My chief solicitude is now, therefore, to increase the comforts and adornments of my cell, and that which I most find wanting is the portrait of my gentle patroness. There is nothing which supplies so well the place of a living companion as a portrait, and especially such a portrait as you are able to paint. I will now, therefore, give you an order, at your own price, for as faithful a likeness of the Holy Virgin as it is possible to execute. Remember, that I am anxious to have the likeness correct and not imaginative, therefore take

your time and fix your own terms, for I should grudge nothing for the possession of an object, I deem so essential; it even seems to me that the more exact the representation before me of Mary, as she now is in heaven, the more earnest would my prayers to her become. In expectation of your answer, which I am sure will excite my grateful thanks, I remain with all humility,

Your sister,

MARIA DE ST. ROMAN.

*The Painter to the Abbess.*

Cloister of the Assumption,  
September 30th, 1564.

My Sister,

You will perceive, from the date of my letter, that I have, like yourself, retired from the world, but I have not given up painting. I have, therefore, with great pleasure received your letter in my seclusion, giving me the order for a portrait of Mary. Henceforth, my labours will at any rate have an object, though I shall prolong them by taking the greatest possible pains about this portrait, and I shall, as you desire, bestow my particular attention on making it a correct likeness.

It seems to me that, to effect this, the following plan will be the best, but still I wish to have your opinion about it. In the first place, I do not intend to imitate any of those well known portraits, for which, as you are aware, Mary herself has never sat, but the handsomest women the painter could meet with, and, too often, alas! women as different as possible from the Holy Virgin. I shall also avoid any reference to the various

legends and innumerable "Lives of the Virgin," written, perhaps, a thousand years after the time when she lived. On the contrary, I must go back at once to the true source, and search the Holy Scriptures for those authentic details concerning Mary, which alone can guide my pencil aright. I promise you to design nothing from fancy, to yield nothing to imagination, and to study the sacred writings with most extreme care, even if this occupation should employ many years of my life.

An obstacle, however, comes in my way, for I have not a Bible, and I have vainly sought for one in the library of our convent; therefore, I now write to you, in the hope that you may be more fortunate in searching for one in yours, and that you may be enabled to send it to me.

Your brother, with all humility and respect,

JOSEPH DE SAINT PIERRE.

*The Abbess to the Painter.*

St. Mary's Abbey, Dec. 1st, 1564.

My Brother,

I am delighted with the plan you propose, and I went instantly in quest of the book you require, but our convent, like your cloister, does not possess it. I wrote, however, to Rome, to obtain a copy from one of the libraries belonging to his holiness the Pope, which, as a great favour, he has granted me, and I herewith send it to you.

Now pursue your task with courage, and I, in the mean time, will pray to Mary that she may deign to guide you in your work. I hope, therefore, you will one day be able to send me a portrait which will add to my happiness as much as it will

increase your celebrity: but I repeat, *take your time*, and do not send me the portrait till you have succeeded in making the likeness *perfect*.

Your sister,

MARIA DE ST. ROMAN.

Two years elapsed, after which the correspondence was renewed in the following manner :

*The Painter to the Abbess.*

Cloister of the Assumption,  
Jan. 4th, 1566.

My Sister,

At last my work is finished, and if ever a work was faithfully and conscientiously accomplished it is this. But it is not enough to make this assertion, I must prove it ; for perhaps you might doubt the truth of the likeness I now send you, if I did not fully explain to you the grounds on which I rest my pretension of having painted the most faithful resemblance that has ever yet been seen of the blessed Mary, *such* as she now is in heaven.

To begin at once on the subject. One of the most important points to be ascertained before you can portray a likeness, is the *age* of the original. When, therefore, your Bible arrived, my first research in it regarded the age of Mary. On opening the Gospel according to St. Luke, at the first page, I observed that Elizabeth, whose conception had taken place six months before that of Mary, was then at a very advanced time of life ; this made me at first imagine that Mary, who was her cousin, could not have been very young at the period when the daughter of either her uncle or her aunt was very old. Nevertheless, I did not attach much im-

portance to this inference, for, after all, it was possible that Elizabeth and Mary might have been the children of brothers or sisters of very different ages—I merely noticed the circumstance of Mary's cousin being very old, six months before the Holy Virgin had even received the visit of the angel Gabriel.

A second circumstance, which helped me to determine Mary's age, was, that she had been affianced before her miraculous conception—a proof that she was then old enough to be married. This is a matter of importance, because we cannot be far wrong in supposing that Mary could not at that time have been less than twenty years of age; the more especially when we recollect that she was cousin to the aged Elizabeth.

Dating then from this point, we may reckon that Mary was affianced at the age of twenty, and we read (Matt. i. 18), "When she was espoused to Joseph, she was found with child." Thus, therefore, when she "brought forth her first-born son," she must have attained the age of twenty years and a half.

I turn now to the second chapter of St. Luke, and find from it that Mary was still living, and that she had forgotten her son Jesus in the Temple at Jerusalem, when, as I learn from (ver. 42,) Jesus "was twelve years old." At that time, therefore, I reckon Mary to have been in her thirty-third year.

From the second I proceed to the third chapter, and learn from thence that Jesus was baptized by John, and that he commenced his ministry, being then "about thirty years of age." Mary then was still alive, for as you well know, and as the Gospel proceeds to inform us, she survived Jesus on earth.

This clear and plain fact, is therefore to be deduced, viz., that if Mary was more than twenty years of age at her son's birth, she must have been more than fifty when Jesus had attained the age of thirty years.

Now a question arose concerning the length of the ministry of Jesus Christ on earth; I found it, however, easy to ascertain this by searching throughout any one of the four Gospels, to find out how many different times during his ministry Jesus had gone up to Jerusalem at the feast of the Passover.

By referring to John ii. 13, I find "The Jew's Passover was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem."

Again, chapter v. verse 1, I read of "A feast of the Jews;" this feast must also have been the Passover, as St. Luke (in the sixth chapter of his Gospel) refers the events here related to that period.

In the 6th chapter of St. John, verse 4, it is again written, that "the Passover, a feast of the Jews was nigh."

Again, the thirteenth chapter records the fourth and last Passover; *that* at which Jesus died.

These four Passovers, which took place during the ministry of Jesus Christ, prevent the supposition that it could have lasted less than three years, or longer than four. Let us take the medium, and allow it to have continued three years and a half. If Mary, therefore, was upwards of fifty years old when Jesus began to preach, and that His ministry lasted three years and a half, Mary, when she stood by the Saviour's cross, must have been fifty-four years of age.

The Gospel here concludes; but it is followed by the Acts of the Apostles, where (chap. i. ver. 14,)

I find that Mary, the mother of Jesus, is named as continuing "in prayer and supplication" with the Apostles. Moreover, it must be remarked that, in obedience to the command of Jesus, the apostle John had, at that time, taken her to his own home. How long did she remain there? This question is nowhere answered in the Holy Scriptures, for no further mention of her is there made. Did she live one, or two, or three, or ten, or even twenty years? I know not; if I could place confidence in the *Tradition of the Church*, I should suppose her to have lived long at Ephesus, where St. John was bishop. But as I do not wish unnecessarily to add to the age of Mary, and as the Bible is silent on the subject, I prefer the supposition that she only lived on earth five or six years longer, and, therefore, that it was when she was about sixty years old that Mary ascended into heaven. But before we follow her there, let us notice a few circumstances which will assist us in forming a more exact idea of her features. If it is desirable that a painter should know the age of a woman, that he may be enabled to give a more accurate representation of her countenance, it is no less so that he should know whether she has been the mother of a family, and if so, the number of her children. This question, as regarding Mary, would never have occurred to me, if, in turning over the pages of the Gospel, certain passages had not struck my eye, which awakened doubts in my mind. The first reference which I found to this subject is in the last verse of the first chapter of St. Matthew, where it is said of Joseph, her husband, that he "knew her not *till* she had brought forth her *first-born* son, and he called his name Jesus." The words I have under-



lined appeared to me full of meaning, but still I would not hastily come to a conclusion, for I would far rather still have believed, unless there was evident proof to the contrary, that Mary had never had any other child than Jesus. Such was my state of mind after having read the first chapter of St. Matthew, and earnestly did I hope that, as I proceeded to read, nothing further would occur which might oblige me to change my opinion; but when I came to the following passage in the twelfth chapter of the same Gospel, it almost inspired me with terror: "While he yet talked to the people, behold his mother and his brethren stood without, desiring to speak with him" (ver. 46). "His brethren," I exclaimed: "if then Jesus had brethren, Mary must have had other children. No, no, that is impossible! the word *brother*, must here mean *cousin*. God Almighty forbid, that any other difficulties should arise to shake my holy faith!" I went on to the verses immediately following, "Then one said unto him, Behold thy mother and thy brethren stand without, desiring to speak with thee." "But he answered and said unto him that told him, Who is my mother? and who are my brethren?" And he stretched forth his hand towards his disciples, and said, Behold my mother, and my brethren!" "For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother" (verses 47, 48, 49, 50). This conclusion to the chapter served to increase my embarrassment. "For," I argued, "if the word brother stands for cousin in the 46th verse, it must likewise do so in those which follow it, and thus it would be here seriously recorded, that Jesus had addressed the multitude in the following extraor-

dinary manner: 'Whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my cousin, &c. &c.'" Such an idea is an absurd mockery, it cannot be? it would be turning into ridicule those sublime and pathetic words of the Saviour which give to us the titles of brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ.

Here, then, you will perceive that I had to choose between the two translations and their respective consequences. Either Mary was accompanied by her nephews, and it was to His cousins that Jesus likened His disciples—in which case *we* must give up the blessed title of His brethren, or she was surrounded by her own children—but, then, Mary must lose her glorious claim to a perpetual virginity. For my own part, I would far rather have believed that Mary was the mother of a numerous family, than that the Church of Christ, Christians of all ages, should lose the heavenly prerogative of being the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ.

Ideas imbibed in early childhood, and cherished throughout one's whole existence, are not, however, easily relinquished; and though my reason was convinced, my heart did not respond to it. I still inwardly resisted the truth, and I almost hoped for a miracle, which might restore my first delusion.

I returned, therefore, to the following chapter in my Bible, and,—can you believe it?—to my utter astonishment, I read, (chap. xiii. 55 and 56,) that not only the brothers but also the sisters of Jesus, are mentioned, "Is not his mother called Mary? and his brethren James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas?" "And his sisters, are they not all with us?" The word *cousin* certainly might strictly be put in the place of brother, for the Greek word (as

I learn from a note in your Bible) is used in both senses; but, alas! it is utterly impossible to make that word (in the feminine) synonymous with sister. I consulted one of the monks of our convent, and, according to him, the two words have never been used in the original text of the New Testament to express the same relation. You are well able to judge of the strength of my argument, without understanding either Latin or Greek, or Hebrew, when I tell you that, in this passage, both the Greek words *adelphos* and *adelpa* occur. Now as *adelpa* in the Holy Scriptures always signifies sister and never cousin, is it not evident that here *adelphos* must be used in the sense of *brother* and not of *cousin*? Moreover, common sense here suggested a reflection which cut short the question. The usual meaning of the word *adelphos* is *brother*, and it is only when employed in its exceptionable sense that it is used to stand for cousin. In a word, if the writers of Holy Scripture had believed in the perpetual virginity of Mary, they would undoubtedly have avoided any ambiguity on the subject.

As soon as I became convinced of the correctness of this interpretation, a thousand other details added weight to my opinion. For instance, in the last passage we have been examining, when the Nazarenes, astonished at seeing the miracles of Jesus, who had passed his childhood amongst them, exclaimed, "Is not this the carpenter's son? is not his mother called Mary? and his brethren James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas? and his sisters are not they all with us?" When the members of a family are, in this manner, enumerated by their neighbours, surely it is but natural that, immediately after the parents, they should name the brothers and the sisters, rather

than the cousins. In fine, if Jesus was the only child of Mary, why does not the Bible declare it? It is said, several times, that Jesus is the only Son of God. Why is it not said, even once, that he is the only son of Mary? The expressions differ because the facts are different: we cannot doubt that writers inspired by the Holy Ghost well knew how to select their expressions, and that they speak with equal truth, when they call Jesus the *only* Son of God, and the *first-born* son of Mary.

It appears then, without doubt, that the Virgin Mary, after she had conceived by the Holy Ghost, and borne a son, who was free from every taint of sin,—the only Son of God!—had fulfilled her supernatural calling, and from that period she returned to her ordinary position in human life, that is to say, she became the faithful wife of Joseph, her husband. Now, according to the thirteenth chapter of St. Matthew, Jesus at this time must have had four brothers and also *sisters*, for this word, being in the plural, must mean *two* at the least; and, therefore, I come to this conclusion, viz., that the children of Mary were—

Jesus, her first-born son,

His four brothers and his two sisters.

In other words, that Mary was the mother of at least seven children, which you will allow, my sister, to be a circumstance of so much importance, that I ought not to lose sight, in my portrait, of the effect it must have had in attenuating her already aged features.\*

\* I find that these four brothers of Jesus Christ have perplexed others as well as me, for there is a manuscript note at the margin of the Bible you have sent me, proving (or rather, I should say, endeavouring to prove) by

But if I am justified by her advanced age of sixty

putting together different passages from the Holy Scriptures, that the James, Simon, Jude, and Joses, there enumerated, are four sons of Alpheus or Cleopas, and of Mary, the sister of the mother of Jesus; also that the three first, of these four brothers, were amongst the apostles of Jesus Christ. Alas! the difficulty is only changed by this explanation; or rather, a new one arises out of it, and the repeated maternity of Mary is thereby made more than ever evident. For example, let it be admitted that the James, Simon, Jude, and Joses, named in this passage, may be cousins of Jesus, and that three of them may also have been amongst the number of His apostles,—then it follows, when (as St. Luke relates in the eighth chapter of his Gospel) “the twelve were with Jesus,”—if three of his cousins formed part of that number, that they must also have been with Him; and as the mother and brothers of Jesus arrived at that very same time, it is clear that those brothers who arrived with Mary, could not have been the same individuals as the cousins who were already there with our Saviour. According to this, Jesus had cousins, but He had also brothers; His cousins were apostles but His brothers were not—His cousins were with Him, and His brothers with Mary;—His cousins were there amongst the twelve, when His brothers arrived with his mother. Thus, both His brothers and His cousins are found to be together at the same time and in the same place, so it is impossible to confound them together.

This distinction between the brothers and cousins of the Saviour is, if possible, rendered still more striking in the third chapter of St. Mark, for that Evangelist, immediately after enumerating the twelve apostles who are *with* Jesus, relates the arrival of His mother and His brothers.

In a word, as the final evidence that the twelve apostles are totally distinct from the brothers of Jesus, let us turn to the Acts of the Apostles, i. 14, where, after the names of the apostles we find these words: “*These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brethren.*”

years, and by her having been the mother of seven children, in portraying Mary as a holy and respectable matron, grown old in the experience, and, alas! in the sorrows of life, for the sufferings and death of her first-born son, had indeed, "like a sword pierced through her soul" (see Luke ii. 35); yet from this I can still gain no idea of the expression of her face. I know not whether her features were handsome and regular, or in any way remarkable. The solution of this question appeared to me indeed difficult, for, I investigated the whole of the New Testament, without being able to find anything to enlighten me on the subject.

At every page, however, I observed a marked contempt for all that related merely to outward form. For instance, it was God's will that His Divine Son should be born in a manger; that He should live with publicans and die upon a cross: throughout the Gospel, flesh is abased and spirit is exalted; everywhere appearance is despised, and reality honoured; the *body* of the Christian counted but of little worth, while his *soul* is held of high value. From this I was inclined to think that so it must have been with the personal appearance of Jesus Christ, when I met with a passage in the Old Testament that confirmed me in this opinion. I will transcribe it. In the fifty-third chapter of his prophecy, Isaiah thus describes the external form of the Messiah. "He hath no form nor comeliness, and when we shall see Him there is no beauty that we shall desire Him." . . . "We hid, as it were, our faces from Him." Such is the testimony of the prophet Isaiah!

Ah! my sister, Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He is God himself, both for you and for me. He is the model of holiness, and moral beauty; of spiritual

B

grandeur ; of magnanimous devotion ; and, without doubt, to him belongs our entire adoration ! But mark well, that I am now speaking only of the human body, which he derived from Mary, his mother, when He came to dwell, for a moment, with us on earth : with all humility and prostration of heart before God, I may, then, still believe, that His body, His mortal covering—had “neither form nor comeliness,” “nor any beauty that should make us desire Him.”

And if such was Jesus, we may, on the same grounds, and still more from the probable resemblance between a mother and her son, suppose that such was also Mary.

Just as I had prepared my canvass and brushes, and as I was about to begin my work, a new idea occurred to me. You wish for a portrait of Mary such as she *now* is, not such as she was in childhood or early life ; and you are right, for it is not Mary a wife on earth, but Mary—ascended to heaven—who now intercedes for us. But here the Bible was no longer my guide ; the church celebrates the “Assumption of the Virgin,” though the Word of God says nothing about it. What was I to do ? It is my duty, as a good Catholic, to submit to the church ; therefore, without any further doubt, I have adopted the teaching of that Holy Mother, viz., that Mary at the end of her earthly life, (when as we have calculated, she must have been sixty years of age) was raised to heaven, both in body and soul, and placed near her son. This fact being once admitted, how was I to represent Mary on her arrival in Paradise ? Clearly, as it appeared to me, with the same features she had on earth, for she is not dead, and she is gone there with the same body.

I have been guided in regard to the dress of Mary, not by those fanciful pictures which represent her clad in robes of celestial blue, neither have I so arranged her garments as to display her figure and the beauty of her form. I have rather sought to follow the descriptions given us in the Apocalypse of those great multitudes of saints in heaven who are clothed in white robes.

And now, my sister, having thus explained to you my portrait, I hope it will give you satisfaction, for I have fulfilled my promise in now sending you the most faithful resemblance of Mary which has ever been painted.

With much devotion and respect,

I remain, your brother,

JOSEPH DE SAINT PIERRE.

P.S. I send back your Bible, as you will, perhaps, wish to examine for yourself the truth of the passages I have quoted in explanation of my work.

After the lapse of a year, the following letter was sent by the Abbess to the Painter in reply, and this closes the correspondence.

St. Mary's Abbey,  
Feb. 10th, 1567.

Dear Brother in our Lord and  
Saviour Jesus Christ,

It is with most pure and heartfelt pleasure that I now address you. You have, indeed rendered me the greatest possible service, and a sense of justice would, of itself, urge my endeavours to return the same to you. You imagined that you had sent me only an inanimate portrait, but you have



in truth, given me a living soul; you thought to make known to me a Mediatrix with Jesus, but you have revealed to me a Saviour God! This, however, requires explanation, therefore I will begin from the beginning.

When I received the picture and your letter, my first thought was for the picture; but the first sight of it positively shocked me! Then I read your letter, and though unwilling to be convinced, yet I could not but acknowledge the truth of your arguments. At last, I hung up that *blessed* portrait in my cell; yet I must call it *blessed*, and as I proceed to write, you will learn how much cause I have for doing so.

The longer I looked at those attenuated features, and at that aged figure, the more was I disenchanted, and the weaker became my veneration for Mary. I was angry with myself, "for after all," I mentally exclaimed, "she is still the same being; and though she is neither young nor beautiful, yet Mary is not the less all-powerful with God." In vain did I, over and over again, repeat these arguments, for still I felt that my love for my patroness was daily growing weaker, and almost imperceptibly passing away, so that, at last, I could no longer conceal from myself that, hitherto, I had more loved the youthful beauty of the Virgin's face, her fair and graceful figure, than her moral attributes, and her intercession with Jesus Christ. Having once made this admission, my earnest wish was to know more of *that* Mary, whom I still greatly respected, but to whom I could hardly address my prayers; and then it was that I opened the Bible which you had sent me. As I read the inspired page—as when I looked at the portrait—all my former ideas seemed to vanish away, and the

young, the gentle, and the beautiful Virgin, the Mediatrix between God the Saviour and mankind! in a word, the *queen of heaven* was changed into the humble follower of the Lord, blessed because she had been graciously accepted; but who, so far from being able to save others, had herself need of salvation. The following passage in the Gospel most forcibly arrested my attention, "And Mary said, my soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour." (Luke i. 46, 47.)

If, then, God was *her Saviour*, I reflected, even Mary must have been a fallible creature; she could not have been without sin. The Gospel continues thus: "For He has regarded the low estate of His handmaiden." (ver. 48) Observe, Mary here speaks of her low estate, and she adds, "All generations shall call me blessed, for He that is mighty hath done to me great things." (verses 48 and 49.)

Thus, then, Mary has been exalted by God and not by herself! Attend also to that which had been said to her by the angel Gabriel. "Fear not, Mary, for thou has found favour with God." (Luke i. 30). We all know that it is to sinners that "*favour*" is granted; for instance, it would have been a mockery to have declared that Jesus Christ had found favour with God, because Jesus Christ was without sin! Do not, however, suppose that I rejoiced so greatly because I had discovered that Mary was only a happy and blessed woman, like all those who are highly-favoured by God, and saved. Not so, but because, from the moment the idol was displaced from her throne in my heart, it became ready to receive Him who alone ought ever to have filled it. Yes! in searching the Scriptures, that I might know more of Mary, I have learned better to appreciate

Jesus Christ, my only, my well-beloved Saviour! and I have found in Him, not what I formerly sought for in Mary,—a carnal human form,—but a soul, a heart, a love, which nothing here below can worthily portray or express. Oh! my dear brother, when I had thus learned to know Jesus, my Saviour, who came down from heaven to dwell on earth; when I had followed Him step by step, healing the sick, visiting the poor, from whom He could receive nothing in return; reproving the great, even at the risk of displeasing them; above all, when I had listened to the words of the Saviour, saying to me, “Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Matt. xi. 28.) “Whosoever believeth in me shall never die.” (John xi. 26.) “I give my life for my sheep.” (John x. 15.) And, then, after having listened to these blessed words, when I had looked on my Redeemer, stretched on the cross, to expiate my sins, and had heard Him exclaim with His dying breath, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Luke xxiii. 34.) Oh! then did I feel my heart burn within me; I was overcome with emotion, tears flowed from my eyes; and I cried “My Saviour and my God, then am I indeed saved!”

From that moment every thing appeared to me in a new light. The same Christian truths which I had believed myself to possess, but which, till now, I had seen only as the form of a beautiful image, seemed now suddenly to arise before me, endowed with life and animation. The Holy Scriptures, Christ, Heaven, even God Himself, had now become realities for me. I felt as if God’s Holy Spirit had vouchsafed to teach me His holy word, and made easy to me those good things which formerly ap-

peared so difficult ; giving me a distaste for those evil things which once I had found so sweet. In fact, I felt transported into a new world, with new ideas and new sentiments ; and this new world was revealed to me from the day that I truly felt and believed that I was freely saved by the merits alone of Christ Jesus my Saviour !

And you too, my brother, will you not pursue to its termination, the path on which you have entered : and, having assigned to the Virgin Mary her proper place, will you not accord also to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, that which belongs to Him alone ? Oh ! believe me, there only are true peace and true joy to be found. Receive this Bible, not the same which you gave me, for *that* I must keep, but accept the one I now send you. Read it every day with prayer, imploring the aid of God's Holy Spirit, and be assured you will learn to know a far better Mediator than the Virgin Mary, even our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ !