Portrait of a Philosopher

Dorothy Canfield

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Chapter 1

THE news of Professor Gridley's death filled Middletown College with consternation. Its one claim to distinction was gone, for in spite of the excessive quiet of his private life, he had always cast about the obscure little college the shimmering aura of greatness. There had been no fondness possible for the austere old thinker, but Middletown village, as well as the college, had been touched by his fidelity to the very moderate attractions of his birthplace. When, as often happened, some famous figure was seen on the streets, people used to say first, "Here to see old Grid, I suppose," and then, "Funny how he sticks here. They say he was offered seven thousand at the University of California." In the absence of any known motive for this steadfastness, the village legend−making instinct had evolved a theory that he did not wish to move away from a state of which his father had been governor, and where the name of Gridley was like a patent of nobility.

And now he was gone, the last of the race. His disappearance caused the usual amount of reminiscent talk among his neighbors. The older people recalled the by−gone scandals connected with his notorious and popular father and intimated with knowing nods that there were plenty of other descendants of the old governor who were not entitled legally to bear the name; but the younger ones, who had known only the severely ascetic life and cold personality of the celebrated scholar, found it difficult to connect him with such a father. In their talk they brought to mind the man himself, his queer shabby clothes, his big stooping frame, his sad black eyes, absent almost to vacancy as though always fixed on high and distant thoughts; and those who had lived near him told laughing stories about the crude and countrified simplicity of his old aunt's housekeeping — it was said that the president of Harvard had been invited to join them once in a Sunday evening meal of crackers and milk — but the general tenor of feeling was, as it had been during his life, of pride in his great fame and in the celebrated people who had come to see him.

This pride warmed into something like affection when, the day after his death, came the tidings that he had bequeathed to his college the Gino Sprague Falleres portrait of himself. Of course, at that time, no one in Middletown had seen the picture, for the philosopher's sudden death had occurred, very dramatically, actually during the last sitting. He had, in fact, had barely one glimpse of it himself, as, according to Falleres's invariable rule, no one, not even the subject of the portrait, had been allowed to examine an unfinished piece of work. But, though Middletown had no first−hand knowledge of the picture, there could be no doubt about the value of the canvas. As soon as it was put on exhibition in London, from every art−critic in the three nations who claimed Falleres for their own, there rose a wail that this masterpiece was to be buried in an unknown college in an obscure village in barbarous America. It was confidently stated that it would be saved from such an unfitting resting−place by strong action on the part of an International Committee of Artists; but Middletown, though startled by its own good fortune, clung with Yankee tenacity to its rights. Raphael Collin, of Paris, commenting on this in the Revue des Deux Mondes, cried out whimsically upon the woes of an art−critic's life, "as if there were not already enough wearisome pilgrimages necessary to remote and uncomfortable places with jaw−breaking names, which must nevertheless be visited for the sake of a single picture!" And a burlesque resolution to carry off the picture by force was adopted at the dinner in London given in honor of Falleres the evening before he set off for America to attend the dedicatory exercises with which Middletown planned to install its new treasure.

For the little rustic college rose to its one great occasion. Bold in their confidence in their dead colleague's fame, the college authorities sent out invitations to all the great ones of the country. Those to whom Gridley was no more than a name on volumes one never read, came because the portrait was by Falleres, and those who had no interest in the world of art came to honor the moralist whose noble clear−thinking had simplified the intimate problems of modern life. There was the usual residuum of those who came because the others did, and, also as usual, they were among the most brilliant figures in the procession which filed along, one October morning, under the old maples of Middletown campus.

It was a notable celebration. A bishop opened the exercises with prayer, a United States senator delivered the eulogy of the dead philosopher, the veil uncovering the portrait was drawn away by the mayor of one of America's largest cities, himself an ardent Gridleyite, and among those who spoke afterward were the presidents

of three great universities. The professor's family was represented but scantily. He had had one brother, who had disappeared many years ago under a black cloud of ill report, and one sister who had married and gone West to live. Her two sons, middle−aged merchants from Ohio, gave the only personal note to the occasion by their somewhat tongue−tied and embarrassed presence, for Gridley's aunt was too aged and infirm to walk with the procession from the Gymnasium, where it formed, to the Library building where the portrait was installed.

After the inevitable photographers had made their records of the memorable gathering the procession began to wind its many−colored way back to the Assembly Hall, where it was to lunch. Every one was feeling relieved that the unveiling had gone off so smoothly, and cheerful at the prospect of food. The undergraduates began lustily to shout their college song, which was caught up by the holiday mood of the older ones. This cheerful tumult gradually died away in the distance, leaving the room of the portrait deserted in an echoing silence. A janitor began to remove the rows of folding chairs. The celebration was over.

Into the empty room there now limped forward a small, shabby old woman with a crutch. "I'm his aunt, that lived with him," she explained apologetically, "and I want to see the picture."

She advanced, peering near−sightedly at the canvas. The janitor continued stacking up chairs until he was stopped by a cry from the new−comer. She was a great deal paler than when she came in. She was staring hard at the portrait and now beckoned him wildly to do the same. "Look at it! Look at it!"

Surprised, he followed the direction of her shaking hand. "Sure, it's Professor Grid to the life!" he said admiringly.

"Look at it! Look at it!" She seemed not to be able to find any other words.

After a prolonged scrutiny he turned to her with a puzzled line between his eyebrows. "Since you've spoken of it, ma'am, I will say that there's a something about the expression of the eyes . . . and mouth, maybe . . . that ain't just the professor. He was more absent−like. It reminds me of somebody else . . . of some face I've seen . . ."

She hung on his answer, her mild, timid old face drawn like a mask of tragedy. "Who? Who?" she prompted him.

For a time he could not remember, staring at the new portrait and scratching his head. Then it came to him suddenly: "Why, sure, I ought to ha' known without thinkin', seeing the other picture as often as every time I've swep' out the president's office. And Professor Grid always looked like him some, anyhow."

The old woman leaned against the wall, her crutch trembling in her hand. Her eyes questioned him mutely.

"Why, ma'am, who but his own father, to be sure . . . the old governor."

Chapter 2

WHILE they had been duly sensible of the lustre reflected upon them by the celebration in honor of their distinguished uncle, Professor Gridley's two nephews could scarcely have said truthfully that they enjoyed the occasion. As one of them did say to the other, the whole show was rather out of their line. Their line was wholesale hardware and, being eager to return to it, it was with a distinct feeling of relief that they waited for the train at the station. They were therefore as much displeased as surprised by the sudden appearance to them of their great−aunt, very haggard, her usual extreme timidity swept away by overmastering emotion. She clutched at the two merchants with a great sob of relief: "Stephen! Eli! Come back to the house," she cried, and before they could stop her was hobbling away. They hurried after her, divided between the fear of losing their train and the hope that some inheritance from their uncle had been found. They were not mercenary men, but they felt a not unnatural disappointment that Professor Gridley had left not a penny, not even to his aunt, his one intimate.

They overtook her, scuttling along like some frightened and wounded little animal. "What's the matter, Aunt Amelia?" they asked shortly. "We've got to catch this train."

She faced them. "You can't go now. You've got to make them take that picture away."

"Away!" Their blankness was stupefaction.

She raged at them, the timid, harmless little thing, like a creature distraught. "Didn't you see it? Didn't you see it?"

Stephen answered: "Well, no, not to have a good square look at it. The man in front of me kept getting in the way."

Eli admitted: "If you mean you don't see anything in it to make all this hurrah about, I'm with you. It don't look half finished. I don't like that slap−dash style."

She was in a frenzy at their denseness. "Who did it look like?" she challenged them.

"Why, like Uncle Grid, of course. Who else?"

"Yes, yes," she cried; "who else? Who else?"

They looked at each other, afraid that she was crazed, and spoke more gently: "Why, I don't know, I'm sure, who else. Like Grandfather Gridley, of course; but then Uncle Grid always did look like his father."

At this she quite definitely put it out of their power to leave her by fainting away.

They carried her home and laid her on her own bed, where one of them stayed to attend her while the other went back to rescue their deserted baggage. As the door closed behind him the old woman came to herself. "Oh, Stephen," she moaned, "I wish it had killed me, the way it did your uncle."

"What is the matter?" asked her great−nephew wonderingly. "What do you think killed him?"

"That awful, awful picture! I know it now as plain as if I'd been there. He hadn't seen it all the time he was sitting for it, though he'd already put in his will that he wanted the college to have it, and when he did see it — " she turned on the merchant with a sudden fury: "How dare you say those are your uncle's eyes!"

He put his hand soothingly on hers. "Now, now, Aunt 'Melia, maybe the expression isn't just right, but the color is fine . . . just that jet−black his were . . . and the artist has got in exact that funny stiff way uncle's hair stood up over his forehead."

The old woman fixed outraged eyes upon him. "Color!" she said. "And hair! Oh Lord, help me!"

She sat up on the bed, clutching her nephew's hand, and began to talk rapidly. When, a half−hour later, the other brother returned, neither of them heard him enter the house. It was only when he called at the foot of the stairs that they both started and Stephen ran down to join him.

"You'll see the president . . . you'll fix it?" the old woman cried after him.

"I'll see, Aunt 'Melia," he answered pacifyingly as he drew his brother out of doors. He looked quite pale and moved, and drew a long breath before he could begin. "Aunt Amelia's been telling me a lot of things I never knew, Eli. It seems that . . . say, did you ever hear that Grandfather Gridley, the governor, was such a bad lot?"

"Why, mother never said much about her father one way or the other, but I always sort of guessed he wasn't all he might have been from her never bringing us on to visit here until after he died. She used to look queer, too, when folks congratulated her on having such a famous man for father. All the big politicians of his day thought a lot of him. He was as smart as chain−lightning!"

"He was a disreputable old scalawag!" cried his other grandson. "Some of the things Aunt Amelia has been telling me make me never want to come back to this part of the country again. Do you know why Uncle Grid lived so poor and scrimped and yet left no money? He'd been taking care of a whole family grandfather had beside ours; and paying back some people grandfather did out of a lot of money on a timber deal fifty years ago; and making it up to a little village in the backwoods that grandfather persuaded to bond itself for a railroad that he knew wouldn't go near it."

The two men stared at each other an instant, reviewing in a new light the life that had just closed. "That's why he never married," said Eli, finally.

"No, that's what I said, but Aunt Amelia just went wild when I did. She said . . . gee!" he passed his hand over his eyes with a gesture of mental confusion. "Ain't it strange what can go on under your eyes and you never know it. Why, she says Uncle Grid was just like his father."

The words were not out of his mouth before the other's face of horror made him aware of his mistake. "No! No! Not that! Heavens, no! I mean . . . made like him . . . wanted to be that kind, specially drink . . ." his tongue, unused to phrasing abstractions, stumbled and tripped in his haste to correct the other's impression. "You know how much Uncle Grid used to look like grandfather . . . the same black hair and broad face and thick red lips and a kind of knob on the end of his nose? Well, it seems he had his father's insides too . . . but his mother's conscience! I guess, from what Aunt Amelia says, that the combination made life about as near Tophet for him . . . ! She's the only one to know anything about it, because she's lived with him always, you know, took him when grandmother died and he was a child. She says when he was younger he was like a man fighting a wild beast . . . he didn't dare let up or rest. Some days he wouldn't stop working at his desk all day long, not even to eat, and then he'd grab up a piece of bread and go off for a long tearing tramp that'd last 'most all night. You know what a tremendous physique all the Gridley men have had. Well, Uncle Grid turned into work all the energy the rest of them spent in deviltry. Aunt Amelia said he'd go on like that day after day for a month, and then he'd bring out one of those essays folks are so crazy about. She said she never could bear to look at his books . . . seemed to her they were written in his blood. She told him so once and he said it was the only thing to do with blood like his."

He was silent, while his listener made a clucking noise of astonishment. "My! My! I'd have said that there never was anybody more different from grandfather than uncle. Why, as he got on in years he didn't even look like him any more."

This reference gave Stephen a start. "Oh, yes, that's what all this came out for. Aunt Amelia is just wild about this portrait. It's just a notion of hers, of course, but after what she told me I could see, easy, how the idea would come to her. It looks this way, she says, as though Uncle Grid inherited his father's physical make−up complete, and spent all his life fighting it . . . and won out! And here's this picture making him look the way he would if he'd been the worst old . . . as if he'd been like the governor. She says she feels as though she was the only one to defend uncle . . . as if it could make any difference to him! I guess the poor old lady is a little touched. Likely it's harder for her, losing uncle, than we realized. She just about worshipped him. Queer business, anyhow, wasn't it? Who'd ha' thought he was like that?"

He had talked his unwonted emotion quite out, and now looked at his brother with his usual matter−of−fact eye. "Did you tell the station agent to hold the trunk?"

The other, who was the younger, looked a little abashed. "Well, no; I found the train was so late I thought maybe we could . . . you know there's that business to−morrow . . .!"

His senior relieved him of embarrassment. "That's a good idea. Sure we can. There's nothing we could do if we stayed. It's just a notion of Aunt 'Melia's, anyhow. I agree with her that it don't look so awfully like Uncle Grid, but, then, oil−portraits are never any good. Give me a photograph!"

"It's out of our line, anyhow," agreed the younger, looking at his watch.

Chapter 3

THE president of Middletown College had been as much relieved as pleased by the success of the rather pretentious celebration he had planned. His annoyance was correspondingly keen at the disturbing appearance in the afternoon reception before the new portrait, of the late professor's aunt, "an entirely insignificant old country woman," he hastily assured M. Falleres after she had been half forced, half persuaded to retire, "whose criticisms were as negligible as her personality."

The tall, Jove−like artist concealed a smile by stroking his great brown beard. When it came to insignificant country people, he told himself, it was hard to draw lines in his present company. He was wondering whether he might not escape by an earlier train.

To the president's remark he answered that no portrait−painter escaped unreasonable relatives of his sitters. "It is an axiom with our guild," he went on, not, perhaps, averse to giving his provincial hosts a new sensation, "that the family is never satisfied, and also that the family has no rights. A sitter is a subject only, like a slice of fish. The only question is how it's done. What difference does it make a century from now, if the likeness is good? It's a work of art or it's nothing." He announced this principle with a regal absence of explanation and turned away; but his thesis was taken up by another guest, a New York art critic.

"By Jove, it's inconceivable, the ignorance of art in America!" he told the little group before the portrait. "You find every one so incurably personal in his point of view . . . always objecting to a masterpiece because the watch−chain isn't the kind usually worn by the dear departed."

Some one else chimed in. "Yes, it's incredible that any one, even an old village granny, should be able to look at that canvas and not be struck speechless by its quality."

The critic was in Middletown to report on the portrait and he now began marshalling his adjectives for that purpose. "I never saw such use of pigment in my life . . . it makes the Whistler 'Carlyle' look like burnt−out ashes . . . the luminous richness of the blacks in the academic gown, the masterly generalization in the treatment of the hair, the placing of those great talons of hands on the canvas carrying out the vigorous lines of the composition, and the unforgetable felicity of those brutally red lips as the one ringing note of color. As for life−likeness, what's the old dame talking about! I never saw such eyes! Not a hint of meretricious emphasis on their lustre and yet they fairly flame."

The conversation spread to a less technical discussion as the group was joined by the professor of rhetoric, an ambitious young man with an insatiable craving for sophistication, who felt himself for once entirely in his element in the crowd of celebrities. "It's incredibly good luck that our little two−for−a−cent college should have so fine a thing," he said knowingly. "I've been wondering how such an old skinflint as Gridley ever got the money loose to have his portrait done by . . ."

A laugh went around the group at the idea. "It was Mackintosh, the sugar king, who put up for it. He's a great Gridleyite, and persuaded him to sit."

"Persuade a man to sit to Falleres!" The rhetoric professor was outraged at the idea.

"Yes, so they say. The professor was dead against it from the first. Falleres himself had to beg him to sit. Falleres said he felt a real inspiration at the sight of the old fellow . . . knew he could make a good thing out of him. He was a good subject!"

The little group turned and stared appraisingly at the portrait hanging so close to them that it seemed another living being in their midst. The rhetoric professor was asked what kind of a man the philosopher had been personally, and answered briskly: "Oh, nobody knew him personally . . . the silent old codger. He was a dry−as−dust, bloodless, secular monk . . ."

He was interrupted by a laugh from the art critic, whose eyes were still on the portrait.

"Excuse me for my cynical mirth," he said, "but I must say he doesn't look it. I was prepared for any characterization but that. He looks like a powerful son of the Renaissance, who might have lived in that one little vacation of the soul after mediaevalism stopped hag−riding us, and before the modern conscience got its claws on us. And you say he was a blue−nosed Puritan!"

The professor of rhetoric looked an uneasy fear that he was being ridiculed. "I only repeated the village notion of him," he said airily. "He may have been anything. All I know is that he was as secretive as a clam, and about as

interesting personally."

"Look at the picture," said the critic, still laughing; "you'll know all about him!"

The professor of rhetoric nodded. "You're right, he doesn't look much like my character of him. I never seem to have had a good, square look at him before. I've heard several people say the same thing, that they seemed to understand him better from the portrait than from his living face. There was something about his eyes that kept you from thinking of anything but what he was saying."

The critic agreed. "The eyes are wonderful . . . ruthless in their power . . . fires of hell." He laughed a deprecating apology for his over−emphatic metaphor and suggested: "It's possible that there was more to the professorial life than met the eye. Had he a wife?"

"No; it was always a joke in the village that he would never look at a woman."

The critic glanced up at the smouldering eyes of the portrait and smiled. "I've heard of that kind of a man before," he said. "Never known to drink, either, I suppose?"

"Cold−water teetotaler," laughed the professor, catching the spirit of the occasion.

"Look at the color in that nose!" said the critic. "I fancy that the ascetic moralist. . . ."

A very young man, an undergraduate who had been introduced as the junior usher, nodded his head. "Yep, a lot of us fellows always thought old Grid a little too good to be true."

An older man with the flexible mouth of a politician now ventured a contribution to a conversation no longer bafflingly aesthetic: "His father, old Governor Gridley, wasn't he . . . Well, I guess you're right about the son. No halos were handed down in that family!"

The laugh which followed this speech was stopped by the approach of Falleres, his commanding presence dwarfing the president beside him. He was listening with a good−natured contempt to the apparently rather anxious murmurs of the latter.

"Of course I know, Mr. Falleres, it is a great deal to ask, but she is so insistent . . . she won't go away and continues to make the most distressing spectacle of herself . . . and several people, since she has said so much about it, are saying that the expression is not that of the late professor. Much against my will I promised to speak to you . . ."

His mortified uneasiness was so great that the artist gave him a rescuing hand. "Well, Mr. President, what can I do in the matter? The man is dead. I cannot paint him over again, and if I could I would only do again as I did this time, choose that aspect which my judgment told me would make the best portrait. If his habitual vacant expression was not so interesting as another not so permanent a habit of his face . . . why, the poor artist must be allowed some choice. I did not know I was to please his grandmother, and not posterity."

"His aunt," corrected the president automatically.

The portrait−painter accepted the correction with his tolerant smile. "His aunt," he repeated. "The difference is considerable. May I ask what it was you promised her?"

The president summoned his courage. It was easy to gather from his infinitely reluctant insistence how painful and compelling had been the scene which forced him to action. "She wants you to change it . . . to make the expression of the . . ."

For the first time the artist's equanimity was shaken. He took a step backward. "Change it!" he said, and although his voice was low the casual chat all over the room stopped short as though a pistol had been fired.

"It's not my idea!" the president confounded himself in self−exoneration. "I merely promised, to pacify her, to ask you if you could not do some little thing that would . . ."

The critic assumed the role of conciliator. "My dear sir, I don't believe you quite understand what you are asking. It's as though you asked a priest to make just a little change in the church service and leave out the Not in the commandments."

"I only wished to know Mr. Falleres's attitude," said the president stiffly, a little nettled by the other's note of condescension. "I presume he will be willing to take the responsibility of it himself and explain to the professor's aunt that I have done . . ."

The artist had recovered from his lapse from Olympian calm and now nodded smiling: "Dear me, yes, Mr. President, I'm used to irate relatives."

The president hastened away and the knots of talkers in other parts of the room, who had been looking with expectant curiosity at the group before the portrait, resumed their loud−toned chatter. When their attention was

next drawn in the same direction, it was by a shaky old treble, breaking and quavering with weakness. A small, shabby old woman, leaning on a crutch, stood looking up imploringly at the tall painter.

"My dear madam," he broke in on her with a kindly impatience, "all that you say about Professor Gridley is much to his credit, but what has it to do with me?"

"You painted his portrait," she said with a simplicity that was like stupidity. "And I am his aunt. You made a picture of a bad man. I know he was a good man."

"I painted what I saw," sighed the artist wearily. He looked furtively at his watch.

The old woman seemed dazed by the extremity of her emotion. She looked about her silently, keeping her eyes averted from the portrait that stood so vividly like a living man beside her. "I don't know what to do!" she murmured with a little moan. "I can't bear it to have it stay here — people forget so. Everybody'll think that Gridley looked like that! And there isn't anybody but me. He never had anybody but me."

The critic tried to clear the air by a roundly declaratory statement of principles. "You'll pardon my bluntness, madam; but you must remember that none but the members of Professor Gridley's family are concerned in the exact details of his appearance. Fifty years from now nobody will remember how he looked, one way or the other. The world is only concerned with portraits as works of art."

She followed his reasoning with a strained and docile attention and now spoke eagerly as though struck by an unexpected hope: "If that's all, why put his name to it? Just hang it up, and call it anything."

She shrank together timidly and her eyes reddened at the laughter which greeted this naive suggestion.

Falleres looked annoyed and called his defender off. "Oh, never mind explaining me," he said, snapping his watch shut. "You'll never get the rights of it through anybody's head who hasn't himself sweat blood over a composition only to be told that the other side of the sitter's profile is usually considered the prettier. After all, we have the last word, since the sitter dies and the portrait lives."

The old woman started and looked at him attentively.

"Yes," said the critic, laughing, "immortality's not a bad balm for pin−pricks."

The old woman turned very pale and for the first time looked again at the portrait. An electric thrill seemed to pass through her as her eyes encountered the bold, evil ones fixed on her. She stood erect with a rigid face, and "Immortality!" she said, under her breath.

Falleres moved away to make his adieux to the president, and the little group of his satellites straggled after him to the other end of the room. For a moment there was no one near the old woman to see the crutch furiously upraised, hammer−like, or to stop her sudden passionate rush upon the picture.

At the sound of cracking cloth, they turned back, horrified. They saw her, with an insane violence, thrust her hands into the gaping hole that had been the portrait's face and, tearing the canvas from end to end, fall upon the shreds with teeth and talon.

All but Falleres flung themselves toward her, dragging her away. With a movement as instinctive he rushed for the picture, and it was to him, as he stood aghast before the ruined canvas, that the old woman's shrill treble was directed, above the loud shocked voices of those about her: "There ain't anything immortal but souls!" she cried.