

THE SCULPTOR OF BRUGES.

Dinah Maria Craik

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Table of Contents

<u>THE SCULPTOR OF BRUGES</u>	1
<u>Dinah Maria Craik</u>	2

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ABOUT the middle of the sixteenth century, there was not an artist in the Netherlands whose fame had spread wider than that of Messer Andrea, the sculptor of Bruges. His father had come from Italy, and settled in Flanders, where he lived and struggled, an ardent and enthusiastic man, whose genius cast just sufficient light to show him his own defects. This love of the beautiful was the sole inheritance he left his son. But Andrea's northern birth and education had, to a certain degree, qualified his Italian descent, so that to his father's impulsive nature he added a steady perseverance, without which all the genius in the world is but as a meteor of a moment.

The branch of design that Andrea followed was wood-carving, in which, by his wonderful skill, he surpassed all his contemporaries. In our day, it is impossible, from the few relics that remain, to know the perfection to which our ancestors of the middle ages carried this art; which attained even to the dignity of sculpture, when Gothic saints and Madonnas looked down from their niches in cathedrals: though the names of the unknown artists who carved these lovely heads and graceful draperies were forgotten, even before the frail material in which they worked had lost its first freshness.

The sculptor of Bruges was one of these now-forgotten artists; and yet an artist he was, in the highest sense of the word. He lived and moved among beautiful forms; they influenced his character and refined his mind, yet did not make him unfit for association with the world. Riches and honour came with his fame, until he stood high in the regard of his fellow-citizens; and the son of the poor Italian student was at last deemed worthy to wed one who had long been the object of an almost hopeless love, a daughter of one of the highest families in Bruges. This union could not but be a happy one; and Andrea and his wife slowly advanced towards middle age, feeling that their present bliss had not belied the promise of their youth. Still, there were a few bitter drops in their cup: the husband and wife saw several of their children drop off one by one, until all that remained were two boys and a daughter—the lovely little Gertrude, who was her father's darling. Nevertheless, these three were sufficient to make the sculptor's home cheerful, and the lost brothers and sisters were hardly missed.

At the time when our story begins, Andrea had finished his latest work;—a group of angels, carved in wood, to adorn the church of Bruges. The burghers crowded to gaze upon and admire the work of their fellow citizen, of whom they were so justly proud. It was indeed a fine specimen of the ancient Gothic carving, such as one meets with sometimes even now in old churches, where the hand of innovation has not reached. Three angels formed the group, one kneeling with up-raised eyes and folded hands, while the other's extended arms were lifted upwards in rapturous adoration; and the third, looking down on the worshippers below, pointed towards heaven. It won universal praise. The artist stood apart, in pleasure not unmingled with honest pride, when many a hand shook his own in friendly congratulation, and many an eye, made humbler by rank and distance, looked at him admiringly.

In all the pleased assembly there was but one dissentient voice, and that was from a brother artist and rival of Andrea. Melchior Kunst was one of those dark and unquiet spirits who seem to cast a shadow wherever they go. He was a man of great talent, yet no one loved him. They could hardly tell why—yet so it was. Even now, all instinctively made way for him, and Melchior strode on until he stood opposite the group. He folded his arms, and looked at it fixedly from under his dark brows. Then he addressed the artist, who stood at a little distance.

"Doubtless you think this very fine, Messer Andrea?"

"It is not what **I** think of it, but the judgment which the world puts on my work, that is of consequence," answered Andrea calmly.

"The composition is well imitated, certainly."

"Imitated? it is my own."

"Indeed!" said Melchior, with a quiet sneer sitting on his lips—the handsomest feature of his very handsome

THE SCULPTOR OF BRUGES.

face. "Indeed! And so you never go into another's studio, and copy figures, attitude, and design, as you have here copied from me?"

"It is not true," said Andrea, with difficulty restraining his passion.

"I tell you it is," cried his opponent. "Look, gentlemen! brother artists, look! this group is mine—my own design; and here I execute my will upon what is my own!" He drew a hatchet from under his cloak, and before the wonder-stricken spectators could interfere, he severed one of the upraised hands of the nearest figure.

Andrea was stung to the quick by this mutilation of his work; all his Italian blood was roused within him: he rushed upon Kunst with the fury of a tiger at bay. Those around interfered, but it was needless; for Andrea's well-constituted mind had already got the better of his momentary rage, and he stood, pale, but self-possessed, gazing alternately at his adversary and at his own despoiled work.

"Melchior Kunst," said he at last, "you think you have done me a great injury; and so you have, but not an irreparable one. I will not revenge myself now, but you will be repaid some time."

A loud laugh from Kunst made the sculptor once more clench his hands, while the bright red mounted to his brow; but he said no more, and after Melchior's departure he too left the hall with some friends, who were stricken dumb by this untoward quarrel.

It was late in the evening when Andrea returned towards his own home. He walked slowly along by the side of the dark and gloomy canal, which the setting light of the young moon only made more solemn and fearful. Thick ivy-hung walls, even in the daytime, cast a heavy shadow on the water; and now it looked like some dark abyss, which no man could fathom. Here and there some pale solitary ray of moonlight pierced through the branches of the acacias that overhung the opposite side, seeming like a bright arrow flashing through the darkness.

Andrea's heart was very heavy. His triumph had ended in pain: disappointment not only at the injury done to his work, but at the unjust accusation of Melchior Kunst. Andrea knew how ready are the suspicions of the world when once aroused; and he fancied that already cold and doubtful eyes examined his group with less favour than heretofore. And besides, the sudden ebullition of anger to which he had been goaded left an exhaustion, both bodily and mental; as is usually the case with men of Andrea's gentle and not easily-roused temperament.

The sculptor walked on quickly amidst the gathering darkness, for the moon had now set. He fancied now and then that he heard stealthy footsteps at a distance behind him; and perhaps this made him unconsciously urge his pace. Andrea was no coward, but it was a lonely place by the water-side, and he was un-armed. Still, as the footsteps approached no nearer, he reproached himself for yielding to the delusion of an imagination heated by the events of the day. All at once he heard distinctly a plunge in the water of some heavy body. His first idea was, that some unfortunate had thus ended his life and his miseries; but the sound was so distant, that he was uncertain. He retraced his steps; but there was nothing to justify his previous thought. The canal flowed on, silent and dark as before: not a struggle, not a groan, not a cry rose up from its gloomy depths. It could have been only a heavy stone, which had fallen from the old dilapidated wall into the waters beneath. Andrea felt sure of this, and went on his way until he reached his home—a home where, since he left, danger and anxiety had entered.

Three days after this, two armed officers of justice made their appearance in the dwelling of the sculptor of Bruges. They came to take prisoner the master of the house, accused of the crime of murder! From the day of the contest in the hall, Melchior Kunst had never been seen, until that morning, when his lifeless body had floated up from the bed of the canal into the very market-place. Then one of the horror-stricken bystanders remembered that on the same night of their quarrel Messer Andrea had been seen to pass by the way that led along the canal, and that not long after Melchior Kunst also followed. Another man, who lived near, had heard a plunge in the water, but thought it was only his own dog, who often at night swam across the canal. A third also had met lesser Andrea beside the canal, but had seen no other person. This was sufficient evidence to convict the unfortunate artist.

The officers found their prisoner alone. He was sitting with his head buried in his hands, and hardly moved at their entrance. One of them laid his hand on the sculptor's shoulder, and claimed him as a prisoner.

Andrea looked up with a face so listless, so vacant, so deadly pale, that the officer started, and unconsciously let go his hold.

"A prisoner!" said Andrea, without making an effort to move. "What have I done? Who accuses me?"

The officer was a man of kindly nature, who had known Messer Andrea in former times. He gently and respectfully explained his errand; but had to repeat it several times before Andrea comprehended them. It seemed

THE SCULPTOR OF BRUGES.

that some heavy cloud darkened his faculties. At last he understood the whole.

"So they accuse me of being a murderer—an assassin?" said he, rising, while a shiver ran through his frame. Then, addressing the first officer, "You were a good man once—follow me!" The other hesitated. "You need not fear," continued Andrea; "I am unarmed—I have no thought of escaping from justice."

The man followed his prisoner until they came to a darkened room: it was the chamber of death. On the bed lay the pale and shrouded form of a woman. Very beautiful she must have been, and her beauty had scarcely passed its maturity. No long illness had taken away the roundness of health from her face, so that even in death she looked lovely as a marble statue. The long, dark lashes rested on her cheek, and a few locks of jet black hair, escaping from the fillet that bound her head, gave a life-like air to her repose. By her side lay an infant—a flower of an hour—whose little soul had come into it at sunrise, and departed at sunset. They were the wife and child of Andrea.

The sculptor pointed to the dead. "Look there," he said, "and say if I am likely to have revenged any trifling insult—if I am likely to have been a murderer!" His voice grew hoarse; he stretched his arms towards the body of his wife, and then fell to the earth in strong convulsions.

During nearly the whole time that elapsed between his apprehension and trial, Andrea was dead to the consciousness of his misery. A low fever enfeebled all his senses, and reduced his outward form to the appearance of an old man. His friends—for he had still many—took both his sons to their charge. It was well that they did, for the father seemed to have lost all remembrance even of their existence. When they visited him, he took not the least notice of them; so the children were at last wisely sent far away from the scene of disgrace and suffering. But with Gertrude the father would not part. She was a fair little creature, the image of her mother in feature and expression, but her complexion resembled her father. Her eyes were of that deep brown-gray which is seldom seen beyond childhood—so dark, that a careless observer would call them black. Gertrude's hair was of that colour which the old masters often gave to heads of Christ and of the Virgin—which the uninitiated might call red, but which painters know to be the most beautiful of all tints. It gave to sweet Gertrude the appearance of an angel.

The first evidence that Andrea showed of returning consciousness, was in recognising his little daughter, and calling her by her name. It was her mother's also; and perhaps that, aided by the strong resemblance, was a comfort to the widowed father. He began to talk coherently, first with Gertrude and then with others who came to see him; and by degrees his mind and body gathered strength, so that he was able to think of his defence against the terrible crime laid to his charge. This was a momentous thing, for the proofs were all against him, and Andrea could bring no evidence in his own favour, save his own explanation of what had happened on his way homewards on that fatal day, and the irreproachable character he had borne all his life.

At last the sculptor of Bruges was brought from prison to the judgment-hall. He seemed to himself like one risen from the grave, and so he likewise appeared to those about him. Andrea had been a strong, powerful, noble-looking man, but now all his flesh had shrunk away, and his height only made him appear more shadowy. Dark circles were round his eyes, and his face bore an unvaried sallow hue. Nevertheless, his mien was firm and composed; no one could look at him, and for a moment doubt his innocence. Andrea's little daughter stood by his side; one might have likened her to a flower growing close beside a tomb. Gertrude had become accustomed to the change in her father's looks, and the shocked and anxious gaze of all around struck her with alarm. She crept closer to him, never taking her eyes from his face.

The trial proceeded. All was against Andrea: even the words he had uttered before Melchior left the hall, were brought in judgment against him: they had sounded like a threat. None who had known Andrea doubted in their own hearts that he was a guiltless man, but the circumstantial evidence was too strong to be legally contradicted. The accused was found guilty; and Andrea—the gentle, upright man, who had never lifted a hand against a fellow-creature, save in that one evil hour when he was driven to passion by Melchior Kunst—was removed from the hall of justice with the stain of murder on his name.

The execution of the sentence was deferred for a short space, for the sake of the hitherto unsullied character of the criminal. In those days the hand of law was often tampered with, and never was it with greater show of justice than in this instance. Andrea's many friends interposed on his behalf. They succeeded in obtaining only a suspension of the sentence for a few months, that some chance might elicit the truth which so many doubted. But in the interim the sculptor was ordered to execute some work of art to adorn the Palais de Justice at Bruges, where

THE SCULPTOR OF BRUGES.

he had been tried. For this purpose he was brought from his cell, and confined in the hall which had witnessed his trial.

It was a large, gloomy-looking chamber, so dimly lighted from without, that even at mid-day the dark shadows in the corners of the room looked like night. An immense hearth, on which lay a few faggots, was the only cheerful object, but even that light and warmth did not reach beyond the immediate vicinity of the fire. There was no furniture in the room, save one small table in the centre, a bench, and a straw couch in the gloomiest corner. It was a place in which one would instinctively shrink from looking behind, and where one's own footsteps would sound hollow and full of dread, as if something fearful were following after. Andrea and his daughter heard the heavy door close, and they were alone in the hall. The little girl led her father to the bench beside the hearth, and then sat down at his feet, holding his hands fast in hers. She dared not look anywhere but at the bright fire and at her father's face; even the shadows that the flames cast on the ceiling made her start sometimes. Gertrude had been accustomed to a prison, for she had never left her father, except when taken home at night, to return next morning—but this place seemed gloomier still than the dungeon.

Andrea had no hope. His life had been free from any very heavy sorrows, and the first that came, so fearful as they were, quite overwhelmed him. His sole desire now was to employ the short remnant of his life in executing some memorial of his talents to leave behind him, that when time had removed the shadow from his fame, his children might have no reason to blush for their father. He returned again to his long-cherished occupation. For a while this gave him sensations almost amounting to pleasure. His step became lighter, and his countenance lost somewhat of its settled melancholy. He almost forgot his sorrows, his blighted name, his impending doom, in the exercise of his beloved art. He would cease from his work, look at the beautiful figure which had risen to life under his hand, and murmur to himself, "What man will say that the hand of an assassin has done this?—that the brain which conceived this dream of beauty could plan a murder?"

And by degrees the influence of his art in some measure soothed the mind of the sorrow-stricken man. His desolate prison became cheerful with the graceful forms which it contained, and Gertrude moved among the whole like a beautiful spirit. If ever the sculptor clung to hope and life, it was when he looked at his darling child, and at the more imperishable offspring of his genius.

At last Andrea's work drew nigh to a close: the wood-sculpture was finished. Then it was that the enthusiasm which had sustained him faded away, and the artist's soul sank within him. He gave the last touches to his beautiful work—he knew he could do no more—and then went and sat down in a stupor of grief and despair. Gertrude clung round him, but he did not speak to her or embrace her.

"Father, dear father, are you weary? You are not angry with your little girl?" and the child stood on tiptoe, trying to remove the hands which covered his face.

Andrea seemed hardly conscious of her presence. He did not move, but kept repeating every now and then in a low tone, "I have done my work—I have no hope—now let me die."

The terrified child, who had all along been kept in ignorance of her father's doom, began to weep, but her tears were unregarded. An hour after the magistrates of Bruges entered. They came to view the finished work of the artist. High as Andrea's reputation had been, they did not expect so beautiful a group as that which now met their eyes. Its subject was "eternal justice"—not the woman with bound eyes and balanced scales—but an open-eyed angel, all-beholding, and equally requiting all. They looked upon it in silence, and then turned to the artist, who, wan and haggard, stood behind his judges. One of them, an old man, was melted even to tears. Forgetting the dignity of office, the magistrate took hold of the criminal's hand and led him to a seat.

"You must not stand, Messer Andrea; you are not yet strong," said he compassionately. "Sit and rest, while we examine your beautiful work."

The sculptor obeyed without a word: he was passive as a child. Little Gertrude, who had shrunk away at the sight of strangers, came and stood silently behind her father, taking fast hold of his garments. The two magistrates inspected the sculpture, and could not restrain their admiration. The eye of the unfortunate artist brightened for a moment at their warm praise, but immediately his face returned to its accustomed melancholy.

"It is all in vain," he answered; "you cannot make men forget the past—you cannot remove the blot from the name of my children—you cannot give to their father his forfeit life."

The magistrates looked at one another, and the elder one spoke.

"There is hope still, Messer Andrea; have you courage to hear it?"

THE SCULPTOR OF BRUGES.

The artist started up. "Tell me only that I am proved innocent, and I will thank God and die."

"We do not promise quite so much," said one of the judges, wishing to temper Andrea's violent excitement.

"Yet take heart! Many strange things have been discovered to-day," continued the aged man whose kindness had first moved Andrea. "Be calm now; ere long we may send you good news: nay," and the good man could no longer hide his hopeful tidings, "it is not impossible that you may be free to-morrow."

The magistrates departed, leaving the poor prisoner with a wildly-throbbing heart, which he vainly endeavoured to still. All that day he sat with Gertrude in his arms, kissing her, fondling her, at times almost weeping over her. To all the questions of the wondering child he only answered, "To-morrow, love: we may be free to-morrow."

And when the attendants came to remove Gertrude for the night, he unclasped her arms from round his neck, with the promise that he too would go away with her to-morrow.

"Go away to-morrow?" cried the happy child. "Will you, too, leave this gloomy place to-morrow, and return no more?"

"God forbid I should return! No, my child, never more," answered the father, with a shudder.

"And shall we go out together—shall we go to our own home?" pursued Gertrude.

"Yes, dear child," said Andrea, as he kissed her once more, and set her on the ground from his arms, that were too weak for even so light a burden. "Yes, my Gertrude, I shall indeed go home to-morrow."

He had spoken truth.

Soon after daybreak next morning some officers entered the hall, bearing a release for the prisoner. A stranger—an Italian woman—who had once passed through Bruges, and lately returned thither, deposed to having received a letter from Melchior Kunst, dated on the fatal day, stating his determined intention of self-murder at the time and place where he was discovered to have met his end.

Further than this was never known. Andrea was innocent! His fellow-citizens rejoiced as one man—for Messer Andrea was proved innocent.

They found him in the prison, leaning on the table, his head resting on his arms, and his upturned face raised towards his beautiful work. But as they drew nearer, they saw that his countenance was meaningless, and that no life shone in his fixed and open eyes. The sculptor of Bruges was dead—his heart had broken with joy.