

My Teacher's Story

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IT was one Friday afternoon in the month of January about nine or ten years ago. School was already over, but I was told by Mrs. Reyes, my teacher, to stay. I had always been very good in school except on the morning of that day, when in company with some playmates I played truant. I was in the seventh grade then.

"I want you to stay, Pepe," Mrs. Reyes said to me, as I was about to join the line with my classmates at dismissal. "I want to talk to you." That was the first time in my life as a pupil that I was kept after class. I cannot now describe exactly how I felt at that moment. I was expecting a good scolding.

When Mrs. Reyes came back into the room, I was sitting on one of the back seats near the door. Her face was not at all angry, yet it was not what may be called



pleasant. I was very much worried, and, in fact, I was beginning to feel really sorry for my misconduct. She motioned to me to approach. "Come and sit right here," she said softly, pointing to a desk in front of her table. I obeyed.

Mrs. Reyes had always been very kind to me. Once when I was a monitor, I heard her remark that I looked very much like her dead boy.

As soon as I was seated, she handed me her copy of the Philippine Readers, opened at the page on which was printed a picture of our Lord sitting at a table with His chosen band.

"Do you remember that picture?" Mrs. Reyes asked. That was the same picture

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we studied with her sometime before.

"Yes, Mrs. Reyes," I answered. "It is 'The Last Supper' by . . ."

"Da Vinci. Leonardó da Vinci," she finished. Then she went on: "I shall tell you a story about that picture, different from what you have read in that book. Would you like to hear it?"

I could breathe freely then. After all it would not be a scolding but a story, only a story.

"Yes, Mrs. Reyes," I answered. "It is very kind of you."

She was looking at me straight in the eye as I spoke, but her look was not harsh. I dropped my eyes on the book before me. How could I dare raise them?

"Very well," she said quietly. I closed the book to show her that I was ready to listen. But I tried to avoid her look.

"It took Leonardo da Vinci many, many years to finish that picture, I mean the original of it," she began. (I could imagine that she was still looking at me.) "He wanted it to be the best of all his works. He wanted it to be a faithful picture of that great event in the life of our Saviour. He therefore not only read books which would give him knowledge about his work but also very carefully chose his models. After many years of patient labor, Leonardo found his work almost completed except for the two most important figures in the group: our Lord and the traitor, Judas. He could find no one whose character and appearance were such as to entitle him to sit up as a model for the Christ, of the picture. At last, however, he discovered in a very religious and at the same time handsome young man the model he had been looking for. This young man possessed not only a beautiful face such as Leonard, believed our Lord's must have been, but also a beautiful, a very beautiful character. And so finally, there was only one more figure wanting."

Mrs. Reyes paused. Unconsciously I raised my eyes to her. No, she was not looking at me now but at something like a picture under the thick glass on her table. It was now my turn to fix my gaze on her. For the first time in my life I felt within me a secret wish that she were my own mother! My mother died before I could remember anything, and my dead father used to tell me that she was very fond of me.

After a while Mrs. Reyes continued, still looking down on the glass in front of her: "Leonardo found it just as difficult to look for a Judas as it had been to look for a Christ for his great work. So he had to wait for some more years.

"One early morning, as Leonardo was taking a walk, he saw two soldiers conducting a prisoner across the street. As he followed them with his eyes, his heart leaped with joy. Surely, he thought, he had never seen such a frightful-looking face before. 'At last, my Judas!' he exclaimed. Because he was court painter, he was able to obtain the king's permission to have the prisoner for a few days.

"Painters, it is said, have what is called a 'feel' in their hands. As Leonardo worked on the face of his Judas on the canvas, something within him seemed to tell him that that face was not at all new to him. At last when he could no longer control himself, he put down his brush and exclaimed, 'Tell me, my man! Somewhere, sometime, I have drawn that face before!' The man who had been looking very pale all that time burst into tears, crying, 'Yes, master! Years ago, I was your Christ!'" Mrs. Reyes paused here for a few seconds, then quietly added, "That is all, Pepe," looking straight into my eyes again.

I did not avoid her look this time. My whole attention was in the story. I only said; "But you did not tell how the man became as bad as that, Mrs. Reyes, after he had been so good before."

And she simply answered, "Look here, Pepe. Do you remember the story of the good and the bad mangoes? Yes? Well, then, that's how. You, too, may become like him, yes, perhaps even worse. That is why I am warning you before it is too late. Pepe, I am very sorry for you."

I seem to hear still that soft, motherly voice of hers even now as I write these words. And God knows that it will be long before I can ever forget it.

