

The Likenesses of Jesus Christ.

HOW FAR THEY ARE AUTHENTIC.

BY ALEXANDER CARGILL.



WERE it possible to imagine the non-existence of every scrap of Holy Writ—of everything, in fact, in the broad domain of literature appertaining to the subject of the life, character, and personality of Jesus Christ while He dwelt among the sons of men some nineteen centuries ago, there would nevertheless remain in the realm of art more than ample material from which the purport and significance of His mission to mankind could be fully and freely understood.

For, since the dawn of the Christian Era, no theme has commanded such universal regard and reverence, or evoked such extraordinary enthusiasm and interest in the great world of art as that of Our Lord's life and death, with their all-momentous sequel. The subject has, indeed, ever had the strongest fascination for the highest artistic genius of man in almost every civilized country under the sun. The greatest painters and sculptors the world has ever known — Raphael and Rubens, Michael Angelo and Guido, for example — were unquestionably those who derived their noblest inspiration from it, and who, by its intense suggestiveness, were enabled to accomplish their proudest achieve-

ments. So very evident is this fact that, of itself, it would appear to bear testimony, were such needed, to the marvellous significance with which the subject is invested, showing how it has, not only in art, but also in literature, in its many forms, through all the centuries that have elapsed since Jesus Christ lived in the flesh, engrossed the highest intellects that have been born to bless mankind. The chief end and aim of art in this lofty sphere has, however, been directed towards Christ Himself and His likeness.

To depict the lineaments of Him as He appeared in the more enthralling acts in that great drama of which He was the central figure for fully thirty-three years — this has been the highest ambition of innumerable artists for these many centuries. And now, looking back on the work of some of the more illustrious of those artists, in this special department, which, by the events of that drama, acquired newer and vaster limits than it had prior to the time of Christ, what do we find? We

find that all through its history, art has been true to the exalted character and mission of Jesus Christ, and has invariably striven to express its conceptions of both in a spirit so far, humanly speaking, commensurate with their supreme dignity and splendour.



NO. 1.—SKETCH OF OUR LORD—ATTRIBUTED TO ST. PETER.

If, in the sphere of literature, fresh versions of the life of Our Lord and new studies of His character are ever and again given to the world with the more or less manifest design of founding some new theory *against* that character, especially in regard to its claim to a Divine origin and authority, it is rare indeed to find throughout the entire domain of art any attempt to depart from a certain originally conceived type or representation of His likeness. In a word, while notable writers like Renan, Strauss, Seely, and others have endeavoured, each after his own method, to deny to Christ those special attributes which it has ever been the aim of the greatest exponents of art to vindicate and set forth with their utmost ingenuity and pictorial skill, no disparager worthy of the name has yet arisen in the ranks of the world's great artists to attempt anything like a travesty of His life and character, or even to depict these *minus* their Divine aspect.

It is true that in the early ages of the Christian Church what might be called caricatures of the image or likeness of its Founder were by no means unknown. For example, His effigy, generally represented by an admixture of some gross Pagan fancy and grotesque *anti*-Christian symbol, is said to have been largely in circulation about the year 60 or 70 A. D. But these and such-like mock-portraits of Our Lord do not in the least discount the interest of the fact that, though there have been many disbelievers in, and detractors of, Him in almost every age that has elapsed since the time when He Himself was a "human inhabitant," the noblest efforts of art have, amid all its vicissitudes, ever found in Christ and His transcendent career themes for the very highest reaches of attainment.

Of course, as a set-off against this, it might perhaps be argued that, since it is not within the province of art to be otherwise than true to Nature, there is nothing so very extra-

ordinary after all in the fact that no artist should have ever attempted a pictorial heterodoxy or untruth in depicting a likeness of Jesus Christ. But we have only to ponder for a moment on the many vicissitudes in the history of art, especially during the early centuries of the Christian Era, and to reflect how, often contemporary with those vicissitudes, the Christian Church itself suffered grave eclipse, and the name of Jesus Christ was covered with the blackest obloquy, to marvel at the manner in which His likeness has all through been preserved, as it were,

inviolate and kept true to the originally conceived type.

In this respect, at all events, the likeness of Our Lord is the most remarkable likeness of any being that has ever been created to be treasured and revered, if not worshipped.

And yet, after all, what is to be said with regard to the *genuineness* of such a likeness? Was there, it will be asked, ever a *real likeness* of Jesus Christ, taken from the life? It is to be feared that the latter question must be answered by a reluctant negative. But that the countenance of Christ, as usually conceived, is by no means wholly imaginary, is highly probable—*how* probable it is the object of this article to demonstrate.

It has been estimated that there are in existence at the present time something like 3,000 different examples of the likeness of Christ, all more or less worthy of mention. The number of those done by the "master hands" of genius does not, however, exceed 150 or thereby. A full list of these would



NO. 2.—THE ST. VERONICA IMAGE.



NO. 3.—ANCIENT HEBREW MEDAL—SHOWING PROFILE LIKENESS OF CHRIST (ABOUT THE FIRST CENTURY).



NO. 4.—LEGENDARY LIKENESS OF CHRIST—ATTRIBUTED TO ST. LUKE.

be of great interest, but we can only refer to a few of the best-known examples. Is it not a most extraordinary fact that those 3,000 individual likenesses are all, without exception, simply and absolutely *ideal* likenesses? Yet such is the fact; for, as regarded by us to-day, Our Lord's likeness must be considered as almost entirely the result of an evolution of a traditional idea or conception of Him.

Having departed from the eyes of men without leaving any authentic portrait of Himself behind as a memento or token, symbols of His beneficent life and work, and, also, of His tragic death, were by-and-by devised by His followers in remembrance of what He said and taught and performed. These, however, were secretly circulated for some considerable time after His death; for it must be remembered that to be identified with one who had been put to death as a notorious malefactor was to be exposed to persecution of the most fearful kind: hence the very significant silence on the part of the early Christians on the subject of Our Lord's likeness: hence, also, their symbolizing of the more vital incidents in His public career—Our Lord Himself being generally the central figure—by means of fresco and mosaic work, and of glass, metal, linen, and enamel pictures and ornaments, which were the popular vehicles of illustration then in vogue.

But surely, it will be asked, there must have been some original ideal-likeness of Jesus

Christ from which these symbols or representations of Himself were modelled? To whom, then, is due the inception of that original likeness? Tradition has duly assigned that honour to St. Peter, who, as a close and intimate friend and Apostle, had, it may be assumed, the best opportunity for recording *his* version of His Master's likeness. Be that as it may, St. Peter's sketch—a rough outline of the head of Christ, with the features but dimly drawn on a morsel of linen-cloth—is still extant, one of the most priceless treasures in the Basilica of St. Prasside, Rome, and is excluded from the public gaze. A facsimile of a drawing of it, executed by the late Thomas Heaphy, and now in the British Museum, is shown in illustration No. 1.

The legend states that this picture was executed by the Apostle Peter at the request of a daughter of Pudens. Pudens was a Roman senator and a Christian. There would seem to be little doubt that the house of Pudens was the resort of the more distinguished amongst the Christian converts. Paul writing to Timothy says, "Pudens greeteth thee." To quote from the legend, the daughters of Pudens—St. Prasside and St. Pudenziana—one evening asked the Apostle St. Peter to show them what the Lord was like, whereupon he took the handkerchief of



NO. 5.—LEGENDARY LIKENESS OF CHRIST.
(Original in San Silvestre, Rome.)
Supposed by an unknown Contemporary Artist.

one of the ladies and drew upon it with ink and a stylus. The sketch from which the accompanying copy was taken—it is now so faded as to be scarcely discernible—whatever might have been the origin of the work, was considered to be old in the year A.D. 320, when the Empress Helena took measures for its preservation; it is executed in the same kind of cloth as the so-called St. Veronica's handkerchief, and is surrounded by an elaborate setting of silver and enamel.

Everything, of course, depends on the fidelity to truth of the sketch by the Apostle: but there is little doubt of the fact that his faint, shadowy outline of the sad features of Christ has formed the groundwork on which numerous subsequent limners of the likeness improved in executing their own ideals.

Contemporary with the St. Peter likeness of Christ may be mentioned a relic of very great interest and value—viz., the *Saint Veronica image*, in which many devout persons are said still to believe. According to the legend, Veronica, one of the devoted women who attended or assisted at the burial of Christ, placed her



NO. 6.—LEGENDARY LIKENESS OF CHRIST—KNOWN AS THE "KING AGGBANUS" PORTRAIT.

tear-stained handkerchief over his face, and on removing it afterwards, found that the impress of the features had miraculously been printed on its surface; a very beautiful story, if more purely mythical than that which has assigned to St. Peter an honour that possibly belongs to another. An illustration of the image (No. 2) is here reproduced.

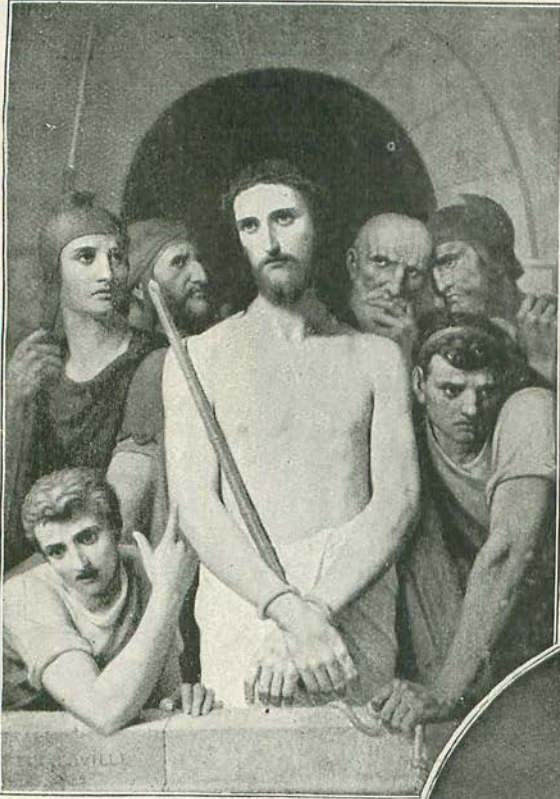
Reverting for a moment to the St. Peter sketch, a very remarkable supposed likeness of Christ was unearthed in 1812 in County Cork, Ireland, which in one or two respects is very sug-

gestive of that sketch. According to the story, one day in the year

named a peasant was digging potatoes, accompanied by his daughter, who picked them up as they were thrown upon the ground. Among them she found, encrusted with clay, what she thought to be a large button, but which, on further examination, turned out to be an antique medal of singular structure and device. On one side was the head of the Saviour (No. 3), and on the other a Hebrew inscription, which, in English, reads: "The Messiah has reigned: He came in peace, and being made the light of man, He lives."



NO. 7.—THE "ECCE HOMO"—BY GUIDO.



NO. 8.—THE "ECCE HOMO"—BY LAVILLE.

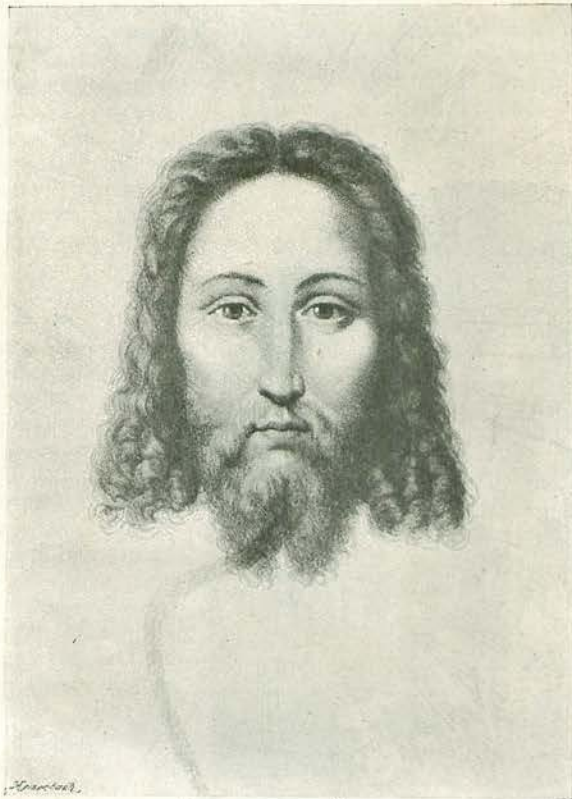
On the medal becoming known to antiquaries, many theories were at once promulgated as to its origin and history, and while there were some dissentients from it, the view subsequently adhered to was that it was a genuine tessera, or amulet, struck by the first Jewish converts to Christianity, and worn by them as a pious memorial of their Master, and that its date was indicated by the Hebrew letter "aleph" on the obverse side, which, representing the numeral "I," implied that the medal was struck in the first year after the Resurrection. The question has been hazarded: might it not have been from the St. Peter sketch of Our Lord's likeness that this medallion copy of His features was modelled? Who knows? There is one thing about the model, however, which, whatever else may be said regarding its origin, gives it a decisive mark of great antiquity, viz., the absence

of the "nimbus of glory" round the head, a feature of the likeness of Christ that is not in evidence prior to the seventh century. For a facsimile of this curious relic, I am much indebted to my friend, George Mackey, Esq., of London and Birmingham, the well-known collector of such-like rare articles of vertu.

At a very early period in the history of the Christian Church there are, therefore, several believed-in likenesses of its Founder, which might have, singly or collectively, formed the model or basis on which many later likenesses were produced. As a matter of fact, the identity of one or other of these first portraits can be traced all through the after-evolution of the likeness. As Didron has well said, the story of its evolution is simply "a compilation by suc-



NO. 9.—"THE SAVIOUR"—BY DE CAISNÉE.



NO. 10.—UNFINISHED "HEAD OF CHRIST"—
BY SIGNOL.

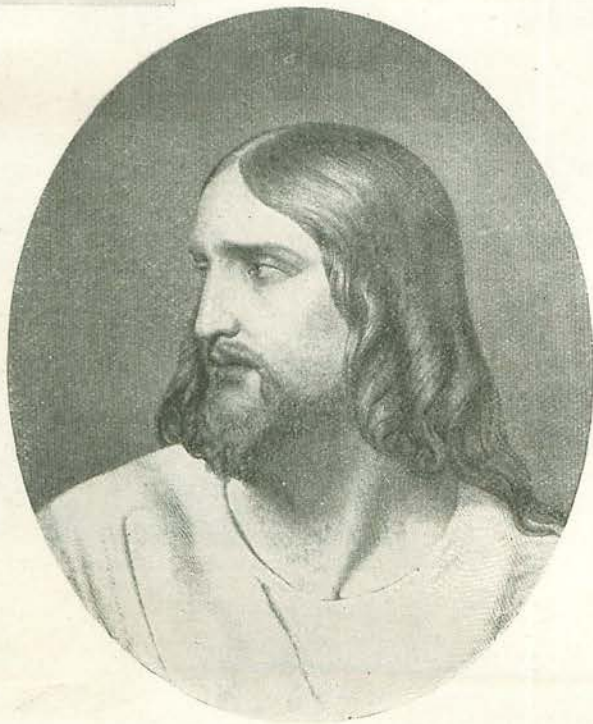
cessive generations of artists, a trait of expression having been added by each, or a feature altered till it became such as we have it now."

And though another authority has asserted that "an ideal likeness of Christ sprang into existence as the work and invention of some unknown artist of the Dark Ages," there is evidence that long before that period there were several ideals in existence which appear to have had the approval of many persons who, if they themselves never beheld Christ in the flesh, were contemporaries of those who enjoyed that inestimable privilege.

That being so, it is unquestionably a factor of some consequence in the view, which many persons hold, that it is quite possible to believe Our Lord's likeness to be founded on some *real* portrait more or less true to

the original, such as, for example, the outline attributed to St. Peter, or the remarkable portrait (No. 4) which tradition has assigned to St. Luke, or, again, to the sketches (Nos. 5 and 6) attributed by Catholic legend to the times of Christ. No. 6 is especially interesting. It is said that our Lord sat for it for King Aggbanus, King of Edessa, in Asia Minor—whatever might have been its origin, a well-accredited history takes it back to the third century, when it was considered to be of the time of Our Lord. It has passed through fewer hands than most works of the kind, having remained at Edessa till that place was taken by the Genoese in the eleventh century, since which time it has remained in the Church of San Bartolomeo. Being accounted miraculous, it is excluded from public gaze, and great difficulty was experienced in attaining access to it.

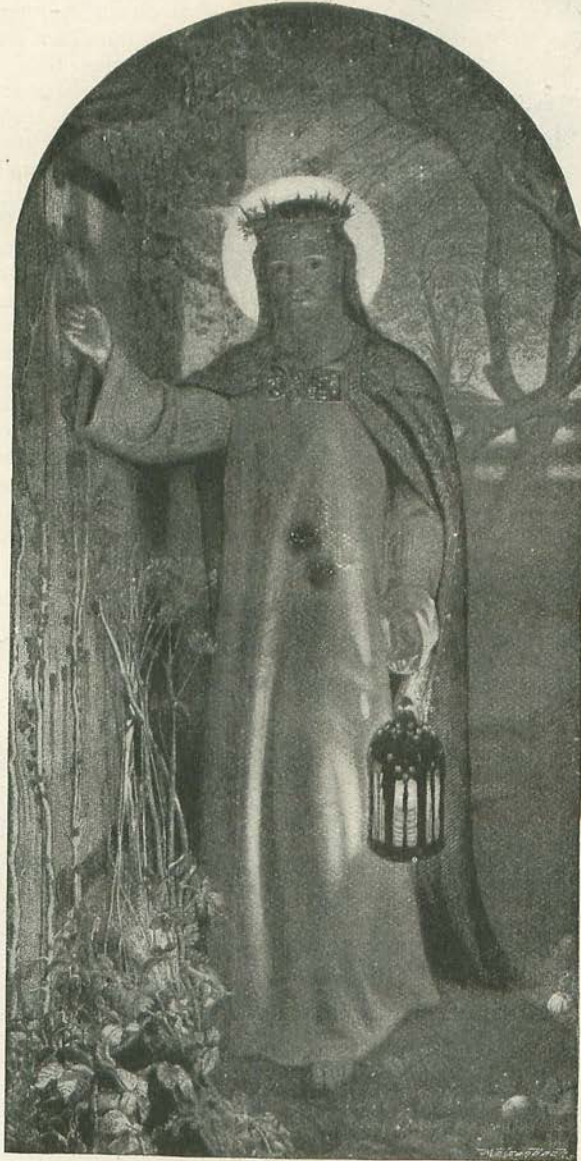
There is yet another very significant fact to be mentioned in concluding this necessarily brief sketch of an almost limitless subject. And



NO. 11.—"THE CHRIST"—BY PAUL DELAROCHE.

it is this: in reproducing the likeness according to his own conception of the ideal, no artist, whatever his nationality may have been, has ventured to diverge from the type or types as shadowed forth in the contemporary portraits just referred to. While each is, in certain essentials, dissimilar to the other, these famous portraits would appear to have served as the models for all subsequent idealization of Our Lord's likeness! Whether we take the notable "Ecce Homo," by Guido (No. 7), or the masterly conception of Christ in the same character by Laville (No. 8), or the beautiful "Saviour," by De Caisnée (No. 9), or the unfinished "Head

of Christ," by Signol (No. 10), or "The Christ," by Paul Delaroche (No. 11), or the well-known "Light of the World," by Holman Hunt, not to mention many other illustrations, examples by Russian, Dutch, German, Italian, and English artists, which, of course, it is impossible to reproduce here, it is indeed amazing to find, amid an endless variety of expression and characterization of the features of Our Lord, and, as it were, glowing through it all, the radiance of that perfect beauty and holiness which belonged alone to Him who was, in His physical as well as in His moral and spiritual nature, the fairest and the noblest of the sons of men.



NO. 12.—"THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD"—BY HOLMAN HUNT, R.W.S.