VARIOUS

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Содержание

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THE ART SEASON

Returning with the circling year, and advancing *pari passu* with the multitude of metropolitan musical attractions, comes the more silent reign of the picture exhibitions—those great art-gatherings from thousands of studios, to undergo the ultimate test of public judgment in the dozen well-filled galleries, which the dilettante, or lounging Londoner, considers it his recurring annual duty strictly to inspect, and regularly to gossip in. As places where everybody meets everybody, and where lazy hours can be conveniently lounged away, the exhibitions in some sort supply in the afternoon what the Opera and parties do in the evenings. Nearly all through the summer-day, they are crowded with a softly-rustling, humming, buzzing crowd, coming and going perhaps, taking little heed of the nominal attraction, but sauntering from room to room, or ensconcing themselves in colonies or clusters of chairs, and lounging vacantly in

cool lobbies. At energetic sight-seers, who are labouring away, catalogue and pencil in hand, they stare languidly. They really thought everybody had seen the pictures; they know they have: they have stared at them until they became a bore. But this sort of people, who only come once, why, of course, they suppose this sort of people must be allowed to push about as they please. But it is a confounded nuisance; it is really.

The great army of art amateurs, connoisseurs, and the body who are regarded in the artistic world with far greater reverence —the noted picture buyers and dealers, have come and seen, and gone away again; after having lavishly expended their approbation or disapprobation, and possibly in a less liberal degree, their cash. After the first week or so, the galleries begin to clear of gentlemen of the class in question; even artists have got tired of coming to see their own pictures, particularly if they be not well hung; and so the exhibition is generally handed over during the greater part of its duration to the languid *far niente* elegant crowd we have seen thronging its corridors. The grand day for the moneyed amateurs, who come to increase their collections, is, however, that of the private view. This generally occurs on a Saturday, and the public is admitted on the following Monday. Within an hour of the opening on the former day, the rooms are crowded with a multitude of notabilities. You see that you are in a special class of society, or rather, in two special classes—literary and artistic on the one hand; wealthy and socially elevated on the other. The fact is evident in the general

mutual acquaintanceship which prevails, principally within each respective circle, but by no means exclusively so. First, you are sure to observe a cluster of those peers and members of parliament who busy themselves most in social, literary, and artistic questions. Bishops, too, are regular private-view men; capital judges, moreover, and liberal buyers; and we seldom miss catching a glimpse of some dozen faces, whose proprietors are men standing at the very top of our historic, philosophic, and critical literature, and who move smilingly about, amid the keen but concealed inspection of the crowd, who pass their names in whispers from group to group.

But the class of regular picture-buyers is quite *sui generis*. You may pitch upon your man in a moment. Ten to one, he is old, and has all the shrivelled, high-dried appearance of the most far-gone and confirmed bachelorism. Everything about him looks old and old-fashioned. His hair is thin and gray, and he shuffles along on a couple of poor old shanks, which will never look any stouter unless it be under the influence of a fit of the gout. He wears a white neckcloth, arranged with the celebrated wisp-tie—shoes a great deal too big for him—and to his keen, twinkling eyes he applies a pair of heavy horn or silver-set glasses. These old gentlemen appear to know each other as if by magic. They cluster in groups like corks in a basin of water, and then go hobbling eagerly along, peering closely into the more promising works, jerking their heads from side to side, so as to get the painting in as many lights as possible; and full of talk—good critical

talk—about the productions in course of inspection. True, there may be something in their observations speaking too much of the technical, and too little of the more ideal faculty. They are greater upon flesh-tints and pearly grays, middle distances and chiaroscuro, than upon conception, expression, or elevation or magnificence of sentiment. Nevertheless, they know thoroughly what appertains to a good picture. They give a work its place in a moment, and assign it to its author by internal evidence, with an unfailing accuracy, which speaks of long training and constant familiarity with all the main studios of London. Perhaps you observe one of our friends apparently fascinated before a particular canvas: he dances about, so as to get it in every angle of light. Then he shuffles off, and brings two other skilful old foggies, holding each by an arm; and the three go through the former ceremony as to the lights, and then lay their heads together; and then our original personage glides softly up to the table where the secretary's clerk sits with pen and ink before him, and whispers. The clerk smiles affably—turns up a register: there are two or three confidential words interchanged; and then he rises and sticks into the frame of the lucky picture a morsel of card, labelled 'Sold;' and leaves the purchaser gloating over his acquisition.

And where do these pictures go? Frequently to some quiet, solemn old house in the West End, or to some grange or manor far down in the country. The picture-gallery is the nursery of that house—its pride and its boast. Year after year has the

silent family of canvas been increasing and multiplying. Their proprietor is, as it were, their father. He has most likely no living ties, and all his thoughts and all his ambitions are clustered round that silent gallery, where the light comes streaming down from high and half-closed windows. The collection gradually acquires a name. Descriptions of it are found in guide-books and works upon art. Strangers come to see it with tickets, and a solemn housekeeper shews them up the silent stairs, and through the lonesome mansion to its *sanctum sanctorum*. At length, perhaps, the old man takes his last look at his pictures, and then shuts his eyes for ever. It may be, that within six weeks the laboriously collected paintings are in a Pall-Mall auction-room, with all the world bidding and buzzing round the pulpit; or it may also chance that a paragraph goes the round of the papers, intimating that his celebrated and unrivalled collection of modern works of art has been bequeathed by the late Mr So-and-so to the nation—always on the condition, that it provides some fitting place for their preservation. The government receives bequests of this kind oftener than it complies with the stipulation.

In the beginning of March, the first of the galleries opens its portals to the world. This is the British Institution, established at the west end of Pall-Mall, and now in existence for the better part of a half century. The idea of the establishment was to form a sort of nursing institution for the Royal Academy. Here artists of standing and reputation were to exhibit their sketches and less important works; and here more juvenile aspirants were

to try their wings before being subjected to the more severe ordeal of Trafalgar Square. The idea was good, and flourished apace; so much so, that you not unfrequently find in the British Institution no small proportion of works of a calibre hardly below the average of the Great Exhibition; while the A. R. A.'s, and even the aristocratic R. A.'s[1] themselves, do not by any means disdain to grace the humble walls of the three rooms in Pall-Mall. This year, the only picture of Sir Edwin Landseer's exhibited—a wild Highland corry, with a startled herd of red deer—is to be found in the British Institution. But the merit of the works is wonderfully unequal. They are of all classes and all sizes, in water-colour and in oils. Clever sketches by clever unknowns, rest beside sprawling frescos by youths whose ambition is vaster than their genius; and finished and accomplished works of art are set off by the foils of unnumbered pieces of unformed and not very promising mediocrity. Among them are the productions of many of the more humble painters of *genre* subjects—the class who delight in portraying homely cottage interiors, or troops of playing children, or bits of minutely-finished still life—or careful academical studies of groups with all the conventions duly observed: this class of pictures musters strong, and connoisseurs, without so much remarking their imperfections, carefully note their promise.

A month after the opening of the British Institution, three galleries become patent on the same morning: the Old Water

[1] Associates Royal Academy, and Royal Academicians.

Colour, in Pall-Mall East, the New Water Colour, in Pall-Mall West, and a still more recently founded society, called, somewhat pompously, the National Institution of Fine Arts. These are mainly composed of dissenters from the other associations—gentlemen who conceive that they have been ill-treated by Hanging Committees, and a large class of juvenile but promising artists, who resort to the less crowded institutions in the hope of there meeting with better places for their works than in the older and more established bodies. The two water-colour galleries are both highly favoured exhibitions, and present works of an importance quite equal to those of the Academy itself. Water-colour painting is indeed a national branch of art in England. Neither French, Germans, nor Italians, can presume for a moment to cope with us in the matter of *aquarelles*. They have no notion of the power of the medium, of the strong and rich effects it is capable of producing, and the transparency of the tints which a great water-colour artist can lay on. Nearly twenty years ago, there was but one water-colour society; but increasing numbers, and the usual artistic feuds, produced a partly natural, partly hostile, separation. The ladies and gentlemen who withdrew were mainly figure painters; those who stayed were mainly landscape artists; and thus it happens, that while in the new society you are principally attracted by historic and *genre* groups and, scenes, in the old you are fascinated by landscape and city pictures of the very highest order of art. The painters, too, you observe, are very industrious. The fact is, they can work more quickly in water than

in oil. Copley Fielding will perhaps exhibit a score of landscapes, blazing with summer sunshine; David Cox, half as many—stern and rugged in tone and style; George Tripp will have painted his fresh river and meadow scenes by the dozen; and the two brothers Callum will each have poured in old Gothic streets and squares, and ships in calm and storm, which catch your eye scores of times upon the walls. As in the other society, many of the finest 'bits' contributed by the water-colourists are not much above miniature size. The screens on which these gems are hung attract fully as much as the walls with their more ambitious freight; and Jenkin's rustic lasses, and Topham's Irish groups, and Alfred Fripp's dark-eyed Italian monks and Campagna peasants, are as much gazed at as Richardson's sunny landscapes or Bentley's breezy seas.

Five minutes' walk takes us to the new society. No lack of landscape here; but it is inferior to that in the rival institution, and its attractions are eclipsed by ambitious pictures of historic or fictitious interest; the scene almost always laid in the picturesque streets or rooms of a mediæval city, and the groups marvels of display in the matter of the painting of armour, arms, and the gorgeous velvets, minivers, and brocades of feudal *grande tenue*. See Mr Edward Corbould. He is sure to be as picturesque and chivalrous as possible. There is the very ring of the rough old times in his caracoling processions of ladies and knights, or his fierce scenes of hand-to-hand fight, with battered armour, and flashing weapons, and wounded men drooping from their

steeds. Or he paints softer scenes—passages of silken dalliance and love; ladies' bowers and courtly revels in alcoved gardens. Mr Haghe is equally mediæval, but more sternly and gloomily so. He delights in sombre, old Flemish rooms, with dim lights streaming through narrow Gothic windows, upon huge chimney-pieces and panellings, incrusted with antique figures, carved in the black heart of oak—knights, and squires, and priests of old. Then he peoples these shadowy chambers with crowds of stern burghers, or grave ecclesiastics, or soldiers 'armed complete in mail;' and so forms striking pieces of gloomy picturesqueness. Figure-paintings of a lighter calibre also abound. There is Mr John Absolon, who is in great request for painting figures in panoramic pictures; Mr Lee, whose graceful rural maidens are not to be surpassed: Mr Warren, whose heart is ever in the East; and Mr Mole, who loves the shielings of the Highland hills. Landscape, though on the whole subordinate to *genre* pictures, is very respectably represented; and the lady-artists usually make a good show on the screens, particularly in the way of graceful single figures, and the prettinesses of flower and fruit painting.

We can merely mention the Society of British Artists and the National Institution of Fine Art. Both are mainly composed of the natural overgrowth of artists who prefer a speedy and favourable opportunity for the display of their works in minor galleries, to waiting for years and years ere they can work themselves up to good positions on the walls of the Academy. Many of these gentlemen, however, exhibit both in the smaller

and the greater collection; but here and there an artist will be found obstinately confining his contributions to one pet establishment—possibly entertaining a notion that he has been deeply wronged by the Hanging Committee of another.

Both of the exhibitions under notice are very various in merit; but each generally contains some able works, and the specialties of one or two painters distinguished by notable peculiarities. Thus the president of the British Artists, Mr Hurlstone, has for several seasons confined himself to Spanish subjects; Mr West paints Norwegian landscape; Mr Pyne sends to this gallery only his very splendid lake-pictures; and Mr Woolmer's curious sketches, which seem compounded of the styles of Turner and Watteau, blaze almost exclusively upon the walls. The best men of the National Institution contribute also to the Royal Academy—as, for example, Mr Glass, with his capital groups of hunters or troopers, so full of life and movement; and Mr Parker, with his smugglers and coast-boatmen. In this exhibition—and, indeed, in all the London exhibitions—a family, or rather a race or clan of artists, connected at once by blood and style, and rejoicing in the name of Williams, abound and flourish exceedingly. These Williamses are dreadful puzzlers to the students of the catalogue; they positively swarm upon every page, and the bewildered reader is speedily lost in a perfect chaos of undistinguishable initials. Sometimes, indeed, the Williamses come forth under other appellations—they appear as Percies and Gilberts; but the distinguishing mark is strong, and a moment's inspection

convinces the amateur that the landscape before him, attributed to Mr So-and-so, is the work of 'another of these everlasting Williamses.'

But the first Saturday of May arrives, and with it many a rumour, true and false, of the state of matters within the Royal Academy—of the academicians who exhibit, and of what are to be 'the' pictures. From early morning, St Martin's bells have been ringing, and a festival flag flies from the steeple; no great pomp, to be sure, but it marks the occasion. About noon, the Queen's party arrives, and Her Majesty is conducted about the rooms by the leading members of the Academy. Between one and two, she departs; and immediately after, the crowd of ticket-holders for the private view cluster before the closed gratings. Punctually as the last stroke of the hour strikes, the portals are flung open, and a cataract of eager amateurs rush up the staircases, and make their way straight to the inner room, or room of honour, all in quest of *the* picture, to which the *pas* has been given, by its being hung upon the line in the centre of the eastern wall of the apartment. The salons fill as by magic; in half an hour, you can hardly move through a crowd of dignitaries of all kinds—hereditary, social, literary, scientific, and artistic. Perhaps, indeed, there is no muster in London which collects a greater number of personages famous in every point of view. The ladies of the aristocracy swarm as at a drawing-room. The atmosphere is all one rustle of laces and silks; and it is anything but easy to make one's way among the bevies of clustered beauties who flock round

their chaperone, all one flutter of ribbons, feathers, and flowers. And to the Academy, at all events, come all manner of political notabilities: you find a secretary of state by your elbow, and catch the muttered criticism of a prime-minister. Ordinary peers and members of parliament are thicker than blackberries. Bishops prevail as usual; and apropos of ecclesiastical costumes, peculiar looped-up beavers and single-breasted greatcoats, the odds are, that you will be attracted by the portly figure and not very refined face of the Romish dignitary whose pretensions, a couple of years ago, set the country in a blaze. The muster of literary men is large and brilliant. Mr Hallam is most likely there as Professor of Ancient History to the Academy; and Mr Macaulay as Professor of Ancient Literature. Sir George Staunton puts in an appearance as Secretary for Foreign Correspondence; and blooming Sir Robert Harry Inglis, with the largest of roses at his button-hole, looks the most genial and good-humoured of 'antiquaries.' The Academicians—lucky Forty!—muster early. Happy fellows! they have no qualms of doubt, or sick-agonies of expectation as they mount the broad flight of steps. They have been giving hints to the Hanging Committee, or they have been on the Hanging Committee themselves. Well they know that *their* works have been at least provided for—all on the line, or near it; all in the best lights; and all titivated and polished up and varnished on the walls, and adapted, as it were, to the situation. You may know an R. A. on the private view-day by the broad, expanding jollity of his visage, if he be a man of that stamp, or

by a certain quiet, self-satisfied smile of self-complacence, if he be a man of another.

But he looks and bears himself as a host. He cicerones delighted parties of lady-friends with his face all one smile of courtesy, or he does the honours with dignity and a lofty sense of —we do not speak disrespectfully—of being on his own dunghill, in respect to the more important exigeant connoisseurs, whom he thinks it right to patronise. He always praises his brethren's works, and discovers in them hidden virtues. For the Associates, he has minor smiles and milder words. The ordinary mob of exhibiters he looks down upon with a calm and complacent gaze, as though from the summit of a Mont Blanc of superiority. At any bold defier of the conventions and traditions of the Academy drawing-school, he shakes his head. The pre-Raphaelite heresy was a sore affliction to him. He looked upon Millais and Hunt as a Low-church bishop would regard Newman and Pusey. He prophesied that they would come to no good. He called them 'silly boys;' and he looks uneasily at the crowds who throng before this year's picture of the Huguenot Couple—not recovering his self-complacency until his eye catches his own favourite work, when he feels himself gradually mollified, and smiles anew upon the world.

Not so the nameless artist, whose work of many toiling days, and many sleepless nights, has been sent in unprotected to take its chance. He knows nothing of its fate until he can get a catalogue. It may be on the line in the east room; it may be above the

octagon-room door; it may not be hung at all. Only the great artistic guns are invited to the private view, the rest must wait till Monday. Possibly a stray catalogue puts him so far out of his pain on Sunday. If not, he passes a feverish and unhappy time till the afternoon of Monday; and then, first among the crowd, rushes franticly up stairs. We had an opportunity the other day of seeing the result of a case of the kind. The picture—a work of great fancy and high feeling, but deficient in manipulative skill—the artist, a poet in the true sense of the word, had spent months in dreaming and in joying over. He found it in the dingiest corner of the octagon-room. His lip quivered and his chest heaved. He pulled his hat further down on his face, and walked quickly and quietly out.

We would gladly, indeed, see the octagon-room abolished. A picture is degraded, and an artist is insulted, by a painting being hung in this darksome and 'condemned cell.' The canvas gets a 'jail-bird' stamp, and its character is gone. In France, at the Palais-Royal, the young artists have a far better chance. After a stated time, the pictures, which, as the best have primarily had the best places, change stations with their inferiors; so that everybody in turn enjoys the advantages of the brightest lights and the most favourable points of view.

No need, of course, of attempting even the most summary sketch of the styles and ordinary subjects of the great painters who bear aloft the banner of the British school of art—of Landseer's glimpses of the Highlands; or Stanfield's skyey,

breezy landscapes; of the quiet pieces of English rural scenery —meadows, and woodland glades, and river bits, fresh and rich, and green and natural—of our Lees, our Creswicks, our Coopers, our Witheringtons, our Redgraves, our Ausdills; of the classic elegance and elevated sentiment of groups by our Dyces and our Eastlakes; of the abundance of clever *genre* subjects —scenes from history or romance—poured in by our Wards, our Friths, our Pooles, our Elmores, our Eggs; or of—last, not least—the strange but clever vagaries of that new school, the pre-Raphaelites, who are startling both Academy and public by the quaintness of their art-theories, and the vehement intensity of their style of execution. All the summer long, the world is free to go and gaze upon them. All the summer long, the salons are crowded from morning till night—in the earlier hours, by artists and conscientious amateurs, the humbler sort of folks, who have daily work to do; in the later, by our old friends, the staring, *insouciant*, lounging, fashionable mob, whose carriages and Broughams go creeping lazily round and round Trafalgar Square. And at parties and balls, and all such reunions, the exhibition forms a main topic of discourse. Bashful gentlemen know it for a blessing. Often and often does it serve as a most creditable lever to break the ice with. The newspapers long resound with critical columns apropos of Trafalgar Square. You see 'sixth notice' attached to a formidable mass of print, and read on, or pass on, as you please. But you distinctly observe, at any rate, the social and conversational, as well as the artistic

importance of the Royal Academy; and you confess, that a London season would be shorn of its brightest feature if you shut the gates of the National Gallery.

A. B. R.

BILL WILLIAMS:

A STORY OF CALIFORNIA

It was in the first flush of the Californian fever, when moderate people talked of making one's fortune in a fortnight, and the more sanguine believed that golden pokers would soon become rather common, that the *Betsy Jones* from London to New Zealand, with myself on board as a passenger, dropped anchor in the bay of San Francisco, and master and man turned out for the diggings. It is my impression that not a soul remained on board but the surgeon, who was sick, and the negro cook, who wouldn't leave him; and the first man I met on the deck of the *Go-Ahead* steamer, which took as up to Sacramento, was our enterprising captain, clad in a canvas jacket and trousers, with the gold-washing apparatus, two shirts, and a tin kettle, slung at his back. The crew followed his example, and all the passengers. The latter were some thirty men, from every corner of Britain, and of various birth and breeding. There were industrious farm-servants and spendthrift sons of gentlemen among them. Some had sailed with money, to purchase land in the southern colony, some were provided only with their hopes and sinews; but California was an irresistible temptation to them all, and by general desire, they had come to try their luck at the washing. We had mere boys

and men of grizzling hair in our company. Two were married, but they wisely left their wives in San Francisco, where, having brought with them some spare blankets and crockery, the ladies improvised a boarding-house, and I believe realised more than their wandering lords. Nevertheless, we, one and all, went up the broad river with loftier expectations than the prudent among us cared to make public.

There was one who made no secret of his hopes. The man's name was Bill Williams. I had had a loose acquaintance with Bill from school-time, for we had been brought up in the same good town of Manchester, where his father was a respectable tradesman, and his three brothers were still in business. Many a town and many a trade had Bill tried to little purpose. Never doing what his relatives could call well, he had gone through a series of failures, which tired out both kinsmen and creditors, and at length shipped for New Zealand, leaving a wife and seven children to the care of the said three brothers, till he should see how the climate agreed with him, and find a home for them. Bill did not belong to the extended fraternity of scapegraces. He was neither wild nor worthless, in the ordinary sense of those terms, but there was a faith in him, the origin of which baffled his most penetrating friends, that he was to get money somehow without working for it by any of the common methods. Unlike many a professor of better principles, Bill had carried that faith into practice. Under its influence, he had engaged in every scheme for making fortunes with incredible rapidity which coffee-house

acquaintances or advertising sheets brought to his knowledge. There was not a banking bubble by which he had not lost, nor a mining company of vast promise and brief existence in which he had not held shares. Uncompromisingly averse to the jog-trot work of ordinary mortals. Bill was neither indolent nor timid in his own peculiar fashion of seeking riches. He would have gone up in a balloon to any height, or down in a diving-bell to depths yet unsounded, had the promise been large enough; and there was something so suitable to his inclinations in the Californian reports, that he was the prime mover of our visit to San Francisco, and the entire desertion of the ship. Strange to say, every man on board believed in Bill; from the captain to the cabin-boy, they had all listened to his tales. Where he had learned such a number, fortune knows, concerning found treasures, and wealth suddenly obtained by unexpected and rather impracticable ways. That was the whole circle of Bill's literature, and going over it appeared his chief joy; but the gem of the collection was a prophecy which a gipsy woman, whom his mother met once in a country excursion, had uttered concerning himself—that he should find riches he never wrought for, and leave a great fortune behind him. In the faith of that prediction Bill had lived; and it was a curious illustration of the sympathetic force inherent in a firm belief, that both passengers and seamen, even those who affected to laugh at the rest of what they called his wonderful yarns, entertained a secret conviction in favour of that tale, and felt secure of gold-gathering in Bill's company.

I am not certain that my own mind was entirely clear of a similar impression, but the two among us who contemned loudest and believed most devoutly, were the captain and his mate. They were brothers, and of Jewish parentage; the rest of the family still hang about an old-clothes and dyeing establishment in the neighbourhood of Houndsditch. I made that discovery by an accidental glance at a torn and mislaid letter before we left the Thames, and thought proper to reserve it for private meditation. The relationship of the two was kept a profound secret, for reasons best known to themselves; but to the eye at least it was revealed by their striking resemblance, both being small, spare, dingy-complexioned men, with keen, cunning eyes, and faces that looked as hard and sharp as steel. Ever since they first heard of the prophecy, they had half ridiculed, half flattered, and kept remarkably familiar with Bill. That familiarity rather increased as we went up the Sacramento. A goodly number we made on the deck of the *Go-Ahead*, our only place of accommodation; and at length we reached the new town, the golden city, which takes its name from the river, christened in old times of Spanish voyaging by some discoverer for his Catholic majesty, and which was to be the metropolis of the diggings. When I first saw it, it consisted of some hundred huts and tents, a large frame-house, in which an advertising board informed us there was an ordinary, a gaming-table, and all manner of spirits; and a timber wharf, somewhat temporarily put together, at which we landed. Yet the city was rising, as cities rise only in the western hemisphere: broad streets

and squares were marked out; building was going forward on all sides; while bullock-wagons, canoes, and steamers, brought materials by land and water. The enterprise and vagrancy of all nations were there, as we had seen them at San Francisco; and those not engaged in building the town, were going off in caravans to the gold-gathering.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.