Six Millais Pictures

BY E. C. ALLEN.

The generation that is growing up to-day, even the generation that has just arrived, does not hear the name of "Millais" with the same throb of excitement, a mixture of delight and doubt, approval and criticism, as we did in the seventies—or even the eighties.

Pre-Raphaelitism is a barely understood word, and now when the early Italian masters need no champion, and the most primitive of them has his appreciative admirers, youth has only a mild wonder for the ancients who needed to preach a crusade to turn the attention of the world to the Quatro-centists.

Yet a crusade there was, led by the rapier-play of Ruskin's prose, and the oriflamme of Rossetti's brush; and in the van was the young Millais, brilliant, beautiful, charming; ready to support the cause of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood against the Philistines of London Society. Full of the enthusiasm of youth, we can imagine the long, long talks of those ardent spirits, Millais, Holman Hunt, Madox Brown, and William Morris,—each determined that his genius should be dedicated in his especial line to shake Art free from the antimacassar period that smothered it; literally to paint or draw or carve, exactly and faithfully what they saw. It was a quarter of a century before the words

> "—Paint the things as they see them
>   For the God of things as they are—"

were written, but they might have been the war-cry of the

Brotherhood. I love the story of the Black Brunswicker, with the ivy covered wall behind him, which was painted by Millais in his own back garden,—by candle light, each leaf faithfully copied that neither more nor less might be there. I used to wonder if his lantern attracted snails.

Sir Isumbras at the Ford belongs to this period, a picture that raised a storm of criticism and abuse when it first appeared. But how wonderful it is! How exquisite the detail, how fine the head of the old knight, and how real the frightened faces of the children! I believe several of the Brethren 'helped' with the horse, whose head is far too small and wonderfully wooden. (Quite a Pintoricchio horse!) When it came back from the Academy Millias painted it again himself, but the result makes the animal still quite impossible. We have to look instead at the faces of the children. The little boy with his chubby cheek against the Knight's armour, the funny striped cushion or bag, fastened to the back of the saddle, for him to sit on; the little girl with her tearful eyes fixed on the Knight's face, not daring to trust him entirely, a mixture of curiosity and fright in her face. The beautiful detail of the water-reeds, and the peace of the little scene across the river, show the diversity of the master. Every detail of the picture is finished with scrupulous care—look at the painting of all the little bells with which the harness is decorated, the puzzle on the old Knight's face. 'Practical Christianity? The woodcutter's brat? Is the answer to his quest here?'

There are many Sir Isumbrases looking for an answer still. One hopes some account of the picture is appended for the benefit of the Port Sunlight people who go to see it, especially the young ones. Youth likes a sign post, and unfortunately usually follows the one with the largest print on it, disregarding directions that are not shouted.

Birmingham has another Pre-Raphaelite picture, "*The Blind Girl.*" In this the brilliant colours of the girl's clothes are faintly repeated in the double rainbow. But the main interest centres in the beautiful face of the girl herself, the pure oval of which is slightly raised to catch the warmth of the sun, while her roughened peasant hand fingers the coarse grass on which she is seated. The little child who lolls on her breast in the careless abandon of affectionate childhood, peers round the shawl that has sheltered them both from the rain that is now over. They both have their backs to the beautiful little landscape,—trees, houses, meadows, cattle, etc., and the flowers of the stream-side; for what boots it to turn from the sun? The blind girl has no physical eyes, and the child no mental. So the rooks and pigeon strut and glean in the stubble, and the butterfly spreads his gorgeous wings on the girl's dark shawl unheeded. She seems to be listening as well as feeling, catching perhaps the song of the lark above her, or perhaps the constant twittering chorus of wild birds that is one of the joys of English country-side. Her wretched concertina lies on her lap; one is thankful that its blare is silent for her for a time at least. One could build up allegories out of the picture—they sit with their feet in the mud, but their heads in the sun—their backs to the passing storm and their faces to the light; and the creatures of God's promises are around them. The birds take their food from Him, and His bow is in the clouds. And the butterfly, Psyche, the emblem of the soul, rests calm and beautiful on her shoulder. But let the children find these and other meanings for themselves.

Let us go on to the *Carpenter's Shop,* another Pre-Raphaelite picture, and one that deserves to be better known. It has another title "Christ in the house of His Friends." Which is I think more appropriate. I think perhaps it will be the most popular of the set we have this term. Every gesture, detail and expression is so beautiful and so touching, so poignant in its simplicity, and so appealing in its pathos. There is no unreality of halo or conventionality of costume, but a brave attempt to render the life of the Carpenter's Son at Nazareth—

"He went down with them, and was subject unto them." The child is wounded,—very likely the wound was self-inflicted, a chisel that slipped, too sharp a knife for a child to manage, and the blood has dripped from His hand to His foot—ominous marks. Joseph examines the hurt hand with rather helpless solemnity, James,—the brother of the Lord,—pauses in his work to see the extent of the hurt; the little St. John brings a bowl of water with careful loving hands, and St. Anne watches the group with sybilline intentness.

But Mary, the Mother of God, kneels beside her little son to kiss His cheek; she knows quite well He has not outgrown the old cure, and her face is full of tender loving care; she does not fuss, nor fondle Him; her attitude is serene, there is no anxiety in her quiet hands, though the fallen eyelids may hide we know not what premonition of sorrow. The whole picture is full of delightful details; tools, shavings, planks, the half-woven willow basket, the bench, St. John's little hairy garment, the linen ephod of Jesus. The sheep too, who flock to the doorway, kept out by the wattle hurdle, give a charming contrast of texture with white-washed stone on the other side. I think I should show the children after this picture, Holman Hunt's "Shadow of the Cross," a far bolder and stronger composition showing the young man Jesus, in the pride of His manhood; but a very interesting sequel, and an interesting indication of the difference between the two friends. Holman Hunt carried his power of allegory and literal translation about as far as it could be carried in his later work; Millais used it less and less, till as a fashionable artist, he abandoned altogether the dreams and ideals of his youth. But we have still three pictures that hold the vision.

"*The North-West Passage*" was one that chained me for hours as a child. "It should be done and England should do it!" I used to wonder so much what she read. My grandmother, a very wise woman, said "Hakluyt's Voyages," and used to point out to me how the purpose of the old sailor over-rode the femininity of the young girl in all the details of the room;—his map, and her flowers; his flag in the corner, and his glass of grog and telescope on her work-table. He would not sit with his back to the window, I used to think; but I loved her quiet face, and the soft feeling of her hand on his; and the shadowed purpose of his deep-set eyes. My grandmother used to point out to me how all the furniture was of the same period, late Georgian, and then she would take me across the Gallery and show me another picture, called the "Death of Hudson," a shivery picture that I did not like looking at, "harrowing," in our childish phrase. But she said it was not success that was the crown of effort, and explained no more, but left me to wander by myself and wonder if effort was always the only crown, and if success was always a poor thing, and try to sort my ideas with, I fear, but scant comfort. I wished painters chose the gayer side of life, and yet knew that I infinitely preferred the "harrowing" pictures.

The Boyhood of Raleigh is always associated in my mind with the opening chapters of "Westward Ho!" Its vivid colour and open air atmosphere is lost somewhat in this small reproduction, but there is enough to suggest the colour in the details. It seemed to me it was a veritable Salvation Yeo who sat on his log and poured out his tale of romance to the two boys. The little Walter listens with his dreamer's eye fixed on that El Dorado that eluded him all his long life; his friend, despite his pointed chin and fair hair, hears but a tale of adventure. A Cary I used to think, though I thought the other boy too fragile for an Amyas Leigh. Everything in the picture is painted with scrupulous care, and each added detail is calculated to stir the imagination of adventurous youth; the claw, the cap of feathers—something else behind the anchor, a gaily coloured handkerchief, if I remember rightly, and the neglected model of the cockle boats of our ancestors, such a ship as the *Rose*, neglected at the side, while the boy sees himself adventuring in the forests primeval, entering the cities of the Incas, drinking in the strange lore of an ancient people, lifting a veil of mystery. For this is no common boy with nought but a boy's vision. More of a Frank than an Amyas, it is the Walter Raleigh of the History of the World, the philosopher scientist, the scholar, the poet. The drawing is exquisite; after the ridicule that followed the horse of Sir Isumbras, no one was ever able to accuse Millais of faulty workmanship; and here is finished, attentive, delightful work.

What though he forsook the Brotherhood? A married man must consider his growing family, and bread and boots are not bought by pictures that the world laughs at. So Millais painted *Her First Sermon* and leapt into popularity. Then portraits followed; a charming face and manner did the rest. Though he never 'went back on' his old friends, his friendship with them was necessarily on a different footing. Each summer saw a beautiful landscape from his brush—"Recreation!" he used to call it, as Morris

did his poetry. I wish we had "Chill October," a picture that brings the marshes into the very room, with the rustling reeds and fresh wind. Our last picture brings us back a little; the charm of this one lies really in the effect of the candlelight on the woman's face and dress, and the contrast of deep shadows and bright lights. Just an ordinary careful housewife, with nothing particular in her face and simple dress, either of interest or beauty; yet she gives an impression of earnest purpose, and embodies the teaching of the Parable. This woman will look till she finds. Her eyes are downcast, but that is where her treasure is. Are we not all ants, piling up little heaps of rubbish, a mockery to the gods? It is not the treasure that matters but the effort we put into the search for it.

We look through our collection again; how diverse has been the subject, but what a unity of purpose. We have had practical Christianity, mysticism, the drive of a great idea, and the staunch Protestantism of the Mid-Victorians.

Much will go over the heads of the younger ones, but much I hope, will go home to them, beautiful examples of great ideas, stars on their pathway that lead their steps onward and upward—

"I who have walked with Beauty, will not falter
Though steep the road before me lies, and long;
For I have seen upon Life's distant altar
Love's candle burning like a flaming Song."

[Mr. Stephens, who has written so well on Millais' works, says of this picture:—

"'Sir Isumbras at the Ford' was the subject of the picture Millais made his leading work in the year 1857. It represented an ancient knight, all clad in golden armour, who had gone through the glories of this life—war honour, victory and reward, wealth and pride. Though he is aged and worn with war, his eye is still bright with the glory of human life, and yet he has stooped his magnificent pride so far as to help, true knight as he was, two little children, and carries them over a river ford upon the saddle of his grand war-horse, woodcutter's children as they were. The face of this warrior was one of those pictorial victories which can derive their success from nothing less than inspiration. The sun was setting beyond the forest that gathered about the river's margin, and, in its glorious decadence, symbolised the nearly spent life of the warrior."—*From The Life of Sir John Millais.*]