

## THE LESSON OF MILLAIS



THE burial of Millais in St. Paul's should have been an honour done to a great painter, who died at the age of thirty-five, the painter of "The Eve of St. Agnes," of "Ophelia," of "The Vale of Rest;" it was but an honour done to a popular painter, the painter of "Bubbles," and other coloured supplements to Christmas numbers, who died at the age of sixty-seven. In the eulogies that have been justly given to the late President of the Royal Academy, I have looked in vain for this sentence, which should have had its place in them all: he did not make the "great refusal." Instead of this, I have seen only: he was so English, and so fond of salmon-fishing.

It is not too much to say that Millais began his career with a finer promise than any artist of his time. In sheer mastery of his brush he was greater than Rossetti, greater than Holman Hunt, greater than Watts, greater than anyone but Whistler. He had the prodigal energy of genius, and painted pictures because he was born to paint pictures. It was at his studio that the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood took form, and he was the most prominent member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. He was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy at the age of twenty-four, a Royal Academician at the age of thirty-four. Up to then he had painted masterpiece after masterpiece, pictures in which there was temperament, intention, a noble interest. From that time to the time of his death he painted continuously, often brilliantly, whatever came before him, Mr. Gladstone or Cinderella, a bishop or a landscape. He painted them all with the same facility and the same lack of conviction; he painted whatever would bring him ready money and immediate fame; and he deliberately abandoned a career which, with labour, might have made him the greatest painter of his age, in order to become, with ease, the richest and the most popular.

Art, let it be remembered, must always be an aristocracy; it has been so, from the days when Michel Angelo dictated terms to Popes, to the days when Rossetti cloistered his canvases in contempt of the multitude and its prying unwisdom. The appeal of every great artist has been to the few; fame, when

it has come, has come by a sort of divine accident, in which the mob has done no more than add the plaudits of its irrelevant clamour to the select approval of the judges. Millais alone, since the days of that first enthusiasm in which he was a sort of fiery hand for the more slowly realizing brains of his companions in art, has made the democratic appeal. He chose his subjects in deference to the opinion of the middle classes; he painted the portraits of those who could afford to pay a great price. His pictures of pretty women and pretty children had the success, not of the technical skill which was always at his command, but of the obvious sentiment which makes them pretty. The merit of these interminable pictures varies; he was sometimes more careful, sometimes more careless. Mastery over the technicalities of painting he always possessed; but it had come to be the mastery of a hand which worked without emotion, without imagination, without intellectual passion; and without these qualities there can be no great art.

The newspapers, in their obituary notices, have assured us that in honouring Millais, we are honouring not merely the artist, but the man; "of the Englishmen who have been the sons of Art," said "The Times," "scarcely one has deserved more honour than Millais." My thoughts have turned, as I read these commendations of the good citizen, so English, so sporting, whose private virtues were so undeniably British, to a painter, also a man of genius, whose virtues were all given up to his art, and who is now living in a destitute and unhonoured obscurity. It has seemed to me that there, in that immaculate devotion to art, I find the true morality of the artist; while in the respectability of Millais I see nothing to honour, for its observance of the letter I take to have been a desecration of the spirit.

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