

A Painter of a New Day

I

IT might not unreasonably be supposed that imaginative art would have been crushed under the prevailing heresy of realism. The enormous advance made in the province of imitative skill might well bring about a deadening of the inventive faculties. The attention once given to the general laws of pictorial and decorative effect has of late come to be concentrated almost exclusively upon conditions of light and atmosphere, the result being seen in numerous pictures of calculated accuracy, wherein may be determined the distance from the spectator of any given chair or table, or the morrow's weather may be foretold from the wind stirring the group of trees in the foreground depicted with such elaborate science. Consequently it has followed that, during the past few decades, the energy of all but the rare and more subtle minds among those concerned with the painter's art has been claimed by the allurements of the popular discovery. It was by a sort of paradox that the general community of painters, at the very time when the rising claims of photography would seem to be steadily taking from the value of their efforts, should have taken so keen a delight in exact record as to have well-nigh forgotten the practice of the older masters, by whom imitative skill was regarded as a means, not an end.

As though in contradistinction to a movement which saw the two extremes—on the one hand, the strenuous study of facts combined with an embroidery-like elaboration of workmanship in the English pre-Raphaelites and in the early writings of Ruskin; on the other, the searching analysis of light in its many phases as proclaimed in the paintings of Manet and of Claude Monet and his followers—there arose a little group of romanticists who have created, at least so it would appear, a common tradition for a future school of romantic painting. This wave of idealism attained its fullest force in England in the works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Sir Edward Burne-Jones, Ford Madox Brown, Simeon Soloman, George Wilson and others, and in a less restricted sense in those of Watts. In France the departure was less pronounced, it being mainly restricted to the achievements of Gustave Moreau, Théodore Chassériau and Puvis de Chavannes: an echo of it may also

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be perceived in Germany in Boecklin and Klinger; in Italy, an example in Segantini, at least as regards one side of his genius.

Although the inventive, as apart from the realistic, element of painting can never wholly fade from the art of any particular generation, it may be taken for granted that the traditions of imagination were rarely at a lower ebb than at the time immediately preceding the movement which grew out of—or to express it more concisely, accompanied from the very first, as though unaware—the so-called pre-Raphaelite movement. The search after the "grand style," which was but a disguise of the imaginative impulse, and the inheritance of a general dignity of tone and vision which had animated painters such as Reynolds and Gainsborough, and in a lower degree Fuseli and Stothard, had died away for want of vigorous minds to sustain it, or perhaps on account of the influence, even then beginning to be felt, of the new and all-embracing inquiry into naturalistic conditions.

Whether the recent rise of the romanticists is the rising of a group independent in itself, or whether the hour has struck for the waning of coldly scientific portrayal, it is as yet too early to determine; but there are not wanting signs that the naturalistic innovation has not only, as is but natural with the lapse of time, lost its freshness, but that it can proceed no further. The general restlessness and the dissatisfaction with existing means evinced among the younger painters, passing as it has done from a healthily awake to a morbidly active condition, may not unreasonably be looked on as a manifestation of decay and fading belief. It must at least be admitted that, were one to deny the existence of such reaction from a widely upheld formula, it would be difficult to imagine from what direction might come the next impulse in art, that might be of true vitality and importance, unless from the direction of a traditional or personal symbolism.

The means of idealistic expression appear to have been advanced to a point beyond which it were not possible to go without covering new and all but unexplored ground. The romantic outlook, as though unconscious of its power, has been approaching more and more nearly to an assured and direct spirituality. The strange half-immortal offspring of mortal life and the world of the imagination has attained the knowledge of its winged power, its capacity for untrammelled flight. It were vain to attempt any de-

termination as to the result of this newly reawakened confidence in vision, but that there is a province stored with unheard-of treasure, awaiting the coming of a powerful and original mind, is a situation existing beyond any great cause for doubt. That William Blake, scarcely less than a century ago, should have championed a cause exactly similar, is but additional proof of its validity to-day. Blake's message, owing partly to a natural obscurity of utterance, partly clouded through his impatience of technique, was rendered so difficult that for years it remained a dead gospel, thrust aside and forgotten. But whether or no the more profound works of Blake may ever be generally read, if only for their lyrical passages, it will be found on the establishment of a spiritual art of real significance, whensoever that may come about, that a philosophic basis for it will not be far to seek.

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II

ROSSETTI, in what was perhaps the most brilliant period of his career, used to advise young men of talent not to put into words the poetry that was in them, but to paint. He maintained that poetry had reached its culmination in Keats, and must henceforward inevitably decline, but that there was nearly everything to be done in painting. Although subsequent events show that he did not maintain this view—just as we do not maintain it to-day—it is certain, by such advice, that he anticipated the coming change. And, indeed, what is this change but a reverting to ancient practice, with the addition, be it noted, of modern discoveries?

Sufficient time has not elapsed since the ending of the life-work of the acknowledged leaders of the romantic school to enable it to be seen who among the newer painters may be most fitted to fill the places left vacant, that is, supposing they ever may be filled. Many young painters in various directions are turning their attention to romantic painting, and with considerable success; but as yet only one or two names begin to stand out prominently from among the general number. That of F. Cayley Robinson, to the few who have followed with delight the infrequent appearance in the public exhibitions of certain lovingly wrought and most individual works, is a name marked as one distinctive and apart. It is

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only necessary to glance carelessly at a work of Mr Cayley Robinson's in a crowded gallery, to be at once and completely removed in spirit from the prevailing triviality of motive that characterizes the average exhibition picture. The work thus beheld, whether for good or ill, is remembered as that of a man who has a definite message. A dignity, even austerity, of treatment, an aloofness of mind, a nobility of aim, a charm of tender humanity at once profound and simple, a sane understanding of the decorative requirements of a picture combined with a close study of the appearances of nature, render these works among the most satisfying of those produced by contemporary English artists.

III

MR CAYLEY ROBINSON has two distinctive moods, which I would name, inadequate though such terms must be, the romantic and the meditative; and in his most recent productions—small, delicately-handled paintings in tempera—he would seem to have attempted a combination of the two, the result, when most successful, being one of mingled reverie and enthusiasm. In art, as in life, one of the most difficult of problems is to retain the charm and fire of youthful enthusiasm side by side with the serenity and repose coming from a more matured skill. But it is in such rare balance of technique with inspiration that the strength of Mr Cayley Robinson's talent mainly lies. This first or more directly romantic mood comprises several of the artist's earlier pictures; it is concerned with chivalry and enchantment, and goes wandering among remote, wonderful, never-trodden countries. The second mood draws beauty and delight out of the humbler, often passed-over, aspects of the world, and it is in these homely interiors, so filled with sweet reverie, that the peculiar individuality of the artist has, I think, as yet most fully expressed itself.

Like many another artist of strong originality, Mr Cayley Robinson, though widely and frankly eclectic, seldom fails to be entirely himself, despite his long brooding over the masters of his admiration. His sympathy with the painters so superficially classed under the designation of Primitive—with Giotto in particular, and with Mantegna and Botticelli—is at once evident, as

is also the debt he owes to moderns, such as Sir Edward Burne-Jones and Puvis de Chavannes, and in more indirect fashion to Blake. At times, perhaps, the surrender is too obvious, as in "The Beautiful Castle," strongly reminiscent of Burne-Jones and "King Cophetua," or in the later and smaller version in tempera of "To Pastures New," bearing the title "Dawn," in which the method of generalization peculiar to Puvis de Chavannes has been closely followed. Another picture, though in a perfectly legitimate manner, recalls a well-known figure by Michael Angelo. But in an age of general disregard of tradition, few will blame an artist, above all an artist so genuinely creative as is Mr Cayley Robinson, for displaying his regard for the great ones who have gone before him.

Mr Cayley Robinson, in devoting himself to the cause of romantic symbolism, but of late upheld so nobly by Sir Edward Burne-Jones, has displayed a rare wisdom in the attitude he has adopted. Had he made the attempt to continue in the mode of vision practised by the master, he would have been doomed to the position of a mere follower. The exquisite art of Burne-Jones is an art full of pattern and line; it has little to do with the interpretation of light: in the domain of colour its most successful achievements are brought about by the use of subtly gradated monochrome, or by a mosaic-like juxtaposition of varied tints, rather than by the fusion resulting from the interplay of light and darkness. Here it is where Mr Cayley Robinson has seen his path. Gifted with the modern feeling for light, he has by that means brought new life into a tradition which, having recently attained a splendid manifestation, could not but become moribund in other hands. As a colourist, the later artist is keenly alive to effects of tone, the influence of the enveloping atmosphere upon coloured surfaces. Without breaking away from the example of the masters of inventive design, he has extended the field he has entered; with what degree of success can be determined by the future alone.

Subject in art is the most elusive of qualities. The present disdain of literary suggestion in painting is based upon sound reasoning. We know to-day that the "Christ and Mary Magdalen," by Titian, has but the slightest connection with its scriptural subject—the revelation of Christ to Mary Magdalen in the garden—although the canvas is thrilled with the message of a divine revela-

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tion from corner to corner. We are justly wearied of pictures, wherein some sprawling female figure holds up a tablet labelled, say, "The Spirit of Metaphysics," and yet we instinctively perceive a stretch of water under a twilight sky by Whistler, or a child lying on the sand by Matthew Maris to be full of subject. The most generally accepted of the motives of Mr Cayley Robinson's paintings may be put into few words; it is merely a group of people, usually children or young girls, resting or occupied over ordinary household duties, in a simply-furnished firelit room. But face to face with the canvas itself we are possessed by a quite extraordinary sensation of mystery. It is evident that the flicker of red light upon white walls, the shadow and silence, have filled the artist with unspeakable thoughts; the impression thus made has followed him into daily life, has entered into his dreams, has been turned over in his mind, until the result is a picture. So, too, each object in the room—the half-curtained window, the round hanging clock, the mahogany chest of drawers, the children's toys, the detail of the dresses of the girls—has been loved for its own sake, and has come from a strange and beautiful dream-world having its origin half in the less obvious dearly remembered scenes of the past, half in the depths of a little-understood, but no less real, inner life. At times this element of strangeness, as of another world, is brought home to the beholder by some accent of deliberate fantasy. Such are the green-eyed cat and the grotesque iron-work monsters which produce a little shiver in "The Foundling," placed as they are in the quiet surroundings of a dripping umbrella, a well-aired bed, china mugs, and old-fashioned books, or the swallows flying outside the window in "The Depths of Winter," or even the falling snow in "A Winter's Evening," or the pattern embroidered upon sleeve or hanging. These interiors have not been painfully thought out and pieced together for the purposes of picture-making, they are the result of vision and memory. Such painting as Mr Cayley Robinson's is intimate in the fullest meaning of the word.

IV

IN dealing with an artist of power the bare facts of his training in craftsmanship go for little, and the experiences of his outer life, though they may be possessed of greater meaning, are often deceptive. It is probable that Mr Cayley Robinson was in no wise influenced by the course of study he went through at the St John's Wood and afterwards at the Academy Schools. At Paris, where he worked for a time, he may have learned the foundations of his technique, for he handles oil paint with rare skill and charm. It is of significance, though, in any estimation of his art that Mr Cayley Robinson spent the greater part of three years in a small sailing-boat, though that period of his life would seem to have been more productive of thought than of results. But it is profoundly significant that an artist, so strongly attracted to the past, should have lived in Florence for several years and have seen no modern pictures during his sojourn there.

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An early painting by Mr Cayley Robinson, entitled "The Ferry," shows the dawning of his personality, but it barely more than foreshadows the excellence of his later work. Other pictures, painted shortly afterwards, are "Suzanne," and the charming "In a Wood so Green," the first notable example of his more romantic tendencies, his most important achievement in this direction being the elaborate composition, "Spring." It was in the year 1894 that he painted the beautiful "Mother and Child," which first revealed his mastery over those lamp-lit or fire-lit interiors, which have since become the most frequently employed of his sources of inspiration. Mr Cayley Robinson's pictures have been seen from time to time, though usually appearing strangely out of harmony with their surroundings, on the walls of the Royal Society of British Artists, at one of the Guildhall summer exhibitions, at Liverpool, and even amid the glitter of the Royal Academy.

In his recent exhibition at Mr Baillie's gallery this most sincere of painters gave evidence of a fresh development of his style, leading in the direction of a greater simplicity, a grander conception of art, a more assured flight of the imagination. But whether the art of Mr Cayley Robinson turn in new directions or continue its recognized course, it cannot fail to be sealed as something entirely beyond the usual average of exhibition pictures. Should he produce nothing more, his works already in existence are not likely to be forgotten, for the painter has put into them something of the light of a new day.

CECIL FRENCH