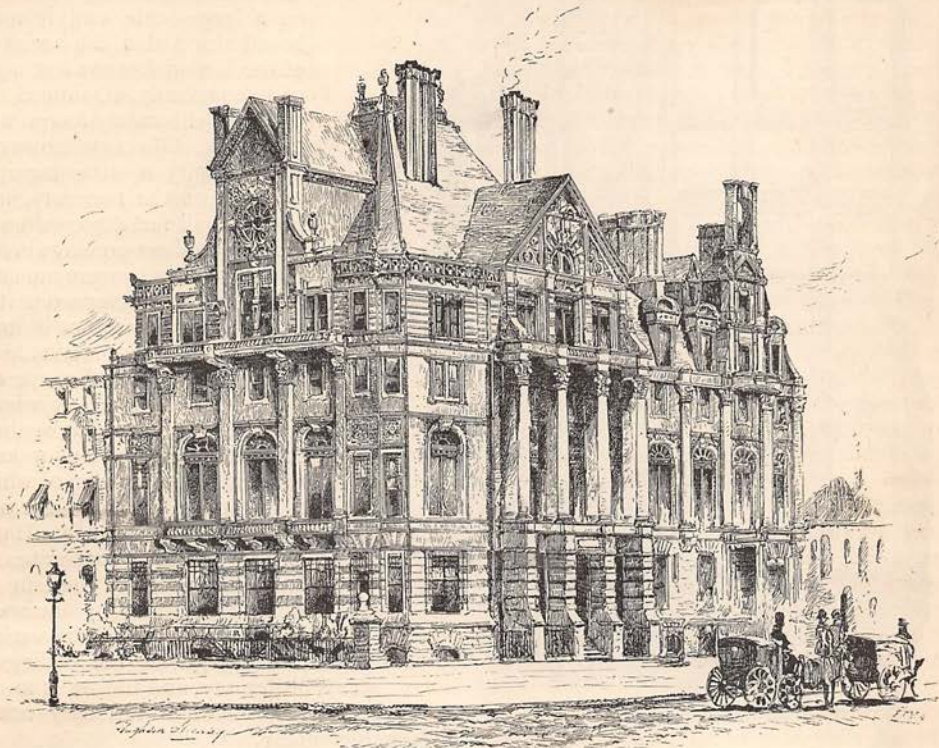


SOME OF THE UNION LEAGUE DECORATIONS.

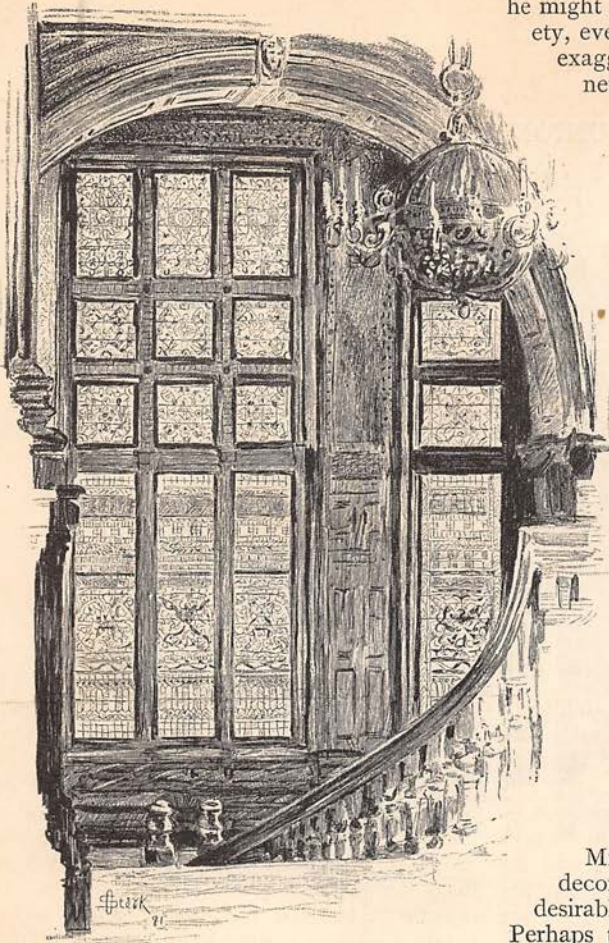


THE UNION LEAGUE CLUB HOUSE. (ARCHITECTS: PEABODY AND STEARNS.)

THE Union League Club House (Fifth Avenue, New York) has, it is hardly fanciful to say, the qualities of its defects. The latter have been frequently pointed out in detail since the completion of the building, but, so far as they strike the ordinary eye, they may be pretty sufficiently summed up in saying that the edifice seems an architectural negation of repose. Repose, to be sure, has been regarded hitherto as an important quality of a monumental building, at least; and if in America we now seem to be divorcing domestic building from the necessity of a reposeful motive, and enduing it with new, different, and more varied possibilities, it will still remain difficult for some time to come, probably, to reconcile the general cultivated taste to the absence of architectural dignity as a prominent element in buildings of the size and importance of the Union League Club House. Nevertheless, there is to be noticed, together with this defect (as the most kindly disposed

critic must consider it), and in great measure, no doubt, dependent upon it, a certain animation and sprightliness, which in themselves are by no means displeasing. The very novelty of their presence brings some refreshment to a catholic mind, which, at the same time, need not mistake its relief from the commonplace monotony characteristic of our monumental buildings, in general, for a positive delight in surprises whose main merits are their unexpectedness and eccentricity. The Union League Club House, in other words, arrests attention and produces divers sensations, and thus has a comparative claim of some importance upon the consideration of any one who has reached it after a walk of five miles up Broadway from the Battery, although he may be able cordially to admire only its large red mass and the unusual circumstance that it has a visible, instead of merely an inferable, roof.

This is especially true of the interior deco-

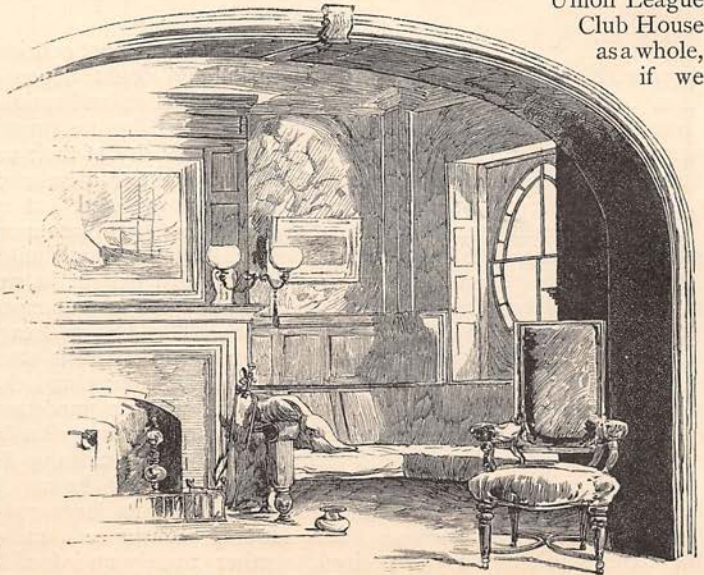


WINDOW FROM GRAND STAIRCASE.
(TIFFANY.)

rations, which make no attempt to secure the ordinary advantages of unity of design, or even of general character, but make the most of variety, and have the air of relying for success upon giving the beholder something new to think of, or, at least, something different to look at, each time he turns his head. There is, to be sure, one criticism to be made upon this system of interior decoration, if one may venture to so term it; and it seems to be justified by the net result in the present case, from which alone, if one had never seen other examples of the practice,

he might generalize the proposition that variety, even when pushed to the extremity of exaggeration and eccentricity, should nevertheless be, for the most part, upon the same plane of merit. This, at all events, is the ideal to be kept in view in contriving *bizarrerie* on a large scale, and it must be admitted that the architect of the Union League lost sight of it constantly, if, indeed, he did not deliberately forego it at the outset. Of course, however, the difficulty of attaining it is as great as the necessity, and no one will feel disposed to be hard upon short-comings in this respect. Only as a general criticism is it to be observed that to avoid monotony is not in itself sufficient if one's details, however violently conflicting, are partly bad as well as wholly diverse: in other words, there is at least one kind of monotony the mere variation of which is not in itself happy—the monotony of merit, namely. If you have a room to decorate, for example (to avoid the temptation to illustrate by instances more nearly in point), the variety obtained by giving the ceiling to Mr. Whistler, say, and the walls to the decorator Garibaldi is distinctly not a desirable variety.

Perhaps this is the great difficulty with the Union League Club House as a whole, if we



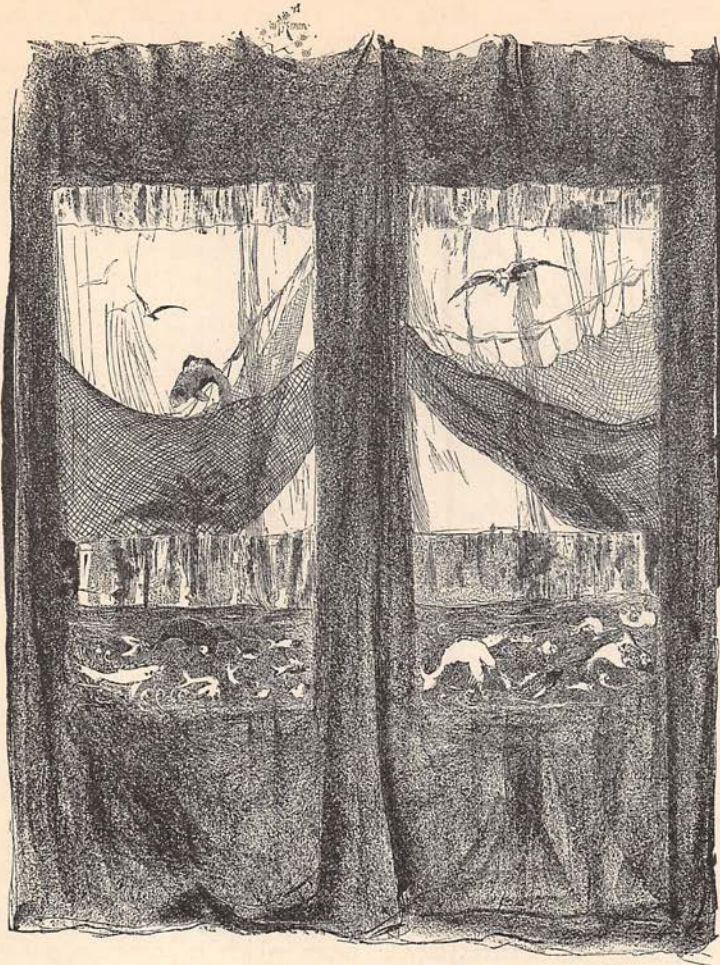
A CORNER OF THE ALCOVE DINING-ROOM. (FRANK HILL SMITH.)



IN THE SMOKING-ROOM.

accept the point of view of the architects, that repose has grown old-fashioned, and interest is to be sought in variety of intention and manifestation. At all events, any one who does not accept this view will be puzzled from the start. For example, to take one of the most obvious peculiarities of the edifice; it is necessary to suppose, when one observes that columns of large diameter are employed on the Thirty-ninth street façade to support a balcony precisely identical in every respect with that on the Fifth Avenue side, which is carried on very thin pilasters, that the advantage architects sometimes take nowadays—and, of course, in the Middle Ages always took—of constructive opportunity, has here been abandoned at the outset. This one of many similar incidents of the construction is sufficient to classify at once the intention of the architect as averse to what is ordinarily termed the architectural expression of purpose, or even of ideas. Here, of course, it is intended to deal only with the decoration of the building, and to have nothing to do with the architecture thereof, but, nevertheless, it happens to be true that one gets as good a clew to anything from a large and evident detail as from a small one, and the credit of the interior of the Union League Club must, on the whole and *en masse*, be awarded to the architects of the exterior. The halls of the building were consigned to the taste and skill of Mr. Louis C. Tiffany, and, of course, they leave the strongest

impression upon any casual visitor to the Club on account of their size and—shall we say?—their *quasi*-splendor. Splendor is a quality, however, which in general has an unfortunate drawback. If it fails to please, it offends. Any one who sets out to decorate halls as Mr. Tiffany has here decided to decorate them, ought to consider this. In that event perhaps a nearer approach to the mean which is acknowledged to be golden would be more easily reached. On the other hand, it would have been very simple to make these corridors perfectly inoffensive to the most exacting taste, and any one who has tried to do more than this is, of course, entitled to great credit. Green and silver may not be agreeable to many tastes, but it is necessary to admit that they at least avoid commonplace. In fact, they do more; they avoid the look of professional decoration. Mr. Frank Hill Smith, to whom, in accordance with the general architectural plan, some of the rooms were intrusted, has not been quite so successful in this respect, for example. If one seeks, in his apartments, for any spontaneity such as Mr. Tiffany has so abundantly shown, he is sure to be disappointed. The services of Mr. Warner are certainly not to be frittered away, and they certainly have not been used here to their utmost advantage in the little plafond corners, which, graceful enough in themselves, might have been modeled by anybody as well as by the best—or, as persons prefer, one of the two best—sculptors that we have.



FISH CURTAIN IN THE DINING-ROOM. (TIFFANY.)

The large room which the Messrs. Cottier have done is certainly far better than Mr. Smith's, for the reason that it is frankly professional. No one need find any fault with it from the professional decorator's point of view, and from any stand-point the windows are agreeable.

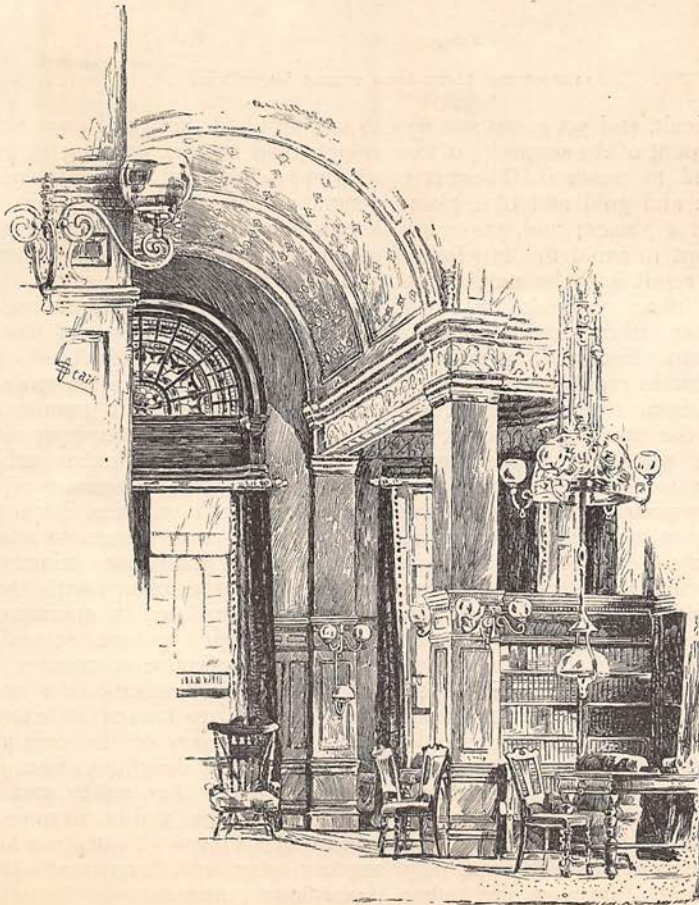
The windows, too, of the main hall are the best portions of Mr. Tiffany's work, in our opinion at least. It should not be forgotten, in saying this, that there is elsewhere a great deal of commendable effort, but if success has anywhere indubitably attended his efforts, it is in the little window on the third landing of the main staircase, which is very pretty, simple, and unconventional. The larger ones on the first landing it is hardly possible to admire so much, unless one's taste exactly fits in with them, in which case, of course, they are triumphant successes. And it is undoubtedly fortunate that mere taste plays so large a part in the judgment of such art-

products as stained-glass; otherwise one might urge as an objection to a window, that it was opaque or muddy or anything else, and—according to the logic of transparent material—the objection would be fatal.

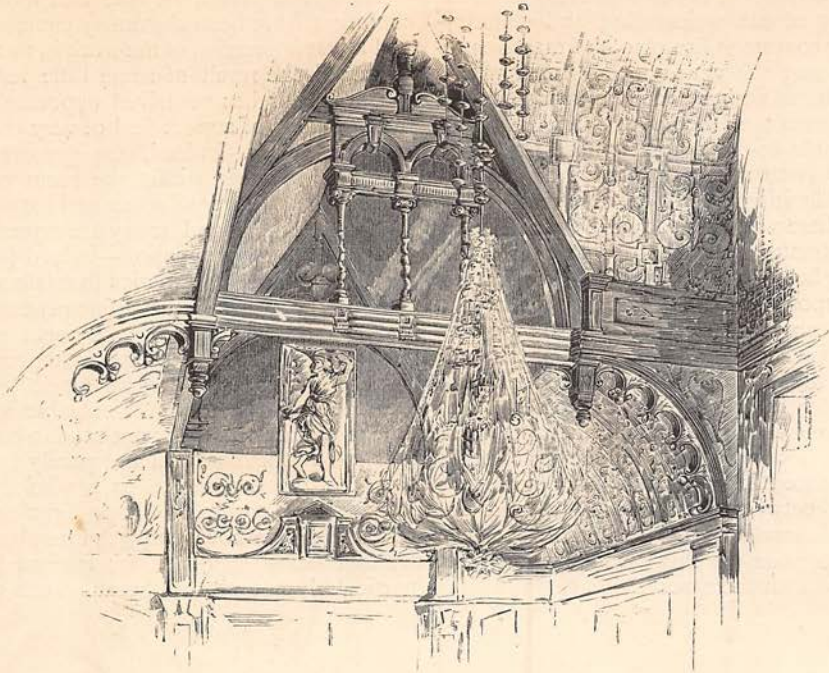
The dining-room (in the top story) was assigned to Mr. La Farge. It should, however, be mentioned that such details as can be called architectural had been inexorably furnished him. It is a little difficult to separate the two things, and not allow one's impression of the construction to influence that made by the decoration. Probably every one who has seen much of Mr. La Farge's interior decoration experiences, upon entering the dining-room, a feeling of disappointment, after having been told that it is his work; and some time elapses before it is possible to trace the feeling to its source in the contracted and fanciful modeling of the cubical contents of the apartment—so to speak—and in such details as the angular scroll-work in plaster relief which

adorns the concave division of the ceiling, the *lightening* of oak wainscoting and chimney-pieces by soapstone fire-places of massive proportions, and the very uncomfortable weight of constructed timber decoration which, to the eye, performs the function of supporting with considerable to-do a point whose irresistible tendency is to spring upward, and has the effect of limiting the vision in various directions. There was only too little space left for effective treatment by the decorator after the general plan of the ceiling had been determined upon. But for the architect and painter-decorator to have pulled together and mortised their work with cordial intimacy would certainly have been stranger still than what evidently happened in this case. There is as chronic an incompatibility between these (except, of course, in the unique instance of the Associated Artists' comity) as, notoriously, there is between both of them and the critic (*soi-disant* or other) whom malevolence inspires to point out this, or, indeed, any fact connected with their work.

Though it cannot be said that its original conditions have been absolutely circumvented, and a just impression of the work is, as already intimated, the result of some little reflection, the decorator has contrived opportunities for the exhibition of a great deal of very charming form and color. Indeed, the general effect, after one is fairly within the room and has placed things, is very distinct and harmonious. Ideas of elegance and luxury are expressed by it with much discrimination—indeed (judging by what we have in America that falls into the same category), with great refinement and tact, whereby luxury and elegance seem rescued from association with grossness or commonness of any kind, and seem (as in point of fact they undoubtedly are) valuable ideas in and of themselves. It is not at all a banquet-hall for a Lucullus. On the purely sensuous side, too, the decoration, as a whole, is correspondingly agreeable. It is light and yet rich, bright without empty glitter, and soft without being subdued. Its success here is particularly noteworthy, because such success



ALCOVES IN THE LIBRARY. (COTTIER.)

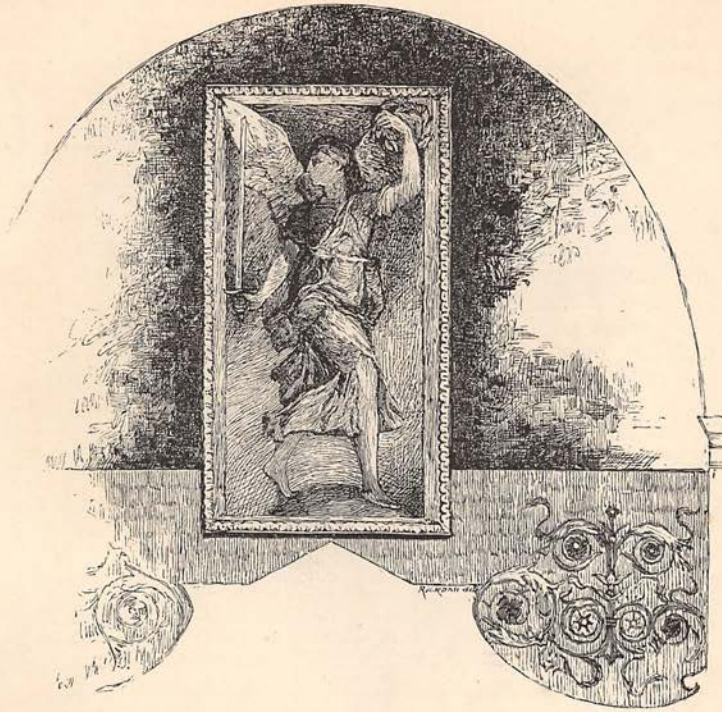


PART OF THE DINING-ROOM CEILING. (LA FARGE.)

is so rare and difficult, and yet seems so easy and simple on account of the simplicity of the elements combined to create it. There is a great deal of oak and gold and blue glass-tiling, one sees at a glance; and, reasoning hastily, is hardly apt to avoid the conclusion that the pleasing result is to be ascribed to the excellence of these materials and their affinity for each other, rather than to any special felicity in their composition. Of course, such an inference as this in regard to a work of any elaborateness, is generally an undesigned eulogy, recalling the memorable remark of the candid critic, who, after expressing a hearty admiration for one of Titian's portraits, inquired why portraits were not always painted thus and not otherwise, inasmuch as Titian's was clearly the right way to paint portraits. This is clearly the way to arrange gold and blues and light browns in a room like this dining-room. You gild the peaks of the ceiling down to within about six feet of the concave division, where, of course, you paint a band of grotesques. These should not be flagrantly ecclesiastical, but they should hint by association at something sufficiently removed from the suggestion of dinners and luncheons (sufficiently removed from "expressing the function" of the apartment, *pace* rigid authority to the contrary) to give some play of a poetic kind to the fancy of the higher varieties of club man. Naturally, wings are

to be furnished them, and any one's sense of color would suggest pricking them out with red and white and a bit of blue from the general golden mass. The tyro in decoration knows the sumptuous results of justly combining gold and white, and he must know also (one argues standing under this ceiling) that, in general, these elements are combined either tamely or violently, and that to secure the effect of richness and softness a great deal of subtlety must be called to one's aid. Supply subtlety in sufficient quantity, however, and success is assured. Similarly with the bed of blue glass-tiling in either gable of this unique room. Blue, especially of the ultramarine or cobalt varieties, is recognized to be a difficult color to use to advantage in any decoration that is not distinctly scientific, and has parted company with the schemes of color contemplated in grammars of ornament. But one is here immediately reminded how effective a primary color can be, even in a color-scheme of some delicacy. The soft, velvety masses at either end of the central division of the ceiling are very harmonious and delightful. The mere non-selection of the tiles, so to speak, is seen to have a value and a purpose, and the accidental variation of quality and the consequent play and movement are plainly desirable properties.

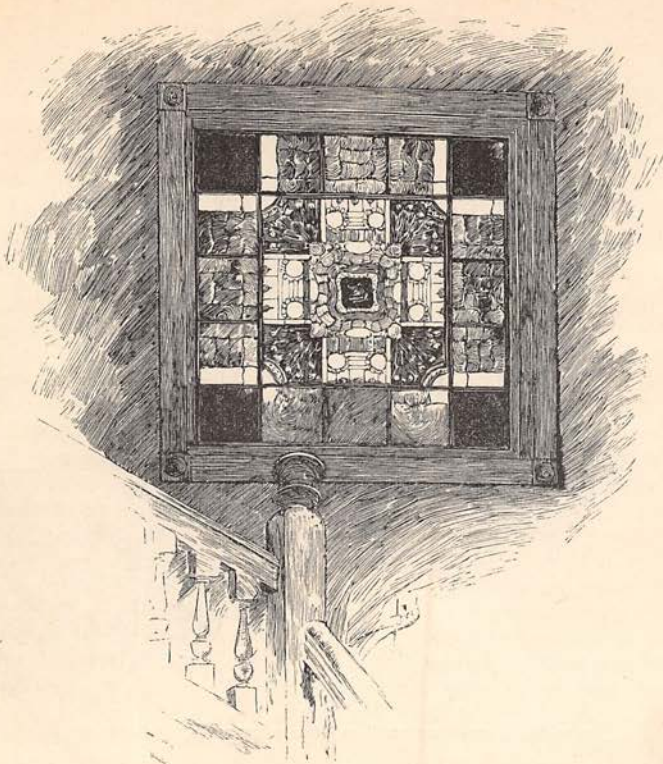
Just here, indeed, one might press this way



BASS-RELIEF OF "VICTORY" IN THE DINING-ROOM. (LA FARGE.)

of treating Mr. La Farge's work to its utmost limits without injustice, and recognize that the faults of the decoration are as frank as its merits: another artist would hardly have been content with the manifest difference in shade between the upper and lower halves of the tiling at the north end of the ceiling. However, when one is bothered about the fitness of an escutcheon, for example, and is considering whether or no its colors are not a little flat and raw in the midst of so much mellow softness, one may easily omit to secure sufficient carelessness in the choice of tiles for the background of the real perplexity. And as to the strict appositeness of the charming figure of "Victory" which hangs opposite this last, does any one imagine that the inventor of its extremely agreeable proportions and general movement is a less competent judge than another of the fitness of artistic things? When a decorator, that is to say a painter-decorator, is called upon to decorate a room of this description, it is certainly asking too much to demand that he exhibit a strict regard for such unities of idea and form as may commend themselves to the general observer, who is always, it is well known, addicted to a *priori* criticism. Why should a "Victory" be here at all, this observer may ask; though if he be of an ultra

logical turn of mind, an answer might be found by some enthusiastic member of a club which has always displayed pugnacity and often enjoyed such success as attends the victor in games of the kind in which it contends. It would be pushing logic altogether too far, the strictest constructionist would admit, to object to this "Victory" that its idea is evidently poetical, whereas the thing it should symbolize is of the essence of prose. What, one must ask, would be the fate of interior decoration if logic of this sort—*i. e.*, logical logic—really obtained currency among its practitioners? And (not meaning, by the way, to insist upon any conspicuous lack of harmony between this figure and its surroundings) still further one may ask himself if hanging a delightful piece of art on the walls of a room arranged on the plan of this, instead of calling it part of the decoration, is not in one view a tribute of conformity to the essential *bizarrie* of the architectural motive? To have followed in the frame of the "Victory" the lines of the neighboring moldings, or, indeed, to have considered these latter in any respect whatever, would doubtless have been to admit the introduction of an element into the general problem the presence of which would have complicated it considerably, and on the whole un-



SMALL WINDOW ON THE STAIRCASE. (TIFFANY.)

wisely, as we have hinted. No considerations at all are needed in order to appreciate the beauty of the detail in question. It is, in execution, the work of Mr. La Farge and the Messrs. St. Gaudens, and of Mr. W. H. Low, who assisted in painting it. As an object of the decoration, it arrests the eye at once, and keeps the attention longest perhaps—

which circumstance has also, no doubt, a disadvantage, since there is no other object adequately to share the blame of individual emphasis. On second thought, however, there is, at least, one other such detail, and perhaps there are many who will find Mr. La Farge's rose-window in the west gable more attractive even than the "Victory."

A WOMAN'S SECRET.

Hid in the deep recesses of this heart
 There lies a chord which thrills to one dear name,
 Though whose it be I may not now impart,
 Lest unrequited love should cause me shame.
 But do I love thee? Let me pause and say:
 My world would be no desert lacking thee;
 My sun shines brightly still and thou away,
 Although its gladness seems less glad to me;
 Life, e'en without thee, seemeth very sweet—
 Small pleasures charm me, though the chief I miss;
 Thee I but need to make all joy complete.
 Can loving be so cold a thing as this?
 Yet, should thy friendship more than liking prove,
 I, who love not, could show thee how to love!