



THE ART OF SILHOUETTING.

By ANDREW W. TUER.



ILL the day ever come when the Iron Duke will be popularly remembered by the Wellington boot, or the great Sir Robert Peel by the double-barrelled nicknames he contributed to his country's police? Certain it is that M. Etienne de Silhouette, the great financial minister of France, has his immortality altogether away from money bags, and is familiar by name only because that name was affixed to the shadow portraits which had their heyday in the days of his decline.

It happened this way. M. de Silhouette may have been a heaven-born minister, but in that case he was a bit before his date. The date was 1709. Destined for public life, he visited England to study her polity; and in this he succeeded so well that, when by his merit and the power of Madame Pompadour he was made Comptroller General, in 1757, he began to reform French finance on English models. Whether it was the reform or the Anglicism matters not, but for one or the other reason M. de Silhouette became the favourite butt of French public life. All that was shabby, mean, and perhaps a little ridiculous, began to be spoken of as *à la Silhouette*. Amongst these things was the bare outline likeness, which began about then to be produced both in France and England, and to which the name was attached.

Not that silhouetting was a discovery of the eighteenth century; in fact, and naturally, it was older than the Christian era. Portraiture is, after all, an art to which love is under long obligation; and it is fitting that this first rudimentary portraiture was, according to tradition, achieved by an Etrurian maiden, the daughter of a potter, who traced on the wall the shadow of her swain. That was 776 B.C. The first artists in monochrome—Crates of Sicyon, Philocles of Egypt, and Cleanthes of Corinth—the Doultons, and Mortlocks, and Walter Cranes of their day—practised the art which then went by the name of skiagraphy.



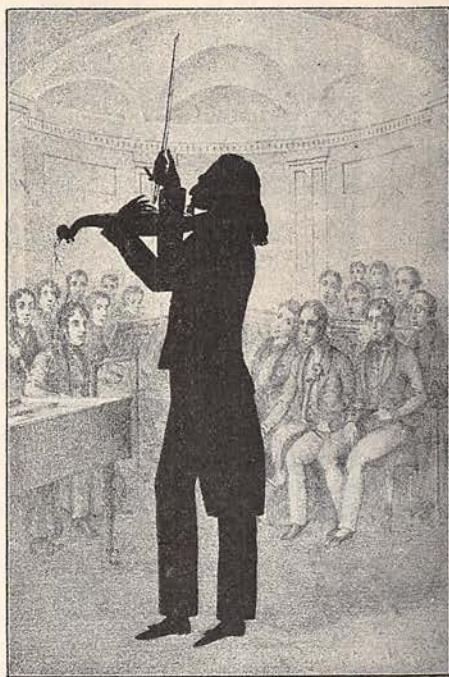
Auguste Edouart

AUGUSTIN AMANT CONSTANCE FIDÈLE EDOUART.

Germany, no less than France and England, shared in the modern revival of silhouetting. In 1780 a German follower of Lavater wrote a volume in which he claimed the shadow portrait as a specimen of true art when compared with the "daub

of the day" (the day of Reynolds, of Romney, and of Raeburn!). "This art," he says, "is older than any other. In Arcadie itself silhouettes were drawn. The shepherds of that golden age, in their happy simplicity, traced shadows of their beloved on the sand—to worship in absence. From silhouettes came contours, then monochrome, and finally, painting. The more perfect in the order of things displaces the less perfect. But now again, since this new culture of physiognomy, silhouettes are asked for, since these give a truer physiognomical idea than the daubs of the ignorant. The taste of man has revolted against affectation and returned to the simple."

Nearly all that is to be said for the silhouette is said here; and its reappearance in the train of Lavater gives it that touch of seriousness which makes it kin to science and to art. Much has happened since then. The "apothecary artist," as Mr. Ruskin calls the photographer, has arrived, and has focussed the silhouettist out of existence. In theory, his art is as defensible now as it was in the days of the German enthusiast in physiognomy; and on the score of simplicity, where ten applauded it a century ago, a thousand would applaud it now. Yet it must be owned that in even so simple a thing as the catching of a shadow Nature may herself be violated. A shadow is nothing if not shadowy. A form so vague and flitting cannot be interpreted by black paper pasted upon white. Precision is foreign to it, and so is permanence; though, on that latter score, he need not throw stones who admires the marble muslin frills of modern Italian sculpture in all the



Nicholas Paganini

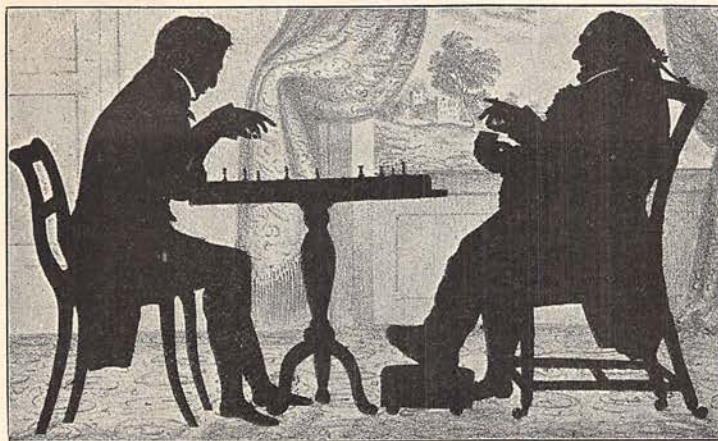
NICHOLAS PAGANINI.

glass-houses of Europe. Man however is said to be never happy unless he is catching something—an element of sport which perhaps gives a zest to the catcher of shadows. Silhouettes

became household possessions even where possessions were few. The sempstress who had

"A wall so blank—my shadow I thank
For sometimes falling there,"

could make her gratitude lifelong by calling in a poor old professor of the art from the nearest garret; while my lady, in the intervals of sitting to Gainsborough, did not



CHECKMATE.

disdain to lend her lovely outline to the "black art."

In course of time machinery usurped the functions of the human hand. The pantograph traced in reduced size the outline of a shadow picture thrown by a candle on to a sheet of white paper. A simpler machine was in the form of a long metal

rod, one end of which passed over the profile; while the other, terminating in a point fixed to a universal joint, accurately reproduced it on a small scale. Sometimes the point was replaced by a knife, which traced and cut out the likeness at the same time.

Every town, and almost every village, was periodically visited by the caravan-housed professor, who for sixpence would supply a likeness by the royal patent machine and throw in a frame. For an increased fee he would cut papa, mamma, and the whole tribe of little ones, whose likenesses would be stuck on to a sheet of white cardboard in a mathematically straight row, the sizes gradually diminishing until the vanishing point was reached by baby, or perhaps a little dog. Cats when cut had a knack of coming out uncommonly like goats or donkeys, and for this reason were tabooed in family groups. Single portraits generally stopped short at the waist. Hands, when attempted by the unskilful, could not fail to resemble glove-stretchers, and for this reason were kept discreetly out of sight.

The silhouettists worth talking about dispensed with any such extraneous aid. They exercised, while cutting out the profile with a pair of scissors from direct observation of the sitter, and without any reference to his shadow, some of the qualities of an artist sketching with brush or pencil.

One of the first and best silhouettists who practised in this country was Augustin



“OH! HOW DO YOU DO?”

Amant Constance Fidèle Edouart, who was born at Dunkerque in 1788, and found his way to London as a refugee in 1815. A soldier in his earlier years, Edouart had served under Napoleon, and was decorated. By his marriage, in 1816, with Emilie Laurence Vital, he had two sons and two daughters, the elder of the sons, the Rev. Augustin Gaspard Edouart, being now Vicar of Leominster.

It was in 1825 that Edouart took to silhouette cutting as a profession. Spending an evening with some friends, he was shown profile likenesses of some of the family taken with a machine. These Edouart condemned; but the daughters pronounced them perfect. Challenged to do something better, Edouart seized upon a pair of scissors and the cover of a letter, and putting the father in position, “in an instant I produced a likeness.” The paper being white, the snuffers were resorted to for blacking it over: natural skill triumphed over inexperience and difficulty. The mother’s likeness was taken with equal facility and exactness; and Edouart’s career as a silhouettist had begun. Dr. Magendie, the portly Bishop of Bangor, was the first patron, and of his portrait forty copies were ordered. Edouart’s charge of five shillings for each silhouette



JOHN’S FUNNY STORY TO MARY THE COOK.

compared extravagantly with the nimble shilling which was the recognized fee of silhouettists of the baser sort.

Edouart became something of an authority on the art and wrote a book about it,



Daniel O'Connell

DANIEL O'CONNELL.

now very scarce. It is entitled *A Treatise on Silhouette Likenesses*, by Monsieur Edouart, Silhouettist to the French Royal Family, and patronised by His Royal Highness the late Duke of Gloucester, and the principal nobility of England, Scotland and Ireland; London: Longmans & Co., 1835. The text, relating to himself and his doings, is enlivened by illustrations, some of which are here reproduced. The likenesses may fairly be regarded as the best ever produced by means of a pair of scissors and a piece of paper. His nimbleness was such that he even made many satisfactory portraits from description. A silhouette would be pointed out in his rooms as somewhat resembling the person whose likeness was required, and from a few hints as to the nose being too long, the chin too pointed, or what not, he would in a very few minutes produce a profile that was smilingly paid for—not a bad test of success.

Even the sitters of the silhouettist had their little vanities. Edouart grows irritable with a man who modified his projecting lower lip by sucking it in, destroying at the same time all chance of a striking likeness. The corpulent man made desperate efforts to be thin—for when does the figure appear to such disadvantage as in the uncompromising blot of black? Children in their innocence

he loved to take, and succeeded in almost retaining the charm of the flower-like profile. Edouart held severely to the limitations of his art. He foreswore the ways of those who added brush work to scissor work, whether a few gold hairs, or a white cravat and frill. His portraits he determined should depend for their effect on the outline only, with no extraneous aid beyond that of an accessory background.

The artist, no less than the sitter, had little vanities of his own. Doubtless Edouart felt himself better than his class. What was, as a rule, a mere means of livelihood to a mountebank, was to him the serious exercise of a talent. His sensitiveness to social slights finds a record in his pages. Once he had a letter of introduction to a well-known public character, who received him among many friends with open arms. Presently his host slipped out of his coat and said that he was quite ready for "a little diversion." Edouart was puzzled, and, seeing that something was wrong, asked that the letter of introduction might be read. It opened—"My dear friend, I take this opportunity to recommend to your notice Monsieur Edouart, the celebrated pugilist." When it was explained that profilist was the word every one, says the chagrined artist, turned his back. Another time—and there were a great many of these invidious other times—a stately proprietress would not "bemean" herself by letting lodgings to "a man who does them common black shades."

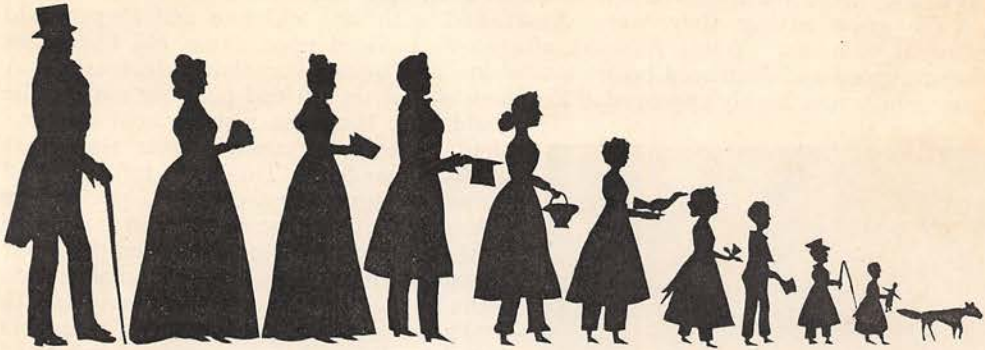
As a set off however Edouart was presented in 1830 to Charles X., ex-King of France, at Holyrood Palace, whose likeness in a paper of four thicknesses he cut in the presence of the Royal family and suite. The little Prince, the Duc de Bordeaux, took one, his sister another, the Duchesse de Berri a third, and the fourth was handed to the Duchesse d'Angoulême. All declared that



PATENT SCREW FOR
FIVE SHILLINGS.

the likeness was perfect, his Majesty being represented "in his usual mood of thoughtfulness in walking about the room."

It cannot be said that the shadow portraits always pleased his sitters. Edouart tells us of a lady who came to him with her husband, of whom she was anxious to have a likeness. When the portrait was finished she said she did not know it, and so



Papa. Mamma. Miss. Tom. Kate. Maggie. Lucy. Dick. Bobby. Nanzy. Byou.

Copied from an Original

FAMILY IN A ROW.

another was taken, and another, and yet another, till at last twenty had been separately cut out. Edouart lost his temper and refused to take any more or to receive payment for what he had done. The wife besought him to try once more, and his reply was to place the twenty profiles one on top of another, "which showed at once they were all exactly alike." She went home very much disappointed, and later in the day the



FAMILY GROUP.

husband returned saying that he had no peace at home and another trial *must* be made. Edouart told him to go away and come back at a quarter before seven, and appointed seven for his wife to meet him. The sitter was punctual. Edouart fastened a white cloth across the room, putting him behind in a sitting posture, a light being placed so as to cast the shadow of his profile on the cloth. The wife appeared a few minutes later and asked for her husband. The lamp in front was put out and her husband's profile was distinctly seen on the cloth. Edouart asked her if she knew that living

silhouette, but she stared without any sign of recognition. She looked and looked but could not tell whose it was, when Edouart pushed aside the cloth and showed her her husband in the flesh. The story winds up, as such a story should, by the wife admitting her want of perception and paying for the portraits.

When Edouart first began to cut out paper likenesses it was on the understanding that if they were not approved others would be taken. Some of his clients returned in a day or so saying they were dissatisfied with the old one and they would destroy it at home. When Edouart afterwards insisted upon these old likenesses being returned and destroyed before a new one was begun, complaints decreased. A young gentleman highly approved of his likeness, but on a friend pointing out that he would look better in a dress coat (he was taken in a frock) another was somewhat rudely demanded. This was refused, and the sitter ultimately declined to pay for the first and only likeness; so Edouart in revenge cut the body of the silhouette from the waist downwards into a screw, made an alteration in the top of the hat and wrote underneath—"Patent screw for five shillings." In this altered condition the silhouette was exhibited in Edouart's window, where it was recognized by amused friends, and it was not long before satisfactory terms were made with the artist.



WELL MATCHED.

Edouart was an early riser, and indefatigable in his work. To preserve a steady hand he was obliged to be most particular in his diet, and could not venture on strong tea, coffee or spirits. He had a variety of ingeniously arranged ready-prepared backgrounds lithographed in a light neutral tint, of which that behind the excellent portrait of Daniel O'Connell is a good example; and in the drawing of special backgrounds he employed skilled assistants. The fingers, hidden by the *Times* forming part of the background, are cut short off in the original silhouette and meet the edge of the newspaper, the deception being perfect. O'Connell was seen by Edouart but once—in the Chamber of Commerce at Dublin. He returned home and cut out the portrait from memory, a feat performed, as will be seen, with singular success. In his compositions he did his best to steer clear of the gradually diminishing family group of the day—papa, mamma, miss, Tom, Kate, Maggie, Lucy, Dick, Bobby, Nanny, and four-footed, curly-tailed Bijou. He asks us to compare with this his own family group, which he tells us renders the effect of the perspective "at once elegant and natural." *Autres temps, autres mœurs*, and we must not be too hard on a really gifted man whose work in its own kind was high above that of his contemporaries.

If silhouetting be allowed to possess an artistic side at all, Edouart may be credited with being its best exponent. Perhaps those who will not recognize art in the mere outlining of the human profile have been unfortunate in the silhouettes they have seen—spiritless specimens still lingering on the walls of wayside farmhouse parlours. The vexed question may be summed up in a sentence when it is said that in principle this art of outline is pure, but in practice and material, unpleasant. What Edouart made of it as a means of presenting expression and the habit and attitude of the personality he studied, should convince the most reluctant how entirely the faculty of watchfully and intelligently apprehending character makes itself felt by any medium it may use. The very grotesqueness of these black-patch pictures is turned to purpose by the hand of the master who finds it framed for the purpose of caricature, and even for that whole art of minor portraiture to which caricature is so dangerously allied.