

ANTOINE WIERTZ.



"THE MAN OF THE FUTURE REGARDING THE THINGS OF THE PAST."—[SEE PAGE 829.]

AMERICANS who visit Brussels rush to see the bare battle-field of Waterloo, and buy relics, made in the factories of Manchester and Birmingham, with all that enthusiasm for the past which finds its ridiculous side in the woman who wept piteously at the grave of Washington—with all that love of things in themselves uninteresting, but associated with the great, which made the tavern-keeper label and put away on a shelf the water-bucket on which General Grant sat down one day and smoked. The ladies eagerly flit about among the sellers of lace, or dwell enchanted over the little shops in the Galerie de St. Hubert; they visit the Cathedral of St. Gudule; they stare at the spire of the Hôtel de Ville and the statue of Godfrey de Bouillon, and go away fancying they have seen whatever is worth seeing in and about Brussels. *Bradshaw* is obeyed, and there being nothing in *Bradshaw* about the Wiertz Gallery, they go away serenely oblivious of the fact that they have not seen the most interesting sight in Brussels, and one of the most interesting in the world.

The extraordinary paintings, as well as the sculptures, in the Wiertz Gallery are all the work of one hand—that of Antoine Wiertz, son of a tailor in the Ardennes. The tailor had been a soldier, and entertained a dream of glory. He transmitted the fire of

his ambition to the son, where it became a steady and consuming flame, burning with clear, pure light, and filling the boy's soul with a spirit which would have been appreciated grandly among the Greek Stoics, but which seemed Quixotic in this practical nineteenth century. He might have lived in luxury by his art, but he preferred to live in abject poverty for his art. His thirst for fame was insatiable—his contempt for fortune incredible. The story of his life is as curious and pathetic as the works of his genius are fantastic and unique.

Wiertz was born in 1806, in the old town of Dinant, on the banks of the river Meuse. At an age when other children play, this child occupied himself with the toys of art. He made drawings almost before he could run alone, and tried to color them with berry juices, plants, bits of clay. He carved curious figures with his jackknife. One of the triumphs of his babyhood was a wooden frog which he had cut with his knife, and which was so marvelous an imitation of the living creature that visitors to the tailor's shop tried to kick the counterfeit reptile into the street. A captain of gens-d'armes who tried to pierce the wooden frog with his sword was so amazed by it that he talked about it every where he went, and the news coming to the ears of M. Paul Maibe, an art connoisseur at Dinant, he visited the

boy, and became his patron in a small way; that is to say, he took him home and had him taught music and drawing—for the boy had an aptitude for music too. The result was that at the age of fourteen Wiertz could teach his drawing-master, not only, but he had acquired a surprising facility at engraving, in which latter art he was entirely self-taught. He made wood-cuts of his own original drawings, and having made the cuts, he himself printed from them; besides which he could play on some half a dozen different musical instruments, but of this art he made little or no use in after-life. At so early an age as this the boy's soul became fired with a passion for Rubens, and his patron finally took him to Antwerp. There the kind-hearted man did what he could for his little friend—found him excellent masters, and got him a pension of about fifty-six dollars from the king—and left him to make his way. On this paltry sum the boy lived, practicing the most rigid economies. He had no pleasures, no occupations, outside his art. In one of his letters to his mother, to whom he was tenderly devoted all his life, he wrote, "Except for food, I hardly spend two farthings." His lodging was his studio, and that studio was a miserable corner in a granary, without fire and without lights at evening, the roof so low that as his stature increased he could not stand upright in it, but went about stooping. Here he wrought all day long on the paintings which he already designed to open the door of fame, and in the darkness of night either went out and studied, or remained in his den and solaced his loneliness with wild, weird music. In winter, in the intensest cold, he worked still, almost without ceasing, in a sort of ecstasy, as wretched in his externals as a beggar, as happy in his sublime passion for art as any king, or, better, as any lover. For six years he so dwelt and so lived, and in his scorn of physical comforts—not to speak of luxuries, pleasures—was as stoical as Diogenes. If he could have painted in a tub, he would have lived in a tub.

Tempting offers were made him to paint for money, but he would not. To one connoisseur who offered him a large sum for one of his studies, Wiertz made a reply worthy to live among the celebrated speeches of genius. "Keep your gold," he said; "it is the murderer of art." This sentence strikes the key-note of this remarkable man's anthem of life. He would never sell his works. Hence the gallery in Brussels to-day crowded with the efforts of his fanciful and grotesque genius, while out in the world you should seek in vain for one of his pictures. Portraits form the only exception to this statement, for portraits he painted now and then throughout his life as "pot-boilers." To the day of his death he adhered firmly

to the programme which he laid down when he was twenty, as the only noble one for artists—for Wiertz wrote also, much and well, about the art he loved so passionately. "In an epoch when mechanism is preferred to expression," he said, "one must have courage enough to imitate the great Poussin, and paint for posterity; and, struggling always against bad taste, know how to remain poor, in order to remain a great artist."

In the twenty-sixth year of his life Wiertz went to Rome, and consecrated himself to the work of producing a masterpiece. It was his dream to fasten on a heroic canvas the grand poetry of the Grecian epopee. He read and re-read the *Iliad* of Homer. "Like the conqueror of Darius," he said, "I keep him under my bolster. It is singular how the reading of Homer frenzies me. I think continually of the struggle between Ajax and Hector. It is these who transport me most when I think of producing a great work. They inspire me with a sort of heroism, and the desire to combat the grandest masters. To give myself emulation, I dare throw down a challenge to the greatest colorists. I want to measure myself with Rubens and Michael Angelo."

In another man this might have seemed mere bombast; but Wiertz proceeded at once to put his aspirations into practice. He entered upon the work of painting on an enormous canvas that majestic picture which, under the title of "The Greeks and Trojans contending for the Body of Patroclus," rivets the admiring gaze of the lover of art who visits the gallery in Brussels more powerfully, perhaps, than any other picture there. His first great work, I am decidedly of the opinion that it is his grandest. The dimensions are gigantic. The canvas stands thirty feet in height, and is twenty feet wide. The central figures are the beautiful nude corpse of Patroclus, and Menelaus in a divine fury seeking to drag it to the Grecian camp. He is aided in this purpose by a throng of Grecian warriors, while the Trojans struggle to bear the body away to the city. A vigorous Trojan has seized the body by the legs, when he is forced back by the lance of Ajax, which breaks with the strength of the effort. Another Trojan, seizing the body by the feet, strives with rigid muscles and bent body to bear off the prize. Hector and Æneas are active in the struggle on behalf of the Trojans. The combatants exhibit every appearance of profoundest fatigue, for it is now the close of the long day during which this gigantic struggle was maintained. The coloring of the work is superb—every tone of flesh is there, the flushed vigor of the combatants, the ghastly pallor of the dead and the dying, the pouring red blood, the shades of falling night throwing boldly into relief the varieties of chiaro-oscuro in the warrior throng. No man can stand before this work and say that

"THE GREEKS AND TROJANS CONTENDING FOR THE BODY OF PATROCLUS."



Wiertz has not grandly borne out his purpose of combating the grandest masters. It is perhaps too much to say that any painter has ever fairly rivaled Rubens, but it is sufficient to say of Wiertz that he has more nearly approached this master in strength and majesty of conception, and in perfection of

coloring, than any other modern artist has done.

The history of this picture is a sort of type of Wiertz's whole career in art. It created a profound sensation in Rome, where it was first exhibited. When Thorwaldsen saw it he said of Wiertz, "This young man is a gi-

ant." Flushed with success, the artist took his picture to Liege, where he placed it on free exhibition (he never in his life allowed himself to realize a farthing of profit from his great works, even in this indirect manner), and supported himself and his old mother again, as formerly, by painting portraits as his "pot-boilers." His cup of glory in Belgium ran over at the brim. He was the lion of the hour; critics discussed and lauded in column upon column; the Academy of Antwerp tendered him a banquet. And now he turned his eyes on Paris. The great canvas was sent off to the French capital for exhibition at the Louvre. Disaster overtook it on the road. The expenses of transportation were great, and the work was detained at the custom-house. It was actually on the point of being sold for the duties, when it was rescued, but it arrived too late for the exhibition. It remained unseen in Paris till the following year, when it was received for exhibition, and placed in the "Salon d'Honneur"—but, alas! in a bad light, and so high up that it attracted very little attention. The blow was a fearful one to Wiertz. For this he had struggled so long and so nobly—he was now thirty-two—for this! To see his masterpiece ignored, made nothing of, when he had counted on seizing glory at a bound by its means. He suffered that most distressing of all feelings, the humiliation of an artist who, seeing his great work fail of applause, begins to doubt his own powers, and to ask himself whether, after all, the world may not be just in its light estimate of him, and he the victim of his own conceit. There is no doubt that this experience gave a tinge of melancholy to the whole subsequent life of the great painter.

The penchant for the horrible, the grotesque, and the fantastic which Wiertz possessed in so marked a degree appears to have been developed more fully after this period in his career. It is foreshadowed in the "Patroclus," but it does not govern there. Indeed, it is doubtful whether a more beautiful representation of a dead man was ever presented on canvas than is seen in this picture; but Wiertz was not ruled by the love of the beautiful, and this fact was suddenly and powerfully illustrated in his second great work—which he entered upon very soon after his Paris failure. Returning to Liege, and again settling down with his old mother, he obtained from the town the privilege of stretching another enormous canvas in an abandoned church, which now became his studio. This canvas was fifty feet high by thirty feet wide, and he attacked his new subject with a sort of fury. Huge demons, writhing in every horrible contortion; avalanches of blasted rocks hurling into the bottomless pit; slowly the "Revolt of Hell" grew into shape. It was a Titanic work,

but it did not reach the greatness of the "Patroclus."

At the same time he competed for a prize for the best eulogium of Rubens, which was offered by the city of Antwerp in 1840, on the occasion of the inauguration of the great master's statue. He won the prize over all competitors, his eulogium being instinct with the same fire which blazes on his canvas.

It was in 1848 that Wiertz established himself in Brussels. His mother was dead; he was alone in the world. He had now one sole purpose in life—to possess a large studio and exhibition-room, upon whose walls he might hang his pictures, never to be disturbed more. Painters with Wiertz's grand aspirations, and his love for the colossal, have in all ages and countries perceived but one road to their goal—that is, by working under the patronage of either church or state. Individuals, however wealthy, are not rich enough to buy, nor have they the space in which to hang, these colossal works. Rubens, Raphael, and Jules Romain all worked either for kings or popes. So in modern time did Cornelius, Kaulbach, and Schnorr in Germany, and Delacroix, Delaroche, and Flandrin in France. Their paintings hang on the walls of either palaces or churches. But Wiertz would no more sell his works to popes and sovereigns than he would sell them to private individuals. He resisted every temptation, refused every offer, that he might retain in his possession and concentrate under one roof all the productions of his genius. An offer was made to him of a sum equal to sixty thousand dollars for his "Triumph of Christ," the first production of his brush in Brussels, but he refused it. "I can not sell my picture," he said, "because to-morrow I may find something in it to correct." This work—the "Triumph of Christ"—was painted in an abandoned manufactory in Brussels, and fairly shares with his "Patroclus," the honor of being his best work. It was immediately recognized as such, in Brussels, and so profoundly was it appreciated that it became the lever by which was opened to him that door which he had long besieged. It placed him in the first rank of living artists, without dispute, and led the government to build for Wiertz his long-desired studio, on condition that the painter should give his works forever to Belgium, to remain undisturbed on the walls of the building where they now are, on free exhibition to the end of time. Therefore was built the large museum on the outskirts of Brussels, mentioned at the opening of this article. It is built of brick, inexpensively, but from the picturesque designs of Wiertz himself, in imitation of one of the ruined temples of Pæstum. Time has covered the structure with a rich mantle of ivy, and, situated in the midst of

lovely grounds, it is in itself a sight worth seeing. Before he died Wiertz had completely covered the walls within with the works of his brush, and peopled it with a multitude of queer contrivances for the production of fantastic effects in viewing some of his smaller works. Here you peep through a crevice in a rude board fence upon a ghastly picture of a murderess cutting up her own babe and putting its members in a pot upon a stove—the wild frenzy of starvation-born madness glaring in her eyes—and you seem to be a secret spectator of this frightful deed, transpiring within the lonely room into which you are thus furtively looking through a crevice. In another place you can only look upon a picture of a group of arctic travelers through a round hole in which you perforce insert your face. By a cunning arrangement of a mirror your face is reflected directly under the fur cap of one of the figures, upon its broad shoulders, and the consequence is that this figure appears to be alive—its eyes wink, and if you smile it smiles in return. A number of dramatic effects of this tricky character are produced by similar contrivances, the pranks of a grand genius in its most fantastic moods.

Established in this studio, Wiertz labored incessantly. Still a stoic in his philosophy—still scorning pleasure, rejecting luxury, indifferent even to ease—he met the bare necessities of life by painting, as formerly, portraits as “pot-boilers.” He refused, however, to affix his signature to these portraits, or in any way to acknowledge them. They sold on their merits alone for sums ranging from sixty to two hundred dollars, according to his freak or his momentary need. They were hastily done; he would give but little time to them—time was too precious: he wanted it for the work he loved. Portrait painting was to Wiertz what copying music was to Jean Jacques Rousseau.

One of his profoundest occupations in his new atelier was the bringing to perfection of a process for painting by which the merits of fresco and of oil should be combined. In the chemical researches which he pursued with a feverish ardor he undermined his health, and planted the seeds of comparatively early death—comparatively early, because, though he was fifty-nine when he died, so ascetic a life had he led, absolutely without the slightest dissipations or indulgence of the appetites, with his naturally robust constitution, he was a man to have lived to a very advanced age. The fault of oil-painting is that it demands a specially favorable light in order to be seen to advantage; and in such large canvases as Wiertz affected for his grandest works it is simply impossible to obtain a light in which every part of the picture is seen to advantage in one comprehensive glance. The light which suits one portion of the picture is reflected,

mirror-like, from another portion. The fault of fresco-painting, on the other hand, is that, applied on mortar, it does not suit a damp climate like that of Belgium. Besides this, however, there is the equal objection, to an artist so insatiable as Wiertz, that while it demands rapid execution it does not permit of retouching. He aimed to be able to paint on canvas with the same effect as upon walls; and after long searching Wiertz discovered what he called his *peinture mate*—unpolished painting. Artists differ widely in their estimate of the value of this discovery. In its favor it is urged that all reflection is done away with; that the canvas retains all its flexibility, and can be placed in any light without any shadow being cast over it; that the layer of color is so thin there is no danger of cracking, of peeling off, nor of running—accidents which have compromised the preservation of more than one picture, and which menace modern paintings more than the ancient, as is proved by the example of Leopold Robert's “Harvesters” and Girodet's “Deluge;” and finally, that while retouching can be done without being perceptible, there is an economy of ninety per cent. on the expense involved in ordinary paintings. On the other hand, it is contended by some that the *peinture mate* is feeble, colorless, and coarse; that it looks from a distance like rude tapestry, and near by like a rough canvas roughly bedaubed with a mixture of paste and oil-color. It is also asserted that Wiertz took his invention to the grave with him, the record of his process which he left behind being insufficient to enable any artist to follow it after him. This, however, is explicitly denied by the admirers of the *peinture mate*, who assert that many painters are now using it with the greatest facility and success, guided by Wiertz's account of his process published after his death. Between these disputing partisans I am unable to decide; but so far as my own observation guides my judgment, I am forced to conclude that the charge of coarseness is a weak one. Coarse or fine, the work Wiertz wrought by this process was grand. It does not so much matter whether genius works with the delicate tool of an Addison or the sledge-hammer of a Carlyle, when we view results.

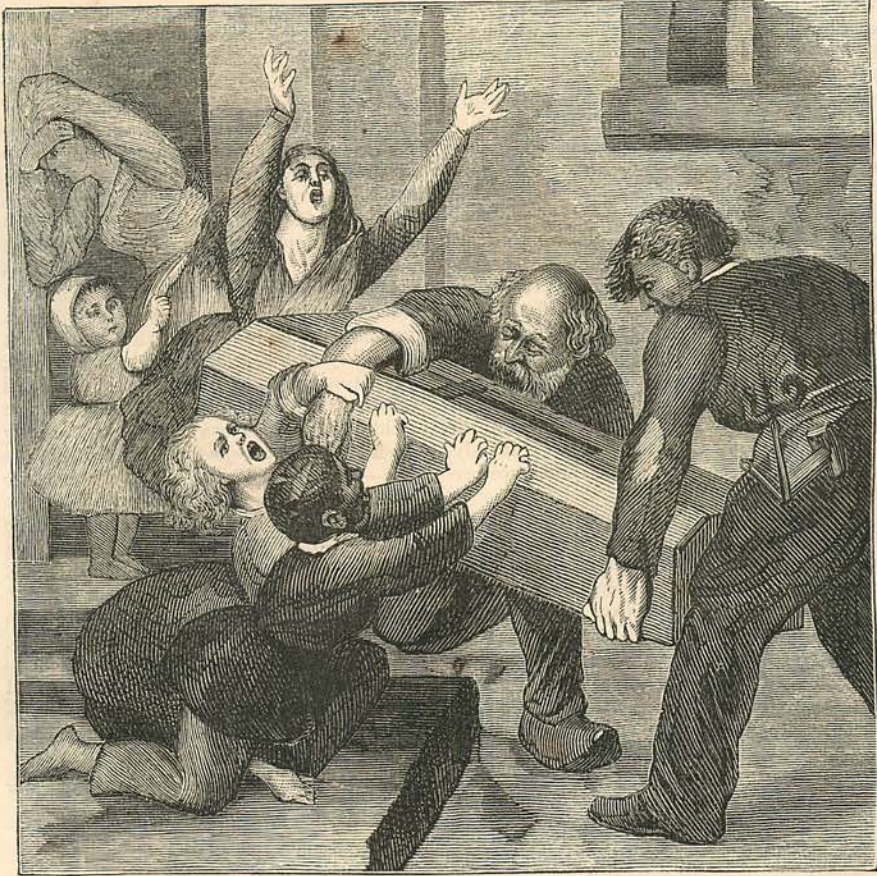
One of the noblest efforts of Wiertz's maturer genius is entitled “The Last Cannon,” and is done in the *peinture mate*. In his “Patroclus” the artist strove to fasten on canvas the Homeric poetry. In “The Last Cannon” it is his own poetic sentiments which he essays to translate in symbolic figures. The thought is unmistakably grand which speaks in this picture. On the earth the terrors of war are depicted; a great battle has just finished; here lies a mass of mutilated corpses, in the arms of one of which a bloody flag is clasped; there a young woman holds the dead



body of her husband on her knees; a father stretches forth to his daughter his mutilated arms. Above this horrible battle-field the genius of Civilization soars, her face glowing with avenging rage; the deity of Progress has seized and broken in two a large cannon; Civilization is triumphant amidst a throng

of philosophers, artists, and poets, representing peace, science, and the arts. To the right a genius is setting fire to the frontier posts which separate nations at enmity. A guillotine is burning in the distance. Above, behind Civilization, legions of freemen chant the praises of peace; poets and artists ex-

"THE LAST GANNON."



"THE ORPHANS."

change fraternal kisses; while at the extreme left a group of savages strive still to resist.

Another of the artist's grandest works, in a similar vein, is called "The Man of the Future regarding the Things of the Past." The man of the future is represented by a gigantic head—for the men of the future are to be giants of civilization as compared with the people of our day. With his wife and child looking on, the man of the future has gathered in his colossal palm certain curious toys of the present age, and is regarding them with a face which expresses curiosity, amusement, and a sort of divine contempt. How infinitely small to that majestic gaze seem the cannon, the thrones, the sceptres, the battle-flags, the arches of triumph of our day!

Two years before his death Wiertz painted the extraordinary picture called "The Orphans." It represents a common scene during a cholera season, two rude men bearing away a coarse box in which the body of a husband and father lies, the orphans clinging to it with screams of anguish, the wife

in the shadow of the doorway turning aside her head, unable to endure the distressing scene. The picture is most intense. One can almost fancy the screams of the children sounding in his ears. This vivid tableau preached a sermon so instantaneously effective and powerful when it was first exhibited that the incident is worth recording. It was at a charity concert for the benefit of orphans. Between the first and second parts of the programme this picture was suddenly unveiled. The effect was thrilling. No orator could have spoken with tongue so eloquent. A munificent contribution was made on the spot amidst a scene of great excitement.

This bit of sensationalism was like Wiertz. He dearly loved to startle and surprise. Grandly manifested, this spirit put a tremendous vigor and movement into his colossal figures, as in the "Patroclus" and "The Last Cannon." But it was manifested in the most playful and trifling ways too. A child, without love of art, without capacity to appreciate the grand underlying spirit of Wiertz's large works, would yet be enter-

tained by these little surprises—such, for example, as the neglected table, on which appear strewn a number of objects—an easel, some dirty brushes, a dried fish—which on closer observation prove to be merely painted there. There are several rude studies, boxed about with the odd board fences, and visible only through an aperture too high up for any child to mount. But children stand fascinated before the colossal paintings where the giants are, for they are the incarnation of giant wonder-tales. Some critics of Wiertz have deemed that this playful side to his genius—this love of startling and surprising, and devising dramatic effects—degraded his genius. Such people, I fancy, would have genius always riding a high horse. If Wiertz chose to find his recreations in toying with his art, instead of in the ordinary amusements of men, I certainly see no reason to carp at this, since we are the gainers.

I have not dwelt on Wiertz's sculptures, because they are of small account in comparison with the works of his brush. He accomplished nothing grand in this department of art, though he always entertained a purpose of giving the world a great work in marble. In the last year of his life he, indeed, modeled three groups which would have been grand if they had ever been produced, as he intended, in colossal dimensions on a public square in Brussels. These groups were to symbolize the history of humanity.

Another design which Wiertz entertained in his later years was the enlargement of his gallery, for it was now filled. "What would you say," he wrote to a friend, "if suddenly a museum three times as large as mine were to present itself to your imagination?—if the least important work that it is to contain were to bear away the palm from all I have done up to the present time?" In this enlarged studio—or this projected addition to his present studio—he intended to paint a series of grand pictures, which he had already sketched out, and of which he had such an idea that he called all he had hitherto done merely the preface to his work. In the midst of these preparations he suddenly died, absorbed to his latest moment in the one love which had occupied his heart from his earliest childhood. In the delirium which preceded the hour of death he raved but of one thing—his art. "Oh, what beautiful horizons! Oh, what lovely faces! Quick, quick! My palette!—my brushes! What a picture I shall make! Oh, I will surpass Raphael!"

It is seven years since this artist died, and it is little to say that probably no man ever lived who worked for fame with such resolute determination, such indomitable industry, such stoical self-denial, and, aided by such unquestionable genius, to fall so far short of a world-wide renown. In truth, Wiertz

is hardly known at all to the world outside Belgium. We are familiar with the names of Verboeckhoven, Leys, Gallait, and other Flemish artists, not one of whom has an equal claim with Wiertz to the meed of fame. That Wiertz's name will outlive these others is certain, but his fame will spread but slowly, and for a simple reason. There have been grave discussions by wise writers in Europe of the reasons why Wiertz failed to make his influence more profoundly felt upon his age. It is pointed out that he was too grotesque; that he did not exalt beauty sufficiently in his works; that he lacked a true sense of the ludicrous; that he thought too highly of his *peinture mate*—and so on. A more practical and sensible reason, it seems to me, is this simple one—that he would not sell his pictures. The very stoic philosophy which made him reject all profit from his work—the very love of his art which made him refuse to let any picture go out into the world, where he could not retouch it if he should wish—interfered with his purpose of achieving wide contemporaneous fame. Brussels is, after all, but of comparatively slight importance as an art centre; and with his every work confined forever to Brussels, it was a moral impossibility that his fame should extend over the whole civilized world in one little half century. For contemporaneous fame a spice of worldly shrewdness is indispensable.

THE PERVERSE.

PERVERSE am I, perverse is he—
Fate or Spirit—I pursue;
I feel I breathe an alien air,
Yet all his shows give me no clew.

When his leafy elms and oaks
Spread deep verdure up above,
And birds and bees stir in the boughs,
Loud in song, and soft in love,

And round the shores of summer seas
White sparkling foam, blue rippling waves,
With crowding voices leaping up
The silver sand and tide-worn caves,

Again I question, and again,
To and fro by Beauty sent,
Tormented, longing, all perverse!
For whom, for what, this pastime meant?

In winter's muffled hours I watch
His snowy crystals weaving fast
A robe to cover naked earth,
As with lilies overcast,

Till breaks above a pearly light,
A sunset flush, and then a star,
Trembling with me that we exist—
And from the answer just as far!

The leaves decay, the birds depart;
The sea complains, the sky is gray:
Tormented, saddened, all perverse!
There is no pastime, might we say?