

TOMBS OF ENGLISH ARTISTS.

No. 16.—GEORGE VERTUE, F.S.A.

WHAT Vasari was to the artists of Italy, Vertue has been to the artists of England. But for his painstaking researches throughout a long life, we should be without that inestimable record of British Art, popularly known as "Walpole's Anecdotes of Painting in England." The cynic of Strawberry Hill was incompetent to the task of collecting materials for such a work; Vertue was untiring in this labour, travelling far and wide—in days when travelling was difficult and expensive—gathering facts about Art and artists; and, note-book in hand, visiting galleries and analysing their contents. Incessantly did he work in this way, a toil which he incurred purely for love of his subject; and though

"The labour we delight in, physics pain,"

there is due to George Vertue the respectful gratitude of all Englishmen, and English artists particularly, for his earnest investigation. At his death the large mass of material he had gathered passed into the hands of Horace Walpole, who, in the luxurious quiet of his toy-home at Twickenham, "digested and published" the whole; an easy task in comparison with that of Vertue, but a task that probably could not have fallen into better hands, for though occasionally cynicisms and biased criticisms appear, which are due to Walpole's pen, the notes of Vertue would have been but dry reading if they had been consigned to the arrangement of any bookseller's hack of that day. Walpole had a sincere estimation for the simple honesty of Vertue's character, and he also possessed enough experience of literary research to value fully the arduous industry of Vertue in collecting facts. He has never failed to record his sense of both in the memoir he has appended to the book from the memoranda Vertue left behind him.

The industry of Vertue's Art-life is attested in the long and varied list of engravings appended to this memoir. Never was labour more continuous, never was relaxation from it more toilsome than this collecting of notes for a history of Art in England. It was fortunate that Vertue lived at a time when remembrances were afloat of that peculiar era in English Art so full of confusion in any other pages than his own. Thus at York he conversed with the old engraver Francis Place, who had been intimate with Hollar, and who furnished him with valuable anecdotes of that amiable, industrious, and ill-rewarded man. A similar value attaches to all his notes. They are unique facts, which would have been lost but for him.

Vertue was born in the year 1684, in the parish of St. Martin's-in-the-Fields, and was apprenticed, at the age of thirteen, to an engraver, who was employed by the silversmiths to place arms and ornaments on their manufactures. His master failing in business, he completed his knowledge of engraving under Michael Vandergutch, a native of Antwerp, who had settled in England, and was much employed in book illustration. As soon as Vertue had completed his apprenticeship, and started on his own account, his father's death left a widow and several children unprovided for. "I was eldest," says Vertue, "and the only one who could help them." This he did with a manful self-sacrifice, which he cheerfully accepted; and his only remark on the subject is, that this "added circumspection in my affairs then, as well as industry to the end of my life." His merit and his character always brought him friends; his tastes ultimately associated him with noble patrons, and he became a member of the Society of Antiquaries, their acknowledged draughtsman and engraver, and to his *burin* we owe some of our most valued historic prints. So great was his conscientiousness that he absolutely refused to engrave for the booksellers unauthentic portraits, after the manner of Houbraken. In the pursuit of his art as antiquarian draughtsman, he travelled much over England, always collecting for his "Anecdotes of Painting." He was much patronized by the noble and the wealthy, but his own unselfish nature and scrupulous honesty never allowed him to profit largely thereby. He rated himself only as a diligent labourer; he treated his noble employers as friends, and he would have given his labour to them could he have afforded it.

His nature was essentially kindly; there are traces of it in all he did. He laments with the ardent simplicity of honesty the deaths of his patrons. In the curious drawing he made of himself and his wife, "in the very habits they were married in, Feb. 17, 1720," he has introduced his pet dog and that of his wife. They were affectionate dependants, who kept alive the healthy sympathies of his heart, which was always large

enough to reciprocate love for kindness wherever he found it.

As he grew older his chief regrets were from the loss of friends with whom he had been associated in the study of art and antiquities: his greatest loss was in Edward Harley, Earl of Oxford, the founder of the Harleian Library, now the chief ornament of our British Museum. Vertue records his sense of the loss in words of striking simplicity.

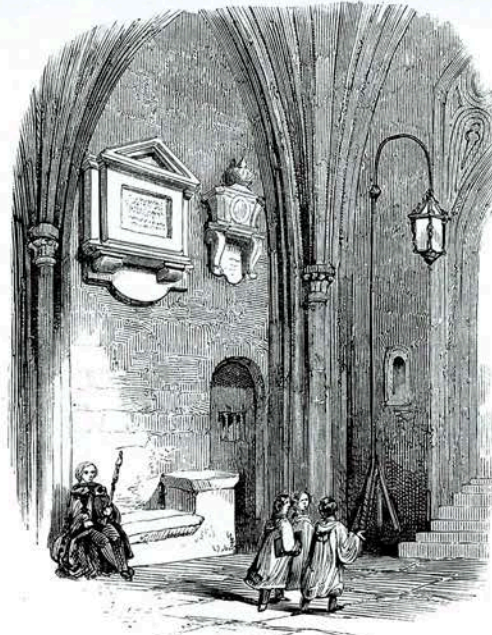


G. VERTUE AND HIS WIFE, IN THEIR MARRIAGE COSTUME.

He says,—“Death put an end to that life that was the support, cherisher, and comfort of many others who are left to lament—but none more heartily than Vertue.” Walpole adds a few words to this, which forcibly paints the deep-seated feeling of Harley's artist-friend:—“So struck was the poor man with this signal misfortune, that for two years there is an hiatus in his story—he had not spirit even to be minute.” Like many quiet natures, he felt as an enduring regret, what more impulsive

men might lament louder, and forget speedily. “He lost his friends,” says Walpole, “but his piety, mildness, and ingenuity never forsook him; he laboured almost to the last to leave a decent competence to a wife with whom he had lived in tender harmony,” and who survived him twenty years. He had no children, and died at the ripe age of seventy-two, on the 24th of July, 1756.

On the west wall of the cloister of Westminster Abbey is placed the tomb of the historian of English



TABLET TO THE MEMORY OF G. VERTUE.

Art. It simply records the date of his birth and death, beneath which is the following verse; it has all the prevalent faults of epitaph writing:—

“With manners gentle and a grateful heart,
And all the genius of the graphic art,
His fame shall each succeeding artist own,
Longer by far than monuments of stone.”

To this inscription was afterwards added, that “Margaret, his faithful wife, lies buried in the same grave. She died at the age of seventy-six, March 7, 1776.”

In the solemn cloister of Westminster many notable people lie; there is little to recall the modern world and its associations to any who may wander here: it is sacred to past ages, and the men who then lived. On quiet moonlight nights the deep solemnity of the place is as striking and impressive as if it was far removed from, instead of being in the centre of, “the mighty heart” of England. It is well that we have preserved to us some few such wholesome thinking-places.

F. W. FAIRHOLT.