

Sir Edward Burne-Jones, Bart.

BY L. T. MEADE.



SIR E. BURNE-JONES.
From a Photo. by F. Hollzer.

LT is the fashion to speak of the present day as realistic and prosaic. The spirit of mysticism and idealism is completely out of date. We are a hard-headed, money-loving race now, and have little time for the gentle graces. We do not believe in legend or myth; the days of chivalry and romance are over. Knights are nowhere to be found, and the poets have almost sunk into oblivion. We pride ourselves on this state of things, and believe that we see better and more clearly because the glamour is removed, and the morning of the world is at an end. We are now in our adolescence, and think scorn of the days of childhood. Notwithstanding this general prosaicness, however, there come moments in the lives of most of us when we regret the absence of that divine gift which men call imagination; we want to see things again from the glamour of childhood, and would be glad to accept the faith which has nearly died away. We get sick of being humdrum; at such moments, romance and legend appeal to us again; in short, we come to the inevitable moment of reaction; we reach the extreme edge of the pendulum and begin to swing back.

All Literature repeats this fact. The romance of Scott and Coleridge followed the classic formality of Gray and Thomson. It is a good sign of our own day that we are beginning to turn with relief from the ugly realism of the modern novel to the light fancy and stirring romance of Stevenson and other writers of his school.

In Art, too, the same thing occurs. We have our realistic painters and our painters of romance. Sir Edward Burne-Jones unquestionably takes the lead in the latter school. Above all other things, he is most remarkable for his vivid power of imagination, his strong sense of poetry, his idealism. In an age which is essentially without reverence or mystery, he stands aloof from the busy crowd, and paints canvas after canvas full of vague mysticism, of almost childlike longing to reach the secret which has never yet been revealed on sea or shore. The fact that Sir Edward Burne-Jones is such a popular painter shows that, after all, the imaginative quality in our hearts is more dormant than dead. He belongs to the age in which he lives, but he has never really mixed with it. He spends his days in the romance of the past. While not unmindful of that sad minor

key which underlies our present hurrying life, he lives himself more or less in a charmed atmosphere of eternal youth. This seems to me to be the dominant note in the greater part of his work.

A brief glance at some of his pictures may illustrate this statement.

In "The Golden Stair," one of the most popular and best known of Burne-Jones's works, we see at a glance a procession which seems to represent the essence of Spring, the very impersonation of glad and happy youth. Wonder may be perceptible on some of the faces, but care on none. The white doves on the window are not more innocent than these innocent and lovely maidens. They have decked themselves with wreaths, and as they trip down the golden stairs, and enter the portals of some life hitherto unknown, they make glad music.

This is perhaps one of the most beautiful pictures which the painter has ever placed on canvas. It seems to represent, though such a term is scarcely allowable, "Youth's Jubilee."

In "The Mirror of Venus" the note of youth is again struck, but the maidens have evidently advanced in the knowledge of good and evil since they first went down the golden stairs. Venus, in all her beauty, stands in their midst—their hearts quicken as they look into the magical pool. Among its water-lilies and forget-me-nots they are anxiously searching for some vision of their own future. Their faces express longing, and even a faint touch of the unrest and perplexity which are so characteristic of the present day.

In his two celebrated pictures, "Chant d'Amour" and "Love Among the Ruins," Sir Edward endeavours to show the power of Love. In the "Chant d'Amour," love is represented as the consecrating Spirit of Life; in his "Love Among the Ruins," it is the Great Consolation. In both these pictures the subject is treated from a mythical and

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spiritual point of view. In the "Chant d'Amour," the time is early morning; the sunrise streams through the church in the



Photographed by

"THE GOLDEN STAIR."

[P. Hollyer.

background, and falls full upon the maiden playing on the organ. The knight in armour sits spell-bound, almost at her feet; Love, with closed eyes and wings, blows the organ.

is in ruins; the briar rose grows over the lovely garden; the harp is silent. All would be blackness and desolation but for the fact that Love itself still lives. The reflection of



[F. Holtzer.

"THE MIRROR OF VENUS."

Photographed by

Here is love idealized—almost passionless.

None of

That unrest which men mis-call delight is perceptible here.

In "Love Among the Ruins" a much sadder note is struck. Love is indeed here the Consolation. All else is gone, the house

its sunshine is seen on the faces of the two lovers. The worst has not therefore come, for Love survives.

This beautiful picture is one of the painter's most popular works. Its exquisite and tender greys and blues can scarcely be surpassed. All is in tone with the subject.

"The Star of Bethlehem" is a new rendering of the old story which is interwoven into the life of each English child. Here are the mother and babe, the angel Gabriel stands near to watch the scene; his wings are folded, his hands clasped together, he looks as if he were just arrested in flight, as if he had just flown from the highest Heaven to witness this first triumph of the King of Kings. The kings from the East are presenting their gifts—gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. The sunlight glitters alike on the jewels and on the white lily blossoms and red roses

as studies in a single colour. "The Wood Nymph" looks out on the world from her throne in the heart of a laurel wood, the thick foliage which surrounds her is of every shade of green. "The Sea Nymph," on the other hand, is a study in blue.

The "Flamma Vestalis" is another type of the inexhaustible imaginative gift of this great painter. The look of serenity is very manifest on the fair face. This expression is not, perhaps, unminged with resignation. The maiden has given up the world, but under protest. The picture is very well



Photographed by]

"CHANT D'AMOUR."

[F. Hollyer.

which grow in the foreground of the picture. This is one of the largest water-colours ever painted, measuring 12ft. by 8ft.; as a work of art it is magnificent, but notwithstanding its subject, it does not seem to me so subtle and full of spiritual meaning as others which are less obviously religious.

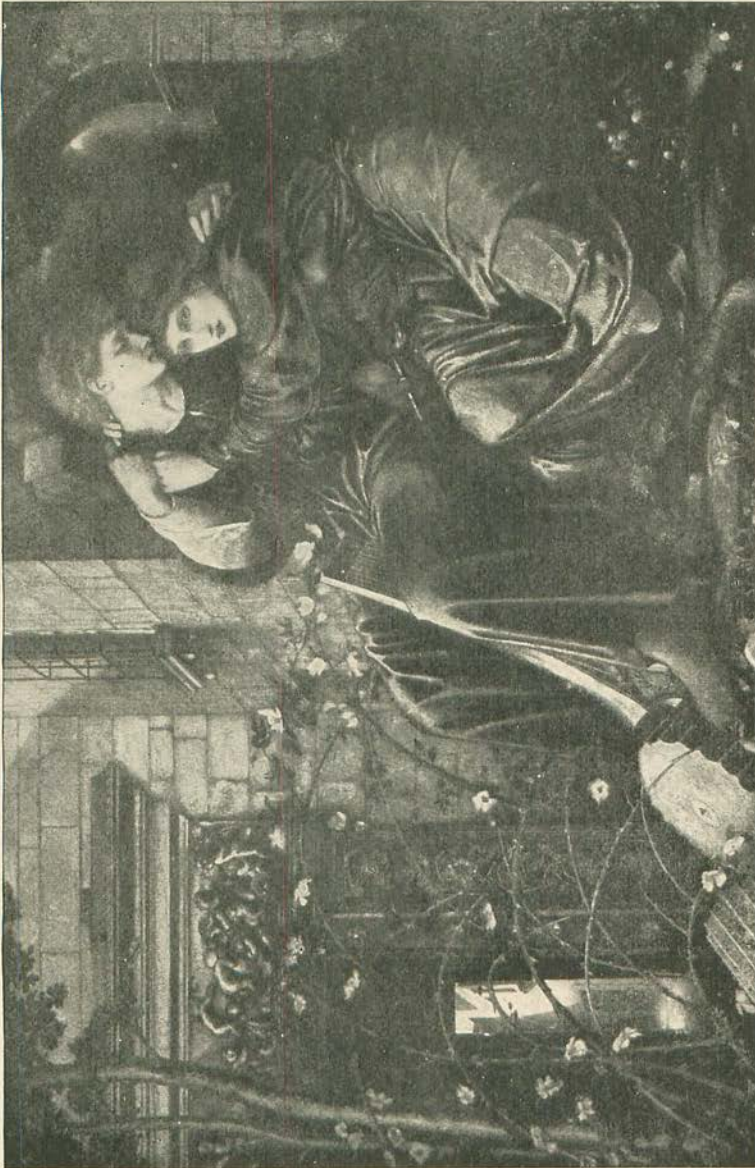
"The Wood Nymph," which is reproduced here, has a companion picture called "The Sea Nymph." Both these pictures were painted in 1880, and are considered more conventional than most of Burne-Jones's work. They are very interesting, however,

known, and is deservedly popular. The very beautiful picture, "Sponsa di Libano," or, as it is sometimes called, "The Winds Picture from the Song of Solomon," is a marvellous conception. The figures, which represent the North and South winds, the Bride who waits for her Beloved in the garden of lilies, have never been more exquisitely portrayed. Here, again, are the old, familiar themes, Youth and Love.

One of the painter's most remarkable pictures, which, alas! is little known, because no photograph has ever been taken

of it, is one which was painted in his early days, but which he has never surpassed in beauty of conception and idea. It is called "Christ Kissing the Merciful Knight." Those visitors who saw the collection of his pictures in the New Gallery two

met the murderer, who prayed earnestly for mercy in the name of Christ who had died on the cross that day. Hearing him plead in this name, the knight forgave him. In the evening, the Merciful Knight knelt at the chapel on the Hill of San Miniato. At that



[W. Holtyer.

"LOVE AMONG THE RUINS."

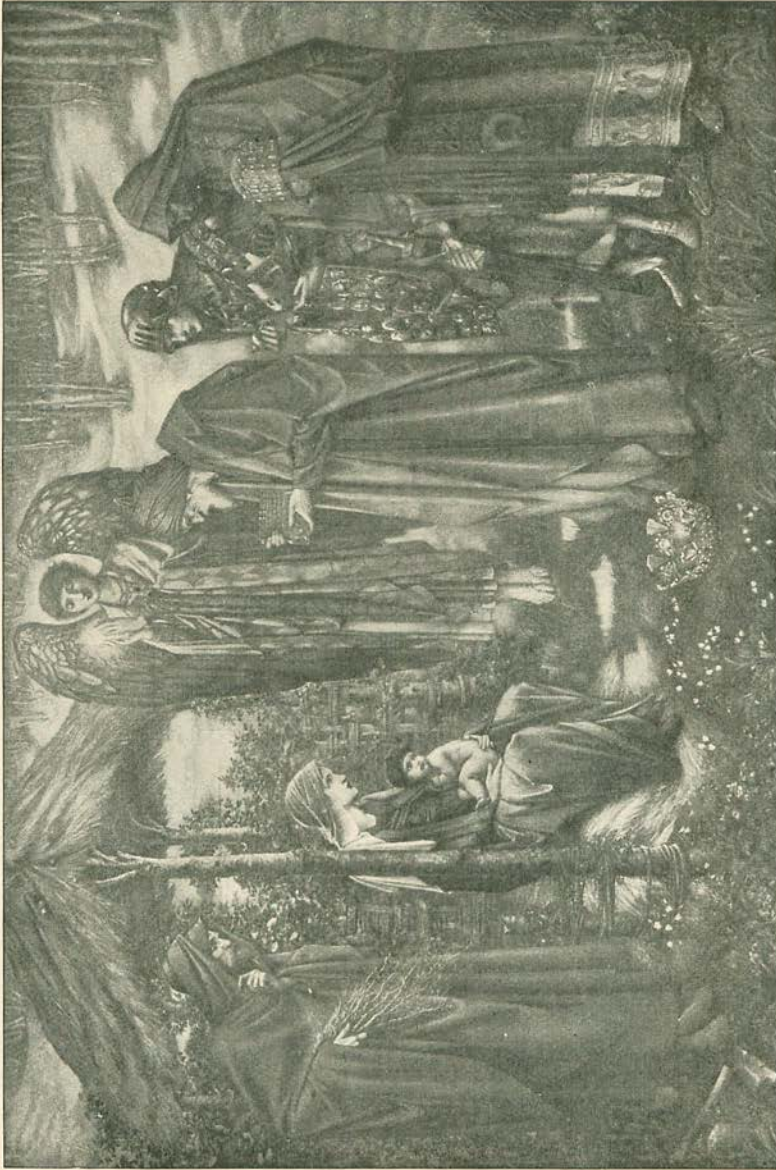
Photographed by J

years ago cannot fail to have remarked this work. The legend from which the picture is painted is as follows: A certain knight, St. Giovanni Gualberto, rode out on Good Friday to avenge his brother's death. He

moment a miracle occurred—the Christ on the crucifix bowed to kiss his cheek. Henceforth the warrior devoted himself to a religious life. Julia Cartwright thus describes the picture: "The forest back-

ground, with its clear pool of water and glancing sunlight, was the same which Rossetti had admired many years before, but the hedge of flowering roses recalls the Florentine hillside where the miracu-

him. The picture made a profound impression at the time; some were startled, and others repelled, by the strangeness of the conception, but it was impossible not to recognise the power and the originality of



[P. Hollier.

“THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM.”

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Photographed by]

lous event is said to take place. Here the good knight kneels, clad in steel armour, at the wayside shrine, and his pale face, worn and wearied with the struggle through which he has passed, gleams with a look of unearthly beauty as the image of Christ bends towards

the artist. All things, it was felt, were possible to the painter of this picture.”

To a nature like Sir Edward's the myths of the past prove an unfailing source of inspiration. Over and over again he turns back to them, rejecting more modern and less classical

themes. He takes the old nursery legends, the old, old romances, and clothes them with fresh life. His celebrated pictures, "The Briar Rose," "Pygmalion and Galatea," "The Story of Perseus," "The Romaunt of the Rose," and many others too numerous to mention, show abundantly where his fancy most loves to wander.

I do not feel qualified to speak of the

immensity and variety of his work. He has done much in every form of decorative art, especially in designs for stained glass and mosaic. With his friend, Mr. William Morris, he has revived decorative art in England; and now, not only in our cathedrals, but in quiet village churches, the beautiful windows, designed and executed by this pair, meet the eye. One lovely example is to be found at



Photographed by]

"THE WOOD NYMPH."

[F. Hollyer.

technical excellence of his work, but the wealth of colour and grace of form which characterize such pictures as "The Briar Rose" and "Pygmalion and Galatea" must be seen to be appreciated.

Those visitors who were privileged to see his splendid collection at the New Gallery can form little idea, even from this, of the

the east end of St. Philip's Church, Birmingham, the birthplace of the painter. It represents, on the right, the Nativity; on the left, the Crucifixion; the centre window is a picture of the Ascension.

Julia Cartwright gives a delightful account of another window, which must be truly splendid in its colouring and design. This



"FLAMMA VESTALIS."
Photographed by F. Hollyer.

window is to be found in the fine old church of Middleton Cheney, a village in South Northamptonshire. I quote from her own words:—

"Thirty years ago, the rector of this parish, Mr. W. E. Buckley, determined to make the windows of his church a complete record of Bible History. Mr. Morris filled the large East window with a picture of the Celestial Country, for which Mr. Burne-Jones designed the Adoration of the Lamb. Mr. Ford Maddox-Brown and other artists supplied cartoons for the remaining saints. In 1867, Mr. Burne-Jones designed the West window in the tower. Here the Three Children are seen walking in the flames, which seem to curl and leap about them as the evening sunlight streams through the glowing panes. Above, in the upper lights of the window, are the Six Angels, bearing in their hands the crystal spheres, which tell of the leafy bowers and clear waters of Paradise—the vision which

came to these martyrs in the flames. The famous pictures of the Days of the Creation were originally designed for this window, and repeated at Tamworth a year later."

There is scarcely any branch of art in which this painter has not laboured some time during his life—his decorations have even extended to articles of furniture, cabinets, pianos, organs. He has designed tapestry and needlework—decorations for tiles and bass-reliefs. In all these varied works he has, to quote from Mrs. Ady, "taken care to observe the principles of design, and the limits imposed by the capabilities of his material." She goes on to tell us that the great tapestry of the Adoration of the Magi, executed from his design by Mr. William Morris, now hangs in the chapel of Exeter College, a fitting memorial of that memorable friendship between the poet and painter, which had its origin in Oxford days. Sir Edward Burne-Jones has also turned his prolific fancy towards the illustration of books—his pencil studies of Virgil's Epic are masterpieces of exquisite finish and beauty.

When a boy or girl shows any special talent, it is a favourite question to ask whether he or she inherits the gift from parent or ancestor. In the case of Sir Edward, there was no hereditary tendency towards Art. He was born in the unromantic town of Birmingham, and grew up in its ugliness and dullness, far from all galleries and Art schools. He had not even story-books to gladden his eyes, and speaks now of the hungry



Photographed by

A STUDY.

[F. Hollyer.

gaze with which he used to look in at the booksellers' windows. At eleven years old he was sent to King Edward's School, and there he threw himself into the classic part of his education with much delight. Homer

The artist's father was anxious that the boy should take orders in the Church of England. In accordance with this wish he went to Exeter College, Oxford, in 1852, but he had little love for the routine of college



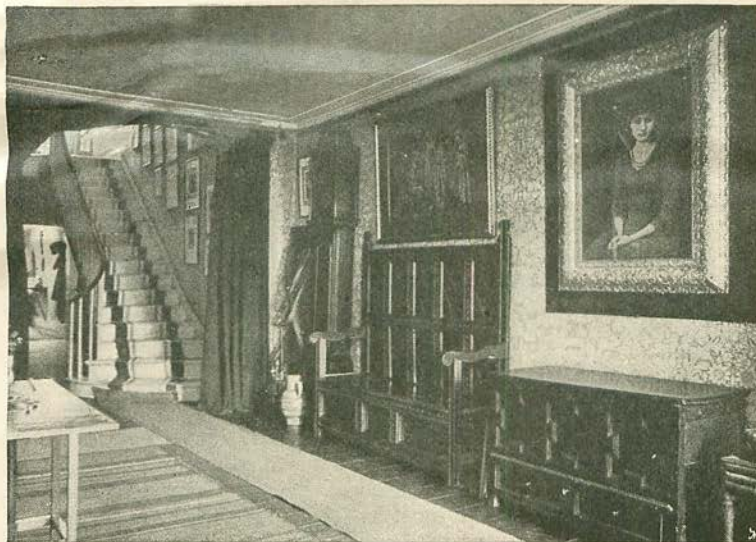
Photographed by]

"SPONSA DI LIBANO."

[F. Hollyer.

and Virgil were indeed congenial food to such a nature, and here he began first to make acquaintance with those wonderful myths and legends which he was to interpret with such splendour by-and-by.

life, and found lectures a weariness to the flesh. It was at Oxford, however, that he first met William Morris; he had also gone there with the intention of taking orders. A great friendship sprang up between these two,



From a

ENTRANCE HALL—THE GRANGE.

[Photograph.]

and after earnest talk and consultation, the young men determined to throw aside all other considerations and devote themselves heart and soul to the service of Art.

They came to London, where they met Rossetti, and other men of what was to be eventually the great pre-Raphaelite school.

From that moment Burne-Jones never turned aside from the real bent of his genius. He was twenty-three years of age when he really adopted Art as his profession. He had, therefore, much to learn, finding himself, to quote his own words, at five-and-twenty where he ought to have been at fifteen.

Perseverance and genius, however, overcame all obstacles, and, step by step, the great master ascended the steep Hill of Difficulty, until he finally reached his present lofty eminence.

In a paper like this, it would take too long to go minutely into the story of his life. To acquire any real success in Art is the work of a lifetime; to many patient workers

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success never comes; but where, to that subtle thing called genius, is added the indomitable spirit of persevering toil, the result is assured.

There are few painters more popular than Sir Edward Burne-Jones is at the present day. Not only in England, but in most continental towns we see reproductions from his beautiful pictures. He has worked for far more than fame; he has endeavoured to add

fresh beauty to the world, and to raise the art which he loves to a high place in every home in the land. But fame has also in a large measure come to him; he meets it with quiet dignity, and in his country home in the heart of London, allows it to trouble him very little.

For the purpose of writing this article, I went to visit him there last winter. When he first took possession of "The Grange," twenty-seven years ago, the house was truly in the country. It stood in the midst of fields, on the borders of London. This old,



From a

THE HOME STUDIO.

[Photograph.]

red-brick house was celebrated even before its present occupant took possession of it, for Richardson wrote his famous novels there, and Dr. Johnson and Hogarth were often to be seen under the old roof. "The Grange" now stands somewhat lonely in the midst of poor streets and small houses, but it still has its leafy trees and sheltered garden, and flowers are yet to be found there uninjured by London smoke. The painter finds his happiness in the old place, and has no apparent wish to change his quarters. In the summer he does much of his work in his beautiful garden studio; but when I last saw him he was in the home studio, where his winter work is principally carried on.

"I shall be glad to give you any information in my power," he said, in his genial way, "but I can't consent to a regular interview. My public life belongs to the nation, and I will gladly answer any questions you like to ask about it. My private life, on the other

hand, I regard as my own. I do not care to have the curtain drawn aside from it. It puzzles me much," he continued, with a sigh, "to know what special interest the public can take in the ordinary domestic life of a man, whether he is well known in his public capacity or not. My pictures are for the people—my inner life for myself and my friends."

In this brief account, therefore, of our great painter, I have been obliged to speak more of his works than of his special and delightful individuality. It is possible, however, that those who study his canvases may by so doing catch something of his spirit.

He has been a hard fighter on the side of Truth against Shams. Looking on Art as almost a religion, he has lived up to his high ideal. Believing in the power of beauty as the most important lever in the true education of the Race, he has done his utmost to add to the Beauty of the World.



From a]

THE GARDEN STUDIO.

[Photograph.