



"THE ORDER OF RELEASE."

From the Picture by Sir John Everett Millais, Bart., P.R.A.

*Some Early Recollections of
Sir John Everett Millais, Bart., P.R.A.*

BY FRANCES H. LOW.



YEAR ago, when Sir John Millais was less sought after by the interviewer than he is to-day, I had the privilege and pleasure of an hour's converse with him; and much of what

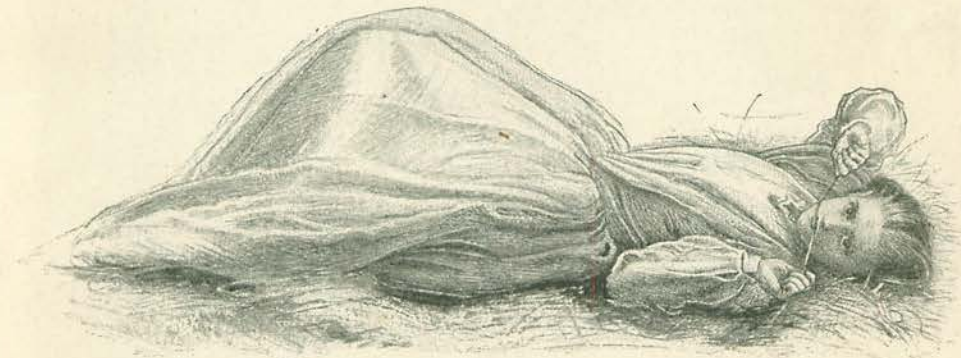
he said upon that occasion appears to me to be of sufficient interest, to those who care about this great painter's pictures, to print. Upon receiving Sir John's permission to do this, he volunteered to let me adorn my little article with some of his early drawings, which were for the moment mislaid, but which it was hoped would be recovered in time.

Now, alas, it is certain that these sketches and studies, to the number of five hundred, have been stolen; and great as is their loss to the President of the Academy, who told me he would give hundreds of pounds to recover them, it is a still greater one to the readers of this Magazine, who would have appreciated the opportunity of examining the first ideas and studies from which Sir John Millais developed his beautiful complete art. Happily the delicate little study that we are able to reproduce here has been preserved, and will be recognised by those

John Millais has never painted anything finer than the face of the Highlander's wife, with its calm triumph and endurance, nobleness and tenderness. Her face is admirably contrasted and harmonized with the strong physiognomy of the gaoler, who examines, with something of scepticism, the document that she hands him; and that is to release her husband, who has taken part in the rebellion of '45. The collie and the true Highland child, with its plaid and bare legs, breathe the very spirit of reality, and carry back the imagination to scenes in past history that will never fail to touch and enchant when presented by the hand of a master.

"Ophelia" is another, and one of the very few modern pictures that are wholly unforgettable. The exquisite solemn beauty of the landscape, with its reeds and rushes and lilies, serves to accentuate the tragic fate of the drifting figure—beautiful in its pathos and helplessness—which will ere long find calm and peace beneath the waters.

The long gallery of child figures, which have given Sir John Millais a place beside Sir Joshua Reynolds as the painter of lovely, innocent English childhood, includes few sweeter pictures than those reproduced in our



STUDY FOR "APPLE BLOSSOMS," BY SIR JOHN EVERETT MILLAIS, BART., P.R.A.

who are familiar with the picture called "Apple Blossoms."

The other pictures of which we are enabled to give illustrations are, for the most part, early ones, and may possibly not have been seen in the original by the younger generation who read these pages. The "Order of Release" is one of the pictures that, once seen, remain for ever in the memory. Sir

pages under the titles of "My First Sermon" and "My Second Sermon," "Asleep" and "Awake," and "The Minuet."

"The Vale of Rest," an early and extremely fine example of Millais's pre-Raphaelite period of production, is one of those supreme pictures whose beauty of colour is rather form than mere decoration; and that can, therefore, be but faintly conveyed by the finest



[Sir John Everett Millais, Bart., P. R. A.]

"OPHELIA."

From the Picture by

engraving or etching. Who that has ever seen this picture forgets the wondrous sunset light that lingers with a thousand evanescent hues over the evening face of Nature, transforming and transfiguring decay, death itself, into a radiant golden vision? The spell of the figure is deepened by the dramatic face of the nun, whose deep, mysterious, and inscrutable eyes seem to reflect the spirit of inanimate Nature with its unsurpassed loveliness and terror; and bid the troubled human soul seek its answer there.

Sir John Millais is the gifted son of a real old Norman family settled in Jersey. He is very proud of his descent, and took care to impress upon me the distinction between Norman and French, and the position of Jersey as a country.

"Thackeray once asked me," he said, "meaning to get a rise out of me, when England took Jersey; and I remember how he laughed when I said, decisively, 'Never; Jersey conquered England!'" which statement his present interviewer does not recollect to have seen in the history-books.

So far as he knows, his family have never produced painters, but his brother and sisters were extremely fond of music and accomplished musicians, and his mother had not only a love of music, but had many cultivated tastes, and was an extremely clever woman. She recognised her son's talent in his childhood, but, naturally, was unable to



"THE MINUET."
From the Picture by Sir John Everett Millais, Bart., P.R.A.

estimate its future greatness, this discernment being due to Sir Hilgrove Turner, the Governor of Jersey, who was so confident of the lad's artistic genius that, when he was barely seven years old, he told his father and mother they must make him an artist.

"I remember," said the artist, "that as a little fellow of six or seven I was perpetually drawing, and was perfectly happy in the possession of a pencil. I did all sorts of things, and had a special love for butterflies and birds. I did a number of pen-and-ink tournaments, which I hoped to have been able to let you have; but they are amongst the stolen drawings."

I asked Sir John whether he thought the beautiful scenery and surroundings of Jersey

had exercised any influence over his early ideas and compositions. He answered that he believed his early associations not only of country and scenery, but also of people, had been one of his most strong and permanent influences. There was a family living at Roselle called Lempriere, who came of an old and distinguished race, and of whom the great painter says: "I do not think any impressible child or young man could have been brought into their presence without recognising, and for ever remembering, the beauty and attractiveness, of dignity of deportment and grace, and urbanity of manner. The head of the family at the time, Philip Raoul Lempriere, Seigneur of

Roselle Manor, was a most handsome, noble man, and his manner down to the poorest dependent was exquisitely fine. One carried away an impression that was unforgettable."

I ventured to say that the humble interviewer of Sir John Millais could recognise that not only had the example been impressive, but that it had also been of practical effect, and its happy fruits added to the other gifts possessed by our greatest modern painter.

"His wife," he continued, with a deprecating smile, "had her own feminine beauty and grace, and the sons and daughters were worthy of them. One of the grandsons, now General Lempriere, was the original of the figure in 'The Huguenots.' There was an atmosphere

of nobleness and beauty there, which was in itself an education incomparably finer than that of college. They were very fond of me, and I spent much of my time there, and learned unconsciously to care for what was lovely. I remember at a very early age noticing their beautiful hands, and being content to watch them. You understand, they had not only rare beauty of form, but the highest standard of honour and rectitude."

At the age of eight Millais's family removed to London, and the boy's exceptional powers obtained his admission to the British Museum, where he drew from the cast every day for several hours. A few years later he won the medal of the Society of Arts, was later on



"MY FIRST SERMON."
From the Picture by Sir John Everett Millais, Bart., P.R.A.

admitted to the Academy School, and exhibited his first picture at the Academy at the age of fifteen.

Nothing can exceed the modesty with which the painter speaks of his early marvellous achievements.

"You must have been very happy," I remarked, "not only to have been able to give outward form to your artist powers at so early an age, but to have also had so prompt a recognition?"

"Prompt recognition!" repeated Sir John. "I never had any encouragement at all. All my early pictures were damned by the critics, and my parents were so discouraged that my father said over and over again: 'Give up painting, Jack, and take to something else.'

"I have had a happy life on the whole, but my youth was very unhappy. I had to work hard, illustrating and doing portraits and all sorts of inferior work, to help at home, ever since I was a lad, and my early pictures received nothing but abuse. The critics were a greater power at that time than they are to-day; and however it may have been with other men, I had no consciousness of ultimate triumph then. I went on for years in a storm of disapproval."

"But, surely," I asked, rather puzzled, "your famous picture, 'The Huguenots,' was painted whilst you were still a young man?"

"Oh, well, yes; young so far as age, as I was only

twenty-two; but then," catching my smile, "I had been painting for years."

Yet to most of us, whose lot is the commonplace one of non-achievement and failure, the figure of this young man producing his immortal picture at an age when genius is generally still immature and dumb, is sufficiently dazzling; and the years of heartsick disappointment and struggle seem but the grey clouds through which the golden sun presently gleams. It may be an encouragement to others to know that Sir John Millais's compositions have not been produced with that ease and lightness that are popularly supposed to accompany great powers. To use his own expressive words,



"MY SECOND SERMON."
From the Picture by Sir John Everett Millais, Bart., P.R.A.



"ASLEEP."

From the Picture by Sir John Everett Millais, Bart., P.R.A.

his pictures have always been done "with great travail."

"I am always dissatisfied, and when the picture is done, I loathe it and never want to see it again. After a time I can regard it from an objective point of view; but, even then, everything comes back to me, and I get for the moment the same feelings."

Art students will hear with interest the views that the President of the Royal Academy holds upon art education.

"I do not believe much in direct instruction. Surround a boy with great art, and he will learn; and if he is too stupid to learn from the models before him, he is no good at all."

At the finish of this utterance Sir John spoke with warmth of the folly of hammering an art into persons who had neither feeling nor appreciation for it. He alluded to the way that music is drummed into a girl for years and years, and at the end of



"AWAKE."

From the Picture by Sir John Everett Millais, Bart., P.R.A.

them she is unable to distinguish Beethoven from Mendelssohn.

Sir John Millais is a believer in great men. He told me that the best education of his life had been gained by associating with great men, especially painters and men of letters. He said he never forgot going, as a boy of fourteen, to a breakfast at the house of Rogers, the poet. All sorts of men came to these functions, and upon this occasion he heard Hazlitt, Sir

G. Cornwall Lewis, and Macaulay in conversation.

"I need not tell you I listened in absolute silence; in fact, I do not think anyone spoke to me; but it was an education all the same, and one of the high pleasures of life. A few months later I met Wordsworth. I looked at him intently. I didn't know who he was, but his face interested me. He was a very spare man, and wore a double-breasted dress coat, and I thought he was a country clergy-



[Berlin Photographic Company.

"THE VALE OF REST."

From the Pictures by Sir John Everett Millais, Bart., P. R. A.

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man. As soon as he had left the table, Mr. Rogers called me to him and said :—

“‘Boy, did you notice that gentleman who has just left the table?’ and when I said ‘Yes,’ the old poet went on : ‘That was Wordsworth, and some day you will be very proud to have sat at the table with him.’”

Sir John Millais, in common with most men and women who have been familiar with cultivated literary society in the early part of this century, says that modern society and conversation are entirely different. To-day everyone, however undistinguished or however little claim he has to speak, has his say, and is listened to as a matter of course ; whereas in those days, when society, or at least literary society, meant a collection of persons of scholarship, wit, and talent, the great man held the table and everybody listened.

“I recall distinctly Rogers one day turning to Macaulay, and saying, ‘Macaulay, will you favour us with your ideas?’ etc.”

What a change has come over the spirit of time, when all the little people are screaming in print and conversation so loudly that it is difficult if not impossible to hear the voices of the few great men who are worth hearing !

It is hardly necessary to tell anyone who is familiar with the pictures of the most distinguished member of the pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood that the President has a passionate love for the poetry of Keats. He repeated, with obvious pleasure, twenty or thirty lines from “Isabella,” and said : “I know that poem and ‘St. Agnes’ Eve’ by heart ; and I think that Holman Hunt, Rossetti, and myself did something for Keats. I know he did much for me, although I have always been a great reader and lover of poetry. I believe I have got a feeling for literary form instinctively, and when I stayed with Tennyson and he was writing ‘Maud,’ he would give me a line in half-a-dozen different ways, all exquisite, and ask me to decide. I used to get at last confused as he refined and refined.”

This has rather led us away from the starting point of education, but it is really closely connected with Sir John’s essential principle, that he who would do great things must familiarize himself with the spirit of the great, with their pictures, their busts, their poems, and, above all, by their living presence and conduct. As regards the education of the day, he takes a less pessimistic view than most of his contemporaries. He speaks with gratefulness of what he learned at the Academy, and says if modern art instruction leaves something to be desired, a man has compensations and advantages that were unknown

to his father. In every art school to-day there is superb sculpture, and in addition to the supreme art of the Greeks, there is all the knowledge that has been gathering ever since.

“But,” and the words seemed to me of sufficient import to a younger generation to-day to take down from the master’s lips, “I think the great defect to-day—I cannot help seeing it in young men—is the want of reverence. Until a young man can admire, nay, until he can give homage, there is no hope for him. It is the first maxim to impress on a young man, and one that seems to me in danger of being forgotten in this age of scepticism and cynicism.”

Perhaps in some of our schools, where competition and success in examinations and the rest of the modern gospel is preached with so much assiduity, we might do worse than embellish the walls with that word, which implies the surrender of the petty and personal, and the generous yielding of what is highest and deepest within our souls.

Remembering the interest, legitimate enough, that is taken by the public in the personal likings of a great man, I asked the subject of this little paper, not without some misgivings as to how he would receive the question, whether he would tell me which of his pictures were his favourites. Sir John, with that kindly indulgence which characterizes him and which makes him beloved of the humble interviewer, said “The Order of Release” and “The Vale of Rest” (both of which pictures are reproduced with this article) were, perhaps, the pictures that gave him most pleasure, “although,” he added, “I had both pain and pleasure in painting them. I have always been fondest of pictures which appeal to the sad feelings and instincts ; and it is the same with poetry. I believe this is the case with many, if not most, artists. They suffer most and enjoy most ; but I have known few that are really happy.”

Is not this another rendering of Shelley’s cry—

The sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought ;

and is it not, perhaps, a law of Nature that what is most beautiful ever brings to the mind of man a vague feeling of tender melancholy ? To know that he to whom we owe the perfect pictorial conception of the most pathetic feminine figure in song, and the loveliest of autumn landscapes, wrought his art in moods of sorrow as well as joy, is not to diminish our delight and wonder and admiration, but rather to deepen them and draw us nearer to their creator.