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"A SAILOR'S SWEETHEART."

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[Marcus Stone, R.A.]

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Illustrated Interviews.

LXVI.—MR. MARCUS STONE, R.A.



DRAMATIST in colour. That, in a word, is Marcus Stone. No one who looks, even cursorily, at one of his pictures can fail to realize the effect or to discover the play upon the emotions which the dramatist in words uses in the evolution of his more diffuse, but not less highly specialized, art.

The son of an artist, an Associate of the Royal Academy, of which he has himself been for twelve years a full member, the student of heredity may see the reason for Mr. Stone's allegiance to art. His difficulty will arise when he has to explain the fact that Mr. Stone never had any so-called real tuition in his life, and owes none of the early bias which he showed towards his profession to direct influence, for at the time when he decided to be a painter he was practically a stranger to the arena of the studio—even his father's.

The first step in any direction is always an interesting one to discover, so the day Mr. Stone received me in the studio in his magnificent house in the Melbury Road, my first question was, naturally, when he first began to draw.

"I can't tell you," he said; "I have no recollection of the time when I did not draw.

I know I was scribbling when I was four years old, and I have some sketches which were preserved from my very youthful days, before I had ever even seen a picture. I was looking over them only a few days ago, and I confess that though they do not appear to me at all remarkable as sketches, even for a child of my then years, they were remarkable for the particular child that I was, for of art education I had had absolutely none. What of the artist I have in me was developed by circumstances, for although my father was an artist, I saw nothing of him as such until I was ten years of age.

My father's studio was in London, and we as children lived in the country, or what was then the country, in the north of London—Bushey, Hendon, and Finchley. In those days—for I am speaking of half a century ago—locomotion was difficult, and my father came down only two or three times a week, and we never went to London. Even then, the meanest little picture-book was a prize to me, and I treasured every scrap of pictorial illustration which I could possibly procure, for I could count on the



MR. MARCUS STONE, R.A.
From a Photo. by George Newnes, Limited.

fingers of my two hands the picture-books of my childhood. There was no STRAND MAGAZINE then, and no wealth of graphic representation such as exists now for the delight of childhood.



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"THE FIRST LOVE-LETTER."

[Marcus Stone, R.A.]

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"When I was about ten years old I went to live in London. My great recreation was to go to the Royal Academy, and no week of my life passed without my seeing pictures, so that I soon got a world of art of my own."

"*Pictor nascitur non fit*," I murmured, changing the quotation slightly. "When did you decide on becoming an artist?"

"I always decided on that. Certainly I never desired to be anything else than a painter. At ten I was allowed to go into my father's studio; but it was not until I was sixteen that I began to take up the pursuit of art seriously. My time before then was devoted to my general education. I fancy, though, I put more into my books in those days than I took out of them, for I filled them with sketches, as I filled every available scrap of paper that came into my possession. I remember when I was quite a little fellow that one day a bill came in from the local shoemaker, which my mother was sure had been paid. The receipt was searched for high and low, but it was not forthcoming. At length I was interrogated on the subject. I overhauled my sketches, and on the back of the receipt was a picture which might have been inscribed, '*Marcus Stone fecit*.'"

"The first studio except my father's I ever was in was Frith's. On one occasion I went to him with a message, and as a great kindness he allowed me to stay and watch him while he was at work. He was painting

some drapery which lay on a piece of paper on the daïs, or throne, in his studio, as it represented a robe on the floor of his picture. I went roaming about from place to place, and accidentally kicked the paper with my foot and turned it completely round. Frith groaned aloud, but he was kindness itself, and didn't say anything. I was fully alive to the enormity of the offence I had committed, and expected to be forthwith ordered out of the room, but happily that fate was not meted out to me, and by a little re-arrangement Frith found that I had not done very much harm.

"On another occasion I went to see Landseer, when he was finishing his picture 'Saved'—you remember the subject: a dog who has saved the life of a little boy. Landseer was painting the pebbles on the beach, and, to my youthful imagination, they seemed far more like potatoes than stones. That impression still remains with me as the result of a recent inspection of the picture.

"Landseer I remember as a remarkable talker, with that extraordinary power of telling a story which makes it impossible for anyone to tell it after him. A few weeks before he was seized with the mental malady which practically killed him, three years before he died, I saw him, and he told me a story. He had been at Windsor, where he was always received with special distinction, and the train in which he was travelling

back to London was invaded at a quiet station by a party returning from a prize-fight. The officials were unable to cope with them, and the defeated combatant and his second were put into the carriage which had been specially reserved for Landseer. 'What was the man like?' I asked; 'was he badly knocked about?' 'He looked very pale,' replied Landseer; 'he was wrapped up in a blanket, and he moaned a good deal. He was very wet and he smelt of lemon.' The way in which the last four words were spoken was inimitable, and conveyed in a most lucid manner the idea of the prize-fighter of those days, who was revived between the rounds by being sponged and having a suck at a lemon."

"When did you paint your first picture?" was my next interrogation.

"The first which was exhibited at the Academy was done when I was seventeen, although it was not exhibited until the spring of 1858. I had long before this, however, been painting in oils, and I tried my hand at everything, from the family milk-jug upwards. My father's health began to fail for some years before he died, and so I was allowed to work as I pleased. That picture was called 'Rest,' and represented an old knight in a suit of armour, reclining under a tree, with some children looking at him. It found

a purchaser, and as he was an absolute stranger to me, it must have had some sort of merit in it. It was not a large picture, the size known in the profession as a 'kitcat,' 3ft. by 2ft."

With a sudden impulse of curiosity I asked a decidedly impertinent question. "Will you tell me what you got for it, Mr. Stone?"

"Certainly," he replied, in such a way that I no longer felt that, in the interests of the



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"LOVE OR COUNTRY."

[Marcus Stone, R.A.]

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[Marcus Stone, R. A.]

"A HONEYMOON."

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equally curious public, I had committed a *faux pas*. "Forty pounds was the price."

"And what happened after that?"

"Then I began to work very hard at self-imposed tasks. I began attending a life-school of an exceedingly interesting character. It was got up by some of the men at the top of the tree in order that they might resume the studies of their youth. They were good enough to allow me to join them. Among them were Frith, Mulready, Holman Hunt, John Phillip, Augustus Egg, and other well-known painters, and I drew side by side with Mulready, who was a contemporary of Wilkie. He was then a very old man, as you may judge by the fact that if he were alive now he would be one hundred and thirteen. He made the most beautiful drawings you can imagine, which were always being bought up for schools of design throughout the country. I naturally derived a great deal of benefit from watching the methods of such men. Indeed, had I a young artist to train, the thing I would desire most for him would be that he should be among his seniors and see the development of their work. Painting is an imitative art, and if an apt pupil he can do well what he has seen others do, and so save a great deal of time puzzling out things for himself."

"How long did you remain at the life-school?"

"About a couple of years. My father died when I was nineteen, and it then became necessary that I should earn my living. Work as well as study had to go on simultaneously, as they have since gone on until the present time."

When a man begins his work at so early an age, the influence of those who have "arrived" more or less counts for something in the formation of his character and his career, so I asked Mr. Stone who had influenced him most.

"As a man Dickens influenced my life enormously," he replied. "A great deal of the origin of my effort to deal with human sympathy in the way I have done is due to him, for that was the sheet-anchor of his whole life. He was a great friend of my father's. I constantly saw him under all conditions. There never was a man who gave himself more trouble and took more infinite pains in the pursuit of his art than did Dickens, and every detail and incident and character in the multitudinous personages in his books was given the greatest consideration. It was his example which was always before me which taught

me habits of punctuality, diligence, and the like, and it was his example which saved me from the possibility of becoming an idler or dilettante, of whom there are too many in all arts."

"Everybody remembers your illustrations of 'Our Mutual Friend' and other of Dickens's novels," I said. Mr. Stone smiled.

"Our Mutual Friend' was not the first of the Dickens novels which I illustrated," he replied, "for I began when I was quite a little boy. When 'Bleak House' was coming out I was about ten. Jo always appealed most vividly to my childish imagination, and I remember that when the part came out with that famous eleventh chapter in which, as every reader of the book will recall, Jo sweeps the step of the gateway of the graveyard in which the man who had been 'werry good' to him was buried, I was so impressed with the reality of the scene that I sat down at a table, took up a sheet of paper, and tried to draw it as I saw it. Dickens happened to call upon my father—my sketch caught his eye. He recognised the subject at once, and, taking it up, said, 'That is very good, Marcus; you will have to give it to me.' It was given to him, and a year after he wrote me a letter, of which I need hardly say I was inordinately proud, and with the letter came the first copy of a book I ever had given to me by the author. It was Dickens's 'Child's History of England.'

"When my father died I had only exhibited two pictures, and as I had no inheritance from him, my prospects were decidedly gloomy. I thought if I could get some illustrations to do it would be a resource which would be valuable. I therefore went to Dickens, and he wrote me letters to three publishers, Murray, Longmans, and Chapman and Hall. None of them bore fruit, however, but that to the last-named firm, who after a long interval, in 1861, gave me a frontispiece to do for the first cheap edition of 'Little Dorrit.' After two or three years came an offer for illustrating 'Our Mutual Friend.' Of course I accepted it, and the drawings were done, as well as others, such as the frontispiece for the first cheap edition of the 'Tale of Two Cities,' eight illustrations for the library edition of the 'Child's History of England,' four for the library edition of 'American Notes,' and as many for 'Pictures from Italy,' and eight illustrations for the library edition of 'Great Expectations.'"

"A friend of yours told me that you discovered the original of Mr. Venus for Dickens. How did it happen?" I asked Mr. Stone.

"I was painting a picture in which I required a begging dog. The ordinary dog is not at present sufficiently highly educated as a model, so I was recommended to go to a taxidermist named Willis, in the Seven Dials, who would supply my wants. He did, as a matter of fact, for he found the dog, killed it, and stuffed it in the attitude I needed. The day I called on him Dickens sent me an invitation to go to the theatre with him. During an interval between the acts he told me that he wanted a very striking and unusual and peculiar vocation to be introduced into the new story he was writing. 'I know the very man,' I replied. 'Take me to him,' said

illustrated, and as I knew Wilkie Collins, and most of the other literary men of my day. I heard that Thackeray was about to publish the *Cornhill Magazine*, in which there were to be illustrations. I thought I might perhaps get some work to do, so I called on him at his house. He was in bed with a sprained ankle, and I was shown up into his room. His man was bandaging his foot at the time, and he was surrounded with proofs of the first number. He showed them to me. One of the articles was illustrated by Thackeray himself. His people all had muffs instead of heads. 'Do you know what I mean by that?' he asked, in his



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"A PASSING CLOUD."

[Marcus Stone, R.A.

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Dickens. The next day we went to call on Willis. He was out, and while waiting for him Dickens sat down and absorbed all the details of the establishment, although he made not a single written note of the surroundings. Willis did not come back in time, and Dickens went away without seeing him, but the interior of the shop was that which he so vividly described as Mr. Venus's."

"You knew Thackeray as well as Dickens, did you not?"

"Not as well as Dickens; but I knew Thackeray as I knew Anthony Trollope, whose story, 'He Knew He Was Right,' I

characteristic fashion. Before giving me time to reply he answered the question himself. 'I mean that they are muffs.' He talked for a few minutes, and I showed him my sketches. 'Where do you get your pencils?' he asked me; 'mine don't draw like that.'"

"Happily for art, you did not long remain in the field of black and white?"

"No, it was merely a means to an end, and luckily for me that end came sooner than I expected. My pictures began to make a certain headway, and all of them sold."

"When did you make your first great popular success?"

"In 1863. It was exhibited at the Royal Academy, and called 'From Waterloo to Paris.' It was what the French call *genre historique*, and it was the line which I continued painting for ten years and more."

"Then what I may call the 'Stone age,' the period with which the later manifestation of your art is so intimately associated, did not materialize for a long time? What brought it about?"

"I had always been a great student of history," said Mr. Stone, "but a student with a political bias. I had come to the conclusion that history as written by the historian was a very different thing from that which was written by the people who made it. It seemed to me very much like the Court Circular, and the people were represented as they were at Astley's Theatre: the kings and nobles were very great and grand, and quite different from ordinary human beings. I felt that I could no longer conform to the prevailing ideas, as I also felt that the number of historical people who would appeal to the popular public taste was very limited indeed. I had for a long time been so struck with this thought that I used to clothe my modern thoughts in ancient dresses. One example will show you what I mean. When I was reading 'Dombey and Son,' I was greatly struck with the dramatic idea of Mr. Dombey's paternal pride in the birth of his heir, while he cared little or nothing for his first-born daughter. I determined to paint a picture on this subject, but nobody in those days would have cared for a literal representation of the subject. While turning over the matter in my mind, and wondering where I could place it, I came across the incident which is related of Henry VIII.'s visit to see Edward VI., while he ignored the little Princess Elizabeth, who was in the room at the time. There was the Dombey incident in characters which everyone would recognise, for Henry VIII. is one of the few historical personages familiar to the man in the street. I painted my picture of the 'Royal Nursery.' It was a historical picture, but it was Paul Dombey for all that."

"But for the 'Stone age'?" I queried.

"That came about in this way. I believe that the best and most valuable art work is done by the man who treats his own period. He knows his subject as, in a general way, he can know no other. He sees his people, he knows their thoughts, their feelings, and, in addition, everybody else knows what he knows. It is, of course, impossible in

England, from what I may call the hourly change of fashion, to paint men and women in the costume of a given year. The dress would be out of fashion before the picture was finished. I therefore determined to get, if I could, some period in which the fashion would remain constant, while the thoughts and sympathies of the men and women would be sufficiently close to be readily sympathized with by the public. I saw this in the early days of the century, the days of our grandmothers, and so I adopted that for my general work. Had I been a Frenchman instead of an Englishman, however, I should have painted the peasant life of the moment, for that is exceedingly picturesque. We have, however, no peasant life in England, and no typical peasant dress, so that was impossible. In the same way, were I a writer of fiction I would never treat of any subject but that of to-day. Dickens and Thackeray both did this, departing from their custom very rarely indeed, and Shakespeare was in the same sense a modern writer, for he wrote of the things of his own time."

"Did any painter exercise a conscious influence over you in the early days of your career?" was my next question.

"No one," replied Mr. Stone. "It was at once my good and ill fortune, and left me catholic in my tastes. Whenever I saw a great work of art, and it is equally so to-day, I always tried to see the artist's aim and purpose, and was never drawn to one point to the exclusion of others. In this way I have always loved Van Eyck and Velasquez, who in painting are as opposite as the poles, but I always have been equally enthusiastic over other great painters. Millais I always counted the greatest man of my time, as well as one of the greatest painters of all time; but there is no evidence of my admiration of his work in my art, so far as I am aware, although I could well wish it were otherwise."

"You and he were great friends, were you not?"

"I knew him from the time I was a child, though he was my senior by eleven years, and was famous before I ever began to paint. As a young man he was an Apollo, and I remember seeing him and his wife, just after they were married, at a party at Dickens's, when I thought they were the most beautiful couple I had ever set eyes on."

"In your own case, Mr. Stone," I said, "can you tell me how your pictures come to be painted?"

"Only vaguely. I get some story which can be told in a picture, in much the same

way as a playwright gets the germ of the idea for his drama. I 'chew' on it, as I may say, until I have evolved that scene which has gone before, as well as that which will come after. These ideas are put down in the notebook of my mind, and I make very elaborate studies in my head, and devote a great deal of time and trouble to my picture in that way. Then on a sheet of note-paper I make a sketch of the idea, with ovals for faces, so that the telling of my story may not depend on the faces of the characters."

Mr. Stone exemplified his meaning by taking some pieces of gummed paper and blotting out the faces of the characters in his pictures, "Two's Company, Three's None," and "A Peacemaker." Attitude and composition tell everything that there is to be told, as anyone may prove for himself by doing the same with the pictures which are here reproduced.

"And after the sketch on note-paper?"

"Then I make a very accurate sketch to scale, after having decided exactly what size my picture is going to be when finished. I consult Nature always and verify the possibilities, to see that the design is sound in every way and does not depend upon matters which are incompatible with truth. Then I have models to sit, and begin to work at my picture. At the same time, I keep on working at my sketch equally with my picture, so that, if necessary, I may make experiments

on it and avoid painting out and painting in on the picture itself, too much of which one is compelled to do in the ordinary way. Unless my sketch were like the picture it would, of course, be impossible to do this, so that at times my sketches are very elaborate indeed."

"Do you paint your models as they are?"

"Never," said Mr. Stone, emphatically. "I have never painted and never would paint a recognisable portrait of a model. I may have half-a-dozen models for a single figure in a picture. What one has to do is to paint one's imaginary man or woman, not a picture of a given man or woman. So strongly do I feel on this subject that if I see my picture is getting like my model the illusion is gone for me, for my picture was not a picture of Miss—whatever her name happens to be, my model—but a picture of someone whom I have seen acting in the drama which I was endeavouring to evolve."

"When once you get to work, do you work rapidly?" I asked.

"Rapidly?" echoed Mr. Stone. "I am the slowest man who ever held a brush. Of course, one can cover a canvas rapidly with colour, but in painting, as in writing, although the public does not usually appreciate this fact, there are times when you don't know how to say what you have to say."

As Mr. Stone said these words my eyes alighted on two packs of cards piled together



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"A PEACEMAKER."

[Marcus Stone, R.A.

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on his table. With a sort of Sherlock Holmes power of deduction I hazarded my next question.

"You find Patience helps you, then?"

"Very much," he replied, with a smile. "When I get into a tangle I find that the gentle stimulation of the mind which Patience necessitates produces a decidedly helpful effect, and so, you will probably be interested in knowing, do a great many of my brother painters."

All the time we had been talking I had noticed that anything in the nature of a picture or an easel was conspicuous by its absence, although we were in the studio. In reply to my question, Mr. Stone's explanation was pleasantly forthcoming.

"I rarely show anything I do to friends or casual visitors," he said, "for it really distresses me to have people looking at my work. If I had not had to earn my living with my brush, I doubt if I should ever have exhibited at all."

"Still, I suppose people do occasionally see your work when you are engaged at it?"

"Occasionally, certainly, but very occasionally. In this connection I remember an incident which always gives me a great deal of pleasure when I think of it, for I found one of my most sympathetic critics in a most unusual fashion. A gas-fitter was at work at the lamps over there while I was painting. After a time he stopped and came over to me, saying, 'I beg your pardon, sir, but will you let me look at the picture you are painting?' It was my picture, 'A Sailor's Sweetheart.' He looked at it long and silently—in itself a great satisfaction to me—and then I hazarded a question, for I had always wanted to find out exactly, from personal knowledge, whether my effects were as clear to men of that class as they were for the more cultivated or the artistic. 'Do you know what I mean by it?' I asked, after he had talked a good deal about it. 'Yes, sir,' he replied, 'there's no mistaking that. She's thinking about somebody in foreign parts.' I could have danced with delight at the 'foreign parts,' for the effect of the sea in the background of the picture had produced on him exactly the effect I had desired to convey. He went over the picture with the utmost care, and presently his eye lighted on the little bunch of blue forget-me-nots in the girl's hand. Immediately a smile played all over his face, and turning to me he said, 'He won't forget her, sir.' I could have blessed that gas-fitter for his acumen, for it is extraordinary the amount of obtuseness one meets

with in people from whom one would expect better things. I have treasured the memory of that gas-fitter, and have often longed for his criticism on other pictures, though I have never seen him since. If the world were full of such gas-fitters it would be a much more satisfactory place for painters to live in."

"To go for a moment from your art to your early life. You knew some of the actors of the past?" I asked.

"I met Macready," he replied, "and one day he gave me some advice about speaking. 'I do not think there is very much to teach,' he said. 'I can tell you all about it in five minutes, but there is a great deal to do. Articulate every syllable, raise your voice at the end of every sentence, and as a matter of exercise try to see how many lines of verse you can say without taking a breath.' Then with a look of pride in his eyes, he added, slowly, 'I can speak fourteen lines of "Paradise Lost" with only one breath.'

"I knew Pechter, too. He used sometimes to ask me about the reading of a line, as he was not at all comfortable in his English when he first came here. Indeed, he actually proposed to me that I should go on the stage and act with him. He promised, if I would, to have a part written which would make a 'personage' of me. I need hardly say, however, that, great as the temptation was, my allegiance to my own art prevented the possibility of my accepting so flattering an offer."

Then I turned to matters of the moment, and glancing round the studio, rich with rare tapestries and hangings, I learnt that Mr. Stone was the first to build a studio for the painting of outdoor effects, for until about thirty years ago painters did not trouble about *plein air* effects, but painted their models in their studio, and afterwards added a background. The studio is one of the largest in London, and like the house was built from Mr. Stone's own plans. "With that reverence which we professional men have for one another," he quickly added, as he told me this fact, "I took my plans to Norman Shaw, who was good enough to approve them as a working basis, and I left the whole building of the house in his hands, so that it is his house—architecturally. In this studio I can verify all my effects, even out-of-door effects, for I can put my model on the balcony if necessary, as it is quite shut out from the outside world."

Mr. Stone led the way and I followed him on to the balcony, where looking through the trees one could see the late Lord Leighton's



[Marcus Stoni, R.A.]

"IN LOVE."

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house across the lawn, while the greening trees made it practically as much cut off as if it were a detached house in the country.

"I have been living here for twenty-two years," Mr. Stone said, answering my question; "before that I lived in Langham Chambers and in Tavistock Square, two doors from Dickens's house. It is a curious thing, but my wife and I went to Langham Chambers only for a few months, on our return from our honeymoon on the Continent, and we stayed there six years—stayed there, in fact, looking for a suitable house, but in vain, and at last we decided to have this one built." Referring to the hangings and furniture, Mr. Stone continued:—

"The tapestry in the studio was made probably before Shakespeare was born, while there is nothing in the room that does not represent a certain period.

"That chair you are sitting in," said Mr. Stone, "was the chairman's seat in the Hell Fire Club, while the other chairs came from Medmenham Abbey. That looking-glass on the wall belonged to the beginning of the last century, and whenever I look into it I can fancy I see Henry Esmond sitting there, arranging his wig in front of it."

On a cabinet stands a very precious object, one of the largest pieces of turquoise crackle ware ever produced. It is four hundred years old, and gains greater value from the fact that the art which produced it is obsolete. Just outside the studio there is an enormous wardrobe, some 12ft. to 14ft. long, reaching from the floor to the ceiling, in which Mr. Stone keeps the costumes which he paints in his pictures. They are real old, short-waisted dresses, picked up here and there. One of Mr. Stone's hobbies is the collection of old brass, and in his dining-room there is a splendid pair of fifteenth-century plaques, which have a curious history. Some five-and-twenty years ago, or so, he picked up



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"MY LADY IS A WIDOW AND CHILDLESS." [Marcus Stone, R.A.

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one piece in Wardour Street. Some years later he happened to be in Venice, and stopping at an art-seller's shop he noticed an almost facsimile reproduction of his plate at home. He bought it, and after having been separated probably for some centuries, these two pieces now hang on each side of the sideboard, in company with pictures by Velasquez, Etty, and other masters.

Though insignificant perhaps to the outsider, it is significant of Mr. Stone's admiration for Dickens that one of the most prized of his treasures, reposing in a cabinet full of beautiful art objects, in a delightful room which is Mrs. Stone's boudoir, is the pocket corkscrew Dickens used always to carry himself when travelling, which was given to Mr. Stone when the great novelist died.