A TALK WITH TIMOTHY COLE, THE ENGRAVER.

BY JAMES MILNE.

WHEN we speak of engraving on wood, as it still happily brightens the world of art, we think first and foremost of the name of Mr. Timothy Cole. By general verdict, alike here and in America—nay, in other countries as well—he is the new master of that old art.

Yet the clear thing, the word about him in a personal sense, would be to call up the old masters. He has lived so much among them, giving fresh fame to their genius, that really they may well have gathered him into their ways. The slight, spare figure, the soft, gentle face, which might have come out of a canvas, the abstracted touch in the eyes—here is a man wholly devoted to his art, with thoughts for little else. The mellow voice, too, the quaint turns of reflection, the merry playful humour, the nearness to what is poetic—these all suggest one who has laboured for ideals and joyed in the struggle to win them.

Of course Mr. Cole is amongst us just now—he has been here some little time—for he is engraving a series of the great English painters—the Hogarths, the Gainsboroughs, and the rest. How delighted they would be, these long gone veterans, could they only return hither for a single hour to see the fine pictures their fair ladies make in the black and white of the craftsman who invented engraving from the originals! That we owe to him beyond question, and the simple fact is that it has revolutionised the art.

Thus to an hour's gossip with Mr. Cole; and if it rambled a trifle, it was only on that account the truer a gossip. A thread of autobiography ran through it, which, moreover, is a text we all like to follow.

MR. TIMOTHY COLE.
(*A portrait specially engraved by H. Fitzner Davey.*)

"Although our kinsfolk in America claim you as one of them, you belonged to us in the first place, didn't you?"

"Oh yes. I was born in Camberwell. However I was only a child, a boy of six or seven, when my people emigrated to

America. How vivid are the impressions of one's earliest years—the most lasting, no doubt, of a lifetime. I remember quite intimately the details of that voyage across the Atlantic, the fearful storm we had, how we were all battened down under hatches, and the anxiety which hung over everybody lest the ship should come to grief. It was a sailing ship, and we took as many weeks to get from Liverpool to New York as it would now take days."

"Well, did your folks settle in New York?"

"For a few years, and I went to school there. I was rather clever at the copying-book—I mean in endeavouring to imitate the fine round hand which you find in a school copybook. One day the teacher held up what we believed to be a five-dollar bill and announced, 'The boy who writes best will receive this.' We all did our level best; here was positive wealth, and the spending of it would be a high campaign. I was awarded the prize, only it turned out to be one of those advertisements made to resemble real paper money. Very sour grapes, I can assure you; but then most of us have our illusions to get over, and it is well to begin early."

"After a few years your people, I think, went to Chicago?"

"That was so. I had other experiences at school in New York—got thrashed, for example, to an amazing pitch one afternoon, and valiantly sought a remedy by seeking another school on the strength of a character which was different, as you may imagine, from what my then teacher in reality gave me, although I have little doubt the handwriting was rather similar. Ah, those boyish days! when even a physically active schoolmaster could not drive the spirits out of you! But, as you mention, we moved west to Chicago while I was still a mere lad. There had been talk of putting me into the lithographing business in New York. When we had been a little time in Chicago I went forth to work as an apprentice to a master engraver."

"And with this Chicago master, I judge, you learned the first elements of engraving?"

"The bare elements, the mechanical methods of commercial engraving—absolutely nothing more, for the great fire happened, and our shop was burned down. I had always been fond of music, and while I was in Chicago I studied it earnestly, and was not without hopes that I might do something with it—in preference to engraving. However the fire blighted my prospects in that respect; a considerable period of inactivity was inevitable, and I returned to New York. Here I went into an engraver's shop, and added somewhat to the rudiments which I had already mastered. But I hardly found myself amid surroundings helpful to any sort of serious effort. There were several other young fellows in the place; they were thoroughly fond of a lark, and if you happened to be still for a few moments you would become aware of being a wonderful centre of interest. Then a stuffed bird, a wet sponge, or something equally persuasive of laughter, would come flying at your head, probably hitting you if you were unlucky."

"I am afraid your employer must have been out a good deal?"

"Just so; and in the very frequent absence of the cat the mice held high carnival. I had to learn to make a living, and further, having a natural aptitude for engraving, I had become deeply interested in it as an art. On things getting more rather than less uproarious, I thought I could do better if I stayed at home and worked, and I did so. I studied the best examples of engraving that I could find; I got sketches to engrave, first from one quarter then from another, and finally I became connected with the *Century Magazine*. That, I believe, was in 1877, and ever since practically all my work has been for the proprietors of that well-known American publication."

"You have done the Italian masters for them, the Dutch masters, and now you are doing our English masters?"

"Exactly; and the engravings are subsequently published in the permanent form of art volumes. I suggested to the *Century* people the idea of my going abroad and engraving some of the famous pictures of Europe from the originals. They seemed pleased with the idea, and I went to Italy in 1883, and remained there for close upon ten years. I stopped chiefly in Florence, which is really the centre of Italian art. Most of the pictures I wanted to reproduce were there, but I was also much in Rome, and indeed I became acquainted with many parts of Italy. What a charming country it is! and how charming also the people! Go to Rome or Florence on a visit and you see Italy and the Italians only on the surface. Go into the byways, stay at towns like Orvieto or Siena, as I did, and then you will truly be able to understand both the people and the country. It is in rural Italy that you find Italy; it is there that you must look for the full beauty

and picturesque life of this nation of the South."

"Now about engraving from the originals, for that has been the keynote of your wanderings?"

"In the old days a draughtsman would draw a copy of a picture on to a wood-block, and then the engraver would engrave this copy. That, roughly stated, was the school, and you will easily see what its weaknesses were. It was hard for a draughtsman to make anything like a just copy of a great picture. In any event the drawing was bound to be a deterioration on the original. Next the engraving was a deterioration on the draughtsman's work, so that you had a double leakage of quality in the course of the transference of a painting into an engraving. In the whole result you were apt to be vastly disappointed, or perhaps I should say that these old engravings never pretended to be reproductions of the originals at all—they were something else. Then came the development of photography, and that permitted a better result to be achieved. You could photograph the painting on to wood—so getting an accurate representation of it—and afterwards have the engraver work from that photograph."

"This is bringing us towards the new school of engraving, only we are not quite there yet, are we?"

"What I tried was to fill into the engraving the elements of the painting which had been lost in the process of photography. In other words, even a photograph was necessarily a deterioration on the original. Why not have the engraver repair this? Have him give you, so far as lines and shades could achieve it, the same effects as colours had afforded the painter. Obviously it meant sitting down with your block before the original, studying the latter in the most exhaustive fashion, and then proceeding to produce what had become impressed on your eye and mind. Naturally engravings obtained in such a manner must be more costly, for see how much greater the labour expended on them would be. At the time the inroad of other black and white processes had, so to speak, put wood-engraving on its last trial. It had to go ahead, do what other processes wouldn't do, or go out, and it could only do the first two at a largely increased cost. Happily I fell upon a road which made me welcome, but I doubt if wood-engraving will hold its own after the dozen or so of its present-day exponents have gone the way of all flesh. There are no more young hands to take up the study of the art."

PORTRAIT OF JACQUELINE DE CORDES.—BY RUBENS.

(From an engraving by Timothy Cole, reproduced, by kind permission of Mr. T. Fisher Unwin, from "Old Dutch and Flemish Masters.")

"If I ask you about Italian art, the impressions will be those of one who has studied it from a novel standpoint—the standpoint of an engraver from the original?"

"If you spend years among the works of the most famous painters you naturally formulate some ideas about this one and the other one. I suppose nobody would dispute the argument that the classic art of Italian painting is the first in the world—that there is none to match it. Of the Italian school, the side which appealed most to me was the early Christian art, that dating from Giotto to Fra Angelico. It is the most unsophisticated period—*naïve* is probably the most fitting word—and its religious feeling and fervour are so profound and so sincere. This line of Italian art finishes with Angelico, just as Greek art stands for a clear period. You see in Rossetti a suggestion of the school—of what it was, and what it meant. The later art of Italy becomes more developed, less unsophisticated, like a luxurious garden rose beside a wild flower. It was the wild flower which captured my heart."

"THE JOLLY MAN."—BY FRANS HALS.

(From an engraving by Timothy Cole, reproduced, by kind permission of Mr. T. Fisher Unwin, from "Old Dutch and Flemish Masters.")

"No doubt you found it a change to go to Holland and Dutch art after the sunny skies of Italy and the sweetness and simplicity of Angelico?"

"It was a striking change, but still I enjoyed my stay in Holland very well, and my work there. After all you can have too many sunny skies, so much of the radiance you get in Italy that clouds and grayness become really welcome. The skies of Italy tend to be monotonous, as you would discover were you to reside under them for a sufficient space, be the experience in itself never so happy. The sun of Italy cuts everything up into patches; the atmosphere becomes sheer glare. In the middle of the summer day folks have to close up everything and go to sleep—they are in the heart of a desert of sunshine. You must not infer, though, that I ever indulged myself in this *dolce far niente* custom—in this sweet doing nothing. I sympathise with Mr. Whistler in his regard for the English sky with its many moods, its endless colour, its softness, its veiled and golden sunlight, the artistic effects which linger in it and of which the eye never wearies. Why, your climate gives you the effects which a statue gets from the gauzy, transparent drapery wound about its nakedness by the sculptor's chisel."

"Then the Dutch art—what would you say about it?"

"In the Italian school you have expression and spirituality, in the Dutch school colour—that would be a ready line of distinction. Rembrandt is the soul of Dutch art; his mantle is over it all. In studying him I felt that I was probably studying the biggest individual artist of the whole world. There

is so much humanity in him, such largeness of heart; he appeals so completely to the profounder sentiments of our nature. Reubens again is a splendid painter for dramatic effect; with what ardour and grandeur of style he projects those canvases of his. As a master of colour he is hardly inferior to the best—that would be my view. Select his picture 'The Deposition from the Cross,' and you can stand and look at it for hours on end and always return again. As you know, this is one of the pictures which was all his own work, for, to be sure, he often simply blocked in figures and left his students to finish the paintings."

"Suppose you are beginning an engraving one morning at our own National Gallery, how would you proceed ?"

"Better come with me. I have a block of boxwood, and this, needless to tell you, has been specially cured and prepared. I give the block a second preparation myself, polishing it until absolutely no trace of fibre is left on the surface, and I never use wood unless it has been cut for at least five years. As I indicated more generally, I have the picture I mean to treat photographed on to the block, and then I, the wood, and the painting are firm companions until we have learned thoroughly to understand each other. What I have to do is to draft into the wood the life which the painter put into his canvas. It isn't merely a copy you want, you must seek to catch the palpitating picture, to convey its meanings, its sympathies, its light and shadow. That is the aim. How far success comes is another matter."

"Those who have eyes to see let them see—and most of us have seen."

"We can get brilliancy or opacity into our tints according to the manipulation of our textures—the coarseness and fineness of our lines and stipples. The painter secures his effects by a manipulation of colours; we secure something analogous to this with our textures. Through a system of these we capture what the artist has gathered with his brushes. You can in wood-engraving give depth of atmosphere, the highest form of relief and richness. And you can suggest those tender and evanescent qualities in a work of art which always escape the mechanical process reproduction. Effects in a painting sometimes really gain on the wood, but there is a loss in the electro, and in printing from the electro. Thus you have, in working up to your effects, to allow for that unavoidable loss; to emphasise characteristics in order to secure the touch you want in the actual proof, which is the final test."

"What a long training would be needed by an engraver of the order you have founded, even allowing he has the necessary natural gifts to begin with !"

"There you come to a very great difficulty that militates against the continuance of wood-engraving: How can the beginner, the learner, earn a living ? How can he do so nowadays in the study of the art, when mechanical processes usurp just that class of work which would be for him a stepping-stone to the higher sphere ? For this reason, as I have already remarked, there are no more young men who are enthusiastic enough to devote the time necessary for acquiring a high degree of skill. Further, the most accomplished wood-engraver has simply to forget all time—to grave away until the block satisfies him, whether it be weeks or longer. As to my own task, at present I have finished about half a dozen of the English masters, and I find them admirable company. Hogarth is a giant—a remarkable, an original figure of English art. He came as the result of no particular school, and he left no school behind him. You feel that there is something of the Dutchman in him, and yet it isn't the general Dutchman, but something more, even as he is an Englishman. Breadth of *chiaroscuro* and refinement and delicacy, humour and satire, like Rembrandt, the power to touch the common chord of life—those are all in Hogarth."

"You place him higher than Gainsborough or Reynolds ?"

"It isn't a question of grouping. They were essentially portrait-painters, and they followed a system. He was a philosopher as well as a painter in his canvases; he came out simply Hogarth—and the last word is Hogarth."

More I might write of the winsome while I spent with Mr. Timothy Cole; but, I doubt me, he will think I have written far too much already—too much, since in his simple modesty he would have chosen silence.