

A SHRINE OF SACRED ART:

ITS ORIGIN AND ARTIST.

BY J. HYSLOP BELL.

Illustrated with Special Photographs.



ABOUT 400 yards due west of the Marble Arch, in Park Place, Bayswater Road, there occurs a sudden break in the long line of diversified mansions. Up to this point the line of frontage has run pretty well sheer

substantial high iron railings, centred by a broad, pillared gateway. Waiting for a moment of comparative interval in the never-ceasing stream of wayfaring traffic, we catch, by the aid of our photographer, a picture of the place sufficiently complete to convey a fair idea of its general appearance.



From a photo by]

THE SANCTUARY IN THE BAYSWATER ROAD.

[W. H. Bunnett.

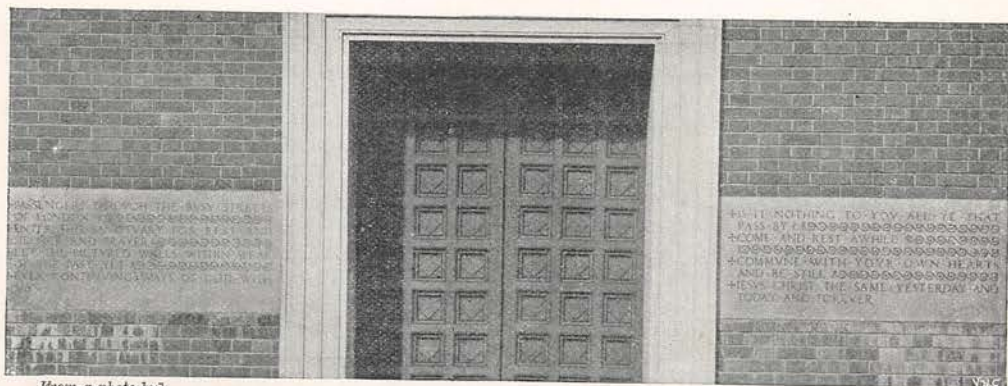
with the street-line. Here you suddenly come upon a recess, the enclosure of which is evidently intended to be permanent, for the owners on either side have been permitted to open lights and outlooks over the dainty greensward, and the boundary towards the thronged roadway consists of

The story of this structure is by no means "an obvious reading" to the passer-by. Indeed, even when acquired bit by bit, by the rational process of inquiry, the story is one full of pleasant surprises.

It carries us but a short way to be informed, as we were by Mr. Worville, of

the Vestry Hall, Mount Street, that in the bad old days of intramural interment of the dead, a burial ground belonging to the parish of St. George's, Hanover Square, extended over several acres from the frontage you now see, backwards. By an Order in Council,

and offices of the caretaker. The central building, by far the most important, remains to be seen. Its doorway, seen from the outside, stimulates more curiosity than it satisfies. At the same time, it affords the first clue at hand to what we are in quest of.



From a photo by]

[W. H. Bunnett.

THE TABLETS ON EACH SIDE OF THE ENTRANCE.

bearing date of the year 1854, this enclosure of mortal remains was closed against further burials. After a long interval of years, the aristocratic vestry of St. George's, Hanover Square, set about the work of "removing the tomb-stones, forming paths, planting trees," and generally laying out the ground in decent order, "and for which a faculty was decreed (26th of April, 1894)." Unseen from Bayswater Road, completely hidden from view by the structure of which the camera has afforded us a first glimpse, there lies beyond to the northward an extensive and neatly laid out park, open to the public under reasonable regulations. Around this park are preserved various monuments, and on its hither side, in a single apartment, part of the old cemetery chapel, are carefully preserved such medallions, busts, and other memorial sculptures as it was felt must needs have continued to them reverent preservation. From the immediate left entrance of the structure facing Bayswater Road the interior of this apartment is seen *en passant*.

This gathering of the memorials of the dead occupies in reality the left wing of the structure. The right wing consists of the residence

I know not whether the photo will render sufficiently legible the invitation here engraved on solid stone. These are the words:—

Passengers through the busy streets of London enter this sanctuary for rest and silence and prayer. Let the pictured walls within speak of the past yet ever continuing ways of God with man!

Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? Come and rest awhile. Commune with your own hearts, and be still! Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever.

They were written for the positions in which they stand, right and left of the doorway, by Emilia Russell Gurney, widow

of the famous jurist and legislator, the Right Hon. Russell Gurney, M.P., for many years the eminent Recorder of London. How it was that this noble Christian woman was the originator of the "sanctuary for rest and silence and prayer" forms itself into a narrative the world could never have heard from her own modest lips or pen, but one which others, with all becoming reverence, may not withhold.

The mortal remains of Russell Gurney were interred at Kensal Green cemetery, June 5, 1878. The service was read by the Dean of Westminster. The chief mourner was Mrs. Gurney.



From a photo by]

[Durrant, Torquay.

THE LATE MRS. RUSSELL GURNEY.

Around the graveside with her stood Sir James Stephen, Sir Henry Keating, Sir John Kennaway, Mr. Cowper Temple, Sir Thomas Chambers. One Lancashire man, Mr. John Bright, conspicuous by his absence, was confined to his sick chamber. From that "first dark day of nothingness, the last of danger and distress," began a still nobler phase of an ever noble life. The palatial home in Palace Gardens was exchanged for a smaller house in Orme Square, to which were removed her favourite books, her music and pictures, the beauties and resources of which she shared with poor sick women returning to convalescence. One friend has placed on record that the new home at times more resembled an hospital for incurables than the residence of a lady of opulent circumstances. From its outlook on a great thoroughfare was gradually evolved the day-dream of her heart—a retreat for the weary from noise and throng to silence, and rest, and worship. Long ago the hope of building such a place had been excited by a small chapel she had seen at Florence, where no services were held, but which was simply set apart for meditation and prayer, and always open. It was of this lady, and probably of this her conception, that the author of "John Inglesant" wrote: "She cast the glamour of her own purity and genius over the works of others, and attained thereby to an appreciation which they themselves were unable to accept. Let us thank God that we have known such lives as hers, a knowledge which subdues and silences all the doubts and perplexities of life." There are such lives. They subdue destiny, falsify fate, and create history.

The widow's beautiful day-dream was approaching realisation. Another life had to be brought into contact with her spiritual conception. The vision was that of a sanctuary enshrined. The painter's art was to reach the heart and conscience by pictured history, passion, poetry, inspiration. Whence derived? The answer to the question came about in this way.

A young artist from Manchester, who had just settled down in London, at "Siena," St. John's Wood, a devoted Christian enthusiast, with strong innate tendencies to judge everybody with loving leniency except himself, was about this time deep in the execution of a novel and important commission—the decorations, in glass and mosaic, of Eaton Hall Chapel, the property of the Duke of Westminster.

That this young artist had already done

work of great merit and of permanent value all the cognoscenti already knew. John Ruskin, then Slade Professor at Cambridge, had spoken of his illustrations of Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress" in no hesitating terms of appreciation: "I have not seen anything at all approaching these designs in power and originality in any modern illustrated work that I remember." Mr. Ford Madox Brown had owed to the disinterested preference over himself by this brother artist the two most important commissions of his protracted and brilliant career. Some further book illustrations from the same pencil had led Charles Kingsley to speak of this young artist as "the English Gustave Doré." The Rossetts treasured him alike as man, as artist, and as friend. Mr. Alfred Waterhouse recommended this young artist to illustrate, in pictured windows, the majestic theme, *Te Deum Laudamus*.

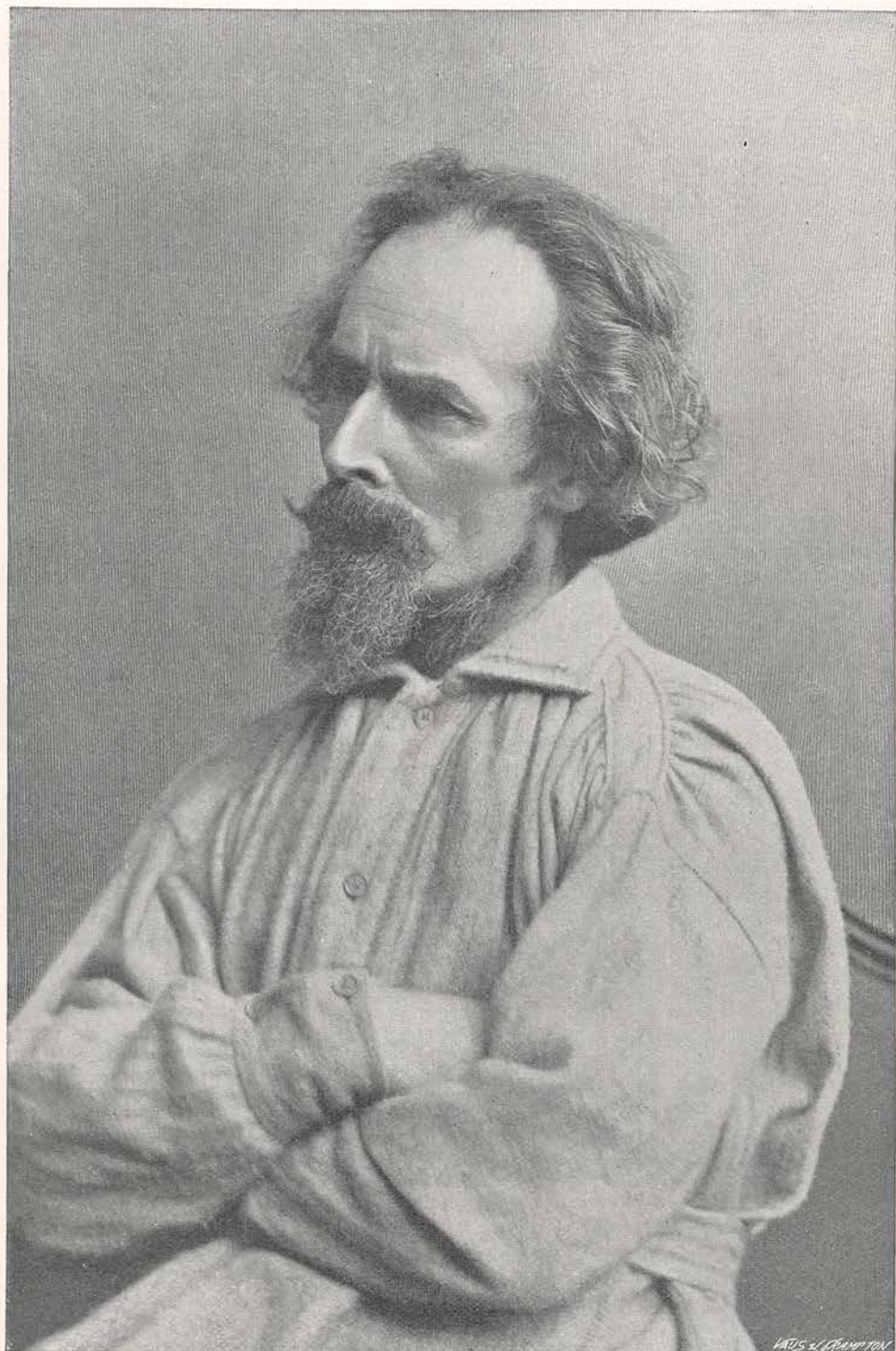
Nor does this summary nearly exhaust the bead-roll of his artistic achievements. The private chapel of Mr. W. H. Houldsworth at Kilmarnock, from designs of the same eye and hand, so illustrated "The Triumph of Faith," as set forth in the eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews, that even Scottish scriptural appreciation triumphed over traditional prejudice in appreciation of the pictures. To this young artist's London studio Lady Mount Temple, of Broadlands, introduced Mrs. Russell Gurney.

The studio was full at the time of incomplete studies for the *Te Deum*. There were power and purpose, soul, sincerity, profound reverence, in every picture and their artist.

Mr. Frederick Shields was, that day, quietly proffered, by Mrs. Russell Gurney, the commission which has grown into the realised fact now under notice, the erection of the Chapel of the Ascension, Park Place, Bayswater Road.

How the reality before our eyes came to grow out of the lady's benevolent desire, and the artist's sympathy with the lady's thought, is too long a story for these pages, and yet cannot be wholly overlooked in the briefest possible account.

It may be thought a work of supererogation to lay down as a proposition that, given that the experiment is to be tried of opening a kind of Interpreter's House somewhere in England, Frederick Shields should be the chosen interpreter. That we believe to be not only sustainable, but an almost self-evident proposition. To those who had never seen him before his face would have



From a photo by]

MR. FREDERICK SHIELDS.

[C. E. Fry, Gloucester Terrace, S.W.

HATS & CAPS

been sufficient passport. No such face ever belonged to any man of meagre or sluggish intellect, of feeble capacity for work, of disloyal affections, of cold fancy, or of colder heart. When Lavater, with twenty portraits of the Sage of Ferney before him, rejected them all because of the want of that touch of the sublime in the eye, of that magnanimity in the general contour, that had been predicated of Voltaire, he was in such quandary as no one habituated to the reading of character could ever fall into in regard to Frederick Shields. He carries in his face the manifest revelation of sincerity, an earnestness and purpose

Never elated while one man's oppressed;
Never dejected while another's blessed.

He is an artist in every nerve, but he is much more. We are not surprised to know of him that Ford Madox Brown, in his great painting of "The Trial of Wickliffe," made a careful study of Shields' features as the basis of his portrait of the distinguished confessor and martyr. This sense of solemnity, of veracity, has often impressed men brought into contact with him. "I cannot enter into and possess the fair domain in which Mr. Shields finds a congenial home," was the exclamation of one of his eloquent Manchester friends; "but, even among artists, I know in whom I have believed; and when I look into the eyes of my friend, and when I listen to his denunciations of wrong-doing the world over, and when I go from his conversation to his productions, I feel that I am in the presence of a man to whom life is indeed real, life is earnest; and who acknowledges the central point of the great scheme of creation, to which at some period or other we must all give an account—an account which by no manner of human self-deceit can be avoided. The picture of Solomon Eagle with the burning brazier is a sermon from the text, 'Arise, or be for ever fallen,' and the preacher is before you! The Holy One stooping over the grabbing miser is a sermon from the text, 'What shall it profit a man?' and the artist preacher is before you! It is in this earnestness, in this unselfishness, in this concentration of all power to one shining goal, that I recognise the actuating motives which have instigated the man."

Given sincerity such as is here recognised, and self-revelation becomes inevitable. The words were spoken at a city banquet in connection with a public exhibition of Shields' then collected works. We extract

two or three characteristic excerpts from the painter's reply:—

"I must confess that I shrank from the ordeal of a collected exhibition of my works. But yet, why should we shrink from knowing the truth about ourselves? When a man knows such truth, he stands better to himself and to others. The great benefit to myself of this gathering of my pictures has been the opportunity of comparing work with work, period with period, the conditions under which one work became good and another bad. In that exhibition you make me look into the very eye of my own soul; perhaps to see in it the beam which I may be enabled to pluck out. At the beginning, untaught, without guide or counsellor, but with the industry of the ant, I worked away. I could only pursue the little truth I saw; but what I saw, that I have heartily followed. I remember, when I was a boy of twelve, going to the British Museum on students' days—drawing and receiving influences unknown from the great works of ancient sculpture all day long—eating my frugal lunch shivering behind one of the huge frigid figures of the Egyptian salon. My first effort from the life was a portrait of my mother, done in true Byzantine style. It excited much astonishment in my good old schoolmaster when he looked at it, and his remark provoked me to try once more, with a softer result. How much we owe to our schoolmasters! Mine always insisted on my being in earnest. He said, 'Be the whole man or nothing.' That wholeness I have sought after. My father's influence was very simply brought to bear. His word to me was, when he saw my art tendencies develop, 'Observe,' and I did try to observe. But my joy—the joy of my life—never came until I was asked [by the proprietors of the *Manchester Examiner*] to illustrate the 'Pilgrim's Progress.' I bounded home with delight on getting that commission. A trifling one it was, as far as money went, but one that enriched my heart, filling it with the greatest and purest thoughts, and made my life a rounded whole—heart, mind, and hand, engaged in congenial work.

"Mr. — has referred to me as 'a high priest of art.' This is indeed an exalted term, which I dare not appropriate. But I can say that I believe painting might be sanctified, and that its professors would be better for assuming the dignity of priesthood—I do not mean in any sacerdotal sense; but I do hold that that purity of heart and mind which the vice-president

alluded to is essential to the production of noble art; and that only as the beauty of the Lord our God is upon us will the work of our hands be established or be worthy of establishing."

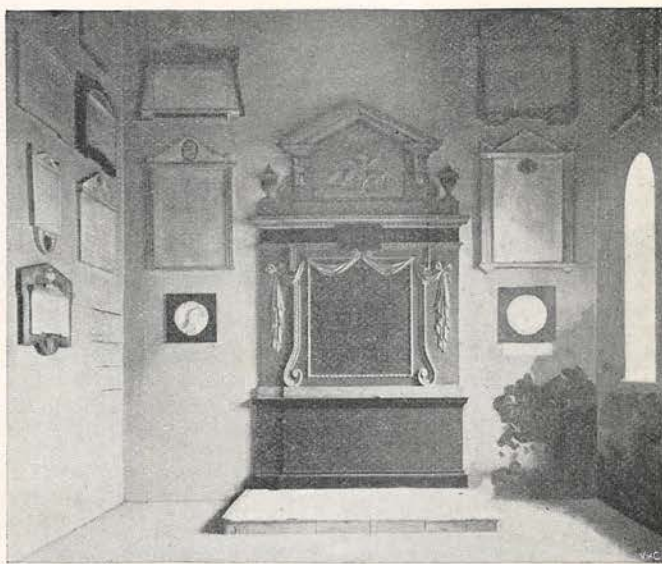
Was it possible that, with such a man, fore-ordained to the ministry of religion by this devotion of a cultured life and heart and soul, before her, Mrs. Russell Gurney could have looked for any other to carry out her work? The selection was certainly made with a single-minded desire to enshrine the best work of the day interpretive of the eternal verities of the Church.

It may—perhaps I should rather say it must—be added, in a word, that Mrs. Russell Gurney never dreamed of taking to herself any merit for the thing she was doing. In a fashion, the thing she was doing was in the air. John Ruskin had protested, in his first "Notes on the Pictures exhibited at Marlborough House," on the scant light and wall-space afforded by the wealth of England whereon to exhibit her pictured possessions to her people; and, with a grim humour temporarily caught by contagion from Chelsea, had "called for a return" showing how much wall-space was provided every year for the growth of cucumbers, and grapes, and olives, and perhaps the sheltering of paddocks, as compared with that given to the necessary purpose of showing us the art products of the country in other than intolerable light. Ralph

Waldo Emerson, the scholar and thinker from Boston, who had helped us somewhat to a binocular vision of "ourselves as others see us," had frankly stated the problem of how to make up for our neglect, by pointing out to us, with his fine ethical discrimination, what it amounted to. There was a kind of immorality, in fact, attached to the sole and selfish possession of art treasures, from which the vision of all who could enjoy was being excluded. Even those Eaton Hall treasures were being buried, at enormous cost, in a "private chapel!" How much more joyous the happiness diffused by the Bunyan Illustrations? How much more fitting a use to make of Shields' manifest genius as an artist, and devoutness

as a disciple of the Master she served, to find light and wall-space for all his new scripture pictures, enable him to carry out to completion his marvellous repertory of human and divine knowledge, and then freely offer, to all who care to "come and see," the produce of his toil!

For this that Mrs. Russell Gurney was devising was no slightly strung sentimentality of the passing hour. It was based on the rational and, as we apprehend it, irrefutable axiom, that the objective of a picture is to be seen, as the objective of a book is to be read; therefore, if pictures are worth preserving, they should be preserved where they can be seen, just as, if books are worth preserving, they should be preserved where



From a photo by]

[W. H. Bunnett.

THE OLD MORTUARY CHAPEL.

they can be read. In many of our churches that practical piety has made some headway against Philistinism that lurks within art circles, as well as against Philistinism that is without. We have some few churches, along the crowded lines of London life, to which the reproach no longer applies, that the weary may not enter their frigid porticoes save once a week, and then only in one's Sunday best; and that pictorial representations, of the "fairest among ten thousand, the altogether lovely," are meant only to be shown under light that is dim, though not religious, under fanes where "cold shade" has been positively cultivated, as if it were an artistic, if not a Christian, grace.

And, when we have admitted that there

was this general trend of feeling in her favour, we are also bound to admit that there were unseen sources of discouragement which required all a clever woman's wit and constancy and resolution to meet and conquer, as she met and conquered them.

The artist was not ready. Well, she should wait until the long and large commission for the Grosvenors was fulfilled.

There was a difficulty in getting such a

of the Master and His Saints, occupied much time—hours, and days, and months, aye, even years, of a life whose sand-glass was visibly running low before all eyes. So that when at last a London publisher, Mr. Kegan Paul, pointed out the opportunity at Park Place which has been taken advantage of—"that the disused, decaying mortuary chapel of the old cemetery on the Bayswater Road, attached to St. George's, Hanover Square, was a splendid site that might possibly be acquired if proper advances were made to its governing board"—it was a day of glad relief.

We continue the Story of the Chapel in Mr. Shields' own words:—

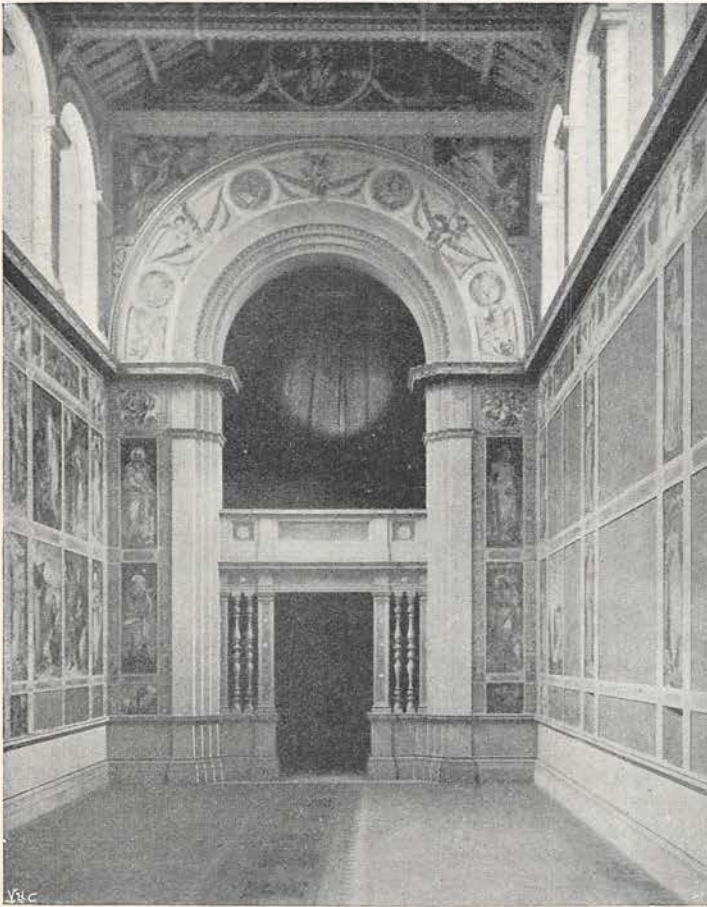
"The situation was perfect—on a great highway, just removed from one of the busiest convergent parts of London's traffic, and yet enough withdrawn from the noise and hurry to and fro to meet the central purpose, never abandoned, of fitness for rest and meditation, surrounded, as it was, by a green, silent God's acre.

"Mrs. Russell Gurney wrote: 'I covet that site; for such a site I would spend more on building. It might be lovely. Do find out whether an application to the Bishop of London would be of any use.'

"The Burial Board met the application in Mrs. Gurney's name with ready entertainment, and slowly it loomed forth that all our schemes had been thwarted that we

might rejoice in a better end than we had ever dared to conceive possible. As she had subordinated it all to the will of God, 'yea' or 'nay,' so now it seemed His *yea* beyond her hopes.

"The many legal difficulties were one by one surmounted, and permission to erect a new chapel formally accorded, the Burial Board electing the generous donor to a seat on their consultations. Finally, the Bishop



From a photo by]

INSIDE THE SANCTUARY.

[W. H. Bunnett.

church interior in the country as she had first set her heart upon. Well, for some city centre, nearer to the throng-wearied crowd, should be provided "the first of the King's rest-houses"; and its zest would then be enhanced by the greater number and the greater need of the weary ones.

Then the finding of a site on which to build, or of an existing temple to illumine, and decorate, and glorify with picture stories

of London's Chancellor sanctioned the erection and conditions of the present building in the latter end of 1890.

"Mr. H. P. Horne was then instructed to prepare designs, and, at Mrs. Russell Gurney's desire and cost, Mr. Horne and Mr. Shields made a tour of some of the northern Italian cities, and primarily to Pietro Santra, in the Carrara district, where the beautiful façade of the principal church was indicated as suggestive of the kind of design preferred by Mrs. Russell Gurney.

"This journey had much influence upon the views of the young and observant architect, and the result was the present edifice, in which he had the difficult task of preserving the old chapel on the one side and the caretaker's residence on the other, the space for the new chapel being set between them in strictly narrowed limitation, and its interior being controlled by the imperative necessity of subjecting its design to the unbroken wall spaces required to receive the painted subjects.

"That within these restraints Mr. Horne has succeeded in producing a chaste and fitting shrine will be freely admitted by all who are sensitive to simple, dignified, and refined qualities in architecture.

"Mr. H. S. Burke, who had executed the mosaic designs for Eaton Hall Chapel, undertook the erection of the Chapel of the Ascension, and threw all his fine experience and enthusiasm into the practical working-out of the plans, and with Mr. Horne frequently held consultations with Mrs. Russell Gurney, wherein she showed an admirably clear, exact forethought for every detail and for all the multiform requisitions of warming, flooring, roofing, lighting, etc.; and, four years later, when I expressed some shrinking from the great cost incurred, she wrote: 'What a privilege for me, out of the mammon of unrighteousness, to have been permitted to set forth your long-repressed aims!'

"Since it was most expedient, by reason of the shortness of life, to await the completion of the chapel building and the preparation of its walls for strictly mural painting, it became necessary to decide on some medium which would allow the paintings to be carried on in the artist's studio simultaneously with the progress of the builders. So, after inquiry and thoughtful care, the painter decided that, taken altogether, oil painting, when placed in favourable conditions and carefully preserved from any form of artificial lighting,

offered, in this country at least, the longest probabilities of endurance. But the object was kept in view to avoid anything like framed pictures, and to seek as far as might be, by the omission of all mouldings in the enclosing panelling, the general aspect of an unbroken wall of decoration.

"In consultation with the architect and Mr. Burke—and to the help of both these friends there is much indebtedness—the plan was formed of rivetting blocks of Belgian slate to the walls, leaving an air chamber behind, and then to affix the painting to the slate, after the manner practised by M. Puvis de Chavannes, at Amiens, with a composition of white-lead, etc. Gas having been proved most destructive to oil-paintings, it was provided in the deed of gift that no artificial light should ever be introduced into the Chapel of the Ascension, the hours of daylight being sufficient for the purposes contemplated. Thus also, with the addition of an iron door to the organ-loft, every possible precaution has been taken against the calamity of fire. The roof was the first part calling for treatment, and here Mrs. Russell Gurney expressed a wish for geometrical design covering the rafters, something after the manner of the decorated timbers of St. Miniato, Florence."

From an angle in the organ-loft the peculiarities of lighting and decoration described by Mr. Shields may be well observed. The decorated timbers of St. Miniato referred to probably have their antetype in the more ancient shafts of ivory, carved and inlaid with deep vermilion, which, still further east, exhibit in brighter climes what here is reproduced. We are glad to observe that our skilful photographer, from the indicated "angle of the organ-loft," has been able to produce the coveted vividness of effect.

A peculiar interest attaches to the history, tragic and in some sense sublime, of the rest of the story, for which no other words than Shields' own seem fitting:—

"The later years of Mrs. Russell Gurney's life were crossed by much physical suffering and weakness, through which her constitutional buoyancy of spirit so often carried her to convalescence, that it seemed to me that the fear she once expressed when hurt by some vexatious delay, 'I shall never live to see it done,' was yet far off. Still, the despondent words lingered in my mind, so that I bent all my powers to press the work on to such a point that some visible promise of the fulness of her idea might be set forth. Hence, within a year's space I designed all

the monumental panels of the enclosing woodwork with the small monochrome figures, some of them being painted with my own hand, and the friezes above of both sides of the chapel, inclusive of the long panels and the angelic figures that lie between them. In painting these Mr. Innes Fripp again gave valuable assistance, and, as the winter of 1894-95 was happily brighter than the preceding one, by the end of February we had reached the end of all the painting needing to be done from scaffolding, which, as soon as the many painted canvases awaiting fixture were set in their appointed places, was at length cleared away, so that March 18, 1896, I could say, 'Come now'; and I had the long-desired joy of receiving my most patient though expectant friend, and of beholding her ecstatic delight in what had been accomplished.

"The morrow had been appointed for the first of a series of lectures by the Rev. Roland Corbet, expository of the purposes of the chapel decoration, to which Mrs. Russell Gurney had invited many friends. She had hoped to be present at succeeding lectures.

"But of this opening day, when she was for the first time able to demonstrate that she had not lightly counted the cost of the plan which all her friends had at first discouraged, and that though the top stone was not yet brought forth, still there was some ocular demonstration that it might now be hoped that grace might be invoked on it eventually—this day was the very last on which she stood within her 'treasure house'

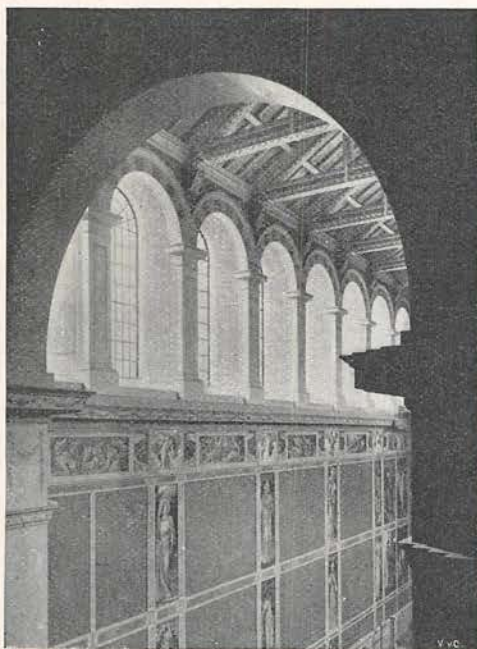
dedicated to God's glory. The next day she was stricken down with illness, which after seven months of lingering suffering, endured with patient resignation, took her away whose gracious presence I had trusted would have long remained my stimulating impulse and encouragement upon a lonely, toilsome path."

One of her last acts was to secure a legal provision for the maintenance of the Temple

of Art to which these few sentences may serve for introduction, and for securing to Frederick Shields the fruit of his labours and devotion.

Viewed as a new institution, open to all comers, this Chapel of the Ascension may fall short, as most things human do, of its noble and refined ideal. When the time comes—which, for reasons unexplained, is not yet—for dealing freely with its contents, we doubt not the piety of its foundress and the devotion and genius of the Interpreter whose paintings it enshrines will be more than justified. Even those who may have shrunk from the novelty of its first

conception will now render affectionate homage to the pure spirit which inspired it. As to the poet-painter, British Art will probably one of these days force upon him the academical honours which Continental academies should not be allowed to anticipate; and the town of his birth will hold its annual gala-day to impress upon the young the example of manliness and modesty with which he has carried forward to this hour a character and career of true fame.



From a photo by]

[W. H. Bunnett.

THE INTERIOR, AS SEEN FROM THE ORGAN LOFT.