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978-1-108-05172-9 - The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais: President of the Royal Academy: Volume 1

John Guille Millais

Excerpt

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THE LIFE AND LETTERS

OF

SIR JOHN EVERETT MILLAIS

CHAPTER I.

The birth of Millais—His parents—Early days in St. Heliers—A mother who educates and helps him—School a failure—The Lemprieres—First efforts in Art—The family move to Dinan—The Drum-major's portrait—Return to St. Heliers—Millais goes to London with his mother—Sir Martin Shee's advice—Millais enters Mr. Sass' school, and gains the silver medal of the Society of Arts—His love of fishing—Original amusement—He enters the Royal Academy—Early successes—Anecdotes of the poet Rogers—William Wordsworth—Oxford's attempt on the Queen's life—Millais as an Academy student—General Arthur Lempriere on Millais as a boy—Poem on students' life—Sergeant Thomas—First visit to Oxford—Mr. Wyatt—Mr. Drury—"Cymon and Iphigenia"—"Grandfather and Child."

IT was at Southampton on the 8th of June, 1829, that the late Sir J. E. Millais made his first appearance in the world as the youngest son of Mr. John William Millais, the descendant of an old Norman family resident in Jersey, where for many years he held a commission in the Island Militia. There, according to local tradition, John William Millais and his ancestors had been settled ever since the time of the Conquest. He was a man of fine presence and undeniable talent, being not only a very fair artist but an excellent musician, with command of four or five different instruments. But with all his gifts he was a man of no ambition save where his children were concerned, and desired nothing more than the life he led as a quiet country gentleman. My uncle, William Millais, describes him as a typical old troubadour, who won all hearts by his good looks and charming manners, and was known in his younger days as the handsomest man in the island.

I.—I

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JOHN EVERETT MILLAIS

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When quite a young man he chanced to meet an English-woman of gentle birth and great natural wit and cleverness, whose maiden name was Evamy, but who was then the widow of a Mr. Hodgkinson; and, falling in love with each other at first sight, they soon afterwards married.



CAPTAIN EDWARD MILLAIS, 1765
(MILLAIS' GRANDFATHER)
From a miniature

Mrs. Hodgkinson had two sons by her first husband—Henry, who lived a quiet life, and recently left to the nation two of my father's best works; and Clement, who greatly distinguished himself as an explorer in the wilds of Australia. In the old days Clement was the principal A.D.C. of Sir Thomas Mitchell, and himself discovered several gold-fields in Northern Australia.

My grandparents, John William and Emily Mary Millais, at first settled at "Le Quaihouse," just out of St. Heliers, where their daughter Emily Mary was born; but later on they removed to Southampton, where my uncle William Henry, and afterwards my father, were added to the family. They presently, however, returned to Jersey, where, at the age of four years, my father's inborn love of Natural History—a love that lasted his lifetime—found means of development. At St. Heliers some choice sand-eels offered an easy capture. The rocks too abounded with novelties in the shape of "slow, sly things with circumspective eyes"; and at the pier-head no end of little fish were waiting to be caught. Here, then, was Elysium to the young naturalist. To one or other of these places he sped away whenever he could escape from parental control, regardless of the admonitions of his mother, whose anxiety on these occasions was hardly compensated by the treasures of the beach with which he stocked all the baths and basins of the household, or by the advance in learning he displayed in naming correctly everything in his collection.

There too, at St. Heliers, his taste for drawing began to show itself. Encouraged by his mother, who quickly

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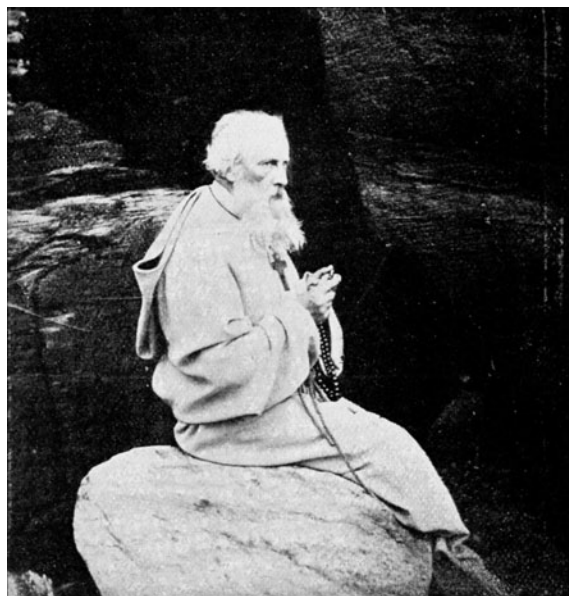
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FIRST EFFORTS IN ART

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discerned the boy's special gift, he devoted much of his time to sketching, and was never more happy than when his pencil was thus engaged. Birds and butterflies proved a great attraction, but it mattered little to him what was the object so long as he could express it on paper. Draw he must, and did at every spare moment.

In his maternal grandfather, John Evamy—a dear old man whom he greatly admired, mainly because of his skill as a fisherman—he found a delightful companion; and one



JOHN WILLIAM MILLAIS (MILLAIS' FATHER)

In fancy dress. Circ. 1870

of his earliest sketches, done in pencil at eight years of age, gives an excellent idea of this old gentleman engrossed in his favourite pursuit.

But Millais' truest and most helpful friend was his mother, whose love and foresight did so much to advance his aims and ambition, putting him in the right path from the very outset. She herself undertook the greater part of his education, and, being more gifted than most women, grounded him in history, poetry, literature, etc., knowledge of costume and armour, all of which was of the greatest use to him in his career; indeed, my father used often to say to us in after years, "I owe everything to my mother."

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One attempt was made to send him to school, but it ended in miserable failure. Throughout his life restrictions of any sort were hateful to him—what he would not do for love he would not do at all—so when, after two days at school, the master tried to thrash him for disobedience, the boy turned and bit his hand severely—a misdemeanour for which he was



JOHN EVAMY (MILLAIS' MATERNAL UNCLE)

Drawn from life at the age of eight

immediately expelled. A happy day this for him, for his mother then resumed her work of tuition, and her method of teaching, in opposition to that of the old dry-as-dust schools, led the child to love his lessons instead of hating them.

My uncle William made an excellent water-colour portrait of his mother, which I am enabled to give here. The reader will see at a glance her strong resemblance to her boy John Everett, presenting the same clever, determined mouth, and

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MARY MILLAIS (MILLAIS' MOTHER)

From a water-colour by William Millais, executed about the year 1869

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the same observant eyes. Nor did the resemblance end here, for she had also the same great love of painting and music.

Others beside his mother very soon began to see that little John Everett possessed real genius, not mere ordinary talent; and one of his uncles was so much impressed with this idea that he used frequently to say to his children, "Mark my words, that boy will be a very great man some day, if he lives."

My father never forgot the good friends of his early days in Jersey, but cherished a lasting affection and regard for them. Amongst those most anxious to help in the early cultivation of his talent was a charming family named Lempriere, then resident in the island. Philip Raoul Lempriere, the head of the house and Seigneur of Roselle Manor, was a man whose personality made itself felt by everyone with whom he came into contact, his strikingly handsome appearance being enhanced by the dignity and kindness of his manner; and the same might be said in degree of every member of his family. To know them intimately was an education in itself; and, happily for my father, they took a great fancy to him, making him ever welcome at the house. There, then, he spent much of his time, and, as I have heard him say, learned unconsciously to appreciate the beauties of Nature and Art. General Lempriere, one of the grandsons of the Seigneur, I may add, figures as "the Huguenot" in the famous picture of that name, painted in 1852.

Roselle, in a word, proved an endless source of interest and amusement to the juvenile artist. He could fish when he liked in ponds well stocked with perch and tench, and in the park was a fine herd of fallow deer, in which he took great delight. A drawing of his—perhaps his best at that date—represents the tragic end of one of those beautiful creatures that he happened to witness. The circumstance impressed him deeply and, as he often remarked in after life, aroused in him the spirit of the chase, even in those early days and amidst such calm surroundings.

My father's cousin, Miss Benest—a wonderful old lady of eighty—writes: "When he was only four he was continually at work with pencil and paper, and generally lay on the floor covering sheets with all sorts of figures." She also mentions, as significant of the frank and open mind and the zeal for truth that he retained to the end of

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his days, that “when he did anything on a larger scale he used to come to my father, throwing his arms round his neck in his affectionate manner, saying, ‘Uncle, *you* do not always praise me as the others do; *you show me the faults.*’”

His brother William was exceedingly clever, but without



SHAKESPEARIAN CHARACTER

Original drawing by Millais at the age of 7½ years

the same application and industry. As a young man he possessed a remarkably fine tenor voice, and a good tenor being as rare in those days as it is now, Mario, after hearing him sing, urged him strongly to go on the stage, saying he would make his fortune. But this was far from his idea of a happy life. He had no ambition to walk the boards, but sang because he loved it, and painted for the same reason,

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REMOVAL TO DINAN

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becoming ultimately well known as a water-colour landscape artist. His unselfish admiration for my father knew no bounds; he was always helping and taking care of his younger and more delicate brother, and did much by his cheery optimism and consummate tact to alleviate the hard knocks and petty worries that assailed the young painter whilst struggling to make a name.

In 1835 the family removed to Dinan, in Brittany, where a new interest awaited the budding artist, then in his seventh



HOGARTHIAN CHARACTERS IN A WITNESS-BOX

Original study of expression.

The writing on the drawing is that of the artist's mother.

year. The poetry of the place, as expressed in its fine mediæval architecture and interpreted by a loving mother, took a great hold upon his imagination, setting his pencil to work at once; but joy of joys to the juvenile mind were the gorgeous uniforms of the French officers stationed in the neighbourhood. Of this period William Millais sends me some interesting notes. He says: "I well remember the time we spent together at Dinan, where our parents resided for two years. We were little boys and quite inseparable, he six years old and I two years his senior. Our greatest delight was to watch the entry of regiments as they passed

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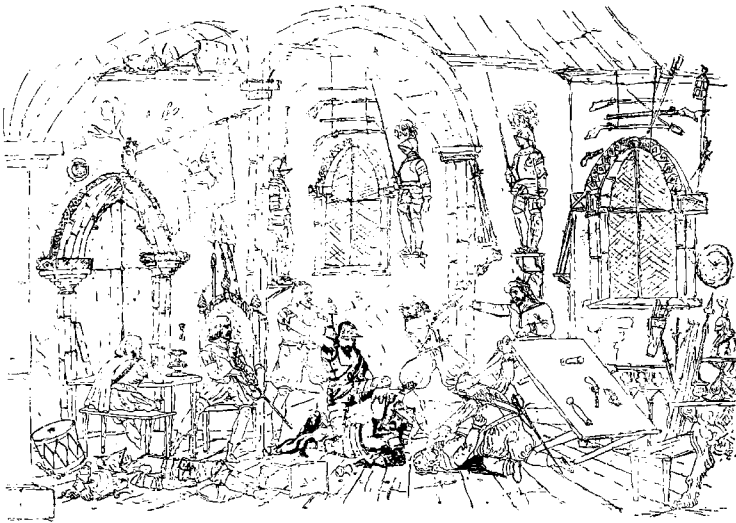
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JOHN EVERETT MILLAIS

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through the town to and from Brest, and these occasions were of frequent occurrence. The roll-call generally took place in the Place aux Chaines, and each soldier on being disbanded was presented with a loaf of black bread, which he stuck on the point of his bayonet and then shouldered his rifle. We usually sat under the *tilleuls* of the Place du Guesclin, on a bench overlooking the soldiers and away from the crowd. On one occasion we noticed an enormous *tambour-majeur*, literally burnished with gold trappings, wearing a tall bear-skin and flourishing a huge gold-headed cane,



MÉLÉE IN A BANQUETING-HALL. 1838.

to the delight of a lot of little *gamins*. Jack at once produced his sketch-book and pencil, and proceeded to jot down the giant into his book. Whilst this was going on we were not aware that two officers were silently creeping towards us, and we were quite awed when they suddenly uttered loud ejaculations of astonishment at what they had seen, for they had evidently been witnesses of the last touch made upon the drum-major. They patted the little artist on the back, gave him some money, and asked me where we lived. Our house was only a stone's-throw off, so we took them up into the drawing-room, and they talked for some time with my father and mother, urging them most seriously to send the child at once to Paris, to be educated in the Arts.