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978-1-108-05173-6 - The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais: President of the Royal Academy: Volume 2

John Guille Millais

Excerpt

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THE LIFE AND LETTERS

OF

SIR JOHN EVERETT MILLAIS

CHAPTER XIII.

1867–1872

Transition in Art—"Rosalind and Celia"—"Jephthah"—"Sleeping" and "Waking"—The Paris Exhibition—Holman Hunt's "Liberal Whip"—Frith and Millais go to Paris—Visit to Rosa Bonheur—"The Boyhood of Raleigh"—"The Flood"—Millais goes deer-stalking—Illness of his father—His death—Sport in the North—"The Knight Errant"—Millais goes to Loch More—A cow who eats salmon—"Chill October"—Death of Charles Dickens—Millais draws him after death—Dr. Anderson—"Victory, O Lord!"—Dr. Grote—The Artists' Benevolent Fund—£16,000 collected at the first dinner—"Hearts are Trumps"—Portrait of Mrs. Bischoffsheim—Its reception in Paris and Munich—Mrs. Heugh—Autumn holidays—Death of Sir Edwin Landseer—An illustrated letter—Mr. Thomas Hills—Millais on Landseer and his critics—He finishes Landseer's uncompleted pictures—Anecdotes of Landseer.

THE year 1867 witnessed another of the great transitions in the period of Millais' Art life. As "The Vale of Rest" proclaimed his emancipation from the excessive detail of Pre-Raphaelite expression, so the two works "Rosalind and Celia" and "Jephthah," painted this year, showed a further development—one might almost say a new departure—in the style and character of his work, marked as it was now by a greater breadth of treatment, while exhibiting the same careful attention as before to every accessory and detail.

We have seen how, in earlier years, he struck out a line for himself, and regardless of all outside opinions and influences, sought to paint exactly what he himself saw in Nature, omitting no detail, and taking Truth alone as his master; and we know how he was laughed at for his pains. But "he laughs best who laughs last." The work of those early days was but the prelude to achievements that have since made his name famous in the realms of Art. They were simply years of self-education, of hardship and drudgery,

in which the foundation of his future success was laid. In his own words, they “taught him everything.” And many a time have I heard him say to young artists, who thought to escape a grind like this by studying in Paris the methods of the impressionist school, “Ah! you want to run before you have learnt to walk. You will never get on unless you go through the mill as I did, and as every successful artist has had to do.”

Even in pictures that mysterious influence called Fashion makes itself felt at times. Impressionism was now the latest fancy, and as interpreted by such men as Millet, Corot, and Whistler, Fashion was justified of her children; but to young British artists the wave of impressionism that passed over Art circles a few years ago probably did more harm than good, the apparent ease and simplicity of the works exhibited betraying no sign of the arduous toil by which the artists had attained their skill. Had any of them been questioned on this point, he would doubtless have given much the same answer that my father did, and so perhaps have saved his art from the desecration of mere hazes of paint by men who do not even know how to draw. The public are beginning to find this out now—to distinguish between genuine Art and imbecile trash; and it may be hoped that under the educational influence of our numerous Art galleries and exhibitions even the most ignorant amongst us will in time come to a better understanding of what is meant by Art.

In “Rosalind and Celia” two or three broad streaks of the brush express exactly a fallen leaf which a few years before would have been highly worked up; and both here and in other works of the period a distinct change is observable in the artist’s methods—in flesh-painting no less than in the treatment of costume and landscape. And yet nothing was lost; the quality of the work remained unchanged; it was simply produced now with a freedom of touch that proclaimed the maturity of the artist’s power.

Millais had great difficulty with the figure and pose of Celia. He painted it originally from his wife’s sister, Mrs. Stibbard, who had so often sat to him before; but for a long time he struggled in vain to produce the effect he desired. Again and again he painted the figure out, and it was only at the last moment, when the picture was about to leave his hands, that he succeeded in his object, taking for his model a pretty, dark woman, the wife of one of Lord Rothschild’s clerks.

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“ROSALIND AND CELIA. 1867
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1867]

"JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER"

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For Rosalind, Mrs. Madley (a professional model) sat, whilst an actor took the part of Touchstone; and for a background the artist resorted to Knole Park, near Sevenoaks, where he painted it in the month of June.

Very interesting is it to notice the careful study of expression in the three Shakespearian characters. There is Rosalind full of alert vigilance while entering into the spirit of the part she is playing; but poor, tired Celia, who rests wearily beside her, betrays no interest in the escapade which is beyond her strength. Touchstone is not tired, but only glum and bored, and he certainly looks it.

The lines chosen from *As You Like It* (Act II. Scene iv.) run thus:—

Rosalind.—Oh, Jupiter! how weary are my spirits!

Touchstone.—I care not for my spirits, if my legs were not weary.

Rosalind.—I could find it in my heart to disgrace my man's apparel, and to cry like a woman; but I must comfort the weaker vessel, as doublet and hose ought to show itself courageous to petticoat; therefore courage, good Aliena!

Celia.—I pray you bear with me; I can go no further.

Good as is the engraving of this work, it gives, of course, no idea of the magnificent colouring of the original. This is a great loss, as "Rosalind and Celia" is a grand example of the artist's skill in harmonising the rich colour of the costumes with the softer tints of the sunlit beech forest.

The picture was sold for a sum far below its value; but, as usual, the value advanced with every change of hands. It is now in the possession of a gentleman by whom it is fully appreciated—Mr. James Bunten of Dunalastair. Hanging at the end of the dining-room, in which are no other pictures, it looks out upon snow-capped Schehallion and the valley of the Tummel—one of the happiest reunions I have ever seen of Nature and Art.

"Jephthah," another picture of this year, is in many respects quite as fine a work as "Rosalind and Celia," though perhaps the subject itself is not quite so attractive. Colonel C. Lindsay sat for the principal figure. He was a particularly handsome man, with beautiful, deep-set, grey eyes, like those of his daughter, Lady Granby. The lovely girl walking away with her arm round her sister's waist was a Miss Ward, and the two other figures were models. This picture (exhibited in 1867) was the first of Millais' works that commanded a very large price, showing an immediate appreciation by the public of his later acquisition of power. Mr.

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Mendel, of Manley Hall, became the owner, and on the sale of his pictures it passed once more to dealers, finally coming into the possession of the present owner, Lord Armstrong.

This was one of Millais' most arduous years. August came—the time for him to put away his paints and fly to the hills for sport and relaxation—but still he stuck to his work, partly for the love of it, and still more, perhaps, because of an accident that prevented his walking about.

His life at the time is described in the following letters to my mother, who was then staying, with the children, at St. Andrews, in Fife:—

“I have been working hard all day (indeed I can do nothing else, as I am quite lame), and two days more will finish the ‘Sleeping’; but ‘Rosalind’ goes on slowly, and I don’t see an end to it. . . . I must try and do two illustrations this month, and a drawing for Macmillan—‘Tom Brown.’ Marochetti called this afternoon, and is to take away ‘Leda and the Swan’ to-morrow to cast. He will take the greatest care of it, and I shall give directions to his man to put a plate underneath, to make it work better on the pedestal.

“I dine to-morrow with Frith, and Tuesday with Mason, the artist. I worked from half-past ten till nearly seven, without any rest, and shall do the like till all is done, as I detest a moment lost. . . . I have finished ‘The Minuet,’ and part of ‘Sleeping,’ [water-colour copies] to the utmost, almost like Meissonnier, and (with another two days to each) I could make them *quite* as finished. They are certainly the best-paying things I do, as I consider I am making a hundred a day whilst working.

“I am quite delighted that Albert [his brother-in-law Albert Gray] is here. He is a very companionable, capital fellow; but it is, of course, very slow for him, and if he doesn’t hear from his friends in Paris he should not waste his holidays with me.”

“*August, 1867.*—I have been working hard all day at ‘Rosalind,’ and it is now another picture. Alice’s head I repainted, as I found it was not in the right place. I have made it better—at least I like it better—and painted it from that pretty model Mrs. Madley, who called when Ford [Sir Clare Ford] was lunching here. The head of ‘Rosalind’ also is deficient, but I don’t think either wants much now.

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1867]

HARD AT WORK

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I only want another day's work for 'Sleeping,' and I have begun 'Waking'; but the more I do the more there seems to be done, and I don't know when I shall finish; which is not so much to be deplored, as I couldn't shoot if I had the opportunity, for my foot is little better. . . . I am heartily sick of work, and I don't care a bit whether I get shooting or not; for I know that, wherever I go, it will be more than a fortnight before I can walk at all. If I go to Fowler's I



SKETCH FOR "JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER." 1869

must buy a new rifle, and the least I can get a good one for is £40—which is offered to me by Halford [Sir Henry Halford], who is not able to shoot.

“The exertion of painting from ten till seven in such heat is more than enough, and I don't pay the least attention to anything else. Even if I should be able to get away the first week in September (which is very improbable) I should not go to St. Andrews, as I have promised Fowler to be there at that time. I can get the little pictures done, but the 'Rosalind' has a good month's work yet, as I must do the drawing, which I can't do properly elsewhere.”

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[1867]

At this time all his friends were off to the hills, while he was still slaving away at his easel all day long. What that means to an ardent sportsman none but a sportsman can know. To me it looks uncommonly like a month's imprisonment with hard labour. But perhaps I had better give his own ideas on the subject, as expressed in the following letter to my mother:—

“*August 16th, 1867.*—My models have gone—never, I trust, to return—but I have an immense deal to do. Just about half-past four the studio is at its hottest, and I generally give you a line then, as I can do nothing else. Charles Buxton has asked me to Fox Warren, but I will not leave my work. Harcourt is going there, and then on to Scotland. He sent me, this afternoon, a letter from Fowler, who is shooting at another place, and has had splendid sport—eighty brace—so the grouse can't be bad there. They expect me at Braemore the first week in September, but I don't see a chance of it. . . .

“Last night I dined with Hodgkinson, and went afterwards to Arthur Lewis' and played billiards. A number of his friends were there, and he seemed in excellent spirits. Val Prinsep is in town, and one or two others, but the club is nearly deserted, as indeed every other place is, in spite of Parliament still sitting.

“Leighton has gone to Greece and Constantinople, so we may expect houris and kiosks next year in the Royal Academy. . . . My studio is in a woeful state of dirt, but I won't allow it to be cleaned as long as the 'Sleeping' and 'Waking' are there; so I lock my door directly I have done for the day, and never open it till I come down in the morning.

“An old gentleman, Lord H——, called with a lady (I suppose his daughter) yesterday. He wanted to see me, and evidently his reason was to discover whether I was painting portraits, as he inquired if I would paint a likeness, and I told him on no account.

“Last night I received a French publication, in which appears a criticism of my pictures in Paris, and as far as I can make out they are really favourable. . . . I expect I shall have to give up the 'Rosalind,' but I shall see better by next week. However, if I have any doubt I will finish the small affairs and leave at once; so don't be surprised if you suddenly hear of me. It is more than I can endure, and life is too short to be such a fool as I am, working here

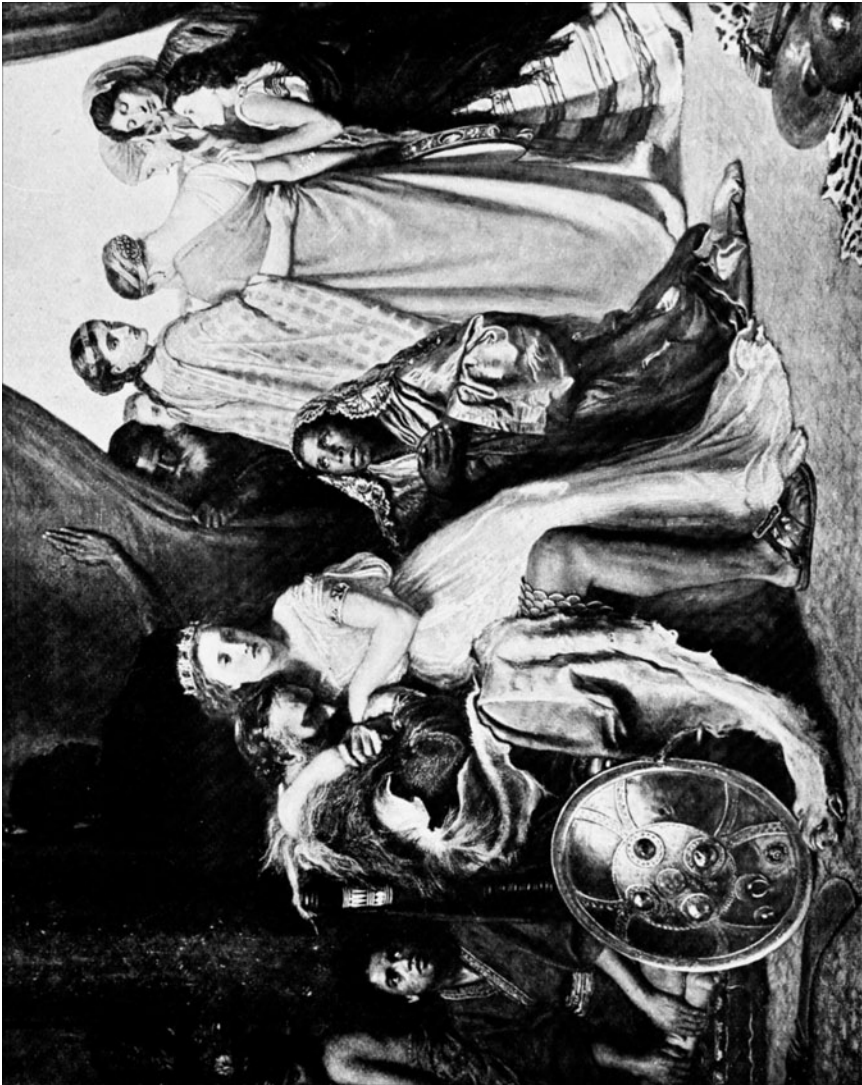
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