

MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY  
AND  
REMINISCENCES.

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CHAPTER I.

EARLY DAYS.

THOUGH it has been constantly urged, and with a considerable amount of truth, that the lives of painters in their somewhat monotonous course present but little or no interest when told, I have thought that if the painter himself were to be the historian, and he were to describe simply and truly his early career up to the final success or failure of it, he might point a moral, though from want of literary ability he might not be able to adorn a tale. At the present date I have passed more than fifty years of artistic life; and I propose to relate the many ups and downs of it, my means and methods of study, some experiences of great difficulties, and the way they have been occasionally surmounted, together with matter more or less interesting arising from circumstances connecting me with men and things with

whom, and with which, I have been in contact in the progress of my life and work.

To begin at the beginning, I was born on the 9th of January, 1819, at a little village in Yorkshire called Aldfield. My father held a position of trust in the family of the then owner of Studley Royal, Mrs. Lawrence. He had a taste for art, and a proficiency in the practice of it which proper cultivation would have improved into excellence—as many of his drawings still in my possession go very far to prove. He collected engravings and pictures which were poor enough, but in which the ignorance which is sometimes bliss enabled him to see merits which did not exist; and it was this passion that blinded him into thinking that a wretched drawing done by me when I was about eleven years old showed signs of a genius worth cultivating. That drawing I still have: it is a copy from Moreland of an animal that might have been a dog under the hand of Moreland, but in my translation of it the species is left undetermined—anything worse or more hopeless it would be impossible to imagine. But I anticipate. I have no very early recollections interesting to myself or anybody else. My family, consisting of two brothers and a sister, with the “parent pair,” left Aldfield about the year 1826, and went to Harrogate, a well-known watering-place, where my father became the landlord of a large rambling inn called The Dragon, now in ruins. It was at that time that the little general education ever allowed me was begun, and I was sent to school at Knaresborough.

How fortunate is the present generation compared with that of sixty years ago! How great the change for the better—in the fact of such schools as those to which I was sent, all more or less of the “Dotheboys Hall” pattern, being improved off the face of the earth—is so evident as to need no proof from me. It is a great satisfaction to me to feel that I have been able to give my own children such educations as have enabled them to take positions, and to do work, utterly denied to me.

As nearly as I can remember, it was on a winter's evening in 1831 when I was sitting idly looking over some of my father's engravings—having previously obeyed an order from my mother to wash my hands, as those members in their normal condition were justly considered to be unfit to touch those precious prints—that I asked for a pencil and paper, and tried to copy an engraving of a dog. What impelled me to the deed which actually determined my future life I cannot tell. If I might guess at the motive, I think it was merely that I thought it would afford me a chance of sitting up later than the hour of the children's bedtime—rigorously fixed at nine o'clock—as it did, for I was allowed to finish my wonderful production there and then. If I have a doubt as to what prompted me to my first work, I have none whatever as to what induced me to undertake the second.

I received sixpence for the dog, with a promise of a similar reward for another effort. From that moment, and on such evidence, I was considered the genius of the family, and schoolmasters were in-

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formed that all other learning must be considered secondary to the cultivation of this great gift! and very secondary indeed it became. I found copying Dutch prints much easier than geography and the use of the globes, to say nothing of Latin, for a very slight experience of that language led me to feel that life would be unendurable if I were compelled to learn it; so that beyond a little of the grammar, and the acquisition of a few quotations—which I find useful to this day when I desire to create an impression that they are but samples of a wealth of the classical knowledge that I possess—I know nothing whatever about it. Greek was not one of the accomplishments taught at any of my schools, so I was spared that trouble. My education was finished at a large establishment at St. Margaret's, near Dover, kept by a very amiable man named Temple, who, with a staff of ushers, boarded and educated nearly a hundred boys for twenty pounds a year apiece. I really believe the education was quite extraordinary for the price paid for it; but I cannot speak with authority, for I was only allowed a very little of it, the most of my time being taken up with my eternal copying in chalks, or lead pencil, with a little pen and ink for a change, from any good, bad, or indifferent print that fell in my way. I was placed in charge of the drawing-master, a Frenchman, with strict injunctions to allow me to do as I liked; and these injunctions received his careful attention, for he never interfered with me. Indeed, I soon found that his knowledge was as limited as my own; and

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it will scarcely be believed when we see the system, admirable as it is, which is now almost universally adopted in school-teaching, that in my early days bad drawings of impossible landscapes, and still more outrageous figures, were the only models placed before art students, who made bad worse, and only learnt that which they had most studiously to forget when they began serious work.

I remained about two years at St. Margaret's, and except a little French, I learnt nothing. There were several French boys from whom I, *volens volens* (here you have classical example number one), picked up a little of the polite language of the world; in return, I endeavoured to instil into one of them a little knowledge of the manly art of self-defence as it is practised in this country. There was a chronic state of ill-feeling between the French and English boys. Waterloo was a red rag which we pretty often shook in their faces; frogs were sought and found in the ditches about St. Margaret's, and also in the beds of the French boys, who, on remonstrating, were accused of ingratitude for complaining of gratuitous gifts of their national food. I forget what my immediate cause of quarrel was with one of them (a long, thin fellow, taller than I); whatever it may have been, the result was a fight behind a haystack in a neighbouring farmyard—that is, if the affair could be dignified by the name of a fight. I placed myself in the posture of self-defence with which I was familiar from my usual source of information—engraving. My adversary, who was very angry,

stared at my projected fists for a moment, then flew at me like a cat, scratching, kicking, and clawing in a very irregular manner; and it was only after a desperate struggle to free myself from his long legs and get my hair out of his clutches with some loss of it, that I was able to give him "one on his peepers" (to use the language of the P.R.), which produced a very black eye, and made him cry, and the battle was over.

This was my first and last fight.

To turn from war to peace, it must be evident to any thoughtful person who may be improving his mind by reading these pages, that my art studies must have resulted in a very large heap of copies from prints, but never in an attempt to draw anything from nature, or to design a composition from imagination—an element of mind which I might, or might not, possess, but without which success in art is hopeless. I fancy everybody can remember the exquisite delight of his first visit to a theatre, or the reading of his first novel; both those experiences are very vivid to me at this moment. Long before I went to St. Margaret's, when I was very young, I revelled in works of imagination—the novels of G. P. R. James, the romances of Mrs. Radcliffe, and, above and before all, the works of Scott and Cooper. The two last named still retain their charm for me. Mr. James I have tried again, but the old love is dead, and I now wonder it was ever born. I can recall the bright pictures with which the Wizard of the North filled my imagina-

tion. Why I did not, as a boy, try to reproduce Rebecca and Ivanhoe, or Jeanie Deans, or Madge Wildfire (I had enough of them afterwards), however imperfectly, is now a wonder to me—a wonder and a lesson—for unless my sensibilities, like Miss Squeers', "came late into blow," I could have done something in the shape of original work instead of wasting valuable, irrecoverable time in profitless copying. I know very well that I never was, nor under any circumstances could have become, a great artist; but I am a very successful one, and my advice is often asked by anxious parents who produce specimens of their children's work, and place me in the really awful position of a kind of destiny over the future of their sons or daughters. Let me advise all artists who may find themselves elected arbiters of the fate of others, to be as dumb as the ancient oracle when difficulties were presented. Except in the rarest and most exceptional cases, judgment from early specimens is absolutely impossible. Consider the quality of mind and body requisite for a successful artistic career—long and severe study from antique statues, from five to eight hours every day; then many months' hard work from the life, with attendance at lectures, study of perspective, anatomy, etc.; general reading to be attended to also—all this before painting is attempted, and when attempted the student may find he has no eye for colour. I do not mean colour-blind, which is of course fatal, but that he is not appreciative of all the subtle tints and tones of flesh; or, what is more

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fearful still, he may find that he has all the language of art at his fingers' ends, and that he has nothing to say. I illustrate this by an example of one of my fellow-students at the Royal Academy, a young fellow named Powell, who died long ago. He was highly accomplished in many ways; he drew splendidly. His studies from the nude were the admiration of student and professor alike. He gained medals in all the schools, and when he tried to turn his knowledge to account and produce pictures, he failed utterly. Composition and arrangement of the colours, and light and shadow, necessary in a group of more or less figures, cannot be taught, or if taught by line and rule the result is nil; the whole thing is a matter of feeling and imagination. An artist must see his picture finished in his mind's eye before he begins it, or he will never be an artist at all. Powell could not appreciate the difference between a good composition and a bad one, nor could he understand the value and importance of light and shadow. I think what I have just said is worthy the attention of advised and advisers alike, and I desire to impress on all those who rely upon advice, no matter from whatever eminent source, that the risk they run is terrible.



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William Powell Frith

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER II.

### MY FUTURE DESTINY DISCUSSED.

I NOW go back to my own career. On returning home from school with my bundle of specimens, a family council was called, with friends to assist. There was no doubt in the mind of one of them, I verily believe, that I was a great genius.

“Why, just look,” said an old woman in the shape of a man, “you can’t tell one from t’other!” showing a print of Teniers’ and my chalk copy from it; and they certainly were, and are (for they still hang and can be compared on my staircase), very much alike.

I was the wonder of High Harrogate, then my home. People came and asked for a sight of the wonderful works, which my dear mother showed with a pardonable pride. She could not, and did not, ask her guests to wash their hands—a treatment, as I remember, desirable for some of them; but she would never let the drawings leave her own hands, for fear of the precious things being rubbed or otherwise injured.

“If I was you,” said one wiseacre, “I’d never let

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him have any teaching; they'd spoil him. Look at Mr. Wilkie now, the man that did the 'Blind Fiddler' and that; he was self-taught."

"No, he wasn't," said my father. "Don't you talk of what you know nothing about."

I may remark here that my father was a gruff, silent man, but by no means such a fool as to think that a self-taught artist had anything but a fool for both master and pupil. At this time I was in my fifteenth year, and it was thought desirable that my future career should be determined. My eldest brother had died, my youngest one was intended for the law, and I for the arts if I decided on that profession. Parents, in nearly all instances that have come within my experience, have shown marked and often angry opposition to the practice of art as a profession for their children; naturally and properly I think, considering the precarious nature of its pursuit. My parents were exceptions to that rule, and I shall never forget my father's look of disappointment when, on his asking me if I should like to go to London and learn to be a real artist, I replied:

"I don't care much about it."

"Well, what would you like to be? You must do something for your living, you know."

"I think I should like to be an auctioneer, or something of that kind."

"An auctioneer be ——!" said my father, who used strong language sometimes.

Itinerant artists, generally portrait-painters, wan-