

MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

AND

REMINISCENCES.



CHAPTER I.

“THE SALON D’OR.”

IN the Exhibition of 1868 I was represented by five pictures, namely, the scene from Goldsmith’s “She Stoops to Conquer,” the “Johnson and Garrick” subject, and three minor works, one of which represented Sterne’s “Maria,” so pathetically described in the pages of that writer, sitting, with wandering mind, “a look of wistful disorder,” her flageolet in her hand, and her goat by her side. Never shall I forget that goat! It was fortunate that I got a strong man to hold it; fortunate, also, that my picture was not destroyed, and myself injured. For the animal violently objected to being painted: it knocked the man over, and butted him as he lay upon the floor; then turned its attention to me, and endeavoured to treat me in the same way. I received its first charge on my mahl-stick, which

snapped in my defence. My assistant recaptured the brute just as my easel, fortunately a very strong one, was made the means of experiment to try whether the goat's head or the mahogany was the harder; and again he—or *she*, I think it was (females are generally vicious—*female goats*, I mean)—was seized by the horns, and her head bent towards the floor. And now began a series of struggles in which man and goat were mixed together, like the Old Guard and our soldiers at Waterloo. For one moment the man had the best of it, and the goat was quiet; then, watching its opportunity, a violent plunge was made, and the man seemed to fly towards the ceiling, then down on his back again, and the butting recommenced.

It was now necessary to get more assistance, and I sent for one of my sons, a sturdy lad, who delighted in the business. After that we got on better, and I succeeded in painting an animal which, strange to say, is not unlike a goat.

The picture of Sterne's "Maria" is now in the possession of one of the brothers Burnand. The two Burnands are specimens of the very best kind of picture-collectors; men of great taste and judgment—though they certainly admired and sometimes bought my pictures: "Nemo mortalium omnibus horis sapit" ('tis long since I showed my classical knowledge); men who collected works of art from love of them, and of exceptional liberality, and without a thought of the mercantile element which so often guides the picture-buyer. Both these gentlemen possessed, and,

I am happy to say, still possess, admirable specimens of many of our best artists.

The model for "Maria" was a pretty, gentle creature, who had a history. She sat to me many times for many pictures; and it was her sad expression as much as her beauty that suggested "Maria" to me, and induced me to try the subject. I drew from her—reluctantly on her side—something of her history. Her superiority to an ordinary model was apparent in many ways; her manner and address were ladylike, and her grammar never caused a shudder. I knew of her mother as being "one who had seen better days," but was not aware that my model possessed a husband, until one day when, seeing palpable evidence of recent tears, and, among other distressing symptoms, something very like the mark of a recent blow, she told me she had been married for some time, and to a wretch who treated her with brutality. The man sought her acquaintance (he was a journeyman something or other, with a tolerable education), and, finding she was a Sunday-school teacher, he professed an ardent desire to join in the good work. She reluctantly consented to his seeing her home, and making the acquaintance of her mother, who very soon saw through the man, and cautioned her daughter against him. But the fellow was clever enough to find out the girl's weaknesses and pander to them. He was very assiduous at the Sunday-school, affected a veneration for religion and its observances, praised her beauty and helped her to adorn it—in short, won her heart and her consent to

marry him. This last fatal step, in spite of her mother's entreaties, she persisted in taking, and within a month afterwards the hypocrite dropped his mask, ridiculed the religion in which she sincerely believed, deserted her for others, came home occasionally mad-drunk, beat her, and would soon have killed her if she had not taken advice and left him. She hid herself successfully for some time, when, on coming to me one day to sit, I saw, before she spoke, that her retreat had been discovered. The man demanded money, and got it, but left her otherwise undisturbed. He informed her, with coarse language, that she needn't fear his wanting to live with her again, he had had enough of her and her tempers; but so long as she earned money—he didn't care how—he intended to have a share of it.

Soon after this my lovely "Maria" disappeared more effectually from my knowledge than she had done from her husband's. I regretted her loss, and made many unavailing inquiries after her—all in vain. I never saw her again but once, and then she was lounging in a splendid carriage, with some children, which, from the hasty glance I had of them, seemed greatly to resemble herself; but whether her husband is dead and she is married again, or whether she is not married again and her husband is not dead, this deponent knoweth not; but he heartily wishes her well wherever or whatever she may be—only reminding her that she has been rather late in coming to keep an appointment to enable him to finish a head begun nearly twenty years ago.

This dilatoriness reminds me of a story told of a sailor who took the opportunity of deserting from his ship on the occasion of his being sent ashore at some island to fetch some fruit for his captain. Fifteen years afterwards the sailor was looking into a print-shop in London, and, turning away to resume his walk, he found himself face to face with his deserted captain. After a look of mutual recognition and astonishment, mixed, on the sailor's part, with a considerable portion of alarm, the captain merely remarked, "You have been a long time getting that fruit!"

My first sight of Boswell and his friends on the Academy walls shocked me as usual. My diary says:

"To the R.A. Pictures well placed, and looking well—all but Johnson, which is hung too low, and looks dingy."

Dingy though it seemed to me, it was much approved, to my surprise; and, to this moment, I cannot account for its success, nor for the ridiculous price that was afterwards paid for it.

I suppose few people in public positions escape the cowardly pest of anonymous letters. Dickens told me that he received so many as to produce a habit of never reading any letter till he first ascertained if there was a name at the bottom of it. If the missive was unsigned, into the fire it went. I never was favoured in that way but once—when the "Boswell" picture was exhibited. I think the epistle emanated from a disappointed artist, for there was an ass's head on it very well drawn, and between the donkey's ears were my initials, "W. P. F."

"That's what you are," said the author; "and the sooner you go to school again, and learn to draw, the better it will be for the Exhibition, as you will not disgrace it as you do now."

It was my habit in those days to read the "art criticisms" in the papers, and, as the unfavourable ones were always sent to me, I had a good deal of reading. In one journal (the *Saturday Review*, I think) one of my larger pictures was severely handled. The paper was sent to me with the most scathing remarks underlined in lead pencil; with pencilled remarks in the margin calling my attention to the critic's observations in such phrases as:

"There you've got it!" "How do you like that?" "That's a nasty one, ain't it?" and so on.

I dare say many such playful attacks have been made upon me since. If so, I hereby advertise the performers that they may save themselves trouble; for, as I have said before, I never read a word of art criticism, either about myself or others.

My next venture was in the field of "modern life." I do not remember the subject of it with satisfaction, or write about it with pleasure; though I and my friends thought well of it at the time of its conception. My idea was to represent two scenes (a double picture). In the first, a young gentleman is asking an elderly one for his consent to a marriage with his daughter. In the second, the young lady is waiting—sympathetically supported by her mother—in great trepidation for the result of the interview. The pictures were placed in one frame, and called "Hope"

and "Fear." I cannot say they were successful—the subject was considered to belong to the "namby-pamby" school—with considerable justice, I fear. They found a purchaser, however, in a Mr. X——, who was a great lover of art, without being much acquainted with its mysteries. He was a very hospitable, pleasant gentleman, with a charming country-house—to which I paid several visits. Mr. X—— had a habit of thinking aloud, which (like a similar propensity in Lord Dudley and Ward) was often the cause of amusement and embarrassment to his friends and himself.

On one of my visits from Saturday to Monday, I went to church with my host. X——'s house was some mile and a half from his place of worship, and he drove me there in a double-bodied kind of phaeton—the front seat made to hold two persons, with a smaller seat behind for a servant. We had reached within half a mile of the church, when a lady was seen walking along the road.

"Confound it!" said X—— (to *himself*, as he imagined), "that's Mrs. Smith. It will never do to pass her. The man must drive her to church—confound her!" Then to me: "You see that lady walking along there? She is a particular friend of ours, and evidently going to church. I think we must offer her the carriage. Would you mind walking the rest of the way?"

"On the contrary," said I, "I should like it."

Almost as I spoke the carriage stopped by the lady's side. The usual "She would, and she would

not," took place, ending in Mrs. Smith seating herself by the groom's side, and being carefully wrapped up by Mr. X—— in a fur rug. As X—— was tenderly covering up the lady's knees, he said :

"Shan't take her back, though. She is as well able to walk as we are."

Fortunately Mrs. Smith was well acquainted with X——'s infirmity. She smiled an acknowledgment of his politeness ; and she certainly walked home.

On another occasion, a large and distinguished company was assembled in X——'s drawing-room, after one of the sumptuous dinners for which he was celebrated. The walls were covered with pictures, the merits of which were freely discussed by the guests. I saw X——, with one of his guests discussing the qualities of a picture, as was evident by frequent pointing on the part of the connoisseur to portions of the work.

The guest had to catch a train ; and he had no sooner left the room, than, in the midst of a momentary stillness, X—— exclaimed in a loud voice, " I don't care a d—— what he thinks !" Then, to me, " Frith, do you think there is a want of breadth throughout this picture ? My friend So-and-so says it is dreadfully 'cut up.' "

I may here relate another instance of thinking aloud that was told me by Vice-Chancellor Wigram :

Sir James Wigram was a guest at one of the State balls given in the days of William IV., and during the evening he found himself close to Queen Adelaide, who was in conversation with Lord Dudley

and Ward. The Queen had evidently been pestered with questions, and was in an irritable state—a condition, I believe, not uncommon with her. Just as Wigram reached the pair, Lord Dudley asked a question. "I have answered that question twice already," said the Queen.

"D—— her!—so she has!" *thought* Lord Dudley, and *said* it aloud.

As the pictures of "Hope" and "Fear" progressed, I was beset with doubts of their success. My diary says, on the 29th of July: "Upper part of mother's dress worked miserably; doubtful of these subjects; they are weak, I fear." I think the pictures were sold separately eventually—a sure sign of failure; for if a story is well told, and of sufficient interest in a series of pictures—as in Hogarth, for instance—no one would dream of selling them separately.

About this time an Exhibition took place at York. A copy, on a small scale, of the Great Exhibition of 1851; pictures, chiefly old masters, playing a prominent part in it. And never was the ignorance of the public in general, and of the owners of the pictures in particular, more ludicrously displayed.

A London doctor had formed a large collection of daubs, to which he had attached great names, in happy ignorance of the special qualities for which the painters were distinguished. So he had a crucifixion, by Ostade; a comic scene of characters dressed in the costume of the time of George I., by Rubens, and so on. And what was stranger, was the fact

that the Exhibition authorities had agreed in the estimate of the enormous value of these gems, as appraised by their owner, to the extent of paying large sums in the way of insurance. Query—would an insurance office be compelled to pay for the destruction by fire (a fate richly deserved) of a George III. Rubens, if evidence were forthcoming to prove the absurdity of its affiliation?

Never was a more assiduous student during the whole of his life than William Etty, R.A. Never, so long as his health lasted, did he miss a single night at the Life School, where his studies from the nude were the wonder and admiration of his fellow-students, young and old. Well do I remember the last he made at Somerset House. It was done from a stalwart life-guardsmen, and on a pedestal partly supporting the figure was written: "Dulce dulce domum vale!"

The Academy migrated to Trafalgar Square in 1837; and there Etty resumed the work that—as I heard him say—made his life "a long summer's holiday." The journey upstairs to the pepper-box tried the old man sorely; and many a time did I find him standing, when half-way up the ascent, recovering his breath, and looking enviously—if his gentle nature was capable of such a feeling—at the alert way in which we boys used to slip past him into the school.

My student-days began in Trafalgar Square, where I was the very first to enter my name in the probationers' book, and where, from 1837 to 1869, the