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Furnished by his Friends and Fellow Academicians: Volume 2

Walter Thornbury

Excerpt

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THE LIFE
OF
J. M. W. TURNER, R.A.

CHAPTER I.

TURNER AT PETWORTH.

TURNER was often at Lord Egremont's, and spent some of his happiest days there, fishing with Chantrey and his old friend, George Jones, R.A. The kind, rough, honest master of Petworth liked him, and the pair of eccentric men got on well together.

For the subsequent chapter I have to thank my clever young friend, G. Storey, Esq., a rising artist, whom Leslie directed in the right path.

“Petworth House is a large aristocratic-looking place, fronting a park which is surrounded by twelve miles of good wall. I do not think it would look well in a picture, as it is a long, straight, white building, full of windows, but the interior is very fine; you walk through rooms of white and gold, large and light, and through marble halls and carved chambers, with the eyes of pale ancestors looking down upon you, some that seem ghosts of the long-departed, some living pictures of fair beauties still breathing; all

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enjoying perpetual youth, for which they may thank Vandyke, Reynolds, Romney, and others. There is a grand staircase decorated with a French version of the classics; and a fine gallery, built by Lord Egremont, full of English pictures, antique statues, and some fine specimens by Flaxman. ‘St. Michael overcoming Satan,’ is a grand work; but to go through the catalogue of all the treasures would require a volume and a year’s study. The rich glowing harmony of the fine old masters makes a man forget his sorrows and his sins, puts his soul in tune, ennobles his mind, and humbles his vanity; that is, if he has anything of the soul of an artist within him. The carved room, the work of Grinling Gibbons and his pupil Ritson, is pre-Raphaelitism in wood: miraculously-worked clusters of leaves, and flowers, birds, &c. &c., from top to bottom, all exactly like nature without the colour, are intermingled with fiddles, flutes, antique vases, and every variety of object difficult to execute.

“Turner’s pictures are unfortunate in being surrounded by these carvings, which are of a light brown colour, and I longed to paint a black line all round them. They also suffer from being placed in front of the light in two ways: first, it is difficult to see them; and secondly, the sun has seen them, and growing jealous of the rival sun in the beautiful picture of ‘Chichester Canal,’ seems to have shown his revenge by cracking it all to pieces; vowing, ‘One day that sun shall set for ever.’ But I must not make complaints against a place that I enjoyed so much. I was enabled to study the pictures unmolested, and the

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PAGAN EPITAPHS.

3

generosity of the owner prevented me from feeling that I was there on sufferance.

“ Behind the house is an old church with a new steeple; it contains some old monuments, and a sitting statue of Lord Egremont, by Baily; here also lies all that is left of many of the Percies, Earls of Northumberland, and others of the Egremont family. The churchyard contains some curious messages from the dead, written in verse: one man gives the reason of his death as follows:

“ I left this earthly world behind,
A crown of glory for to find;’

and another, making the best of a bad job, says:

“ ‘ Could you so happy be as I,
You’d not care how soon you’d die;’

another kindly tells us to

“ ‘ Behold and see the grave
Where I lie sleeping;
Whilst glorious angels *have*
My soul in keeping.’

and a lady, who might rank with a modern poet for vagueness, and who is quite Turneresque in mystery, says:

“ ‘ I am as grass when in its bloom,
My morning sun rises at noon.
Weep not, dear friends, but think of me,
And hope that Christ will set me free.’

“ However, there is one serious epitaph that might really be a voice from the tomb:

“ ‘ Dear reader, ’tis a serious thing to die,
Thou soon must find it so as well as I.
If for our works we bliss or woe receive,
Dear reader, ’tis a serious thing to live.’

“ While trying to read some others, nearly oblite-

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rated, I could not help thinking of the contrast between the content of the dead and the discontentedness of the living. Here are mortals, with scarcely a bone left, telling us they are happy and comfortable, and who are yet fain to speak to the living, though Time rubs out their last speeches.

“In the centre of the town, opposite the inn, in the Market-house, is a bust of William the Third, in flowing wig. The maid told us it was a statue of Henry the Eighth; it might be Henry the Ninth, as it was as much like one as the other. The poor seem well cared for, judging by the charity-school, almshouses, hospital, and house of correction. The almshouse, for twenty poor widows, is a very pretty old brick building. While I was looking at it, a pretty little dove-like girl, with soft eyelashes, stood in the porch, making a sweet contrast to the age within and without.

“To return to Petworth House. The greater part of the present building was erected by the proud Duke of Somerset, James’s favourite, Overbury’s mortal foe, and the father of the beautiful angel, Lady Ann Carr, whose portrait by Vandyke is so matchless. The duke and duchess spent their last days here, doubtless holding in their hearts many terrible secrets. But to begin upon the historical interest would be getting miles out of our range. I was much struck with the fine old massive walls, especially by lamplight; these, going away into intense darkness, were most impressive. In the long passages, or cloisters, one might paint sunny ‘De Hooghes,’ and the courtyard and gardens ringing

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THE THAMES.

5

with the clear sound of birds, doubly loud in the still and peaceful air, would make good backgrounds for many of our painters of Cavalier subjects.

“The following notes were written in front of the pictures:—

“33. A grand sea-piece by Turner. The waves are full of wind, and the wind full of strength; the sky looks stormy; some small frigates are beating into harbour, a fine old Indiaman is waiting for a favourable wind; while a man-of-war, lit by a stream of light that breaks through the dark clouds, is lying at anchor, her white masts and giant sides rolling about; and behind her is the black storm.

“5. ‘The Thames at Weybridge.’ I mention this picture as most highly finished; the foreground is large and beautiful, and every leaf truly and exquisitely drawn.

“21. ‘The Thames near Windsor;’ has a fine sky, a very sweet little girl carries a baby, which baby is holding out its little joyous arms to its mother. On the river, fishermen are engaged with their nets; but the water looks dirty.

“108. ‘The Thames at Eton.’ Another very lovely picture, full of peace and poetry, extremely simple, but rather yellow with age. The calm river winds away by the distant college, summer trees are reflected in it, white swans swim in it, and some men in a punt fish in it; but the effect of the picture is subdued, and after the sun of those in the carved room is little more than darkness.

“46. ‘Echo and Narcissus.’ This is simply grand as a line of Homer. The scenery is very true and

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vidid; a deep blue bay, in the distance pale mountains, and an ancient city built round the brink of the waters; rocky hills rise round the valley in the middle distance, which is full of rich deep-coloured autumn trees. In front of the wood, Narcissus bewails over the image in the stream, crying, ‘Alas!’ Echo, with her hand raised, and her ear attentive to catch the voice of her cruel lover, repeats, ‘Alas!’ he, raising his hands in admiration, saying, ‘Beautiful!’ she repeating, ‘Beautiful!’ and, indeed, I must needs be another Echo, and say also, ‘Beautiful!’

“There are some sweet Gainsboroughs, of course very inferior to Turner as regards drawing and knowledge, depth and vigour, but sweet in the extreme. A tree is only a tree with Gainsborough, whereas with Turner it is a willow or an oak besides being a tree. Yet there is such tender sentiment, such harmony of colour and composition, that his pictures are pleasant to the eye as music to the ear; while Turner lays hold of us with a firm, a giant grasp, Gainsborough steals into our hearts like soft melody, and we can but say, ‘Play on, gentle musician.’ 28 is a most charming sketch by this artist. A shepherd and shepherdess meet at a fountain whither they have led their thirsty cattle, while the summer’s day, so hot, was soft declining. The fair shepherdess sits on the grass, looking up into her rosy lover’s face, and delicate trees, bending gracefully over, enclose this tranquil place of rendezvous. It truly is a pleasant pastoral. There are also many good specimens of the old landscape painters.

“Petworth is a very quiet, pretty old place, and, as

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COUNTRY SCENES.

7

a thorough contrast to the din and smoke of London, is most delightful. You wake in the morning to the sound of the blacksmith's forge and the singing of birds; you look out upon the blue sky, on picturesque roofs of the old time with richly coloured tiles, a fresh little green garden, and fine massive stone walls of a venerable grey. You come down to breakfast at the inn, roused by the pleasant smell of ham and eggs; and while they are getting ready, you take a little ramble to look at the valley that sinks away, like an enormous green wave, from the Petworth-house side of the town. The church clock sometimes tells me that I am rather lazy. I am most fortunate in the weather—it is beautiful, and the sun shines in through the red curtains, giving a cheerful aspect to the clean breakfast-table that makes the coffee and the shining dish-covers look still more enjoyable. We have houses here of the most picturesque period, and judging from the smallness of some of the windows, I should say they belong certainly to the dear old dark ages. We artists take great pleasure in gable-ends, overhanging upper stories faced with quaint and curious tiles, and doors just big enough for one small man to get through. The town is remarkably clean, and the inhabitants, to all appearance, most orderly and respectable. The boys about here have not learnt the art of rudeness. I thought I was in the last century when I saw some of them in their little grey knee-breeches, white stockings, tail coats, shiny buttons, and round caps, playing at marbles, their pleasant voices seeming almost as innocent as the bleating of lambs. The park is pretty, although the trees

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are not very fine; but there are plenty of nimble, graceful deer scampering about over the downs. The long hills in the distance, always delicate in form and colour, add much to the beauty and variety of the scenery; and, indeed, were I writing to some one else, I might say of this place,—

“ ‘Come live with me and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove,
That hills and valleys, dales and fields,
Woods or steepy mountain yields.’

“I took a most delightful walk with a very pleasant guide, who led me over a common, through woods ringing with the music of birds, and bright with countless primroses. We were greeted by the hoarse crow of the pheasant, and by the always distant cuckoo. At every turn some fresh picture opened upon us—now a far outlying view going miles and miles away; now a quaint old cottage, or a farm with its tumble-down barns and moss-covered walls. Almost every variety of picturesqueness peculiar to Old England seems to abound unmolested either by the artist or the model farmer; indeed, so delighted was I with all I saw, so fresh and hopeful at this early spring time, that I thought of taking up my abode here for awhile, in order to study the great beauty that Nature, left to herself, can bestow upon the meanest object, not only by the delicate working of her moss-spreading fingers, her infinite variety of lovely leaf and flower industry, but by the various lights that sun or moon, night or day, cloud or blue sky, cast, altering into a thousand pictures one modest valley. To-night I sauntered almost sadly, and in a somewhat sentimental

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THE SOUL OF NATURE.

9

mood, to that valley where in the morning I had seen the little boys of the last century playing at marbles. The calm moon shone down on the graveyard through the black firs, casting their long shadows down the dusky slope, flowing away in subdued mystery over the wide view beyond, sending down another gentle but ample stream behind an outstanding hill; behind it, dark delicate trees, swimming away over to the distant hills, and so softening them with light that they almost mingled with the sky, the glittering sky. There was no sound but that of the little brook, rising clear and constant in the distance; the only inhabitant of that vast and still scene was a little bat, monarch of all he surveyed, and an old horse, that one might almost have taken for a ghost of one of the departed, sauntering slowly in the grass. Such scenes teach the artist something of the deep soul of Nature, which, unless he can get at, his pictures are but worthless, cold, material pieces of cleverness; forgotten as soon as left, admired, perhaps, but never loved. I once heard a remark from a refined and witty lady which struck me at first as odd, but of which I have often felt the truth. She said that she did not care for any landscape that could not make her cry. I remember noticing two drawings of the same old castle (I forget which), one by Turner, and the other by a very ordinary drawing-master. The latter had painted it in its cold every-day reality—had almost photographed it—and we turned it over at once. But the other was by Turner; he had gone down to the other side, where there was a river; he had gone there when the calm

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light of evening was lying along at the back of the black ruin ; the waters were still ; the sullen walls were reflected clear and deep in the stream ; the castle itself towered high above, and one seemed to look up to it with reverence and with sadness. The day departing, the strong walls broken down by time, and the deep, still flowing river, flowing on through the dark night of the future, made me think of the littleness of every-day life, and the greatness of that other life that only the soul can understand. And all this beauty, all this solemn majesty, depended on Turner's choosing his time and his place, and on his feeling that the sentiment of Nature was her noblest attribute.

“There is a pretty little lake in the park where Turner was so fond of passing hour after hour with his fishing-rod. It is a pleasant place, especially on a summer's day ; full of tranquillity and delight, little troops of ducks swimming on its sparkling waters, timid fawns nibbling on its green banks, and birds whistling out of the reach of bird-nesters, enjoying their own on the very tiny islands that dot its surface, and are hardly large enough for the many roots of the trees that grow out of them, some standing in the water, and dabbling in it with the ends of their delicate drooping branches. The ceaseless cry of the noisy rooks harmonizes well with the scene ; they chatter to us of bygone days, perhaps tattling of lords and ladies that they have seen grow up and pass away—for may not some of them be nearly as old as the ivy-mantled walls beneath them, or even, to take a poetic licence, as the great house, the great jewel-case, that contains