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Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

Sono io anche pittore.—CORREGGIO.

I have begun my book with my progenitors and with childhood, partly because order gives all things view, partly because whatever we may assume, as we grow up, respecting the dignities of manhood, we all feel that childhood was a period of great importance to us.

LEIGH HUNT'S *Autobiography*.

BACON says of dramatic poetry that by means of it the results of personal action may be made more conformable to human desires than they are found to do in simple nature. In accordance with this dictum previous historians of Pre-Raphaelitism have dramatically improved upon the facts they have undertaken to elucidate. My evidence is not derived from outside suggestions bent to suit a pretty theory, but drawn from the records of my own memory, confirmed by the testimony left to us in the works of the active members of our circle, by documents of the time referred to, and by spontaneous admissions in the works published by the originators of the romances which I have to overturn.

As the many volumes written upon this subject have in tenor been preponderatingly of one character, public opinion is confirmed in the conclusion that these hitherto uncontradicted books contain the truth. I have read most of these compositions in whole or in part, and since I have undertaken the duties of a historian and feel myself responsible for the validity of the statements offered to

2 PRE-RAPHAELITISM AND THE CHAP.

the world, my narrative must conflict with nearly all those which have hitherto appeared on the purpose and progress of Pre-Raphaelitism.

I had long paused in writing these pages when the *Life of Sir John Everett Millais*¹ appeared. This book supplied the first accurate information about the relative positions of the first three active members of our Body. My memoranda had been put together only in the intervals of a much-taxed leisure, during which time many fresh writers had endorsed their predecessors' fables, and added to the credence in them, so that I lost heart, and had been more than once inclined to abandon my iconoclastic task. Sir Robert Walpole says that written history cannot by any possibility be true; the compilers of Pre-Raphaelite stories, so novel and astonishing, had for the time resigned me to agreement with the opinion of the experienced statesman; but the words of my old friend, my only companion in the beginning of the reform, as written and spoken by himself, and recorded by his son, have strengthened my original resolution to complete the unvarnished story.

Beyond the circle of Pre-Raphaelitism pure and simple it may be noted that, notwithstanding the number of references to art and artists in modern books, there are few questions on which there is more need of information derived from personal experience than the practice and the actual life of men pursuing the profession of art in England.

Outside the reform struggle which made opposition the more acute, the experiences of the working members of our Body were very much those of other artists at the same period who were directing their energies to subject painting.

In view of this, I shall extend my observations of particular experiences to the more general facts of our profession.

What British artists have hitherto done has been

¹ *Life of Sir J. E. Millais*, by his son.

1 PRE-RAPHAELITE BROTHERHOOD 3

dependent almost exclusively upon private patronage, and this often but of a very measured kind ; yet the outcome is a glorious first-fruit of the exceptional artistic genius of the race.

As chronicler of Pre-Raphaelitism, some personal element must have prominence ; thus only can I unfold the circumstances which led me to the centre where those other youths were found who played their part in the movement.

Having on my stage to present performers at first all inconspicuous, yet in fuller time made prominent enough by destiny to mingle with the distinguished of their age, it will be my privilege to add some little to the records of both. And this not as it were in Court attire, but in everyday dress—even kings and queens have sought distraction in putting aside the trappings of their royal state, and found ease in the garb of common subjects. As the records of such family life have been found pleasing by the world, so I trust that my story of the private life of these men of genius will glorify them not less than those more ceremonious histories, in which they appear as it were in stiff brocades and fine coats.

The history of my family claims a few words. Our earliest recorded ancestor had taken part against King Charles, and at the Restoration had sought service in the Protestant cause on the Continent. He returned with the army of William III., and busied himself in an attempt to recover the paternal property, which had fallen into alien hands. The law's delay drove him to engage in trade, and his children and grandchildren had to accept this as their only patrimony. My father had no admiration for those of the family "who continued hankering after the golden bird that had flown, and in doing so neglected the brood at home." One of his uncles at the beginning of the French Revolution had, in a traditional view of freedom, made it his business to go to Paris, where he got entangled, and was eventually lost in the political

4 PRE-RAPHAELITISM AND THE CHAP.

maelstrom. This intensified my father's dread of vagabond courses, which, as will be seen, did not fail to affect his attitude towards my passion for art. Yet he had not forsworn his love of liberty; it was only the recognition of changed circumstances that actuated his course and made him declare, "It is better to have the worst tyranny of kings, priests, and nobles, than that of the hydra-headed mob." Hence he was intent upon suppressing in the blood all flighty and unprofitable eccentricities; "Sober business alone," he said, "was the road to recover prosperity," and he held up to my admiration at all times steady business men who had so prospered.

Down to the middle of last century most merchants still lived above their places of business. My father, as manager of a warehouse, was living in Wood Street, Cheapside, and there I was born on the 2nd of April 1827. I was christened at the church of St. Giles, Cripplegate, in which Cromwell was married, and where the toil-worn body of Milton lies. My orderly way of life was not to be influenced by their ambitious courses, for I was from the first meant for a citizen of the most thorough business training, the more so because from babyhood I delighted in a dangerous taste for pencil markings. My father had evidently forgotten that when a child he himself was an artist, as was early proved to me by drawings preserved, duly framed and hung by his loving old aunt in her sitting-room, with the words "drawn by William Hunt, aged 9, 1809," written on them. I can call them up before me now in their quaker-like black and gilt frames, and I can declare they showed unusual aptitude of eye and hand. Dear old Aunt Nancy, with the bluest of eyes, and with cheeks vermeil-veined by the pencilling of nature, and with impulses of the most imperious benevolence! Certainly she had a fondness for all art, else when Edmund Kean came for the last time to the City to act, what made her declare that it would be shameful if the children did not see the great player? So she took a box for us, and he played *Sir Giles*

I PRE-RAPHAELITE BROTHERHOOD 5

Overreach before our bewildered eyes and my astonished intelligence. Whether the love of art went farther back in the family I know not. With my father it was early crushed, except for its indulgence in the collecting of prints and the literature of art, and in the seeking acquaintance with a few painters living in the City. From my earliest years a great enjoyment to me on Sunday nights was the inspection of my father's scrap-books, his dissertations on each picture making them the more enthralling.

When I was about four years old we moved into the suburbs. Shortly afterwards fever came as an unwelcome guest, and my father stayed at home the better to protect the invalids. I escaped the infection; and when he could spare the time I prevailed upon him to colour some theatrical prints which had been bought for me. It was a passionate delight to me to watch him, and at last I begged a brush and some paints, with which to follow what seemed to me his supreme achievements.

How I idolised the implements when they were in my possession! The camel-hair pencil, with its translucent quill and rosy-coloured silk binding up its delicate hair at the base, all embedded together as in amber, was an equal joy with the gem-like cakes of paint. I carried them about with me in untiring love. A day or two of this joy had not exhausted it, when, alas! alas! the brush was lost. Search proved to be all in vain. I remember going around and over every track about the house and garden. Waking up from sorrowing sleep, in which my continuing pain had been finally relieved by a dream of the lost treasure lying ensconced in some quiet corner—I hurried to the spot, only to find it vacant. The loss was the greater trouble because it was my first terrible secret. That my father should ever forgive me for losing so beautiful an object was to my distracted mind impossible. What could be done? My hair was straight, fine, and of camel brush hue. I cut off pieces to test its fitness for the office of paint brush, and as I held a little lock I found that it would spread the

6 PRE-RAPHAELITISM AND THE CHAP.

tints fairly well, but what to do for a handle? Quill pens were too big, and I could not see how they could be neatly shortened. A piece of firewood carefully cut promised to make a more manageable stock. With my utmost skill I shaped this, and with a little length of coloured cotton I bound a stubborn sprout of hair upon the splint. I was disconcerted to find that it formed a hollow tube. It seemed perverse of fate to ordain that just in the handle where it was needed to be hollow it should be solid, and that the hair which should be solid would form an open pipe. Attempts to drill the stick into a tube failed; but there was an expedient for making the tuft fuller. Cutting a cross cleft in the bottom of the wood, I inserted a straight length of hair, which I then rebound with its crimson thread. With gum I managed patiently to bind down loose ends and to give an improving gloss to the whole. My fears grew apace, since every hour there was a danger of inquiry for the lost pencil. I summoned up, therefore, an assumption of assurance, trusting that my father would see no difference between my brush and his. I went forward to him, holding the trophy very tenderly lest it should fall to pieces. He turned his eyes; they became bewildered; his usual loving look made a frown from him the more to be dreaded. I fortified my spirit, saying, "Thank you very much, father, for your brush." He took it with, "What's this?" and turned it over. Breathless, I sobbed; he burst out laughing, and so brought a torrent of tears to my eyes. He exclaimed, "Oh, I see, it's my brush, is it?" caught me up and tossed me aloft several times, ending with a scrubbing on my cheek from his close-shaven chin. This was the reception of my first work of art.

I cannot remember when, after, as indeed before, this, I did not draw. I was as fond of noisy fun as other children, but in the intervals of play I always found a pencil to copy stray pictures within reach, or to represent what was in my memory or in my mind's eye.

My father's warehouse was now shifted to Dyer's Court,

I PRE-RAPHAELITE BROTHERHOOD 7

Aldermanbury. Its back looked on to Guildhall. It was one of the houses which had been built immediately after the great Fire—roomy, handsome, and meant to last till Doomsday. The space behind the ground floor had been covered to enlarge the storeroom for goods kept in stock. Beneath this ground level was a ramification of cellars which extended also beneath other houses. On the first floor the packing and ticketing of small parcels went on, and on two higher floors the stranger came upon the cause of a constant droning heard lower down. It was the rattling of a multitude of hand machines winding “Brooks’” cotton and thread into balls and on reels. When I was ascending to the upper floor my difficulty was to run through these apartments from the spring door at the top of the lower flight stealthily and swiftly enough to escape the toll of kissing which the young women winders always exacted when I was caught. The object of my quest was Henry Pinchers, of the velvet-binding room, whose wit sparkled and danced and thundered ; so that I laughed, sang, and trembled in turns, all with equal delight. When I asked why he had no whiskers, he very gravely said he bit them off inside. He complained that Robin Badfellow came in the night and undid his work, and what he had to tell of him was as endless as his girth of velvet lengths that encircled twin rollers. Once I thought I had tracked him into a corner in asking if as he had stated that in walking along the slippery pavements that morning he had slid back two steps for every one he had advanced, how had he got to the warehouse at all? “Don’t you see, you silly boy, I turned round and walked backwards,” was his reply.

My visits to the City generally had some special purpose ; sometimes it was to see the exercise of the Honourable Artillery Company, Bartholomew Fair (held for the last time in 1855), the Lord Mayor’s Show, or a banquet at Guildhall. Whatever the attraction, the hours I thus passed furnished a highly valued treat. I was often allowed to go out with a porter, who, with

8 PRE-RAPHAELITISM AND THE CHAP.

knot on head, went sweating along under a weight of goods such as is never seen now on men's shoulders. Thus I learned to know the great City of London, and to love it enough to make me believe that I shall not be blamed for essaying to chronicle some phases of its picturesqueness which have since passed away: the images on the unblurred surface of a child's mind are clear and ineffaceable. Thus conducted, I saw and wondered at fascinating traces of what men who had lived in the days that were gone had put into solid form as their legacy to after time.

Wherever we turned there were new surprises, through narrow lanes and portalled walls. Here were plots of grassy land with garden beds, and trees swinging their green branches sweetly and happily, as though knowing that for them this oasis had been kept sacred from the builders' hands from the day when first it had been left by the narrowing Thames. There elms towered with swaying crowns above protected enclosures wherein rooks cawed with careless confidence as they built their nests, or brought food from afar for their young, perching awhile to scan the crowd below, as though with pride that they were the sign of the City's retention of rural memories.

Imprisoned below such a well-thronged rocketing canopy of foliage, there could still be seen at the corner of Wood Street a worthy successor of "The bird that sang loud," who addressed his audience from his rostrum in a palace of wickerwork all the day long. My guide had no breath for answering questions by the way, so I restrained my curiosity until he made use of one of the then frequent porters' rests; when he had deposited his burden thereon, I fired off my inquiries about the objects of interest we had passed. But porters are not historians, and I learned but little from him. As with him, so with all in turn. Each left me with the conviction that much of my curiosity was only foolishness.

To be told that Temple Bar was thus called "because there was no other name," that nobody knew whether

I PRE-RAPHAELITE BROTHERHOOD 9

St. Paul's Cathedral or the Tower of London was the older, and that the martyrs were burned at Smithfield "because they were martyrs," was not satisfyingly instructive. Yet a tone of reproof could not be doubted, and it made me fear the exhausting of my mentor's patience, and value the more such facts as he could tell. Not only did I learn the streets, the public buildings, the churches, the open places, civic halls, and the tranquil oases of green courts, and look upon the last remaining buttresses of old London Bridge, but I entered the different warehouses with my guide, and so became familiar with the ins and outs on every floor of them, and I surmise it was in part to help me to acquire this knowledge that my father put me in charge of my stalwart companions.

One day a prize had come in my way in the form of lead pencils of different degrees of blackness. Securing from the "ticketing room" a print of Britannia seated, grasping in one hand her spear and in the other her shield, the British lion at her feet, I chose a suitable piece of cartridge paper and took possession of my favourite corner, one obscured from observation. The oaken counter made an excellent, although in parts over granulous, drawing-board. Delighted with the unprecedented beauty of my chiaroscuro work, I did not notice, until they were upon me, my father and a buyer who was being taken round to see what part of a large order could be executed without the delay of ten or twelve days' transit by canal from Manchester. The stranger asked, "And is this little boy part of your stock in hand, sir?" My father replied, "I cannot say, sir, that he has qualities conducive to business, but he has the great merit that when provided with paper and pencil we hear no more of him for hours."

There was one moment of the day full of awe for me. It was when all the busy noise had ceased, when each whirling wheel was dumb, when every workman, woman, and clerk had left their posts, and the floors below and above

10 PRE-RAPHAELITISM AND THE CHAP.

were in ghostly darkness, my father, armed with a bull's-eye, descended into the cellars, traversing each winding to its remotest corner, and, ascending, proceeded stage by stage, going slowly with every sense intent to make sure that nothing anywhere boded ill for the safety of the place. Every room, so lately palpitating with energy, lively conference, and the bandying of quick retort and laughter, was now silent as the void after a thunder-clap, and to my senses seemed as threatening; so that when my father, examining some newly arranged pile, shot a stream of glaring light into the distant mystery, it was to my awed mind like the flash of a searching eye from another world. I have known many rejoice that they were born in the green country, away from the haunts of men; I see reason to acknowledge many compensating enjoyments for any losses I may have suffered in my childish lot as a citizen.

One mid-day in the winter of 1834 my father took me with him to call upon an artist who was painting a picture of Herne Bay for him, the money for which he had already advanced. While the elders talked I stood enraptured before two large canvases, the objects of the artist's highest devotion. One was of the burning of the Houses of Parliament, and this was gorgeous in its display of regal flame, for the glare was supreme over the dark, half-demolished buildings, the sky, the shining river, the black barges, and the people. When my father's talk was over, I begged to be left behind to watch the painter at work. It was a startling request, and could only be granted on condition that I stayed on the stairs and looked through a little window to be opened for me. I accepted the terms gratefully, and stood there until dark. In the meantime the conflagration grew in volume to such an extent that two or three times the palette was put down, and the painter set to work with the muller on the slab to grind a fresh supply of vermilion and chrome yellow, an incendiary proceeding which I hailed, when once understood, with special acclamation, for it was ever the pre-