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HAYDON.

BY ARTHUR CHRISTOPHER BENSON.

I HAVE just finished reading what I believe to be one of the most tragic books in the history of art and letters—the *Autobiography and Journals of B. R. Haydon*.* Its tragedy lies in the fact that we have there revealed, in what may be called absolute nudity, the thoughts and struggles of a man of genius and enthusiasm, who lacked the power of adequate expression. Haydon was inspired by a devotion to art that verged on frenzy. He gave up the certainty of a comfortable maintenance for life, when he was almost a boy, by refusing to enter his father's business, in order that he might devote himself wholly to painting. He gave himself to the production of historical pictures on a gigantic scale, and refused to admit of any sort of compromise. The taste of the day was all for portraits and *genre* pictures. Later in life, under the pressure of necessity, he painted portraits and pictures of common life, but only that he might devote himself to his chosen branch of art. For over forty years he carried on an almost incredible struggle with every kind of difficulty. He saw his old companions, such as Wilkie and Jackson, succeed; he was constantly in debt; he was several times imprisoned. He could not sell his pictures, he could not get any one to listen to him. He quarrelled hopelessly with the Academy, and was the victim of constant misrepresentation and malignity. He finally died by his own hand, worn out in the struggle. More than half his days were spent in wandering about from creditor to creditor, begging and borrowing money from every possible quarter. Yet he lived on terms of intimacy with the greatest writers and statesmen of the time. He was the friend and

* "The Life of Benjamin Robert Haydon, Historical Painter, from his *Autobiography and Journals*, edited and compiled by Tom Taylor, 1853."

associate of Wordsworth, Lamb, Keats, Walter Scott, Lord Melbourne, Sir Robert Peel, the Duke of Wellington. Indeed, there was hardly a prominent man from whom he did not borrow money, or whom he did not besiege with letters entreating them to encourage high art.

Much of his misfortune was due, no doubt, to his own fault. He was vain, irascible, egotistical, vehement. He could not keep his hands off public controversy. As a young man, being disappointed at the place assigned to one of his first pictures, he abused and vilified the Academy and its methods in unguarded terms. He was extravagant and improvident, and in money matters shamelessly importunate. But, for all that, his devotion to art was of a noble and magnificent quality. He was a deeply religious man, and never began a picture without long and earnest prayer. He was devoted to the work of early Italian painters, and was one of the first to recognize the surpassing merits of the Elgin Marbles. In the presence of great art he was like a man inspired, and the description of the delight he found in his work is deeply stimulating. Yet he effected nothing, and his pictures are practically forgotten. His chief idea was that artists should be employed to decorate great spaces in public buildings with colossal historical paintings; and the nearest he came to effecting anything was when the frescoes in the House of Lords were determined upon. But as a matter of fact, though Haydon did not know it, this decision was due far more to the influence of the Prince Consort than to any national impulse. One of the most tragic moments of Haydon's life was when he sent in designs for the competition for these frescoes, and his pictures were rejected; but he had lost by this time all his earlier force, and he mistook haste for facility. This was perhaps the determining cause of his suicide; he was certainly deranged at the end of his life, and the *post mortem* examination revealed disease of the brain, while his last memoranda, made on the morning of his death, show signs of insanity. Yet the act was in a sense deliberate. He had shown all his life an extraordinary power of recuperation, and of casting off disappointment. His art was to him a source of divine consolation and enjoyment, and when the pressure of difficulties was momentarily removed, he dashed back to his painting like a man inspired.

Thus, on October 1st, 1806, in his twenty-first year, he writes :

"Setting my palette and taking brush in hand, I knelt down and prayed God to bless my career, to grant me energy to create a new era in art, and to rouse the people and patrons to a just estimate of the moral value of historical painting. . . . I arose with that peculiar calm which in me always accompanies such expressions of deep gratitude, and looking fearlessly at my unblemished canvas, in a species of spasmodic fury I dashed down the first touch. I stopped; and said, 'Now I have begun; never can that last moment be recalled.'"

Some ten years after this he wrote, in his thirtieth year:

"I took again the state of my exchequer into review, and asked myself, shall I paint for money, or by borrowing as I did when engaged on Solomon, keeping my mind in its high key, and go on watching, exciting, and regulating the public mind? The battle about to be fought (I said to myself) is a great battle. I cannot suffer my attention to be turned off."

Sixteen years later he writes, at the age of forty-five:

"July 20th (1831). A quarter to nine. This moment I have conceived my background stronger than ever. I strode about the room imitating the blast of a trumpet,—my cheeks full of blood, and my heart beating with a glorious beat. Oh, who would exchange these moments for a throne?

" 'Here is my throne—let kings bow down to it!'

"Now, for my palette—and then, canvas, look sharp!"

Let us hear him seven years later, in 1838, at the age of fifty-two:

"When I come to dinner my dear Mary says I have been a great deal alone. Such a sensation never enters my head. I never feel alone. With visions of ancient heroes, pictures of Christ, principles of ancient Art, humorous subjects, deductions, sarcasms against the Academy, piercing remembrance of my dear children, all crowding upon me, I paint, write, conceive and fall asleep, start up refreshed, eat my lunch with the fierceness of Polyphemus, return to my room, go on till near dinner, walk, dine, read the paper, return to my study, complete what I have been doing, or muse till dusk, then to bed, lamenting my mortality at being fatigued. I never rest, I talk all night in my sleep, start up: I scarce know whether I did not even relish ruin, as a source of increased activity."

And again four years later (1842), within four years from his death:

"July 9th. How delightfully time flies when one paints! Delicious art—the bane and blessing of my life! Painted in delicious and ex-

quisite misery. A bill due and no money. Went out for it last night, and came home wet, weary and disappointed."

"July 13th. Huzza—Huzza—Huzza; and one cheer more! My cartoon is up, and makes my heart beat, as all large bare spaces do, and ever have done. Difficulties to conquer. Victories to win. Enemies to beat. The nation to please. The honour of England to be kept up.

"Huzza—Huzza—Huzza; and one cheer more!"

It will be seen from these extracts how fiercely the fire of art burnt in the man. The marvel is how, with his debts forever hanging over him, and with the consciousness of failure, perpetually renewed, he kept this spirit active. He was to a certain extent sustained by a prodigious vanity; he talks of his genius, almost without ostentation, as a simply incontestable thing. He speaks naïvely of his intention to put up a brass plate, in one of the studios he had used, to state that there he had painted his picture of Solomon's Judgment. He never seems to have had the slightest misgiving about his ultimate fame. But there can surely be few instances of artists who have prolonged this sort of youthful delirium of enjoyment and enthusiasm to the threshold of age; and even if there have been instances, I know of no one who has described it himself with such gusto.

Yet, egotistical though he was, he was an adoring husband and a tender father. He must have had a real charm of manner and nature, because he seems very seldom to have alienated a friend, even by his inveterate demands for money. His landlord, to whom he owed thousands, treated him with patience, affection, and even reverence; believed in him, lent him money, never quarrelled with him, though Haydon constantly wrote to him with extraordinary offensiveness. He had a way of taking an unfinished picture to a creditor, pointing out its merits, and saying, "There, is it not a pity to prevent that being finished?" which often produced a further loan. The fact is that there was probably something naïve, childlike, and appealing about him, which made others feel in a way responsible for him.

He was, moreover, virtuous, temperate and industrious. He wasted time only over controversy, or books in which he got absorbed, like a child, so that the flight of time and all external impressions were obliterated. He was not convivial or dissolute; he was not a gossip. He lived the quietest of family lives, and he and his wife were as lovers to the end. Perhaps the very days

when, weary and draggled, he hurried from creditor to money-lender and back again, saved him from overstrain of hand and eye and mind, by substituting one activity for another. Who knows? He certainly kept his health and his spirits in a marvellous fashion. When it is said that it is worry that kills, and not hard work, one thinks of Haydon. A month of days such as he describes in hundreds would have broken the heart of many sensitive men. But Haydon was so penetrated by the thought of his right to live and to be maintained, the greatness of his destiny, and the splendor of his vocation, that he did not suffer, it seems, from scruples about money. It did not appear to press on his mind that he was using the hard-won earnings of the tradesmen he failed to pay. When he was insolvent and had got his discharge, he thought no more of his former debts; his new debts were only to him a species of trial which he must bear with fortitude. No scruples of honor or honesty seem to have troubled him. He did not wish to have his work interrupted; but as long as he was not conscious of extravagance, as long as he considered he was living simply, he seems to have thought that he had a right to be supported, whether the money was obtained by begging or borrowing. There are many schedules of his debts and of his earnings given in the book, from which it is clear that, if he could have lived as many men of small incomes have to live, he could have supported himself. But he seems to have thought that he was entitled to live at the rate of about £800 a year when his earnings averaged about £500; but to reduce his scale of living seems not to have occurred to him. If he had chosen from the first to bestow a part of his time on saleable work, such as portraits or casual commissions, and to devote the rest of his time to idealistic work, he would not only have kept straight pecuniarily, but he would probably have painted better. But when he was once embarked on one of his great pictures, there was nothing he would not do to achieve his end. He would make studies for days together from living models and from antique sculpture; he thought nothing of blotting out a figure over which he had worked for weeks, to put it in a few inches higher. And the absorption in his work was so entire that nothing could distract him. He received the news of his father's death, by letter, while he was painting his picture of Solomon's Judgment, but he was so preoccupied, he says, in painting a head, that, though

he read the letter, he could not stop until he had finished the head, and not till then did his loss come home to him. Yet he was a man of the deepest and tenderest affections. He describes the death of two of his children with intense emotion. He lost a little girl named Fanny, to whom he was devoted, in her third year:

“My sweet Fanny died. . . . There is now such an intimate connection with me and the grave that I shall never break the chain. I pierce through the earth, the coffin and the lid, and see her lying still and awful. At breakfast, at dinner, at tea, I see her. I look forward to my own death with placid resignation, and only hope God, in His mercy, will not let me suffer much. . . .

“Peace to her little soul—born weakly, but her weakness aggravated by improper treatment; always ill, in a large family, wanting repose and rest and never getting it. What a weakly child suffers from the healthy children! Good God! The teasing, the quizzing, the tyranny, the injustice.”

The same week his little boy, Alfred, of whom he was devotedly fond, lay dying too. Yet this extraordinary man could write in his diary:

“24th Oct. Began my picture with dear Alfred’s head, who is dying too. I went on painting and crying. There he sat, drooping like a surcharged flower: as I looked at him, I thought what an exquisite subject a dying child would make. There he dozed, beautiful and sickly, his feet, his dear hands, his head, all drooping and dying.

“25th. Rubbed in the dying boy to-day. It will make a most piercing subject.”

There is nothing heartless about this, because Haydon was the most loving of fathers. Indeed, he gave the same intense love to his two stepsons, his wife’s children by a former husband, that he gave to his own sons, educating them, borrowing money to pay for them, following their careers, manifesting a simple pride in them, and grieving over one of them who died as passionately as if he had been his own child.

Yet the artistic emotion was as strong as the natural affection; and if in the midst of his tears he thought that his dying child would make an affecting subject for a picture, why, it was only a reason the more for loving him and sketching him.

Quite apart from this personal interest, and the self-revelation of these volumes, there is the extraordinary interest of the person-

alities with whom Haydon came in contact. He observed them with an artist's eye, and he had a knack of picturesque portraiture as well. His description of the Duke of Wellington, with whom he stayed at Walmer, romping with his grandchildren on the ramparts and pelting them, or driving the party to bed by lighting the bed-candles with a prodigious yawn, is a splendid piece of characterization; or the account of Lord Melbourne sitting, discussing art, in his dressing-gown, with his neck bare, and his charming half-mocking, half-affectionate smile, is imperishable. Then, too, there is the description of the famous dinner-party in Haydon's rooms, at which Lamb, Wordsworth and Keats were present, when Lamb declared that Newton had destroyed the poetry of the rainbow by reducing it to prismatic colors, and proposed the toast, "Newton's health and confusion to mathematics!" The party were joined by a respectable comptroller of stamps who wished to see Wordsworth and plied him with questions. "Don't you think, sir, Milton was a great genius?" Lamb was dozing by the fire, half intoxicated, and turning round said, "Pray, sir, did you say Milton was a great genius?" "No, sir," said the comptroller, "I asked Mr. Wordsworth if he were not." Charles Lamb began to sing nursery rhymes, and, taking a candle, said to the poor comptroller, "Sir, will you allow me to look at your phrenological development?" "Charles! my dear Charles!" said Wordsworth. The others got Lamb away, and into the painting-room, where he continued to sing the nursery rhymes, and to ask to be allowed to feel the comptroller's bumps.

But, of all the affecting descriptions, the last sight Haydon had of Sir Walter Scott, who was just on the eve of starting for his last voyage to Italy, is the most pathetic. He was much distressed at the alteration in Scott.

"He said he feared he had occasionally done too much at a time, as we all do. . . . After a quarter of an hour I took my leave, and as I arose he got up, took his stick, with that sidelong look of his, and then burst forth that beautiful smile of heart and feeling, geniality of soul, manly courage and tenderness of mien, which neither sculptor nor painter has ever touched. It was the smile of a superior creature, who would have gathered humanity under the shelter of its wings, and while he was amused at its follies, would have saved it from sorrow and sheltered it from pain. Perhaps it may be the last time I am ever to see him, as he sails in a day or two; and if it be, I shall rejoice that this was the last impression."

The man who writes thus is not a mere artist or a mere observer, but a true hero-worshipper, with a desirous glance that pierces into the soul.

But there falls upon us a melancholy shadow of reflection. If the result of Haydon's life of wild enthusiasm, of wrestling with difficulties, of fervent prayer, of solemn, abstracted, secluded visions, had been to produce some imperishable pictures, how we should have glowed and luxuriated over the record! How often we should have said, "Here we can look into the very fiery furnace of genius, and see the forms that walk there, see the divine visitant attend upon shrinking humanity!" How unquestionably should we have attributed the result to the process, the beauty of conception to the fine reverie, the finished technique to the indefatigable patience! How preachers and lecturers would have bidden us to observe the unflagging hand, the uplifted heart, the almost intolerable glow of genius! And yet the truth is that we have every manifestation of genius here except the great result; we have all the rapture, all the perseverance, all the self-consolation, all the indomitable courage; and yet there were half a dozen artists of the day, painting tranquilly and indifferently, whose pictures are not only better known, but actually finer, more inspiring, more beautiful than Haydon's. Take the fashionable sociable life of Lawrence; almost the only thing he had in common with Haydon was his inability to manage money. Take the tranquil, kindly, comfortable life of Reynolds, always the same, as Johnson said, perfectly equable in spirit and benevolent in mind. Take the sordid, ugly, laborious, mean, suspicious life of Turner, and compare these with Haydon's exaltations and raptures. Of course, it may be said that perhaps Turner and Reynolds did not say what they felt, while Haydon had the art of expression, the egotistical need for self-revelation. But we have no reason to suspect Reynolds or Turner of these joyful visions, and we can hardly believe that some hint of it would not have escaped them if they had been there.

And here lies the supreme sadness of this record. The life of Haydon is the record of a man of real genius, who joined to an intense and absorbing enthusiasm for art, a delight in detailed labor, a patience, a tenacity, a courage and a tenderness that deserved the highest rewards. Yet he received little but discouragement,

sordid trials, contempt, derision, malignity. His consolations were his art and his friends; and it is curious to note that, though his conduct is singularly wanting in many of the qualities that earn respect, he seems to have won and retained the respect and admiration of his friends in a singular degree. Yet with all this devotion to art he achieved very little. His pictures are melodramatic, distorted, disjointed, unequal. Hundreds of artists, without a tenth of Haydon's enthusiasm and tenacity, have attained and deserved success by a certain dexterity of hand. Men of mean, petty, ungenerous and spiteful character have had the power, through their skill in arousing the emotions of their admirers, to a degree that Haydon never attained. Haydon's art was the imperfect expression of a character which, with all its patent faults, had yet something divinely inspired about it. And yet artists who have had no sort of depth of inspiration, no particular tenacity of character, no passionate quality of soul, have contrived to do the very thing that Haydon agonized to do and failed to achieve. The story has a hard and a sad moral, which seems to be that no amount of enthusiasm, no amount of sedulous or strenuous practice, can ever make up for the absence of a certain instinctive knack of presentment. Given this knack of presentment, intellectual force, enthusiasm, zest, patience all tell; but, without it, all these qualities can effect nothing. For want of it, Haydon has no permanent place in the hierarchy of art. Yet, on the other side, this very deficiency lends a touch of pathos and romance to a figure of a man who coveted not only renown, but the opportunity of exercising the noblest and purest influence. The soul-history of Haydon restores the balance, by teaching us not to be too much dazzled by the rewards of art. We are apt to think of the great artist as the benefactor of the human race, and of the unsuccessful artist as a poor dilettante creature who might better have confined himself to some humble and useful pursuit. But, after all, for each human being it is the quest, and the spirit in which the quest is pursued, that matter. When we have subtracted Haydon's gross and patent faults, his vanity, his intemperate vehemence, his inconsiderateness, his pettiness, there remains a very august figure, penetrated with glowing enthusiasm, throbbing from head to foot with divine emotion. Take away from Haydon's life his bitter days of trudging about from creditor to creditor, from prison to pawnshop, there remains an

amount, a quality, of happiness such as falls to the lot of but few of us. We may remember the sonnet, prophetic almost in character, which Wordsworth wrote for Haydon's encouragement some thirty years before the sad ending:

“And oh, when nature sinks, as oft she may,
Through long-liv'd pressure of obscure distress,
Still to be strenuous for the bright reward,
And in the soul admit of no decay,
Brook no continuance of weak-mindedness,—
Great is the glory, for the strife is hard.”

ARTHUR CHRISTOPHER BENSON.