MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

AND

REMINISCENCES.

VOLUME THREE.

INTRODUCTION.

It is long since I read Judge Haliburton's story of "Sam Slick, the Clockmaker," whose smart Yankee sayings were often in the mouths of his English admirers some forty or fifty years ago. If I remember rightly, the Clockmaker made a voyage to England, and found himself, the ship, and passengers, becalmed in mid-Atlantic. I think there were no steamers in those days, or if those vessels made their rapid passages, they found no favour with Sam, who preferred a sailing-ship. Amusement on board ship is always a somewhat difficult matter. Time hangs heavily enough when wind and tide are favourable, and the passenger has the consolation of feeling that every hour that passes so slowly brings him nearer to his journey's end; but a calm that may last for days! not a puff of wind responds to the seamen's whistling,

not a ripple disturbs the placid surface of the sea. On the occasion I speak of, the pleasures of whist seemed exhausted, books fell from the hands of wearied readers — what was to be done? A passenger appeared on deck with a rifle in one hand and a bottle in the other. More guns were produced, and a party of gentlemen prepared for sport. The Clockmaker looked on. The black bottle was securely corked, and after being thrown into the sea, was allowed to drift slowly away to a prescribed distance, when one of the gunners fired at it unsuccessfully, for his ball was observed to strike the water at some distance ahead of the bottle; several other sportsmen followed suit with no better success, to their own discomfiture and the loudly-expressed contempt of the Clockmaker.

"Here, you sir," said one of the passengers, "suppose you try, as you seem to think hitting that bottle such an easy matter."

Now Sam Slick had never fired a gun in his life, and his request to have it properly prepared, and even cocked for him, was looked upon as a piece of Yankee impertinence.

"That bottle is farther off than it was," said the Clockmaker. As he spoke, he raised his piece, looked at his mark, shut his eyes, and fired. When he opened them, the bottle had disappeared, knocked into fragments by the hero of the hour. With a smile of conscious superiority, Sam resigned the weapon into the hands of a passenger, who immediately offered to back the Yankee against the field

for any amount agreeable to the rest. His offer was accepted, other bets were freely made; a rifle was prepared, and offered to the Clockmaker.

"Well, no," said Sam; "gambling is against my principles. I have just made a hit; I might make a miss next try, I calculate, so I intend to repose upon my laurels."

Dear reader (I may call you so, for great numbers of you have been very dear to me during the publication of my "Reminiscences"), I am in the position of Sam Slick. I have made a hit, and in the following pages I may probably "miss next try," and thus prove, to my own discomfiture, the wisdom of the Clockmaker's resolve.

Some men's lives bristle with surprises; I have had my share, but never in the course of what may be called a long life have I experienced anything like the astonishment created in me by the success of my autobiography. Hearing somehow or other that I was contemplating such a performance, a well-known publisher wrote to me, offering what seemed to me a fabulous sum of money for a book still in the air, for not a word had been written when the offer was accepted. I might not have been able to express myself intelligibly, much less grammatically, when the bold publisher took upon himself a risk which, I am thankful to say, has been justified by its results. I am not sure that my success would have brought about another "try," if I had not been urged to it so frequently by my readers, many of whom in letters (extracts from which my modesty prevents me repro-

ducing) have placed themselves in the position of Oliver Twist, and "asked for more."

I take this opportunity of thanking all those who have joined in a chorus of praise which has been "honey and cream" to me. One gentleman—or was it a lady?—criticised me anonymously. If I could discover my assailant, I would thank him also, for, after all, I am rather inclined to agree with him when he says, "Frith's autobiography is a poor, gossipy book, garrulous, and silly enough. In people he has known he mentions names that he should have omitted, and leaves out others" (this gentleman's, perhaps) "that should have had places," and so on. He then proceeds to a long personal attack on a very eminent man, whose name very properly appears, against whom my anonymous friend evidently cherishes undying hatred.

I now come to my critics in the public press, to whom I consider I owe a deep debt of gratitude. I begin to think I am a judge of style and the rest of that which goes to make good literary handiwork, and I confess I think that when the critic is dealing with matter of which his own pursuits make him a competent judge, his mode of expression is far more satisfactory than it is when he criticises pictures of the qualities of which in all probability he knows nothing at all. I have been called over the coals a good deal for the freedom of my expression regarding the incompetence of art critics. I could multiply instance after instance in proof of it, but that is needless, for the critics are for ever supplying the

proofs themselves. Hazlitt abused Reynolds. Horace Walpole said Hogarth was no painter, but a master of comedy with a pencil. Ruskin's works bristle with errors; one of his notable ones was his saying, on the discovery of a bit of what he took for pre-Raphaelitic work in one of the worst pictures I ever painted, that I was at "last in the right way," or words to that effect. Until that great writer appeared, and in a moment of omniscience discovered some of the glories of Turner, there was not an art critic who did not vilify and ridicule that great man. In the picture by Turner of the burial of Wilkie in the sea, one of the most poetic of the painter's works, the steamer, which is, of course, dark in the moonlight, is called a black fish-kettle, and the friends of the painter are recommended to place him under such restraint as will prevent his exhibiting insults to the public.

In the year 1842, *or thereabouts, Etty exhibited a picture called "To Arms, ye Brave!" in which the power of his matchless painting of flesh was fully displayed. I read in a daily paper the following remarks which did duty for criticism: "Number so-and-so: 'To Arms, ye Brave!' (W. Etty, R.A.). A parcel of people exposing themselves in a manner that calls for the interference of the police." The criticisms in that journal are done very differently now, but I hear my brethren are "frighted from their propriety" now and then by errors which are inconsistent with a thorough knowledge of the subject of which the writer treats.*

The power of the press is enormous, and greater care and knowledge should be used in the wielding of it. I know an instance of the loss of the sale of a picture through an off-hand remark of a great art critic. If the public could only be persuaded that printed opinion is but that of a gentleman or lady who can have no technical knowledge, and which, if expressed vivâ voce *in general society, would have little or no effect, it would appreciate public art criticism at its true value.*

I have known pictures praised by a newspaper in one exhibition, and when the same pictures were exhibited in another place, the same writer in the same paper abused them. A half-length *portrait of Sir Charles Barry by Pickersgill was criticised by a gentleman who never could have seen it, for he said it had the common defect of modern* whole-*lengths, the man's feet were not flat upon the ground: in fact, he stood upon his toes.*

Creswick, the landscape-painter, sent two empty frames to the British Institution to take their places upon the walls pending the finishing of two landscapes destined to fill them. The pictures were admitted at the last moment, too late for a critic to have seen them. The painter's surprise may be imagined when he read an abusive article, in which he was said to be worse than ever, and fast falling into a condition that would make it a world's wonder that he had ever attained a notable position in art at all.

It has always appeared to me that if art criticism can claim to be called a science, its catholicity must

be complete, or, in other words, the critic should be able to estimate at their precise value the merits of all the schools; he should be able to ascend to the sublime height of Michael Angelo, and descend to the lower level of the Dutch school. It should be impossible for him to make a mistake. He may, and of course would, prefer one school to another; but his knowledge of art would prevent his committing such mistakes as those with which the greatest of modern art critics is credited. I have grave doubts of the power to appreciate Turner in one who cannot see the merits of Cuyp and Rembrandt. The ridiculous prices paid for some of the later productions of Turner are strong proofs of the evils of critic-led opinion. I am convinced that if Turner's career had been commenced with the eccentric productions of his later time, his name—now and for ever to be honoured—would never have been heard of.

The policeman at the National Gallery (I quote from memory a well-known pamphleteer) has great opportunities for the study of the old masters; he may have, and in some instances doubtless he has, a great desire to learn from the treasures he is appointed to guard, and thus qualify himself as art critic. Perhaps the absurdity of the comparison between the policeman method and that of the art critic is not so great as it appears; endless instances exist of educated people who stare at pictures, and what they call study *them, print the result, and thus prove themselves as blind as bats to the merits and defects of the objects of their "study." Hazlitt had just enough*

knowledge to lead him wrong. Lamb knew nothing of art; his criticisms of Hogarth resolved themselves into justly deserved expressions of admiration for the character and expression, and the telling of the story in all the inimitable works of that unapproachable genius, of which his own practice in literature made him a judge. Of the exquisite technical qualities abounding in them he knew no more than the critic who prefaces a cheap edition of Sir Joshua's lectures by ignorant remarks concerning other painters, and gravely informs us that Hogarth was no colourist.

A few personal observations, and this introduction is done. I do not presume to think that my opinion of the literary qualifications of a writer in "Blackwood" is of importance, or likely to gratify that gentleman; but I had more pleasure from his praise of my book than from any of the other gratifying comments that have been showered upon me; but my pleasure was suddenly changed into a different emotion when I found a pretty confident prophecy respecting my artistic work. "The day will assuredly come," said the prophet, "when posterity will read with feelings of astonishment the praises that have now and again been bestowed on Mr. Frith's pictures; they will hold no place in the contemporary art of this time. It will be a matter of wonder how such pictures as the 'Derby Day,' the 'Railway Station,' 'Ramsgate Sands,' etc., could ever have been thought works of art at all." How enviable would be this power of seeing into the dead wall of the future if any human being were really in pos-

session of it! My friend may be right; of course, I think he is wrong, and that the pictures of contemporary life and manners have a better chance of immortality than ninety-nine out of every hundred of the ideal and so-called poetical pictures produced in this generation. With this observation—in which I acknowledge I have abandoned, for the moment, my usual modesty—I take a respectful leave of my critics.

CHAPTER I.

GREAT NAMES, AND THE VALUE OF THEM.

I SHALL never put my pen to paper in this attempt to write an olla-podrida, which is intended to appear as a supplementary volume to my "Reminiscences" already published, without a nervous apprehension that I may repeat myself, and thus inflict upon my reader a very undeserved punishment. As in the previous volumes I have told my history, like Othello, "even from my boyish days," I cannot be supposed to have more to say that is worth hearing; to be candid, I thought a great many of my early experiences were without interest to the general reader. I am very happy to say that I was mistaken, as the unusual interest shown in my book sufficiently proves; and I am not without hope that my present attempt—now grave, in the hope of instructing or warning; now less serious, in the hope of amusing—may not altogether fail of some amount of success. In the present chapter I have something to say respecting a habit of certain art-loving parents who take advantage of the helplessness of infancy to inflict upon their unfortunate