

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

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.

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

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*

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

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,

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

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

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 whirring wheel was dumb, when every workman, woman, and clerk had left their posts, and the floors below and above

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-

lude to a fresh outburst of flame. His wife the while astounded me by her indifference to the magic of her husband's work—going to the stove, tending the grate, filling the kettle, spreading the tea-table, cutting the bread and butter, and summoning the children as though there



W. H. H.

WATCHING THE PAINTER FROM THE STAIRCASE.

was nothing in the world to wonder at. Then the husband, with sleeves turned up, sat down in turn like an ordinary mortal, taking his meal as though he had no more been in dreamland than had his imperturbable spouse. I watched the favoured circle from above. It was the family life of a poor artist, which I have since recognised in Dutch pictures representing the painter's studio, and to my mind it seemed as enchanting as could be conceived. When

daylight had gone a porter came for me and took me back to the warehouse. There I soon found two sheets of paper and a pencil, and, ensconced in my favourite corner, not without sighs over the inefficiency of my colourless lead, I taxed my memory for the features of the two compositions. The porter found me at work when the drawings were nearly completed, and held them up for general observation, pointing out the details as those which he had seen in the large pictures; and so I had part of the professional artist's glory reflected upon me.

From early years my father was explicit in his measured toleration of my passion for art. He told me the story of Morland, and recounted many tales to illustrate the unsatisfactory fortunes of the career when trusted to as a means of livelihood. A few artists he knew of had won great renown, but even these were generally deep in debt; and frequently, after a short period of favour from patrons, they ended their days in misery, hastened by dissipation and drink. In Roman Catholic countries there had been a steady use for painting and sculpture, he said, but here there was no settled demand for art. As a profession, therefore, it was out of the question, but as a diversion after business nothing could be more delightful. A man without a hobby was a poor creature. He did not, therefore, repress my disposition to draw; on the contrary, when I left home for a boarding school he provided me with some large drawing-books and some lithographs to copy; and, when visiting me there, he looked over these, and could not resist making some sketches himself. But my persistence eventually began to make him serious. At twelve and a half he asked me what I wanted to be, and when I said I had determined to be a painter I knew by his ominous silence that I had pained him. Soon after, my mother told me that I was to be removed from school, because my father was convinced that a boy might easily enter upon a city life too late, but never too early, and that he was taking steps to place me in a warehouse forthwith. The position he sought for me I

knew to be one in which there would be no opportunity to draw, and so I determined to forestall my father. My knowledge of city warehouses taught me that for two years the full hours of each day, from 9 till 8 at night, would be fully occupied in going about with invoices for goods; and when, two years later, promotion came, it would be to take my post in a desk elevated like a pulpit, to write out the orders for the new-comers to distribute.

About this time it happened that a boy three years or so older than myself, who lived near us, was leaving his post of copying clerk to an estate agent. I ascertained full particulars of the duties, and persuaded my friend to take me to see his master. I set out with him to the office betimes one morning. While awaiting the master's arrival, I saw a good stock of tempting old-fashioned books, and a large Dutch painting of a furious battle—a formidable warrior bestriding a white horse, luminous against blackening smoke and sky.

After an hour's waiting, the arbiter of my fate arrived, and, inquiring who I was, said good-naturedly, "And what do you want?"

"I hear that William D—— is leaving your office, sir."

"And so he is!"

"Well, sir, I have thought that you might, if you please, take me instead. I know what he does, and indeed I could do it. I could copy letters and papers, and I am really far on in arithmetic."

"So you know addition, subtraction, and division?"

"Oh yes, sir! I am long past simple division and all that. I understand vulgar fractions, decimals, and algebra; I am right through the cyphering book, and I'm always at the head of the mental arithmetic class."

"And so you want to go out into the world to seek your fortunes? Does your father know of this?"

"He doesn't know I've come here, but he has taken me away from school to put me in a warehouse."

"Well, why don't you wait?"

"Please, sir, I'd rather come here."

"Humph! What age are you?"

"I'm nearly twelve and a half, sir."

"Your name's William. Well, Willie Winkie, I'll tell you what I should do if I were you. I should go to the Life-guards' barracks; they want smart young fellows there. I should enrol myself in Her Majesty's service at once as a Grenadier. What do you say to that?"

Feeling my footing insecure, I replied, "I really should like your place better. Will you try me?"

"Well, show me how you can write."

The result of trials in writing and arithmetic being satisfactory, I was set to read, and was then told that I might come on the following Monday, but only to fill the gap temporarily. My father was taken by surprise by my news, and went down to see my self-chosen master; liking him, it was agreed that affairs might take their course. After a trial of three weeks my principal fault was found to be in slowness of growth; and with a request that I would do my best to amend this, it was decided that I should stay with Mr. James.

In retrospect, it is remarkable that when circumstances outwardly seemed most unpromising, a special fate always kept open my artistic prospects. My employer, who on my introduction had made merry over my juvenility, later seemed to take more paternal interest in me on this very account. A shade had recently crossed his life which had made him kindly with his kind. Returning suddenly one day to the office, he saw me putting away a drawing in my desk. He asked about it, and examined my work approvingly. Fortunately, drawing turned out to be no crime in his eyes, and he pointed to a large cupboard, saying, "In there is a complete box of oil colours, brushes, palette, and everything necessary for painting, and some day we shall shut ourselves up and have a good day with them together, a thing I dearly love." It was not long before we did so, and then Mr. James proved himself to be a landscapist of high poetic order,

introducing on his canvas a range of mountains, a grand waterfall, an expansive lake, and, wherever trees would not hide the enchanting distance, scattered forestry in profusion. Eventually I had the box with its treasures made over to me. Some colours being wanted, my master explained how the crude pigments and oils could be bought and mixed. I soon ground these for myself, and put them in bladders; thus I was started as a painter in oil in true practical form.

Shortly afterwards I was allowed to attend a mechanics' institute in the evenings to practise drawing; and my father, having an introduction to John Varley, took me one Sunday to see this remarkable professor of water-colour landscape and "Zodiacal Physiognomy." He lived in a neat, spotlessly curtained, six-roomed house in the Bayswater Road. He was not of grand stature, but somewhat obese; three or four very fat King Charles' spaniels were about him, which Mrs. Varley petted. It was difficult at first to get peace from the barking creatures, but spite of the noise, the artist's politeness and cordiality were admirable. In receiving me, he said he hoped that I should become as great an artist as his former pupil of my name, for he claimed William Hunt as of his training. Had my father been an aristocrat and I an amateur, bringing heavy purses, he could not have paid us more attention. He commented encouragingly on my drawings, and made independent sketches to explain his views; one favourite theory of his was that every object in nature was divided into triangles; and that the lines were at times curved, only veiled this fixed law. The human figure standing upright with arms extended, or again as crucified from its extremities, makes a figure of three sides; the features of the face seen in front are grouped in a triangle. In profile, again, the features form a triangle, from ear to chin, chin to eyebrow, eyebrow again to ear, and each feature is in its shape three-sided, even parts of each are triangles. A tree is an inverted triangle; a hill is a triangle on its base.

Nature, with its light and shade, is always at work dividing squares and parallelograms into triangles. The square sails of a boat, he went on to say, are thus transformed in a very striking manner. Then he chatted about astrology, enthusiastically defending the science; adducing mythic histories, as explained by the rising and setting of heavenly bodies and their mutual influences. He mentioned particular animals born only at special seasons, and claimed that men appearing at the same junctures have similar characteristics. Abraham, he demonstrated, was born under Capricorn, and accordingly all Israelites had the features of this sign. Alexander the Great was born under Aries, and claimed to be the son of Jupiter Ammon, consequently he was represented by the ancients with a ram's horn. Thus our kind host talked himself out of breath.

He showed us a copy of his book—or rather of the first number of a serial. It was excellently illustrated by John Linnell, and was to have been followed up, but the public never appreciated it enough to demand further parts. He sent us away with drawings for me to copy, and with his pamphlet on the occult laws for both father and son to study. He gave us a pressing invitation to come again soon, adding a request to my father for the exact moment of my nativity.

On our next visit, having studied the pamphlet, I recognised Mrs. Varley as the original of the profile, there given, of a native of the "House of Gemini."

In showing Varley my copies from his originals, my father revealed that I took special interest in figure-drawing. Not a bit discouraged in well-doing, the old gentleman, born evidently with the sun in the ascendant, left his drawing of "The Dead March in Saul," and led us upstairs to a back room, where he found some lithographic sketches of fisher boys and other rustic figures. He produced also a head in crayon, which he called a Rembrandt, and pressed me to take it home to copy. In the intervals he muttered aside to my father about my horoscope,

emphasising certain dates pregnant with importance to me. I overheard that on arriving at seventeen, and again at twenty-seven, there were to be critical turning-points in my fortunes. I left him thus brimming over with goodness, never to see him any more, for he died soon after; and when I went to return the so-called Rembrandt, his house was deserted, and I could not then find, and have not yet found his relatives.

His cheerfulness was the more wonderful seeing that at that time he could not leave the house from fear of bailiffs except on Sundays. A friend met him one Sunday looking more than usually jolly, and on being challenged to explain, he said: "I never was in better trim in my life, for—what do you think?—I have now only three writs out against me that can actually take my person." With a soul larger than his body, he was a man never to be forgotten.

The indulgence of these visits was only a step to the further leave granted me by my father to spend my salary on weekly lessons from a City portrait painter, Henry Rogers, a pupil of Sharpe, who was himself a pupil of Beechy, who, in turn, had been a pupil of Reynolds. He had, if not the inventive merits of his forerunner, at least some of his secrets of pigment and oil mediums, which had not then generally proved themselves to be of treacherous value, as since they have done. The lessons of boldness I received from him ingrained certain habits and practices which afterwards cost me pain to eradicate.

Good Mr. James, when retiring from business, sought my father, and without any prompting from me, kindly pleaded his utmost that I should be allowed to become a painter. The arguments he advanced, and the independent interest shown, had weight for three or four weeks.