

Little Trips Among the Eminent.

Whistler.

[With acknowledgments to Biographies of Whistler, by T. Martin Wood, Elizabeth Luther Cary, and others.]

Thirty-five years ago there took place in England one of the most remarkable trials ever seen in a court of justice. At that time, John Ruskin, the famous art critic, master of English, and social reformer, was at the height of his popularity in England, where, especially in art, he had become, as Mr. Pennell has said, "a prophet and a pope." At that time, too, James Abbott MacNeill Whistler, comparatively young and unknown, coming before the public with a conception of painting unique in all the annals of art, was looked upon as an upstart, a nobody, "a charlatan, a mountebank."—And the famous law suit was between these two.

A few weeks previously, Whistler had exhibited a picture, "The Falling Rocket—Nocturne in Black and Gold," at the Grosvenor Gallery. The picture, doubtless, was daring. It represented a display of fireworks at Cremorne, a glittering spatter of yellow and gold on a midnight sky, a dully-illuminated foreground, and behind all the silhouettes of dark buildings with lights gleaming through the windows—all executed in Whistler's broad, impressionistic style, with no regard to the detail which had become necessary to popular art, and which the Pre-Raphaelites had run to the limit. In his "Fors Clavigera," then being issued serially in chapters, Ruskin referred to this picture in the following words: "I have seen and heard much of cockney impudence before now, but never expected to hear a cockcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face."

Whistler, never a coward, and now fired with the wish to vindicate his ideals of art before the world, immediately entered a suit against the great man. The result was such as might have been expected, such a result as has transpired, no matter what the principle at stake, in almost every case the world over where a man without wealth or influence has come up against one possessed of both. Ruskin was too ill to attend, and did not appear in court, but those who testified in his behalf were influential—Burne-Jones and Frith. Whistler was bantered and derided; two of his pictures, the one under discussion and "Battersea Bridge by Moonlight; Nocturne in Blue and Silver," were brought into court and there subjected to jeering criticism, and finally, although Ruskin lost the case, the plaintiff was awarded—"one farthing damages"! Could insult go further?

And yet Whistler had his revenge. Even during the trial the glory did not all go to the strong, for the sharp wit of the artist turned the laugh on his inquisitors many a time, as when, for example, the Attorney-General asked in reference to the "Black and Gold," "Do you think, now, that you could make me see the beauty of that picture?" when Whistler paused, and examining the face of the inquisitor for a moment, said, "No! Do you know, I fear it would be as hopeless as for the musician to pour his notes into the ears of a deaf man." And when the trial was all over, with the essence of satire, he embodied a full account of the trial, as reported officially in his Ten O'clock Lecture, and a mass of criticism from the periodicals of the time, in his book, "The Gentle Art of Making Enemies."

His book stands to turn the laugh on

his tormentors; the disputed "Nocturne," now owned by Mrs. Samuel Untermyer, is worth a fortune; the picture of Battersea Bridge, at first received at Christie's with hisses, was afterwards sold for sixty pounds, and finally bought by the National Arts Collection Fund, for 2,000 guineas, to be hung in the National Gallery. Conceptions of art have changed. It is recognized that there may be different qualities of excellence in painting, and that of these, Whistler's ideal is worthy of high rank. To-day, Ruskin's writings on art are not taken, in many respects, seriously, and it is as master of beautiful English, as the writer of many noble thoughts, above all for his works on social reform, that the great man's claim to eminence must rest. So be it. Whistler did not live to realize his overwhelming success, but he

never for one moment keeping his brushes in his hands after the inspiration had fled. For this reason his canvases are few in number, but precious as few.

At the immediate close of the trial, however, Whistler came forth discredited, the kicked-out cur. The judge had emphasized the contempt of the jury in giving their verdict of one farthing damage, by giving judgment for the plaintiff in such a way that both sides had to pay costs. Immediately the public started a subscription to pay those due from Ruskin, and Whistler contributed to the fund his "one farthing damages." Whistler, on the other hand, had to meet his own costs, and went through the bankruptcy court. The dogs of the press, too, had set upon him. Men who knew nothing of art united to jeer his work. His motives in beginning the

was while at West Point Military Academy that he became fully convinced that art must be his life-work. At once, in his twentieth year, he went to Paris to study, working with Courbet and others, but never being greatly influenced by those with whom he studied. At twenty-five he went to London, and presently settled down to work in earnest in Chelsea, not far from the house of Rossetti, where he was a frequent visitor. Indeed, it may have been on his mid-night returns along the river-bank, from the frequent foregatherings there, that he became impressed with the beauty of reflected light and the damp airs, expressed so often and so poetically in his paintings.

His first important picture, "At the Piano," was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1860, and bought by a member of the Academy. In 1861 he exhibited "La Mere Gerard," which was bought by the poet Swinburne. In 1863 his "White Girl" was sent to the Paris Salon, but was refused, though exhibited immediately at the famous "Salon des Refuses," which was instituted as a protest against the unfair judgment for the Salon.

It was of this picture that Swinburne wrote the poem beginning:

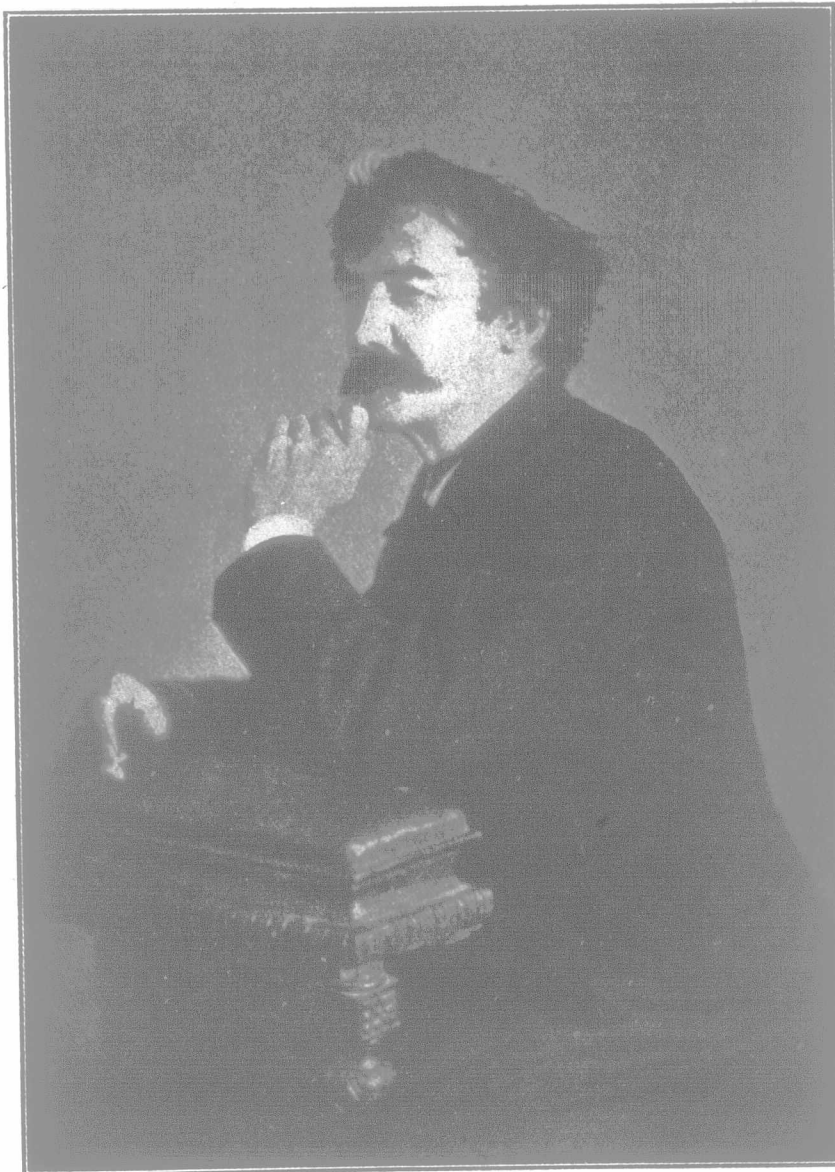
"White rose in red-rose garden
Is not so white;
Snowdrops that plead for pardon
And pine for fright,
Because the hard East blows
Over their maiden rows,
Grow not as this face grows from
pale to bright."

In 1865 he went to Valparaiso, and returned with his beautiful "Valparaiso Nocturnes," and in 1874 the first exhibition of his collected work was held at a gallery in Pall Mall, among the pictures then exhibited being the famous portraits, "My Mother," "Thomas Carlyle," and "Little Miss Alexander."

Later in life he started a school, and to this is due perhaps, most of the best pen-pictures which have come to us of his personality. His students did not, perhaps, love him as some teachers have been loved, but one and all testify to the awakening which he gave them, to the change in their ideals of art wrought under his lecturing, and to the faculty to "see," the additional eyes which he seemed to confer upon them. Long afterwards, too, these students could smile at his sharp and caustic utterances. Upon one occasion, for instance, a young lady exclaimed, "Mr. Whistler, I am sure I am painting what I see." "Yes,"—he retorted—"but the shock will come when you see what you are painting." This academy was, however, short-lived.

In the year of the famous Ruskin trial, 1878, he went to Venice for some months, and on his return exhibited at the Fine Art Society's gallery a series of Venice Pastels and etchings. He also contributed to the Grosvenor, and held exhibitions of his own.

Shortly afterwards he got into another altercation, which for a time promised him trouble. A rich ship-owner, Mr. Leyland, had bought one of his pictures, "La Princesse du Pays de la Porcelaine," and had had a room decorated especially in expensive Spanish leather, by a famous firm of decorators, for the reception of the new treasure. Whistler, on seeing the effect, was not pleased, and obtained permission to treat a little of the wall. Mr. Leyland and his family chanced to be going north at the time and left Whistler in possession of the house. On their return they found the artist turning the apartment into the famous "Peacock Room." He had divided the wall into panels, and, utterly indifferent to the costliness of the leather, had painted



Whistler.

had the satisfaction of standing his ground and maintaining his independence. He had also the satisfaction of finding opportunity to declare in words before the whole world what he had always tried to teach by his painting, viz., that a picture should represent mood or temperament, that above all things it should be a harmony of color capable of giving intense pleasure through that harmony; and that it is in no wise necessary that it should tell a story, or depict detail. "The work of the master," he thundered, "speaks not of the sweat of the brow, and is finished from the beginning." While Ruskin insisted on painstaking, Whistler insisted on inspiration, even as a poet must be inspired in writing a true poem, or a musician in composing a piece of real music; and as he believed he worked,

suit were misunderstood, and looked upon as merely mercenary. Poor Whistler had left but few friends in England. Not one was there, save the artist, Albert Moore, to staunchly stand by him, yet, he may have found some balm in Gilead in the recollection that in his testimony at the trial, Burne-Jones had admitted: "I must, tell the truth, you know. In the picture I see fine harmony and color."

And now a few words in regard to this daring artist. He came of the Irish branch of an old English family, but his immediate ancestry was American, and he was born at Lowell, Mass., July 11, 1834, the son of Major Whistler of the United States Army. While at school at Pomfret, Conn., he repeatedly gave evidence of his talent in drawing, but it