

something of menace in it. "All right," he said, "I'll pack up the Velasquez myself and you can call for it."

CHAPTER XV.

The Old Master and the New.

CHRISTIE'S great saleroom was thronged and throbbing with excitement, though it was nearly an hour from the time fixed for the sale; nor was there any secret about the cause of the excitement. A Manet "Cafe Scene," glaring, vivid, relentless, alive, vibrating with crude juxtaposed colour had come in for sale. It was a picture of two men of the working classes in blue blouses—one wearing a vivid scarlet tie—and a woman in a bright pink market dress, seated at a little marble-topped table in the early morning. Behind them the sleepy-eyed garcon laboriously arranged matches in a series of little earthenware holders upon another table. The red and yellow stripes of the holland awning formed the top of the picture.

It seemed to be one of Manet's very latest works. The leader of impressionism had only become an enthusiastic "plein-artiste" in the closing years of his life. Varnish and age had scarcely time to commence to soften the vigorous calculated crudities of the canvas. Painted without regard to finical detail, with a clear appreciation of the value of broad masses of primary colour, the picture was one of the most daring pieces of artistic assurance ever created—a frank, realistic interpretation of modern life.

The name of the owner was not mentioned, and in the picture records there was no hint of the existence of this great painting. Some sceptics questioned if it were really a Manet. But some eminent judges had pronounced it to be unmistakably genuine, and Christie's had, in their sale catalogue, given it the customary hall mark of their high approval by affixing the initials to the name of the painter.

No wonder so many connoisseurs, collectors and dealers assembled in the saleroom.

Every now and then a crowd would gather before the big picture which was hung fairly high in full light, a blaze of gorgeous colour in the dull and crowded room. As the crowds dissolved and re-assembled amid a constant buzz of admiration, Hugh Limner found himself the centre of an animated group.

"Hallo, Limner," cried one, a stout, elderly man, who looked a good-natured cattle dealer, and was a specialist in French painting, "what do you think, I suppose it is a genuine Manet all right, but still there's something about it that puzzles. There are tints and touches that I never saw in a Manet. What do you say about it?"

"It is a fine picture," returned Limner, "and it is undoubtedly in Manet's best style."

"But is it an original, do you think?"

"Why, certainly, no painter ever painted like that who had tied up his imagination to copy another man's work."

Limner's words ran rapidly round the great room with additions, alterations and improvements.

The gossips swore that he pronounced "the picture genuine Manet." Details even added "he knew its owner, he had seen it before, he could trace its history," "he was commissioned to buy it."

More than one dealer whom Limner had bested in many a bargain determined that if he bought the picture he would at least pay the full price for it.

Sharp at the appointed hour the auctioneer stepped into his rostrum with the famous hammer in his hand which had broken up rare collections and scattered masterpieces over the world. The crowd gathered closer and all eyes were turned on him as the eyes of a congregation on a great preacher. Some of the most constant frequenters had places of their own, where no one intruded and where the auctioneer's glance could always find them when he wanted a bid.

He began very quietly. "Gentle-

men," he said, "as I know many of you come here for a special purpose, I will not detain you. I guess the picture you want to buy, and I will give you the opportunity at once. You see in your catalogue 'Cafe Scene', by Manet. But it is fair to you to add that as far as I know it has no history. We don't know where it comes from or the name of the owner. You must use your own eyes and judgment, gentlemen, and if you have a doubt don't bid."

He smiled at the mere notion of a doubt, and added, sharply, "How much shall I say, gentlemen, for this fine Manet? Shall I begin with a thousand? Thank you."

Hugh Limner had nodded and started the bidding. There was an almost imperceptible pause and the auctioneer went on again. "A thousand and twenty-five—fifty—seventy-five, thank you. A thousand one hundred." Smoothly and easily the figure mounted to two thousand.

Here there was a pause for a moment. The auctioneer remonstrated. "Going for two thousand—a Manet for two thousand." Then a nod from Hugh Limner set the ball rolling again.

At two thousand four hundred, Lord Sternholt interposed for the first time, raising the figure by a hundred at a single jump, and again there was a pause.

A dealer known as the agent for the Hermitage gallery took the bidding to two thousand five fifty, and Lord Sternholt promptly retorted with six hundred, and the dealer dropped out.

"Going," said the auctioneer, once more, very slowly. "There is no reserve, the highest bid takes the picture. 'Two thousand six fifty,'" he added, briskly. Hugh Limner had nodded again.

Lord Sternholt promptly retorted, and from that out the bidding was a duel between the two; Limner placid and smiling, Sternholt eager and aggressive.

At three thousand five hundred, a bid by his lordship, the end came. The auctioneer's appealing glance to Limner was answered by a decisive shake of the head. He ran rapidly through the prescribed formula, and knocked the picture down to Lord Sternholt amid a murmur of applause.

HALF a dozen dealers crowded round to congratulate him on his bargain. Hugh Limner sauntered toward the excited group.

"An easy victory, Mr. Limner," cried his lordship, triumphantly, as he saw him coming. "Faint heart never won fine picture. Did you doubt your own judgment?"

"Not in the least, my lord," replied Limner, still smiling.

"You let such a Manet go for three thousand five hundred," jeered his lordship.

"The picture is not a Manet, my lord. I would have told you that if you had condescended to ask me. It is a fine picture by one of the best of our young painters, and some day will be worth more than your lordship paid for it, but it is not a Manet."

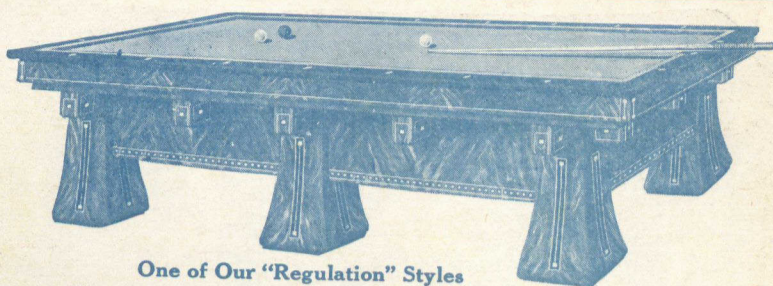
(To be continued.)

Once Upon a Time.—Once upon a time there was a peer who knew the frailty of unennobled man.

Having occasion to entertain at dinner a number of useful fellows, he instructed his butler to transfer the labels from a number of empty bottles of champagne to an equal number of magnums of dry ginger-ale, at ten shillings the dozen, and these were placed on the table.

At the beginning of the repast his lordship casually drew attention to the wine which he was giving his guests, and asked for their candid opinion of it, as he was aware that they were all good judges, who knew a good thing when they saw it, and he would value their opinion.

And they one and all said it was an excellent champagne, and two or three made a note of it in their pocket-books. And such was their loyal enthusiasm that the banquet ended in a fine glow of something exactly like hilarity.—Punch.



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