



Little Trips Among the Eminent.

RICHARD WILSON.

(Börn 1714, died 1782.)

When reading the lives of great men one is often surprised and mystified as to why it is that outstanding talent, or even talent plus hard work, which, according to Carlyle, constitutes genius, is so often disregarded in the day when a little recognition might warm the heart of its possessor, fame arriving—and even great wealth to someone who has no real connection with the works of the genius—ten or twenty or perhaps a hundred years after the death of the poor aspirant himself. Franz Hals, in his day, almost suffered for want of food; two or three years ago a single canvas from his brush was sold in New York for \$500,000. And a somewhat similar story might be told of many another, whether artist, or writer, or inventor.

We were told not long ago by a picture-dealer that the very moment an artist dies his paintings are doubled in value, and (if he has been an artist of note at all) have much better chance of meeting with sales.—The rank injustice of it!

Richard Wilson started out upon life with rather better chances than most of the young painters of his time. His father was a clergyman in Montgomeryshire, his mother one of the Wynnes of Linwold, a family possessing education and refinement, as well as a long line of illustrious ancestry; hence it is not surprising to find that from his earliest years—for Wilson began to draw wonderfully while a mere babe—the young artist was encouraged rather than reproved for his tastes, so much so that, as soon as his school life was completed, he was sent, through the generosity of a relative, Sir George Wynne, to London, to take a course of instruction in art. As has happened in many another case the pupil advanced far beyond his master, for Thomas Wright is now known solely through his connection, for six long years, with Richard Wilson.

At the end of that time the young artist, probably observing that portrait painting afforded the surest way to a living, set up a studio as a painter in that department of art, and at first appears to have had a good practice. He painted portraits of the Prince of Wales and the Duke of York for their tutor, the Bishop of Norwich, and this opportunity alone seems to have brought him many commissions; but his talent clearly did not lie in portrait-painting, and none of his fame depends upon the work of those early years.

He had, however, made some money by the venture, so that in 1749, when thirty-five years of age, he was enabled to go to Italy to study. "Here," says Cunningham, "an accident happened which opened the way to fame—and poverty." One morning while waiting in Zucarelli's studio he passed the time by painting the scene from the window. Zucarelli, coming in presently, stood amazed, and asked him if he had started landscape painting. Wilson said that he had not, whereupon he was strongly advised by the older painter to begin forthwith, and the opinion was reinforced by the French painter, A. Menges, who had been struck by a picture which Zucarelli had painted merely for a moment, and offered to exchange one of the pictures of his own for it. Wilson accepted the offer, and his bit of landscape found its way into Vernet's exhibition, where it was enthusiastically purchased by all visitors.

During the time that he was in Italy he painted many fine views of the Campagna, the mountains, the bay, and the capes fanned with the pure air of the

with the glowing suns, filled with the ruined temples, and sparkling with the wooded streams and tranquil lakes of that classic region; then he returned to England and took apartments in London near Covent Garden.

No more portrait painting now for Wilson; he had learned wherein lay his talent, wherein lay the work that he loved. At first hope ran high. He was at once recognized as the first great English landscape painter; two of his pictures found immediate purchasers in the Duke of Cumberland and the Marquis of Tavistock; he assisted in the establishment of the Royal Academy and was one of its first members. Then interest died out. Landscape painting was not generally popular; those who cared for it had already bought; no one else wanted to spend money so. "He had the mortification," says one biographer, "of exhibiting pictures of unrivalled beauty before the eyes of his countrymen in vain."

People came to see, yet no one bought, and at last he was reduced to depending, as his chief resource for subsistence, upon the pawnbrokers, to whom, for a mere pittance, many of his finest works were consigned. The story is told that upon one occasion a pawnbroker, whom he was pressing to buy another picture, took him to his store-room, and, pointing to a pile of landscapes said, "Why, look ye, Dick, you know I wish to oblige, but see!—there are all the pictures I have paid you for these three years."

A crowning disappointment came in a contest for fame with Smith of Chichester. The Royal Academy decided against Wilson, chiefly, according to Cunningham, because of a personal dislike on the part of Reynolds, who was then the President of the Academy.

"We are told," says Cunningham, who at no time, it is true, had any liking personally for Reynolds, "that the eminent landscape painter, notwithstanding all the refinement of his mind, was somewhat coarse and repulsive in his manners. He was, indeed, a lover of pleasant company, a drinker of ale and porter—one who loved boisterous mirth and rough humor; and such things are not always found in society which calls itself select. But what could the artist do? The man whose patrons are pawnbrokers instead of peers,—whose pockets contain little copper and no gold—whose dress is coarse and his house ill-replenished—must seek such society as corresponds with his means and condition.—He must be content to sit elsewhere than at a rich man's table covered with embossed plate. That the coarseness of his manners and the meanness of his appearance should give offence to the courtly Reynolds is not to be wondered at;—that they were the cause of hostility I cannot believe, though this has often been asserted. Their dislike was, in fact, mutual, and I fear it must be imputed to something like jealousy."

The truth of the matter seems to be that there is no excuse for the coarseness of manner into which Wilson permitted himself, at times, to drift; that he developed, too, goaded by ill-fortune, a shortness of temper that set him at decided disadvantage in altercations in the Academy with the cold, calm, courteous Reynolds; and that Reynolds really permitted a personal dislike to prejudice his judgment even the work of the object of his dislike. In this Reynolds, however, it is to be said, he showed a certain lack of generosity.

Wilson's life was a struggle, that the Royal Academy was not as generous as it might have been. The one consolation of his life was his art, and his art was his life.

work. Upon one occasion, it is told, at an Academy supper, he deliberately proposed the health of Gainsborough "as the best landscape painter." Wilson was quick enough to retort at once, "and the best portrait painter, too."

The whole course of the friction between the two does not form pleasant reading. One cannot but blame Wilson for his weakness, yet one cannot but sympathize, too, with Cunningham in his conclusion: "Reynolds had never experienced any reverse of fortune—the applause of the world was with him, and much of its money in his pocket; he might therefore have afforded to be indulgent to a man of genius suffering under the want of honor and even the want of bread."

Even to the last, however, Wilson retained something of his early sense of dignity. Upon one occasion Zifani, in a picture of the members of the Academy, represented him with a pot of porter at his elbow. One cannot but admire the mettle with which the offended artist at once got "a proper stout stick," which he threatened so ardently to apply that the offender made haste enough to erase the beer-pot.

From this unhappy incident some biographers have jumped to the conclusion that Wilson was a habitual drunkard. The truth is, as has been conclusively proven, that he was very abstemious at his meals, that he rarely touched wine or other strong liquors, though he had a weakness for a mug of porter with toast.

Notwithstanding his ill-fortune, Wilson never lost confidence in the excellence of his work. "Beechey," he used often to say to his friend, Sir William Beechey, at whose home he frequently visited, "you will live to see great prices given for my pictures."

In 1776 he obtained the post of librarian to the Academy, with a small salary which kept him from actual starvation, although he was reduced to living in one small, obscure, half-furnished room near Tottenham Court Road. Here, one day, he was found by a lady who wanted a good landscape, and was conducted thither by a young art student. She asked for two pictures and left, the student remaining. In a few moments Wilson took his young friend by the arm. "Your kindness is all in vain," he said, in a voice full of emotion, "I am wholly destitute.—I cannot even purchase proper canvas and color for those paintings."

The young man immediately gave him a loan of £20. "When Wilson, with all his genius, starves," said he, later, "what will become of me?" And forthwith he laid down his palette and brushes forever, subsequently attaining a high position in the church.

At last relief came to "poor Wilson." By the death of a brother a small estate in Wales fell to him, and was almost immediately found to contain a profitable vein of lead. He went thither to live, and took up his abode with a relation, a Mrs. Jones, with happiness, it might be hoped, at last in view. But he was now old, and both sight and health were failing. Perhaps happiness was not for him, but peace had come, and he was glad to spend his days walking slowly about the dales of beautiful Denbighshire. "The stone on which he loved to sit, the tree under which he shaded himself from the sun, and the stream on the banks of which he commonly walked, are all remembered and pointed out by the peasantry," says Cunningham. "But he wanted what wealth could not give—youth and strength to enjoy what he had fallen heir to. His strength failed fast, his walks became shorter and less frequent, and the last scene he visited was where two old, picturesque fir trees stood, which he had loved to look at and introduce into his compositions. Walking out one day, accompanied by a friend, he was

exhausted by fatigue, or overcome by some sudden pain, Wilson sank down and found himself unable to rise. The sagacious animal ran home, howled, pulled the servants by their clothes, and at last succeeded in bringing them to the aid of his master. He was carried home, but he never fairly recovered from the shock. He complained of weariness and pain, refused nourishment, and languished and expired in May, 1782, in the sixty-ninth year of his age."

Like Turner, Wilson idealized scenes, making them poetic rather than photographically true. As a noted critic has said, "The works of Wilson are skilled and learned compositions rather than direct transcripts from Nature. His landscapes are treated with great breadth, and with a power of generalization which occasionally led to a disregard of detail. They are full of classical feeling and poetic sentiment; they possess noble qualities of colour, and of delicate silvery tone; and their handling is vigorous and easy, the work of a painter who was thoroughly master of his materials."

After his death Wilson's fame began at once to increase, and in 1814 about seventy of his works were exhibited in the British Institute. To-day his canvases, whenever offered for sale, bring high prices. Nine of them are in the National Gallery, London.

Some Old-Time Echoes.

ON TREK IN THE TRANSVAAL.

My "echo" to-day carries me back, to some thirty-five years ago, and in offering it to you I would apologize for the personal touch, which, as my story is a true one, can hardly be wholly left out of it if I am faithfully to call, according to promise, some occasional extracts from pages out of the long-closed first volume of my life.

I should like to offer you a picture of the old manorhouse in Hertfordshire which I then called home, and if I can find a copy not too defaced to serve the purpose, I will ask our editor to make room for it in our Home Magazine.

Vividly can I recall as I write, that bright, clear-skied spring morning early in the year 1875, the events of which I tried to describe as the first entry in the pages of a journal which afterwards expanded into a good-sized book, one which probably on account of its being almost the very first published just after the eventful happenings which brought into prominence the hitherto unknown Transvaal, met with far wider and kindlier recognition than I had ever dared to hope for it.

At the time of our starting upon that eventful journey, no thought of the possibilities of any disruption in South Africa had entered into our minds, although afterwards, on nearly every day throughout its course, in one form or another, the question would confront us. "What would you do if your wagon and oxen, your men, and even your husband, were 'requisitioned,' as they are liable to be at a moment's notice at any point on your way, seeing that you have exceeded the limits of exemption forty-eight hours in the Republic of the Transvaal? You are all right yourself, and so is your fellow-traveller, he being a clergyman." I naturally repudiated the idea of its being possible to be "all right" myself, should such untoward circumstances occur, and stoutly averred that they certainly would have to requisition me, too, whether they wanted me or not. I could load their guns and fire them off, if hitting any special object was of no moment, and I might do odd jobs in Laager and earn my salt in some way, but kind fate spared us this, although many others were not so fortunate, notably a troupe