

LETTER XLVII.

Antwerp.

MY DEAR:--

Of all quaint places this is one of the most charming. I have been rather troubled that antiquity has fled before me where I have gone. It is a fatality of travelling that the sense of novelty dies away, so that we do not realize that we are seeing any thing extraordinary. I wanted to see something as quaint as Nuremberg in Longfellow's poem, and have but just found it. These high-gabled old Flemish houses, nine steps to each gable! The cathedral, too, affects me more in externals than any yet. And the spire looks as I expected that of Strasbourg would. As to the grammarye of bells and chimes, I deliver that over to Charlie. But--I have seen Rubens's painting! Before I came to Europe, Longfellow said to me, "You must go to Antwerp, to see Rubens."

"I do not think I shall like Rubens," was my reply.

"But you will, though. Yet never judge till you have been to Antwerp."

So, during our various meanders, I kept my eye with a steady resolve on this place. I confess I went out to see the painting without much enthusiasm. My experience with Correggio's *Notte*, and some of the celebrities of Dresden, was not encouraging. I was weary, too, with

sightseeing. I expected to find an old, dim picture, half spoiled by cleaning, which I should be required to look into shape, by an exercise of my jaded imagination.

After coming down from hearing the chimes, we went into a side room, and sat down before the painting. My first sensation was of astonishment, blank, absolute, overwhelming. After all that I had seen, I had no idea of a painting like this. I was lifted off my feet, as much as by Cologne cathedral, or Niagara Falls, so that I could neither reason nor think whether I was pleased or not. It is difficult, even now, to analyze the sources of this wonderful power. The excellence of this picture does not lie, like Raphael's, in a certain ideal spirituality, by which the scene is raised above earth to the heavenly sphere; but rather in a power, strong, human, almost homely, by which, not an ideal, but the real scene is forced home upon the heart.

Christ is dead,--dead to your eye as he was to the eye of Mary and of John. Death absolute, hopeless, is written in the faded majesty of that face, peaceful and weary; death in every relaxed muscle. And, surely, in painting this form, some sentiment of reverence and devotion softened into awestruck tenderness that hand commonly so vigorous; for, instead of the almost coarse vitality which usually pervades his manly figures, there is shed over this a spiritualized refinement, not less, but more than human, as if some heavenly voice whispered, "This is the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world!"

The figures of the disciples are real and individual in expression.

The sorrow is homely, earnest, unpicturesque, and grievously heart broken. The cheek of the kneeling Mary at his feet is wet with tears.

You cannot ask yourself whether she is beautiful or not. You only see and sympathize with her sorrow. But the apostle John, who receives into his arms the descending form, is the most wonderful of all.

Painters that I have seen represent him too effeminately. They forget the ardent soul whom Jesus rebuked for wishing to bring down fire from heaven on his enemies; they forget that it was John who was called the son of thunder, and that his emblem in the early church was the eagle. From the spiritualized softness of his writings we have formed another picture, forgetting that these are the writings of an aged man, in whom the ardor of existence has been softened by long experience of suffering, and habits of friendship with a suffering Lord.

Rubens's conception of John is that of a vigorous and plenary manhood, whose rush is like that of a torrent, in the very moment when his great heart is breaking. He had loved his Master with a love like an eternity; he had believed him; heart and soul, mind and strength--all had he given to that kingdom which he was to set up; and he had seen him die--die by lingering torture. And at this moment he feels it all.

There is no Christ, no kingdom--nothing! All is over. "We trusted it had been he who should have redeemed Israel." With that miraculous, lifelike power that only Rubens has, he shows him to us in this moment of suppressed agony; the blood choking his heart, the veins swollen, and every muscle quivering with the grief to which

he will not give way. O, for this wonderful and deep conception, this almost divine insight into the mysteries of that hour, one might love Rubens. This picture cannot be engraved. No engraving is more than a diagram, to show the places of the figures. For, besides its mesmeric life, which no artist can reproduce, there is a balancing of colors, a gorgeousness about it, as if he had learned coloring from the great Master himself. Even in the overpowering human effect of this piece, it is impossible not to perceive that every difficulty which artists vaunt themselves on vanquishing has in this piece been conquered with apparently instinctive ease, simply because it was habitual to do so, and without in the least distracting the attention from the great moral. Magical foreshortenings and wonderful effects of color appear to be purely incidental to the expression of a great idea. I left this painting as one should leave the work of a great religious master-- thinking more of Jesus and of John than of Rubens.

After this we went through many galleries and churches devoted to his works; for Antwerp is Rubens's shrine. None of them impressed me, as compared with this. One of his Madonnas, however, I must not forget to describe, it was a conceit so just like him. Instead of the pale, downcast, or upturned faces, which form the general types of Madonna, he gives her to us, in one painting, as a gorgeous Oriental sultana, leaning over a balcony, with full, dark eye and jewelled turban, and rounded outlines, sustaining on her hand a brilliant paroquet. Ludicrous as this conception appears in a scriptural point of view, I liked it because there was life in it; because he had painted it from

an internal sympathy, not from a chalky, second-hand tradition.

And now, farewell to Antwerp. Art has satisfied me at last. I have been conquered, and that is enough.

To-morrow for Paris. Adieu.